

NOSTALGIA AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN CONTEMPORARY REGIONAL NOVELS

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Images of nature that are used in contemporary culture are frequently nostalgic and express the sense that a meaningful relationship to nature or nature in general have been lost to us. These representations of nature – for instance in campaigns of environmental organizations – frequently make use of what Renato Rosaldo calls “imperialist nostalgia”, in which people mourn that which they have destroyed, be it the way of life of a colonized people or nature (69-70). Such implied imperialism as well as the idealization and escapism that shape nostalgia make it a highly problematic means of imagining nature. Critics have recently begun to comment on the role that nostalgia can nonetheless play in contemporary culture. Scott Slovic, for instance, suggests that nostalgic representations of nature do not merely function as places of solace and inspiration but that in itself it is one of the “most vigorous and useful strategies in the literature of social reform” (56). Similarly, Martin Ryle argues that nostalgic narratives that are brought into connection with contemporary circumstances can speak of that which has been lost and at the same time critique the present (56).

In my opinion, this does not make most uses of nostalgia less problematic. Slovic in particular draws on nonfiction nature writing to illustrate the shift he believes is taking place in regards to nostalgia. Yet he doesn’t account for the many fictional works that are overtly nostalgic without commenting on contemporary circumstances, such as novels set in the past. These works use the rhetoric of nostalgia without voicing activist concern. In their escapism and idealization they create a bubble in which there is no room for environmental

awareness. In this paper I want to contribute to the suggestions made by Slovic and Ryle. I will analyze two contemporary novels set in the past – Bruce Chatwin’s *On the Black Hill* and Sarah Hall’s *Haweswater* – that are escapist and nostalgic. However, nostalgia is also refashioned in these works by which they become less anachronistic. My main premise is that nostalgia is founded on oppositional thought. By establishing and deconstructing dualities, *On the Black Hill* and *Haweswater* come to function as vehicles of environmental awareness without explicitly referring to contemporary environmental concerns.

I will begin by discussing nostalgia in both works. Chatwin’s *On the Black Hill* tells the story of twin brothers, Lewis and Benjamin Jones, who have lived all their lives on their parents’ farm. They have never gotten married and only left the farm once, as children, to visit the seaside. The novel is told in a series of flashbacks: it begins a few months before the brothers hand over the farm to their nephew Kevin and then relates the story of their lives. At the end of the work Kevin has indeed taken over the farm, Lewis has died in a tractor incident and Benjamin is put in a home. Thematically, then, the novel is nostalgic because it takes as its subject a way of life that has been lost, whereas the flashbacks of which the work consists make it structurally nostalgic as well.

In *On the Black Hill* a number of related dualities form a web on which nostalgia depends. First of all, the opposition of past and present – the past in which the narrative is set and the present in which it is related and read – contributes to a sense of something that has been lost. The novel hereby makes use of what Raymond Williams calls an escalator in which the past is always perceived as better in comparison to the present [**check page**]. The duality between past and present is subsequently connected to the opposition of nature and culture. Nature here comes to be associated with the lives of the brothers and the past whereas culture – carrying negative connotations – is associated with the present,

modernization and intensive farming. The opposition of country and city adds yet another dimension to these dualities: the city is presented as a place of vice and violence whereas the pureness and innocence of the country are idealized. By continuously attributing positive meaning to that which has been lost – nature, the countryside – the novel becomes nostalgic.

Dualities are furthermore developed through Benjamin and Lewis. As twins, they are both naturally similar and connected but also oppositional. Benjamin, for instance, is associated with the country and nurturing: his favourite occupation is delivering lambs and after their mother's death he takes on her jobs around the house. Benjamin is also the most conservative of the two and the one who turns his back most explicitly on modernization and the city. Lewis, on the other hand, is adventurous by nature: he wants to travel to far-off places, visit the city and find a wife. He is more progressive than his brother and interested in technology.

On the one hand, taking twins as his main characters allows the narrator to give a balanced view of events, incorporating both more conservative opinions – voiced by Benjamin – and more progressive ones – expressed by Lewis. On the other hand, characterization is used to increase the sense of nostalgia already present in the work. Towards the end of the novel Lewis dies in a tractor accident. Benjamin had always resisted buying a tractor. The fact that the most progressive of the twins dies in an accident with a tractor – a symbol of modernization – is in line with Benjamin's earlier attempts to protect their way of life. It affirms nostalgia: Lewis' death implies that the past – which Benjamin prefers – is better than the present and the future which, symbolized by the tractor, are violence and destructive.

Haweswater also describes a way of life that has been lost, namely that of the farming community of Mardale village. It's set in the 1930s and describes the construction of the Haweswater Dam which was built to create a reservoir that provides water for the citizens of Manchester. The isolated rural communities in the valley are subsequently evacuated and flooded. In describing a lost – or in this case, drowned – world, *Haweswater* is thematically explicitly nostalgic. It also fits in with a larger discourse on the Haweswater Dam, which is equally nostalgic.¹

In *Haweswater*, the rhetoric of nostalgia is established by contrasting the life of the villagers with the dam and everything that is associated with it. A web of dualities is created in which the lost village has positive connotations and is associated with the countryside and nature – also positive aspects. The dam, on the other hand, is connected to the city, destruction and even imperialism. This opposition is further explored in respect to the characters of the novel, particularly Janet Lightburn and Jack Liggett. Janet is a young village woman and a fierce opponent of the dam. Throughout the narrative she is associated with the land and the earth. Jack, on the other hand, is the representative of Manchester City Waterworks, the company that builds the dam. He is a city man, who arrives in the village in a flashy suit and a brand-new car. Nostalgia is therefore not mainly created through the landscape itself – which is being lost – but also through the characters who represent nature and culture.

The nostalgic sentiment is increased by the structure of the novel: in the prologue of the work a farmer visits his house for the last time before it is flooded along with the rest of the valley. The rest of the novel is a flashback and relates the events that went before this visit.

¹ *The Lost Village of Mardale*, W.R. Mitchell (1993) and *Mardale Revisited*, Geoffrey Berry (1984).

The oppositional frameworks of the novels make a constructive environmental reading difficult if not impossible. Firstly, both narratives seem to be so caught up in a longing for the past that they are escapist and anachronistic in light of contemporary circumstances. As Ryle notes, nostalgic narratives can only be effective in a contemporary context if they provide viable alternatives to the present, which neither novel appears to do. Secondly, both *On the Black Hill* and *Haweswater* are problematic because in their escapism they to a large extent ignore the historical circumstances of the periods in which they were set. Hereby they effectively cancel history as Williams puts it (*Williams Country* 257). *On the Black Hill*, for instance, shows little awareness of the actual circumstances in which Welsh farmers lived. In the late nineteenth and twentieth century, they were poorer than farmers in other areas (Howell and Baber 293-4). The twins in *On the Black Hill* are generally well-off throughout their lives, as are their neighbours. The narrative of *Haweswater* similarly ignores most of the historical circumstances of the 1930s, apart from the construction of the dam itself. Yet even the dates relating to the Haweswater project have been changed: the construction of the dam started in 1929, rather than 1936, and the valley was flooded in 1936. The project in its entirety was finished in 1941. Changing the dates and leaving out historical information is not merely a narratological device – cancelling history is a way of idealizing the past, which contributes to nostalgia.

Nevertheless, nostalgia is also challenged in *On the Black Hill* and *Haweswater* through characterization. On the one hand, characterization can contribute to nostalgia. As I said earlier, in both novels the characters are made part of oppositions: Benjamin – Lewis, Janet – Jack. Characterization can – and does – however, also destabilize these oppositions. In *On the Black Hill*, a minor character – Theo the Tent – challenges the dichotomy that had earlier been established. His lifestyle is the opposite of that of the twins – which is idealized

throughout the work – yet he is nonetheless described in positive terms. Theo is originally from South Africa and came to Britain to study Buddhism and live in a yurt. Until he appears, travel has negative connotations in the work. Whereas the twins lead local and rooted lives, Theo has come to believe that “all men were meant to be wanderers ... like St Francis” (241). Since that which was previously negative in the novel – mobility – is now connected to a positive character, the opposition of rootedness and mobility is challenged. Nostalgia, which mourns the loss of local lives lived by Benjamin and Lewis, is subsequently critiqued as well. Even more so, through Theo the narrative is no longer escapist but taps into contemporary debates on mobility.

Environmentalists such as Naess, Berry and Scott Russell Sanders call for rootedness instead of vagabondage or nomadism, suggesting that an ethic of proximity (Heide *Sense* 33) is a necessary part of environmentalism. Theo’s nomadism, however, isn’t as destructive as these environmentalists envision. Instead, Theo embraces the Heideggerian belief that true dwelling is not staying put but that it is a way of being on the earth (“Building” 147), through heedful inhabitation. Similarly, ecocritics and environmentalists are questioning the feasibility of staying put, particularly in bringing across an environmental message. A possible solution seems to be heedful inhabitation and the kind of mindfulness, awareness and engagement that Theo demonstrates. Hereby the rhetoric of nostalgia is refashioned and comes to express a sense of environmental awareness more appropriate to a contemporary context.

In *Haweswater*, the dualities upon which nostalgia depends are similarly challenged through characterization, more specifically character development. As I said earlier, the opposition between nature and culture that informs the novel is also reflected in the characters. Yet whereas at first Janet and Jack conform to the duality of nature and culture,

they change and develop as characters and hereby destruct the opposition. Nostalgia is destabilized as well since the characters no longer allow a reading of the novel in which Janet and everything she stands for is mourned because it has been destroyed by Jack and that which he represents.

In the course of the novel a shift takes place in respect to Jack: he is no longer solely associated with culture but comes to be associated with nature as well. This is best illustrated by his death. Earlier, shortly after his arrival in the village, Jack had asked a poacher to shoot a golden eagle for him. When the bird is delivered to him months later, he feels such remorse that he decides to return it to its nest. When he climbs the rocks at night, however, he slips, falls and dies. The implications of this event are two-fold. On the one hand, the narrative hereby suggests a sense of justice for nature comparable to Lewis' death in *On the Black Hill*. On the other hand, and more importantly, this episode illustrates that nostalgia is inadequate because it does not account for character development.

Character development such as Jack's questions oppositional thought as it shows that characters often do not fit within a dualistic framework. This is also the respect in which nostalgia is refashioned in narratives such as *Haweswater*, as is illustrated as well by Janet. Despite her relationship with Jack she remains one of the fiercest opponents of the dam. In this light her death is highly symbolic: she dies – a year after Jack – in a failed attempt to blow up the Haweswater dam. At first sight this may be interpreted as a political act, a way in which a woman who is continuously associated with nature attempts to destroy the dam, which has come to illustrate the imperialism of the city and culture. Yet the narrative denies this possibility as soon as it is presented. When Jack dies, Janet retreats completely into herself and is consumed by grief. Her attempt to blow up the dam is not, therefore, a grand gesture by which she wants to defend nature but a personal act of grief. To a certain extent

this may seem to make the novel less environmentally sound. Yet, precisely because Janet's death deconstructs the nature-culture opposition and challenges nostalgia, the novel hereby expresses more environmental awareness. A significant part of this kind of awareness is acknowledging that human-nature relations and environmental concerns cannot be caught in simple dualities. As many critics have suggested, a so-called environmental problem such as the hole in the ozone layer is not natural or cultural but both (Latour, Phillips etc). Similarly, in *Haweswater* Jack and Janet can't be caught in dualities either – they neither represent nature nor culture but demonstrate that environmental concerns are more complex than black-and-white thinking. Nostalgia is therefore refashioned to include such an awareness.

To conclude, it's been my aim today to contribute to a recent debate on nostalgia in a contemporary context. Contemporary novels set in the past – nostalgic as they may be – can nonetheless voice environmental concerns. Focusing on the dualities gives insight in the way in which nostalgia is created in a narrative. It becomes apparent that even works that are overtly nostalgic deconstruct dualities which play such an important part in them. Consequently, *On the Black Hill* and *Haweswater* are still thematically and structurally nostalgic yet through their critique of dualities also become vehicles of environmental awareness.