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Labyrinths of Memory in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*

ABSTRACT

The essay explores the themes of memory, identity, and trauma in Susanna Clarke's novel *Piranesi* (2020) within the context of other postmodern and contemporary labyrinth narratives. As a singular space encompassing multiple forking paths, the labyrinth has offered postmodernity a stylistic paradigm for narratives that branch out to other texts, creating palimpsestic structures which may be explained in terms of Genette's theory of hypertextuality. When such a labyrinthine text takes on the form of a journal, its exploration comes to stand for the narrator's attempts to make sense of his own palimpsestic identity, made fragmentary by traumatic amnesia and the resulting loss of psychological continuity. The fantastic mode allows the novel to enact a metonymic shift between the exploration of space, the reading of text, and the reconstruction of personal identity through the process of remembering. The labyrinth becomes a spatialization of the protagonist's post-traumatic inner space and, through metonymy, of the contemporary western psyche's fraught relationship with memory.

KEYWORDS: labyrinth, palimpsest, memory studies, trauma, inner space, hypertextuality, fantasy

1. Introduction

Susanna Clarke's 2020 novel *Piranesi* takes place in a world-spanning labyrinth reminiscent of the eponymous Italian artist's *Carceri d'Invenzione*, themselves artistic representations of the "labyrinthine architecture of the human soul" (Assmann 2011: 303). It follows the lonely inhabitant of this place as he deals with his own labyrinthine memories by trying to piece together an identity out of journal fragments. It wields the genre conventions of fantasy and detective fiction to contrast the exploration of a secondary world ruled by the cyclical patterns of rituals and seasons with the working-through of the narrator's past, only accessible through the repetitions of traumatic re-enactment. This essay aims to bring further

attention to the close relationship between the novel's use of its fantastic setting and its exploration of the protagonist's memory, identity, and trauma.

Piranesi's relationship to other bodies of text is crucial to this discussion. From its very title, the novel invites the reader to look for connections beyond the page, and even in scholarly analysis, it offers many interesting readings when considered as a palimpsest, a text "superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through" (Genette 1997: 399). Most existing research focuses at least in part on its hypertextual nature: the novel has been read as a response to the Neoplatonism of C.S. Lewis (Dugger 2021), as a postmodern twist on portal fantasy and fairy abduction narratives (Błaszkievicz 2021), as commentary on the Wordsworthian ideal of the Romantic scientist (Sanders 2024). As Myśliwiec (2024: 108) puts it, "Through creative recycling of established literary solutions the author links the past with the present".

The workings of this "creative recycling" are deeply rooted in the postmodern tradition, following the stylistic paradigm of the labyrinth. *Piranesi* thus finds a point of comparison in other postmodern labyrinth narratives, such as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), but especially the short fiction of Jorge Luis Borges. Clarke has openly acknowledged the novel's debt to Borges's work and especially to "The House of Asterion" and "The Library of Babel", most recently in the afterword to *The Wood at Midwinter* (Clarke 2024), but a more extensive comparative study is warranted: many of Borges's stories have dealt poignantly with themes of memory and trauma, developing an aesthetic of memory that recognises the subject's instability in dialogue with the past (Pakman 2007: 177), and Clarke's own treatment of the subject follows in his footsteps in terms of depth and nuance. The narrator's journals play an active role in his struggle with post-traumatic amnesia, and the House itself stands at an intersection of several metaphors of memory. The novel's use of the fantastic mode allows these metaphors to come to life, turning the labyrinth of *Piranesi* into a spatialization of the protagonist's post-traumatic inner space and, through metonymy, of the contemporary western psyche's fraught relationship with memory.

2. The labyrinthine model and the palimpsest of hypertextuality

The "labyrinthine model of narrative structure" constitutes "a distinctive sign of writing, reading, and thinking in our era" (Faris 1988: 2). This model often manifests in an interpretive structure characterised by "forking paths", what Eco calls

an “open work” (Faris 1988: 10; see Eco 2004: 120–121) where the reader takes on an active role in the construction of meaning. The most extreme examples are works of ergodic literature (Aarseth 1997: 1) such as *House of Leaves*, a “techno-text” (Hayles 2002: 794) demanding to be physically explored by flipping back and forth through meandering footnotes, appendices and multiple layers of narration unexpectedly intruding into each other. In their organization, such works come to resemble the hypertext fiction of the late Twentieth century: “a rhetorical form having multiple reading paths, chunked text, and a linking mechanism connecting the chunks” (Hayles 2002: 795). Even in cases of linear storytelling, “the labyrinths of the novels match the labyrinths in the novels” (Faris 1988: 11). Is there a labyrinth to be found in the structure of *Piranesi*, then?

Clarke's novel is deceptively linear. It may be read in a few hours, with no need to skip pages or keep track of multiple narrators, and by the end the fabula reveals itself to be quite neatly closed. If there are any forks in its path, they lead outside of the book: literary allusions abound, taking the reader on a journey of inference through several genres, each shift creating a new interpretive meander. The novel may not be a hypertext in the ergodic sense described by Aarseth, but it can be argued that its hypertextual strategies (in the Genettian, palimpsestic sense)¹ serve the same purpose: creating an underlying network of interpretive paths for the reader to wander. These paths begin branching out at the very start of the novel, as the opening sections of *Piranesi* appeal to Borges's metaphysical musings, encouraging the reader to adopt the suspension of disbelief of the fantastic mode.

In Part I, the eponymous Piranesi paints a reverent “description of the World” (*Piranesi* 5), a labyrinthine House populated with Statues, and matter-of-factly presents his struggles to survive and catalogue it, exemplifying the “mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic” (Cuddon 2013: 417) typical of magic realism. This echoes both “The Library of Babel”, where care is taken to describe how the inhabitants of a universe-spanning library perform their “physical necessities” (Borges 1999: 112) and dispose of the dead, and “The House of Asterion”, where the myth of the Minotaur trapped in its labyrinth is subverted as the prisoner lovingly describes his House, which “is as big as the world – or

¹ It must be noted that the primary textual relationship discussed here is architextuality, according to Genette's classification. However, as Genette himself notes, hypertextual cues serve to orient the reader's expectations towards an architextual body or literary genre (Genette 1997: 7).

rather, it *is* the world” (Borges 1999: 221). Similarities between *Piranesi* and “Asterion” abound at all levels, from characterisation, to stylistic choices, to the structure of their respective narrations. Anderson Imbert (1960: 35-36) argues that “Asterion” is a three-part riddle: the epigraph offers a key which may only be understood upon a second reading, the body piles up puzzling clues while avoiding any mention of labyrinths or Minotaurs, and the final lines reveal the solution.

Piranesi follows a similar pattern. The novel’s epigraph directly quotes C.S. Lewis’s *The Magician’s Nephew*. A character bears the surname Ketterley, the same as the titular Magician’s, implying that the two may be related.² Piranesi describes one of the Statues lining the halls of his House as “a Faun [...] He smiles slightly and presses his forefinger to his lips. [...] I dreamt of him once; he was standing in a snowy forest and speaking to a female child” (16). The dream is, of course, an overt reference to an iconic scene in Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Together with the increasingly-frequent appearance of extraneous words (a “biscuit box [...] bears the legend, *Huntley Palmers* and *Family Circle*”, 9; the years 2011 and 2012, 13; the London district of “Batter-Sea”, 21), the Lewis references act as clues pointing the reader towards a different genre: portal fantasy, of which *The Lion* is an archetypal example (Mendlesohn 2008: xix). *Piranesi* may in fact be read as a portal fantasy starting *in medias res*, the narrator having lost the thread of his portal-quest to the point of forgetting it entirely. The accumulation of clues ends in a revelation: far from having mastered the labyrinth, the narrator is trapped inside, and must piece together the events that brought him there in order to find his way out.

The riddle-like structure and concern with the reconstruction of the past bring into focus a third genre: detective fiction, in which the labyrinth is a key metaphor (Shiloh 2011: 6). Borges is once again relevant: “The Garden of Forking Paths” frames a discussion of the labyrinthine nature of time within a spy story, and “Death and the Compass” may be described as an anti-detective story whose climax describes a “labyrinth that consists of a single straight line that is invisible and endless” (Borges 1999: 156). Faris (1988: 183) also argues that detective fiction shares structural analogies with labyrinths “in its use of different interpretations that branch out from one or more clues, and in its

² Błaszczewicz (2021: 114-116) and Dugger (2021: 64) note that *Piranesi*’s Val Ketterley and Lewis’s Andrew Ketterley also share a role as “transgressive thinkers” (*Piranesi* 146) with a dangerous interest in the occult, furthering the connection.

emphasis on linear progression through a complicated and confusing but nonetheless predetermined itinerary”.

This is, essentially, the topography of *Piranesi*: its hypertextual references are branches for the reader to explore, or rather meanders that complicate an otherwise-linear path. In Borges's "Garden" and "Death", much like in "Asterion", the text begins by anticipating the climax, letting the reader glimpse the solution to the mystery before the meandering deceptions begin. Similarly, the Lewis quote opening *Piranesi* obliquely reveals the House's nature as a portal world; the reference to Giambattista Piranesi in its very title suggests that the protagonist is trapped in an imaginary prison. The reader does not initially hold the keys to the riddle and so moves on, misled by the metaphysical meditations of the first few pages. But the inciting incident of *Piranesi*'s plot is the intrusion of a detective from the primary world, Sarah Raphael (initially known as "The Sixteenth Person"). The narrator turns out to have been a sort of detective all along: Matthew Rose Sorensen, an academic writer with an interest in transgressive thinkers, sequestered into the House by one of his research subjects, Val Ketterley, during an investigation.

This reconstruction process forces both narrator and reader to grapple with three overlapping timelines – a Borgesian labyrinth of time. The first covers Piranesi's life in the House and his investigation; the second follows Sorensen's past, before and after his imprisonment; the third concerns the thinkers who trapped him inside and their previous victims. Much like the characters and events in "Garden" mirror one another (see Rimmon-Kenan 1980), Sorensen's abduction by Ketterley is a repetition of James Ritter's abduction by Laurence Arne-Sayles, Ketterley's mentor and the first theorist of the House; and most importantly, Piranesi's piecing-together of his identity, ultimately leading to his exit from the House, is specular to Sorensen's journey into the House, culminating in his loss of identity. This allows *Piranesi*'s narrator to function as a double of himself. As the reader proceeds through journal entries penned at different points in time, they discover different perspectives, "each reflecting on the others in a typically post-modernist collage/polyphony of narrative voices" (Błaszczewicz 2021: 127).

After the detective plot has reached its climax, with the re-emergence of Sorensen's identity and the discovery of Ketterley's crime, the interrupted portal-quest may resume and be resolved, as the narrator exits the House and returns to the primary world. But at the end of the novel, the reader is ultimately left with a nameless protagonist, who has rejected all of his previous identities

and has not yet chosen a new one for himself. Rather than providing the clean resolution traditionally required by portal-fantasy and detective fiction (return to the primary world; a solved case), *Piranesi* returns to the ambiguity of magic realism. At the end of “Garden”, the protagonist muses that what happened after his contradictory act of murder is “unreal, insignificant” (Borges 1999: 127); in “Death”, Lönnrot dies feeling “an impersonal, almost anonymous sadness” (Borges 1999: 156). *Piranesi*’s narrator seems to find at least temporary peace (“I felt calm”, 244), but even as he returns to the primary world, he cannot let go of the House: “*I am not home. I am here*” (243). Discussing the novel’s postmodern take on fairy abduction, Błaszkiwicz (2021: 129) concludes that “the fairyland which becomes a state of mind is significantly harder to conclusively abandon than would be the case with any form of physical incarceration”. Upon a second reading, an early moment of revelation inevitably stands out:

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. (*Piranesi* 60)

This epiphany comes to *Piranesi* just before Detective Raphael’s intrusion misleads him (and the reader) into trying to unravel the twin riddles of the House’s nature and his lost identity. Solutions are offered for both, only to be rejected in favour of postmodern ambiguity. The House is a secondary world, but crossing a portal is not enough to leave it; the narrator may reconstruct his former life as Sorensen, but he cannot truly resume it. Portal-quest and detective fiction are, in the end, hypertextual meanders complicating a path that from the very beginning leads towards magic realism.

And yet, all three genres are there, underlying the text. By playing with hypertextual cues, Clarke invokes the Genettian palimpsest; and because the text is palimpsestic, its plot structure becomes labyrinthine. A palimpsest is, after all, a sort of textual labyrinth: as a three-dimensional space, its structure implies an inner “core” only accessible by navigating the outer layers that conceal it, an earlier text obscured by subsequent writings. Both images share an impression of depth and complexity, an overlap obvious in Neo-Victorian literature, where the urban environment is presented simultaneously as an architectural palimpsest of different cultures and ages, and as a labyrinth whose core becomes a site for encounters with the monstrous (Kohlke 2015). To understand just what monster lies in this textual labyrinth, we now turn to analysing *Piranesi*’s protagonist.

3. The palimpsest of memory and the Minotaur

As anticipated, the palimpsest is a highly polyvalent symbol, first brought into the realm of literary metaphor by Thomas De Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* (Dillon 2007: 1-10). His description of the human brain as a palimpsest upon which "Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen" (De Quincey 2019: 54), stored forever but inaccessible until brought back to the surface, represents a turning point in the conceptualisation of personal memory (Assmann 2011: 142). Genette employs it to explain transtextual relationships, allowing it to take on cultural significance: the dialogue between a hypertext and its hypotexts forges a close connection between different points in time, turning the palimpsest into a form of literary memory (see Nünning 2007: 571-573). Being both a two-dimensional medium for the recording of memory and a three-dimensional place where memory is stored (Assmann 2007: 517), the palimpsest may be employed as a logical key to interpret *Piranesi*, helping to illuminate the link between the text, the narrator's identity, and the labyrinth he inhabits.

Where *Piranesi* the novel may be read as a palimpsest of genres, its narrator's mind may be interpreted as a palimpsest in the style of De Quincey, communicated to the reader via stylistic cues in his self-writing. It would, however, be reductive to confine all discussion of memory in the novel to a singular image: Clarke incorporates multiple memory media into her narration, moving from writing, to photography, to archival imagery. The meeting-point among these different media is found in the narrator's journals, which may themselves be looked at as a palimpsest.

The word "palimpsest" itself never appears in the novel, and the journals' initial presentation seems to be that of a coherent whole, written in a style reminiscent of a Late Modern memoir. In full Enlightenment fashion, *Piranesi* states that writing is "a medium by which Reason can pass from one Person to another" (169) and a tool which "inculcates habits of precision and carefulness" (12), allowing him to describe, rationalise and catalogue the world around him. His method, as explained in the opening pages of the novel, is meticulous, making use of indexes and tables and weighing the merits of different dating systems. He presents himself as a rigorous scientist, though one enchanted with the nature he documents (Sanders 2024: 301): a man systematically exposing himself to the reader, baring his inner truth and rationally explaining his perspective.

Piranesi's writings are both a prosthesis and a metaphor of his narrative memory, a crucial tool of psychological continuity: in Lockian terms, they allow

his consciousness to extend “backwards to any past Action or Thought” (Yaffe 2007: 216), joining his memories together into a coherent identity. It is telling of his mental state that discrepancies and disruptions are almost immediately introduced to this supposed continuity. The first few journals follow the Earth’s calendar, from December 2011 to November 2012 (13); subsequent volumes use a system of Piranesi’s invention, naming years after notable events. By his own, perplexed admission, two competing systems “introduce confusion, uncertainty, doubt and muddle” (15), and he is unable to remember the reason for the sudden switch. More worryingly, some journals “have gaps where pages have been violently removed” (13). Piranesi begins the novel in a state of denial: he is on some level aware that something is wrong, recognising that “as far as I remember [Piranesi] is not my name” (9; the nickname was chosen by Ketterley, “a sort of joke”, 163), but like Borges’s Asterion he cannot acknowledge his status as prisoner. He is also oblivious to the gaps in his memory, candidly stating: “I remember everything” (22), “Nowhere is there any disjuncture where I ought to remember something but do not, where I ought to understand something but I do not” (71). Yet the removed pages do correspond to missing memories. When Piranesi comes across the torn journal scraps, he finds their content is fragmentary and unnerving: “minotaur”, “slave”, “kill him” (62). Even the handwriting is foreign to him, “atrocious – like a tangle of seaweed” (61–62). Piranesi initially lacks the tools to recognise or understand this intrusion of the past upon the present: this is the paradigm of trauma, an event too shocking to be integrated in self-narration and encrypted into the psyche as “disconnected fragments” (Assman 2011: 252).

Like his fragmented words, Sorensen’s character still shows through in glimpses. His identity may be reconstructed from indexes and notes found by Piranesi while investigating the journals, and through other characters’ descriptions of him. Though the two identities are sometimes contrasted (“I thought you sounded an arrogant little shit. [...] But now... Charming. Quite charming”, 93), many things that are true of Sorensen are also true of Piranesi. Sorensen’s background as a mathematician explains why the narrator can compile complex tables to track and predict the flow of tides, even after forgetting what a university is. Likewise, his scholarly inclinations are reflected in Piranesi’s admission that “the idea of writing a book appeals to [...] [him] strongly” (146), as well as their journaling habit and Piranesi’s interest in cataloguing the wonders of the House. After returning to the primary world, the narrator remarks that Sorensen and Piranesi shared a love of clothing (238), making sense of Piranesi’s anomalous insistence on describing Ketterley’s menswear upon their every meeting. Detective Sarah

Raphael notes that Piranesi retains Sorensen's body language: "It's the way you raise your eyebrow at me. That dubious, rather imperious look" (223). In short, the identities of Sorensen and Piranesi are best understood as overlaying: they share habits, tastes and mannerisms. And yet, Piranesi is unable to retrieve recollections of Sorensen, only experiencing him as "an emptiness, a silence, an absence" (165).

Piranesi also fails to remember that Sorensen was the one to tear away the pages. This violent act is accompanied by a literal scraping of the palimpsest, as it also involves re-numbering some of the covers. He is only able to detect the alteration because "the scratching out had not been done perfectly [...] and I could still make out the ghostly form" of missing numbers (105). Journals 1, 2, and 3, the first penned by Piranesi, are actually journals 21, 22, and 23 of Sorensen's collection: twenty volumes are entirely missing. The scraping of the journals is equated with a scraping of the mind, which has made the memories of the narrator's previous identity as Matthew Rose Sorensen at least temporarily irretrievable.

Where Piranesi's consciousness refuses to extend back in time through writing, photographic metaphors step in. The torn journal fragments (which, as established above, are yet-unintegrated traumatic memories) are found during a journey to a sort of *camera obscura*: the One-Hundred-and-Ninety-Second Western Hall is described as one of the few dark places in the House, with only a single narrow entrance through which light shines (58). Piranesi describes it as "full of Presence" (49); drawing on Roland Barthes's theories on photography, it may be understood as full of *Spectrum*, the simulacrum or residue of the photographed subject (Calzoni 2007a: 326). In the vivid stillness of this dark room, a crowd of images is suddenly illuminated: "for a moment I had an inkling of what it might be like if instead of two people in the World there were thousands" (59). In the Seventeenth century, Locke employed the *camera obscura* as a metaphor for the acquisition of knowledge (Yaffe 2007: 247), while undeveloped photographic plates have often been used to discuss memories which are temporarily unavailable, but nevertheless impressed upon the mind (Assmann 2011: 144-145). Here, the negatives of Sorensen's memories are suddenly developed into consciousness by the chemical reaction triggered by an uncanny experience.

But this is not enough. Piranesi's struggles may not be resolved without confrontation with his journals: rather than being the inert product of narrative memory, they take on an active role in the complex process of remembering. Piranesi's relationship to self-writing bears echoes of other uncanny encounters between narrators and their externalised memories. In *House of Leaves*, Johnny

Truant is left reeling by journals he does not remember writing; in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, the titular protagonist is dumbfounded by his recorded voice; in Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, Leonard Shelby is led astray by the Polaroids he uses to mitigate his amnesia. All are cases of "an editor and reviser of his autobiographical records, who tries to make a synthesised self from the mechanically reproduced recorded voice by cutting and patching it up", thus revealing "the interaction between subjective recollections and the objective media which record them" (Iwata 2008: 34).

The best evidence of this interaction is found in the section titled "The Index" (102-108). Discovering the re-numbering of his journals, and thus old entries penned by Sorensen before the amnesia, triggers a crisis in Piranesi that forces him to confront and change his relationship to writing. This requires non-trivial effort:

The strange thing was *so* strange, so entirely incomprehensible that I found it difficult to form coherent thoughts about it. I could see the strangeness with my eyes, but I could not think it with my mind. [...] Nevertheless, I forced my eyes to see it; I forced my mind to think it. (103-104)

Initially, like Krapp in Beckett's polyphonic monologue, Piranesi fails to understand the version of himself mechanically reproduced in the journals. The attempt is frustrating, as only the reader is able to grasp the significance of what he finds:

The words on the page – (in my own writing!) – looked like words, but at the same time I knew they were meaningless. It was nonsense, gibberish! What meaning could words such as 'Birmingham' and 'Perugia' possibly have? (108)

And like Shelby in *Memento*, the narrator's amnesia leads him to the wrong conclusion about the contents of his prosthetic memories, eroding his ability to tell truth from lies: "I must have been ill when I wrote those entries in my Journal or else I would not have filled them with outlandish words such as 'Birmingham' and 'Perugia'" (110).

Once Piranesi forces himself to confront them, the memories of Sorensen's life first emerge as ekphrastic descriptions of visual and auditory flashes, experienced without understanding:

I begin to feel anxious again. A crowd of images stirs in my mind – strange, nightmarish, but at the same time oddly familiar. The word 'Birmingham', for example, brings with it a blare of noise, a flash of movement and colour and the fleeting image of towers and spires against a heavy grey sky. I try to catch hold of these impressions, to examine them further, but instantly they fade. (110)

These “nightmarish” yet “oddly familiar” (in one word: *unheimlich*, uncanny) flashes reoccur whenever the narrator is reminded of the world outside the House, and he describes them in psychopathological terms, as intrusive images “breaking through into consciousness” (108) after being triggered by reading his journals, a dangerous activity for his psychological continuity (112). Here and throughout the novel, the flashbacks are accompanied by the physical symptoms of a panic attack, like those typical of post-traumatic stress disorder: nausea, headaches, difficulty breathing.

Faced with the evidence that his narrative identity is a construct born of a selective, violent removal, Piranesi's first reaction is again denial. He thinks of getting rid of the journals, the physical simulacrum of his traumatised mind, and of going back to his previous illusion of perfect sanity and total recall. Like Shelby burning his Polaroids to escape his guilt in *Memento*, the narrator has already altered his prosthetic memory at least once, before the beginning of the novel, with the scraping of Sorensen from the palimpsest's surface. When the crisis repeats itself in “The Index”, however, something has changed: Piranesi has found comfort in the House and resolves to take better care of himself, to begin working through his traumatic memories instead of repressing them again (109).

The House's role will be explored below. First, a clue to the journals' potential may be found in the narrator's description of the visions they trigger: in his words, they bring “madness or else understanding” (108). This is the awareness that allows him to begin processing his traumatic experience, presented as a literal and metaphorical piecing-together of the past. The torn pages are scattered in a faraway hall of the House, the numbers leave imprints that let him notice their absence: the fragments are retrievable, though the process is draining and painful. The middle section of the novel, devoted to this reconstruction under the guise of archival investigation, largely consists of Piranesi looking up entries on his journal index (see Bain 2021: 114–115). Where in Beckett's drama “the word and the experience are entirely lost to Krapp's mind when they appear in his ledger as fragmentary data” (Iwata 2008: 37), Piranesi is able to make his way through his memories by learning to re-cognise the logic of their indexer, his past self, and thus reconstruct a coherent narrative out of confusing fragments.

This process culminates in another revelatory moment in the form of writing: Part 5 of the novel is a long journal entry penned by Sorensen, pieced together from torn scraps, detailing his imprisonment at the hands of Ketterley. Reading it triggers a reaction more intense than any previous flashback: rather than photographs developing in a *camera obscura*, the more apt comparison here is the “phosphoric

radiance” which, according to De Quincey (2019: 55), reveals the hidden layers of a palimpsest. De Quincey and Piranesi describe the process in similar terms: to the former, memories “are not dead, but sleeping” (De Quincey 2019: 55), and to the latter, Sorensen “reposed in a state of unconsciousness somewhere inside [...] [himself]” (*Piranesi* 190) until reading brings him back. The buried identity emerges with a cry of pain, before being soothed: “I placed my hand on my chest. *Hush now!* I said, *Do not be afraid. You are safe. Go back to sleep*” (191).

A crucial difference must however be pointed out. De Quincey depicts the retrieval of deeper layers as a magical process, a “fantasy of resurrection” (Dillon 2007: 24-26): bringing the past back to life, exactly as it was before being buried. But much like eighteenth-century chemical techniques, which were often more destructive than reconstructive of actual palimpsests (Dillon 2007: 20), the re-enactment of Sorensen’s trauma is ineffective at bringing him back. Rather, reliving trauma is re-traumatising to Piranesi: “This is where I lost Myself. I lost Myself in long, sick fantasies of revenge” (189).

The only difference between the incident of Sorensen’s erasure and the epiphany of his re-emergence is that, having pieced together his journals, Piranesi has found the words to narrate his trauma. The result is not the magical resurrection of a previous layer of the palimpsest, but rather the addition of a new top layer of identity. Piranesi is not violently removed as Sorensen was, but the narrator declares himself to be “not Piranesi – or at least not only him” (239). Clarke thus casts doubt on the uncomplicated equation Piranesi had previously tried to draw between memory and identity: “You don’t think of yourself as Matthew Rose Sorensen?” / “No [...] I haven’t got his mind and I haven’t got his memories” (212).

At the end of the novel the narrator shares all of Piranesi’s memories, but they are no longer one and the same. Rather than unbroken narrative continuity, what connects them, and what connected Piranesi to Sorensen, seems to be their shared habits. The most obvious, and the only one left intact among all three layers of the palimpsest (as by the end, even the love of clothes is gone) is writing: the narrator still intends to compile a book, just as Sorensen did in the beginning and Piranesi expressed interest in doing. More to the point, he is still keeping a journal: self-narration is reinstated as Ariadne’s thread in the labyrinth of personal identity, seemingly a rather Lockian notion. There is, however, a subtle difference between Locke’s theory of the mind and *Piranesi*’s position on writing. What allows the narrator’s identities to cohere is not the *product* of writing, consciousness extending back in time; the key here is the habit to undertake the *process* of remembering through self-writing. The narrator’s collection of

journals, completed after he retrieves Sorensen's twenty missing volumes at the end of the novel, is a symbol of this continuity.

Piranesi is always with me, but of Rose Sorensen I have only hints and shadows. I piece him together out of the objects he has left behind, from what is said about him by other people and, of course, from his journals. (238)

Where the journals take on the role of what De Quincey (2019: 54) called "the organising principles" which fuse into harmony the heterogeneous fragments of the narrator's mind, the habit of remembering they entail may be read as an ongoing negotiation between the different layers of the narrator's self. Samuel Beckett offers an explanation:

Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals; the world being a projection of the individual's consciousness [...] Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects. (Beckett 1987: 19)

Clarke espouses this idea while eschewing Beckett's pessimism. The ending of *Piranesi* is bittersweet and leaves the reader uncertain of who the narrator is. Yet it is not the total negation of meaning typical of absurdism, nor does it turn its protagonist into an Asterion, so lost and lonely that he welcomes death as a form of redemption. Sorensen was clever, but prideful enough to get himself kidnapped; Piranesi was kind, but naive enough to let himself be manipulated for years. But Piranesi's kindness allows him to take care of what little is left of Sorensen without succumbing to his same violent breakdown, and the narrator is able to temper Piranesi's naivety without letting go of his good nature.

Comparison and contrast between *Piranesi* and Borges's "Asterion" have thus far helped illuminate the novel's structure and characterisation. The symbolic value of the Minotaur myth is also worth remarking upon. Borges notes in the *Book of Imaginary Beings* that "it is fitting that at the centre of a monstrous house there should live a monstrous inhabitant" (132): the Minotaur is a hybrid, paradoxical creature, juxtaposing human and beastly traits. It is both the prisoner and guardian of the labyrinth, the killer of innocent youths and the victim of Theseus. In the postmodern labyrinth of the self, the Minotaur symbolises the fragmented, unstable abyss concealed by the fragile construct of identity (Ieranò 2007: 85; Faris 1988: 135, 146), perfect to depict a time of inner crisis. Its fragmented, unstable nature makes it a good parallel for the fragmentary, intrusive nature of traumatic memory.

In *Piranesi*, the word “Minotaur” only appears in two circumstances. The first is in Sorensen’s journal fragments: “minotaur”, “slave”, “kill him” (62). In this context, it heightens the uncanniness of traumatic memory by hinting at a monstrous presence within the labyrinth. The word is initially associated with Sorensen, thus linking the monster to the violent memories buried in the protagonist’s subconscious. The other appearance of the Minotaur is in descriptions of the First Vestibule of the House, which is “dominated by eight massive Statues of Minotaurs” (78). Like a guardian, the monster watches over the hidden hallway that links the House to the primary world. Facing this Minotaur-memory does not mean braving the labyrinth in order to slay it; it means taking care of it by following the thread of self-narration, ultimately piecing together a path to the exit.

The narrator’s shifting relationship to his journals over the course of the novel mirrors the history of our cultural relationship to writing as a medium of memory: from Enlightenment-era confidence in the ability of Reason to conceptualise and accurately portray reality on the page, to a postmodern loss of trust in the possibility of preserving meaning when faced with chaotic, fragmentary experience, and on to a cautiously optimistic ending that recognises the faults of self-writing while still finding an important role for it in the construction of the self. As the narrator admits at the end of the novel, “Without the journals I would be all at sea” (238).

4. The fantastic mode and the House as inner space

In *Piranesi*, the construction of the self is achieved through the relationship between the narrator and the written word. The exploration of the self is intrinsically linked with the exploration of the text in the form of reading and writing; at the same time, this exploration is externalised and situated in the fantastical space of a labyrinth, itself a representation of the world. The polyvalence of the labyrinth metaphor is due in part to its ability to draw an association between text, mind and world (Faris 1988: 121-123). Borges’s “Asterion” has played an important role in turning these metaphors into “symbolic referents for subsequent postmodernist literature” (Kravchenko 2024: 68), allowing for explorations of the complex interactions between reality and the psyche.

Through the fantastic mode, Clarke is able to turn this chain of metaphors into a metonymic chain where “one object does not *stand* for another, but literally *becomes* that other, slides into it, metamorphosing from one shape to another in

a permanent flux and instability" (Jackson 2003: 42). When *Piranesi's* narrator leaves the House at the end of the novel, his loved ones tell each other that his memories of entrapment are just "a description of a mental breakdown seen from the inside" (237). This is presented as a rationalisation, as the House is an actual place, with people and objects able to travel to and from it; but the remark is true insofar as the House functions as an extension of the narrator's self. Assmann writes of science fiction that "the genre takes on a special role in a world that – under the impact of trauma – has lost its realistic shape and is therefore constantly being fictionalized" (2011: 273). In departing from realism, the narrator projects his interiority onto physical space; via metonymic shift, the place comes to embody the individual who calls it home, and the individual comes to embody the culture they belong to. Ballard (2014a: 99) names this "fusion of the outer world of reality and the inner world of the psyche" *inner space* and discusses "its redemptive and therapeutic power".

What is the inner space of *Piranesi* like, then? Descriptions of the House bear several hypertextual echoes, resembling both *Narnia's* Charn (Dugger 2021: 63) and Borges's House of Asterion. As previously mentioned, the title of the novel calls to mind Giovanni Battista Piranesi's etchings, evoking architecture vast enough to become landscape and creating "a totalising space, a universe unto itself" (Morris 2024: 121). The descriptions of staircases seemingly built for giants, ceilings high enough for clouds to form, and a lower level that contains an ocean of tides also mirror the "architectural dreams" of "vast Gothic halls" inspired by Piranesi's work in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (De Quincey 1986: 105-108). Where De Quincey's visions are filled with "friezes of never-ending stories" (De Quincey 186: 103) from history and myth, *Piranesi's* House is populated with countless statues. De Quincey and the narrator even use similar wording to describe the sea that sweeps their respective labyrinths: "my mind tossed – and surged with the ocean" (De Quincey 1986: 108); "in my mind are all the tides, their seasons, their ebbs and flows" (*Piranesi* 243). Within this dreamlike space, *Piranesi's* confessional self-writing deviates from the realism of the Enlightenment-era memoirs evoked by its style. Instead, it dives into less rational territory.

The House's marble halls lined with statues also echo the *loci* and *imagines* employed in classical *ars memoriae* (Assmann 2011: 210). The narrator theorises that the statues exist "because they embody the Ideas and Knowledge that flowed out of the other World into this one" (90). When trying to understand why he knows words he does not remember a referent for, he turns to the statues to

explain “how the House places new ideas gently and naturally” in his mind (121). Even after returning to the primary world, he keeps revisiting the House in his mind through a process that closely mirrors mnemotechnics:

I close my eyes and I name a particular vestibule to myself; then I name a hall. I imagine I am walking the path from the vestibule to the hall. I note with precision the doors I must pass through, the rights and lefts I must take, the statues on the walls that I must pass. (243)

The House may thus be read as a spatialisation of memory and thought, a world of simulacra; though Piranesi does not share the common understanding of the relationship between representation and the thing represented, between word and referent, between memory and event. As Błaszkiwicz (2021: 119) and Dugger (2021: 68-79) note, the hierarchy is reversed: “I would argue that the Statue is superior to the thing itself, the Statue being perfect, eternal and not subject to decay” (222). While their perfection is questionable (at several points we see derelict halls and crumbling sculptures), the statues certainly seem to bend time. They remind Piranesi of his repressed past, like in the Faun incident, and they tell him about the future: in the passage “A conversation” (39-43), they function as units of meaning that convey a complex warning. These analexes and prolexes place the House outside of linear time, an idea supported by the narrator’s abandonment of the Western calendar and by the fact that his inner sense of time periodically falls “out of sync” (68) with the primary world.

Time within the House is cyclical. Spatial repetition, a common trait to all labyrinths, corresponds here to temporal repetition. Piranesi’s life is dominated by natural cycles, such as the flow of tides, as well as the cycles of habit; some tied to material needs (fishing and foraging), some to spiritual needs. Habitual journaling is crucial to his memory, and a similar importance may be attributed to his rites for the dead. Having found the remains of previous prisoners, Piranesi brings them offerings of food and flowers, pays regular visits, and tells tales of the House’s wonders. He trivialises the difference between the living and the dead, repeatedly baffling other characters by including the remains whenever he counts the House’s inhabitants. This form of ritual commemoration has been conceptualised by Pierre Nora as a symbolic *lieu de mémoire* where the past is re-actualised (re-membered) and crystallised in collective memory (Calzoni 2007b: 533-534).

As shown below, the House does hold significance for collective memory. For now, we note the potential of repetition for individual memory: even when

casting doubt on Piranesi's sanity, Ketterley remarks that Piranesi has total recall when it comes to the House's cycles (69). And yet, the narrator does forget: "Time. You're always losing it" (68). Just as he loses track of time, the narrator loses sight of the discrepancies in his journals until confronted with them. Like Shelby in *Memento*, he finds himself repeating the same conversations over and over. This too is presented as a cycle, "repeating roughly once every eighteen months" (68).

Myśliwiec (2024: 112) notes that the House is a character in its own right, an active force able to shape its inhabitants. The shape it imposes is circular and repetitive, and here repetition takes on a double meaning. On the one hand, the House encourages ritualistic commemoration; on the other, it bears witness to the narrator's traumatic re-enactment. In trauma theory, repetition is a symptom: the traumatised mind gets stuck on a violent interruption of narrative memory and re-experiences the traumatic event over and over again (Van der Kolk 1991: 436). Piranesi does experience post-traumatic flashbacks, but the House is never the cause of such episodes. Rather, its presence is soothing, and Piranesi attributes a protective role to the cyclical amnesia it induces: "*if the House has made you forget, then it has done so for good reason. [...] It does not matter that you do not understand the reason. You are the Beloved Child of the House. Be comforted*" (112). Unable to integrate the violence of Sorensen's entrapment into a coherent self-narrative, the narrator's mind does the only thing it can: it represses the painful memory to continue functioning, breaking the linear flow of time. The House's repetitions offer emotional anaesthesia, allowing the traumatised identity of Sorensen to fade away and the post-traumatic identity of Piranesi to be born.

He had suffered. He had been alone with his enemy. It had been more than he could bear. [...] Matthew Rose Sorensen had torn into pieces the description of his enslavement that he had written in his Journal and he had scattered the pieces [...] Then the House in its Mercy had caused him to fall asleep – which was by far the best thing for him – and it had placed him inside me. (191)

This transition is not shown, but it has dulled the loneliness, claustrophobia, hunger and thirst that plagued Sorensen. Piranesi appreciates the company of remains and birds, the endless succession of hallways, the abundance of seaweed and rainwater: the pain has been made so alien to him that he no longer recognises it as his own. Reading a fragment written by Sorensen, Piranesi muses: "I wished that I could reach through his writing to comfort him, to show [...] how the House provides and protects its Children" (126). Sorensen's prison, to Piranesi, becomes a place of immeasurable beauty and infinite kindness.

The recontextualization of trauma as aesthetic pleasure is common to postmodern visual and literary arts, exemplified by works such as Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* 1962-63 print series (see Botescu Sireteanu 2022). The novel element in *Piranesi* is that the (an)aesthetic does not cause a loss of emotive response or "death of affect" (Ballard 2014b: 116). On the contrary, Piranesi's empathy in the face of death and trauma extends even to his kidnapper (such as in the section titled "I comfort Dr Ketterley", 216-217), as well as his own past self, whom he treats like a scared child: "*Do not be afraid. You are safe. Go back to sleep. I will take care of us both*" (191).

In fact, Piranesi is childlike on multiple levels (Myśliwiec 2024: 120-121). It is no surprise, then, that entering the House requires a return "to a child-like state of wonder, a pre-rational consciousness" (153): Piranesi's inner space is also a place of regression. Finding the House means getting in touch with the same state of the eye that according to De Quincey grants children "a power of painting [...] upon the darkness all sorts of phantoms" (De Quincey 1986: 102). The House thus stands at a crossroads of several spatial metaphors: not just a mind palace, but the theatre of the mind, the *camera obscura* where the film of the subconscious is developed, the deepest layer of the palimpsest where latent memories are preserved. In Borges's "Asterion", the Minotaur's innocence is uncanny because it makes him unable to recognise the monstrosity of his own actions: of his sacrificial victims, he says "I run joyously to find them [...] One after another, they fall, without my ever having to bloody my hands" (Borges 1999: 221). Likewise, Piranesi's regression makes him unable to recognise his own imprisonment. It is also a temporary condition. As the statues themselves prophesy, the cycle will break: "*A message from afar. Obscure Writing. Innocence eroded*" (43). The "Obscure Writing" in question may be read as Sorensen's traumatic memories in the shape of torn journal pages. Traumatic memory is impressed upon the subconscious but remains unavailable; the House preserves the scraps, but in the unserviceable form of bird-nest fodder. Piranesi eventually retrieves them, the first element in his piecing-together of identity, but making sense of them is a painful process. The House can provide comfort, but not growth and healing, just as anaesthesia can prepare the body for surgery, but a doctor still needs to do the stitching.

This is where the "message from afar" comes in. What allows the narrator to heal is the intrusion of Sarah Raphael, whose identity as a police officer is doubly significant. She heralds *Piranesi's* connection to detective fiction, as shown above, but her role as a detective is itself therapeutic: just as a physician works backwards from the symptoms to reach a diagnosis and cure a disease, a detective works

backwards from the evidence to reconstruct the particulars of a crime and stop the perpetrator (Hoffman 1973: 74-77). In Raphael's case, the more appropriate comparison is with psychotherapy. To investigate Sorensen's disappearance she delves into his inner space and reaches out to Piranesi, leaving written messages and persisting when he initially rejects them; she offers Sorensen comfort and room to cry; and, most importantly, she engages the narrator in thoughtful conversation that, however painful, helps him work through his trauma. Being one of the inciting incidents of the narration, Raphael's intervention interrupts the cycle of re-enactment and regression, and her presence is what allows Piranesi to avoid losing himself like Sorensen did: the journal entry immediately following his re-traumatising breakdown is titled "It is 16 [Raphael] that is my friend and not the Other" (190). A colleague tells of a previous encounter between Raphael and another "troubled person [...] She sat down with [him] and she got him to stop throwing flaming newspaper everywhere and she got him to come down" (236). Likewise, instead of coercing Piranesi into leaving the House, she allows him to come to the decision on his own terms. Her perspective helps, but the piecing-together of identity is an active choice on the part of the narrator. The process is bittersweet, and coincides with the prophesied erosion of innocence: "perhaps even people you like and admire immensely can make you see the World in ways you would rather not" (228).

The relationship between inner space and those who explore it is as complicated as the relationship between the subject and the remote depths of the self. To traumatised minds like Piranesi and James Ritter (a previous prisoner), the House is a place of comfort, to the point that Ritter cries "not of fear, but for happiness" when brought back for a visit (239). To Raphael, who is described as "not the easiest person in the world to work with" (235) and seems to stand apart from her colleagues, the quiet and solitary halls are dangerously alluring: "in them she hopes to find what she needs" (242). To poets like Sylvia D'Agostino, who "lived very much inside her head" (178), it is a source of inspiration. To Arne-Sayles and Ketterley, who have used it to imprison and abuse others, it is a labyrinth inducing "amnesia, total mental collapse, etcetera, etcetera" (91).

Though reflective of individual psyches, the House also takes on a collective significance. Arne-Sayles comes to theorise its existence while looking for the lost knowledge of Ancient Man and Ketterley, lacking the imagination required to enter a state of childlike innocence, reaches it by chanting Brittonic rituals as a sort of intellectual regression. The two conceptualise the House as a world created by the transition from antiquity to modernity:

[...] I pictured [the wisdom of the ancients] as a sort of energy flowing out of the world, and I thought that this energy must be going somewhere. [...] This is what I call a Distributary World – it was created by the ideas flowing out of another world. (89)

The House is a paradoxical place of forgetting and remembrance: the world “into which everything forgotten flows” (153), only to be preserved forever. It functions much like a Foucaultian heterotopia (Myśliwiec 2024: 123-124), the archetypal museum “in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit” (Foucault 1986: 26). Arne-Sayles even theorises that “in some remote area of the labyrinth, statues of obsolete computers are coming into being as we speak” (90), reflecting the dynamic that turns living memory into cultural memory: when a recollection of the past is no longer relevant, “it becomes objectified, exteriorized and stored away in symbolic forms” (Assmann 2010: 110). In *Piranesi*, rushing tides of ideas carve the recollections into otherworldly statues. Identity is a plastic force, shaping memory just as memory shapes it. If so, whose cultural identity shapes the House?

Architectural descriptions of the House “do not vary much at all in terms of a consistently applied classical grammar” (Morris 2024: 121). Ketterley summarises it as “an infinite series of classical buildings knitted together” (179). Many statues depict creatures from Greek myth: Minotaurs, fauns (15), satyrs (37), centaurs (38). On the other hand, Arne-Sayles and Ketterley connect to the House through the specific cultural past of Britain, by performing rituals on bog bodies (149) and evoking the Romano-British king Addedomarus (150). Roman, Greek, Celtic: the past flowing into the House meshes the various heritages modern British society has laid claim to. Even the statues of elephants and gorillas refer to the colonial past of the British Empire, as imagery made popular by the Orientalist craze of the Nineteenth century. The House represents what modernity has left behind, a counter-narrative to the view of history as linear progress. It holds the cultural memory of a mythicised past where “the world was constantly speaking to Ancient Man” (148). Rather than a foreign country, the past of *Piranesi* is an uncanny land: the ideas that shape the House are still recognisable as products of Western culture, modes of thought that have been cast aside as latent memory, “still present but rarely seen” (Assmann 2011: 150).

Again, the reaction of different characters to this uncanny place is indicative of their relationship to the past. Ketterley explores the House in a bid for power, never seeking to understand it on its terms: “he cannot imagine why anything should exist if he cannot make use of it” (90). When the House does not provide what he

wants, he dismisses it: "There isn't even anything alive. Just endless dreary rooms all the same, full of decaying figures covered with bird shit" (47). This dismissal does not diminish his fear of the House, and he is constantly anxious about being swept away or spending too long inside, lest the labyrinth drive him mad. His perspective on memory reflects colonialist views of the past as an instrument of control, or else a dangerous presence that must be avoided entirely.

Arne-Sayles fetishises the past as a rejection of modern rationality. Taking pride in the label of "transgressive thinker" and gathering followers from the Sixties' New Age movement, the self-proclaimed Prophet treats the discovery of the House as proof of his genius while still failing to see it as valuable on its own. He compares the place to a cave system left behind by draining water, a leftover no longer holding anything valuable after the ideas that shaped it have "seeped away" (90). Remarkably, in insisting that there is nothing left of the tides of ideas, Arne-Sayles fails to acknowledge the literal sea that is still actively shaping the halls. He is more enamoured with the abstract idea of a pre-rational world than with the shift in perspective that truly confronting it would entail.

Both Arne-Sayles and Ketterley refuse to linger in the House, fearing it as "a source of madness and forgetfulness" (112). Instead, they enslave others to explore it for them. The narrator is one such instrument in their "colonisation of the past". While he may be read as a dismantling of the Noble Savage stereotype (Myśliwiec 2024: 120), in his relationship to Ketterley he is more akin to a colonial agent going native. Ketterley's manipulation is what leads him to adopt the positivist view of the world as "a sort of riddle to be unravelled, a text to be interpreted" (60), but his experience of the House periodically leads him to a different conclusion: "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). Though Ketterley attempts to keep Piranesi compliant by making him doubt his sanity, he develops an animistic reverence for the House (Myśliwiec 2024: 119) that allows him to understand it in ways impossible to Arne-Sayles and Ketterley: he is the first to make the connection between the statues and the ideas they represent, and the only one to recognise that "the World still speaks to me every day" (154).

This is where Piranesi's relationship to the "essentially imperialist" (Mendlesohn 2010: 9) genre of portal-quest fantasy comes into play. The secondary world normally represents an unchanging past, easily circumscribed and narrated from an outside perspective. But while the House resembles both ruin and museum, the memory of the past held within it is far from crystallised. As noted by Błaszkiwicz (2021: 120-122), the narrator surrenders to the plastic force of his secondary

world: instead of learning to appropriate and master it, the narrator breaks the “iron hand of modern rationality” (152) and lets the secondary world appropriate him. By giving up control over his memory (individual, with Sorensen’s amnesia, and cultural, with Piranesi’s epiphany on the nature of the House), the narrator of *Piranesi* accepts memory as living *vis*, “a driving force that follows its own rules” (Assmann 2011: 20). This acceptance of memory as a process allows him to re-construct his psychological continuity, and consequently to re-connect with the world around him. The memory of a pre-rational perspective has worth, not because it hides a supposed secret, but because it still belongs to humanity, and embracing it may illuminate sides of the world that modernity has lost sight of. As Sanders (2024: 301) states, Clarke reconciles positivist faith in Reason with Romantic sensibilities, exploring cultural anxieties about a lost connection to the world.

5. Conclusion

It is not in spite of, but precisely thanks to its fantastic setting, that *Piranesi* manages to deal with both individual and cultural trauma.

On the individual level, Clarke explores the trauma of a life violently interrupted, and the necessary adjustments required to still make sense of the post-traumatic world; meaningless repetition can feel like the madness of traumatic re-enactment, but the habits formed by it can preserve sanity and take on a meaning of their own through active ritualisation. Although the novel was written before the Covid-19 pandemic, it is no coincidence that Piranesi received critical acclaim and resonated with so many readers during the 2020 quarantines.

On the cultural level, the novel deals with anxieties due not to a single triggering event but to the cumulative effects of a radical change in mode of thought: the positivistic, progressive narrative born with the Enlightenment clashes against the feeling that something has been lost along the way, that there is a deeper connection to the world to be retrieved, a sense of loss made literal in *Piranesi* through what Arne-Sayles, echoing Max Weber, calls the “disenchantment” (148) of the world. Clarke’s debut novel *Jonathan Strange and Mister Norrell* (2004) deals with a similar theme, exploring the reaction of Nineteenth-century British society to the sudden return of magic. In *Piranesi*, the reflection is carried forth into the Twenty-First century to grapple with the postmodern cultural crisis. The House thus comes to embody not just a single protagonist’s inner space, but the

collective archive where Western modernity has stored away its repressed beliefs and superstitions.

The abundance of hypertextual connections in *Piranesi* turns the novel into a palimpsest, connecting the narrator's struggles to the rich symbolical repertoire of the labyrinth myth, as well as to centuries of explorations on the theme of memory. In this sense, fantastic literature "operates as a mnemonic device" (Lachmann 2010: 306): by drawing upon traditions excluded by mainstream scientific discourse, it preserves them in cultural memory. As a literary mode, in its departure from realism and its use of metonymy, it opens the way for a lively dialogue on memory, capable of connecting the individual and cultural dimensions of memory studies. Further research of the specific manifestations of memory within fantastic literature is warranted to illuminate this connection.

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