

From Religious Pilgrimage to Planetary Traveling: A Cognitive Study of the History of English Travel Literature

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Abstract—Taking the history of English travel novels as the research object, this paper analyzes the relationship between the development of English travel literature and cognitive evolution from the perspectives of cognitive science theory, spatial theory and evolutionary theory, and constructs a set of cognitive evolution model throughout the history of English travel literature. This model reveals the deep relationship between the internal spatial representation of the text and human cognitive mechanism, and understands the evolution of the history of English travel novels as a cultural map from "embodied existence" to "cognitive evolution", covering embodied practice, social mind, psychological internalization and planetary scale expansion. By analyzing *Canterbury Tales*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels* and other works, this paper points out that travel novels not only record the cognitive changes of human beings in space, self and 'other', but also continuously push the boundary between literature and cultural thinking to the future, thus providing a new research path for understanding the dynamic relationship between literature and human cognitive system.

Index Terms—travel novels, travel narrative, travel literature, cognitive literature studies, cognitive evolution

I. INTRODUCTION

Travel, as a practice across geographical and cultural boundaries, has been deeply involved in the shaping process of human experience since the beginning of civilization. It is not only related to the movement of the body in geographical space, but also deeply embedded in cultural production, social structure and mental evolution. Travel has recently emerged as a key theme for the humanities and social sciences, accompanied by a proliferation of scholarly research work on travel writing (Hulme & Youngs, 2002, p. 1). The travel tradition formed in English literature since the Middle Ages—from the pilgrim narration in *The Canterbury Tales* to the modern planetary travel writing—not only reflects the migration and evolution of literary themes, but also witnesses the historical changes of human cognitive patterns. As Karin Kukkonen convincingly argues, the history of the novel can be aptly understood as the history of a lifeworld technology that affords the dynamical interaction of strongly embodied and embedded readers (and writers) with literary texts and other relevant material artifacts (2019, p. 197). Therefore, travel narrative is no longer simply regarded as a plot frame describing space movement, but is re-understood as a result of embodied cognition generated by interaction with social and cultural environment, as well as a process of the human mind modeling and projecting space, others, and the self. This theoretical turn enables us to re-examine travel literature from the perspectives of cognitive science, spatial theory and cultural evolution, and endow them with cognitive cultural value in the history of literature. It is in this interdisciplinary context that this paper systematically analyzes the cognition and evolution path of travel literature, aiming to fill the lack of understanding of the relationship between travel writing and human cognitive development in traditional literature research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although research on travel literature has grown substantially, most previous scholars predominantly focus on the analysis of colonial narratives, the construction of the other, or power mechanism (Pratt, 2008; Youngs, 2013) while relatively less attention has been paid to the internal cognitive structure and evolutionary logic of travel fiction. Particularly from the cognitive perspective of literature history, there remains a lack of a cohesive cognitive framework spanning from the Middle Ages to the contemporary era—one capable of integrating embodied experience, emotional construction, and spatial imagination. Furthermore, traditional literary theory has often treated "travel" merely as a theme or symbolic structure, failing to adequately reveal its generative mechanism as a "cognitive model" at the narrative level. The elements such as maps, paths, obstacles, directions and place names that frequently appear in travel novels are not just rhetorical devices, but constitute a part of "cognitive map", which reflects the way human mind constructs the world in different historical stages (Tuan, 1979; Moretti, 1998). Therefore, the core question put forward in this paper is how can travel novels, as a mirror image of the evolution of cognitive culture, present human cognitive style and spatial consciousness in different historical stages?

Literature and cognitive science are mutually enriching. According to Polvinen, “the cognitive sciences can offer literary studies both experimental results and philosophical insights into the reading mind”, while many cognitive scientists, in turn, use literary works as a rich source of insight into human mental life (2023, p. 2). Kolaiti states that “literature/art has distinct cognitive rather than linguistic properties” (2025, p. 2). Based on the theory of cognitive literature studies, this paper comprehensively applies embodied cognition theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), the evolutionary model of culture and cognition (Donald, 1991), and introduces spatial turn (Tally, 2017) and planetary turn (Heise, 2008) and other contemporary theoretical paths, constructs a cognitive development model of travel literature: from the survival needs of the body, to the maturity and socialization of cognitive ability, and then to the planetary turn of cognitive scripts. Through this framework, this article regards travel novels as a “cognitive form”, that is, a way to organize body action, social interaction and spatial imagination into narrative structure. In terms of research methods, this paper adopts the analysis path of combining historical verticality with text close reading, starting from the subjective self-examination or construction, combining the perspectives of embodied experience, emotional construction and spatial imagination, and taking the cognitive affection theory as the main framework, selects representative English travel novels (such as *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, *The Castle of Otranto*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *A Passage to India*, *The Mars Trilogy*, etc.) to analyze them in different historical contexts.

III. EMBODIED COGNITION IN EARLY ENGLISH TRAVEL WRITING

From the perspective of evolution, human travel behavior originated from the demand for resources and survival. With the complex changes of the natural environment, human beings identify, evaluate and judge the environment in space, and their cognitive ability will gradually improve, which involves people's attention, perception, memory, categorization (Waller & Nadel, 2013, p. 3), way-finding, orientation, navigation and transport (Zunshine, 2015, pp. 225–238). The theory of embodied cognition emphasizes that many cognitive phenomena are enabled or influenced by the properties, movements, and physiological states of the body (Alber & Schneider, 2025, p. 303). In other words, people know the world in action, and travel is the concentrated embodiment of this “action-cognition” structure. Therefore, from the earliest human migration and tribal movement to the later trade routes, expeditions and pilgrimages, travel behavior has always been closely related to the evolution of human cognitive patterns.

In literature, early travel writing is usually closely related to religion, myth and the legend of heroes. As Laura Nenzi states that “pilgrimage has inspired the production of a large body of literature. It has also provided an important frame of reference for many other types of travel and travel writing” (Thompson, 2020, p. 217). Especially in medieval England, travel was not only a spatial movement, but also a process of spiritual cultivation and moral advancement. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is a literary representation of this cognitive structure. This work depicts a group of travelers who go on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. They tell their own stories during their journey. Travel here is not only the movement of the body, but also the framework for the tempering and narration of the mind. Pilgrimage narrative provides a structure that frames individual experience as a symbolic journey, so that readers can understand the tension between individual and collective, belief and secular through the journey. As a cultural cognitive script, pilgrimage is highly symbolic: it puts individuals in a cognitive environment of ethics and beliefs, making them constantly reflect on the relationship between themselves and society.

In line with the narrative tradition of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the 17th-century English religious literature master John Bunyan elevated the “cognitive journey” to a more profound spiritual dimension in his allegorical masterpiece *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The protagonist Christian leaves the “City of Destruction” in search of salvation, undergoes various trials and misdirections, and finally reaches the “Celestial Gate”. This is not only an individual soul's “cognitive journey” but also a symbolic construction of the “correct path of faith” within the religious society. Like Palmer said that narrative is the description of fictional mental functioning (2004, p. 12). In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the path choice of characters, the symbol of obstacles and the cognitive judgment of companions and enemies constitute a dynamic mental simulation system. Through the repeated interweaving of geography and psychological space, the novel enables readers to “travel in the story” and experience the cognitive dilemma and emotional adjustment of the characters. This overlapping structure of “inner and outer space” provided a narrative template for later novelists, and also promoted the expansion of travel narrative from a single physical movement to a multi-dimensional cognitive space.

The early travel narrative does not emphasize individual desires or the complexity of the real world, but is characterized by symbolism and fable. Space is coded as a symbolic system of morality and religion here, and the cognitive goal of travelers is externalized as “God's will” or “the road to redemption”. This model embodies the “goal-directed action” in cognitive science, and the actions of characters always revolve around some ultimate truth or belief goal. It is in this narrative structure that travel, as a literary expression, gradually gained a stable prototype position, which provided the embryonic form of cognition and narrative for later secularized travel novels. Especially with the rise of rationalist culture in the 18th century, travel novels gradually broke away from the religious framework and turned to the exploration of the secular world. Therefore, the travel novels from the Middle Ages to the 17th century, although not divorced from the cognitive framework of religion and morality, have laid a foundation for the cognitive tradition of travel novels in narrative structure, mental modeling and spatial construction. In the interaction between embodied experience and symbolic space, literary travel shows a unique “cognitive simulation”, which is not only a

simulation of the real world, but also an exercise of mental growth under the framework of cultural cognition.

IV. SOCIAL MIND GROWTH IN 18TH CENTURY NOVELS

The 18th century is an important stage for the formation and rapid development of English novels, which marks the transition from religious narration to secular experience narration. During this period, travel gradually broke away from the religious symbol system and became the main means for individuals to explore their identity, social cognition and moral decision-making in the real society. This change is closely related to the empirical rationality and anthropocentrism emphasized by the Enlightenment (Porter, 2001). Travel novels not only continue the "moving" mode in narrative structure, but also gradually develop complex psychological description and social interaction mechanism. The travel novels at this stage highlights how the human beings, through engagement with others, spatial transitions, and the comprehension of causal relationships, gradually achieves social mind—the socialization and maturation of cognitive capacities.

The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling, authored by Henry Fielding in 1749, is widely regarded by academia as a representative masterpiece that embodies the mature form of the English novel in the 18th century. Centered on the journey of its protagonist, Tom Jones—marked by his departure from home, his fall into error, and his eventual restoration to recognition—the novel unfolds a richly realistic social panorama. Travel is not only a tool to promote stories, but also a process in which Tom gradually gains the ability of social cognition, moral judgment and emotional discrimination. During the traveling, Tom met people from different social classes and constantly shaped his mental structure through interaction and misunderstanding. This is the process of "mind modeling" emphasized by cognitive literature studies (Zunshine, 2006). The novel embodies the close relationship between travel and causal reasoning. For example, Tom was expelled from his home because of an impulsive mistake, which triggered a series of encounters and turning points in his travels. Every choice compels Tom to re-judge the way others and society operate. This "narrative causality" is not only the basic logic of the novel structure, but also reflects the cognitive mechanism between the internal mental development of the characters and the interaction of external social experience.

The evolution of human cognition is not only biological, but also driven by culture. As in Donald's theory of cultural cognitive evolution, he argues that specific types of human culture have direct effects upon individual cognition (Donald, 1991, pp. 9–10). We adapt to the new situation by developing new representation systems (such as language, images and external symbols), and these systems are preserved and integrated into the structure of modern mind during the evolution. At this time, the representative works of travel literature, from "Tom Jones" to Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe" (1719), can be seen as a progression from "cognitive exercises in real society" to "cognitive creation in wilderness environments." Although Robinson's life in isolated island is divorced from the social background, it constitutes a pure cognitive experimental field. He rebuilt social order on an isolated island, from cognitive confusion and emotional panic to the establishment of timetable, spatial order and value system, showing a high degree of "cognitive adaptability". This process can echo Donald's statement that "cultures restructure the mind... the brain sets fewer constraints than formerly thought on the process of cognitive evolution" (p. 14).

Meanwhile, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) pushed the travel novel to the extremes of satire and cognitive reflection. Each of Gulliver's four voyages—to Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, and the Land of the Houyhnhnms—serves as a symbolic mapping of contemporary British society, politics, and science. Though these alien realms appear absurd, they constitute a sophisticated process of modeling of the Other (Said, 1993; Spivak, 1997). Through Gulliver's perspective, readers not only perceive the absurdities of society but are also prompted to reflect on their own cognitive blind spots and cultural biases.

In these three works, the role of travel as a cognitive framework is obvious. It is no longer a religious road to salvation, but a process of guiding individuals to constantly "calibrate" their cognitive maps in the reality. Obstacles and encounters, choices and misunderstandings in travel constitute "cognitive events" in narrative. The growth of characters and readers' understanding can be realized in parallel in these cognitive events. Generally speaking, the cognitive model embodied in English travel novels in the 18th century includes not only the ability to understand others and society, but also the ability to reflect on one's own mental state. The travel novels at this stage show that cognitive growth is not only the development of "inner psychology", but also a comprehensive process embedded in social interaction and spatial transformation. On this basis, travel novels have gradually become the core type of literature reflecting the evolution of mind, laying the foundation of narrative and cognitive structure for later emotional introversion, subconscious exploration and space reconstruction.

V. EMOTION AND COGNITION IN SENTIMENTAL FICTION AND GOTHIC

From the end of 18th century to the beginning of 19th century, English travel novels gradually turned from describing the external space to exploring the internal feeling, emotional fluctuation and psychological cognition of the subject, showing a significant trend of "introversion". This change is not only due to the change of travel concept from geographical practice to psychological experience, but also closely related to the development of Sentimentalism and Gothic tradition in English literature. Travel novels in this period often take mental space as the core, and reveal the subconscious activities and psychological complexity stimulated by travel behavior through emotional adjustment,

subjective perception and cognitive projection. This trend is reflected not only in the theme of the text, but also in the cognitive narrative strategy.

Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) is regarded as a representative work of English sentimental literature in the 18th century, and it is also a symbolic text of the transition of travel narrative from external space to internal psychological space. As Zunshine (2006) pointed out, the 18th century novels used the strategy of "theory of mind" to express the psychological state and emotional reaction of the characters. In *A Sentimental Journey*, the protagonist Yorick does not focus on the curiosity for landscapes, historical relics, or ethnic customs as traditional travelers do, but rather concentrates on the emotional fluctuations, the awakening of sympathy, and the formation of moral judgments he experiences during his travels. Cognitive scientist Damasio (2006) proposed the "somatic marker hypothesis," which emphasizes that emotion serves as a central mechanism in cognitive decision-making processes, rather than being a peripheral factor. Yorick's journey can be viewed as a cognitive process guided by such somatic markers, where his moral judgments, social responses, and even aesthetic experiences are deeply rooted in embodied emotions and internal reactions. *A Sentimental Journey* employs a non-linear, fragmented narrative style, utilizing flashbacks, inner monologues, and emotional depictions to reveal the fluidity of subjective consciousness. This structure also reflects the theory of "mental space construction" proposed by Fauconnier and Turner (2003), which posits that humans create multiple interconnected mental spaces at the cognitive level during processes of understanding and narration. Consequently, *A Sentimental Journey* is not merely a novel about travel, but rather a narrative experiment on the workings of the mind. Yorick's compassion for beggars, his admiration for women, and his reflections on his own emotional fluctuations collectively constitute a form of "cognitive journey" grounded in embodied emotion. The novel's narrative perspective and emotional rhythm together mimic the non-linear structure of human mental activity, thereby evoking a "cognitive empathy" effect in readers, synchronizing them with the protagonist's emotional states.

If Sterne's novel initiated an "inward turn" in travel narrative, then Gothic novelists such as Ann Radcliffe further deepened the trend of "psychological spatialization" within the travel novel. The journeys depicted in Gothic fiction often unfold among gloomy castles, remote mountains, and mysterious ruins—spatial constructions that themselves constitute a symbolic reconstruction of characters' psychological states. As Botting (2014) notes, through strategies of "spatial personification" and "psychological landscaping," Gothic fiction transforms external environments into projections of inner fears and desires. "Physical locations and settings manifest disturbance and ambivalence in spatial terms as movements between inside and out... the castles, abbeys and ruins... transfer these institutions to zones outside a rational culture... they are located in isolated spots, areas beyond reason, law and civilised authority" (p. 4). "The internalisation of gothic forms represents the most significant shift in the genre, the gloom and darkness of sublime landscapes becoming external markers of inner mental and emotional states" (Botting, 2014, pp. 83–84). For instance, in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), the landscapes traversed by the heroine Emily are not merely geographical but function as affective mappings of her inner turmoil, sorrow, and curiosity. The intricately layered and obscured spaces in the novel form a psychological labyrinth, echoing Edward Casey's philosophical view that "place is a container of memory" (2013). These spaces are not merely backdrops for events but serve as extended platforms for characters' cognitive states.

Moreover, Radcliffe's characteristic use of the "explained gothic" structure—which rationally or naturally demystifies seemingly supernatural phenomena, ultimately revealing them as human deception, psychological illusion, or scientific occurrences—can itself be understood as a strategy of cognitive integration. By systematically resolving seemingly supernatural events through rational logic, Radcliffe not only dispels readers' fears but also alleviates the cognitive tension built into the narrative structure. This "explanatory narrative" satisfies, to some extent, the reader's expectation for coherence, resulting in a reading experience characterized by emotional stability.

From the perspective of cognitive psychology and spatial cognition theory, the recurring "castles", "mazes" and "dark passages" in Gothic novels are not only spatial images that create a horrible atmosphere, but also concrete expressions of an internal "psychological schema". The fuzzy structure, asymmetric layout and visual masking characteristics of these spaces are highly metaphorically consistent with the "subconscious depression" and "spatial anxiety" discussed in psychology. "Fundamental psychological mechanisms underlying navigation minimally include (a) piloting—the ability to use sets of landmarks to determine or maintain a direction of travel; (b) dead reckoning—the ability to determine one's position on the basis of information about one's velocity and acceleration; and (c) cognitive mapping—the use of a global mental representation of one's environment" (Waller & Nadel, 2013, p. 5). However, in Gothic novels, the author deliberately breaks the cognitive stability of characters and readers by disintegrating the spatial order on which these cognitive mechanisms depend, and pushes them into a state of "cognitive ambiguity". Taking *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian* as examples, through the constant dislocation of space and identity, the narrative gradually dives into multiple subconscious levels from the external geographical description. Travellers' wandering identity, ambiguous motives and broken memories together lead to their travel behavior breaking away from the logic of traditional geographical exploration and becoming a symbol of psychological fissure and cognitive maze.

VI. EXTENDED COGNITION IN MODERN ENGLISH TRAVEL WRITING

In modern society, the development of science and technology has brought about the evolution of culture and

literature, and human imagination has surpassed the development of science and technology. In the aftermath of the spatial turn, a “planetary turn” has caused many of the traditional discourses within modern language and literary studies to make fascinating connections among the local, regional, national, and global circuits of cultural production (Tally, 2017, p. 4). The production of space and geographical imagination bring human emotions into a new framework. With the rapid development of science and technology and the awakening of global consciousness since the middle of the 20th century, the spatial imagination of travel literature has undergone a fundamental change, which is no longer limited to the representation of geographical space, but towards the extended cognitive model of “planetary consciousness” and post-human. This evolution from “earth scripts” to “interplanetary scripts” is reflected in the deep transformation of travel writing, media technology and spatial cognition. “Travel” in literature has gradually become a process of cultural experiment and cognitive speculation in the post-human era.

In the travel narratives in the late 19th century and early 20th century, modern transportation, such as postal vehicles, railways and ships, did not exist simply as background, but formed a part of human travel experience itself, remolding human perception and time-space experience, and forming a brand-new cognitive framework in the period of industrial modernity. As Schivelbusch (2014) said, “annihilation of time and space was the topos which the early nineteenth century used to describe the new situation into which the railroad placed natural space after depriving it of its hitherto absolute powers” (p. 10). The traveler perceived the landscape as it was filtered through the machine ensemble (p. 24). When people sit in modern traffic vehicle, they could have “panoramic perception”, “in contrast to traditional perception, no longer belonged to the same space as the perceived objects” (p. 64). In Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, the airplane, as a modern means of transportation, profoundly functions as a “cognitive-mediational technology,” reshaping the modern intellectual woman's spatial experience of the world. Anna Wulf, the protagonist of the novel, travels frequently between London and Africa. The “God's perspective” brought by high-altitude flight makes her accustomed to examining the context of the surface and the division of national boundaries from the cloud. This detached and panoramic sense of space has formed a profound fracture with the political turmoil and emotional entanglements she experienced on the ground. Air travel is no longer just the movement of physical location, it forcibly separates Anna's cognition from concrete and local life experience, forcing her to speculate on a global and abstract scale. The means of transportation mediates and reconstructs her spatial consciousness, making her constantly switch between the two identities of world citizen and individual woman, which has become the key medium for the formation of her split modern consciousness and global cognitive style.

From the second half of the 20th century to the 21st century, travel science fiction gradually expanded their perspective from the earth to the space, showing the “planetary turn” defined by Tally (2017). This shift transcends the framework of globalization and emphasizes the spatial consciousness based on the coexistence of ethics, ecology and multi-species. Heise (2008) proposed in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* that “planetary consciousness” is not only the expansion of spatial scale, but also the innovation of cognitive structure and ethical vision. In this context, travel is no longer a single subject's observation of the external world, but a “relational space” composed of environment, others and non-human factors. Under this model, literary travel is transformed into an experimental field of ecological consciousness, technological perception and social symbiosis mechanism.

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) is often interpreted as an allegory of gender politics. However, when approached from the perspective of planetary space, the novel presents a planetary cognitive experiment generated within a heterogenous environment. In the story's setting, the Ekumen envoy Genly AI is sent to the planet Gethen to persuade it to join an interstellar alliance. The inhabitants of this planet are androgynous, only undergoing gender differentiation during “kemmer”. This setup not only deconstructs gender binarism but also provides the backdrop for a cross-cultural, cross-cognitive travel narrative. This journey embodies not only the physical challenges of survival but also constitutes a profound ethical and cognitive experiment. The symbiotic relationship between Genly and Estraven on the ice sheet forms the core of the novel's narrative structure. During their months-long trek across the glacier, they share food, warm each other in snow caves, maintain each other's rhythm while skiing, and respect each other's distinct gender, cultural, and political barriers—vividly revealing the post-human attributes of planetary space. The icy expanse not only drives the plot but also serves as a cognitive exercise in “relational space”. Confronted by this pure, non-human natural force, all socially constructed human identities—envoy/exile, king/beggar, and even initial gender assumptions—are stripped away. Space compels the two individuals to revert to a most primitive state of symbiotic existence. Within this planetary space, the subject's perception and emotions are reorganized, ultimately enabling Genly to transcend a binary framework in understanding gender difference and cultural otherness. As Spivak notes in *Death of a Discipline*, the planet belongs to the “species of alterity,” “belonging to another system” (p. 72); planetarity requires us to acknowledge that we inhabit a planet we do not own and cannot fully comprehend. Ethical responsibility arises precisely from this fundamental difference and incommensurability, not from our ability to fully understand or empathize with the Other. We must learn to coexist with and take responsibility for this “Other” that we cannot fully control or comprehend. This responsibility toward the “incommensurable Other” represents an ethical turn in travel narratives within a planetary context. While academic discourse has largely focused on the text's deconstructive significance for gender politics, this paper argues that the reconstituted perceptual mechanisms of the subject within the planetary spatial environment not only challenge gender binarism but also reshape the traveler's cognitive schema. From the perspective of cognitive literary studies, this constitutes a form of spatial cognition

unfolding in a planetary environment—a powerful challenge to the "anthropocentric perceptual system".

VII. CONCLUSION

Travel is a common social phenomenon in western wandering culture, and it has also been fully reflected in the history of English literature. On the basis of outlining the history of British travel novels, this paper discusses the cognitive cultural characteristics and evolutionary implications behind them, constructs a cognitive evolutionary model that runs through the history of British travel novels, and reveals the deep relationship between the internal spatial representation of the text and the cognitive mechanism. The development of English travel novels can be understood as a cultural map from "physical existence" to "cognitive evolution", which has experienced physical practicality, social and mental development, psychological introversion and cognitive expansion on a planetary scale.

In this process, travel novels not only record the human understanding path of space, subjectivity and the other, but also constantly refresh the cognitive boundary and promote the common opening of literature and cultural thinking to the future. The cognitive development model constructed in this paper may provide a new research path for understanding the dynamic relationship between literature and human cognitive system. British travel novels not only reflect the historical evolution of cognitive model as cultural texts, but also actively participate in and shape the cognitive reconstruction of the relationship between self-other-world.

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