Symposium Report
Writing Landscape: An Interdisciplinary Symposium for Writers and Scholars

The Writing Landscape symposium marked the launch of the ‘Understanding Landscape’ project (or, to give it its full name, ‘Understanding Landscape Through Creative Auto-Ethnography’). The stated aim of the day was to “move beyond disciplinary boundaries and to reassess current theoretical and methodological issues”. This was achieved by a mix of speakers, largely representing the two disciplines of Geography and Literary Studies, and an audience of a diverse mix of fields and backgrounds, from creative writing to landscape architecture, from scholars to landscape designers to writers. With eight presentations, including two keynotes, it is fair to say that the day was packed with approaches and ideas to and around the writing—and indeed the reading—of landscape. Ensuring that not just bodies but minds were well nourished, Stewart House’s catering service kept supplies of coffee, tea, cakes and biscuits coming in a seemingly endless stream.

James Kneale’s rich introductory keynote theorised the key concepts of the day, with the appropriate enough example of London as a landscape. James covered such ground as: the experience of being in and moving through a landscape, the ways we conceive of writing landscape, and the role of the reader in all of this. This took us from an analysis of spatiality and temporality together, to the problems of encountering the experiences of those who have moved through the landscape before us. James dealt too with representational and historicist approaches to landscape writing, before ending with a look at how theories of reading—from text-dominant to reader-dominant models—could be brought to bear on landscape-writing.

Such a thorough exploration of the terrain set the stage for the six delegate presentations of the day. Adriana Craciun situated her work in the interface between the extremes of polar landscape and the excesses of the Gothic, suggesting that the Arctic explorers of the 1820s found their surroundings so resistant to aesthetic categorisation that they could make sense of them only through the emerging cultural trend of Gothic fiction. From the challenges of dealing with the unfamiliar in landscape, we turned our attention to the familiar and the remembered with Owain Jones. Against a backdrop of Garry Fabian Miller’s haunting photographs, Owain explored the role of memory in perceiving landscape. In an appropriate follow-on from this, John Wylie’s paper (read by Catherine Brace in John’s absence) paid attention to the way in which landscape constructs and determines the viewer of landscape, rather than the other way round. This paper provoked a fair amount of discussion, by taking a phenomenological reading of landscape to what some in the audience saw as an extreme position.

After a hearty sandwich and bagel lunch (more food!), discussion resumed with Helen Maulion speaking to a detailed diagram that set out the interactions of geographical setting, expression, plot, character and language in the work of writer-geographer Julien Gracq. Sylvie Crinquand then provided a comparative analysis of William Wordsworth’s and John Keats’s attitudes to the typically sublime landscapes of Romantic literature, returning us to the question of how prevalent cultural constructions of landscape are incorporated, transformed, or—in Keats’s case—resisted in the writing of landscape.

In the final delegate paper, Alison Barnes and Joe McCullagh entertained us with an outline of their innovative design project, an attempt at ‘inventing’ a new typography that
is not so much a type of font as the insertion of random words and expressions into text. These words were derived by Alison and Joe from interviews with residents and the graffiti found in the New Basford neighbourhood of Nottingham (the offensive nature of the graffiti—as Alison warned us—was not for the faint-hearted). To write in the ‘New Basford’ font, it seems, is to experience something of what it means to walk in the New Basford area, to encounter the shock and grit of its graffiti and stories.

Ella Westland’s final keynote took us from London to Cornwall (where the next stage of the ‘Understanding Landscape’ project—the writers’ workshops—will take place). Ella delivered a compelling account of the Cornish landscape as depicted by the writer whose work so resonates with it, Daphne du Maurier. This (along with Alison and Joe’s paper, as the only presentation not explicitly from either Geography or Literary Studies) opened the way for a conversation on the very nature of interdisciplinarity, with which the day ended.

It is fair to say that the day closed on a convivial note. Minds and bodies well fed, we decided that a mix of tolerance and patience, with a good dose of intellectual curiosity and confidence, were pre-requisites for rigorous and fruitful interdisciplinary research. These characteristics were amply demonstrated by the symposium’s participants. Everyone who participated deserves a big thank-you, for the generosity and enthusiasm they showed, whether as speakers or audience. The postscript to the day was a round of drinks in a nearby pub, followed by an excellent Thai supper!

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