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“I must fight, always, against forgetting”*: A journey through memory and grief in Helen Macdonald’s relational autobiography *H is for Hawk

Abstract. The article presents how Helen Macdonald, the author of *H is for Hawk*, undertakes the task of ordering ‘the archaeology of grief’ – uncovering strata of remembrance with past states of mind, forgotten events, emotions, and earlier perspectives. Because the book reveals the author’s strong sense of connection with nature, it is therefore classified under the heading ‘nature writing’ or ‘new nature writing’. This non-fiction autobiographical narrative is, however, primarily a personal journey where the narrator’s/author’s inner self is revealed through carefully orchestrated memories which form her as a protagonist. The narrative is a confession of how she struggled through the ordeal of mourning after her father’s death and how in order to cope with the trauma of loss she undertook the task of taming a hawk. The story shows how in the course of manning the hawk Helen begins to ‘forget’ or rather deny civilisation, social ties, her own professional duties, and how the obsession with bird taming takes her to the very edge of sanity. At the same time, however, it is the hawk that becomes a lifeline, a connection with the corporeal, the tangible, and the physical. Moreover, the narrator’s journey with the goshawk through English landscape becomes a catalyst for remembrance that belongs to public realm. And so, it evokes more lengthy reflections on environment, literary heritage, history, society, and relations between humans and nature.

Keywords: relational autobiography, mourning, nature writing, *H is for Hawk*, Helen Macdonald.

The memories are like heavy blocks of glass.

I can put them down in different places but they don’t make a story.

Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk*

In one of the first scenes of Helen Macdonald’s 2014 book *H is for Hawk*, Helen, the protagonist, travels to the Breckland region of Norfolk in East Anglia. There she spots a sparrowhawk. To preserve the memory of the sighting she takes a piece of reindeer moss, a “memento of the time” –

a botanical keepsake. As if shifting through the landscape required a material witness. Thus, memory is given a physical dimension; it becomes preserved in a tangible object, the recollection is embodied. The narrator calls this observation “candescent”, “irresistible”, and it takes her back to the time when she was little – a small watcher obsessed with raptors, rambling the countryside with her father in search of birds of prey (Macdonald, 9). Now, through the recreation of this past moment, the readers are allowed to enter the world of Helen, the adult. Unbound by spatial-temporal constraints, the narrator’s mind moves from physical location to another time, another consciousness, another way of seeing the world.

The above scene is suggestive of the extent to which Macdonald’s narrative relies on apparently random acts of remembering. The book’s generic affinity is quite elusive. On the one hand, it has added to the abundance of narratives which are presently labelled under the common term ‘nature writing’ or ‘new nature writing’. Even though many authors whose writing is thematically akin would rather discard this term (Macfarlane, 34). Macdonald’s account indeed demonstrates primarily her strong sense of connection with nature and landscape, in-depth environmental knowledge, experience in bird watching and concern for natural surroundings. The narrative is at the same time an autobiographical account of the author’s dealing with a personal loss and her own year-long, intimate travel inwards. “The writer of autobiography depends on access to memory to tell a retrospective narrative of the past and to situate the present within that experiential history. Memory is thus both source and authenticator of autobiographical acts” (Smith and Watson, 16). In its confessional form the narrative is intrinsically retrospective, and so its reliance on memory is unquestionable.

By setting Macdonald’s narrative within the framework of self-referential autobiography this article aims to discover how the author’s access to memory becomes an organizational tool. In reading the meanings of this intricate account, it further attempts to implement the concept of ‘relational autobiography’. Here, textualization of the author’s traumatic experience is realized by relating the self to the world of birds of prey. It is therefore through presenting the natural world of hawks, or rather one hawk in particular, that Macdonald participates in the process of literary self-creation.

Additionally, personal memory in *H is for Hawk* becomes a narrative strategy encouraging insights into literature, culture, history and society. To this aim it offers a literary academic reading of another author’s memoirs, namely T.H. White’s *The Goshawk*. This training account by another writer is yet one more act of ‘relating’ to another subject, which apparently diminishes the position of the solipsistic narrator.

Defining the genre – some problematics of autobiographical narratives

Linda Anderson, a literary critic and author in life writing, traces the origins of the term ‘autobiography’ to its first use by Robert Southey in 1809. She emphasizes, however, that other earlier uses of the notion are discussed by literary critics and points to the fact that its definition has al-

ways been a work in progress. In defining this self-narrative category, Anderson indicates its main distinguishing feature, namely the sameness of the author, protagonist and narrator. Additionally, autobiographical writing in its very act seeks organization and framing. It aims at ordering experience in the form of a narrative, offering “the possibility of alleviating the dangers and anxieties of fragmentation” (Anderson, 5). Furthermore, she demonstrates that the critical analyses of the genre have pinpointed “intention” as its other unique characteristic: the earnest intention to represent both the events and oneself truthfully. And it is this intention, she notices, that constitutes a connection between the figures of author, narrator and protagonist (Anderson, 3-7).

This intentional seeking of truth in the creative act of writing has invariably attracted critical interest. Many autobiographical theorists have investigated the tensions between non-fiction narratives, which attempt at documenting reality, and fictional acts of self-creation, which seem to subvert the former aim (Allister, 5-6). For in autobiography the quest for discovering objective truth is undermined by the authorial strategy of organizing, and consequently fictionalizing experience. The validity of self-referential writing was an important aspect by which the readers assessed the value of literature. For instance, in the nineteenth century any form of populism or commercialization at the expense of integrity would be unthinkable (Anderson, 8).

The currency of the above question persists in the twentieth century. In the 1970s, under the influence of Paul De Man, literary critics debate the generic affiliation of autobiography. One of the problems posed at the time is again the genuineness of life narratives. Can self writing be considered a non-fictional act? Or are all autobiographical texts in fact fictions? And consequently, is autobiography a separate genre at all? De Man concludes that it is “a figure of reading or understanding” of a text which inevitably camouflages the author’s own fictionalization (Anderson, 12-13). The complex problematics of the genre are also addressed by Roland Barthes. He further destabilizes it by questioning the unity of the self-narrating subject and by defying the text’s potential to reconstruct or restore the past coherently (Anderson, 70-74). However, even earlier the unity of the autobiographical subject had already been questioned by Virginia Woolf, who shifts the dominating central (masculine) “I”. In the 1970s and early 1980s other fissions within life writing emerge, prompting questions of ethnicity, sexuality, race and class (Anderson, 92-103): “autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition” (Anderson, 104).

The question of truth continues to remain an important constituent element of autobiographical criticism. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, influential critics in autobiography, conclude on the demarcation line between fiction and nonfiction in the following way: “A life narrative is not a novel, although calling life narrative ‘nonfiction’ ... confuses rather than resolves the issue” (Smith and Watson, 7). Yet it should be remembered that there are many features which differentiate life writing from a novel, and among the most distinguishable include the following. First, the author’s name merges with that of the narrator’s. Second, the narrator of self-referential mode must rely on his or her locality within the certain (real) time, space and culture they lived in or experienced (Smith and Watson, 8-10). Finally, rather than representing a fact or factual truth, life writing cre-

ates the truth of the narrative, one author's truth or, so the argument goes, "a shared [between narrator and reader] understanding of the meaning of a life" (Smith and Watson, 13).

The proliferation of self-referential writing has always called for making distinctions into types or modes of self-representation. In an attempt to address such abundance, Smith and Watson propose three categories: "life writing", "life narrative" and "autobiography". The first term is the broadest, and indicates any written form of explicit strategies of turning somebody's life into the subject, including biographies and historical novels. "Life narrative" is narrower in that it includes self-referential or self-reflecting techniques which evoke past events but endow them with present meanings, shaping present identity. Finally, "autobiography", which was earlier canonized as "master narrative" to represent universal truths about somebody's lifetime, was in due course subverted by postmodern and postcolonial critiques. It is now viewed as unsatisfactory and too inefficient to encompass the diverse life-narrating practices around the world (Smith and Watson, 3-4). True, the above remarks emphasize generic diversity. However, because it is a widely recognized fact that the types are mutually complementary and overlap in many respects, the following analysis of *H is for Hawk* will use the notions interchangeably.

Generic hybridity – between 'relational autobiography' and 'nature writing'

Mark Allister, in his book *Refiguring the Map of Sorrow: Nature Writing and Autobiography*, investigates how the genre of autobiography evolved in critical discourse to finally generate the so called "relational autobiography". Rooted in great founding texts such as Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (written at the end of the 4th century) or *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (published in 1782), autobiography was understood as an act of emerging identity, self-discovery and self-growth¹⁴. In his proposal of reading life narratives Allister indicates the expansion of the genre and its contemporary unquestionable status with literary critics. But, by his own admission, he does not wish to engage in the debate on whether autobiography constitutes a work of non-fiction or whether it is a form of fictitious construction. He chooses not to take sides in the controversy about the dissolving boundary between a real living author and the author created within the narrative (Allister, 21-27). Instead his focus remains on how the narrative subject has evolved to refer to the realm beyond the human self.

In the twentieth century the scope of reading autobiography was extended owing to feminist critique. As a result the process of self-identification and formulation of subject became more inclusive in that it assumed the existence of some other self (Allister, 14-16). Gender related criticism centred on the subject which was established in relation to some other presence, some other entity. This shifting of subject marked the emergence of 'relational identity'. The concept of 'relational-

¹⁴ The idea of individual growth emerged as a formal tool organizing autobiographical texts in the nineteenth century, but as early as in the founding autobiographical text St. Augustine's *Confessions* apparently insignificant moments become subsequent meaningful stages in personal development (Anderson, 19).

ity' emphasised the fact "that the boundaries of an 'I' are often shifting and flexible" (Smith and Watson, 64). The term was first proposed by Susan Stanford Friedman in 1985 to denote a certain type of self-representative mode in women's autobiographical writing. Characteristically, the shared identity with other women was contrasted with that of an autonomous individual (more typical for masculine writing).¹⁵ However, this narrower understanding of 'relational' writing was later disputed by Paul John Eakin¹⁶ and Nancy K. Miller on the grounds that formation of identity in childhood formative years included both autonomous and relational practices (Smith and Watson, 201-2). Consequently, the authors argue after Eakin, "because the assertion of autonomy is dependent on this dynamic recognition [of the intersubjectivity of identity], identity is necessarily relational" (Smith and Watson, 202). Therefore, any literary act of identity formation will be somehow relational. Finally, in the 1990s under Eakin's influence, the term "relational autobiography" gained in popularity and became pivotal in reading the life-writing genre (Allister, 15-17).

Following other readers of autobiography, Allister finds it too narrow to accommodate the multitude of memoirs, journals and diaries: "Traditional autobiographies depict through time and space a single self, undeniably the star of the show, around whom everything revolves. An artist asked to represent the subject of an autobiography would in most cases draw a portrait of the writer" (Allister, 19-20). In 'relational autobiography', on the other hand, in order to arrive at the state of "self-knowledge", the writer observes and resonates with the outer world and other people, usually family members.

Drawing from autobiographical theory, psychology and eco-criticism, Allister's inquiry seems much more selective. It concentrates on nature, that is the non-human other to which memoir writers relate in order to textualize their experience of mourning¹⁷. While a traditional autobiography narrates life events and covers a longer period of time, 'relational autobiography' concentrates on the personal trauma and on the act of grieving, the rite of passage he calls "the arc of mourning" (Allister, 2). It demonstrates how the moments of self realisation mark the drama of loss and how the literary act of writing becomes its testimony. Most importantly, emphasis is placed on the theme selected for the 'relational' other, namely the world of nature.

15 The polarisation towards 'relationality' versus individuality was further applied in differentiating native indigenous cultures (e.g. the native subjectivity of American Indians with the emphasis on kinship and community) from Western (European) autonomous subjectivity. Such binary oppositions, though, are held by some critics to be reductionist and simplistic. And while the 'relational' mode of reading is a useful analytical tool, it does not represent the diversity of any biological, ethnic or social subject. (Wong, 168-69)

16 As Smith and Watson (64) indicate, the notion of 'relationality', in a variety of forms, is proposed by the following critics of life writing: Nancy K. Miller ("Representing Others"), Paul John Eakin (*How Our Lives Become Stories*, 43-98), and G. Thomas Couser (*Recovering Bodies*).

17 In his critical analysis Allister selects five non-fiction narratives: Sue Hubbell's *A Country Year* (1986), Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge* (1991), Bill Barich's *Laughing in the Hills* (1981), William Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways* (1982), Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1979), and Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces* (1985). Whereas collectively the books reveal a number of themes, what they share is how the autobiographical act leads to the self-creation of the traumatized narrator and how it is realized through the introduction of nature themes.

Yet life narratives in which authors turn to nature have not so far received due attention within the sphere of literary criticism. One of the reasons behind this observation is that such texts have been largely typecast as thematic. Its 'relational' subject, nature, has pushed them outside the scope of autobiography into the category of 'nature writing' (Allister, 18). Another explanation, Allister continues, is in the cultural bias of literary academics, who are typically urban residents. Therefore, their interest lies primarily in textualizing the experience of culture and the human world. And this only augments the challenge of textualizing the "unfathomable" non-human sphere (27). Nature writers contest the dominant "relational view of humans" and traditional solipsistic human-centred autobiography, and write non-human others into the textual expression of their grieving experience (33).

While they write directly about nature (including humans), their self-creation becomes spiritual autobiography because only in that form are they able to transcend their loss. The tension of their narratives—and the alternation of voice—concerns the psychological swings between grieving and a hope that grieving is coming to an end. (Allister, 170)

Writing one's loss into a narrative by relating to nature effaces the author from the text. In this respect 'relational' life-nature writing poses an additional challenge for critical reading.

Obliterating personal memory, *unbecoming human*

In *H is for Hawk* the botanical Breckland reminder is accidentally the first thing the narrator looks at when she receives the call about her father's death. Previously a relaxed itinerant savouring the local landscape, she will later become a restless wanderer who roams the countryside in order to rediscover her shattered self. She will struggle to make sense of the world as she knows it but to no avail. The fragmentariness of remembrance, the accidentality of recollections, their unexpected and persistent reoccurrence are all elements she will have to learn to accept in the painful process of mourning. Then, shattered by her loss, she will set off on an inner journey in an effort to write or rewrite the self. The goshawk will become her companion, her breakout from reality, and for some time her only connection to the lost world.

The unexpected loss of her father prompts Helen into isolation and an obsessive pursuit of her childhood dream – birds of prey. Equipped with all the falconry know-how, and against the better judgement of friends, family and other experienced falconers, she purchases Mabel – a female hawk that she intends to tame, an aim difficult to attain even for professional hawk trainers. Early in the narrative the subject self is localized within the realm of feral raptors. First, the reader's attention is shifted to observe their brutal hunting ways. Then Macdonald presents the first step of taming the bird, called 'watching'. From this moment onwards Helen embarks on a psychological process in which she will purposefully forget her human world. In order to succeed at this mourning stage, falconers must discard their human ways and become invisible. It is a highly medita-

tive state in which the bird tamer concentrates on “not being there”. Because hawks are not social animals, they will not yield to constraint or punishment. So the bond between human and non-human is possible only through the positive lure of meat. But nothing seems possible at first as the bird is petrified by the fear of her human presence (Macdonald, 62-81). The narrator explains:

The space between the [bird’s] fear and the food is the vast, vast gulf, and you have to cross it together... Imagine: you’re in a darkened room. You are sitting with a hawk on your fist. She is as immobile, as tense and sprung as a catapult at full stretch. Underneath her huge thorny feet is a chunk of raw steak. You’re trying to get her to look at the steak, not at you, because you know - though you haven’t looked - that her eyes are fixed in horror at your profile. All you can hear is the wet click, *click*, click of her blinking. (Macdonald, 67)

The taming process involves, if only temporarily, renouncing the human way of seeing. It makes one freeze in time and realize the acuteness of the bird’s sense of sight. And if the eventual inter-species concord is to be possible, the falconer needs “very urgently not to be there”. What must come first, though, is comprehension of the fear:

The goshawk is staring at me in mortal terror, and I can feel the silences between both our heartbeats coincide... It feels like I’m holding a flaming torch. I can feel the heat of her fear on my face. She stares. She stares and stares... What I am doing is concentrating very hard on the process of *not being there*. (Macdonald, 66-67)

Macdonald’s detailed descriptions of ‘watching’ clearly demonstrate how conscious she is of the other, the non-human. The success of shifting her perspective, of going beyond the anthropocentric relies here as much on her expertise as on her (and the reader’s) imagination. It also demonstrates one feature of ‘relational’ life writing. The author effaces herself from the narrative. She is “not there” because she is taming the young raptor. Her absence, nonetheless, indicates the denial of her trauma. Being there would necessitate becoming a subject of the story and it would entail the admission of emotional suffering. The early stage of ‘watching’, watching the bird and watching with the bird, is primarily her implementation of falconry know-how. But it is additionally an organizational phase within the narrative which correlates the process of hawk manning with the process of grieving. The early stages of bereavement obliterate the protagonist from the central position within the narrative. ‘Watching’ diverts the reader’s attention from the solipsistic subject towards the world of the non-human. The readers, however, interpret this shift within the context of mourning, making sense of the way the narrative is structured.

In the course of the account, the narrator, immersed in bird taming, gradually dismisses her everyday responsibilities: academic duties as a fellow scholar at Cambridge College, prosaic household chores and any form of social interaction. Gradually Helen disappears from the world that she was part of until the traditionally acceptable axis which organizes common life dissolves.

Consequently, she will eventually suffer the professional and material losses of her career and house. Alone, with her phone unplugged, the house spattered with bird droppings and shreds of raw meat, she becomes “a hermit with a hawk in a darkened room” and “forgets how to speak” (Macdonald, 69-84). She engages in a journey of obliterating the outside world. Human memory becomes marginal, secondary. At the same time as protagonist Macdonald consistently marginalizes her narrative self. She reveals her subject position only as an observer. The reader is invited to follow into this human and non-human world but it is the bird that is centralized. Apparently, Mabel’s feral appetite takes precedence over Helen’s feeling of loss. Human “forgetting how to speak” is suggestive of how the author textualizes her inability to express sorrow.

The civil, domestic and cultural have slipped into oblivion, to be now replaced by the feral, wild and untamed. These indicate the state of perpetual inner anguish. The narrator strives at developing “the sixth sense”, at acquiring “hawk’s apprehension”. Her perception sharpens but she becomes easily alert or instantly agitated. The bonding process for both parties seems conversely related: “As the hawk became tamer I was growing wilder” (Macdonald, 108). In her present “visceral, bloody life with Mabel” she watches the bird kill and feed on its prey. This is an attempt at eradicating the human way of perceiving reality, including the residual human suffering: “I stayed out with Mabel, found it harder and harder to return, because out with the hawk I didn’t need a home. Out there I forgot I was human at all” (Macdonald, 186). Hunting with the hawk becomes a coping strategy of the bereaved. Human memory of loss is replaced with “hawkish things”, which now make absolute sense. It allows temporal reference points, such as the past or the future, to dissolve into the instantaneousness of the moment and be replaced with the hawkish reference points. The protagonist shares with other writers this need to dramatize the process of grieving. Likewise, “they seek experience that will divert them, or teach them, and then in the autobiographical act they discover and create a construction of that experience that is ultimately therapeutic” (Allister, 141). Of special significance are realistic accounts of hunting, which show Helen’s protectiveness towards the bird:

She is a child. A baby hawk that’s just worked out who she is. What she’s for. I reach down and start, unconsciously as a mother helping a child with her dinner, plucking the pheasant with the hawk. For the hawk. And when she starts eating, I sit on my heels and watch, watch her eat. (Macdonald, 184)

The above illustration figuratively obscures the perimeters of human and savage. Smith and Watson observe that when the self-creation of a subject evolves in relation to another, it is typically the subject that differs. So, the narrative self is formulated through disparity. But conversely, on other occasions self-identification can draw from similarities. It is the progression of the “constant placement and displacement of ‘who’ we are” (33). In her description of hunting Helen feels “the human below” the hunting bird. She reports the strangeness of this experience, the “splitting” as if time was “stretching” and “slowing”. In the narrative such are the moments of complete derealisation, of annihilating one’s place in material reality. In *H is for Hawk* the narrator’s identification

with the hawkish perspective alternates with her human perception. Both ways of self-positioning are ever-changing and demonstrate the narrator struggling towards self-awareness.

In such instances, Helen is slowly beginning to recognize that her mind has been slipping away. Such as the moment when she is invited to a summer lunch party at the Master of the college's house. Now, the centre of everyone's attention, surrounded by the elegant upper class intellectuals her late father used to admire so much, she experiences a moment of derealisation: "*I am the Fool, I think dully. I used to be a Research Fellow, a proper academic. Now I am in motley. I am not Helen any more. I am the hawk woman*" (Macdonald, 129). But while she loses the sense of reality or belonging, in the meantime the corporeality of the bird seems unaffected:

The hawk pulls on the rabbit leg. Wasps circle her like electrons. They land on her feet, on her nose, seeking shreds of rabbit flesh to take back to their paper nest in some nearby Cambridge loft... This summer lunch feels deeply unreal. Shadows of damask and silver, a photogravure in an album, something from Agatha Christie, from Evelyn Waugh, from another time. But the wasps are real. They are here, and they are present. So is the hawk, the sun at their centre. (Macdonald, 129-130)

The above passage illustrates the apparently contradictory paths the narrator takes in writing of her mourning. On the one hand, by taking refuge from the civilised world she comes to rely on hawkish ways of seeing. On the other, as narrator, she invites the reader to notice how impossible this refuge is in the long run. Living a feral life and attempting to empty one's mind from human perception is visibly at odds with the literary act, which involves logic, organization, finding patterns of cause and effect.

Meredith Skura, an author in psychoanalysis, explains that the grieving process involves moments of insights and self-awareness which occur throughout the mourner's process towards healing. Random or infrequent, they gradually accumulate to allow self-realisation. Finally the truth, the sense or the explanation emerges (Allister, 56). Apart from hunting descriptions in *H is for hawk* such moments of insight are marked by random acts of childhood remembrance. Consistently they relate to the non-human world and include, for example, the memories of numerous hunting trips. These recollections often evoke "killing things", "making death". Now the narrator's adult consciousness dissects her own complex perspective on hunting: "the vocabulary I'd learned from the books distanced me from death. Trained hawks didn't catch animals. They caught *quarry*. They caught *game*. What an extraordinary term. *Game*." (Macdonald, 160). Informed by years of falconry, the author reflects on how the language obliterates certain awareness, human sensitivity.

Paradoxically, while it is hunting that makes the narrator transgress the borders of humanity, it is also this very same act of killing that brings her back. She has already lived for months on the verge of the civilized world. She has also literally touched death and suffering and pain. She sabotaged her own life, bringing in self-destruction, isolation and self-annihilation. Now, by the instinctive decision to put Mabel's game out of its misery, she reclaims her own humanity:

If I didn't kill the rabbit, the hawk would sit on top of it and start eating; and at some point in the eating the rabbit would die. That is how goshawks kill. The borders between life and death are somewhere in the taking of their meal. I couldn't let that suffering happen. Hunting makes you animal, but the death of an animal makes you human. (Macdonald, 196)

The ethical perplexity of hunting moments finally restores in her the lost sense of reality. Through empathy she eventually regains her forgotten or obliterated capacity to feel, suffer, and be able to stop the suffering. At the same time, by accounting her violent hunting with Mabel, Macdonald achieves the level of realism which autobiography needs to reveal if it is to be credible. Because the therapeutic self-construction does not involve distortion of truth; in this case Helen's partaking in "making death" must expose the drama of killing. Characteristically, her descriptions are not emotional. In her struggling to arrive at autobiographical truth she resorts to the mode of 'testimony'¹⁸. Testimony entails relating the facts objectively without having to rely on personal commentary. "To testify, in its legal sense, is to produce one's speech or one's story as part of a larger verdict yet to be made. Testimony is called for in a situation where the truth is not clear, where there is already a 'crisis of truth'" (Anderson, 126). Beside the factual and informative aspect of falconry, the reader is likely to recognize the psychological truth within the narrative and is invited to make judgements. This further authenticates the hunting account.

Literary dialogue with the past

Throughout the memoirs, and especially when the protagonist is lost in those "dark days", the goshawk continues to remain the lifeline to the rest of the real world. Mabel, the bird, signifies corporeal, tangible nature. Suggestively, in the narrative the moments of physical proximity with the hawk are the ones which are void of memories. As if the anguished mind, which incessantly forces painful introspection, achieved the state of utter sensory concentration, the state of being present in the now; mind and body united in a single moment. No chasm between the physical and mental presence. The hawk is her "material reassurance", especially in the moments when the world is "unrecognizable".

However, beside the hawk, the narrative introduces one more intermediary with the protagonist's human awareness, one more 'relating subject'. And Macdonald now speaks not only in her capacity as a bird tamer but also as a Cambridge academic. Throughout her account she maintains a dialogic connection with another English author – Terence Hanbury White – best known for his fantasy novellas about King Arthur, such as *The Sword in the Stone* (1938) or *The Once and Future King* (1958). Macdonald's rereading of White's memoirs maintains her attachment to civilization, culture and history. But she states emphatically that her account is not Terence Hanbury White's biography. By way of explaining why she needs White, the author recounts her first

18 In broaching the concept of 'testimony' in autobiographical narratives Anderson (126-27) follows Shoshana Felman's book *What Does a Woman Want?: Reading and Sexual Difference* (1993).

encounter with his book, which pre-dated the current events by around three decades. At first the necessity to speak of him is rationalized by the simple: “because he was there” (Macdonald, 38). But weaving White’s journals into her own memories is illustrative of how carefully the narrator is working on creating her new self. In other words she is using the narrative as a healing tool to help her struggle through grief. The need to interpret it reflects the need to look for new meanings, and to organize and order the shattered reality. Apparently, telling White’s story means telling Helen’s story.

White’s much disliked training journal begins to haunt her as if demanding her attention, wanting to be reread. Her obsession with the other book, similarly to her hawking pursuits, diverts the attention of the mourning mind. Roy Shaffer argues from the position of a Freudian psychoanalyst that a traumatised patient needs to create new meanings, new narratives. A new explanatory story is needed in order to facilitate the healing process (Allister, 39). The first sentence in White’s diary lures Helen into her own past and into the cultural-historical moment in which White recorded his bird manning attempts: “It was a sentence from a long time ago, and it carried with it the apprehension of another self. Not the man who wrote it: me. Me, when I was eight years old” (Macdonald, 27). *The Goshawk*’s opening line incites childhood memory and imagination of which White has remained a part. By analysing White’s memoirs Macdonald indicates that she is now searching for new ways of seeing the world; her new reading is part of her own self-creation as protagonist.

Macdonald’s reading of *Goshawk* (1951) only adds to the intricate composition of her own book. White’s memoirs become the object of scholarly analysis. On the one hand, both training accounts are intertwined into parallel emotionally loaded stories clearly intensified by personal traumas. On the other, the chapters on White attempt to appear informative, reliable, objective. This is reflected, for example, by Macdonald’s use of endnote references. The discourse of academic interpretation has the effect of detachment. The narrator’s own self is decentralized again and replaced with White’s figure. Macdonald rereads the 1951 diaries in order to comprehend the famous English writer. White is therefore granted the status of ‘relational’ subject, and all other qualities of a protagonist such as history, motivation, family background and the socio-historical moment he lived in.

So from *H is for Hawk* the reader learns that T.H. White, tormented by his inner anguish, forsakes his teaching career at Stowe School in Buckinghamshire and retreats to a nearby cottage. He has only old-fashioned hawk training manuals on which to rely, and these are poorly informed. Nonetheless, he embarks on an attempt to tame Gos, his newly purchased goshawk. The taming quickly turns into breaking and, by all accounts, White’s narrative becomes anything but what bird training should present. It is a combat of human and “ferocious” other. In her introduction to the 2007 edition of *The Goshawk*, Marie Winn presents White’s strikingly controversial personality; his brilliance and talents, but also his eccentricity, propensity for competition, his obsession with control and self-control, and his willingness to subjugate the feral bird (Winn, x-xv).

Macdonald sets White's failures side by side with her own. Both accounts reveal quite contrary uses of avifaunal knowledge. Helen's enterprise, albeit emotionally driven, is submitted to rigorous falconry know-how. It involves technique, measurement, routine and distanced scientific rigidity. White's engagement in raptor training is dictated as much by passion for falconry as by his unpredictable impulsive reactions to failures and personal agonies. But what is at stake here is not merely addressing his deplorable mistreatment of the bird. White, embedded into her own life story, becomes her 'relational' other. Helen's story of mourning must inevitably entail understanding White's errant ways. Her Freudian explanation leads to the conclusion that by attempting to tame the hawk White was re-enacting, responding to painful experiences from the past, his troubled relationship with his parents, especially with the dominant father, and his suppressed homosexuality. His failures stemmed from inexperience in hawk taming and were coupled with an excessive desire to prove his own prowess. And also, paradoxically, with the constant unconscious drive to sabotage his successes: "He had taken something wild and free, something innocent and full of life, and fought with it. The cost of his mastery would be to reduce it to a biddable, broken-feathered, dull-eyed shadow of the bird it was meant to be" (Macdonald, 162). The compassion for the troubled man as she sees him through his diaries *The Goshawk* corresponds with Macdonald's disavowal of his manning methods.

The parts of Macdonald's own narrative in which she interprets White's text show how as author she carefully crafts the narrative self. Without emphasizing her own perspective, she balances the triple auto-representation of Helen: an experienced hawk trainer, a distanced literary critic and, conversely, an emotionally engaged mourning daughter. The temporary self effacement of the author in order to present a more scientific view of the world is one of the features of grief narratives which relate to nature (Allister, 41-45). As an author of non-fiction, Macdonald cannot allow herself to fictionalize certain events. Additionally, her knowledge of falconry in fact limits her to objective analysis of White's erroneous training. But her ability to read the diaries again (she read them first as a child) is an act of finding new meanings. She first read them with innocent naivety, with the credulity that can be typical of any first reading of a text. Now, her interpretation is critical. She is looking for new answers and reads retrospectively. And in this act of reading she is returning to her own self when she was young. She is also returning to White's times.

To explore further the intertextuality in Macdonald's own memoirs, it is worth mentioning that her critical, distanced analysis is evocative of the term 'personal criticism'. The notion, proposed in the 1990s, denotes such reading in which the author reveals her or his own identity as a critic (Anderson, 121-26). The reading allows compassion for the analysed subject. Hence its limitations. 'Personal criticism' easily acknowledges the constraints of objective knowledge and its own right to err. Such is the analysis of *The Goshawk* within *H is for Hawk*. Here the very act of intertextuality achieves manifold aims. It first avows Macdonald's self-creation, admitting her own background in academia. Yet, paradoxically, by making her analysis 'personal', the author also subverts her own privileged position as a critic. Consequently, the reader's perception is diverted towards Helen the hawk trainer, or Helen the bereaved daughter. It finally results in

fragmenting identity. The reader becomes a witness of how the narrator struggles to reconstruct a coherent self.

Linda Anderson, after Nancy K. Miller, also points to the problems of locating the subject in ‘personal criticism’¹⁹, and more specifically to the origin of the subject’s authority. Can the subject speak of other authors without admitting his or her own “locatedness as a social subject” (Anderson, 125)? Can a literary analysis be void of the analyst’s own social standing, class or gender perspective, which tinge the very analytical act? While Miller talks about “‘autobiographical acts’ within criticism” (Anderson, 126), in *H is for Hawk* Macdonald introduces ‘critical acts’ within autobiographical writing.

Macdonald’s account demonstrates how the narrative subject locates herself in a social context. Her repudiation of White’s manning techniques goes further to extend onto the social system of the 1930s, which he belonged to and at the same time fell victim of. Macdonald frequently criticises the oppressive social relations of the era, its forceful schooling system and family relations. She emphasises the personal tensions which must have ensued as a result of excessive belief in authority, class privilege, male dominance and striving for perfection. She disdains that “aristocratic moral certainty” which advocated “ancient virtue” but suppressed and stigmatized any form of otherness (Macdonald, 281-82). On a symbolic level, on her own way to recovery, she finally visits the premises of Stowe school and White’s cottage. Initially tempted to go inside, learn more about her protagonist and “make him alive again”, she decides to the contrary: “I put [that thought] down, and the relief was immense, as if I had dragged a half-ton weight from myself and cast it by the grassy road” (Macdonald, 283). White’s ghost-like shadow memoir performs the function of a catalyst, which ultimately brings the lost sense of reality. It evokes as much critical analysis as compassionate understanding for both human and non-human. It is at the same time catharsis, the lifting of the “heavy block of glass” that memory is.

Mosaic of haunting pasts

In *H is for Hawk* various narrative threads are weaved together and then unfolded along the space-temporal journey towards self-realisation. But in addition to forming Helen as the protagonist of a private intimate realm, the carefully orchestrated recounting also becomes a catalyst for remembrance which belongs to the public orbit. On the narrative platform various literary, cultural, and social pasts intersect with the present.

An illustration of current social commentary comes in the following scene. On one occasion, a friend comments about the superb crafting of the falcon hood, the delicate object the narrator carries in her bag at all times. It is an entirely innocuous remark. Helen’s troubled mind, however, responds with a jumbled list of cultural and historical connotations:

19 In her book *Getting Personal* (1991) Nancy K. Miller discusses the limitations and potential of ‘personal criticism’. But rather than perceiving it as contrary to objective theoretical analysis, she points to how both modes of reading may become mutually complementary.

I shut my eyes and my head is full of hoods... I think of fetish hoods. I think of distant wars. I think of Abu Ghraib. Sand in the mouth. Coercion. History and hawks and hoods and the implications of taking something's sight away to calm it. *It's in your own best interest*. Rising nausea. There is a sensation of ground being lost, of wet sand washing from under my feet. I don't want to think of the photographs of the tortured man with the hood on his head and the wires to his hands and the invisible enemy who holds the camera, but it is all I can see and the word hood like a hot stone in my mouth. *Burqua*, the word in Arabic. Hood. (Macdonald, 94-95)

The authorial thoughts generate a mosaic newsflash where in the collective consciousness of Western readers the falcon hood becomes an instant signifier of dominance, oppression, torture. This organizational pattern suggests a lack of unity or coherence of the narrative subject (Smith and Watson, 71-75). The shattered suffering self produces fragmented images of the world falling apart. They are an individual's response to both personal and global instability. The process of textualizing one's suffering is demonstrated by the fragmentation of memories. The author offers merely vignettes into her former life as a social person. The interpretation of uncovered fragments is left to the reader, who makes connections and by observing comprehends the narrator's struggle out of depression (Allister, 40).

Macdonald is consistent throughout her diaries in using memory as a narrative tool to provoke observations which go beyond the personal. Here the act of uncovering strata of historical remembrance resembles unearthing geological layers: "The archaeology of grief is not ordered. It is more like earth under a spade, turning up things you had forgotten. Surprising things come to life: not simply memories, but states of mind, emotions, older ways of seeing the world" (Macdonald, 199). Macdonald's use of archaeology here is analogical to Freud's argument: the uncovering of fragmented memories may help in the healing process and may offer insight into the hidden problems of the past. "The analyst ... becomes an archaeologist sifting through memories and desire, careful to keep what is of value... [But] if we cannot recover the past, we can create it in order to make sense out of later symptoms" (Allister, 39-40). Macdonald uses memoir writing as a tool for recovering or creating her shattered past memories. Writing a coherent narrative may be an attempt to recreate past meanings but also to create new ones.

To provide insight into public problems of the past the author uses apparently accidental personal memories. She recollects, for example, her visit to a friend – the president of the British Falconer's Club. He presents her with an artefact that neither of them actually enjoys looking at: "He pulled open a cupboard, and there, right at the back, half-observed by the usual household bits and bobs, I saw it" (Macdonald, 200). The "it" is a stylised statuette of a bronze falcon, an award sent to the British representatives from the International Hunting Exhibition held in Germany in 1937. The relic of an unwanted past was sent by Hermann Göring, who himself was known for taking great satisfaction from hunting with hawks. Falconry was the realization of power and dominance over the less fit – the embodiment of Nazism (Macdonald, 200-201). And it is this

very closeness to brute wild nature which served as an ideological tool for the Nazis to engineer Aryan supremacy and the purity of the master race. The evidence for racial supremacy came to be situated in the wild sylvan settings of the primeval forest. A nature myth came to play a part in the birth of Nazi ideology (Schama, 118-119). Clearly, throughout her memoirs Macdonald goes beyond striving towards self-realisation. Her personal memories become instructive, revisionary. She explicitly speaks against becoming obsessed with nature and transforming the non-human surroundings into a construct that may later produce lethal ideologies.

The collective response to landscape seems to be one of the many-layered concerns in *H is for Hawk*. In exploring further the mechanism of how the countryside conveys shared memory, the author goes beyond a mere response to its picturesque beauty. The landscape amalgamates past cultural imagery. It is further unfailingly the material location of national identity. "Landscape is the work of the mind, its terrain formed by strata of rock *and* memory" (Schama, 7). Macdonald recounts the mystic moment when she saw chalk landscapes for the first time. Even as a child she felt it reverberated with meanings accumulated over the centuries. And "if a child's vision of nature can already be loaded with complicating memories, myths, and meanings, how much more elaborately wrought is the frame through which our adult eyes survey the landscape" (Schama, 6). Now she refers to the chalk scenery as "the grand conjuration of our mythical English past" (Macdonald, 261). Chalk hills, Macdonald explains, may invoke a sense of "blood belonging", a shared recognition of the birth-place of the nation. This symbolism encourages the cultivation of an intimate, exclusive connection with the scenery. But natural remembrance and its celebration may result in the formulation of the national, or worse, the nationalistic.

By musing on the function of landscape the author disclaims the belief that what is familiar is also superior to the other, unknown and foreign. "And it was much later, too, that I realized that these myths hurt. That they work to wipe away other cultures, other ways of loving, working and being in landscape. How they tiptoe towards darkness" (Macdonald, 261). Such reflections are followed by the recounting of another memory. While rambling with Mabel through terrain around Cambridge the narrator witnesses a herd of fallow deer. She is dazzled by the view and runs to share it with an elderly English couple. "Doesn't it give you hope? [the man] says suddenly... Isn't it a relief that there are things still like that, a real bit of Old England still left, despite all these immigrants coming in?" (Macdonald, 264). So the human-landscape connection is as organic as it is exclusive, in that it excludes 'the other'. What the narrator evaluates to be "Old England" is little more than "words", "woodcuts", "picturesque engravings", representations of the visual. It is merely an imaginary construct. Dangerously, this collective imagination may arouse national myths that drive people to wars and conquests. The similarity of the contemporary Isles to Old England is an illusion, a token semblance, a fabrication of imagination and memory. And yet, at the same time, people fail to think and imagine beyond their own human scale, both in time and space. They are unable to picture what complex histories landscapes had before and what life will be like when we are no longer here (Macdonald, 260-265).

In the course of her grieving the author is clearly challenging certain persisting imaginations about land, landscape and belonging. Her social critique is far from subtle or understated. She frequently provides commentary which distances her from the social framework, tradition, and commonly accepted ways of conduct. Her escape from the civilized world seems to be spurred by the pressures of grief. So are her outspoken social comments. Yet, far from incriminating others Macdonald confesses:

And I am guilty, too. I'd wanted to escape history by running to the hawk. Forget the darkness, forget Göring's hawks, forget death, forget all the things that had been before. But my flight was wrong, always wrong. Worse than wrong. It was dangerous. *I must fight, always, against forgetting.* (Macdonald, 265)

As the protagonist proceeds along the “arc of mourning” the moments of personal insights, if still blending with the public sphere, become more frequent.

Like other contemporary writers who use their narratives to provide an insight into the human-landscape interaction, Macdonald is wary of the powerful and seductive myth of pastoral and romantic visions of nature. As she explains, T.H. White, despite his non-conformity, was markedly in connection with his own times, for during the 1930s countryside walks and tours proliferated. The English began to search for “mystical communion with the land”, for the magnetism of an unspoilt pre-industrial epoch; an attempt which was to offer “solace and safety to sorely troubled minds” of the mid-war era (Macdonald, 103-104). The author is utterly suspicious of any attempts at using the natural world as a surrogate for national ideologies, for anything more than it truly is – nature itself. The aforementioned passages again indicate Macdonald’s organizational strategies. Her speaking as a historian, an academic, effaces her mourning self. At the same time, nonetheless, her remarks are suggestive of conscious autobiographical attempts to provide explanations, meanings which may have healing power. Moreover, collective remembering is politically charged and it is also endowed with intention. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note, “acts of personal remembering are fundamentally social and collective” (21). Practising personal and collective remembrance has the capacity of shaping the future (for an individual or for other subjects). Macdonald’s recollecting extends beyond the personal to make claims for “those on whose behalf one remembers” (Smith and Watson, 20).

Robert Macfarlane, a distinguished author of travel books which deal with the natural landscape and the human soul, claims that “powerful writing can revise our ethical relations with the natural world, shaping our place consciousness and our place conscience” (Macfarlane, 34). *H is for Hawk* indeed reveals this interplay between consciousness and conscience. For certain moments in the narrative expose how the narrator’s hawk training excursions come to represent memorialization of a different loss – that of the natural landscape, human contact with nature, or even the blissfully misleading ignorance about the extent of environmental damage people cause. A symbolic memento of this most devastating loss is a misshapen rabbit, stricken with myxo-

matosis²⁰. In her diaries Helen remembers seeing people crowding around a ghost-like, blistered, deformed shape lying by the road. She kneels down and puts it out of its misery. But the persistent rabbit memory haunts her. And she later recollects: “It felt like a revenant, something pulled from the past, from back when I was small and the countryside was in crisis” (Macdonald, 198). Again the memory spurs a mosaic of apocalyptic images that evoke past fears, both from personal and collective memory – hawks exterminated by pesticides, felled elm trees, polluted rivers, oil-drowned guillemots – the whole ecosystem was endangered. “Everything was sick. And we’d be next” (Macdonald, 198). The memories are reminiscent of the ecological thinking and movements which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a reaction to countryside pollution, economic recession and the nuclear threat (Moran, 54-58).

This crafting of Macdonald’s personal memoir into a broader environmentally conscious perspective offers a platform for an intersection between memory and the natural landscape. Instead of invoking Arcadian countryside dreams, Macdonald does the opposite; she explores past fears which belong to both the personal and collective memory. It does serve the purpose of creating a synergy between awareness of the place and “place conscience”. The spectre of the rabbit is a reminder, a lest-we-forget contemporary indication of ecological problems.

Conclusion

H is for Hawk is an intricate interplay of perfectly organized recollections whose randomness is, as the reader finally discovers, a narrational method. If ‘relational’ reading is implemented to understand the narrative strategies, the book reveals how the world of nature, the world of birds of prey becomes instrumental in the process of grieving. The hawk is a refuge in a time of personal crisis and, conversely, the only tangible material reassurance that the fragmented reality may be reordered again. Further, Macdonald’s account offers enough self-analysis for her seclusion, her rite of passage to clarify the rationale behind narrative events. Her purpose was to obliterate the memory: “I did not want the hawk to make me feel I was striding righteously across the lands of my long-lost ancestors. I had no use for history, no use for time at all. I was training the hawk to make it all disappear” (Macdonald, 117). It is self-evident that Helen’s attempts to erase her life as she had known it before the loss of her father constituted a coping strategy of grief. This ultimately led her to a deeper dysfunction than she had been willing to admit. Equally important is the author’s methodological weaving of intimately introspective memories with collective remembrance, and localizing her narrative self in a broader social and historical context.

Yet Helen’s self enquiry leads her inevitably to learn that feral birds hardly yield the consolation she craved. Nature does not offer the cure. This conclusion corresponds with some other literary narratives branded ‘nature writing’ (Moran, 57). Still, such inner revelation of nature’s mute indif-

20 A virus brought to the British Isles in the 1950s from South America which within two years exterminated almost the entire rabbit population, littering the English countryside with millions of misshapen dead bodies. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myxomatosis> (03 March 2017).

ference is only partly devastating, for Macdonald's misgivings seem to permeate the entire memoir. The effects of her disillusion are therefore intentionally invalidated. Instead, time is the healer. Symbolically, this is expressed by the season in which the narrative ends – spring, a natural symbol of renewal. The mourning has completed its natural cycle. Helen realizes she no longer needs the hawk's presence; the gradual acceptance is indicated by their growing physical separation. She accepts the fact that she will live with a loss. And the elusive memory of loss, of absence, is given a spatial dimension, so it can be preserved, touched, tamed: "you have to grow around and between the gaps, though you can put your hand out to where things were and feel that tense, shining dullness of the space where the memories are" (Macdonald, 171).

As narrator and author, Macdonald too completes the process of textualizing her grief. All the tools of 'relational' autobiography have accomplished their tasks: the connection with the raptor loosens, White's diaries lose their haunting power and gain new understanding, the protagonist's self is written anew. But is it? Eliminating nature's capacity to heal seems to have an overwhelmingly destabilizing impact on the entire self-creation strategy of autobiography. As Smith and Watson note:

Readers often conceive of autobiographical narrators as telling unified stories of their lives, as creating or discovering coherent selves. But both the unified story and the coherent self are myths of identity. For there is no coherent "self" that predates stories about identity, about "who" one is. (47)

This double subversion (of nature's and autobiography's potential) surprisingly threatens to overthrow the reader's expectations for closure. What is offered then as consolation is the materiality of the present and past. The recurring motif of the need to restore the physicality of the past is illustrated in the book in a number of ways: collecting mementos of place, writing a journal, 'revisiting' somebody else's memoirs. One of the final scenes in the narrative is evocative of the elusive, intangible nature of human memory, i.e. the moment when Helen finds her father's plane-spotting diaries, his "records of ordered transcendence". The author recognizes his need to preserve the sightings of planes, birds, his whole diary keeping mania. Likewise, she understands his boyhood obsession with war artifacts – shrapnel, helmets, bullet shells, items recovered after the London bombings. They are as much an act of resistance against oblivion as her own survival tactics. And while browsing through his records she accidentally finds the key to his flat (Macdonald, 267). Finally, it is this human artifact, the key, that becomes a symbolic witness of her mourning. Holding the key in this epiphanic moment she suddenly feels crushed by the weight of her sorrow, the physicality of absence, the touch of the loss she has suffered. And it is the key, not the bird, that momentarily takes "the shape of [her] grief". Helen has reached her destination, she is now in the place and moment when "time had passed all the same, and worked its careful magic" (Macdonald, 268). Time heals. Nature instead remains mute, unredemptive and indifferent.

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