LANDSCAPE AND IDENTITY IN HUGH THOMSON'S *THE GREEN ROAD INTO THE TREES*

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Abstract

Although familiar with distant and exotic locations, Hugh Thomson became alienated from his own native region. The study explores the process of re-familiarising oneself with the native landscape by allowing the natural environment to inspire probes into its historical and social layers. Thomson´s book, *The Green Road into the Trees*, documents the restoration of his local identity through physical and psychological immersion in the British countryside. The paper focuses on the phenomenon of slow travel as a means of reconnecting with the environment and enabling one to identify as part of the local landscape. I argue that such reconnection, albeit driven by anthropocentric motivations, helps to break the traditional human-nature dichotomy and enables us to see the landscape as "the engagement of people in place, as experience in the world" (David and Wilson, 2002: 5-6). On a more general level, the analysis also examines how the focus on travelling enriches the genre of nature writing. Although the text analyses nature writing, it is not an environmental study, but rather a study of identity construction.

Key-words: *nature writing, landscape, local identity, Hugh Thomson, space.*

Introduction

The genre of nature writing is most often studied from an ecocritical perspective. It is often viewed critically for its anthropocentrism and escapism. This study focuses on a completely different aspect. The book *The Green Road into the Trees*, which represents nature writing here, is interpreted as an identity study. Its author, Hugh Thomson, reexamines his local identity through a physical, immersive experience of the local landscape. For him, landscape is not merely a location, but an interface between people and places. This interface contains many layers, which the author uncovers through his experience. He is drawn to these different historical layers by various impulses – visual (or aesthetic), social (by encountering many diverse characters), or personal (referring to his own memories and his own personal history). Through his journey and his unique experience of the landscape, Thomson adds a layer to the location, and at the same time, he manages to redefine and reclaim his own local identity, his own version of the relationship with his home.

1. Location and Identity

Studying a country´s culture through the literary depiction of space in time is only logical, as space and its temporal dimension basically define our existence. At the same time, the categories of time and space are so mutually connected that they basically define each other. Such a claim is theoretically grounded, e.g. in Edward Soja´s *Thirdspace*: "we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, actively participating in the social construction of our embracing spatialities." (2012: 1) This citation perfectly summarises the human/natural co-creation of space and its multiple, layered cultural meaning. It also resonates in Henri Lefebvre´s triad of physical–mental–social, or perceived–conceived-lived. At the same time, the volatility of space, which is (according to Doreen Massey) "always under construction" as a "product of inter-relations," (2005: 9) opens the political side of space, negotiating gender, class, ethnicity, ecological issues or the sense of belonging. When focusing specifically on landscape, the volatility of this notion is further deepened by the traditionally rather aesthetic approach to it. But bearing in mind Lefebvre´s triad, landscape becomes a possibility to sense "how location and identity are formed through a complex entanglement of ideas and practices." (Anderson, 2014: 42) Landscapes, understood as meaningful, socially constructed places that involve both bodily and cognitive experiences. (David, Wilson, 2002: 5), expresses the engagement of people in the place, as an experience of the world. This text primarily examines how the physical experience of a landscape embodies the process of identity construction, which aligns closely with the theoretical framework briefly mentioned above. The interpreted text is Hugh Thomson´s *The Green Road into the Trees*, first published in 2012, which is an account of the author´s walk through England (the book´s subtitle), inspired by his desire to overcome the alienation he felt towards his home country after a prolonged absence. Although the book won the 2014 Thwaites Wainwright Prize for nature and travel writing, it has so far attracted limited academic attention.

2. Nature Writing

The Green Road into the Trees is most often linked to the genre of nature/travel writing, which can be characterised as essentially spatial. Space plays a crucial role here, exceeding that of a passive setting. Moreover, this genre presents the temporality of space in two dimensions: horizontal (usually as a journey progressing from its start to its conclusion) and vertical (uncovering various historical layers of meaning in space). In a similar way, nature writing considers space as the sphere of a multiplicity of trajectories that can be likened to a train journey (for example) speeding across ongoing stories (Massey, 2005: 120). Additionally, the genre explores the intersection of subjectivity and objectivity in a thought-provoking manner. Nature writing rests in an individual´s subjective experience of a landscape, which is often presented with an almost confessional quality, but aims to formulate objective conclusions about the effects of human immersion in nature.

Nature writing is a relatively traditional nonfiction genre combining personal reflection with scientific description and aesthetic interpretation of the

environment. This combination of scientific precision with often highly emotional personal experiences makes the genre unique: the emphasis on the emotional interconnection between humans and nature leads to the formulation of ethical values and enables the presentation of ecological themes. Within the British literary tradition, the genre was pioneered by Gilbert White thanks to his *The Natural History of Selborne,* published in 1788. White, as a prototype of a rural pastor, somewhat disappointed by his career, devoted himself to a rather stereotypical activity: tending his country garden. Gardening then unmistakably included a meticulously kept gardening diary. In White´s case, it, however, evolved into a meditative, philosophical, descriptive, and, above all, beautifully poetic text. White´s book is also unique because of the period's fascination with the exotic and the imperative to discover new species. In contrast to such discoveries, White explored his local countryside and discovered the environment on his doorstep.

The genre had to negotiate many tight spots during its development to reach its current form. On one hand, it is the problematic target of the genre: nature itself. As Raymond Williams famously characterised, it is the most complex term in the English language (1983: 219), and the definitions of what we call 'nature', 'wilderness', 'the wild', or 'environment' have since undergone significant rethinking. On the other hand, the genre has been attempting to free itself from its internal tension between fidelity and artifice, caused by the two original sources of the genre: the Romantic aesthetic approach to landscape and the Enlightenment's scientific precision in its description. The current version of the genre of nature writing represents a multidisciplinary approach focusing on relationships and experiences that create particular landscapes.

Although these texts still contain both detailed descriptions of the environment and a rhapsodic approach to the landscape, they go further to examine, record, and assess the complex entanglement of human/natural co-creation. Although these issues do not necessarily fall within the scope of this article, it is worth mentioning that there are also numerous discussions about the level of escapism and consolation that the genre entails, as well as debates over its relevance. Abberley et al., for example, dispute the environmental value of some key texts of the genre, claiming that some of the most illuminating pieces of nature writing may turn out to be the least useful environmental texts. (2022: 233) All the abovementioned issues demonstrate that nature writing is still grappling with several internal tensions and challenges that need to be addressed. Texts like Thomson´s are now referred to as nature/travel writing and represent a resulting mix between the originally distinct genres. Just as nature writing struggled with its internal tensions between the aesthetic and scientific approaches, travel writing was often criticised for spatialising the wild. Travel literature often treated the wild as a distant, and sometimes extreme, place to visit and then leave, i.e. as a sight (thereby limiting the perception of the wild to only one of human senses). These limitations are generally overcome in the resulting form. It employs all senses, characterised by Kylie Crane as "senses of being, wondering and bewildering" (based on travel writing) and, as the legacy of nature writing, shifts towards the "affect of presence that is encoded in forms activating the non-visual

senses, a presence that is valuable in and of itself". (Haberman, Keller 2016: 52) The character of such texts is thus often very intimate and rests upon one´s search not for a particular location (be it the wild or one´s home), but for one´s own experience of the multiplicity of stories negotiating the identity of that space. The interface of that experience and the many layers and stories of the individual locations then represent the space "as a simultaneity of stories-so-far" (Massey 2005: 9).

3. Thomson´s Identity Reconstruction

In *The Green Road into the Trees,* Thomson reaches a multilayered negotiated space to which he adds his own story. From the beginning, he acknowledges that the main motivation for the journey is to rediscover his own home, to overcome the alienation he feels towards it, and to regain a sense of belonging. He focuses on the landscape of his home region, taking a path he is familiar with – the ancient Icknield Way. The landscape that this path crosses was, centuries ago, inhabited by Western Saxons and was only slightly affected by Roman colonisation. At the same time, it was once the part of the British Isles most densely covered by forest, which the author views as a traditional preindustrial pastoral image of the English countryside. Thus, the choice of this path suggests the author´s intention to delve deeply into the history of the English landscape, but at the same time, the nostalgia-powered desire to find its pure pastoral image.

Nowadays, parts of the Icknield Way are well-trodden by walkers, other parts are grassy, and some are completely overgrown by bushes and brambles, which, for the author, guarantees a truly authentic exploratory experience. Last, but not least, the Icknield Way already has its literary image. It is rather interesting that Thomson is not the first to write about this particular route. He acknowledges inspiration in Edward Thomas´s eponymous book, which had been devoted to the Icknield Way and published in 1913. The book opens with the following words:

> "Much has been written of travel, far less of the road. Writers have treated the road as a passive means to an end, and honoured it most when it has been an obstacle; they leave the impression that a road is a connection between two points which only exists when the traveller is upon it." (Thomas, 1916: 1)

Thomas´s focus is thus completely the opposite of Thomson´s: it is a geographical study of the path itself and its surrounding landscape. Even though the history of the Icknield Road is important in Thomson´s work, he treats the path as a museum exhibit, as fixed in time and space, removed from the human experience and the aforementioned *multiplicity of stories*. The landscape around the Icknield Way is central to explorations of identity in Thomson´s account, too, but he does not treat it as a static object. For him, it serves as a way of seeing, as Haberman and Keller call it, the affective turn —i.e., a constant negotiation between imagination and material objects. (2016: 2) Thomson approaches the search for his local identity or its redefinition as a professional traveller or travel

writer, defying the nostalgia which is often part of longing for home. As Massey suggests, such nostalgia often powers the attempts to fix identity in time and space so as to return to old familiar things rather than rejoin ongoing lives. It, however, can mean robbing others of their histories and identity when nostalgia articulates space and time in such a way. (Massey, 2005: 124) Hugh Thomson departs from exactly that: the disappointment of not finding the place he used to know. This is the main impulse that sends him on a journey to rejoin the ongoing stories of his home country.

> "England has become a complicated and intriguing country. In truth, it´s always been one, but perhaps I´m just noticing it more now. The familiar is looking very strange. It may be the jet lag, or the sudden immersion in all this noise, colour and confusion after a deep sleep, but I am seized with a sudden desire to explore England." (Thomson 2013: 4)

Doreen Massey, building on Michel de Certeau, claims that one cannot go back in space-time (2005:125), so Thomson negotiates many other stories on his walk, thereby creating a new version of his home region. He uncovers and muses upon many historic layers of landscape, especially when encountering the sacred landscapes of ancient cultures.

> "Making a landscape yours, stamping ownership on the land by showing that you too can shape it, is a primal human instinct. The power of the sacred landscape, and in this case, of the sea as well, can be refracted by a sense of placement, of concentration. There was a feeling at the stone circle of great deliberation – that this was precisely the right place for these stones." (Thomson 2013: 22)

But rather than trying to interpret their original meanings, he connects their histories to other stories. Here, for example, he debates the decision of the English Heritage to close off some of these sights, which, by barring a direct experience, disables the negotiation of meanings and new versions of these places. Such isolation thus exempts them from local identity, and they are artificially frozen in time and excluded from the local landscape.

Later in the book, when the author meets traveller Danny, Thomson continues to a more general rumination on a long-standing issue of Britain – private ownership of land versus the right to roam. Danny, inspired by the New Age Traveller subculture, built his own wagon and set off on a journey in the opposite direction to Thomson's. Born from the culture of resistance and the cultural upheaval of the late 20th century, the Traveller subculture went against the fixed local identity and addressed its volatility by practically resisting the need to identify with a single place. Being at home everywhere and nowhere (permanently) is a type of otherness that upsets not only the British tradition of home ownership and land ownership, but is also clearly only temporarily acceptable for some members of the local communities. The author examines the

locals' reaction to Danny´s presence, which often results in open hostility should he decide to stay longer. His wagon is seen as a nice feature added to the village green, but only as a temporary one. Under any sign of long-term stay, the locals take a protective approach to "their" space and react aggressively to the obvious *otherness* of Danny´s existence. The locals´ possessiveness of space is, again, motivated by the attempt to freeze the location in time and space and refers to the pastoral image of place, resisting the negotiation of its identity yielded by multiplicity and variety. In a way, such treatment of space can be linked to Edward Thomas´s book *The Icknield Way*, as both attempt to dissociate space from time and freeze it in a certain set of conditions. However, such attempts are futile in their struggle to halt the constant flux of identity creation.

Another important issue that Thomson addresses through the stories of the locals is the changes that various layers of the landscape undergo within one human lifetime. For example, Sarah and John, an old farming couple, reminisce about the changes in their local community:

> "When we bought the farm in 1956, it was about the only private property in the village; the rest were owned by one of the Oxford colleges and rented out to agricultural labourers. We had three shops, a school and a post office. Everything had to be here as the wives didn´t have cars. Now there´s hardly anything left." (Thomson 2013: 134)

Just as Doreen Massey suggests that the 'presentness' of the horizontality of space is a product of a multitude of histories whose resonances are still there (2005: 118), Thomson combines his horizontal journey with uncovering the many vertical layers of the given landscape.

Interactions with the local poacher, traveller Danny or a large number of local farmers, who have deep experiential insight into the landscape, inspire Thomson´s ruminations about the meaning and impact of organised nature protection schemes:

> "These days, of course, we encourage all the predators and raptors – the buzzards and sparrowhawks and the red kites, although kites are more carrion. But what no one ever points out is what it´s doing to the songbirds. Used to get a lot of skylarks on Salisbury Plain. Not any more. There were clouds of peewits over by the aerodrome. But they´ve all gone. What people don´t understand is that there is a reason to control predators. You ever see a sparrowhawk come down on a garden table and take a few songbirds for breakfast?" (Thomson 2013: 73)

Despite their original good intentions, they focus on a single aspect, disregarding local knowledge, and by protecting one species, they disrupt the balance of habitats and local ecosystems. From the ecocritical perspective, this approach would be linked to the sense of ownership of nature, which is inherited

from, as Abberley suggests, a complex legacy of environmental practices and imagination. In the British case, such practices are tied to the specifics of national heritage that include the history of enclosure and deforestation, the exploitative nature of agricultural reform, and all the losses entailed by these practices. (Abberley et al., 2022, p. 215) The exploration of identity formation ties the historic layers of these mistakes to the limited experiential knowledge of the location and a lack of direct engagement with its multiple stories.

Apart from experiencing the landscape by negotiating other people´s stories, Thomson enjoys the physical immersion in the place, enabling the combination of physical experience with cognitive processes. As the author´s motivation to set off on a journey can be described as existential outsidedness, i.e., the feeling of not belonging and the inability to identify or participate in the given location, he tries to rediscover local distinctiveness in order to reinvent his own local identity.

This turn toward the local is typical of British society since the 1980s, when the country was experiencing a deep economic and cultural crisis, and the general disillusionment with large collective identities (such as national unity, etc.) resulted in the fragmentation and individualisation of the society. It was reflected later in the 1990s and after 2000 in the landscape aesthetic, defining landscape as a cultural process based on individual personal experience. Thomson´s book suggests the remedial quality of such experience. As he walks part of the journey he has known since his youth, he recalls having walked here when he was in love and later again, as he tried to recover from his failed relationship. The beauty of the lush spring forest with a carpet of bluebells enchants the author and inspires not only his contemplation of personal history, but also its connection to the wider context of English cultural heritage:

> "They spread across the ridge. A heavy-seeded plant, bluebells travel slowly across the ground: it had taken many generations for them to cover such distance. The carpet of blue flowers managed to be a celebration both of the transience of spring and of the permanence of the English landscape." (Thomson 2013: 10)

As if the author recalled the legacy of modernism and its understanding of landscape as a symbol of national identity. But he belongs to the 21st century, to a society and culture that have pushed collective identities aside. Thus, his personal experience and the authentic experience of their reflection in the local landscape create new layers of local distinctiveness.

Just under the carpet of bluebells, Thomson discovers the remains of a prehistoric dyke, which directs the focus of his immersion in the landscape to a history even older than the Saxon. These prehistoric Celtic cultures symbolise mystery – something that goes beyond the author´s understanding, but he accepts it as part of the authentic experience. He interconnects these myriads of impulses with his personal history of love as well as failed marriage. Celtic mysticism leads the author to acknowledge the mystery, the secret, or the inability to grasp and understand even the different phases of his own life. His involvement with the

natural environment, albeit motivated by existential outsidedness, enables him to make personal discoveries as well as more general comments about the country's identity as a whole.

Thomson´s conclusion is not settling, and those who are looking for a happy ending, i.e. a reconciliation with his region, will be disappointed. Yet, his greatest achievement is in letting go of a fixed image of the place: "Rather than hold onto some outmoded notion of national identity like a piece of driftwood out in the ocean, we should just let go and have the waves take us where they will." (Thomson 2013: 284)

His experience of the landscape is a reassurance of his local identity, a complete identification with the volatile notion of it as well as the state of mind which it involves.

Conclusions

What consequences does this recognition of the volatility of space and the impossibility of fixing it with lasting characteristics have for identity formation? Jon Anderson refers to it as an *entanglement of ideas and practices* which embody the relations between people and place, i.e. local identity. (2014: 37) Many genres, including nature writing, mentioned here, bear witness to these complex entanglements of ideas and practices, and speak of the need to belong, of yearning to negotiate, rather than construct, local identity. At the same time, this process represents historical reconnection with ancient cultures, creating a "temporal continuity" in which time and space are constructed in worldly experience.

The author´s effort to understand himself in a place to which he wants to relate again is typically phenomenological and represents a departure from viewing the landscape as a frozen historical scene. On the contrary, landscape as a physical experience accentuates the importance of sensual perception, which, according to Ted Relph, includes not only sight, smell, touch, and movement, but also memory, imagination, and anticipation (2007: 19). Thus, it is an active and creative interface between humans and nature. Genre writing is a genre that depicts highly authentic and often intimate experiences, which the author is willing to share with us. After all, one of the initial citations with which Thomson opens his book is notorious: "My house is your house." His book can, therefore, be viewed as the hospitably opened door through which we are invited to enter. Landscape as experience plays a crucial role in post-humanistic environmental ethics, where the rediscovered identity of a human being as part of the natural environment leads to a democratic form of anthropocentrism and can be interpreted as a positive sign that the traditional dichotomy between humans and nature is being challenged.

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