Wordcaves Not Word-hoards: On Robert MacFarlane's Landmarks

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Photograph by Flickpicpete

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Landmarks,
Robert MacFarlane,
Hamish Hamilton, 400 pp.

> *For as long as I could remember, my parents and I had picked up things as we walked. Surfaces in our house were covered in shells, pebbles, twists of driftwood from rivers and sea. We weren't the only ones. Everyone I know seemed to gather pebbles, and line them up on window ledges and mantelpieces, performing a humdrum rite of happiness and memory-making.* Spot, stoop, hold in the hand, slip in the pocket*: a kind of karmic kleptomania. In their Cairngorms house, my grandparents kept special stones in glass bowls that they filled with water to keep the stones shining. They even constructed a makeshift* Wunderkammer*: a wall-mounted cabinet, the white-wood compartments of which held a pine cone, a rupee, cowries, a dried shepherd's purse, a geographic cone-snail shell with its map-like patterns, and polished pebbles of chalcedony and onyx.*

In the resurgent 'field' of lyrical British nature writing, a prosaic form given to delight in the relationship of language and landscape, to relish and revel in the world and in words, Robert MacFarlane is one of the leading lights. His most recent book *Landmarks* delves deeper into this relationship. The book consists of a series of topographically-arranged essays (under headings such as *Woodlands* and *Edgelands*) on the nature writers whom the author most reveres, interspersed with glossaries which collect together terms for the landscape which MacFarlane has "collected" during his research and added to his 'word-hoard'. His prose continually restates the effulgence of language with all its sparking sibilance, sloshes of onomatopoeia and adorning assonance. *Landmarks* is suffused with examples (such as the one above) which demonstrate the author's adoration for both the natural world and for language. His writing is beautifully descriptive, lyrical and sensuous.

Throughout this compendium, MacFarlane's totemic word is *precision*: "to use language well is to use it particularly" he states after introducing the ten writers on whom the book focuses (Roger Deakin, John Muir, J A Baker, Nan Shepherd, Jacquetta Hawkes, Richard Skelton, Autumn Richardson, Peter Davidson, Barry Lope and Richard Jeffries). He goes on claim that all ten authors use "precision of utterance as both a form of lyricism and a species of attention". References to precision repeatedly crop up throughout his analysis. One particularly memorable example, in reference to Roger Deakin, runs: "his writing was often magnificently precise in its poetry (precision being, to my mind, preferable to rigour – the former being exhilaratingly exact and the latter grimly exacting)." For MacFarlane, the richness of our lexicon is directly related to our ability to use it *precisely* and in the process of uncovering and recording these tables of terms the author hopes that the potential for that rich lyrical precision, may be conserved.

There is a political dimension at work in here as MacFarlane draws a connection between the preservation of the language of landscape and the preservation of the landscape itself. In this spirit, *Landmarks* seeks to be a "counter-desecration phrasebook": a way of protecting the lexicon of the natural world, enclosing it in the hope of igniting the formation of new ways of thinking about the environment and its disappearance. MacFarlane is aware of the potential danger of nostalgia, asserting from the outset that "To celebrate the lexis of landscape is not nostalgic, but urgent". He also recognises the problematic nature of "the pastoral" and the "cult of the picturesque" (as Nick Groom refers to it) and furthermore that he is "wary of the dangers of fetishizing dialect and archaism".

It is difficult, having had any kind of rural upbringing, to read the group of texts which have emerged during the recent resurgence in 'nature writing', more particularly the lyric mode of descriptive non-fiction which includes the works of writers such as Richard Mabey, Helen MacDonald and Robert MacFarlane, and not be drawn into one's own recollections of landscape. It is a narrative mode implicitly tied to memory yet one which often claims urgency and relevance in virtue of its environmental concerns and a desire for *preservation*. A half-formed childhood recollection, a pebble of one's past, will suddenly be adorned with lexical jewels and weighted with petrological forms:

> *Some of my earliest memories are of walks. My mother and I would tramp through the bracken-dense gulches and coal-black crags of our Yorkshire hillside as we fossicked and foraged: all the while feeling the wet thumps of unrelenting rain beating horizontally at our cagoules. We would wander*

> *through the woodland for hours: searching the soil for exotic mushrooms, chiselling globules of smoky quartz and pupal grains of mica from the cloughs of soft dark sandstone, and prickling our hands on spiny grasses as we hunted for the stark bleached treasure of animal bones.*

Despite the tendency of this lyrical mode of description to verge on the parodic, to merely write off this descriptive prose as empty nostalgia would be a mistake. There are however a number of political and aesthetic concerns arising from this mode of writing that warrant investigation, especially given its recent revival. One might loosely attempt to describe these concerns as being associated with two central concepts: the political and the linguistic. Because of its anthological structure, as well as its broad scope and its lexicological investigations, *Landmarks* provides a perfect opportunity to examine these concerns.

Despite MacFarlane's proselytization, even under a soft, mica-flecked, light his claims of urgency and political clarity soon begin to unravel. From the appropriation of "Shards of Eastern philosophy" that "glitter in the prose" of Nan Shepherd; the hornet described as "tubby, like a weekend footballer" by Deakin; or the description of Jeffries noting "sympathetically rather than voyeuristically" the "hard hand-play" of workers in the fields; there are suspect veins of middle class politics marbled throughout the language of MacFarlane's chosen subjects. This woolly liberal ideology bears fruit in the author's own writing too which, despite its oft restated ecological concern, too often collapses into little more than nostalgia. Nowhere is this more evident than in the recollections of MacFarlane's childhood pebble collecting, quoted at the beginning of this essay, which are so laden that one must have a heart of stone in order to read them without laughing. This nostalgia is a dangerous entity, rendering our relationship with nature as a form of MacFarlane's beloved *wunderkammer*, something static to be opened at one's leisure, an assortment of relics gleaned from a safe space which can still be owned, explored, colonised.

MacFarlane's recent essay on 'The eeriness of the English countryside' further accentuates this questionable political undercurrent. The piece is an attempt to unearth a leftist current of dissonance, of political activism, in what he sees as a new eerie relationship to the countryside being established in British Art. Beginning with M.R. James, and certainly feeling no need to adhere to the concept of precision, MacFarlane pulls together a disparate list of artists under the banner of a new occultism, a supernatural 'weirding' of the rural landscape, under late capitalism. The lazy application of such an explicit Trotskyist phrase gives a clear indication of the broad political strokes being painted and which plague the essay throughout. It is MacFarlane's optics which are defective. His weak allusion to Marx (set dangerously close to a citation of the notoriously racist H.P. Lovecraft) and his borderline uncomfortable attempt to draw black experience onto this eerie pathway by the inclusion of the photographer Ingrid Pollard, only serve to exacerbate the situation.

It does not end there, once again his muddled attempt to consider the potential weaknesses of his assertions only serve to further highlight the inadequacies of his argument:

It would be easy to dismiss all this as an excess of hokey woo-woo; a surge of something-in-the-woodshed rustic gothic. But engaging with the eerie emphatically doesn't mean believing in ghosts. Few of the practitioners named here would endorse earth mysteries or ectoplasm.

Here MacFarlane precisely misses the point (this sentence is also uncharacteristically ugly, as though his own "radar ear" for language had deserted him at a crucial moment). In reality, the symbolic transformation of capital into a supernatural force is an alchemic transmutation most simply cannot afford. The occult remains the practice of those sufficiently removed (by their class) from the direct exploitation of the very real social relation of capital. They are the ones free enough to hedonistically engage in the occult: relating their experience to its supernatural rituals and dark forces, disconnected as they remain from its narrative. Throughout the muddy waters of his argument, this poorly mapped meridian, what most clearly crystallises this political dubiousness is MacFarlane's own language. Throughout his sentences the arcane glitters like laminate specks on a Formica table top. Words like 'eldritch', the sibilance of "saltings . . . set seething" and the "puncturing of the pastoral" (a phrase which is virtually its own negation) agglomerate to produce a nullifying effect in which any potential dissonance is set in far too comfortable surroundings. Perhaps alchemy is an appropriate term for MacFarlane's process here: a loosely scientific attempt to draw a direct relation between the glittering gold of language and the base metals of the material landscape. It is a relation which does not exist, a relation whose hermetic pursuit, despite any genuine political concerns, can only lead to mystification.

Here emerges another set of concerns. The unstable political ground upon which *Landmarks* is founded is only part of the problem. Where the case MacFarlane builds really begins to subside is in its notion of the very thing with which the book claims to be a hymn for: the relationship between nature, our landscape and language.

MacFarlane's guiding principle throughout *Landmarks* is the notion of precision. For him the maintenance of a vast lexicon of words of natural phenomena and objects allows for the writer and observer to accurately translate the experience of those objects and phenomena into descriptive writing. In this way, the 'lyric' or 'descriptive' adorns the 'taxonomic' or 'scientific'. This conception of precision's relation to description recalls the one which Lukács so lambasts in his famous essay 'Narrate or Describe'. In this dialectical discussion of the narrative and descriptive modes of prosaic expression he views precision as part of the inherently bourgeois descriptive mode. Precision for Lukács is a concept which ultimately leads to a nightmarish prose of description run wild: an "empty literature of pure adventure" (a phrase which one would not have to stretch very far to apply to MacFarlane and some of his case studies in *Landmarks*). Precision and the descriptive mode are, for Lukács, inextricably linked with the middle class encounter with the objective world, an encounter which is not bound narratively to the world by use and experience. Macfarlane's linguistic precision, and the one that he delights in the writers in *Landmarks*, is intertwined with his suspect politics. The alienated and static gaze which this notion of precision pertains to is thus not capable of moving beyond "things" – though it may go on naming them more and more lavishly – it whose presence it compounds until they finally break free from the hold of narrative movement and colonise the text.

Interestingly, the work which MacFarlane looks at which breaks most obviously with this conception of precision is the one which is often cited as an ur-text for the lyrical prosaic form practiced by the present crop of nature writers: J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine*. In the chapter dedicated to him, MacFarlane immediately offers a sign which serves to distinguish Baker, remarking that he reveals himself to be "a good writer but a rather bad birdwatcher". Throughout this chapter, despite a couple of extremely tenuous attempts to tar him with the

same brush, the word precision is curiously absent. Baker's myopia is both literal and linguistic. He is a brilliant writer but he is anything but precise. Instead his prose seems to stem from urgency, disorientation, and desperation. His landscape is one which is drawn with compass points but no more, it remains loose and elusive. His peregrinations are cartographically inchoate. Baker continually upsets the even, leisurely syntax and spacing of his fellow nature writers, his prose is an expressionistic and feverish thirst which seemingly cannot be quenched. He often turns nouns into verbs and adjectives, wilfully ignoring the conventions of language, painting his observations in loose obsessive strokes. His prosaic obsessiveness recalls the pictorial desolation of Van Gogh: the falcon's kill is his yellow paint and, at one stage, we worry he might decide to eat. One does not need to know that Baker was suffering from a slowly encroaching paralysis, or that he was sacrificing his own financial stability and health in his search: his hunger is evident on every page. Like Federigo degli Alberighi in the *Decameron*, Baker spends the whole of his substance: he has nothing but the falcon.

What sets Baker apart then is that, for him, writing has a transformative aspect. His desire is to *become* the peregrine. In this sense, unlike the other writers in *Landmarks* (and unlike its author), Baker's writing is not a (re)-turn towards nature but a turning away from it. Baker seeks to shed the humanity which he finds so abhorrent but it is not nature which allows him to do this: it is writing. Baker wishes to negate the distance between the human and the animal, to lose his physical form and become the animal he hunts. At some point the all-seeing 'I', that solid conquering subject which plants nature writing so firmly within the turf of the political status quo, begins to slip. Baker recognises the exteriority of his being to that of nature and that he must turn to something else if he is to try to express this separation. In this sense his prose is an act of ritual, of magic, of re-enchantment. There is something prehistoric about it. Like those painters who daubed the walls of Lascaux in order to commune with the animalistic existence which still haunted them, Baker seeks to use his words in order to shed his human form, to gain, in Bataille's words, 'the silence of the beast', and take flight. But, most importantly, he recognises that this ritual, this turn towards language, too can only be a failure. The 'We' of communion with the hawk is illusory and Baker knows he will always remain part of the 'we' who 'stink of death'. Writing and the material cannot be connected, there is space between them. By not recognising this disjunct, the preservation of these words, these memories of landscape, may too easily function as their memorial.

What, then, is it which ultimately makes the language of *Landmarks* an act of preservation in its most pejorative sense: pickled, sweetened, displayed? Is it its refulgence, its fertility, its abundance? Certainly, that constitutes part of the problem, but what seems to underlie this fecundity is the assumption of a direct correlation between landscape and language. Despite the weak protestations MacFarlane offers, he never questions the assumption that reality, a reality full of objects to be conquered and collected, is merely there. It lacks the interrogative lacuna, the space between, which literature requires. The problem with MacFarlane's language, and the language of nature writing, is that it posits a direct relationship between the sounds and syntaxes of our words and the natural world of our experience.

MacFarlane's prose is certainly sensuous and his descriptive power is unquestionable. Reading *Landmarks* one is certainly left *satisfied*, indeed full. The language satiates one's

lexical desire, and his vocabulary is suffused with a richness that slakes one's word-thirst. Every sentence is full to the brim.

> *Sunset was close as we climbed back up to the plateau, so we waited for it on a westerly slope. As the sun lowered and reddened, cloud wisps blew up from the valley and refracted its light to form a dazzling parhelion: concentric haloes of orange, green and pink that circled the sun.*

The book really is a word-hoard (the title of the book's opening chapter): a treasure trove, something to be kept safe, held on to. But this is precisely the problem: words are not necessarily used, they are displayed. Words are not torn and broken apart; they are accumulated and stored, polished and preserved, held up to the light and feasted upon with lexical depravity. They are butterflies, suffocated, wing-pierced and stored under glass. These words are not available to everyone either – as Beowulf can attest – any word-hoard has to be unlocked.

There is a tendency, albeit one questioned by writers such as Richard Smyth in his essay on the limitations of the lyric mode of nature writing, to grasp for 'poetry' when analysing and referencing such sensuous and effusive prose as that of MacFarlane. However this urge is mistaken. Poetry's direction, and in fact literature's as well, tends out towards a place where words cannot reach, where words fail. What poetry proves, what it must prove, is that words do not and cannot ever function in the way which poetry hopes. Poetry must repeat and replicate and re-combine its words, it must shuffle its feet, it must re-tune and re-score its rhythms, and re-align its associations because words cannot stand on their own. They are social constructions and require context.

The term 'word-hoard' offers a poetic comparison which may help to more fully explain the problematic nature of this linguistic 'fullness' in relation to poetry: namely Celan's distinctly geological portmanteau 'wordcaves'. Here is the poem in which it appears in full:

Line the Wordcaves

with panther skins,

widen them, hide-to and hide-fro,
sense-hither and sense-thither,

give them courtyards, chambers, drop doors
and wildnesses, parietal,

and listen for their second
and each time second and second
tone.

[Translated by Pierre Joris]

The wordcaves, the building blocks of language, of poetry, of writing, are hollow: beneath their relational form there is always absence. Celan uses 'wordcaves' to show, not only the cave-like structure of words – their strange spaces, their petrological formations and their internal complexities – but also their very emptiness. Here the excesses of MacFarlane's writing are stood on their feet: not the words of landscape but the landscape of words. For MacFarlane the chasm between language and landscape is not a hollow but a "Holloway", a tree-lined glade he may traverse and on whose hearthrug he is able to 'toast his arse'. Celan is one of the twentieth century's most exacting writers but his precision is light years away from clipped scientism and glistening descriptiveness. Instead precision shows itself for what it always must be – which is yearning, which is awareness of language's lack. It is precision as proof of language's un-precision, precision as its own critique. Celan's words speak of a language that distrusts both beauty and words, of a failure of expression, of a chasm which cannot be crossed. In this chasm, words lose their fullness, they echo back into the empty space, a repetition which is both intensifying and mocking.

This 'other' precision is also the precision of Beckett, whose own writing is full of inchoate wanderings, wanderings however which are necessarily eventful and distrusting in their language. They have a perpetually self-destructive attitude towards their own lyricism. This is a lyricism, a precision, born of failure and of restlessness. The impossible space which poetry, which literature, is searching for can only arrive at its precision through the recognition of the impossibility of its search in the first place. To use language well is to use it mistrustfully.

It is clear throughout *Landmarks* that MacFarlane has a deep and genuine regard both for nature and for language. There is no question that his lamentation for the damage being wrought by the development of global capital on the natural landscape, and the concomitant reduction in the richness of terms used to describe that landscape, comes from the same place: a desire to raise awareness and help prevent this process of erosion. However, between the unstable and muddy political foundations of his narrative mode and his implicit trust in language, which leads to the swollen parataxis and vulgar musicality that pervade the book, *Landmarks* is unable to coherently develop its convictions. Macfarlane conceives of a universal landscape word-hoard of Borgesian proportions, but does so without the power that comes from the latter's awareness of his creations' impossibility with words being what they are. He also describes this lexicon as an enormous prose poem, but it is one without the uncomfortable lacuna, the constant lack, the discomfort from which poetry and literature must derive their existence. Instead, one is left with something rather limp, whose purpose is very much unclear, an object rather like the Slovene dictionary from Handke's *Repetition…*

> *There I sat, contemplating the one word, leafing back to the others: was this a map of the areas of the earth or only of their memory—or perhaps even their obituary?*

About the Author:

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