

Walking off the Map, or the *arrière-pays*

John Dixon Hunt

Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania, USA
jdhunt@design.upenn.edu

Abstract

The essay explores what some recent writers have seen as the actual and metaphysical meanings of walking and how it impacts how we walk and design in both undesigned and designed spaces.

Keywords

Robert Macfarlane, Yves Bonnefoy, meanings, Thomas Clark, hinterlands.

I have been much intrigued by books by Robert Macfarlane on walking, his “journeys on foot”¹. His walking involves landscapes beyond those formed by landscape architects, what ‘Capability’ Brown called “makers of place”. But those are precisely the worlds that designers like Brown draw upon to fulfill and stimulate their creations. This returns me to a theme I have often explored, the relation of designed places both to what has been called wilderness and to the cultural places in rural and town life that humans have made during their lives².

In *The Old Ways* (pp. 238 ff.) Macfarlane sets out to meet Miguel Angel Blanco in Madrid. The Spaniard had established a library, called the Library of the Forest. These “books” are a cabinet of curiosities, or what Macfarlane calls “reliquaries”, and contain the material of the walks that Blanco took.

«Each book records a journey made by walking, and each contains the natural objects and substances gathered along that particular path: seaweed, snakeskin, mice flakes, crystals of quartz, sea beans, lightning-scorched pine timber, the wing of a grey partridge, pillows of moss, worked flint, cubes of pyrite, pollen, resin, acorn cups, the leaves of holm oak, beech, elm.»

But, as its creator tells Macfarlane, while the concept is to record “an actual journey”, it is also a *camí-*

no interior, and these are at once both metaphysical and actual wayfaring. So, this involves both the recollection of actual walking and the stopping to review its record.

Macfarlane is invited to take out three books from Blanco’s library - for «my past, my present”, and (so he is told) “your future”. The first is the most eloquent of the three, since it hints at worlds beyond phenomenal fragments:

«... the fourth page became a box. There was a glass window and behind it a cabinet-like space resembling a specimen drawer in a Victorian natural history museum. Under the glass was a strip of rusted metal with two rhomboidal eye-holes punched into it, pieces of broken white pottery and two shards of white quartz.»

Implying that only the book’s reader, here Macfarlane, can know “what it means”, he is led to recall the many white stones and quartz fragments he had met. The other two books are multidimensional atlases with “an ever-growing root-map” [in my own mind I mis-read “route-map”]. The first offers a bed of thorns, “full of aggression and darkness, compelling but obscene”, while the third, (entitled “Slates, Mirror of the Alps”) “played with the fact that the summits of the Alpine peaks had once been seabeds: the coccoliths represented in the paper alluded to this deep-time conversion of the sub-



fig.1 – A walk, or path to walk, at Versailles (all author's photos except fig. 1, by Emily T. Cooperman).

marine into the aerial". The books, that Macfarlane "appeared to open", "actually opened me", and became part of his "future."

The somewhat mysterious books that these books reveal are what I want to call hinterlands. The English word is a plausible, but not wholly indicative, of what the French term an "arrière-pays". I came across this word first in an extraordinary book with that title by Yves Bonnefoy (1972), superbly translated in 2012 by Stephen Romer, who decided to retain the original French title. English equivalents would not work - "back country" hints at backwardness or poverty, and hinterland for the French ear has militaristic overtones. The very first sentence of Bonnefoy reads: "At such moments it seems to me that *here*, or close by, a couple of steps away on the path I didn't take and which is already receding - that just *over there* a more elevated kind of country would open up, where I might have gone to live and which I'd already lost".

But what does this mean, or suggest, for landscape architects? Two things: one essentially physical, the other metaphorical or perhaps symbolic.

The physical is all the materials that designers use to make their places: plants, structures, including paths to walk on, along with forms derived from agriculture like terraces, groves and glades, meadows, copses, perhaps sculptures and temples. These forms directly how we learn to experience landscape designs: paths in regular gardens keep us on permitted trajectories, whereas even in open lawns there is still the temptation to walk through to other items; viewsheds, too, can be established (figg. 1- 2)

None of those presents anything more than a palpable and seeable item. Only perhaps the viewshed may hint at places beyond our immediate inspection. But when Bonnefoy writes of the "path I didn't take and which is already receding", it implies a fork or a crossroads, again a tangible experience. Yet he also notes that what he has missed is nevertheless



fig.2 – The Temple of Four Winds at Caste Howard, Yorkshire. Author’s photos

“a more elevated kind of country where I might have gone to live and which I’d already lost”. That revelation is once again actual *and* metaphorical.

A clear evidence of hinterlands can be mountains, for they can be imagined from a distance, but beyond the plains, the foothills and slopes that we could walk and actually find them (fig.3). For Macfarlane’s motto to *Mountains of the Mind* he quotes Gerald Manley Hopkins’s “O the mind, mind has mountains”, and cites John Ruskin’s “endless pursuit of space, the unfatigued veracity of eternal light”. In his chapter “Waking off the Map” he shows a photograph of “the unexplored valley” that lies beyond the Inylchek glacier, and while he himself is unable to progress further on foot, he recalls how a German-born explorer Gottfried Merzbacher was able to reach, near the Chinese border, what was called the “Lord of Heaven”. He himself and his climbing party must ride in a dangerous helicopter to the same destination.

Yet it is during his walks in *The Old Ways* that he senses how non-Western cultures find that “ideas of footfall” are a mode of thinking, a metaphor for recollection”, and thereafter finds that Wittgenstein’s word for ‘thought’, *Denkbewegungen*, “might be translated as ‘thought movements’, ‘thought-ways’, or ‘paths of thought’”. And in the poetry of Thomas Clark, whom he frequently quotes and whose writing and death in the first world war are the topics of his last chapter, he reads of a walker along the shore who images “step[ping] down in the sea / into another knowledge / wild and cold”. Among the lines Thomas scribbled in pencil before his death at the battle of Arras was that “any turn may lead to Heaven/ Or any corner may hide Hell” and ends with “Roads shining like river up hill after rain.”

Macfarlane’s walking is certainly subjective and clear-sighted. He recounts his solitary excursions, sometimes with friends and fellow enthusiasts, and in an astonishing range of locations, from his own



fig.3 - Distant mountains at the Geological Observatory, Ticino, Switzerland, designed by Paolo Bürgi.

country - Scottish highlands, Cambridgeshire, and almost anywhere in the UK that he finds or seeks out lost or untrodden trails, and to Israel, Spain, the Himalayas. Nor does he dispense, as Bonnefoy did, with geography and maps: though the latter are filled with multicolored pages, like mottled endpapers, of geological annotations of granite, clay, chalk, limestone. His own interior paths are premised upon the many routes that he finds to discover and explore. When he contributes a foreword to *Strata*, an edition of William Smith's Geological Maps, he honors stratification in more than the usual ways.

The phenomena of his walking trails are readily evoked and yet his instinct is to see more - of those who might have traveled there before. Macfarlane's own hinterland is composed of old and sometimes aged histories, recovered in lively and often elegiac prose and is a "search of a route to the past, only to find myself delivered again and again to the con-

temporary", and that in its turn often projects himself forwards. Again he quotes Thomas on the "long white roads ..[that] are a temptation. What quests they proposed! They take us away to the thin air of the future or to the underworld of the past". Of course, landscapes are compelling when we are in them, but "there are also landscapes we bear with us in absentia, those places that live on in memory long after they have withdrawn in actuality... the most important landscapes we possess".

For both writers places are shaped by their inhabitants and by themselves, and their explorations figure ways of explaining ourselves to ourselves. Yet they both do much more than that, for we learn from them how hinterlands might be accessed. We all have such access to them. A past beckons a feasible future, desires and pursuits that we entertain, and hopes and nostalgies that enjoy palpable presences. We all have these moments, store them away (maybe obsessively), but either largely return

to navigating their demands, or entirely banish – repress – all intimation of our personal hinterlands. But Bonnefoy and Macfarlane find comfort in their pursuit, without denying the phenomena in which we all must exist. Macfarlane is told there is a Sanskrit word, *darshan*, which suggests “a face-to-face encounter with the sacred on earth”. Exploration on foot or in imagination is history, “a region [that] one walks back into”. Similarly Bonnefoy suggests that “When a road climbs upwards, revealing, in the distance, other paths among the stones and once it was Caraco, where I was told that the paths were long since impassable, smothered by brambles [it] tells me to be on the alert”. For Macfarlane seeks out precisely the paths lost or now untrodden, and along them travels towards the understanding, as Bonnefoy did, not to deny “the interiority of the object, its being, its transcending of all notional description”.

Now that is but a prelude to asking what hinterland, what *arrière-pays* (or distant garden) can be sought in a designed landscape. Even the most pragmatic, like a children’s playground, offers them that sense of a “more elevated” landscape (fig.4). All designs may have that potential: it derives as much from what people bring to it as what the designers envisaged. One key element of walking in designs gardens or parkland is the opportunity to pause, to stop. That invitation or inclination may be supplied by ensuring a sudden view of far hills through an opening in the dense forest. Alternatively, and most obviously in earlier gardens, are statues that ask us to stop and find out who they are and why they are to be found here (fig.5); or temples with inscriptions or names – The Temple of Ancient Virtue, The Temple of the Winds (fig.6) – that their owners or visitors on a guided tour are told how they got those names, and they too can invite a pause for thought or conversation. In urban areas, walking is more often than not the mode of doing from this place to another, though



fig.4 – Buck Hill Falls, former hotel site, with distant Poconos hills. A stopping place on the author’s frequent walk in Pennsylvania.

along the way opportunity to stop (traffic lights, sudden and unexpected views, window shopping) may allow us to pause.

But I want to push further into what Wittenstein called “thought ways” (*Denkbewegungen*). Before bicycles, let alone motor cars, you walked, rode a horse, or took a horse-drawn cab. And many still do walk; but walk, *not jog* and not jog while listening to music or interviews on their iPhone. Walks *without* these modern invitations to join some invisible company alone serve as paths of thoughts. This is the *camino interior*. When I wrote a book on *Historical Ground*, it was to see exactly what histories were embedded in that ground or could be introduced into it by place-makers. Such histories are, as Macfarlane says, routes to the past, but as ‘travel’ that route leads us into both the actual present and an anticipated future.

Bonnefoy writes of “elevated kinds of country that would open up...”, but these, while they could be ac-

tual mountains, are our own higher thoughts. We tend to examine our own or others' higher thoughts in books we term philosophical, and we know well that many philosophers accumulated and refined their ideas in the process of walking. It is that deliberate attempt to stimulate thoughts that lie, surely, at the root of all landscape architecture from playgrounds for kids, with a multitude of entertaining invitations, to labyrinths, and to Villa D'Este, Prospect Park, or Parc de la Villette.

Those gardens are 'thoughts ways' for many different kinds of people. I have written much about William Kent's garden at Rousham in Oxfordshire, but there is nothing there that directs you to any one specific idea or train of thought.

What to think about when you stop and look will be depend differently on what visitors bring to it. If you know what Kent had witnessed in Italian gardens during his nine years there, or knew he had seen an original of the Dying Gladiator and so would identify it – and perhaps ask why it was copied at Rousham for its owner General Dormer. But there is much else to absorb the visitor that may not receive any formal inscription of meaning, or that may linger in the mind and be rescued later with some fresh ascription.

There is perhaps the point of Andrew Marvel's lines in "The Garden" of 1681:

*Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,
Withdraws into its happiness:
The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find,
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas,
Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.*

Note

¹ *The Old-Ways* (2012), from which my first title comes, and *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), and *The Wild Places* (2007).

² I discussed this most fully in chapter 3 of *Greater Perfection. The practice of landscape theory* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 'The Idea of a Garden and the Three Natures', pp. 32-75.



fig.5 – Statues of Dying Gladiator (a copy of Roman original) at Rousham, Oxfordshire. Author's photos



fig.6 – A chance to walk wherever the person wants – 'Capability' Brown's Grecian Valley at Stowe, Buckinghamshire.