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Animism as a Key to Remodelling Modern Environmental Ethics: An Ecocritical Reading of *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke

ABSTRACT

The article recognizes the need to complement the existing criticism on *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke with acknowledgement of the deep concern for current environmental problems evinced by that text. Employing ecocritical literary theory, it calls into question the dichotomy between fantasy literature and contemporary concerns of the primary reality. By exploring two alternative models of human relationship with the House, the secondary world entered by the characters of that portal fantasy novel, the article seeks to prove that they may serve as actual models of environmental practices and ethical stances on the relationship between man and nature. It argues that *Piranesi* proposes a certain form of animism as a solution to modern man's alienation from his natural environment. Moreover, it suggests that a return to the child-like state of wonder and recognition of one's multidimensional connection with one's place of living is a necessary remedy for the science and greed-driven devastations of nature. The novel's environmental ethics are interpreted in the context of Barfield's concept of Original Participation. Using Foucault's concept of heterotopia, the article establishes Clarke's House as an example of heterotopia of compensation stressing the contemporary cultural silence of the Earth.

KEYWORDS: ecocriticism, heterotopia, portal fantasy, animism, original participation

1. Introduction

According to Lynn White "what we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship" (1996: 12). Given the current ecological crisis, contemporary views on nature and the role of man in the environment are most likely flawed and urgently need rethinking and correction. Where can we go in search of guidance or alternative models of relationships with nature, which could help us change our ethics and better respond to the ecological dilemmas and problems of contemporary times? Literature, especially fantasy literature,

mimics the primary reality, yet simultaneously frees itself from its constraints. It constitutes one of the spaces that may serve as “laborator[ies] of the possible” and “experimental fields of alternative realities”, according to Bertrand Westphal (2007: 63, 59). This paper’s aim is to present the ways in which *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke suggests nonconformist and unconventional views of nature and serves as a model of the man-nature relationship.

Despite its brilliance, *Piranesi* does not offer much novelty in terms of narrative solutions, imagery, or ideas. The author is not hesitant to acknowledge multiple influences and literary sources, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, Jorge Luis Borges’ *Labyrinth*, or the art of Giovanni Battista Piranesi¹. The novel is intertextually indebted to many literary traditions, such as epistolary novels, detective stories, or the topos of fairy abduction among others². Through creative recycling of established literary solutions the author links the past with the present, and illuminates the future with a ray of hope. Moreover, as will be demonstrated later, *Piranesi* is also a text anchored in ecocritical thought, making use of well-known ecological metaphors and images. This paper shall also pay particular attention to the contribution of Owen Barfield’s anthropological concepts to Clarke’s construction of the relationship between her characters and their environment and the implications and applicability of these models for the humans inhabiting the primary reality.

2. Reasons for treating *Piranesi* as a site of discussion of the primary world’s problems

Despite its recent publication date (September 2020), critics have already interpreted *Piranesi* in various ways. Biographical reviews have attributed the author’s choice of subjects, such as solitude, imprisonment and mental disorder, to her own experiences of prolonged illness confining her in the closed domestic space (e.g. Sinha 2021). More abstract interpretations have seen the House presented in the novel as an allegory of imagination (e.g. Phillips 2020) or “a Renaissance memory palace” (Martin 2020). It can also be argued further that Piranesi’s life embodies the process of creative writing, during which an author,

¹ Clarke spoke of these works as direct sources of inspiration during Waterstones Online Event celebrating the publication of *Piranesi*: an interview with Madeline Miller: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQHhFyQbLoE>

² See Błaszkiwicz, “On the Idea of the Secondary World in Susanna Clarke’s *Piranesi*” for a discussion of the topos of fairy abduction in *Piranesi*.

like Clarke's hero, inhabits a magical realm of fantasy alone. Once the novel is published, the author is also banished from that world, and may enter it only occasionally in reminiscences. *Piranesi* has also been viewed as a book exploring the topic of mental illness (e.g. Tomko 2023), a manual on coping with difficult circumstances and the art of adaptation, as well as a representation of confinement and solitude that was a part of experience of the pandemic of coronavirus (e.g. Schnellbach 2021). *Piranesi* is therefore an indescribable story, which escapes easy categorization and proves relevant in diverse contexts. However, to state what a book of such magnificence, complexity and ambiguity is about is to give a highly subjective picture of readerly response. What is more, the author herself might well have been alluding in *Piranesi* to one of the abovementioned issues or none of them. The novel may consciously or unintentionally echo the sentiments experienced by Clarke and, potentially, it could have helped her to work through her traumas, but it could also have been a text with a much more general relevance and application. This paper does not claim precedence over other interpretations of *Piranesi* and, above all, does not intend to reveal the author's intentions, but it seeks to complement the abovementioned readings by pointing to the environmental awareness of the text.

Ostensibly, *Piranesi* does not touch upon the most severe ecological maladies of our times, as it never acknowledges the climate change, the problem of pollution, the accelerating extinction of species etc. How can such a book be considered part of the modern discussion on ecology? How can a novel set in a fantastic secondary world governed by the rules so different from ours tell us anything meaningful about preservation of biodiversity on Earth or about lowering the emission of greenhouse gases? Perhaps counterintuitively, fantasy and science fiction literature, frequently considered to be out of touch with reality or criticized for being a downright escape from the troubles of the primary world, are often more dedicated to the current ecological problems than regular fiction. Grim catastrophic and dystopian visions of the future cynically respond to the anxieties of the modern society. Science fiction presenting ecodisasters occurring on other planets informs us about human tendency to repeat ecological mistakes. Secondary worlds inspired by Tolkien's works speak of fragility of ecosystems. According to Ann Swinfen "all serious fantasy is deeply rooted in human experience and is relevant to human living. Its major difference from the realist novel is that it takes account of areas of experience – imaginative, subconscious, visionary – which free the human spirit to range beyond the limits of empirical primary world reality" (2019: 231).

Relevance of fantasy and science fiction stems from the fact that these genres of literature ultimately are not devoted to magic or fantastic creatures but to “the adventures of men in the Perilous Realm” (Tolkien 2008: 32). They explore the human condition, attitudes, values and actions employing fantastic circumstances, which are often more dangerous, extreme or stimulating than the reality of the modern life of ordinary people. Returning to the main focus of this paper, the relevance of *Piranesi* for the contemporary ecological dilemmas results from its engagement with the question of the relationship between man and the world, which, as was observed above, is a fundamental aspect of ecology.

3. Piranesi’s relationship with the House and the function of the House in the novel

Tolkien himself refuted the accusation that literature set in fantastic secondary worlds is worthless due to its embracing of escapism as a rightful temporary liberation of the mind and soul from the tediousness and ugliness of reality (2008: 73). According to Tolkien, the escapes that fantasy offers convey universal human desires, e.g. the talking animals commonplace in fairy stories speak of the desire “as ancient as the Fall” to “converse with other living things” (Tolkien, 2008: 73). The idea that humans once did not consider themselves apart from other living things (as well as inanimate objects and phenomena such as the moon, wind, stones, or even maladies) and believed in the possibility of communicating with them was developed by Owen Barfield under the name of Original Participation (1957). It remains in contrast with the prevalent attitude of modern people, who grant themselves cultural primacy, believing themselves to be exceptions, singular entities apart from the whole kingdom of living organisms, not to mention landscape. “Despite Copernicus, all the cosmos rotates around our little globe. Despite Darwin, we are not, in our hearts, part of the natural process” (White 1996: 12). Tolkien and Barfield were the Inklings, hence it is not surprising to trace Barfield’s ideas concerning the evolution of human consciousness in Tolkien’s works. In *On Fairy Stories* he wrote about the “men of the unrecorded past” who did not develop the sense of separation from other living creatures and did not share the guilt that lies on men of the modern era who have “broken off relations” with nature (2008: 74). Human vision of the world before the onset of advanced civilizations clearly was not anthropocentric, and there are proofs that animism was a universal system of belief and practice among early human societies (Manes 1996: 18). Hunter-gatherers spoke to trees, animals, and the

Sun, believing them to be inhabited by intelligence comparable to themselves, and they also considered themselves capable of receiving and understanding the “language” of nature. Barfield described that phenomenon as a type of belief or conviction; Clarke goes a step further in *Piranesi*. Her immoral scientist Arne-Sayles is confident that humans not only used to speak to the elements of the natural world but also that communication between human beings and the world was real and tangible. As Arne-Styles explains to Piranesi: “Once, men and women were able to turn themselves into eagles and fly immense distances. They communed with rivers and mountains and received wisdom from them. They felt the turning of the stars inside their own minds” (88). Elsewhere, Arne-Sayles ideas are summarized in a conclusion: “the world was constantly speaking to Ancient Man (...) this dialogue between the Ancients and the world was not simply something that happened in their heads; it was something that happened in the actual world (148). This magic of communication, “wisdom of the ancients” (89) had been neglected and discarded by people until it finally left the world of humans, seeping into another world called the House. Eventually, the ancient Knowledge leaked also out of the House. Arne-Sayles thinks it irrevocably lost; his former student, Ketterley, is fruitlessly looking for it in the House, while Piranesi, the hero and the narrator of the novel, actually possesses that ability to communicate with the House, yet he is ironically unaware that this very skill is the mastery of the Great and Secret Knowledge that Ketterley is searching for in vain.

Piranesi inhabits the House, which is a vast labyrinth consisting of monumental halls and vestibules full of stone statues of various sizes and shapes. It is repeatedly inundated by ocean waves, which Piranesi tries to chart and predict in order to avoid drowning. He believes that he shares the House with Ketterley, whom he calls “the Other” who in fact only visits that world from time to time. Piranesi therefore lives completely alone in the House as the only living creatures inhabiting the House apart from him are a few species of animals, such as albatrosses, rooks, sparrows and fish. Due to the mental consequences of the prolonged stay in the House, Piranesi does not remember that Ketterley imprisoned him in the House, and treats the scientist as his dear friend. Likewise, the House is not a prison for the hero, but a beloved domestic space; he equates the House with the entire world as he no longer remembers his former life on Earth and the House encompasses all reality for him. Despite meager nature of his existence and the inhospitably cold, wet stone halls devoid of greenery, Piranesi is grateful for the kindness of the House and extolls its beauty and goodness towards him on nearly every other page of the journal, which is the content of the novel.

However, it would be wrong to treat the House as a mere setting for the action of the novel. The role of the House in *Piranesi* is rather that of a central character, the true “other” for Piranesi, who forms his new identity and personality in relation with the place in which he inhabits. This observation is corroborated by Farah Mendlesohn’s stance that “the primary character in the portal fantasy is the land” (2008: 28).³ Some critics, Scott Sanders among them, have commented that modern fiction feels barren, and that emptiness comes from lack of nonhuman context and acknowledgement of wilderness (1996: 183). Modern fiction devoted solely to human business pretends that there is nothing worth mentioning beyond its limited scope. This anthropocentric illusion is a weakness of which *Piranesi* is free. Fantasy works such as Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or *Piranesi* are such compelling reads because in them human affairs are just specks against the living wild uncontrolled environment, the secondary reality. In *Piranesi*’s foreground there is the House, which is a vision of an environment beyond human capacity to understand and encompass. It is alive, magical, vast, and strange, as well as wild but it has a potential to become a beloved home to those who come to love it thus forgetting the modern vision of the material world rooted in utility.

Old entries from the journal reveal that in his former life Piranesi (known previously as Matthew Rose Sorensen) had a distinctly different character. He was an ambitious, proud and sophisticated academic doing extensive research to author a book. Piranesi, on the other hand, a Child but also a product of the House, is a naïve, charming, absolutely innocent, humble, grateful, and inquisitive man. The House exerts substantial influence on all human beings, causing amnesia, mental collapse, and personality modifications, yet the range and power of its impact is varied and seems to depend on the quality of the character exposed to it. Several people died while imprisoned in the House, either because they had not learnt to cooperate with the House and fend for themselves, or because they had gone mad. This supposedly malevolent impact of the House is a legacy of the fairy abduction topos, which Clarke explored explicitly in her former novel, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norell*⁴. In *Piranesi* the idea of madness or amnesia induced by the fairy world serves as an element crucial for the development of the plot and the hero’s character.

³ According to Mendlesohn’s definition *Piranesi* can be qualified as a portal fantasy: “A portal fantasy is simply a fantastic world entered through a portal” (XIX).

⁴ In *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norell* human characters are abducted and imprisoned in the Kingdom of Lost Hope by a fairy named the Gentleman with the Thistledown Hair or forced to join balls happening there every night.

Piranesi's relationship with the House is contrasted in the novel with the Other's approach to that world. Both men consider themselves to be scientists, yet they mean different things by it. Piranesi is an explorer who bases his research on first-hand observation and his main interests are the ways of the House, cycles of its waves, structure of the labyrinth, its weather conditions, and the statues that crowd the halls. He is a naturalist who takes keen interest in what he sees; the search for the mysterious Great and Secret Knowledge is of no consequence for him. He is aware that the House's essence cannot be extracted and that the House provides everything that he, "the Child of the House" needs, which excludes all the magical powers that Ketterley desires. Piranesi feels abandoned by the Other in his admiration of the House and he experiences a pressing urge to "bear witness to the Splendours of the World" (6), hence his scientific inquiries are complemented by an aesthetic and somewhat religious adoration. He is a scientist using contemplation and imagination as primary manners of acquiring knowledge. His reverence is reflected by the capital letters always used by him in his journal to write the name of the House or any of its components or features. For him the process of naming the statues and halls is not an act of taking possession but a way of familiarizing himself with the House. Piranesi wants to catalogue, name and chart the House in an attempt to domesticate that space and make the world his home. Perhaps this penchant for naming is also dictated by Piranesi's insecurity concerning his own identity. "Knowing a place is knowing yourself" (Shepard 1977: 32) and since Piranesi is convinced that he was born in the House, he wants to understand himself and learn the purpose of his life through knowing the world that he inhabits.

As observed above, the story is narrated in the form of first-person entries in a journal written by Piranesi, who appears to be a reliable and objective narrator with a scrupulous scientific mind, whose memory, however, plays tricks on him. Conventionally, the protagonist provides the reader with a "guided tour of the landscapes" and unravels the mystery of the fantasy world along with the reader (Mandlesohn 2008: XIX). Nevertheless, the reader must not rely solely on the narrator's subjective discourse in forming a picture of the House. The split in the narrator's personality and Piranesi's scrupulous transcriptions of his conversations with Ketterley, Arne-Sayles, Rafael and James Ritter allow for certain plurality of perspectives. While Piranesi is a devoted follower of the House, the entries written by Matthew Rose Sorensen shortly after his imprisonment in the House express his wild anger and despair, and, expectedly, reveal none of his future attachment to his prison. His description of that world contains many

negatively coloured expressions: he feels “vast emptiness”, hears “a dull thud” (182) and perceives the statues as “inscrutable” (78). Ketterley sees the House as “endless dreary rooms all the same, full of decaying figures covered with bird shit” (47), where nothing lives. Like Arne-Sayles, he is afraid of its effects on human mind and seems disappointed with the House, which he expected to contain the Great and Secret Knowledge. Rafael, the policewoman who rescues Piranesi, finds solace and peace of mind in the House and visits it willingly; she also learns from Piranesi to admire the beauty of that world. James Ritter, a former prisoner of the House, shares Piranesi’s affection and adherence to that world. When Piranesi helps him visit the House, he begins to cry “for happiness” (239) and does not want to leave it. However, despite the seemingly positive relationship with the House, Ritter barely survived his sojourn in it, and many others, including other prisoners, Giussani and Ovenden, as well as D’Agostino, who apparently visited the House of her own accord, paid for it with their lives. Thus Piranesi’s extremely positive relationship with the House is rendered slightly precarious by the plurality of visions and emotions towards the House expressed by other characters, or by Sorensen’s initial reactions to the world. In the end, that plurality of opinions is ultimately compromised by the fact that the novel is a narrative of one man, and this narrator filters contrasting opinions. Piranesi is often mistaken about the intentions of the House, for example, he thinks that one of the female skeletons that he found in the labyrinth, whom he calls the Folded-Up Child, was intended as a wife for him, when in fact it was the remains of Sylvia D’Agostino⁵. The protagonist is also convinced that the House is the benevolent creator of everything, when in actuality it is a derivative of the human world, a residue of forgotten ideas, a quasi-Platonic world of ideals. There are several disturbing questions left unanswered by the novel: How can the House be kind when it erases memories? It is really an intelligent presence or a hostile desert with no consciousness? For Piranesi the answer to these questions is obvious but Clarke seems to intentionally leave the status of the House open. Piranesi’s relationship with the House may be read either as an instance of Barfield’s Original Participation, a one-sided animism (ultimately reduced to a figment of his imagination) or a picture of the unique “magical” communication with the world.

⁵ Sylvia D’Agostino died in the House long before Piranesi first entered it and her fate was completely unconnected to his. The idea that she was intended to be his wife originated with Piranesi alone.

Acknowledgement of the controversy concerning Piranesi's relationship with the House does not exclude the environmental value of the novel, yet it is necessary for its honest analysis. Whether Piranesi's communication with the House is real or imaginary, it still serves as a model of human communication with nature. Likewise, whether his child-like state of wonder and openness are imposed on him by the House or not, they still make him a better man. Finally, whether his relationship with the House is mutual or one-sided, it allows him to survive and make the best of the difficult circumstances.

4. *Piranesi's environmental message*

The aim of this article is to propose reading the House as a metaphor for the Earth, and to consider Ketterley's arrogant treatment of the House and Piranesi's loving relationship with it as models of disparate human relationships with their home planet. The metaphor is a well-established manner of presenting human responsibility for nature in environmental texts, and seems to resonate with both scientists and the general public⁶. *Piranesi*, a fantasy novel, offers us important environmental wisdom by employing a metaphor already functioning in the scientific world. Like every metaphor, the "Earth as home" simile is both revealing and obscuring, or, in other words "it reveals by concealing" (Hills 2022); and in seeking a connection between two diverse objects, ideas or phenomena, it deliberately ignores the mismatched features of the two.

Since for Piranesi the House is both wilderness and unknown territory, which he explores with fascination, as well as domestic space, where he feels comfortable and at home, and which he is constantly naming and taming, he does not distinguish between domestic space and wilderness. The two concepts are a product of advanced civilizations, and many animist societies do not even have words to describe this opposition (Manes 1996: 18). Piranesi's habitat is also a mixture of two other binary opposites corresponding to the previous pair, namely nature and culture. The House is a world resembling a building filled with stone statues. Its structure and its shape are therefore derived from the

⁶ For example, see "Metaphor and Visions of Home in Environmental Writing" by Alison Steinbach, for a discussion of two specific environmental texts employing the Earth as home metaphor. See "The Earth is our Home: Systemic Metaphors to Redefine our Relationship with Nature" by Paul H. Thibodeau et. al for a more in-depth study encompassing many heterogenous texts.

area belonging to the human world that remains in dichotomy with nature in the modern Western vision of material space, namely art, the apex of culture. However, the House is also a place governed by the elements: it displays seasonal changes in the weather, its waves are a wild force beyond anyone's control, and its birds, seaweed, and corals transform it from a pristine museum into a nature-reclaimed space. It is a world of nature and culture's fundamental coexistence and intimate combination. Hence, the construction of the House and Piranesi's relationship with it undermine the foundational divide on which modern anthropology is based –that of human vs. nature. Błaszkiwicz also points out “a lack of clear differentiation between the physical and the metaphysical” in the construction of the House characteristic for “early natural philosophers” (2021: 119) predating Plato and Aristotle, who established the distinction. This aspect of the secondary world of *Piranesi* is the cornerstone of the hero's ability to interact intimately with that world and it is a basis of Barfield's concept of Original Participation. Interestingly, Piranesi's favourite sculpture depicts a faun, a creature crossing another fundamental divide –that between man and animals. Other sculptures important for Piranesi are also hybrids, namely the Minotaurs, The Horned Giants, as well as representations of animals: the Fox, the Gorilla, and the Woman carrying a Beehive containing some bees. As Piranesi is one with the space that he inhabits, he also embraces and tries to communicate with the non-human inhabitants of the House. His love for the Statue of the Faun is a symbol of his openness to interspecific relationships and embrace of animals as elements of the metaphysical continuum of the House. There are few animals in the House and the species that do appear in it are genetically distant from humans (birds, crustaceans, fish), yet Piranesi speaks to them and reads their behaviour in a manner that illustrates his belief in immanence of the quasi-divine intelligent spirit in the material aspects of the world. Like early Christians who treated the world as a symbolic system of meaning through which God spoke to people (White 1996: 11), he associates various archetypal statues with meanings and lessons and treats them as personal messages. However, unlike influential Christian thinkers⁷, Piranesi is not convinced that the world exists solely to serve people; for him “the House is valuable because it is the House. It is enough in and of Itself. It is not the means to an end” (61).

⁷ Obviously, this is an oversimplification of the matter, yet many eccritics point to human utilitarian approach to nature as rooted in the Christian axiom of nature's servile role in human salvation.

Ketterley, on the other hand, is a scientist of the intangible; he wants to find the Great and Secret Knowledge in the House in order to gain certain superhuman skills, for example, the ability to vanquish Death, penetrate lesser minds, be invisible (46). He is a vain man of mediocre imagination and creativity, seeking to compensate for his scientific failure by acquiring magical powers. Arne-Sayles calls him “an egotist” who always thinks “in terms of utility” (64). That utilitarianism seems to be a universal approach to all the “others” that Ketterley interacts with. He imprisons Piranesi, abandons him in the House, and treats him with arrogance and superiority as if he were his private servant, field researcher, and provider of data. The House has no intrinsic value for him either, but constitutes merely a means to an end as well as a constant threat and a growing disappointment.

Ketterley spend as little time as is necessary in the House and his research is based solely on the data provided by Piranesi and Arne-Sayles’ vision of the Lost Knowledge. The results of those circumstances are his detachment and estrangement from that world. Although he is scientifically interested in the House, he is a stranger to it and suffers the consequences of that in the final moments of his life, when the sudden surge of waves drowns him. Hence, while Piranesi is an inhabitant of the House, Ketterley is a tourist figure, a visitor, who is unable to bond with the place. His scientific pursuits resembling spiritualistic-magical rituals are supposed to lead to the discovery of the Lost Knowledge, which is the human ability to communicate with the world. Piranesi, who has mastered that skill unconsciously, recognizes vanity and futility of these rituals. Ketterley, a sceptical and wary tourist, is structurally unable to find the language of communication with the House as he lacks the necessary child-like state of wonder and openness, and his attitude towards the material world is anthropocentric to the core. For Ketterley the world is silent and must be forced to listen to humans to do their bidding. That silence is the context in which modern human “ethics of exploitation regarding nature has taken shape and flourished” (Manes 1996: 16). Piranesi, to whom “the World speaks (...) every day” (107), displays a humble disposition towards the House, aesthetic consciousness of its beauty, trust in its kindness, and awareness of the fragility of its ecosystem. He “hears” the House through his eyes, nose, hands and heart, and such hearing is out of reach of Ketterley, who would rather have the House perform his orders than listen to its advice and warnings or even cooperate with it for his own survival. Ironically, in his deafness to the House’s “speech” Ketterley is ignorant of the very power that he is searching for and of the means of his own rescue.

Ketterley treats his scientific pursuits as a heroic undertaking, conceived of as a victory over the House. Moreover, he believes that conducting scientific

research allows him to reach for unethical solutions. According to Ursula LeGuin, technology and science are perceived in modern Western culture as heroic undertakings, a battle with the elements (1996: 153). The outcome may only be triumph or tragedy, and in case of Ketterley the outcome is the tragedy of his death. His heroic persistence at first earns him Piranesi's admiration, yet the protagonist abandons him when he realizes that Ketterley is unable to recognize any intrinsic value in the House and treats it as an opponent, who must be stripped of his armour and left to rot. Recognizing egoism and shortsightedness intrinsic in his companion's scientific undertaking Piranesi concludes: "I realised that the search for the Knowledge has encouraged us to think of the House as if it were a sort of riddle to be unravelled, a text to be interpreted, and that if ever we discover the Knowledge, then it will be as if the Value has been wrested from the House and all that remains will be mere scenery" (60).

Piranesi's identity, attitude, and character traits are shaped by the House and are essential for his communication with it. When Matthew Rose Sorensen becomes imprisoned in the House, he is unhappy, angry and unable to interact with the world. However, the impact of the House on his psyche erases not only his memory but also primary cultural assumptions and instincts nurtured by his society in relation to the material world and nature. Piranesi is not demanding of the House, but rather, he is grateful for the origin of his meagre sustenance. He is not silencing the world with his arrogance but instead he is attuned to its "voice". He is not seeking his own comfort but amplification of the beauty of the House. Finally, he does not feel supreme to this world but an integral part of it, having as much right to live in it as other creatures.

Piranesi's communication with the House is often verbal: he prays to the House and at one point in the story he actually hears the statue of the Faun talking to him (108-109). However, this communication is often also subliminal. Piranesi knows that he is the "Beloved Child of the House" (113) and the source of that knowledge must have been the House, yet the narrator never explicitly relates the moment of its reception. It comes from his intuitive awareness, a metaphysical perception of the intentions and attitudes of the House. Piranesi also experiences a Vision (at the coming of the albatross) and a Revelation (when looking at the fool moon), which indicate his sensitivity to the irrational, the spiritual, the unknown, and readiness for reception of symbolic meaning of reality⁸. This is best represented

⁸ Piranesi's first meeting with the albatross and his subsequent devotion to these birds is a direct allusion to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Coleridge. In the ballad, the

in moments, in which he studies behaviour of birds decoding their alighting on particular statues as a series of meaningful bits of information. Once, when he notices a flock of small birds, he calls out to them: "I am paying attention! (...) What is it that you wish to say to me?" (42). The birds not only warn him against poor haul of fish but also help him recover his lost memory.

How can Piranesi's interactions with the House be a model for modern society's approach to the Earth? On a very basic level, Piranesi displays ecological wisdom consisting in his awareness of his own entanglement with the House. He preserves the beauty and cleanliness of his surroundings, gathers only as much of food as he is able to eat, burns trash that he finds in the House, recycles old objects, and requires an absolute minimum of man-made items, hence his everyday practices are dictated by his direct reliance on the House for his survival. Piranesi can thus serve as our conscience, enveloped as we are in the Western civilization's epidemic of consumerism. Our avaricious materialism results in considerable pollution of the natural environment displaying our blindness regarding our dependency on Earth for our very sustenance. On a less tangible level, Piranesi's animistic approach to the world in which he lives can be read as something belonging at once to the distant past as a universal response of man to nature in the childhood of humanity (in Barfield's opinion), and a thing of the future. Once Piranesi's mind is cleared of his cultural background, he develops a loving relationship with the place that he inhabits, thus allowing it to become a source of his identity. Piranesi, the "Beloved Child of the House" is a child also in another sense. His naivety and trustworthiness, as well as his animism, are the features associated with child psyche. According to Piaget, a child in the pre-operational stage of development believes that the world is alive, conscious, intelligent and has a purpose⁹. Thus animism presents itself as a fundamental human response to nature, which is replaced by civilization and the process of acculturation and education resulting in adoption of a more objectifying and often utilitarian approach.

Barfield's theses resonate with Rousseau's concept of the Noble Savage, which has been stereotypically attached to various indigenous groups with negative consequences. However, environmental writers still use the optimistic view of

killing of an innocent bird by a sailor is punished by God with a severe curse, teaching the man that "He prayeth well who loveth best,/ All things both great and small:/ For the dear God, who loveth us, /He made and loveth all" (lines 657-650). The intertextual allusion additionally casts Piranesi as a morally correct person with regard to his relationship with the natural world through his instinctive respect and affection for albatrosses.

⁹ See Part II of Piaget's *The Child's Concept of the World*.

human nature in their studies, emphasizing the ecological wisdom of Indigenous practices¹⁰. Clarke seems to encourage the association of Piranesi with the concept of the Noble Savage by attributing the hero with certain features that fit into the stereotype. Piranesi is the only black-skinned person in the novel; he wears rags and walks without shoes; he is an animist displaying a religious admiration of the material world in which he lives; he is dominated and treated contemptuously by a white man; finally, he is a forager. His instinctive interaction with the House is the proper manner in which the House wishes to be treated and his pure and naive heart is the source of his submissive nature. However, Piranesi in the end dismantles the stereotype by also being a scientifically-oriented man with keen mind, who learns the truth about his condition from his own scrupulous writings. The discovery allows him to shed the yoke of bondage imposed on him by Ketterley and become the master of his own fate.

The third layer of meaning connected with Piranesi's status of a "child" refers to his child-like dependence on the House for his survival and the life-giving force of the House. Piranesi believes that he is the "Beloved Child of the House" because he cannot remember his real family and childhood, and as a result he thinks that he was in some manner created by the House and raised in it. Consequently, his reverence for the world imitates a parent-child relationship and is reminiscent of the ancient personification of nature as the Mother Earth. This multi-layered sense of entanglement with the House allows Piranesi to overcome his confusion regarding his origins, his name and his purpose. Unlike a modern man often experiencing a sense of confusion, isolation and insecurity, Piranesi is calm, fulfilled and satisfied. He does not know his name but he knows who he is because of his relationship with the place in which he lives.

In his critique of the modern urban life depriving men of "the sensation of being part of a known place" Neil Evernden states: "What does make sense, however, is something that most in our society could not take seriously: animism. For once we engage in the extension of the boundary of the self into the "environment" then of course we imbue it with life and can quite properly regard it as animate-it is animate because we are a part of it" (1996: 101). The lost sense of a place may be retrieved according to Evernden by the Pathetic Fallacy, metaphorical thinking of nature, or in other words – cognitive animism. The Earth is our House and unless we begin to perceive it as a living thing, we will never experience ourselves

¹⁰ For example, see Fairhead and Leach, "False Forest History, Complicit Social Analysis: Rethinking Some West African Environmental Narratives".

as a vital part of it, nurtured and supported by it through our lives. Piranesi finds a connection with the World discarded by humanity at the advent of civilization through an animist approach to it. Hence, the hero's approach encourages us to discard our utilitarian mode of thinking about the Earth and instead to treat it as a live interlocutor. Through her novel Clarke seems to imply that our world, like the House, is not silent, only we behave like the deaf Ketterley, unwilling to connect with it, remain within it, and listen. Susan Jeffers explains how humans can communicate with nature, taking into consideration a literal interpretation of that concept: "To listen to the environment is, practically speaking, to observe its reaction to human actions, and to understand its rhythms, practices, and habits. It is to recognize, in our minds, our lives, and our policy making, that there is life out there beyond our own, and that we are connected to it" (2014: 5).

Traditional modern ecology supports the claim that humans are the greatest threat to the natural ecosystems and that nature thrives best if it is left uninhabited and not interfered with¹¹. For example, this belief is reflected by establishment of the national parks, which on the one hand restrict human presence, but on the other hand allow for ecotourism, thus continuing negative human effects on nature. However, more recent studies speak of virtual disappearance of intact natural ecosystems. Instead, they speak of multiple and irreversible entanglement of humans with nature described as Anthropocene, a new geophysical era in which humans constitute the greatest transforming power irrevocably changing the Earth's environments and leaving a lasting geological imprint. Such vision of human impact on the natural world erases the probability of man's withdrawal from pristine ecosystems as it abolishes the very possibility of their existence in the modern era. Within the anthropocentric vision of human relationship with the world there are no pristine ecosystems left on Earth, and the distinction between the artificial and the natural has been blurred by the pervasive human interference. One consequence of this situation is the impracticality of the outdated ecological axiom that nature should be left untamed and unprotected, as Elizabeth Kolbert suggests: "What's got to be managed is not a nature that exists – or is imagined to exist – apart from the human. Instead, the new effort begins with a planet remade and spirals back on itself –not so much the control of nature as the *control of* the control of nature" (2021: 3). Kolbert does not advocate human withdrawal from nature because nature is unable to deal with the consequences of human-induced

¹¹ For example, see the conclusion of a study by Jones et.al., "Restoration and repair of Earth's damaged ecosystems".

changes. Instead, she calls for responsible management of the continuums consisting of natural elements of the old environments and the alterations and “controls” introduced by humans.

The above discussion allows for an extended reading of the House from *Piranesi* as a metaphor for the Earth. Piranesi is the only human being living in the House. At one point in the novel he considers leaving that reality and experiences grave doubts and remorse. He says: “If I leave, then the House will have no Inhabitant and how will I bear the thought of it Empty?” (157). His instinctive ability to communicate with the House allows him to claim that “the World (...) wishes an Inhabitant for Itself to be a witness to its Beauty and the recipient of its Mercies” (157). The House, which was created out of the lost magic consisting in human ability to communicate with the natural world, seems to realize its full potential in its interaction with a human being. Piranesi temporarily leaves the House to seek human company, yet he returns regularly to it, sometimes introducing others to its beauty, because he misses the tranquillity and solitude of that world as well as his relationship with it. Clarke’s novel is thus a vision of people’s deep entanglement with the Earth and their special place in it. Humankind cannot “abandon” its House, a place which it “created” and where it belongs. An empty house without inhabitants is a hollow shell, a haunted space, an object bound to wither and collapse in time. As Kolbert claims, at this point in history nature has been furnished, repainted and reconstructed by humans so extensively, that it no longer can be abandoned by him. In consistence with the current ecological findings, humans need to remain the Inhabitants of the Earth to uphold its fragile ecosystems already irrevocably tampered with. Romantics believed that humans lost psychological harmony due to their lack of intimacy with nature (Goodbody 2013: 63). *Piranesi* shows that humans also need to combat their alienation from nature and think of themselves as Inhabitants and a Children of the Earth in order to build their own well-being resulting from the sense of belonging.

On the other hand, the metaphor of Earth as a house and Piranesi’s insistence that the World requires human presence evokes associations with the biblical story of creation, where God creates earthly Paradise as a place for humans to live and thrive. Adam is brought to life by God on the last day of creation as its capstone. One of his occupations is naming every creature living in the Paradise, which is mirrored by Piranesi, who attempts to chart all the tides and name all the statues of his reality. Piranesi’s solitude in the House is an echo of Adam’s initial isolation in the confined space of Eden. Both are pure of heart and easy to manipulate by the forces of evil – the Devil/Ketterley. Both communicate spontaneously with

a divine force –Adam speaks with God, Piranesi talks with the House. Both lose their innocence and as a result gain more informed understanding of the reality, in which they used to live. Also, both Adam and Piranesi long for their initial state of innocence and happiness, and if it were possible, would gladly return to Eden/the House. Most importantly, both are indispensable elements of the world to which they belong. The House needs an admirer, a recipient and a child to take care of; Eden with all its creatures was created as a habitat for humans and can perform no higher function than to serve them. Therefore, The House may be interpreted as a vision of God immanent in His creation, whose love for humans makes Him miss their attention and desire their reciprocal love with holy jealousy. The House, like the God of the Old Testament, speaks to his chosen one and wants to bind him with goodness and mercy, yet allows Piranesi to leave when he makes that decision, respecting his free will.

5. The House as heterotopia

The above discussion has dealt with the House as a space used in *Piranesi* to explore human relationship with the world in the primary reality. However, an analysis of the House in relation to the frame world presented in the novel, the ordinary human world, reveals how the House serves also as a heterotopia, a place within a place, inverting the set of relations that it mirrors, and contesting the reality which it represents (Foucault 1986: 24).

In accordance with Foucault's division, Piranesi's world is a heterotopia of deviation, which is a place which shelters humans displaying atypical behaviours. The amnesia that it causes forces Piranesi to return to the state of Original Participation, where he ascribes intention, will, and intelligence to the material world. This attitude is believed to be deviant and unacceptable attitude in the primary world, which takes a utilitarian approach to nature. Moreover, the House attracts people who do not fit in well with society like Raphael, who finds constant human company tiresome (227). Secondly, true to the third principle of heterotopias set out by Foucault, the House "juxtaposes in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (1986: 25). It represents, as described above, domestic space and wilderness, culture and nature, the metaphysical and the physical. Therefore, The House's contradictoriness contests the clear ontological and conceptual divisions operational in the primary reality, which result in modern people's alienation from nature. Furthermore, the House is a heterotopia "linked to the accumulation of time" and "oriented toward

the eternal" (1986: 25), where the statues represent the Platonic ideas and the hero, despite his best efforts, is lost in his reckoning of time. The statues' metaphysical existence out of time is contrasted in the House with the internal patterns of change in the form of the waves or the seasons (suggesting the existence of time as motion in Aristotelian philosophy). As a portal fantasy *Piranesi* also fits in with the fifth principle of heterotopia, which is its compulsory or restricted access requiring the use of rituals, or permission. Only a few people are able to enter the House strictly following the instructions restricted to the followers of Arne-Sayles. Also, Foucault's system specifies the House as a heterotopia of compensation since it is a "space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (1986: 27). The House's perfection is not grounded in its aesthetical values; rather, the beauty of that world lies in the unchecked and surprising creativity of the forces of nature, as well as in the order of the mind that it produces in certain individuals. It is also perfect in the solitude and tranquillity it offers, something lacking in the novel's frame world characterized by its multitude of people, suffering, as well as chaos, and rivalry.

Conclusions

Piranesi offers us "environmental counterethics" (Manes 1996: 16) necessary in times of crisis resulting from the modern utilitarian approach to nature. In particular, it presents a picture of a man so interrelated with the fantastic world that he inhabits, that that world becomes a part of him, alive and articulate. His House is a heterotopia of the frame world, the ordinary world of modern people, offering a means of escape from the pervasively negative patterns of human interactions with the environment and modern people's lack of bond with the space inhabited by them resulting in their alienation from it. *Piranesi* encourages breaking the vicious circle of indifference and destruction as well as seeking means of connection with nature. It also teaches that animism does not need to be sentimental make-believe but a powerful mental practice potentially promising tangible "consequences in the realm of societal practices" (Manes 1996: 15). These consequences may include not only increased ecological awareness and sensitivity to the effects of human interferences with nature but also a stable sense of identity and belonging based on realization of the mutuality of nature-human relationship. Within the logic of the novel the first obstacle to the moral treatment of the Earth is the dismantling of nature's cultural silence. This is necessary since "for human societies of all kinds, moral consideration seems to fall only within a circle of speakers in communication with one another" (Manes 1996: 16).

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