
Discovering Landscape with(out) Photographs

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The knowledge of authorial audiences

Challenged to explain the language of his poem “Un coup de dès” (1897), Stéphane Mallarmé famously responded that poetry was made of words, not ideas—and one can hardly disagree. But words (usually) have referents, and authors (usually) expect their readers both to know what these referents are and to bring that knowledge to their reading. Even Mallarmé, setting out to reduce words to sound and spaces, probably knew that he could not use lexis from a known language without readers presuming that they knew the meaning of the words he chose.

What is probably true for authors of symbolist poetry is certainly so for authors of novels, and indeed is something they rely on. Meaning is “caught up . . . in context,” Adorno observed (47), and novelists presume that readers will be aware of this. As Peter J. Rabinowitz suggested in an important article published some thirty years ago, there are at least four audiences implied in any narrative literary text, and the second of these (what he calls the authorial audience) is made up those who have the “beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions” presumed by authors in writing their works (“Truth” 126). Authors write with this audience in mind, and efficient readers have membership.

Sometimes what readers are expected to bring to a text is simply defined: a knowledge of history, perhaps (Cervantes,

for example, presumed that his readers knew the significance of Sancho Panza's boasting that he was an "old Christian"), or a knowledge of geography (as when Shakespeare presumed that at least some in the audience for *Cymbeline* would know the location of Milford Haven); the kind of knowledge that, if they do not have it, they can always hope to discover by checking footnotes or doing their own research. But sometimes an author presumes not just a knowledge of place (or geographical location) but a sense of place—not just a knowledge of where X is, but a sense of what it means to live there; and, as with the historical and geographical references, if we do not have that knowledge, if we are not in the authorial audience, then our understanding is incomplete. In the words of Christiane Nord, in such a situation we are merely "an observer listening to the conversation of two strange parties" (50).

Helpful here is an example discussed by Benedict Anderson. If we read Mas Marco Kartodikromo's *Semarang Hitam* (published serially in 1924) as members of the authorial audience, "we-the-Indonesian-readers" are "plunged immediately into . . . a familiar landscape"; so familiar indeed that "some of us may well have walked [Kartodikromo's] 'sticky' Semarang roads" (Anderson 32). But if we are not Indonesian readers, and cannot easily imagine the novel's "shops, offices, carriages, kampungs, and gas lamps"—if we do not even know why Semarang roads are sticky—we have work to do. As Rabinowitz noted in a later article, to the extent that we do not take on the characteristics of the authorial audience (including, I suggest, a sense of place), "our reading experience will be more or less seriously flawed" ("Where" 5).

The task we face is not easy, of course. Place, as Marc Augé has reflected, is "relational, historical and concerned with identity" (77-78)—and if we cannot claim this triplet for ourselves, we need approximate it by bringing together "the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the discursive and the sensual; . . . oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about [a given location]" (Pearson and Shanks 64-

65). Doing so allows us to construct what Augé calls a fiction of anthropological place, and to begin to understand what the authorial audience already knows. The task is not easy, however, and in what follows I discuss some of the difficulties it entails by turning to a novel better known to most readers of *MEJ* than *Semarang Hitam*, and therefore more suited to my purposes: Wilkie Collins' runaway best-seller of 1860, *The Woman in White*.

Sense of place in *The Woman in White*

Collins' novel is organized around three spatial centers: Limmeridge House in Cumberland (now Cumbria), Blackwater Park in Hampshire, and a series of addresses in London; and each one contributes to the novel's thematic development. As it happens, we can possibly point to an original for Limmeridge House: Hayton Castle, the only village manor-house Collins would have passed when he and Dickens visited the Cumberland coast in 1857. (They had left the Maryland and Carlisle Railway at Aspatria, and passed through the village of Hayton on their way to the Ship Inn at Allonby where they stayed.) We can't do the same for Blackwater Park: although Collins might have been thinking of Braemore House (near Fordingham, south of Salisbury) there is no clear evidence for this, and Collins' amusement when someone wrote to him claiming to be the owner of the "real" Blackwater Park (Robinson 153-54) should serve as caution against taking architectural detective work too seriously. Even in the case of Limmeridge we should not think that Collins was describing Hayton Castle, or doing more than thinking of something like it, in something like its location.

This is the first problem we face. We are trying to gain a sense of place for places that do not exist, for places within a fiction are fictional objects, even when they reference real-world locations. They cease to be the kind of places we know—the products of social and economic forces—and become instead something imagined and therefore imaginary (Roudaut 39). And yet, to return to the point made earlier, without some sense of real-world location (some sense anthropological place) we can

hardly make sense of the geography of the novel—and clearly Collins wanted us to do so. After all, we can trace Walter Hartright’s steps on the fateful night he met Anne Catherick: he crosses Hampstead Heath, joins the Finchley Road, and continues “by the western side of the Regent’s Park” towards the City (14). Even if the “London” of *The Woman in White* is not really London, as Roudaut would insist, Collins counted on readers recognizing the one in the other, and bringing their knowledge of real-world London to their reading of his text. He expected them to know, for example, what kind of place Hampstead was; or to appreciate the significance of Count Fosco’s renting property in St. John’s Wood—a suburb that was “pretty, high-class, but decidedly shady,” as Sucksmith points out (Collins, *Woman* 617), and noted for the seclusion of its residences (Clark); even to be able to make sense of the scene, late in the novel, where Fosco “stopped at a pastrycook’s” at the entrance to Regent’s Park.

In this passage Fosco “went in (probably to give an order), and came out again immediately with a tart in his hand. An Italian was grinding an organ before the shop, and a miserable little shrivelled monkey was sitting on the instrument.” With “grotesque tenderness” the Count gives the monkey some of the tart, but he contemptuously denies the organ-grinder’s request for assistance (527-28). Obviously enough, the scene is important to our understanding of Fosco—but what exactly is the scene? Is the street empty but for the organ-grinder and his monkey (as in Tissot’s 1878 engraving, “Le joueur d’orgue”), or was the entrance to the Regent’s Park, the pastrycook’s location, a popular site for entertainers—the “Punch-shows, and monkey-shows; hurdy-gurdies, and ground and lofty tumblers” that we know were found in London’s streets (Tait 18)? Was it that Fosco could not avoid seeing the organ-grinder, or that he selected him (or at least his monkey) from several candidates for benevolence?

These are not the only questions we need to ask about the scene, of course. At the least we should also wonder about the significance of Fosco’s ignoring his compatriot. Should we

regard it as a matter of class, or of musical taste—on a par with Carlyle’s hiding in the garden to avoid “a scandalous Italian beggar . . . grinding his abominable organ under my window” (20); or should we think of it as more problematic? Collins was no doubt aware of the habit of Gabriele Rossetti (the father of the poet) of interrogating every Italian he met: “Hardly an organ-man or plaster-cast vendor passed our street-door without being interrogated by my father, ‘*Di che paese siete?*’ (‘What part of Italy do you come from?’)” (Rossetti 46; Collins knew Rossetti, and may have based one of the novel’s characters on him); and it could therefore be significant that Fosco, a spy charged with monitoring the Italian community in England, did not do likewise. But to understand the scene we have to be able to see it first—and it seems reasonable to suppose that Collins expected that at least some of his readers could.

If that is the case, then it also seems reasonable to suppose that Collins also expected his readers to apply real-world knowledge to the novel’s Hampshire and Cumberland scenes. Not a knowledge of streets and buildings, their spatial relationships and their populations; that should go without saying. When he came to refer to Allonby in *No Name* (1862), he would only expect the most general geographical knowledge of his readers (for example, that Scotland could easily be reached from the coast of Cumberland), and there is no reason to think that he expected anything else of them two years before. But he did count on them having a sense of what it would be like to live at Limmeridge House and Blackwater Park, for these houses and their landscapes become charged with significance as the plot unfolds. As Eudora Welty noted, fictional places can become credible gathering spots “of all that has been felt . . . in [a work’s] progress” (122), and so it is in *The Woman in White*. Readers have to discover this focalization and localization of significance as they move through its pages.

Marian’s landscapes

The story of Laura Fairlie (one of the three that Collins keeps before us in *The Woman in White*) begins and ends at Lim-

meridge, but the conspiracy against her is conceived and begun at Blackwater Park, and Collins allows us to anticipate the dangers that will face Laura there through the reactions of her half-sister, Marian Halcombe, when she moves from Cumberland to Hampshire. Marian finds Blackwater Park to be “the exact opposite” of Limmeridge (171). “The house is situated on a dead flat, and seems to be shut in—almost suffocated, to my north-country notions, by trees,” she writes of her new home, thinking of the Limmeridge countryside as she does (177). Lacking the open space of the fells (what Laura calls “the friendly hills of Cumberland” [235]), it seems a threatening environment.

By this point in the novel we have probably recognized its Gothic qualities, and our reaction to Blackwater’s threat is in part intertextual. This is our second problem. We expect the estate to figure some of the less amiable of qualities its owner, Sir Percival Glyde—and of course Collins counted on this. (In case we miss the point he introduces the theme of “the picturesque,” and lets us note how the “still, stagnant” Blackwater lake, surrounded by thick stands of trees that “shut out the view, and cast their black shadows on the sluggish, shallow water” [184], violated principles of landscape gardening [see Smith 67; Price 1:56]. Discovering this can help us realize that something is morally wrong at Blackwater.) But intertextuality is not all: we cannot just class Blackwater Park as a Gothic pile, and stop there, congratulating ourselves on having read Radcliffe or Maturin. We even need to get beyond the echoes of the Brontës in the contrast of north and south, of moors and woods, of bleakness and fertility. Although that is important, it is only part of what preoccupies Marian.

Collins would certainly have been aware of the obvious differences between Cumberland, with its long ridges and gradual open slopes (to Southern eyes a barren landscape, remarkable for its lack of trees), and Hampshire. Dickens’s memories of Carrock Fell at dusk (apart from his account of the steepness of the slope that he and Collins had climbed) could be applied to the countryside of the Allonby coast that they had seen. “[D]otted about like spots of faint shadow, the division-lines

which mapped out the fields were all getting blurred together, and the lonely farm-house where the dog-cart had been left, loomed spectral in the grey light like the last human dwelling at the end of the habitable world” (Dickens and Collins 317). As for Hampshire: one of the last painting expeditions of Collins’ father had been to enjoy the “quiet, fertile, inland scenery” of Shedfield, some twelve miles north of Southampton, and the description he gave of the countryside he set out to sketch can serve as a summary of what his son had in mind for the countryside around Blackwater Park. (As noted, the Glyde estate itself is darker, more Gothic.) “The bright glimpses of barn and homestead; the winding lane, dappled with the pleasant sunlight shining through tree and hedgerow; the farmyard enclosures, with their toppling pigeon-houses, quaint old dog kennels, and picturesque duck ponds; the cottage gardens, bright with simple English flowers; the old cart road over the common. . .” (*Memoirs* 2:259).

The contrast between these scenes—though perhaps obvious—would have been worth making. In 1858 the Manchester photographer James Mudd, who knew the bleakness of the Pennines and had spent time the previous year photographing trees in Salford, in the western suburbs of Manchester, to provide evidence of environmental damage from industrial waste, would still characterize the pleasures of landscape photography as the ability to capture on film “the shady wood, by the river side, or in the hedgerow, where the wild convolvulus, the bramble and luxuriant fern have arrested us in our wanderings. . .” (39). Mudd knew that Northern realities were different, but promoted other scenes out of respect for conventional ideas about the picturesque and his feeling that “every portion of [a] picture” should be filled “by some object of interest or pictorial value” (45). Collins could have rested content with showing the differences between north and south that Mudd ignored. However, he does not. He focuses instead on the way landscapes are felt as well as seen, and expects us to contrast the suffocating claustrophobia of Blackwater Park, where the view is “shut out . . . on all sides” (181), with the “dry airy” moors of Limmeridge (170).

It is not hard to understand why Marian would talk in this way. Hayton Castle—whose perspective Collins would have seen, and should therefore be taken into account here (whether or not we accept that it was Limeridge’s original)—“stands on a gentle eminence, at the east end of the pleasant village of Hayton, and commands a very extensive prospect over the Frith, and Irish Sea as far as the Isle of Man; and also the borders of Scotland.” Thus a guide-book reports (Jollie 2:14; for “Frith” as a variant of *Firth*, see the *OED*). The closed-in darkness of Blackwater Park could have only seemed oppressive and suffocating in contrast. But to understand what Marian says, to appreciate the opposition of ideas in her words (suffocation and airiness, for example), is not to *feel* the opposition. It is not to have a sense of place. “A place is more an *event* than a *thing* to be assimilated to known categories,” Casey has written (26)—and if we agree we cannot rest content with comparing and contrasting words. We need to see, and feel, for ourselves.

Forgetting photographs

Having come this far, our next step must seem obvious. If we cannot draw on memories of places like Limeridge and Blackwater, we need to draw on the evidence of photographs (or paintings or engravings) that can stand in such places’ stead. If we do, however, we face our third problem. Although we might think that bringing a photograph to a text to clarify what we read, there is a sense in which our actions actually obscure it. Once we focus on a photograph of a place that we read of (or of a scene that represents the features an author has described), the dynamics of our relationship with the place itself changes. We remember the image rather than the original (verbal) description.

Barthes is helpful here. The association of a text with a photograph can burden the image “with a culture, a moral, and imagination,” he notes (“Message” 26), and the same process occurs in the movement between image and text. As a result, rather than preserving memory, a photograph blocks it, and becomes instead an anti-memory, “un contre-souvenir” (*Chambre*

142; Theroux makes a similar point in his short piece, “The Cerebral Snapshot”). And just as a photograph of a place we know can block memories of the place itself, so, if it is used to define what a fictional landscape looks like, it can shape the way we read a text, blocking and filtering alternative perception of its scenes. Earlier I referred to the passage in *The Woman in White* where Fosco encounters an organ-grinder at the entrance to Regent’s Park, and suggested that the scene was possibly full of life. But because I know the engraving I mentioned, I see the organ-grinder in an empty suburban street. There is no park, no pastry-cook’s, in what I see; no Fosco, even. Tissot trumps Collins—and inevitably so. No story or explanation offered for what is shown in a photograph is ever “quite as present as the banal appearances preserved in [it]” (Berger 86)—and what is more “present” is inevitably foregrounded. When a photograph (or in this case, an engraving) is tied to a story, we prioritize the visual imagery and reduce the importance of the story itself.

This is a familiar problem for those who enjoy film or TV adaptations of novels, and end up remembering the adaptation as the original work. (Chatsworth makes a fine Pemberley, but once the camera pans across its exterior there is a danger of our remembering too much, too sharply.) But it is not a new one. Wordsworth would complain when the reality of Mt. Blanc replaced what his imagination had led him to anticipate—when “a soulless image . . . usurped upon a living thought / That never more could be” (*The Prelude*, Bk 6, ll. 452-6)—and though the parallel is not exact, since he would have had some ideas about the Alps, perhaps have even seen engravings of them, whereas we are supposing a situation where we have no idea what Mt Blanc or Pemberley (or Limmeridge House) could look like, we can sympathize with his disappointment and recognize our danger.

Of course, when we are conscious of thinking too precisely we can try to self-correct, but often we are unaware of what is happening—the distortions introduced are often less obvious than those in my example, and we do not recognize how the details we remember from a photograph change the text we

are trying to understand. And that is troubling. As Alexander Nehamas points out, to change a detail of a work is to cascade change throughout a text, thereby creating another work (165). Nehamas, drawing on Nietzsche, was thinking of how to take away even a single detail is to create a world of changes—but, I would suggest, it is no less dangerous to add a detail to the author’s work. Again Barthes is helpful. “[I]n differing degrees,” he reflects, “everything . . . signifies. This is not a matter of art (on the part of the narrator), but of structure; in the realm of discourse, what is noted is by definition notable” (261). As we absorb the details of a photograph in order to understand a text, the *Gestalt* of the text changes. For some readers of *MEJ*, this might not matter. A novel, they might maintain, is created in their reading: its meaning is constructed, not discovered. But even if that is granted, they have a responsibility to master the lexis used and the context presumed. As Patrocínio Schweickart notes, although reading is “necessarily subjective” it must not be entirely so. “One must respect the autonomy of the text. The reader is a visitor and, as such, must observe the necessary courtesies” (80).

This, then, is our problem: if we need a photograph to understand references that would be familiar to the authorial audience, its details need to be part of our background knowledge, not our focus if we are not going to let visual imagery control what we read. Paradoxically, to allow for a reading that is not distorted by explicit comparisons between the text and extra-textual resources but is still informed by those resources, the photograph needs to have lost its place in our sensory memory *before* it is used. As Mallarmé suggested—albeit of his introductory Note for “Un coup de dès,” not a photograph or engraving illustrating the poem’s content—if what was external to the text had to be looked at, it should be merely “glanced at and then actually forgotten” (262).

Such advice is easier to give than to follow, particularly when it comes to visual imagery. After all, we do not usually forget photographs that we have seen. Noting the results of a study in which people were shown 10,000 pictures over five days, the

cognitive psychologist Lionel Standing calculated that people retain short-term memories of 98% of pictures that they see, and would still recognize over 73% after a year. Yet to recognize a scene is not the same as to remember its details—and although we are trying to avoid the recall of details that would be read into a text, we do not need these details for recognition. We can “know” a scene as we read an author’s description without “seeing” it (Kosslyn and Jolicoeur); in theory, at least, we can draw upon knowledge we already have without being overwhelmed by its specificity, and that, we might presume, was what Mallarmé had in mind.

Teaching landscape

So much might be granted in theory, but glancing at, forgetting, and then recalling the gist of an image seems a tall order when we know its importance to our understanding of a text. If alerted to the fact that an image has significance, we notice and remember its details even if even alerted through a prohibition. If we go in search of photographs that can inform our reading, they will control our understanding.

However, although the danger seems unavoidable, we might consider what the implications are for teaching the novels—and then work back to ourselves. When we do not know that an image is important, and therefore do not flag it any way, when its **photograph is just one among many seen, the task of remembering the gist but not the details of a scene is feasible**. As the neurologist Antonio Damasio has reminded us, “The brain does not file Polaroid pictures of people, objects, landscapes” (100)—or of photographs, we might add. What we remember is a “reconstructed version” of our experience, not a record of what we saw, and the level of detail in the reconstruction will reflect the attention paid to the stimulus. Indeed, recent memory research (reported by Brainerd and Reyna) has suggested that we store the details of what we experience in a “verbatim” trace, and the gist or meaning of it in a “fuzzy” one, **and that because the former fades more quickly than the latter, the essence of the experience remains with us even when its details are forgotten**.

The implications for the classroom should be obvious. There is more than enough to show students about Cumberland landscapes without us having to draw particular attention to photos of Hayton and Allonby; more than enough to explain about New Forest villages (important for Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* as well as Collins' novel) without drawing attention to one of them as "Blackwater" (or "Helstone"). Likewise, we can easily trace Collins' residences in London and note the differences between Hampstead and St. John's Wood, without creating a virtual blue plaque to announce "Count Fosco lived here." In this scenario, when students turn to the novel they will only have a fuzzy recall of the photographs that they have seen—but that is all that they will need as members of an authorial audience, and approaching the task this way there is less danger that the photograph's point of view, framing, and detail could come to be mistaken for that of the author. Although they will only have a fuzzy recall of what they have seen, that is all that they will need to be able to read as members of an authorial audience.

Can *we* discover fictional landscapes in this way—by drawing on fuzzy traces rather than verbatim ones? Probably not if our curiosity to learn about the world of Laura and Marian takes us to regional histories of the Allonby coast or on walking tours of the fells; but that is perhaps no great matter if we read with sufficient attention. Besides, what is in sharp relief (and possibly a source of distortion) for the *Woman in White* will have a softer focus when we turn to *No Name*, and will be suitably fuzzy when we discover Wordsworth's Cumberland and its "wild, unpeopled hills." And if our curiosity is more general, we explore contexts just for their interest, without forcing connections, and trusting that our mind can do the job when necessary we can even approximate the classroom dynamics described above. "The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows," David Ausubel reminds us (iv); and if we believe this and confidently store up discoveries against future need, we can come close to the scenario described, and a little bit closer to what the authorial audience knows and the way that they know it. There is a final danger, here, of course:

that of hubris. We cannot really know in the way the authorial audience's knew, any more we can really know what it was that they knew. Both tasks are impossible to achieve. But they are also impossible to refuse.

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