

# Provençal Landscapes in Aldous Huxley's Fiction and Non-Fiction

Krajobrazy Prowansji w Prozie Aldousa Huxleya

Grzegorz MOROZ<sup>1</sup>

Uniwersytet w Białymstoku

## Abstract

The paper focuses on the analysis of different ways in which Aldous Huxley chose to represent Provençal landscapes in his novels, such as *Eyeless in Gaza* or *Time Must Have a Stop*, as well as in his essays, such as “Music at Night” or “The Olive Tree”. The analytical tools which have been developed by scholars of the so called ‘spatial turn’ have been used (particularly the notion of ‘polysensory landscapes’), while Huxley’s representations of Provence are considered in the context of Aldous Huxley’s biography and the political situation in France in particular and in the world in general in the 1930s.

**Keywords:** Aldous Huxley, landscapes, fiction, non-fiction, Provence, ‘spatial turn’, ‘polysensory landscapes’, representations

## Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia analizę różnych metod przedstawienia (reprezentacji) krajobrazów Prowansji w twórczości Aldousa Huxleya, zarówno w powieściach, takich jak *Niewidomy w Gazie* czy *Czas musi stanąć*, jak i w esejach, takich jak „Muzyka nocą”, czy „Drzewo oliwne”. Do analizy zostały użyte narzędzia badawcze opracowane przez naukowców związanych z tak zwanym ‘zwrotem przestrzennym’ (‘spatial turn’), a w szczególności koncepcji ‘krajobrazów polisensorycznych’ (‘polysensory landscapes’), podczas gdy reprezentacje krajobrazów Prowansji są rozpatrywane w kontekście biografii Huxley oraz sytuacji politycznej we Francji, oraz na świecie w latach trzydziestych dwudziestego wieku.

---

<sup>1</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9593-0224>.

Słowa kluczowe: Aldoux Huxley, krajobrazy, fikcja, non-fiction, Prowansja, 'zwrot przestrzenny', 'krajobrazy polisensoryczne', przedstawienia, reprezentacje

The main goal in this paper is to analyse the diversity of ways in which Aldous Huxley represented Provençal landscapes in his fiction and non-fiction. In the process of close reading of the crucial fragments containing Huxley's representations of landscapes in this region of France, selected analytical tools developed by scholars connected with the so called 'spatial turn', as well as of eco-criticism, will be applied. Dennis Cosgrave (1984, p. 269) argued that "landscape is a social and cultural product, a way of seeing projected on a land and having its own techniques and compositional forms". Contrarily W.J.T. Mitchel (2002, pp. 1-2) postulated a more comprehensive model for landscape studies which "would ask not just what landscape 'is' or 'means' but what it *does*, how it works as a cultural practice." These two statements will serve as general guiding principles in the analysis of Huxley's representations of landscapes in Provence.

The Huxleys settled in Provence after they bought a house in Sanary-sur-mer in March 1930. At that time they were staying in the region because they were visiting D.H. Lawrence, who was dying there. The Huxleys "arrived in Vence on 24<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup> February" and "found Lawrence even worse than they had feared" (Bedford, 1973, p. 224). Lawrence died at the Villa Robermond at Vence and was buried at the cemetery there the next day. Sybille Bedford, Huxley's first biographer and a good friend of both Aldous and Maria, in the closing fragments of Chapter XVIII "Endings" described Lawrence's funeral and the Huxleys' part in it, and added:

A day or two later, Aldous, Maria and Rina [their Italian servant – G.M.] drove away to look for their new house up the coast. Mme Douillet, the owner of the Hotel Beurivage, who had befriended Lawrence, gave them advice and help, and before the week was out they had found one on a bay at Sanary near Toulon. (Bedford, 1973, p. 228)

Since 1923 the Huxleys had been leading a life of ex-patriots; first in Italy and then in Suresnes, near Paris. They must have been really determined to return to the Mediterranean climate and landscape as the search for the house which started on 4 or 5 March 1930 ended with finding it "before the week was out". They bought it at a notary in Bandol before the month was out, and moved into this house in the course of the next month despite major

building works that were, in the words of Sybille Bedford (who saw the process with her own eyes), going to change “a cramped little house built [...] around 1910. By knocking down walls, cutting windows and enlarging here and there, the Huxleys changed it beyond recognition.” (Bedford, 1973, p. 230). The first of many letters of Aldous Huxley in Grover Smith’s edition, which bears the caption “La Gorguette, Sanary (Var)”, is written to “Tom” (T.S. Eliot) and is dated “24 April 1930”. In it Huxley wrote:

Here on this Coast of Azure, the wind as usual howls and the rain pours down, but a certain vegetable tradition that the climate was once good still lingers on in the visible forms of olives, cypresses and the like, making the landscape classically lovely. So, it’s pleasant all the same [...] (Smith, 1969, p. 334)

Chapter XIX of Bedford’s biography describes the Huxleys’ first months in Sanary and Bedford’s first meeting with the them. At that time Sybille Aleid Elsa von Schoenebeck (later Sybille Bedford) was a cultured girl of nineteen living in Sanary with her mother and stepfather. Bedford also used the word “classical” to describe the landscape around Huxley’s new house:

Then the country round Bandol and Sanary was unspoilt, a classical landscape of hills, olives, vines. The new house though was on a slightly scruffy promontory between the two villages, called La Gorguette, where the dominant vegetation was thin pines and the land already destined to advancing development. (Bradford, 1973, p. 230)

The Huxleys lived in this house for the next seven years, but the “classical” landscape of La Gorguette in particular, and also Provençal landscapes in general were to crucially embellish Aldous Huxley’s non-fiction and fiction in later years. In the collection *Music at Nights and Other Essays*, published in September 1931, we get two such representations. The first one comes at the beginning of the essay entitled “Wanted, a New Pleasure”, which centres around flippant musings on speed as the only truly new pleasure that humanity has managed to invent over the last two thousand years. It brings a gloomy ‘bird’s-eye-view’ description of the French Riviera as a whole:

From the Italian border to the mountains of the Esterel, forty miles of Mediterranean coast have been turned into one vast “pleasure resort”. Or to be more accurate, they have been turned into one vast straggling suburb – the suburb of all Europe and the two Americas – punctuated here and there with urban nuclei, such as Mentone, Nice, Antibes, Cannes. [...] There are no suburbs

in the world so hideous as those which surround French cities. The great Mediterranean *banlieue* of the Riviera is no exception to the rule. The chaotic squalor of this long bourgeois slum is happily unique. The towns are greatly superior, of course, to their connecting suburbs. A certain pleasing and absurdly old-fashioned, gimcrack grandiosity adorns Monte Carlo; Nice is large, bright, and lively; Cannes, gravely pompous and as though conscious of its expensive smartness. (Huxley, 2001a, pp. 260-261)

It seems that Huxley was really enjoying himself as a poet/writer coining the description of the Riviera's suburbia referred to oxymoronically as a "long bourgeois slum", "the chaotic squalor" of which "is happily unique"; while Monte Carlo's townscape is adorned in a truly camp manner, strengthened with an alliterative "g": "with a certain pleasing and absurdly old-fashioned, gimcrack grandiosity". Huxley's exuberant mood could not be quenched even by "those howling winds, half Alpine, half marine, which on certain days transform the Croisette and the Promenade des Anglais" in Cannes "into the most painfully realistic imitations of *Wuthering Heights*" (Huxley, 2001a, p. 261).

The mood in which Provence appears in the title essay of the volume, that is "Music at Night", is very different. We also get a different type of "scapes" here, different from "townscapes", "cityscapes" and "suburbiascapes", of "Wanted, a New Pleasure". In "Music at Night" we get a "soundscape" and a "smellscape", even though Huxley does not use these terms in his description. However, they are the terms used by scholars of the so called 'spatial turn', one of whom, Elżbieta Rybicka, while analysing different 'branches' of the contemporary research on landscapes wrote:

A rival area of interest to sight-centrism at present is the ongoing research into soundscape and smellscape, which is changing, or at least relativising the former hierarchy of the senses. Notably, there is an increasing move towards perception of landscape in polysensory terms. (Rybicka, 2015)

Huxley's poetic description of the Provençal night, which opens the essay "Music at Night", might be definitely treated as a pioneering attempt to approach landscapes in "polysensory terms":

Moonless, this June night is all the more alive with stars. Its darkness is perfumed with faint gusts from the blossoming lime trees, with the smell of wetted earth and the invisible greenness of the vines. There is silence; but the silence that breathes with the soft breathing of the sea and, in the thin shrill

noise of a cricket, insistently, incessantly harps on the fact of its own deep perfection. Far away, the passage of a train is like a long caress, moving gently, with an inexorable gentleness, across the warm living body of the night. (Huxley, 2001a, p. 67)

The “polysensory” character of this fragment is strengthened by the fact that the smellscape, composed of blossoming lime trees and wetted earth, is augmented by the smell of “the invisible greenness of the vines”, where the “greenness of the vines”, which cannot be seen because of the darkness, is transformed fragrantly to add to the overall effect. This “polysensory smellscape” is devoid of vision, thus devoid of traditional landscape features, but it is augmented by the “soundscape”, which is at first referred to as “silence”, but this “silence” will soon prove to be just a “background” – to use a phrase usually associated with landscapes—to “sounds”: an anthropomorphised breathing of the sea, the shrill, but nevertheless perfect, harping of a cricket, and the unspecified, distant sound of a faraway train, which is, again in a polysensory manner, rendered as a gentle touch – a caress – across the anthropomorphised body of the warm night. This “warmth” together with “caress”, give a “tactile” angle to the smellscape and soundscape of Huxley’s moonless, but starry Provençal, June night.

This polysensory description of a (relatively) silent, warm, fragrant, starry Provençal night is, paradoxically, an introduction to the essay, the main theme of which is the ‘non-transferability’ of the ‘languages’ of different arts: music, painting, literature. In the second paragraph of “Music at Night” the ‘lyric I’ responds to the ‘lyric You’ request “that it would be a good night for music” (Huxley, 2001a, p. 67), and he plays, apparently at random, for, as he explains, he has selected the record in the dark, the introduction to the Benedictus in Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*. Huxley’s main argument in this essay is that “writing in our own words” of Shakespeare’s poetry or Beethoven’s music is useless and senseless, and that:

Only music, and only Beethoven’s music, and only this particular music of Beethoven, can tell us with any precision what Beethoven’s conception of the blessedness at the heart of things actually know, we must listen – on a still June night, by preference, with the breathing of the invisible sea for background to the music and the scent of lime trees drifting through darkness, like some exquisite soft harmony apprehended by another sense. (Huxley, 2001a, p. 70)

So, at the end of the essay, the June night of the Huxleys in La Gorguette returns, with one more sense added; the sense necessary to apprehend

the “blessedness at the heart of things”. It was only towards the end of the Huxleys’ seven-year long spell in Sanary that Huxley was to describe the Provençal landscape again in his non-fiction. The title essay of the volume *The Olive Tree and Other Essays* (1936) is about many things. It is about nature, the appearance and symbolism of olive trees, about woods and forest and the ‘numinous’ nature of trees in general, about the olive tree being the symbol of “Latinity”, which influenced so profoundly quintessentially English writers such as Chaucer and Shakespeare. But it is also, and to a considerable extent, about Provençal landscapes, which are approached from two main perspectives. The first one is the perspective of landscape painting, the role which Elżbieta Rybicka saw as “dominant [...] in research into perception of landscape” (Rybicka, 2015). The other perspective is “ideological”, and is connected with areas which in Rybicka’s essay are referred to as “ecology” and “cultural economics”.

Huxley was well versed in the history as well as theory of European painting, and it is particularly in his travel essays and travel books that his (amateur) expertise in this area regularly surfaces, often in connection with landscape painting. For example, one short essay in *Along the Road* (1925), entitled “Patnir’s River”, is, in fact, a tribute to Joachim Patnir’s landscapes of the river Meuse; the narrative persona, travelling in his car on a rainy day along this river experiences a minor epiphany: “Crag, river, emerald green slopes, dark woods were there, indubitably real, I had given Joachim Patnir the credit that was due to God. What I had taken for his exquisite invention was the real and actual Meuse” (Huxley, 2000, p. 451). In “The Olive Tree” Huxley compares the colour palettes used to paint Provençal landscapes by Renoir and Derain (Huxley, 2001b, p. 424), and modestly states that if he could paint and had the necessary time, he would devote himself for a few years “to making pictures only of olive trees. What a wealth of variations upon a single theme” (Huxley, 2001b, p. 425). And in the final paragraph of this essay he argues that “the proper background to the olive trees is the thinly fledged limestone of the hills – pinkish and white and pale blue in the distance, like Cezanne’s Mont Sainte Victorie” (Huxley, 2001b, p. 427). Yet, overall, in “The Olive Tree” the aesthetic, ‘painterly’ considerations of Provençal landscapes are ultimately subordinate to a larger ‘eco’ consciousness which pervades the essay from the beginning to the end.

It might be argued that “The Olive Tree” should be read as one of the ur-texts of what is now generally referred to as ‘the spatial turn’, which in turn (pun intended) is generally considered a part of a larger phenomenon known as ‘the cultural turn’. For Huxley’s considerations about the nature of the changes

of Provençal landscapes take into account many features central to scholars of the cultural turn. The most crucial of these features is perhaps the ability to locate and name the key factors influencing the changes of landscapes in Provence. Huxley's Provence might still have been "a painter's paradise" in the middle 1930s, but Huxley lucidly shows the historical, economic, social and scientific forces which, on the one hand, made this paradise possible, but, on the other hand, made this paradise highly susceptible to changes. Huxley presents the alterations of the Provençal landscape from Roman times, when it was "a land of great forests" and "[t]he hills were covered with a splendid growth of ilex trees and Aleppo pines", to "[t]he Provence that we know – terraced vineyard and olive orchard alternating with pine-woods and those deserts of limestone and prickly bushes which are locally called garrigues" (Huxley, 2001b, p. 426). Huxley vividly presents the long process of alterations in Provençal vegetation as "a decline and fall", which begins with the ilex wood and ends with the garrigue:

The process of destruction is a familiar one. The trees were cut for firewood and shipbuilding. (The naval arsenal at Toulon devoured the forest for miles around.) The glass industry ate its way from the plain into the mountains, carrying with it irreparable destruction. Meanwhile the farmers and the shepherds were busy, cutting into the woods in search of more land for the plough, burning them in order to have more pastures for their beasts. The young trees sprouted again—only to be eaten by the sheep and goats. In the end they gave up the struggle and what had been forest turned at last to a blasted heath. The long process of degradation ends in the garrigue. And even this blasted heath is not quite the end. Beyond the true garrigue, with its cistus, its broom, its prickly dwarf oak, there lie a series of false garrigues, vegetably speaking worse than the truth. On purpose, or by accident, somebody sets fire to the scrub. In the following spring the new shoots are eaten down to the ground. A coarse grass – baouco in Provençal – is all that manages to spring up. The shepherd is happy, his beasts can feed, as they could not do on the garrigues. [...] And it allows very little else to grow in the neighbourhood. If protected long enough from fire and animals the garrigue will gradually build itself up again into a forest. But a desert of asphodels obstinately remains itself. (Huxley, 2001b, p. 427)

Huxley also shows that apart from the process of deforestation, which is largely the result of the forces of the pre-capitalist, agriculture-centred economy, there exists another important factor strongly affecting Provençal landscapes: "Even the majestic stability of agriculture has been shaken by the progress of technology" (Huxley, 2000, p. 426.) And we get a roller-coaster-

like story of different crops introduced to Provence by forces of capitalism and also having an impact on its landscapes, which are in turn replaced by other plants as the old ones turn out to be commercially unprofitable. Thus, in the Rhone valley mulberry trees used to be grown for silkworms. They were abandoned after the invention of viscose, and replaced by vines, which unfortunately were also grown in North Africa, which brought the price of *vin ordinaire* down so much that they were replaced by peach orchards. At which moment Huxley writes, only half mockingly, “A few years from now, no doubt, the Germans will be making synthetic peaches out of sawdust or coal tar. And then what?” (Huxley, 2000, p. 426).

The uniqueness of Huxley’s perspective of Provençal landscapes in “The Olive Tree” lies in the smooth, seamless merging, within one relatively brief essay, often within its individual paragraphs, of the views of an aesthete familiar with the intricacies of the landscapes of old and new masters, with musings of an intellectual deeply rooted in historical, geographical, social and economic issues and deeply concerned with the unpredictable, but nevertheless ominous, changes in the world and the landscapes around him.

Provençal landscapes/seascapes also appear in two of Huxley’s novels: in *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) and in *Time Must Have a Stop* (1944). The first of these novels was written in Sanary, the second much later, long after the Huxleys’ move to California. In the non-chronological, seemingly random order of the chapters in *Eyeless in Gaza*, the description of a landscape/seascape comes close the beginning of the novel, in Chapter Three, dated August 30, 1933. The first chapter of this novel is also set on this day. It is set inside a house like the Huxleys’ ‘Villa Huley’, and it describes Anthony Beavis’s – who is a kind of Huxley’s own *porte parole*, however, also with some important differences from the original – musings on the photos taken over the last thirty years he has accumulated in the drawers of his desk. It is an introduction to the novel’s complex handling of such issues as time and chronology itself in the context of man’s developing (changing) personality. Chapter Two of the novel gives extracts from A.B.’s (‘converted’ Anthony’s) diary entries dated April 4 and 5, 1934, some seven months later. Chapter Three returns us to August 30, 1933; this time we are not inside, but outside Anthony’s house:

From the flat roof of the house the eye was drawn first towards the west, where the pines slanted down to the sea – a blue Mediterranean bay fringed with pale bonelike rocks and cupped between high hills, green on their lower slopes with vines, grey with olive trees, then pine-dark earth-red, rock-white or rosy-brown with parched heath. Through a gap between the nearer hills, the long straight

ridge of the Sainte-Baume stood out metallically clear, but blue with distance. To north and south, the garden was hemmed in by the pines; but eastwards, the vineyards and the olive orchards mounted in terraces of red earth to a crest, and the last trees stood, sometimes dark and brooding, sometimes alive with tremulous silver, against the sky. (Huxley, 1964, pp. 12-13)

Never had Huxley been more painterly and poetic but also precise in his descriptions of La Gorguette. In the second paragraph of Chapter Three some features of this seemingly idyllic Med summer day of Anthony and Helen are given:

There were mattresses on the roof for sun-bathing; and on one of these they were lying, their heads in the narrow shade of the southern parapet. It was almost; the sunlight fell steep out of the flawless sky; but a faint breeze stirred and died and swelled again into motion. (Huxley, 1964, p.13)

What follows is a troubled interior monologue of Anthony after the sexual intercourse which is only alluded to. In Chapter Four we jump back to a younger Anthony, thirty-one years earlier, and to his mother's funeral, on November 6, 1902. In Chapter Five we move to December 8, 1926, to a younger Helen stealing a piece of kidney from a butcher's to show her bravado to her sister Joyce. In Chapter Six we return to the day of Mrs. Beavis's funeral in 1902, and in Chapter Seven to A.B.'s diary of 1934. Chapter Eight brings the post-coital conversation between Helen and Anthony on the sunny terrace on August 1930. Chapter Nine is set on April 2, 1903. Chapter Ten on June 18, 1912., Chapter Eleven on December 8, 1926. And in Chapter Twelve we return for the fourth and last time to August 30, 1933, and Anthony's Mediterranean villa. "Half-conscious fringes" of Helen's and Anthony's "torpor" are at first caressed by a faint rustling which soon became "a clattering roar that brutally insisted on attention" (Huxley, 1964, p. 103). There follows a scene of wanton, senseless cruelty which ends the Med landscapes/seascapes in *Eyeless in Gaza*, as well as the frail relationship between Helen and Anthony:

With a violent but dull and muddy impact, the thing struck the flat roof a yard or two from where they were lying. The drops of a sharply spurted liquid were warm for an instant on their skin, and then, as the breeze swelled up out of the west, startlingly cold. There was a long second of silence. "Christ!" Anthony whispered at last. From head to foot both of them were splashed with blood. In a red pool at their feet lay the almost shapeless carcass of a fox terrier. The roar of the receding aeroplane had diminished to a raucous hum, and

suddenly the ear found itself conscious once again of the shrill rasping of the cicadas. (Huxley, 1964, pp. 103-104)

Therefore this final, horrible Mediterranean scene of the novel, set in the twelfth chapter of the novel's fifty four, moves away from the painterly colours and 'classical beauty' of Chapter Three to a description focused on other issues: the tactile sensations of Anthony's naked skin and the noises made by the airplane, the fox terrier and Anthony receding and fading in order to allow the return of the everlasting "shrill rasping of the cicadas", so 'natural' soundscape for this region.

A Provençal landscape with a sea also appears in the final Chapter, XXX "Epilogue", of *Time Must Have a Stop*, first published in 1944. It is equally important as the landscape from the opening chapters of *Eyeless in Gaza*. There, the bizarre scene with the killed fox terrier leads to the breaking up of Helen and Anthony's relationship, and this, in turn, leads to Anthony's spiritual development into the 'perennial philosopher' described in A.B.'s diary. While in the epilogue of *Time Must Have a Stop* the fifteen weeks between the accidental meeting of the terminally ill Bruno Rontini with Sebastian on the Promenade des Anglais and Bruno's funeral are retrospectively portrayed as the period of Sebastian 'conversion', the period that the two of them spent was "at that little house at Vence:

Furnished and decorated with an unflinching bad taste. But Bruno's bedroom had windows on three sides, and there was a wide veranda, windless and warm with spring sunshine, from which one could look out over the terraced fields of young wheat, the groves of orange trees and the olive orchards, down to the Mediterranean. (Huxley, 1964, pp. 285-286)

The peaceful, serene dying of Bruno, and Sebastian's concomitant nursing of him, and 'soaking' in the perennial philosophy takes place in the 'classical' Mediterranean landscape/seascape, and during a windless sunny spring. The mood of subdued, melancholic beauty is strengthened by Huxley's putting into Bruno's dying voice melancholic passages in the original Italian from Dante "*Il tremolar della marina*" and Leopardi "*e sovrumani/Silenzi, e profondissima quiete*" and "*E il naufrager m'è dolce in questo mare*", evocative and poetic, even to those unfamiliar with the Italian language.

Denis Cosgrave (1984, p. 270) wrote that in the long history of representations of landscapes "there have been these individuals whose

imaginative power has allowed them to address profoundly human needs and experiences both within prevailing conventions and, like Turner, beyond them." Undoubtedly, Huxley's representations of Provençal landscapes, both in his fiction and in his non-fiction, can also be viewed as transcending "prevailing conventions" through merging into one, unique blend, such diverse traits as the aesthetic, the mystical and the eco-critical.

## References

- Bedford, S. (1973). *Aldous Huxley: A Biography*. Volume I, London: Chatto & Windus.
- Cosgrave, D. (1984). *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books.
- Huxley, A. (1944). *Time Must Have a Stop*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Huxley, A. (1964). *Eyeless in Gaza*, New York: Bantam Books.
- Huxley, A. (2000). *Complete Essays: Volume I*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- Huxley, A. (2001a). *Complete Essays: Volume III*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- Huxley, A. (2001b). *Complete Essays: Volume IV*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. Introduction. In W.J.T. Mitchell (Ed.), *Landscape and Power* (pp. 1-4), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Rybicka, E. (2015, December 8). *Landscape. A Brief Introduction*. Retrieved November 22, 2019, from <https://www.herito.pl/en/articles/landscape-a-brief-introduction>.
- Smith, G. (Ed.) (1969). *Letters of Aldous Huxley*, New York: Harper & Row.

