

Naming the Sycamore: A Short Exploration of the Relationship Between Language and
Landscape and How the Loss of One Reflects the Loss of the Other

*The hardest thing of all is to see what is really there - J.A. Baker, *The Peregrine*.*

Autumn. Red treetops pop like a sunset against a clean, blue sky. My girlfriend Alaina and I wind our way along a graveyard path, reading engraved names as we pass. It is a beautiful day, warm but crisp. When we are not reading the names and epitaphs on the gravestones, we are admiring the colors of the bordering tree line. Green leads to yellow leads to red as if someone divvied up the treetops and painted them in Rasta tricolor. We continue to walk and to read, but it is not a grave that we are searching for. “Here we are,” I say, “the maple-birch;” and before us stands a tall tree, its grey-green bark peeling to reveal bone white wood, its blood-red leaves hanging heavy on its branches. I have no idea what kind of tree it is. Alaina and I had seen it before, though: “leaves like a maple, bark like a birch- a maple-birch,” we decided. Our nickname for the tree stuck for a while, but this time we were determined to uncover the true name of the maple-birch. I reach into my backpack for my *Peterson Guide to Eastern Trees*, Alaina reaches up to pluck a leaf from its stem. “Well, let’s find out who you are...”

Landscapes¹ are often overlooked. In cars, planes, and on rails, landscapes flash by before they can be taken in by an observer. Only when walking does a landscape come into focus, and even then much of the detail is missed. Hills rise like black waves on a nighttime horizon, oak stumps border a field hinting that a forest once grew there, an old rust-red barn in the process of being consumed by ivy; much is observed but little is seen, the landscape and its features an inconsequential backdrop to our daily lives.

The language of landscape is often overlooked too. The incredibly rich, descriptive, and precise English vocabulary once used to describe landscape and the natural world is increasingly obsolescent or forgotten altogether. In 2012, for example, the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* omitted over fifty words relating to the natural world and the rural countryside. In his book *Landmarks*, Robert Macfarlane elaborates: “The deletions included *acorn, alder, ash, beech, bluebell, catkin...fern, hazel, heather, heron...mistletoe, nectar, newt...pasture and willow*” (Macfarlane, 3). That same year, the *OJD* introduced new words such as “*attachment, block-graph, blog...celebrity, chatroom...MP3 player, and voicemail.*” Many were appalled by the omission of ‘nature words,’ or ‘lost words’ as Macfarlane calls them, from the *OJD*. Among those distressed by the *OJD*’s choices of word omission were twenty-eight English authors, Robert Macfarlane included, who signed a petition requesting that the *OJD* reconsider their decision to exclude nature words. Their pleas were not met.

“All our dictionaries are designed to reflect language as it is used, rather than seeking to prescribe certain words or word usages,” a spokesperson for the Oxford University Press

¹ The word ‘Landscape’ comes from the old Frisian word ‘landschop,’ literally ‘shoveled land.’ It once denoted land built up against the sea, then a style of painting, and now as any general area of land. John Stilgoe, whom I will refer to later, suggests that landscape refers only to land manipulated or sculpted by people, as opposed to land that is not which he strictly labels wilderness. In this essay, I use landscape in the most general sense of the word: any area of land and its features. My apologies to Stilgoe for my misuse.

explained (*The Guardian*, 2015). “As we do with all our dictionaries, we use words that were being used by children at the time. As a result, a small number of words about nature, which are listed in the petition, were removed. However, new words about nature were introduced at the same time, including ‘amphibian’, ‘sunflower’ and ‘cobra.’” Her response is a fair one, even pointing out that the *OJD* still contains over 400 nature words. And their decision makes sense: words relating to nature are not as relevant to children today, and the new edition of the *OJD* wished to provide children with words which are. “When you look back at older versions of dictionaries, there are lots of examples of flowers for instance,” Vineeta Gupta, the head of children’s dictionaries at OUP states; “that was because many children lived in semi-rural environments and saw the seasons. Nowadays, the environment has changed” (Macfarlane, 3). Again, a fair response, and yet as Macfarlane notes there is an “alarming acceptance of the idea that children might no longer see the seasons, or that the rural environment might be so unproblematically disposable” (3). It is hard to blame the *OJD* for their decision to omit some nature words. If anything, they are reflecting a greater cultural turn away from the natural and towards the technological, a turn especially prevalent in children who are spending more time indoors than ever before. And yet, the *OJD* and similar institutions have the power, perhaps even the *responsibility*, to keep these words alive in the minds of both children and adults. But why should they? As we have read, the *OJD* seeks not to prescribe language but to reflect its use. Now, however, as both landscapes and the language used to describe the natural world are disappearing, it is of prime importance to keep these words alive, both in mind and on tongue, as the survival of nature words may be a key factor in the preservation of the natural world.

Words have power, names especially. They denote importance and connote attachment. John Stilgoe, professor of Landscape Studies at Harvard University, explains that “putting words

to things, especially simple things, enables and empowers and pleases” (Stilgoe, XIII). Phil Cousineau, in his book *The Art of Pilgrimage*, asserts that “to name something is to imbue it with soul,” and psychologist Susan Rako M.D. states that “giving something a name makes it real, as well as something that can be communicated about. This is a constructive achievement” (*Psychology Today*, 2018). By naming something you draw attention to it and make it real, it comes alive in your consciousness and awareness; *to name something is to imbue it with soul*. But perhaps most importantly, by naming something you become aware of it. After all, to name an object you must first perceive it and, as it turns out, the language we use (or do not use) may dictate what we see (or do not see).

In 2013, Gary Lupyan, professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, conducted a study in which participants were shown two separate images at the same time, one in their left eye and another in their right eye. In one eye the participants were shown a familiar image- a drawing of a dog or a pumpkin in this case. In the other eye, participants were shown “visual noise: a rapidly changing mess of lines” (*National Geographic*, 2013). “When these two images are presented at the same time,” Lupyan explains, “our minds process only the noisy part and completely ignore the static, familiar image.” Here’s the catch. In some trials, participants would hear the word associated with the static image, *dog*, and immediately the image would take form: “the previously invisible object would pop into their conscious visual perception.” During other trials, a different word, one not related to the image, would be spoken to the participant. In this case, the image would remain blurred and buried behind the mess of moving lines. “It’s not that they are hallucinating or imagining a dog being there,” Lupyan states, “if they hear the label, they become more sensitive to inputs that match that label.” The study demonstrates what the Sapir-Wharf hypothesis proposes: that the language we speak influences what we see and how

we perceive reality. How this relates to landscape is clear: without the language to describe landscapes and the natural world we become blind to them, they do not exist in any meaningful way to us, and subsequently we cease to care for them. As wildlife artist and conservationist Robert Bateman asked, “if you can't name things, how can you love them?”

In his book *What is Landscape?* John Stilgoe speaks of “nameable nuance,” the idea that the more names or words available to describe a landscape the more nuanced it becomes. Each name we acquire denoting a certain feature makes that feature pop to our eyes, as demonstrated in Lupyan’s study. Macfarlane demonstrates this not within a controlled lab like Lupyan, but while out on a walk: “*Smeuse* is a Sussex dialect noun for ‘the gap in the base of a hedge made by the regular passage of a small animal; now I know the word *smeuse* [and] I will notice these signs of creaturely movement more often” (Macfarlane, 5). A personal example to juxtapose Macfarlane’s is that of my friend’s mother, Cheryl, who calls all tall marsh grasses cattails despite the presence of different species; without a difference in name, they all seem the same.

There are words which denote features of a landscape still in common use. However, the most common words denoting landscape are vague, often denoting a large concept rather than a specific feature. “The terrain beyond the city fringe has become progressively more understood in terms of large generic units,” states Macfarlane (5). Words like ‘field’, ‘hill’, ‘valley’, ‘woods’, ‘forest’, and ‘pasture’ are useful for distinguishing major features of a landscape, but their failure to grasp the smaller details of a landscape renders the landscape indistinguishable, a “blandscape.” Recall Cheryl who, only having ‘cattail’ as a label, sees a marsh void of diversity. But even common landscape words like ‘meadow’ have seen a steady decline in usage over the past century. According to Google’s N-gram Viewer, an engine which charts the frequencies of word use in printed sources from year to year, words like ‘meadow’, ‘hill’, and ‘valley’, which

were commonly used around 1900, have been steadily declining in use up to the present time, at least in print. The declining use of landscape words, even common ones, suggests a compound of symptoms. Stilgoe would point out the Western cultural trend of turning away from the agricultural and towards the urban-industrial; perhaps so many meadows and valleys are being gobbled up in the urban sprawl that there are fewer meadows left to talk about, much less write about. Macfarlane would point out that more and more children are staying inside and have no use for nature words. But it is not just children who spend more time indoors.

According to the BBC, children aged 5 to 16 spend upwards of six hours each day indoors on a screen. Compare that to adults who, according to a Nielson audience report, spend upwards of ten hours on a screen each day. Furthermore, according to a study conducted by Natural England titled “Childhood and nature: a survey on changing relationships with nature across generations,” in England, only 10% of children regularly spend time outdoors, and a staggering 40% *never spend considerable time outdoors*. Compare this to the estimated 40% of children who regularly played outdoors just a generation prior. Not only that, but the “roaming radius” of children from home has shrunk an estimated 90%, with most children never venturing out of sight from their home. It is stated that “Obesity, anti-social behaviour, friendlessness, and fear are the known consequences” of not enough time spent outdoors. There are other consequences too, such as risk aversion, stunted creativity, and troubles with mental health, to name a few.

Recall the *OJD* statement which suggests that the environments of people have changed to become increasingly confined to the indoors. Now both work and play occur indoors, as the option for remote working has become more viable, and as video games and other entertainment media continue to absorb much of our time. That is not to say that remote working and video

games or television are exclusively harmful things. But the balance between time indoors and time outdoors has tipped considerably in favor of time indoors despite the negative affects this may have. As such, words relating to landscape are quickly forgotten as they have little use indoors. Rich words, nature words, are being lost, made obsolete and useless, dead on the tongue. And yet, as we have seen, the loss of the words goes far beyond limiting a vocabulary. Losing nature words means losing what they name and our connection to them. To name something is to give it life and soul. To name something is to create nuance and variety. As Lupyan's experiment demonstrated, if we have no name for something we do not see it, it does not spring to life in our consciousness nor stand out in our observations. If we have no name for something, we do not care for it and will lose it. Because without a name for something, "how could we love it?" The *OJD*'s decision to cut certain nature words from their dictionary was understandable; they simply wished to provide children with a vocabulary that is relevant and useful to them. And yet, if this trend of purging nature words from dictionaries continues, then they will not only be lost in text, but they will also be lost in our minds and in our speech.

"You're an American Sycamore," we shout, having found a matching tree in our field guide. "*Platanus occidentalis*, or American Sycamore, is a large deciduous tree that may grow 75 to 90 feet tall with a trunk diameter of 10 feet or more. It is one of the largest hardwood trees," I read from the *Peterson* field guide. "The bark of the tree has a mottled look," Alaina continues for me, "its bark lacks elasticity and is incapable of stretching to accommodate the growth of the wood underneath, so the tree sloughs it off." We leave the graveyard having found what we came for. The mystery of the maple-birch is solved.

The next day, as I drive home, I notice something for the first time. Interspersed between the browns of oaks and tupelos, in the forests that border the highways and back roads, bone white trees with blood-red autumn leaves stand out to me. Now I know the American Sycamore, and now I will see them more often.

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