‘PUHPOWEE’ AND THE GAPS BETWEEN THE LINES

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In *Underland*, Robert Macfarlane talks about two matters that elude language, particularly the language of transparency (and visibility): deep time and all that lies beneath our feet. This is not an easy feat. How can one talk of time that does not seem to move, especially in our age of jumping, frolicking, running time? And how can one talk of that which cannot be seen—because it lies under us—and that can mostly be accessed only at the risk of changing it (for instance, by digging into the earth)?

However, I will not look at this large endeavour in this admirable book. Instead, I will look at three-page interlude about language that crops up as part of a discussion in the book. It starts with reference to the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer. A botanist and the author, among other texts, of *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses* (2021), Kimmerer is also a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation; it is a word from the Native American language, Potawatomi, that initiates the discussion. Macfarlane quotes Kimmerer on the Potawatomi word *puhpowee*, ‘which might be translated as “the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight”’ and that, despite all its terminologies, ‘Western science has no such term, no words to hold this mystery’. Macfarlane correctly notes that this ‘missing something is predominantly the acknowledgement of life in the more-than-human world, an indifference which is grained into language not just at the level of individual words, but as the deeper-down levels of grammar and syntax’.

If one transposes this discussion into the matrix of my discussion here, one immediately has access to prominent aspects of Literature. One of them contains elements like Pound’s invocation to ‘make it new’ and Orwell’s practical prescriptions to keep language fresh in his essay, ‘Politics and the English Language’ (1946). This would mean a constant challenging and renewing of vocabulary, syntax, grammar as they exist in any language: something that, in different ways, much of Literature does. Another aspect would include the grasping of other words—even the creation of new words, either from slang, dialect, etc., or from other languages. In some ways, Macfarlane and Kimmerer have made this possible by putting ‘puhpowee’ on record, and it will just take, say, a good poem to remove the scare quotes around that alien word and insert it into the English language. This is also what Literature does.

This, as Macfarlane notes, is something that Literature can—and should—do. This is an aspect of what I mean when I say that Literature is a thinking device. Macfarlane continues this train of thought and hopes, with Kimmerer, for a ‘grammar of animacy’, for instance. He notes that projects have ‘recently been started around the world to gain even the most basic vocabularies for the experiences of life and death in the Anthropocene’. But he also records that such ‘stuttering attempts to speak’ have ‘generated ugly new terms for an ugly epoch: “geotraumatics”, “planetary dysphoria”, “apex-guilt”’. These necessary terms, Macfarlane observes, ‘stick in the throat in two ways: they are difficult to utter and hard to swallow’, and he concedes that only one of these new terms (‘species loneliness’) resonates with him.

Macfarlane does not take this further. He leaves the discussion poised on the verge of the possibility of a new language to address an obscure/d aspect of existence. But I cannot help noticing the limitations of this hope, especially as even Macfarlane, a writer who can use words creatively—make them new, in Pound’s words—finds these necessary terms ‘difficult to utter and hard to swallow’. Within the circumference of my call for Literature, this is not just a matter of creating a new language; it is also a matter of the relationship between language and reality. Though the need to keep language alive and to make it anew is an aspect of Literature, there is also another side of it: the awareness that language is not enough, will never be enough, and is especially limited when confined solely to the role of transparency and communication and visibility. Like Macfarlane’s explored underland, much of reality will remain difficult to see and/or it will shift shapes when accessed. Language pinned down to the disciplinary requirement—necessary, I say again and again, in its contexts—of transparency is always language that, now or sometime, becomes difficult to utter and hard to swallow.

Macfarlane is absolutely right when he calls on writers to create a new language—but this language will never be just a language. This language is Literature—language that is instinctively aware of its necessity and limits. This language, as I keep noting, demands the ‘agnostic’ reading of Literature. I will argue that this is what distinguishes Literature: its very use of language, because it does not treat language as transparent, smooth, sufficient, and, despite how popular critics read much of current fiction, representative. However, its meanings are not relative but contextual, and being contextual they are also—as is the case with the other, for the other always presents its face to the self—precarious. Literature, unlike other language uses, is not just about language, though obviously, as the Russian Formalists argued, it is a very concentrated and acute use of language. It is also about what language, in any given moment, fails to capture or convey in the words that we have or can use, because of historical, political or even ontological reasons. Literature is not just about or in language; it is about and in the silence, gaps, and even noise between the words. Hence, Literature is always about reading the lines, carefully, and then reading between the lines just as carefully.