Prague & The Sense of Presence

Andrew Lass[1]

There is no such thing as was – only is. If was existed, there would be no grief or sorrow.
William Faulkner

This essay explores the cultural phenomenology of the sense of presence as it is manifested in a sampling of discursive practices that speak of the initial visits to a 'Prague' that had once been 'my own' and to which I returned after a prolonged absence as if "into the past". It describes some of the shifting and illusive ways in which memory grapples with and reads into an urban landscape.

Overture

As only fate would have it, I was destined to walk in Prague, in March 1990, thirteen years later to the day and one day before the anniversary of that tragic day of March 15, 1939 when Hitler's armed forces marched into the capitol of Czechoslovakia and installed themselves in the Hradčany castle. They brought with them the plague. I remember the weather most clearly. One could sense the bitter cold of that gloomy day in the stern, black, helmeted faces of the heavily armed German soldiers as they marched on to the first courtyard and the heavy winter coats, scarves and fedoras worn by the citizens of this ancient city who, depending on the photograph, were either raising their fists in anger or, out of fear, their right arm extended in the familiar "Heil Hitler" salute. I grew up seeing only the first version of these photographs. A few years after the Velvet Revolution I got to see the other. It neither was the first time nor was it the last that an epidemic devastated the place. But the one that would follow lasted much longer – from February 1948 to November 1989 to be precise – and if the death toll was smaller

[1] Andrew Lass, PhD., je Ford Foundation Profesor kulturní a sociální antropologie na Mount Holyoke College (Massachusetts, USA). Ve své vědecké činnosti se věnuje dějinám oboru, poetice a různým teoretickým přístupům k otázce smyslu času a paměti a jejich zpředmětnění v místě, a to především v českém kontextu. Jeho odborné práce vycházejí v časopisech *American Anthropologist, American Ethnologist, Dialectical Anthropology* a jako příspěvky v celé řadě tematických sborníků.

and the oppression appeared lighter, so much so that it did not, at times, appear at all, it was, if not as sinister then certainly as perverse.

Nothing could match the balmy March day in 1990 when I stood with my long lost friends under the Strahov monastery overlooking a valley of church steeples and red tile roofs, the Hradčany castle extending on the hill to my left, the Petřín garden on the hill to my right. The late afternoon sunlight cast the gray city in an intense sepia-orange intensified by the visible thick line of brown smog hovering across the horizon above which I could only imagine a blue sky. We heard the police sirens in the distance and then had a glimpse of two white BMW sedans escorted up Neruda street with president Václav Havel accompanying his West Germany's counterpart, Peter Genscher, as he welcomed him, on the anniversary of that tragic day 51 years ago for the first of several friendly visits to the Hradčany castle.

I can recall these dates as I can so many others, quite clearly as if not just the first one but all were photographs. Moreover, it would only befit the history of these impressions that while the first is obviously black and white, the more recent ones are in color as if to mark them off as my own lived experiences. It is only now, as I write these words, that I look for some significance to this confluence of dates, one that could somehow speak to more than the play of words or just the sad state of affairs that is inside my head. Something to do with the promise of spring and of marching ahead, with that embodied sense of movement that haunts me, and with the terror of pain and the power of the imagination and the divine sorrow of remembering.

Perhaps *stesk* (longing) provides the key. For 'longing' does have a sorrowful note to it *(smutek)* but it is the sense of loss, absence from the now of my embodied present that drives it. The object of desire remains elsewhere, in another place or another time. The acts of 'renewal' and 'removal' are like 'recollection' and imply both distance and its bridging.

Narratives of return

Nancy Munn's carefully woven and incisive study *The Returnee Narrative: Defamiliarization and Changes in City Places*[2] suggests some important ways to

[2] The draft chapter from a book manuscript tentatively titled *Places in Motion: space-time and memory in antebellum New York* was first presented at a workshop on place, University of Helsinki, Finland, in August, 2005 (Munn 2005). The quotations in the following two paragraphs are from Munn's paper and include both her words and those of the 1830 Bryant and Verplanck essay quoted by her.

think about this potent yet passing encounter. Her concern is with the speed of change that characterized the rapidly expanding New York during the antebellum when, as many at the time noted, buildings already standing could be razed with little or no regard for either their historical significance or as place-memories while new structures appeared, creating new vistas as if overnight. In writing of defamiliarization Munn is deliberately invoking an English gloss of the Russian formalist Shklovsky's term *ostranienie*, in order "to suggest the doubling of this mode of consciousness as entailing both a dynamic – the shift from a previous familiarity to a present unfamiliarity – and attention holding these two together in the experience of the unfamiliar." She continues by qualifying her use of the term by observing that the original usage as a literary devise has to do with the force of making strange – quoting Coleridge (1938) – "as a mode of drawing attention to what might otherwise be blunted by 'the film of familiarity'" where her "own concern is not with art or aesthetics, but with a capacity of significant tangible changes in this city to undue familiarity and so to problematize recognition of city places."[3]

The captivating read that Munn's chapter presents derives also from its construction, a palimpsest of returnee narratives, each "explicitly configuring experience", here carefully unwrapped to reveal the manner in which one's sense of self is disturbed by a fracturing and consequent highlighting of the tie to place as one's embeddedness in place. Of the several cases, one in particular drew my attention: In it a Mr. Herbert, the fictional protagonist of an essay published in 1830, while walking down Greenwich Street with his friend Mr. Vielleceur, compares the rapidity of change in New York to what he perceives as the slowness of change in European cities he had visited. In New York, "Time was working... so much more swiftly" then in the latter cities where "after an absence of 30 years" everything still seem to Mr. Herbert "neither newer or older than before, the same order of streets, public buildings,... offices, hotels and shops,...[so that] I found my way through their intricacies as if I had left them but yesterday." But in New York, he

[3] The Russian *ostranenie* is frequently translated as 'estrangement', which I prefer and will henceforth use in my own analysis, because I find it a closer approximation of the Czech, use *ozvláštnění*, lit. "making special/strange". I quote from a recent exchange with the Slavic linguist Robert Rothstein (University of Massachusetts) in which I inquired about the etymology of the Russian term: On strictly etymological terms it's "making strange", so Nancy Munn's gloss is not bad. Mukařovský presumably meant "obzvláštní". One of the meanings of the prefix "o-" in Russian is the so-called factitive meaning – to make something X ('osvobodit', 'to make free = to liberate', 'oslozhnit', 'to complicate', 'osirotit', 'to orphan' etc.). If I remember correctly, Shklovsky originally used it to describe scenes in Tolstoy in which a character looks at something familiar from a different perspective and it seems strange (an opera performance seen from the gallery, a battle scene observed from on high)."

laments, "[returning] after an absence of two years, everything was strange, new and perplexing, and I lost my way in streets which had been laid out since I left the city."[4]

Mr. Herbert's remarks setup a contrast between the New world and the Old, suggesting that one moves fast, thereby obfuscating recognition, while the other remains stable, as if governed by a different temporality. For the purpose of my argument, the comparison also glosses over an important difference between the two events: a return visit is not the same as a return home. While this distinction changes nothing about the observation Mr.Herbert is making – it is the authors' and it is incisive – it does point to the possibility that had his trip to a European capital after 30 years absence been a return to a place called home, the accompanying sense of recognition could have been also intensely disorienting in spite of the fact that "so little had changed." For how we react to a place has as much to do with what we bring to it, with the trajectory of our passing through, its intentionality, as it does with the changes in the urban landscape and their perceived speed. I wish to suggest, and further illustrate by way of a European example, what Munn and others have addressed for some time: that personal memory – whether cognitive, emotional or bodily – together with the broad spectrum of representations – whether in the form of letters, news items, photographs or other media – are integral components of our experience, that our sense of presence is as thick with expectations as it is with pastness. One is here reminded of the classic example, of tourists drawn to Paris in order to see the Eiffel Tower "with their own eyes" not because they have never seen it before but on the contrary, because they already have. They recognize it, except now it's "for real", and it is this commoditized experience of authenticity that is pivotal to this kind of sense of presence.[5]

[4] Nancy continues "It is as if the streets had indeed turned Mr. Herbert into a stranger, deactivating his bodily memory (the "active imminence of the past in the body," as Casey (1987, 149) describes it) which we earlier saw Mr. Viellecour attempting to re-embody in his walk through the metamorphosed Richmond Hill mansion" (Munn 2005, 11). I will turn to the issue of body memory later when, in another section, I discuss the narrative of return in the context nostalgia and body paralysis.

[5] Rolland Barthes in *L'Effet de réel* (Barthes 1979) suggested the term 'reality effect' to describe this type of signification in which reality confirms its own representation (visual, textual) that refers to it in the first place.

The post-card

The postcard I received in the summer of 2002 from my friend Spaska, a former Bulgarian student, reads as follows:

"Dear Andy, somewhere in between gruesome trips to Moldava and Albania, I stopped in Budapest for a breath of filthy European air. Moldava was fascinating while a day trip to Transnistria was like going back at least 30 years into the glory days of the USSR."

A black and white photograph pictures an urban waterfront with an elderly man in a trench coat standing by a stone wall overlooking a river with a large and ornate white palace hovering in the distance softened by the rising mist. The man is absorbed reading the newspaper; a large paper shopping bag is resting against his legs. I took a quick glance at the photograph and recognized it instantly, I thought, it seemed so familiar. Yet, I was wrong in thinking that it had been taken in the 1950s, and I could not actually locate it. In fact, the ornate palace is the Hungarian parliament, a snapshot from the 1990s. What threw me off was his trench coat, his composure and that shopping bag; I had grown up in that black and white world.

Of course, the reverse – Spaska's time travel to "the glory days of the USSR" – further complicates the picture. She was 10 years old when Bulgaria, like the rest

of Communist Europe, changed course. One may wonder about the personal memory of the glory days let alone 30 years ago and in Transnistria. Nevertheless, as in Herbert's case, the truth is hers; the sense of being present in the past is genuine. She had internalized the discourse of that world no less than I did a generation earlier, and so she recognized it for what it was as if to say, "my goodness, nothing has changed here," though I'm certain she, like Mr. Herbert in New York, would easily get lost in the city streets. As I did when in late autumn of 2002 I visited Tallinn, the capital of the former Soviet republic of Estonia. The references to other times and other places were multiple, creating an odd cacophony of overlapping associations that made a place I had never been to and that, in its intense foreignness, offered nothing to hold on to, oddly familiar. I recognized the buildings, they were like those I saw in Stockholm and my Russian children's books, I had walked the medieval streets of the Hanseatic League before, though I cannot recall where. I recognized the streetcars. Manufactured in the Czech Republic and exported throughout the former Soviet empire they even made the same noise as they do in Prague. I spoke the now useless once imperial language of the Russian minority and never heard a language so strange and foreign as Estonian. I could pick the Russians out of the crowd, dressed in the plastic looking clothes we used to get in East Germany. They are generally avoided, living in the housing ghettos. "Useless people" the proud, tall and handsomely dressed "Northerners" told me, though they seemed to do a good job mopping the marble steps in the hotel lobby.

The strong sense of familiarity is the key ingredient to the feeling of defamiliarization as one travels to new places that, upon arrival, turn out to be old places in both senses of the term. We recognize them in our past. Of course, the opposite holds as well, since the whole experience, if not in its structure then certainly in its content, is entirely new. It is both of these positions, this exhilarating feeling of novelty and the equally exhilarating feeling of familiarity that, in playing off each other like the ever-shifting foreground and background of ambiguous *Gestalt* figures, constitutes the disorienting tension that also accompanies the return home after so many years.

By the time I landed in Prague on March 15, 1990, I was emotionally drained by the half a year of ceaseless anxiety that reminded me that nostalgia, in addition to having to do with identity and memory, is a physically debilitating state. Since mid-September of the previous year, as we all watched and listened to Eastern Europe's Communism unravel, I could barely sleep at night while during the day I experienced the same rapid fragmentation of thought in slow motion that characterizes dreaming... I too was unraveling. There, on the television screen, radio news and the newspaper's front page was the Prague I grew up in, there were the friends I left behind when 17 years earlier, I become suddenly a *persona non grata*, thrown out of the city I considered my home and from a country that

was not, I was born in New York. I will leave for a future discussion whether to describe the period between September 89 and March 90 as *liminal*. For sure, it was a tumultuous passage in which identity narratives were thrown into relief as I tried to reconcile the elation over the unexpected ending to an interminable state of siege with a deeply felt resentment at this seismic disturbance of my taken-for-granted world.

With this in mind, the estrangement I experienced during my first return to Prague was precisely that of confirmation, that things really are the way I recalled them *in absentia* only more so. It was a sensuous experience and in that sense – perhaps in the Kantian rather than the artistic usage – it was an aesthetic one:[6] an overwhelming sense of recognition, a sameness that was estranging and emotionally powerful. Of course, this time the 'reality effect' had been transcended by reality itself. It is not enough to speak of authenticity or note "I had been here before." I was back; I was once again here, in the present. Their present and my present were once again in the same place. Phenomenologically speaking, all recognition is exactly that, re-cognition, a repetition formation of identity. At this precious moment of arrival, this layering of our being-in-the-world in which the past 'being-in' provides the thickening that makes the present into a plot (where the "once before" is recalled as if on command and with precision so as to be on hand to fulfill the meaning of what would otherwise be just a peripheral "passing by"), this layered sense is something I was suddenly made keenly aware of. And I knew what was coming, too. As my friend Vašek drove me in his car from the airport into the Old Town, he chose the high rode behind the Castle on purpose. For he knew exactly what he was doing reconstituting my childhood and our adolescent Sunday walks, pass the entrance to the New World and then along the King's Gardens and the Summer Residence of Queen Anne to turn in by the hedges of the Chotka park. I knew that once he completed the right turn we would start down the serpentine and to our left, right in front of us, the view of the old city of Prague would open up. Indeed, that is what I saw when my friend completed the turn. I saw the city landscape just as I always did; I could feel my sense of anticipations ease off, now confirmed, into my present.

The sensation that I had both stepped into the past but also simply returned to the present took on an interesting twist when a couple of days later, when my friends and I bumped into my old friend Jiří and his wife Jana. The "unexpected bumping into" was actually mutual and, in the moment, foretold. As we were crossing the small bridge past The Devil's Mill *(Čertovka)* on to the Island of Kampa my friends' younger sister came walking back, towards us, hollering that

[6] A related distinction between 'recollection' and 'remembering', one that works with the concept of the aesthetic, pertains directly to the present discussion (Lass 1994) but I have chosen to ignore it here for reasons of expediency and leave it, like so many other points merely "thrown on the canvas", for future elaboration.

she had just met Jirka and Jana. She had gone ahead, with the kids, to see the source of the festive music that was coming from the small square we had not yet reached. Of course, she had told them that I was around the corner. As I came around, on to the medieval setting full of people with kids running around, I was struck by the festive atmosphere including a loud jazz band on a raised scaffolding. Suddenly, I found myself embraced by a woman I did not recognize. And, as she cried into my ear and pressed my neck against her shoulder, I recognized, peering over it, Jirka in his signature cap across from me laughing and greeting me, as he always did, with four letter words and the little ditty he would recite whenever he introduced me to others *("...Andy Lass husy pás...")* I had completely forgotten about it. From under his shirt, he pulled out a little whistle on a string and proceeded to play and prance around while red eyed Jana, who had finally let go, looked at me and exclaimed "Andy's back! Now I know it's not a dream, that the whole thing really happened and things are OK again."[7]

It is a powerful emotion when reality confirms our memory in that moment of closure (a prolonged and complicating one), when one returns home. This is not to say that one does not notice changes or that one remembers everything. If anything, the opposite takes place and perhaps plays significantly into the experience of heightened awareness as one recognizes, having forgotten, and remembers "on the fly" as the context driven, associative memory "kicks in". As if, I needed to be there in order for things to come back to me. Hence the doubling effect, only a few days after my first return, of walking down *Husova* street for the first time in 17 years and being asked by an out of town visitor (not a foreign tourist) for directions to *Můstek*. I was able to show him without hesitation – by pointing my stick and gesticulating as I mapped out the direction in midair – the left and right turns, thoroughly enjoying the treat, this unexpected test of embodied familiarity which I passed on, as if to confirm that this place was still mine and I knew it "like the back of my hand", though I hadn't been at *Můstek* myself for close to two decades.

It strikes me, as I look back 15 years later, how intensely satisfying my initial returns to the city were, in the very early 1990s, in so far as they were not a disappointment to my memory, so full of longing *(touha)*, desire *(slast)* and sorrow *(stesk)*. And in those early years I was very conscious of my intense need to capture this atmosphere, my city, its walls, the odors, noises, but most importantly, to unlock the city's mysteries of chance coincidences *(princip náhody)* and haunting pleasures (*princip slasti*). And that is what I did, obsessively, as I wondered through the city taking pictures of cobwebs and forgotten ladders, of that magical light, and of this time that seemed to be stuck in its own kind of present.

[7] The reference here is to the so-called Velvet Revolution that marked the downfall of the Communist regime in the Fall of 1989.

Gradually, over the years, this would change, as everything did, and my salvage phenomenology would end as the city and the country "woke up" to the world, in order to fill its desire to join it, to re-center itself as another center in the cultural West that had been for so long, geographically to its west. The past 15 years have witnessed a complex series of strategic and chaotic moves to re-join Europe *(návrat do Evropy)*, at a cost to the landscape as we knew it. The city has cleaned up its act and its people have moved on to follow other trajectories (or their old trajectories took on new directions). I also settled into my routine.

Present sense

The 'present' or, more accurately, the 'present sense' has a peculiar, seemingly paradoxical, quality that I have tried to illustrate above. On one hand it corresponds to that ever-moving temporal sliver we refer to as the "now" in our experience of the world as we live it, and that – in Husserl's inquiry into internal time consciousness – includes retention and protension (Husserl 1964). On the other hand it is within (rather than against or next to) this "now" that the past and the future take place as temporal modalities experienced as "not now". As if the infinitely narrow 'now' is also the infinitely large umbrella, one that provides a temporal grid that also includes, among other modalities, the "now". While the Bergsonian objection to spatial representations of time still applies, like Escher's images, the model I am suggesting is suitably warped. It is important to keep in mind that I am here thinking of the kinds of temporal experiences that we, as conscious beings, usually (if not always) have no trouble distinguishing as we do the past and future tense or the pastness of that which had past. Since the past, present and future, like dreaming or imagining, are culturally specific and historically shifting modalities it would be tempting to say that the above model distinguishes the presuppositional backdrop against which these kinds of times and activities are constituted.[8] Perhaps. Nevertheless, I find this distinction to be misleading (mainly because it takes us down the slippery path of dualisms and

[8] Of course, the critical difference between the two notions of presence has to do with the fact that we are, so to speak "stuck and cannot leave" the former, other than by "losing consciousness". For this reason, the present sense is thought of as nothing less than consciousness itself, as the always-intending turn towards its object. Whereas, in the latter sense, the present like the past or future are broader periods with nebulous boundaries and tacit understandings of what all fits within one or the other frame such that, for example, all of 'today' is the present even though at any moment I am only present within that moment. The problem with these distinctions is that they move us away from the phenomenology of the experience in which the two kinds of temporal 'present' coexist on uneven yet enriching grounds.

wondrous a-priories) and instead suggest that we work with the idea that the experiential structure of the temporal present, or present sense, encompasses this dual function precisely because it is descriptively accurate and because what it describes is a tension that inscribes our every day life and, in this case, the heightened feeling of estrangement when the past and present meet.

Likewise, the expression "return to the past" is in fact rather ambiguous since it is not so much that I returned to the past only – though I, like others, seem comfortable using this turn of phrase – but also, and more importantly as far as the phenomenology of nostalgia is concerned, that I had arrived in the other present, one in which my memory/expectations were suitably matched/fulfilled (rather than disappointed). While I had to travel, physically and in space, it was in fact not in time. After all, while the place was "as I had left it", my friends had aged (in some cases beyond recognition) and their identities required readjustments on my part.[9] Furthermore, I was fully aware that we shared the same present (homogenous) time and I am therefore tempted to argue that it is precisely for this reason that the atmosphere was so enigmatic, so emotionally saturated, tense and disorienting: I was where I longed to be, it was what I had missed. On the other hand, the strong, accompanying feeling of intimacy,[10] while heartwarming, had a disturbing quality to it. I had arrived in a dense but opaque social network and it would take years before I understood its nodes and found my way around. Only then would I be been fully present. As for the sense of belonging, that is yet another narrative.

[9] Importantly, the many friends who met me at the airport made for a moment of 'welcoming' that, 15 years later, remains emotionally 'raw' as it was when I passed Customs and came out into the arrival hall. After 17 years we certainly aged and acquired partners and children. It was all a bit confusing. But it was their voices that remained the same and perhaps their gestures that guided me as I quickly readjusted my mental image. This has not happened every time and to this day I meet people I know but cannot place them and find myself agonizing as I scramble through the rubbish of my exhausted memory to find the appropriate Madeleine.

[10] Later on in this project I will use the term 'intimacy' as I address the sense of psychological and social 'closeness' or 'distance' also glossed by a variety of Czech words/expressions that describe, condone or object to ways in which people are/not in each other's spheres (further exemplified by notions of privacy [*soukromí*] as well as caring [*starost*], envy [*závist*] or back stabbing [*podraz*].) I argue that this process of valuation, itself a discursive practice, is a key component to the concept of 'home' (as a kind of 'sense of place') as it informs the 'sense of presence'. Etymologically, the term 'presence' is conveniently ambiguous since it conflates both 'here' (a spatial referent) and 'now' (the temporal referent) but refers also to the 'gift' and the act of 'giving' (in Latin). All this and more is at best hinted at in this brief presentation.

All this to say why a friend's postcard both confirmed my initial reaction to Munn's paper (and Mr. Herbert's observations) and, as I tried to convey here, gave me thought.

References Cited

BARTHES, Roland (1979). *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies.* Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Hill and Wang.

BENFEY, Christopher – REMMLER, Karen, eds. (2006). *Artists, Intellectuals and World War II: The Pontigny Encounters at Mount Holyoke College, 1942–1944.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

CASEY, Edward (1987). *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

HUSSERL, Edmund (1964). *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

LASS, Andrew (1994). From Memory to History: The Events of November 17 Dis/membered. In: WATSON, Rubie, ed. *Memory, History and Opposition Under State Socialism.* Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

MUNN, Nancy (2005). *The Returnee Narrative: Defamiliarization and Changes in City Places, Chapt. 5. workshop on place.* University of Helsinki.

Andrew Lass, PhD
Ford Foundation Professor of Anthropology
Department of Anthropology
Mount Holyoke College
50 College Street
South Hadley, MA 01075
USA
alass@mtholyoke.edu