

# The Textual Ecology of the Palimpsest Environmental Entanglement of Present and Past

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## 1. *Introduction: Time and Materiality*

The consideration of time, both elapsed and anticipated, is essential in achieving a full and nuanced understanding of the present. This tenet is supported by the recent academic interest that has arisen in the exploration of the link between time and the material world (cfr. Bailey [2007]: 198). Interdisciplinary fields are particularly interested in managing the discourse of these concepts, given the drive inherent in cross-discipline studies to create a more layered understanding of events, processes, and discourses (cfr. Smout [2011]: 1).

The palimpsest, a metaphorical device combining the abstractions of past and present, offers a useful tool to nuance and enhance interdisciplinary discussions. The palimpsest is commonly used across disciplines to deconstruct and complicate longstanding stakes (cfr. Dillon [2007]: 1). However, it lacks usage in ecocritical discussion.

The concept of the palimpsest offers an answer to the emergent «crisis of representation», which posits that representations of the natural world are inherently tinted by human projections of reality, not by reality itself (Daniels *et al.* [2011]: XXXIX). By allowing multiple projections of the landscape to comfortably coexist without losing distinction, the palimpsest can promote more inclusive discourse. Furthermore, the palimpsest has the potential to move beyond academia and enter public discourse as a tool to force entanglement and consideration of various aspects of historical, current, and future impacts on the environment, from both human and non-human sources.

## 2. *A Word on the Palimpsest*

The metaphorical construct of the palimpsest, from the Greek roots *pakim* (again), and *wax* (rub or scrape), stems from a literal object (cfr. Bailey [2007]: 203): in a palaeographic sense, a palimpsest is a parchment bearing multiple levels of inscription. The original text was scraped off, and the parchment reused. In time, however, the original writing began to show through, often due to the oxidation of iron in the original ink, or some other chemical process or treatment. Thus, in a palimpsest, multiple levels of text are visible (cfr. Dillon [2007]: 12).

The concept transcends the literal into a discursive tool used to hold multiple separate ideas in parallel, echoing the multiple layers of writing. In 1845, Thomas De Quincey introduced *the palimpsest* as a metaphor: to talk of «palimpsestuousness» is to consider distinct concepts in the same space. They are simultaneously entwined and separated (cfr. Dillon [2007]: 1-3). The palimpsest is most useful in allowing past concepts to be held in consideration with current ones. Specifically, the palimpsest unifies time and space, allowing the consideration of both aspects without forcing them to melt together (cfr. Dillon [2007]: 9).

Arguably, the palimpsest is a metaphor more relevant now than for previous generations. Andreas Huyssen writes that, in recent years, technology has created a particular instability of the boundary between past and present (cfr. Huyssen [2003]: 1). A closer look at the complicated intertwining of a present constructed by millennia of cultural influences and evolutionary developments, however, suggests that the past and present have always been more united than Huyssen gives them credit. In fact, it is difficult to find something that does *not* constitute a palimpsest (cfr. Bailey [2007]: 209). It can therefore follow that the aspects embraced by the employment of the palimpsest are intrinsic parts of most elements of the landscape under discussion – aspects which, perhaps, have been largely ignored in the absence of a discursive tool capable of managing them.

## 3. *Layers in the Landscape*

The palimpsest is particularly well suited to discourse surrounding the natural landscape because of the inherent overlay of natural systems, both throughout time and within the simultaneous occurrences of various ecological processes. Even on a surface level, the landscape must be seen as a multitude of concurrent systems. Eugene Hunn and Brien Meilleur present the notion of biologically distinct ecotopic patches creating a surface

mosaic. It is when this mosaic is extended beyond the surface level, however, that an even greater territory for the complication of landscape formation emerges.

In his essay on the County Mayo peat bogs, Stuart McLean describes the layered construction of peat: accumulating over hundreds, or even thousands, of years, compacted plant and animal remains form the lower layer of the bogs, topped by a thin upper crust of living vegetation, mostly sphagnum mosses (cfr. McLean [2003]: 48). The compression of the layers over time is essential to forming peat, as opposed to just sodden layers of animal and plant remains. Given its composition, what it means to be a peat bog is inherently bound up in time as well as physical substance (cfr. Strathern, Stewart [2003]: 229).

In his seminal *Sand County Almanac* (1949), Aldo Leopold too writes about peat bogs, albeit in a more literary way than McLean:

A sense of time lies thick and heavy on such a place. Yearly since the ice age it has awakened each spring to the clangor of cranes. The peat layers that comprise the bog are laid down in the basin of an ancient lake. The cranes stand, as it were, upon the sodden pages of their own history. These peats are the compressed remains of the mosses that clogged the pools, of the tamaracks that spread over the moss, of the cranes that bugled over the tamaracks since the retreat of the ice sheet. An endless caravan of generations has built of its own bones this bridge into the future, this habitat where the oncoming host again may live and breed and die. (Leopold [1966]: 102)

The layering and transformation at work in the peat bogs suggests that they could well serve to be mascots, of a sort, of the palimpsest. The peat bogs are defined by a merger of substance and elapsed time, offering a tangible image of the palimpsest's allowance for «time depth». This notion lends a physical dimension to time, when so often the only shape granted to time is linear (cfr. Bailey [2007]: 198). Time, transformation, and re-emergence are essential aspects of the palimpsest, all evinced in the physical example of the peat bog. The palimpsest, furthermore, influences how we see time itself, allowing a shift from linear, chronological time to «real time» (cfr. Bailey [2007]: 217), incorporating flow, temporalities, and multiple narratives into a time seen as a fluid duration, not as a system of sequential measurement.

The aspect of time depth in the ecological palimpsest is also presented by Leopold. In his essay on Clondeboyne in Manitoba, Leopold suggests that typical chronological time is not well-suited for discussing natural occurrences:

Only the uncritical consumers of hand-me-down history suppose that 1941 arrived simultaneously in all marshes. The birds know better. Let a squandron of southbound pelicans but feel a lift of prairie breeze over Clondeboyne, and they sense at once that landing

here is a landing in the geological past, a refuge from that most relentless of aggressors, the future. (Leopold [1966]: 169)

Though it is tempting to think of geologic time, and indeed, much of time as a whole, as a process completely separate from humans, it is important to note that not only non-human processes contribute to the layering in the formation of time depth – humans play their part as well. James Proctor writes that, beyond notions of the transcendence of time, Leopold's land ethic advocates an overlap of the tenets of human and landscape requirements, forming an ecological citizenry (cfr. Proctor [1996]: 282). To extend this to the palimpsest metaphor, human stories and landscape stories must be able to be read simultaneously. Additionally, both man and land have the simultaneous ability to inscribe and erase the actions of the other. This concept of mutual power is essential in acquiring a land ethic in line with Leopold's philosophy.

In their work on landscape ethnoecology, Leslie Johnson and Eugene Hunn term the human-land relationship of co-inscription as a feedback loop, in which the physical capabilities of the landscape both influence and are influenced by human technologies and knowledge (cfr. Hunn, Meilleur [2012]: 282). This recognition of mutually influential processes is echoed by André Corboz in his essay *The Land as Palimpsest*, which focuses on layering processes at work in natural formations. Corboz writes that the land is formed via both natural and human-induced processes. Those that are spontaneous, due to the «instability of terrestrial morphology», include moving forests and ice, while human remodelling includes irrigation, roads, dikes, canals, tunnels, land clearing, and reforestation, resulting in an «unceasingly remodelled space» (Corboz [1983]: 16).

The palimpsestual formation of the peat bogs, some of Ireland's most famous landscapes, has not been necessarily "natural" in the commonly-used sense of the term. Instead, the soil was formed by a combination of human and environmental intervention: farmers cleared areas for grazing, and excess rainfall led to waterlogged soil, a chief condition necessary for peat formation (cfr. McLean [2003]; Smout [2011]). The draining of bogs reveals submerged and buried artefacts, from submerged prehistoric settlements to preserved human remains, as well as the fossilized remains of an ancient forest of Scots pine, which had begun to grow in the bog during a drought (cfr. McLean [2003]: 53, 62).

The simultaneous presence of cultural and ecological artefacts gives support to T.C. Smout's terming of the peat bog as a «cultural landscape» (Smout [2011]: 213), in which human and natural histories are merged via time. McLean, meanwhile, posits the bogs as a hybrid landscape of sorts, a «slippage» between nature and society (McLean [2003]:

57). This «slippage» occurs beyond the peat bog; illustrations of human-nature collaborations pepper even the most pristine landscapes. Hunn and Meilleur acknowledge the human influence in the biological ecotopes, writing that «It may be the case that every ecotope is to some extent “anthropogenic”» (Hunn, Meullier [2012]: 21). If human stories are indeed written into landscape stories, and vice versa, then the palimpsest can serve as a powerful rhetorical device to bring the multiple stories at work under consideration, without dictating that one aspect be subservient to another.

#### 4. *Erasure & Emergence*

While peat bogs are, perhaps, one of the most tangible examples of botanic and human layering in landscape, layering alone does not *require* the palimpsest to thoroughly discuss. Encapsulated in the palimpsest are also the notions of disappearance and re-emergence – natural processes, to be sure, but not ones necessarily evident in peat bogs. The nomination of peat bogs as the palimpsest’s mascot is tempered by the recognition of the similar, if not greater, suitability of the ancient forest for illustrating the power of the ecological palimpsest.

At first, it would seem that Sara Maitland’s work on forests is merely offering another example of temporal layering in nature. In her essay about the Forest of Dean, Maitland acknowledges the explicit layeredness of forests’ formation, explaining that flood residue buried forests in wetlands, compressing them underground until they turned into coal (cfr. Maitland [2012]: 172). It is in this presentation of the transformation of substance that Maitland offers a transformative manner of discussing woodlands. By referring to the coal seams first by their original biological state (as forests) Maitland resists the urge to view natural features as stagnant resources, deposited divinely for the sole purpose of harvesting. Instead, she enters the coal seams – and all matter of forest material – into a long-range historical context. The trees of the past manifest in the present in an altered – but still tangible – way.

Similar notions of re-emergence run throughout Maitland’s arboreal discussion. Rather than focus on the buried past, Maitland looks at the manner by which the past is realized in the present. In the search for an ancient forest, for example, long overlaid with human settlements, Maitland concludes that the wood had not vanished completely, but is rather «hidden and secret» (cfr. Maitland [2012]: 122). Human and non-human processes both play roles in revealing the hidden location of the forest: clues are hidden in the names used on suburban maps (Woodside, Honor Oak etc.),

while oak seedlings invade disused railways, the forest «sneaking back into places from which it had been exiled» (Maitland [2012]: 123-125).

A second salient image of the palimpsest at work in the Great North Wood is that of the disused railway line from Forest Hill to Norwood, partially hidden from view by boarded up tunnels and vibrant plant growth. Maitland grants agency to both humans and the woods in this act of covering up the signs of the rail line, using an anthropomorphic gesture to give the woods agency in «trying to create deeper veils» (Maitland [2012]: 136). Despite the efforts to the contrary, however, the railway is still visible for Maitland and her companion to follow. The view of the industrial ruin within the thriving growth of the wood forms a scene of «a ruined past and a lively present» (Maitland [2012]: 136). In the case of the railway line, humans and nature are both overwriting each other, creating a layered parchment with inscriptions and erasures attributable to both the natural and human factors.

Within the palimpsestuous reality of cultural landscape formation, humans are inherently caught up in the landscape, and human and non-human actions and processes are not necessarily distinguishable from each other – nor, perhaps, should they be. In keeping with his community view of human-inclusive ecosystems, Leopold's work contributes to this notion of joint action as well, as he blurs the line between human and animal action:

Some day my buck will get a .30-.30 in his glossy ribs. A clumsy steer will appropriate his bed under the oak, and will munch the golden grama until it is replaced by weeds. Then a freshet will tear out the old dam, and pile its rocks against a tourist road along the river below. Trucks will churn the dust of the old trail on which I saw wolf tracks yesterday. (Leopold [1966]: 161)

It is key that Leopold fails to make a distinction between the agency of the freshet and the agency of the trucks. Raging rivers and back road vehicles are treated as textual equals, counterparts in inscription and erasure. The layers of replacement – rivers moving rocks, trucks covering tracks, can be read as the palimpsest within Leopold's landscape. The palimpsestuousness of the multiple layers in this construction allows for a consideration of ecological and social processes at work in Leopold's text.

##### *5. The Potential of the Palimpsest*

Utilizing the palimpsest has implications beyond ecocritical critique. Specifically, its use has the potential to nuance the ethics of landscape usage, primarily by allowing for the consideration of multiple ethics, reducing reductionism and over-simplification. James

Proctor, in his essay looking at the different facets of land use in the Pacific Northwest's old-growth forest stands, writes that there are usually more than one ethic, or sense of right and wrong, at work in environmental debates. These different ethical fields create dualisms (intrinsic versus instrumental value, biocentrism versus anthropocentrism, etc.) that can be detrimental for forming a consensus between or among opposing parties (cfr. Proctor [1996]: 281). Palimpsestic viewing allows the various aspects of the dualism to be considered on their own merit, yet on the same platform.

The palimpsest allows for an inclusion of multiple facets of landscape ethics without necessitating they be equated or merged. It leaves room for all of what is or was in a place, both cultural and physical. However, the palimpsest is still bound – there is no room for that which there never was. Cultural nature is not infinite but multi-faceted, engaging with cultures and ecosystems on a large scale. This notion of limits allows for an inclusive, yet still feasible, environmental ethics (cfr. Proctor [1996]: 295).

This palimpsest-informed ethical approach encompasses the major players in landscape discussion, broadly grouped below into cartographers (those who wish to document the various features of the landscape, from artists to scientists) and activists (those who have a particular goal for the landscape in mind, be it conservation, development, or some other end).

Map Makers: It is commonly claimed that maps, far from being objective presentations of reality, are in their very creation rendered irreparably culturally subjective (cfr. Smith [2003]). The process of mapping distorts the social and environmental factors central to the landscape they are trying to represent (Johnson, Hunn [2012]: 282). Corboz, for instance, worries that reducing the landscape to a map has the potential to filter out cultural aspects of landscape such as seasons, conflicts, myths, experiences, and memories (cfr. Corboz [1983]: 24). The limiting perspective of maps is particularly worrisome given their ability to determine what others perceive as important in the landscape, and indeed, after they have seen the map, what they see in the landscape at all (cfr. Smith [2003]: 72).

Through the palimpsest framework, however, Sara Maitland offers the notion of the «double map», which encompasses time, geography, and imagination, forming a palimpsest of history and «re-creation» (Maitland [2012]: 49). It is true that maps already fulfil in part the function Maitland suggests, serving as records of the physical, social, and ideological viewpoints of the map's creator (Smith [2012]: 73). However, what Maitland proposes is an explicit acknowledgement – and embrace – of the multiple complexities of mapmaking.

Maitland's double map is a map of a natural, not merely political, history. This natural history allows human and non-human pasts alike to be presented together. This concept enters Maitland into the critical discourse of natural history. To cite two examples, Corboz refers to the collective relationship between human populations and the topographic surfaces they inhabit (cfr. Corboz [1983]: 18), while Bailey talks of a cultural stratification of meanings, in which the landscape means different things to different people, and often undergoes multiple modifications within its lifespan to fit new purposes.

Activists: Environmental groups arguably have the most to gain from a more multi-faceted view of nature. Acknowledging the largely socially constructed underpinnings and human narratives at work in the cultural understanding of nature could go a long way toward addressing many of the conflicts involved in landscape management (cfr. Proctor [1996]: 295). Jeffrey Ellis argues that a more nuanced environmental history of the earth could help address the oversimplification of environmental issues. He writes that a crippling current problem with environmentalists is the prevalence of narrow, reductionist arguments that attempt to define the «key problem». The emergent splintering in the ranks only holds back the environmental movement (cfr. Ellis [1996]). Utilizing the palimpsest allows the multivariate parts of the deeply complex environmental crisis, a tangled mess of social, political, and scientific complexity (cfr. Ellis [1996]: 267), to exist and interact simultaneously, without giving up any of their key parts. Utilized in this rhetorical sense, the palimpsest offers a device to make complication, variation, and ambivalence more manageable.

Finally, the ability of the palimpsest to draw attention to the significance of the passage of time holds great potential for environmental awareness and activism. Viewing the past as separate from the present is a naïve and limiting perspective, an essentialist tendency all too suited to the current environmental discussion. The individual human is minute in the scheme of time, their own endeavours steeped in «fundamental temporality» by the brevity of their lifespan (Huysen [2003]: 7), but the actions of humans as a collective transcend the time frame of any individual generation. As a discursive device, the palimpsest is well-suited for holding such opposing ideas, initially at odds, in tandem. The concept of time depth, and with it time perspectivism, allows focusing the same action through different timescales to bring different features of it into focus; certain considerations gain and lose relevance depending on the depth of field (cfr. Bailey [2007]: 200). The palimpsest can allow these various depths of field to form one multi-level image. How we shape the world on paper has both moral and



material impacts, «ethical implications for relations between people and place, land and life» (Daniels *et al.* [2011]: XXVI). By siting human endeavours in more expansive notions of temporality, a more apt understanding of the impact of humans on the planet can be felt.

#### 6. Conclusion: Encouraging the Ecocritical Palimpsest

Interactions within human and non-human nature follow a pattern of «inscriptions, erasures, and reinscriptions», the key tenets of the trope of the palimpsest (Dillon [2007]: 8). This being said, it is surprising that the palimpsest has not been further utilized in strengthening interdisciplinary connections surrounding ecocritical discourse. The palimpsest allows for consideration of the varied cultural and environmental constructions of landscape, neither forcing the consideration of some aspects only within the context of others, nor allowing one strand to be elevated above the others.

Palimpsestuousness both facilitates and necessitates the entanglement and intimacy of multiple distinct discourses. It can thus be used to facilitate discourse both within and without academia. The power of a palimpsestuous visualization of the ecosphere is not one to be ignored, and implementation of this powerful discursive device should be undertaken to lead to improved environmental communication and understanding.

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