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The Cardinal Points of Robert Macfarlane's Palimpsestuous Walking

Les point cardinaux de l'écriture palimpsetueuse: Robert Macfarlane

Georges Letissier

- In 2017, Manchester museum, in a partnership with the Whitworth and Manchester Art Gallery, hosted an exhibition titled *New North and South*¹ to celebrate shared heritage across continents and develop artistic talent through art installations and events. A group of Pakistani performing artists, banned from entering the UK at the last minute, as a result of England's new, stringent immigration rules, sent a testimony to be displayed instead. On a plain, ruled paper sheet, one could read: 'the North' (top of the page), 'the South' (bottom of the page) 'are divided', printed in red in the middle of the page. Then, as in an afterthought, the word 'still' in blue ink had been interposed between 'are' and 'divided.'² What has, most unfortunately, become a nearly banal incident is testament to the highly politicised nature of the topic of cardinal points. A dimension which Robert Macfarlane, the subject of this article, spells out in no ambiguous terms in an interview with Diane Ackerman: 'Mapping is always partial, and for that reason is always an expression of priority—and often an expression of power' (Ackerman 74).
- Macfarlane is a writer, walker, explorer, academic, climber, caver, and self-proclaimed open-air thinker. He is a travel and nature writer who has published around ten works so far.³ He ranks also among the most publicised, and commercialised authors in the bookshops' 'nature writing' sections which attract an ever-growing number of readers. Ascribing a literary genre to Macfarlane's writings is likely to baffle our standard cardinal directions. Indeed, his works count among the written production which Ingrid Horrocks describes in the following terms:

Nature is not sectioned off in this nonfiction, not treated as though it were separate from daily lives, or as though shared survival was not the most intimate thing imaginable . . . I keep reading and listing Robert Macfarlane and Rebecca Solnit,

whose writing in some way brought me here . . . I notice how much some fiction now sounds like creative nonfiction . . . This is testament to the predicament we are all trapped in, forcing us to follow Donna Haraway's justly famous phrase, for the task that faces all of us is 'staying with the trouble.' Macfarlane's nature is his way of coming to terms with the trouble. (Horrocks 129)

- 3 My encounter with Macfarlane was a serendipitous, unmapped one. It was made whilst working on George Eliot for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which brings us back, through a circuitous route, to cardinal points. There is, evidently, the all too well-known fact that Eliot prioritised the Midlands, with its semantic inflections of middling and middleness, and of course the middle is held in some cultures as the fifth cardinal point; China with its Empire of the Middle springs to mind (Viegnes 8). More interestingly, before becoming a household name as nature writer, Macfarlane was known as a scholar who authored a major study on plagiarism in 19th century fiction, in which Eliot featured prominently.⁴ He argued in particular that Eliot valued the commonplace over and against the Romantic fetishization of originality and that creation for her was chiefly relational: 'Independence must be understood as a function of interdependence' (Macfarlane 2002, 17). Literally, the commonplace, or better common place, is the area we hold in common, a space which is not fenced off by forbidding 'private property' signs for example, or stretches of land given over to shared communal rambling; put differently a topographic transposition of what Jacques Rancière calls the 'common good/space':

Politics begins precisely when one stops balancing profits and losses and worries instead about distributing *common* lots and evening out communal shares and entitlements to these shares, the *axiai* entitling one to community. (Rancière 1995, 5; original emphasis)

- 4 Interestingly, Eliot suggests alternative forms of mapping, which are perhaps tantamount to unmapping and, somehow, herald Macfarlane's own approach to nature writing. In *Felix Holt*, the Victorian writer speaks of motherly love as what can 'enlarg[e] the imagined range for self to move in' (Eliot 1995, 23) and in *Daniel Deronda* she remarks that 'There is a great deal of unmapped country within us which would have to be taken into account in an explanation of our gusts and storms' (Eliot 2014, 233). Admittedly, this subjectification of geography, imbued with emotions and affects, relies on individual perception, private intuition and a proximity with nature, thus inviting other forms of orientation. The latter are closer to the practical experience of people daily confronted to the mystery and hazards of their environment. However, this homespun, traditional lore is fast disappearing, as is the specific vocabulary linked to space, which Macfarlane meticulously collects in the glossaries which he intersperses in his nature writing. Eliot is also known for her iconic citation: 'If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat' (Eliot 2019, 182). Not only do these words call for a radical change of scale, whereby the enlarged, towering perspective of cardinal directions is eclipsed by the teeming multitude of the infinitely small, but they also posit forms of mutualism, symbiosis, and reciprocity existing aside, below and beyond the objective signposting of these cardinal directions. So this is under the aegis of George Eliot that Macfarlane's take on nature writing and his idiosyncratic appropriation of cardinal points will be apprehended in the following.
- 5 The aim of this paper is to establish a line of continuity between Macfarlane's academic work on nineteenth century fiction, Eliot in particular, and his approach to nature

writing. Walking is an embodied experience of space which circumvents the arithmetic coordinates of cardinal directions. It is both 'palimpsestic', as it harks back revealing to the process of layering that produces a palimpsest and 'palimpsestuous' as in the act of wandering, different temporal layers fuse together, inducing a 'type of relationality' (Dillon 4) with the many previous walkers who have trodden on the same paths. Therefore 'palimpsestic' corresponds to the antiquarian desire to uncover testimonies of past ramblings, when 'palimpsestuous' underscores the fact of experiencing the past as present through the act walking. In this perspective, the relationship with nature may be paralleled with the act of reading: 'while a palimpsestic reading seeks to unearth the hidden message of the subtext, a palimpsestuous reading begs for a relational interpretation capable of the complex meaning of a text in constant evolution and change, consequently, yielding new and unstable shades of meaning' (Adán Hernández 54). This connectiveness and relationality, which are the hallmark of Macfarlane's writings on nature walking, are intrinsically Eliotian, as the Victorian novelist's aesthetics relied on: 'wholes composed of parts more and more multiplied and highly differenced, yet more and more absolutely bound together by various conditions of common likeness or mutual dependence' (Eliot 1990, 232).

- 6 The study falls into four parts. First, the cardinal point North is analysed as a specific mindset through a form of subjectivised geography. In a second part, it is shown that Macfarlane toys with the idea of 'walking off the map' and, in so doing, revives topics evoked in Eliot's fiction-writing. Then the emphasis is laid on the crucial act of nature walking and how it incorporates several dimensions: spatial, temporal and somatic. Eventually, in a final looping of the loop the question is raised of what becomes of the North when dealing with the subterranean.

North-Mindedness

- 7 'I am, and have been for as long as I know, north-minded: drawn to high latitudes and high altitudes, and drawn also to those writers and artists for whom northerliness is a mode of perception as well as a geographical position' (Macfarlane 2016, 209). The semantic of north-minded is tell-tale; it links north—a scientific, objective given (it was once referred to as the pole star or magnetic North pole, due to earth rotation)—with a mental disposition that is liable to be poles apart from cardinal directions, as purely abstract, absolute data. Therefore, right from the start, it should be noted that Macfarlane's north is not strictly speaking septentrional, as it also partakes of the experience of mountaineering and all the mountain ranges are not located in the north, let alone the northern hemisphere. Thus, the north amounts to a phenomenological experience, conveyed through what Macfarlane calls 'spare boreal grammar' (Macfarlane 2016, 59), giving examples such as 'the snow driving dim on the blast', 'green as ice', or 'the glass-white shiver/Singing over stone' (Macfarlane 2016, 59–60). These spare, brittle, cutting phrases foreground the reverberation of light. Besides, the North, understood as subjective, sensorial experience, which is not strictly confined to the geographic north, sets a challenge to language. Indeed, because it is chiefly characterised by immensities and repetitions 'unrelieved stretches of snow and ice' both 'huge and 'monotonic' (Macfarlane 2016, 212), the north does not give words foothold or purchase for the purpose of description. How can language be made to grip a landscape consisting of stone, light, snow, ice and bright air; a landscape singularly

devoid of the very diversity that allows for lexical variety, combinations of adjectives, syntactic modulations and suchlike. This so-called northerly scenery is of course common to the two poles, but also to mountains or landlocked high plateaus. And Macfarlane, whose writings are intertextual, intercultural and transgeneric, summons the American poet Robert Lowell to speak of 'the grace of accuracy' (Macfarlane 2016, 212), an umbrella phrase that would be relevant to all the writers who venture to render the experience of the north through speech. Macfarlane even goes as far as to extrapolate 'a shared metaphysics of northerliness' (Macfarlane 2016, 212), which he defines as follows:

An exactness of sight; lyricism as a function of precision; an attraction to the crystalline image; shivers of longing; aurora-bursts of vision, and elegies of twilight. In the northern writers and artists to whose work I constantly return, the north represents not a retreat to an imagined distance, but rather a means of seeing more clearly and thinking more lucidly. (Macfarlane 2016, 212)

- 8 The citation is illuminating because it operates the shift from a cardinal point to a mindset and mode of perception. In short, north-mindedness entails an epistemological disposition; clear-sightedness as a means for a better comprehension of the self and whatever is beyond. Despite its lack of variegated traits, its uniformity of stone and whiteness, the north is highly polysemic, according to Macfarlane. It conflates aesthetic categories: 'lyricism' and 'elegies' with modes of perception 'precision', or degrees of luminosity 'twilight'. It heightens bodily and psychological responses to the surrounding environment, acting as a catalyst, as it were: 'attraction', 'shivers of longing', or 'burst of vision'. The north is not so much a backcloth as an inner mental space dramatising, in the sense of setting in motion, the 'body-mind' (Dewey 1981, 199–205), as if the human body were 'the most wonderful of all the structures of the universe' (Dewey 1982, 351).
- 9 The fact that Macfarlane uses lines from Gerald Manley Hopkins's poetry as epigraph to *Landmarks*: 'Where lies your landmark, seamar, or soul's star!' (Hopkins 196), and borrows 'O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall' from 'No worst, there is none' (Hopkins 100) for the title of his first book *Mountains of the Mind* is revelatory. 'O the mind, the mind has mountains' is actually a truncated segment from one of the Jesuit Poet's so-called 'Terrible Sonnets', suggesting that for Macfarlane landscape is primarily mindscape, and thus situates itself within the romantic tradition, which Hopkins carries to peaks of tragic intensity. In a moment of utter despair, the poet uses the mountain as a metaphor for the awful chasm of mental depression:
- A quality of feeling for which there are no words, as the poet says, emotions that are mind mountains no-man-fathomed. It is a strange and compelling paradox, then, that Hopkins managed to divulge a depth of feeling which is non-verbally communicable: the awful chasm of suicidal depression. (Pouncey 242)
- 10 Said differently, to conjure up the depths of an emotion which cannot be put into words, Hopkins relies on an image pertaining to the sublime to convey the sensation of loss of one's bearings. For Hopkins, the mountain affords a unique, idiosyncratic experience—an inscape, characterised here by acme of despair. As for Macfarlane, he reverses Hopkins's rationale from intensification of the self's torment to depersonalisation through fusion with nature. The mountain is no longer instrumentalised to provide an objective correlative to call up mental agony—it remains fundamentally an absolute, in and of itself. For example the experience of mountaineering, which is closely bound up with north-mindedness, does not close the

self in on itself, but rather affords an escape from the self that seems to be disembodied, by being lifted bodily into immensities of whiteness:

Those who have travelled in high mountains or to the poles are likely to be familiar with the white-out: the point at which snow, cloud and blizzard combine such that the world dissolves into a single pallor . . . space is depthless. Even gravity's hold feels loosened: slope and fall-lines can only be inferred by the tilt of blood in the skull. It felt . . . as if we were flying in white space. (Macfarlane 2016, 67)

- 11 That said, in a 2019 interview Macfarlane struck a less elating note, since being north-minded entails being on the forefront of ecological disasters: the thawing poles, the deglaciating peaks, the melting of eternal snows and the disappearance of the permafrost in the Anthropocene or Capitalocene age. The Austrian philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the term 'solastalgia' to label the state of distress induced by the effects of climate breakdown on the environment.⁵ Unlike nostalgia, which is the pain caused by the fact of leaving one's beloved homeplace, 'solastalgia' concerns the psychic torment brought about by watching an environment or landscape change towards the point of unrecognisability around oneself. Therefore, the north, as environmental reality, mythic construction or polysemic linguistic sign is threatened to disappear. If anything, Macfarlane's take on the north, as a plural entity, covers a whole range of perspectives. It may draw from various cultural and literary sources. However, it never shuns the urgent pressures of the here and now. Is there a line of escape from climatological disasters? Probably not! Yet, as Macfarlane demonstrates, some people have toyed with the idea of walking off the map for a long time.

'Walking off the Map' (Macfarlane 2008, 168–198)

- 12 Walking off the map, not being accountable for one's place, let alone locatable, is the type of wishful thinking easily indulged in, especially when hypertechnological societies are increasingly enforcing ubiquitous control through surveillance systems. On the other side, chancing upon an uncharted spot nostalgically revives childhood adventure plays. Ironically, though, it is technology which now gives the possibility of doing away with maps altogether, thanks to the daily use of navigation apps. Compass directions become irrelevant when what matters are the transactional and functional skills of processing the input from GPS units. Traditional cartography is superseded by the more pragmatic, hands-on approach consisting in accessing direct digital information, without having to bother about the larger picture, i.e., without having to work out cardinal directions from a map. Incidentally, neuroscientists have now established that our spatial cognition may be impaired as a result. This is actually the lure of dispensing with maps, the Promethean impulse of not being shackled by the gridwork of cartography, which Macfarlane broaches in his 'walking off the map' section of *Mountains of the Mind*.
- 13 As is nearly always the case, Macfarlane is both historical and intertextual. He records two seemingly contradictory attitudes which turn out to be causally related ultimately. Firstly, the desire to be the first to discover an uncharted spot, a *terra incognita*, and to establish one's posterity as discoverer and, secondly, the correlative crave to shelter in an unknown place beyond anyone's reach, thus forestalling any likelihood of being ever pinned down on a map. What is common between the two is the desire for novelty, 'the desires for priority and originality which are so entrenched in the Western

imagination' (Macfarlane 2008, 176). And this is where George Eliot comes in again because, as previously observed, she favoured the 'common', prioritising webs of connections and mutual endeavour, over individual feats. This entails that the fascination exerted by *terra incognita* is narcissistic or driven by cultural hegemony. To put it in plain, simple terms, it stems from the lure to project one's north, south, east and west, in short all one's cultural baggage, on to an imaginatively malleable space: 'Like Echo's cave, the unknown will answer back with whatever you shout at it' (Macfarlane 2008, 175). The 'blank space' on the map of the heartland of Africa that Charlie Marlow dreams of filling in with British colours, in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, is probably the best-known illustration of this expansionist impulse triggered by a self-seeking quest for personal achievement.

- 14 However, once the task of gridding and girdling the whole globe has been completed, imagination is left in a state of frustration. This despondency over the dwindling stretches of the unknown is captured through the character of Will Ladislav in Eliot's *Middlemarch*, about whom Macfarlane quotes: 'he should prefer not to know the sources of the Nile, and that there should be some unknown regions preserved as hunting grounds for the poetic imagination.' (Macfarlane 2008, 192 and Eliot 2019, 75) The thirst for mapping segued into the crave to walk off the map, in other words the desire to preserve unmappable areas over which the mind might stray and wander freely. Eliot's answer was to flag the tantalising promise of 'the unmapped country within us' (Eliot 2014, 233), Macfarlane, for his part, more pragmatically advocates alternative- or perhaps counter- mapping.

Countermapping/Alternative mapping: *The Old Ways*

- 15 Macfarlane opened *The Old Ways*, his third book, with two maps, the section titled 'Map 1' (I-IV) consists of a fragmented copy of William Smith's 1815 geological map 'A Delineation of the Strata of England and Wales' and the following section 'Map 2' (V-VIII) reproduces John MacCulloch's 1840 'A Geological Map of Scotland', broken down into four subsidiary maps. Interestingly, page IX of this cartographic threshold displays a lone walker with a stick, seemingly lost on a boundless beach at low tide. The splintering of maps into smaller units, either magnifying a spot or giving decentered perspectives to see, induces a sensation of defamiliarity from what is expected to be guiding posts at the book's opening. Indeed, it takes some time and effort to work out the connections between the successive maps and, once this is done, the interest in geographic signposting is likely to be eclipsed by the overall effect resulting from the chromatic layout and the line distribution of these successive maps. The reader metaphorically plods along these consecutive maps—unless he or she decides to skip them altogether—just like the walker in the black and white picture treads wearily on the wet sand. Therefore, these maps are not so much there to indicate the ways and paths that are to be followed all along the subsequent pages, as they are tools or utensils, partaking to the paraphernalia of rambling. This may be construed as the first warning that, in what follows, maps are not to be apprehended merely as neutral pragmatic and utilitarian instruments for the purpose of finding some guidance, but rather as proof that maps are ways of encoding and regulating space, according to epistemological, political or ideological agendas. This is why Macfarlane breaks up and fragments his maps in the first pages of *The Old Ways*, so that our attention should be

drawn to peripheral, specific areas which may pass unnoticed at first glance. It is tempting to see in this subdivision of the main map the equivalent of the parergon in painting.⁶ Indeed, the dynamic originates from the margin, the frame, i.e., from fragments of the main map which are magnified to underscore spots which may not arrest our attention at the beginning.

- 16 Then, by delving into history, Macfarlane opposes two ways of relating to space, i.e. the commercial and military: 'The growth of the Roman imperium and the consequent growth of the European road system transformed the political geography of Europe' (Macfarlane 2013, 94) and the migratory and nomadic: 'Peregrini—wandering devouts—travelled by boat on their pilgrimages, making landfall on distant islands and headlands' (Macfarlane 2013, 95). Precisely, non-utilitarian displacement, of the peregrinating sort, is mostly what *The Old Ways* is all about. Geography as discovery, more than as conquest, in which cardinal directions are less crucial than what Macfarlane refers to as 'hodology', i.e. the 'study of roads and pathways' (Macfarlane 2013, 367) or, more poetically 'footfall as knowledge' (Macfarlane 2013, 11).⁷
- 17 Thus, *The Old Ways* is primarily concerned with venturing on trails unregistered on Ordnance Survey maps and letting oneself be guided by the elements, rather than by the compass, when getting lost; in other words, trusting one's celestial flair rather than a plain needle. This is obviously still orientation which is sought after, but the process is now inflected by mysticism and imbued with a form of mystery. Orientation becomes akin to interpretation: 'The way-marking of old paths is an esoteric lore of its own' (Macfarlane 2013, 15). In this perspective, paths are like stories, and reciprocally (Macfarlane 2013, 104). Different temporal layers are superimposed on these paths and lanes which, by the same token, also turn out to be multisensorial. However, the multisensorial is an experiential dimension which can hardly be transcribed through the coding of maps, as Macfarlane is keen to remind the reader: '[Francis Galton] wanted to give travellers a phenomenal impression of the lands they visited. Maps should somehow duplicate the smells, scents and sounds of a place' (Macfarlane 2013, 185).
- 18 Furthermore, the palimpsestuous dimension of landscape as timescape/mindscape is noticeable through ghostly or blind roads, whose memory survives through toponyms or vestigial traces scattered here and there. Such thorough diachronic knowledge of the terrain presupposes a form of mental close-mapping⁸ only accessible to the locals and likely to exceed the professional cartographers' technical competence, because it is predicated on rootedness. What is crucial is the organic, embodied relation to space according to which the environment is decisive in shaping the individual. 'The space has entered me' (Macfarlane 2013, 110), writes Macfarlane citing Tim Robinson, the English writer, artist and cartographer known for having drawn exceptionally detailed maps of the Aran Islands, The Burren, and Connemara. It is the intrinsic link between life and land, bio and geo (the earth) which is decisive, whenever mapping is not solely confined to collecting data. Interestingly, Macfarlane refers to Walter Benjamin's concept of biogeography, in *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehn hundert* (*A Berlin Childhood in 1900*): 'Walter Benjamin floats the idea of representing his own life cartographically: "I have long, indeed for years," writes Benjamin, "played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life—bios—graphically on a map"' (Macfarlane 2013, 32). What could have been the function of cardinal directions in such a never completed, alternative project of mapping? Would they have been relegated to the function of moral beacons? For

example, 'to go West' for running to one's ruin by committing excesses, as opposed to 'to find true North', for getting on the right direction and, of course, the necessity to never forget that 'East is East and West is West', etc.

- 19 If 'Paths are the habits of a landscape' (Macfarlane 2013, 16) they need not follow a course predicated on cardinal points' coordinates. For example, Macfarlane aestheticises a walk on the shore line by calling up the curved sand ridges redolent of William Hogarth's serpentine or ogee line of beauty: 'exquisite in its functionless and repetitive elegance; a line that drew the eye onwards' (Macfarlane 2013, 73). Any idea of a linear progress towards a set target fixed by the points of the compass is forsaken and the writer walker and his friends give themselves over to the insouciance of a pointless perambulation: 'With so few orientation points and so many beckoning paths, we were finding it hard to stay on course' (Macfarlane 2013, 73). Therefore, it is not surprising that Macfarlane should mention Eric Ravilious, a watercolourist of the 1930s, who is known for his representation of the meandering paths of Wiltshire, noticeable for the omnipresence of whiteness. The very whiteness, which was to become associated with the South country, celebrated by Edward Thomas. However, in the case of Ravilious, this passion for whiteness, first associated with the Wiltshire chalk, was to develop into a fascination which pushed the artist to volunteer to go fighting in the North in 1939: 'The colour white—or if not colour, or atmosphere, or absence—seems to have possessed a particular power of attraction for him: it was there first in the chalk of the south, and later in the ice of the north' (Macfarlane 2013, 299). Looping the loop, after a quick foray into the South, the North provides a fitting transition to the last part of this exploration.

Underland

- 20 *Underland* has been hailed as the long-awaited sequel to *The Old Ways* and its counter- or alternative, mapping. This time though, Macfarlane escapes the earth surface to undertake catabatic journeys into caves, catacombs, mine pits, burial chambers and so forth. These expeditions into subterranean spaces could exclude any reference to cardinal directions, as the experience of getting below the ground is not predicated on surface orientation. However, the book's last section is titled 'Haunting (The North)', firstly for geographical reasons as it describes three Scandinavian spots, the Lofoten islands in Northern Norway, the calving glaciers and melting snow of Kulusuk in Greenland and Onkalo's repository for nuclear waste in South West Finland; and, secondly, because it affords a plunge into deep time, through a confrontation with timescales far beyond existing computational measures. Moreover, these septentrional locations dramatise current environmental issues between, on the one hand, the return to the surface of long-frozen objects and animal remnants, as a result of melting ice and, on the other, the dread of not managing to keep nuclear waste hermetically sealed inside their underground vaults or sarcophagi. Even if the north is not the exclusive spot on earth to dump contaminated substances, its vast desolate stretches, far from densely populated areas, prove especially convenient. Seen from this perspective, the north is associated with the dread of the unburied, or the unburiable, a haunting anxiety fit to disrupt our relationship to temporality.
- 21 Most of the cave paintings still extant are located in South-West France or Northern Spain, because in the north, rocks were buried under glaciers which erased

inscriptions. The north, however, is richer in igneous and metamorphic rock, a geological reality which A.S. Byatt uses to maximum narrative efficiency in her short story 'A Stone Woman'.⁹ The Lofoten caves, visited by Macfarlane in what amounts to an archeological, anthropological and literary expedition, are located in liminal, transitional places on the coastline. Reaching them involves passing through the Moskstraumen: 'one of the strongest whirlpool systems in the world' (Macfarlane 2020, 257), a terrifying prospect which can be imagined by reading Edgar Allen Poe's 'A Descent into the Maelstrom'. In this narrative, the eponymous maelstrom turns out to be a gateway to the core of the earth, inducing metaphysical speculations on human finitude through cosmic vertigo. Fact and fiction overlap in the northerly subterranean areas visited by Macfarlane, to such an extent that the compass rose makes no sense since the horizontal plane of cardinal directions is replaced by a vertical *axis mundi*, whereby the universe is divided into three layers with an upper and lower spirit realm, connected to the living present. Besides, the wall paintings located in coastal environments or ecotones depict 'rites of passage, permitting mortal movement—through the membrane of the stone—to the cosmic underland or overland' (Macfarlane 2020, 266). Situating oneself in time and space in these surroundings is akin to no less than an ontological ordeal, and the proximity of the Moskstraumen Maelstrom is likely to give rise to the sensation that one's destiny is ominously poised on the brink of the unknown. To quote Macfarlane 'the Maelstrom spins and unspins' (Macfarlane 2020, 279), which of course conjures up the memory of the famous Fates of Greek mythology: '*The hands of the dead press through the stone from the other side, meeting those of the living palm to palm, finger to finger. . .*' (Macfarlane 2020, 279; original emphasis).

- 22 To all intents and purposes, the first section of 'Haunting (The North)', dedicated to the Lofoten archipelago, remains steeped in an anthropocentric tradition, whereby landscapes and sceneries reflect mindsets, trigger introspective moments or elicit metaphysical reflections. This is made clear through occasional confessional remarks such as 'For a long time after those days at the [Norwegian] cave . . . I find myself unable to shake the sense that I have left one of my selves back in the bay—left a figure on the shore' (Macfarlane 2020, 286). Such foregrounding of the self resonates with the subjective bias in the Romantic treatment of nature, persisting even in contemporary approaches such as 'Romantic ecology' or 'green romanticism'.¹⁰ Likewise, this inscription of the self, aggrandised by the spectacular manifestation of an indomitable nature, is consonant with the eighteenth-century theory of the Sublime. However, confronted to the unprecedented damage and irreversible destruction caused by human activities in the age of the anthropocene, it would seem that literature increasingly calls for an effacement of the centrality of human agency and control. As far as writing goes, this may entail a radical change of perspective, consisting in gesturing towards impersonality and giving up on character-driven plotting. This could be one of the means to humbly 'live with the trouble', to summon once again Donna Haraway, whom Macfarlane quotes in one of his interviews:

Donna Haraway's justly famous phrase for the task that faces all of us is "staying with the trouble." There is no prelapsarian state of nature to be returned to, or even briefly accessed. It is impossible now to write from outwith a context of damage, decline, and injustice. (Ackerman 77)

- 23 Precisely, 'Haunting (The North)' propounds a shift from what Macfarlane called 'North-minded(ness)' in *Landmarks* (2015) to a North that is spoiled and defiled, a north

that is unhinged and beyond control, and carries the lethal script engineered by man's greed for power. To this extent, 'Haunting', correlated with the North in the title, qualifies as hauntology, in the Derridean acceptance:

This element [which we take here as the North] is neither living nor dead, present or absent: it spectralizes. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death. It requires, then, what we call, to save time and space rather than just to make up a word, *hauntology*. (Derrida 63; original emphasis)

- 24 'Haunting's last three subsections 'The Blue of Time' and 'Meltwater', on the melting of glaciers in Greenland, and the 'Hiding Place', on Onkalo's first permanent nuclear waste site in South West Finland, are striking instances of the north as 'hauntology'. In the first case, with the thawing ice, 'troublesome history thought long since entombed is emerging again' (Macfarlane 2020, 330). This, of course, calls to mind Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, on which Derrida's *Specters of Marx* opens and, in the 'Hiding Place', the nuclear waste sarcophagus that 'is intended to maintain its integrity without future maintenance for 100,000 years, able to endure a future Ice Age' (Macfarlane 2020, 398) also unhinges our relation to time. In both cases, human agency is eclipsed, and the present short-circuited, whilst the infinite span of past and future, not amenable to human measurements, appears, to say the least, as mind-boggling.
- 25 In a literary tour de force, Lawrence Norfolk in his 1996 historical novel *The Pope's Rhinoceros* succeeded in delaying the introduction of characters by dramatising nature's activities in the frozen immensities of the Arctic:

This sea was once a lake of ice. High mountains overlooked a glacial plain frosted with snow and scoured by the freezing wind. Granite basins curved up from under the ice-tonnage to rim it with irregular coasts. In ages to come, boulder waste and till will speak of the ice pack's tortuous inching, over buried rock and sandstone; moraines and drumlins of advances and recession that gouge out trenches and shunt forward ridges. (Norfolk 3)

- 26 Something comparable occurs in the 'The Blue of Time' and 'Meltwater' sections of 'Haunting (The North)', except that the real-life characters are not so much absent as thrown back and relegated to a secondary, ancillary position, as it is *nature* that keeps the upper hand and determines the narrative's structure and poetics. For example, the chain of concatenated events, often fiction's mainstay, according to the so-called *post hoc ergo propter hoc* principle, is upset by the unpredictability inherent in 'the changes in the weather, the changes in the ice, and the consequent changes in the people themselves' (Macfarlane 2020, 335). The Inuits have even coined a word, '*uggianaqtuq*—meaning "to behave, unpredictably"' (Macfarlane 2020, 335) to acknowledge the shaping role of the weather on their mindset. The principle could perhaps even be enlarged to *Underland* as a whole, as its structure seems more serendipitous than predetermined. It is also striking that Macfarlane's prose cannot help being self-reflexive, because language is an obstacle that must be constantly tackled, if only because there are no prior texts to draw from, and the referent cannot be measured and encompassed by means of our existing scales: 'Up there, language seems impossible, impertinent, sliding stupidly off this landscape. Its size makes metaphor and simile seem preposterous. It is *like* nowhere I have ever been. It shucks the story, leaves the usual forms of meaning-making derelict' (Macfarlane 2020, 361–362; original emphasis). In a sense, such long unknown and uncharted immensities would call for new cosmogonies, however cosmogony, a mythological narrative to

account for the origin of the world, postulates a form of human ascendancy, which, in these boundless stretches of whiteness, seems to be hubristic: 'the notion of human dominance over the planet seems greedy, delusory' (Macfarlane 2020, 362).

- 27 Memory, traditionally a human prerogative, is vested in ice. This memory is neither rhetoric, nor metaphoric but quantitative; days of sunshine, temperature in the cloud, the chemical composition in the air etc. Ice also goes as far back in time as the holocene and the Stone Age:

Once you know how to read its archive, it is legible as far back—as far down—as the ice goes. Trapped air bubbles preserve details of atmospheric composition. The isotopic content of water molecules in the snow records temperature. Impurities in the snow—sulphuric acid, hydrogen peroxide—indicate past volcanic eruptions, pollution levels, biomass burning, or the extent of sea ice and its proximity. (Macfarlane 2020, 339)

- 28 This is why, as a recording and storage media, ice compares favourably with hard disks or terabyte blocks which preserve digital data but constantly require updating as a result of their fast obsolescence. Ice consists in superimposed strata of snow that have sintered (i.e., solidified into mass) under the pressure of new snowfalls. The ice crystals which are formed are like so many burial chambers keeping a record of the atmosphere when the snow first fell; tiny museums, as it were, or reliquaries. Macfarlane borrows from Thomas Browne, the seventeenth century polymath, the term 'conservatories' which is redolent of home-made preservation of perishables, long before the invention of fridges (Macfarlane 2020, 351–352). Because of this capacity to hoard remnants of the past and keeps up vestiges of 'cobalt meltwater' (Macfarlane 2020, 356) at the foot of glaciers, Macfarlane speaks about 'The Blue of Time' (Macfarlane 2020, 356). The author even resorts to geochemistry: 'Ice is blue because when a ray of light passes through it, it hits the crystal structure of ice and is deflected, bounces off into another crystal and is deflected again.' (Macfarlane 2020, 385). However, this poetic vein, afforded by science, should not obfuscate the warning signals sent by the ice cap: 'it tells—tells us that we live on a fickle planet, capable of swift shifts and rapid reversals' (Macfarlane 2020, 338).

- 29 The term 'unweather', from the Old English *unweder* (Macfarlane 2020, 334), describes weather that is so unusual that it seems to originate from another place or time altogether. Over the past few years, it has become the rule more than the exception and one of the consequences of climate change is that pools of meltwater form on glaciers. Because this meltwater is above freezing, it warms the ice, and bores holes into glaciers. The eternal frozen winter gives way to an ever-changing morass reconfiguring geographic contours whilst our vision of the North which is increasingly out of sync with reality, becomes mythology. Drawing from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* in which a watchman stares at the horizon year in year out, to spot the brazier that will tell of the fall of Troy, before he finds himself struck dumb and unable to articulate a single word, when the momentous event does occur, Macfarlane observes the all-pervasive silence in the face of the impending disaster. The cause may not be fully intentional, indeed Sianne Gay, a cultural theorist whose 2005 essay *Ugly Feelings* the author cites, hypothesises that when confronted to extreme situations, humans tend to experience 'thick speech', in other words a degradation of communication skills: 'A drastic slowdown and recursion of language occurs . . . Tenses work against each other. There is a backflowing, a loss of causal drive, a gathering of hesitations and stutters. We speak an eddying speech, cloyed to the point of *congealing*' (Macfarlane 2020, 364; emphasis

added). A most apt choice of word under the circumstances! Ironically, it could be argued that the eternity of a forever frozen Northscape is being replaced by a potentially lethal fake eternity, the burial of nuclear waste at Onkalo in Finland, the last step of Macfarlane's exploration of underland spaces in the North. Is the repository a cop out or a responsible choice? Macfarlane leaves the question "Are we being good ancestors...?" (Macfarlane 2020, 410; original emphasis) pending.

Conclusion

30 From north-mindedness to the north as hauntology, this paper has plotted a meandering survey of Macfarlane's mapping and cardinal directions. Through the trope of the palimpsest, which applies equally to George Eliot's subtext and to landscape, it has been argued that space is treated throughout as common place, i.e., as relational and subjectively reconfigured through webs of connection. The top-down approach, whereby cardinal points are regulatory benchmarks, both spatial and ideological, is reversed because what counts is the immediacy of the relation with space; a sensory, experiential apprehension of place, epitomised by 'footfall as knowledge' (Macfarlane 2013, 11). This calls for an immersive experience of space in which cardinal points, when they do happen to be summoned up at all, tend to be invested with an esoteric dimension, for example the North Star, polaris, as part of a cosmic mystique, possibly harking back to Shakespeare. The north, which is omnipresent throughout, is less inflected by an ideological bias than it is a pliable mental disposition, a memory garnered from miscellaneous encounters, both physical and textual. It is also primarily seen as a phenomenological response to the environment. Not only could Macfarlane's approach be described by using Guy Debord's concept of drift (*dérive*), if the concept can be transposed to a non-urban space, but the contemporary nature writer is also remarkable through his abrupt changes of perspectives and paradigms; his capacity to shift our cardinal point coordinates, as it were. In the *Old Ways*, within the same section, 'Limestone', rambling shifts from East Anglia, with scattered debris from World War Two, to Ramallah, where the prospect of seeing 'artefacts of war as museum objects, rather than as live threats' is receding daily (Macfarlane 2013, 211).

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NOTES

1. <https://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=31583> (accessed 18.12.2023).
2. On a label next to the displayed inscription, the visitors could read 'Tentative Collective were commissioned by the Gallery as part of the exhibition *New North and South* in 2017 to make a work in the form of a performance lecture. When they were denied a visa to travel from Pakistan to carry out the commission, they sent this work in their place.'
3. *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), *The Wild Places* (2007), *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (2012), *Landmarks* (2015), *The Gifts of Reading* (2016), *The Lost Words: A Spell Book* (together with the artist Jackie Morris, 2017), *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (2019), and *Ness*, also in 2019.

Macfarlane regards *Ness* as Underland's companion piece, it is a dystopian prose-poem (*Ness* is a shingle spit on the Suffolk coast), and the work is illustrated by Stanley DONWOOD.

4. Robert MACFARLANE's thesis was published under the title *Original Copy. Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth Century Literature*, Oxford: OUP, 2007.
5. See *Solastalgia. An Anthology of Emotion in a Disappearing World*, ed. Paul BOGARD, foreword by Glenn ALBRECHT (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023).
6. 'A parergon is against, beside and above and beyond the ergon, the work accomplished, the accomplishment of the work, but it is not incidental; it is connected to and cooperates in its operation from the outside' (DERRIDA 1979, 20).
7. 'Hodology' (from the Greek 'hodos', meaning 'ways') is a complex notion, which has been used both in psychology and philosophy. According to Jean-Paul SARTRE, who draws from Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin, all individuals bear a 'hodological map' because they exist in a given environment. This means that they possess a sub-cognitive, lived sense of the pathways which make up their familiar surroundings. This lived sense of space depends upon their preferred paths, a compromise mingling different aspects, such as shortest distance, security, minimal effort or maximum experience.
8. One which is concerned with the topographic and historical singularity of a limited area, without being determined by the wider perspective of regional or national mapping.
9. A.S. BYATT, *Little Black Book of Stories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003, 127-83).
10. See Kevin HUTCHINGS, 'Ecocriticism in British Romantic Studies', *Literature Compass* 4/1 (2007): 172-202.

ABSTRACTS

What is the common point between Robert Macfarlane, the specialist of George Eliot, and Robert Macfarlane, the celebrated author of nature walking experiences. The answer lies probably in the communal dimension of walking. The top down approach, whereby cardinal points are regulatory benchmarks, both spatial and ideological, is reversed by an immersive approach. What counts is the immediacy of the relation with space; a sensory, experiential apprehension of place, epitomised by 'footfall as knowledge.' In a world controlled by geolocation, Macfarlane toys with the idea of 'walking off the map'. If the appeal of the North was foundational for the contemporary nature writer, the North soon came to stand for a mindset rather than for a specific geographic area. Macfarlane's relation to the cardinal points is complex; he lends them a near mystical value in *The Old Ways. A Journey on Foot* before engaging in metageographical reflection in *Landmarks*. Finally, by plunging underground, Macfarlane powerlessly witnesses the ecological disaster of the anthropocene from the Deep North.

Quel est le point commun entre Robert Macfarlane, spécialiste de George Eliot et Robert Macfarlane l'auteur adulé de récits de randonnées pédestres. La réponse tient probablement dans la dimension collective de la marche. L'approche hiérarchique, en vertu de laquelle les points cardinaux sont des repères régulateurs, spatiaux et idéologiques, se trouve renversée par une expérience immersive du lieu. Ce qui importe c'est un rapport sensoriel, phénoménologique à l'espace, qui pourrait se résumer par la formule : « la connaissance acquise au fil des pas ». Dans un monde contrôlé par la géolocalisation, Macfarlane évoque la possibilité de s'abstraire des cartes. Si l'attrait du nord a été pour lui déterminant au départ, ce nord en est vite venu à

désigner une disposition d'esprit plutôt qu'un lieu géographique. La relation que Macfarlane entretient aux points cardinaux est complexe, il leur prête une valeur quasi mystique dans *The Old Ways. A Journey on Foot*, avant de se livrer à des réflexions métagéographiques dans *Landmarks*. Enfin, en plongeant dans les tréfonds terrestres, il observe impuissant, à partir du Grand Nord, le désastre écologique de l'anthropocène.

INDEX

Keywords: Robert Macfarlane, George Eliot, mapping, cardinal directions, the common, palimpsest, north-mindedness, hodology, solastalgia, biogeography

Mots-clés: Robert Macfarlane, George Eliot, cartographie, points cardinaux, le commun, palimpseste, nordicité, hodologie, solastalgie, biogéographie

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