W.H. Hudson and Bruce Chatwin in Patagonia: The Phantasy of Disappearance

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Abstract
Many writers have observed that Patagonia is a paradoxical space that has a fuelling effect on the human imagination. Jean Baudrillard writes of it as a "phantasy of disappearance" and links this observation to a general statement about travel, namely that it serves the purpose of a gentle deterritorialization. In *Idle Days in Patagonia* the ornithologist and writer W.H. Hudson observes that the Patagonian landscape lets him transcend his usual mindset of requiring an excuse for being inactive. Eighty-four years later, Bruce Chatwin finds Patagonia to be the ideal stage to enact his obsessively flighty engagement with landscape and people in *In Patagonia*. What Hudson's and Chatwin's texts have in common is that they play with the idea of idleness and absence: influenced by the empty landscape, both texts enact the connection between empty space and idleness and textual fragmentation.

Key-words: Bruce Chatwin, W.H. Hudson, idleness, Patagonia, travel writing.

1. Context: *Idle Days in Patagonia* (1893) and *In Patagonia* (1977)

Latin America has played a rather marginal role in British travel writing, one of the main reasons for this being that "it is not an area where the English have played any great historical role" (Young 1995: 165). Yet Patagonia has fascinated people, especially English writers, for many years. In *Patagonia Revisited* (1985) Paul Theroux and Bruce Chatwin establish connections between Patagonia and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), Lady Florence Douglas Dixie's *Across Patagonia* (1880) and Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the* Beagle (1839). W.H. Hudson is also among the writers mentioned, and it is the parallels between his and Chatwin's accounts of Patagonia that this article examines.

Hudson, who was born in Argentina in 1841[1] but immigrated to England in 1874[2], wrote *Idle Days in Patagonia* in the mid-1880s when he and his wife were living on the edge of poverty[3]. What he ended up writing was a "series of brilliant and suggestive sketches" as the *Saturday Review* claimed (1893: 361), which exhibited his expertise on South America, its birds, and culture[4].

The book is characterized by a sketchy style; it is neither a clearly fictional nor factual account but a generic borderland. Despite Hudson's reluctance to be considered a novelist, the reader plunges right into an adventure tale at the beginning: Hudson and his crew are going to the Rio Negro by steamer; the ship's engine is "throbbing like an overtasked human heart" (Hudson 1893: 1), there is an atmosphere of imminent danger. The opening resembles passages in Melville's *Moby Dick* and Ruth Tomalin compares it to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* "with a storm at sea, a ship running aground, a voice crying 'We are lost'" and says that "[the] blend of travel, adventure and evolutionary debate had a strong appeal for the late Victorians" (Tomalin 1982: 137). One learns that Hudson is driven to Patagonia by "the passion of the ornithologist" (Hudson 1893: 5) who is thrilled to drink "of the cup of wild nature" (p. 8). After a while, he travels barefoot because his riding boots get too heavy and reacts enthusiastically when seeing Dendrocolaptine birds ("busy little architects") building huge nests (p. 10). The first chapter is narrated as a combination of an adventure novel and an account of exploration (all the birds' names are given in Latin) progressing linearly toward a specific destination.

[1] He writes about his childhood in *Far Away and Long Ago* (1918).

[2] Peñaloza, therefore, claims that the sense of "Britishness" of his writing can be questioned (Peñaloza 2008: 155); yet I think it is more relevant that Hudson wrote the book after having lived in England for almost 20 years. It thus combines his memory of the time in Argentina with the perspective gained living in England.

[3] For a detailed analysis of the connection between idleness/*otium* and writing in Hudson's travel book see Liedke (2016).

[4] He had already written ornithological work for the Royal Zoological Society before the 1870s. Yet "[l]ittle was known about the bird life of Argentina when Hudson, in his mid-twenties, was commissioned by the Smithsonian Institution of Washington D. C. to collect bird skins for scientific purposes" (Shrubsall, Coustillas 1985: 2). A report of the trip was also published in essay form ("On the Birds of the Rio Negro of Patagonia") in March 1872 in London (cf. Moss 2008: 162).

Bruce Chatwin's motivation to write *In Patagonia* eighty-four years after Hudson was both frustration with his job at Sotheby's and a personal quest for a family heirloom. He wanted to "'see' the people and […] understand their actual ways of life" and not present a "romanticised picture of cultural difference" (Pordzik 2003: 374). At the beginning of *In Patagonia*, Chatwin renders an evocative scene in which his grandmother's cousin, the sailor Charley Milward, is shipwrecked at the entrance to the Strait of Magellan and discovers a mysterious 'brontosaurus' (in fact a Giant Sloth) poking out of the ice. Chatwin intersperses the story with reminiscences of his grandmother's house and the emigration plans the Cold War inspired in him as a boy. Such a beginning corresponds with Hans Magnus Enzensberger's claim that *In Patagonia* "has been called a documentary and a travelogue, but neither of these odious terms will fit" (Enzensberger 1989: 657). Moss attributes the success of Chatwin's book to his conjuring up of "bizarre legends" (Moss 2008: 257) – of Patagonian princes with French descent, Butch Cassidy, and Welsh émigrés, for instance – playing with his own loneliness and the loneliness of the empty Patagonian space. The travelogue reflects "a particular kind of self-imposed exile" (Taylor 1999: 196), yet he populates it "with vignettes, anecdotes and tall tales" (Moss 2008: 259). Most importantly, Chatwin is almost always the detached re-teller, he meets many people whose stories he is not part of. His writing reminds one of Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*: it has a rushed quality and its narrator appears a nonchalant idler[5]. This reinforces the myth that Chatwin decided to go to Patagonia spontaneously, after having talked to the architect and designer Eileen Grey, who encouraged him to go there in her stead (Chatwin 1996: 14).

2. Patagonia as paradoxical space

The connection between travel writing and the construction of imaginative spaces has been established in studies on travel literature[6]. I wish to focus on Hudson's and Chatwin's writing about

[5] See Sterne (2008).

[6] See, for instance, Slater (2015), Chard (1999), and – with reference to Joseph Conrad – Schwarz (1992).

Patagonia because they present a particularly interesting connection between empty space/idleness and textual fragmentation, as I shall demonstrate. I will use Jean Baudrillard's essay "L'Exotisme Radical", in which he establishes the idea of Patagonia as a fantastic space, as the starting point for my analysis. While in Hudson's case the Patagonian space teaches him to gaze into the sky 'as if he were not there,' Chatwin plays with it to express his idea of nomadism – something he is obsessed with (Schramer 1999). While the two act out different facets of the concept of idleness, both their accounts present phantasies of having disappeared, a notion I am taking up from Baudrillard.

Many travel writers have described Patagonia as a paradoxical space that has a fuelling effect on the human imagination: it is "faraway, without form and void" (Moss 2008: 283). While the "barren plains, the desert, the Cordillera, all seem to convey the masculine metaphors of power" (Peñaloza 2008: 160), Peñaloza rightly observes that, instead, many travellers have found themselves disempowered by the surrounding vastness that had the power to wipe their thoughts out[7] – an idea that Peñaloza links to the sublime[8].

Baudrillard writes of Patagonia as "[le] [f]antasme de disparition. Celle des Indiens, la tienne, celle de toute culture, celle de tout paysage, dans l'indistinction des brumes et des glaces" (Baudrillard 1990: 154). While similar phenomena may occur in Europe, Patagonia represents "la disparition visible" (p. 154), a notion which entails the following:

> Ce qu'on cherche dans le voyage n'est ni la découverte ni l'échange, mais une déterritorialisation douce, une prise en charge par le voyage lui-même, donc par l'absence. Dans les vecteurs métalliques qui transcendent les méridiens, les océans, les pôles, l'absence prend une qualité charnelle. (p. 155)

Patagonia represents visible absence, a space that is not even a space and which can enable the traveller to enjoy the phantasy of having disappeared too. It is a playground for the imagination. Baudrillard

[7] See Dixie (1880) and Morgan (1907).
[8] For a comprehensive discussion of the concept see, for instance, Ferguson (1992).

elaborates on this idea and continues his assessment of Patagonia with the abstract implications of travel:

> Voyager était le moyen d'être ailleurs, ou de n'être nulle part. Aujourd'hui c'est le seul moyen d'éprouver *la sensation* d'être quelque part. Chez moi, environné de toutes les informations, de tous les écrans, je ne suis plus nulle part, je suis partout dans le monde à la fois […] Atterrir dans une ville nouvelle, dans une langue étrangère, c'est me retrouver soudain ici et nulle part ailleurs. *Le corps retrouve son regard*. Délivré des images, *il retrouve l'imagination*. (p. 156, emphases added)

The idea uttered here is that travel no longer has the mere function of uprooting the individual, of destabilizing her position (even if that destabilization was desired); on the contrary, it can root her in a 'somewhere'. This rooting is of a physical nature and characterized by a sensual perception of *being* in a particular place. One begins to 'look' with one's body, which in turn incites the entire imaginative faculty. When the traveller, thus freed, is confronted with the Patagonian landscape in a process of freeing – rooting – freeing, the intensity of the rediscovery of the imagination is even more enhanced. Tying these observations back to travel in the nineteenth century, one is struck by a similar link between visiting Patagonia and the impact of this visit on the individual's emotions in Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*:

> [T]he plains of Patagonia [...] can be described only by negative characters; without habitations, without water, without trees, without mountains [...] Why, then, and the case is not peculiar to myself, have these arid wastes taken so firm possession of my memory? […] I can scarcely analyze these *feelings*: but it must be partly owing to the free scope given to the *imagination*. (Darwin 1909: 530, emphases added)

It is noteworthy that, as Richter (2009) has discussed, while Darwin mainly uses the description of the primitive "Fuegians" to assert his superiority, especially as a scientist, this passage narrates his bafflement at being confronted with a landscape that does not appeal to reason but to the traveller's senses. This is why the experience of Patagonia can be so fundamental: similarly to Baudrillard, Darwin describes the impact of the landscape as evoking an indescribable *feeling* as opposed to, for instance, linking it to findings of

geographical and geological interest. The plains in Patagonia seem to have no boundaries and it is "a paradoxical zone whose lack of limits confounds a Reason dependent upon limits and scales" (Nouzeilles 1999: 35). The vastness of the landscape leaves no room for science.

Hudson's and Chatwin's travel texts are realizations of this sensual experience of Patagonia that Baudrillard and Darwin are describing: in *Idle Days in Patagonia*, Hudson's self-inflicted isolation (where he is unwilling to banter with the locals) lets him appropriate the foreign and alien space and turn it into an emotional refuge which facilitates his newly acquired habit of indolence. For Chatwin, Patagonia is also a self-imposed exile "from a country that didn't exist" (Shakespeare 2006: xii). He is convinced of a "metaphysics of walking", that is the idea that "any destination is unattainable and that travel consists of nomadic and never-ending wandering" (Marfè 2011: 446). Yet he rarely talks about the walking experience itself; one exception is his reference to his own notebook where he describes how the relentless wind would drown out an engine's noise (Chatwin 1979: 74). Fragment 66 stands out in this regard; in one passage Chatwin renders the occurrence of a symbiosis between himself and Patagonian nature:

> The track showed up again, yawning a straight corridor through the dark wood. I followed the fresh spoor of a guanaco. [...] And then the trees cleared and the river wound sluggishly through cattle pastures. Following their tracks I must have crossed the river twenty times. At one crossing I saw boot-marks and suddenly felt light and happy, thinking I would now reach the road or a peon's hut, and then I lost them and the river sluiced down a schist-sided gorge. (p. 133)

For a moment, he is the experiencing and feeling "I" rather than merely the narrating "I": the river guides his way, he is in silent communication with a traveller who left behind boot-marks. For Chatwin, it is "the act of wandering as a movement that binds together space and imagination" (Marfè 2011: 451), a notion which prioritizes narrative/narrated space over narrative/narrated time in poetic discourse. Apart from a few exceptions, such as the ones presented above, his willingness to submit to the rules of this exile, as if he were not there, merely a passive eavesdropper, and be drowned out by the noise, prevails in his text.

3. Geographical and stylistic borderlands

Baudrillard's phantasy of disappearance also manifests itself in the sense that there are many things Hudson and Chatwin choose not to do, either physically or stylistically. The unreserved zest with which Hudson comes to Patagonia disappears after the first chapter and his energetic outbursts are transformed into a different shape registered on a fictional level. When he injures his knee, the wound enables him to take on a new persona, that of the lingerer – a liminal being somewhere between physical passivity and mental activity. The first couple of paragraphs of the second chapter, entitled "How I became an Idler", form an achronological digression and relate the thoughts he had after the accident before describing the event itself. In a humorous fashion, Hudson explains that "these desultory chapters" are "a record of what I did not do" (Hudson 1893: 18). He compares the problems he was thinking about to flies but calls them "these fascinating elusive insects of the brain" (p. 19). This formulation is an example of Hudson's peculiar fashion of conflating human and amorphous attributes, fusing himself and the birds, for example, which become "winged wanderers" and "passengers" (p. 5). In the initial stages of his enforced idleness, his mood is one of perceptible resignation and the narration is increasingly nonlinear. He states that he "caught nothing, and found out nothing; nevertheless, these days of enforced idleness were not unhappy" (p. 20). He then embraces the idea of being an idler and observes

> that when no longer any excuse for inaction existed use had bred a habit in me – the habit of indolence, which was quite common among the people of Patagonia […]; and this habit and temper of mind I retained […] during the whole period of my stay. (p. 20)

In the light of discussions about the necessary justification of idleness and idle travelling within Victorian discourse[9], it is striking that it is the Patagonian landscape that lets Hudson transcend his usual internalized convictions of needing an excuse for being inactive.

In contrast, being inactive is something Chatwin shies away from. Yet he plays with the idea of pleasant idleness in his text,

[9] See Korte (2014).

which expresses detachment both at its core and on a stylistic level. Taylor aptly speaks of the "Chatwinian convention […] to elide particularity" (Taylor 1999: 202) but while he links this to Chatwin's agenda of nomadism and calls his interest in exiles largely intellectual, I argue that he has a private, whimsical agenda. Of course, he wants to turn the nomadic experience into text; yet he also wants to turn the particular Patagonian (idle) *void* of a landscape into text. This void creeps through the cracks in between the 97 chapters that constitute his travelogue. In his attempt to create a unique, first-hand account that mirrors "'raw' or 'lived' experience" (Pordzik 2003: 377) he creates fragmented records that can only reflect the impossibility of achieving coherence and that only make sense within their own diegesis. I would refer to them as 'alter-experiential', that is, relating to the experience of others: almost every fragment introduces a new 'character', legend or historical fact and only occasionally does one learn that Chatwin walked to a place or took a bus. He elides particularity with regard to his own role and existence. Similarly to Hudson's experience, when Chatwin *does* leave the shadow of other people's tales it is because Patagonia forces him to, as in parts of chapters 41 and 53. In both cases, the experience of allowing himself to experience is rendered like an opening of the eyes that can at first be blinding: suddenly the trees he sees are "lilac, rose-pink and lime-green" and the "unnatural colours" give him a headache (Chatwin 1979: 79). Seeing a bus full of nuns on their way to a penguin colony on Cabo Vírgenes, he captures the hypnotic effect of this image by repeating the colours "Black and white" (p. 108). It is in these instances where one can finally see Patagonia creeping forth through Chatwin's eyes: when he is moved by the landscape to look himself.

In the same way that Patagonia is a geographical borderland, Hudson's and Chatwin's texts are stylistic 'borderlands'. A neither-here-nor-there state of narration (digressions, nonlinearity) is a characteristics of *Idle Days.* Scientifically well-founded observations on the connections between birds' songs and the colour of their feathers, for example, appear alongside the vivid story of Hudson's friendship with an old dog. The choice to switch between different types of information is typical for travel writing[10], yet in Hudson's

[10] See, for instance, Raban, who says that "travel writing is a notoriously raffish open house where very different genres are likely to end up in the same bed" (1987:

case it is particularly noteworthy: he plays with the idea of his text as a border zone that will never quite leave his readers at rest.

Hudson's encounters with people are rare; in the few instances that describe social interactions, he praises the inhabitants of Patagonia. In his view, they are in communication with nature and their minds are "not wholly dormant" (Hudson 1893: 40). He attributes the "peculiar state of mind" he is proud to be able to exercise in Patagonia "to a reversion to a primitive and savage mental condition, a state of intense watchfulness and alertness" (James 1893: 248). It seems that when Hudson refers to himself as a "lingerer" (Hudson 1893: 31) who is delightfully "[l]ying in the grass" (p. 33) or taking "solitary rambles" and drinking from the "sweet and bitter cup of wild Nature" (p. 34) he wishes to demonstrate that he can be like those Patagonians whose habit of indolence he internalizes. His self-stylization as an idler is necessary for him to affirm his new role. Hudson elaborates on his idea of the specific mindset that he cultivated in Patagonia towards the end of his book:

> [D]uring those solitary days it was a rare thing for any thought to cross my mind [...] In that novel state of mind […] *thought had become impossible*. Elsewhere I had always been able to think most freely on horseback […] but now, with a horse under me, I had become incapable of reflection: my mind had suddenly transformed itself from a thinking machine into a machine for some other unknown purpose. To think was like setting in motion a noisy engine in my brain; and there was something there which bade me be still […] My state was one of *suspense* and *watchfulness:* yet I had no expectation of meeting with an adventure, and felt as free from apprehension as I feel now [...] The change in me was just as great and wonderful as if I had changed my identity for that of another man or animal; […] the state seemed familiar rather than strange […] (pp. 215 f., emphases in original)

Here Hudson defines his changed attitude towards the process of thinking and his specific understanding of idleness. Surrounded by the Patagonian silence his 'brain machine' suddenly serves a purpose unknown to him and it is set into an idle mode – he breaks

253) and Korte, according to whom it is "hardly surprising […] that travel writing has been characterized as an essentially 'hybrid' or 'androgynous' literary form" (2000: 9).

with old habits. Judging from this passage, the main reason why he has such a negative view of thinking is that it usually brings about a state of apprehension; an idle state of mind thus provides solace. By emphasizing that he was walking and not using other means of transport and being primarily engaged in 'deep' rather than superficial looking, he distances himself from the Victorian tourist. Only occasionally does he still try to justify his behaviour with the human desire to escape from "conventional trammels" and act like "wild animals, unconfined monkeys, with nothing to restrain us in our gambols" (p. 143).

In *In Patagonia* Chatwin also plays with the fluidity of the genre he is writing in; he was accused by many of lying in his book to make the story more interesting. Yet Nicholas Shakespeare points out that there are, indeed, "few instances of mere invention" (2006: xxv). When he turns a Ukrainian nurse into a lover of Mandelstam instead of Agatha Christie, he romanticizes rather than lies about her (Chatwin 1979: 59). This is not so much a case of an unreliable narrator but of a "master fabulist" who uses everything and everyone as "artistic devices" and does "not subtract from the truth so much as add to it. He [tells] not a half-truth but a truth and a half" (Shakespeare 2006: xxv). Patagonia is peopled with fellow fabulists, such as the priest who cries: "'O Patagonia! [...] You do not yield your secrets to fools. [...] Not one palaeontologist has yet unearthed the bones of the unicorn!'" (Chatwin 1979: 71), before spouting biblical references.

Similarly to Hudson, Chatwin is adamant about performing his nomadic role[11]. This also leads Chatwin to proclaim dramatic statements such as: "I haven't got any special religion this morning. My God is the God of Walkers. If you walk hard enough, you probably don't need any other God" (Chatwin 1979: 35). In fact, his walking has nothing to do with religion: he prefers walking because "[o]ne's own legs are more reliable" (p. 82). As mentioned above, however, he does not deem it necessary to write about the actual act of walking except in a few instances.

Thus, Ezra Pound's argument that "Hudson is an excellent example of Coleridge's theorem 'the miracle that can be wrought'

[11] For another analysis of Chatwin's nomadism, see Boomers (2006); Pordzik (2003); for a general discussion of postmodern travel see Kaplan (1996) and Russell (2000).

simply by one man's feeling something more keenly, or knowing it more intimately than it has been, before, known" (Pound 1967: 13) also applies to Chatwin's text. Pound's oxymoronic formulations are especially fitting: Hudson's moments of idleness and Chatwin's fragments of portraits and performed nomadism are indeed, much like the re-appropriated Patagonian space they find themselves in, characterized by being held together simultaneously through 'feeling' and 'knowing'.

Hudson's and Chatwin's travel texts attest the transtemporal fascination emanating from Patagonia and capture its appeal to the senses rather than reason by linking it to the multi-faceted concept of idleness. They turn the vastness and silence of the Patagonian space into a textual space in an original way and thus serve as paradigmatic examples for the traveller's experience of an extreme space at the end of the world and for the manifold ways in which travellers can turn loneliness into playful documents. Patagonia, the fantastic space, is thus successfully transformed into a text: while the travel experience may be unsettling, both Hudson and Chatwin can root themselves in their writing about it.

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