


Drowned Halls and Watery Prisons: Fantastical spaces of water in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*

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Abstract— Amongst the resources available to mankind, space continues to be the most disputed commodity especially in the post-modern era. With the rising need for climatic action towards the preservation of planetary space, the Anthropocene and its representation in literary works, has been studied with a zest approaching activism accorded through analytical study. However, a similar focus continues to elude the representations of water in creative works, which have only been under the purview of scholarly investigation as recently as the previous decade., The fluid medium of water is as easily accessible as is evasive to the popular imagination and so the various modes of depicting and utilizing water in literature can be analyzed to form conclusions regarding the psych-anatomical as well as cognitive implications and usage, reflected in both virtual and real-world spaces. In the light of rising interest in blue humanities, this paper attempts to 'blue' the fantasy craft of Susanna Clarke in *Piranesi*, and how women's fantasy writing can be a gateway to hydro spatial explorations of literary and cultural texts.

Keywords: Fantasy, hydrospace, literary space, sea, Women's writings, waterscapes.

I. INTRODUCTION

There hardly exists something so enigmatic and magical as the expanse of the sea brimming into the horizon. When 19th Century sailors set sail to explore new horizons, or when Anglo-Saxon poetry paid homage to the sea, the literature born out of this sentiment of the human fascination with the unknown and the endless, embodied man's awe of the sea. Mesmerizing beyond explanation and terrifying beyond consolation, the sea and its watery domains continue to tantalize the adventurous streak of mankind even today, reaffirmed by the numerous attempts to conquer the depths of the sea-floor or its undulating surfaces.

The majority of the oceanic surface of the earth remains unexplored for a variety of reasons ranging from unfeasibility due to the pressure of water making scientific probing difficult and the hazardous nature of the task (Jamieson et al. 798-800). They discuss how the notion of water bodies and their depths are shaped by pessimistic connotations opposed to the optimistic rhetoric used to describe the horizontal and vertical expanse of land or outer space, describing it as the reason that sea-imaginaries take on macabre light (Jamieson et al. 798). This departs from the usual portrayal of adventures undertaken to conquer its expanse of waves, errant weather conditions and viscose natural elements that don't take the puny existence of mankind into deliberate consideration. The representations of sea in literary works are seldom passive, enhancing the narrative with its depth and fluidity. Susanna Clarke's 'water' craft in *Piranesi* therefore serves as suitable work towards exploring the blueness of literary spaces.

Background - *Piranesi* opens with the description of a humongous waves inside a Hall of the House that threatens to dash the eponymous narrator to death. Piranesi, whose real name is Matthew Rose Sorensen, is one of the inhabitants of The House. Piranesi was imprisoned in the alternative spatial dimension of the House by Ketterley, or The Other, who considers him his rival. Thus imprisoned, Piranesi is obligated to assist The Other in his quest for the Great Knowledge. However, within the timeless and seemingly infinite spatial plane of The House, Piranesi begins to lose track of his Self and his memories. Aided by his detailed journals and fragments of information provided to him by the Prophet and later Raphael, Piranesi is able to regain some of his memories of his real-world Self; eventually returning to the real world. Despite his return, the fragmentation of his alternating Selfhood is sustained.

Objective of Study - This study seeks to investigate the spatial planes of Susanna Clarke's alternative house in *Piranesi* through the study of its literary spaces and waters, and the narrators' navigation and usage of the same in the novel.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Astrid Ensslin proposes T. S Eliot's *The Wasteland* as an all-encompassing location for the dichotomies of life – death and survival, a symbol characteristic of the modernist and postmodernist literary traditions (205). She equates the topographical

makeup of the desert to pastoral tradition as an alternative with intact spatial boundaries that reduce movement and interaction with the constituting elements.

Marlene Dirschauer, in *Modernist Waterscapes: Water, Imagination and Materiality in the Works of Virginia Woolf*, analyses the motif of water and fluidity in Woolf's seminal Modernist texts, studying the symbols and images of water and the ways they can contribute towards a Modernist literary landscape dominated by this ecofeminist element.

Hofmeyer et. al, in *Reading for Water* undertakes the study of Postcolonial African Literature, problematizing and exploring the socio-political dynamics of water and water-bodies employing the ideas of infrastructure in reading water as a social and scholarly tool.

Jacky Bowring in *Melancholy and the Landscape: Locating Sadness, Memory and Reflection in the Landscape*, reflects upon how melancholy shapes the experience of tangible landscapes. Elucidating the aesthetic of melancholy, it delves into the architectural theory to delineate structures that are conducive to melancholy which, "is not directed towards the overcoming of grief, but rather the intensification of the contemplative and existential planes of memory" (Bowring 58).

Gaston Bachelard in *Poetics of Space* utilizes the method of *topoanalysis* to examine the role of imagination and its prevalence in the forming of our memories and consciousness of the private and domestic spaces of one's home.

III. METHODOLOGY

This paper scrutinizes *Piranesi* using the methods of review of existing scholarly literature and textual analysis of the primary text. Basing its analysis on the theories of exploration of space in Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* and Foucault's "Of Other Spaces", this paper assumes the lens of spatial reading for water and its representations in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*.

IV. RESULTS OF DISCUSSION

Bachelard postulates that the house or other similar places of shelter allows the inhabiting self to dream, the state of dreaming being the facilitation of the subconscious to manifest unhindered by the demands of the tangible world (pp. 26-29). Within the material framework of the familiar space of human shelter, the intangible landscape of imagination, memory and identification of the self within this space, allows the self to explore itself and its situatedness within those spaces. The literary space of a text functions in a similar way as it allows the incoming reader to fully cross the threshold into the realm of the text. Within the context of fantasy, this flâneurial stroll within the intangible realm of the "unreal city"¹ and its houses is comparable to the character's setting foot inside a portal and entering a new dimension.

Susanna Clarke in *Piranesi* conjures such an alternative dimension of a wet, watery landscape of what the eponymous narrator describes as the House. It is frequented by waves and tides that crash into countless statues inhabiting the house. This house on a planetary scale of its vastness, is seemingly suspended in space; with only celestial objects outside its immediate domain. It is further divided into 'Halls' or 'Rooms' with their own Vestibules occurring at three major levels - The Lower Halls, where the tides filter the light; the Upper Halls with clouds, and Middle halls that sustains men and birds (Clarke 47). The spatial depiction of the house is a nod to the Italian artist Piranesi's portrayal of the vaults in *Carceri d'invenzione*, an exemplary *capriccio* of overlapping architectural depictions of unreal structures. The unending halls and the water that continually washes off any signs of occupation heightens the sense of placelessness, and timelessness as multiple spatiotemporal planes merge into one another. Forming what Foucault described as a heterotopia, the space of the house mirrors and yet contradicts the world inhabited by the reader. The spatial plane of the House thus, is not an absolute space but derivative from another dimension that the characters, like us, once inhabited but with time fail to remember. The House takes away from the narrator, the essence of his self by tampering with his memory, leaving behind an alternative selfhood, 'Piranesi' that is transient and transitional.

Spatial designs for private spaces often prioritize utilitarian purposes rather than aesthetic. Space and its literary representations thus function as crucial indicators influencing the sentiments of the individual Self, as it continues to create meanings and realities through the private and public places they navigate, often creating new heterotopic cultural and social spaces. Domestic spaces such as houses and gardens, and even minute elements of places thus function as significant manifestations of the melancholic sentiment especially when thought of as extensions to the human body and mind.

¹ From T.S Eliot's, *The Wasteland*. Eliot, Thomas. S. *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*. Faber & Faber. 2011

Since the spatial and temporal mapping of the Self is prerequisite in its identifying and situating itself, the numerous and mazelike structure of the halls only aid to the confusion of by its unmappable vastness and fragmentariness. Despite being clearly distinguishable from one another by the size of the statues in them, the lack of elements characterizing a homely occupation and usage of otherwise sterile spaces, blur these distinctions. While the Upper Halls bear significantly smaller statues compared to the humongous ruined structures in the Drowned halls, the statues mostly tower over the narrator making the surroundings feel larger than life itself, adding to the self's floundering in an unnavigable space (Clarke 34-36).

Piranesi's position within this heterotopia is that of exiled outcast, inhabiting a foreign and unfamiliar space that requires the performance of a ritual to be able to enter, the Ritual that Ketterley who cages Piranesi, performs (Clarke 178). This is characteristic of fantastical spaces that derive or improve upon the real-world model, such as Lewis' Narnia, that required Lucy's belief in magic, or the Other Mother's house and world in *Coraline*, that necessitated Coraline's dissatisfaction in her real-world circumstances and curiosity to set foot through the door. But Lucy's brother Edmund follows a very different trajectory into Narnia where his disbelief and curiosity let him in, but the White Witch's persuasion lures him to stay by her side, segregated him from the world he belonged to, a similar fate meted out to Sorensen or Piranesi for being let into the 'safe space' of the House.

What could go unnoticed is the 16th person's, supposedly the reader, entering the heterotopic plane of the House as a silent witness to Piranesi's consciousness, would also necessitate the performance of a ritual. While the text later reveals the 16th person to be the character Raphael who is allegedly ushered in to murder Piranesi, the text offers no glimpse of the reader's entrance nor the exit and yet Piranesi is aware of the reader character's presence and addresses them directly (Clark 12). While it can be assumed that the reader accompanied a character who possesses the knowledge of the Ritual, it can also be speculated that perforation into the spatiotemporal domains of the House, can be achieved by alternative means, that complicates the presence of the non-human elements within the time-space of the House. Ketterley might have forced in Piranesi into the House but the existence of the albatross and the plethora of other birds indicate the existence of a higher power at play. It can raise questions challenging the tangibility of The House, and whether the elements of it - the sea it houses, the birds and the waves, and if they might be hallucinatory figments conjured in Piranesi's mind. However, The House and the sea, regulates and sustains the ecosystem that comprises of all living creatures including Piranesi. Piranesi receives external aid in the form of clothes and shoes that the Other procures, but he sustains himself on the fish and seaweed that he forages. This also establishes the tangibility of the intruding reader as their presence is as real as the other elements of The House. If walking into the alternative dimension requires the knowledge of the Ritual, providing the reader addressed as 'You', the agential scope to influence and sway Piranesi's fate.

V. SPACES OF WATER AS SITES OF EXISTENTIALISM

As Piranesi describes his movement through the watery spaces of the House,

“In all these spaces, I have stood in doorways and looked ahead. I have never seen an indication of the world coming to an end, but only regular progression of halls and passageways into the far distance.” (Clarke 5)

The baffling infinity of the timelessness and the liminality of the House, and its lack of coziness or closure, makes it an existential site for the Self. The watery expanse within the text emulates the real-world inhibitions encountered in endeavors of scientific probing of watery domains as well as the procurement of survival and food. Piranesi sustains himself exclusively on seaweed or fish perilously caught in the ruins of the Drowned Halls. The incessant waves also pose as an obstruction to his navigating the Halls, with the tides also posing a threat to his life. In a significant moment, the narrator comes across a leaf floating on the water, that he recognizes is something that is born and made for the air. The benign image of the floating leaf is an unconscious reminder of his own foreignness in the inescapable waterscape. With his feet eternally drenched in the water he becomes a part of the house as much as he isn't. The water or the endless sea, invading the precincts of a man-made structure establishes how it distorts, muffles and influences not only spatial movements and usage, but also his perception of himself. Like the water that filters the light through the windows in the Drowned Halls, it also obscures the truth. Piranesi's loss of memory is symbolized in the tides continuously washing away at the statues and the halls, wetting and eroding them, in turn preventing acts of dwelling in the water-invaded spaces. The pervasive image of water in the House can also be considered as an allusion to the powerlessness of architectural structures faced with the elements of nature.

The structure of the House infested with water, contributes to its inhabitable nature, distinguishing it from the idea of a home. A home not only functions as a shelter from the elements of the natural world but also facilitates the formation of dreams in safety (Bachelard 28-29). However, Clarke's alternative house incorporates water into its structural vicinity. The tides and dark pools

of in the Drowned Halls are very much part of the house as are its windows and halls, wetting its surfaces and making it uninhabitable. The narrator might inhabit within the material span of the House, but the act of dwelling², despite involving his visions, remains inadequate. Piranesi's lack of personal belongings, with most of them being provided for by his captor Ketterley furthers this notion as he is dependent on his captor for a semblance of dwelling within the confines of an uninhabitable space. Additionally, Piranesi's sense of familiarity with the Halls results from the two-fold activity of navigating for curiosity of unfamiliar places and navigating for survival. This familiarity enables him to map the spatial plane of The House in his journals, a mental faculty threatened into oblivion due to the erosion of his memories in the timelessness of his existence. In a gradual process, the fragmentation of his memory occurs simultaneously as his transition into his alternate self within the confines of the unreal spatial landscape, nears completion.

The sentient space of the house, is responsible for this transitional selfhood of the narrator, alternating between the dual identities of Matthew Sorensen and Piranesi. The narrator is an island surrounded by unnavigable expanse of waters permeating a labyrinthine space of planetary scale. The materiality of the House and its structure might be real but the essence of it is unreal. Raphael draws attention to how the elements inside the house, despite being tangible, are only imitations of the spatial elements of the real world, much like the shadowy images that flitted across the mirror of the Lady of Shallot³ when she is held captive by her curse. Crossing the threshold of gazing into the real, leads to the activation of the curse ending in her demise. Similarly, the alternative self of Piranesi must also be cast away along with his place in the House, if he is to rejoin society as Matthew Sorensen. The two identities despite co-existing, fail to integrate and the narrator never embodies one or the other in entirety but is in perpetual flux aided by the amnesiac fluidity of the House. In this state of exile from the society, the narrating self undergoes a transformation housed within the amniotic womb-like liminality before he completes his transformation to rejoin the social space and plane that he originally belonged to⁴. The watery space of the House is then a distorted metaphor to the real world, where human consciousness finds itself helpless against a lesser god-like power, with the only glimpses of life being the statues as they go about their day, manifesting in and out of view.

Here Piranesi is met at his loneliest, most turbulent phase of his self-hood. A man in a lonely world, who we later find out is captive. Captive in the sense of a panopticon prisoner by someone who while is akin to a rival, functions and appears to him as the sole benefactor and savior, the sort of rival who had bested him. Piranesi the prisoner lives in a prison remnant of *Piranesi*, a captive artist in search of the truth of the world. The house can thus be considered as the levels of his consciousness, the washing of the flood is his forgetfulness of the fog of the conscious that fogs and conceals access to the unconscious or subconscious. The isolated world of the House is an extended spatial metaphor for the creative isolation act, in which it is necessary for the creative art to withdraw from the world to engage in the act of creation. A practice that can be equated to rite of passage that is the act of pregnancy and birth.

In *Piranesi*, Ketterley and Piranesi are connected through an alternate reality from the one in which the reader first encounters them in the text. Through dreams and visions, Piranesi becomes familiar with the House that is situated in another time and space. In the labyrinthine depths of the House dimension, we see Piranesi unquestioningly living out his "ideal" life as – the seeker of a truth, which however continues to elude him. In that alternative space, he is detached from his real-world identity but is content in simply being someone a seeking a subconscious escape from the persuasions and temptations of the real-world. We see a similar tendency in Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*, where the protagonist flees to escape from a truth that he believes he is trying to unearth. In both these situations, the main characters are similarly forced into a state of captivity where they find themselves, or their higher selves. They are in no hurry to escape this captivity and are willing to be drawn into the enchanting embraces forever until the rousing voices from the real-world, like that of Raphael's in Piranesi's case or Miss Saeki's in Kafka's situation, the present corporeal form of Miss Saeki and the lady investigator's form rouses them into the shock of their state of their captivity. As such transmutable selves transform, like sculptures under the sculpting demands of the domain of their situatedness, performing Self-hood like the characters do – resulting in the taking on and rejecting the text's lure of identification.

² From "Building, Dwelling Thinking" in Heidegger, M., & Hofstadter, 1971. A. *Poetry, language, thought*. Harper Perennial Modern Thought. pp. 143 – 159. 2013.

³ Tennyson's poem, The Lady of Shallot. Tennyson, A., & Keeping, C. 1986. *The Lady of Shalott*. Oxford University Press.

⁴ From Gennep's concept of liminality in Van Gennep, A. 1960. *The rites of passage*. Routledge, 2013.

VI. CONCLUSION

Literary spaces seeped in the fantastical or the imaginary, appeal to the psych-anatomical tendencies of situating an alternative selfhood even while navigating unreal spaces. The act of mapping and dwelling in spaces of fantasy is especially significant in the present age when the notions of occupied space, withing both public and the private are undergoing rapid changes in terms of boundaries and usage. Since water as medium of control and usage is universal in its familiarity, it is natural that such a motif be studied as a subject of expressive symbolism and selfhood. As literature is rightfully considered to reflect the human mind, analysis of spatial planes both topographical and oceanic, would fuel the self's navigation and usage of unreal spaces beyond the threshold of the written text; providing meaningful insight pertaining to our real-world spatial praxis and its implications.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The lens of Riverine Humanities might be adopted to explore literary works, with emphasis on rivers as a recurring motif in artistic works, both in the past and present. The analysis of textual matter can be undertaken in original or in translation, extending to other written and visual sources like songs, films, folklore and paintings where the political, socio-economic and cultural charged nature of water and its ties to identifying and identity can be observed. Ecocritical analyses of migration and displacement writing, focusing on movement or utilization of waterways, might also be undertaken.

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