

The Writer Who Gave Up on Names:
John Fowles' Unwarranted Hostility Towards Nature Writing

The work of the post-war English writer John Fowles has not often been discussed from an ecocritical perspective. This is unfortunate. Fowles has often written on nature: in his collection of essays, *Wormholes* (1998), where a third of the volume is devoted to writings on the natural world; in his novels, principally *The Magus* (1966), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and *Daniel Martin* (1977); in his poetry; and in his recently published *Journals* (2003). One of Fowles' abiding concerns over the years, explored most famously in the long essay *The Tree* (1979), has been the relationship between linguistic categorisation and the natural world, how the first can lead to a defamation or misrepresentation of the second. An examination of Fowles' writings leads one through an interesting dialectic in questioning the worth of naming nature. As I will show, we would be wrong to think that we could ever meaningfully renounce the practice of naming in relation to the natural world. Fowles' newly available journal writings are also of interest for their questioning the very worth of formal nature writing in its attempt to catch nature on the page. In examining one of Fowles' own poems I hope show that the author's pessimism as to the value of nature poetry does not survive extended scrutiny.

Before turning to written language I will first discuss Fowles' treatment of the practice of naming in the context of the perceiving mind. What is the relationship between linguistically mediated perception and nature? This problem has been explored in two of the author's poems. Both of these poems come from a section of Fowles' *Poems* (1972) which he entitles 'Epigrams', and are less lyrical and more philosophical than the poems of the volume's other two sections. A distrust of giving names to objects in the natural world is expressed in 'Naming':

NAMING

Like a blur of rain on the real world.

And no one denies the great utility
For comptrollers of imperial households,
For quartermaster-sergeants,
For grocer's assistants,
For museum curators;
For taxonomists and schoolboys,
Pundits and critics.

And if the name becomes the thing,
The rain it raineth every day
And anyhow: could we bear it?
Could we bear the light of a world?
Of things without names?[1]

The first stanza of the poem associates the urge to name the world and its contents with a cluster of types (a comptroller is one who keeps a counter-roll so as to check a treasurer's accounts; a quartermaster is an officer who looks after the equipment of a regiment and a quartermaster-sergeant assists a quartermaster). Many of these types might connote pejorative qualities. Think of the pedantic nature of the activities of a comptroller (along with the pomp of working for an 'imperial household'); the petty station and duties of not just a quartermaster, but a mere quartermaster-sergeant; the banality of the classificatory duties of a grocer's assistant; the morbidity of the tasks of a museum curator; and finally, the emotional immaturity of a schoolboy. The association of the human tool of naming with this particular flotilla of lamentable and potentially inter-related personality types inadvertently speaks to us of the author's preferred type: one who is able to move beyond lists, accounts and systems, and to 'grasp the transience of being'. [2] For such a person it would be unnecessary to put the present on curatorial record, and

most important of all, for such a person the experience, not the assignation of description, would be the final good.

Fowles himself has been by turns a collector of insects, a hunter of wildlife, a searcher after rare orchids, a collector of fossils and a museum curator. As the reformed smoker intimately knows the evils of smoking and is avidly contra the cigarette, so too with Fowles and his past relationships with nature. As one of the former 'taxonomists and schoolboys' Fowles well understands the seductions and traps of naming, and in this first stanza of the poem 'Naming' he places the habit in a harsh light, associating it with pedantic, petty and banal people and practices. The second stanza of the poem opens with a reminder of the alienation from experience that is the outcome of 'the name becoming the thing'. If this were to happen the rain would 'raineth every day', the object would be forever occluded by its label. The line 'the rain it raineth every day' is telling. In its source in the epilogue of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* a clown sings this line while iterating a litany of inevitable human errors and misconducts.[3] Thus the reader is alerted that although we are in error to allow the name to 'become the thing', it is an error of an everyday kind.

This is also commented on in Fowles' closely related poem 'How It Begins'. Before completing my reading of 'Naming' I would like to discuss this brief and obviously interrelated poem:

HOW IT BEGINS

The small whirled eddy

Of the dull October leaves.

Two passing boys. And one:

"Whirlwind." Not "Whirlwind!"

But "Whirlwind." Period.

Eminently normal *voilà*,

So to speak.

There. I grow, I pin you,

Having seen you pinned before.

You thing, you stupid

Pinnable, nameable *thing*.^[4]

Here two passing boys notice an eddy of leaves on the ground. One of them exclaims:

'Whirlwind.' The notion that linguistic reification is equated with regrettable alienation from the world is represented by the ridiculously supercilious boy, perhaps one of the school boys from the previous poem, and his trite victory, through ascription of name, over an eddy of wind. The linguistic aspect of the reification is stressed in the first stanza through the bringing of our notice to, firstly, the fact that 'Whirlwind' is a written sign with appropriate punctuation – 'Not "Whirlwind!" / But "Whirlwind." Period.' – and secondly by the reflection that the French term for 'here it is' is a particular kind of speech pattern – 'Eminently normal *voilà*, / So to speak.'

Linguistic reification is also responsible for a banalisation of the world: the speaking of "Whirlwind." covers up the freshness of the event, the small marvel of a swirling shower of autumn leaves, it makes it 'Eminently normal'. The wind, or human breath, is the original medium of communication in oral, indigenous cultures (a point made by David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, and one I will expand on later in the essay), and only with the advent of formal language have we been able to seal our cultures off from the exhalations of the animate world with such hermetic success. Only formal language, signalled in this poem by the insertion of a self-conscious period and the phrase 'so to speak', can so successfully shut down our access to nature's actual voices.

The age of the namer in this poem is of note: the poem is entitled 'How It Begins', and the fact that the namer is very young indicates that he is a novice in the human practice of naming the world. The self-satisfied attitude towards this worldly phenomenon presented in the second stanza - 'There. I grow, I pin you,/ Having seen you pinned before' - as well as the pettily hostile attitude towards the named - 'You thing, you stupid/ Pinnable, nameable *thing*' - appear as the imputed attitudes of the boy. The poet associates the practice of assigning names with emotional immaturity. The boy has conquered the eddy of leaves by giving it a classification in his system of language, but only someone personally insecure in the face of a threatening outside world, like a small boy, would feel the need to actually gain a victory over the outside world in this sense. By the end of the poem an over-ready absorption of attention in the 'name' as opposed to the 'thing' has been represented as both obscuring our view of the physical world and as having emotionally disreputable origins.

I mentioned that only someone personally insecure in the face of a threatening outside world, like a small boy, would feel the need to conquer the world by assigning names to it with untoward alacrity. Towards the end of the first chapter of *Daniel Martin* (1977), Fowles' most socially realist, and most thinly autobiographical novel, the boy Daniel, the work's protagonist, is analysed by his older self along such lines:

The sun in the extreme west, as he likes it best. Its slanting rays reveal the lands in a pasture-field on the other side of the valley, the parallel waves where an ox-plough once went many centuries before; and where he must pay a visit soon, childish, but another of his secret flowers, the little honeycomb-scented orchid *Spiranthes spiralis*, blooms on the old meadow there about now. He clings to his knowledges; signs of birds, locations of plants, fragments of Latin and folklore, since he lacks so much else.[5]

Among Daniel's 'knowledges' are 'fragments of Latin', such as the name of this orchid that he is soon to visit. It is, according to the narrator, the personal inadequacies of a young boy that cause him to be so eager to attach fragments of Latin to beautiful orchids. His emotional inexperience – at this point in the novel Daniel has had no experience of heterosexual love – as well as the more general distance he feels between himself and manhood, creates in the protagonist a deficit of confidence which makes him act similarly to the boy in Fowles' poem 'How It Begins'. He clings to his classificatory systems as the few weapons he has to deal with an otherwise uncontrollable world.

Later in *Daniel Martin*, in another scene from Daniel's boyhood, the protagonist walks down a back lane in his Devon village, playing with a parsley stem as a make-shift blow-pipe:

Now a plane drones slowly over, high in the azure, very different from the future-hidden Heinkel, and I stop and watch it. A Tiger Moth. Another name. I also know the real (though do not know that in that unconscious "real" my redeemer cometh) tiger moth: the fluttery, zigzag-striped, chocolate-and-cream, black and red-orange Jersey Tiger. We catch some every year in the garden. The airplane is more interesting. I'm good at names. I shoot it down with a grass stalk.[6]

Here the notion of a small boy using an assignation of name as a weapon against the outside world is again represented. Daniel identifies a Tiger Moth plane flying overhead. His naïve pride at his act of classification, 'I'm good at names', is placed alongside his shooting down the Tiger Moth with a grass stalk, suggesting that the assignation of name allows him to score a victory over the physical world, but that this victory is a trite and unrealistic one. If the boy Daniel thinks his habit of naming signifies a profound engagement with the physical world, then he is as bumptiously idealistic as Daniel imagining himself to have shot down an airplane with a piece of grass.

The central point made by the above poems and excerpts from *Daniel Martin*, that naming causes a kind of reification and occlusion of the natural world, is made repeatedly in Fowles' long essay *The Tree*. However in the 1950s Fowles became interested in Zen theories of seeing, as he writes in *The Tree*, of 'learning to look beyond names at things-in-themselves'.^[7] He also learnt from Zen that, with practice, one can float, seemingly without identity, in front of a perceived object, placing all sense of identity in the thing one looks at. Gary Snyder, a contemporary of Fowles more heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism, explains eloquently this Zen technique of perception:

The twelfth-century Zen Buddhist philosopher Dogen put it this way: "To advance your own experience onto the world of phenomena is delusion. When the world of phenomena comes forth and experiences itself, it is enlightenment." To see a wren in a bush, call it 'wren', and go on walking is to have (self-importantly) seen nothing. To see a bird and stop, watch, feel, forget yourself for a moment, be in the bushy shadows, maybe then feel 'wren' - that is to have joined in a larger moment with the world.^[8]

With his gloss of a fragment of Zen Buddhist philosophy Snyder points out an alternative to a linguistically-mediated apprehension of nature. Instead of pinning the wren-as-thing with the turn of phrase, 'wren', one might experience the world and its phenomenon in a more quietly receptive manner. In Snyder's words, one might forget one's self for a moment, be in the bushy shadows and maybe feel 'wren'. Such an experience is preferable, allowing one access to a less regressively language-bound way of being in the world.

It is also the approach to nature that Christopher Hitt has argued is well conceptualised as the 'ecological sublime'.^[9] Hitt sees the sublime as 'a particular cultural and/or literary expression of something that is indeed universal: human beings' encounters with a nonhuman world whose powers ultimately exceeds theirs'.^[10] Although critics have usually concentrated

on the aspect of 'humbling fear' in the sublime, an ennobling humility before nature is also a part of Burke and Kant's conception.[11] Hitt uses Neil Evernden's argument in his book *The Social Creation of Nature* that we should try to move beyond language and reason and see nature as 'a unique and astonishing event', which is therefore experienced as 'wholly other'.[12] We move outside conceptualisation and, 'there is no room, no time, for reflection. We are seized by the relationship; we cannot think about it as we would an object. It is here, now, and while it lasts, there is only now.'[13] This sounds like the moment with a wren that Snyder adumbrates, and that I adduced as representative of the Zen alternative Fowles mentions to the maligned practice of naming. One steps outside the *logos* and experiences nature unmediated by both language and a conception of the subject-object dualism. According to Hitt such an experience is well termed 'the ecological sublime'. The ecological sublime, Hitt writes, is given quintessential expression in Thoreau's essay 'Ktaadn', where Thoreau made an ascent of Mount Katahdin in New England. Thoreau wrote in this essay: 'Think of our life in nature, - daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it - rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact!* *Contact!*'. [14] In transcending linguistic conceptualisation Thoreau truly reveals nature, at least in Hitt's interpretation.

But are writers like Hitt and Evernden wise to champion 'the ecological sublime'? I return, after having made a circuitous deviation, to my discussion of Fowles' poem 'Naming'. In the second stanza of that poem we find a hint of that author's realisation that life without the practice of naming, the practice of discursive conceptualisation, would be impossible. This post-Zen realisation of the impossibility of living without names, and thus of language, is seen in the last three lines of the poem, where life without naming is suggested as unbearable: 'And anyhow: could we bear it?/ Could we bear the light of a world?/ Of things without names?' The poet seems to be asking us, could we bear the senseless and chaotic over-load of perceptions of life linguistically-unmediated? Living in a world of things without names, it is hinted, might

well be beyond human capabilities. This is a view well articulated by the natural history writer Sue Hubbell:

The bits and pieces of life are so numerous that we need to order and classify them before we can think about them. Our sort of brain cannot handle the world in the raw. We have to arrange all the bits into piles, and if there are too many piles we arrange those into clusters. Without ordering systems, which is what taxonomies are, we can't think, live, or work with our world.[15]

Hubbell answers Fowles (and Snyder and Hitt), asserting that, no, we could not bear the light of a world without names. Such a 'world in the raw' would prevent us from successfully interacting with our environment.

According to Steven Pinker, a series of representations do underlie our thinking, but they are not synonymous with language. Words do not determine thoughts. Any thought in our mind embraces a huge amount of information, but when we want to communicate this information to another person we can only encode a small percentage of it in the form of sentences to be spoken or written. We do not think in language, as some mistakenly believe, but in what Pinker calls 'mentalese'. [16] As studies on babies, monkeys and adults without language have shown, the human mind can practice advanced kinds of conceptualisation without any form of language. [17] For physicists thinking is geometrical, and many creative people report thinking in mental images. [18] So, to return to my discussion of naming, we do order the chaotic streams of inputs into our minds from the natural environment around us into 'piles' and 'clusters' as Hubbell phrases it. It is just that these 'piles' and 'clusters' are more accurately referred to as 'categories' than as 'names'.

We perceive categories of objects, such as robins, lakes and mountains. Giving things a category label allows us to infer properties that are not directly observable in a thing before us.

For example if we are to label something a bird we will infer that it has wings even if the bird may not exhibit this part of its anatomy to us just as we are looking at it. Giving words to concepts allows us to share our discoveries about the world with the less experienced or less observant. As Pinker points out: 'even a wordless thinker does well to chop continuously flowing experience into things, kinds of things, and actions (not to mention places, paths, events, states, kinds of stuff, properties, and other types of concepts).' [19] Whenever we intentionally perform any kind of action, such as riding a bike for example, we are using categories. In the case of riding a bike we are employing our knowledge of a particular kind of motor activity that is largely a matter of moving one's legs up and down, as well as sitting atop a metal frame with wheels. Giving the world category labels is a very basic and highly useful aspect of our cognition. As George Lakoff points out 'without the ability to categorize, we could not function at all, either in the physical world or in our social or intellectual lives.' [20] Even if the Zen-influenced naturalist wanted to he or she could not enduringly renounce classification of nature at a fundamental level.

Further than this, the assignation of category labels to reality may be said to be even more fundamentally a part of human cognition when we focus on plants and animals. Pinker hypothesises that there is an adaptive mental module one might call 'intuitive biology'. [21] Hunter-gatherer societies have hundreds of names for different plants and animals and their ecology, life cycle and behaviour. The anthropologists Scott Atran and Brent Berlin found that: 'universally, people group local plants and animals into various kinds that correspond to the *genus* level in the Linnaean classification system of professional biology', and 'since most locales contain a single species from any genus, these folk categories usually correspond to species as well'. [22] People's classifications of the organisms into higher-order life forms (trees, birds, fish, etc) mostly corresponded with the biologist's classification of *class*. The structure of our intuitive biological concepts is different to the way we organise classification of other objects. For example 'whereas people everywhere say that an animal cannot be both fish and fowl, they are perfectly

happy with saying', 'that a piano can be both musical instrument and furniture'.[23] Human infants make a distinction between living and nonliving things, which takes the form of seeing a difference in inanimate objects pushed around by billiard-ball physics and organisms which are self-propelled. Soon children's thinking about living organisms takes on a structure which is different from thinking about other objects, for example they assign hidden essences (a snake cannot be made a lizard even if you glue legs to it) and understand reproductive continuity within species (horses cannot have cow babies). Our classifications of nonliving objects does not assume such logical structure. Thus not only is giving category labels to the world one of the most basic pieces of mental apparatus we inevitably acquire, but assigning natural kinds to plants and animals may even be said to be a cognitive module that is easily activated in the developing mind.

Zen theories of seeing that would help one look beyond the name at the thing-in-itself might be edifying, Fowles suggests in his poem 'Naming', but while it may be good to be aware of the dangers of linguistic reification causing us to cease paying close attention to the 'thing-in-itself', a renunciation of language in some form or other, be it mentalese or English, is impossible. Fowles remarks in *The Tree*, written in 1979, that he had concluded after a period of interest in Zen philosophy in the 1950s that: 'living without names is impossible, if not downright idiocy, in a writer; and living without explanation or speculation as to causality, little better.'[24] As the author makes clear in this remark, the practice of assigning names to things is imbricated with the aims of science: to classify and explain. While Fowles would not follow Zen to the logical conclusion of not giving names to the natural world, neither would he abjure the tenets of science in his relationship with nature.

Language shapes how we see the world, and if Pinker and others are right, particularly how we see plants and animals. However, while all apprehensions of nature will be made with some basic level of classification in mind, we might acknowledge that some apprehensions will be less dominated by classificatory strategies than others. Some apprehensions of nature will be

comparatively, if not in the absolute sense of Zen doctrine, open and receptive to the physical environment. This is the difference between the 'seeing' associated with William Wordsworth, in contrast to the much more intellectually proactive and deliberative knowing associated with Carl Linnaeus. Landscape may well, some kind of classificatory mediation withstanding, be, as Barry Lopez holds, a gestalt that can impress itself on the mind in a fundamental way.[25] In the uncertain borderland of culture and nature there are degrees of absorption in our own ways. In contrast to Evernden's petulantly totalising-critique of category-laden perceptions of nature – 'once defined, the nonhuman other disappears into its new description... the wild disappears the instant it is demystified' – Fowles acknowledges both the dangers of an absorption in the name occluding the thing named, as well as the inescapable necessity of living with names in our relationship with nature.[26]

Having discussed the relationship between categorisation-mediated perceptions of nature and nature itself, I move now to a discussion specifically of the written word in the context of Fowles' ecocritical writings. How wide is the gap between 'presence' and 'representation' in nature poetry? How wide must it be? In his essay 'The Nature of Nature' Fowles approvingly quotes Virginia Woolf's words: 'Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy...they tear each other to pieces.' [27] The English author has used Woolf's notion as an explanation for why he has not been as prolific on the subject of nature as other writers with an interest in the natural world. Evernden writes that it is speakers such as 'John Fowles', who 'may help us acquire the vocabulary needed to accommodate wildness and extinguish the technological flashfire of planetary domestication'. [28] However Evernden is perhaps overly optimistic: the English author's longest continuous published description of nature is found in the ten pages at the end of *The Tree*. Further, very few of the poems in his one collection of poetry constitute revelations of dwelling in the natural world. If Fowles will secure a place in the literary history of nature writing, then it is not as a latter-day John Muir, as one who has spent much time fashioning a plinth for nature's glories, but rather as one who would turn us away from written records.

Justification for Fowles' not having written much nature poetry during his writing career is found in *The Tree*, however it is also commented on in his recently published journals. In 1965, after having recently moved from the built environments of London to Underhill Farm in rural Dorset, Fowles received a vivid impression of the natural world, coming as it did freshly to his city-accustomed eyes. During this period he wanders around the fields enjoying his immediacy of impression, but does not feel inclined to write poetry about nature:

Though lines of poetry come, no poems come... in a way this is like Greece [where Fowles had lived in the early 1950s], it is too immediate, too constituted by poems of phenomenon, a constant flux of actual poetic events – the linnets that haunt the garden (because I am a bad gardener and the fescue is rampant) with their fine Stravinsky-like songs and their ancient Chinese harp flight calls – the first pale, huge violets on the big 'step' down to the sea – finding a bed of moschatel in the woods – the wonderful owls that haunt our nights – a flock of fifty oystercatchers, black, white, coral-red against a pearl-grey sea – the grey-black depths in a watching rabbit's eyes – these things are poems in their language, and in a way to write poems in mine about them is not creative, but merely a matter of translation.[29]

In *Lectures on the English Poets* William Hazlitt, in the nineteenth century, expressed a similar view to Fowles', writing that poetry is 'the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself', and that 'wherever there is a sense of beauty, or power, or harmony, as in the motion of a wave of the sea, in the growth of a flower that "spreads its sweet leaves to the air, and dedicates its beauty to the sun," – there is poetry, in its birth.' [30] Fowles aligns himself with the Romantics: as Jonathan Bate comments, 'in Romantic poetics, poetry is to be found not only in language but in nature.' [31]

Fowles writes 'lines of poetry' about the natural environment in the above excerpt, for example the description of the linnets 'Stravinsky-like songs and their ancient Chinese harp flight calls'. He despairs of writing complete poems, asserting that the 'poems of phenomenon' have pre-empted any greater creative effort he might muster. The 'poems of phenomenon' that may come to us when we are in nature are irreducibly different to the brief representations of nature that Fowles gives us here in poetic language, where he likens birdsong to humanly created music. It is true that nature poetry shares more in common with the 'poems of phenomena' in its assumed epistemology than does science (both are holistic, and personally associative). Yet nature poetry remains embedded in printed language. Fowles' terminology is correct: nature poems remain 'translations' of poetic experiences. Four years later another entry in his journal demonstrates that the author has not changed in his inability, or refusal, to write poems about the countryside:

Not being able to write poetry because you see too much of it every day. All the poetries in this garden; words like throwing stones at swallows. Both mean and futile.[32]

The otherness of nature evades adequate description like the agile and fleetingly present swallow evades the ineffectually lobbed stone. But does writing poems about nature really have the meanness and futility of throwing rocks at a species of bird? It is true that writing cannot fully describe reality: the lived present tense experience, with all its intellectual *and* affective qualities, remains irreducible. As, to use a notion popularised by Martha Nussbaum in relation to writing fiction, literary writing is a matter of trying to get the whole human picture in, the whole texture of reality, its 'surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty',[33] it is understandable that Fowles has consequently often felt, as he reported in an interview, 'condemned to a sort of vulgar futility, or eternal second-best' when writing novels.[34] If we are to believe Fowles from this journal entry, the same inbuilt obsolescence may

be part of the process of writing poems about nature. When it comes to the poetry of nature, translation may be traducement.

One of Fowles' favourite nature writers, who has also barracked for the supremacy of the lived present while commenting on the experiential inadequacies of recorded descriptions of nature, is Thoreau. Here, in *Walden*, Thoreau listens to the first signs of life at the close of a New England winter:

The faint silvery warblings heard over the partially bare and moist fields from the blue-bird, the song-sparrow, and the red-wing, as if the last flakes of winter tinkled as they fell! What at such a time are histories, chronologies, traditions, and all written revelations?[35]

The artist or poet, even one with literary greatness, still only provides a second-hand and unfortunately re-presentational perception of nature. In his essay 'The Blinded Eye' Fowles predated Jonathan Bate's ecocritical treatment of the Romantic poets by almost twenty years, noting perspicaciously that Romantic poetry can be heuristic in offering a more emotionally affective, holistic and personally associative model of perceiving the natural world than that offered by science. [36] However, while such poetry can be edifying in its assumed epistemology, ultimately it is neither recorded science nor art, both Thoreau and Fowles suggest, but rather lived experiences of the outer world that has ultimate value.

According to David Abram, in tribal and indigenous societies humans have a participatory experience of non-human animals and the earth. With the transition to iconic writing systems some remnant of sensory participation in nature was evident. However after the adoption of the phonetic alphabet and the Greek appropriation of this alphabet, language's referents were tied purely to sounds made by the human mouth. Hence, 'the highly anthropocentric (human-centered) mode of experience endemic to alphabetic cultures spread

throughout Europe in the course of two millennia.’[37] Abram, like Fowles, sees the written word as creating a distance between humans and the natural world. Unlike Fowles, Abram analyses this split historically. Abram claims that while plant-based, indigenous cultures ‘read’ the ‘language’ of the trees, winds, and waters in a sense contiguous with their comprehension of oral language (into which nature’s influence also happens to penetrate in the form of echoic and gestural resemblances), today’s industrial Western societies have transferred much of their sensory participation to the written word, cutting themselves off from nature.[38] While the *logos* was originally infused with the carnal, today our darting attention is drawn to text (and electronic media) and divorced from the shapes and patterns of the trees and open skies. For Abram, the expressive medium common to both natural phenomena and human language prior to the written word was the air. As the written word came to be used more and more, the voice of the natural world began to fade: ‘and only then would language loosen its ancient association with the invisible breath’.[39] The ‘forgetting of the air’ is concomitant with the internalisation of human awareness, a process whereby humans can contemplate their own language and thoughts in isolation from the surrounding natural environment.[40]

So Abram, in a similar vein to Fowles, claims that written language ‘significantly solidifies the ephemeral perceptual boundary... between the human body and the sensuous world’.[41] However Fowles’ intuitive remarks lack Abram’s historical sweep in his diagnosis of an ‘exile in the word’. Abram can make the historical comparison and see that, compared to many oral cultures, we who have formal language and the written word are today existing in world of our own making; we are, comparatively, sealed in a ‘hall of mirrors’.[42] At the end of Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous* he asks the question, ‘but what, then, of writing?’[43] In answer he writes that our task is ‘writing language back into the land’; ‘freeing words to respond to the speech of things themselves’; and ‘spinning stories that have the rhythm and lilt of the local soundscape’.[44] Abram closes his work by claiming that language can be made more responsive to the natural world.

In interviews Fowles has expressed an admiration for poets whose work describes nature, such as Seamus Heaney, Norman MacCaig and Ted Hughes.[45] Perhaps he considers such writers to have somehow surmounted the dangers of nature and letters 'tearing each other to pieces'. Fowles has published one volume of poetry, *Poems* (1973). He has said in an interview that: 'the tragedy of my own life is that I am not a great poet.'[46] If it is the case that poets can in a sense do justice to the natural world, as Abram closes his initially pessimistic discussion by claiming (and as Fowles perhaps tacitly admits with his admiration of the work of Seamus Heaney et al.), then perhaps it is the author's lack of talent as a poet that makes him resigned to an aggressive antipathy between written language and nature.

However this is to rely on only one evaluation of the author's poetry: his own. In an essay on Fowles' poetry Dianne L. Vipond quotes Lawrence Durrell's description of Fowles as 'a great poet', and writes that 'serious critical consideration of Fowles' poetry is long overdue'.[47] Many of Fowles' poems are indeed of great interest. As a test-case for Fowles' ability to portray the natural environment through language I chose 'Apollo', one of the poems the author wrote in Greece in 1952:

Apollo

the stones the pines

the shadow of pines
on the singing stones

gurgle of stones
turned in the sun
by the silent water

the water like glass
pale glass
the sun on the water
the stones in the water
the pines and the stones

the salt stones singing
and the sea singing
and the pines and the sun
singing

a yellow sea-poppy
sun and shingle
sea and silence

shrike screams

I come [48]

The lack of grammatical correctness and punctuation in the very first line of the poem, 'the stones the pines', directs the reader into thinking that this poem will present the physical environment pure and unmediated. However the irony of the poem, making it the perfect example of Fowles' nature poetry in this context, is that its very title, Apollo, god of the arts, alerts us to the writer's status as an active creator, not merely a scribe for the scene. The sea-shore landscape is, being in Greece, literally the domain of Apollo, but it is also figuratively the domain of Apollo in the sense that the poem is not an instantiation of Greek landscape, as the simplicity of the syntax initially might cajole us into believing, but primarily a humanly crafted artifact, an assemblage of printed words. The last line of the poem, 'I come', emphatically declares to us that these words are the passionate expulsion of a creator, like the scream of the island bird, the shrike. (The line 'I come' might also be interpreted in relation to Apollo occasional guise as sun god. In this reading one could see the poem as the love-making of Apollo to his landscape, with the land's ecstatic 'singing' indicating that it is in the throes of sexual pleasure, and the final ejaculation of the sun-god bringing the harmony of elements to a heightened, epiphanous moment.)

This poem is almost haiku-like in its simplicity of natural imagery. Its very spare elements - light, sea, stone and pines - remind one of the pastoral simplicity sought and found by the character of Nicholas in Fowles' 1966 novel *The Magus*. For Nicholas the light of Greece (phenomenological before cultural - and hence classical - in its simplicity) was an agent of redemption, corroding away his narcissism and leaving him clean. For Fowles himself the genesis of *The Magus* lies in a journal entry from 1952 telling of his experience of nature in Greece ('a compound of exquisitely blue sky, brilliant sunlight, miles of rock and pine, and the sea', causing the young man to experience 'an all-embracing euphoria').^[49] Read in this way the poem 'Apollo' chronicles the moment that the creative seed of the idea for *The Magus*, that peculiar pastoral, was spilt.

If we focus again on the way nature is represented by the language of the poem we notice how, as Vipond explains: 'the sibilance of the recurring s sounds emulate the sound of water

running over stones, the background noise of the sea, and an implicit whispering of wind “singing” in the pines’.[50] The repetition of the images of stone, sun, sea, pines and shadow, impresses the enduring reality of the land over a flow of time on the reader. The reiteration in the lines ‘the sun on the water/ the stones in the water/ the pines and the stones’ structurally echoes the lapping of the sea against the land’s edge. Although very few of his poems are properly described as nature poems, Fowles can evoke nature well using the English language, as he proves here in ‘Apollo’.

Fowles’ lack of confidence about there being a potentially satisfactory relationship between his nature poetry and nature may be unwarranted. In the chapter of *The Environmental Imagination* entitled ‘Representing the Environment’ Lawrence Buell argues that: ‘the capacity of the stylised image to put the reader or viewer in touch with the environment is precisely what needs stressing as a counter to the assumptions that stylisation must somehow work against outer mimesis or take precedence over it.’[51] Buell quotes Annie Dillard’s words that ‘language need not know the world perfectly in order to communicate perceptions adequately’.[52] For Buell stylisation helps to give reality to a landscape. He gives as one example a botanical passage from Mary Austin’s *Land of Little Rain*. In Austin’s text one finds a description of a flower’s opening over night as making a rustling noise when in fact such slow movement would cause no literal sound in the human ear. In the words of Austin: ‘One hears by night, when all the wood is still, the crepitatious rustle of the unfolding leaves and the pushing flower-stalk within, that has open blossoms before it has fairly uncramped from the sheath.’[53] The flower that is opening up in this passage is of the false hellebore, a plant Austin characterises as having rude vigour. Her image may be an invention and a stylisation, but it is precisely in her power as a writer to invent and stylise that Buell thinks she is enabled to pursue ‘a decidedly referential project’.[54] Buell’s argument gives persuasive force to the view that nature writing may be valuable as a representation of the environment.

Having read Fowles' journal entries about 'poems of phenomena' not being well translated into the written word, one might be tempted to think that our perceptions of the natural world cannot be communicated adequately by written language. However as I think Fowles' own poem 'Apollo' demonstrates, stylisation can be a powerful heuristic in helping one to develop an acquaintance with a particular biota. In 'Apollo' the haiku-like simplicity of the natural imagery evokes the elemental simplicity of wild Greece; the onomatopoeic alliteration of words beginning with the letter 's' evokes the sound of the wind scything through the trees; and the repetitive cadence of the verse hints at the sea's repeated caress of the shoreline. Although 'Apollo' is most classically the domain of cultural creation, it is also a significant and effective invocation of an actual place.

Agreeing with this claim does not mean that we cannot also agree with Dana Phillips' statement that 'landscapes in words... lack the complexity and biodiversity that make natural landscapes compelling'.^[55] Descriptive prose about the natural world must create, as Abram argues, a significant boundary between the human body and the sensuous world. Fowles' captures Greece in his poem 'Apollo', and yet he also fails to capture it. Onomatopoeia can make language more responsive to the soundscape of a particular bioregion, and yet onomatopoeic words still remain symbolic abstractions on printed paper, far from the world of actual swaying pines and immobile stones. We should not be satisfied if nature writing ever usurped actual time readers were to spend in nature.

In the present essay I have treated Fowles as a fellow ecocritic, as indeed I think more people in the literature and the environment field should acknowledge him as. As an ecocritic, Fowles' has swung far wide from the belief that language helps us to know nature in a profound sense. His practice of Zen techniques of perception placed him, for a time, alongside writers like Hitt and Evernden who champion 'the ecological sublime' and eschew names in their relationship with nature. However, as I have shown, Fowles-the-naturalist did come to realise the impossibility of living without names when perceiving the natural world. In *The Tree*, and in

his poem 'Naming', he conceded that, as Pinker has shown, living without categorisation would be futile, particularly so in the case of perceiving nature. However the English writer remains wary of descriptive nature writing, marking him as unusual among contemporary ecocritics, in some respects closer to Phillips than Bate or Buell. Fowles' belief that we should look away from writing towards present tense being in our relationship with nature, as presented in *The Tree*, but also in the recently published journals, has clear force. However the writer's position on the relationship between nature poetry and nature fails to engage with the positive advantages of stylisation, as discussed by Buell. Even a thinker as wary of the potential of the written alphabet to alienate us from the sensuous world as David Abram can see that nature writing is valuable when it underscores the soundscapes of particular ecosystems. Fowles' estimation of the worth of his own poetry misses its mark: as a critical judgement it is interesting, yet ultimately flawed. Outer mimesis, the relationship between written language and the physical environment, can be much more than throwing stones at ever elusive swallows.

notes

1. John Fowles, 'Naming', from *Poems*, (New York: The Ecco Press, 1974), p.41.
2. Fowles, 'Collectors Items: Introduction', from *Wormholes*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), p.341.
3. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, (ed.) Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan, (Walton-on-Thames, Surrey: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd[date?]), pp.1189-1216, p.1215.
4. Fowles, 'How It Begins', p.42.
5. Fowles, *Daniel Martin*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977), p.11.
6. Fowles, *Daniel Martin*, p.88.
7. Fowles, *The Tree*, (New York: The Ecco Press, 1979), p.38.
8. Gary Synder, 'Language Goes Two Ways', *A Place in Space*, (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995), p.179.
9. Christopher Hitt, 'Toward an Ecological Sublime', *New Literary History*, 1999, 30: 603-623.
10. Hitt, p.609-10.
11. Hitt, p.606-7.
12. Everden, *The Social Creation of Nature*, (Baltimore, 1992), p.117, quoted in Hitt, p.613.
13. Peter Reed, 'Man Apart: An Alternative to the Self-Realization Approach', *Environmental Ethics*, 11.1 (1989, 53-69, 57, quoted in Hitt, p.614.
14. Thoreau, 'Ktaadn', *The Maine Woods*, in *Thoreau in the Mountains: Writings by Henry David Thoreau*, ed. William Howarth (New York, 1982), p.150, quted in Hitt, p.615.
15. Sue Hubbell, *Waiting for Aphrodite; Journeys into the Time Before Bones* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), p.160, quoted in Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology. Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*, (Oxford: OUP, 2003), p.14.
16. Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, (London: Penguin, 2000), p.78.
17. Pinker, pp.61-4.
18. Pinker, p.65.
19. Pinker, p.161.
20. George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things. What Categories Reveal about the Mind*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.6.
21. Pinker, p.465.
22. Scott Atran, *The Cognitive Foundations of Natural History*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), quoted in Pinker, p.469.
23. Pinker, p.469.
24. John Fowles, *The Tree*, p.39.
25. Barry Lopez, 'Landscape and Narrative', quoted in Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.83.
26. Evernden, p.131.
27. John Fowles, 'The Nature of Nature', from *Wormholes*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), p.352.

28. Evernden, p.133.
29. Fowles, Diaries, EUL 102/1/15, 31 January 1966, p.24.
30. William Hazlitt, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, (ed.) P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London, 1930-4), v.1, quoted in Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p.17.
31. Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p.17.
32. Fowles, Diaries, EUL 102/1/16, 15 July 1970, p.7.
33. Martha Nussbaum, 'Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature', from *Love's Knowledge*, (Oxford: OUP, 1990), p.3.
34. Fowles, 'An Interview with John Fowles', Carol M. Barnum, 1984, originally in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 31:1 (Spring 1985), 187-203, from *Conversations with John Fowles*, Dianne L. Vipond (ed.), Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999, p.103.
35. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, Or Life in the Woods*, (London: J.M. Dent and Co., 1909), p.274.
36. John Fowles, 'The Blinded Eye', (1971) from *Wormholes*, [page numbers?], p. 263. Twenty years later Bate famously championed the Romantics as proto-ecological in *Romantic Ecology, Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991).
37. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, (New York: Vintage, 1996), p.138.
38. Abram, p.139.
39. Abram, p.254.
40. Abram, p.255.
41. Abram, p.256.
42. Abram, p.257.
43. Abram, p.273.
44. Abram, p.273.
45. Fowles, 'An Unholy Inquisition', interview with Dianne L. Vipond, from *Conversations with John Fowles*, [page numbers?], p.200. Also 'A Dialogue with John Fowles' (from same volume), [page numbers?], p.237.
46. Fowles, 'An Unholy Inquisition', interview with Dianne L. Vipond, from *Conversations with John Fowles*, p.200.
47. Dianne L. Vipond 'The Landscape of Loss in the (Love) Poems of John Fowles', *John Fowles and Nature*, pp.238-53, p.238 (quote by Durrell from Charles E. Claffey, "Lawrence Durrell: British Author of the Exotic is Still Dazzling the Critics", *Boston Globe*, 25 April 1986, pp.12-3).
48. Fowles, *Poems*, [page number?]
49. John Fowles, 'Behind *The Magus*', *Wormholes*, [page numbers?] p.58, pp.61-2.
50. Vipond, *John Fowles and Nature*, p.242.
51. *The Environmental Imagination*, pp.97-8.
52. Annie Dillard, *Living By Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's, 1978), p.105, from Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p.101.
53. Mary Austin, *Land of Little Rain*, from Buell, p.99.
54. Buell, p.99.
55. Dana Phillips, p.14, p.19.

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