

The Scenology of Landscape in *The Quickening Maze* by Adam Foulds

Olga Roebuck

ABSTRACT

This text presents various possibilities of looking at landscape from a literary perspective, allowing the possibilities of interpreting it as a literary text or a theatrical scene. Such theoretical claims are tested in the analysis of several characters from Adam Foulds's novel The Quickening Maze.

KEYWORDS

Landscape as a cultural artefact, scenology of landscape, literary landscape, John Clare, Matthew Allen, Adam Foulds, *The Quickening Maze*

The role of landscape and natural features thereof has been described in many different ways. Depending on one's particular perception of landscape, various functions are assigned a diverging degree of importance, the prime one usually being that of life and a living environment, followed and often juxtaposed by that of a natural resource. The purpose of this text is to explore that function of landscape which is often placed below the above-mentioned ones, the aesthetic qualities of nature rather than the material – the role of landscape as a cultural artefact. This article will present several possibilities of looking at landscape in this way, as well as examine it in a literary context. The text will look into the possibility of interpreting the landscape not only as a literary agent, but also as a scene, and will explore ways in which nature invokes particular types of behaviour in several literary characters. The scenic quality of landscape will be examined. First, the analysis will attempt to assess the mutuality, hierarchy and typology of the relationship between people and landscape, then this theoretical input will be confronted with a relatively recent work by British writer Adam Foulds, *The Quickening Maze*, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2009.

The first and important issue in the debate following is a definition of landscape and its potential to act or invoke certain actions in its inhabitants. Josef Valenta starts his assessment of the scenic quality of landscape from scratch by stating that natural landscape (landscape unaffected by human action) does not behave, does not act; such landscape simply *is*.¹ That, however, does not mean that landscape is denied the status of being alive. Valenta uses the above claim only to enhance the importance of humans as the carriers of scenic action within the landscape as the scene. At first glance it may seem that such a claim can be effectively undermined: a storm moving through the open landscape, hilltops hiding in and then re-appearing from behind a low cloud, a section of a rainbow shining and disappearing above a forest, or shadows of clouds travelling across the sea are only a few examples of the this scenic ability. It is, however, the role of the spectator, which Valenta enhances. For Jiří Sádlo, landscape represents a live system. This means that it is not a mere mixture of interactions, of independent not-living and living structures, or of live and dead.² Furthermore, Sádlo identifies two views of

1 Josef Valenta, *Scénologie krajiny* [The scenology of landscape] (Prague: Kant, 2008), 8.

2 Jiří Sádlo, "Krajina jako interpretovaný text," [Landscape as an interpreted text] in *Archeologie a krajinná ekologie* [Archeology and landscape ecology] ed. Jaromír Beneš and Vladimír Brůna (Most: Nadace Projekt Sever, 1994), 47.

landscape. One he assesses as reductionist, because it does not attribute landscape with a personality and sees it as a passive result of matter, forces and relationships which occur within a given landscape. The other view represents landscape as a self-sufficient phenomenon with its own laws, along with substructures that result from these laws. The second view perceives landscape as a phenomenon with its own personality.³ The above-mentioned opinions suggest that the key aspect lies in the interpretation and the role of human interaction with landscape, or rather the human perception of landscape. Even the most general scientific definitions of landscape attribute it with antropogeneous characteristics and very often perceive it as the uniting point between nature and culture, i.e. the natural and the human-made. Most interesting for the purposes of this text may be Martin Gojda's definition, presented by Valenta, in which landscape is seen as the place where nature meets humans, the meeting point between nature and human culture, where the natural environment becomes an artefact.⁴ This once again stresses the vital, active role of a human being in participating in the scenic behaviour of a landscape (if not creating it). The mutual relationship and connection between humanity (or individual humans) and landscape thus become central. An example of the above claim can be found in this statement by Václav Cílek's on the meaning of landscape:

We almost automatically expect that a place must have its *meaning*. [...] The opposite of the meaning of landscape is boredom. This boredom means an absence of excitement, feeling, and fulfilment. It is a lack of lower instincts which make us alive as well as higher motivations which make us feel fulfilled.⁵

The understanding of the role of landscape determines its scenic function as well. For an examination of the mutual determination and influence between landscape and various subjects, it is useful to try to identify not only their mutual relationships but possibly also a certain hierarchy. Sádlo uses the splendid metaphor of landscape as "the interpreted text," in which the reader (significantly) does not have to be a human being, but can be any part of the landscape, any sub-structure, be it a specific person or people, forest or village. "The existence of each segment of the landscape means three things at the same time: it physically creates landscape, it registers – reads landscape – and changes it."⁶ This feature is also very important in the following literary analysis of Foulds' novel in which the relationships between characters and the surrounding natural environment play a vital role. Because the analysis is concerned with scenic behaviour of landscape in Foulds' novel it thus, examines the landscape's capacity to induce a certain type of behaviour in certain characters. Thus, in terms of hierarchy, this analysis uses the identification of people as one of the above-mentioned segments of landscape, which comprises, senses and re-creates (or changes) it. After establishing this hierarchy, the final assessment of the typology of relationships between people and landscape can be presented. Making sense of landscape, attributing it with various and often contrasting meanings, is clearly determined by the typology of the subject, i.e. the psychology of individual people. Valenta presents three different types of people representing three basic approaches to landscape: the ectomorphic type sees terrain through the optic of his/her own moods and feelings and not as it really is, using landscape as a projection of his/her own psychology. The mesomorphic type sees landscape and the natural

3 Sádlo, "Krajina jako interpretovaný text," 48.

4 Valenta, *Scénologie krajiny*, 11.

5 Václav Cílek, *Dýchat s ptáky* [Breathing with the birds] (Prague: Dokořán, 2008), 78.

6 Sádlo, "Krajina jako interpretovaný text," 48.

environment as a challenge, seeking to rule, exploit and own it. And finally, the endomorphic type is characterised as someone contemplating landscape, attempting to sense it and take in all its nuances – physical as well as aesthetic.⁷ All three types will be identified, and the varying influence of landscape and certain natural features on their behaviour will be examined.

Adam Foulds's poetic novel *The Quickening Maze* was categorized by reviewers as a *novel of identity*, as it deals predominantly with the loss of identity of the character John Clare, whose identity dissolves in his mental illness. This label, however, is by no means straightforward. The author is dealing with real historical characters (John Clare, Alfred Tennyson, Dr Matthew Allen) and, although their historical identities seem to be rather accurate, as least as denoted by various contemporary references, the author has added his imagined qualities to each of them, thus creating unique personalities. Furthermore, the novel's "identity" is remarkable; the work is written in the form of a novel, but with incredible poetic quality. It is taking place in a Dr Matthew Allen's lunatic asylum, in which Allen is attempting to put to practice his theory about a more humane treatment of mentally ill people. At the same time the doctor is trying to reconcile his own present life as a respectable family man with his criminal past. To a great degree the novel uses the potential of the peculiar setting and characters and its picturesque natural environment, which is presented as a no less peculiar location with peculiar characters. Andrew Motion points out the intriguing ambiguity of the novel's characteristics:

[...] blend of something essentially poetic and something essentially to do with prose. It makes *The Quickening Maze* look shimmery yet feel resonant, and creates a lush metaphorical life within the shapes of the narrative. Yes, it's a novel about two famous poets and a slightly less famous asylum. At bottom, though, it's a story about identity, which is variously explored through Matthew Allen and his family, through the inmates of the asylum, through two great and greatly different writers and through the Gypsies who live in their hinterland.⁸

The following analysis will use the metaphorical richness of the novel, which the author mainly draws from landscape, as well as explore the characters' selfhood with reference to the natural background.

Although the novel is full of very interesting personae (Alfred Tennyson, Allen's daughter Hannah and others), this analysis will center mainly on three characters selected to correspond with the typology presented earlier in this paper. The only problem of Dr Matthew Allen, a charismatic owner of the mental sanatorium who is capable of holding together not only the institution but his rather large family, seems to be with disciplining himself. The novel sees him at the height of his medical career, yet with his focus already shifting towards another enterprise: his new invention called *the pyroglyph*. In this analysis, the character of Dr Allen functions as an example of the mesomorphic type, for whom landscape is a source of material, an object to be exploited or a space to be used and mastered. The woods surrounding the asylum, which represent a fascinating world to a whole range of other characters in the book are hardly noticed by Allen and, if so, only as the natural barrier separating his clients from the rest of the world. His appreciation of nature is marked by the search for ways to use it.

7 Valenta, *Scénologie krajiny*, 32.

8 Andrew Motion, "The Asylum in the Forest," review of *The Quickening Maze* by Adam Foulds, *The Guardian*, May 2, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/may/02/the-quickening-maze>.

Matthew Allen lifted his head and looked out at the morning. Beyond the blue lawn the trees were there. Their fine twigs, at this distance, made a russet mist. He looked back down at his page of calculations. They added up to something, and that was with a very modest number of predicted orders. He smiled. He looked up again and saw a fox trotting silently across the lawn [...] How light it was in its movements, and quick, all travel and purpose.⁹

The passage clearly suggests that despite the noticeable beauty of the early morning, it is the accounting which puts a smile on Dr Allen's face. Expressions like *to add up to something*, *predicted* and *orders* all point at qualities which the untamed wilderness surrounding Dr Allen does not possess. Seeing the fox, Allen's appreciation is focused on its speed and, most importantly, *purpose* – an expression characterising most fittingly Dr Allen's main motivation. His interest in landscape is purely scientific, assessment rather than appreciation. The philosophical background of his approach is revealed in one of his discussions with Alfred Tennyson, who has come to the asylum to visit his brother. Tennyson classifies Allen's natural philosophy as "a Spinozism, of sorts"¹⁰. Indeed, Dr Allen describes his understanding of the natural world mainly as the movement of energy, i.e. "the caloric flow" ruled by "the Grand Agent" as a common cause and unitary force.¹¹ The analysis shows that for Dr Allen, landscape function as a mere stage set, seemingly not influencing his behaviour – quite the contrary, he seems to control his surroundings rather well. Yet, a certain deeper relationship can be perceived about Allen's success towards the end of the story, when the first problems are being foreshadowed. This involves the purchase of the mechanical orrery, a piece of complex machinery symbolising the heavenly bodies, which spin around when a handle is turned. "It stood on his desk, a brass machine with three curving feet, a stem, a barrel with a handle and many radial arms that branched up at right angles with finer stems surmounted with globes of different colours, some of them surrounded by a corolla of tiny globes on separate stems."¹² It seems rather appropriate that the orrery arrives just as Dr Allen's business is beginning to fail. The ambition to represent in a mechanism something as complicated as the whole universe is a symbol of the doctor's rather complex, albeit short-lived ambitions. Furthermore, his joy of moving the entire universe by a mere turn of a handle gives a glimpse of whom he really sees as the Grand Agent when he encourages his wife to try the machinery: "Fear not. The heavens are at your command."¹³ After his failure becomes obvious, it is paradoxically the orrery, which most clearly reveals the overestimation of his endeavour.

The second character which falls neatly into the typology presented by Valenta is Margaret, who later in the story becomes Mary. She is one of the patients at the asylum and, like that of John Clare, her illness is gradually worsening. Lost in her hallucinations, she develops an alternative character with whom she fully identifies. She accepts the name of Mary, which is coincidentally also the name of John Clare's demised lover. Her relationship to landscape is closest to an ectomorphic one. Her psychological state often finds reflection in the landscape's natural features, and her strongest hallucinations are also inspired by it.

9 Adam Foulds, *The Quickening Maze* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 90.

10 Foulds, *The Quickening Maze*, 25.

11 Foulds, *The Quickening Maze*, 25.

12 Foulds, *The Quickening Maze*, 166.

13 Foulds, *The Quickening Maze*, 166.

Her stomach empty, her body light and thin, Margaret stood in the forest and looked up at bare, spreading branches and thought of Christ's body hanging there, hanging from its five wounds. The thorns like those thorns over there, wound round Him in a tight crown must have infested His head with pain.¹⁴

The forested landscape for Mary creates a dome for worshipping Christ and it is a place where she expresses her longing for sacrifice. Her relationship with landscape is very intense, of course intensified by her loss of sanity, but in the end becomes in many ways physical. Her vision of the crucified Christ in the trees provokes a physical reaction: "She felt this in herself, that at her points of contact with the world she was in pain, that her soul was pinned to the wall of her flesh, suffering, suffocating for release. [...] She breathed hissingly through her teeth, grateful for this illumination, and wanting more."¹⁵ Another instance of the natural world provoking a hallucination in Margaret, one which proves to be vital for her change of identity, is that of finding a scrap of a bird's wing in a meadow of bluebells on a very windy day. The individual objects come together in Margaret's mind into a single symbolic image of an angel.

The wind separated into thumps, into wing beats. An angel. An angel there in front of her. Tears fell like petals from her face. It stopped in front of her. ... It reached out with its beautiful hands to steady itself in the mortal world, touching leaves, touching branches and left stains of brightness where it touched. ... When it spoke, she felt that the words were spoken precisely in the middle of her mind, but that they somehow pervaded the whole forest. The leaves crisped and trembled. "Do not weep," it said. "I am an angel of the Lord."¹⁶

In this vision, which proves to be completely reformatory for her character, Margaret unifies with the surrounding landscape, as if she becomes one of the trembling leaves. These are the reactions that she attributes to the forest, which she experiences herself. Margaret's submission to the force of her environment foreshadows what is to come. In her hallucination, the angel rechristens her to become Mary and gives her the task to drive out evil from people. Margaret/Mary's answer "I submit. Utterly, I submit."¹⁷ resonates with what has already been suggested. From the point of view of the scenic behaviour, Mary is a true segment of landscape. Her interpretation of landscape is very specific, extremely personal and ultimately physical. She cannot separate the natural world from her own bodily sensations. "The pure water. Drops scattering. Seeds of light falling in the grass, on the earth. She made light, also. She must have caught it from the angel."¹⁸ is Mary's experience of rain. Of all the characters in the novel, Mary resonates with landscape most and most dangerously for herself. Mary does not experience landscape as such; her liberation is in the escape into her own world, where the images of the real are blending with her visions.

Finally, the third character analysed will be that of John Clare. This poet, whose personality dissolves into the multiple personalities created by his mental illness and whose moments of clarity torment him with pictures of lost love and a lost audience for his verses. In the assessed typology he represents the endomorphic type, whose appreciation of landscape is complete – artistic, psychological and physical. For John

14 Foulds, *The Quickening Maze*, 98.

15 Foulds, *The Quickening Maze*, 98.

16 Foulds, *The Quickening Maze*, 126.

17 Foulds, *The Quickening Maze*, 127.

18 Foulds, *The Quickening Maze*, 135.

Clare, landscape has yet another dimension, a different one than the other characters: it is his home. In a similar way to how Václav Cílek claims that in the landscapes of home people grow old together with the land and trees, years pass and people grow into the landscape.¹⁹ In Foulds' novel, John Clare is portrayed from the very first page as a character who feels landscape to be his natural home – known or unknown – where he feels safe in solitude. "He walked quite out of his knowledge, into a world where the birds and flowers did not know him, where his shadow had never been"²⁰ is John's reminiscence of getting lost as a child. This recollection opens this novel in which *getting lost* is one of the main themes. Yet, it is landscape where John seems to be able to find himself. Natural landscape induces his self-identification and self-realisation. Quite in line with the characteristics of the endomorphic type, he claims landscape to be his embodiment: "Watching this, being there, given time, the world revealed itself again in silence, coming to him. Gently it breathed around him its atmosphere: vulnerable, benign, full of secrets, his."²¹ This is completely opposite from Mary, whose glimpses of the natural world lead her deeper into confusion and madness. John rather uses individual natural images as stepping stones on his path back to the moments of his mind's clarity. The objects he sees, he begins to identify as specific objects and by attributing particular meaning to them, he returns *back*.

His thoughts began picking up comfortable speed as he looked and realised that those were particular logs being consumed, logs from particular trees burning with particular flames in that exact place at that specific hour and it would only ever occur once in the history of the world and that was now.²²

The landscape is the one reliable factor anchoring John's perception of time and place. Another factor induced by the perception of the surrounding natural world is John's longing for his lost love Mary. Pondering his feelings towards her, John is overlooking a pond and suddenly, his thoughts turn to the physical: "John stood and stared down at the widening hem of slime where in the heat the pond had shrunk down into itself. A thick smell to the heavy green water, a sexual stink."²³ John's suppressed sexuality finds its realisation in the rather unfortunate and unintended rape of Margaret/Mary, who he with his clouded mind mistakes for his dead lover. The fact that they talk to one another does not help to clarify the misunderstanding, as if the behaviour induced by landscape cannot be changed. Finally, another desire is invoked by John's observations of the surrounding landscape – a longing for freedom. The glimpses of animals and plants inspire at first John's short-term escapes into the gypsy camp, then, as his mind gets more and more lost in the *quickenning maze*, his desire and plan to escape and return to the landscape of his childhood. It is in this final escape of his, when he is weakened by the very long walk and his deteriorating mind and body, that he is completely united with the landscape. "He got onto his hands and knees and began eating the damp grass. Sweet and plain, it was not unlike bread."²⁴ It is his physical experience of landscape, being a part of it, which is the sole and central sensation of John on the final pages of the

novel. Everything around him vanishes and he exists as a mere throbbing and breathing organism. Unlike Mary, John is throughout the novel capable of a clear appreciation of landscape, of seeing its qualities in purity, faultlessness and freedom, and is able to associate these with his own life and situation.

In this analysis of Adam Foulds's novel *The Quickenning Maze* the importance of landscape as an agent, determining the scenic behaviour of individual characters has been demonstrated. A theoretical examination of the importance of people in the landscape and determining the hierarchy in the relationship between people and landscape were followed by a typology of different types of relationships related to different psychological characteristics in individuals. The varying typology of the literary personae in the novel, their varying strengths, show differing approaches to landscape and the different degrees of influence landscape has on their behaviour, ranging from a mere stage set or a resource to be used, to a set of fragments forming themselves into hallucinations determining the whole life of a character, to the truly natural living environment framing and inspiring one's existence from birth to death. At the beginning of the paper it was said that for the scenology of landscape, the human being is necessary as the audience or the carrier of the action. In the words of Václav Cílek, "the landscape of home is a flow in which our humanity is mixed with the natural and the resulting mixture then stands, like music and poetry, somewhere between the humans and the elements."²⁵ The analysis of the literary characters showed that the human beings are also important for contributing meaning or by mingling with nature and creating altogether new meanings which are, in Foulds's novel presented in a highly apposite form – prose mingling with poetry, historically accurate characters mingling with fiction, reality mingling with dream, the rigid world of the asylum mingling with the freedom of the forest.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cílek, Václav. *Dýchat s ptáky*. Prague: Dokořán, 2008.
 Foulds, Adam. *The Quickenning Maze*. London: Johathan Cape, 2009.
 Motion, Andrew. "The Asylum in the Forest." Review of *The Quickenning Maze* by Adam Foulds. *The Guardian*, May 2, 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/may/02/the-quickenning-maze>
 Sádlo, Jiří. "Krajina jako interpretovaný text." In *Archeologie a krajinná ekologie*, edited by Jaromír Beneš and Vladimír Brůna, 47–54. Most: Nadace Projekt Sever, 1994.
 Valenta, Josef. *Scénologie krajiny*. Prague: Kant, 2008.

Olga Roebuck is an Assistant Professor at the University of Pardubice. She has received her M.Litt in Cultural Studies at Strathclyde University in Glasgow and her PhD in English and American literature at Charles University in Prague. Among her research interests are cultural identities in contemporary Scottish fiction and mainly the role of landscape in contemporary British fiction.

19 Cílek, *Dýchat s ptáky*, 72.

20 Foulds, *The Quickenning Maze*, 3.

21 Foulds, *The Quickenning Maze*, 17.

22 Foulds, *The Quickenning Maze*, 59.

23 Foulds, *The Quickenning Maze*, 151.

24 Foulds, *The Quickenning Maze*, 257.

25 Cílek, *Dýchat s ptáky*, 72.