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The upland bogs and mires are aesthetically difficult places. As Emily Brady observed of the Icelandic landscape, the classic categories of the agreeably beautiful, the challenging sublime or the recuperation of disorder into the picturesque say little about landscapes that might be deemed ugly. It is perhaps not surprising that in Iceland the mires and bogs are presented on maps by a melange of symbols for meadows on the one hand and marshland on the other.

These have ‘proved themselves appealing to twelvetimes. As Emily Brady observed of the Icelandic landscape, the classic categories of the agreeably beautiful, the challenging sublime or the recuperation of disorder into the picturesque say little about landscapes that might be deemed ugly. It is perhaps not surprising that in Iceland the mires and bogs are presented on maps by a melange of symbols for meadows on the one hand and marshland on the other.

The upland peatbogs of England seem equally semiotically unstable as they are physically. The words for them though coined from the Old Norse of mýrr to the Middle English of mires from thence to moss and mire. These are terms that suck in sets of negative connotations – cropping up in myth and literature as the beyond of civilisation, the wild and the irrational.

As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has so ably shown they have often functioned as the solid ground on which philosophy can rise – its unchanging obsolete other – that invokes a romantic sense of expansive time extending into the geologic past and forwards. It was thus Leopold’s realisation that “only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf.” To think of a world not organised around humanity, a less anthropocentric vision, takes a re-reading of eyes onto processes and durations seen from different angles. The movement of mountains wandering across the globe, their rise and fall, shows that nothing is really stable, that even the most rigid and solid is entangled in global process. But in a timescale of eons the appeal of rock is that it perdures, that it appears adamantine and resistant, as obdurate and unyielding.

But the high places here are not rocky mountains, but hummocks. How then the beguiling multiplicity in which so much ‘nature writing’ luxuriates. These denuded landscapes though call forth a sense of being an unfinished world: a composition – a poesis – and one that literally can’t be seen as a simple repository of systemic effects imposed on an innocent world but has to be traced through the generative modalities of impulses, daydreams, ways of relating, distractions, strategies, failures, encounters, and workings of all kinds.

The peat landscape here acts. We might ask it what has it known? The earth here is both a wandering and a grounding, a name and a substance. Moss Flats speaks of the wild places, and the high places, yet its curiously alien and bare surface renders the matter of the earth apparent.

For her then science and as she terms it ‘Geography’ is the space of the map, which is regulated by measurable abstract coordinates, that is abstracted from its lived qualities. By contrast she points to a version of landscape that is a place revealed by sensation, which she terms it ‘Geography’ is the space of the map, which is regulated by measurable abstract coordinates, that is abstracted from its lived qualities. By contrast she points to a version of landscape that is a place revealed by sensation, which

Bare life in测 the Myrr, Meos, and Mire

Mike Crang

Erthe toce erthe wyth wyth
Erthe other erthe to the wyth wyth
Erthe leye erthe in earth through.
Tho heuede erthe of erthe erthe ynoh.
Erthe leyde erthe in erthene throh.
Erthe toc of erthe erthe wyth woh.

It is in their midst that the peat landscape here acts. We might ask it what has it known? The earth here is both a wandering and a grounding, a name and a substance. Moss Flats speaks of the wild places, and the high places, yet its curiously alien and bare surface renders the matter of the earth apparent.

For her then science and as she terms it ‘Geography’ is the space of the map, which is regulated by measurable abstract coordinates, that is abstracted from its lived qualities. By contrast she points to a version of landscape that is a place revealed by sensation, which has no fixed coordinates but transforms and moves as a body passes through it. Art then in this vision should not depict matter but enable it to resonate, intensify and become more vivid. In a different vein this is to discover ‘wonder-full geomorphology’.

One can find others looking to peat landscapes in this light. Rachel Giese’s The Donegal Pictures tries to both precision bogs as a sensory experience and use their dynamic texturing and depth, their apparent (entropic) disorganisation alongside striations from turf cutting them to evoke a haptic visibility where the visible can also become tactile (subjective and close) instead of remaining solely optical (objective and dispersed). Alternatively performance art with water by Minty Donald looked to engage the fluidity of matter. Taking samples from rivers, but also the everyday landscape of puddles and drips and dribbles, the best term to sum up their practice was through the Scottish colloquial phrase ‘guddling about’ for giving voice to nature, and evoking play through onomatopoeia.

To return to the opening poem, what we have are multiple worlds and instabilities under the term earth – where we are buried, where things come to rest, where we share the fabric of the world, where excavation is violence. As Jeffrey Cohen notes ‘the lyric insists upon the inherent metaphoricity of the material as well as the sheer materiality of metaphor.’ The earth here is also a recording device for the seasons and climates past – though one that takes science to read the beautiful section drawings of hags then sit alongside sparse scientific photography. It is a landscape at once bare and yet its gyreality in which so much ‘nature writing’ luxuriates. These denuded landscapes though call forth a sense of being an unfinished world: a composition – a poesis – and one that literally can’t be seen as a simple repository of systemic effects imposed on an innocent world but has to be traced through the generative modalities of impulses, daydreams, ways of relating, distractions, strategies, failures, encounters, and workings of all kinds.

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Notes

1 Various translations of this Middle English poem can be found online. My favourite for its sense and style: Earth took of earth with ill. Earth other earth gave earth with a will. Earth laid earth in the earth stock still. Then earth in earth had of earth its fill.


7 Bogland Seamus Heaney, in Door into the Dark 1969, Longman.


12 Smith, op.cit. pages 24-25


14 Groz page 72.


18 Cohen page 6.
