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Narrative Presenting of Architectural Monuments

Atmospheres in Seibo There Below

Angeliki SIOLI¹

Abstract. Engaging a selection of narratives from the episodic novel *Seibo There Below* (2008) by László Krasznahorkai, this paper discusses how literature can enable the atmospheric presenting of architectural monuments. It examines how the reader can partake of the multilayered atmosphere of three famous places of heritage, that are spatial manifestations of different civilizations: the Athenian Acropolis (Greece), the Ise Grand Shrine (Japan) and the palace of Alhambra (Spain). The paper unpacks atmospheric descriptions related to these monuments, through the affective and emotional accounts of the novel's characters. By doing so, it allows architects, historians and theoreticians to understand significant places under a light that may even contradict canonized interpretations.

Keywords. Literature, Narratives, Monuments, Presenting Atmospheres

Presenting Atmospheres through Literature

Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, in his work *The Bow and the Lyre*, discusses the capacity of literature to present and reveal atmospheres of place. He argues that a real author amplifies the meanings and moods present in the world, rather than imposing personal feelings upon perceptions (Paz, 1956, 75-81), thus attributing to literature the capacity to communicate valuable and valid knowledge for the world we live. Philosophical voices from the field of phenomenological hermeneutics have argued along with Paz on this front. In *Truth and Method* (1960) Gadamer advocates that works of art are forms of knowledge and not mere aesthetic objects (Gadamer, 1960, 77-87). For the poetic language of literature and poetry, in particular, Heidegger points out, that it is not a conveying of pure interiority, but a sharing of a world; it is neither a subjective nor an objective phenomenon but both together (Palmer, 1969, 139).

This is why the poetic language of literature, as an intersubjective sharing that amplifies moods of the world, is a unique means to presence atmospheres of place. Through the affective and emotional accounts of a narrative's characters, the readers can partake of in-situ atmospheres. Literature has the wondrous capacity to transmit the elusive, short lived and situated elements of a place's specific atmospheres, revealing aspects of this place not necessarily included in historical or scientific descriptions. Unlike history and science that focus mainly on quantitative and measurable data, literature works with the emotional quality of a given *lived space*, meaning the space we experience in real life and to which plane geometry turns out to be blind (Griffero, 2014, 36). From an architectural perspective this promises to enrich our understanding of place, offering an alternative to established interpretations

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that prioritize quantitative approaches. Tonino Griffero, in his recent work *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Space* poignantly points to the fact that “geometry is incapable of justifying the (not only metaphorical) volume of the Sunday silence or the narrowness of a living room” (2014, 36). This extradimensional and non-epistemic sense of space is tied to the experiences of the felt-body and its actions (Griffero, 2014, 36-37), elements with which literature deals *par excellence*. Thus, the presenting of spatial atmospheres that literature can provide, becomes a valuable tool in an extended and renewed study of place.

To this end, I show how literature presents the atmospheres of well-known architectural monuments, by studying three selective narratives from László Krasznahorkai’s episodic novel *Seibo There Below* (2008)². The novel depicts historical locations and buildings with verisimilitude, offering readers the possibility to experience moods of geographically and culturally diverse places of heritage, in unique and often unexpected ways. I examine how the reader can partake of the multilayered atmosphere of three famous monuments: the Athenian Acropolis in Greece (5th C. BC), the Ise Grand Shrine in Japan (7th C. AD) and the palace of Alhambra in Spain (13th C. AD). I unpack atmospheric descriptions related to these monuments, through the affective and emotional accounts of the novel’s characters.

Intense Ghastly Brilliance: Acropolis

The protagonist of “Up on the Acropolis” arrived in Athens on a hot summer day driven by his desire “to see the Acropolis one day” (Krasznahorkai, 2013, 133)³. He stepped on the path towards the monument as soon as he landed in the city, despite the locals’ warning to wait “until evening, as the sun up there will be scorching, dreadfully so.” The protagonist dismissed their advice. The sun was indeed scorching, “the noise from the traffic was practically unbearable.” But for him:

“it didn’t matter, as the only thing that mattered was that he was getting ever closer to the Acropolis [...], and that he was going to see the Temple of Nike, and he was going to see the Erechtheion, [...] the unsurpassable Parthenon—and most of all he would be up on the summit of the Acropolis.”

It is with exuberant enthusiasm that he arrived at the entrance of the archeological site, wishing to sense the atmosphere of the monument in person. His deepest desire was to understand the temples’ actual proportions, their actual size. The pictures of the Acropolis he used to study as a kid never offered “any clarity especially in regards to the proportions.” He actually believed that one could not “on the basis of [...] drawings or photographs, be sure of the dimensions, if one tried to judge the size of the *temenos*, as the Athenians called the district of their sacred buildings.” He could “never picture to himself [...] how big for instance was the Propylaea, how big was the Parthenon,” by looking at drawings and illustrations. The intention of the novel’s protagonist is thus to immerse in the monument’s *lived space* and understand dimensions and proportions. Despite the countless historical accounts discussing the proportions of the Parthenon and the surrounding temples the protagonist insists on the experience of *lived space* to reveal the impression these proportions have on him.

2. I first heard about the novel through: Lending, Mari. “Fabrics of Reality: Art and Architecture in László Krasznahorkai.” In *Reading Architecture: Literary Imagination and Architectural Experience*, edited by Angeliki Sioli and Y. Jung, 49-60, New York: Routledge, 2018.

3. Unless otherwise indicated all the quotes in this section come from: László, Krasznahorkai, *Seibo There Below*, trans. by Otttilie Mulzet (New York: New Directions Books, 2013), 127-145.

The literary account instead presents an atmosphere emerging from the monument's characteristic materiality on a hot Athenian summer day. It is the atmosphere that countless tourists experience every summer. A few steps into the path leading up the Acropolis and the protagonist immediately realized that he could not bear the bright white light reflected on the white marble of the monument. He looked down but this did not help him either. The paving, "made of the same white marble as the rest of the *temenos*, completely blinded him." The narrative describes the protagonist walking towards the Parthenon, but without really being able to see. He only knew:

"that there on the left rose the so-called Pinacotheca of the Propylaea, and on the right was the garrison building, then high above in the Temple of Athena Nike, with its four wondrous columns; but he only knew this, he couldn't see anything, he just went upward, squinting."

The narrative evocatively communicates the pain in the protagonist's eyes, the heat from the sun on his face, his dry mouth in need of fresh water, the emotional frustration in not being able to fully take in what he had longed for, as "the entire *temenos* was built on a colossal snow-white limestone cliff." The presenting of an atmosphere very real, but so very unexpected, emerges strongly. With the "sun right above his head," and "no kind of soothing corner, niche, roof or recess [...] anywhere," the protagonist left the monument defeated. What:

"completely astounded him, the grave import of which he was not at all aware, was the effect of the sunlight on the limestone, he was not prepared for this intense, ghastly brilliance, nor could he have been, and why, what kind of guidebook, what kind of art-historical treatise relates such information."

Due to a "ridiculous, commonplace, ordinary detail," his trip to Athens "turned out to be an ignominious failure." But even now, after this lurid experience, he would still refuse to visit the monument with sunglasses, "because the Acropolis in sunglasses has nothing to do with the Acropolis."

Sweet Fragrance of Hinoki Trees: Ise Shrine

The overwhelming disappointment experienced by the protagonist on the Acropolis is a different kind of disappointment than the one experienced by the visitors of the Ise Shrine. Two friends "take part in the 71st rebuilding of the Ise Shrine, in the ceremony known as *Mimosa-Hajime-sai*" (Krasznahorkai, 2013, 374)⁴. The ceremony consists of the ritualistic cutting of two hinoki trees, the wood from which will be used for the new shrines. The two friends wished to grasp the atmosphere of this ceremony, as it is connected with the very essence of the Shinto religion. "According to legend [...] the Emperor Temmu in the seventh century, [...] commanded [...] that every twenty years the entire structure of shrines in both Naikū and Gekū [...] would be rebuilt again and again." The new buildings could not be copies of the old buildings. They had to be "the *same* buildings," "and everything - every beam, piece of masonry, dowel, corbel - really, with a hair's breadth accuracy" had to be rebuilt," so that the buildings remain "in the true vividness of creation, in the realm of a truly eternal present." Mesmerized by such powerful tradition, the two friends arrived at the monument dreaming of encountering a solemn, metaphysical atmosphere.

4. *Ibid.*, 373-421.

Instead, they found themselves in front of a big stage, where the empress and the priest led a ceremony, completely devoid of solemnity and mysticism, up until the moment that the woodcutters appeared. The two friends:

“both felt that [...] up until the point when the woodcutters appeared, it was simply impossible to take this entire Misoma-Hajime-sai seriously, [...] that it was the complete absence of sacredness [...] taking place on the stage, because the whole thing was so untrue, and there was no credibility to anything, not one movement, not a single gesture of the chief priest, [...] betrayed anything but [...] sheer exertion, [...] nothing was true, not true, not sincere, not open, and not natural.”

This lack of authenticity in the air, the tension felt by protagonists and guests, and so strongly communicated to the reader, dissolves the moment that “the echoing axes blows” fill the air. The sound from the absolutely calibrated rhythmical movements of the specially trained woodworkers created an atmosphere so overpowering that “the entire gathering watched the operation for close to two hours with bated breath.” The literary description presences the strength of this new atmosphere very clearly, and is a reminder of Heidegger’s understanding on moods as *attunements* that are directly shared and beyond the control of any one person, drawing in each new participant like a raindrop into a hurricane (Heidegger, 1995, 66-67).

After the impressive cutting of the two trees, which fell in the exactly predetermined location, the two friends were further drawn into the encompassing atmosphere because of “the astonishingly powerful fragrance” that was everywhere. The “particular fragrance of the two felled hinoki trees practically burst onto the section of the forest like a cloud,” and “it drew them in.” And they felt happy that they were “not experiencing disappointment again, and they would not return home beaten down, although that really happened too.” It is with this elevated feeling and the evocative presencing of a mystical, echoing, sonorous and fresh atmosphere that the reader of the story leaves the Ise Shrine and moves to the next pages of the novel.

Marble-lace Intangibility: Alhambra

The third story from *Seibo There Below* presences the atmosphere of Alhambra, a monument that has excited the imagination of many writers, musicians, and filmmakers in recent history. Strictly, historical accounts classify the monument as a palace and a fortress. Though the protagonist of the story finds it difficult to classify the wondrous architectural ensemble as such. His “jaw drops” when he enters the monument, “because something like this, but like *this*, [...] he has really, but really never even seen, this [...] surpasses anyone’s imagination” (Krasznahorkai, 2013, 296)⁵. The amazement that overwhelms him translates into a feeling of disorientation. The architecture does not guide him in navigating the place. He “proceeds in utter confusion,” heading hesitant towards the Cuarto Dorado courtyard, where he stands felling lost amidst the “breathhtakingly harmonious magnificence” of the Arab architecture. Stepping accidentally in the Mirados de la Daxara he feels elevated by “the rooms’ stalactites swimming in gold,” and he “grows blinded from the radiance of the vaulted fenestration as the light streams from without.” Finding himself into the Baths he immerses into “the marble-lace intangibility descending ethereally onto the slender columns.”

5. *Ibid.*, 289-311.

As the readers take in the wonderous atmospheres of the different rooms, the colors, the sounds and the astonishing hieroglyphs, they soon discover, along with the protagonist, that the “Alhambra does not recognize within itself the concept of a right direction.” Indeed, the more time the protagonist spends wondering “from the Patio de los Arrayanes to the Sala de la Barca, the Patio de Comares to the Patio de los Leones, the Sala de los Hermanas to the Mirador de las Daxara,” the more he realizes that in the Alhambra there are no paths at all:

“every single room and every single courtyard exist for its own sake [...] every courtyard and room just represents itself, within its own self, and at the same time within its own self, represents the whole, the entirety of the Alhambra.”

The narrative moves on to also present also the atmosphere the monument communicates from the outside. The exterior walls of the Alhambra “originally whitewashed with lime,” were “in a military sense [...] not able of defending anything.” Their presence seems to bewilder even the scholars who have studied and written about them. The narrative humorously questions the official scholarship, “the entirely serious monograph” by professor Grabar (“an instructor at both the University of Michigan and Harvard”), who wrote “how the story of the Alhambra is in fact nothing but the story of a great conspiracy.” Krasznahorkai opposes the historical analysis and vouches for the embodied perception prevalent in the atmosphere of the monument itself: “that the Alhambra—already far beyond its really being neither fortress nor palace nor private residence—stands there with no explanation, it is wholly extant.” The narrative, presenting an atmosphere of utmost and inexplicably overpowering wonderment, comes to an end with the conclusion that the “Alhambra offers everyone the understanding that it will never be understood.”

Conclusion

The three narratives present unique atmospheric conditions of the monuments' *lived space*, as experienced by their protagonists. The atmospheres of these monuments even contradict established historical views, which tend to create specific expectations for these monuments' understanding. The proportions of the Acropolis, cannot be communicated through drawings, photographs and the traditional means of architectural representation. The protagonist, although unable to fully enjoy the place, still senses the brilliance of its materiality. The Ise Shrine feels authentic and real because of the fleeting elements of axe sounds and hinoki fragrance, and not because of the Shinto tradition associated with it. The Alhambra is sensed neither as a fortress nor as a palace, but as a mesmerizing conglomeration of ethereally magnificent rooms and courtyards.

This literary presenting suggests an architectural approach towards place that prioritizes embodied and emotional interpretations. The power of literature to *amplify the meanings and moods present in the world* emerges from the narratives by László Krasznahorkai in the most convincing way. Literature becomes a way to experience, presence, and study the multiple, real, unabbreviated atmospheres of historical monuments. It exhibits how intellectual experiences and expectations crumble before our sensory and empirical understandings of a place in-situ.

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