

Changing Your Vision for Good

The Work of Words and Books in
Robert Macfarlane's *Landmarks*

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Abstract

Taking its point of departure in recent considerations of the notion of post-pastoral literature as capable of inducing awe in readers, this article discusses the work of words and books analysed and performed by Robert Macfarlane's *Landmarks* (2015) in terms of vastness and accommodation.

Keywords post-pastoral, awe, (re)enchantment, vastness, accommodation, Robert Macfarlane, language, landscape.

In his book *Pastoral*, Terry Gifford shows that certain literary texts are capable of more than representing our environment, they also change our relationship with our environment by inducing or encouraging a particular stance in us. While these particular texts take as their points of departure both pastoral's tendency to rank and celebrate the country over the city (1999: 2) and anti-pastoral's derogation and dismissal of what it regards as attempts at idealising the real nature of country life, these texts, nevertheless, go "beyond the closed circuit of pastoral and anti-pastoral to achieve a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human." (148) Gifford coins the term post-pastoral for the kind of literary text that is con-

cerned with shaping these new kinds of images and visions of the relationship between man and his environment.

In part, Gifford presents his notion of post-pastoral as a response to Lawrence Buell's call to eco-criticism for "'a mature environmental aesthetics'" (Buell 1995: 32 quoted in Gifford 1999: 146, 147, 149). He agrees with Buell that pastoralism remains key to eco-criticism since it forms "'a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without'" (Buell 1995: 32 quoted in Gifford 1999: 4). The notion of post-pastoral is used by Gifford to refer to texts that are aware of the contradictions inherent in pastoralism, but, nevertheless, forge "a language to outflank those dangers with a vision of accommodated humans, at home in the very world they thought themselves alienated from by their possession of language. (149)

Gifford identifies six features which to varying degrees characterise post-pastoral literature (146-74). They all emphasise the vision changing actions performed by the texts. Thus, post-pastoral texts are said to produce "recognition" (153-56, 156-61), "awareness" (161-63), "conscience" (163-64), and "realisation" (164-74) in the reader. The most ambitious aspect – and the one I find most interesting in the context of art's agency – is the aspect which he finds fundamentally responsible for producing a new vision or image in readers, i.e. "an awe in attention to the natural world." (151-52) Awe signifies "the feeling of solemn and reverential wonder, tinged with latent fear, inspired by what is terribly sublime and majestic in nature, e.g. thunder, a storm at sea" (Oxford 2016, sense 3). According to Gifford, it springs from several sources. It "derives not just from a naturalist's intimate knowledge or a modern ecologist's observation of the dynamics of relationships, but from a deep sense of the immanence in all natural things." (152) While Gifford doesn't disqualify the careful and systematic observation of empirical reality undertaken by amateur and professional students of nature as productive of awe, his emphasis is clearly on the spiritual awareness that earthly things manifest a divine principle. This principle cannot be grasped empirically by any of the five senses, but is only available to a sense that is deeper or more profound – a sense found in post-pastoral texts and prompted in readers.

Gifford's notion of post-pastoral and, more particularly, his ideas that certain literary texts are capable of inducing forms of awe, rev-

erence, wonder, and humility in readers partake of the turn away from looking at art as a representational thing towards appreciating it as an actor, which the present volume of *Akademisk Kvarter* addresses. In this paper, I analyse and discuss the matter of arts's agency with reference to the production of awe in English writer Robert Macfarlane's most recent book *Landmarks* (2015). Macfarlane is often associated with what a 2008 special issue of the literary magazine *Granta* christened *The New Nature Writing*. In contrast to the old nature writing identified as "the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer," the new nature writers are said to deal with their subject "in heterodox and experimental ways" (Cowley 2008: 10). In this essay, I address Macfarlane since he has published widely on the agency of books and, particularly, on how they have helped shape his sense of landscape. His first book, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (2003) outlines e.g. how "the great stories of mountaineering" (1) fashioned him as a boy. Similarly, *The Wild Places* (2008), among other things, concerns how his love of the wild originated in reading the word *wild* as a child (7). Also, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (2012) is a testimony to the enduring influence of "the life and work of Edward Thomas" (1878-1917) on Macfarlane (23). Lastly, in *Holloway* (2012) one of the guides – together with a map of the area – Macfarlane and his friends bring in order to explore the landscapes of sunken paths in south England is a novel (9). *Landmarks* continues – and is perhaps the culmination of – Macfarlane's examination of the agency of texts in relation to their readers. Here he explores the power of words and makes a series of ambitious claims about the transformative power of a dozen writers or so, who have produced "writing so fierce in its focus that it can change the vision of its readers for good, in both senses." (1)¹

But before I turn to Macfarlane, though, I begin by developing aspects of Gifford's notion of awe in order to analyse how it manifests itself in texts. First, I situate it in the historical context of modernity in terms of disenchantment and (re)enchantment. Secondly, I narrow down its constitutive aspects in terms of vastness and accommodation.

The Law of Awe

Gifford's definition of awe with its scientific and a spiritual components sums up Richard Jenkins's reformulation of one of sociolo-

gy's founding ideas, i.e., Max Weber's notion that modernity constitutes an irreversible process leading inevitably to the progressive disenchantment and demystification of the world and to the dominance of rationalism and capitalism over traditional world views (Jenkins 2000, 12). According to Richard Jenkins' paraphrase of Weber's ideas, disenchantment equals "the historical process by which the natural world and all areas of human experience become experienced and understood as less mysterious: defined, at least in principle, as knowable, predictable and manipulable by humans" (Jenkins 2000, 12). However, Jenkins problematizes the linearity and teleology involved in Weber's grand narrative of modernity as the defeat of magic and success of rationalism. He argues that, "the imperialism of formal-relational logics and processes has been, and necessarily still is, subverted and undermined by a diverse array of oppositional (re)enchantments".² As outlined by Gifford, awe exemplifies this double logic. It is disenchanted by the work of the naturalist and the ecologist *and* (re)enchanted as originating from a deep sense of immanence in earthly things.

Contemporary scientific studies of awe allow us to grasp its constitutive features as an emotion or what Gifford would call a deep sense. For instance, social psychologists Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt's study entitled "Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion" (2003) arrive at what they call a "prototype" of awe after reviewing earlier treatments of the subject in the fields of religion, sociology, philosophy, and psychology. They identify "two features [at] the heart of prototypical cases of awe: *vastness*, and *accommodation*" (303). The category of vastness they split into literal and metaphorical components. It involves physical size in the form of, for instance, "loud sounds or shaking ground", on the one hand, and, on the other, social or symbolic size (their examples are fame, authority, and prestige). By the notion of accommodation they refer to the process of "adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience" (304). Prototypical awe, then, "involves a challenge to or negation of mental structures when they fail to make sense of an experience of something vast" (304). The features of vastness and accommodation are implied in Gifford's definition, too, I think. Awe cannot just be assimilated or explained empirically by the scientifically minded. The experience of immanence, which is Gifford's particular example of prototypical vast-

ness, involves the negation of the five senses and instead giving room for what he called a deep sense. Like Gifford, Dacher and Keltner underline the transformative powers of awe, effectively (re) enchanting it.³ They point out that “awe can transform people and reorient their lives, goals, and values” (312) and they advise that “awe-inducing events may be one of the fastest and most powerful methods of personal change and growth”.

Awe and the Work of Words and Glossaries

Like Gifford and Keltner and Haidt, Robert Macfarlane’s *Landmarks* (2015) is also concerned with awe, reverence, and wonder and the opposing tendencies of disenchanting (re)enchantment. The book deals with language as the basis of enchantment and the source of awe. It deals with “the power of language – strong style, single words – to shape our sense of place” (Macfarlane 2015: 1) and with “how reading can change minds, revise behaviour and shape perception” (12). The structure of the book mirrors its basic concern with words and style. Ten chapters are devoted to an analysis and discussion of a selection of 19th, 20th, and 21st century British and North American writers whose work is capable of permanently changing the mind-set of its readers for the better. Between those chapters, nine individual glossaries list “thousands of words from dozens of languages and dialects for specific aspects of landscape, nature and weather”. In the following, I begin by outlining Macfarlane’s idea that individual words and glossaries have the power to inculcate a particular kind of awe by signifying vastness, a kind of intimated immensity that resists assimilation and forces us to accommodate and rearrange our mind-set. Then I take a look at Macfarlane’s reading of a particular book, J.A. Baker’s *The Peregrine*, a book that dramatizes vastness and accommodation on the levels of the action and reading and has been responsible for changing Macfarlane’s outlook.

The individual words have been collected into glossaries because they form part of a “vast vanished, or vanishing, language for landscape” (2). He believes that the loss of a “basic literacy of landscape” (3-4) is accompanied by the loss of “a kind of word magic, the power that certain terms possess to enchant our relations with nature and place” (4). For instance, he speaks about words that enlarge our experience in naming “something conceivable, if not instantly locat-

able”, i.e. words that produce the possibility of naming a specific and precise sensation which has resisted signification or gone unnoticed. Along these lines of enlarging our experience, he also mentions “untranslatable” words from languages generated by people engaged in particular kinds of work (5). Those terms are magical in allowing “us glimpses through other eyes, permit[ting] brief access to distant habits of perception.”

Next to words that work their magic by extending the referential possibilities of our vocabulary and the range of our experience, making both more inclusive of other cultural practises and historical contexts, the words gathered by Macfarlane also enchant poetically (2). Thus, euphony (4) and onomatopoeia (5) are highlighted. Similarly, he mentions, for instance, how forgotten synonyms are capable of revitalising the already known by bringing “new energies to familiar phenomena”. His most ambitious claim concerning the poetic magic worked by some of the words, however, is that they form “topograms – tiny poems that conjure scenes” (6). He gives the following example:

Blinter is a northern Scots word meaning ‘a cold dazzle’, connoting especially ‘the radiance of winter stars on a clear night’, or ‘ice-splinters catching low light’. Instantly the word opens prospects: walking sunwards through snow late on a midwinter day, with the wind shifting spindrift into the air such that the ice-dust acts as a prismatic mist, refracting sunshine into its pale and separate colours; or out on a crisp November night in a city garden, with the lit windows of houses and the orange glow of street light around, while the stars *blinter* above in the cold high air. (6)

Here Macfarlane draws upon principles of signification that elude the standard accounts upon which traditional dictionaries are composed. While, *blinter* works as a sign, he posits a different kind signification. Next to denotation and connotation, he identifies a level of signified that appears to rest on personal associations rather than the conventional and culturally specific system of meanings shared by language users. Taken together the referential, poetic, and topogrammatical functions help to reinstate a sense of awe in relation to

language. Not only is language a vast store of signs that spans experiences that we have forgotten or that we are unfamiliar with, it also works in ways that we tend to overlook. His view of language is certainly difficult to integrate into our quotidian or academic practises of talking and writing about the world. It requires something akin to accommodation to take seriously features such as euphony and the topogram. Macfarlane asks us to rethink the relationship between world, experience and language.

The individual terms are organised into glossaries according to the specific kind of landscape they belong to. Each glossary is headed by a unique and landscape-specific title. Some are found in ordinary usage, e.g. "Uplands" (81) and "Coastlands" (163). Some are intertextual references, e.g. "Flatlands" (37) and "Waterlands" (117). Others again are neologisms, e.g. "Underlands" (195)⁴ and "Earthlands" (279). In general, the headings appear to depart from established ways of signifying landscape in terms of moors, woods, mountains, and marshes, for instance. This principle is continued within each glossary, which contains a number of further subdivisions devised by Macfarlane. For instance, in the first glossary of the book, "Flatlands" (37-53), the terms are grouped according to specific aspects of such landscapes: "Flowing Water" (39), "Mists, Fogs, Shadows" (40), and "Pasture, Transhumance and Grazing" (41-42) to give just three examples. The originality of the glossaries suggests that they are intended as a new kind of writing. Macfarlane himself regards some glossaries as prose-poems (18), and I understand the glossaries in *Landmarks* along the same lines. But apart from this very broad generic label, they do not conform easily to traditional standards of writing. Perhaps they constitute the discourse of a lover of lost landscapes, and perhaps they can be assimilated along the lines of Roland Barthes' *Lover's Discourse* (1978). Consider, for instance, the following entry in Gaelic from the Isle of Lewis: "éit: practice of placing quartz stones in moorland streams so that they would sparkle in moonlight and thereby attract salmon to them in the late summer and autumn" (Macfarlane 2015, 39). Certainly, this entry is reminiscent of Barthes' concept of *figures*, his "outbursts of language" or "fragments of discourse" (Barthes 1978, 3) that form a "code" or "reservoir" or "thesaurus" (6) of linguistic gestures familiar to lovers. But unlike Barthes' lovers, we cannot recognise Macfarlane's figures because they never have been, or

they are no longer, or not yet, part of our discourse and cultural practices. So the glossaries involve a certain amount of accommodation, too, and we must adjust our set of mind to appreciate them. The book includes a space for the newly accommodated reader. The last glossary of the book consists of a number of blank pages left for readers to fill in with future words and words of their own (329-32).

The blend between accommodation and assimilation also surfaces in Macfarlane's account of their purpose. He doesn't believe that they "will magically summon us into a pure realm of harmony and communion with nature" (Macfarlane 2015, 9) Instead, he hopes that his collections of words are capable of "enriching" life, "stimulating" the imagination, and "irrigate[ing]" contemporary sterile conventions of talking about and using landscape. In the following chapter of his book, Macfarlane develops his views further. A return to "animism" (25) or "systematic superstition" is not the idea behind his glossaries, nor is it a valid replacement of the disenchantment diagnosed by Weber (24). Instead, he regards language as "fundamental to the possibility of re-wonderment" and takes seriously its performative powers, and the fact that certain kinds of language can restore a measure of wonder to our relations with nature" (26). Rather than consecrating landscape anew, rather than making it holy once and for all by casting a spell of magical words, Macfarlane's oppositional glossaries of (re)enchantment involves what he calls *counter-deseccration* (15-35).⁵ Counter-deseccration is a form of re-enchantment, then, that works by relativizing existing representations of landscape and wildlife – representations that parade as absolute and without any alternatives. The agency of the glossaries is twofold, then. They demand accommodation as a new form of writing, but allow for integration into oppositional strategies, too.

The Work of Books

Chapter Five of *Landmarks* is entitled "Hunting Life" and concerns J. A. Baker's *The Peregrine*. Originally published to great acclaim in 1967, Baker's book is now a classic and, according to Mark Cocker, regarded as "the gold standard" in the history of British nature writing (Cocker 2010: 4). The chapter falls into nine sections and with one exception they are narrated chronologically around the events of a single day. Framed by accounts of the sighting of per-

egridines, the majority of the chapter outlines Macfarlane's visit to the J. A. Baker Archive at the University of Essex. Here his explorations of Baker's field notes, proof copies, maps, and binoculars inform his discussion of Baker's life, *The Peregrine*, and the power and influence it holds over him.

The chapter opens with three attempts at narrating a single event, i.e. the sighting of a peregrine. The three accounts differ massively in style. The first is short, elliptical, and sparse (139). The second is longer, consisting of full sentences. The third adds more detail and contextualises the sighting (139-40). Macfarlane neither explains his use of multiple frequency nor his stylistic choices, but launches into an account of Baker's life, instead. His account centres on how Baker became a bird watcher, and why he became interested in peregrines in particular. To Baker, partly because of his myopia and his suffering from a particularly debilitating form of arthritis (141, 144), falcons came to signify something analogous to the notion of vastness outlined by Keltner and Haidt (2003). Macfarlane claims that "[f]rom the start, the predatory nature of the falcons, their decisive speed, their awesome vision and their subtle killings all thrilled him. Baker was enraptured" (149). Macfarlane's neologistic pun sums up Baker's complete enchantment by the peregrine well. The biographical sections also narrate Baker's ways of accommodating the experience of awe elicited by peregrines. For instance, Baker resigned from work (151) in order to follow the falcons on a daily basis across the Essex landscape and partake in their "hunting life" (155). He studied WWII aerial photos of Essex in order to begin to see like the peregrine (154). He taught himself ways of tracking the elusive birds of prey (155-56). And he began mimicking their "behaviour and habits" (156) to the extent that they became "first his prosthesis and then his totem" (157), i.e. the falcons became a remedy for his short-sightedness and a species he came to associate himself with.

However, for Baker accommodation also involved a literary aspect, and he found it impossible to assimilate his experiences of the peregrine into existing conventions of nature writing and representation. According to Macfarlane, he devised a new style to fit the falcon "as sudden and swift as the bird" (151). Although he is aware that Baker's unique style, its "shocking energies," and its "hyperkinetic prose" (152), are simply the consequence of a set of linguistic

choices, he is surprised, nevertheless, when he opens a proof copy of the book and discovers the extent to which Baker subjected his writing to rigorous and systematic analysis. The pages of the proof copy are heavily annotated, and

On every page, he [Baker] had also tallied and totalled the number of verbs, adjectives, metaphors and similes. Above each metaphor was a tiny inked 'M', above each simile an 'S', above each adjective an 'A' and above each verb a 'V'. Written neatly in the bottom margin of each page was a running total for each category of word-type, and at the end of each chapter were final totals of usage. 'Beginnings', the first chapter of *The Peregrine*, though only six pages long, contained 136 metaphors and 23 similes, while the one-and-a-half page entry for the month of March used 97 verbs and 56 adjectives. (153)

Thus, Macfarlane's account shows how disenchanting enchantment is at the very heart of Baker's book. In the last instance, the vastness manifested by *The Peregrine* – evoked by Macfarlane in terms of shocking energy and restless movement – and the enchantment produced by Baker are the premeditated results of his carefully monitored distribution of word classes and rhetorical devices. This realisation does not change Macfarlane's attitude to the book, however. The scientific analysis does not allow him to assimilate Baker's prose. Accommodation is an irreversible process and the book has changed the ways he sees landscape for good. It has made him literally follow in Baker's footsteps across Essex (161). One of his books has Baker's "style stooped into its prose". When he sees peregrines and tries to recall the experience, he always does so "at least partly in Baker's language". Thus, we are led to understand that the sighting of the peregrine which opened the chapter depended upon a frame of mind *already* accommodated to Baker. Without Baker's *Peregrine*, that morning's peregrine would have eluded him. Moreover, without Baker's *Peregrine*, his own style would have remained unable to recount the experience satisfactorily.

Macfarlane's chapter on Baker concludes with an outline of an incident that occurred months after his visit to the archive when a pair of falcons made their nest on a window ledge of the library

tower in Cambridge. He outlines how one of his friends gave him the exact directions to the nest, “South Front Floor 6, Case Number 42 (2015, 161)”. The positioning system used here dramatizes the awe inspiring relationship between books and the natural world. For Macfarlane, books literally form the privileged place from which we look at wildlife with awe. Books are awe elicitors. They have the power to resist assimilation by the reader and force us to accommodate.

Conclusion

This essay began by exploring one of Terry Gifford’s contributions to environmental aesthetics, i.e. the idea that post-pastoral texts are texts that act by inducing particular stances and attitudes in readers. More particularly, I singled out what he regards as the fundamental agential aspect of post-pastoral texts, i.e. their capacity for encouraging awe, respect, and humility in attention to our environment. Because of the progressive demystification of the world that constitutes modernity according to classical sociologists, this inculcation of a deep sense of awe performed by post-pastoral texts is necessarily – in Jenkins’ terms – an act of (re)enchantment. (Re)enchantment involves notions of vastness and accommodation, which according to social psychologists are constitutive of prototypical awe. Using the notions of vastness and accommodation, the second part of my essay outlined a way of analysing and discussing the work done by what is arguably a post-pastoral text. Macfarlane’s *Landmarks* works by engaging its readers in two ways. First, it is a collection of words carefully organized into glossaries designed to produce awe. His glossaries succeed in exemplifying that signification is quantitatively and qualitatively much more complex than we usually consider. Vastness according to Macfarlane involves both the idea that the sheer number of signifiers is limitless, and the fact that the nature of signification is other than and much more than the referential one we usually appreciate. This leads to accommodation in readers. We have to change our basic ideas about how our language works. We have to admit that language is central and acknowledge the existence of other linguistic traditions, other principles of signification, and other figures. The book even includes a glossary for the newly accommodated reader to fill in with terms from specific areas of experience to counter des-

ecration. Secondly, his book also analyses and discusses other books as examples of disenchanted enchantment produced by and productive of awe in terms of its prototypical features. Books like Baker's *The Peregrine* originate from a deep sense of awe and are stylistically fashioned in terms of vastness to produce (re)enchantment and accommodation in its readers, changing their vision for good. In Gifford's sense, post-pastoral texts form a significant body of texts for the study of art's agency. In a reading of an example of a post-pastoral text, this essay has outlined how the notions of vastness and accommodation are useful in analysing how texts actually work and succeed in (re)enchancing and inducing awe in readers.

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Notes

- 1 Macfarlane is also a highly esteemed academic working in the field of English Literature. His *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (2007) deals with the subject of nineteenth century British fiction. Moreover, he is a prolific writer of paratexts, e.g. introductions to and reviews of other books on landscape or wildlife. Lastly, he is also a prolific presenter for radio and television where his thoughts are transformed into speech, sounds, and images.
- 2 Jenkins' re-reading of Weber is echoed by many scholars. Joshua Landy and Michael Saler show how the disenchantment of the world is accompanied by the rise of a "thoroughly secular strategy for re-enchantment" (Landy and Saler 2009, 1). Christopher Partridge's two volumes on *The Re-Enchantment of the West* (Partridge 2004, 2006) deal particularly with (re)enchantment in the context of what he calls "the alternative spiritual milieu in the contemporary Western world" (Partridge 2004, 1)
- 3 Specific examples of the disenchanted study of the transformative and accommodation demanding powers of awe, instances where disenchantment is followed by re-enchantment from within, are not difficult to find. To name just two: Harlan Ullman and James Wade outline how "Shock and Awe" tactics can be used by the U.S. Military as "actions that create fears, dangers, and destruction that are incomprehensible to the people at large, specific elements/sectors of the threat society, or the leadership" (Ullman and Wade 1996:110). On the level of the individual, awe has been (re)enchanted as effective way for businesses to enhance the well-being of their time-starved customers (Rudd et al. 2012).

- 4 I credit Macfarlane with the term. But it is also found in Ted Nield's *Underlands: A Journey Through Britain's Lost Landscape* (2014)
- 5 Macfarlane credits Finlay MacLeod with the term (31)