

Susanna Clarke's 'Piranesi' (with Susannah Black and Derek Rishmawy)

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Preacher: Derek Rishmawy

- [0 : 00] Hello and welcome. I am joined today by Derek Rishmawi and Susanna Black. We have decided to boot Matt Lee Anderson and to add Susanna Black and to move it all over to my podcast. It's a hostile takeover and not really, but still.
- Well, this is an unusual discussion. We're going to be talking about Susanna Clark's recent novel Piranesi, which is a fascinating book. If you have not read it, you might want to stop now because this is going to be a spoiler heavy episode in which we get into some of the meaning of the book, some of its influences, some of its philosophical themes.
- So to kick us off, I thought that Derek, who suggested this conversation, could say a bit about the fundamental setting of the book and some of the key plot points.
- So really quick, I think we have established the baseline. Is it Piranesi or is it Piranesi? Like I just, I think it probably is Piranesi, but in my head, uneducated, unlettered man that I was, I kept on going Piranesi.
- I think it's Piranesi. Piranesi. Yeah, my dad, so. It's Italian, right? Yeah, it's, it's the name of a printmaker. And my dad actually, when I was growing up.
- [1 : 25] Yes. He still has like a Piranesi print on his wall. And Piranesi did these like freakish, strange, elaborate, sinister, mostly sinister interiors, like architectural interiors. So we should probably.
- I looked this up. Yeah, we should like find one to include as the image of the show. Yeah, Piranesi. I looked this up and I think he does, he did these, because he did a lot of kind of like, I don't, I don't think it's neoclassical. It's like pre neoclassical or something like that. But some of them were these crazy interiors of like prisons.
- Yeah.
- And you're like, I don't care about the spoilers. I will just tell you, this book is awesome. You should read it. Like, if you don't plan on reading it, you should read it. I read it in like five hours last week on an afternoon.
- You should care about spoilers. I just couldn't put it down. Stop listening. You should with this book. Stop right now. I'm like, I'm just right now we're, we're warning, we're begging you, pleading with you.
- [2 : 58] Yeah. Okay, but you had your warning. So Piranesi opens and it's, it's conducted entirely in the form of journal entries by the main author, the voice of the storyteller, who's known, goes by Piranesi.
- And he begins to describe a, the world in which he lives, which he refers to as the house. And the house has many rooms, but they're not just rooms.
- There are these, it's like a world that has cavernous vestibules that, you know, extend for, for hundreds and thousands of feet or, sorry, meters, Alistair.

And, you know, there's, you know, 192 in one direction, 200, whatever, in another direction. And it's not just that these, these, these, these, these rooms extend to the side, they have different levels and that, you know, there are, there are layers.

So on the first, on the first level, these rooms are filled with water, almost the ocean, great lakes filled with fish and all that. And then the second layer is kind of like where Piranesi usually hangs out.

[4 : 18] And these are the, these are the, these are the, in a sense, habitable rooms. And then the upper, the upper level is, these are actually rooms that are filled with the clouds, right?

They're that high up. So this house is not just a normal house. It's, it's, it's, it's world-ish. It's whole world-ish. All the rooms, all the vestibules are filled with statues of all sorts of figures.

There's fawns and barbers and animals. And they're just figures upon figures upon figures. Piranesi lives in this world and he begins talking about the world.

And there's only one other person in the world that he knows of, which is just referred to as other, the other. And, and they meet regularly.

And he, it's just this fascinating thing where I'm, I'm setting it up and I realize I should be just expounding the plot a bit more. But basically, the story revolves around Piranesi coming to discover the truth about himself and the truth about the world that he's in.

[5 : 22] He only knows of 15 other people who have existed in the world. Himself, the other, and like 13 dead folks that he's found their bones in the labyrinth of the world, of the house.

And I'm, I'm, it's hard, it's so hard to describe, but there's this, the unfolding mystery is, who is the other that he talks to as they, as they, they make observations about the world.

Who he himself is and where he actually is. What is the house? You guys want to interject because I, I'm, I'm not actually getting us the full plot storyline.

I'm just giving us a setup because it's so hard to describe. It, it, it's hard to describe because you only get the sequence of events. You only kind of understand what the sequence of events that led up to Piranesi sort of starting to narrate to you, starting to tell his story towards the end.

Like you, it's, it's a very gradual unfolding of like what's happened in the last like five years or something. Like, is that the kind of timeframe that it seems like?

[6 : 30] Yeah. Yeah. And it turns out again, just turn it off right now. Just go away. Everyone go away, go read the book. You haven't done that.

I'm going to carry on. It turns out that they're all researchers from, are they from Oxford? Like, do we know what university they're from? I think, yeah, I think it's the Oxbridge world.

Manchester. So they're essentially, I don't, I can't remember what department they're in. They're like physicists or something like that.

Or, no, it's, it's like, it's like anthropology and kind of cultural anthropology kind of, but weird hybridity of, of disciplines.

Right. It's a very university-ish book. Nerds, grad students and nerds love this kind of thing. It's like they're a bunch of grad students. Like, this is what it turns out. Every, basically everyone here is a professor or a grad student.

[7 : 28] And, and this is like what happens to you when you, when you try to go for an advanced degree, you just end up like a fish in a gigantic, you know, house that is a world.

Um, so what's happened is there was this, there was this group of researchers who were, um, one of whom was the kind of, um, you know, charismatic, uh, academic sort of head of this project.

Uh, they're all very familiar academic types too. Like it's, it's such a, it's such a university book. Um, so, so the guy Lawrence Arndt sales, he's a, he's like a transgressive thinker.

He's a visionary poly poly, uh, disciplinary thinker. Right. And he, you just triggered my memory of this.

Basically he theorizes the existence of other worlds. And one of the worlds in a sense is the world where things go when they kind of go out of the world.

[8 : 37] So he, he's drawing on this, uh, this kind of like idea that the world used to be a certain way. And this is where we come into like the idea of enchantment and disenchantment a lot, but, but essentially it's like almost like the, I want to say it's like the world of the, it's like Plato's world of the forms of a sort.

Uh, when they, when they, when they, when they, when they lose their place in our world, their functional place in our world, they don't just disappear. They go into another world and they appear in this world of the house.

And Lawrence Arndt sales is this transgressive thinker who theorizes it and then tries to get there. And he gets there and people end up there.

They end up stuck there. And Piranesi is, uh, when you come to find out that he was a researcher who was, uh, he was a journalist. Who's studying transgressive thinkers falls down this rabbit trail of thought and ends up getting, um, stuck in this world.

And he was brought there by one of the former disciples of Lawrence Arndt sales, uh, this guy named Ketterly, who's he's known as the other. And he's kind of a malicious character, but he tracks him in this world.

[9 : 44] And then Piranesi being in this world actually for so long, he can't get out. He's all alone. He, he, he, the effect the world has on him is he loses his, he, he loses his, his, um, his idea of himself.

He doesn't know who he is anymore. Uh, he doesn't know his, his, his history. And he basically just comes to believe himself to have always existed in this world. And he takes, he, he's so, so the journal is initially like his journal of when you're reading his journal of like his readings and understanding the world.

He thinks of himself as a researcher alongside Ketterly because he has forgotten who he is. And so the mystery is him finding out who he is, who all these people are going through old journal articles, old journal entries that he himself had written years earlier, but had forgotten about.

And like thinking, Oh, these are all these characters. These are all these people who were our mystery to me, but like, they were the people who in a sense brought me here. Uh, at least my study brought me here.

And so I, I, I cannot get over how, so at this point, I don't know. I feel like if we keep describing this book, we're just going to keep going on because it's so hard.

[10 : 58] I think what people should already notice if they're familiar with his work is the influence of Lewis, CS Lewis upon this. Ketterly, of course, is the surname of Uncle Andrew in The Magician's Nephew, which is perhaps the book above all others that is behind Piranesi.

So if you look at, um, the story of The Magician's Nephew, there are a couple of places within that, that resemble or remind you of the house. There's the ruined world of Chan, um, where the Empress Jadis comes from, who becomes the white witch.

And then there's also the wood between the worlds, which is a realm of forgetfulness, which exists in this liminal, liminal place between various worlds.

Right. It's a place that is horrific to the Empress Jadis, but it's a place into which others can sink and their consciousness kind of merges with the place.

They're, they're forgetful and they feel at peace and at rest there, but it's a place of profound forgetfulness. So when you're reading the book, you will hear that influence throughout and some of the deeper themes of the book.

[12 : 04] So if you think about the curiosity that is, um, seen in Diggory's actions in the great hall where he rings the bell, um, or the way in which Uncle Andrew expresses this higher vocation, this desire to exercise magic, the use of Guinea pigs and trying to break through to other worlds, get power and control.

And the way that that gives him license to treat other people in horrific ways. These are themes that are explored in Piranesi along with other themes from Lewis.

So some of the things that came to my mind were, um, the head in, um, that hideous strength. Um, you might also think of the discarded image in, um, some of the ways that the medievals viewed the world and an attempt to recover that.

And also the other inklings, most notably Barfield and his notion of original participation. Right. And I mean, the thing that most reminds me of the distinction that Lewis makes in, I don't even remember where I read it first, but throughout his work between Magia and Goetia.

Um, between somebody tell me how to pronounce this between magic and kind of, um, wicked enchantment or wicked, um, mechanical attempts to control the world through, you know, summoning demons and so on.

[13 : 36] Um, um, um, the, the heart of the book seems to me to be there. Basically the world as we understand it has fallen apart into, um, into science and magic or into facts and meaning.

And there, and we need to, and those two sides need to be put back together in some way. And, but there are kind of two different ways that are presented of putting those two things back together.

Um, and those two different ways are represented by, um, by Piranesi and the other. And one is the way of the kind of magician scientist who's kind of a Faust character, um, who, you know, the other is attempting to find what he calls the great and secret knowledge.

Is that, am I remembering that right? Something like, yeah, the great knowledge or something like that. Yeah. And so he's trying to, Ketterli is trying to find, um, the great and secret knowledge.

He's doing this in order to control other people, like explicitly he wants power. And in order to like, and he's basically exploited Piranesi.

[14 : 52] He's, he's, you can, it's a getting pig to a certain degree. He's, um, to be hidden him away and is entirely capable of doing terrible things to other people. Um, so he's, he's sort of like a magician scientist.

And then Piranesi himself is kind of the, I was trying to think of what the contrast would be. And it would be something like a magus natural philosopher.

So I know like the contrast between magician and magus is, is wrong. But like, if you think of like a magus as a practitioner of magic, who is not trying to use it to control other people, who's not trying to exploit the natural world.

Um, but is in instead kind of like in harmony with it. Um, and I, it's really difficult not to see, um, uh, Ketterly as basically Francis Bacon.

I was going to say, he's like, he's the bad caricature of, of Baconian science as dominance, knowledge, power knowledge, uh, or whatever.

[15 : 59] You know, as a, as a, as a rule of control. Yeah. That, that's. Now we've got to go. Awesome. Sorry. That's all right. Everyone gets one.

Um, man, it's like more difficult to talk about this book than I thought it would be because it's so interesting. And it's so like, as you're reading it, it's this experience of kind of these ideas kind of enter into you and you realize gradually like what, what Susanna Clark is on about.

And then you try to like put those ideas into words. And it's almost like you are by putting the ideas, what we're doing now, by putting the ideas into words, you're anatomizing something that can't be fully anatomized.

And, but I mean, at, at the very basic level, um, this is a book about what happens.

So say things have happened, say there has been disenchantment. Um, where did the enchantment go? And, but the, the, the thing that's so difficult to convey is that it's not, it's not about magic.

[17 : 09] Like what the house is, what the house represents is not magic as we would understand it at all. Like there's no, um, you know, Piranesi is not able to do, you know, there's nothing supernatural other than like the fact of the house.

Um, but what it is, is everything in the house is charged with meaning and legibility and Piranesi's relationship with the house as his world is a relationship of feeling loved by it and feeling like it's his job to read it and understand it.

And that it is legible. And that it is legible. It's not just stuff like the, the, the fact that there, that there are these statues, these figures everywhere. Um, it's almost as though.

Like. Like they're like naturally occurring figures, but they're, but they're stories as well. And that kind of connection between a natural world that is not just matter, but that actually has meaning baked into it is I think, um, what the book does such a good job of evoking.

I think understanding what the house is, is really such an important part of grasping what the book is about. Um, so there are a number of things that come to mind when you read the book.

[18 : 29] It can, you can compare the house, for instance, to the wood between the worlds or somewhere like Chan, but in a positive sense, it's a lost world. Um, that is not dead, but a sort of living world that has been abandoned.

In other ways, it might remind you of Plato's cave, but it's not Plato's cave. It's, it's not, um, it, there is something that has a closer relationship.

It's like where the forms have gone. Yeah. Yes. But, but in a way, it's not that either because the forms, um, it's what's left behind when the shaped with the flowing out of the forms.

So it's the hollow that the forms have left when they've, when they have departed from the world. So it's not actually the real world. It's not the forms. It's the absence that is left by the forms when they have departed.

And so perhaps the thing that most came to my mind was the sort of Renaissance memory palace, but it's a palace of forgotten memory. It's a place where all these things that have been lost to the mind have, they've seeped away and they've left this hollow behind them.

[19 : 41] But the image is one in which you, so for me, it's like the memory palace that you might have, but there's no life to interpret it. Um, and so when you have, um, when you have Piranesi within it, he's trying to make sense of it, but it's not his mind that was created, that created it.

The other is trying to ransack it for some hidden knowledge that isn't there. Um, the knowledge created the place, but it's, it's departed. And so it's a memory palace without any life to actually work out its meaning.

You might also think about the house as, as Derek already mentioned, it is a world. And so it includes the clouds above that part of the house, the sea in the basement and the lower floor.

It's externalized and it refuses to, the other sort of refuses to be a part of the world. He's trying, he's holding himself apart from it and he doesn't perceive it as lovable.

the very end of the book is that the other is alone and sorry um Piranesi is alone and the other is kind of like not it turns out a friendly presence um so it almost seems as though there has to be something that happens there has to be a kind of like um reuniting of the world of the house with the you know our world so a re-interpenetration of meaning and matter in order for Piranesi to sort of re-enter society in a way or to not be alone but it's not clear that that's so but he doesn't really perceive that need so so what's interesting here is is seeing this actually happening in Piranesi himself um you know there's so much going on here that you know Piranesi's approach to the world is one of yeah that naturalist philosopher who is attuned to it who's become attuned to it it's deeply observational it's attentive it pays attention to details it looks at like the the patterns of of the birds flying and sees meaning in it it's not just a random bird showing up it's like what does it what does it mean what does it mean um are they trying to speak to me his his approach to it is is interesting in that regard and it's not the kind of externalized objectified um I need to like suck the the knowledge out of it to control um but what's interesting about that is that it's Piranesi goes through a transformation himself uh you know he comes to find out that prior to being Piranesi he was Matthew Rose Sorensen he was a a student he was a journalist he was a he was somebody who was working academically on this uh figure Lawrence Arns

Arnsales I can't remember how to say his name where is it on sales um Arnsales yes he's got this project on transgressive thinkers and the way that they their relationship to um reason their relationship to uh knowledge and all that kind of thing he himself is he's not necessarily like uh when when Arnsales comes to the world and talks to him uh he looks at me like when I met you and this is something that Piranesi not picking up at the time he's like when I met you you were you were basically you were a punk but now now you you're quite nice like something has happened in the way Piranesi himself approaches his subjects he was a journalist who was observing people trying to as far as I understand you know capture them and subject them himself to to write this book to write these academic articles around Arnsales but as he becomes Piranesi his approach to people shifts his approach I mean so he attentively uh thinks about um like the bones of the dead people who are in the house alongside him who were they what was their story and he cares for them and he moves them to safe places um his approach to the world seems to shift and and you know when he's brought out of the world by uh was it Raphael the the cop yeah um he comes out of the world and he doesn't quite feel like Matthew

Rose Sorensen uh as he comes to remember who he was but he's not quite Piranesi anymore fully or entirely either and you know towards the end you see that like he is becoming he has become um some union or some reconciliation or an increasing reconciliation of Matthew Rose Sorensen and Piranesi the the one who was formed in a world without those that kind of intrinsic meaning the one who was kind of um looking at people researching trying to pull them together for his own like with almost a similar approach to to power and knowledge uh as Ketterly yeah who is reconciling that with the time the person he became in the world uh in in the house and that is almost like happening within himself um out now in our world and so he's transformed uh so he's not who he was in in the pure world because in in the house he lost himself he lost his sense of time lost that that wasn't fully himself it was so like attuned to the house like his sense of identity went weird so anyways that that that I see that movement happening in Piranesi himself and or at least the attempt to to have that movement happening within Piranesi himself and his own I mean his own development as a character yeah and the other thing that I'm sort of reminded me of you guys are gonna roll your eyes um so originally when he's studying um these transgressive thinkers he's not like he's not really asking himself are they right he's just he's like yeah like somebody who's like I'm really into like Julian

James and also um who's that guy who did the Robert Anton Wilson and like I'm just I'm into these guys I'm into people who are who have strange ideas about the way the world works but he wasn't asking himself like are they on to anything um what is reality here and and he but he got sucked into the reality of one of the idea of one of these transgressive thinkers and it I hate to do this but it reminded me of my experience of of sort of reading Strauss and reading um reading Leo Strauss and the the experience of kind of Straussian um approaches to political philosophy where you know the ordinary approach to political philosophy is you you study the history of political philosophy like you study what different you know philosophical thinkers have what their what their systems are um what they believed what they're you know you'll probably do something about what what their time and place was um you might try to understand them from the perspective of the events that were going on around them but you don't actually ever like say okay you know what's Plato right was there was Aristotle correct um are they describing the world and so his his transition Matthew Rose Sorenson's transition from being a kind of um voyeuristic uh journalist who's interested in what these strange academics think to someone who's fully um fully living out one of the realities of their ideas is is that's also fascinating to me yeah I don't know I want to interrupt Alistair but go ahead no no just that that that being coming subject to them I think I think I'd be curious to hear what you guys have to think about you know that the figure of our own sales is extremely ambiguous right not even a big he's a bad he's he's bad like he's callous he doesn't care about the subjects of his experiment I mean Ketterly is is more malicious but he's this transgressive thinker he's transgressive in all sorts of ways right and but he's right and so kind of like wrestling with you know the the just wrestling with his ambiguous morality but nevertheless insight into the way the world works at least in this world um I'm I want to I'd love to hear what you guys have to think about him as a figure in the book like uh and and how that relates to that so it's interesting the way that um Piranesi refers to him as the prophet when he encounters him um there's a sense of again I think there's something about the way that words relate to reality um that changes during the course of the book so the idea of the prophet is a word that illuminates the world that gives some sort of deeper meaning and significance and some sense of the charged reality of the world and one's path within it as opposed to the word words that can actually destroy your world that he's warned about by the other that if he reads the words that are or hears the words of this other person who's entered his world his world might be destroyed he might be sent mad and writing and words and speech are such an important part of the book and I think that may be one way into thinking about the character of the prophet or say on sales um so the way that words disrupt something of his original participation to use

barbfield's understanding um he is at one with the house he senses the house as a presence um that interacts with him that interacts with him that he's the beloved child of the house and the moment that that is disrupted he feels himself to be alone the capital h that always used to be given for the halls now becomes a small h there's a sense in in which the world has been demystified there's something of an absence and he is someone who's now alone in the world he's lonely and that is a result of a particular engagement with words among other things the words that could not easily be erased the words that um he read in his book that gave him the memory that he had lacked as a result of his union with the house the words that he himself had written yes yeah yeah that's fascinating Susanna you're about to um

[32 : 57] I mean so one of there there's so many different kinds of reading experiences and and hearing experiences that this book reminded me of one of them was actually um so Lev Grossman who's this uh other kind of fantasist other science fiction writer um wrote a series of books called the magician's trilogy and if this is about um if Piranesi is about meaning as magic like what what the magic is is the um the meaning that's embedded in matter or the meaning that's embedded in reality um then the magician's trilogy is I would say something like goodness as magic but you see it in the lack of goodness so again spoilers uh although man I I always I can never tell whether I want to recommend these books or whether I want to like warn people away from them um but there are a series of books where there is a like it's it's very Hogwarts-y it's very Harry Potter-y there is there are the standard sort of apparatuses apparati of um you know a lot of uh sort of college-based um fantasy novels where there's this college of magic and you get you know if you are sort of have the potential to become a magician you are taken away when you're or you know you're invited to study there um and there are centaurs and there are spells and there are you know there are all kinds of different sort of you know creatures um but there's no actual like no one's good no one's like super bad either but no one's particularly good there's no battle between good and evil there's no quest um the teachers are kind of careerist the magic is very mechanical so like you can do magic but there's not any reason to do magic um and that trilogy like reveals by its absence I would say that when you know when we're reading the Narnia books or even when we're reading Harry Potter like the the magic is like the goodness and the idea of a quest the idea of um there being something that's worth doing and then the kind of friendship that grows up or relationship that grows up in the doing of it and the idea that like you can if you choose wrong you're choosing something that's morally wrong um not just disadvantageous or something like that's intrinsic to the magic like the magic is not about the centaurs or the fawns or the the spells and you're lazy it's it's it's not so much goodness although the goodness is there as well but it's just really focused on meaning as magic two thoughts there one is that reminds me a lot of the other uh other magic series that um oh why not blanking on uh Philip something not Philip Pullman uh oh no not Philip Patrick Rothfuss is um the Kingkiller Chronicles oh my gosh the name of the wind yeah the name of the wind the name of the wind is so good but like yeah the form of magic and the way it's attached to uh naming and words and and like the the form of magic is interesting here and it relates like again because this is not a magical this is actually not magic like this book is not about magic um but uh it got me thinking about

Susanna Clark's other book *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* which we should have a separate conversation about but the the even there that that book had an internal debate within it about the nature of magic is it nature magic is it scientific that same debate in a sense you know you've got you've got strange as kind of like uh almost like a natural um uh kind of uh savant of magic who intuitively taps into things as far as I remember and then and then Mr. Norrell who wants to have this very like orderly science of thaumaturgy yeah yeah properly English magic and yeah and but who who who who who eschews the old ways looks down on you know the magic of the Raven King and invoking fairies and that sort of thing that's all kind of like disorderly and not really good magic um it's wild and and it's wild and it's natural in a way that but natural in a like personal uh way not natural in a in a way of that can be like harnessed like the forces of you know gravity and so forth but but um the personal dimension of like invocation and and contract and all that um yeah the fight of around magic is i mean there's still some of that that personal dimension of the way we relate to the world the way that we relate to the depth dimension and the power contained within the world is it receptive is it personal or is it um instrument impersonal is it a matter uh subject to our instrumental subject to our control that's a theme that is running throughout both of her both of her books yeah and is also tied into the question of disenchantment and of the disenchantment of the world as we instrumentalize our relationship to nature and to create well when it becomes nature instead of creation in a sense right she uses a lot of that's something to think about i think she explicitly references oma barfield at one point um as one of the authors that was a transgressive thinker that people were in or a person that transgressive thinkers were interested in and his theory of original participation and a sense of oneness with the world relating to the world as if there were some intelligence or presence that were in the world that you could relate to and that you had some that it was present within you and that's something that for instance we talk about panic and panic is something that overtakes you that comes upon you that is a real thing out there in the world um almost it's a force at the world in the world there's also present within you and acts upon you and he gives that as an example of the way that the ancient mind would have related to the world more generally that there were great um god-like forces that you could experience their presence and impact upon you and there's a sense of sacredness and communion and charge meaning and then even after that there's a residual sense of meaning that the world is a scrutable um meaningful place as you have for instance in the discarded image of lewis that's not quite the same thing as original participation but it's something that has a remnant of the flavor of it and so barfield was very interested for instance in looking back at language and seeing the way that as you go further back in language you see the connection of language not just as putting tags on things in the world as it were but a sense of the unity of the various realities in the world metaphor and direct reference coming together and this more poetic experience of reality and so if you want to understand

the world one of the things you need to do is recover the sense of the etymologies in all our dead metaphors to trace back the course of language and to go beyond the sort of hollowed out dry riverbed of language to see the the water that once coursed through it the sense of participation the sense of unity between the self and the the forces of the world and one of the ways in which that course was diverted through science and the way that science engages with the world as something to be as a source of resources to be wrested from it or an understanding to imprison it and its forces to be harnessed and used for our purpose but without any sense of the sacredness the personhood almost of the world and so you see this even in the differences between the ways that piranesi speaks of the house the house is personal for him whereas the the other speaks about the house in ways that lose any sense of its sacredness that lose any sense of its sacredness it's there the set the statues don't have meaning they're just things covered with bird shit as he speaks about it the technological framework of thought that he brings to the house makes it impossible for him to see it in the way that piranesi does and so there's a sense in which the world that um the other sees moves the world of piranesi towards a sort of oblivion um he can't perceive the world in that way his eyes are dim to it whereas piranesi has this original participation the struggle is then he's broken free from that so um you might think about raphael who comes to deliver him she's i mean you might think about the archangel patron saint of travelers the blind and also in islamic thought the one who would blow the final trumpet leading to the resurrection there's something of that character that she has that she's breaking him out of this world and then the problem is how does he relate to that world afterwards can he return to the original participation he can't he's moved out of it and so somehow he has to reconcile the scientific world of modernity and the world that he is in thoroughly invested in as matthew rose sorensen and then the world of piranesi which is the world of original participation and somehow move beyond that to an imaginative reunion i was thinking about the work of ea burt the metaphysical foundations of modern science as he talks about this sort of sapping of meaning from the world this is one quote from him the features of the world now classed as secondary unreal ignoble and regarded as dependent on the deceitfulness of sense are just those features which are most intense to man in all but his purely theoretic activity and even in that except where he confines himself strictly to the mathematical method it was inevitable that in these circumstances man should now appear to be outside of the real world man is hardly more than a bundle of secondary qualities and so one of the ways in which he has to bring the world back together is to see the glory in things that have been sapped of their glory that have been reduced just to their surfaces and to see hidden behind that some sense of their participation in a glorious reality beyond themselves and so that final participation to use barfield's um barfield's language comes just at the very end of the book where in its final line he recognizes the house um in the world of um the streets that he's walking through and he also sees the way in which people that he meets have corresponding images within

the house there's one passage this comes to mind here people were walking up and down on the path an old man passed me he looked sad and tired he had broken veins on his cheeks and a bristly white beard as he screwed up his eyes against the falling snow i realized i knew him he is depicted on the northern wall of the 48th western hall he is shown as a king with a little model of a walled city in one hand while the other hand he raises in blessing i wanted to seize hold of him and say to him in another world you are a king noble and good i have seen it but i hesitated a moment too long and he disappeared into the crowd that coming after 200 pages it's just there's something like you you read it and i can like feel my heart just it's so good one of the things that's interesting that you know taylor talks about the porosity of the self in in part of what makes folk secular is the fact that we we're not we're not porous anymore we're not open uh we don't feel ourselves to be um uh subject or uh penetrable by you know spiritual forces and that sort of thing where we have buffered selves and you know keterli is a buffered self uh in respect to the house you know he comes in he's he he takes precautions not to be subject to the house in such a way that it would impact his his mental and intellectual uh integrity so he doesn't lose his memory his sense of who he is in his in the normal world whereas um you know uh piranese is is a is a fully porous self in that sense he's lost himself to the house um he he he he has his buffer has gone down it's been dampened almost entirely which is why he loses himself in there and so um the coming of raphael actually reintroduces his old buffer to some degree but it's now it's a it's a far more porous one uh as he reenters the world and this is where you kind of see the the you know even in that quote there's that level of of of the the the buff you know the the the the old piranese who had no buffer would have just grabbed him oh you're in the hall blah blah whereas the the the buffer of being out in the world has has started to reassert itself but not fully and i think there's something like even emotional about this in terms of thinking about the way we are you know keterli the other relates to the world and relates to others in the way piranese does he becomes much more open and receptive emotionally and spiritually and you think about like the even the nature of magic in these in these worlds or the nature of meaning um the ability to uh be receptive in uh is risky right there's something risky about his relationship to the house to the world to persons he can be taken advantage of he can be harmed in a lot of ways he but but he's also open to trust he's also open to relate uh keterli is keterli is self-contained keterli trust takes you know takes only his own counsel keterli is uh narcissistically uh he narcissistically relates to others and he's he's self-enveloped and there's there's a relationship there between you know his interpersonal relational dynamic and then the relational dynamic between him and the house him and the world yeah those are caught up with each other and say in in in in the sense that he's like he's closed off from reality and that makes him closed off from other people and therefore the only thing that he can serve is himself and that means that he can't actually perceive what's there finally i feel like i want to try to describe so i haven't read a ton of barfields or

i'm trying to think if i've ever read any barfield other than like quotes um shush what but no i haven't read that's me i i think i've read two quotes or i just see references to i just i mean i have uh the book the worlds apart i think but and i've got i think anyway so i'm gonna but i'm gonna try to describe two things that i think would get at like so there are actually three things that i think would kind of like help people to understand at least my understanding of what barfield was getting at at least via my understanding of what susanna clark was doing so first is like so there are certain words that throughout you know most languages that have gendered nouns take one gender rather than another so um oranos and shamayam are the um the greek and hebrew words for sky um and they're both male and gaia and um is it gosh eretz am i thinking of a hebrew word are are both feminine words um for earth and there's this weird thing that if you you can probably do this think of nouns you can very frequently you can guess whether they're whether they have this kind of um for the most part masculine or feminine character and then like go check see whether you're right so it's a kind of like reading a masculine or feminine nature in in nouns both in words and in the objects that for which they're referenced and like you can kind of do this experiment with yourself and you'll probably get it more than you know a um a random degree a percentage of them correct so that's like one way to kind of get into this to experience your way into this earlier um earlier participation the other is like i don't know if you guys did this but like um i can remember kind of not realizing that so throughout the the year each year i would have different kind of emotional flavors for for different seasons but i didn't perceive them as things in myself i i thought that they were like out there in the world so like the christmas feeling that i would get like in december i didn't think that that was in me i thought that that was in like in december and or you know the feeling of may april and may you don't feel like that's a subjective thing you feel like oh that's that's spring um and i mean i still feel that way honestly um i was gonna say susanna don't lie i was a kid look i'm last tuesday a lot of it is the openness to the world producing a sort of awe and wonder and a corresponding response in the person um i think of the first chapter of lewis's the abolition of man and the way he talks about the proper correspondence between uh response in the human spirit and actual physical realities and so if we do not have that corresponding response there's something wrong with us we've um we're not relating to reality properly and what the example you give about language i think is a good one um you may be thinking about the term adam that you have in genesis relating to adam where adam is from form from the earth and the earth is presented as his mother um and you have that elsewhere in the poetry of scripture naked i came

[52 : 48] from my mother's womb naked i will return there um knit together in the lowest parts of the earth the sense that the earth and the mother's womb belong together and there's a deep affinity to them with them it's not just a sort of poetic imagination it's something real and if you understand yourself and the world and your mother's womb you'll see that that's something real in the world and so the mother's womb and the earth there is a continuity between them that is not just a product of the imagination it is something out there and you can feel it in this more original participation sense or you can get at it in some form of final participation to use barfield's approach and i also think for instance of some heidegger's work along this line the sense of particularly his later work the fourfold or the way sky earth divinities and mortals join together language as a house of being coming in having a sense of the movement of being and its disclosure and the way that the technological approach to the world has tried to rest things from a reservoir of resources and as a result has prevented us from actually um having a sense of being at home in the world and the way that even things like the temple or the bridge to use some of his illustrations can gather things together in the world they're not just resting um indiscriminate and fungible resources they're actually uniting a whole um a world of the earth the sky mortal beings and the gods um which has a flavor of animism to it but an animism that is trying to recover that original participation through a poetic understanding for all of heidegger's deep problematic character there's something there so piranesi the thing is piranesi and ketterly's different relationships to the world uh you know you see that piranesi after a while you know there's this there's this uh there's one of the funny things that keeps happening is piranesi like realizing like i don't know how you know ketterly is always so well dressed he describes his various suits and he doesn't realize that ketterly is popping in and out of like our world and and the house and he's always dressed immaculately uh like he he brings sandwiches uh that are prepared in a world like he doesn't have to at all be attuned to anything that's going on there which is why partially why he's so uh scared of it and he doesn't venture out and the piranesi like he's lost his shoes he's you know he's got shells in his hair he's learned to fish he's learned to to to kind of be attuned to like the cold and the heat and the and and all of it um and he's closer to the house like just actually naturally physically like he's subject to it in some ways that whereas you know ketterly has ketterly is in a sense involved we keep coming back to the porosity and the and the bufferedness but like ketterly has utter control almost utter control of his relation to the house because he can extract himself from it um whereas piranesi is is he is a child of the house he lives within it he dwells within it it is it is it's the womb the womb of the world is is is where he dwells in it and it you know in a sense it mothers him um kind of a harsh mother uh in a lot of ways when you see him describe the the winters and the waves and all that sort of thing but it's his relationship is much more uh on that register one one thing i kind of want to pull on which is interesting think about is the feel theologically um the house is personal and the house is impersonal

this is like a this is a this is like a pantheistic panentheistic um kind of like participatory metaphysics which is not the same as a theistic uh participatory metaphysics right are you know that there is there is something different in a universe where things are created and god transcends it radically even though he's radically imminent to it and so this is this was something that is interesting thinking along along the lines of wanting to go straight back to um just going back to that original unity going back to that kind of participation um it's not uh it's not an unproblematic thing of of going back to the world i think there's something there with piranesi's losing himself in the world uh i mean this is maybe just correlating you know the i guess i'm i'm i'm i'm curious what you guys think correlating that issue of transcendence and eminence and even piranesi's own ability to distinguish himself uh his continuity through time his own identity uh losing himself to the house um you almost think of of you know uh a theology of god being lost within the world or actually distinct distinctly creating the world as a as his creature that uh reflects his glory reflects his paternal care but is nevertheless not god i don't know so i'm curious you know this is that was a jumble but these are some of the bells that are are being set off and i'm curious if you guys want to put some of bells in an order so so i have a couple of different ideas about this one of them is that um i recently saw a production in the before time so not that recently but like i don't know a year and a half ago um i saw a production of heracles um the the soft please play that was put on by um my friend caleb simone um who's this uh he's getting he's actually gotten now his doctorate in classics from columbia it was his um part of his you know doctoral program was doing this production um he did he's done a lot of research into greek music and the music that would have gone along with um with you know with each play he like found an aulos player there's like three aulos players left in the world and he found one of them um and so like i we could maybe like find a link to that production um to drop in the show notes to this because both in the in the experience of watching the play and in the play itself in sophocles's text um so lissa is the i forget she's sort of like the goddess of or the emissary of the goddess um who you know makes heracles go mad and kill his family again spoiler sorry um although if you didn't know that i don't know what to do um and so like there is this again spoiler spoiler alert on sophocles it's really it's kind of like i think you know it's been it that season has been uh released for a while now um you can even go back and binge watch those um yeah so um so heracles gets taken over by this music which is um played by this emissary of the goddess that drives him mad and like terrible this is no this is not a happy story it's there's a reason that we call it a tragedy um and there's this moment

where heracles is um sort of saying i can't basically despise everything that we've just seen where the gods are literally messing with him he he says i just can't believe that that god would be petty or it would be sort of like amoral i can't remember what the um the words are but like it's this moment of um classical theism in the middle of this mythological story and it's this moment where he experiences like the hope of good order in the world um which as someone who's been like thoroughly buffeted like back and forth as a completely unbuffered self you know taken over by you know the madness and the music of the goddess um it's like it's as though he's he's he's he's hoping for the disenchanted world but not fully disenchanted he's hoping for the world that we live in as christians where it's where god is a god of order and a god of goodness um but he's not hoping for like a world devoid of meaning it's almost like there's almost more meaning in a world where god can be counted on to be good um but it's less of it's it's less pantheistic it's less enchanted in a lot of ways and charles taylor um i mean my original i tweeted after right after i finished the book i said charles taylor eat your heart out like this is a very charles taylor book and charles taylor in um uh a secular age talks about um the disenchantment that christianity kind of like it's not it's never totally clear whether taylor is happy about this or not um but the disenchantment that christianity brought to the pagan world but it was not a complete disenchantment so that's kind of a little bit of what i i don't know if that's getting at anything that you were thinking about derek i was reminded of the work of the science fiction writer gene wolf latro in the mist is particularly oh i haven't read those a lot of he has though unreliable narrators but this particular one is yes an ancient character who's constantly forgetting he's lost the ability to remember for periods of time as a result of a judgment by a goddess and it explores many of the same themes of participation the ancient mind and its experience of the world and the attempt to try and hold things together with language and that i think gets at something of the book in terms of the way that language and the word is so important in actually helping him to first of all make sense of the world to restore some um reality to matthew rose sorensen and the word of the prophet is key there it's um a world a word from a sort of father type figure entering into the world of his original participation with his mother the house and it breaks that original unity in some sense and it seems to me that that's one of the things that is very important about the fact that god is our father if god were our mother we would have that sense of original participation of unity god is the womb has the womb in which we live and um have our existence and there's complete panentheistic um unity whereas with god as our father god stands over against the world in some sense there's a material hiatus between god and his creation and so the world is a

place where we can experience unity the world the earth is in some sense our mother and we're not supposed to just relate to it as um a depersonalized lot of stuff to be used but on the other hand god and his word um move us into a symbolic realm where there is a break of that original participation with the reality of a world into which we're just sunk in a sort of naive innocence and forgetfulness we actually can step outside of it and the coming to language i think even for the human person the individual that process of coming to language is a movement beyond a realm of original participation of the earliest years of childhood where you're almost sunk in this realm of forgetfulness of unity unity and then you can step outside of it and you can stand over against it to some sense to some extent and that comes with the the word in particular and i think that's important for um piranese i was thinking of like trinitarian like not just trinitarian but christological almost the dialectic between wisdom and torah i mean they're they're they're unified but there's a there's a distinction of like walking in god's world according to wisdom some of that's gonna be like natural wisdom you know almost like i think of like the the the proper i don't know proprioception that you get from your feet uh feedback you know uh you know just the way babies have a proper orientation to the world uh just through your natural movement but then yes the speech orienting you giving you categories that are yes kind of abstracted from immediate experience but then orient your immediate experience uh and and help you actually see more clearly there's something about um an external word a torah given legislated uh delivered that is not immediately bound and caught up in kind of unmediated and uninterpreted uh experience i mean sense experience you know you you have that mediation no no it's just that that you have that dialectic of like uh lady wisdom and logos and like but there's there's creation and redemption there is there is the world is charged and suffused because it has been created by and through uh god's word and god's wisdom like there's a reflection within that order and yet god's word and god's wisdom is not bound to creation it is not it is it's in and it's not right you're all we're at this point we're playing with the doctrine of divine ideas and exemplar causes and things like that but that whole dialectic is there you're i mean you're also this is also the distinction between divine law in saint thomas's sense and natural law so divine essentially divine positive law so god's god's wisdom um god's eternal law speaking and natural law which is god's wisdom sort of embedded in us um with so we can kind of read from ourselves um as well as reading from uh from his book you can read from the book of nature as well as from the book of scripture and so like there's one other part of this and i'm not really sure if there's if i'm so okay so first of all the experience as well as you know recommending love grossman and sophocles um as and um patrick rothbis as sort of good parallels to to read in concert with this i also really want to recommend alistair's bible studies because there's a way of alistair has a distinctive way of reading scripture that reminds me of susanna clark in this book and i can't describe it any more than that because also we are probably getting to the

end of this podcast um but just trust me on this anyone who's listening and has not kind of uh dug into this bible studies i would recommend them would you say it's deep exegesis well weird the deep the deep magic of the you should have you should have called your study like the deep magic of the bible with alistair roberts um no but it's true but that that kind of queuing in on the fact that the words that are inspired and written and taken down have that have a have an originary and um rooted sense that there's there's intrinsic there's intrinsic dimensions to the image the images and the words picked up and inspired and written they're not just like extrinsic uh like a like a self-contained science system uh it it corresponds and correlates and draws on the world in that sense and yeah i think i i think for me one of the things about way one of the things about is that poetry is one of the truest ways of speaking about the world and once that clicks i think a lot of what scripture is doing makes a lot more sense it's not just decorative it's not just fancy literary tricks it's telling us something true about the world and likewise with understanding the world around us that the attentive poet who is attuned to the world can tell us something true about the resonance between things the interpenetration of realities and the ways in which we are implicated as worlded creatures and that i think is something we're very forgetful about within the modern world okay one more thing i i think that um so there's the sense that like it's not just that the words of the bible as alistair impacts them kind of have this same sense of embedded meaning it's also that like the history the bits of the bible that are history that are describing things that happen you can sort of see history itself as being like the similar stories or similar themes playing out in people's actions and people's decisions in people's relationships and i feel like there's something about um you know the hebrew idea of history as having both a direction but also a kind of spiralness to it so like we're going from creation towards um you know towards the final judgment towards the new heavens and the new earth but like as we go there's a kind of like spiral shell that directionality of the spiral shell where you keep seeing the same patterns over and over again um and that's kind of like that's in contrast to a purely cyclical view of the world which you might get with a much more eminentist like fully eminentist panentheistic and or pagan understanding where you're not actually going somewhere or or flat or a flat linear progress that is is just going all straight forward and and where there are no echoes rap no echoes it's all radical breaks it's all pure and and and it fails to look back and see oh we're just doing a different version of the same dance you know uh farther down the line um i'm amazed that we've got to this point without talking about the theme of progress in the book well yeah i mean there's just so much but but that whole this is this is the thing about the the disenchantment versus enchantment discourse and all that is you know you have this sense that there's people have this sense of lack there's something off

[72 : 59] there's something and i go back and forth and how much i evaluate that i i i'm but this is my my my kind of protestant skepticism about um our our need to re-enchant the world is not all enchantments good uh not all of it what was what we've you know quote unquote was lost i mean the fairies are freaky um you know the elves are mercurial and they're they're they're ambiguous characters and don't even refer to them you don't you don't just the good people yeah you don't say the the fay don't invoke them um but uh but that whole element of like you know there's the danger of the baconian ketterly but also it's not it's actually it's not good to try and return and become just become piranesi in the house um that that's actually not a fully human existence either um to to have no sense of history no continuity no and so that i think that's a sense yeah i i don't i don't think susanna clark um goes into that kind of pure this pure enchantment nostalgia i don't think her book does that i think that's part of what she's playing with is that dialectic um which is why it's so rich and it's only 250 pages it's crazy what she does in 250 pages of journal entries if you have not read the book then we're very disappointed in you for having listened to this point but but you can redeem yourself somewhat by buying a copy of it and reading it now and thank you so much for joining me susanna and derek it's been a great conversation that was a lot of fun oh yeah god bless and thank you for listening