



Pathways through Winter Landscapes: Confronting Haunting Memories in David Park's *Travelling in a Strange Land* (2018)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interconnections between the natural space and the human psyche in David Park's novel *Travelling in a Strange Land* (2018). Focus is placed on the active role of the natural landscape in both exacerbating the protagonist's struggle with traumatic memories and contributing to his process of making peace with the past. Suppressed memories buried into the unconscious rise to the surface and unsettle Tom's emotional and mental state as he travels alone through the frozen landscapes of Ireland and England to bring his ill son back home for Christmas. In this literary work, the snowy landscape assumes a major presence. The natural world provides stimuli that activate the traveller's memory and mentally transport him into times and places that have left an indelible mark upon his psyche, while it also acts as a sanctuary allowing Tom to reflect upon the loss of his eldest son and bear witness to his grief and trauma. Ultimately, this analysis brings forth the two parallel journeys that are in progress; that is, Tom's winter road trip and an inner journey through mental and emotional landscapes of traumatic memory.

KEYWORDS

Introduction

Representations of the natural environment have been prominent in Irish Literature throughout the years. From folk tales about the natural world and its magical power, like the stories about the mythical island of Tír na nÓg, to nature poems such as Seamus Heaney's *Blackberry-Picking* (1966) and W.B. Yeats' *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* (1890) and to contemporary works of fiction such as Niall Williams' *This is Happiness* (2020), the Irish landscape extends over its function as setting and assumes an active role in these literary narratives. David Park's award-winning book *Travelling in a Strange Land* (2018), which will be the focus of this paper, is a narrative of travel fiction that brings forth the interconnections between the natural space and the human psyche. This paper will engage with the active role of landscape in both exacerbating the protagonist's struggle with recurring memories of a traumatic past and contributing to his process of making peace with the past. Suppressed memories buried in the unconscious rise to the surface and unsettle Tom's emotional and mental state as he travels alone through the frozen landscapes of Ireland and England to bring his sick son Luke back home for Christmas. In this literary work, the snowy landscape does not merely function as a background for the narrative to unfold but rather assumes a major presence. On the one hand, the scenery provides stimuli that activate the traveller's memory and mentally transport him into times and places that left an indelible mark upon his psyche; on the other hand, it allows Tom to reflect upon the loss of his eldest son Daniel and acknowledge the great impact of carrying such a family trauma. Although at the beginning of the narrative Tom's arduous journey is connected to his parental concern for his ill son Luke, what later transforms this middle-aged man's story into a modern-day pilgrim story is the attempts to both retrieve the painful memories of his first son Daniel from the inner chambers of his psyche, and mourn that loss. Indeed, due to the double purpose the journey serves, Claire Kilroy characterizes Park's protagonist as an "everyman" in her review in *The Guardian* (par 8), an individual embodying the universal experience of dealing with child loss and trauma. With the above in mind, this paper aims to probe the two parallel

journeys being in progress; that is, Tom's winter road trip to Sunderland, England and an inner journey through mental and emotional landscapes of traumatic memory.

In *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place* (1994), Paul Rodaway brings to the fore the human-environment encounters, shedding light on the corporal experience of geographical locations and how that experience is registered in the individual's mind through the senses. "Sensuous geography," argues Rodaway, "is an interaction with the environment both as given to the senses and as interpreted by the senses themselves in conjunction with the mind" (26). Hence, the senses allow for any kind of environmental stimuli to reach the barrier of the body as well as lead to the decoding and comprehension of that stimuli. Subsequently, individuals form a connection with a place and assign specific qualities to that geographical location. In *Travelling through a Strange Land*, as Tom crosses Northern Ireland and moves through the snow-covered land of England, not only is he highly alert of his surroundings and the dangers lurking in that heavily snowed environment, but also, he is triggered to look inwards and revisit places in memory. As Rodaway contends, the body's ability to move is a key factor that defines the concept of sensuous geography, a concept that "is in fact both spatial and temporal in character" (28). The movement of the car towards Sunderland, and particularly the GPS directions showing Tom the way towards his final destination, are always juxtaposed with the emerging memories of the past that momentarily interrupt this forward movement. The place of memory is defined by non-linear mobilities that unsettle the traveler's inner world and challenge his emotional buoyancy. This notion is explored further in this paper.

In the first subsection of the paper, the outer world of the narrative is interlinked with the realm of memory since any encounters with the natural environment trigger the buried traumatic memories to rise to the surface, fusing Tom's past and present reality. In the second subsection, focus will be placed on the role of the natural space in assisting the protagonist's attempts to articulate his pain and lessen the impact of haunting memories upon his psyche. Drawing on Michelle Balaev's seminal essay "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" (2008), which

examines the impact of the natural world on the traumatized person's turbulent process of delving into memories of the past and finding ways to alleviate their pain, it will be argued that the landscape can function as a sanctuary for the grieving father, as a place for him to bear witness to his own trauma and externalize the pain that has been haunting him. The specific division into two subsections aims to address the gradual changes in the protagonist's psyche as he struggles to find balance between revisiting the past and releasing his distress. While a major part of the narrative revolves around Tom's struggle with regularly resurfacing traumatic recollections, another part underscores his need to confront those haunting flashbacks and seek healing. This paper draws attention to the transformation of the natural surroundings into a place of refuge for the traumatized character who, in his challenging journey midwinter, has the opportunity to reconnect with nature and actively try to alleviate his emotional distress.

— 63 — Outer and Inner Worlds: Encounters with Nature and the Return of Traumatic Memories

The world of the novel is a frozen one. It has been snowing for days, warnings against unnecessary travelling have been issued, and as the concerned protagonist notes, “nothing seems quite certain anymore, and not just the relationship between time and distance but everything that makes up the world as we once thought of it feels like it has been knocked out of sync” (Park 5). The natural world gains an eerie and uncanny quality from the very beginning of the narrative. Drawing on Jentsch's theory of the uncanny, Freud defined the “unheimlich” as anything that “arouses dread and creeping horror,” since the uncanny suggests the loss of what previously evoked a sense of home (219-20). In the novel the once-familiar place is transformed into an unwelcoming one which Tom is forced to learn to navigate through. Indeed, it requires effort to enter this unfamiliar and strange land. With every attempt to get the car on the main road, Tom encounters failure as the car slides on the ice and returns to point zero of the journey (Park 8). Performing the first task that would mark the start of his road trip instantly becomes an overwhelming experience for the hero who is momentarily overcome by despair, conceiving of

that situation as “not a good omen for the journey,” feeling “powerless to affect its trajectory” (Park 8-9). David Conradson examines the close relationship between the individual’s emotional world and landscape and acknowledges the impact of the qualities of each location upon a person’s inner world. To borrow his words, “as individuals become imbricated within particular ecologies of place, so their emotions . . . arise in part from embodied physiological and psychosocial responses to the constituent elements of those places” (Conradson 183). The eerie atmosphere of the snowy surroundings has a great effect upon Tom’s emotions. Yet, an ulterior motive makes this journey unavoidable and fuels the protagonist’s perseverance. Despite the uninviting character of the natural world around him, “this winter pilgrim”¹ (Mantis 10), will engage in a physically and emotionally challenging journey in hope of releasing a burden from his psyche by reaching his destination. Notably, it is not the actual geographical location to which the readers are introduced in the first page, but rather the landscape of a recurrent nightmare that discloses a family tragedy and a loss that Tom has yet to overcome. In that feverish dream Tom is confronted with the challenging task of crossing a frozen lake to reach the house opposite it. It is a mentally and emotionally accessed world where “[e]verything is hidden, even the secrets that [Tom hugs] tightly to stop them finding the light” (Park 1). This inner world reflects the protagonist’s turbulent psychological world and particularly his struggle with articulating traumatic experiences. The act of burying secrets magnifies the impact of haunting memories upon the psyche and further contributes to trauma remaining unresolved. Tom creates what Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok call “psychic crypts,” that is “the individual’s forcible creation of a psychic tomb” where tragedies from the past are hidden (22). Tom’s past is marked by the death of his eldest son Daniel and suppressing his grief in these internal tombs leads to the prolonging of his bereavement and the decline of his mental health. In his nightmare, Tom is often “sunk knee-depth” and is tempted to “surrender to [his] weariness and rest [his] head in the soft pillow of its snow” (Park 1). The prominent presence of the natural world in his consciousness and his use of language allows readers to adopt what Sten Pultz Moslund

¹ The corresponding term in Greek, which is found in the introductory part of the translated text, is “χειμωνιάτικος προσκυνητής.” The translator reveals from the start the connection between Tom’s journey and a pilgrimage, preparing the reader to keep in mind that this journey will have a great effect on the traveler’s psyche.

describes as “a topopoetic mode of reading” (30) of a literary work. That is, the language of many literary works is infused with elements that convey the setting’s topography, anything that reminds readers of the “tangibility” of the world and therefore allowing them “to enter . . . the sensuous experiences of place as a lived-in world” (Moslund 31). In Park’s narrative, memory is experienced as a “frozen land,” a place where the fear of “fall[ing] into some gaping crevice” (1-2) and the ice covering the surface of the lake breaking dominates. The world of that recurrent and unsettling dream is experienced as “a lived-in world” (Moslund 31) by Tom as much as the real-life place of Belfast and all the other places he ventures through. Thereupon, the prominence of an imagined place demonstrates the central role of the land of memory in the unravelling of the narrative.

— 65 — Interestingly, the farther away Tom manages to reach, the more evident this parallel journey through memory and suppressed grief becomes. As Tom is observing the boat moving away from the “snow-covered shoreline” (Park 14) of Ireland and into the open sea, he is engulfed by thoughts of his family and senses a change within him. He admits that “everything feels intensely strange as the present slips into the silent place where memory and consciousness filter into each other to make something new” (Park 14). Tom gradually realizes that on this solitary journey he will be confronted by memories of a traumatic past that reside within him, and whose great effect still lingers. For a brief moment, past and present mingle, and Tom is convinced he can discern Daniel among the crowd. Details are not yet disclosed about this young man’s identity, except that Tom often sees him in different places, “always fleetingly and never long enough for [Tom] to raise [his] hand and call out to him” (Park 14). Thus, Daniel is a liminal figure, rooted in Tom’s memory but with the power to unsettle his present. Anne Whitehead’s explorations of trauma in narrative fiction show that the concept of ghosts “represents an appropriate embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, the surfacing of the past in the present” (6). Indeed, by blurring the boundaries between the actual world and the place of memory, Daniel’s presence becomes a ghostly one haunting Tom. As the narrative progresses,

Daniel assumes the role of Tom's fellow traveller. To cite an example, when snow falls from a branch, breaking "the silence and stillness" of the place where Tom has stopped the car, he is confident that Daniel is hiding somewhere in the woods (Park 26). Yet, the real place around him contrasts with the one rooted in memory and images of the past since "there are no prints in the snow" (Park 26). This oscillation between reality and memories indicates that Daniel occupies an active role in Tom's life, being deeply engraved in memory as well as gaining presence in the here and now of the journey as a haunting figure of someone long lost. Rodaway argues that sight is "a creative interpretation of appearances," dependent also on the rest of the senses and memory (117). In Tom's case, visual illusions are frequent and memory often dominates over the senses. Despite knowing that he is daydreaming of Daniel and that the person sitting next to him in the car is but an illusion, since "the light of the snow streams *through* [Daniel's figure]" (Park 32; emphasis added), the part of Tom that is plunged in grief carries Daniel to the present. The relationship between time and space rumbles, as the place of memory and the place of experience weave into each other.

In this winter journey, Tom comes to the realization that he must grapple with not only the challenging weather conditions, but also the memories of a traumatic past, lying buried in the mental landscape of his psyche.

"I'm not sure if I can go on covering what for the moment is hidden": The Natural Environment and Overcoming Unresolved Trauma

In this subsection, focus is placed on the main character's tumultuous process of confronting painful memories, with the natural space gradually assuming an important role as a sanctuary, where Tom can ultimately confess the trauma he suppresses in his inner world. On the one hand, this solitary journey helps the main character bear witness to his own trauma but, on the other hand, the treacherous conditions make the journey already challenging enough for Tom to dwell on his inner turmoil. He expresses his doubts about whether "the monochrome world [he's] travelling through makes it easier or harder" to reflect on a traumatic family past (Park 60).

Each attempt to delve into memories that burn bright in the protagonist's mind leads to a constant collision of inner and outer worlds: "The snow conceals everything but I'm not sure if I can go on covering what for the moment is hidden" (Park 60), Tom admits, disclosing his distress. Despite trying to suppress his grief like the snow covering his surroundings, Tom is conflicted over the urge to release the burden of carrying traumatic memories. The healing process often entails looking inward and retrieving memories that triggered psychic wounds. As Balaev observes in several contemporary narratives "[t]his inward glance is paired with a growing awareness to the external world outside the individual mind" (164-65). It is a process manifested in the narrative as obtaining a multidirectional feature. While external stimuli lead the traveller to probe into the interior tombs in his psyche and address the buried memories of the past, the very act of confronting unresolved traumas leads Tom to become more alert of the external world and through the imagery of the natural landscape try to articulate his inner pain. As this winter traveller continues his venture, the question of whether Daniel "[i]s part of [the family's] inner world or locked outside" (Park 46) overshadows Tom's mind. Rodaway places emphasis on the body's ability to move and notes that one's geographical experience is informed by the collaboration of different senses and the mind's perception of a locality, suggesting that one's sensuous experience of place does not remain stable. Rather it is in progress as the body and mind pass through places and receive stimuli that are interpreted and can affect the individual's perception of himself and his relationship with that place. In particular, Tom's revisiting of his past is affected by the winter landscapes he crosses; the more he is exposed to a frozen and unwelcoming natural environment, the more he believes that his relationship with his eldest son Daniel was significantly more difficult to navigate than reaching England in such conditions. Despite the snow and the fear of an accident occurring, "there are the tracks of other cars to follow" and warning signs that offer a relative consolation to the traveller, whereas the journey through parenthood is "a kind of blizzard" (Park 56). Both father and son are caught in a blizzard of flawed parental decisions and adolescent drug addictions, a blizzard that ultimately causes

Daniel's death and leaves a scar upon Tom's psyche.

For Rodaway, perception is a key factor in geographical experience since it "is inclusive of both passive encounter with environmental stimuli and active exploration of that environment" (12). As Tom drives through places and (un)consciously draws parallels between the natural world and his experiences, he gradually engages in a process of articulating his pain. Particularly at the sight of a farmer feeding his livestock, Tom is reminded both of images on the local news of farmers looking for their lost sheep, relentlessly digging in the frozen soil until they find their animals and of his failure to find Daniel and save him (Park 105). Despite trying to console himself by thinking that helping Daniel with his drug addiction was a strenuous challenge for a parent to effectively handle, "this thought gets blighted by the image of the farmer never giving up . . . and how with his hands sunk deep he pulls the black-faced sheep from its burial place" (Park 112). The landscape probes him to capture his feelings of guilt and regret in language, and thereby externalize this burden. Hence, memories of a traumatic past do not remain ineffable but with effort can gradually turn into narrative memories. The natural world is infused in the language of the narrative, disclosing the prominence of the landscape in the traveller's mind and providing him with the means to articulate his trauma and externalize it. Balaev notes that this conjunction between natural place and an inner psychic world suggests "the various workings of the mind as the individual attempts to understand, incorporate, and explain the traumatic event" (161). Even more, when the natural world acquires a vindictive, insidious power over human existence, it discloses Tom's deteriorating psychological state. That is, when the memory of embracing Daniel's dead body surfaces in Tom's consciousness, he mourns that loss by repeatedly pleading for Daniel to return "from the high places, the sea that is too rough," to cross "this snow-filled road" and approach his father (Park 148). Therefore, the depiction of treacherous landscapes in the novel underscores the finality of death and Tom's irreparable loss, rendering his calls for Daniel futile. As Moslund observes, the language of the narrative is often defined by elemental forces like "earth, wind, water, light, vegetation, density,

or scarcity of matter” (34). These natural elements shape one’s geographical experience and in Tom’s case provide him with the means to incorporate in discourse the indelible mark of his son’s death upon his psyche. In his desperation to comprehend the tragedy he suffered, Tom returns to the memory of him and his own father destroying a bats’ nest, thinking that “[he] disturbed some natural order, set in motion everything that has ever happened in [his] life” (Park 160). Thus, the natural world gains increasing presence in Tom’s narration, particularly when he reflects on the trajectory of his life and confronts the pain induced by his trauma.

As time goes on and the destination seems to be unreachable, depressing thoughts cloud the traveller’s consciousness and the need to share his burden is intensified. Could the woman whose car got off track act as a witness to his confession? Could the snow-covered woods function as a safe space to release the burden of his past hurts? The brief but unexpected halt to Tom’s journey is a crucial point in his process of acknowledging his trauma and ameliorating its effect by sharing his internal pain. “[I]n this frozen suspended moment where [they] both wait for the future to arrive,” Tom is swept by the desire to open up to this stranger and bury his memories into “that pure white grave of snow” (Park 98). The landscape plays a major role in evoking these thoughts. The forest surrounding the place evokes feelings of calmness that creates the impression to Tom of being somewhere isolated, and regardless of the outcome of his confession, even if this woman cannot understand his vulnerable state, the reality will not aggravate since “whatever words are spoken will be subsumed into the silent snow-filled spaces that lace the trees” (Park 98). For psychoanalyst Dana Amir, bearing witness entails “the possibility to deposit the traumatic substances in another subject who cannot be annihilated by them” (6), to an individual who will not act as a vessel for the traumatic affect to be transmitted but who can keep a relative distance. With that in mind, Emily, a stranger whom Tom meets unexpectedly, would act as a witness to his narrative and become an objective listener to his confession if he managed to externalize his pain. Notably, it is when Tom finds himself in this woman’s company, that the woods emit a sense of safety. On the contrary, when the two of them

continue their separate paths, the tranquillity and silence of the woods affect the traveller negatively, as he contemplates about death, wondering whether it would be better to reach deep into the forest and never find his way out (Park 125-26). Traumatic memories are engraved in his mind and, to prevent being entirely consumed by them, Tom has to grasp any chance in this journey to reflect upon his psychic wounds and ameliorate the traumatic effect of past events.

In moments of emotional tension, when the aftereffects of traumatic events overflow, the female voice of the satnav² on the car draws the traveller back to reality and acts as a reminder of Tom's two parallel journeys, in memory and in the lived-in world. Tom feels grateful for the "calming voice" guiding him and contends that this voice, despite "its bewilderment," would understand the reason for the change in the journey's direction (Park 155). "I can't tell anyone where I am because it's not where I'm supposed to be and I can't explain the reason if anyone asks" (156) admits Tom, suggesting that his action of making a final stop at a place that tugs at his heart relates to everything he suppresses and needs to confront. As Rodaway notes, maps demonstrate "both features and relationships in space and ideas or claims about or on that space" and particularly for Tom, there is a different kind of map, a mental one linking past and present, a map illustrating his wounded psyche (140). While according to the GPS device assisting his journey, the traveller moves forward in time and space to reach closer to his son Luke, he is also drawn back to memory lane whenever he dwells on bleak memories of his past. Hence, the past acquires its own geographical location in memory and becomes reachable when Tom's traumatic affect is triggered, and he is overwhelmed by recollections of what he has suffered. The connection between this mental map and the actual world of experience becomes more evident as Tom travels by the place that reminds him of experiences of a long time ago.

The final stop in his journey is a mental stop in the realm of memory. The forest Tom stops by is a camping site where he used to bring his boys when they were young and somewhere deeper in the woods there is a big statue of an angel. "The paths to the monument have disappeared under the snow" but Tom finds his way (Park 159). He reaches the realization that it

2 Abbreviation for satellite navigation. It refers to a navigation system that depends on information received from satellites to guide the driver of a vehicle. In the literary work the term refers to the gps device commonly used in cars.

is not his body that should be buried under the snow but rather past mistakes and every hurtful word that was spoken (Park 160). In this place that feels “as sacred as anywhere [he’s] ever stood” Tom takes the courage to look at the picture he took of Daniel when he found his dead body and then delete it (Park 160). Although for a moment he hesitates to look at the camera and focuses on the blue sky and the sounds, “hoping to hear a voice that might guide [him]” (Park 162), he has to confront what haunts him on his own, to bring this image from the place of memory to the outer world and bear witness to his trauma. Without resorting to language to articulate his grief, Tom offers a silent testimony to a place that functions as a sanctuary, a meeting point for the character’s past and present, his emotional and lived-in world. As Balaev concludes, “the talking cure does not always provide a remedy for the traumatized protagonist” and healing can often be achieved through “direct contact with the natural world” (164). Although Tom’s countless encounters with the natural world do not result in his healing, they do contribute to the reconstitution of what Dori Laub calls “the internal ‘thou’” (70); that is, the possibility of having a witness or listener within oneself, a first crucial step in initiating the challenging process of healing.

Conclusion

This paper engaged with a contemporary work of Irish Literature that brings to the spotlight the interconnections between an individual’s inner world and the natural environment. Like a winter tale of the twenty-first century, Park’s *Travelling in a Strange Land* is both a personal account of Tom’s journey in midwinter from Belfast to Sunderland and an account of an inner journey through the suppressed memories of a grieving father. That is, while Tom moves forward toward England where his son Luke waits for him in the college dormitory, he also follows a non-linear direction in the land of memory, struggling with his unresolved trauma. In this narrative, an imbalance defines the time-space continuum, as traumatic past and present mingle and inner and outer worlds constantly clash. By crossing the frozen land Tom is provided

with the chance to contemplate upon his pain and become a witness to his own trauma. Thus, traumatic memories do not remain buried.

Travelling in a Strange Land illustrates the embodied experience of place and the connection between the human psyche and the natural world. The solitary journey through winter landscapes is transformed into a journey towards confronting haunting memories and releasing the burden of suppressing grief and trauma within oneself. When the whiteness of the snowy landscape evokes calmness and the feeling of safety, the natural landscape becomes a refuge for the traveller. What Park's narrative underscores is not the idea that encounters with nature offer complete healing of one's psychic wounds, but rather the role of nature in empowering traumatized individuals engage in a process of healing. This travel narrative poses the question of whether nature can assume the role of a witness to the traumatized person's vulnerable position. Eco-literature brings to the spotlight the need to further examine the intimate relationship between emotional landscapes and the natural environment. Thereupon, such narratives open the space for discussions about the therapeutic power of nature, stressing the significance of reconnecting with the natural world.

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