Andrew Lass

Prague & The Sense of Presence

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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 capital 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

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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 smoke hovering across the horizon above which I could only imagine a blue sky. We heard the police sirens in the distance and then also a glimpse on 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 suggests some important ways to

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 osvěžení, 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. Mukavskovsky presumably meant "osvěžení". One of the meanings of the prefix "o-" in Russian is the so-called factitive meaning – to make something X (osvoboditi, 'to make free = to liberate', oslozhni, '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."  

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.  

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.

4 Nancy continues “It is as if the streets had indeed turned Mr. Herbert into a stranger, deactivating his bodily memory (the “active imminance of the past in the body,” as Casey (1987, 149) describes it) which we earlier saw Mr. Viellecours attempting to re-embodify 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.

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 unrelenting. 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 - 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 Václav 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 (Certovka) on to the Island of Kampa my friends’ younger sister came walking back, towards us, hollering that

*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."

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 Mlýnek. 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 Mlýnek 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 (slašt) 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 slašti). And that is what I did, obsessively, as I wandered through the city taking pictures of cowwebs and forgotten ladders, of that magical light, and of this time that seemed to be stuck in its own kind of present.

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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-priorities) and instead suggest that we work with the idea that the
eriental 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 readjust-
ments 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 'wel-
coming' 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 psycho-
logical 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 [žalost] or back stabbing [podrazi]). 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'. Epistemologically, 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.

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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.

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