

ATMOSPHERIC SPACES

OLA SIGURDSON

THRESHOLDS AND PLACES

ON EXISTENTIAL SPATIALITY 2

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What is an “Atmosphere”?

According to an aesthetic, phenomenological and ontological view, such a notion can be understood as a sensorial and affective quality widespread in space. It is the particular tone that determines the way one experiences her surroundings.

Air, ambiance, aura, climate, environment, genius loci, milieu, mood, numinous, lived space, Stimmung, but also Umwelt, ki, aida, Zwischen, in-between – all these words are names hiding, in fact, the founding idea of atmospheres: a vague ens or power, without visible and discrete boundaries, which we find around us and, resonating in our lived body, even involves us.

Studying atmospheres means, thus, a parte subjecti, to analyse (above all) the range of unintentional or involuntary experiences and, in particular, those experiences which emotionally “tonalise” our everyday life. A parte objecti, it means however to learn how atmospheres are intentionally (e.g. artistically, politically, socially, etc.) produced and how we can critically evaluate them, thus avoiding being easily manipulated by such feelings.

Atmospheric Spaces is a new book series whose aim is to become a point of reference for a community that works together on this philosophical and transdisciplinary subject and for all those whose research, more broadly, is involved in the so-called “affective turn” of the Social Sciences and Humanities.

OLA SIGURDSON

THRESHOLDS AND PLACES

On Existential Spatiality 2

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PRELUDE

Even if spatial experience by necessity shapes human existence, not all such experiences are alike. Of all the myriads of different experiences of spatiality possible, a fundamental distinction could be made, or so I would suggest, between moments of transition and sites of belonging. In everyday parlance, these are what we call thresholds and places. Both thresholds and places are realities of physical space but at the same time also existential structures. They simultaneously form our experience of spatiality on all levels of existence.

Thresholds and places, places and thresholds. Which one comes first? Can we do without the one or the other – continuously transitioning or just remaining where we belong? I would suggest not. Never arriving can be as fearful or as harmful as never being able to leave. As I will argue in this book, experiences of thresholds and of places are distinct, but nevertheless inseparable. Human existence unfolds in the dialectical tension between transitioning and belonging. To paraphrase Gillian Rose, a life without thresholds would be as mad as one without places.¹ Overlooking either thresholds or places could have fateful consequences for how we understand and live our life together.

This volume continues the exploration of existential spatiality that I began in *Atmospheres in Everyday Life*, turning attention to the dialectic between thresholds and places as core spatial structures of human experience. Thresholds are where we cross into the ambiguous and the unknown; places are where we find orientation and familiarity.

1 Rose 1995, p. 98.

Thresholds are approached as liminal zones – existential transitions marked by ambiguity and becoming – while places are studied as sites of stability, memory, and affective attachment. Together, these two dimensions reveal the lived complexity of space as something that is always both structured and structuring – never static, always becoming. Where *Atmospheres* explored the sensory and affective textures of everyday environments, *Thresholds and Places* turns to the spatial dynamics of transformation and belonging.

I have chosen the simplest structure possible for this book: first thresholds, then places. Even though inseparable, thresholds and places, both as phenomena and as concepts, need to be treated separately, not just for the sake of clarity but also because of a certain contemporary forgetfulness or even repression of both threshold and place, which calls for a distinct articulation of how both of them are encountered, experienced, and practiced in everyday life. As in *Atmospheres*, I shall draw on anthropology, architecture, literature, philosophy, and lived life, to show how we are always situated both between and within thresholds and places. First, then, thresholds. After that, places.

PART 1

THRESHOLDS

AT THE THRESHOLD

There are thresholds in every house. The most important ones lead into or out of the house. They are where the home and the outside world meet. Outside the house, in the city, there are also many thresholds, often marked concretely and materially. They separate one place from another place, one neighbourhood from another neighbourhood and one atmosphere from another atmosphere. Thresholds are everywhere. Yet there is not much talk about them. What are they and how do they affect us?

“The threshold” – *die Schwelle* (German), *le seuil* (French), *la soglia* (Italian), *tröskeln* (Swedish), *terskeln* (Norwegian), *ho oudos* (Greek), *limen* (Latin) – is a term for a thing or function that is everywhere but rarely the subject of any systematic investigation. Despite its ubiquity, most of the time we seem to cross it without much thought. Or do we? Is it that the historical customs that developed around thresholds – carrying the bride across the threshold, not shaking hands across a threshold, not crossing the threshold before being invited – are in some way still alive in our own time?¹ Do these indicate that we actually attach greater importance to thresholds than our relative silence about them suggests? The simple design of thresholds can hardly be the reason for this oversight. In another economy, the simple slab that forms the threshold of my office might be made of solid oak, but its artlessness does not prevent it from fulfilling its function. After all, my simple slab is also a threshold that makes colleagues or students hesitate a little to cross it without an explicit invitation. Is the elusive nature of thresholds therefore rather

1 A rich selection of historical customs is presented by Trumbull 1896.

a consequence of their very function? They may be a “demarcation on the floor between rooms” according to a Swedish dictionary, but experience teaches us that this demarcation carries a deep symbolic meaning, a meaning that structures our relationship to the physical spaces we inhabit.

As a compound term, we encounter “threshold” everywhere. By threshold states, we mean countries that have the capability to produce nuclear weapons or have secretly done so, as opposed to official nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states. When we talk about thresholds, we are talking about a certain intensity or magnitude being exceeded so that something occurs or becomes visible. With threshold training, we aim to improve our endurance by running as fast as we can, but not faster than the body can still transport the lactic acid away from the muscles. In these terms drawn from international relations, biology and exercise, thresholds refer to an intermediate state or a turning point, a peripety of a situation or event. Is it perhaps the instability and dynamic mobility implied here that makes them so elusive?

The thresholds between the home and the street, as well as between different neighbourhoods, are as much “demarcations between rooms” in the form of a concrete materiality of some kind, even if they do not run along a floor and consist of a crossbeam. The threshold, according to philosopher Otto Friedrich Bollnow, denotes “the border between inside and outside”, but you can be “inside” and “outside” in relation to many different spaces.² You are at home in your house in a way that I am not; someone feels like a stranger in the Gothenburg neighbourhood Masthugget but not in the neighbourhood Gårda. It is precisely such border crossings between different spaces that define who we are, says Bollnow. Although not all thresholds are of the same dignity, the crossing of thresholds between different spaces can sometimes have “a deeper symbolic meaning: it is the place of transition to a new life”.³ It is precisely the relationship between thresholds as physically and geographically

2 Bollnow 2011, p. 150.

3 Bollnow 2011, p. 150.

concrete “demarcations between rooms” (“the border between inside and outside”) and their symbolic meaning as “the place of transition to a new life” (an intermediate state or turning point) that I want to explore in the first part of this book.

My thesis is that thresholds are dynamic and elusive phenomena that in an existential sense structure how we inhabit the spaces we find ourselves in. Before setting out a direction for my investigation of thresholds as a phenomenon, I will substantiate and deepen this claim with three examples of how they have been treated literarily, religiously and philosophically. If it is true that there is a relative silence about thresholds, we first need to see them before we can understand what they are, how they work and how they affect us. Although none of the examples I give really have thresholds as their main subject, they say enough for us to recognise their existential significance.

The Vampire at the Threshold

Why does the threshold recur in representations of vampires? A vampire, if the popular culture narrative is to be believed, cannot cross the threshold of a home unless invited by the occupant. No vampire enters the home as an uninvited guest. There must be some consent on the part of the resident. In Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*, a classic of the vampire genre and a major trendsetter, we encounter the threshold a number of times, not as a central phenomenon, but with sufficient concreteness to tell us something about its significance.

Dracula is an epistolary novel, in which we are confronted with Count Dracula mainly through diaries, letters and newspaper articles, and more rarely through a direct account. We first meet the lawyer Jonathan Harker, who, on behalf of a British law firm, visits the Count in Transylvania to assist with his imminent move to England. When he arrives at the Count’s castle in the Carpathian Mountains, he is met at the gate by Dracula himself, who greets him with the following words: “Welcome to my house! Enter freely and of your

own will!”⁴ The Count, however, remains standing and does not go to meet Harker until Harker has stepped “over the threshold”.⁵ Here, we are at the very beginning of the story and cannot yet harbour many ideas about the significance of the threshold. After the opening scenes in which Harker will become Count Dracula’s prisoner in the castle in Transylvania, the novel shifts to portraying the Count indirectly, through other characters’ accounts of rumours or experiences of him. Yet we get another hint of the significance of the threshold for the vampire when the Amsterdam doctor and professor Abraham Van Helsing eventually figures out what kind of creature they are dealing with. He seals the entrance to the burial chamber of one of the Count’s victims with a dough made from communion bread.⁶ Only the consecrated bread can prevent the undead from returning to the tomb and its grave.

In the latter part of the novel Van Helsing gives a fuller account of the nature of the vampire – his vast and supernatural powers, but also his limitations – which we have hitherto met only in passing. The Count’s power diminishes at dawn; he must be able to take refuge in his coffin and can only change his form at dinner or just at sunset or sunrise. Van Helsing’s account makes explicit the limitations the vampire faces at the threshold: “He may not enter anywhere at the first, unless there be some one of the household who bid him to come; though afterwards he can come as he please.”⁷ A central part of the complication in *Dracula* is how the Count cunningly manages to overcome his limitations, for example by secretly inviting himself to the hospital where Van Helsing and the other vampire hunters meet, so that he can spy on them. This would not have been possible if one of the inmates, the mental patient Renfield, had not opened the window and called out to him: “Come in, Lord and Master!”⁸ This is a knowledge that Count Dracula has to acquire through his own

4 Stoker 2011, p. 22.

5 Stoker 2011, p. 22.

6 Stoker 2011, pp. 224–227.

7 Stoker 2011, p. 255.

8 Stoker 2011, p. 299, cf. p. 322.

experience, but he is unable to change the very conditions imposed by his limitations. In *Dracula*, the importance of thresholds for the vampire is depicted both through the experiences of Dracula at the threshold and the conclusions that Van Helsing draws from these experiences.

The references to thresholds are not extensive in *Dracula* and they never really answer the question of why Count Dracula cannot cross a threshold without someone inviting him in. But the novel does give enough hints to allow us to speculate a little.

Dracula is a novel about transgressing boundaries and about intermediate states where boundaries are blurred: specifically between the living and the dead in the form of the undead, but also, in one interpretation of the novel, between the sexes. After Freud, it is clear that the vampire's hunger for blood carries sexual connotations.⁹ And Count Dracula, like all vampires, is a shape-shifter, someone who is able to change his physical form. In the novel, the Count is portrayed in a variety of ways, both in terms of his physical constitution and appearance, but remains recognisable. So if the novel is about transitions, it is not surprising that the threshold is important because, in its concrete, physical form, it symbolises the intermediate state that exists in every transition. This is also the case in our own everyday lives: on the threshold I am neither in nor out, home nor away. On the threshold of my home, you are not yet at home with me, but on the other hand you are no longer out on the street. You are about to enter, and if you are not about to break in unlawfully, it is I or someone else in the household who has invited you in.

Even today, the threshold carries a symbolic meaning: here I am no longer who I was, but not yet who I will become. The fact that Count Dracula has to be invited to enter a house but can then move freely across the threshold suggests that everyone in the novel can, in a way, find themselves in the same position as the hospitalised patient Renfield in relation to Dracula, namely to willingly welcome the Count. Is there a deeper connection between the vampire and the

9 See de Lauretis 2008, pp. 26–32.

threshold? That the threshold plays an important role in stories about vampires may be merely a convention of such stories – a convention that Stoker helped to establish through his *Dracula* – but if so, it is a convention deeply rooted in the symbolic meaning of the threshold. The invitation to cross the threshold is – even outside the domain of the vampire novel – not only about a purely instrumental practicality, to enter a room, but most deeply about our desire: who do we want to meet, who is this other, who do we want to be and who do we become in relation to this other?

Existential Thresholds

The symbolic meaning of the threshold is ancient. In Ovid's calendar, the *Fasti*, Janus is the god of beginnings, gates, and transitions, while Terminus is the god of boundary markers. Janus is the “guardian of the threshold” and thus regulates the access of other gods, while Terminus sets the boundaries “of peoples, cities and vast kingdoms” without which war would be a fact.¹⁰ It is a matter of keeping good relationships with these gods through sacrifice and remembrance, of respecting the threshold.

The existential and religious importance attached to thresholds throughout history is interestingly illustrated by a quote from the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry from the end of the second century. In an exegesis of a few lines from Homer's *Odyssey* about the cave of the nymphs, Porphyry says that Homer is aware that “gates are sacred” and that wise men of the Pythagoreans and Egyptians therefore forbade anyone to speak when passing through a gate or entrance.¹¹ The “gates” referred to – in Greek *thyra* with the synonym *pyle* (here closest to “entrance”) – denote the very things called gates, but the context shows that it is the gate as a passage or passageway that is of concern to Porphyry here. It is therefore not inappropriate to translate *thyra*, as has sometimes been done,

10 Ovid 2011, 1,173, 2,659.

11 Porphyry 1986, p. 72 (§ 27). Cf. Homer 2016, book 13, lines 102–112.

as “threshold”; as a passage, the gate or entryway is a threshold between two rooms.¹² The quality of holiness attributed to the gate in its aspect of passage is denoted by the adjective *hierá*. Greek has several words for sacred, and *hierá* can be compared to *hagia*, the latter term referring to a quality of a person or a relationship with a person, while the former refers to an object, place or event. It is thus consistent that *he thyra* is *hierá* rather than *hagia*; the gate in its aspect of passage is at once an object, a place and an event.

There are only two gates to the cave. The Homeric gods, in the account of the cave of the Naiads commented on by Porphyry, enter through the southern gate but the northern gate, intended for humans, is also sacred. The silence imposed when someone crosses the threshold is an expression of respect for the god “who is the beginning of all things”. The cave of the Naiads symbolises, in Porphyry’s interpretation, the cosmos, and the gates of the cave therefore become symbols of a human being’s relation to its own origin and to its insight into that origin, both its material creation and its liberation from it in the Neoplatonic doctrine of salvation.¹³ In other words, the thresholds of the cave are a kind of concrete manifestation of a mystagogy, the initiation by which a human being is both concretely and figuratively brought into the mystery. This mystagogy is the ultimate subject of Porphyry’s allegorical exposition of Homer’s description of the cave of the Naiads in the *Odyssey*. According to Porphyry, Homer and Plato conveyed the same message, albeit in different forms. The cave of the Naiads with its southern and northern gates is a place of transition, of a fundamental change in human existential conditions.

For Porphyry, the liberation sought is about the liberation of the soul from the material world, but what I want to draw attention to here is that this spiritual escape is nevertheless symbolised by the gates as earthly passages. According to Porphyry, these gates

12 Gaston Bachelard quotes a French translation in Bachelard 2020, p. 306, which uses the noun “seuil” as a translation of *thyra*. The English translation (Bachelard 1994, p. 223) uses, accordingly, “threshold”.

13 See Akçay 2019.

actually existed in the material world. He imagined that the cave of the Naiads existed as a concrete, geographically definable location, specifically on the Greek island of Ithaca. The symbolic meaning of the cave did not mean that its concrete existence was indifferent. Speaking of the cave and the gates as symbols is consistent not only with our own language but also with Porphyry's own: *symbolon* is a central term in his *De antro nympharum*. The concrete meaning of the symbol conveys a different, more abstract or profound meaning without itself being cancelled out.¹⁴ The actual gate into and out of the cave is, at the same time, the threshold between earthly and heavenly life. It is therefore not surprising that the concrete manifestation of this existential passage is considered sacred by Porphyry, since these two dimensions are interrelated. The sacredness of the passage is not only a matter of its associations with divine liberation; passage across the threshold is also fraught with danger, since it is the very foundations of human existence that are literally at stake: a person is in the process of becoming, in their liberation from the material world, another, someone new. The passage through the gates of the cave is an existential turning point.

Gates, entrances, passages, all have a central role in ancient religions as symbols of a more existential passage. They are, in Bollnow's words quoted above, "the place of transition to a new life". Even when the threshold as such is not mentioned, they have a threshold function: the threshold as a transition from one state to another. The fact that the cave of the Naiads is perceived by the Neoplatonist Porphyry as a concrete place on Ithaca and not just as an image for an existential realisation is typical of the general way in which existential passages were thought of at this time as being linked to physical passages. Different philosophies or theologies in history thought differently about a place's meaning and the meaning of place. The meaning of Jerusalem as a holy city came to change for the early Christian Church in comparison to its Jewish origins through the Church's mission "to all nations" (Matthew 28:19). When the Temple in Jerusalem was demolished in 70 CE, Judaism

14 Akçay 2019, pp. 34 f.; Ricœur 1976, pp. 53–63.

was transformed into a diaspora religion. The constant is the place as a symbol, that is, the linking of geographical and existential meaning with the passage as threshold or the threshold as passage.

Such symbolic meanings are not unknown in our own time, in political and religious movements but also beyond them. As the historian of religion Mircea Eliade writes in a discussion about the ritual function of the threshold for sacred as well as profane space: “The threshold, the door *show* the solution of continuity in space immediately and concretely; hence their great religious importance, for they are symbols and at the same time vehicles of *passage* from one space to the other.”¹⁵ But he also traces a similar transition in the threshold of our home. The thresholds into and out of our homes are yet another reminiscence of a more sacred transition and are therefore also subject to special rites. And in a discussion on the dialectic between outside and inside, the philosopher Gaston Bachelard argues that the door is “an entire cosmos of the Half-open”, one of the “primal images” as a symbol of the closed and the open as existential modes.¹⁶ Even in our time, poetry can help us to sense “that, incarnated in the door, there is a little threshold god”.¹⁷ Admittedly, Bachelard refers such images to daydreaming and poetry, and therefore seems to largely separate concrete locality and existential meaning: the door is for him an image, not a symbol. But nevertheless, especially in his concrete elaborations of the meaning of space, a symbolic connection between locality and meaning is implied as the very premise of these poetic dreams – it is, after all, an original image.

It is this relationship between the concrete locality and the existential meaning of the threshold that I want to explore in this book. What does it look like? Has it been lost in modern times? Is it possible that the articulation of the existential meaning of the concrete thresholds has disappeared in our time or been referred to the subjective, more than to the experience of the threshold as a symbol?

15 Eliade 1959, p. 25.

16 Bachelard 1994, p. 222.

17 Bachelard 1994, p. 223.

A loss of language then does not simply mean that the threshold experience is impoverished, but that it has become homeless even though it has not disappeared completely.

The Threshold Between Inside and Outside

The fact that the threshold is a material thing with a concrete locality and therefore appears in the most everyday contexts has not escaped the attention of ancient philosophy. A simple definition of what is called *oudos* in Greek is found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "a piece of wood or stone placed in such-and-such a way".¹⁸ For Aristotle, the threshold is clearly an everyday phenomenon, as we often encounter it. This is why we can use his definition to further deepen our understanding of the threshold as a phenomenon. According to Aristotle, what defines a threshold is its position: that it is *between* something and something else, for example the entrance to a house, where it separates inside and outside. Aristotle is well aware of this property of the threshold, but chooses to argue that the intermediate state of the threshold is a consequence of its being between inside and outside, rather than the difference between inside and outside being a consequence of the threshold itself: "if the threshold [*ho oudos*] is defined by its position [*thesei*], the position is not derived from the threshold, but rather *vice versa*".¹⁹

Contra Aristotle, the intermediate state of the threshold is characterised both by the fact that it is established by the difference between inside and outside and that it establishes the difference between inside and outside itself. However, if Eliade writes about the difference between sacred and profane space, it is equally applicable to the difference between inside and outside in a more general sense: "The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds – and at the same time

18 Aristotle 1933, VIII, 1043a.

19 Aristotle 1933, 1043b. But it is not quite as clear-cut as Aristotle claims, see Carter 2010.

the paradoxical place where these two worlds communicate”.²⁰ Put another way, the threshold is both *copulative* and *privative*: it both unites and separates. Precisely by establishing a transition between inside and outside, the position of the threshold is produced as between two states and therefore also produces these two states that were not there as such before the difference between them was established. The function of the threshold is thus to be between inside and outside, thereby establishing the difference between inside and outside. The threshold not only produces differences but also connects the states that are separated. There is no inside except in relation to an outside. The threshold concept is a relational concept that is both copulative and privative.

As an intermediate state, a threshold is neither inside nor outside, but a transition between them. Whoever is on the threshold on the way out is no longer inside but not yet outside. On the threshold, we are no longer in a place we can call here – as in “here is my home” – but not yet in another place we can call there – as in “there is the street outside my home”. We are neither here nor there. Of course we can say that it is here on the threshold that we are, but if we are talking about a threshold that is truly a transitional state and cannot be limited to a physical object – “wood or stone in such and such a position” – then this “here” is dynamic rather than static and does not denote a permanent or unchanging position. Rather, it is precisely the instability, ambiguity or transition that characterises the threshold. In other words, a threshold is neither identical with one side nor the other of that which it both unites and separates, nor is it a third thing that exists independently of that which it both unites and separates. Its mode of existence is different from the more stable and bounded states of an inside or an outside. It is not really a place in its own right, but an intermediate state between two places – a “state” that is dynamic rather than static.

There may indeed be significant differences between physical thresholds and experiential thresholds. While there may be both similarities and differences, it is essential to recognise that there

20 Eliade 1959, p. 25.

may well be fairly insignificant thresholds. Between my office at the university and the corridor outside, there is, as I mentioned, a simple threshold slab. During the course of a working day, I cross it many times without particularly noticing it, but when a colleague or student crosses the threshold on their way into my office, they can sometimes be seen hovering for a moment on the threshold, waiting for a concrete invitation. For a short question or discussion, stopping on the threshold may be enough, but a more in-depth dialogue requires the person to come in and perhaps sit down. For particularly sensitive conversations, we close the door. The concrete threshold plate is thus a symbol, a physical manifestation of an experiential difference between meeting in the corridor, in the office or at the threshold. The corridor and the office differ in terms of atmosphere in a way that makes a transition between the two necessary. This transition is symbolised by the physical threshold and is therefore also in a sense staged by it. On certain occasions, such as when I put a letter in the post box or fetch a cup of coffee, the physical threshold is, as I have said, of little importance to me, but it retains its symbolic significance for the colleague or student who finds the door open but the office empty and therefore hesitates to enter. When I myself put the key in the lock and accidentally open the door to a colleague's neighbouring office, I abruptly slow down my previously rapid steps: I am not invited here, I do not belong here. To step over the threshold would be an intrusion. At the threshold is a boundary.

Is the threshold therefore equal to a boundary, as Aristotle seems to think? In a sense it is, because it demarcates inside from outside. But unlike the concept of boundary, which I see as essentially privative, the concept of threshold is always also copulative. One could argue that the concept of the border is an incomplete concept of the threshold, because the border as a phenomenon always establishes a relation to what is beyond the border. But perhaps it is rather a question of emphasis, where the threshold concept more clearly underscores that it is precisely a phenomenon where what the threshold unites or separates belongs to the experience of the threshold as such? The border also unites by virtue of the fact that it separates. The border between two states can be perceived as a

difference established between them. There is a border control, the function of which is to prevent unauthorised traffic between these two states. But the border control is actually part of a more extensive borderland that bears the characteristics of a threshold, since it is neither here nor there, but is an intermediate state that enables the passage between states and thus puts them in contact with each other. The border guard who checks my passport belongs to this intermediate state because he has already put me in contact with the nation I want to enter, even when I am denied entry. To think or draw a line is in a sense to have already crossed it. Thus, the border becomes a kind of threshold.

A threshold is not primarily a thing but a function or a symbol. The insignificant threshold slab that separates my office from the corridor outside would not really deserve to be called a threshold when it was lying by itself on the shelf of the DIY store. Possibly it could be called a potential threshold. Only when it is in place and can really distinguish between an inside and an outside in the form of an office and a corridor can it be called a threshold in a more definitive sense. It needs a specific inside and a specific outside to both unite and separate; its character cannot be separated from its function. Thresholds are not just boundaries between inside and outside taken on their own. They cannot be thought of as thresholds without also thinking about what they are thresholds between. Both conceptually and experientially, a threshold is inevitably accompanied by that which it unites and separates, abstractly or concretely.

The Ambiguous Thresholds

The elusiveness of the elusive thresholds has to do with their dynamic character. A threshold can be a physical thing, a “demarcation between rooms”, but it is also a symbol of an existential passage or turning point. It is precisely its character as an intermediate or transitional state that gives it ambiguity as a phenomenon. We have seen how Homer, according to Porphyry, considered the gates of the cave of the Naiads to be sacred. From the point of view of human

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