The Landscape and the "Death of the Author"

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Abstract

The writer has argued that environmental education should embrace the notion of *landscape as text*, in addition to the notion of *landscape about text*. This might, however, be opposed on the grounds that "texts" are clearly artificial human constructs, whereas "landscapes" are, at least in part, not. Structuralist and poststructuralist literary theory has, however, challenged the assumption that texts are "authored," thus invalidating the objection. The paper explores the notion of the "death of the author" with respect to a view of landscape as text, and suggests implications for environmental education.

Résumé

Selon le rédacteur de cet article, l'éducation relative à l'environnement devrait adopter la notion de paysage comme un texte, en plus de la notion de paysage au sujet du texte (landscape about text). Cette proposition pourrait être toutefois contestée, considérant que les "textes" sont des construits humains artificiels, alors que les paysages ne le sont pas, du moins en partie. La théorie littéraire structuraliste et poststructuraliste conteste toutefois la prémisse selon laquelle les textes sont issus d'"auteurs", invalidant de ce fait l'objection précédente. Cet article explore la notion de la "mort de l'auteur" en regard d'une conception du paysage comme texte, et suggère des implications pour l'éducation relative à l'environnement.

The notion of the "death of the author" has become accepted within literary criticism. Although it can be argued that it has been partially superseded, in literary-critical terms, by a new historicism

which validates the incorporation of an understanding of the author into the reader's construction of the text (in line with Gadamer's "historically effected consciousness" [Gadamer, 1975]), it is still a powerful phrase in that it embodies a full realisation that readers make meaning of text in a way which is partly independent of the author, and that the concept of "author" is, of itself, simplistic.

The "death of the author" implies that no one individual can be held responsible for the reception and reputation of a work of literature, and that literature remains literature despite the lack of any objective conception of an author. The implication that the forces which shape the presentation of the text to the reader need not be merely *human* (i.e. social or intentional) has not been much explored. There is still the implication of a person creating the text, albeit this individual exists only in the context of a shared network of meanings. Modernist and post-modernist theory has tended to see text in terms of social contruction of meaning, but not to look at "social" in terms of its implications of human interaction with the natural world. We should acknowledge more fully that social construction of meaning arises from, and gives rise to, patterns of interaction between human beings and non-human elements—often, in social terms, conceived as resources: a simple but obvious example from the English literary tradition is the evolution of agricultural communities in the south-west of England and the effects of industrialisation and mechanisation on such communities, as charted graphically, for example, in the plots and characters of Thomas Hardy's Wessex.

Indeed, in the case of a "natural text" we cannot make the naive assumption of solely human forces of creation. A landscape depends for its existence on life forms other than the human: on the growth of its flora and fauna, and on chemical and geological forces. At the same time, it is difficult to find a landscape where the presence of humanity has not been instrumental in its shaping, and human intervention can even be used to create "wild" landscape, as in the case, in Britain, of the use of Millennium funds to reafforest parts of Scotland with native woodland. The network of shared meanings that created, and represents, the landscape therefore goes beyond the human.

This paper considers the problem of the author in relation to the landscape, and the implications of such considerations for environmental education.

Texts Without Authors

> structuralism, like post-structuralism, is grounded upon the death of the author, whose experiences and motives are not available to us for investigation—except, of course, as texts themselves. (Griffith, 1987, p. 42)

There has been a revolution in the last century concerning our conceptions of the role of language in the world. Key insights in the fields of literary and linguistic theory have brought about apparently quite sharp shifts of emphasis within the humanities disciplines over the period of a few decades. For many years literary studies have been moving away from a simple conception of the individual author as sole creator of the text. In a general but much read overview of movements in literary theory, Eagleton (1983) writes of a movement from concern with the author to concern with the text to concern with the reader.

In linguistics, Saussure (1974) discredited the easy assumption that language somehow merely mirrors reality, replacing it with the now commonly held view of language as a social enterprise. Since Saussure, structuralist and post-structuralist literary theorists have altered previously held conceptions of *text,* and of *literacy.* Any socially constructed system of signs can be held to constitute a text, and alongside this theoretical insight, new forms of text continue to appear, particularly as a result of the computer. Believers in deconstruction go a step further by challenging the integrity of the text itself (Derrida, 1992). Such an open and challenging view of text of itself problematises the role of the author.

"Literacy," like "text," has developed much broader parameters in recent decades. It is now almost pedantic to speak of "computer literacy." Following Hirsch (1987) we have "cultural literacy," while Williams and Snipper (1990) regard "functional literacy" (the ability to decode writing at the literal level) as the lowest level of literacy, to be superceded by literacies that are "cultural" and "critical." Indeed, an acceptance of language as social semiotic (Halliday, 1978) renders problematic the acknowledgment of any kind of literacy that is "functional" without being cultural. Texts can no longer be seen as simple vehicles for the transmission of meaning from author to reader.

Literary and social theory have been united as critical theory both in a view of the social world as a series of discourse communities (Habermas, 1987; Volosinov, 1973), and in a fuller acknowledgment of the power of language, a view which finds one of its most extreme expressions in Althusser's conception of literature as "ideological state apparatus" (Althusser, 1970). Critical social theory has had an influence on many aspects of education, including environmental education (Hacking, 1992).

Phenomenologists have stressed in more general terms the role of language in shaping, and not merely expressing, human consciousness. To Heidegger, "Language is the house of being" (Krell, 1978, p. 193). Gadamer concludes that "That which can be understood is language" (1975, p. 475): that the world in which human beings live is constituted by language, rather than merely containing it. Analogous to this is a problematisation of the distinction between subject and object, which in turn subverts a clear distinction between the creator and the created, a move reflected in literary theory by the various conceptions of "reader," "society," and "ideology" as all responsible for the meaning created within and through the text, rather than the "author," and by the breaking down by literary theorists and linguists of the clear dichotomy of signifier and signified as components of the sign as postulated by Saussure (Griffith, 1987, pp. 40-55). Bakhtin's "dialogism" valorises only the communication itself, without which both author and reader are meaningless (Holquist, 1990), though dialogue can itself give a reality to each. To Bakhtin and his followers, all existence is dialogical.

The quotation from Griffith at the head of this section, however, expresses a contradiction inherent in the idea of the "death of the author" insofar as it helps us to understand what constitutes a text. The clause "whose experiences and motives are not available to us for investigation" presupposes the existence of the author rather than its reverse.

Indeed, the phrase the "death of the author" can be interpreted in any of the following ways:

• There is an author, but s/he is not solely responsible for the reader's understanding of the text;

- All texts are socially and ideologically constructed, therefore although one person may have put pen to paper, that person cannot be held solely responsible for the text;
- There is no author. Putting pen to paper does not constitute authorship any more than publishing the text, printing the text, reading the text, or even forming part of the culture of which the text is a part;
- There is no author. "Putting pen to paper" is an empty cliché, as the development of new technologies is beginning to make clear. We are all involved in text production all the time, and there is no clear distinction between "writers" and "readers";
- There is an author, but s/he exists (only) as part of the world of the reader (just as, as children, we feel we are developing a knowledge of, say, Queen Elizabeth I).

Our uncertainty concerning authors contributes to our uncertainty concerning what constitutes a text, an uncertainty which poses problems for educators when it comes to defining their obligations (e.g., Stables, 1995). Our broadening of conceptions of text is potentially liberating as well as problematic for teachers, however. Environmental education, with its lack of a traditional disciplinary framework, offers rewarding opportunities for textual studies which remain as yet largely unexploited.

Reading the Landscape as Text

Umbrella terms such as "landscape," "environment," and "nature" are inevitably problematic. For the purposes of this paper, the term "landscape" has been used primarily for the following reasons: it clearly exists beyond the individual ("nature" is problematic here); it clearly relates to that which is seen (or "read" in terms of visual literacy); there is a long tradition of considering "landscape" in relation to the arts; and there is a verb ("landscaping") which defines human action in relation to the landscape.

If we were to combine our contemporary conception of visual literacy with nineteenth-century assumptions concerning the omniscience of the author, we would experience little trouble in deciding which landscapes and landscape features were human-made cultural artefacts and which were "natural": there would be a

clear and unproblematic distinction between those landscapes and landscape features created by human hands and those not so created (though it is interesting that God—the ultimate author—has been credited with the creation of the latter, while humanity has been deemed to exist in His image). When we are unclear about the role of the author, however, we must also be unclear about the distinction between wild and humanly constructed landscape.

Certain landscape features have been given the status of texts since time immemorial, insofar as they have been regarded as human, cultural, and ideological constructs, often intended to symbolise, reflect, and express the greatness of God in the natural world as a whole. This is particularly true of gardens. In a scene from Shakespeare's *Richard II* (Ure, 1961, pp. 117-123), gardeners bemoan the state of England as a garden run wild. They are in a garden (within the conventions of the play) the physical order of which is threatened by the bad management of the realm by a foolish king whose behaviour runs counter to the moral expectations of the time. The gardeners' garden is threatened by the disorder in the broader garden of England. As readers we see a garden as an expression of the conflict of the elemental moral forces of order and disorder at war in the state. In this situation, we cannot easily disaggregate author, reader, and ideology. To Shakespeare, in this scene and elsewhere, the world around us is moulded by forces we might now call ideological.

This scene from *Richard II* is merely one example from a great cultural tradition that sees the garden as richly symbolic as well as consciously crafted.

There is also a tradition of embodying wild landscape, which clearly has no single human "author," with mind and moral intention. In some of Thomas Hardy's work, for example, elements of the landscape themselves are endowed with human characteristics and are seen as directly influential in shaping human action; a powerful example of this is Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native* (Hardy, 1974). In fact, Hardy promotes Egdon Heath almost to the status of the author itself of the events of *The Return of the Native*. He begins the novel with a chapter entitled "A Face on Which Time Makes but Little Impression" and states on the third page that:

It was a place perfectly accordant with man's nature. . . . It had a lonely face, suggesting tragical possibilities. (p. 35)

Wild landscapes play a similarly strong role in Wordsworth's poetry. The moral influence exerted by wild landscape is neatly summed up in a stanza from the short poem, "The Tables Turned" (Hutchinson, 1969):

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can. (p. 377)

The notion of pathetic fallacy seems insufficient in these cases. Hardy's "Heath" and Wordsworth's "wood" are described as shaping events, and not merely reflecting mood. Moreover, in each case the wildness of the landscape seems to make it more, and not less, powerful in its effect on human mood and action. Although in each of these two cases it could be argued that the landscape is rather personified than textualised, the response is clearly analogous to response to more conventionally defined text. Further, the rather uncertain distinction between landscape as text and landscape as person here only serves to remind us of the authorship debate within literary theory. Similarly, the fact that the two cited examples are of landscape in literature does not invalidate such response to such landscapes in themselves; indeed, the literature both depends on and invites such a response.

An acceptance of the human influence on so-called natural landscape is not, of course, confined to the arts. It is widely acknowledged in the scientific community that few British landscapes exist independently of human intervention. It is less clear that the scientific community sees any methodogical implications of this in relation to environmental education.

The present writer has argued elsewhere that when we conceive of the physical world as environment, we are responding to it, and perhaps remaking it, very much in terms of a cultural artefact (Stables, 1996). The problem of authorship blurs the boundary between the kinds of environmental feature we can conceive of as human-made and the kind we must regard as "wild" or "natural." It is no longer possible to make an easy distinction

between natural and human-made landscapes, nor to regard as invalid, or mere pathetic fallacy, the response to many (or any?) kinds of landscape as text. This has clear implications for environmental education.

Textual Studies in Environmental Education

Environmental education can be affected by these debates in two respects: in terms of its place within the curriculum, and in terms of its practice.

Environmental education in schools is a cross-curricular element within the national curriculum for England and Wales. As such, it can be covered within one or all curriculum subjects, though it is probably safe to state that it has chiefly been handled by teachers of geography and science hitherto. Despite this, there has been a realisation for some time that environmental issues can be dealt with under the aegis of other subjects, such as English literature (Caperon, 1991; Stables, 1993).

The linking of response to environment to response to text clearly draws environmental education into the humanities, if we define these, as did Gadamer (1975), as all those disciplines properly pursued as essentially hermeneutic.

There is a danger of this being practised on only a superficial level, however. Environmental education through textual study can go beyond texts *about* the environment and should embrace the notion of landscapes *as* texts, since a prior preconception (i.e. that landscapes cannot be texts because they have not been created by authors) has been shown to be invalid, or at least unproven. There is no case for arguing that this should replace the study of landscape features as the objects of natural science, but a strong case for arguing that it should complement it.

In a sense, this is no new realisation. The opposition of nature and culture which has divided the curriculum for two hundred years is not only being increasingly challenged by critical theorists within environmental education but is itself only a recent historical phenomenon. We have, again, to look no further than Shakespeare to revisit a world in which human nature, society and external nature are inextricably linked (see Stables, 1993 for a fuller exploration of this in relation to *Macbeth*). We now have, of course,

distinct traditions dividing the humanities from the natural sciences, and the distinctiveness of these traditions cannot suddenly disappear. Nevertheless, both in terms of its place within the curriculum, and in terms of the methods used to develop it, environmental education may prove an ideal meeting ground for the arts and the sciences. There are innumerable ways in which this realisation can be exploited in the practice of teaching. Popular culture has already accepted the validity of emotional response helping to guide environmental action, in areas as diverse as town and country planning, organic farming, and animal rights. The educational community is yet to exploit this fully.

Notes on Contributor

Andrew Stables lectures in the School of Education at the University of Bath. He is particularly interested in the interrelationships of culture, language, and environment and is a founder member of the Culture and Environment Research Group within the School.

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