ossian's hall of mirrors: nature, artifice, and the environmental imagination

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abstract

This essay describes the story of a small, mirrored viewing house, located in an eighteenth-century picturesque landscape known as the Hermitage outside Dunkeld in Perthshire, Scotland. A well-known tourist destination, Ossian's Hall allows visitors to experience the spectacular Black Linn Falls from the comfort of its mirrored interior. The foil backing of the mirrored glass is printed with references to a third-century bard named Ossian, creating the effect that fragments of image and text insert themselves between one's own reflection and that of the furious water beyond. The resulting experience is an act of imagination, slipping between outside and inside, nature and artifice, reality and illusion, blurring the relationship between the interior and interiority.

With interiority, nothing is what it seems. Ossian was a fiction of the romantic imagination, and the viewing hall as experienced today was built in 2007 not 1806, as the little section painted on one of the mirrors suggests. What is maybe less obvious is that the landscape it looks out on has been subject to its own interiority, being simultaneously a 'natural' woodland and an eighteenth-century romantic picturesque landscape, while, for its original owners, the Dukes of Atholl, it was an expression of power and the trees a commercial crop. The landscape is as designed as the little mirrored hall. Why is it so difficult for us to think of nature in this way?

In answering this question, I explore Ossian's Hall and the Hermitage using a combination of historical and archival research, autoethnography and fieldwork. I describe what I find in three layers titled history, self, and nature, that like the reflections in the mirrored interior hover over one another, which I follow with a reflection. This essay is an experiment in applying interior thinking to environmental storytelling.

keywords

interior; interiority; nature; artifice; reflection

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Figure 01.
Interior of Ossian's Hall of Mirrors, May 2022. Photograph by author.

introduction

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* Amitav Ghosh suggests the reason 'why contemporary culture finds it so hard to deal with climate change [is because] the climate crisis is a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.'[1] Ghosh explains this statement, writing that 'culture generates desires' — for material goods, behaviours, and expectations, that might be a 'speedy convertible' or a 'certain kind of garden.'[2] He argues however, it is not the thing itself we desire, so much as the image it evokes in our imaginations — images that create longings that are deeply embedded in culture.

> when we see an advertisement that links a picture of a tropical island to the word *paradise*, the longings that are kindled in us have a chain of transmission that stretches back to Daniel Defoe and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. […] The artifacts and commodities that are conjured up by these desires are, in a sense, at once expressions and concealments of the cultural matrix that brought them into being [blinding us to the fact that these desires] are the principal drivers of the carbon economy.[3]

What Ghosh alludes to is that the act of imagination allows us to look forward and imagine the future, but it does so in reference to the past. This is a past that relates not just to our personal memories but also a collective cultural past. In the context of questions concerning imagining, and the interior, this essay explores what insights an interior imagination might reveal about attitudes to nature, both historical and current. Through historical and archival research, field work, and reflections on my own family's past, it reveals how current attitudes towards nature are intertwined with our failure to imagine what the climate crisis might bring.

What is meant by an interior imagination? As an interior educator I have long been interested in the relationship between an interior and interiority, the built form and the effect it creates, the physical and the perceived. These ideas are developed from the position that interiority is an act of imagination requiring the occupant to create an image in their mind that combines the scene in front of them with past experiences, memories, and associations creating a layered image of the space.[4] The major conceptual frame for this is psychoanalysis, particularly Freud's model of the functioning of psyche through the interactions of conscious and the unconscious mind.[5] Resonant with the cultural mechanisms Ghosh describes, an understanding of interiority reveals why interiors are both architectural in their form as well as carriers of wider cultural meaning representing the 'expressions and concealments of the cultural matrix that brought them into being.'[6]

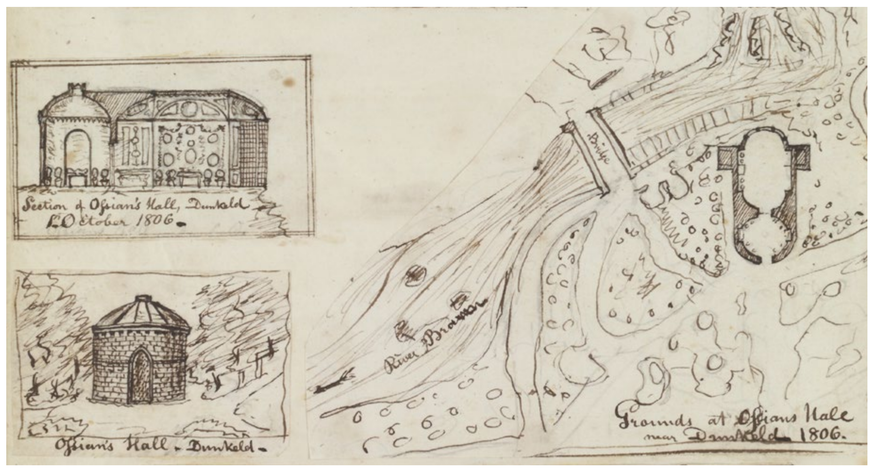
Separated into a series of layered readings entitled history, self, and nature, the essay explores what the relationship between Ossian's Hall and the surrounding landscape expressed when it was created, and as presented today, to shed light on what might have been concealed over time. This is done with reference to Sherry Turkle's understanding of material culture as 'goods-to-think-with', Toni Morrison's practice of 'literary archaeology' to reconstruct forgotten sites, and Roman Krznaric's use of applied history to open our imaginations to long term thinking.[7]

layer 1: history

> 'By the side of a rock on the hill, beneath the aged tree, old Ossian sat on the moss; the last of the race of Fingal. Sightless are his aged eyes; his beard is waving in the wind. Dull through the leafless trees he heard the voice of the north. Sorrow revived in his soul: he began and lamented the dead.'[8]

In 1760, fifteen years after the defeat of the second Jacobite rising by the British Crown and the resulting suppression of Highland culture, a 24-year-old Scottish writer and poet called James Macpherson (1736–1796) set off on travels around the Western Isles.[9] He returned claiming to have discovered some fragments of poetry written by a third-century blind bard named Ossian (or Oisín), which he published as *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse language*.[10] The poems have been described as a form of nature writing, portraying heroic deeds of love and loss and 'the sense of an ancient culture being destroyed' set against dramatic wild landscapes that reflected the emotions of the protagonists.[11] As Professor of Celtic Literature Mark Williams describes, 'Ossian's world is mist-shrouded and crepuscular: the characters are never more than a stone's throw from a gloomy cataract or haunted glen.'[12] Resonant with the eighteenth-century sensibility, 'which thought to dethrone rationality and elevate the passions, with an emphasis on nature as awe-inspiring and productive of deep turbulent feelings', the poems ignited the public imagination in Scotland and beyond.[13] They were read by notable figures of the day including Walter Scott, Thomas Jefferson, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.[14] It is said the 17-year-old Napoleon purchased the Italian translation and 29 years later took a copy with him to exile on St Helena.[15] Today the Ossianic poems are credited with igniting the Gaelic revival and the Romantic movement in general. They also contributed toward 'converting Britons, nay, Europeans, into enthusiastic admirers of nature in her wilder moments.'[16]

Despite their immense popularity, many — including the preeminent man of English letters Samuel Johnson — were sceptical about the authorship, believing Ossian to be a creation of Macpherson's imagination.[17] The view that is generally accepted today is that the poems are an example of the 'found manuscript trope', that is a work of literature that claims to come from an original source, which is in fact fictional.[18] Looking back from the twenty-first century, Macpherson is not so unusual. If one reads the eighteenth-



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Figure 02.
Contemporary descriptions of Ossian's Hall. (a) Sketch plan, section, and elevation drawn by John Sime in 1806, with permission from Historic Environment Scotland Collections. (b) Ossian's Hall by John Dugmore (1793–1871), with permission from the Government Art Collection. (c) Original furniture from Ossian's Hall displayed at Blair Castle, Perthshire, May 2022. Photograph by author.

century travel writers and novelists one will notice how the two genres were curiously intertwined, as is the relationship between reality and imagination, fact and fiction. Consider that Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) are both fictions presented as memoirs that, like Macpherson's poems, captured the public imagination and became ingrained in culture.

Ossian was as influential in the visual arts as literature and one of the many physical manifestations of 'Ossian-mania' was Ossian's Hall commissioned in 1783 by John Murray, the 4th Duke of Atholl (1755–1830). The Dukes of Atholl were chiefs of the Scottish Clan Murray, who, despite divided family loyalties during the Jacobite rising in 1745, retained their substantial land holdings in the 'post 45' reorganisations which replaced the collective ownership of clan lands with a so-called 'modern' system of property or single private ownership.[19]

Ossian's Hall was designed by the painter and architect George Steuart (c. 1730–1806), his brief to re-design a small structure on the Atholls' estate as a homage to the Celtic warrior-poet. The original structure, built in 1758, was a simple single chambered 'view house' known as the Hermitage (which had lent its name to the area), situated over the dramatic Black Linn Falls and suited to solitary contemplation. In contrast, Steuart's design was a fashionable two chambered panorama-style interior, furnished for socialising, the walls lined with paintings depicting scenes from the Ossianic poems and mirrors reflecting the falls [Fig. 02]. Steuart describes the design in detail in a letter sent to his patron on 28 June 1783.

> The paintings are framed to fit the sides of the room between the return glass Pilasters and a space left in the centre panels to screw the convex glasses to. The light is reversed on the Painting to suit the light from one end. The circular end at the door is formed by three panels of glass on each side of the door.[20]

The duke's guests would arrive by carriage and be served refreshments while appreciating the picturesque landscape in front of them so reminiscent of those described in the poems. Ossian's Hall of Mirrors offered an elite and affected view that reflected the duke's cultural taste and wealth as much as Macpherson's poems or the falls.

Ossian's Hall, and its fantastic mirrored interior, dedicated to the imagined words of a semi-mythical third-century poet, soon became one of the most visited sites of the Romantic Movement in Scotland, recommended by early travel writers such as advocate of the picturesque William Gilpin in 1776, and the poets William and Dorothy Wordsworth in 1803.[21] It was visited by celebrities of the time including Queen Victoria and the artist J. M. W. Turner.[22]

Dorothy Wordsworth described her visit in her travel memoir:

> The waterfall, which we came to see, warned us by a loud roaring that we might expect it; we first, however, conducted into a small compartment, where the gardener desired us to look at a painting of the figure of Ossian, which, while he was telling us the story of the young artist who performed the work, disappeared, parting in the middle, flying asunder as if by the touch of magic, and lo! we are at the entrance of a splendid room, which was almost dizzy and alive with waterfalls, that tumbled in all directions — the great cascade, which was opposite to the window that faced us, being reflected in innumerable mirrors upon the ceiling and against the walls.[23]

layer 2: self



Figure 03.
Letter dated 10 October 1772.

The second layer begins in 2015, following the death of my parents, when I inherited a carrier bag of 'family papers' from a great aunt including fifteen letters dating from 1768–1774 sent by a John Warden (1742–1814) in the Virginia Colony in America, back home to his friend Thomas Spankie (1743–1783) in Scotland.

In her book *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, Professor Sherry Turkle, a psychologist at MIT, suggests that objects act as emotional and intellectual companions that anchor memory, sustain relationships, and provoke new ideas.[24] She writes, 'We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought.'[25] Turkle continues with reference to the structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who described bricolage as a way of combining and re-combining a closed set of materials to come up with new ideas.[26] She suggests objects work in a similar way, that material things are goods-to-think-with, because they represent many things to us.[27]

The letters are both objects and texts [Fig. 03]. Written in the days before postage stamps, the paper is folded in such a manner to create an envelope with the address and instructions to the captain of the ship that will carry them. They are 250 years old. I am drawn to their fragile beauty as objects — the worn velvety texture of the paper that has been read and re-read and carefully passed down the generations. The tiny but legible handwriting gives a personal account of the build-up to the American Revolution as well as detail of everyday life. The last letter is sent in November 1774, a few months before military engagements broke out. Warden's immigrant narrative echoes Sarah Pearsall's argument that the American Revolution was the result of a complex global context rather than an isolated event.[28]

An observant reader might guess by the name that the recipient Thomas Spankie is my direct ancestor. Ever since I was given the letters, they have become my evocative objects, offering me clues to my own identity, decentring my understanding of the past, revealing how quickly things get forgotten as the prevailing narrative reconstructs the past to fit the present — history is a bricolage.

Warden had met Spankie while studying theology at St Andrews University. A man without prospects, due to his father being imprisoned for being a Jacobite, in 1768 he set sail for Virginia to become an indentured tutor and later to train as a lawyer. Through the letters I have got to know Warden — thoughtful, well read, and a fluent writer; he is also lonely and often unwell.[29] As the recipient, Spankie remains frustratingly silent. The St Andrews Biographical Register records him as being Minister in the Parish of Falkland (1770–1783); however, correspondence in the Blair Atholl archive revealed that as well as being a Minister, he acted as a 'factor' or property manager to John Murray, the 4th Duke of Atholl. Letters from Spankie to the duke describe digging test pits for coal 'thirty fathoms deep' (180 feet) and planting large numbers of trees.[30] These are not tasks one expects of an educated theologian and man of God and suggest his history is more complex than it first appears.

In studying interiors, I have always been interested in how history is stored in places and things, an embodied non-verbal history that combines

and complements more traditional histories as found in libraries and archives. In an essay titled 'The Site of Memory' the American novelist Toni Morrison explores the difference between memoir and fiction.[31] Her interest is the slave narratives or memoirs from the eighteenth century, in which she notices that in an attempt to encourage a broad readership the authors drop 'a veil over proceedings too horrible to relate', the result being that 'there was no mention of their interior life.'[32] As a writer of fiction drawing on these narratives for her novels she reflects 'but memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me.'[33] In her attempt to imagine what these writers' lives were like she describes her research strategy.

> It's a kind of literary archaeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image – on the remains – in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth.[34]

She notes that 'the act of imagination is bound up with memory', by which she is referring to her own memories, which she acknowledges as a source of reconstruction.[35] Her methods resonate with my experience of my own family's history. Warden and Spankie were of no historical significance. Their stories are long forgotten. In 2015, when I was given my inheritance, the only tangible evidence I had for the two men's existence was the letters themselves and the names of places and spaces they referred to. However, reading Warden's memories of their time together at St Andrews, I cannot help but project family traits onto Spankie.

The more I researched into the contents of the letters, the more I realise how much of the eighteenth century is still with us if we care to recognise it, both in physical artifacts and in the ideas that underpin our so called 'modern' culture. The beginning of the Scottish Enlightenment was a time that saw a marked paradigm shift from religion and the feudal clan system into education, reason, and industrialisation, which went hand in hand with a shift from an allegiance to a collective endeavour to the emergence of the individual.

It is also the time where the man/nature divide becomes more pronounced. For me it is significant the letters were written in the 1760s, the start of the Industrial Revolution, a date that is commonly identified with the origins of the current climate crisis but also when Macpherson introduces the romantic figure of Ossian. I can imagine these seemingly contrary ideas of the rational vs the romantic by picturing my ancestor, an educated and religious man, digging for coal, the energy-dense material that will drive industrialisation, versus the duke sitting in his viewing hall contemplating a layered image of himself, his face reflected alongside fashionable cultural references and the landscape that he owned. Like the romantic tourists, the duke's view of nature was as a backdrop to project onto rather than something to be part of. The roots of our complex and contrary relationship with nature today similarly reflect the 'expressions and concealments of the cultural matrix that brought them into being.'[36]

layer 3: nature

> Apparently, in its heyday, a couple of hundred years ago, the walls were lined with mirrors to reflect the falls, so the Duke of Atholl and his guests could enjoy the sublime river sound and the peat-tinged, spumy water cascading all about them. A little Romantic eco-art installation.[37]

W. G. Hoskins argues in *The Making of the English Landscape* that landscapes are the richest record we have of the past, and function as a living archive.[38] In contrast, a recent Government briefing revealed that as a nation, in the UK, we spend 80 to 90 per cent



a b c

Figure 04.
The Hermitage, May 2022. Photographs by author.

of our lives indoors, meaning one could reasonably suggest we are ill equipped to understand this incredible natural archive in the way our ancestors might have.[39] The result is a phenomenon that Jared Diamond describes as 'landscape amnesia' or the tendency to forget what kind of natural assets existed even in the recent past.[40] For me, landscape amnesia combined with an inability to 'read' the natural world is one of the reasons that has resulted in the crisis of the imagination referred to by Ghosh.

I decided to visit Ossian's Hall. Working in a manner similar to Toni Morrison's literary archaeology, combining literary work with field work was particularly helpful when writing about nature. Today the Hermitage is an area of 33 acres of conifer and deciduous woodlands maintained by the National Trust for Scotland. Home to some of the tallest trees in Britain it is listed as 'outstanding' for 'Artistic', 'Historical', 'Horticultural', and 'Architectural' interest by Historic Environment Scotland.[41] Until one visits the site it is easy to forget Ossian's Hall is designed to be experienced as one of a series of features in a picturesque landscape.

diary entry of a visit 14 May 2022

We pull off the A9, park the car and choose to follow the path that runs up alongside the River Braan. It is May and the forest feels dark, damp, and lush. The path is covered in pine needles from the huge Douglas firs that tower above us, their ancient, gnarled roots pushing between the valley's rocky floor, providing natural steps up. All the time as we walk, we are accompanied by the sound and smell of the water. The word Braan is of Pictish origin, meaning to 'bellow, bray, roar' and as the Braan tumbles down the gorge it lives up to its name.[42] It's a landscape that feels both ancient and alive and I am excited to be walking in my ancestor's footsteps [Fig. 04].

The first sign that we are getting near to our destination is a single-arch stone bridge, a bridge so picturesque that it seems more like a film set. A fallen tree stump below reminds one of how vulnerable these giant trees are to the recent deadly storms that some see as the planet warning that not all is as it should be. Once one of the tallest trees in Britain, the root plate is all that is left after this giant came down in January 2017. It was over 61 metres high when it fell, crashing through its own information board, luckily just short of the stone bridge.

Above the bridge, perched on a ledge, suspended over the falls, we see Ossian's Hall [Fig. 05]. Just as Dorothy Wordsworth had described two hundred years before, one enters through a circular antechamber to be faced by a mirror with an illustration of a man's face on it. The mirror is actually



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Figure 05.
Ossian's Hall as seen May 2022. Photographs by author.

a door that slides into a slot in the wall, allowing access to a larger oval chamber, open at the far end, giving the most spectacular view onto the Black Linn Falls. The walls are painted ochre red and lined with mirrors that reflect the trees and waters beyond, allowing the visitor to see themselves and the falls at the same time. The mirrors are printed with painted figures and quotes from the Ossianic poems — creating the effect that fragments of image and text insert themselves between one's own image and the furious water beyond. The curved form of the room accentuates the sound and smell of the falling water. The mirrored hall is a textbook example of the power of interior design to transform a seemingly simple architectural structure with plaster, paint, and mirrors, the artifice allowing the experience to slip between inside and outside, reality and illusion, blurring the relationship between the interior and interiority, challenging one's perception of the space.



Figure 06.
Dr Prosody's 'Disaster in Ossian's Hall' parodying the three giants of Scottish tour writing, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Pennant, and William Gilpin from *The Tour of Doctor Prosody* (1821).

The door is already open when we arrive and most of the visitors ignore the antechamber and the mirrors and head straight for the viewing platform where, in that curious twenty-first-century fashion, they turn their back on the view to take a selfie. Interestingly, the twenty-first-century obsession of treating nature as a backdrop to one's own image echoes the purpose of this mirrored pavilion from the eighteenth century. The difference today is that everyone's doing it, not just the cultured few. The experience is a little disappointing and I cannot help but wonder at the irony of all this narcissistic gazing dedicated to a poet who was blind.

As the Dukes of Atholl grew in power, so did social unrest. The effete romantic tourists of Ossian's Hall were parodied in publications such as *The Tour of Doctor Prosody* [Fig. 06].[43] In 1821, it was recorded that a tourist guide who hadn't been paid deliberately broke open the door, allowing cattle to wander into the viewing hall, damaging the interiors.[44] Then more spectacularly in 1869, in response to an unpopular tax, Ossian's Hall was blown up with gunpowder by locals.[45] In the explosion, the roof was torn off and the mirrors shattered. By the twentieth century Ossian's Hall stood derelict and in 1943 the Duchess of Atholl gave 33 acres of the Hermitage including the ruined viewing hall to the National Trust for Scotland.[46] Its current mirrored interior is a reconstruction by the National Trust for Scotland that re-opened in 2007, which perhaps explains my disappointment and reveals the pitfalls of literary archaeology as well as an over reliance on eighteenth-century guidebooks.



a b

Figure 07.
(a) *Falls on the River Braan*, Charles Steuart, 1765, oil on canvas, from the collection at Blair Castle, Perthshire.
(b) The Black Linn Falls as seen May 2022. Photograph by author.

During a visit to Blair Castle, home to the Atholl family for over seven centuries, I notice a painting of the *Falls on the River Braan* from 1765, eighteen years before Steuart's mirrored hall was built. It is noticeable how different the landscape looks compared to today, in particular the lack of trees [Fig. 07]. The Hermitage at Dunkeld had once been part of the Great Birnam Wood made famous by William Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Macbeth*, first performed in 1606.[47] By the 1760s this ancient native woodland had largely been cut down for lumber. However, one of the results of the single private ownership created in the 'post 45 reorganisation' was a rapid increase in commercial plantations transforming the once open glen back to forest. The scale of the Atholls' planting was astonishing, responsible for planting 21 million trees on 15,000 acres of ground over a period of a 100 years, the majority of which were Dunkeld Larch.[48] In 1782 Thomas Spankie wrote to the Duke that he was also planting, 'Planes, Oaks, Beeches, Rowan, Elm and Ash.'[49] The 4th Duke is recorded as saying that planting ought to be carried on for beauty, effect, and profit, a very modern sentiment.[50] I allow myself to imagine my ancestor, the Reverend, walking up the open glen with his congregation to plant trees. Perhaps some of the very trees I walked past that morning?

the challenges of thinking long term in a short-term world

The Dukes of Atholl or Clan Murray can trace their lineage back to the twelfth century, allowing for long-term thinking. Part of the grand plan of the 4th Duke was to replant the area with larches and conifers that when mature could be sold to the Royal Navy and bring in a good return for his descendants.[51] This long-term plan failed, as by the time the trees had matured two hundred years later, the Navy was building steel-hull ships. Unintentionally, however, the so-called 'Planter Duke' left a different legacy. Today, in Scotland, ancient woodland is defined as land that is currently wooded and has been continually wooded since at least 1750.[52] The Hermitage, which is already exhibiting considerable natural regeneration, is about to come under this category.

The artifice has become natural, but there are few who remember such a time span. Part of the disconnect is because what is considered natural depends on what time span you are working in. The danger of the mirrored reflection and the selfie is that one freezes a living backdrop to a moment in time and assumes it always looked like this. Consider the different life spans of the various protagonists of this essay: the landscape: millennia, the trees: an Oak a thousand years, a Douglas Fir 750 years, a Larch 250 years, or a family line such as my own (Thomas Spankie is my fifth great grandfather and there are 220 years between our birthdates) compared to an individual life span of potentially eighty years.

Toni Morrison suggested the act of imagination is bound up with memory. Yet, it is also bound up with time. The longer the timespan the more difficult it is to rely on memory and the greater the act of imagination required. As Morrison writes, 'on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world these remains imply.'[53] The challenge is to remember (or even understand) what is fact and what is imagination as one constructs a narrative around the fragments that remain. Just because an object, a tree, or a building exists in the present, it doesn't mean it existed in the past in the same

context. As L. P. Hartley famously wrote, 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.'[54] The important thing is that we try.

the reflection

I want to finish where I began. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh points out:

> Recognition is famously a passage from ignorance to knowledge. To recognise, then, is not the same as an initial introduction. Nor does recognition require an exchange of words: more often than not we recognise mutely. [...] The most important element of the word *recognition* thus lies in its first syllable, which harks back to something prior, an already existing awareness that makes possible the passage from ignorance to knowledge: a moment of recognition occurs when a prior awareness flashes before us, effecting an instant change in our understanding of that which is beheld. [...] The knowledge that results from recognition, then, is not of the same kind as the discovery of something new: it arises rather from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies within oneself.[55]

The etymon of the word reflect is 'reflectere', to turn back, suggesting the function of reflection is also to look back, behind you, but also in time. Recognition and reflection resonate with the idea that interiority is an act of imagination requiring the occupant to create an image in their mind that combines the scene in front of them with past experiences, memories, and associations, thereby creating a layered image of a space.

The research for this essay used historical and archival material, as well as my own family history to direct field work and create what Toni Morrison describes as a 'kind of literary archaeology' of the little mirrored hall and Thomas Spankie's life.[56] In each of the three layers, history, self, and nature, there is nothing new. Instead, as Turkle suggested, I have combined and re-combined an existing set of materials as provocations to thought.[57] This was not done to provide a historical description of an interior. Instead, it aimed to understand what lies behind contemporary attitudes to nature and give insight into the cultural crisis that Ghosh suggests is preventing us imagining and acting on the climate crisis. As Krznaric writes, the 'purpose of the past is not to enable us to predict the future [...] but rather to open up our imaginations.'[58]

John Warden's story of immigration and colonialism place him in a culture that Ghosh describes as 'intimately linked with the wider histories of imperialism and capitalism that have shaped the world.'[59] In contrast, Thomas Spankie's life aligns more closely with the romantic sensibility of shaping nature to a culturally pre-conceived and imagined world view. These are two seemingly different positions that, like the mirrors that line the interior of Ossian's Hall, reflect not just nature but also an eighteenth-century idea about nature, where nature and artifice are seen as opposites. The word 'natural', meaning derived from nature, is the opposite of the word 'artificial', meaning made or produced by human beings.

I want to suggest such binaries may no longer be useful. Comparing the contents of my ancestor's letters to the living archive reveals a more complex picture, as both stories involve shaping or designing the so-called natural world. Today the landscape of the Hermitage presents as an ancient woodland. In 1783 visitors looked out on an eighteenth-century romantic picturesque landscape embodying the wild nature of the Romantic imagination. Meanwhile, for the Dukes of Atholl, it was an expression of power and the trees a commercial crop. Looked at over 250 years, the landscape of the Hermitage is as much a part of Ghosh's cultural expressions and concealments as Steuart's mirrored interior and could be said to be just as susceptible to artifice. Living in the geological age of the Anthropocene, this shouldn't come as a surprise. But in the

twenty-first century, an increasing disconnection from the natural world, combined with an inability to imagine non-human timespans, has resulted in what Diamond describes as 'landscape amnesia.'[60] This amnesia is the reason why we struggle to comprehend nature as human-made and an integral part of culture, allowing us to stop treating nature as a backdrop and imagine ourselves as part of it.

We can perhaps take a clue from these eighteenth-century figures described in the text and their ability to imagine the past; the nostalgic wild landscapes described in Macpherson's nature writing and the future; the Atholls' ambitious re-foresting project.[61] Or the last words of John Warden, who reportedly wrote in his will:

> I hope no tombstone will be raised over me, because it will merely hinder something from growing on the spot. If all men had tombstones erected over their graves, the earth, in a few centuries, would be one entire pavement.[62]

It is an exemplary act of imagination and a powerful response to Ghosh's provocation.

postscript — further reflections on the natural

'Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him.'
Macbeth, Act IV, Scene I

After visiting the Hermitage we walk down to the River Tay to visit the 'Birnam Oak.' It is the last survivor of the medieval forest known as the Great Birnam Wood. Many believe that Shakespeare got inspiration for the 'Scottish Play' during a visit to Perth, Birnam, and Aberdeen in 1599, as one of a troupe of players known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men sent by Elizabeth I of England at the request of King James VI of Scotland.[63] This ancient Sessile Oak is estimated to be 600 years old, so would have been mature in 1599 when Shakespeare and his troupe may have performed in Dunkeld.

In *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Macbeth, who has gained the throne through murder, is told by three witches that he shall never be vanquished until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill, the site of his castle. Macbeth takes the witches' prophecy literally and believes himself to be invincible, because, he reasons, trees don't move. But as every school child knows, under Malcolm's orders, his army cut branches to camouflage themselves as they advance on Dunsinane and, to Macbeth's horror, the unthinkable, the unnatural happens, the trees seem to 'unfix their earth-bound roots' and he is overcome.[64] For Shakespeare and his audiences, however, the one who is unnatural is Macbeth, on account of his immoral behaviour. Nature and morality were intertwined in the Elizabethan mind.

Considered today, Shakespeare's conceit has an eerie and predictive quality to it, as the trees are on the move again, this time due to global warming. Writer and environmental activist Ben Rawlence has mapped out the boreal forest on the move, turning white arctic green.[65] He writes that a forest is not a static thing, the boreal forest (which consists of similar trees to the Hermitage, Scots Pine, Birch, Larch, Spruce, Poplar, and Ash) has been on the move for millennia, moving up and down with each ice age; climate change is their core business. It has taken 250 years for the Hermitage to become a 'natural' woodland. Today the boreal forest is currently moving towards the pole, moving at such a pace that maps can't keep up. We should take heed of the witches' and/or the scientists' warnings.

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