



HAL
open science

Scripting the Wilderness

Wendy Harding

► **To cite this version:**

Wendy Harding. Scripting the Wilderness. *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, 2009, 30 (Ecocriticism issue), pp.57-72. hal-00718146

HAL Id: hal-00718146

<https://univ-tlse2.hal.science/hal-00718146>

Submitted on 16 Jul 2012

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Scripting the Wilderness

Wendy Harding

The literature of place poses the problem of writing about what is beyond the self—and therefore beyond the immediate range of human experience—through the filter of human consciousness. This conundrum is most acutely felt in writing about wilderness, which, in the context of American culture, is generally conceived of as “an area where the earth and community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”¹ The perplexity of the writer faced with the challenge of writing about a place where, by definition, he does not belong can be felt in the title of Don Scheese’s essay “The Inhabited Wilderness.” This brief text about a hike into Hammond Canyon in Utah shows how a particular writer responds to the challenge; at the same time, it challenges readers to find ways of responding to texts about place, a genre to which the usual critical methods are not adapted.² The present study offers a close reading of Scheese’s “The Inhabited Wilderness” as an example of a new interpretative model designed to respond to the literature of place.³ Like others of its genre this text departs from a prior experience that is personal and irrecoverable and creates a new literary space made of words. The text is a montage of what I call “scripts” proposing different responses to and interpretations of the land.

Scheese’s account of a solitary hike in the Manti-La Sal National Forest plunges readers into a time and place—an August afternoon in the Utah wilderness—in which quotidian concerns seem to be suspended. Is Scheese appealing to readerly fantasies of escape? This seems unlikely given the firmly stated terms of the text’s conclusion: “Ruins are the bones of the past, to which we return again and again, seeking answers to the most profound inquiries about human existence” (352). Unlike escapist travel literature, the essay

1 The definition comes from the Wilderness Act of 1964, Section 2 (c).

2 Scott Slovic considers this problem in *Going Away to Think*. Responding to Terry Tempest Williams’s question about what ecocritics do, he suggests that beyond specific narratives, critics can engage in the work of “contextualization and synthesis” (34).

3 I am indebted to Jacky Martin for his invaluable contribution to my investigation of these questions.

asks readers to consider weighty ontological issues. Still it does not feel like a philosophical meditation. On the contrary, it issues a compelling invitation to consider places, cultures and concepts as if they formed a coherent landscape to visit and contemplate vicariously. At the same time, the text is neither an anthropological nor a geographical study. Rather than recounting a systematic exploration of either space or time, the writer ranges freely through different moments, places, and cultures. Fragments or flights of thought, held together by idiosyncratic principles, cohere around a speaking subject. How does the text interest readers in the exploration of places that they have never visited, make them empathize with cultures long departed, and then acquiesce to a series of vaguely discordant concepts? To try to answer these questions by adopting a detached critical stance is to risk failing to understand the text's particular aesthetic choices and its persuasive force.

To follow the text's development, to remain close enough to it to respect its particular continuity and coherence, this study adopts the hypothesis that, like numerous examples of the nonfictional literature of place, Scheese's essay deploys various scripts that readers can trace and take up. The term "scripting" highlights the choices writers make, as well as the effect their selectivity has on readers. It offers an alternative to the concept of representation, which is problematic because it implies that the writer can observe external objects and in turn exhibit them to another observer, the reader, through the medium of words. Scripts organize in textual form a montage of events, places, people and ideas that have occurred or are imagined to occur in real-life circumstances. In the particular case of the literature of place,⁴ scripts trace mental geographies in which references to actual places are fertilized by a human response, and conversely, mental activity is fashioned by its inscription in non-human settings.⁵ Scripts are multi-faceted: they refer to the external world and the speaker's internal experience; they straddle referential and textual space, pointing back to past events and creating new encounters for readers in the future. Rather than splitting the representing subject from the represented object, the notion of scripting emphasizes the interaction between inside and outside.

Scripting place is very different from either mapping or narrating it, although these functions may be evoked in scripts. Maps evoke places through the application of orthogonal coordinates to an empirical simulation of a particular

4 The generalizations made in this study concern a corpus that has proved difficult to classify, as Lyon has shown in *This Incomperable Land*.

5 The origin of the notion of scripts as mental geographies is suggested by Alison Deming's perception of her writings as "geographic and mental habitats located on the borders of change" (Deming 10).

terrain. Scripts may refer to traditional maps, but they gear that evocation to different objectives. Things that are important in maps—landmarks, routes, or topography—receive less attention than the uncharted spaces, the dead ends, the accidents, the encounters, or the epiphenomenal features that catch the observer’s eye but escape the cartographer’s notice. Scripts transform impersonal maps into humanized places. Scripts may also evoke stories; nevertheless, their relationship to narrative is far from being straightforward.⁶ Stories are fundamentally concerned with evolution in time, and conventionally they move from an initial situation toward a resolution. Scripts are less concerned with origins or closure; they develop in rhizomatic formations. Though they do not ignore the element of time, they often uncover the past in fragmentary form. In contrast to cartographers and storytellers, scriptors organize impressions about space and time into configurations of tension and interaction in order to produce concerted effects.

One of the scripts in “The Inhabited Wilderness,” refers to the hike that the author took in the Utah backcountry, but it cannot be read as either a guide to the terrain or a simple description of events. The trajectory is endowed with its own empiric logic: a walker decides to explore a little-known canyon to discover an Anasazi cliff dwelling and eventually returns to the trailhead. Yet the scripts that start from this referential basis are not only multiple but also widely divergent in empirical terms. Their function is not only to describe a particular exploration, but also to clarify and problematize certain issues about man’s relation to externality.

Scripts are not simple transcriptions or even constructions of events, since those definitions posit a distinction and hierarchy between a plane of experience and a plane of representation, as well as a constructing subject able to extract herself from a chain of events. For Don Scheese, the act of representation is an experience as absorbing as the canyon adventure. It is an experience of a different nature and in a different medium. Instead of having to tackle the difficulties of progressing in the wild, the scriptor contends with the necessities of expression and communication. So Scheese retrieves, selects and organizes details issuing from the hike, aggregating a more or less wide array of sometimes discrepant terms in order to provoke certain reactions in readers. Far from disentangling or

6 Patricia L. Price speaks of the importance of stories in allowing human beings to connect with places: “They would not exist *as places* were it not for the stories told about and through them. Stories constitute performative, mimetic acts that conjure places into being and sustain them as the incredibly complex, fraught constructs that they are” (xxi). While I agree with this statement, I want to distinguish the formal aspects of narration from those of scripting. The distinction allows a better understanding of the non-fictional literature of place.

finalizing them, “The Inhabited Wilderness” maintains these terms in a state of suspension that puts readers in a situation of energized indecisiveness.

In Scheese’s essay, scripts appear to be deployed ineffectually in textual space to evoke an experience that somehow remains inexpressible. This apparent failure demonstrates the difference between aesthetic scripts and pragmatic ones. The latter are oriented toward action, toward regulating or facilitating our interactions with others and the world around us. Pragmatic scripts attempt to eliminate information that would detract from their efficacy. The map of the Manti-La Sal National Forest to which Scheese refers in his essay is an example of this kind of script. It excludes all details that are not deemed pertinent for reading the topography of the land. Everything that is left out could be seen as subscripts, indeterminate sets of alternative or cognate utterances that fringe the selected script but that would detract from its applicability. In aesthetic texts, these subscripts are allowed to surface alongside the scripts, creating effects such as indeterminacy or ambiguity. Scheese permits this duality from the outset with the oxymoronic title suggesting two mutually exclusive types of space. Finally, pragmatic scripts differ from aesthetic ones in the way in which they configure space. To return to the example of maps, pragmatic scripts tend to focus exclusively on observable external features. By contrast, and this is particularly pertinent to the nonfictional literature of place, aesthetic scripts make connections between the external world and the human subject.

“The Inhabited Wilderness,” is compounded of four different scripts of unequal length relating to Scheese’s Hammond Canyon adventure. Although pertaining to a common subject, these scripts are fairly autonomous in orientation yet together they produce a combined effect. There is a first *topological* script, by far the longest and the most detailed, which describes the excursion from the trailhead into the canyon and back. There is a much shorter *epiphanic* script organized around the discovery of the Anasazi dwelling place as “inhabited wilderness.” A third *conceptual* script organizes a meditative sequence enouncing concepts supposed to elucidate that discovery. The brief final *lyrical* script is a sustained rhetorical flourish attempting to suggest the import of the previously analyzed discovery.

The first script describes the exploration proper. It is the closest to empirical reality and paradoxically, though it is placed under the aegis of reality and thus creates the expectation of factual discourse, it also suggests highly personal readings of the landscape. The hike’s factual development is the pretext for the construction of a very elaborate topological script in which the conceptual values brought into play bear only a glancing relation to the hiker’s

movements *in situ*. These values are superscripted upon the hiker's movements so that his successive positions suggest a semantic configuration of space—it is in this sense that scripts can be described as mental geography. The first visual marker concerns the elevated or depressed status of objects in space. The cliff dwelling that is the ostensible goal of the excursion is situated at a lower altitude than the trailhead where the hiker has to return to retrieve his vehicle. The bottom of the canyon lies below the two previous positions that seem to stand for places of human habitation (cliff dwelling and car), although because of the waterfall and the shaded area, the bottom of the canyon is described as “the perfect place to have lunch” (348), an ideal but temporary resting place. This static geography is set into motion, turned into a suggestive scenario, by the hiker's trip that takes him from the security of his vehicle, through the idyllic pause at the bottom of the canyon, to a site of perplexity engendered by the visit to the Anasazi dwelling, and back to the trailhead. The fact that the hiker confesses that: “I regretted that I had not brought my sleeping bag and more food, for I longed to spend further time exploring this canyon . . .” (351), suggests that he leaves the ancient ruin and returns home reluctantly, although we never know for sure which of the sites that mark his passage in the canyon have his preference or whether he is lured by the thought of other, unexplored places. This undecidability is reinforced by complementary details signaling that none of the highlighted places is considered as ideal: the trailhead from which he departs is threatened by thunderstorms, the shady canyon bottom has only a trickle of water, and the cliff dwelling is rather claustrophobic. The indeterminacy should not be seen as a flaw in the text but as a gap inviting the reader's participation.

The global impression of indeterminacy is reinforced by the alternation of bright and dark spots in the description:⁷ the somberness of the forested trail alternates with open vistas disclosing impressive figures such as “voodoos, pinnacles and buttresses of red sandstone” (348); graced with the bright tinkle of the waterfall, the shady spot on the canyon floor is also marked by the traces left by flash floods, and it contrasts with the rock formations “flar[ing] like matchsticks in the afternoon light” (348); the “cumulo-nimbi massing” (347) contrast with the “blue dome of the sky” (350). This disconcerting scrim of

7 This pattern of contrasts recalls Scheese's analysis of the Thomas Cole painting, *The Oxbow*, in his book, *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in American Literature*, as does the presence of the creator in the landscape he describes: “In nature but also dwarfed by nature, relatively inconspicuous, he appears to be conscious of his dual role as dweller in and creator of nature” (3). Art becomes a means of inhabiting nature, of connecting the human and the non-human; this is just one of the many possible interpretations of the essay's title.

flickering light and shadow creates an atmosphere of uncertainty that prepares readers for the “discovery” which is the theme of the second script.

Another striking aspect of the topological script concerns disparities in the quality of vision associated with the various positions in space. While some vantage points open narrow and restricted vistas, others offer wide-ranging panoramas. The Anasazi habitat is represented from a variety of angles: from the outside, “glassed” though binoculars, it appears as “something odd niched between a horizontal gap in the rocks,” or as “a dark slit in the wall,” or “a narrow cave.” The impression of cramped exiguousness is confirmed by the hiker’s impression inside the dwelling: the abandoned granaries are so dark and confined that the hiker quickly feels claustrophobic and “seeking for fresh air and light again, [he] crawled outside” (350). As opposed to the restricted perspective “through the small portholes that served as windows” (350) that the Anasazis are imagined to have used, the hiker enjoys a bird’s eye view of the canyon: “Beyond . . . Below . . . Across . . . Up Canyon . . .” (350). In the cumulative layering of that visual mini-script, we are invited to rediscover the canyon from the narrator’s panoptic eye and in the very place where the Anasazis were supposed to have been posted.

Imbricated in the play of contrasting perspectives is another opposition scripted onto the topography of the canyon: that between observed and imagined details. Juxtaposed to the precise observations and measurements of a scientific investigator, who examines “the five separate structures . . . in turn, slowly and methodically” (349), are the imagined scenes of a writer who conjures up visions of the “extended family” who once lived there, “huddl[ing] around a fire for warmth” (350) or “mak[ing] love and h[olding] ceremonies” (351). The cave dwellings appear as both archeological sites for investigation and, on the contrary, zones of mystery—“black holes of antiquity” (349)—that swallow up all claims to know them. The topographical script invites readers to organize spatial values and to respond to the challenge of being in several places and times at once. Both inside and outside spaces are amenable thanks to the scriptor’s introspective projection and detached observation. Scheese’s evocation of the canyon creates one of Alison Deming’s “mental habitats” (10) in which the empirically familiar terms of subject, object, and context are deactivated and rethought interactively in keeping with each other. The different points of the topographical script jointly and collectively create a multi-polar space that is the starting-point of the next script.

The second, epiphanic script is based on a series of contradictions that, in keeping with my unresisting approach, I will not attempt to disentangle. It is organized in two flights of personal introspection. The first response to the cliff

dwelling comes when the hiker attains a position within twenty feet of them: "It is hard to describe my feelings as I stepped on the ledge that gave me an eye-level view of the ruins . . ." (349). Instead of representing something new and unexpected that would correspond to the definition of a discovery, the speaker expounds in a very structured discourse his response to what he has seen. The script is very logically ordered, passing from a feeling of "Awe," to "Respect," to "a tinge of fear" (349), in response to the impression of a haunting presence. Paradoxically, the object of the discovery remains if not exactly absent at least stated in very general terms: "ruins," "structures," "realm of ghosts," "the absence of a human presence in a place where humans had once lived and thrived . . ." (349). The second phase of the epiphanic script begins after the full exploration of the ruins. Having inventoried the contents of the dwellings, the speaker exits in order to contemplate and record his findings from the all-embracing position outside and the comfort afforded by "the shade of the overhang" (351). Again, as in the previous passage, he focuses not so much on the place itself as on the nature of the epiphany that he experiences. He considers all the coincident factors attending his discovery—the solitude, stillness and remoteness of the site—that seem to converge on the realization that he feels connected to the former inhabitants of the cave. Finally, he hits upon the revelation highlighted in the essay's title; he has an intimation of "inhabited wilderness" (351). But what does the phrase mean? The canyon could not have been identified as a wilderness when it was inhabited by the Anasazis; it has become one because it has ceased to be occupied. Is it now a wilderness disturbed by the hiker's presence or a deserted site haunted by the vestigial traces of humanity?

The impression of having reached a culminating point in the text is mitigated by accessory considerations. The first concerns the hazy manner in which the previous inhabitants of the cliff dwellings are evoked. In spite of the fact that the hiker has visited similar archeological sites and been instructed about the early occupants of the canyons from those "institutional, impersonal tours" (347), his evocation of their daily life is extremely sketchy and commonplace—it is difficult to distinguish these early Amerindians "hoping and praying for no killing frost, adequate summer rains, and winter snowfalls" (351) from the average Midwestern farmer. The elaboration of the "discovery" concludes with a series of questions about the Anasazi that reveals how little the speaker knows about them (351-2). He leaves the site "with more questions than answers" (352), sure only of his urge for further exploration.

Several explanations could be produced at this point to account for the emphasis on his present-day discovery rather than archeological insights. We could dismiss the discovery script as solipsistic or as a reenactment of the

Eurocentric appropriation of American space. These reductive readings would be erroneous because they would privilege one or the other terms in the scripted relation established in space, across time, between the Anasazis and the hiker. The two occupants of the cliffs seem to be competing for pride of place but neither, if my characterization of scripts as tensional structures is valid, can be decisively chosen as preeminent. Although the hiker stresses his “special feeling of solitude” (351), it is obviously the Anasazis’ former occupation that endows the place with significance. The tension in the script between presence and absence gives the scene its particular pathetic and enigmatic aura. The “profound connection with the past” (351) felt by the narrator depends on the effacement of one or the other parties concerned: to imagine the Anasazis living their idyllic lives, one has to forget the hiker’s intrusion, but to affirm his recapturing of their universe one has to admit their extinction. An atmosphere of fluctuating uncertainty defines the epiphanic script. The hiker’s “profound connection with the past” is offered as a tentative, stopgap explanation that obviously fails to accomplish its function. It is superscripted by the more obscure and contradictory concept of “inhabited wilderness” which is the object of the next script.

The obvious, even glaring proof of the expressive flaw in the epiphanic script is suggested in the title’s contradictory terms. This contradiction is both the text’s focus and its blind spot. How can a place be classed as wilderness when it bears the signs of habitation and, correlatively, how can one inhabit a wilderness without automatically changing it into a humanized space? That contradiction is an enigma that appears conspicuously while remaining completely unexplained. In fact, the contradiction is not as symmetrical as implied: if a human can choose to inhabit a wilderness, a wilderness does not choose to be inhabited. This sounds trivial. And indeed it is trivial until we realize that because of the passive voice, it is not so much a question of the act of “inhabiting” as the state of being “inhabited.” No one in particular inhabits the wilderness yet it is said to be “inhabited.” Exactly by whom, the text refrains from disclosing. Is it by the Anasazis centuries ago? Is it by the ghosts of those former inhabitants? Is it by the wandering hiker who temporarily visits the place? Or is it by something else that the text is trying to decipher. The contradiction contained in the term “inhabited wilderness” is the driving force at the back of all the scripts contained in the text, but the deployment of scripts leads to no conclusive resolution. This inconclusiveness is a characteristic of the third “conceptual” script.

What is remarkable about this script is that it offers a string of pregnant concepts given one after another without any analysis of their connections. The

term “inhabited wilderness,” seamlessly leads to “rewilded landscape” (351)⁸ which in turn suggests the notion of “interrupted space” (352) that glancingly calls up the notion of the “sacred.”⁹ Rather than producing logical links that would weave those heterogeneous notions into a coherent discourse, the author admits that he had difficulty finding words to describe the import of the experience: “I groped for words adequate for the moment as I wrote in my journal” (352). Naturally this reference raises the question of the relation of the text we are reading to this journal. What has become of the missing text or pre-text? Is the published text supposed to contain the words that could not be found on location? Are the words in the quotations that follow “adequate for the moment” or are they the sign of a mind still groping? This avowal of the failure of language is perhaps the writer’s feint, aiming not to mislead us but to guide us where he wants us to go. The narrator’s earlier description of the clinking of shards of Anasazi pottery that “broke the silence” (350) offers a clue. This gesture foreshadows the narrator’s failed attempts at expression, which also replicates the “crude petroglyphs” that are characterized as the “doodling, as it were of these prehistoric inhabitants” (350). The fragments and the doodling are somehow, like the essay, efforts to link humanity to the environment they inhabit.

In his search for the adequate expression to capture the experience, the scriptor lists a series of concepts that seem not so much to account for anything as to create a sense of expressive incapacity. He ceases to assume responsibility for articulating his own impressions and resorts to outside authorities; he summons Cronon, McPherson and Eliade to testify in his place. A quotation within a quotation produces an effect of ever-receding distance, as Eliade’s text is cited from MacPherson’s *Sacred Land*. Then, in an ever more remote *mise en abyme*, Scheese mentions “a photograph of an Anasazi ruin in southeastern Utah” (352) that McPherson includes in his book with a caption from Eliade’s text. The hermeneutic circle is finally closed, but its center is empty or too full—there are no words for what has to be experienced by visual means, at the heart of experience.

The conceptual script turns out to not to explain but to underline the failure of explanation. Indeed, Cronon’s article about the Apostle Islands presents an innovative concept that seems to counter the topographical script in Scheese’s essay. Cronon critiques the official representation of wilderness “as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by

8 The term is derived from William Cronon’s essay, “The Riddle of the Apostle Islands.”

9 Both the term “interrupted space” and the suggestion of the sacred come from a passage that Scheese quotes from Mircea Eliade’s book, *The Sacred and the Profane*.

man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (Cronon 36).¹⁰ The separation of nature and culture in this legal definition of wilderness matches the trajectory of Scheese’s lonely hike into the canyon and harmonizes with his explication of the “rewilded landscape” as: “a place once settled by humans and then abandoned, reverting back to, and reclaimed by, nature” (351). By contrast, Cronon advocates a new “wilderness area” concept in which the traces of human habitation would still be visible: “I would argue for a few locations outside of the designated wilderness which, although still managed to protect wilderness values, could be modestly restored and actively interpreted so as to help visitors understand the historic landscapes of logging, quarrying, farming, and early tourism” (Cronon 42). In short Cronon lays the stress on the traces of settlement while Scheese, at least initially, seems to be looking for a place away from human society.

Is it a case of misquotation, of insufficient documentation, or of a deliberate attempt to subvert another person’s text? None of these interpretations quite fits, yet the pattern of apparent misappropriation continues. After “grop[ing] for words” (352), the author subsequently hits upon a passage in McPherson’s *Sacred Land* from which he extracts a reference to Eliade’s description of how the sacred occupies “interrupted space” (Macpherson 123; Scheese 352). In Eliade’s study, sacred space is indeed “interrupted,” in the sense of separate from “the mundane world of daily life” (Macpherson 123; Scheese 352), yet it always remains in close proximity to the quotidian: “For it is not a matter of geometrical space, but of an existential and sacred space that has an entirely different structure, that admits of an indefinite number of breaks, and hence is capable of an indefinite number of communications with the transcendent” (Eliade 57). As a matter of fact, it is the proximity with the sacred that gives coherence to the mundane. This is in direct contradiction with the definition that Scheese appears to favor in his sense of the sacred as emanating from the effacement of human presence. In his own account of his experience, awe and reverence are linked to solitude. This word, or its variant “alone,” is repeated four times in the paragraph relating his thoughts on leaving the cliff dwellings (351). What are we to make of the curious conjunction of the scriptor’s apparent abdication of authority and his misappropriation of quotes?

The apparent abandon of conceptual responsibility associated with the decontextualization of borrowed concepts converges on the realization of a certain

10 Cronon quotes this passage from the 1964 Wilderness Act and favors a presentation of landscape that would not “remove, erase, or otherwise hide historical evidence that people have altered a landscape and made it their home” (39).

form of eerie transcendence that does not include humans but arises out of the signs of their former presence. Scheese's discovery of the traces left by the vanished cliff dwellers is indispensable in his evocation of the special quality of the place. His wilderness experience is both solitary and peopled—"inhabited." He insists on mentioning that "there were no other footprints besides mine" (347), while admitting that "others had been here before me" (351). He concedes that he has experienced a similar feeling of solitude "numerous times before on wilderness trips" (351), but insists on a new element, "a profound connection with the past" (351). Words or concepts finally seem inadequate to account for the experience, and the narrator's feelings cannot be attached to any identifiable constituent in the scene. Scripting becomes a form of abstention, a deliberate reticence. This self-effacement allows the surrender to pure existence in space-time.

Scheese's sacred instant is a form of possession rather than an epiphany; it is the total absorption in and of the potentialities of the site in which he has immersed himself. The site itself is inhabited, haunted by his presence, but his personal physical existence as subject has become immaterial, for it has been absorbed in the landscape. Indeed, through his imaginative engagement with his surroundings, Scheese seems to achieve something comparable to the state of being that elsewhere he attributes to ancient cultures: "[B]efore the decline of 'primitive' cultures and the emergence of agricultural and then industrial societies, before the alienation of the human species from its wilderness condition, there was a time when people felt no need to retreat to a pastoral haven because where they lived was where they wanted to be—they were at home in nature and felt no separation from it" (Scheese 2002 37-38). This is another interpretation that can be given to the intriguing passive form of the verb "inhabit"—at the moment when the occupation of space is maximal, the occupier abandons the claim to being a causal agent. He both exists and disappears in the experience; maximal existence equates with maximal disappearance. Perhaps more than other forms of writing, the nonfictional literature of place seems to put into relief the interaction between self and non-self that is inherent in experience. In contrast to the novel, where place is often relegated to the background, or to the supporting role of giving definition to human characters, the kind of text we are looking at places the human and non-human at center stage and shows them in interaction. Topological scripts become scripts of self and vice versa.

The final script which I have identified as "lyrical" comes as a kind of anticlimax after the first three, for it moves to a degree of generality that seems to contradict the questing, questioning restlessness of the previous scripts. The conclusion rests on a very emphatic accumulation of parallel constructions, each offering a generalization ("Ruins fascinate us . . . Ruins haunt us . . . Ruins

remind us . . . Ruins mesmerize us . . . Ruins are . . .” (352). A curious sentiment of perplexity permeates the Romantic effusion that accompanies the topos of the ruin. Alongside the *memento mori* theme, the contemplation of ruins seems to elicit a curious impression of alacrity. “[T]heir enigmatic silence” (352) provokes the paradoxical conviction that they contain important teachings. An impression of beauty contrasts with a morbid reminder of bones. The crucial turning in this concluding script is the unexpected appearance of the inclusive “us” that for the first time associates readers with the speaker’s experience. Whatever lessons we may extract from the lyrical finale, it fails to capture the unique personal experience that the other scripts have tried to convey.

The notion of “script” used so far as a heuristic concept needs to be further investigated. “Scripts” are the various verbal patterns that reflect our interaction with the world and that pertain both to the non-human world and to our humanity, uniting both into an indissociable complex. Scripts are not distinct from experience; they are part and parcel of our interaction with the world. Scheese’s text produces a scenario of facts concerning the development of the hike: nevertheless, it is much more than the simple transcription of an experience.

Written expression as documentation or as note taking during and after the hike is integral to the initial experience, and this dimension of experience forms a part of many excursions. However, once the writing activity becomes the unique object of a person’s interest, it becomes a totally different kind of experience. Expression becomes an end in itself. The interaction that is at the heart of the writing experience is no longer with reality but with the medium in which writers choose to express themselves and the situation of communication that they anticipate for the finished product of their activity. Written or, for that matter, any other forms of expression are experiences in communication. These experiences are never *sui generis*, they habitually feed, like Scheese’s text, on previous experiences that are rethought and redesigned in order to further a specific communicative objective.

A few important observations are in order at this point that are of particular relevance to the kind of texts that are habitually classified as environmental writing, nature writing, or the literature of place. First, even if the written text has the status of an artifact, it is incomplete in itself. It cannot be comprehended without reference to previous experiences, and it is itself an authentic and complete experience that is not resolved in the examination of its written content. The written text is more than a representation producing an image, a reconstruction or a projection of an exterior reality. The referent cannot be

detached from either the context of reproduction, the activity of the reproducer, or the reception situation.

Viewing texts as montages of various scripts puts the emphasis on the synergy between past experience, the specificity of the artist's medium, and the anticipation of reception. The most obvious consequence of this new critical approach is that it ceases to assess or explicate from such exterior templates as subject matter, the author's personality, or generic distinctiveness. In its very title, "The Inhabited Wilderness" explicitly announces that it does not refer to the exploration of a specific canyon, or to South Western cliff dwelling or to the Anasazi culture but to some more complex relation that the text is going to investigate. Something strange and exceptional seems to occur after the visit of the cliff site when the speaker confesses: "with the ruins at hand and the incontrovertible proof of human existence and activity next to me, I experienced a profound connection with the past that I had not felt on previous wilderness sojourns. I had entered an inhabited wilderness . . ." (351). The ambivalent impasse highlighted in the title appears to be the generating center of Scheese's essay. Readers are encouraged to follow its irradiation and circulation throughout the text's multiple scripts.

While this text is a classic exemplar of the literature of place, it would be difficult, except by reference to very superficial criteria like "region," "nature," "exploration" or "discovery," to pinpoint the generic features that establish such a classification. Although the essay evokes a specific site in the American South West, it is far from being limited to landscape description. Nevertheless, this particular text offers a sampling of the various types of discourse that can be found in contemporary literature of the environment. Description, meditation, lyricism or exhortation interweave in one place-oriented text. Far from being diversions or interpolations, these different threads contribute to the definition of an absent but problematic center.

What distinguishes the literature of place from the scripts we encounter in daily life is that in certain circumstances, not necessarily but frequently associated with experiences in natural environments, individuals find themselves momentarily or for an extended period of time, deprived of available pre-defined scripts. They are left without the possibility of determining how they are going to negotiate the challenge of the present moment, and even more crucially, how they are going to be affected by the exterior circumstances that they cannot assign to any recognizable script. They seem to be cast adrift in space. The world seems at the same time too large and too intangible to embrace. These moments of disorientation, when presence and absence are felt simultaneously,

like Scheese's experience at the cliff dwelling, lie at the core of wilderness-centered writing. They are frequently experienced in encounters with animals, with extreme or exceptional environmental conditions, or as in Scheese's text, with the vestiges of past cultures, although it would be a mistake to tie them down to any specific places or occurrences.

The experiencing subject is either forced to improvise or to rely on familiar conceptual frames such as anthropocentric projections or canonic scripts borrowed from science, anthropology or history. These discourses serve as stopgaps, makeshift expedients. Although this does not disqualify them, they are bound to fall short of expressing the fullness of the experience. The challenge of the unknown, the unpredictable or the overwhelming cannot be met or "scripted," that is, completely translated into scripts. This is in part the situation in which the speaker in Scheese's essay finds himself when he announces "something about [his] trip . . . allowed [him] to think of it as a 'discovery'" (351). The vague use of "something," the word "allow" and the quotation marks used to mark the inappropriateness of the word "discovery" indicate that because of the ineffability of his experience, he authorizes himself to use an approximation, that its real significance is unnamable. And, as if to prove that point, he immediately embarks on a series of conceptual conjectures, which in their very accumulation prove that they can, at best, be considered as makeshift equivalents. In order to confront the unknown/unknowable, what Adorno calls the "non-identical" (95)—that which cannot be matched with anything else—writers naturally resort to all sorts of discursive justifications. The first reaction is to evoke esoteric identifications such as Nature, Wildness, Mystery, Transcendence, Exteriority, or Alterity to evoke extreme but contrasted emotional responses such as awe, terror, panic or ecstasy, and to write a justification or scenario for their existence.

Discourse can render acceptable the scandal of the coexistence of the known and the unknowable that is part and parcel of human subjectivity. In the literature of place, scripts are responses to the inexpressibility of what is exterior to humanity; they not only attempt to give it expression but also to attenuate the impossibility of attaining adequate expression. More specifically than other forms of writing, the literature of place has the paradoxical aim of confronting the unknowable with the aim of giving it plausible expression, a dilemma that Adorno expresses with particular force: "What in artworks is structured, gapless, resting in itself, is an after-image of the silence that is the single medium through which nature speaks" (Adorno 96). This analysis of Scheese's essay has tried to show that what Adorno envisages as a silence that demands expression is the generating center of the text and the source of its

aesthetic dimension. The essay's multiple scripts draw attention to an aporia that might be viewed as a block, interruption or failure in expression, but which is, on the contrary, a source of generative power. "The Inhabited Wilderness" proceeds to develop from its very cryptic title a series of complementary and partially overlapping scripts that all approach, although never quite reveal, a buried, glimpsed, or unknown insight. The scripts are like the layers of an onion, protecting an unattainable, lost, irrecoverable center. This hypothetical center reflects the intolerable pressure of all the utterances that could have been produced and that the text has displaced by its univocal and exclusive existence. It is the subliminal dream of total expression or ideal expressiveness that the text misses in trying to reach.

The real nature of aesthetic texts is conflictual: they stage a struggle for expression and the combat is all the more poignant as they must, as in Scheese's text, present an appearance of composure. Again, this seems to correspond to Adorno's conception of the artwork: "The aim of artworks is the determination of the indeterminate" (Adorno 165). The core of indeterminacy at the center of aesthetic texts, aggravating as it feels for both writer and reader, becomes all the more tantalizing as, exceptionally, in the context of the literature of place, it seems to be accessible, almost tangible. Scripts confront the evidence of inexpressibility—of the irreconcilable gap between experience and discourse—while assigning themselves the task of giving it expression. In "The Inhabited Wilderness," "something" literally dawns upon the hiker in the form of a "discovery" (351). Whatever stands revealed, "discovered," seems to be infused with pertinence, yet the speaker abandons the quest for optimal formulation at the end of the essay.

The new direction that Scheese's essay takes in the final paragraph is scarcely predictable if we consider that the preceding scripts were devoted to unraveling the repercussions of a hike in the wilderness. In concluding, the narrator directly addresses readers in a manner that, since Thoreau, is not infrequent in the literature of place. He exhorts us to adopt a certain attitude, to envisage a certain course of action. This raises the question of the performativity of texts. Does the literature of place have the capacity to provoke us or incite us to act in connection with our environment? Can texts of this kind have an ecological impact? This is the question that ecocriticism has been debating from its origin. The notion of scripts can point a way out of the deadlock that opposes essentialist and constructivist critics. If it is hard to accept that nature is a socio-cultural construction that excludes the non-human, it is also difficult to conceive of an essential nature that is separate from humanity. Scripts are an integral part of social experience, and they are also our way to insert ourselves

in the world. To script the wilderness is a way to inhabit it, to mark it with a human trace while still conserving it. Scripts occupy a middle ground between reality and imagination, in other words, the terrain of the aesthetic. Aesthetic texts do not clarify or formalize issues; they do not fix agendas; they do not constitute political action. Other texts perform those roles more efficiently. The role of aesthetic texts is to mirror the complexity of the issues involved in the ecological debate or, more generally, in our insertion in the world; they are able to show the reversibility of arguments and the relativity of positions. Scripting wilderness in an aesthetic text is a way to evade the established discourses that fix it in ideology. By loosening up the terms surrounding the subject, by creating gaps and zones of indeterminacy, scripts allow us to begin to imagine more responsible forms of connection with place. Scheese's essay confronts readers not with a brief or a message, but with *an open*, multi-entry mental itinerary that we are free to explore or to ignore. It raises questions about humanity's relation to the land, questions addressed both to the Ancient Ones and to the present.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. New York, London: Continuum, 1997.
- Cronon, William. "The Riddle of the Apostle Islands." *Orion* (May/June 2002): 36-42.
- Deming, Alison Hawthorne. *The Edges of the Civilized World, A Journey in Nature and Culture*. New York: Picador, 1998.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane, The Nature of Religion*. Trans. W. Trask. London: Harcourt Books, 1959.
- Lyon, Thomas J. *This Incomparable Land: A Guide To American Nature Writing*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.
- McPherson, Robert S. *Sacred Land, Sacred View. Navajo Perceptions of the Four Corners Region*. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1992.
- Price, Patricia L. *Dry Place: Landscapes of Belonging and Exclusion*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2004.
- Scheese, Don. "The Inhabited Wilderness." *ISLE* 16.2 (2009): 347-352.
- . *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America*. 1996; London: Routledge, 2002.
- Slovic, Scott. *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*. Reno, NV: U of Nevada P, 2008.