

“How Shall We Build?": Fiction and Housing in Postwar Britain

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Abstract

This dissertation charts the construction and dismantling of the British Welfare State, through novels, films, and architecture, with a focus on one of the defining issues of the period: housing. In 1942, the Beveridge Report designated housing a basic right for all citizens. After four million homes were destroyed during World War II, the reconstruction of houses and towns was an urgent task for the nation. In the Welfare State, housing became the measure of success for socialist interventions. Drawing upon literary studies, film studies, and architectural history, this dissertation traces four aspects of postwar housing – architecture, town planning, country house preservation, and government housing policy – in both fictional and non-fictional discourses. Realist representations, whether in novels or films, offer more than thematic representations of history; they actively contribute to its construction as much as town plans, architectural models, builders, and government policies. The two-way transmission between fiction and housing can be conceptualized spatially through a shifting relationship between the horizontal and the vertical. Bombs leveled buildings during the war; architecture and government policies aimed to level class and other social distinctions after the war. In fiction, horizontality and verticality emerge through both narrative tropes and formal techniques that critique the central social problems of the postwar period. Chapter 1 of this dissertation, “Boardinghouses,” assesses the stakes of wartime and immediate postwar reconstruction through attention to the relationship between the individual and community in public debates, town plans, and two novels set in wartime boardinghouses: Patrick Hamilton’s *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947) and Muriel Spark’s *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963). Chapter 2, “Country Houses,” examines the role of fiction in the

transformation of postwar country house culture, with a specific focus on the phenomenon of the country house-museum and the tension between lived and narrated experience. *Angel* (1957), by Elizabeth Taylor, and *The Little Girls* (1964), by Elizabeth Bowen are critical iterations of the country house novel genre. Chapter 3, “Modern Living,” considers the expression of mobility, verticality, and modernity in the fiction of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Sam Selvon’s novel, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Colin MacInnes’s novel, *Absolute Beginners* (1957), and Joseph Losey’s film, *The Servant* (1963), revise modernist aesthetics and principles for a multi-ethnic, socially and economically liberated generation. Chapter 4, “Safe Houses,” measures the legacy of the Welfare State and its deconstruction under the Thatcher Government through the fictional desire for safety and hospitality in the built environment. In Graham Greene’s novel, *The Human Factor* (1978), Doris Lessing’s novel, *The Good Terrorist* (1985), and Ken Loach’s film, *Riff-Raff* (1991), resurgent realism responds to the largest socio-political paradigm shift in Britain since the 1940s. Realist fiction confronts, and then constructs, the postwar world.

Résumé

Cette thèse analyse la construction et le déclin de l'État-providence anglais à travers des romans, des films et des exemples d'architecture, en portant une attention particulière à un enjeu qui a défini cette époque : le logement. En 1942, le Rapport Beveridge a proclamé que l'accès au logement était un droit humain pour tous les citoyens. Lorsque quatre millions d'habitations ont été détruites lors de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, la reconstruction des logements et des villes est devenue une tâche primordiale pour la nation. Dans l'État-providence, le logement est devenu le barème de la réussite des interventions socialistes. En puisant dans les études littéraires, les études cinématographiques et l'histoire de l'architecture, cette thèse retrace quatre facettes du logement d'après-guerre – l'architecture, la planification urbaine, la préservation des maisons de campagnes et les politiques gouvernementales sur le logement – dans le discours fictionnel et non fictionnel. Les représentations réalistes, qu'elles soient romanesques ou filmiques, offrent bien plus que des représentations historiques; elles contribuent activement à la construction de l'histoire, tout autant que les plans officiels, les maquettes architecturales, les bâtisseurs, et les politiques gouvernementales. La transmission à double sens qui s'effectue entre la fiction et le logement peut être conceptualisée spatialement au travers d'une relation qui glisse du vertical vers l'horizontal. Des bombes ont aplati des bâtiments durant la guerre; l'architecture et les politiques gouvernementales ont essayé d'aplatir les distinctions entre les classes sociales après la guerre. Dans les romans, les concepts d'horizontalité et de verticalité émergent à travers des tropes narratives et des techniques formelles qui viennent critiquer les problèmes sociaux de la période d'après-guerre. Le premier chapitre de cette thèse,

« Boardinghouses, » évalue les enjeux de la reconstruction des logements pendant et après la guerre, en accordant une attention particulière à la relation entre l'individu et la communauté dans les débats publics, les plans urbains, et dans deux romans dont l'intrigue se déroulent dans des pensions familiales pendant la guerre : *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947) de Patrick Hamilton, et *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) de Muriel Spark. Le deuxième chapitre, « Country Houses », examine le rôle de la fiction dans la transformation, sur le plan culturel, des maisons de campagne de l'après-guerre, avec un regard spécifique sur le phénomène des maisons de campagnes « musées » et la tension entre l'expérience vécue et la narration. Les romans *Angel* (1957) d'Elizabeth Taylor et *The Little Girls* (1964) d'Elizabeth Bowen incarnent des manifestations critiques du genre romanesque liés aux maisons de campagne. Le troisième chapitre, « Modern Living, » est une étude de l'expression de la mobilité, de la verticalité, et de la modernité dans la fiction de la fin des années 1950 et du début des années 1960. Le roman *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) de Sam Selvon, le roman *Absolute Beginners* (1957) de Colin MacInnes, et le film *The Servant* (1963) de Joseph Losey, révisent l'esthétique moderne et les principes d'une génération multiethnique socialement et économiquement libérée. Le quatrième chapitre, « Safe Houses, » mesure l'héritage de l'État-providence et sa déconstruction par le gouvernement Thatcher à travers le désir romanesque pour la sécurité et l'hospitalité de l'environnement bâti. Dans le roman *The Human Factor* (1978) de Graham Greene, le roman *The Good Terrorist* (1985) de Doris Lessing et le film *Riff-Raff* (1991) de Ken Loach, un réalisme renaissant répond au plus grand changement socio-politique que l'Angleterre a connu depuis les années 1940. La fiction réaliste confronte et reconstruit ensuite le monde d'après-guerre.

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Introduction: “We Shall Look Out Through Glass”

In its 1945 election campaign, the Labour Party promised to build a “New Jerusalem” in post-World War II Britain. After six years of reconstruction efforts under austere conditions, Party leader Clement Attlee laid out the manifesto for re-election. There was still much work to be done, and this time Attlee invoked the literary lineage of the “New Jerusalem” in his promise to continue rebuilding: “Let us go forward in this fight in the spirit of William Blake”:

I will not cease from mental fight,
nor shall the sword sleep in my hand:
till we have built Jerusalem,
in England’s green and pleasant land. (Attlee n.p.)

Attlee’s reference to Blake’s lines indicates the importance of the literary imagination in the specific task ahead: transforming a national landscape and culture. Through Blake, Attlee calls for the collective building of a mythic, utopian city. He appeals to material innovation alongside pastoral preservation, two aspects of reconstruction that would emerge continually throughout the postwar period in competing visions, fictional and otherwise, for a new British society.

This dissertation attends to the implications of Attlee’s literary and architectural vantage point. It charts the construction and dismantling of the Welfare State through novels, films, and architecture, with a focus on housing as one of the defining issues of the postwar period. In 1942, the “Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services” (the Beveridge Report) designated housing as a basic right

for all citizens alongside health, employment, and education. After four million homes were destroyed during the war, the reconstruction of houses and towns became an urgent national task, and in the Welfare State, housing became the measure of success for socialist interventions. Drawing upon literary studies, film studies, and architectural history, this project traces four aspects of housing – architecture, town planning, country house preservation, and government housing policy – in both fictional and non-fictional discourses, from the immediate postwar period to the dismantling of the 1940s settlement under Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Government in the 1980s.

As town planners and architects set to work on physical reconstruction after the war, writers and filmmakers contributed imaginative rebuildings through their fiction and nonfiction meditations on the material conditions of life and its representations. Artistic and non-artistic discourses commingled within a cultural moment defined by the promises and challenges of building a new society. Concepts from architecture and town planning vocabularies, such as “reconstruction,” “planning,” “preservation,” “mobility,” and “safety,” help to elucidate the relationship between fiction and the built domestic environment in this particular historical moment. The project thus aims, in part, to demonstrate the efficacy of this interdisciplinary methodology as an approach to postwar British culture. I argue that non-literary and non-cinematic concepts position postwar fiction as historically situated in the material acts of rebuilding, repurposing, and demolishing homes and communities – acts that were central to shaping British political and cultural identities between the 1940s and 1980s. Reading works of fiction alongside housing concerns demonstrates that novels and films offer more than thematic representations of history; they actively contribute to its construction as much as town

plans, architectural models, builders, and government policies. This framework, in turn, enables new interpretive possibilities for postwar fiction.

Throughout the postwar period, the two-way transmission between fiction and housing is apparent spatially, through a shifting relation between the horizontal and the vertical. As the Welfare State emerged, vertical social hierarchies and vertical lineages in the artistic realm were overtaken by an ethos of horizontality. Bombs leveled buildings during the war; architecture and government policies aimed to level class and other social distinctions after the war. Between 1945 and 1951, the Labour government built approximately 1 million homes through initiatives that reinforced a social and architectural ideal of horizontality. New Towns and council estate housing within cities, built according to horizontal ideals of the neighborhood and the garden city, dominated reconstruction initiatives. Slum clearance programs in the early 1950s transformed working-class communities and “flattened” cities as inhabitants moved from crowded inner-city flats to “Two-Up, Two-Down” houses constructed on town peripheries. These homes, with two rooms on each of two floors, could be constructed in terraces, as semi-detached units, or as stand-alone homes. As such, they made the “ideal,” middle-class, two-story home accessible for working-class families (Kalliney 126-7). Country houses were transformed from living symbols of individual or familial vertical success to fixed expressions of national history. They faced demolition, liquidation, or reappropriation for public use and the museum and heritage industry. The horizontal ethos of the Welfare State was also evident in the country house as the disappearance of the live-in servant class, all but complete by the end of the war, forced a conversion of many surviving houses from hierarchical structures into spaces of domestic equality.

After the immediate postwar recovery period, which extended at least until the end of rationing in 1954, tower blocks, built according to modernist design principles, reintroduced a visual aesthetic of verticality and the social promise of upward mobility: over 500,000 new flats in council estates and multi-story buildings were added to London by 1960. After the economy slowed in the 1970s and construction projects dwindled, privatization schemes and the “right to buy” program under the Thatcher Government formally reversed the ethos of horizontality underlying Welfare State reconstruction culture. As the provision and maintenance of public housing were taken over from the government by private corporations, British citizens once again found themselves facing ruins – not of a bombed city, but of a dismantled Welfare State – that would require a new reconstructive vision.

Literary fiction and fiction films participated in shifting spatial and ideological orientations. Horizontality and verticality emerge through both narrative tropes and formal techniques. Interpreted in the context of housing issues, these artistic elements amount to critiques that take on the central social problems of the postwar period. The dissertation is organized thematically to allow these problems to come to the foreground. Chapter 1, “Boardinghouses,” assesses the stakes of wartime and immediate postwar reconstruction through attention to the relationship between the individual and community in public debates, town plans, and two novels set in wartime boardinghouses: Patrick Hamilton’s *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947) and Muriel Spark’s *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963). Chapter 2, “Country Houses,” examines the role of fiction in the transformation of postwar country house culture, with a specific focus on the phenomenon of the country house-museum and the tension between lived and narrated experience. *Angel* (1957), by Elizabeth Taylor, and *The Little Girls* (1964), by Elizabeth Bowen, are critical iterations

of the country house novel genre. Chapter 3, “Modern Living,” considers the expression of mobility, verticality, and modernity in the fiction of the late 1950s and early 1960s, a period of general prosperity and cultural innovation. Sam Selvon’s novel, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Colin MacInnes’s novel *Absolute Beginners* (1957), and Joseph Losey’s film, *The Servant* (1963), revise modernist aesthetics and principles for a new multi-ethnic, socially and economically liberated generation. Finally, Chapter 4, “Safe Houses,” measures the legacy of the Welfare State and its deconstruction under the Thatcher Government through the fictional desire of refugees, spies, and squatters for safety and hospitality in the British built environment. In Graham Greene’s novel *The Human Factor* (1978), Doris Lessing’s novel *The Good Terrorist* (1985), and Ken Loach’s film *Riff-Raff* (1991), resurgent realism responds to the largest socio-political paradigm shift in Britain since the 1940s. Throughout this project, I argue that postwar fiction reveals the value of prioritizing the role of the imagination in building human societies.

Reconstruction Culture and Realist Fiction

British culture was saturated with an obsessive reconstruction discourse by the early 1940s. Literature and other forms of artistic expression joined the countless articles, speeches, treatises, broadcasts, and planning documents of the period in talking about housing, and thereby communicating visions for a particular kind of postwar Britain. Reconstruction initiatives were, on the one hand, a necessary response to bombing damage; on the other, they were the result of new theories of socio-political well-being. Approximately 230 town plans were produced during the war, but many of these plans were for towns such as Warwick and Worcester that were hardly damaged or not

damaged at all (Larkham 99). The war thus became an opportunity to test new methods and philosophies for building a better society – sometimes in spite of the actual extent of destruction. The primary challenge for postwar architecture and planning was to transform wartime techniques, machines, and philosophies for peace-time tasks. The construction of prefabricated dwellings, for example, would no longer be motivated by the wartime need for air raid shelters or mobile troop housing, but by the Welfare State mandate to provide housing for all – not only for those who had been bombed out during the blitz. In 1942, the Committee for the Industrial and Scientific Provision of Housing recalibrated the goals of the prefabrication industry for the postwar period when it called for the “mass production” of houses “by industrial and scientific methods” (White 5). Philosophically, the shift to the peace-time Welfare State meant asserting human control over industrial technologies that had been put to such catastrophic ends as the genocide, aerial bombardment, and atomic bombings.

At the sixth conference of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM), held in 1947 in Bridgwater, England, architects reaffirmed the human aspect of building and planning: the CIAM “feels called upon to examine the implications of the process of industrialization that is now being applied to building, in order to ensure that such necessary technical developments are controlled by a sense of human values” (qtd. in Ockman 102). In the aftermath of fascism, the impetus to attend more carefully to emotional and spiritual needs merged with democratic political goals. Architecture, it was felt, should come to “the man on the street” with the individual’s needs and rights as its central concern (Ockman 16). In the specific case of London, this human-centered perspective merged with nationalist rhetoric in reconstruction documents such as the 1943 *County of London Plan*:

We have learnt the value of planning for war; peace will demand speed and efficiency no less. The energies, sacrifices and bold financial measures that the war has called forth will be more necessary in time of peace. With the united efforts of all, we can build the new England which has been the inspiration, and must be the reward, of the citizen-soldier who ‘knows’ what he fights for and loves what he knows. (153)

Intellectuals and artists across Europe who lived through the war were attuned to the significance of reconstruction initiatives, both in architectural and imaginative capacities. Elaborating ideas that he had developed during the war, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) that “space calls for action, and before action, the imagination is at work. It mows and plows” (12). The evidence suggests that the British fictional imagination was, in its own right, a crucial component of reconstruction culture that clarified the material and social challenges facing the British homefront. In 1941, Louis MacNeice echoed discussions happening in political, economic, and architectural circles when he observed the cultural dominance of reconstruction questions; as he put it, “the new division, the vital division, in this country will be between Planners and Non-Planners (or Anti-Planners)” (114). MacNeice’s attention to the planning question attests to a broad trend: writers and other intellectuals were as concerned with the parameters and implications of reconstruction as were the town planners, architects, and politicians.

After the destructive and disruptive conditions of wartime life, writers often thought about the craft of literature, the goals of representation, British literary history, and culture in general in terms of an architectural discourse. In a 1944 essay, for example, Elizabeth Bowen expressed a desire for renewed, clarified vision in metaphors of plans

and glass: “The old plan for living has been erased, and you do not miss it. [...] No doubt [...], everyone else, like you, is standing still, taking stock, looking round. [...] When the war is over, there will be no more of this nonsense; we shall look out through glass” (“Calico Windows,” 184, 186). George Orwell also contemplated representation in terms of glass when he claimed in his 1947 essay, “Why I Write,” that, “Good prose is like a window pane” (320). V.S. Pritchett wrote in his introduction to a new edition of *Wuthering Heights* (1956) that the logic of Emily Brontë’s “construction is masterly,” and he went on to say of the novel that “There is nothing careless or amateur about its architecture” (x).

Postwar writers also attended to housing issues thematically in their reconstruction fiction. Bowen offers an assessment of the attraction of wartime homes in a 1945 BBC Home Service broadcast: “Poor houses, how fragile they have become! Bombs plucked out the hearts of their mysteries! But do they, perhaps, for this very reason, appeal, today, more strongly to our imaginations?” (“Book Talk” 81). Writers returned to the wartime home to explore the consequences on human life of ruins, physical impermanence, the social tensions of billeting, and re-integration challenges for veterans and their families. These literary domestic spaces are in clear need of reconstruction. In Rose Macaulay’s novel, *The World My Wilderness* (1950), for instance, “shells of flats” in the heavily bombed City of London, “soared skyward on twisting stairs, staring empty-eyed at desolation” (110). And in Elizabeth Taylor’s novel, *At Mrs. Lippincote’s* (1945), the protagonist feels “burdened” by someone else’s possessions in the wartime billet; “We shall never make a home of this,” she complains (13). Representing a time when the notion of a permanent home was under siege, reconstruction novels explore the implications of the makeshift dwellings that characterized the wartime experience: mass-

produced Anderson shelters, tube stations, basements of public buildings, boarding houses, billets.

After wartime ruins had been cleared away and homes were rebuilt, housing and building materials remained a potent avenue for artistic explorations of British society and, in particular, for determining the meaning of the war in collective memory. Muriel Spark's *The Girls of Slender Means* takes place in a wartime London boardinghouse that stood

in a row of tall houses which had endured, but barely; some bombs had dropped nearby, and in a few back gardens, leaving the buildings cracked on the outside and shakily hinged within, but habitable for the time being. The shattered windows had been replaced with new glass rattling in loose frames. More recently, the bituminous black-out paint had been removed from landing and bathroom windows. Windows were important in that year of final reckoning; they told at a glance whether a house was inhabited or not; and in the course of the past years they had accumulated much meaning, having been the main danger-zone between domestic life and the war going on outside: everyone had said, when the sirens sounded, 'Mind the windows. Keep away from the windows. Watch out for the glass.' (Spark 8)

Rather than offer utopian solutions or propagandistic accounts, postwar fiction focused on housing issues to create space for laying bare the challenges to rebuilding and asking fundamental questions about the future of British society: what will be the fate of the individual in a community-oriented Welfare State? Will marriage and the nuclear family recover from the exigencies of war? How will houses "work" without live-in servants?

What is the significance of inheritance, heritage, and preservation in a time of national housing crisis?

Fictional treatments of wartime houses begin the work of postwar rebuilding by depicting accurately a society and its spaces in ruins. One of the central objectives and distinct contributions of this dissertation is to argue that postwar realist fiction, a highly varied phenomenon, is artistically and politically necessary in a material sense. The realities of wartime life – blackouts, shattered windows, bomb shelters, evacuations, billeting, rubble – had turned the practices of observation, imagination, and representation that underlie fiction-making into monumental and revelatory tasks. Bowen’s utopian prediction for postwar representation substantiates this claim: “When the war is over, there will be no more of this nonsense; we shall look out through glass” (“Calico Windows,” 186). Her desire for glass windows is, on the one hand, a practical, material desire to replace the murky calico material that was used to replace bombed out windows during the blitz. On the other, her statement is metaphoric, deeply symbolic, even prophetic. With the reference to glass, she predicts a postwar renewal that will allow clarity of vision and existential transparency.¹ “Realist reconstruction fiction,” as I call it, attempts to move beyond the conditions of the war, to “look out through glass,” thereby serving as a critical experiment for contemplating the transformation of British society. The novels and films discussed in this project use realist techniques to continue the work of imaginative rebuilding and repurposing made necessary by the war.

¹ Bowen’s prophetic statement is likely a direct reference to Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, which metaphorically describes the transformative power of faith: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (King James Version, I Cor. 13:12). It also recalls Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), a literary touchstone for Bowen that emphasized the significance of both sides of the glass for perceiving and representing reality.

“Realism” is, therefore, one of the key critical terms for this project. It is not my intention to make claims about realism as a universal, homogeneous concept, but to mobilize it in a historically specific sense to describe postwar novels and films that depict, with a wide range of formal strategies, a recognizable human world. While specific to its context, reconstruction realism has its roots in nineteenth-century realism, which, according to George Levine, expressed a “highly self-conscious attempt to explore or create a new reality” (20). For Levine, realism “was a method consonant with empirical science in that it was exploratory rather than definitive” (11). Georg Lukács argues in *Studies in European Realism* that “the method of realism is a method of discovery, not of representation of preestablished realities” (47). Thus, the term “realism” is not synonymous with documentary, mimesis, or comprehensiveness. Rather, it describes a mode of expression and presentation that emphasizes the effort to bring new material to light, to see the familiar anew, and therefore to imagine what might or ought to be.

Realism expresses the significance of the exterior world – what can be seen. Bowen isolates the significance of the war as writers’ interests shifted toward the exterior world, away from the internal workings of consciousness that preoccupied many modernist writers:

The salutary value of the exterior, the comfortable sanity of the concrete came to be realised only when the approach of the Second World War forced one to envisage whole-sale destruction. The obliteration of man’s surroundings, streets and houses, tables and chairs sent up, for him, their psychological worth. Up to now, consciousness had been a sheltered product: its interest as consciousness diminished now that, at any moment,

the physical shelter could be gone. (“English Fiction at Mid-Century” 322-3)

Immediate postwar realism paralleled 1940s architectural trends toward surveying and planning. It responded to the physical destruction and socio-political upheaval of the war with an impetus to explore the disrupted state of the “exterior” and the “concrete,” and to rebuild proactively.

In its commitment to representing human experience accurately, postwar realism does not offer a false sense of closure or stability. It is faithful to history, not wholeness, and as such, it accounts for both what is there and what is missing. Bowen’s novel, *The Little Girls*, for instance, represents the implications of the absent aristocratic country house not through direct narration, but through various tropes (the empty time capsule, the half-full cave museum, the bomb-site), as well as stylistic and structural techniques (fragmented dialogue, an inconclusive flashback). Experimental aesthetics, such as the punctuation and syntax used by Bowen and by Sam Selvon in *The Lonely Londoners*, are not in conflict with realist representation because they amplify, rather than deny, a real world. Doris Lessing’s “real-time” narration in *The Good Terrorist* and Ken Loach’s refusal to clarify vernacular dialogue or soundtrack muddle in *Riff-Raff* similarly contribute to an affective representation of contemporary conditions. Not everything that is seen or heard can be understood or neatly explained. Realist fictional structures thus clarify, rather than replace, reality, whatever it may look like. As much as postwar realism recalls the exploratory ethos of nineteenth-century realism, it does not prize itself on collecting and objectifying the world. Rather, it has a suspicious attitude toward the permanence of things and historical meaning. The narrator of Colin MacInnes’s novel, *Absolute Beginners*, demonstrates his knowledge of cultural trends in fashion, hairstyle,

and music while also making it clear that he values transient spaces and a regular disposal of material possessions. MacInnes's realism, like that of Elizabeth Taylor's ironic portrayal of country-house culture in *Angel*, is anti-nostalgic. Postwar realism thus contributes to the construction, demolition, and reconstruction of British society by setting and pushing boundaries for the way that human experience is imagined and represented.

Graham Greene's 1954 short story, "The Destroyers," captures shifting postwar attitudes towards housing in the distinctly postwar realist mode. The story demonstrates the tension between domestic values that emphasize a stable connection with the past – specifically World War II and pre-war aesthetics – and those that embrace a future-oriented modernity and social mobility. Greene uses the destruction of a house whose design was inspired by Christopher Wren, one of Britain's canonical architectural figures, to pit tradition and history against modern engineering skills and a mobile postwar youth. The teenage boys who make up the Wormsley Common gang – Blackie, Summers, Mike, and T. – are against everything in the built environment that refers to a time before they existed: glorified Georgian interiors, Victorian collections and decoration, Palladian façades. They despise these things not in and of themselves but because they represent a past in which they find neither value nor use.

Rather than mourn the homes lost in the blitz or glorify those homes that survived, the boys take the destructive historical moment as their starting point; the blitz cuts off the past and presents a new basis for power and purpose. Establishing a new postwar ritual, the gang meets every morning at "the site of the last bomb of the first blitz," but "no one was precise enough in his dates" to point out to Blackie that he could not possibly have heard the first bomb fall, as he claims, because he would only have been one year old

“and fast asleep on the down platform of Wormsley Common Underground Station” (226). Blackie was born into the acute mobility of wartime Britain; each night during the blitz, he moved with his family to an underground shelter. Whereas the forced mobility of the war disrupted the safe, stable home held as an ideal by an older generation, Blackie’s generation – the blitz babies – feel “at home” when they are on the move. The boys value contingency and risk: they prefer the future to the past, the open outdoors to the protected indoors. They meet in “an impromptu car-park” (226) and plan to “disperse in pairs, take buses at random, and see how many free rides could be snatched from unwary conductors” (228). With mobility as one of their most prized values, they are indifferent, if not directly opposed, to architectural preservation and the social status afforded by owning historical artifacts.

The gang condemns the practice of architecture as an authoritative, bourgeois exercise in taste and heritage formation. T.’s father is a former architect, and T. uses his architectural knowledge not to reinforce a traditional aesthetic appreciation of buildings, but to create a plan for their demolition. It is his understanding of the industrial engineering of the house – its layout, plumbing, building materials, electrical wiring – and not his ability to theorize its beauty that gives T. authority within the gang. Initially, Blackie distrusts T. because he seems to be praising Old Misery’s house, which T. recognizes as a Wren building, for its beauty; he tells the group about its wood paneling and free-standing, two-hundred-year-old staircase held up by opposite forces (226). “It was the word ‘beautiful’ that worried him [Blackie] – that belonged to a class world that you could still see parodied at the Wormsley Common Empire by a man wearing a top hat and a monocle, with a haw-haw accent” (229). But T.’s suggestion that they pull the house down methodically from the inside – what might be called vertical dismantling –

rather than break in and steal things gains popularity with the group as a total rejection of the past. The act of demolition becomes a more poignant affirmation of modernity when the narrator explains that Old Misery had once been a builder and decorator, but that he had no knowledge of plumbing; he had to use an outdoor lavatory once the pipes had been damaged in the blitz. Old Misery's lack of modern home-building knowledge puts him at an ironic disadvantage when the boys lock him in his lavatory while they complete the demolition by turning on the taps and flooding the house.

T. is a planner without attachment to the past or architectural canon. As such, he works against the postwar preservationist ethos promoted by influential figures such as architectural historian John Summerson and National Trust Secretary James Lees-Milne. His vision requires the use of modern techniques to remove any historically resonant sense of "home" from the structure. When the other boys suggest that they leave after having gutted everything within the walls, T. protests that they haven't finished: "“Anybody could do this—’ ‘this’ was the shattered hollowed house with nothing left but the walls. Yet walls could be preserved. Façades were valuable. They could build inside again more beautifully than before. This could again be a home” (238). Demolition, for T., requires elimination of all historical referent; an outdated attachment to history would perpetuate an outdated idea of "home." Old Misery's house, from the perspective of the gang, epitomizes the persistence of obsolete history. It is the only house to have survived the bomb blasts on its street; it "literally leant," and it "stuck up like a jagged tooth and carried on the further wall relics of its neighbour, a dado, the remains of a fireplace" (226). As they destroy the house, they reject nostalgic efforts of preservation as well as the profit-driven reappropriation and redevelopment of old buildings by contemporary builders: the boys would rather burn the money they find in Old Misery's mattress than

become inheritors of tainted capital. For T., the signs of a bourgeois domestic life have become completely stripped of their ability to confer meaning. “There’s only things,” he tells Blackie, “and he looked round the room crowded with the unfamiliar shadows of half things, broken things, former things” (236). For Greene’s teenagers, total demolition that leaves a clean slate is the only antidote to a world populated by things and buildings that have no meaning for a new generation.

Methodology, Original Interventions, and Critical Conversations

“The Destructors” demonstrates how postwar reconstruction realism depends on specificity. Whether characters are in favour of preservation or demolition, Greene depicts their relationship to the built environment in concrete terms. Accordingly, my methodology for this project aims for a similarly specific set of descriptive techniques to bring together literary, cinematic, and historical concerns. Rhetorically, I resist relying too heavily on terminology and concepts that have already been spelled out in modernist and postmodernist studies, which, although important in laying the foundation for historical approaches to twentieth-century culture, have reached a saturation point. It is possible to reanimate texts and events of the past with a new set of terms and parameters. One original contribution of the dissertation is to eschew vague theoretical definitions of space and fiction. In the broadest of conceptual terms, buildings and books resonate with one another. They are both physical enclosures for the metaphysical “stuff” of human lives; dreams, stories, personalities, and relationships emerge through and are contained within these structures. By this logic, a work of fiction from any time period could be considered as formally analogous to a work of architecture. Against such generalized claims, I insist that there is a historically specific reason for attending to this analogy in wartime and

Welfare State Britain and, accordingly, for pursuing an interdisciplinary methodology when examining the culture of the period. Although fiction always constructs a world (or worlds), the world-building of novels and films deserves special attention in a time when the “real” world is being reconstructed in such dramatic and concrete ways.

In order to attend to the material consequences of imaginative reconstruction fiction, I invoke premises from several disciplines: literary studies, film studies, history, cultural studies, architecture, and urban planning. This interdisciplinary approach, with emphasis on the built environment, puts my project into dialogue with recent work in twentieth-century literary studies, such as Peter Kalliney’s *Cities of Affluence and Anger: A Literary Geography of Modern Englishness* (2007), Todd Kuchta’s *Semi-Detached Empire: Suburbia and the Colonization of Britain, 1880 to the Present* (2010), and Victoria Rosner’s *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (2005). My attention to thematic representations of architecture in literature and film aligns with efforts by Kalliney and Kuchta to read the consequences of historical events, namely, imperial devolution, as expressed in the treatment of domestic space and geography in British fiction. In terms of form, my argument about the mutually constitutive relationship between architecture and fiction echoes Rosner’s claim that “the modernist novel draws a conceptual vocabulary from the lexicons of domestic architecture and interior design, elaborating a notion of psychic interiority [...] that rests on specific ideas about architectural interiors” (2). Recent work in architectural history, moreover, such as Richard Hornsey’s *The Spiv and the Architect: Unruly Life in Postwar London* (2010), also resonates with my project in its contention that postwar architectural reconstruction is intimately tied to cultural discourse and social identities. As Hornsey puts it, one can only understand the parameters of postwar identities – specifically, for his argument, queer

identities – within the context of architectural and planning discourses that attempted to “reorganize everyday space and time within postwar London” (3). I build on all four of these studies by taking a multimedia approach to fictional culture in the period that includes novels as well as films. The spaces of cinema have a unique relationship with the spaces of the built environment, and film studies scholars have explored this claim exhaustively. Karen Shonfield’s book, *Walls Have Feelings: Architecture, Film, and the City* (2000), helps to define the particular implications of this relationship for the postwar period. She argues that British fantasies of national identity and spatial boundaries are crucial for understanding reconstruction culture as a broad phenomenon that links architecture and fiction film.

Another original intervention of this dissertation is to consider wartime and mid-century fiction within a fresh set of contextual parameters. My analysis is future-oriented; it does not return to the question of modernism or World War I in order to assess artistic or political value. Instead of looking back to these prior historical moments to frame my arguments, I examine reconstruction culture in relation to the history, literature, and film that comes after the war. Recent critical accounts of mid-century literature have argued valuably for the significance of wartime, “late modernist,” or mid-century fiction, but they do so in part by comparing this “later” literature with that of high modernism or the “Great War.” By setting up their projects in this way, Jed Esty’s *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (2003), Marina MacKay’s *Modernism and World War II* (2007), Marina MacKay’s and Lyndsey Stonebridge’s *British Fiction After Modernism* (2007), and Patrick Deer’s *Culture in Camouflage* (2009) have been indispensable in reframing our understanding of wartime and postwar texts within

cultural, political, and broadly historical circumstances.² MacKay, for instance, “aligns the renovation of the public sphere in [World War II] Britain with the aesthetic discourses that had anticipated its necessity and came to record it in the process of taking shape” (4). My approach to mid-century and postwar literature is, like MacKay’s, a rejoinder to Esty’s book, which takes up “the question of late modernism and imperial contraction between 1930 and 1960” in order to “address the blank space or interregnum between modernism and postmodernism, between empire and welfare state” (Esty 4). I begin from the premise that World War II is anything but a “blank space,” “interregnum,” or even a continuation of modernism; it is a crucial historical moment that generates an entirely new cultural idiom, most evident not through the work of the high modernists who are the subject of Esty’s book but through emerging voices of a younger generation. Patrick Deer also views wartime culture as a pervasive phenomenon that deserves special attention. He revises accounts such as Esty’s when he “aims to remap the history of British war culture by insisting on the centrality and importance of the literature of the Second World War” (2).

The novels and films analyzed in this project represent a range of gender and socio-economic positions, political beliefs, and aesthetic approaches. They are unified not by the artistic standards of modernism, or by some other canonical distinction, but by their engagement with the issues that are most central to home- and community-building in the postwar period. In my attempt to reframe the terms and stakes of artistic significance, the project intersects with Kalliney’s *Cities of Affluence and Anger*, which

² These books offer important correctives to earlier perspectives that considered fiction of the 1940s and 1950s to be reactionary, parochial, conservative, and overly invested in small domestic scenes – especially as this fiction was often defined in relation to high modernism. In 1995, for instance, Andrzej Gąsiorek argued that the war had a dampening effect on the literary imagination: “Post-war writers lacked zest and a sense of excitement” (2). This statement is debatable. Graham Greene’s spy thrillers and Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*, alone, are enough evidence to challenge Gąsiorek’s claim.

considers British fiction over the course of the twentieth century, from a diverse range of writers, and in relation to space and geography. Literary significance, for Kalliney, is determined not by a relationship to modernism or postmodernism but to the material contributions that literature makes to historical change. Specifically, he understands English literary texts as discursive sites through which class differences were renegotiated as a bi-product of colonial decline, thereby creating a unifying national discourse (6). Kalliney's approach to fictional works as discursive sites with real historical implications is an important precedent for my own argument. In the realist examinations of domestic life by writers and filmmakers across the aesthetic and socio-economic spectrums – Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene, Patrick Hamilton, Doris Lessing, Ken Loach, Joseph Losey, Colin MacInnes, Sam Selvon, Muriel Spark, and Elizabeth Taylor – I see more than the insular introspection of a once-great colonial force, as Esty argues regarding the later work of T.S. Eliot, E.M. Forster, and Virginia Woolf. Rather, I read crucial and critical reconstructions of British life on the brink of a dramatically transforming world.

As they attempt to “look out through glass,” the writers and filmmakers featured in this project test various postwar shelters: boardinghouses, country houses, Victorian row houses, council estates, and squats. Each structure allows for a different kind of story that dramatizes particular social ideals and conflicts. Where the boardinghouse allows Patrick Hamilton and Muriel Spark to assess the Welfare State relationship between individual and community, the squat represents, for Doris Lessing and Ken Loach, the breakdown of the connection, metonymic and actual, between house and nation under Thatcher. And where Elizabeth Taylor and Elizabeth Bowen use the country house to interrogate the intrusion of public narrative into private domicile, Losey uses the Victorian row house to imagine the modern, working-class reconfiguration of once

aristocratic spaces. By linking realist narrative drama with domestic structures, these novels and films reinforce the 1940s reconstructive vision. Their value is to ask not only what, but how, we should build.

Boardinghouses: Shared Space and the Reconstruction Novel

World War II boardinghouse narratives depend dramatically on the problem of shared space. This chapter investigates how two postwar reconstruction novels, Patrick Hamilton's *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947) and Muriel Spark's *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), use the wartime boardinghouse to reframe the relationship between the British individual and community. While wartime legislation demanded that individual citizens subordinate their desires to the state for economic and political reasons, the war also became an opportunity to recast the collective – which had been associated with totalitarian regimes in Germany, the Soviet Union, and Japan – as an expression of democracy. Socialist policies and physical rebuilding in Welfare State reconstruction initiatives directed individual desire away from the bourgeois promise of vertical social mobility toward horizontal visions of socio-economic equality. Novels such as *The Slaves of Solitude* register and interrogate this shift in spatial and ideological orientation by setting novelistic action in the always-public living space of the wartime boardinghouse. In Hamilton's novel, the single protagonist cannot find meaningful social and literary positions, as the goal of vertical mobility loses its historical and narrative relevance. Nearly twenty years after the war, Muriel Spark uses the boardinghouse narrative to account for individual gaps and silences in postwar collective narratives. The boardinghouse – as both a setting and a narrative mode – problematizes the related novelistic goals of individual character development and linear plot progression. Instead of unfolding in the manner of a traditional development novel, the boardinghouse novel is characterized by the presence of numerous minor characters and plotlines that do not advance in predictably logical directions. As such, the boardinghouse allows writers like

Hamilton and Spark to assess the shift toward horizontality that characterizes wartime and postwar Britain.

Postwar horizontality and community-oriented reconstruction should be understood as dramatic turns away from the verticality and desire for individual privacy that characterized Victorian and modernist sensibilities. In the nineteenth century, the goal of upward mobility became central to British social and cultural life, especially for the middle classes. Property ownership was one of the major avenues for pursuing this aim. Those aspiring to middle-class or upper-middle-class social positions counted the occupation of a single-family home as one of the more important signs of successful upward mobility. Architectural historian Deborah Cohen explains the importance of the home and household possessions for developing a social identity in late Victorian England:

The Victorian preoccupation with possessions reflected an age in which once-rigid distinctions of class and rank seemed to be rapidly eroding. The question, as late nineteenth-century observers noted, was no longer merely who you were, but what you had. For aristocrats, of course, land and title still guaranteed a privileged status. Among the middle classes, whose numbers more than tripled in the second half of the nineteenth century, possessions became a way of defining oneself in a society where it was increasingly difficult to tell people apart.

Homes [...] became flexible indicators of status, which could be exchanged for better accommodation as fortunes allowed. Taste, viewed in the eighteenth century as a largely innate quality reserved for the well-born, was now a trait to be cultivated, available to all. (Cohen xi-ii)

Good taste in homes and household goods was best expressed by the Victorian single-family home. The ideal home prized individual privacy, as the architectural features and partitioning of space for specific uses indicate: rooms with lockable doors, nooks for reading and writing, separate rooms for children and parents, clearly distinguished public and private rooms. With the support of a nuclear family, the individual in the single-family Victorian home had a built-in socializing experience that allowed the individual to learn how to negotiate the demands of public life – represented by parents and siblings – with the needs of private development.

Modernist writers and intellectuals such as Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, and Lewis Mumford emphasized the importance of the single-family home, private individual space, and the desire for upward social mobility in their 1930s texts. In 1929, when Woolf associated women's intellectual liberation with the ability to have a room of one's own, her prescription required private property ownership and the possibility of being surrounded by one's own possessions. In her 1937 chronicle of the Pargiter family, *The Years*, working-class characters identify with their employers' houses and things, rather than their own space and possessions. This displaced attachment prevents working-class characters from advancing socially and from gaining more prominent roles as literary characters. When the family house is sold after Colonel Pargiter's death, Crosby, the long-time housekeeper, moves into a house that has been subdivided into flats. She relocates to "her little room," which merely echoes the upper-middle-class interior of which she had been part and parcel:

Her room was at the top, and at the back, overlooking the garden. It was small, but when she had unpacked her things it was comfortable enough. It had a look of Abercorn Terrace. Indeed for many years she had been

hoarding odds and ends with a view to her retirement. Indian elephants, silver vases, the walrus that she had found in the waste-paper basket one morning, when the guns were firing for the old Queen's funeral – there they all were. She ranged them askew on the mantelpiece, and when she had hung the portraits of the family – some in wedding-dress, some in wigs and gowns, and Mr Martin in his uniform in the middle because it was her favourite – it was quite like home. (190-91)

Quite like home, but not home – Crosby needs more than a room of her own in a converted single-family home to be socially, intellectually, and novelistically liberated. As a servant within the Pargiter home, Crosby cannot fully claim her own domestic space, proving Victoria Rosner's point that the late Victorian and modernist home "does not proffer its protection equally to all household members, nor does its protection invariably extend autonomy to those who dwell within its doors" (5). In theory, late Victorian interior design and decoration, as influenced by reformers like William Morris and John Ruskin, were a primary avenue of individual expression within the home. In practice, however, personalized room décor was limited to the upper and upper-middle classes. Crosby, as live-in housekeeper and not home-owning homemaker, can only mimic the decorative taste of her upper-middle-class employers. If, as Rosner asserts, the modernist home was a site of social experimentation for Woolf (5), that experimentation required the expulsion of working-class characters who would foreground the reality that bourgeois individualism was not universally accessible.

George Orwell's 1937 study of working-class British life, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, confirmed the idea that sharing interior space would not enable the development of singular, strong, personal intellect for the working classes. Orwell laments the stagnant

social and intellectual position of individuals forced by economic need to inhabit slum-like boardinghouses. By starting his study with a detailed description of what he calls a “fairly normal” lodging-house of industrial areas (13), Orwell foregrounds the problem of shared housing as against the traditional family home of the Victorian and Edwardian periods:

There were generally four of us in the bedroom, and a beastly place it was, with that defiled impermanent look of rooms that are not serving their rightful purpose. Years earlier the house had been an ordinary dwelling-house, and when the Brookers had taken it and fitted it out as a tripe-shop and lodging-house, they had inherited some of the more useless pieces of furniture and had never had the energy to remove them. We were therefore sleeping in what was still recognizably a drawing-room. Hanging from the ceiling there was a heavy glass chandelier on which the dust was so thick that it was like fur. And covering most of one wall there was a huge hideous piece of junk, something between a sideboard and a hall-stand, with lots of carving and little drawers and strips of looking-glass, and there was a once-gaudy carpet ringed by the slop-pails of years, and two gilt chairs with burst seats, and one of those old-fashioned horsehair armchairs which you slide off when you try to sit on them. The room had been turned into a bedroom by thrusting four squalid beds in among this other wreckage. (3)

For Orwell, the lodging-house is a degenerate space. It does away with individual privacy. Four individuals sleep in one room, and there is an air of impermanence because the lodgers are transient: “a succession of commercial travelers, newspaper-canvassers and

hire-purchase touts who generally stayed for a couple of nights” (4). Like the Pargiter home for Crosby, the lodging-house does not enable individual development for residents because rooms and their furniture and decoration no longer signify as they had been intended to do when the building was an “ordinary dwelling house” (3). The publicizing of private space, impermanence, and the disruption of room-use specification, Orwell’s study suggests, underlay the problem of working-class poverty and stagnation in the 1930s. Without a permanent, private, “properly” decorated room of one’s own, how could workers become enfranchised, enlightened citizens?

In his 1938 volume, *The Culture of Cities*, Lewis Mumford echoes the cultural demand for private domestic space, not in the name of women’s liberation or working-class social mobility, but with a grand view toward a universal humanist architecture and urban planning. Mumford locates the basis of this revolutionary architecture – “biotechnic planning,” as he calls it – in the design of the family home. For Mumford, the family home is, above all, a space for human reproduction and child-rearing. The most important design factor, he argues, is the clear demarcation of private space for children and parents:

the child is no less entitled to space than the adult: he must have shelves and cupboards for his toys, room for play and movement, a place for quiet retreat and study, other than his bed. No housing standard is adequate that provides only cubicles or dressing rooms for the child, or forces him into the constant company of adults. [...] At the same time, every part of the dwelling must be arranged equally with an eye to sexual privacy and untrammelled courtship. Private rooms alone are not enough: soundproof partitions are equally important. (432)

For Mumford, a dedication to using birth control combined with a loving devotion to one's children, if practised within the nurturing environment of the biotechnically planned houses and urban communities, would lead to a flourishing civilization. This civilization would value the regenerating life cycle instead of valorizing the "false" permanence of stone monuments erected by previous "great" civilizations. Instead of stone, which gives "a deceptive assurance of life," Mumford names glass and synthetic materials as "valid symbols of this more vital and more enlightened social sense" (443). Mumford's vision foreshadows the work of wartime and postwar planners in its effort to reconcile the desire for individual identity, individual space, and the nuclear family – values expressed by Woolf and Orwell – with a transparent and fluid relationship between individual and community. Mumford's modernism is rooted in a domestic architecture that bridges private housing and public planning.

With the demands put on domestic life by World War II, an asymmetry emerged favouring the responsibilities of public life over individual desires. Vertical social ambitions of the prewar individual were abruptly halted as the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act of 1939 limited civil liberties of British citizens. This act effectively subordinated individual agency to the goals of the state in the name of the war effort. As a military and political tactic, the act was intimately linked to the household, as many individuals were obligated to take in evacuees, lend houses to billeted military personnel and their families, or be evacuated due to bombing dangers. Wartime writers such as Elizabeth Bowen, Patrick Hamilton, Elizabeth Taylor, and Evelyn Waugh explored the connection between the citizen and the state through fictional meditations on the transformed relationship between individuals and their once-private homes. Domestic interiors took center stage during the war; they were disrupted and exposed to "the

outside” through bombs, evacuation, and billeting, which laid bare to strangers the most intimate corners of people’s homes. In her 1945 essay, “Opening Up the House,” Bowen homes in on the dramatic potential inherent in this disruption of interiors; she reflects on “those unnumbered human beings who came and went [...], who] have left something behind them, something that will not evaporate so quickly as the smell of unfamiliar cigarettes” (*People, Places, Things* 133). Evelyn Waugh satirizes the responsibility of billeting evacuated children in *Put Out More Flags*. While evacuees generally “were tolerated now as one of the troubles of the time,” the Connolly children are an extreme, trouble-making exception: they were housed in one place for no longer than ten days and for as little as an hour and a quarter. “Everyone agreed that the only place for the Connollys was ‘an institution’” (82). Given the historical value placed on domestic privacy and permanence in British life, the forcible opening up of the house was a major cultural turning point that at once exposed the fear of losing individual privacy while also creating an opportunity for the emergence of community-oriented narratives and Welfare State initiatives.

The Individual in Planned Communities

The shift to horizontality and the challenges to individual privacy that concerned writers and intellectuals were expressed in reconstruction discourse through debates about planning. Louis MacNeice’s 1941 observation that “the new division, the vital division, in this country will be between Planners and Non-Planners (or Anti-Planners)” indicates the significance of the debates (114). As many architectural and urban planning historians have noted, the idea of national planning and planning in general came to dominate all fields of life in Britain during the 1930s. In architectural circles, the comprehensive

planning ideal, with the survey as its central tool, reached its peak of influence during World War II through reconstruction initiatives. In this way of conceiving built space, according to architectural historian Michiel Dehaene, “the planner-intellectual takes centre stage,” which allows for a gradual “transition from an architecture-based planning tradition to a more technocratic style of planning, [...] merging the expert’s voice with the artist’s vision of the architectural design” (44). The challenge inherent in British reconstruction plans was to preserve a humanizing architecture within scientifically grounded plans to rebuild quickly and efficiently.

Concerns about efficiency were not new in the 1940s; they had been an integral part of modernism. As Evelyn Cobley argues in *Modernism and the Culture of Efficiency*, “Although efficiency became an issue in the nineteenth century, it was during the first three decades of the twentieth that it generated a host of cultural anxieties” (5). Cobley reads modernist novels as dramatizing a broad ideological preoccupation with efficiency: “these novels reflect, in various registers, an almost imperceptible cultural slide from the desire for the perfectibility of machines to the perfectibility of society” (5). The modernist desire to perfect society – a desire that Cobley characterizes as “the lure of a perfectibility remaining always out of reach” (8) – found its expression in a shift along the political spectrum from free-market liberal democracy to totalitarian systems of fascism and Stalinist communism. All areas of life were subject to the move toward greater organization and systemization.

Modernist architecture and urban planning schemes were epitomized by Le Corbusier’s re-conceptualization of the house as a hyper-efficient “machine for living in” (*Towards a New Architecture* 4). In his 1929 work, *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning*, Le Corbusier placed the goal of efficiency above all other values, including

historical preservation, when he envisioned a new model for central Paris. He explicitly intended to demolish, cover up, or do away with any remnants of old Paris. In his words,

This plan makes a frontal attack on the most diseased quarters of the city, and the narrowest streets: it is not ‘opportunistic’ or designed to gain a yard or two at odd points in over-congested roads. Its aim is rather to open up in the strategic heart of Paris a splendid system of communication. As against streets ranging from 20 to 35 feet in width with cross roads every 20, 30 or 50 yards, its aim is to establish a plan on the ‘gridiron’ system with roads 150, 250 to 400 feet in width, with cross roads every 350 or 400 yards; and on the vast island sites thus formed to build immense cruciform skyscrapers, so creating a *vertical* city, a city which will pile up the cells which have for so long been crushed on the ground, and set them high above the earth, bathed in light and air. (280; emphasis original)

It is no coincidence that Le Corbusier does not speak directly about the people who would inhabit this concrete, high-speed, vertical Paris. Lived human life, with individual desires and experiences, was subordinated, if not completely irrelevant, to the project of efficiency. Le Corbusier’s vision exemplifies Cobley’s description of efficiency as “no longer just a means to an end but [...] an end in itself” (9). In Britain, wartime intellectuals, architects, and planners were acutely aware of the slippery slope from democratic planning to totalitarian bureaucracy and social engineering experiments of the most nightmarish order, which helps to explain why Le Corbusier’s ideas failed to take

root in British architectural circles until historical perspective had been gained and those modernist ideas were revised in the mid-1950s.³

The planning ethos that dominated Britain during the war was balanced by a consistent strain of skepticism in the name of individual freedom. In his 1944 book *Building and Planning*, one example of many such wartime publications, economist G.D.H. Cole summed up the anxiety about the implications of large-scale planning initiatives:

Are we to plan? If so, what are we to plan, and what are the essential instruments for making our plans and for carrying them into effect? And, first and foremost, what is planning, and how much substance is there in the allegation that it is inconsistent with liberty? [...] Would it mean less real and tangible freedom for ordinary people, or would it mean an enlargement of the kinds of freedom that most people want and value? (38)

Cole's questions echo the cautionary attitude toward planning expressed by Mass-Observation in a 1943 article for *Town and Country Planning*. M-O resists the possibility of a totalitarian bureaucracy in which individual lives lose value:

Mass-Observation's job is to provide the link between expert and amateur, planner and planned-for, the democratic leader and the democrat. In the increasing complexity of modern civilisation the specialist's job tends to become more specialized and he to become more remote from the people in whose interests he is working. In this article we have tried to suggest

³ In Chapter Three, I explain how vertical, modernist aesthetics are revised in both architectural and literary registers in the 1950s and 1960s. Architects such as Alison and Peter Smithson, for instance, echo Le Corbusier's appreciation for verticality as they develop their "streets in the sky" building philosophy for large-scale, high-rise housing projects.

some of the lines along which experts in housing might stiffen their knowledge a little, in order to ensure that the houses they plan are not only beautiful, hygienic and convenient, but also lived-in, lived-for and demanded. (“Some Psychological Factors” 7)

Planners are reminded, in an official capacity, that houses must be built for individual human beings in a democratic, community-oriented society, not for sweeping principles of technological efficiency or aesthetic vision. MacNeice, for one, saw no conflict between efficient planning and political integrity. He argued in 1941 that “it is possible to become more efficient at the same time as, *and by reason of*, becoming more democratic” (112).

As reconstruction plans began to emerge during the war, efficiency was put to work with explicitly democratic goals. Utopian visions of a community in harmony with the individual dominated, from the New Town to the suburban-style council estate to the tower block. The *County of London Plan* (1943) and New Towns Act (1946) – major examples of official planning documents – lobbied for reconstruction that would happen at a community level. A combination of single-family homes and blocks of flats were arranged within neighbourhood units with the explicit goal of socializing inhabitants to an entire lifestyle centered on pubs, churches, and pedestrian shopping areas. The *County of London Plan*, devised by Patrick Abercrombie and J.H. Forshaw for the London County Council, made a strong case for carefully planned reconstruction – as opposed to quick, cheap, haphazard building to solve the immediate shortage crisis. The argument for well planned but more costly and slower-paced building was based on a philosophical commitment to good community planning that serves human needs and improves living conditions:

Houses are needed to replace those destroyed by enemy action or condemned as unfit for human habitation. Are they to be built on isolated sites picked up from time to time, perpetuating an antiquated street net, or are they to build up into a general community plan, which the inhabitants can see gradually realised before their eyes? Does a translation of blocks of housing into real societies of men and women in a planned form in fact cost more than haphazard building? (18)

Long-range, community oriented planning became the favoured methodology for reconstruction, as it was for all aspects of the burgeoning Welfare State: education, health, insurance, employment.

The *Plan* sought to balance the single-family home ideal with the realistic demands of the housing shortage. “A good house,” the *Plan* argues, “with all the amenities necessary for a full and healthy life, is a primary social need for everyone and must be the constant objective” (74). Although the *Plan* contends that houses are preferable to flats because they have private gardens and “fit the English temperament,[...] houses would provide for only a quarter or a third of the present population” (77). In order to meet its socio-political mandate of providing housing for all, non-single-family homes had to be built – or created through conversion – and incorporated into the ideal of utopian, planned community (74). For a density of 100 people, the *Plan* put 55 per cent in houses and 45 per cent in flats (83). Unlike works of literature, documents like the *County of London Plan* had to be functional as well as economically and philosophically persuasive. Like works of fiction, such documents created imagined environments and worlds. The *Plan* includes maps of a potential city, of potential houses, built with potential materials, and inhabited by potential citizens of a

potential postwar state. With its neighbourhood maps and building plans, The *County of London Plan* calls a particular world into being: one in which individuals live in harmony with their local and national communities, where citizens are “ready and alive” to “the opportunity that [is] before London, as before the world, to create an environment that is worthy of our sacrifices” (19).

Five years later, the 1951 Festival of Britain contributed to the vision of harmonious individual-community relations put forth by planning documents such as the *County of London Plan*. The Festival was conceived by *News Chronicle* Editor, Gerald Barry, and Labour Deputy Leader, Herbert Morrison, as a “tonic for the nation,” which continued under strict rationing conditions until 1954. Innovations in home and community planning were a key component of the Festival. A “live architecture” exhibition, Lansbury Estate, was created in the heavily bombed East End as an example of urban and New Town reconstruction initiatives. According to the Museum of London,

Catering for the whole community [of Lansbury Estate], houses, flats, churches, schools, an old people's home, a pedestrianised shopping centre (first in London, sets trend for postwar towns and New Towns) and covered market place, pubs and open spaces were all carefully laid out and linked by footways. There was even a block of flats and a special garden with sheltered seats tailored specifically to the needs of older inhabitants who were not yet ready to move into the old people's home. Particular effort was paid to ensuring that the centre of the neighbourhood would be a focus for social life. The use of traditional materials such as London stock bricks and Welsh slates countered the modern architecture and layout,

making the neighbourhood seem new, clean and fresh and yet in some ways reassuringly familiar. (“The Festival of Britain” n.p.)

The Festival of Britain, like the *County of London Plan*, promoted transparency of planning and design initiatives that at once sympathized with the needs of the individual and demanded continued sacrifice of personal needs to national socio-economic recovery. Alongside public exhibitions like the Festival, pamphlets, articles, and books related to housing and intended for consumption by the general public were generated in vast quantities. Publications such as *Homes for the People* (1946), put together by the Association for Building Technicians, promoted community-oriented building and planning while also clearly laying out the desire for individual living space as one of the most important facets of postwar building initiatives: “No part of the housing problem is so obvious as this: that there are not enough houses. *Very large numbers of the British people have no dwelling to themselves*” (Association 18; emphasis original). With the experience of wartime living conditions and postwar austerity measures still fresh in the minds of most Britons, the possibility of community-based living would have been anticipated more as a threat than as a promise.



Baring House, Lansbury Estate, 1951
Source: *English Heritage*

Building initiatives after the war tried to recast the idea of the collective through neighbourhoods that emphasized groupings of nuclear families as well as individuals. Such approaches to building and planning retroactively justified the demand for wartime communal spirit by trying to elide the conflict between private (individual) and public (communal) home-spaces. *Homes for the People* emphasized to the general public that a balanced view of the debate about housing in single-family buildings versus housing in flats “requires not only a consideration of how the advantages and disadvantages of houses and flats affect (a) the individual at home, but also how they affect (b) the town as a whole with its citizens” (21). With nearly a decade of wartime rationing ahead, citizens of the immediate postwar period were encouraged to recalibrate their sense of individual identity to accommodate the needs and desires of others. The town, city, and nation were to be aligned with, not pitted against, the individual. The Association of Building Technicians assured the public that its ultimate goal was not to eliminate the individual and spatial privacy: “We cannot be content, our standards will not be really civilized, until every unmarried person other than a young child can have a separate bedroom” (27).

Postwar building initiatives imagined worlds in which the possibility of consequence for individual lives would be reinstated in the community-centered living space.

Individuality and Novelistic Space: Impossible Postwar Protagonists

The imaginative worlds of reconstruction plans, which are concrete parts of any building project, intersect with the imaginative worlds of literature. In particular, narratives set in boardinghouses and shared wartime billets interrogate the relationship between individual and community that documents such as the *County of London Plan* and exhibitions like the Festival of Britain explicitly address. The novel as a literary form, like the architectural form of the house, is challenged by the war to reconsider the necessity of individual space for social success. Aspiring protagonists in wartime billeting novels like Patrick Hamilton's *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947) and Elizabeth Taylor's *At Mrs. Lippincote's* (1945) cannot find enough – or the right kind of – household and literary space to emerge as wholly developed individuals. As characters resist communal responsibilities of wartime living, they become occasions for narrators to mock literary fantasies of individual identity, marriage, and single-family home occupation achieved through vertical mobility. Against characters' aspirations for linear, vertical advancement, the narrators have a leveling effect, functioning like centralizing planners that continuously limit the excessive development of any single character.

Housing is a clear point of thematic intersection for postwar literature and architectural discourse; on close investigation, however, housing also suggests a common formal problem in terms of the use of space and the distribution of inhabitants. As much as the specifications and rhetoric of official planning documents enrich interpretive possibilities for reconstruction literature, textual readings and literary concepts deepen the

cultural and social implications of building initiatives. In particular, Alex Woloch's work on character in the nineteenth-century novel, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, provides a productive theoretical touchstone for the relationship between formal structures (books and buildings) and socially constituted individuals (characters and citizens). Nancy Armstrong's study, *How Novels Think*, also helps to draw a connection between novels and houses in terms of individualism as a modern construction dependent on intellectual history since the Enlightenment. Woloch and Armstrong both use the nineteenth-century novel and its historical context to theorize their positions. It is not my intention to transpose their theories abstractly to the mid-twentieth century. Rather, I argue that the social realist mode that characterizes reconstruction novels by Hamilton and Taylor resonates with the dominant realist mode of nineteenth-century fiction in such a way that the two contexts have the potential for shared theoretical approaches. The particular issue of crowds and shared living space during World War II, moreover, is an important rejoinder to arguments about individuality and "the masses" in the nineteenth-century context.

According to Woloch, literary characterization emerges from a distributional matrix in novels in which the "discrete representation of any specific individual is intertwined with the narrative's continual apportioning of attention to different characters who jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe" (13). Narrative form is distinctly social for Woloch because "the space of a particular character emerges only vis-à-vis the other characters who crowd him out or potentially revolve around him" (18). The form of the novel becomes historically productive in the relationship between "*character-space* (that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole) and the *character-system*

(the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces – differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure – into a unified narrative structure)” (14). Narratives, and the distribution of characters within narratives, do not mirror simplistically the distribution of actual people within culturally coded social hierarchies; they actively contribute to the construction and dynamics of the “real” world.

Nancy Armstrong offers an explanation as to why novels have the power to play such an active role in determining the relationship between individuals and society. Since the eighteenth century, she argues, a mutually constitutive relationship has existed between novelists, their protagonists, and their readers that hinges on the notion of a modern, middle- or upper-middle-class subject with a self-enclosed and internally coherent identity. “Once formulated in fiction,” Armstrong contends,

this subject proved uniquely capable of reproducing itself not only in authors but also in readers, in other novels, and across British culture in law, medicine, moral and political philosophy, biography, history, and other forms of writing that took the individual as their most basic unit.

Simply put, this class- and culture-specific subject is what we mean by ‘the individual.’ (3)

Characterization, for Armstrong, depends upon the reader’s willingness to understand a character as an implied human individual and, by implication, to further understand that individual as someone who inhabits a greater narrative and larger social context. This way of understanding character and narrative has a distinctly architectural implication when the space that characters occupy within narrative totalities is emphasized. For characters and people – both conceived according to the modern definition of the individual –

physical space matters. The way in which larger systems of narrative and building construction delineate this space has crucial consequences for literary and social success.

In terms of character development, the novel traditionally depends on inequality. As Woloch explains it, “Narrative meaning takes shape in the dynamic flux of attention and neglect toward the various characters who are locked within the same story but have radically different positions within the narrative” (2). The novel needs a protagonist, and the protagonist needs space. For Woloch, character space is understood in terms of readerly attention. As my close readings of Hamilton, Taylor, and Spark will demonstrate, character space is at once about readerly attention and the domestic space allotted to characters within their fictional homes. Protagonist space – in both senses of the term – can only be occupied at the expense of space allotted to lesser characters, characters who, by virtue of the “laws” of the narrative, do not need or deserve more of the reader’s attention. Indeed, as Woloch argues, the very integrity of narrative progression requires a readerly neglect of a whole cast of minor characters: “*all* characters are potentially overdelimited within the fictional world – and might disrupt the narrative if we pay them the attention they deserve” (Woloch 13). Minor characters can threaten the stability of the novelistic narrative if they encroach too far upon the protagonist’s space, and so they must be formally restrained. How, then, does the novel traditionally decide to privilege one character over others? As Armstrong argues, in order to “qualify [as a protagonist] a character had to harbor an acute dissatisfaction with his or her assigned position in the social world and feel compelled to find a better one” (4). If the protagonist must desire advancement, then upward mobility must be a real possibility both in the narrative and within the historical context inhabited by that character. In order for the protagonist to move up socially – a condition of his or her full development as an individual – others

must be left behind or denied the possibility of moving up as well. In other words, minor characters are denied space, mobility, and the achievement of full individuality so that one or two protagonists can have everything they desire.

As I have established, World War II and the ideals of the Welfare State transform the relationship between the British individual and the British community – a transformation exemplified in postwar building initiatives. In the planned environment, whether architectural or narrative, characters relate to each other on horizontal, rather than vertical, terms. In literary terms, this environment renders all characters potentially minor. Reconstruction fiction by Patrick Hamilton and Elizabeth Taylor exposes the space of the novel and the role of the individual protagonist as being in ruins. They use overbearing narrators and an unromantic realist mode to explore the consequences of the necessary sacrifices and responsibilities with which the postwar individual is charged. Protagonists in *The Slaves of Solitude* and *At Mrs. Lippincote's* are perpetually victimized by narrators who know more than their characters do. Reconstruction novels about shared living space operate horizontally.

By “operating horizontally” I mean that these kinds of novels lack clear linear plot progression and strong individual protagonists. They prevent characters from communicating and therefore from entering into meaningful narrative relations with others; they can bring character and plot development to a standstill. Narrators intrude to point out how characters have made incorrect conclusions because they lack information due to their own insufficiencies or because they cannot see into the future as the narrator can. Romance plots are initiated only to be cynically aborted. As characters are forced to inhabit borrowed and shared spaces, room décor and house plans do not translate logically to self-knowledge and family security that would allow for vertical social mobility.

Sounds emanate – often, it seems, sourcelessly – without clear or logical signification for characters. Wartime crowds literally drown out and impede the assertions of any given individual. The result, for these novels as a whole, is that something other than the individual development of a single protagonist constitutes their *raison d'être*. Armstrong argues sweepingly that “new varieties of novel [after the nineteenth century] cannot help taking up the project of universalizing the individual subject. That, simply put, is what novels do” (10). She claims that the “ideological core” of the novel as a genre remains “the presupposition that novels think like individuals about the difficulties of fulfilling oneself as an individual under specific cultural historical conditions. Whether this involves resistance, complicity, mimicry, or hybridity does not alter the basic fact that new generations of novels in English [...] are by definition reproducing modern individuals wherever novels are written and read” (10). In the analysis that follows, I will take up Armstrong’s claim alongside examination of shared living space in realist reconstruction fiction to assess whether postwar texts such as *The Slaves of Solitude* and *At Mrs. Lippincote’s* reaffirm the existence of a universalized, modern individual, or instead, indicate other possibilities for the novel as a genre.

***The Slaves of Solitude* and Narratives of Inconsequence**

Patrick Hamilton’s 1947 novel, *The Slaves of Solitude*, chronicles the daily wartime experiences of Miss Edith Roach, unmarried former headmistress of a boys’ boarding school and current boarder at the Rosamund Tea Rooms in a fictional suburb called Thames Lockdon. Forced to evacuate her London home, Miss Roach, as the narrator calls her, finds herself in too-intimate proximity with a group of boarders. By setting his novel in a boardinghouse, an always-public living space that subordinates the

single tenant to the standards of the house, Hamilton is able to explore the consequence of individual life in the wartime and postwar community.⁴ Hamilton dramatizes this common wartime living scenario by depicting Miss Roach's attempt to maintain her sense of self while also entering into meaningful relations with other characters. Her desires, thoughts, and actions are limited on every front: by an authoritarian landlady who responds to any sign of tenant "originality" with "a sharp note within twenty-four hours" (5), by what she fears the other boarders will think of her, and – on a structural level – by a narrator who never allows her to have the right information at the right time in the right order.

"Consequence" and "inconsequence" are key terms for thinking about the relationship between individual and community in Hamilton's novel. The narrator often uses the word "inconsequence" to describe the way Miss Roach thinks of people, as when she decides on "inconsequence" as the characteristic that best describes the American Lieutenant (36). The narrator emphasizes the limits of Miss Roach's individualism by directly undermining her efforts to piece together meaning about the events that unfold around her: the consequence of particular information is never clear for her, and therefore,

⁴ Thierry Labica, Alan Munton, Jean-Christophe Murat, and Mark Rawlinson have debated the extent to which *The Slaves of Solitude* should be read as a war novel. Labica observes that *The Slaves of Solitude* is "generally seen (when seen at all) as a good documentary novel about war and evacuation" (74). He offers a rejoinder to this perspective by arguing that the novel "rehearses a non-strictly contextual tradition of literary experience of the city (and more particularly that of London); and that indeed *The Slaves* is a war novel, but a war novel in which war-as-context is the metaphor of a non-contextual issue, that of conversation" (74-75). Labica's essay ultimately explains away the war in order to get to what he thinks is the most important aspect of the novel: a theory of language and linguistics. More recent interpretations, including my own, have insisted on the centrality of the war for the novel. Murat argues, for instance, that although the novel should not be read as a documentary account of the war, its polyphonic language "fully conveys the intensity and complexity of the war in people's minds" (330). Rawlinson has echoed this position as well, arguing that "the book is clearly of the war," and that the suburban scene of Thames Lockdon should be understood as a "front line of total war, a place subjected to occupation and invasion" (260). My argument, while assuming that the war is central to the fabric of *Slaves of Solitude*, moves beyond the debate about whether or not the novel is a "war novel" as such. Instead, I focus on the more future-oriented problems of postwar reconstruction literature and society. Lawrence Phillips has recently interpreted the novel in the context of postwar London, but his analysis focuses on representations of the city and suburbs alongside Angus Calder's theory of the myth of the blitz.

the narrative consequence of particular characters and relationships remains elusive. As she struggles with consequence on every front, Miss Roach is deprived of the individualized plotlines of traditional development novels, like the marriage plot, that rely on linear, logical progression. Every action seems, in the end, inconsequential.

Inconsequentiality is the fate of the boardinghouse dweller. If, as Orwell would have it, the modern boardinghouse is a degenerate living space, the boardinghouse narrative is equally degenerate in terms of individual novelistic development. Hamilton's narrator observes that "nearly all who lived in the boarding-houses of Thames Lockdon were conscious of having descended in the world, of having arrived where they were by a pure freak of fate, and of courteously but condescendingly acting a part in front of their fellow-boarders" (74). Rather than housing those with lofty expectations and life goals arrived at through lengthy introspection and deep exploration of one's interior self, the boardinghouse caters to the downwardly mobile who are stripped of their individuality and self-knowledge – because the boardinghouse requires almost constant public performance – and who therefore cannot enter the normative narrative path for individuals toward marriage, children, and the single-family home. The omniscient narrator of Hamilton's novel, who escapes the limits imposed on boardinghouse tenants, ensures the impossibility of narrative consequence for Miss Roach. Rather than reaffirming the potential for individual identity in postwar Britain, Hamilton's novel exposes the pressures on individuality and exemplifies the horizontal, anti-protagonist quality of reconstruction literature.

In the context of World War II, the boardinghouse setting mirrors the subordination demanded of individuals within the national community of Britain. Historically, boardinghouses limit the desires and actions of each resident through their

transparent labour economics and house rules, as well as their regulated furnishings and décor. The twentieth-century boardinghouse featured in *The Slaves of Solitude* has its roots in the nineteenth-century tension between home and work. As historian Wendy Gamber explains, “In an era dominated by powerful – if often illusory – dichotomies between home and market, public and private, love and money, boardinghouses emerged as unsavory counterparts to idealized homes” (2). In idealized middle-class homes, women’s home-making work went unpaid or was taken care of by servants. The boardinghouse, on the other hand, made the work of managing a home and the financial transactions of tenancy overt. Moreover, as Gamber notes, “Women’s labor stood at the heart of this social equation, for boardinghouse keeping was women’s work” (7). Mrs. Payne, the owner of the Rosamund Tea Rooms, is a Dickensian caricature of the profit-hungry landlady: “This active, grey-haired, spectacled, widowed woman had no interest in knowledge, only in gain” (4). In agreeing to be her paying tenants, boarders consent to her rules and the over-arching goal of profitability, which the war conveniently helps to serve by forcing evacuations from London. This goal often directly challenges boarders’ desires for personal privacy and individual expression.

Already forced into undesirable intimate proximity with other residents, boarders are at the mercy of Mrs. Payne, “whose love of gain over-rode all other considerations, [and who] did not hesitate, when the occasion arose, to inflict her regular guests with the company of strangers at meals” (156). Profit is put into direct tension with any sense of “home” that a boarder might derive from living at the Rosamund Tea Rooms. Individual comfort and expression are strictly limited by boardinghouse rules: “All innovations were heralded by notes, and all withdrawals and adjustments thus proclaimed. Experienced guests were aware that to take the smallest step in an original or unusual direction would

be to provoke a sharp note within twenty-four hours at the outside, and they had therefore, for the most part, abandoned originality” (5). Mrs. Payne, reinforcing the wartime call to community responsibility, announces that “*Visitors will be held personally responsible for completing their own black-outs in their bedrooms*” (5). Even personal actions within personal space are subject to strict regulation. With the architectural history of private space in mind, such close “public” monitoring of individual rooms calls into question the very possibility of individual subjectivity within the boardinghouse community.

Individual development is also limited by Mrs. Payne’s regulation of furnishings and décor. The description of Miss Roach’s room exemplifies the temporary, comfortless, generic, barely modern space of the boardinghouse and, in particular for Miss Roach, this description emphasizes the stranglehold that the building has on her individuality:

[She] saw her room in the feeble light of the bulb which hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room and which was shaded by pink parchment. She saw the pink artificial-silk bedspread covering the light single bed built of stained-oak – the pink bedspread which shone and slithered and fell off, the light bedstead which slid along the wooden floor if you bumped into it. She saw the red chequered cotton curtains (this side of the black-out material) which were hung on a brass rail and never quite met in the middle, or, if forced to meet in a moment of impatience, came flying away from the sides; she saw the stained-oak chest of drawers with its mirror held precariously at a suitable angle with a squashed match-box. She saw the wicker table by the bed, on which lay her leather illuminated clock, but no lamp, for Mrs. Payne was not a believer of reading in bed. She saw the gas-fire, with its asbestos columns yellow and crumbling and

its gas-ring. She saw the small porcelain wash-basin with Running H. and C. (the H. impetuously H. at certain dramatic moments, but frequently not Running but feebly dripping – the C. bitterly C. yet steadfastly Running). She saw the pink wall-paper, which bore the mottled pattern of a disease of the flesh; and in one corner were piled her ‘books,’ treasures of which she had saved from the bombing in London, but for which she had not yet obtained a shelf. (5-6)

Miss Roach’s personal possessions are acknowledged in the most reluctant manner possible; for the narrative as a whole, they are objects of inconsequence. The books are last to be mentioned in the description of the entire room; punctuated by quotation marks, they hardly seem to exist for the narrator; and without a shelf, they are not properly housed, displayed, or accessible. The décor – light, thin, pink, crumbling – underscores the impermanence and therefore insignificance of Miss Roach’s presence in the boardinghouse. And the comic repetition of “she saw” emphasizes her alienation from those things that she cannot perceive as her own. In a concluding satirical stab at Miss Roach, the narrator refers to the space as “a room of her own at the top” (7), mocking the pretension to believe that she could derive any of the sort of personal intellectual development from this room that Virginia Woolf’s “room of one’s own” promised. Only the fact of a closed, lockable door and a single bed makes this room demonstrably hers. Hamilton uses the boardinghouse community to put Miss Roach to a test that has political implications beyond the social theatrics of the dining room. The narrator’s comically sarcastic tone makes it impossible to sympathize fully with her, regardless of the authoritarian landlady and the poorly equipped bedroom. Her exaggerated, often

inappropriately dramatic or critical reactions point not to the injustices she faces but to her self-centredness in a historical moment that asks for cooperation and sacrifice.⁵

In general, Hamilton's wartime boardinghouse is characterized by inconsequence due to the challenge of balancing private life with public performance: possible meanings proliferate, reinforced by sights and sounds that do not signify finally or logically. It is difficult to determine where "real" information is located, as the boardinghouse is distinguished by constant spying, eavesdropping, over-hearing, guessing, gossiping, and performing. The narrator frequently contributes variations of the phrase, "it was very difficult to ascertain how much precisely was known about last night" (182). Offered such partial knowledge, the reader occupies the position of a boarder, also at the mercy of a privileged narrator. Everything that happens in the boardinghouse is orchestrated for the benefit of others. Individual desire and action are always mediated by a concern for how the other boarders will interpret what has happened. Narrative ambivalence is, therefore, the rule. This ambivalence produces a chronic inconsequence that keeps individual characters from developing according to linear progression.

In Hamilton's novel, architectural ambivalence underlies this narrative condition. The "Rosamund Tea Rooms (which were not Tea Rooms any more, but a boarding-house)" is a converted building, and its name no longer properly describes its function (2). In this respect, the Rosamund Tea Rooms is similar to other shared living spaces, such as flats or bed-sits, which were created by partitioning Victorian or Georgian houses that had become too large or unprofitable. Reappropriation of architectural space lays a foundation

⁵ Miss Roach is typically read as an innocent English spinster set in opposition to the fascistic behaviour of the boardinghouse bully, Mr. Thwaites, and the German boarder, Vicki Kugelman (See essays by Jean-Christophe Murat and Mark Rawlinson, for example). Although this interpretation is supportable to an extent (Mr. Thwaites and Vicki are depicted clearly by the narrator as expressions of fascism), I argue that the narrator's portrayal of Miss Roach and her reactions to the other boarders does not render her innocent or meek. Rather, she is capable of irrational violence (200) and intense xenophobia (99).

for a modern literary comedy of errors: things do not add up spatially or logically as traditional landed property comes under increasing pressure from bourgeois trends and buying power. In Evelyn Waugh's 1934 novel, *A Handful of Dust*, for instance, reappropriation and redecoration become the catalyst for the darkly comic breakdown of Tony and Brenda Last's aristocratic marriage. Brenda moves out of their too-large country house and takes up residence in a room in a Belgravia house that Mrs. Beaver has divided into six flats – but not before Mrs. Beaver is commissioned to redecorate the morning-room of the country house, against Tony's wishes, by lining the walls with white chromium plating and covering the floor with natural sheepskin carpet (81). In Waugh's novel and in Hamilton's, the relation between form and function has been reconfigured to the delight of those in money-making positions – the interior decorator, the landlady – and to the detriment of those who have no choice but to pay – the nearly bankrupt aristocratic landlord, wartime boarders.

In the re-appropriated architectural space of the Rosamund Tea Rooms, individuals constantly review and revise their behaviour so as not to upset the delicate balance of communal living and embarrassingly reveal private information. Roles are performed in order to generate the least amount of gossip and sensation within the always-public space.⁶ But these roles are under the constant pressure of residents' efforts to uncover private lives in the most scandalous way possible. When Mr. Prest, an actor who "kept himself very much to himself," enters the dining room, "A silence fell [...], and people found themselves staring at him, seeking to discover his secret" (75). Each

⁶ Gossip and talk in this novel also have clear intertexts with the wartime work of Mass Observation, which listened in on and observed the daily lives of Britons during the war, documenting the topics and registers of conversation. Thierry Labica briefly discusses the M-O context in relation to the novel in his article, "War, Conversation, and Context in Patrick Hamilton's *The Slaves of Solitude*."

individual presents a narrative mystery within the boardinghouse, a mystery heightened by other sensory obstacles: silence and non-linguistic noise. Mr. Thwaites, the boardinghouse “bully,” initially seems transparent enough in assuming his role (12). Nevertheless, mystery persists when he can be overheard, without the aid of language, making his actions unintelligible: he “left the Lounge and went into his bedroom, in which he was heard walking savagely about for at least half an hour – or at any rate what seemed at least half an hour to his fellow-boarders. What was he *doing* in there? This mystery, repeated relentlessly each morning, but never clarified, hung like a sullen cloud over the Rosamund Tea Rooms at this time of day” (70). Individual identity in the boardinghouse is always both sought after and elusive.

Mrs. Payne contributes to the generation of gossip, which obscures “real” information. When Miss Roach receives a telephone call from an American Lieutenant stationed in town, for instance, the seed for scandal is planted: “The telephone being in Mrs. Payne’s private room on the ground floor, this was a boarding-house sensation. The residents of the Rosamund Tea Rooms were not telephone-using animals. Mrs. Payne was in the room, and did not see any reason to leave it” (39). Miss Roach’s sense of self is increasingly threatened by assumed gossip. Her anxiety over the possibility of gossip reaches its peak when she presumes that Mr. Thwaites and the German boarder, Vicki Kugelmann, have bonded over teasing Miss Roach behind her back:

To gain the knowledge that she had been talked about at all by two people was shock enough for Miss Roach (such knowledge is always a shock of a kind to any human being, unless it is at once followed and compensated for by the news that the talk is of a highly favourable nature): but to learn that two people of this sort had been talking about her, and in this way – she

believed it was more than she could stand. [...] And she betted your life they had talked! If she knew anything about them, they had talked and talked and talked. (178-9)

Already self-victimized by the possibility that she is the subject of gossip, Miss Roach is further teased by the narrator in this passage, who questions her ability to know anything at all: “*If* she knew anything about them” (179; emphasis added). Even if her assumption about their gossiping is accurate, that assumption allows her to conclude merely that they have talked – but about what, precisely, she remains ignorant.

Spying and eavesdropping – two primary modes of gathering information in the boardinghouse – can be understood as seeing and hearing without apparent consequence. When someone sees something through a cracked door or hears something through a thin wall, that seeing or hearing is not mobilized as part of a meaningful interaction with the person who generates the sound or sight. Gathering intelligence has, rather, the opposite function: excess knowledge that is not meant to circulate. In the Rosamund Tea Rooms, such excess knowledge accumulates and is redistributed as gossip, but it does not enable connections among individual boarders, despite the intense proximity of the forced wartime community. Miss Roach is so invested in this inconsequential excess knowledge that she continually imagines over-hearing or glimpsing something in order to confirm conclusions that will justify her refusal to enter into relations with others. Upon returning to the boardinghouse one evening, she hovers on the first floor landing “outside the ‘Lounge,’ from behind whose closed door she could hear (she was now aware that she had been hearing it in anticipation all the way back from the station) Mr. Thwaites’ voice booming nasally, indefatigably, interminably” (5). Her double hearing – imagined and

actual – only reinforces a dislike for Mr. Thwaites that keeps her from making the effort to get along with him.

The war context, furthermore, contributes to the accumulation of excess knowledge, since under blackout conditions, “people were muffled from each other” (3). The blackout causes half-glances and missed interpersonal connection. While sitting in the dining room, Miss Roach “glanced up at Mr. Thwaites and Mrs. Barratt, and saw that they were not looking at her. But their way of not looking at her, she observed, was a way of looking” (151). Clandestine looking and paranoid observation establish a non-connection between Miss Roach and the other boarders. Nothing of narrative significance for Miss Roach comes of this mutually acknowledged, withheld recognition. Spying and eavesdropping replace meaningful eye contact and conversation. Rather than directly knocking on Mr. Thwaites’s door to find out what is happening, Miss Roach spins in circles of eavesdropping and assumptions: “she went on to the landing, listened, went into her room again, came out and listened, and at last, after four or five minutes had passes, went downstairs and listened outside Mr. Thwaites’ door” (176). Indirect access to information contributes to the proliferation of gossip and possible meanings. Someone is always missing something in the boardinghouse, as when Miss Roach tells an indifferent Mr. Prest, “But you missed something [at the boardinghouse] tonight” (203). For Miss Roach, who is so concerned about what she might not know, spying, eavesdropping, gossip, and sensation prevent her development as an individual character and confirm her perennial inconsequence within the boardinghouse narrative.

Miss Roach’s inability to progress as a protagonist becomes evident thanks to Hamilton’s all-knowing narrator, who reveals the incongruence between public performances and private feelings, discreet sense perceptions and “actual” events. As

Miss Roach's attitude toward Vicki Kugelman becomes more and more hostile, Miss Roach's performance of kindness is thrown into sharper relief:

If this woman (thought Miss Roach, as she sat on the wicker-chair and seemed placidly to smoke the last cigarette of the day with her friend) goes on talking about 'beans' and 'gents': if she makes any further mention of 'handling' people or taking people 'in hand': if she combs her hair over any more people's photographs, or flops her body on to any more people's beds, or, as she was now doing, flicks her cigarette-ash over any more people's bedside tables, then she, Miss Roach, was at some time in the distant future, or even in the very immediate present, going to start to scream or going to start to hit. But she shows nothing of this, save for a faintly absent minded look in an otherwise cheerful and cordial countenance, and their cigarettes at last came to an end. (99)

As Miss Roach subjects Vicki's behaviour to critical scrutiny, the narrator retaliates on Vicki's behalf by putting Miss Roach's performance under the microscope. Via third-person technique, the narration shifts from focalization through Miss Roach to omniscient disdain for Miss Roach. Private thoughts are equally as vulnerable to reappropriation as public utterances under the watchful eye of Hamilton's boardinghouse narrator, which means that narrative progression is always out of Miss Roach's control.

The narrator emphasizes the limits of Miss Roach's individualism by directly undermining her efforts to piece together meaning about the events that unfold around her. Narrative threads stop and start in her head. She keeps thinking, "it's all over," and then, "it wasn't all over after all!" (34; 206-207). She fails to bring consequence to actions or to understand the actions necessary in order to ensure meaningful narrative interaction

with others. She fails, for instance, to understand that the American Lieutenant stationed in town only desires her as a “good time girl,” not as a potential wife. When Miss Roach does not provide the direct dialogue indicating her befuddlement, the narrator provides it to undercut her position, as when she contemplates a conversation with the Lieutenant and the narrator surmises, “Or again, had she completely misheard or misunderstood what he had said?” (43). Miss Roach is narratively isolated in her ignorance of other people’s needs and desires. “You never knew what people were really like, did you?” (92). She repeats variations of this question throughout the novel: “Though you never knew – you never knew anything about anybody” (203).

The failed romance plot in the novel most clearly demonstrates Miss Roach’s ignorance about people and her inability to enter meaningfully into narratives of development. Miss Roach struggles to interpret the American Lieutenant’s desires and to define their relationship. At first, she imagines that he has brought her fully into the home front wartime community. “In the last astonishing three weeks it seemed that she had actually acquired her own American – just as every shop-girl, girl-typist, girl-clerk, girl-assistant, girl-anything in fact, in the town, had acquired her own. [...] She felt a sudden, delightful, modest, gin and French pride in her experience as a 1940 Londoner” (27, 29). The narrator, however, suggests that this feeling of participation is temporary: it only “seemed” that she had become just like all of the other home front London girls. In fact, she is a spinster living in a suburban boardinghouse. Her romantic notions about the Lieutenant are abruptly challenged when several other characters intrude while they are having drinks at the pub. Miss Roach’s ability to be part of the community is put to the test: “Then, all at once, everything went bad. His friend, Lieutenant Lummis, entered with two girls, and the tête-à-tête was transformed into an awkward yet noisy party of five.

[...] She was, in fact, almost completely left out of it, and her sole desire was to go home” (30-1). True to form, her feelings at this moment are not final at all, but continue to vacillate. As a defense against her inability to figure him out, she refuses – or pretends to refuse – to have any interest in or responsibility for how he acts. When he arrives at the boardinghouse, for instance, “She did not like the idea of his going into the Lounge, but,” she concludes, “it was not her responsibility or business” (37). Later, contemplating how he might have acted in the Lounge, she again thinks, “It was not her business” (39). As a boardinghouse resident, Miss Roach cannot mind her own business; it is her narrative fate to be obsessed with other people’s business at the expense of minding her own successfully. Her compulsive analysis of the Lieutenant leads nowhere narratively, however, as she settles upon “the quality which mainly characterized the Lieutenant – his inconsequence. He was not only inconsequent, as most human beings are, in drink: he was chronically and inveterately inconsequent” (36). Miss Roach cannot get the logic of his actions, so he appears to her to act without intention. In truth, however, she cannot see that he intends to have her in his life on an inconsequential basis only. She mistakes his advances for the initiation of a romance plot into which she can never properly enter.

After feeling “left out of it” at the pub when the Lieutenant’s friends arrive, Miss Roach retreats to the boardinghouse, which she mistakenly thinks of as “home” (31). Home is a supposed refuge for the individual, but the boardinghouse as such cannot provide this comfort. The truth of her situation makes itself evident: “She had no place in either environment, and she was alone in the world” (32). Ultimately, this novel suggests that if a character cannot find a room of her own, she cannot find a plot of her own. In addition to her failed romance plot with the Lieutenant, Miss Roach also finds herself edged out of any narrative agency with regard to her “friend,” Vicki Kugelmann.

Although Miss Roach initially suggests that Vicki look for lodging in the Rosamund Tea Rooms, Vicki moves in without Miss Roach's help, which enrages her: "and now it had all happened without any bother, had been coolly and calmly fixed up, apart from her. You might almost say it had happened behind her back! The worst part about this feeling was that she not only had to grin and bear it: she had to grin and make a pretence of absolutely adoring it!" (60). Her ineffectiveness with regard to Vicki's lodging forces her to retreat even further in terms of her sense of self. Scraping for some sense of involvement, she feigns reluctance in assuming responsibility for Vicki that she really does not have: "Though actually the whole thing had been arranged independently of her by Vicki Kugelmann and Mrs. Payne, she still felt that, because she was known in the boarding-house as the friend of the German girl in the town, she was in fact responsible and would have to bear the brunt of any shocked or resentful sentiment amongst the guests which the news might possibly cause" (67). Miss Roach's identity is not self-sustaining but is wholly based on how she imagines she is known in the boardinghouse. The narrator ensures that Miss Roach is ultimately plot-less and stalled as a character, even after her rejection of and departure from the Rosamund Tea Rooms.⁷ Although she escapes to a hotel room at Claridge's in London, she is not "at home" in this transient space either.⁸ She is half "delighted," half "intimidated" by the luxurious qualities of the room at Claridge's. Yet again, she questions herself: "Wouldn't she, for a bedroom

⁷ Mark Rawlinson reads Miss Roach's escape as successful, as "a spinster's triumph over humiliation," which is analogous to the story of "an appeaser provoked into resistance" (266). As I demonstrate, however, Miss Roach's ostensible escape is anything but a victory in the wider context of the war that she consistently denies, even in her return to London.

⁸ Jean-Christophe Murat reads Miss Roach's failed escape as proof that *The Slaves of Solitude* is a "false town-versus-city novel," and that the lack of distinction between town and city demonstrates, in Marina MacKay's words, a "uniquely modern lesson about the amorphousness of the war experience" [MacKay 8] (Murat 334).

simply as a bedroom, rather have Mrs. Payne's? Was this really her line of country?" (241). Fitting in nowhere architecturally, Miss Roach's novelistic identity is ambivalent.

The room-less and therefore plot-less wartime spinster is not a unique creation of Hamilton's. Elizabeth Taylor's 1945 novel, *At Mrs. Lippincote's*, satirically tells the story of Eleanor, a spinster who has to share the space of a wartime billet as well as the literary role of protagonist with her cousin-in-law, Julia. She flails between plotlines that never quite get beyond the fantasy stage. Her doomed romantic attachments – to her married cousin, Roddy, and to a soldier whom she has never met – will never become marriage plots. And her potential to emerge as an active political character is similarly limited: she is curious about communism but conducts her explorations in secret and ultimately remains politically ambivalent. Like Miss Roach, Eleanor seems to belong nowhere. Also like Miss Roach, Eleanor is acutely aware of how her house-mates perceive her, and she tries "not to behave like a spinster in a book" (20). Her seemingly unalterable position as a spinster is revealed by "what Roddy called her 'little ways,' by which he meant the trivial comforts, consolations, cups of tea and patent medicines, small precautions against draughts and a gentle fussing" (20). The doomed romance plot between Miss Roach and the Lieutenant finds its parallel in Taylor's novel with Eleanor's unrealistic, romantic view of marriage and her particular wish to marry Roddy, whose infidelity behind his wife Julia's back makes him a less-than-worthy object of desire: "'If I had Roddy,' thought Eleanor, 'my greatest happiness would be to go out with him to meet the other wives.' [...]. She could not forgive Julia for wanting more than her own dearest dream" (11). Taylor sets Eleanor's attitude against Julia's realistic point of view: "having no life of her own, all she could hope for would be a bit of Roddy's" (20). In Taylor's novel, both Julia and Eleanor are prevented from becoming fully fledged protagonists who can

enter into meaningful plotlines; the reality of wartime life takes precedence over individual desires and fantasies.

Architecturally, Eleanor feels out of place in Mrs. Lippincote's house with the Davenant family, but like Miss Roach's escape to Claridge's, Eleanor's one-night move into a house shared by a number of unmarried communists does not provide the narrative mobilization she needs to claim the protagonist's role. She has to share that role with Julia. Upon entering the communist house, Eleanor observes its shabby décor: "two sash windows there were, not clean, a fawn, characterless wall paper, a deal table covered with a typewriter, a duplicator; then, the worn moquette sofa and an empty grate littered with cigarette ends and toffee papers. A breakfast cup full of faded dog-roses stood on the mantelpiece and a large clock with a brass plate" (64). The décor prompts Eleanor to confront her lack of self-knowledge as she lies awake at night:

The sounds of running water had at last ceased, the house grew quiet. Up on the mantelpiece, the famous clock ticked and rustled and even, on occasion, struck, preceded by a whirring like the sound of angels' wings. 'Everything so strange,' she thought. 'Who am I? Lying here, under this coat, which is heavy but certainly not warm. It is not I. Or is it, at last, I, myself? The adventurer, the liar, the hypocrite?' (127)

Not quite part of the Davenant family, Eleanor is also not part of the communist community. As an unmarried middle-class woman, she is a hybrid character who cannot be easily assimilated anywhere, and her liminal position is reflected in the houses in which she peripherally exists.

The similarities between *At Mrs. Lippincote's* and *The Slaves of Solitude* suggest that the wartime context produces general anxiety about the relationship between living

space, individuality, and narrative fiction. Boardinghouses and other communal living arrangements after the war cannot escape being associated with wartime demands to share housing, food, clothing and other basic necessities. In a sense, the war insists on the normalcy of makeshift families instead of “proper” nuclear ones, which effectively makes every house a potential boardinghouse and every individual a potential boarder. In Hamilton’s novel, Miss Roach resists her position as a boarder and therefore resists participation in the war as one of “the people.” The narrator takes every opportunity to pit Miss Roach against the forces that challenge her desire to be a private individual who hides from historical realities: other boarders, London, crowds, the war in general. From the very beginning of the novel, it is clear that Miss Roach will be at a disadvantage in the face of forces greater than her, including the narrator, who has enough omniscience to report that “The men and women imagine they are going into London and coming out again more or less of their own free will, but the crouching monster [London] sees all and knows better” (1).

The war, moreover, produces its special, spontaneous crowds: compositions of characters that “No imaginable combination of peace-time circumstances could have brought about,” which make individuals like Miss Roach feel physically and socially claustrophobic (118). “In the war,” according to the narrator, “everywhere was crowded all the time. The war seemed to have conjured into being, from nowhere, magically, a huge population of its own – one which flowed into and filled every channel and crevice of the country – the towns, the villages, the streets, the trains, the buses, the shops, the hotels, the inns, the restaurants, the movies” (26). Wartime crowds take up too much space, a condition emphasized syntactically by this over-stuffed sentence. The crowds keep expanding, stretching into unexpected places, like the middle-class home. In the pub,

for instance, Miss Roach is a victim of the war as “somber begetter of crowds everywhere” (47). The narrator counts her among the population of “respectable middle class girls and women, normally timid, home-going and home-staying, who had come to learn of the potency of this brief means of escape in the evening from war-thought and war-endeavour” (47). Everything, in short, is at the mercy of the war.

Within the wartime boardinghouse community, Miss Roach clings to a promise of individuality that is always elusive. She is truly a slave of solitude whose determination to shut out the world around her has consequences that extend far beyond the social theatrics of the dining room. She is overcome by “fear of life, of herself, of Mr. Thwaites [the boardinghouse bully], of the times and things into which she had been born, and which boomed about her and encircled her everywhere” (27). Although she tries to bracket the particular version of wartime community experienced at the Rosamund Tea Rooms, the narrator makes it clear that she is more generally in denial about the responsibilities of confronting the historical reality of the war, a war that did not permit people the option of not being cut out for its demands. The narrator forces her to take responsibility for her actions by calling her out: “About certain things, and about the war in particular, Miss Roach was an ostrich, and purposely and determinedly so. [...] In pity and horror she didn’t want to hear. She hid her head in the sand, and didn’t want to have anything to do with it. [...] As for listening in morning, noon, and night to the wireless [...], she hated it, and she would always, if possible, leave the room” (165). Miss Roach’s refusal to take part in home front conventions is not attached to a principled kind of pacifism. Her desire for personal privacy, rather, is far stronger than any political view she might adopt. In her hotel room at Claridge’s in the final scene, the narrator undermines her assumption that she is “squaring up” to the war and ultimately indicates the violent consequences of

individualistic isolation and determined ignorance of historical reality: “Then Miss Roach, knowing nothing of the future, knowing nothing of the February blitz shortly to descend on London, knowing nothing of flying bombs, knowing nothing of rockets, of Normandy, of Arnhem, of the Ardennes bulge, of Berlin, of the Atom Bomb, knowing nothing and caring very little, got into her bath and lingered in it a long while” (242). To strive for individuality, in Hamilton’s novel, is to deny the realities of war faced by the national community.⁹

“The minor character,” Alex Woloch argues, “is always drowned out within the totality of the narrative, and what we remember about the character is never detached from how the text, for the most part, makes us forget him” (38). In *The Slaves of Solitude*, all of the characters are swallowed up – made minor – by the war. History has made such a remarkable and demanding intrusion on the individual that full protagonists are impermissible; character itself is a rationed good. Instead of taking advantage of her novelistic potential to triumph over the other characters she encounters, Miss Roach is relegated to a frustrated minor-ness. For Woloch, the formal position of minor characters can be read as having political potential vis-à-vis nineteenth-century capitalism and the demands of bourgeois individualism that enables the full and successful development of a protagonist. In terms of minor characters’ “essential formal position (the subordinate beings who are delimited in themselves while performing a function for someone else), *minor characters are the proletariat of the novel*” (27). Woloch continues, via Marx, to argue that “Utility both expresses the structural contingency of the bourgeoisie – in

⁹ Although I agree with Mark Rawlinson’s analogy between Miss Roach and the prewar appeasers, my argument directly opposes his ultimate conclusion that “Thames Lockdon is a nightmare from which Miss Roach awakes into history” (268).

relationship to the exploitation of other human individuals – and facilitates the ‘full development of individuals’” (29, quoting Marx).

Following Woloch’s logic, Hamilton’s novel rejects the possibility of full development for bourgeois individuals because it rejects utility as a motivation for character desire and action. The narrator, speaking often on behalf of the all-consuming war effort, ensures that self-serving utility is a futile course of action. Furthermore, the boardinghouse, as a structure, is decidedly anti-bourgeois, with its transparent means of production and systems of economy leveling out the residential playing field. Is the boardinghouse narrative, then, if not proletariat in form, at least anti-bourgeois? And by this logic, does the boardinghouse narrative – especially the wartime boardinghouse narrative – suggest that the novel as a form can be conceived of in the postwar period separately from the goal of a protagonist’s individual development?

Nancy Armstrong describes the increasing pressure on the individual in the last decades of the nineteenth century exerted by notions of collective or mass man. In novels of that period, “The figure of mass man loomed as the means of both conceptualizing the populations accumulating within their empire and of posing a threat to modern individualism. Novels made the double impact of this way of figuring humanity absolutely clear by giving it the features of the cannibal” (23). Hamilton refers to the cannibalism haunting the formation of literary characters not by pitting people against fantastical monsters but by identifying a cannibalistic presence that was a historical reality: modern, wartime London inhales its inhabitants. *The Slaves of Solitude* opens with the ominous description of “London, the crouching monster,” which

like every other monster has to breathe, and breathe it does in its own
obscure, malignant way. Its vital oxygen is composed of suburban working

men and women of all kinds, who every morning are sucked up through an infinitely complicated respiratory apparatus of trains and termini into the mighty congested lungs, held there for a number of hours, and then, in the evening, exhaled violently through the same channels. (1)

Suburban “working men and women” are individuals at the mercy of history. Yet the scathing portrait of Miss Roach as a working woman who is utterly blind to historical demands suggests that individual development might indeed be a threat to the well-being of a community. As the Welfare State emerged, novels such as Hamilton’s called a world into being that fore-grounded the challenges to individual identity as well as community solidarity in the aftermath of the war.

The Girls of Slender Means: “It’s all gone, all elsewhere”

Muriel Spark’s boardinghouse novel, *The Girls of Slender Means*, reframes the literary legacy of World War II from the perspective of the “age of affluence.” In Chapter Three, I examine the late 1950s and early 1960s as a time of relative prosperity and aesthetic experimentation in Britain that followed the immediate postwar decade of emergency reconstruction and widespread rationing. In this chapter, I consider the early 1960s as a sort of culmination point for reconstruction, before the various socio-economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s that Chapter Four addresses. Because Spark’s novel returns to World War II for its boardinghouse narrative, it helps measure the literary outcome of reconstruction efforts vis-à-vis the individual and community. While immediate postwar reconstruction novels like *The Slaves of Solitude* and *At Mrs. Lippincote’s* depict the individual in social and literary crisis, later reconstruction novels like *The Girls of Slender Means* reject the novelistic desire for deep individual interiority and, instead, explore a

world in which exteriors, pauses, gaps, and disconnections have become the new reality. The boardinghouse, for Spark, holds the promise of community while persistently keeping individuals apart – like the war itself. When characters try to communicate on the telephone in the present about a man they knew from their time at the boardinghouse, the war fails to be a source of interpersonal or historical connection. Nothing emphasizes this failure more convincingly than the constant interruption of these present-day phone calls – which are, themselves, interruptions of the 1945 narrative – by “rotten lines,” work commitments, missing details, and “thousands of secretaries” (63, 19). The novel ultimately suggests that postwar collective narratives and memories of British wartime experience are crucial parts of reconstruction that remain unfinished, despite “official” or mythical accounts. Rather than fill in the still bombed-out spaces of these narratives and memories, however, the novel is constructed like scaffolding built up around what is missing.¹⁰

The Girls of Slender Means is set at the May of Teck Club, a women’s boardinghouse in Kensington, at the moment when the Labour government comes to power in 1945. Like Hamilton’s Rosamund Tea Rooms, the May of Teck Club is a repurposed wartime space. As such, the building is disconnected – or, liberated – from its original purpose and function as a private residence. Instead of housing a wealthy single family, the Club is a women’s hostel that had been converted in the early twentieth century and that now houses some “forty-odd girls” (6). The interior décor and house plan resemble those of “most of the women’s hostels, noted for cheapness and tone, which had flourished since the emancipation of women had called for them” (26). Indeed, the

¹⁰ In Chapter Two, I discuss another example of a novel that highlights what is missing and absent: Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Little Girls*.

conversion of the building into a women's boardinghouse aligns it historically with a number of purpose-built residences constructed in southwest London in the late nineteenth century. As architectural historian Annmarie Adams has argued, these women's residences are significant in real and symbolic terms:

The construction of these buildings marked an enormous victory in the nineteenth-century women's movement. First it acknowledged in real ways the need to accommodate unmarried, independent women, a group that occupied a larger proportion of the population than ever before. Second it recognized that the design of traditional middle-class housing did not suit the needs of single women. [...] Finally, the design and construction of purpose-built housing offered women a safe and protected environment in the unpredictable city, thwarting fears about the chastity of independent, professional 'ladies.' (154-5)

Although the building participates in the feminist tradition of women's hostels, the younger wartime inhabitants feel little connection to the history of the women who came before them, as demonstrated by the way they treat the space. The disjunction between the past and present is clear when the elder and younger women fail to understand and use the space in the same way:

Anne trod out her cigarette-end contemptuously on the floor of the large entrance hall with its pink and grey Victorian tiles. This was pointed to by a thin middle-aged woman, one of the few older, if not exactly the earliest members. She said, "One is not permitted to put cigarette-ends on the floor." The words did not appear to impress themselves on the ears of the group, more than the ticking of the grandfather clock behind them. But

Anne said, “Isn’t one permitted to spit on the floor, even?” “One certainly isn’t,” said the spinster. “Oh, I thought one was,” said Anne. (13)

The blitz puts pressure on the promise of protection that such purpose-built residences were once meant to fulfill. Like other wartime houses, the Club becomes a basic shelter rather than a permanent home: it stands in “a row of tall houses which had endured, but barely; some bombs had dropped nearby, and in a few back gardens, leaving the buildings cracked on the outside and shakily hinged within, but habitable for the time being” (8). From the vantage point of 1963, when sexual liberation, birth control, and widespread university education were becoming major social issues for women, the May of Teck Club fails to be a source of strong female community.¹¹ It symbolizes, instead, the myriad ways in which women are kept apart – or keep themselves apart – in spite of efforts to create solidarity.

While the wartime boardinghouse in *The Slaves of Solitude* is a particularly apt example of domestic horizontality, where rules and landladies and narrators keep individuals on an equal playing field, *The Girls of Slender Means* emphasizes the potential for vertical hierarchies to develop within the space of the boardinghouse, which creates distance and difference among residents. The narrator contributes to the verticality by describing the building plan and its inhabitants floor by floor, beginning at the bottom and moving upwards. The first floor houses the youngest, teenage girls, followed by the spinsters, then a “mad girl.”¹² Finally, “At the top of the house, on the fourth floor, the

¹¹ In addition to linking her novel contextually with feminist history, Spark’s very subject of a female boardinghouse recalls the tradition of female community texts, such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*, George Gissing’s *The Odd Women*, Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *The Corner That Held Them*, and her own previous novels, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Memento Mori*, that imagine a domestic world controlled – financially and otherwise – by women.

¹² The “mad girl” with her own floor is a clear reference to *Jane Eyre*. Elizabeth Taylor also makes this reference in *At Mrs. Lippincote’s*: Mrs. Lippincote’s daughter returns fleetingly to her room in the attic of

most attractive, sophisticated and lively girls had their rooms. They were filled with deeper and deeper social longings of various kinds, as peace-time crept over everyone. Five girls occupied the top five rooms. Three of them had lovers in addition to men-friends with whom they did not sleep but whom they cultivated with a view to marriage” (30). Against the ethos of wartime and reconstruction horizontality, the girls aspire upwards, toward marriage and away from “lesser” female fates of madness or spinsterhood. Yet the narrator makes clear the limits of the boardinghouse for the girls as individuals; they cannot follow these upwardly mobile paths to their traditional conclusions: “Nothing but the roof-tops lay above this [top] floor, now inaccessible by the trap-door in the bathroom ceiling – a mere useless square since it had been bricked up long ago before the war” (30). With its partitioned rooms, strictly divided floors, and inaccessible roof, the boardinghouse creates an enclosed community that generates factions, hierarchies, and thwarted plotlines.

The spatial and historical dislocations that define the May of Teck Club echo various literary disjunctions: between the reader and the characters, among characters, and within the narrative. Although the girls are isolated from each other, none of them emerge as fully developed individuals in the recognizably novelistic sense. The sheer number of residents who populate both the Club and this short novel – “forty-odd girls” in 141 pages – means that they are equally kept at a distance from the reader. There is no single

her mother’s house, which is now a billet for the Davenant family. In both reconstruction novels, the “Bertha Mason” character proves only that the character development and plotlines of *Jane Eyre* are unavailable to the women of postwar Britain. In his essay on Spark and contemporary politics, Adam Piette reads *The Girls of Slender Means* as a rejection not of the mad woman, but the “angel” of Victorian culture: “The new postwar sexual freedom inaugurated by the mini-Blitz of the bomb blast in *The Girls of Slender Means* necessitates the sacrifice of the Victorian woman. So the devout, self-sacrificing Christian ascetic Joanna dies reciting the Psalms...” (59). For Piette, the novel obscurely registers the guilt of liberated feminists in the 1960s that “secular feminism had to forgo and deny the Joannas of this world (and the next)” (60).

protagonist; minor characters abound. The girls share everything: character space, space within the house, clothing (including one particular Italian dress that is passed around for special occasions), food, soap, rationing coupons. Names, rather than complex personalities, accumulate: Joanna, Jane, Anne, Collie, Greggie, Selina, Pauline, Gareth, Nicholas, Felix, George.... When the narrator lingers on a girl, the description is emotionally detached, with highly mediated access to interiority or no access at all. As one reviewer noted in 1964, none of the girls are “brought sharply into focus. They pass in and out as if through a revolving door” (Howes 583). While sketching Joanna Childe’s character, for instance, the narrator reports, “What had happened to Joanna was that she had fallen in love with a curate on leaving school. It had come to nothing. Joanna had decided that this was to be the only love of her life” (22). Not only is Joanna presented at a far remove, but the narrator uses that distance to foreclose on future narrative possibilities for her. Attention is focused on the void of knowledge, the absence of future plot, instead of newly available information. “Nobody,” according to the narrator, “at the May of Teck Club knew her [Joanna’s] precise history, but it was generally assumed to be something emotionally heroic” (25). Instead of providing the “precise history” that could create a basis for Joanna’s development, the narrator simply points out that this information, and therefore her development, are missing from the narrative. Nor will development occur.

The reader’s sense of distance from the characters is doubled by the distance among characters themselves. Like the inhabitants of the Rosamund Tea Rooms, the girls at the May of Teck Club have difficulty making sense of things and expressing themselves; therefore, they do not enter into meaningful narrative relations with others. They often miss key pieces of information, and conversations are imagined, fragmented,

or aborted. Emergency evacuation instructions are provided to the boarders four times a year at dinner, but “Selina had missed all this,” because she seldom came to dinner (31).

During a conversation in the dining room, Jane struggles to have her political ideas understood, because Felix does not engage with her: ““That is a very original idea,”” he says, “but he was referring to something that Nicholas had said before Jane had spoken” (72). Confusion becomes a pattern of behaviour that is even affected at times as the only possible response to the chronic inconsequence that characterizes life at the Club.

Greggie, for instance, “put on a puzzled air, as if she genuinely did not know what Collie was talking about. After thirty years’ hostile fellowship with Collie, of course she did quite well understand that Collie had a habit of skipping several stages in the logical sequence of her thoughts, and would utter apparently disconnected statements, especially when confused by an unfamiliar subject or the presence of a man” (104). Jane is left conversationally isolated again when she makes a joke that no one gets: “This was a hilarious statement, but Tilly did not laugh [...]. Jane then laughed loudly at Nicholas, but he too had no sense of humour” (114). As with Jane’s political convictions and jokes, Joanna’s spiritual beliefs are undermined by the general air of disconnection that pervades the boardinghouse: “It was not known to many that” the line of verse that she quotes – “He rageth, and again he rageth, because he knows his time is short” – “was a reference to the Devil, but it caused amusement. She had not intended it so. It was not usual for Joanna to quote anything for its aptitude, and at conversational pitch” (12).

Rather than fill conversational gaps by providing access to character interiority or anchor indecipherable sounds in fleshed out locations, the narrator hovers on the periphery of events and characters. The boardinghouse space creates opportunities for multiple narratives, but the narrator chooses detachment, not involvement, in characters’

lives. The narrative has no center in character or plot; it spends as much time describing the girls as it does describing sights and sounds that accumulate without contributing meaningful information for development of the novel:

The number and variety of muted noises-off were considerable. Laughter went on behind the folded doors of the first-floor dormitory. Someone was shoveling coal in the cellar, having left open the green baize door which led to those quarters. The telephone desk within the office rang distantly shrill with boy-friends, and various corresponding buzzes on the landings summoned the girls to talk. (81)

“Muted noises-off,” including the interruptive and interrupted telephone calls, fill the novel with their unclear significance, making it difficult for the reader to piece together a coherent narrative. This narrator, often reporting from an exterior or evacuated place, does not help make narrative sense of sights and sounds. When Winston Churchill gives his election speech, the narrator does not provide any content from the speech nor any reactions from listeners; instead, the narrator reports, “No one was about. Everyone was gathered somewhere else, in the drawing-room or in the bedrooms, sitting round wireless sets, tuning in to some special programme. Then one wireless, and another, roared forth louder by far than usual from the upper floors; others tuned in to the chorus, justified in the din by the voice of Winston Churchill” (89). In her article, “Hearing Them Speak: Voices in Wilfred Bion, Muriel Spark, and Penelope Fitzgerald,” Lyndsey Stonebridge convincingly reads *The Girls of Slender Means* in terms of Spark’s interest in “the kinds of collective fantasies that can attach themselves to voices” (447). For Stonebridge, in Spark’s writing, “strangeness is pressed up against its historical moment so tightly that the voice itself becomes the object of scrutiny” (448). Building on Stonebridge’s reading, I

argue that the legacy of the May of Teck Club and its inhabitants is not only about voices that accumulate in spite of what they have to say. It is more broadly about incomprehensible noise and voided places, a legacy demonstrated most clearly by the destruction of the Club after an unexploded bomb goes off in the garden. When Nicholas takes Joanna's father to see the site of the demolished Club, "The rector said to Nicholas. 'There's really nothing to see. [...] Yes, it's all gone, all elsewhere'" (137). Instead of providing meaning and connection, the war produces narrative and spatial inconsequence. In Hamilton's novel, inconsequence signifies a resistance toward history and community participation. In Spark's novel, inconsequence is a sign of all that has been lost and left out of reconstruction narratives. The plot of female solidarity is obsolete, as is the plot of wartime camaraderie. The demolished building takes with it these various outdated stories.

Death and violence make the political implications of individual dislocation clear. During victory celebrations on V.J. night, a woman is stabbed, but the roar of the crowd overtakes the incident: "private demonstrations [fade] in the general pandemonium" (141). Narrative irony mounts as the jubilant crowd inflicts violence on individuals: "Two men lay unconscious at the side of the path, being tended by their friends. The crowds cheered in the distance behind them. A formation of aircraft buzzed across the night sky. It was a glorious victory" (142). The detachment and extreme irony with which Spark narrates these moments of violence suggest that – by the early 1960s, after years of postwar rationing and the emergence of affluent consumer culture – the war can no longer be mobilized to generate austere proud community feeling. The myth of the "people's war" empties into isolated vignettes, not a singular, cohesive narrative. Attention must be turned to the silences covered up by propagandistic rhetoric that was once necessary but is

now superfluous. Spark attends to these silences – to those who would “object to not being listened to” – with the fate of the May of Teck Club and its residents (Stonebridge 458). The Club collapses after the bomb goes off in the garden, and Joanna, trapped inside, dies. In the austerity of postwar reconstruction, Joanna dies a second death: “The tape-recording [of Joanna’s recitation] had been erased for economy reasons, so that the tape could be used again” (131).

As postwar reconstruction efforts culminate, *The Girls of Slender Means* recasts the war and the ambitions of the Welfare State without their romantic sheen of noble sacrifice and socialist idealism. These monumental moments in Britain’s collective history are revealed, with their myriad dislocations and individual silences, as fodder for novelistic and newspaper gossip. Jane, who works in publishing, focalizes this attitude toward the war: she “did not see the May of Teck Club as a microcosmic ideal society; far from it. The beautiful heedless poverty of a Golden Age did not come into the shilling meter life which any sane girl would regard only as a temporary one until better opportunities occurred” (65). Just as Jane debunks the myth of romantic wartime austerity, she rejects literary myths that would define “better opportunities” for “sane girls” as marriage, a family, and a home of one’s own. Instead, she relocates to a furnished room in Kensington Church Street and builds a career as a “prophetic gossip-columnist” (76).¹³ Her postwar interest in the death of Nicholas Farrington, whom the girls knew at the Club, is not motivated by an emotional or historical connection to Nicholas but is limited to the promise of “an interesting story” for her paper (19). Social

¹³ Hope Howell Hodgkins, in her essay, “Stylish Spinsters,” also homes in on Jane as the character whose fate is most significant for the novel as a whole. Hodgkins is interested in Jane not as a gossip columnist but as a “stylish spinster” who represents the postwar woman who has moved beyond “diminished style and Romantic hopes” (147).

mobility and literary worth for women is not determined by vertical progress or the marriage plot, but by the ability to gather information laterally about one's peers and reveal nothing about oneself – a skill that Hamilton's Miss Roach could never master.

Gossip about others' lives allows one to keep in touch with the community while remaining on the periphery, protecting and wielding authority over the content of one's personal life.¹⁴ *The Girls of Slender Means* goes against the tradition of the novel that, as Ned Schantz and others have suggested, subsumes and counteracts the activity of gossip by investing in the realistic portrayal of entirely fictional characters. In Schantz's words, fiction of that tradition "lets you talk about people without talking about people" (12).¹⁵ Spark's novel is a new kind of gossip novel, one that foregrounds, rather than hides, the activity of talking about people. It does not, moreover, deploy the particular "stuff" of fictional interiority to keep the threat of gossip at bay. The rejection of interiority leaves space for the real to overtake fiction. Spark's own strategy for living finds an echo in her resistance to the literary value of interiority. As her biographer, Martin Stannard, explains, "her readers rarely found her on a TV chat show or even on the radio. In interviews, her various public images remained polished and impenetrable" (xv). *The Girls of Slender Means* makes the wartime boardinghouse – as emblematic of community-oriented living – do work for the individual by redirecting the reader's attention. The narrative does not depend on the reader's investment in characters as individuals but on an appreciation for the keen observer whose greatest accomplishment is revealing the gaps and concealing

¹⁴ In this respect, the evasiveness of Spark's novel resonates with D.A. Miller's analysis of Jane Austen and the attraction for readers of what he describes as "a truly out-of-body voice, so stirringly free of what it abhorred as 'particularity' or 'singularity' that it seemed to come from no enunciator at all" (1). And yet, unlike Austen's novels, *The Girls of Slender Means* does not empower that "out-of-body" voice to let us in on any secrets.

¹⁵ With this claim, Schantz builds on work by Patricia Spacks as well as Catherine Gallagher, who situates the novel in direct opposition to gossip by emphasizing the importance of fictional particularity as a technique for developing a character as "nobody" in the real world (269).

individuality at all costs. Denying the readerly option of luxuriating in fictional characters' private lives enables the novel to force a turn to what is really there.¹⁶

Conclusion

In the years of postwar reconstruction, British housing and fiction expressed both visions and critiques of an efficiently planned, horizontal society born of wartime conditions. As novels populated by an abundance of minor characters rather than dominated by a singular developing protagonist, *The Slaves of Solitude* and *The Girls of Slender Means* foreground the new reality that individuals – whether fictional characters or actual people – are subject to functional requirements of a newly built world. The narrators in these novels act like architect-planners who arrange characters and information in order to create structures in which no single element dominates the others. Characters are second-guessed, corrected, mocked, and represented at a far remove. Instead of struggling with and transcending grim circumstances, these characters are exercises in a necessary literary fate-less-ness. Like rationed food or clothing, characters are dispersed throughout the narratives – especially in *The Girls of Slender Means* – not in order to promote upward mobility and individual development, but to demonstrate the minor-ness of all individuals and all stories under the pressure of planning, physical reconstruction, and the creation of collective narratives in postwar Britain.

In these two novels, female characters, in particular, are the focus of wartime and postwar inconsequence. Although there are male characters that remain minor in both novels, the inability of female characters to grasp information and integrate

¹⁶ John Updike noted in his 1964 review of the novel that “the farcical world of her [Spark’s] portrayal is the *real* world” (311).

consequentially into communities is striking. Women's lives were dramatically transformed during the war. Many participated actively in the war effort through service in organizations such as the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and the Women's Royal Navy Service (WRNS) or through work in munitions factories. And for all women, home life was recast without servants and often without husbands or children, or with a sudden influx of evacuees. The relative freedom and independence that women experienced during the war was abruptly challenged in the immediate postwar decade. Allison Light explains that the dispersal of the servant class put the average, middle-class housewife at a severe disadvantage: "The well-off woman of the 1930s could indeed be far freer than her Victorian grandmother, wrestling with the Angel in the House, or her daughter in the 1950s suburb, servantless" (121). After the war, many middle-class women went into the kitchen, as it were, for the first time. Likewise, without governesses for their children, mothers found themselves confronted with new parenting and educating responsibilities. Marriage – in life and in literature – could no longer serve as the fantasized end-point to a woman's individual development. *The Slaves of Solitude* and *The Girls of Slender Means* point to the particular difficulty of reintegrating the female subject into traditional literary and architectural space after the war.

Boardinghouses serve as an alternative to marriage and the single-family home for postwar women. For Miss Roach in Hamilton's novel, the alternative is experienced negatively. Her inability to follow normative trajectories of love and marriage is matched by an inability to integrate into the boardinghouse community and create a new kind of narrative. She remains alone, but not of her own volition. Spark's novel finds a more proactive alternative in the boardinghouse: the opportunity to shift attention from the individual to the collective. Jane's postwar career as a gossip columnist shifts the stakes

of women's place in literature. The goal, for women, is no longer character development, but character evasion. To develop a character at all, Spark's novel suggests, is to be at risk of narratorial persecution, and what is more, to be a fictional distraction from the reality of pervasive dislocation in postwar memory. The boardinghouse – as an architectural structure and as a narrative mode – demands the subordination of character, but also provides a training ground for the canny postwar narrator ready to move the novel beyond its preoccupation with individual development.

Country Houses: Preservation and Reappropriation in Postwar Country House Culture

From Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* to Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* to Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, the British novel has had a special relationship to the British country house. Twentieth-century narratives of socioeconomic mobility, as in E.M. Forster's *Howards End*, as well as stasis and austerity, as in Angus Wilson's *Hemlock and After*, have often been tied to the dramatic fates of particular houses. This chapter explores the transformation of the British country house novel in the context of post-World War II reconstruction and reform, in which the country house embodies a general ethos of repurposing and reappropriation that defines the construction of the Welfare State. As wealth was redistributed via taxation to ensure a more equal share of education, healthcare, employment, and housing rights, so the country house transformed from a relic of aristocratic tradition into a site of renegotiation for the relationships among land, houses, class, history, and national identity. The transformation of the country house and the transformation of the country house novel are two interrelated phenomena of the postwar period; they entail a merger between the public narratives of museum practice and the private narratives of domestic life. After the war, and especially by the late 1950s, the country house was no longer an exclusive, inaccessible purview of the aristocracy. Instead, it was a sign of the absent power and identity of a formerly landed class and a primary symbol for the middle-class imagination, which thrived on a curated image not only of aristocratic life but of the history of the entire British class system.

Novels by Elizabeth Taylor and Elizabeth Bowen enact and interrogate the merger between public and private narratives tied to postwar country houses. Taylor's 1957

novel, *Angel*, reinforces the middle-class investment in the country house genre while questioning the value of such an investment. *Angel* picks up on the strain of nineteenth-century country house novels, such as *Mansfield Park* and *Jane Eyre*, that are not interested centrally in the aristocratic owners of houses, but in the middle- or lower-class characters – Fanny, Jane – who dream of upward social mobility. Indeed, this lineage of the country house novel suggests that the genre is generally much more about middle-class fantasies of marriage and romance than aristocratic dominance. Taylor’s work of historical fiction satirizes the fantasy of vertical mobility while acknowledging its significant role in the coherent “official” narratives of early twentieth-century Britain. Elizabeth Bowen’s penultimate novel, *The Little Girls* (1964), which follows the 1959 sale and demolition of her family estate in Ireland, dramatizes the severed link between aristocratic power and country houses after World War II. *The Little Girls* examines the transformed relationship between the landed gentry and their houses by narrativizing an absent heritage and the thwarted attempt to act in the present with imagined posterity as the driving ethical force.

In their novels, both Taylor and Bowen reject nostalgia: Taylor through irony and Bowen, more thoroughly, through style and structure. In doing so, their novels offer a way to approach postwar country house culture that departs from conventional interpretations that emphasize a romantic yearning for national consciousness in drab, post-imperial Britain. *Brideshead Revisited* is, understandably, a default example for such interpretations put forth by literary critics, cultural historians, and architectural historians alike.¹⁷ My focus on Taylor and Bowen allows me to show how the critical preoccupation

¹⁷ See, for example: Richard Gill, *Happy Rural Seat: the English Country House and the Literary Imagination*; Simon Joyce, *Victorians in the Rearview*; David Littlejohn, *The Fate of the English Country*

with nostalgia has obscured other culturally significant facets of the postwar country house and its modes of representation. Nostalgia flattens history. Critical approaches that aim to locate and dismantle nostalgia at all costs risk duplicating the very historical flattening that they seek to critique. I resist theoretical rhetoric that maps a vague nostalgic history. Instead, I use specific terms and images from the texts and spaces of postwar country house culture in order to present a more contoured sense of cultural history. In doing so, I argue that Bowen and Taylor intervene in heritage culture with novels that explore the costs and benefits of allowing private, personal experience to be tethered to or even silenced by “official” public narratives.

What Is a Museum?

To ask about postwar country house culture really is to ask about the meaning of preservation, conservation, heritage, and museums in the public sphere after the war. A number of literary and cultural critics since the late 1990s have investigated the intersection of literature and museums and heritage. Most do so by focusing on literary texts that feature museums, collections, visual art, or beauty. Notable examples include Barbara J. Black’s *On Exhibit: Victorians and Their Museums* (2000), Suzanne Keen’s *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (2001), Catherine Paul’s *Poetry in the Museum of Modernism* (2002), Allan Hepburn’s *Enchanted Objects* (2010), and Ruth Hoberman’s *Museum Trouble: Edwardian Fiction and the Emergence of Modernism* (2011). Barbara J. Black and Ruth Hoberman consider Victorian and Edwardian house-museums as literary and cultural entities, but neither focuses on the country house

specifically as a museum phenomenon. Building on their work, I examine how postwar novels engage with the cultural work of the country house-museum. After outlining a theoretical framework for thinking about what public museums are and how they work in the postwar era, I explore how the country house goes from being a private house to being a public museum, and then how the postwar country house novel participates in this museum-ing enterprise, and to what end.

Work by Carol Duncan and Barbara J. Black, among others, has thoroughly demonstrated that the contemporary public museum has its historical roots in the nineteenth century, coinciding with the birth of liberal European democracies and, in the case of Britain, the height of imperial expansion.¹⁸ Black finds the museum to be part and parcel of a Victorian culture of classification and exhibition:

one may perceive the museum as an impulse or spirit that infused the [Victorian] age and many of its projects: the triple-decker novel; collected works; encyclopedias and dictionaries; and phenomena as ordinary as keepsakes, dollhouses, and rock collections or a theory as cataclysmic as Darwin's panoramic evolutionism. Great and small, these system-building projects involved compilation, organization, and display – the three activities fundamental to a museum's work. (4-5)

These defining acts of the Victorian museum and its culture – compilation, organization, display – entailed and intensified a further act of separation between a heightened symbolic order and the disorder of an increasingly chaotic reality, epitomized by the ever-

¹⁸ Ruth Hoberman explains that the late nineteenth century was a high-point of museum creation: “Between 1890 and 1914 alone, 215 museums were created in Great Britain, their funding facilitated by the passage two acts: the Museums and Gymnasiums Act of 1891 and the Public Libraries Act of 1892, which made it easier for municipalities to establish museums” (13).

expanding metropolis of nineteenth-century London. A number of scholars have interpreted museums according to the political implications of poststructuralist logic. In her work on the museum and Edwardian fiction, Ruth Hoberman observes, “From its earliest incarnation, the museum has seemed inseparable from the imagination of disorder: its evocation of extreme order brings with it an impish vision of havoc” (3). For Black, museology similarly represents “a response of control and order to the specter of chaos” (15). The ordering mechanism of the museum creates a space for civic participation and education that normativizes particular narratives while rejecting others. As Tony Bennett argues of the nineteenth-century museum, it “shaped the behavior of museumgoers, moving them through exhibits in particular ways, leaving them with particular notions of order and their own relation to the nation and the world; [...] museumgoers also shaped each other’s behavior, by watching each other and enforcing decorum” (Hoberman 3). Museums, according to such logic, have a disciplinary function that links spatial awareness, temporal narrative, and civic identity to the promise of ordered democratic life.

The roots of the public museum as an expression of liberal democracy has meant that, since the nineteenth century, museums have been accepted almost unquestioningly as “important, even necessary, fixtures of a well-furnished state” (Duncan, “Art Museums,” 88).¹⁹ Reinforcing the work of Victorian museum proponents such as John Ruskin, Richard Owen, and Henry Cole, museums since the nineteenth century have striven to create educated publics in place of unruly mobs, and they have prided themselves on open, equal access. As Duncan argues, however, the architectural

¹⁹ According to Carol Duncan, “the French Revolution created the first truly modern art museum when it designated the Louvre Palace a national museum” (“Art Museums” 98).

affirmation of democratic participation embodied in the public museum can be understood as a substitute for actual civic engagement: the museum “produces the public as a visible entity by literally providing it a defining frame and giving it something to do. Meanwhile, the political passivity of citizenship is idealized as active art appreciation and spiritual enrichment. Thus the art museum gives citizenship and civic virtue a content without having to redistribute real power” (“Art Museums” 93-4). Like anthologies of canonical literary texts, museums reinforce a sense of “greatness” tied to timeless values and universal responses to cultural objects. By consuming those values and objects in the space of the museum – as in the space of the anthology – museumgoers perform an act of surface-level civic participation in singular, public narratives that is divorced from the material political reality of their “real” private lives. In other words, museumgoers take part in heritage without contributing historically.

From the perspective of critics like Duncan, Black, and Hoberman, the disciplinary function of public museums means that they operate necessarily as an arm of state power, producing and then containing subversive elements. Kevin Walsh takes this critical vantage point in his work on postmodern, postwar conservation and the heritage industry in Britain. Walsh argues that conservation and preservation work are necessarily politically conservative: “Conservation, the preservation of the historic environment, as the term implies has been essentially a traditional, conservative phenomenon, concerned with maintaining that which conservatives consider to be ‘traditional,’ worthy of representing that which best signifies the idea of nation” (70). In his critique of such politically conservative preservationism, Walsh echoes Fredric Jameson’s formulation of postmodern art as a surface-level reproduction of present-tense nostalgia for a past – rather than art as a material engagement with the actual conditions of history. For Walsh,

the heritage industry is built not on “an interest in the study and understanding of the past, but rather a concern with the maintenance of historical surfaces, where importance is attached primarily to an aesthetics of tradition” (70). History, as presented within the heritage industry, is not critical or recuperative for Walsh; instead, “The (post-) modern sense of history is one which promotes the past as that which is over” (83). In this sense, postwar heritage in the public sphere is about concealing conflict, mummifying the present, and promoting a seamless narrative of national pride and beauty for an ostensibly democratic public sphere.

As I will later demonstrate, literature by postwar women writers is at least one way to envision a mode of conservation and preservation that is not necessarily politically conservative. This is not to say that fiction by writers like Bowen and Taylor is “progressive”; rather, their fiction suggests that such terminology as “progressive” and “conservative” is, like all language, historically specific. Indeed, Walsh’s argument was produced within the confines of Thatcherite Britain, giving the term “conservative” a particularly loaded meaning. In that context, “conservation” in the heritage industry is an activity that actually goes against preserving the Welfare State – a subject that I address more fully in Chapter Four. Walsh is responding to sentiments put forth by 1970s preservationist figures such as Roy Strong, who opened his introduction to *The Destruction of the Country House* with the following: “We take them for granted. Like our parish churches the country houses seem always to have been there, since time immemorial part of the fabric of our heritage. [...] The ravished eyes stir the heart to emotion, for in a sense the historic houses of this country belong to everybody, or at least everybody who cares about this country and its traditions” (7).

But even within the context of such stodgy rhetoric, black and white distinctions between “progressive” and “conservative” can be problematic. As Andreas Huyssen argues, spaces of conservation are not unilaterally conservative: “No matter how much the museum, consciously or unconsciously, produces and affirms the symbolic order, there is always a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory” (15). My own argument builds on Huyssen’s viewpoint as well as Suzanne Keen’s observation that “While on the one hand sanitized, sensationalized, self-deceiving, marketable versions of the past deserve to be criticized for debasing history in the interest of tourist-trail heritage, on the other hand readers, movie-goers, and travelers should not be blamed for enjoying themselves” (98). Automatically to denigrate as “popular,” “commodified,” or “conservative” all work that is interested in historical preservation is to elide other, differently valuable modes of literary and historical work in the postwar era – namely, work that announces a conflict between private and public narratives or work that aims to assert revised public narratives.

Wartime and Postwar Museums

Efforts by critics to theorize “the museum,” “the exhibition,” and “heritage” help to establish the political stakes of what happens to museums in the specific historical context of wartime and postwar Britain. World War II threatened the secular sanctity of the public museum that Duncan identifies. During the blitz, major collections, including those from the British Museum, the National Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the National Maritime Museum, were evacuated to the country, often to aristocratic estates. Public museum space was therefore markedly empty during the war. As country houses became temporary museums, museums became multi-purpose spaces whose

sudden emptiness existed uneasily alongside the wartime housing crisis. In the case of the National Maritime Museum, much of the space was occupied by the Admiralty throughout the war, an ironic requisition that threatened the curatorial gap between actual naval history and its ordered, narrative presentation within the confines of the museum. That gap was also challenged by requests that conceived of the museum as a storage facility for “bombed out” furniture belonging to blitz victims or mobilized soldiers – the inverse of the country house acting as storage facility for bombed out art and artifacts. On the 17th of April, 1943, the Director of the National Maritime Museum, Geoffrey Calendar, learned of one such request in an update from Reginald Lowen:

Mrs. Hawkes, at the instigation of Frank Goodrich, has asked whether I can store her furniture anywhere in the Museum. She was bombed out, and ever since has had her furniture stored in a room in somebody else’s house, but as that somebody is now moving she has to find other quarters. There is only one place here and that would be Neptune’s Hall [the main exhibition space in the museum]; but we may have other people asking questions if this is permitted. I believe the furniture is also the property of Goodrich, and he has no home until he comes back from the Service and makes one. I suppose it would have been his mother’s as he lived with her.

(National Maritime Museum Archives)

Robbed of its ritual, civic function, the empty Maritime Museum served as an echo chamber for the seemingly endless crisis of wartime homelessness and contingent living arrangements. Rather than announcing and reinforcing the permanence of civilization, wartime museums became clearing houses for the temporary. In a different kind of repurposing, the National Gallery became the site of Dame Myra Hess’s regular lunch-

time piano concert series. Although the series was undoubtedly a significant wartime ritual, it lacked the visual permanence of the art objects that had been moved to storage in the Manod Quarry in Wales. Music exists in time, leaving no trace, no opportunity for the spatial reinforcement of a dominant narrative of national identity or historical significance.²⁰ This a-spatial use of a structure designed for the visual display and organization of objects underscores the absence of architectural security and permanence during the war. It also suggests that the physical evacuation of wartime museums entailed a symbolic evacuation that made space for new political narratives of an emerging Welfare State.

In the immediate postwar period, as Britain faced economic and structural ruin, museums and exhibitions gave voice to those new political narratives by returning with a transformed vision to their nineteenth-century function: responding to the specter of chaos through the controlling mechanisms of order, display, and compilation. In 1946, the Council of Industrial Design put on *Britain Can Make It* (BCMI), a design exhibition held at the still-empty 90,000-square-foot Victoria and Albert Museum. As the first major postwar exhibition, BCMI placed home design at the center of the British plan for economic recovery, with special curatorial emphasis on redirecting technologies of warfare to peace-time production. In its Policy Committee Meeting, the Trade Association announced that BCMI would “represent the best and only the best that modern British industry can produce...[it will be] British industry’s first great post-war gesture to the British people and the world” (Darling n.p.). Visitors were introduced to

²⁰ Such narratives, however, clearly are reinforced by the ritual performance of particular pieces of music. In the case of Dame Myra Hess, those performances were ritualized visually, if not spatially, when they were filmed by documentary filmmaker, Humphrey Jennings.

new ways of conceiving interior design elements that were set to redefine the British home: raw materials, heat, light, power, packaging, fashion, appliances.

According to this museum narrative, the ideal postwar home was economical, efficient, and tied to the well-being of the national community. Ironically, however, with the central aim of economic recovery, the exhibition was geared explicitly to an export market, and many visitors referred to the exhibition cheekily as “Britain Can’t Have It.” In the first major postwar moment of national reconstruction via museum exhibition, the material conditions and realities of a new national home and narrative remained conspicuously cordoned off from the people of that nation. By exhibiting this ideal, curated home and its constituent values in the ritually significant space of the Victoria and Albert Museum, BCMI was an important symbolic gesture for the burgeoning Welfare State – a gesture that linked the civic museum projects of the postwar British nation with those of traditional liberal democracies and a time of global dominance in spite of the real economic austerity facing the nation. In 1951, this exhibition ethos was repeated and intensified by the Festival of Britain, which explicitly harkened back to the Great Exhibition of 1851 and its “shrine to manufactured things” (Black 10). But whereas the Victorian museum was about cementing and celebrating Britain’s imperial power, the postwar exhibition was about domestic tourism made accessible to all classes, even if the exhibited objects and explanatory narratives would never be truly available across the socioeconomic spectrum. Central to this new, postwar exhibition culture was the country house.

From House to Museum

In July 2011, I stood in the long portrait gallery at Knole, a National Trust country house in Kent that has been in the Sackville-West family since 1566. Having made my way through several of the thirteen staterooms laid out in seventeenth-century décor, I paused at the window to look out over the 1,000-acre deer park surrounding the house. The serenity of the view was suddenly disturbed by a figure exiting through one of the wings not open to visitors. He was dressed in a bathrobe and a pair of Wellington boots. My imagination reeled as I tried to map out this character as a genuine aristocrat in the age of *Downton Abbey*. I felt mildly giddy at this apparent glimpse of “real” life that had seeped from the house and blurred the seemingly well-manicured National Trust line between house and museum. Knole-as-Trust-house-museum would never give me access to Knole-as-postwar-house – a prohibition that only intensified my desire to know what that latter version of the house was really like. It is the version of Knole that caused James-Lees Milne, in 1946, to feel “horried by piles of dust under the chairs from worm borings. The gesso furniture [was] in a terrible state. All the picture labels [wanted] renewing; the silver cleaning; the window mullions mending” (Lees-Milne 40). It is also the house in which, “the public [amused] themselves by carving their names on the oak door of the gatehouse on days when they [were] not admitted to the state rooms” (Lees-Milne 41).

Would visitors pay to see heirlooms covered in dust and windows smashed from wartime damage? My secret aristocratic sighting reinforced my scholarly desire to access the historical experience that the National Trust conceals, including – perhaps especially – the damaged postwar house. The experience revealed a voyeuristic fantasy at the heart of the country-house-as-museum that simultaneously accepts and rejects the legacy of the

British class system. As country houses transform from houses into museums, with their velvet ropes and souvenir guidebooks, visual evidence of the lived-in house of both past and present is selectively withheld to perpetuate desires that structure the dominant cultural understanding of class hierarchy and its historical significance. These once-private homes become hybrid structures in which public narratives assert themselves in order to mask the private lives that often still exist somewhere behind the scenes.

Although country houses and the aristocratic class were already under significant pressure for their survival by the 1920s, World War II and its economic aftermath marked a decisive shift in that story of decline. During the war, many country houses were requisitioned for evacuees and army operations. Wartime requisitions often left the houses damaged to the extent that owners could not afford to make full repairs in the aftermath of the war. The financial burdens of reconstruction coupled with Welfare State land reforms and changes in the labour market – the complete dissolution of an already minute servant class – effectively forced many landlords to sell their houses to the government for demolition and redevelopment. As Peter Mandler argues in *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, the 1940s were a low-point for the country house. In particular, the landmark 1947 Town and Country Planning Act decisively reversed any growth of aristocratic estates by nationalizing land development rights. By transforming the way land was valued, the Act ensured that public housing needs, which were substantial after 4 million homes had been destroyed by wartime bombing, would take precedence over the preservation of private wealth. In addition to such legislation, death duties were raised after the war to levels that were financially devastating for many owners. As a result, nearly 300 country houses were demolished in the decade after the war.

Many houses, however, were transferred to the National Trust. The Trust was a private charity founded in the 1890s to preserve the English landscape. By the 1930s, it had become the major institutional body dedicated to preserving country houses and their grounds through the 1936 Country House Scheme. The Scheme, which soared in popularity after the challenges of World War II, allowed the owner to avoid death duties and remain living in the house in exchange for abiding by three conditions: the house, and typically its entire estate and valuable contents, would be transferred to the National Trust; the house would be opened for public access; and the owner would contribute an endowment for maintenance. Transferring to the National Trust was a decision taken reluctantly by many owners, a decision that marked a new phase in a national history no longer materially tied to the economic power of landed lineage.

James Lees-Milne, secretary to the National Trust Country Houses Committee, cultivated a preservationist aesthetic that helped to transform the country house into a house-museum in the postwar period. During and after the war, he visited many “endangered” houses to assess the possibility of donation to the National Trust. His diary, a significant cultural artifact in itself, records the details of his visits to numerous houses where he interacted with notable cultural and political figures, including Vita Sackville-West. Lees-Milne’s reflections register the impact of the war on country houses. In a 1944 entry, for instance, he observes how Osterley, a well-known house in Middlesex, just outside of London, had been transformed: “What a decline since 1939! [...] Now total disorder and disarray. Bombs have fallen in the park, blowing out many windows; the Adam orangery has been burnt out, and the garden beds are totally overgrown” (50). Four years later, on a follow-up visit to Osterley, he laments that donation to the National Trust

might not improve the situation: “It is sad to think what the place is bound to become when made over to the public” (51).

For a figure like Lees-Milne, who was himself raised in a country house, preservation entailed not only a recuperative transfer to the National Trust, but the recording of devastation, of the inherently dramatic changes brought on by the war and changing economic imperatives. Lees-Milne’s diaries capture what a journalist for *The Observer* recently called, “the sadness of these places and their stories, their quiet and dignified tragedy” (Lee n.p.). At Sissinghurst, where Vita Sackville-West lived with her husband, Harold Nicholson, Lees-Milne interweaves a description of the gardens with a deeply sympathetic portrait of Vita as a noble and tragic figure, which makes his record of the house a record of human life and relationships:

I love her romantic disposition, her southern lethargy concealing unfathomable passions, her slow movements of grave dignity, her fund of human kindness, understanding and desire to disentangle other people’s perplexities for them. [...] We talked of love and religion. She told me that she learnt only at twenty-five that her tastes were homosexual. It was sad that homosexual lovers were considered by the world to be slightly comical. The memory of this evening will be ineradicable. (61)

Through this preservationist lens, the postwar story of country houses and national heritage involved humanizing the drama of aristocratic decline. The loss of “living” country houses was equated to the various losses of human life. The shifting realities of wartime neglect and personal struggle settled on top of once publicly grand houses like so much dust on furniture.

Lees-Milne's reflections on Ham House, near Richmond, captures the layered drama of house, owner, and aristocracy that epitomized the preservationist impulse:

The grounds are indescribably overgrown and unkempt. I walked round the house, which appeared thoroughly deserted, searching for an entrance. The garden and front doors look as though they had not been used for decades. So I returned to the back door and pulled a bell. Several seconds later a rusty tinkling echoed from distant subterranean regions. While waiting I recalled the grand ball given for Nefertiti Bethell which I attended in this house some ten years ago or more. [...] The son showed me hurriedly round the house, which is melancholy in the extreme. All the rooms are dirty and dusty. The furniture and pictures have been moved to the country for safety. There is no doubt whatever that, even without the contents, this house is worthy of acceptance because of the superlative interior treatment, the paneling, the exquisite parquet floors, the extraordinary chimneypieces, the great staircase of pierced balustrades, the velvet hangings, etc. It is a wonderful seventeenth-century house, and from the south windows the garden layout of symmetrical beds, stone gate plinths and ironwork is superb. Once we were away from the father, whom [the son] clearly holds in mortal dread, the son became confidential. He said the family were worth £2 million and did not receive as much as sixpence in each pound; that they had two gardeners instead of twelve, and no indoor servants except a cook (and himself). He told me he was so distracted by looking after the Ham property and the Lincolnshire estate that at times he felt suicidal. I looked straight at him, and knew that the

poor man meant it. When I waved goodbye, the faintest flicker of a smile crossed his bucolic face, and a tiny tear was on his cheek. (33-35)

This real scene at Ham House is similar to the fictional one narrated by Charles Ryder in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisted*, when Ryder walks through Brideshead after his Company has requisitioned the house and grounds. Ryder strikes quickly through the "desolated ground-floor rooms, trying doors that were locked, opening doors into rooms piled to the ceiling with furniture," and he finally finds a pre-war relic in whom he hopes to find recognition: Nanny Hawkins (Waugh 392). Like the father and son in Ham House, Nanny Hawkins laments the emptiness of the wartime house but seems utterly unwilling or unable to change.

Lees-Milne's preservationist aesthetic was practised by many figures of the reconstruction period. Sackville-West, for instance, contributed *English Country Houses* to the "Britain in Pictures" Series in 1941. In a manner characteristic of preservationist rhetoric, she begins the book by claiming that the country house is a symbolically significant entity for English history and national identity: "There is nothing quite like the English country house" (7). She goes on to construct an image of England rooted in aristocratic, eccentric pastoralism. Architectural historians such as John Summerson also participated in the work of preservation through their writing. Summerson became the curator of the Sir John Soane's Museum²¹ in 1945 (a post which he retained until 1984) and published *Georgian London* in the same year. He pleaded in the preface, "This research needs doing now, before the age of reconstruction blots out all that vast quantity of minor evidence which, battered and often derelict, cannot be expected to survive long"

²¹ Sir John Soane's museum is one of the most notable precedents for the modern house-museum. Through an Act of Parliament in 1833, the notable architect and collector had his house in Lincoln's Inn Fields turned into a permanent, public institution.

(*Georgian London* 9). In the closing pages of *Brideshead Revisited*, Waugh echoes Summerson's resistance to a reconstruction ethos that must demolish the past in order to create a more equitable future. Charles Ryder nostalgically laments the failure to keep Brideshead alive, and he links that failure to an initial act of rebuilding. When Brideshead Castle is rebuilt as a house, architectural, familial, and spiritual decline begin:

The builders did not know the uses to which their work would descend; they made a new house with the stones of the old castle; year by year, generation after generation, they enriched and extended it; year by year the great harvest of timber in the park grew to ripeness; until, in sudden frost, came the age of Hooper; the place was desolate and the work all brought to nothing; *Quomodo sedet sola civitas*. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

(395)²²

Waugh, Sackville-West, Summerson, Lees-Milne – these writers made careers out of longing. Under their pens, through the discourse and aesthetics of preservation, and supported by organizations like the National Trust, country estates transformed from dying houses into still-life house-museums.

The preservationist vision was not shared by all Britons during reconstruction. According to Peter Mandler, a PR report on future of National Trust in 1944 concluded that, based on strong public opinion, the government should support projects that would convert houses into “centres for drama, art, or similar cultural activities” (324). The public was, not surprisingly, generally against the idea of aristocratic owners living in their homes while the National Trust paid to maintain it. After the hardships faced by all

²² In addition to *Brideshead*, a number of Waugh's novels, including *Decline and Fall* and *Handful of Dust* satirically dramatize the encroachment on the aristocracy of the forces of modernization and bourgeois economic mobility as expressed through the redecoration, renovation, and requisition of country houses.

during the war, and considering that many rationing restrictions were not completely lifted until 1954, public opinion about houses in the 1940s reflected a general cultural resistance toward aristocratic privilege and the desire for increased and modernized social services. Owners who did not wish to transfer to the National Trust but also wanted to avoid demolition partnered with private organizations or the government to convert the houses into public spaces such as schools, hospitals, hotels, or, as in Angus Wilson's 1952 novel, *Hemlock and After*, artists' retreats. This public resistance to the National Trust appears, however, to be generally short-lived.

As the economy began to recover from the exigencies of the war in the later 1950s and 1960s, the country house museum took centre-stage as tourist destination and scholarly subject in a growing culture of affluence and consumerism. Popular BBC Third Programme radio installments, such as Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald's "There and Back" and "Let's Go," helped to create a general cultural discourse that reincorporated the country house into British national life not as an emblem of aristocratic tragedy but as a crucial part of domestic tourism that valued public spectacle.²³ Middle-class families often made an excursion to a country house the centerpiece of a holiday. Houses also became sites of an anthropological academic interest, as public intellectuals like Summerson, John Betjeman, and Nikolaus Pevsner frequently explored the cultural value of the country house in their writing and broadcasts from a point of view that, as Mandler puts it, "saw architecture as 'a witness of phases of human life in the past'" (332).

This period of revival for the country house in the 1950s and 1960s cemented a fundamental separation that had been put in motion by the war and its aftermath: a

²³ For Kevin Walsh, the postwar spectacle of heritage was rooted in aristocratic privilege, with a prime example being the increasing public profile and celebrity of the royal family after Elizabeth and Philip married in November of 1947 (73).

separation between houses as material expression of a living, evolving history and the cultural and social values of houses for a largely middle-class, consumer public. The physical house and its metaphysical values diverged. Before World War II and certainly before the twentieth century, the country house and its inhabitants made physically, economically, and politically concrete contributions to British national life; in the postwar era, the country house became valuable only insofar as it could be put to use in the cultural and scholarly life of those who had never been and would never be part of the aristocratic realm from which the house emerged. National Trust properties are undoubtedly their own form of museum: preserved to re-create different times in the history of the houses.²⁴ This separation – between the house as material expression of historical conditions and the house as vehicle for curated history lesson – prompts questions about the political implications of the postwar country house-museum.

Carol Duncan argues that since the objects in a public art museum are “recontextualized as art history, the luxury of princes could now be seen as the spiritual heritage of the nation, distilled into an array of national and individual genius” (“Art Museums” 95).²⁵ In the country house-museum, private wealth becomes public historical narrative just as it does in a public museum, but there is an added spatial component to the visitor experience. The house-museum commemorates and celebrates a particular historical narrative not just through its *objets d’art* but through its domestic architecture

²⁴ It is now standard procedure for the National Trust to fill many house libraries with books from a central repository, rather than necessarily displaying the original collections. Manufactured smells of freshly baked bread are frequently piped through the kitchens, as is the scent of freshly washed clothing in laundry rooms (Lee n.p.).

²⁵ Duncan uses the Louvre to explain how museums create the false impression of public ownership: “Significantly, [in the Louvre] the new value discovered in the prince’s old treasures could be distributed to the many merely by displaying it in a public space. [...] [I]f the uneducated were unable to use the cultural goods the museum proffered, they could – and still can – be awed by the sheer magnitude of the treasure” (“Art Museums” 95).

and relation to the landscape it inhabits. Viewing tapestries and chairs and paintings in their original space reinforces the significance of landed wealth in British history, even if that landed wealth is now no longer generative. Unlike the countless objects that were removed from their original colonial locations in the nineteenth century and displayed in the British Museum, country house treasures are shown *in situ*, making not only the objects but the objects' context part of the work of preservation. The house and its parkland become artifacts that, like any museum installation, "take visitors on a kind of mental journey, a stepping out of the present into a universe of timeless values" (Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals* 19). This process creates a "shared" cultural hierarchy of artistic and material value – a vertical hierarchy seemingly made horizontal by virtue of its publicness.

One other way of grasping the slippage between the vertical and horizontal that happens through the country house-museum is to think, in Susan Stewart's terms, of the gigantic and the miniature. The country house-museum acts as a revolving door between the large estate, its expansive and defended wealth, and its connection with the natural world – the gigantic – and the rooms of the house-museum, neatly on display, like a dollhouse – or the miniature. Stewart theorizes a relationship between these scalar extremes in which consumer culture co-opts and reformulates the gigantic as the miniature in order to create and maintain a certain cultural order:

In contrast to the still and perfect universe of the miniature, the gigantic represents the order and disorder of historical forces. The consumerism of the miniature is the consumerism of the classic; it is only fitting that consumer culture appropriates the gigantic whenever change is desired.

We want the antique miniature and gigantic new. And while our daydream

may be to animate the miniature, we admire the fall or the death, the stopping, of the giant. (86).

By merging the gigantic and the miniature, the country-house museum protects landed wealth and its legacy of verticality while deflecting potentially troublesome counter-narratives that would lobby for real socio-economic equality. As my experience at Knole suggests, however, the country house-museum is not an air-tight container for public narrative. New forms of the country house novel in the postwar period, such as those by Taylor and Bowen, demonstrate the frailty of museological containment.²⁶

From House-Museum to Country House Novel: Irony and Absence

If postwar country houses became special museums that blurred the line between lived-in home and public exhibition, what happened to the postwar country house novel? How did the novel participate in the cultural discourse of the hybrid country house phenomenon? One way of answering this question is to consider narrative as the literary equivalent of a museum. Just as a museum organizes and displays through an undeniably ideological process of selection, so writers organize, shape, and depict narrative information with ideological consequences. In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart invokes the museum-like quality of narrative by focusing on its “absolute closure, its clarity of beginnings and endings” (22). The bounded quality of printed narrative marks it off as a space where rituals are established and norms are enforced – a space that is a-historical in its tidy closure. For Stewart,

²⁶ In his essay, “Drifting into Dangerous Waters: The Separation of Aesthetic Experience from the Work of Art,” Martin Jay summarizes the critical debate surrounding the “loss of the allegedly integrated world that preceded the split into distinct and incommensurable value spheres” (3). Like Jay, I do not intend to join the critics who “yearn to dedifferentiate [...] the boundaries separating the spheres” (3-4). Rather, I am interested in how writers like Taylor and Bowen detect and manage those boundaries through their narrative choices.

While “lived” history is perceived as open work, work without established beginning or established ending, it is the accomplishment of narrative to provide both origin and eschaton, a set of provisions that are profoundly ideological in the closure they present. Narrative is ‘about’ closure; the boundaries of events form the ideological basis for the interpretation of their significance. (22)

In this sense, we could think of any narrative as akin to a museum, but there is a particular set of implications for novels that deal with the historical significance of houses and heritage.

For such texts as Elizabeth Taylor’s *Angel* or Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Little Girls*, narrative is an ideological act of boundary-setting that has a critical, reflexive relationship to the house-museum and questions of heritage within its “walls.” Both novels do the work of a museum through historical fiction and flashback, but their curatorial choices suggest that literature can work as a counter-narrative in the context of postwar heritage culture. Taylor uses satire to criticize the a-historical stance of *Angel*’s house-museum: a warning that heritage and museum culture in the postwar period must always be conceived as only one part or version of a story. There is always, her novel suggests, a less tidy, historically meaningful “reality” behind the romance of curatorial closure. In *The Little Girls*, Bowen uses tropes and strategies of absence to reconfigure the relationships among former country house owners, heritage culture, and literary history. Like Taylor, Bowen challenges the pretension of closure in order to access a more accurate reality, and she associates the history and practice of literary modernism with the task of acknowledging this reality.

Elizabeth Taylor provides a critical middle-class version of the country house narrative in two of her postwar novels. While I will focus primarily on her 1957 novel, *Angel*, her second novel, *Palladian*, published in 1946, is an important generic precedent and counterpoint to Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. *Palladian* is a governess novel that takes as its theme the decaying country house and its aristocratic inhabitants, but the narrative of decline refuses the nostalgic yearning for a lost national greatness that Waugh's novel is generally thought to represent. In *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*, for instance, John Su reads *Brideshead* as emblematic of a postwar nostalgia concerned with English history and identity as linked to the country house: "The decay of the English country estate in [...] *Brideshead Revisited* [...] evokes a powerful yearning for lost national glory. [...] The diminished condition of the estate is taken to be emblematic of the nation as a whole" (Su 120).²⁷ In *Palladian*, the desire for continuity through the country estate is blocked at every turn, including that of generic lineage. The novel invokes the gothic romance tradition via intertextual references to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca*, but Taylor undercuts nostalgia for these earlier literary fantasies through character and plot. Various inhabitants of the house in *Palladian* undermine its romantic appeal: an alcoholic, an adulterer who has an affair with the working-class landlady of the village pub, a woman who prefers to become a single mother rather than to marry, a live-in servant from the prewar years who clashes with the young, daily charwoman. The modernizing world beyond the boundaries of the estate comes crashing into the house, and, in the end, the house proves its own failure as a

²⁷ In *Victorians in the Rearview*, Simon Joyce similarly reads *Brideshead Revisited* – alongside *Howards End* – through the framework of nostalgia, as "two texts that are redolent with a longing for some of the supposed values of the past, at the same time that they also stage self-reflexive discussions of the benefits and dangers of nostalgia" (41).

shelter for the future generations of Britain: a statue on the grounds falls and kills the only young child of the estate family. *Palladian* is a morbid novel, but one that seems, unlike Waugh's novel, more interested in the emerging forces that encourage the decline than in mourning the values being lost. The novel offers neither a falsely optimistic or opportunistic vision of the future nor a sentimental portrait of old-fashioned values. Its dead-end-edness indicates Taylor's recognition that the country house novel tradition can no longer serve a romantic role for the middle class, especially in the austere immediacy of the postwar period, and it foreshadows her search for an alternative iteration of the genre.

Just over ten years later, *Angel* provides this alternative. Taylor's only explicit work of historical fiction tells the life story of Angel Devereil from 1885 to 1947. Beginning in adolescence, the heroine's rich fantasy life becomes, through a country house and the written narratives it generates, both her prison and her means to financial and social mobility. Angel's sensational and highly romantic novels are pure expressions of a fantasy world: she publishes her first novel, *The Lady Irania*, at the age of 16 without having read much of anything beyond the occasional volume of Shakespeare. Despite the doubts and embarrassed fears of her lower-middle-class mother and aunt, Angel quickly becomes infamous – adored by the romance-devouring reading public and joyfully torn apart by high-brow critics.²⁸ After leaving the rooms above her mother's grocery store in a "shabby" industrial town, she begins her ascent through various living spaces that

²⁸ As N.H. Reeve has pointed out, Angel's career as a writer of sensationalist novels is a clear reference to the careers of figures such as Marie Corelli and Amanda Ros (54). Victoria Stewart, moreover, reads *Angel* alongside E.F. Benson's *Secret Lives* (1932) and Mary Renault's *The Friendly Young Ladies* (1944) in terms of the middlebrow woman writer, with emphasis on the legacy of Corelli. Stewart argues that "Taylor's novel [...] acts as a reminder that while writers of Angel's ilk may not leave a lasting literary legacy, they have a vital importance, in their time, for their readers" (34).

ultimately leads to her life in a country house, Paradise House, which the owner has abandoned in favour of a less financially demanding residence.

Like a country house-museum, Taylor's historical narrative of *Angel* and Paradise House displays the past. *Angel*'s coming-of-age story takes place at a high-point of museum creation at the turn of the twentieth century. This exhibition frenzy accompanies the demise of late Victorian sensation fiction and the birth of literary modernism. Taylor's novel, therefore, is "preserving" a time when the tension between the Victorian obsession with the past and the modernist hunger for the future reached a breaking point. By narratively enclosing this period, *Angel* participates in the revived heritage culture of the 1950s, but not uncritically. Through its mode of satirical historical fiction, the novel distinguishes itself from the modern fiction of the earlier twentieth century in the sense that Allan Hepburn has identified: "Whereas modern novels about artworks and collections validate self-expression and ownership, postmodern novels historicize value and critique museum culture" (10-11). Although it is beyond the bounds of this chapter to consider the significance of terms such as "modern" and "postmodern," it is clear that Taylor is trying to establish a critical vantage point for understanding the role of the country house and heritage culture in the on-going history of middle-class women's writing.

In a time of supposedly greater class equality, *Angel* signals a contradictory, middle-class uneasiness at work in the 1950s and 1960s: the desire to consume a well-curated, nostalgic, saleable version of aristocratic history – and the class hierarchy that accompanies it – alongside the need to mock and reject social-climbing impulses. This contradictory position, in which the desire for narrative wholeness and coherence conflicts with the real disorder of human life, is focalized through the country house novel

just as it is through the country house-museum. According to John Su, postwar narratives about the country house signal a conflict between symbols of power, order, and dominance and the historical forces that threaten the stability of those symbols. Although the postwar country house holds, he argues, “long-standing associations with continuity, tradition, and Englishness, [...] its presence belies the cultural turbulence caused by increasing emigration from the colonies; chronic unemployment and economic depression; and the resurgence of regionalism within Scotland, Ireland, and Wales” (121). *Angel* reveals the middle-class desire for continuity, tradition, and Englishness as represented by the country house, but rather than deploy a nostalgic aesthetics, the novel interrogates this middle-class desire by positioning it ironically with a satirical treatment of fantasy, romance, history, and the writing profession – all funneled through a desire for the country house life. As Alice Ferrebe has argued, “Elizabeth Taylor’s writing relies upon romance only ultimately to undermine the genre” (61). Instead of wholeness, continuity, and genuine participation in a national narrative, the country house-museum that is Paradise House seals Angel’s private isolation and affirms her historical redundancy.

From the very beginning of its fantasy-driven occupation, the country house in Taylor’s novel is effectively a museum or mausoleum. Readers are never privy to a “real” Paradise House; rather, the house is the manifestation of Angel’s childhood fantasies. As a young girl, she frequently uses her imagination to transpose her material circumstances into a romantic version of aristocratic life in a country house. In her school classroom, for instance, “Angel had often, during dull lessons, tried to imagine it as a bedroom again, with plush curtains drawn, a fire in the grate, a white satin gown over a chair and herself being laced into her stays by a maid” (8). Such fantasies often take place in a vague time

and place, but she frequently attaches them to Paradise House, where her Aunt Lottie works as a daily servant. Although Angel never visits the house as a girl, she dreams of one day living there and even fabricates stories for her schoolmates to suggest that the house belongs to her family and is destined for her in the future. In her fantasy, time, the house, and Aunt Lottie's real work as a servant stand still as frozen narrative *objets d'art* in the realm of Angel's imagination. She tells her schoolmates, "It is all kept in order and so is the house. There are dust-sheets over the drawing-room and drugget over the carpets, but the housekeeper sees that everything is polished and shining and ready for the day when I can go there myself to live" (9-10). The house is unreal, completely shut out from the material conditions of history. It exists only in Angel's imagination as a pastiche of the details she romantically chooses:

closing her eyes to create the darkness where Paradise House could take shape, embellished and enlarged day after day – with colonnades and cupolas, archways and flights of steps – beyond anything her aunt had ever suggested. Acquisitively, from photographs and drawings in history-books, she added one detail after another. That will do for Paradise House, was an obsessive formula which became a daily habit. The white peacocks would do; and there were portraits in the Municipal Art Gallery which would do; as would the cedar trees at school. As the house spread, those in it grew more shadowy. Angel herself took over Madam's jewel-box and Madam's bed and husband. (15)

Angel's piecemeal curatorial fantasy serves as a double reflection: of the eclectic and picturesque collections that dominated the late Victorian museums of Angel's childhood, and of country house-museums contemporary with publication of the novel in 1957.

Paradise House, like the tourist-attraction National Trust House that preserves different time periods in different rooms, is divorced from historically situated ownership and occupation. Instead, Paradise House becomes an illusory vehicle for Angel's fiction writing, in which "her sense of period was so vague and her notions of country-life wonderfully sensational. A handsome young man among dogs was going off to shoot his rival in a duel, not pheasants among the autumn foliage; a lady in an Empire gown had been a mistress of Charles the Second" (123). In mocking Angel's stylistic incoherence, Taylor's narrative resonates with contemporaneous work by architectural critics and historians that deride a lack of clear style. John Summerson, for example, recalls his Victorian childhood boarding school, Riber Castle, in Derbyshire as

not only very ugly, but [it] has the rare characteristic of being stylistically unclassifiable. [...] One can hardly call it "primitive," but primitive, in a way, it is. Not the sort issuing from the innocence of folk-art but with a savagery of its own century bred in the haunted, cluttered mind of a man who has seen the Alps, visited the cathedrals, the castles, the châteaux and absorbed some of the vanity of their builders, with an appetite to convert his wealth into "galleries," "saloons," "canopies," "clerestories," "spiral staircases" and the rest. Had Smedly [the architect] employed a professional he would have got a house unmistakably, however crudely, stamped with a style – Italian, Norman, Gothic or Baronial. As it was he produced an object of indecipherable bastardy – a true monster.

("Unromantic Castle" 14)

In Summerson's recollection as well as in Taylor's narrative, stylistic olio is an occasion for humour. More deeply, however, it speaks to an underlying anxiety that such confusion

will persist, as in the case of Riber Castle, or be sold, as in the case of Angel's novels. It is a cautionary note against uncritically accepting the pre-packaged historical narratives of house-museums.

The cautionary note is not to be taken lightly, for the historically inaccurate fantasy has real consequences. In spite of their mock-able qualities, the fictions fueled by an elusive, patched-together image of Paradise House enable Angel's financial success and ultimately her ability to possess the real Paradise House. But rather than accepting its reality – and the reality of the social and material context in which it resides – Angel incorporates the house into her fantasy world. The house is not her entry point for history; rather, she is the point at which the house exits the historical stage. Upon first seeing the abandoned house, she notices incongruencies between her fantasy and the reality. Hence, she condemns what she sees and makes plans for redecoration and renovation: “But how different it was from her dreams,” she reflects, “and from the house she had described in her first novel. The ashen look of the stone was a great shock to her. It was all built the wrong way about and was not big enough or decorated enough, and there were no peacocks” (146). When Angel and her husband, Esmé, return to Paradise House after their honeymoon, “There was scaffolding over the front – the South side – and patches of new plaster, a smell of paint and putty and a sound of hammering. The balustrade had been mended and the fallen urn put back. Two peacocks had arrived. [...] They moped on the terrace, which they covered with their droppings; they moulted; they sometimes screamed but never fanned out their tail-feathers” (153). Angel's fantasy-driven makeover of Paradise House never lives up to the grandeur that she imagines, as the rather disappointing peacocks suggest. Taylor's comic narration checks any impulse toward taking the fantasy seriously. Angel is not furnishing a house; she is curating her life as a

museum exhibition. Any attempt to live and produce life in the house is foreclosed by this founding curatorial gesture.

The museological quality of the house epitomizes a dark undercurrent of historical denial that runs through the novel. Although house-museums are interested in historical preservation, they are ironically a-historical in relation to the present. Figuring her house and life through a museum sensibility means that Angel does not engage with the world around her; instead, she conceives of her life through the eyes of a posterity that will judge her cultural value. In other words, she thinks of her life as already over, its narrative already sealed off. Given that Angel's life includes two world wars, the political implications of such a curatorial backward gaze are grave. Taylor's narrative, however, works critically against the pat ideological closure of Angel's house-museum: real history cannot be entirely shut out. As N.H. Reeve observes, although Angel "does her best to ignore altogether the history, both private and public, that [history] nonetheless shapes her existence" (42). Angel's personal history always looms: her lower-middle-class childhood threatens to break the surface of her "aristocratic" life. She quickly represses, for instance, a "curiously silencing thought": that she once had been offered a job in Paradise House as a lady's maid. She fights against the pressure of this "real" historical possibility: "She could not – even if she had cared to, and nothing did she desire less – have peopled it with the ghosts of Aunt Lottie's Madam and that other Angelica" (158). Taylor's narratorial interjection between the dashes indicates the level of mental barricading and emotional boundary-setting that Angel undertakes to prevent historical intrusion.

To keep personal ghosts at bay, Angel also shuts out the national and global history unfolding around her. When Esmé decides to enlist in the Army during World War I, she enters a period of disturbing, furious anti-patriotism, not because of actual

political convictions, but because the war effort disturbs the house-museum world in which Esmé merely played a role that she has scripted for him. Her writing career suffers from her inexplicable, extreme pacificism, and so, too, does Paradise House. The funds begin to run out as Angel's fantasy world shrinks and loses appeal for her readers. Reality encroaches upon the house: it "was half shut up and there was nothing to show for Esmé's work on the garden; the lawns were shaggy again and tall grasses grew around the urns and the stone seats on the terrace" (166). The tragedy of Angel's historical denial culminates in Esmé's honorable discharge after losing a leg through injury. He returns to Paradise House to find that there is no room for his wartime experience nor his postwar trauma in the narrative enclosure of the house that Angel stubbornly has maintained. As a result of Angel's refusal to let her "public" personal narrative be influenced by the narratively unclassifiable experience of war, Esmé commits suicide by drowning himself in the lake on Paradise House grounds. The haunting image of his empty wheelchair alongside the water is matched in horror only by Angel's subsequent replacement of it with a large obelisk monument to Esmé, a gesture that recalls Sir Edwin Lutyens's 1919 Cenotaph for those killed in World War I but without the public resonance. Esmé could be only an abstract museum object to Angel – and through him, the war itself remains at a sanitized distance.

During World War II, a similar story of historical denial plays out, and Angel and Paradise House enter their final days. The physical and symbolic evacuation of wartime museums is reflected in the diminished furnishings: the library has few books, and the telephone "echoe[s] startlingly in the hall, for, [...] the house was very bare of furniture" (224). The few people who visit the house fight their way through weeds. Angel herself dresses in "moth-eaten chinchilla" (237). As she dies, Paradise House lies cold and

muffled in snow that “drifts to the lower window-sills” (242). In a haunting homage to Charles Dickens’s Miss Havisham, Angel’s final gesture of the novel comes through her unofficial will. She orders that the executors “‘shall set aside a sum of money to preserve Paradise House as it stands at the time of my’ – the word ‘death’ had been crossed out and ‘decease’ superimposed – ‘to be retained as a public memorial and true record of my life’” (251). Even in death, Angel insists on the veracity of her museological fantasy and on the role of the house in faithfully confirming it. Her editorial revision to the will, moreover, only emphasizes the amount of revision necessary to perpetuate such a historically ignorant fantasy.

Angel’s conception of a decaying, overgrown, furniture-less Paradise House as a public memorial is deeply and disturbingly ironic: such a house-museum is a fittingly empty memorial to mismotivated pacificism and, less directly, to the dangerous appeasement policies supported by many who clung to country house life and hierarchy in the 1930s. Although country houses mostly had lost their connection with actual political power by at least the 1920s, isolated cases in the pre-war decade – that of Nancy Astor and the “Cliveden Set,” for example²⁹ – suggest that the insulation of country house life might have grave political consequences for the nation. That Angel essentially loses her entire readership constitutes Taylor’s critique of writerly and museological projects that are so dangerously out of touch with the lives of those who make up the real public.

With her historical novel, Taylor critically memorializes a time in which middle-class writers longed for romance over history. The temporal distance works to mark such

²⁹ In addition to cultivating pro-Nazi appeasement politics at its 1930s weekend house parties, Cliveden became further notorious in the 1960s during the “Profumo Affair,” a sex scandal at the house that led to the resignation of John Profumo and established facts that contributed to the fall of Harold Macmillan’s Conservative government in 1963. Cliveden was donated to the National Trust in 1942 and later became an exclusive hotel, which is still managed by the Trust.

a time period as effectively over yet not without the recognition that the consequences of such romantic yearning would persist in the realm of postwar middle-class country house culture. Through the young art critic, Clive Fennelly, Taylor critically forecasts the persistence of sentimental appeal for the postwar public. Clive is enamoured with the *image* of decayed wealth: “The space, the quiet, the strangeness captivated him; it was so unlike the neat villas, the golden privet hedges, the shaved lawns of the suburbs where he lived. The wildness and the beauty were enhanced for him by Angel herself in her dress of faded, streaky red, her coiled-up hair with not a grey thread in it, her eccentricity which seemed to him so typical of the decaying aristocracy” (205). Clive is a suburban, middle-class professional who invests in the “performance” of aristocratic life. Only a social-climbing suburbanite, Clive’s character implies, could be fooled by Angel’s pretensions. He not only buys into the fantasy; he helps to create it: “the prodigious collapse of Paradise House he [Clive] could foretell; the stains already running up the walls, brickwork at the back held together only by matted ivy, floor boards rotting, plaster crumbling” (212). Taylor might be poking fun at herself with this description of Clive’s fantasy of ruin; it recalls her own description of the decrepit country house in *Palladian* as well as the deserted house in her 1947 novel, *A Wreath of Roses*. With *Angel*, Taylor achieves historical distance from her earlier preoccupation with the collapse of country-house life; she also marks off the Edwardian period and the two world wars as distinct from her present moment. In narrativizing Angel’s life and the history in which it was necessarily embedded, Taylor offers an enclosure that critiques the cost of conceiving of houses as if they were museums and lives as if they were exhibitions.³⁰ Moreover, she

³⁰ Taylor also explores the country house-museum in her short story, “Hare Park,” which appears in her 1958 collection, *The Blush*. In “Hare Park,” the Duke opens up his country house to the public in order to

offers a new mode of country house novel as a revisionary tool in the midst of country house-centred heritage culture.

Elizabeth Bowen's *The Little Girls*: Modernism in the Vault

Elizabeth Bowen's 1964 novel, *The Little Girls*, obliquely interrogates the postwar concept of heritage by revealing the emptiness of the posterity-oriented gesture. This gesture is literalized through the various tropes of absence within the narrative: the empty time capsule, the missing country house, the half-filled cave-museum, the bombed landmark. Stylistically, the novel also is defined by the untraceable. Plot trajectories trail off into nothing. Characters are thinly sketched, mainly through dialogue, with minimal narratorial access to interiority. A flashback to 1914 is bracketed by two longer parts set contemporaneously to the publication of the novel in the early 1960s, with very little information from a narrator or the characters about the intervening years. Just as the characters search for their time capsule, its missing contents, and their relationships to each other, so the reader searches for meaningful content in the literary time capsule that Bowen creates with the 1914 part of the narrative. By structurally enclosing this flashback with highly fragmented prose and obscure narration, Bowen re-opens and then partially seals up the story of literary modernism for which 1914 – and the war that ensued – was such a defining historical moment. Strains of violence, threat, and cruelty run through the novel both thematically and stylistically, suggesting that the past is never entirely “sealed up” in museums, time capsules, or narratives. Moreover, the political and aesthetic violence associated with 1914 and high modernism finds an historical echo in the

keep it alive. The “sightseer” cars “looked purposeful and menacing [...] like a funeral procession [...]”; the crowds spread about the terrace, invading the house from all sides, like an army of ants, penetrating in no time the stables and courtyard and lining up for the house itself” (197).

demolition of Bowen's family estate in Ireland in 1959 – an event that looms as a palpable absence throughout the novel. Whereas Taylor's postwar country house novel uses irony to reframe the historical significance of the genre for the middle class writer, Bowen's demonstrates the impact on the genre of country house demolition and heritage industry culture as practised by a formerly landed writer.³¹

Beginning with her first novel in 1928, *The Last September*, Elizabeth Bowen was imaginatively preoccupied with houses, in particular the Anglo-Irish Big House.³² Her 1949 wartime novel, *The Heat of the Day*, and her 1957 novel, *The World of Love*, both explicitly explore the link between the decaying Anglo-Irish house, the Ascendancy class to whom the houses belonged, and World War II. *A World of Love*, written just two years before the sale of Bowen's Court, is, perhaps, a more straightforward engagement with country house culture than *The Little Girls*. *A World of Love* provides a clear eulogy for the postwar Anglo-Irish Big House and its loveless inhabitants in the tradition of Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. Bowen's cultivation of preservationist themes goes back at least to World War II. In 1940, she wrote an essay for *The Bell* entitled "The Big House," in which she defensively defines the Irish Big House as representative of "the good life for which they were first built," although "in a changed world and under changed conditions" ("The Big House" 30). In 1942, she published *Bowen's Court*, an extensive history of her family estate in Ireland, and in a 1944 essay entitled, "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met," she begins by evoking an empty Bowen's Court in an empty landscape:

³¹ Bowen's novel was published one year after Muriel Spark's *The Girls of Slender Means*. Both texts are representative of a particular postwar novelistic idiom that emphasizes absence, violence, the destruction of physical space, female communities, and the relationship between the World Wars and the 1960s.

³² A number of critics have considered the theme of the Anglo-Irish Big House in Bowen's work. For a recent exemplary discussion of the Big House in *The Last September* and *Bowen's Court*, see Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: the Shadow Across the Page*. In *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return*, Neil Corcoran considers the Anglo-Irish estate in relation to Anglo-Irish history in *A World of Love*.

A great grey stone house, with rows upon rows of windows, ringed round with silence, approached by grass-grown avenues – has life forever turned aside from this place? So the stranger might ask, approaching my family home in Ireland. It is miles from anywhere you have ever heard of; it is backed by woods with mountains behind them; in front, it stares over empty fields. Generations have lived out their lives and died here. But no – everybody has gone away? (254)

The preservationist aesthetic and mission of these wartime works resonate with similar, contemporaneous efforts by Waugh, Vita Sackville-West, John Summerson, and others. In all of her writing about country houses, Bowen demonstrates a clear knowledge that she was preserving soon-to-be ghosts and their haunted dwellings, but she conveys faith in this preservation work. In the 1964 “Afterword” to a new edition of *Bowen’s Court*, reissued in the same year that *The Little Girls* was published, Bowen locates this faith in the fictional, imaginative impulse:

Loss has not been entire. When I think of Bowen’s Court, there it is. And when others who knew it think of it, there it is, also. [...] Knowing, as you now do, that the house is no longer there, you may wonder why I have left my opening chapter, the room-to-room description of Bowen’s Court, in the present tense. I can only say that *I* saw no reason to transpose it into the past. There is a sort of perpetuity about livingness, and it is part of the character of Bowen’s Court to be, in sometimes its silent way, very much alive. (458-9)

For Bowen, as for Waugh, fiction about the country house novel preserved what was threatened – even if only by focusing on its present absence. In Bowen’s case, the

demolition of Bowen's Court not only reinforced but mandated her faith in fiction as a mode of presentation for what is materially absent.

Bowen also announces this faith in *The Little Girls*. The novel sketches out a set of relations among Dinah, Clare, and Sheila (known also by their childhood nicknames: Dicey, Mumbo, and Sheikie) as bookended by two time capsules: one that the girls buried at the site of their school in 1914 and one that Dinah is creating in a cave for her local village in the early 1960s. At Dinah's urging, the women agree to dig up the 1914 time capsule. When they arrive at "what had been the site of St. Agatha's, grounds and building," it "looked like being impossible to determine" (196). The narrative voice anticipates their discovery of the empty time capsule and echoes Bowen's sentiments in the *Bowen's Court* "Afterword" when it announces: "What is there is there; there comes to be something fictitious about what is not" (196). As in the case of Muriel Spark's *The Girls of Slender Means*, loss of the material past – the objects in the time capsule, St. Agatha's school, the literal shape of landscape, Bowen's Court – is compensated by narrating its silence or absence in the present.

In *Angel*, Paradise House symbolizes the tragic implications of the middle-class fantasy of the country house sealed off from history. In *The Little Girls*, the missing country house corresponds to the opposite trajectory: the impossibility of keeping aristocratic houses, public museums, and private narratives sealed up. A number of critics have considered Bowen's novel in terms of objects (Elizabeth Inglesby), posterity (Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle), and the relationship of past and present (Maud Ellmann, Marian Kelly, Anne Wyatt-Brown). While these interpretations offer compelling directions for reading the novel, some of which I will touch on later, none discuss the implications of objects, posterity, the relationship of past and present for the

larger context of country house culture in early 1960s Britain. For all of the critical reference to “the past” in Bowen’s work, there is little substantive historical analysis. In her work with archival material, Inglesby approaches the larger historical context. She foregrounds her reading of the novel with a discussion of the demolition of Bowen’s Court and how that experience affected Bowen’s personal writing technique and philosophy:

The end of Bowen’s Court forced Bowen to examine once again the ways in which we seek to preserve history, personality, and expression in both houses and the small everyday items that most people barely notice. All of the imaginative work she had done concerning the value of places and objects could not completely prepare her to transfer the bricks and mortar of her heritage into the realm of pure language. During this period [the 1950s], she attempted to brace herself for the impact of demolition by flatly denying her material attachment to her home. (320)

Inglesby’s biographical framework is historical to a degree, but her main goal is to use this information to return to the text and better understand the literary relationship that Bowen crafts between characters and the inanimate world.³³ As I have mentioned, the biographical context of the sale and demolition of Bowen’s Court is an important part of my approach to the novel, but my main goal is to read Bowen’s narrative technique and thematic choices as historically specific

³³ In his essay, “‘A Sort of Lunatic Giant,’” Eibhear Walshe uses a biographical framework to set up a brief discussion of *The Little Girls* alongside a more extended analysis of *Eva Trout*. Walshe considers the impact of the sale and demolition of Bowen’s Court as well as Bowen’s time living and traveling in Rome on her two final novels. As with Inglesby’s study, Walshe’s essay makes use of limited historical context in order to argue that these novels are “crucial within Bowen’s canon” (151).

expressions of a dramatically transformed, broadly conceived socio-economic postwar landscape.

The sale and demolition of Bowen's Court in Ireland occurred as the country houses that survived in Britain became increasingly popular centerpieces of a domestic tourism culture. With the sale, Bowen lost her status as landed gentry; she effectively became upper-middle class.³⁴ She lived in rented houses before buying a modest seaside house in Hythe in 1964. In *The Little Girls*, Bowen explores her new, un-landed position through Dinah's abortive attempts to participate in a heritage culture designed with the middle-class tourist in mind. Dinah constantly talks about "posterity" and worries about how a future group of explorers or tourists will interpret the objects she has collected for the cave-museum. She is concerned about the lack of a clear narrative that will contribute to public knowledge while preserving the private identities of those who contributed objects.

When her friend, Frank, complains that the objects "Still all look to me very much the same" (4), Dinah responds with a curatorial gesture that aims to link the objects with individuals: "'Look, though,' she cried with renewed fervour, 'I've been cataloguing, before I forget what's whose'" (5). Her cataloguing efforts are entirely future-oriented. As she says to Mrs. Coral, "one should give posterity a break. One must leave posterity some clues! [...] Clues to reconstruct *us* from. Expressive objects. What really expresses people? The things – I'm sure – that they have obsessions about: keep on wearing or using, or fuss when they lose, or can't go to sleep without. You know, a person's only a *person* when they have some really raging peculiarity" (11). Beneath her eager time

³⁴ One could argue that Bowen's status changed earlier, as she earned a living through writing, rather than depending on the estate revenues since 1930 when she inherited the house.

capsule curation, Dinah lacks confidence in the expressive potential of the things she has collected: ““And the point is, all are completely different! ... At least, ‘ said Dinah, looking with faint discouragement, or at least misgiving, at the clumps of objects, ‘so I’ve always believed”” (11). Dinah is trying to create a site of historical preservation that works against the ethos of the civic museum, which effaces individual particularity in favour of public narrative. In fact, she protests to Mrs. Coral that the cave will be air-tight, sealed up, inaccessible: ““It’s not a museum – or really anything like” (10). As Dinah continues to try and explain the cave and its expressive objects to Mrs. Coral, however, she becomes “Exhausted,” and her “voice ran down to a pause” (12).

Despite Dinah’s efforts to preserve individual history within the cave, the space of the cave is undoubtedly museum-like in its sense of enclosure and timelessness – the liminality that Carol Duncan identifies as crucial to the work of the museum in creating a singular, public narrative through ritual (*Civilizing Rituals* 20). Bowen’s narrator explicitly describes the timelessness of the cave: “It was now within an hour or so of sunset – unpent, brilliant after the rainstorm, long rays over the garden overhead, making wetness flitter, setting afire September dahlias and roses. Down here [in the cave], however, it was some other hour – peculiar, perhaps no hour at all” (5). Not only is the cave a space with no temporal specificity, the description of Frank and Dinah standing in their own light recalls the primitive, symbolically bare moment of Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”: “Their two tall forms, backs to the entrance, not only overshadowed the table but further darkened the cave – blocking away from it outdoor daylight” (5). The cave is, like any museum, a space in which history is simultaneously narrativized and cordoned off from the present. The allusion to Plato’s allegory emphasizes the partialness of the “reality” presented in the cave. Like a wartime museum or a country house that has been

transformed into a hospital or arts center, the cave is a repurposed, symbolically unstable space, an incomplete record of what has been, as demonstrated by Mrs. Coral's recollection that "Chickens were kept down here when I was a girl. [...] Times change" (9). Dinah attempts to enclose the various narratives within the cave through a ritualizing gesture: "Pulling, then tying the cave's curtains together was a ceremony amounting to locking up" (14). The very partial enclosure and unlocked quality of curtains – rather than doors – suggests that not only this cave, but all efforts to enclose heritage spaces are abortive.

For Bennett and Royle, *The Little Girls* is a critique of the posterity-oriented gesture that obliterates genuine, intangible individuality in favour of representable, material evidence: "In representing our lives for posterity, objects make up our lives: not only do they represent idiosyncrasies which constitute our identities, but in some sense, they are those identities" (132). Inglesby adds to Bennett and Royle's reading the consideration that, for Bowen, not only are people in some sense made up of objects within the posterity-oriented paradigm, but objects are themselves "inhabitants of another dimension of reality not dependent on humanity to lend it significance" (310). Both critical interpretations are supported by the novel, especially at moments when people and things seem to be interchangeable. In a discussion between Dinah and Clare, for instance, Dinah describes Sheila as if she were a sunken ship or some other buried artifact: "More barnacled over. Far, far more barnacled over than you or I are. Wouldn't you say? She's [Sheikie's] certainly thickly covered with *some* deposit" (186). The interchangeability means that, as Inglesby puts it, there is "a dark undertone of menace directed not only at the characters, but also at their homes and possessions. Bowen's characters do not seem to

realize that their things are in danger of slipping away, of failing to survive and memorialize them” (321).

With the destruction of World War II and the selling off, museum-ing out, and demolition of country houses forming the historical backdrop to Bowen’s novel, Dinah’s efforts to preserve objects in lieu of people is not only naïve but decidedly a-historical. In this sense, Dinah resembles Angel, for whom the monument to Esmé seems more important than Esmé himself. Bowen’s narrative, however, goes further than Taylor’s ironic portrayal in challenging the over-investment in material preservation and heritage culture. Inglesby persuasively argues that this counter-narrative involves an opposition between character identity and perception and the material world described by the narrator. Taking into consideration the larger historical context of country house heritage culture and demolition, I build on Inglesby’s analysis with a focus on the narratorial strategies of absence and enclosure.

The Little Girls is more about what is missing and partial than what is present and abundant. In this sense, the novel picks up on contemporaneous literary philosophy such as Michel Butor’s 1961 essay collection, *Inventory*, in which he writes of the significance of that which is narratively missing: “We might emphasize the importance of a given moment by its absence, by the study of its surroundings, thus making the reader feel that there is a lacuna in the fabric of what is being narrated, or something that is being hidden” (21). Bowen’s commitment to enclosing absence, to putting emphasis on the “lacuna” in *The Little Girls*, is part of her work against nostalgic aesthetics. In 1951, Bowen recorded a broadcast for the BBC Third Program – “The Cult of Nostalgia” – in which she hoped for the decline of nostalgia and argued that “Against it, there is the pressing realism of history” (101). She calls for “a whole generation [to] keep the power of taking its

moments ‘straight’ – not half-overcast by fantasy, not thinned-down by yearning. Why, indeed, should not imagination—without which, granted, happiness is impossible—be able to burn up in the air of today? [...] What has great art done but enclose that eternal ‘now’?” (101). Thirteen years later, *The Little Girls* is a clear exercise in imagination as well as material existence burned up in the air of today. And in thematically and structurally enclosing a burnt-up absence, she turns away from an impulse to depict a utopian past toward the “realism of history,” an eternal and ever-evaporating “now.”

Bowen’s attitude toward the past in this broadcast and in the novel reflect her realist, anti-nostalgic stance: all of Dinah’s efforts to enclose objects, people, places, and narratives of the past are cut short or completely reversed. The novel, in this sense, works against a nostalgia that, as Susan Stewart describes it, “does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience” (23). While the narrative voice works as a counter-point to Dinah’s failed nostalgic efforts – as Inglesby and Marian Kelly have argued³⁵ – Dinah is, herself, aware of the potential pitfalls of her preservation projects from the very beginning of the novel. She remarks self-consciously to Frank, “Did you know I had a predisposition to bury things? [...] I mean, for a purpose. One of the things that’s happened to me this evening is, I see what I’ve been up to down in that cave. [...] That cave idea’s been nice, and I’d never call it a fake, but of course it’s been really only a repetition. – No, perhaps not so much exactly that as a going back, again, to something begun” (21). After the women agree to dig up the time capsule, Dinah pinpoints her own nostalgia and questions its validity: “But one can miss without knowing what one misses. Miss – can’t one? – without even knowing one *is* missing?”

³⁵ Kelly uses reader-response theory to argue that, with this novel, “Bowen has finally and definitively attained her goal of giving us a model for rejecting nostalgia” (13).

(183).³⁶ Bowen counters Dinah's nostalgia-driven burials and enclosures with a larger project of enclosing missing landmarks, objects, and narratives as a sign of the "real" present.³⁷

Landmarks and landscape continuously evaporate, as Clare puts it, "into thin air" (76). When Dinah suggests that the women meet at St. Agatha's to dig up the box, Sheila explains that "'it's not there': 'As you may or may not know, we were shelled at Southstone. [...] They lammed away at us, onward from 1940. [...] The girls had] been long gone. That old place had not been a school for years. When it was hit it was empty and boarded up.'" At this point Clare responds with the interjection: "'Into thin air'" (76). While World War I separates the girls from each other – and holds a pronounced place of narrative interruption in the 1914 flashback – World War II is introduced here as a further source of violence and demolition that disturbs the continuity of land and buildings for the postwar era. Unlike Angel's Paradise House, which hides from the wars and the accompanying monumental cultural shifts, buildings in Bowen's novel are exposed and destroyed.

In addition to the wars, land development is a force of visual transformation for the landscape that the women try to navigate. As Dinah says to Clare, "everywhere there's been built over with new houses. [...] And to make pretty little gardens, one quite often uses fragments of gardens which have been there" (191). Indeed, outside the cave, the narrator defines the landscape as what "had been an orchard," with "such trees as had not been cleared away [...] seen in the near distance" (14). This haunted, absent orchard

³⁶ Susan Stewart, building on Freud, describes nostalgia as "sadness without an object" and "the desire for desire" (23). Dinah's "missing without knowing one is missing" clearly recalls this Freudian concept.

³⁷ Bowen's novel precedes the moment when general cultural concern about the history of demolition became a dominant public narrative. In 1974, for instance, the Victoria and Albert Museum put on an exhibition, "The Destruction of the Country House," which chronicled a selection of over 1,000 houses that had been demolished over the preceding century.

space is the placeholder between the cave and Dinah's house, Applegate. The house, a 1912-built suburban villa, is another thwarted attempt within the novel to seal up, enclose, and prevent historical leakage. It has a fabricated version of what Vita Sackville-West described in 1947 as the "peculiar genius of the English country house," the "knack of fitting in":

The house bespoke the sound workmanship which had gone into it; nothing had so far blunted the cut angles, gables, or mullions of the plate-glass windows (of which several projected into bays) or modified the new-quarried glare of the whole – which, by contrast, the lush green, wooded and pastoral, rolling Somerset landscape round it enhanced. Applegate promised to be much the same within as it was without, and was. Nothing rattled at night, even in a gale: the windows fitted, the doors shut properly. Neither the staircase nor any floor creaked. (17)

A twentieth-century phenomenon, Applegate is a modern, ostensibly sturdy re-creation of the historically vulnerable structure that formerly occupied its place: a farmhouse that had burnt to the ground one year before the construction of Applegate. Bowen's narrator introduces the absent farmhouse as a haunting absence through the sun that had "diluted into a misty film" and that "drew out an undertone that was there" (17). Rather than admit and be changed by the haunted past, however, "Applegate stood up to the hour, as it had to others" (17). Like Dinah's house, Sheikie's ultra-modern house seems to deny any connection to historical context. It is unhomely: "overlit," with curtains that "handsomely [sail] apart" when a cord is pulled: "a place to be left to go back to one's own home" (210-11). Dinah's house and Sheikie's house, like the cave-museum, the time capsule, and the country house-museum – are the prefabricated placeholders for an absent house,

its land, and its history. In narrating the empty gesture that these various placeholders make, Bowen attempts to contribute a more “real” type of preservation work.³⁸

Missing landmarks in the novel double the missing objects or souvenirs in the empty coffer that the women dig up. In the un-burial scene, the action appears on the page as follows:

It was there.

It was empty.

It had been found. (201)

The literal blank space on the page reinforces that the “It” that the women have found is absence and emptiness. In developing a theoretical relation between nostalgia and the souvenir, Susan Stewart writes that “The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia. The souvenir generates a narrative which reaches only ‘behind,’ spiraling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future” (135). In the case of *The Little Girls*, the *missing* souvenir accomplishes the opposite of what the found and kept souvenir does: it propels the characters “outward toward the future.” According to this logic, the missing objects enhance Bowen’s critique of nostalgia. The characters are denied access to objects that would take them back, repeatedly, to a non-repeatable time.

The emptiness of the time capsule, moreover, is put into sharp relief against the house in whose garden it is buried: a glass house called “Blue Grotto.” The utter

³⁸ Bowen’s attention to missing landmarks in this novel resonates with growing popular concern over the destruction of public monuments, such as the Euston Arch. In 1961, the British Transport Commission decided to demolish the Arch, a Roman artifact, in order to modernize Euston Station. The general public and architectural critics, including John Summerson, Nikolaus Pevsner, J.M. Richards, and John Betjeman voiced concern, but to no avail. In 1968, influential modernist architects Peter and Alison Smithson wrote a book about the history of the arch: *The Euston Arch and the Growth of the London, Midland & Scottish Railway*.

transparency of this biblically named house seems to mock the nostalgic fantasy of hide-and-seek that the coffer represents. If the empty coffer signals a resurrection at the site of the “grotto,” it is a resurrection that liberates the concealed objects from the narratives in which the girls attempted to contain them. In fact, not only are the objects liberated; so are the “reality” and “history” that those objects represented for Dinah. After the failed “un-burial,” the women sit uneasily together at Sheila’s house, and Dinah becomes increasingly agitated and eager to leave:

‘Your home,’ pointed out Sheila, ‘won’t run away.’

Dinah examined the speaker, before saying: ‘that’s what it *has* done, Sheikie.’ She took a shaky gulp at her drink. She added: ‘Everything has. *Now* it has, you see. Nothing’s real any more.’ (209, emphasis in original)

Dinah’s urgently nostalgic narrative, which had held in place the “reality” of her past and her home, is revealed to be fictitious and un-seal-able when she confronts the absence of the time capsule souvenirs. Propelled into the present and toward the future, Dinah finally submits and rejects her prior desire to recover the souvenir: “It might be better to have no pictures of places which are gone. Let them go completely” (216). Eibhear Walshe, building on Bennett and Royle, reads the emptiness of the coffer as metonymic for the emptiness of the past in general. “By characterizing the past as dangerously empty,” Walshe argues, “Bowen is extending her earlier preoccupations with isolation and unrootedness to a point of uncompromising bleakness, even nightmare” (156). Undoubtedly, the characters in the novel seem isolated and unrooted in the face of the

emptiness they encounter, but I would argue that there is an acceptance, through narrative enclosure, of this “bleak” emptiness as a new condition for a liberated mode of fiction.³⁹

Thematic absences further announce their symbolic value through Bowen’s structural and stylistic methods. The novel is decidedly partial and fragmented. Despite her commitment to the “realism of history,” it is difficult to visualize characters, places, or scenes in terms of the kind of “wholeness” generally associated with realist narrative fiction.⁴⁰ In terms of plot, a number of narrative trajectories begin only to disappear or remain unresolved: Dinah’s drafted advertisements for the newspaper (28-29), Francis’s desire to have a career in the Secret Service (26-7), the possible relationship between Dinah’s mother and Clare’s father (167).⁴¹ At the level of prose, Bowen’s sentence construction is relentlessly passive and her punctuation disturbingly interruptive. This style is typical of the modernist aesthetic that Bowen cultivated in her earlier novels, especially *The Heat of the Day*. Taken to a much greater extreme in *The Little Girls*, this style serves as a counterpoint to the structural enclosure of the 1914 part of the novel – a literary time capsule that seems, on the surface, to bury modernism and its historical context. Marian Kelly uses reader-response theory to interpret the flashback structure of the novel alongside the similar structure that Bowen used in her 1935 novel, *The House in*

³⁹ Marian Kelly describes the novel not as bleak or nightmarish, but in quite the opposite direction, as triumphant: “when faced with *absence*, Dinah is finally forced to see the past as past, as no longer present” (11). Kelly reads the final line of the novel as confirmation of Dinah’s triumphant discovery of the present in place of the past. Upon waking, Dinah uses the grown-up, present-day name of “Clare” instead of the childhood nickname, “Mumbo,” she asks, “‘Who’s there?’ ‘Mumbo?’ ‘Not Mumbo. Clare. Clare, where have you been?’” (12).

⁴⁰ Bowen’s realism might fruitfully be compared with that of Henry James – a writer whom Bowen read and admired a great deal. The open-ended conclusion of *The Portrait of a Lady*, for instance, resists narrative wholeness in such a way that, as Ned Schantz puts it, “short-circuits the flow of gossip narrative information, questioning the reader’s straightforward ‘right to know’” (30). With *The Little Girls*, Bowen’s tactics question not only the reader’s right to know narrative information, but the very possibility that full knowledge exists at all.

⁴¹ In her essay, “But One Isn’t Murdered: Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Little Girls*,” Sandra Kemp interprets these missing and abortive narratives as evidence of a perverse detective story that “contains internal relations and echoes that point to no meaning beyond the text” (131).

Paris. For Kelly, the flashback forces readers to experience the same isolation-inducing nostalgia that Dinah experiences, and the return to the present calls readers back to the present tense of the text and their own lives. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theory of reading, Kelly argues that Bowen's novel makes an analogy between reading and nostalgia: "reading literally displaces people: like nostalgia, it locates them elsewhere so that their surroundings cease to exist" (13). But the partialness of the flashback and the abrupt return to the present, for Kelly, prevent the reader from indulging freely in nostalgic reading practice and, instead, the reader is forced to "experience the disruption that nostalgia creates" (15). Kelly's analysis of the relationship between past and present vis-à-vis nostalgia and narrative is generally compelling but surprisingly a-historical. In order to comprehend the implications of Bowen's rejection of nostalgic reading practice, or, as I would put it, nostalgic narrative enclosure, it is necessary to consider the significance of the historical moment that this literary time capsule seeks to bury.

Near the end of the flashback, Bowen interrupts the text with a large image of the message on a birthday cake for one of Dinah's schoolmates:

Olive
Many Happy Returns
Of
The day
23rd July
1914

Just five days before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the beginning of World War I, "many happy returns" is a morbidly ironic if not entirely ominous message. Never again would the world be able to return to a time that was so historically innocent.

Bowen's flashback "returns to" or "digs up" this pre-war period only to reveal the emptiness of its promise to Olive of "many happy returns." The naïve happiness of this historical moment is accompanied by a naïve violence, morbidity, and recklessness that, placed in another year, might seem a normal part of childhood; in 1914, however, it becomes darkly prescient. The girls, for instance, try to blow up the bicycle shed at Sheila's house (96-7). And when they are playing on the beach, a boy named Trevor climbs up into a "vast iron drain-pipe, flaking with rust [...] [T]he thing had the look of being a sewer" (159). Dacey later recalls that she imagined that Trevor had never emerged, and she thought of his "wedged-in bones" (288). When the girls decide to bury a time capsule, they include bones and a note that is clearly childlike, yet ominous given its historical context:

We are dead, and all our fathers and mothers. You who find this, Take Care. These are our valuable treasures, and our fetters. They did not kill us, but could kill You. Here are Bones, too. You need not imagine that they are ours, but Watch Out. No wonder you are so puzzled. Truly Yours, the Buriers of This Box. (147)

In addition to the bones, each girl contributes one mystery item not revealed to the others. We later learn that Clare includes a gun and Sheila puts in a sixth toe that she had removed as a baby (242). There hardly could be a more troublingly ironic gesture as a prelude to the death and disfigurement about to descend on Europe with the start of the war.

Bowen hints at the literary significance of the naïvely violent time capsule with Dinah's mystery object: a volume of Shelley's poetry. Literature, it seems, is a failed guarantor of historical preservation, if not an outright source of violence. The girls'

inability to grasp the nascent violence of this moment in their past is foreshadowed when Clare has trouble reciting Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," a nostalgic poem about not being able to see in the present what once was visible in the past (80). Literature – especially Romantic poetry – does not help to clarify for the girls a significant relation between past and present. Realist novels are even less helpful. Dinah's mother, Mrs. Piggot, reads novels in the drawing room at Feverel Cottage⁴² at the cost of remaining connected with material, present-tense conditions in which she exists: "As for her surroundings, they were nowhere. Feverel Cottage, the sofa, the time of day not merely did not exist for Mrs. Piggot, they did *not* exist. This began to give Clare, as part of them, an annihilated feeling. She burned with envy of anything's having the power to make *this* happen. Oh, to be as destructive as a story!" (94-5, emphasis original). As a prelude to trench warfare, air raid bombings, and suburban development, Bowen depicts literary demolition. By enclosing this prelude in her own literary time capsule, Bowen narratively links that moment with the military, architectural, and artistic upheavals of modernism that followed.

The narrative enclosure accomplished by the flashback structure is, like every other enclosure in the novel, partial and challenged. In terms of plot, the middle section fails to reveal what seems from the first part of the novel to be the crucial piece of information: the contents of the coffer. Bowen does not reveal the contents until the narrative returns to the 1960s, and the revelation is decidedly anti-climactic (242). The flashback narrative is, like the rest of the novel, fragmented and difficult to visualize as any sort of meaningful entirety. Similarly to Spark's *The Girls of Slender Means*,

⁴² Feverel Cottage alludes to George Meredith's 1859 novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, in which the main female character, Lucy Desborough, goes mad and dies.

Bowen's flashback narrative reads like a newspaper that has been partially blotted out by raindrops, a radio station that comes in and out of tune, or a camera lens that moves in and out of focus. It mimics Dinah's perception of the picnic on the beach: she looks back, "up the long stretch, at the far-away picnic – which though in view, in miniature, was in hearing only in gusts and starts" (164). Rather than confer meaning on the other two parts of the novel, the flashback acts as a digression that, as Susan Stewart suggests, "stands in tension with narrative closure. It is narrative closure opened from the inside out. [...] Instead of offering the reader transcendence, the digression blocks the reader's view, toying with the hierarchy of narrative events" (30). The resounding emptiness, absence, and partiality that characterize the present-day parts of the novel are only intensified by the empty digression of the flashback. Although the literary time capsule appears to enclose the historical moment that was so pivotal for high modernism, the affect of fragmentation and emptiness in the novel as a whole challenges the finality of that narrative enclosure. To attempt in 1964 to lock modernism and its historical context in the museum vault, Bowen's novel suggests, is always to confront the impossibility of wholeness and closure.

Ultimately, *The Little Girls* critiques the impetus of narrative enclosure that defines country house and heritage culture in the 1960s. For Bowen, history, like life itself, is not clearly delimited. As Clare says to Sheila "Mistakes have histories, but no beginning – *like*, I suppose, history?" (299). Mingling with Clare's thoughts, the narrator takes this attitude toward history further in claiming its righteousness: "Chance, and its agents time and place. Chance is better than choice; it is more lordly. In its carelessness it is more lordly. Chance is God, choice is man" (306). The neo-sacred space of the postwar country house-museum is a public celebration of man-made choices, especially the

curatorial choices that allow certain narratives to emerge while others remain invisible or unheard. With the sentiment that “Chance is God, choice is man,” Bowen’s novel tries to re-locate the sacred in that which cannot be chosen, curated, and enclosed. Her novel remains defiantly open and porous, and in doing so, it preserves a space for that sacred chance to materialize.

Under Glass, Behind Ropes

In the grand entrance hall at Knole, one can inspect the holograph manuscript of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* cased in glass. Ironically, the novel anticipates its own museum-object status in a passage that captures the transformation of Knole from house to artifact collection:

Rows of chairs with all their velvets faded stood ranged against the wall holding their arms out for Elizabeth, for James, for Shakespeare it might be, for Cecil, who never came. The sight made her [Orlando] gloomy. She unhooked the rope that fenced them off. She sat on the Queen’s chair; she opened a manuscript book lying on Lady Betty’s table; she stirred her fingers in the aged rose leaves; she brushed her short hair with King James’ silver brushes: she bounced up and down upon his bed (but no King would ever sleep there again, for all Louise’s new sheets) and pressed her cheek against the worn silver counterpane that lay upon it. But everywhere were little lavender bags to keep the moth out and printed notices, ‘Please do not touch’, which, though she had put them there herself, seemed to rebuke her. The house was no longer hers entirely, she sighed. It belonged to time now; to history; was past the touch and control

of the living. Never would beer be spilt here any more, she thought (she was in the bedroom that had been old Nick Greene's), or holes burnt in the carpet. Never two hundred servants come running and brawling down the corridors with warming pans and great branches for the great fireplaces. Never would ale be brewed and candles made and saddles fashioned and stone shaped in the workshops outside the house. Hammers and mallets were silent now. Chairs and beds were empty; tankards of silver and gold were locked in glass cases. The great wings of silence beat up and down the empty house. (157)

Like the “tankards of silver and gold [that] were locked in glass cases,” Woolf’s manuscript would become part of the house that was its very subject, a house that “belonged to time” and “was past the touch and control of the living.” Just as the chairs on which centuries of royalty have reclined remain behind velvet ropes for the twenty-first-century visitor, the manuscript echoes but no longer contributes to the life of the house. The larger implication for literary history is that, alongside the history of seventeenth-century, monarchical England, twentieth-century modernism is sealed into the house-museum vault. With the donation of Knole to the National Trust in 1946, almost twenty years after the publication of *Orlando*, and five years after Woolf’s death, her experimental, fantastical biography of Vita-Sackville West became part and parcel of a public country house narrative that was anything but avant-garde. On display at Knole, Woolf’s novel is no longer about a house or a family, but part of a country house-museum. Postwar novels such as *Angel* and *The Little Girls* point, respectively, to the danger of over-investing in house-museum culture and to the impossibility of containing literary history within such museums. As my aristocratic “sighting” at Knole confirms, no

matter how much institutions like the National Trust keep objects under glass and behind the ropes, there is always an uncharted space, and the literary imagination is one way of creating and accessing it.

Modern Living: Mobility in Postwar Fiction and Architecture

Literature, film, and architecture transformed during the 1950s and 1960s to create a more mobile experience of domestic life. Although verticality and mobility had posed a threat to the promise of equality underlying Welfare State initiatives in the 1940s, these modern concepts were embraced in the 1950s and 1960s. Sam Selvon's 1957 novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, Colin MacInnes's 1959 novel, *Absolute Beginners*, and Joseph Losey's 1963 film, *The Servant*, took up mobility and verticality as aesthetic strategies and narrative tropes to revise the meaning of "home" in postwar Britain. Paralleling trends in architecture, these works used mobility as an aesthetic innovation, particularly in their treatments of urban settings; they pushed against formal boundaries with vernacular language, nonlinear narratives, handheld cameras, and expressionistic cinematography. Through experimental techniques, they investigated the extent to which residential mobility could secure broader freedoms in postwar society. Their explorations of characters' lives and domestic environments challenged the role of the novel as the art form that best captures the social experience and values of the home, just as architectural projects by figures such as Alison and Peter Smithson and Erno Goldfinger challenged assumptions that the traditional single-family home was the most appropriate form of dwelling for the modern, postwar era. Rather than lamenting the loss of stable, long-standing property, these cultural endeavours revived modernist impulses; they took as their impetus the promise of movement associated with the demolition of the past and the construction of the new.

Verticality and mobility emerge as related, distinctly modern phenomena in 1950s Britain. I use these terms together to indicate not only literal physical movement, but also

the desire for and faith in the possibility of social, economic, and cultural liberation that characterizes the period. Moving freely within a dwelling and among domestic spaces allows for vertical social advancement. In the built environment, an ethos of verticality and an appreciation for elevated mobility was expressed through the construction of high-rise tower blocks, such as Erno Goldfinger's Balfron Tower (1965-67) and Chamberlin, Powell, and Bon's Barbican Estate (1965-76), which symbolized a modern Britain that had left behind the strictures of wartime life.⁴³ These structures were striking vertical additions to a landscape that had been leveled by bombs. Such modernist projects were influenced by the interwar International Style, which valued verticality, spaciousness, and free circulation. In 1930, Le Corbusier stated categorically that movement was the most important concept in conceiving built space: "architecture is circulation" (Forty 87). The housing market, meanwhile, reflected new opportunities for upward mobility. Single-family home ownership transformed in the 1950s and 1960s from a social ideal of wartime reconstruction to a viable reality of vertical advancement for many. In 1951, 30 per cent of the population of England and Wales owned a home; in 1970, this number had risen to 50 per cent (Hanson 102). Shelagh Delaney's play, *A Taste of Honey*, and Alan Sillitoe's novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, depict the transformation of working-class families and communities facilitated by new possibilities for home ownership in this period. As larger portions of the population gained economic leverage, they moved house, and in doing so they demonstrated that, socially, they were moving up.

⁴³ In his essay on the tower block in contemporary British cinema, Andrew Burke characterizes the high-rises constructed in the 1960s as "primary symbols of the future." "However compromised and corrupt the building of tower blocks seems to have been," he argues, "they nevertheless serve as a symbol for the effort and necessity to think of the future and of change" (186).

While verticality and mobility signaled progress and opportunity for many, they were also, for others, a threat to the security promised by the Welfare State settlement. Homelessness persisted throughout the most prosperous years of the postwar period. There had been little public attention to homelessness in the first postwar decade, but this began to change in the late 1950s with the 1957 Rent Act. This legislation allowed the decontrolling of rents and opened up a portion of the rental market to private property development via owner-occupation, the seed for the right-to-buy program that was the hallmark of the Margaret Thatcher government's privatization scheme (Austerberry and Watson 54). Throughout the 1960s, and continuing into the 1970s, long waiting lists, discrimination by landlords, and the decrease of household size were obstacles for immigrants, large families, single women, and homosexuals looking for residential security. Sam Selvon's fiction chronicles the ways in which residential mobility could be a trap of horizontal stasis rather than an avenue for vertical advancement. Andrew Burke explains that the utopian promise of mass housing projects in the postwar period was fraught with contradictions:

The formal regularity of their modernist design facilitated construction on a mass scale, yet the demands for housing far outstripped production. As a result, the image of the modernist housing scheme, whether in the form of tower blocks or low-rise slabs, is at least initially invested with the allure of a modernity that for many remained out of reach. (180)

For some, therefore, the potential for vertical mobility translated into social advancement and cultural freedom, while for others it meant insecurity and uncertainty. For all, the idea of "home" changed dramatically.



Balfour Tower in the East London neighbourhood of Poplar
Source: *Londonist*



The Barbican Estate in the City of London
Source: *London-Londonborough Centre for Doctoral Research in Energy Demand*

Mobility and Stability as Domestic Values

The modernist conception of houses with little evidence of personal habitation – Le Corbusier’s “machines for modern living” – transformed from aesthetic ideal to emergency political measure as homes were destroyed by bombs and replaced by bomb-sites during World War II. In 1944, faced with a shortage of traditional building materials and skilled labour, the government instituted the Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act, which called for the quick, mass construction of temporary housing in order to accommodate citizens who had lost their homes. These prefabs were also intended to house demobilized veterans. Using prefabricated construction techniques championed by Le Corbusier in the interwar years, approximately 155,000 temporary houses were manufactured in or imported into Britain between 1945 and 1948.⁴⁴ Although the government envisioned this solution as temporary, most of the prefabs remained permanent fixtures. Tenants had access for the first time to high-quality internal furnishings and amenities: a kitchen-bathroom plumbing unit, electric or gas cooker, refrigerator, and drying-cupboard. The necessarily mobile condition of wartime life thus created an opportunity for technological improvement in home design. Such advancements had once been associated with the modernist ideals of efficiency and spaciousness that would encourage circulation and mobility within the home, but in the British wartime context, prefab construction and broader reconstruction initiatives harnessed technology to restore a relatively fixed and human-centered sense of home in a time of destruction and upheaval. The desire for stability, fixity, and human scale can be

⁴⁴ Le Corbusier saw prefabrication as one wartime practice that could be used, in peace-time, to revolutionize the housing industry across Europe: “In wartime the farsighted have realized immense possibilities in an alliance between the planners and industry. The war itself has bequeathed to the country a working plant. A quantity of the elements of housing can be produced in factories: dry assembly; the prefabricated house. Provision of housing will become the largest, the most urgent, the most fruitful item of the industrial program” (qtd. in Ockman, *Sur les quatre routes*, 14).

understood as a corollary to the desire for horizontality and community that defined reconstruction plans and projects.



Prefabricated house in Birmingham, constructed in 1945 (28 August 2001)
Source: *English Heritage*



Fully modernized kitchen in prefabricated house in Swindon (1947)
Source: *English Heritage*

After the inescapable mobility and impermanence of the war years, British architects conveyed their desire to reestablish stability by reviving a picturesque style and developing a distinctly English townscape theory. Architect Hugh de Cronin Hastings outlined this architectural position with a 1949 article for the *Architectural Review*, “Townscape: A Plea for an English Visual Philosophy.” Townscape theory, as Hastings explains it, favoured a picturesque, visual approach to architecture and careful town planning over a modernist architectural commitment to positive space, clean lines, and functional buildings. Recalling the Victorian rooms filled with historical artifacts and trinkets, Hastings’s picturesque theory valued the unique and the specific; it was dedicated to “giving every object the best possible chance to be itself” (115). Against modernist critiques of the incoherence of picturesque design, Hastings asserted that differences between unique individuals and objects should be valued for creating historical layers and hybridity that would become an English vernacular architecture: “One looks to see an English, a radical, modern aesthetic growing in the same way out of innumerable individual judgments [...]. A mass of precedents gone over creatively to make a living idiom” (119).⁴⁵ Townscape theory and the picturesque style, like many community-oriented reconstruction initiatives, sought to rehabilitate the individual as an indivisible entity rather than as a moving part of a war machine.

Even as architects, designers, and planners sought to convey a sense of stability after the war, the mobility afforded by modernization and enforced by exigencies of war became an unavoidable factor in ways of conceiving built space. In his discussion of the

⁴⁵ It is possible to understand postwar townscape theory and the picturesque as an example of what Jed Esty has described in *Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* as an “anthropological turn” that characterized British culture as the empire collapsed and external attention and exploration was re-directed inwards. My analysis suggests, however, that a more basic need to reestablish physical security and human scale in the aftermath of modern warfare can explain such trends effectively.

construction of the M1 motorway in the early 1950s, Peter Merriman explains that mobility gained a central role in the postwar built environment: “While earlier proponents of the picturesque had presented movement and travel as antithetical to picturesque ways of seeing and experiencing the world, movement lay at the heart of the neo-picturesque formulations of townscape and landscape” (87). Indeed, the *County of London Plan* (1943) predicted that the postwar era would be “the age of mobility,” because the war had made many people “mechanically minded”; many cars were to be expected on the roads (49, 84). Mobility in postwar reconstruction was also actualized in the process of planned demolition, which the government ordered on a large scale in the early part of the 1950s. The Town and Country Planning Act of 1947, which extended the power of public authorities to acquire and develop land, provided major funds for the clearing of land.

Major reconstruction efforts in London, Coventry, and Plymouth took advantage of the war as an opportunity to demolish over-crowded and dilapidated Victorian slums. Between 1955 and 1974, approximately 1.165 million properties were demolished in England and Wales (an estimated one in ten of all homes in the country), which necessitated the movement of 3.1 million residents, most in established working-class communities (Hanson 94-5). In the *County of London Plan*, planners describe how the beauties and graces of London “were overlaid, and a tide of mean, ugly, unplanned building rose in every London borough and flooded outward over the fields of Middlesex, Surrey, Essex, Kent” (iii). With “depressed housing” as one of the four major defects identified in the analysis of wartime London, the plan casts the demolition of such housing and the rebuilding of the city as “one of the great moments of history” (iv). Intellectuals such as Louis MacNiece celebrated the opportunities afforded by the London blitz to remove and rebuild neglected housing (MacNiece 102). Slum clearance

programmes instituted in the early 1950s moved traditional working-class communities out of inner-city areas to newly built properties on the outer margins of towns. The utopian vision for a rebuilt society inherent in demolition schemes was not without its disruptive effects on communities with long-established, if troubled, ties to particular geographical locations. Plays and novels by the “Angry Young Men,” including Alan Sillitoe’s 1958 novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, chronicle the effects of these transformations on northern working-class communities. Moreover, as planned demolition instigated a new wave of residential mobility that created opportunities for improved living conditions, it allowed the evidence of oppressive living conditions effectively to be erased from historical memory.

Mandates to relocate and rebuild in the 1950s and 1960s became an occasion for architects to inject a modernist philosophy into the British built environment, which had remained fairly isolated from modernizing trends in continental architecture during the interwar years. Alison and Peter Smithson, Erno Goldfinger, and Ivor and Jack Lynn were decidedly anti-historical in their vision for domestic architecture. The Smithsons – leading figures in the young, experimental British division of CIAM, Team 10 – pioneered the building philosophy known as New Brutalism, which aimed for a universal experience of basic building materials and domestic spaces. “What *is* new about the New Brutalism,” they explained, “is that it finds its closest affinities not in a past architectural style, but in peasant dwelling forms. It has nothing to do with craft. We see architecture as the direct expression of a way of life” (“The New Brutalism” 1; original emphasis). Although the Smithsons broke with past styles in some ways, they were also indebted to the architecture and design of the interwar period, which resisted the accumulation of things and unnecessary decoration within the home. Major figures of the International Style,

such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and the Bauhaus, made movement through space a central design tenet of their projects. They reversed prior mandates to “place solid objects” within negative spaces; instead, they “sought to utilize the aesthetic potential of space itself” (Kern 158).

The Smithsons’ projects aimed to reflect the basic needs and desires of the everyman. They were liberated from historical tradition and embraced the innovations of the machine age while remaining specific to their location and purpose. In 1953, at a CIAM conference at Aix-en-Provence, the Smithsons led a movement to reform the long-held goals of the organization – which had been established by Le Corbusier and Gropius – of planning according to strict zoning rules that would divide cities into specific areas for living, working, leisure, and transport. Instead, they argued for an ideal city that valued free circulation and mobility, in which boundaries between human activities were fluid or nonexistent, and dwellings were conceived as “streets in the sky” (see images below), which would “encourage residents to feel a sense of ‘belonging’ and ‘neighbourliness’” (Design Museum London).



Park Hill Estates, Sheffield, aerial view. Built by architects Ivor and Jack Lynn according to the Smithsons’ “streets in the sky” housing philosophy.
Source: www.urbanadventure.co.uk

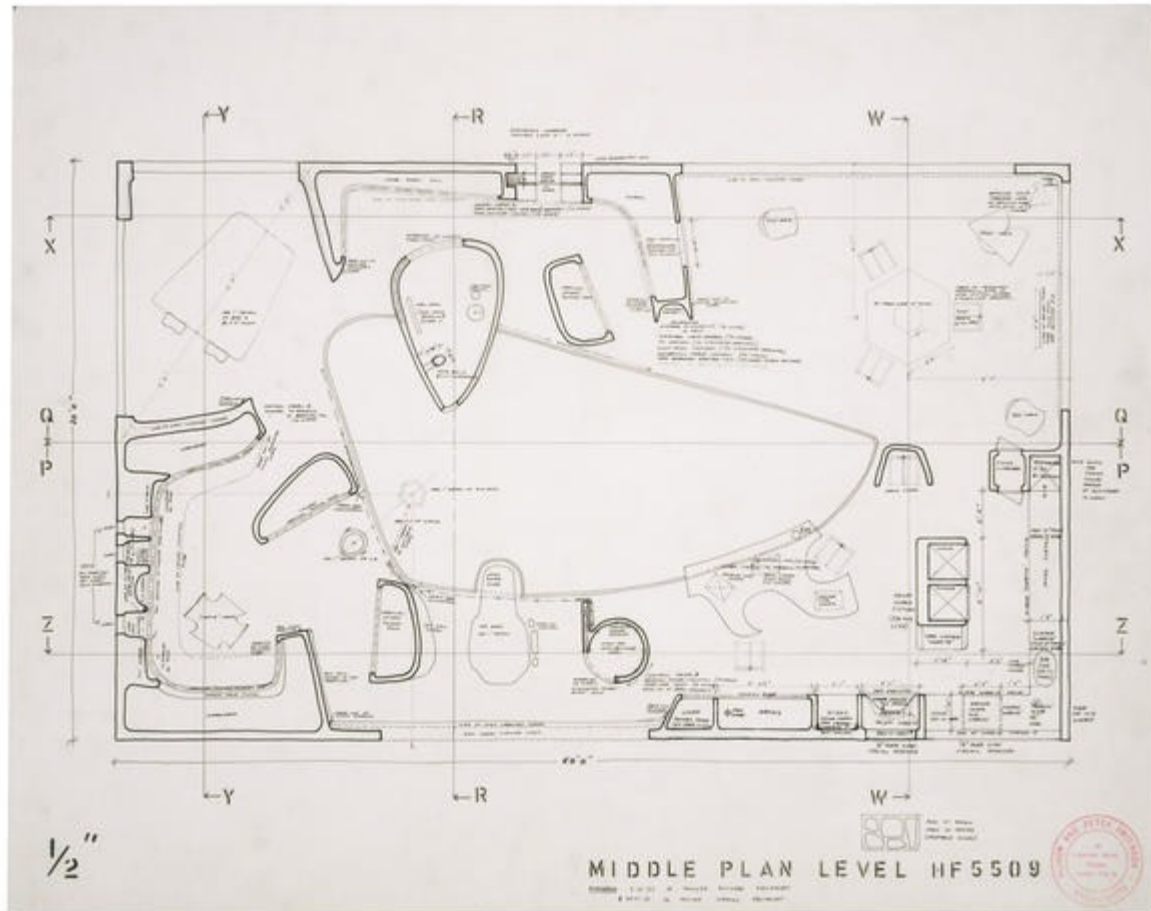


Corridor, or a “street in the sky,” Park Hill Estates, Sheffield

Source: www.urbanadventure.co.uk

One of the Smithsons’ first major exposures to the British public was the House of the Future, which they designed for the 1956 *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Exhibition using the most up-to-date technologies in prefabrication, mass-production, and engineering. The project reflected their desire to create, as architectural historian Nicholas Bullock puts it, “an architecture for this new world of post-war plenty, even if this meant breaking with traditional definitions of the past” (112). The Smithsons’ mission for the Exhibition was to imagine a house for 1980. Central heating, air conditioning, colour television, dishwasher, compact cooking appliances, and a self-washing bathtub and shower with a warm air drying system were built into the walls. Its design inspiration came from the advertising culture created and perpetuated by American popular magazines. The image of the perfect American home was especially compelling for British citizens who had until very recently been living under rationing restrictions. With each room constructed in one prefabricated piece of moulded plastic composites, like an airplane, the house reflected a new aesthetic of efficiency and disposability that characterized the consumer

culture of the “affluent society” in Britain. The Smithsons continued to develop their interest in disposability with the “Appliance House,” which they proposed in a 1958 article for *Architectural Design*. In this house, appliances would “be hidden in cubicles so that they could be replaced with more up-to-date models ‘without disrupting the appearance of the interior’” (Owens 21). While the House of the Future integrated new technologies and valued disposability, the overall composition also consciously referred to ancient precedents, keeping with the New Brutalist philosophy. Its complex moulded shapes echoed the carved caves of Provence, and the interior garden was inspired by the atrium houses of Pompeii. Without exterior windows, individual units were meant to be joined to create a compact community (“Alison and Peter Smithon: House of the Future”). The House of the Future expressed an architectural vision based not on the stability or rigidity of British historical precedents, but on the future-oriented mobility of mass-produced, expendable construction materials.

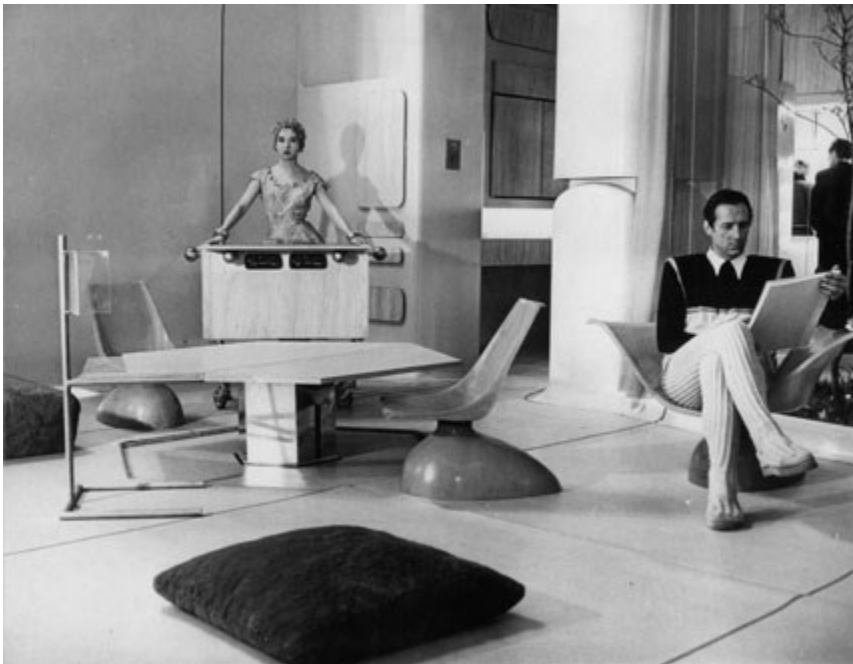


Middle Level Plan (HF5509) for House of the Future showing the arrangement of the furniture, Alison and Peter Smithson, 20 December 1955.

Source: *Canadian Centre for Architecture Collection*



House of the Future interior.
Source: *Design Museum London*



House of the Future interior.
Source: *Design Museum London*



House of the Future interior, including interior garden.

Source: *Design Museum London*

Like earlier modernist precedents, the House of the Future made space a positive element that enabled circulation and transparency for its imagined inhabitants. Without freestanding walls and doors enclosing rooms, sightlines were opened up; the interior garden could be seen from every part of the house, bringing a sense of the outdoors into the central, indoor space of the dwelling. Moreover, furniture innovations, such as a table that could be lowered into the floor, created new paths for movement within a house of modest dimensions (Owens 19). For the Smithsons, the physically mobile architecture of the House of the Future allowed for a domestic experience that was flexible and attuned to the technological present. These domestic values were tied to a set of ethical objectives that underpinned the New Brutalism. As Peter Smithson wrote in 1957, “Any discussion of Brutalism will miss the point if it does not take into account Brutalism’s attempt to be objective about ‘reality’ – the cultural objectives of society, its urges, its techniques and so on. Brutalism tries to face up to a mass producing society and drag a rough poetry out

of the confused and powerful forces which are at work” (“Thoughts in Progress” 113). The Smithsons’ New Brutalism forged a set of visual and material codes for a postwar generation that would enforce a new basis for architectural and moral authority: transparency, fluidity, the freedom to move and consume at will.

Absolute Beginnings: Rejecting History in Literature of the 1950s

Alongside the Smithsons’ approach to building, fictional works such as *Absolute Beginners*, *The Lonely Londoners*, and *The Servant* challenge notions of domestic normalcy perpetuated by postwar reconstruction projects. These works reject individual privacy, heterosexual partnerships, and the single-family home. They also challenge the preservationist ethos of country house and heritage culture that emerged at the same time as Brutalist architecture. In mid-century fiction, domestically mobile youth act as a foil to history, tradition, and stasis. Rose Macaulay’s novel, *The World My Wilderness* (1950), for example, traces the experiences of Barbary, a young girl who feels disconnected from the plans and sensibilities of older generations, especially her parents. She is out of place in and indifferent to the fixed values of adult domesticity. Her father tries to make her conform: “You know, my dear child, you’ll have to learn sometime to fit into the society about you” (92). She rejects conformity: “Barbary wondered what society he meant. Perhaps really she fitted into none” (92). Instead of abiding by the requirements of her father’s pre-war interior world, Barbary creates makeshift, mobile “homes” with friends and half-relatives in the war ruins around St. Paul’s Cathedral. Graham Greene’s teenagers in “The Destructors” are similarly “at home” when they are outside and mobile.

Shelagh Delaney’s play, *A Taste of Honey* (1959), and Alan Sillitoe’s novella, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1959) – as well as their respective film

adaptations by Tony Richardson – also feature young people who make a virtue of mobility as they resist the confines of an adult world. In Delaney’s play, after being abandoned by her social climbing mother, the teenaged Jo takes advantage of her homelessness and single woman status to establish an unconventional domestic arrangement with a homosexual textiles student who helps her prepare for having a baby. Like Colin MacInnes’s young Londoners in *Absolute Beginners*, Delaney’s teenagers use the forced mobility of homelessness as an occasion to create more fluid domestic values that appreciate a range of identities.⁴⁶ In *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, Colin uses the literal mobility of his body – he is a runner – to defy his incarceration at a youth corrective facility and assert a future-oriented individuality. Alongside architectural projects like the Smithsons’ House of the Future, these texts convey a desire for the freedom to move beyond the physical and social confines of an increasingly outdated reconstruction paradigm. These works, both fictional and architectural, create a new idiom for the postwar generation.

Although Colin MacInnes clearly aligned himself with the future-oriented, anti-traditional perspective of fictional teenagers and the Smithsons’ projects, he also believed that buildings communicate historical information that is valuable for the present. In a 1960 article, “The Englishness of Dr Pevsner,” he praises the influential architectural critic, Nikolaus Pevsner, who came to England from Germany during World War II and became a core member of British architectural circles. MacInnes admires Pevsner’s ability to capture England through his discussions of English buildings, their inhabitants,

⁴⁶ Colin MacInnes reviewed a production of *A Taste of Honey* in 1959 for *Encounter*. In the review, he praises the play for being “the first English play I’ve seen in which a coloured man, and a queer boy, are presented as natural characters, factually, without a nudge or a shudder. It is also the first play I can remember about working-class people that entirely escapes being a ‘working-class play’: no patronage, no dogma, just the thing as it is, taken straight” (“A Taste of Reality” 205).

and their histories. MacInnes voices a concern for the quality of information available through various contemporary media vis-à-vis Englishness, a concern he repeats throughout his essays. He asserts architecture as a reliable alternative source for English identity in the multimedia world emerging in the late 1950s and 1960s:

A paradox, among so many, in our society, seems to me to be the extreme difficulty, among the welter of informational media, of finding exactly what is going on: what England really *is*, and the lives of those therein. Films and TV tell nothing, radio very little, newspapers rare snippets, and plays and novels and social studies much, much less than they could. For any who may be likewise wracked by the pangs of a sociological hunger, Dr Pevsner offers a very rich fare indeed. (“The Englishness of Dr Pevsner” 125)

Alongside this commentary, MacInnes’s novel, *Absolute Beginners*, reads as a response to “sociological hunger” through an exploration of people and their buildings: an attempt to be an architecturally attuned novel that communicates “exactly what is going on: what England really *is*.” At the beginning of the novel, the narrator turns to see “new concrete cloud-kissers, rising up like felixes from the Olde Englishe squares” (9). This opening image roots the main character and the narrative within the context of modern postwar architecture. Just as Pevsner depicted a sense of England and Englishness in his county-by-county books describing British buildings, MacInnes offers a guide to his England by demanding that his reader pay attention to the built environment of London in *Absolute Beginners*.

MacInnes offers a vision for England in its era of rising affluence that takes advantage of verticality and domestic mobility. Against the ideal of individual and family

privacy promoted through most Welfare State reconstruction projects, *Absolute Beginners* imagines an England in which architectural boundaries are fluid, and from this structure of domestic space, other boundaries – sexual, racial, familial, artistic – also become malleable. Scholars such as Gail Low, John McLeod, and Susie Thomas have discussed the role of space and geography in *Absolute Beginners*, but they do so mainly in order to make an argument about race in postcolonial London. Low, for instance, “considers the social, cultural and symbolic uses space is put to in the narratives of Caribbean post-war migration in Britain. The literal movements of peoples, marked by the arrival of *Empire Windrush* in Tilbury in 1948, challenge us to think through the problematics of space, identity and collectivities that inform the post-war narratives of immigrations, emigration, home and exile” (159-60). McLeod also considers MacInnes in terms of narratives of postcolonial migration; he links the urban geography of MacInnes’s earlier novel, *City of Spades* (1957), and *Absolute Beginners* with the popular culture of immigrant communities: “MacInnes, an enthusiast of music hall, pop songs and teenagers, offers visions of an inclusive, cosmopolitan London built upon the emergent popular cultural activities of the city’s African and Caribbean newcomers, yet threatened by economic hardship, police hostility and – in *Absolute Beginners* – race riot” (27). Both lines of argument are productive for thinking about changes to the postwar British metropolis, and part of my discussion will engage with these scholars in exploring the domestic mobility of immigrants in MacInnes’s novel. My reading, however, does not focus on London as a postcolonial space but on how the novel formally and thematically depicts London as a site of a newly vertical built environment that enables potentially revolutionary physical as well as cultural mobility for a multi-ethnic, sexually diverse urban population.

London, in *Absolute Beginners*, is always moving, its pieces constantly circulating and recombining. Along the Embankment, the narrator observes new tower blocks as the transparent backdrop to a post-industrial urban landscape in which the boundaries between home, industry, travel, infrastructure, and entertainment are fluid: “I stood beside big new high blocks of glass-built flats, like an X-ray of a stack of buildings with their skins peeled off, and watched the traffic floating down the Thames below them, very slow and sure (chug, chug) and oily, underneath the electric railway bridge (rattle, rattle), and past the power-station like a super-cinema with funnels stuck on it” (39). The narrator, himself a moving part of the city, takes pleasure in the landscape. As an unnamed character, he is unattached and mobile in a basic literary sense instead of being tied to a family name, home, and lineage. His parents own a boardinghouse – a domestic structure defined against the permanent single-family home by temporary, mobile residence – inhabited mainly by immigrants from Cyprus. This house is just one of many spaces that the narrator moves among freely as he travels through London neighbourhoods: Pimlico, Belgravia, Notting Dale, Bayswater, Notting Hill Gate. For transportation, he walks or zips around on a scooter. Movement accelerates in the final pages of the novel through the narrator’s arrival at Heathrow airport, where “everyone [is] equal in the sky dominion of fast air-travel” (42).⁴⁷ There are very few still points in MacInnes’s urban novel, and architecture and geography only reinforce its sense of unceasing motion.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Bowen’s 1957 novel, *A World of Love*, also ends at an airport after an abrupt acceleration in the closing pages. Although Bowen’s novel – set in a decaying Anglo-Irish country house – is very different from *Absolute Beginners*, it also narrates the inevitable entry of a highly mobile modernity into the lives of people “stuck” in the past. Moreover, the arrival of an American by airplane in Ireland resonates with MacInnes’s interest in the arrival of American cultural media in Britain through new, mobile technologies: gramophone, television, and film.

⁴⁸ My attention to London as a “moving” city resonates with recent work in cultural studies that has emphasized the importance of circulation in the study of modern urban cultures. In the introduction to their 2005 volume, *Circulation and the City: Essays on Urban Culture*, for instance, the editors propose that

Within the landscape of the narrative, MacInnes's narrator provides on-going orientation that unfolds like a walking tour of West London. Providing specific geographic markers, he invites readers to know a "real" London neighbourhood: the Harrow Road, Grand Union Canal, a mainline rail station, a hospital, gas-works, Kensal Green cemetery, Wormwood Scrubs park, a prison, a sports arena, and "the new telly barracks of the BBC" (44). He characterizes the space as modern and thoroughly urban when he details "escape routes," which "cut across one another at different points, making crazy little islands of slum habitation shut off from the world by concrete precipices, and linked by metal bridges" (44). In his neighbourhood (Notting Dale, or "Napoli," as he nicknames it), the houses escaped bombing damage during the war but have also been overlooked by postwar slum-clearance programs. They are "old Victorian lower-middle tumble-down, built I dare say for grocers and bank clerks and horse-omnibus inspectors who've died and gone and their descendants evacuated to the outer suburbs, but these houses live on like shells, and there's only one thing to do with them, absolutely one, which is to pull them down till not a one's left standing up" (44).

Despite this case for demolition, and despite his calling the neighbourhood the "residential doss-house of our city," he remarks that, "however horrible the area is, you're *free* there!" (45, 46). Freedom, for the narrator, is only possible in a part of the city and

"circulation is not simply something that happens *to* the city, nor is it even something that happens exclusively *in* the city. Rather, the city is itself constituted by circulation. [...] Mobile technologies, mass transportation, mass media, and human migration (in its various forms) are perhaps the more visible structures of a city culture that is increasingly defined by vectors of travel, transit, migration, and other forms of mobility. The movement of people in and through the city – via the rapid transit of the daily commute, the rhythms of tourism, the push and pull of a diasporic community, or the more gradual shifts in population as processes of decay, gentrification, and cultural renewal transform some urbanites into nomadic subjects – means that cities often function as nodes on a global circulatory system through which capital, signifiers, commodities, and human bodies move in a seemingly unending stream" (Boutros and Straw 9). While it is not my intention to make claims about a generalized "city," the late 1950s London represented by MacInnes and Selvon is a clear example of the kind of city that Boutros and Straw might have been imagining in describing a city that is "constituted by circulation."

within buildings that lack a sense of historical continuity. In his multi-story block of flats, “The tenants come and go”; there are “regular squatters”; and the landlord (“an Asian character called Omar, Pakistani”) stays away as long as the rent is paid (46, 47). The narrator offers a guided tour through the building with descriptions of several squatters. On the floor below him, The Fabulous Hoplite, a fashionable homosexual, serves as an unofficial contact for gossip columnists.⁴⁹ Mr. Cool, a black man whose occupation is unknown, inhabits the first floor. Finally, Big Jill, a “Les ponce” [lesbian pimp] lives in a basement room (47-8). In a decidedly utopian vein, these characters move freely in and out of each other’s rooms, and up and down the vertical structure of the block of flats, helping each other and forming friendships, but never losing individual autonomy.⁵⁰

MacInnes’s novel strives to depict the ideal mode of dwelling – impermanent, fluid, multi-ethnic – for what could be called, generally, a culture of movement. In 1954, the literary editor for *The Spectator* coined the term “The Movement” to describe a group of writers including Kingsley Amis, Thom Gunn, Elizabeth Jennings, and John Wain (“In the Movement”). And in 1966, *Time* magazine picked up on an adjective frequently used in popular culture, “swingin’,” to describe London (*Time*). In *Absolute Beginners*, to thrive in the culture of movement starts with a rejection of housing that harkens back to Victorian values of domestic stability. The narrator delivers a scathing critique of the proliferation of “Houses”: “Victorian bourgeois palaces that have been made over into flatlets for the new spiv intellectual lot,” and renamed with titles such as “Serpentine

⁴⁹ As in Muriel Spark’s *The Girls of Slender Means*, gossip becomes a meaningful path to agency for those who are not part of normative plotlines: in the case of these two novels, spinsters and homosexuals.

⁵⁰ MacInnes’s vision of a free world inhabited by squatters and hustlers is undeniably romantic and naïve, despite the fact that he ends the novel with an account of the violent Notting Hill Race Riots. In Chapter Four, I discuss how this earlier perspective is countered by realistic depictions of a post-Welfare State London in which squatting is not a privilege but a necessary act of shelter-seeking once public housing has been largely privatized.

House,” “this ‘House’ thing being the new way of describing any dump the landlords want to make a fast fiver out of” (86). Against this “housed,” “spiv intellectual lot,” the narrator and his Napoli friends specialize in mobility: the circulation of information, people, and trends. They are journalists, hustlers, prostitutes, pimps, gossips, bisexuals, freelancers. They gather and dance at jazz clubs, where the narrator demonstrates to readers his up-to-the-moment knowledge of fashion. He carefully outlines the differences between various trends – the mods, trads, Teds, spivs, and so on – down to the details of fabric, cut, and hair parts (60-1). In sporting the latest garb and spinning the latest records, the characters he describes are decidedly anti-historical in their consumerism. They have to be; to be attached to the past in this context is to be slowed down, or to miss out on the current trends.

The narrator’s personal domestic space is also free of reference to the past – personal or cultural, in a more general sense. His room has minimal furniture and decoration, only one chair and several cushions spread out on the floor. No curtains hang in the windows. In this space, as in the Smithsons’ House of the Future, there is room to move, and sightlines are open within the flat as well as out into the city. He reinforces this lack of permanence by regularly culling his pop cultural belongings: “The only other objects are my record-player, my pocket transistor radio, and stacks of discs and books that I’ve collected, hundreds of them, which every New Year’s Day I have a pogrom of, and sling out everything except a very chosen few” (48-9). MacInnes’s novel expresses the ethos of efficiency and disposability that characterized the House of the Future and that of the demolition of things valued by Graham Greene’s teenagers. The novel thus depicts the possibility of taking part in consumer culture – the material base for the culture of movement – without developing the bourgeois habit of hoarding objects. This

new kind of object-world is defined not by attachment and preservation, but by circulation and disposal.

Absolute Beginners is one fictional example of MacInnes's general fascination with teenagers and popular culture. Within the limited amount of scholarship on MacInnes, his novels are often discussed in relationship to the youth culture movement and New Left sociological studies of the late 1950s.⁵¹ I am less concerned with the subversive political potential of youth culture than with the relationship between youth culture and the more mobile domestic values expressed in literary and architectural projects in the 1950s and 1960s. What makes the highly mobile teenager a suitable subject for the postwar novel? For MacInnes, teenagers have an explicit material connection to mobility and vertical social advancement because they had become the driving economic force in contemporary England. In several essays in the late 1950s, he issued warnings to adults to pay attention to teenagers. "[T]he 'two nations' of our society," he wrote in 1958, with a deliberate invocation of Benjamin Disraeli,

may perhaps no longer be those of the 'rich' and 'poor' (or, to use old-fashioned terms, the 'upper' and 'working' classes), but those of the teenagers on the one hand and, on the other, all those who have assumed the burdens of adult responsibility. Indeed, the great social revolution of the past fifteen years may not be the one which re-divided wealth among the adults in the Welfare State, but the one that's given teenagers economic power. This piece is about the pop disc industry – almost

⁵¹ See, for example: Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*; Nick Bentley, "The Young Ones: A Reassessment of the British new Left's Representations of 1950s Youth Subcultures"; and David Fowler, "From Jukebox Boys to Revolting Students: Richard Hoggart and the Study of British Youth Culture."

entirely their own creation; but what about the new clothing industry for making and selling teenage garments of both sexes? Or the motor scooter industry they patronize so generously? Or the radiogram and television industries? Or the eating and soft-drinking places that cater so largely for them? (“Pop Songs and Teenagers” 54)

In this ethnographic essay, MacInnes characterizes teenagers as a “new classless class” (47) with an unconsciously international sensibility. Their wealth, combined with an indifferent attitude toward adults and all issues that earlier generations in Britain invested with importance – class, history, the threat of nuclear warfare – leads MacInnes to argue that generational difference has revolutionary potential.

In *Absolute Beginners*, MacInnes defines the teenager subculture against an older, tax-paying population. Teenagers were financially mobile in the sense that they had income through a new labour market open to young people and yet they were minors, so exempt from taxes and from responsibility in general. Although MacInnes distanced himself from “the Angries” – whose work the narrator refers to as “cottage journalism” (81) – he shared with those writers a desire to characterize teenagers who were profoundly anti-authoritarian and preoccupied with the quest for individual power. As in Alan Sillitoe’s novella, *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, MacInnes’s narrator runs from the law, which is painted in undeniably stark colours (93). He has no interest in “the bomb” or fighting “their [adults’] wars” (23, 31). But whereas work by writers such as Sillitoe, John Osborne, and John Wain feature teenagers who are underdog champions of the working class, MacInnes’s teenagers are ambivalent about questions of class. Their desire for individual power has more to do with sexual, racial, and pop cultural preference – an identity – than it does with preserving the economic aims of the Welfare State.

As MacInnes wrote in 1960, “In contrast with the earlier generation (say, now aged 23-35) that was emancipated by the Welfare state and who, in spite of economic gains, still seem almost ferociously obsessed by class, the kids don’t seem to care about it at all” (56). The protagonist in *Absolute Beginners* is not a “hero” or even an “anti-hero” who works in a factory or a shop; rather, he is a media source. Mainly concerned with the accurate portrayal of contemporary England, MacInnes’s freelance photojournalist narrator has a sense of social justice rooted in the residential mobility – the domestic freedom – of all people. The narrator gets a chance at his version of vigilante justice when the Notting Hill race riots break out and threaten the freedom to move in and out of that neighbourhood. He is quick to jump into the fight and to document the injustice in his journalistic role. Free from the constraints of fixed, adult domesticity, MacInnes’s young narrator is fit to document the pressing issues of contemporary British life. Further, he is a newly appropriate subject for the novel as a form in a time when culture moves with increasing speed and justice depends on preserving the ability to move at will.

Teenagers, for MacInnes, are easily aligned with other major forces of postwar urban mobility: globalized culture and postcolonial immigration. In a 1957 essay for *Encounter*, “Young England, Half English,” he discusses the impact of American culture, especially popular music, on English teenagers. “[P]otently diffused by the cinema, radio, the gramophone and now TV,” American music encouraged English teenagers to identify more with an international youth culture than with any particular set of English cultural attributes (“Young England” 14). For MacInnes, this shift in identification is a sign of inevitable postwar de-nationalization: “if a people – like the English – sings about another people – the Americans – then this may be a sign that it is ceasing to be a people in any real sense at all. Perhaps this is happening: perhaps it has to” (“Young England” 15). As

Absolute Beginners and *City of Spades* suggest, the loosening sense of Englishness experienced by young people created an opportunity for new relations and identifications with the wave of African and Caribbean immigrants arriving in England in the 1950s. Both novels tell stories about a young white English male who immerses himself in immigrant communities. He connects with the immigrants through an appreciation for jazz, calypso, hustling, fashion, drug use, and sex. Gail Low observes that, in the 1950s, immigrants were prevented from fully assimilating into the dominant English community that continued to value the nuclear family and the private individual: "Discourses of Englishness insisted on the privacy of the national character; its recurrent pattern of symbolism centred on domestic and familial life. Immigrants, in contrast, were characterized precisely by their 'domestic barbarism' and 'incapacity for domestic and familial life'" (160). As MacInnes's narrators mix with immigrants in the fluid architectural spaces of his novels, they challenge a sense of Englishness based on the stability of individual identity, families, and their houses.

Unlike MacInnes's narrator in *Absolute Beginners*, who chooses to live a highly mobile lifestyle in a slum rather than with his parents, many immigrants had to move house repeatedly because of discrimination and lack of funds.⁵² The neighbourhood of Notting Hill was a popular destination for new immigrants in the 1950s because it was one of the few areas of London in which rooms would be rented to non-white tenants, if at highly inflated prices. Many people arriving from Africa and the Caribbean became victims of Peter Rachman, a notorious landlord who made millions by acquiring slum

⁵² In this sense, MacInnes's narrator is a precursor to Doris Lessing's protagonist in *The Good Terrorist* (1985), who gives up her bourgeois life for the squatter's existence. But whereas MacInnes maintains a fairly romantic depiction of this choice in 1959, Lessing provides a scathing depiction of such a move in the context of Thatcher's dismantling of the Welfare State.

properties – he owned 147 buildings in Notting Hill alone – and leasing rooms at extortionate prices to tenants who were intimidated if they complained or could not make payments (McLeod 49). Often forced to share living space and move frequently, immigrants were precluded from an Englishness based on domestic stability and a permanent sense of home.⁵³

Immigrant culture is one part of the culture of movement that forms the backdrop for literature in 1950s Britain. Sam Selvon's 1956 novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, and 1957 short story collection, *Ways of Sunlight*, are important precursors and intertexts for MacInnes's novels in their thematic preoccupation with domestic mobility and their generally mobile aesthetic. With the first sentence of *The Lonely Londoners*, Selvon establishes mobility as the dominant stylistic and narrative mode: "Moses Aloetta hop on a number 46 bus at the corner of Chepstow Road and Westbourne Grove to go to Waterloo to meet a fellar who was coming from Trinidad on the boat-train" (1). The verbs (hop, go, meet, coming), prepositions (on, at, to, from), place names (Chepstow Road, Westbourne Grove, Waterloo, Trinidad), and modes of transportation (bus, boat-train) make the sentence move grammatically and geographically; it is literally all over the place. Throughout *The Lonely Londoners*, and in the stories in *Ways of Sunlight*, Selvon's immigrant characters are defined by movement: walking ("liming," in Selvon's Caribbean dialect); drifting; riding the tube, bus, and train; arriving in England by boat; dancing; moving drugs and money; working for London Transport;⁵⁴ and moving in and out of

⁵³ In addition to Low and McLeod, who examine MacInnes's work in constellation with postcolonial writing, there are a number of scholars who have worked specifically on the immigrant cultures in 1950s London. See, for example: John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis*; Peter Kalliney, *Cities of Affluence and Anger: A Literary Geography of Modern Englishness*; James Proctor, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing*.

⁵⁴ Many West Indian immigrants who came to Britain in the 1940s and 1950s often worked in the service industries, especially public transport and hospitals (Proctor 4).

rooms. Preoccupied with trying to “get settled” (*Lonely* 1), characters arrive at Waterloo station and are immediately challenged to find permanent accommodation and employment. The narratives then trace this impermanence, expressing the theme and feeling of movement itself.

Heightened mobility – from room to room, building to building, job to job – is counterbalanced in Selvon’s work by an attachment to permanent landmarks within London: Waterloo, Piccadilly, Bayswater (“The Water”), as well as particular bus route numbers. As the characters learn to demonstrate geographical knowledge, they gain status within their community and a more fixed sense of identity within London: movement between landmarks becomes a means of social power. As in *Absolute Beginners*, the city at large becomes their “home,” a fact underscored by the permeability of their domestic spaces as rooms are unpredictably occupied by friends, extended family, and newly arrived immigrants. In the stories included in *Ways of Sunlight*, such as “Waiting for Aunty to Cough,” “Brackley and the Bed,” and “Basement Lullaby,” identity is not based on a private, individual domestic space, but on the relationships necessarily forged in spaces inhabited by multiple people.⁵⁵

Echoing *The Lonely Londoners*, *Absolute Beginners* engages the high modernist example of Virginia Woolf’s metropolitan writing through its experimental approach to the novel.⁵⁶ MacInnes uses few traditional literary methods for creating a narrative; plot and character development are subordinated to a structure of largely disconnected experiences that happen over the course of June, July, and August (which serve as chapter

⁵⁵ Like the boardinghouse residents in Patrick Hamilton’s *The Slaves of Solitude* and Muriel Spark’s *The Girls of Slender Means*, Selvon’s immigrant characters are limited both spatially and narratively as they are forced to share living quarters.

⁵⁶ For a thorough discussion of Virginia Woolf and Sam Selvon regarding modernist treatments of public metropolitan space, see Chapter 3 in Peter Kalliney’s *Cities of Affluence and Anger: A Literary Geography of Modern Englishness*.

headings). Selvon's novel is also unmoored from central plot concerns, structured without chapter breaks and arranged into a series of untitled, often unrelated episodes. The pace of *Absolute Beginners* is intensely fast, and the high-speed effect is actualized on the level of narration. One moment the narrator is discussing pop music in a club; the next, he is lost on the side of a road, his scooter out of gas. "Quite honestly," he remarks, "I don't know quite what happened then, because my next quite clear recollection was batting along a highway on my Vespa, which went on for miles and miles, I don't know where, until the petrol ran out, it stopped, and I was nowhere" (125). There is, moreover, no intervening narration to explain the transition. Narrative mobility is reinforced by the narrator's fast-moving, trendy diction.⁵⁷ The language of the novel is not arranged into polished, careful syntax; instead, it is conversational – as in the repetition of the colloquial word, "quite," in the example above – and punctuated by pop cultural slang, such as "dig," "cats," and "telly." The reader needs access to this trendy vernacular in order to keep pace with the narrative and its characters. Finally, the novel is characterized by mobility of content in the sense that it narrates the Notting Hill race riots within one year of their happening: news, through MacInnes's novel, travels quickly.

MacInnes poses an interesting intermediary between the high modernism of Woolf and the postcolonial modernist revision of Selvon in terms of both his relationship to Britain and the implications of domestic mobility that pervade his novels. Although he was born in England and eventually settled there, he spent his childhood in Australia and his young adulthood in Paris and then in Belgium during World War II. He chose

⁵⁷ MacInnes explained that the dialect he employed in *Absolute Beginners* was not meant to be a wholly faithful example of teenager slang, but it was based on his collective experiences with teenagers and popular culture. Nevertheless, using dialect to evoke a particular demographic was common literary practice in the 1950s. In addition to Selvon's fiction, in which he used a Caribbean dialect, novels and plays by writers associated with the Angry Young Men movement brought working-class slang into a broad public awareness.

England, Half English as the title for his early collected essays to comment simultaneously on the state of English culture and on his own relationship to that culture. “Born in London,” he remarked in 1962, “but not reared there for so many vital years, my feeling for the city has perforce become that of an insider-outsider: everything in London is familiar; yet everything in it seems to me as strange” (qtd. in McLeod 40). Although MacInnes was not a postcolonial immigrant in the way that Selvon was, as McLeod puts it, MacInnes wrote from a position of displacement (40). This position was reinforced by the fact that he identified as bisexual. His relationship to contemporary literary schools and trends, moreover, was similarly “that of an insider-outsider.” According to Alan Sinfield, MacInnes “was affiliated neither to the movement nor to the traditional literary establishment. [...] He harked back to the radical social concerns of Wells, Shaw and Orwell, and anticipated the new journalism of the 1960s – fast-moving, welcoming the new, launching into superficially unpromising topics” (169).⁵⁸ While MacInnes was not forced into a state of perpetual mobility or homelessness, like Selvon, a mobile lifestyle resonated with his background and vision for postwar England; he was attuned to anti-bourgeois promises of domestic and cultural movement. Any sense that *Absolute Beginners* is a straightforward homage to *Mrs. Dalloway* is ironically thwarted with the early revision of Woolf’s celebratory line, “in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; London; this moment of June” (166). In MacInnes’s version, the narrator comments on the “absolutely fabulous June day, such as only that old whore London can throw up, though very occasionally”

⁵⁸ In 1959, MacInnes remarked that he objected to critics referring to *City of Spades* or *Absolute Beginners* as “documentary” novels. Echoing the manifesto produced by filmmakers of Britain’s Free Cinema movement in 1957, he categorized his work as poetic realism: “I would thus describe *City of Spades* or *Absolute Beginners* – no doubt – flatteringly – as poetic evocations of a human situation, with undertones of social criticism of it” (“Sharp Schmutter” 147).

(13). Woolf's bourgeois romance of mobilized city life is transformed in *Absolute Beginners* into an energetic openness to the possibility of an England without racial, sexual, economic, artistic, or architectural barriers.

In his discussion of youth and popular culture in *Absolute Beginners*, John McLeod argues that

MacInnes creates a narrator who enshrines his optimistic and progressive vision of youthful London, but for the primary purpose of critique. In looking at London through his narrator's eyes, MacInnes attempts not only to explore critically the political shortcomings of new forms of popular culture nurtured by young people at the time, but also to examine at arm's length his idealistic and problematic visions of London which the [1958 Notting Hill Gate] riots had dramatically threatened. (50)

McLeod's argument works against Sinfield's contention that MacInnes "was virtually the only established writer to celebrate youth culture and try to develop its subversive potential" (169). While Sinfield's view is, at times, over-simplistic in its dogmatic commitment to reading MacInnes in light of Adorno's approach to culture and ideology, it is not clear that MacInnes is interested in exposing "political shortcomings of new forms of popular culture," as McLeod would have it. MacInnes's essays on popular culture, teenagers, and the novel, as well as *Absolute Beginners* and its precursor, *City of Spades*, indicate that youth culture *does* have a revolutionary social potential in his vision, and that this cultural movement should be documented and disseminated in order to break up the stagnant and uninformative adult cultural enterprises – including the novel. Although undoubtedly leftist, the revolutionary potential that MacInnes invests in youth culture is not about a specific political agenda or a high modernist appeal to liberal,

universal humanism. As Sinfield points out, “the humane values” of *Absolute Beginners* “are not tied back [...] into the humanism of the classics, but depend upon the absoluteness of the beginners” (171). In its anti-historical desire to begin from a clean slate, MacInnes’s vision has more in common with the work of the New Brutalist architects than with the agendas of his fellow “Angry” novelists. His teenagers are revolutionary because they demand and create social movement.

1950s writings by MacInnes and Selvon signal a renegotiation in Britain of the relationships among the novel, the home, and history. Young protagonists are removed by a generation from the exigencies of wartime living. Welfare State reforms are taken for granted – and sometimes mocked. Against the weighty nationalist rhetoric of the war years, these works express a desire for individual freedom and take pleasure in newfound possibilities for physical and economic verticality. Moreover, they do not take themselves too seriously: *Absolute Beginners* and *The Lonely Londoners* both end with the sound of laughter in place of clear narrative closure. Turning away from history, and from the desire to find comfort and stability in buildings and literary works that announce historical continuity, these texts are open to the future and on the move.

MacInnes summarized this irreverent attitude toward the seriousness of a weighed-down, closed society in thinking about teenagers in 1958:

Contemporary England is peculiar for being the most highly organized country, in the social sense, for ensuring the moral and material welfare of everybody – pullulating with decent laws, with high-minded committees, with societies for preventing or encouraging this or that – and yet it has produced, in consequence, the *dullest* society in western Europe: a society blighted by blankets of negative respectability, and of dogmatic

domesticity. The teenagers don't seem to care for this, and have organized their underground of joy. ("Pop Songs and Teenagers" 58-9)

As architects such as the Smithsons and Ivor and Jack Lynn created housing that, in a similar fashion, rejected the heaviness of the past, "underground joy" would become distinctly above-ground in the vertical tower block. The Smithsons' notion of "Streets in the Sky" – actualized in projects such as Ivor Smith and Jack Lynn's 1961 Park Hill Estate in Sheffield – celebrated an open, permeable domestic architecture unencumbered by the traditional, bourgeois attachment to the single family house.

While laughter is, on the one hand, a response to the oppressive seriousness of history and bourgeois conventions, laughter is also posited in these works as a coping mechanism for the loneliness associated with the absoluteness of beginning without historical moorings. In Selvon's poignantly titled *The Lonely Londoners*, a sense of isolation and detachment hovers over the characters; in an environment moving away from history, as Selvon's narrator observes, "People in this world don't know how other people does affect their lives" (*Lonely* 62). Trying to find Hampstead Heath with his girlfriend on a rainy night, the narrator of Selvon's short story, "My Girl and the City," gets lost. Loneliness is a bi-product of a world that constantly is moving, where it is difficult to fix one's place. "What is all this," the narrator asks, "what is the meaning of all these things that happen to people, the movement from one place to another, lighting a cigarette, slipping a coin into a slot and pulling a drawer for chocolate, buying a return ticket, waiting for a bus, working the crossword puzzle in the *Evening Standard*? [...] Motion mesmerizes me into immobility" ("My Girl" 171-73). The search for the Heath amidst the whirring chaos of London is echoed in *Absolute Beginners* when the narrator expresses a longing for "wide, open, lonely spaces" (90).

Tony Richardson, taking up the theme in his film adaptation of Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, translates the problem of lonely space into a formal consideration through the medium of cinema. Colin, the protagonist, tells a girl that he always wanted to get lost, but then realized that you cannot get lost. Richardson explores this desire for and thwarting of freedom through his use of the long shot. On several occasions, Colin is pictured running with an extreme long shot. To the viewer, he is almost imperceptible, almost lost, yet the camera tracks him; the long shot offers only a guise for freedom. In these works, the desire for freedom and movement brushes up against the threats of isolation, loneliness, and a dizzying mobility without meaning. In "My Girl and the City," Selvon offers a solution to the conundrum of historical attachment that unites the built environment with the architecture of a story, effectively calling for literature that creates new histories: "One must *build* on the things that happen: it is insufficient to say I sat in the underground and the train hurtled through the darkness...." ("My Girl" 176; emphasis mine). Unlike the high modernist desire to "trace the lineaments of motion itself" (Marcus 2), such as Virginia Woolf's deployment of syntax to outline the patterns of consciousness, 1950s writers such as Selvon and MacInnes use architectural, vernacular, and stylistic mobility in order to capture the "things that happen" and build a new idiom accordingly.

Mobility as Mastery in British New Wave Cinema

Just as the British novel of the 1950s was transformed by writers like MacInnes and Selvon, British cinema of the period was reinvigorated by a return to the modernist obsession with motion. Cinema, at its inception, demonstrated the revolutionary conception of infinite and mobile space that Einstein's theory of relativity defined. As a

spectacle of motion, cinema “broke up the homogeneity of space” by manipulating it for the viewer: changing lens angles, moving the camera in various ways, editing, filming “far-away” places (Kern 142-3). Often represented by early observers as a kind of transport, cinema was literally understood as “locomotive,” an association reinforced by the first film shown to audiences in 1895: the Lumière brothers’ train pulling into a station, *Arrivée d’un train en gare à La Ciotat* (Marcus 19). The metaphysical implications of cinema were far reaching, as Laura Marcus explains in her comprehensive study of writing about cinema in the modernist period: “the writings of many early film critics and commentators revealed an acute awareness not only of the relationships between filmic motion and the modernity that they inhabited, but also of the need to articulate new understandings of vision and identity in a moving world” (5). In the early decades of the twentieth century, cinema was a profoundly effective medium for expressing a new relationship to space and time.

New Wave British films of the late 1950s and 1960s refer back to the early history of cinema by foregrounding the unique qualities of the medium. For these postwar filmmakers, however, mobility was not an isolated spectacle. As with postwar architecture, the fascination was not with machines per se but with the social implications of those machines. Leading the movement in Britain were three young filmmakers – Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz, and Lindsay Anderson – who organized the Free Cinema series at the National Film Theatre in 1956. The printed statement for the Free Cinema series emphasized “the poetry of everyday life,” highly subjective and personal filmmaking, and freedom and democratic rights for all people (Hughson 43). Stylistically, the filmmakers were influenced by French art house techniques that drew attention to film as a mechanical medium: speeding up the film, jumbling chronology through jump cuts

without clear narrative cues. Films such as Karel Reisz's documentary *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1958) and Tony Richardson's film *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) demonstrate the New Wave interest in mobility as a special cinematic capability. Both use on-location shooting, with highly mobile and often handheld cameras. Scenes revel in the movement of human bodies and objects. Actors attend jazz performances and youth dances. They play games, run, ride in automobiles and buses, go on carnival rides, and go shopping. Richardson emphasized the socio-political importance of cinematic mobility, moreover, when he stated that "films should be an immensely dynamic and potent force within society" (Hughson 43).

By depicting domestic themes and real social issues with a mobile and unsettled aesthetic, New Wave filmmakers helped to reframe the normative values that had defined home, family, community, and identity through postwar reconstruction culture. Many of the films produced by the New Wave directors were adaptations of "kitchen sink" plays and novels by the Angry Young Men, including John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe, Kingsley Amis, John Braine, and the "angry young woman" Shelagh Delaney. As with these writers, the Free Cinema filmmakers were interested in recasting the social documentary tradition established by John Grierson and George Orwell in the 1930s to depict working-class life. According to John Hughson, the aesthetic preoccupation of the Free Cinema directors distanced them from the social documentary tradition: "Lindsay Anderson clarified the difference by re-defining the achievement of the Free Cinema as 'poetic realism.' According to Anderson, 'the best realist art should not remain at the level of mere reportage but should transform its material, into "poetry'" (Hughson 43). For Andrew Burke, the cinema of this period should be understood as distinctly modern and as a corollary to the modernist architectural projects that defined the era: "the realist

impulse in contemporary British film should be linked not to older forms of life and community, but to the experience of the modern itself and the built space of modernity” (179).

Joseph Losey’s 1963 film, *The Servant*, both contributes to and departs from the Free Cinema component of the British New Wave. Adapted from Robin Maugham’s 1948 novel, *The Servant* was the first of three collaborations between Losey and Harold Pinter, who wrote the screenplay. Like work by Richardson, Anderson, and Reisz, Losey’s film is characterized by a highly mobile camera: it is frequently moving throughout takes, and shots are taken from a wide range of angles. Although depicting a recognizable social world, the film departs from the documentary tradition in the poetic sense that Anderson identified: it is intensely expressionistic, using lighting, depth of field, diegetic and non-diegetic sounds to establish the ominous psychological tone of the narrative. Thematically, however, Losey’s film does not exhibit the same overt political project as the films of the Free Cinema directors.⁵⁹ Although *The Servant* depicts a power struggle between an aristocrat and his working-class servant, the film is not anti-authoritarian. By comparison, films such as Richardson’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* announce their working-class, anti-authoritarian agendas directly through their anti-heroes’ dialogue. Interpreting *The Servant* within the intersection of architectural and cinematic innovation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I argue that the film uses verticality and mobility to express a new postwar domestic order.

⁵⁹ The major films of the British New Wave have been discussed frequently by scholars in relation to their overt working-class politics. See, for example: Phillip Gillett’s *The British Working Class in Postwar Film*; John Hughson’s “The Loneliness of the Angry Young Sportsman”; Adam Lowenstein’s “‘Under-the-Skin Horrors’: Social Realism and Classlessness in *Peeping Tom* and the British New Wave.”

The Servant depicts the gradual immobilization of the aristocracy – literally and socioeconomically. As against MacInnes’s narrator and Selvon’s immigrants, the aristocratic Tony stays almost wholly indoors, transforming from a person who makes active contributions to society into little more than a decorative household artifact. Tony’s transformation is ensured by his attachment to the main space of the film, the Victorian row-house that he is “lucky to get,” a phrase that reveals his preservationist stance and his opposition to the demolition of historical precedents to make room for updated, contemporary buildings. Although he stuffs the house to the brim with neo-classical paintings, gilt-framed mirrors, rococo furniture and decorative objects, Tony is confronted time and again with the pressures of modernization. Foreshadowing his fate and that of his house, the first shot of Tony shows him asleep on a chair, the house empty of all furnishings. The sparseness of the empty room, the open doors, and naked light bulb all gesture toward modernist architectural principles of positive, functional space. That Tony’s body could be a dead body in this interior landscape suggests his ultimate inability to modernize, to keep pace with a newly mobile Britain. The narrative recounts a postwar aristocratic naivety; he is attracted to the modern but unsure of how to be modern. His follies are at once self-destructive and the butt of a joke for Barrett and his mod girlfriend, Vera. Recalling the end of “The Destroyers,” the helplessness of those hanging on to a Victorian sense of house and home is merely a source of laughter for those who have more mobile, modernist sensibilities.



The Servant: the first shot of Tony, asleep in his still unfurnished house.

In *The Servant*, the aristocracy has become trapped in its glorification of the interior. The aristocracy maintains itself only so far as it owns houses, objects, and the land to preserve its way of life. A scene at Tony's parents' estate frames Tony, his fiancée Susan, his mother, and father standing like sculptures or pieces of furniture in an antiquated drawing room. The family, like the Marchmains in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, are perennially inside, insular, and behind the times. When Susan tells Tony's parents about his involvement with a project to clear jungle in Brazil in order to build cities, they seem to have little interest in, let alone knowledge about, South America. Tony's mother remarks that she spent some time "in the Argentine" when she was young, and she insists that "South American cowboys" are called "ponchos," despite Susan's attempt to explain that a poncho is a piece of clothing. Tony's father, meanwhile, is a caricature of the English gentleman, a Colonel Blimp figure who has lost touch with

the contemporary world and can only participate in conversation by asserting the way it used to be in his day.



Tony, Susan, and Tony's parents are unmoving fixtures in a snowed-in, Georgian interior.

The comedy of the scene is shared by Tony and Susan, who laugh privately at his parents, but the entrenchment of this old generation in antiquated, immobile ways proves too deep for its offspring to escape unscathed. As the film progresses, Tony's house seems to pull him inside permanently. Although Tony does leave his home, the viewer sees him outside only a handful of times, either pulling up to his house in a Mercedes or standing in front of the door, about to enter, obviously put out by the weather. Only one scene featuring Tony takes place outside: he and Susan play in his parents' snow-covered sculpture garden. Even here, the frozen landscape and the immobilized sculptures are metonyms of the limits facing Tony and Susan and the aristocracy, writ large, in postwar Britain. In this sense, the immobile quality of Tony, his family, and their estate recalls the crisis of country houses and the rise of heritage culture in the postwar period. Aristocratic

culture is no longer actively contributing to history, but has become a set of objects to be displayed and curated. In the case of *The Servant*, Losey gives curatorial power to the working-class character, who takes control of Tony's house and things to create a mobile, modern domestic space.

The opening of the film foregrounds the significance of structural modernization when the camera pauses on a crest before settling on the servant, Barrett: "By Appointment to the Late King George V Sanitary Engineers." Recalling Greene's gang of teenagers, with their preference for structural engineering over architectural ornamentation, Barrett's identification with the sanitary engineers links him explicitly with the functional principles that drive modern home design. Barrett's modern authority is further established by showing that, unlike Tony, Barrett has command over indoor and outdoor spaces, and he can move easily between the two. The first take of the film tellingly locates Barrett on the street walking assuredly toward Tony's house. He demonstrates a mastery of transportation by regularly going to and from the train station, as well as a competence in Britain's new consumer culture by going shopping. Barrett is also mobile within England, having moved from Manchester to London in order to take the post with Tony. Within the house, Barrett is constantly moving in and out of rooms, opening doors, and appearing unexpectedly.

The master-servant relationship is reversed in the film as Barrett gains control over the interior of the house. The conflict between the two men is worked out through room use, décor, cooking, bodies and sexuality, and the vertical axis of the staircase. Barrett and Vera misuse purpose-built rooms, and in doing so, they disrupt Tony's control over the house. In the Victorian home, each room is designed in order to enclose and regulate a particular function: sitting, drawing, dining. Modernist architecture, with its

emphasis on spaciousness and open-plan layouts, removes these kinds of restrictions on room usage. In *The Servant*, Vera's pervasive, uncontained sexuality within the Victorian house – at Barrett's behest – amounts to a scandalous misuse: she seduces both Barrett and Tony on the kitchen counter, makes love to Tony on the living room chair, kisses Tony while standing against the wall in the corridor, secretly shares Barrett's bedroom, catches Tony off-guard by using his bathroom. The disruption is complete when Tony and Susan return earlier than planned from a weekend in the country to find Barrett and Vera using Tony's bedroom. Modernist sexual expression throughout the house is set against the inhibited sexual relationship between Tony and Susan. When they try to have sex on the floor of the living room Barrett interrupts, and Susan angrily leaves the house. Tony and Susan are denied the ability to modernize, as well as to reproduce, reinforced by the fact that they live in separate houses and have separate rooms when they visit Tony's parents. The rooms that once ensured mastery over domestic space by containing undesirable elements become either prisons for the aristocrats or sites of modernist disruption for socially mobile youth.

The conflict between Vera's and Barrett's sexual liberation and Tony's impotence is reinforced by the way the film uses the body, especially limbs, to distinguish between the two men. Barrett's functioning hands and feet allow him to move freely and maintain domestic power. As Tony and Barrett first walk through the empty house, Tony has his coat draped over his shoulders, effectively removing his arms and rendering him ineffective as a decorator in the proto-modernist interior space. Mirrors – representing Barrett's visual command of the house – often distort Tony's body, leaving a hand out of the reflection, which the camera captures uncannily in the foreground. When Barrett goes away for a weekend, the house quickly falls into disarray, and the camera rests ominously

on Tony's single, limp arm. Barrett's and Vera's feet, isolated in numerous shots, are always unimpeded. Tony's feet, conversely, are shown only as he hurries inside to escape the bad weather and then thawing in hot water that Barrett has provided. Vera's arms and legs exert sexual power over Tony, who feebly admonishes her for wearing a skirt that is too short before giving in to her seductive overtures. Barrett's functioning, mobile body gives him domestic power that allows him to redecorate Tony's house according to his anti-aristocratic, modernist principles.



Tony's winter-weary feet soaking in water provided by Barrett.

As Barrett takes charge of decoration and cooking, he comes into conflict not with Tony but with Susan. Although she attempts to diffuse Barrett's influence on household management by contributing to the décor, he reverses everything she does. Barrett transfers her flowers from Tony's room to the corridor, and he removes her spice rack from the kitchen. Their antagonism culminates when Susan arrives at the house unannounced while Tony is out. She attempts to assert authority over Barrett, ordering him to collect packages from the taxi, fill a vase with water, and light her cigarette. The

packages contain cushions, which she litters over the chairs and sofa. She asks Barrett if he thinks he goes with the colour scheme; before he can reply, she tells him that she does not care what he thinks. Susan's attempts to make Barrett, rather than Tony, powerless within the house, are ultimately defeated when Barrett introduces Vera into the house. He mobilizes Vera's sexuality to exert control over Tony and remove Susan from the equation. Susan's absence allows Barrett to modernize the space more freely.

A modernist portrait and radio shift location throughout the film, symbolizing Barrett's ultimate, modern control over the domestic values that govern the space. Before Barrett has gained control over the house, Tony bursts into Barrett's room; Tony angrily accuses Barrett of leaving tea dregs on the carpet and orders him to clear them up. A neoclassical sculpture mirrors Tony, and the portrait mirrors Barrett; their aesthetic sensibilities face off. As Tony and his domestic values lose ground, Barrett's things shift throughout the house: the painting sits haphazardly on a chair and the radio disrupts the display of the candelabra. Finally, the painting and radio become permanently installed in the dining room. In the foreground, the viewer witnesses the new domestic order of the household: the two men sit together at the table, eating the meal that Barrett has prepared.



An aesthetic conflict begins.



Barrett's portrait and radio move into Tony's space.



Barrett's new domestic order, permanently installed.

Barrett's control over the staircase is the most potent proof that hierarchies have been reversed in the film. Staircases allow vertical mobility within a house. Although Tony occasionally is positioned above Barrett, Barrett's total dominance and vertical advantage ultimately prove unquestionable. Losey foreshadows the symbolic power invested in the staircase with the first interior shot of the house, which focuses on the staircase, then tracks backwards to capture Barrett as he climbs a few steps and commandingly takes hold of the banister. The staircase lurks menacingly in the background of a deep focus shot when Tony calls for Barrett; its presence undercuts whatever domestic authority Tony is trying to assert. A number of crucial scenes take place on the staircase. When Tony and Susan discover Barrett and Vera in Tony's room, Barrett's shadow appears at the top of the stairs in a dominating pose. The shadow stands between Tony and Susan. It looms over Tony, who grips the staircase fearfully and submissively. Even during the lengthy scene in which the two men appear to be on equal

social footing, Barrett asserts his dominance using the staircase, a dominance reinforced by the extreme, high-angle camera position that places Tony at a disadvantage. They play a ball game on the stairs; after Tony breaks a vase, they change positions on the staircase, a reversal mirrored by the dialogue in which Barrett orders Tony to fix drinks for them. In a game of hide-and-seek, Tony hides upstairs, terrorized by Barrett's authoritative voice as he climbs the staircase. Finally, the last take announces Barrett's successful vertical mobility against Tony's horizontal impotence: Barrett walks slowly up the stairs, gripping the banister, while Tony lies on the landing, passed out from alcohol and drugs, imprisoned by the staircase bars.



Vertical advantage foreshadowed.



Tony breaks a vase, demonstrating his inability to function in the vertically superior position.



Barrett claims vertical advantage; Tony performs the servant role.



Barrett as master of mobility.



Tony in his horizontal prison.

Losey's film has received a limited amount of attention from critics in recent years. Instead, films by the Free Cinema filmmakers have been favoured in scholarly work because they allow discussions of progressive filmmaking techniques rooted in the

Griersonian documentary tradition alongside postwar working-class politics. While it is possible to read a progressive politics in *The Servant*, as I have done in part above, it would oversimplify the film – and the political currents of the time – to argue that it is simply an allegory for rising working-class social power. Several scholars have pushed against allegorical, class-based readings of Losey’s film. For Richard Combs, “Part of the richness of *The Servant* is the indeterminability of its subject (even Losey couldn’t say what, exactly, it was about)” (48). Combs wonders whether “the master-servant reversal is an incident in the class war; or something more spiritual, mystical, ghostly?” (48). Indeed, as with MacInnes’s narrator, Barrett is not a working-class hero or anti-hero; he even refers to himself as “a gentleman’s gentleman.” Tom Sutpen takes Combs’s observation of ambivalence further, arguing that matters of class are “in no sense [...] anything more than a vague underpinning [...]. This is a film about power, in its most basic and consuming forms,” what Sutpen later describes as “the savage destruction of one man’s will at the hands of another” (2). Politics and social allegory, according to Sutpen, are not the subject of the film, and to make them so detracts from its real strengths.

While I agree with Combs and Sutpen that the film does not have a dogmatic message about class politics in the way that many Free Cinema films did, Losey clearly is interested in the artistic potential inherent in the decline of the aristocracy and upward mobility for the working classes. As with Losey’s other collaborations with Harold Pinter, *The Accident* (1967) and *The Go-Between* (1971), the fate of the aristocracy is conceived as a punishment for sexual presumption and rendered by a harsh immobilizing force. In *The Accident*, for instance, an aristocratic Oxford student is killed in a car crash after it is announced that he will marry the woman with whom the two other main male characters are obsessed. But the anti-aristocratic strain in Losey’s films is not paralleled by

narratives or rhetoric of working-class ascendancy. While a working-class character like Barrett assumes domestic, sexual, and psychological dominance over his aristocratic counterparts, that dominance leads not to Welfare State reforms but to a hedonistic playground in the former bedroom at the top of the aristocratic house. With the architectural philosophy of the New Brutalism in mind, it is possible to read *The Servant* as a radical return to “primitive” domestic arrangements within the future-oriented, modernizing house.

Barrett’s takeover of Tony’s house indicates that, in 1960s Britain, mastery over domestic space “defeats” an aristocratic mastery over time. Like MacInnes’s novels and the Smithsons’ House of the Future, the film suggests that the modernizing moment of the “affluent society” works against the strength of historical precedent by promoting openness, fluidity, and youth. The aristocracy, with its time-bound identity, is ultimately no match for those who can keep up spatially. Indeed, the last shot of the film is a still shot focused on the antique grandfather clock, which has stopped keeping time. Barrett’s class status – a more evident concern in Maugham’s novella – is less important than his demonstrated ability to modernize and thrive in culturally mobile Britain. Architecture and décor exert as much of an influence in this film as class politics do in films such as *Room At the Top* (1959) and *Look Back in Anger* (1959). As Houston and Kinder argue, “Losey’s visual embodiment of Pinter’s rooms makes them a living force in the drama. Images are framed by mirrors, railings, windows, arches, and doorways, suggesting that the environments, like the social rules, impinge upon and reshape the lives of the characters” (24).

Barrett’s abilities do not make him a sympathetic hero who simply defeats Tony and the archaic class hierarchies he represents. Instead, the film reveals the simultaneous

thrill and peril associated with spatial liberation and the adjustment to rebuilt space. In this respect, *The Servant* resonates with another menacing British New Wave film: Michael Powell's 1960 thriller, *Peeping Tom*. Vertical domestic mobility and cinematic mobility are also united in Powell's film, which elicited a shocked and harshly negative response from critics at the time of its release (Lowenstein 221). A psychologically disturbed cinematographer lives on the top floor of his childhood home and rents out the rooms on the lower floor. From this dominant spatial position within a house defined by the mobility of its residents, he uses his handheld camera to stalk women and murder them. The pattern is broken only by a woman living on the first floor who asserts herself within the house and within his spatially dominant location on the top floor. Her interference enables him to purge the traumatic memories of his childhood that are responsible for his psychosis. Mastery of mobility within domestic space, according to *The Servant* and *Peeping Tom*, allows for the erasure of troubling histories. While this erasure may not necessarily translate to working-class activism, it does clear a space for new psychological, political, and cultural arrangements within postwar Britain.

Conclusion: The Pleasures and Perils of Uncontained Mobility

In the original novella version of *The Servant*, Robin Maugham tells a story with a different domestic crisis at its center. Unlike Losey's film, which triangulates Barrett, Tony, and Susan in competition for control over the house, Maugham replaces Susan with a male, first-person narrator who is an aristocratic friend of Tony's from the army. The novella is, accordingly, about the clash between two different contexts for male relationships: the military and domestic service. With the house as its setting, Maugham's narrative is clearly concerned with the re-assimilation of veterans into a domestic world

that threatens the strong homosocial bonds – with all of the homoerotic undertones attached – that had been forged during the war. Once all soldiers had been made equal on the frontline, would it be possible to re-establish socio-economic and gender boundaries within the postwar home? As Martin Francis argues, the late 1940s and 1950s were “a time when marriage and the home were vigorously promoted to men through the ideals of the ‘companionate marriage’ and the ‘family man,’” yet there was “a significant postwar male restlessness and a yearning for the all-male camaraderie of service life” (164).

Whereas the novella is nostalgic, the film refuses nostalgia; the novella longs for the Oxbridge boys’ club that was reinforced by the bonding of officers during the war. The leveled social conditions of the Welfare State – represented by the upstart Barrett – threatened this outmoded form of the all-male club. By the time Pinter and Losey adapted Maugham’s novella in 1963, the context had changed. Although the film rejects the traditional male-female domestic arrangement that Susan represents, it does not favour a strictly male environment: Vera’s disruptive, modernist sexuality is part and parcel of Barrett’s domestic profile. Like MacInnes’s *Absolute Beginners*, Losey’s film posits a domestic space in which sexual activities and sexual identities are mobile and difficult to contain.

The two versions of *The Servant* offer a starting point for thinking about the transformation of narrative art in the two postwar decades. Maugham’s novella makes the Oxbridge literary elite its protagonist; although the aristocratic values of this elite class are threatened, the narrative ultimately defeats the working-class threat and preserves the traditional hierarchy of privilege. Like other preservationist works of the postwar period, Maugham’s text signals the crisis in the role of the novel as a place of preservation, security, fixity – as a home – for the narratives of upper- and upper-middle-class life. In

works such as *Absolute Beginners* and *The Lonely Londoners*, writers experimented with the novel to convey the changing landscape and values of 1950s Britain. Traditional character development, narrative modes, plot arcs, and language associated with the rise of the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became destabilized as the homes, domestic values, and architectural histories of the upper- and upper-middle classes became less stable and more mobile.

As the horizontality of Welfare State visions for reconstruction became entrenched in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the next generation of architects, writers, and filmmakers developed a desire to reintegrate modernist vertical mobility as a socio-economic and aesthetic possibility. The tower block, which came to dominate new construction in the late 1950s, through the sixties and into the seventies, symbolized this desire for a space that could be both vertical and democratic. In *Absolute Beginners* and *The Servant*, housing is characterized by the fluidity of values and movement of people within the vertical space of dwellings. These more modern domestic arrangements arose, in part, out of a loosening of government controls that began with the Conservative victory in 1951. As Alan Sinfield points out, the Conservative election slogan, “Set the People Free,” “was understood to mean free from rationing and ‘restrictions,’ so those who had money could buy more things” (105). While many citizens emerged from the restricted postwar decade able to buy a home and other home-oriented consumer goods, others – the West Indian immigrants depicted in Sam Selvon’s fiction, for instance – had a more ambivalent experience in the less regulated version of the Welfare State. Indeed, the 1958 Notting Hill race riots, which MacInnes narrates in *Absolute Beginners*, reveal the other end of the spectrum of domestic freedom: prejudice, violence, and injustice resulting from unrestricted, unprotected mobility.

MacInnes aimed to demonstrate the value of the novel as a form through a commitment to sociological realism. As a response to the growing number of intellectuals in Britain who claimed to find no valid reason to devote time to reading novels, he developed a critique and defense of the novel in a long essay published in 1975, *No Novel Reader*. He argues that the nature and social function of the novel had changed since the nineteenth century. Although he is skeptical about the potential for the novel to create large-scale social transformation, the form is redeemable and important, from his perspective, because it has a sociological function. “If the ‘great novel’ is not [...] characteristic of our fragmented, rapidly changing society,” he contends, “what novelists do offer is a far more informed and accurate picture of particular aspects of our lives” (*No Novel* 52). Moreover, he indicts those members of the educated middle class who believe the novel is escapist and has nothing meaningful to contribute to intellectual life: “In shutting themselves off from the novel, its denigrators are also turning against much unknown human experience, and the classes and races to which the novel increasingly belongs” (43-4).

For MacInnes, the novel needs to be appreciated as one of a diverse set of “media for the diffusion of factual and imaginative prose,” including radio reading, TV cassettes, and microfilm (53). Running parallel to his attitudes toward popular music and teenagers, his argument about the novel is one that values real social information and therefore promotes inclusiveness. The postwar novel and film intersect in the 1950s as interrogations of the limits of medium with respect to new ideals of social mobility (*No Novel Reader* 42-3). Film was an intuitive tool for exploring the wide-ranging potential of multi-directional mobility. Whereas literature is more or less locked into the progression of printed text from left to right, top to bottom, film technology by the early 1960s, such

as smaller, mobile cameras, allowed motion along an expanded number of axes. Losey's film revels in its move-ability. Novels such as *Absolute Beginners* push up against the limits of literature in capturing the desire for non-linear, liberated movement. Where the film is at home, the novel reveals what it can no longer house.

Safe Houses: Seeking Shelter after the Welfare State

In a 1987 interview for *Woman's Own* magazine, Margaret Thatcher criticized the expectation that the British government has a responsibility to provide for the welfare of individual citizens:

I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand “I have a problem, it is the Government’s job to cope with it!” or “I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!” “I am homeless, the Government must house me!” and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. (Thatcher n.p.)

Under Thatcher’s Conservative government (1979-1990), the foundational vision of a community-oriented Welfare State that emerged from the 1940s settlement was exchanged for a polity that centrally valued individualism. A horizontal ethos of government-sponsored social equality gave way to a vertical desire for economic growth associated with liberalized markets and private property. Severe cuts in government spending for council housing and other public industries, such as electricity and railways, followed by the privatization of these services, transformed the relationship between the state and citizens’ security, broadly construed.

This chapter examines the relationship of fiction to the dismantling of the Welfare State, as focalized through the dramatic changes to housing policy that took effect in the 1980s. Thatcher’s reference to housing and homelessness in the *Woman's Own* interview

– “I am homeless, the Government must house me!” – indicates the centrality of these issues in debates about the purpose of government in late-twentieth-century Britain. Alongside a discussion of privatization, I interpret Graham Greene’s novel, *The Human Factor* (1978), Dorris Lessing’s novel, *The Good Terrorist* (1985), and Ken Loach’s film, *Riff-Raff* (1991), as works that critique a society in which shelter and hospitality are no longer guaranteed and individualism is the new, dysfunctional social rule. In these narratives, safe and reliable domestic space is elusive, a condition that recalls the volatility of the blitz and immediate postwar narratives.⁶⁰ Homelessness caused by wartime bombing damage finds its echo in homelessness caused by privatization.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, with the Welfare State effectively dismantled, fiction again became a politically charged, world-building tool. Realist strategies, such as Lessing’s “real-time” narration of life in a squat and Loach’s on-location shooting at a construction site, assert the need for new artistic visions that could help clarify social realities. In contrast to the 1940s, however, the late-twentieth-century context lacked the utopian or future-oriented impulse of postwar reconstruction. The community-centred housing estates and confidently vertical modernist tower blocks of the first two postwar decades, in many cases, had fallen into disrepair by the 1970s, signifying the reversal or failure of postwar initiatives rather than continued progress. For Andrew Burke, postwar council housing, especially in tower blocks, has been the major symbol used by filmmakers to assess the promises and pitfalls of modernity: “Originally identified with the modernist and modernising enthusiasms of the welfare state, tower blocks now house

⁶⁰ This kind of domestic instability is dramatized and formally expressed in postwar novels such as Elizabeth Taylor’s *At Mrs. Lippincote’s* (1945), Henry Green’s *Back* (1946), Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day* (1949), Graham Greene’s *The End of the Affair* (1950), and Rose Macaulay’s *The World My Wilderness* (1950).

those who have been left behind or are out of sync with the dominant fantasies of a fully modernised British state” (178). Existing modernist structures suffered from governmental neglect, as did the building industry in general. Construction rates across the United Kingdom slowed dramatically as a result of cuts to government spending on housing after the Conservatives came to power in 1979. While approximately 100,000 council housing units were constructed each year in the 1970s, that number declined to fewer than 30,000 per year by the mid-1980s, and by 1993, council housing construction had halted almost completely (Golland 7). Over the course of the 1980s and early 1990s, Britain experienced the longest sustained fall in nominal house prices since the early 1950s; housing was “no longer seen as a ‘safe’ asset” (Meen 425).⁶¹

Reconstruction narratives from the 1940s and 1950s often conveyed faith in the future of the Welfare State through closing images of repaired or newly built houses and domestic communities. In Graham Greene’s *The End of the Affair* (1950), for instance, Maurice and Henry share a house after Sarah’s death rather than drifting into despair and isolation. Alan Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) also ends with an optimistic architectural vision: Arthur Seaton moves from a run-down house in an overcrowded working-class neighbourhood into a home on a new, modern housing estate. Within the context of the 1980s, *The Human Factor*, *The Good Terrorist*, and *Riff-Raff* demonstrate nothing of this earlier confidence in rebuilding. Instead, these works articulate the thwarted desire for a “safe house.” Basic physical shelters and ideal notions of political or familial homes are threatened or unavailable in post-Welfare State Britain. In depicting efforts to establish domestic safety and stability, these narratives critique a

⁶¹ The phrase “safe as houses,” which means “completely safe and secure” and “certainly, undoubtedly,” also has a late nineteenth-century meaning in Britain that refers to houses as safe economic investments.

society in which individuals are isolated because architectural safety and community-oriented planning are no longer dependable realities.

Removing the Safety Net: Privatization and Inhospitability after the Welfare State

I use the concept of the “safe house” to understand the cultural ramifications of and responses to the political, economic, and ideological transformations of the Thatcher years. The Welfare State can be understood as a safe house in both metaphoric and literal terms: the ideology of state-sponsored security through citizenship, immigration rights, and welfare programs is coupled with the government-backed construction and maintenance of public housing. American Studies scholar, Mary Louise Pratt, uses the phrase “safe houses” to describe historical scenarios in which threatened communities obtain basic protection while also finding the space to create identities or nurture ideals. Her characterization of safe houses, furthermore, resonates with my focus on the horizontal legacy of the Welfare State. For Pratt, safe houses are

social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression. [...] Where there are legacies of subordination, groups need places for healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone. (6)

Against the equality of safe houses, Pratt identifies “contact zones”: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly

asymmetrical relations of power” (1).⁶² In the context of the Thatcher years, metaphoric and literal safe houses of the Welfare State come under threat or disappear altogether. Social relations are characterized more by the logic of the contact zone than the safe house.

Margaret Thatcher’s election as Prime Minister was a major turning-point in postwar British history; Stuart Laing describes this election as “the final confirmation that the postwar settlement of welfare capitalism (based on full employment) was over” (20). The Welfare State had struggled under the global and domestic socioeconomic challenges of the 1970s, but near total reversal was ensured by market liberalization and the privatization schemes that came to dominate economic policy under Thatcher’s Government in the 1980s. Privatization of public housing programs and major public utilities such as gas, electricity, coal, railways, oil, and telecommunications was the ultimate manifestation of an ideological and political break from social democracy as it had been practised, relatively unchallenged by both Labour and Conservative governments in Britain, since the 1940s. For political scientist Andrew Gamble, “Selling nationalized industries back into private ownership was visible proof that collectivism could be turned back” (4). Privatization was felt across all aspects of British society, but housing bore the brunt of public spending cuts throughout Thatcher’s term (Cooper 18). Because public housing was threatened, it became a crucial political issue, as did homelessness.

Homelessness numbers had increased during the 1960s as a result of slum clearance programs. Displaced people were put on long waiting lists to be re-housed. As

⁶² In “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Pratt defines the concept of the contact zone in part by distinguishing it from Benedict Anderson’s notion of the imagined community (4).

public concern escalated, numerous charities were founded to address the problem, including Shelter (1966), Crisis (1967), St. Mungo's (1969), and Porchlight (1974). Although data collection was inconsistent until the 1990s, the National Assistance Board conducted various surveys beginning in 1965, which suggest that the scale of homelessness increased significantly during the 1980s and early 1990s. The number of homeless people likely reached its peak in the early 1990s. According to the 1991 Census, 2,703 people were "sleeping rough" in a given night (Porchlight n.p.). As Stephanie Cooper, education officer with the Inner London Education Authority, described the situation in 1985, "In deciding whether or not there would be a future for public housing the future of the welfare state would be called into question" (18). Housing can thus be understood as *the* cultural and political issue of the 1980s – the issue through which major structural and ideological transformations of British society can be measured.

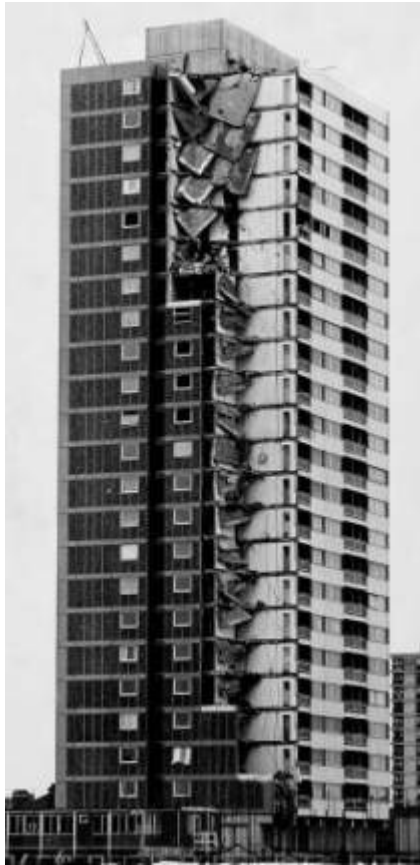
Thatcher government housing policy is most strongly associated with the 1980 Housing Act, which introduced the "right to buy" program. Under this program, owner-occupation of private property became the economic goal and ideological norm for residents in public housing. The program was popular in the aftermath of 1970s public expenditure cuts, which had led to the physical neglect of much council housing. Norman Ginsburg, Social Policy scholar, explains the popularity of "right to buy" as an outcome of social mobility dependent on consumer culture and the ideal of private property ownership:

The socio-political tide began to turn against council housing in the 1970s, as home ownership came increasingly within the reach of working class families. Mortgaged owner occupied homes became a central element in and the locus for consumer culture. The 'fiscal crisis of the state' in the

mid 1970s prompted the then Labour government to cut back on investment in maintenance, improvement and development of council housing. This process was greatly enhanced under the Conservative governments from 1979–97. Hence from the tenants' point of view, the advantages of council housing ebbed away, as rents increased above inflation, maintenance and improvement withered, and 'right to buy sales' visibly demonstrated governments' lack of commitment to the sector. The spiral of decline over the 1980s and 1990s was, thus, largely engineered by governments, bolstered by an often zealous commitment to widening home ownership. Councils were hamstrung, unable to raise investment funds for maintenance, improvement and new development, and, yet, held politically responsible by tenants. (118-9)

Modernist housing projects, celebrated by earlier works like Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners*, were not sustainable without full financial and ideological support from the government. The neglected public housing tower block, in particular, was a highly visible sign of the failure of Welfare State modernism. One of the early symbolic challenges to modernist public housing was the 1968 gas explosion at the 22-story Ronan Point in Newham, East London. An entire corner of the tower collapsed, leaving three people dead and eleven injured. The tower block, designed by Taylor, Woodrow, and Anglian, was built using a modern construction technique known as Large Panel System building: large concrete panels were prefabricated off-site and then bolted together on-site. The disaster prompted public and governmental concern over the safety of System-built projects. As privatization became the rule, the sense of security once conferred on tenants in public housing could, and then would, no longer be guaranteed by the government. Individuals

in alliance with corporations and private banks were to bear the burden of maintaining their own domestic and economic security, and this policy shift can be understood as a strategic move by the Conservative government that projected a vision of nothing short of a new social and economic order.⁶³



Ronan Point Tower after a gas explosion in 1968.
Source: *Modern Structural Analysis*, Iain Macleod

The Human Factor, *The Good Terrorist*, and *Riff-Raff*, respond to the pressures of the post-Welfare State contact zone with characters who seek safe houses, hospitality, and community belonging. The search for immediate physical shelter reflects the broader need for a system of socio-political security, which was once proffered by the Welfare State but no longer is guaranteed to the same extent. Hospitality should be understood not as a

⁶³ For a full discussion of “Thatcherism” in its political, economic, legal, and ideological manifestations, see *Thatcher’s Law*. Ed. Andrew Gamble and Celia Wells. Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1989.

simple extension of good will, but as a complex social problem defined by a contradiction. In Jacques Derrida's formulation, unconditional hospitality is an impossible ideal because the inclusive ethos of such hospitality depends on a simultaneous exclusion of the undesirable. The open welcome, in which we "say yes to *who or what turns up*, before any determination," is necessarily yoked to conditional laws or a politics of hospitality (Derrida 77).⁶⁴ In order for refuge to have meaning, in other words, a danger or threat must still exist that forces limitations upon hospitality. Under Thatcher's Government, the dangers and limitations that give hospitality and safe houses value became increasingly prohibitive. Those who could not afford to take part in the "right to buy" program had to take their chances with, in many cases, multi-year waiting lists for public housing. In the meantime, they were forced to find basic shelter in over-crowded temporary housing, with relatives, or, as depicted in *The Good Terrorist* and *Riff-Raff*, in squats. Rather than invest in the maintenance of public housing with funds from the central government, local councils made it difficult for squatters to occupy abandoned housing by cutting electricity and blocking toilets, leaving the structures uninhabitable.

In *The Human Factor*, physical barriers to safety and hospitality are reinforced by a shift away from social inclusiveness as privatization and morally suspect Cold War politics become entrenched in British society. The black South African characters, Sarah and Sam, are permitted to stay in the home of Sarah's white English mother-in-law, but they are hardly welcomed there. The Welfare State was not perfectly hospitable to all of its citizens, as my earlier discussion of Sam Selvon, Colin MacInnes, and the Notting Hill

⁶⁴ In Derrida's words: "But even while keeping itself above the laws of hospitality, *the* unconditional law of hospitality needs the laws, it *requires* them. This demand is constitutive. It wouldn't be effectively unconditional, the law, if it didn't *have to become* effective, concrete, determined, if that were not its being as having-to-be. It would risk being abstract, utopian, illusory, and so turning over into its opposite. In order to be what it is, *the* law thus needs the laws, which, however, deny it, or at any rate threaten it, sometimes corrupt or pervert it. And must always be able to do this" (79).

Race Riots indicates. Determined policies of privatization under Thatcher, however, and her general belief that there is “no such thing as society,” added limiting conditions to the relatively more welcoming framework of the Welfare State that had extended resources to all members of British society, including newly arrived immigrants from former colonies. The waning socio-economic safety nets and the disappearance of public housing as reliable physical shelter under Thatcher can thus be understood as profoundly and materially inhospitable.

The three works of fiction analyzed in this chapter interrogate the transformed conditions of state-sanctioned hospitality through thematic attention to safety and danger as well as to the hospitable and inhospitable gestures of individuals and small communities. Safe houses emerge intermittently, without help from the government or in spite of aggressive tactics to deny access to those spaces of refuge. In the end, all three texts reveal safe houses to be unsustainable, inadequate, and incapable of compensating for the lost hospitality of Welfare State initiatives. Narrative tropes of threats to domestic safety are reinforced by structural instability. Together, these thematic and formal traits undermine the possibility that realist fiction can function as a space or experience that is sheltered from its context – in other words, realist fiction is not a literary safe house. A lack of narrative closure in *The Human Factor* and the realist techniques of *The Good Terrorist* and *Riff-Raff* force the reader or viewer to experience the feeling of life in the contact zone and to confront actively the consequences of danger and discomfort. Narrative and style do not console. For the two latter works, in particular, the aesthetic experience is markedly inhospitable for the reader or viewer, an experience that mirrors the inhospitable social conditions experienced by the fictional characters. Without basic

protections, characters and readers alike become preoccupied with individual safety over and above collective well-being and socio-political efficacy.

The Human Factor and the Borderless Ideal

Like many of Graham Greene's novels, *The Human Factor* explores the experience and consequences of isolation. Characters starved for connection find themselves placed in literal and metaphorical boxes, ultimately alone. Maurice Castle, the MI6 protagonist of *The Human Factor*, fantasizes about a time and place where boxes, walls, and the "safety curtain" are not necessary (206). Early in the novel, Castle steps into a church in Berkhamstead, the village where he grew up and has returned to live as an adult. He hears the parishioners singing a hymn: "There is a green hill far away, without a city wall" (57). This borderless place is an unattainable ideal rather than a realistic goal for the novel. The real world, plagued by divisive categories of nation, ideology, race, and self, continually reasserts itself. Forced to live in that world, Castle has aims that become impossible to reconcile: to protect and enclose himself and those he loves while also striving to break down walls and achieve open connection with other human beings. Recalling Derrida's formulations, Castle's dilemma demonstrates the "insoluble antinomy" of hospitality (77). While the safe house, in espionage terms, offers a place of physical and political refuge for Castle at the end of the novel, it also represents the necessary limits of human openness, acceptance, and connection, as the safe house is inaccessible to his South African wife and son. In the context of late 1970s Britain, the representation of safety and hospitality in Greene's espionage novel critiques a world in which political and social borders seem increasingly arbitrary while the necessary

physical protections are less reliable. The result is moral and spatial isolation: only one person alone in a room, it seems, can be truly safe.

Begun in 1967 but not finished until 1978, *The Human Factor* captures the initial decline of the legislative framework and philosophy of the Welfare State. After Edward Heath's Conservative government came to power in 1970, unemployment grew, and tension between the state and trade unions began to escalate following the Industrial Relations Act of 1971 and the miners' strike in 1972. Conflict with Northern Ireland grew more serious. Terrorism began to spread in England with bombings perpetrated by the IRA, as well as the anarchist group, "Angry Brigade." Global recession took its toll, and the oil embargo associated with the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 led to sky-rocketing oil prices and widespread inflation. The embargo gave leverage to the miners, who sought to protest an anti-inflation cap on pay rises; the government responded to strike action with the institution of the Three-day Week, a measure introduced to save electricity.⁶⁵ When the Labour government was elected in February 1974, it was "the first example of an industrial dispute leading to a change of government in contemporary British history" (Laing 19). Despite this landmark election, Labour held a very small parliamentary majority; as a result, any hopes of restoring the framework of Welfare State socialism drifted away. With Thatcher elected as Conservative party leader in 1975, the late 1970s came to be defined by cuts to public spending, increasing tension as a result of nationalism in Wales and Scotland, and perhaps most dramatically, the Winter of Discontent in 1978-79, in which workers in the public sector refused to accept salary caps as a solution to economic hardship.

⁶⁵ The Three-Day Week limited commercial electricity use to three consecutive days each week, as specified by the government, from 1 January to 7 March 1974.

Like John Le Carré's 1974 novel, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, *The Human Factor* chronicles the banal, unglamorous world of Secret Service bureaucracy in the depressed socioeconomic context of 1970s Britain. In his autobiography, *Ways of Escape* (1980), Greene explains that his aim in writing *The Human Factor* was to humanize the genre of British spy fiction by de-romanticizing its adventurous plotlines and redirecting attention to the individual character. He aimed

to write a novel of espionage free from the conventional violence, which has not, in spite of James Bond, been a feature of the British Secret Service. I wanted to present the Service unromantically as a way of life, men going daily to their office to earn their pensions, the background much like that of any other profession – whether the bank clerk or the business director – an undangerous routine, and within each character the more important private life. (227)⁶⁶

The “private life” of Maurice Castle is closely guarded and thrown into sharp relief against a “background” of malaise, apathy, and frustrated insecurity. The waning of economic and social safety nets is evidenced by the schoolmasters who live on either side of Castle: they earn a salary that provides “no possibility of saving” (18). The entire novel is littered with characters, relationships, houses, and systems for which there is “no possibility of saving,” in any sense of the word. Tellingly, an alternate title for the novel was “Sense of Security” (Snyder 26). Castle's co-worker, Arthur Davis, is wrongly

⁶⁶ Most critics consider *The Human Factor* in relation to the espionage context, in a comparative analysis of Greene's spy novels, or in a discussion of loyalty and morality in Greene's work. For instance, in the introduction to their recent edited volume, *Dangerous Edges of Graham Greene*, Mark Bosco, SJ, and Dermot Gilvary describe *The Human Factor* as a novel that “explores the virtue of disloyalty when it comes to the state secret service apparatus. Greene continues to condemn the wasteland of modern espionage, especially as smaller nations get drawn into shady alliances between the super powers” (11). For other relevant examples, see Robert Snyder's essay, “‘He Who Forms a Tie Is Lost’: Loyalty, Betrayal, and Deception in *The Human Factor*,” Laura Tracy's essay, “Greenland,” and Allan Hepburn's book, *Intrigue*.

suspected to be the source of an information leak to the Soviets in South Africa, and he is subsequently killed; in order to protect himself as the true source of the leak, Castle cannot save Davis. When Davis says to Castle, “I’m tired to *death* of this damned old country, Castle, electricity cuts, strikes, inflation,” the ironic foreshadowing is subtle, yet poignant, given the context: Davis is an innocent casualty not only of a corrupt espionage system, but more broadly of the times in which he lives (51, emphasis added).⁶⁷

The fatigue of living in Britain in the late 1970s, where there is “no possibility of saving,” literally kills Davis.⁶⁸ The political goals of Britain’s espionage work in South Africa, moreover, do not justify Davis’s death in ethical terms. He is killed in response to what MI6 Control, John Hargreaves, believes is a spectacle of power for power’s sake. In discussing the motives for the leak, Hargreaves says to Percival, the Service doctor responsible for poisoning Davis: “There are no atomic secrets in Africa: guerrillas, tribal wars, mercenaries, petty dictators, crop failures, building scandals, gold beds, nothing very secret there. That’s why I wonder whether the motive may be simply scandal, to prove they [the Soviets] have penetrated the British Secret Service yet again” (31). Scandal, fatigue, hypocrisy, and failure define Britain’s international and domestic politics in the 1970s. Greene channels these characteristics through Castle, who worries, when talking with Cornelius Muller, the racist South African agent, about how many of his agents were incriminated in the scandal: “His own relative safety made him feel

⁶⁷ In referencing electricity cuts, strikes, and inflation, Davis clearly alludes to the Three-Day Week put into place in 1974 by the Conservative government and the continuing tension between trade unions and the Labour government after 1974.

⁶⁸ It is worth noting that punk music emerged in the late 1970s as a major cultural expression of apathy, discontent, and disenfranchisement. In Britain, perhaps the most important moment of punk history is the release of the Sex Pistols’ 1977 song, “God Save the Queen.” In contrast to the ironically “saved” Queen, the song ends with a refrain that makes the plight of the people of Britain perfectly clear: “And there is no future / In England’s dreaming / No future, no future / No future for you / No future, No future / No future for me.” The modernist and early postwar orientation toward the future strikingly reverses.

shame. In a genuine war an officer can always die with his men and so keep his self-respect” (97). As the Welfare State unravels, personal safety and ethical politics are shown to be increasingly at odds.

In the context of such insecure times, Maurice Castle’s borderless fantasy reflects a disillusion with Cold War politics and the hypocritical ideological affiliations of nation-states. Greene explicitly links *The Human Factor* with his frustration over South Africa in *Ways of Escape*: “It was so obvious that, however much opposed the governments of the Western Alliance might pretend to be to apartheid, however much our leaders talked of its immorality, they simply could not let South Africa succumb to black power and Communism” (229). In contrast to this corrupt political scenario, Maurice nostalgically yearns for a time and place in which personal relationships trump ideological concerns. It is a fantasy of returning home and capturing the innocent belonging of childhood without the requirements of political affiliation or religious faith. The fantasy itself is his ultimate safe house. When Castle and Sarah are forced to offer hospitality to Cornelius Muller, the man who had once been the enemy of their relationship in South Africa, the tension between personal commitments and political duties come to the foreground. Later that night, Castle seeks refuge in his fantasy: he allows himself “to strike, like his childhood hero Allan Quatermain, off on that long slow underground stream which bore him on towards the interior of the dark continent where he hoped that he might find a permanent home, in a city where he could be accepted as a citizen, as a citizen without any pledge of faith, not the City of God or Marx, but the city called Peace of Mind” (107). Robert Snyder aptly reads this passage as a sign of Greene’s recurring interest in the “‘No Man’s Land’ of temporizing indecision” that he first coined in *The Confidential Agent* in 1939

(Snyder 35).⁶⁹ Castle is fixated on an idealized place that escapes the strictures of human systems but that nevertheless provides citizenship – a means of participation and an announcement of inclusion. This ideal city, “Peace of Mind,” resembles the cities of refuge in the Judaic tradition, cities that are only apolitical in the sense that they provide refuge from consequences and conditions that would be applied legally elsewhere. Such cities do not exemplify universal safety, but conditioned immunity that requires territory to be partitioned and compartmentalized.

To preserve his safe house, his borderless place, Castle ironically constructs, identifies, and reinforces protective walls in all aspects of his life. He tries to obtain security without what he perceives to be the cost of arbitrary ideological commitment. When he goes to see Boris, his Soviet controller, he feels “at home” because only Boris knows the full extent of his counter-espionage (even more than Castle knows, in fact), but Castle insists that their relationship remain strictly informational: “I’ve never pretended that I share your faith – I’ll never be a Communist” (121). Despite his ostensible resistance to ideology, however, he cannot help but conceive of Boris’s role for him as “a bit like a priest must be to a Catholic – a man who received one’s confession whatever it might be without emotion” (117). The analogy, and the reality that “there’s no one in the world with whom I can talk of everything, except this man Boris whose real name even is

⁶⁹ This passage also clearly recalls Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* and, as Snyder claims, the Victorian adventure narrative in general (29). In *The Heart of Darkness*, Charles Marlow narrates his obsession with the “blank” and “dark” spaces on maps, and in particular, “a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. [...] I went on along Fleet Street, but could not shake off the idea. The snake had charmed me” (22-3). Snyder argues that Castle’s attachment to the Victorian adventure narrative indicates a rejection of modern-day institutions and belief systems: “The former banker [Castle] whose boyhood hero was Allan Quatermain and whose sole achievement since joining the firm more than thirty years ago consists in having ‘reduced the expenses of the [Pretoria] station considerably’ is a man defined by his generation’s search for some viable model of authenticity, most other candidates having been discredited with the rise of modernism (68)” (Snyder 33).

unknown to me,” gives Castle “a sense of revulsion” (117). He needs the security that Boris provides, but he takes it grudgingly.

Castle’s troubled loyalty to the Soviets is doubled by his interest in religious sanctuary – as if he suspects that he might be able to exchange an arbitrary loyalty for something more stable and secure. He seeks sanctuary in a church only to leave disappointed, rejected, and as disillusioned with religion as he is with politics. When he goes to look for Boris a second time only to find that the Soviet safe house is no longer there – that even the “official” safe house cannot provide safety – he goes into a church following an urge to confess “*in camera*” (183). Whereas Boris takes Castle’s information without requiring a profession of Communist faith, the priest refuses his information on exactly such ideological grounds: he is not a Catholic or a Christian of any kind: “‘I think what you need is a doctor,’ the priest said. He slammed the shutter to, and Castle left the box” (184). Castle spends the novel stepping in and out of “boxes,” looking for protection that won’t require ideological affiliation. It is ultimately Boris who speaks the truth that Castle refuses to hear – “We live in boxes and it’s they who choose the box” – a truth confirmed by the ending of the novel in which Castle is left isolated in the most inhospitable of safe houses: a two-room apartment (or box) in Moscow, with an unreliable telephone line that goes dead (117).⁷⁰

Against Boris’s proclamation that Castle cannot determine the boundaries of his own life, he vainly struggles to secure the safety of his family – the community to which

⁷⁰ Snyder also observes the importance of “boxes” in Greene’s novel. For him, the trope of boxes works to signify Castle’s entrapment in the world of espionage: Castle ironically aligns himself “with the law of expediency governing intelligence networks” (Snyder 30). In *Intrigue*, furthermore, Allan Hepburn points out that, across his oeuvre, “Greene’s protagonists frequently enter closets, railroad cars, sheds, out-houses” (121). In addition to causing physical claustrophobia, Hepburn argues that these dark, box-like spaces signify “a recollection of death or near-death experience” that induces “existential panic” (122).

he tries to pledge allegiance above all others – without the help of external allegiances. Where Sarah and Sam are concerned, his thoughts and actions are tempered by the promise of safety throughout the novel. After kissing Sarah, for instance, “he was reassuring himself that what he valued most in life was still safe” (19). And when discussing his time in South Africa with Hargreaves, he remarks, “We’re safely married now. But we did have a difficult time out there” (53). They live away from the dangers of London, in quiet Berkhamstead. Ironically, Castle wants to protect his family, but he also needs the barrier of his house and family – his entire domestic space – to protect himself from the world with its arbitrarily set borders, boxes, and categories. He attends to the physical space and literal sounds of his house in order to create a protective mental border between himself and that world:

A door was closed softly, footsteps passed along the corridor above; the stairs always creaked on the way down – he thought how to some people this would seem a dull and domestic, even an intolerable routine. To him it represented a security he had been afraid every hour he might lose. He knew exactly what Sarah would say when she came into the sitting-room, and he knew what he would answer. Familiarity was a protection against the darkness of King’s Road outside and the lighted lamp of the police station at the corner. (144)

Castle recreates with his house and family the ethos of a heavily bordered nation-state. Greene leaves no room for doubt about this parallel; Sarah refers to Castle or their family repeatedly as “our own country” (187). When Castle is awaiting help for his escape but expecting the police to discover him first, he clings to the borders of his familial country: “he was unwilling to leave the four walls of the house, even to go into the garden. If the

police came he wanted to be arrested in his home, and not in the open air with the neighbours' wives peering through their windows" (203).

Although Castle ultimately is able to escape England without being caught by the police, the "country" of his family proves to have insufficient borders against the violence of international Cold War politics. When Sarah asks Castle, "are you sure we are safe?," the narrator interjects with the ambivalent truth: "To that question there was no easy answer" (176). Love and relationships cannot provide secure borders in the context of multiple and incompatible political allegiances. As Robert Snyder puts it, "both [Castle and Sarah] should know from their telephone's being tapped that such an elevation of the private sphere's inviolability over the geopolitics of Cold War espionage is impossible" (29). The brutal history of apartheid South Africa and the failure of England to protest a regime that promotes racial hatred for fear of siding with communists, haunts the Castle family even after they have escaped to relative safety in Berkhamstead. When Castle reads to Sam from a book of childhood verse, Sam imagines the character in one poem as driven by racial hatred: "I think all the white people are afraid of him and lock their house in case he comes in with a carving knife and cuts their throats. Slowly,' he added with relish" (174). Castle realizes the limitations of his private familial country: "Sam had never looked more black, Castle thought. He put his arm around him with a gesture of protection, but he couldn't protect him from the violence and vengeance which were beginning to work in the child's heart" (174). Sam's historical memory will not be apolitical, and the consequences are violent. The novel hints at the futility of Castle's efforts to protect his family in the face of historical realities early in the novel. Sarah fears burglars and intruders, so Castle buys a dog to guard the house. Buller, a boxer, turns out to be anything but vicious. As Sarah says to Castle, "you know what he's like with

strangers. He fawns on them” (21). Greene depicts the dog barking giddily and drooling down the leg of any and all visitors. Castle resents the dog for failing to symbolize the apolitical, non-ideological security that he naively imagines family can provide.

In a novel in which safety is precarious or impossible, domestic hospitality – particularly English hospitality – is a damaged phenomenon. Davis invites Castle into his flat, but instead of a place of comforting refuge, Castle confronts “a stack of dirty dishes in the sink” and a cupboard “stacked with almost empty bottles” (66). Davis offers Castle a drink, but the traditional gesture of English hospitality is corrupted: “Davis tried to find a whisky bottle containing enough for two glasses. ‘Oh well,’ he said, ‘we’ll mix them. They’re all blends anyway’” (66). This early difficulty with hospitality foreshadows the fact that Davis’s flat is not a safe house – least of all for him. After Percival tricks Davis into poisoning himself by taking pills that are supposedly for his liver, Davis fails to show up at work and is found dead in his flat. While Davis lacks a safe house through which to find and provide refuge, Castle and Sarah are forced “by order” to turn their home into a hospitable safe house for the wrong kind of guest (61). “They laughed, with a touch of fear,” as they imagined “A black hostess for Mr Cornelius Muller. And a black child” (61). The ironic danger of Muller’s visit is that it goes well. Although Muller speaks in racist tones about the “many Englishmen who have started with the idea of attacking apartheid and ended trapped by us [BOSS] in a Bantu girl’s bed,” he changes gears when Sarah is introduced as Castle’s wife, “adapting, as naturally as a chameleon, to the colour of soil” (101, 103). He makes “courteous conversation” over dinner, drinks whiskey and port with Castle, and offers a gift to Sarah, which she is obliged to accept as hostess, even though it is from her “old enemy” (103, 104). The evening concludes with a gesture of the most unconditional kind of hospitality, that which comes not from the human world but

the animal one: “Buller licked the bottom of his [Muller’s] trousers with indiscriminating affection” (105). The significance of the moment is not lost on Muller, and he takes advantage of the opportunity to announce an obligatory tie between himself and the Castle home: ‘Good dog,’ Muller said. ‘Good dog. There’s nothing like a dog’s fidelity’” (105).

Sarah, the non-English, non-white African, cannot participate with agency in the dynamics of English hospitality. On the one hand, she is forced to be a hostess to Muller and therefore to accept the hypocritical political allegiance between England and the South African government. On the other, she is begrudgingly accepted as a guest in her mother-in-law’s home once Castle has fled to Moscow. Mrs. Castle offers highly conditional hospitality to Sarah and Sam: “This is *my* home, Sarah. It would be convenient to know just how long you plan to stay” (234). “So much a stranger did she [Sarah] feel in this house,” that she identifies not as a guest in an English home but as a refugee without rights, desperate for basic physical shelter: “now she was without Maurice and without a country” (235, 239). Sarah’s enforced isolation signifies the breakdown of systems of socio-political hospitality beyond the kitchen and the lounge.

England and the international community are represented by *The Human Factor* as inhospitable and dangerous. Individuals remain isolated, or worse: trapped in undesirable, hypocritical obligations. In the context of a global war with an unclear moral compass, Greene’s novel takes up E.M. Forster’s famous 1939 statement about loyalty: “I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country” (68). Although Castle’s desire to protect his family, as well as his occasional empathy for characters such as Colonel Daintry, seems to suggest that he is a humanist in Forster’s liberal sense, the

novel as a whole renders a much bleaker verdict on the role of the individual in political life. Castle is not committed to friends over country; he is committed only to himself. Disillusioned by a world of meaningless moral and political frameworks, a world in which Thatcher's individualistic non-society is becoming the enforced norm, his dream is to be apolitical, to refuse ethical responsibility for the implications of his actions. He finds solace when "his door was locked and the Don't Disturb notice was hanging outside" or when he imagines himself as "an object on a conveyor belt which moved him to a destined end with no responsibility, to anyone or anything, even to his own body. Everything would be looked after for better or worse by somebody else" (224, 115).

As Robert Snyder points out, Castle's seeming affinity with Forsterian humanism must be considered in the context of the real double agents whose appeals to such credos in the 1960s were scandalous: Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, George Blake, and Anthony Blunt. For Snyder, Castle is unable to grasp the logic that, "As Goronwy Rees wrote in 1972, [...] 'One's country was not some abstract conception which it might be relatively easy to sacrifice for the sake of an individual; it was itself made up of a dense network of individual and social relationships in which loyalty to a particular person formed only a single strand' (208)" (36). Greene's novel does not, however, suggest that it is as easy as Rees would have it to connect individual commitments with political loyalty in 1978. As self-centered as Castle is, he does face a genuine dilemma in which his personal relationships with his wife and son are not simply accommodated or welcomed in any fundamental sense into Cold War Britain. As the Welfare State unravels, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify common bonds within any community, be it familial, national, or international.

The Human Factor has been compared by scholars such as Snyder and Laura Tracy with Greene's 1948 novel, *The Heart of the Matter*. I conclude with another comparison, between *The Human Factor* and *The End of the Affair* (1951), in order to contrast the historical moment of World War II and the inception of the Welfare State with that of the Cold War and the end of the Welfare State.⁷¹ Both novels tell the story of a man and a woman, both couples named Maurice and Sarah, who are kept apart by forces larger than themselves. In *The End of the Affair*, Sarah's religious faith remains a barrier between the two, but after her death, Maurice overcomes his isolation by building a relationship with Sarah's husband, Henry. The two men actually share a house, suggesting that some form of community and political belonging is possible, despite the narrative sacrifice – or necessary martyrdom – of Sarah. Nearly 30 years later, *The Human Factor* has no antidote for isolation. Maurice ends up alone in Moscow, ironically reading *Robinson Crusoe* next to a "dusty disconnected telephone," as Boris says, "safe at the centre of the cyclone" (259). Sarah is left unwelcome and abandoned at Mrs. Castle's house, confronted by a "long unbroken silence" and the realization that "the line to Moscow is dead" (265). The impediments to creating a hospitable, unified community in 1979 are made evident by the fact that Maurice and Sarah end up in separate domestic spaces, as geographically and technologically far apart as possible.

Although Sarah is allowed to live in the later version of the story, there is still a sacrifice: Buller is killed in order to facilitate Castle's smooth, undetected escape from England (218). The sacrifice of Buller is more disturbing than Sarah's death in *The End of the Affair*. While Sarah's death brings the two men together, Buller's death – the sacrifice

⁷¹ Judith Adamson talks briefly about these two novels together when discussing Greene's female characters in her essay, "The Long Wait for Aunt Augusta: Reflections on Graham Greene's Fictional Women."

of an entirely innocent creature – only guarantees Maurice’s personal safety, which comes at the cost of political, moral, and interpersonal community. There is, in other words, no way to justify ethically the death of this most vulnerable member of Maurice’s familial “country.” Both national and international political communities are, it seems, beyond repair. As Andrew Wright has argued, *The Human Factor* “centres more explicitly than any of his other work on the sense of man-made apocalypse” (108). It is not God that keeps Maurice and Sarah apart, as it is in *The End of the Affair*; it is the choices that people make. For Robert Snyder, *The Human Factor* as a whole is an indictment of the individual who refuses to make choices, to commit without sentiment to a guiding system of belief (32). Where the message of *The End of the Affair* is hopeful reconstruction, the message of *The Human Factor* is bleak deconstruction. In 1978, the story of the times is one of a political agent who tries to deny his socio-political identity, who tries to “come in from the cold,” and is left with nothing. Faced with the final image of a disconnected telephone line, moreover, the reader is left equally outside the literary safe house of narrative closure.

The Good Terrorist: Hostess as Hostage, Guest as Terrorist

The bleakness of isolation and political disconnection that characterizes *The Human Factor* is shown to have violent consequences in Doris Lessing’s *The Good Terrorist*. In Lessing’s text, Alice Mellings has given up the security of her upper-middle-class childhood in order to live as a squatter with vaguely communist sensibilities. She commandeers Number 43 Old Mill Road, an abandoned Victorian house that has been slated for demolition and made uninhabitable by the local council. Alice’s effort to “save” the house and to remake it into a home for a group of squatters are ultimately empty

gestures. A squat, as such, is cut off from the social dynamics of property ownership, public housing provision, and community planning; it is also cut off physically, without access to sewage systems and power grids.⁷² Where the postwar council housing estate symbolizes, at least at some level, government hospitality, the postwar squat is a sign of the state that has abandoned its responsibility to provide housing for all. Just as the squat cannot provide full enfranchisement and community belonging for the citizens who seek shelter there, Alice, as the head of this isolated household, cannot provide hospitality to the potential guests who truly need shelter. Her doomed, obsessive efforts only keep her from taking responsibility for the political actions unfolding around her, which culminate in a fatal car-bombing. Lessing's novel thus depicts a historical moment in which the metonymic relation between home and nation, host and government, has become dysfunctional.

A hostess only exists as such when she has guests. In this sense, a hostess is fundamentally a "hostage" to her potential guests (Derrida 109). Alice's "hostage" status – her desire for guests and preoccupation with hospitality – dominates the novel at the expense of effective activism. The implication is not that the personal or domestic and political must be at odds, however, but that responsible political participation depends at some level on a basically functional system of state hospitality. In other words, the government's failure to guarantee safe housing for all British citizens may force a choice between personal welfare and responsible civic participation. Lessing's choice to focalize the third-person narrative through Alice's irresponsible consciousness and to relate events more or less in "real time" serves as a warning that novelists, too, may be put in a

⁷² Although squats were isolated from basic services, the Criminal Law Act of 1977 did give limited protection to squatters. It became illegal to force entry upon premises that appeared to be occupied, even if the occupants were not the property owners.

“hostage” situation, to feel forced thematically to eschew political activism and historical engagement in order to attend to “basic” human needs.

Critics generally agree on the significance of buildings in Lessing’s oeuvre as metaphors for British society. Elizabeth Maslen notes, for instance, that buildings are important “as images for social order or disorder” (26), and Gayle Greene reads the house in *The Good Terrorist* as a “microcosm of English society” (206). I argue that, in the context of Thatcher’s privatization schemes, *The Good Terrorist* scrutinizes the suggestive link between household and greater sociopolitical community, asking whether such a relationship is effective or even possible. The more that Alice Mellings identifies with and invests in the house as a fulfillment of her bourgeois sensibility, the more isolated she becomes, and the more complicit she is in the act of terrorism that results from a lack of community engagement. Alice is capable of relating only to buildings, not people or the systems they create. Compassion attaches her to Number 43 Old Mill Road. She forms a “passionate identification with the criticized house,” and when she thinks about its fate of demolition, “her heart [is] full of pain because of the capacious, beautiful and unloved house” (26, 5). Even when she is not directly engaged in home-making duties, which she gladly performs as “housemother,” she thinks about the house, mentally cataloguing the rooms, “imagining it clean and ordered” (17, 35). Putting the house in order does not translate in this novel to political integrity. It demonstrates, rather, the limits of bourgeois home-making as a replacement for basic Welfare State provisions.

Alice ostensibly works to create a safe house for the community of squatters at Number 43, but her efforts are actually directed toward creating her own fantastical safe house: a recreation of her abundant, comfortable, privately-owned, middle-class, childhood home. She frequently takes trips to the houses of her divorced mother and

father in order to steal things or money, or simply to channel the feeling of the domestic space, before returning to Number 43. In the hall at her mother's house, for instance, she stands, "breathing in the house, *home*; the big, easy-fitting, accommodating house that smelled of friendship" (51). In the kitchen of her father's house, her heart aches as she takes in the room, "being large, and with that great wooden table set with bowls of fruit and flower which for Alice were the symbol of happiness" (83). Once back in Number 43, Alice tries to carry with her some of the essential comfort of those spaces that, for her, represent home and safety. She puts flowers on the kitchen table and prepares soup for the squatters. Privately, she gains "a comforting sense of familiarity" from the house shaking with traffic, since "she seemed to have lived all her life in houses that shook to heavy traffic" (107). Alice's relationship to houses and families recalls that of Maurice Castle. She wants to have it both ways: to reject the protection and community belonging available to her without making herself vulnerable to danger and without taking responsibility for the welfare of others.

Alice does not know enough about British politics to help the squatters by trying to achieve policy reform. She has a bachelor's degree, but her education has no substance. We are told that she "never read anything but newspapers," and that "She used to wonder how it was that a comrade with a good, clear and correct view of life could be prepared to endanger it by reading all that risky equivocal stuff that she might dip into, hastily, retreating as if scalded" (66). England, for Alice, is not a political system that can be altered according to the demands of committed progressive politics. It is, instead, a fixed entity that she wants to preserve and protect, like private property: "It was ours! National characteristics were precious" (237). To think in possessive terms of national characteristics not only runs counter to the internationalism of class politics; it hints at the

potential for fascist ideology. When Gordon O’Leary arrives at Number 43 to find out about the “*materiel*,” guns delivered to the house for IRA operatives, Alice uses a confused nationalist argument to send him away: “I’m not interested in America or Czechoslovakia or Russia or Lithuania,” she tells him (322). “None of us are. We are English revolutionaries and we shall make our own policies and act according to the English tradition. Our own tradition” (322). When another “agent,” Peter Cecil, comes to the house in the wake of the car-bombing, Alice seeks solace in him as an Englishman: “she thought, *He is English*, was coming to her rescue. [...] He is English, he will understand” (395). In her version of England, moreover, the working class is at once idealized and politically redundant:

Salt of the earth! Alice was dutifully saying to herself, watching this scene of workers fueling themselves for a hard day’s work with plates of eggs, chips, sausages, fried bread, baked beans – the lot. *Cholesterol*, agonized Alice, and they all look so unhealthy! They had a pallid greasy look like bacon fat, or undercooked chips. In the pocket of each, or on the tables, being read, was the *Sun* or the *Mirror*. Only lumpens, thought Alice, relieved that there was no obligation to admire them. Building or road workers, perhaps even self-employed; it wasn’t these men who would save Britain from itself! (47)

Alice’s relationship to England is one of surface preservation, of conventional rules and attitudes that support her personal fantasy of a safe and comfortable life. She cannot create a household that effectively symbolizes national identity because she does not have an accurate understanding of how that nation practically works.

In place of educated activism that aims to improve society through official political channels, Alice directs her dissatisfaction at unresponsive buildings. When Margaret Thatcher gives a talk at the University of Liverpool, Alice attends to protest. Her violent anger is not articulated in a specific or informed way in terms of Thatcher's policies; it is aimed instead at the university's "great cold lunatic buildings" that:

looked at them through the downpour, and Alice felt murder fill her heart. She knew most of the new universities; had visited them, demonstrated outside them. When she saw one she felt she confronted the visible embodiment of evil, something that wishes to crush and diminish her. The enemy. If I could put a bomb under that lot, she was thinking, if I could....
(253)

Alice does not try to rehabilitate the utopian promise of postwar modernism, or to forge alliance with the red brick universities that were so influential in cultivating progressive cultural politics in the 1960s and 1970s. She sees only the surfaces of buildings as a backdrop to a political figure who she is supposed to dislike. Instead of fixing systemic problems at their roots, Alice patches up a broken system at the surface level. Her efforts go toward rehabilitating a Victorian house as a squat rather than campaigning to reverse the privatization of council housing.

Alice is fluent in modern housing language, which depends more on engineering, utility, and function than it does on beauty. When she tries to persuade the local council that the house should be spared demolition, she runs through the "vital statistics of the house": "Its size, its solidity, its situation. Said that, apart from a few slates, it was structurally sound. Said it needed very little to make it liveable" (23). The teenagers in Graham Greene's "The Destroyers" also speak this language, but whereas the teenagers

in Greene's story use this knowledge for the modernist demolition of outdated aesthetic standards, Alice uses it for the preservation of bourgeois sensibilities. She thinks of herself as a house rescuer and of Philip as "her saviour, the restorer of the house" (40). We are told that she had "rescued" houses in Manchester, Halifax, and Birmingham, "where electricity had flowed obediently through wires, after long abstinence" (63). At the council office, she watches on hopefully as Mary Williams writes "the words which would – Alice was sure – save the house. For as long as it was needed by Alice and the others. Save it permanently, why not?" (25). Alice has a keen eye for danger and waste that stand in the way of saving the house and transforming it into a comfortable home. When she first surveys Number 43, she notices "electric cables ripped out of the wall [...] dangling, raw-ended. The cooker was pulled out and lying on the floor. The broken windows had admitted rain water which lay in puddles everywhere. There was a dead bird on the floor. It stank" (6-7). She observes that "This rubbish is a health hazard," and pronounces, "There must be rats" (11). While the other squatters go to political protests, Alice remains at the house, working with a builder, Philip, to make the house habitable.

To rescue and repair a neglected house is to affirm bourgeois values about waste: a safe house and a comfortable home is one in which human waste is hidden and material waste is put to use. One of Alice's proudest moments comes after she and Philip restore the plumbing by digging out the concrete that the council had poured into the toilets. She and Jim dispose of the buckets of "shit" that had been collecting in an upstairs room by burying it in the back garden (72). It follows that one of the major setbacks that Alice experiences in the novel occurs when a policeman pokes fun at her efforts to bury the human waste by throwing a bag of shit into the house foyer. This incident is dangerous for the squatters, as un-disposed human waste can lead to disease, but for Alice the

incident is a more serious threat to her home-making fantasy, where everything is “clean and orderly”: shit does not belong in the foyer.⁷³ At the same time, material waste is another kind of danger that must be avoided in the bourgeois home. The thrifty Alice complains to Jasper and Bert about “Waste. All this *waste*,” and orders the men to go “looking in the skips for some furniture” (91, 90). When they return with their “gleanings,” Alice thinks, ““Oh the wicked waste of it all,’ she raged, seeing plastic bags full of curtains, which were there because someone had tired of them; a refrigerator, stools, tables, chairs – all of them serviceable, if some needed a few minutes’ work to put right” (96-7).

Alice’s tireless hostessing, mothering, repairing, and salvaging efforts add up to an impressive home-making feat. As a hostess, however, she fails on two counts: her fellow squatters do not value her efforts, and she does not provide for the truly needy. After Alice and Philip remove the concrete from the toilets, the group gathers around her: “They cheered her, meaning it, but there was mockery too. And there was a warning, which she did not hear, or care about” (43). Just as the squat is cut off from the surrounding community, Alice is incapable of forging interpersonal connections and, therefore, from understanding how best to meet other people’s needs. Jasper, the homosexual man with whom she shares an icy, sexless relationship, continually negates her domestic impulses: ““We are not here, [...] to make ourselves comfortable. We aren’t here for that”” (8). For Margaret Rowe, Alice is never a genuine home-maker; rather, she

⁷³ For Gayle Greene, “The futility that informs Lessing’s vision in this novel is epitomized by the image of shit. [...] This shit is simply shit, not a resource capable of being transmuted to gold [...], but a revelation [...] of what it’s all worth. Moreover, it is ‘systemic,’ produced both by the physiological system, the body, and by the socioeconomic system, the body politic” (218). Sandra Singer also picks up on the image of “shit” as Lessing’s ultimate judgment of Alice: “In the end, rather than a positive valuation of Alice’s character as resourceful or resolute, the reader is left with the police officer’s comparison of Alice to a bag of shit” (97).

“appropriates the maternal role which she saw her mother, Dorothy, play in the golden days of the Mellings” (101). Alice’s relationship with Jasper further enables this fantasy by allowing her to avoid the sexual maturity of adult relationships; instead, with Jasper, she can “play parent and fantasise about playing wife” (Rowe 101). In lieu of a reciprocated life as hostess and mother, Alice is confined to a solitary fantasy life in which home-making amounts to political failure.

A successful hostess provides refuge for the vulnerable and takes responsibility for their welfare. Under Alice’s command, the characters who are genuinely at risk – Jim, Philip, Faye, Monica – are casualties who do not find the hospitality they need.⁷⁴ Faye aggressively tells Alice that she doesn’t “care about all this domestic bliss, all the house and garden stuff [...] Any minute now we are going to have hot running water and double glazing, I wouldn’t be surprised. For me this is all a lot of shit, do you hear? *Shit!*” (112). Rejected by Faye and Jasper, Alice turns to the only non-white character in the squat, Jim: “she loved Jim, loved his helplessness, his vulnerability, and her own part in alleviating these wounds” (192). But her self-centered perspective backfires: she manages to help Jim get a job at her father’s factory but promptly undermines that achievement by stealing money from the company safe – a crime pinned on Jim, for which he is fired. Jim disappears; Faye dies in the car-bombing; Philip dies after he is not given a place in the squat and so forced to live on the streets; Monica is a single mother who remains homeless and locked out from the professed hospitality of Alice’s squat. The flowers on

⁷⁴ As Jean Pickering, among others, has noted, Alice is not the only one who disregards the true needs and wants of the disadvantaged people who seek refuge in the house: “Few of the would-be revolutionaries show much concern for those on whose behalf they wish to overthrow the system. Philip and Jim are the only two working-class members of the commune; they want jobs, not revolution” (Pickering 189)

Alice's table are no substitute for the structural safety nets that might have kept these characters alive and socially enfranchised.

Alice cannot offer protection to the people who need it most, and she also fails to provide refuge for the vulnerable birds that she and Pat find while attempting to fix the roof. Recalling Maurice Castle's willingness to sacrifice the dog in *The Human Factor*, Alice stands by as Pat destroys a bird's nest. Alice begins to cry, becoming "hysterical" and "childlike" as Pat takes action: "'A *bird*,' said Pat. 'A *bird*, not a *person*.' She pulled out handfuls of straw and stuff, and flung them out into the air, where they floated down. Then something crashed on to the tiles of the roof: an egg. The tiny embryo of a bird sprawled there. Moving" (92). As with the sacrifice of Buller in Greene's novel, the sacrifice of the birds cannot be justified ethically. If Alice had fixed the rotting roof beams, which Elizabeth Maslen has aptly called the "fatal flaw" of the house, the destruction of the nest might have been justified as a guarantor of safety for the squatters (Maslen 28). But as it is, the act only reinforces the limits and misguided nature of Alice's efforts. For Maslen, the roof beams signify the breakdown of political purpose and the unethical anarchy that comes to dominate the squatters' behaviour and aims. "The house is the central image," she argues, "for the ultimate weakness of the group: animal functions are taken care of but wrong-headedness, mirrored by the rotten roof-beams, typifies the group as collective and as individuals" (28-9). In addition to this metaphoric significance of the rotten roof-beams, there is a literal implication: physical safety is a prerequisite for a house that is able to nurture healthy relationships and effective sociopolitical communities. Although Alice demonstrates knowledge of construction, plumbing, and electricity, her larger goal is surface-level bourgeois comfort, which she

can achieve only at the cost of more substantial structural solutions, genuine interpersonal connection, and refuge for the truly needy.

For Gayle Greene, Alice's many shortcomings are significant insofar as they demonstrate that she is a failed revolutionary. Greene's critique of Alice may be reasonable if the goal is to condemn her attempt at radical politics, but Lessing's novel asks readers to do more than hold up Alice as a straw man. When considered within the context of Thatcher's privatization schemes, Alice's ineffective middle-class fantasy can be understood as a response to the threat of impermanence and isolation, of an inhospitable existence in the contact zone. The narrative suggests that any successful politics, revolutionary or otherwise, depends on a functioning system of hospitality, a system in which humanitarianism and government welfare have value. Psychologically, Alice believes herself to have been a victim of inhospitality at some formative stage: "it had been with her since she could remember: being excluded, left out" (108). She painfully recalls the large parties that her mother used to throw: "All that splendour of hospitality, the big house, the people coming in and out, the meals, the..." (347). Alice would have to give up her room to house guests and sleep on the floor of her parents' room. She was, in other words, a condition of her mother's hospitality to others: "When there were parties, when there were people in the house, it seemed Alice became invisible to her mother, and had no place in her own home" (229). As an adult, she is haunted by what Gayle Greene calls "originary dispossession" (216), and she becomes "possessed [...] by a vision of impermanence; houses, buildings, streets, whole areas of streets, blown away, going, gone, an illusion" (133). In Alice's dystopian vision, as in the policies of the Thatcher government, the work of postwar reconstruction disappears, leaving its mark on both the psyche and the landscape.

Alice's psychological wound is literalized in an architectural sense when the narrative relocates her mother from a privately owned home into a much more modest flat. When she goes to find Dorothy in her new accommodation, she enters an unfamiliar neighbourhood that confirms the impermanence of her material past: "Not a very nice area; it could just – Alice supposed – be called Hampstead, by someone charitable. Soon she was standing outside a four-storey block of flats, with a small dirty garden in front. Surely her mother was not living here? Yes, her name was on a scrap of paper inserted in a slot opposite 8: Mellings" (227). Alice's vision of impermanence and the displacement of her mother are not revolutionary, or modernist in the sense appreciated by Graham Greene's or Colin MacInnes's teenagers, but bleak and pointlessly destructive. In this sense, *The Good Terrorist* recalls the anxious themes expressed by writers during World War II, when physical destruction was a constant threat and reality. But in Lessing's novel, this anxiety is far bleaker. In 1985, unlike in 1945, the loss of homes cannot be justified – however painfully – by a sense of moral purpose and political responsibility associated with the war. Without the guaranteed provisions of the Welfare State, the novel suggests, individuals are forced to attend to their own safety and well-being at the cost of engaging actively with society. Indeed, in Thatcher's own words, "there is no such thing as society" (n.p.).

Like Maurice Castle, Alice retreats to her internal safe house when the dangers of the material world are too great: "Alice shut her eyes, retreated inside herself to a place she had discovered long years ago, she did not know when, but she had been a small child. Inside here, she was safe, and the world could crash and roar and scream as much as it liked" (130). Similarly, after the terrorist attack, she relates not to her lost "comrade"

Faye or to the other squatters who are all dispersing, but to Number 43 and her fantastical version of the safe house:

She sat on quietly there by herself in the silent house. In the *betrayed* house. [...] The house might have been a wounded animal whose many hurts she had one by one cleaned and bandaged, and now it was well and whole, and she was stroking it, pleased with it and herself ... not quite whole, however. [...] she felt that she could pull the walls of this house, her house, around her like a blanket, where she could snuggle, where she could feel safe. (392)

Like Castle's sense of self-loyalty, Alice's ultimate responsibility is to herself and her own safety, a ruthless individualism that forecloses on her efforts to provide hospitable safety to others who are more vulnerable than she is. Her disturbing denial of responsibility after the attack further indicates not only her alienation from the others, but also from herself as a participant in social systems: "Not that Alice believed that she – Alice – had any real reason to feel bad; she hadn't *really* been part of it" (393).

Representing the bigger betrayal of the nation failing to house its population, the squat at Number 43 cannot be a basic safe house or a comfortable home; it is only a "trap" that reproduces and reinforces Alice's isolation (288). The house can only be a metonym for Alice, alone, not for a functioning national community. The break between houses and politics represented by Alice's narrative and culminating in senseless violence is nothing short of tragic. Lessing's story of isolation, lost homes, destroyed birds' nests, and rotten roof beams is ultimately one of the political and moral abandonment of British citizens by their government.

Many critics and reviewers see *The Good Terrorist* as a conservative, reactionary book for Lessing. Gayle Greene foregrounds her analysis of the novel by exclaiming, “What I find horrific about it [*The Good Terrorist*] is the way Lessing seems to turn on her own former beliefs in a mood of savage caricature” (205). Echoing Greene, Margaret Scanlan offers this critique: “even a surface reading would seem to suggest that the problem is [...] that its political message is far more conservative, both about women and about action, than we might expect from this feminist icon and former member of the Communist Party” (183). And Scanlan aligns herself with “Denis Donoghue’s argument that by portraying her terrorists as incompetents, Lessing soothes the middle class: ‘bourgeois liberalism is safe if these are the only opponents it has to face (Donoghue 3)’” (Scanlan 192). A “surface reading” of the kind that Scanlan suggests could easily support these criticisms. The characters are not only unkind and unlikable; they are, as Donoghue observes, incompetent, irresponsible activists. They traffic in slogans and political jargon without devoting the time to thorough education, analysis, and politically engaged action. There is no doubt that Lessing intends to portray this misfit group in an entirely negative light.

In her 1985 Massey Lectures for the CBC, given in the same year that she published *The Good Terrorist*, Lessing spoke pessimistically about the role of young people in politics:

In the balance against this hopeful fact [of new emerging democracies], we must put a sad one, which is that large numbers of young people, when they reach the age of political activity, adopt a stance or an attitude that is very much part of our times. It is that democracy is only a cheat and a sham, only the mask for exploitation, and that they will have none of it.

We have almost reached a point where if one values democracy, one is denounced as a reactionary. I think that this will be one of the attitudes that will be found most fascinating to historians of the future. For one thing, the young people who cultivate this attitude towards democracy are usually those who have never experienced its opposite: people who've lived under tyranny value democracy. ("Laboratories of Social Change," 65)

Dorothy echoes Lessing's Massey Lecture comments in her diatribe against what she sees as the young, spoiled people of Britain. She concludes her conversation with Alice: "And then you are going to build it all up again in your own image! [...] with only one thought in your minds, how to get power for yourselves" (354). The obvious parallels between Lessing's views and Dorothy's rant have led critics such as Margaret Scanlan to claim that "Dorothy defines the novel's point of view, is its hidden narrator" (195).

Interpreting the novel in light of Lessing's comments and Dorothy's character should not result in a simplistic assumption that Lessing is no longer a committed leftist thinker. Elizabeth Maslen offers an alternative interpretation, arguing that Lessing's work is concerned generally with individual responsibility for collective morality (26). Maslen reads *The Good Terrorist* not as an attack on socialism as an ideology, but as an attack on "the ways in which an ideology can be betrayed" (25). I extend Maslen's reading by considering the significance of novel as a realist text. Lessing captures how Alice's preoccupation with individual safety comes at the cost of community safety and, ultimately, political responsibility. Moreover, to create a selfish and childish female protagonist does not necessarily prove that Lessing is adopting a reactionary attitude toward women; rather, as her comments from the Massey Lectures indicate, we should consider Alice's "stance and attitude" as "very much part of our times [the Thatcher

years].” Facing the facts may not seem as rhetorically or stylistically optimistic as a more propagandistic approach, but, as with immediate postwar reconstruction fiction, it serves a valuable purpose.

Against critics who find the bleak vision of the novel to be conservative or reactionary, I argue that it is profoundly effective in light of the reading experience, which emulates the breathless, overwhelming pace and of real life in a world without basic safety nets. The reader follows Alice in more or less real time as she scurries about London and throughout the house over the course of only a few days. She is constantly on the move, and she rarely sleeps. The narrator presents her thoughts as strung together haphazardly, often strained by emotion and fatigue. Fragmented sentences and a blurred line between the narrator and Alice, moreover, make it as challenging for the reader to find literary stability as it seems to be for Alice to find physical comfort. It is difficult for a reader not to empathize with Alice’s occasional desire for a home-cooked meal at a large kitchen table: the book and the world it represents are exhausting. In Maslen’s apt words, the “reader is never allowed to relax on apparently familiar ground” (26). Ultimately, the reader is forced by Lessing’s stylistic insistence to pull back from those identifications, to see them again as a move away from community responsibility toward individual isolation. In the aftermath of the attack, Alice allows herself, as she occasionally did,

to slide back into her childhood where she dwelt pleasurably on some scene or other that she had smoothed and polished and painted over and over again with fresh colour until it was like walking into a story that began, ‘Once upon a time there was a little girl called Alice [...]’. But today her mind would not stay in this dream or story, it insisted on coming

back into the present, away from her mother who was finally repudiating Alice because of the bombing. (395)

Lessing's realism is not an escapist retreat to simple plots, straightforward representation, and narrative closure. It is a brutal awakening, an insistence on "coming back into the present." Gayle Greene characterizes Lessing's style as hopeful in this regard:

This is realism with a vengeance, but realism with a difference, that disallows the consolation of explanations or origins, of 'sequence' and 'consequence' (to use Drabble's terms in *The Radiant Way*). *The Good Terrorist* offers none of the usual consolations of narrative; that what has happened in the past accounts for the present, that what we do in the present affects the future, that we can learn through experience, that the next generation will do better than the last. (218)

Although Lessing does not provide a logical set of explanations for the terrorist violence that ends the novel, the dire consequences of turning away from the present and reality are apparent.⁷⁵ Alice's awakening may have come too late, but Lessing's realism makes the adamant case that it is not too late for the engaged reader.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ For Margaret Scanlan, Lessing undermines any political value that might come from her investigation of terrorism because she fails to ask any historical questions about the existence of terrorism in Britain in the 1980s. Instead, Scanlan argues, Lessing creates a link "between private madness and terrorist impulses" (190); "The novel's pessimism depends heavily on its attribution of terrorism not to social conditions-which might, with whatever difficulty, be articulated or improved-but to unapproachable centers of power and unfathomable madness" (Scanlan 192). Scanlan's assessment is persuasive when the novel is considered primarily as an investigation of terrorism, but when considered within the broader social context of Thatcher's Britain, as I have attempted to do, the novel does offer a substantial critique of a politics committed to individual safety before collective well-being.

⁷⁶ Gayle Greene reads the novel as an indication that "Gone is Lessing's belief that the next generation will make a better life than the generation before, and with it, the hope of progress" (218).

Loach and the Value of Deconstruction

Like *The Human Factor* and *The Good Terrorist*, Ken Loach's film, *Riff-Raff*, uses fiction to explore the challenges to interpersonal connection, community belonging, and political empowerment in the post-Welfare State era. Released in 1991, the year after Margaret Thatcher lost her Conservative party leadership to John Major, the film offers a hindsight evaluation of the effects of Thatcherism, particularly on working-class communities. Stylistically and thematically, Loach returns to a kind of gritty social realism that dominated his contributions to radical British filmmaking of the 1960s New Wave with films such as *Cathy Come Home* (1966), *Poor Cow* (1967), and *Kes* (1969). Like many New Wave directors in the 1960s, Loach was interested in poetically capturing challenges to working-class life. He built a stylistic reputation for neo-realism or naturalism that relied on location shooting, non-professional actors, scripts with vernacular dialogue, and room for improvisation. Even today, Loach continues to be an outspoken and popular filmmaker who directly articulates a desire to link his art and left-wing politics.⁷⁷ With *Riff-Raff*, he returns to earlier stylistic markers and also to the issue of housing and homelessness, which were the major themes of his influential 1966 television docudrama, *Cathy Come Home*. *Riff-Raff* can be understood as an argument for taking up a fresh realist lens in order to see clearly the destructive impact of Thatcherism as a first step to real political action.⁷⁸ Putting *Riff-Raff* into dialogue with

⁷⁷ When asked to provide a bio for the Foreign Office in 1997 that would be included in the "Planet Britain" project to promote British culture, Loach spoke deprecatingly of himself and emphasized the collaborative political struggles with which his art had engaged: "A recurring theme in work with writers – e.g. Jim Allen, Barry Hines and Paul Laverty – has been to explore the two curses of the labour movement: Stalinism and Social Democracy, the latter exemplified by the Blairite project of trying to give a radical gloss to hard-line capitalist politics" (qtd. in Hayward, n.p.). The Foreign Office rejected this bio on the grounds of its controversial implications.

⁷⁸ Stuart Laing has observed the similarities between Loach's films of the 1990s and those of the 1960s, but he also points to a meaningful difference in terms of social resonance: "Loach's subject-matter [...] is

contemporaneous work by Greene and Lessing, moreover, helps to reveal the significance of this overtly political filmmaker's choice to use the issues of housing and building to focalize a fictional critique of Thatcherism.

In *Riff-Raff*, those who build homes are not those who own homes. London Heritage Homes is the ironically named construction company that is responsible for renovating an abandoned hospital, symbolizing the abandonment of public service funding by the government, into luxury flats for private purchase. The workers navigate the dangers of construction work while they search for their own physical, financial, and emotional security. Like the squatters in *The Good Terrorist*, Loach's builders find lodgings in provisional shelters rather than permanent homes. But unlike Lessing's protagonist, who chooses to give up her permanent residence, Loach's characters are forced to squat. Stevie (Robert Carlyle), newly arrived in London from Glasgow, is homeless. His co-workers help him to find a squat in an abandoned block of council flats. Although this act partially compensates for the lack of government assistance, ultimately the squat, like Number 43 in Lessing's novel, cannot serve as a space to nurture human relationships, political ideals, or fictional closure.

The film has two major components – documentation of the building industry and fictional narrative – that work together to establish housing as a potential avenue for political change and, specifically for Loach, the cultivation of class consciousness in the aftermath of Thatcher's destructive "attack" on the Welfare State. Although the film is fictional, Loach went to great lengths to allow the drama to emerge from "real"

drawn from the social fallout of the destructive side of the Thatcherite project of the 1980s: widespread unemployment (and fear of unemployment); the casualisation of labour; the growth of the black economy; increasing homelessness; and families without security and under stress. While much of this seems a return to the subject-matter of the 1960s, these issues now seem less the experience of a small number of victims than typical experiences through which large sections of the population may have to travel" (26).

conditions. The film was shot almost entirely on an actual building site location in Tottenham in North London (Hayward 211). The cast did include several professional actors, such as Robert Carlyle, but the majority of actors “were expected to have worked on a building site, and were encouraged, through improvisations, to bring their own experiences to bear upon their performances” (Hill, “Finding a Form” 136). In fact, the script, written by Bill Jesse, was based on Jesse’s own experiences working as a builder. Ricky Tomlinson, the most politically vocal and class-conscious of the characters, was chosen in part because he had been involved with the Shrewsbury Two pickets during a 1973 builders strike and had served prison time as a result (Hayward 212). With *Riff-Raff*, Loach made it clear that fiction had real implications by choosing on-location shooting, encouraging improvisation, and casting actors with real experience in the building industry and organized industrial action. After the film was released, Loach continued to emphasize the relationship of the cinematic drama to actual political contexts by screening the film for the Construction Safety Campaign (Hill, “Interview” 173).

Much of the film is composed of scenes that are not directly expository or interested in character development. Instead, they resemble documentary footage. These scenes offer an insider’s view of every aspect of the building site: the labour associated with rehabilitation projects, the lack of basic safety precautions under privately contracted jobs, the relations between management and workers, the political conversations and moments of camaraderie. By accurately portraying the working conditions on the site, Loach may have been aiming to correct what he perceived to be a shortcoming of *Cathy Come Home*, which depicted the plight of homelessness faced by many families, especially single women and children, during the 1960s. Despite the fact that scholars such as Andrew Burke see *Cathy Come Home* as representing “the watershed moment in

terms of a fictional film's projecting questions of housing and homelessness into wider public consciousness," Loach expressed to John Hill in an interview that *Cathy Come Home* wasn't political enough (Burke 180). Instead of dealing directly with the economics and politics of the building industry, Loach contended, *Cathy Come Home* was a feeling-based exploration of homelessness (Interview 171).⁷⁹ Returning to the theme of housing with *Riff-Raff* reasserts the need for radical filmmakers and artists to focus their efforts on realistically portraying labour conditions and challenges to national social welfare.⁸⁰



Interior shot showing the everyday tasks and working conditions on the building site

⁷⁹ The homelessness problem in London in the 1980s was symbolized by what was known as "Cardboard City," a shanty-town community where approximately 200 people found transient shelter near Waterloo Station in the pedestrian underpass of the Bullring roundabout. The site of the "Cardboard City" was transformed after those finding refuge there were evicted in 1998 and the site was redeveloped by the British Film Institute for £20 million into a 500-seat Imax cinema. This redevelopment is ironic. Whereas *Cathy Come Home*, brought much-needed public attention to the homelessness problem in the 1960s, the symbol of British national film, the BFI, literally displaced homeless people with a cinema in the 1990s.

⁸⁰ Burke observes that "Housing has long been a focus of British cinema, with the documentary tradition in particular returning time and again to questions of substandard dwellings, slum clearances, and urban renewal" (179). He mentions a number of documentaries that took up housing issues since the 1930s: *Housing Problems* (1935), *Glasgow Today and Tomorrow* (1952), *Cumbernauld, Town for Tomorrow* (1970), *Let Glasgow Flourish* (1956), *Not a Penny on the Rents* (1968), *Who Cares* (1971).

It is striking, given Loach's overt concern to explore the "economics and politics of the building industry," that he chose to present that material in *Riff-Raff* through a fictional rather than documentary framework. The film comes at a time when Loach felt the need to take a new approach to political filmmaking.⁸¹ During the 1980s, he had spent most of his time working on documentaries that addressed the urgent crises of Thatcherism as directly as possible, but he struggled to gain support from studios and networks. *Questions of Leadership* (1983), for instance, was a four-part series on trade union democracy that was refused transmission because of the radical nature of the political message. *Which Side are You On?* (1984), a documentary about songs and poetry of the miners' strike, eventually aired on Channel 4 without the network logo. *Riff-Raff* marked Loach's return to fiction film-making. It was produced by Channel 4 for television, a medium that guaranteed widespread exhibition and with which Loach had worked since the 1960s. With *Riff-Raff*, Loach expressed his belief in the political and artistic efficacy of a realism that rejects excessive stylization and aims to portray people and their living situations accurately.

When Hill asked Loach whether the changed political circumstances of the 1990s might require any change in his cinematic approach, Loach responded by renouncing overtly aesthetic projects: "If you can be fairly accurate about the way people are and what they are up to that's always interesting and relevant. Providing you are true to people you don't have to invent theories or construct an aesthetic for what you do. Just go and be accurate and that will be contemporary by definition" (Hill 165). Roach's assumption that accuracy is a non-aesthetic choice is obviously problematic. He

⁸¹ Much of the criticism on Loach focuses on exhibition and production histories. See, for example, work by Anthony Hayward, John Hill, and George McKnight.

contradicts this assumption later in the interview, when he tells Hill that “we wanted something that felt quite random and haphazard” (165). Loach’s lack of theoretical sophistication here is somewhat beside the point, but it does help to demonstrate his commitment to accessible art and political practice over abstract theorizing and universalizing aesthetic standards.

Unlike documentary, fiction allowed Loach to explore the relationship between real living and working conditions and the ideals that help shape politics, relationships, and narratives. Alongside the non-expository portion of *Riff-Raff*, a number of plotlines emerge that all center on the desire for community belonging and physical and emotional safety. The basic problem of security thoroughly permeates the narratives: homelessness, thievery, loose scaffolding on the construction site, unemployment. The central domestic setting is Stevie’s squat – a temporary dwelling that lacks the safety attached to permanent residences. Recalling Number 43 in *The Good Terrorist*, Stevie’s squat cannot be a space that cultivates effective political action, long-term relationships, or resolvable narrative trajectories. While helping to make the squat habitable for Stevie, Larry identifies the privatization of public services as a potential political rallying point for the construction workers: “Could someone explain to me why someone’s got to make a profit every time you boil a kettle, every time your kid has a drink of water, or every time a pensioner has a warm by a gas fire?” He specifically links the privatization of the housing sector with homelessness and unemployment: “millions of people without homes,” “250,000 building workers out of work.” Despite Larry’s efforts to generate activism within the squat and on the construction site, the narrative trajectory that he spearheads leads nowhere. He loses his job after he complains about a lack of safety precautions.

Just as political ideals fail to materialize and progress, the romance plot is abortive. Susan and Stevie begin to make a life together in Stevie's squat, but the space cannot support their relationship. The abandoned council housing estate is not a realization of Alison and Peter Smithson's "streets in the sky," but a dangerous structure in which dark concrete stairwells are populated by thieves, who break into the squat, and drug dealers, who sell heroine to Susan. Rather than foster neighbourliness, the squat makes living in close proximity to others a serious threat. Deborah Knight similarly reads *Riff-Raff* as an observation "of the decay and collapse of the 1960s housing projects" (67). Indeed, the drug dealers are intruders into Stevie's and Susan's living space as well as into the progress of the romance plot. After discovering that Susan is using heroine, Stevie ends the relationship. She moves out, and the film returns to the building site without addressing the emotional fallout of their separation. As Loach himself describes the relationship: "there were two people who each needed each other for a time – ships that passed in the night" (Hill 165). The relationship and the romance narrative itself cannot thrive in a social context in which temporary squats and quick fixes replace dependable public housing and successful policy reform.

Fictional drama and real conditions collide when one of the unnamed, young, black builders falls off of loose scaffolding and is taken to hospital, where he may die. Throughout the film, he talks about his dream of going to Africa. Like Larry's political activism and Stevie's romance with Susan, this ideal is impossible in the context of a post-Thatcher world. The fictional possibility of a sojourn to Africa is superseded by the real, dangerous conditions of privatized construction work. Loach explains that the script writer, Bill Jesse,

knew people who had been injured on building sites. The danger is worse on small sites where a lot of the work is subcontracted and there's no union representation protecting people against hazardous working conditions. [...] The defeat of the unions in the eighties had opened the door for the return of the old days of the Lump, where building workers had no protection from danger, exploitation or instant dismissal. I remember talking to a group of building workers shortly after we did *Riff-Raff*, and they were saying there had been eleven deaths of building workers in the previous two months in London. But nobody knew what their real names were. That's just Dickensian, isn't it? (Loach 86)

The fact that the workers cannot find physical safety is doubled by their anonymity and general disenfranchisement. When Stevie goes to the hospital, he is reluctant to give his name and, instead of seeing his injured co-worker, he turns to violence. Stevie and several other builders respond to the incident with an act of arson that destroys the entire building site. That final act of destruction, recalling the car-bombing in *The Good Terrorist*, is significant not because it effectively responds to political and socioeconomic injustice, but because it reveals the state of affairs in 1991: it is easier to destroy what you cannot have than to work for or even hope for social change. Apathy and unattended frustration dominate.



High angle shot following the near fall of one of the builders from the scaffolding.

Just as the building site is demolished in a flash by the fire, relationships, political ideals, and fictional narratives are abruptly terminated. Only the “real” conditions of the contact zone remain. *Riff-Raff* is not a naively simplistic us-versus-them story that idealizes the potential for class-based social change. Rather, it depicts a society in which multiple underprivileged groups cannot come together within social communities. Larry pleads with the other builders, “we need to stick together to have security,” but his efforts to create safety for the group through organization are challenged by in-fighting, xenophobia, and lack of political engagement. Although the film captures camaraderie among the workers, I agree with John Hill’s argument that “what the film successfully demonstrates is that the resistance to change comes not only from the workers themselves, who generally lack the will and the means to fight back” (Finding a Form 137). Hill goes on to argue that

Loach's return to the conventions of documentary realism may have brought with it a too clear-cut version of class politics. While this has the undoubted virtue of drawing attention to the severe economic divisions which continue to be a characteristic of British society (and which significantly widened during the Thatcher years), it may also be at the expense of an ability to deal adequately with other social divisions, such as those of sex and ethnicity, and the ways that these may be seen to complicate a basic class perspective. (Finding a Form 138)

Hill points specifically to the doomed relationship with Susan, in contrast to the supportive male bonding with the other workers. Nonetheless, Loach does not hierarchize these issues. Instead, the film shows how the various struggles for safety within British society – not just those experienced by the working classes but those experienced by women, immigrants, and non-white citizens – are interconnected in a complex way that needs serious attention. Housing and building are a materially located set of issues through which those various struggles and experiences come together. Andrew Burke observes that neglected council flats are “routinely associated in the popular imagination as the sites of, and symbols for, the major social problems of contemporary Britain (crime, poverty, anti-social behaviour), but such identification, by politicians and the media especially, frequently serves only as a cover for anti-working class and anti-immigrant sentiment” (178). Against such widespread rhetoric, *Riff-Raff* lifts the “cover,” exposing the realities of physical danger, socio-economic inequality, and prejudicial values that actually characterize daily life for many after the Welfare State ends.

The realism of *Riff-Raff*, like that of Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*, is critical in its commitment to seeing and representing things as accurately as possible. In her essay that

situates Loach's work within the tradition of British naturalism, Deborah Knight concludes that, in his films,

it is not the case that disequilibrium is succeeded by equilibrium. Things do not come right in the end. The point of these narratives is not to pretend that artistic representations fix – or show us how to fix – actual social or political problems. Rather, in the spirit of naturalistic experimentation, their point is to present the complexities of a given situation, knowing full well that a satisfactory resolution may be as impossible in life as in naturalistic art, but that the only place where the attempt to improve matters makes any sense is not in art, but in life. (78)

Riff-Raff is not a fantasy of social unity. Rather, it depicts the fractures within and among the marginalized groups represented in the film. Vernacular, naturalistic dialogue also makes it difficult for viewers who come from various subject positions to follow the narrative and identify with the characters. In this sense, *Riff-Raff* addresses Loach's concern for the challenges facing class politics, which, for him, constitute the most significant avenue for attempting to "improve matters," "not in art, but in life." In the interview with Hill, Loach claims, "if it is to be progressive, the heart of the struggle has got to be around the class that's got revolutionary potential. Otherwise its [*sic*] just a liberal cause" (166).⁸² At the same time that he propagandizes, however, he also demonstrates a commitment to reality and to taking responsibility for the facts of British political malaise: "We all voted for our own misery in 1979. We just have to be realistic.

⁸² When asked by Hill whether issues of racial and sexual inequality are in effect subordinate to the issue of class inequality, Loach responds by affirming the central significance of class struggle for progressive politics: "They are not subordinate in the sense that they are unimportant. But if you are wanting to change the way we live together then the key issues are the ones where power is at stake" (Interview 167)

On the average building site in England, just as in any walk of life, people are not terribly politicized” (Hill, “Interview” 166). Realism, for Loach, is not useful because it fantasizes solutions but because it lays bare the difficulty of finding those solutions. As Michael Eaton has argued, the “comeback of British realism” in the early 1990s through the films of Loach and others, such as Mike Leigh, should be understood not only as “a return to a particular style,” but also as “a return to value” (qtd. in Hill, “Finding a Form” 138). Value in *Riff-Raff*, as in *The Good Terrorist* and *The Human Factor*, resides not in fantasies of reconstruction, but in the necessary first-step fantasies that deconstruct a system that no longer protects people.

Dead Lines, Dead Animals, Dead Buildings

The Human Factor, *The Good Terrorist*, and *Riff-Raff* all end with images of disconnection, death, and destruction. In Greene’s novel, a dead phone line fails to connect Maurice in Moscow with Sarah in England. More overtly destructive images conclude Lessing’s novel and Loach’s film: a terrorist attack and an act of arson. In *Riff-Raff*, although the blazing building site is construed as revenge for the dangerous working conditions that led to the builder’s fall, the final shot suggests that the film as a whole is not condoning such an act of violence. The fire casts its glow over rats panicking in the construction rubble as the building burns. The image recalls the opening of the film, in which rats crawl in this same location, and a scene in which the builders cheer on one man as he kills a rat and then proceeds to tear up the floorboards to find the rats’ nest and kill the babies, recalling the sacrificial deaths of the dog in *The Human Factor* and the birds in *The Good Terrorist*. While the workers have much to protest, the rats are a reminder that the workers are not the only or the most vulnerable members of society. No

one, the film suggests, is exempt from the responsibilities of collective welfare. All three scenes of violence toward animals ultimately point to the fact that the human beings cannot make society safer for others, including animals, because they are struggling to find security and hospitality for themselves. The safe houses for these most vulnerable beings are ultimately unsustainable in post-Welfare State Britain, where the basic safety nets of social assistance are no longer guaranteed. The sacrifice of these animals is rendered even bleaker when it becomes apparent that nothing is to be gained: human civilization will not become more ethical or just or hospitable as a result of the deaths. In fact, the deaths signal the extent to which danger and inhospitality have spread throughout British society, and it is not surprising that these acts of violence foreshadow much larger acts of violence – the terrorist attack and arson – that are similarly void of clear ethical or even political benefit.



Closing shot of *Riff-Raff*: rats panic in the rubble as the construction site burns.

Patrick Wright argues that the cinematic image of the tower block represents the “tombstone not just of council housing but of the entire Welfare State” (qtd. in Burke 187). One could extend Wright’s metaphor by thinking of the works of fiction I examine here as eulogies for the Welfare State. Indeed, they are narratives that face death, destruction, and isolation without offering a false sense of hope for progress or revival; in place of a thriving home and nation, these narratives show the dangers of squats and Moscow safe houses that provide no connection with the outside social community. But, on the whole, I think it is more appropriate to understand these narratives as emergency signals – as air-raid sirens for a new kind of blitz on British citizens. In *The Human Factor*, when Sarah reluctantly meets Dr. Percival in a restaurant to find out information about Maurice’s whereabouts, he congratulates her on having the “courage” to meet him at the restaurant. When she asks for clarification, he replies, “Well, this is one of the places the Irish like to bomb. They’ve thrown a small one already, but unlike the blitz their bombs are quite liable to hit the same place twice” (242). The new blitz on British citizens at the end of the Welfare State is not only about IRA terrorism, but about a more widespread experience of insecurity. The brutal violence of *The Good Terrorism* and *Riff-Raff* make sure that, like real-world British citizens, readers and viewers can have no false sense of security, no “city without a wall,” through literature or film. Like the fiction of postwar reconstruction, these late-twentieth-century works bring to light the concerns that should play an urgent part in building a safer world.

Conclusion: Home-building, fiction-building, world-building

In 1942, Elizabeth Bowen wrote that, “Homes are much more than rooms and tables and chairs. Homes wait in our hearts till we can make them again” (“Christmas Toast” 128-9). She appeals to the imaginative component of home-making – to what lies beyond furniture and room-use “in our hearts” – and to its significance in rebuilding the material world. This dissertation returns for its conclusion to Bowen and one of her many wartime meditations on houses because she was one of the most prolific commentators on the domestic scene and British fiction of the twentieth century. This particular statement encapsulates and predicts the continual impulse of postwar British culture to reframe its sense of identity by recalling the wartime house and the promise of postwar reconstruction. The impulse is evident enough in immediate postwar fiction, such as that set in wartime billets and boardinghouses by Elizabeth Taylor and Patrick Hamilton. But even as works of fiction from the 1950s and 1960s, such as Graham Greene’s “The Destroyers,” Colin MacInnes’s *Absolute Beginners*, or Muriel Spark’s *The Girls of Slender Means*, contribute narratives and idioms for a new postwar generation, they cannot move on from the legacy of the war without vividly acknowledging the imprint of that historical moment on the built environment. Indeed, some of Britain’s most influential recent novels, such as Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), are works of historical fiction that explicitly choose wartime country houses to focalize their narratives. While history necessarily moved on from war in a material sense, the ethos of rebuilding houses born of that conflict has remained a staple of postwar fiction.

This project has relied broadly on “building” as an analytic category. Whether in relation to fictional constructions, houses, town plans, or social initiatives, “building” suggests a generative process. The Welfare State and postwar fiction are not static entities that appeared as finished products as soon as the war had ended. Rather, as my study has demonstrated, they are dynamic phenomena – materially and philosophically. They are, like the country houses that became schools or museums after the war, always in the process of becoming something new, subject to reconstruction, reappropriation, and demolition. Hence, it has not been my objective to characterize postwar literature as decidedly late modernist, postmodernist, or otherwise. As a conceptual term, “building” also indicates a future-oriented position. As Karen Shonfield puts it in her discussion of postwar British architecture, “utopian aspirations [...] lie behind the very act of building. At the smallest scale building involves transformation, and some investment in the future (29). William Beveridge, Clement Attlee, and the architects and planners who created the Welfare State keenly demonstrated their faith in the utopian dimension of building. Writers and filmmakers also invested in the future with their constructions, even if they critiqued rather than condoned the realities they depicted. The story of postwar building continually emphasizes that no structures or worldviews are permanent, and that the imagination can play an invaluable role in determining what is preserved and what is pulled down.

This dissertation set out to describe the architectural and fictional life of the British Welfare State. To achieve this goal, I have assessed an array of primary material: novels, films, essays, plans, buildings, legislation, and preservationist discourse. Several original contributions to knowledge have resulted from this investigation. First, while all works of fiction and works of architecture construct potential worlds, this analogy has

specific applicability in the aftermath of wartime destruction and in relation to the creation of a substantially new kind of polity. Hence, what I have termed “realist reconstruction fiction” should be read as a necessary imaginative component of postwar society-building. Second, this project reframes the stakes for interpreting mid-century British literature, which, as this dissertation proves, has value not only in relation to modernism, World War I, or postmodernism, but in relation to the development and subsequent decline of the Welfare State. Third, this project is methodologically original as an interdisciplinary and multimedia contribution to the fields of twentieth-century literature and cultural studies. It integrates historical specificity with concrete analyses of texts and films that attend to formal as well as thematic issues. Further, it asserts that literary fiction and fiction films both contribute to the postwar realist imagination. As my arguments about mobility in Chapter 3 and safety in Chapter 4 demonstrate, disciplinary boundaries should not force a choice between these two narrative art forms.

Ethical politics in postwar British fiction lead to good, stable homes and satisfying narratives. In Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, the semi-treacherous appeasement policies of Lord Darlington corrupt both the wartime house and the butler Stevens’s postwar attempts to rebuild his relationship with the former housemaid, Miss Kenton. As long as Stevens refuses to acknowledge Darlington’s dubious politics, he also refuses his own agency in the postwar world. He doubts, for example, his own ability to explain the “greatness” that characterizes Great Britain: “I am quite aware it would take a far wiser head than mine to answer such a question” (28). Despite Stevens’s extreme self-deprecation throughout the novel, Ishiguro makes it clear that questions of British “greatness” – of its politics, its politicians, and its houses – are well within the realm of answerability for the reader. As a novel told through a first-person narrator prone to denial

of events that unfold around him, the most crucial actions, emotions, and political commitments are those that happen elsewhere. By virtue of what it leaves out, the novel thus argues that Britain needs citizens who will meet the world with open eyes and clarity of purpose. Further, Stevens's fate of heartbreak and isolation suggest that a stable house cannot be built on such an unreliable foundation.

The fruitful connection between postwar fiction and architectural discourse opens up a number of promising avenues, not all of which I could investigate in this project. In specifically literary terms, each chapter has been limited necessarily to two or three main texts. I have not included a text by one of the "Angry Young Men" as a major case study, and my attention to postcolonial work is limited to a brief reading of Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. These omissions could be read as significant, given that working-class fiction by writers such as Alan Sillitoe and John Osborne, and immigrant narratives such as those by George Lamming, undoubtedly contribute to reconfigurations of postwar built and imagined environments – including that of England or Britain as an ultimate symbolic "home." As I have indicated throughout the project, however, the postwar period has already been examined thoroughly by other scholars in relation to working-class culture and postcolonial identities. In future work on the postwar period, I will offer new readings of texts that have been interpreted narrowly, if persuasively, within the categories of "working-class" and "postcolonial" or "immigrant" culture. As with this dissertation, my goal for future work on the literature of the period will be to ask how fresh sociohistorical parameters can open up new interpretive possibilities for texts – and vice-versa.

Another area for further scholarship relates to questions of form and medium. In Chapter 3, I begin to develop an argument about the distinct formal potentials of the postwar novel and film, but there is clearly more room for investigation. How do the

histories of these mediums come to bare on postwar human experience? In this project, I have focused on readings of specific works of narrative fiction, but a future project could delve more fully into strictly formal questions. One potential iteration of such a project would expand the focus on realism in an historicized account of postwar British theories of the novel, such as Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, and attitudes toward film form that emerge through movements like Free Cinema and journals such as *Sequence*. Although these subjects have been discussed by other scholars in their respective fields of literature and film studies, they have not been combined as historically synchronous examples of a cultural moment. Doing so under the banner of postwar realism would allow for a more sophisticated understanding of how these forms worked either in tandem or in opposition in order to shape particular kinds of British visual culture.

“Reconstruction culture” is a concept that can do scholarly work beyond this project. Specifically, my assessment of the relationship between wartime destruction and reconstruction initiatives – both architectural and fictional – is one that could be transposed to other significant moments or national contexts of historical violence. How do cultures respond to physical destruction in distinct ways? For example, two strikingly different 1948 films depict a devastated Berlin in the immediate aftermath of World War II: Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* and Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair*. Building on the description of reconstruction realism that I developed in the dissertation, these films can be read as contributing telling reconstructive visions for the postwar world. Specifically, they are produced within the context of the Marshall Plan, which began in 1948 and through which the United States almost single-handedly rebuilt much of war-torn Europe. Rossellini's neorealist film is a stark confrontation with a German culture that is still very much entrenched in wartime violence, instability, and death.

Wilder's film is a romantic comedy in which both romance and comedy come only at the cost of German repentance. In both films, actual footage of postwar Berlin, with its nightmarish architecture of buildings bombed out by Allied forces, forms the backdrop for a vision of what will survive and what must be sacrificed in the rebuilt world.

Realist reconstruction fiction is persistently relevant. Today, Britain once again finds itself in an age of austerity measures, dramatic public spending cuts, and reversals of government welfare policy. Recalling the Thatcher years, moreover, housing is one of the major issues that circulates in current public discourse as a response to these conditions. In one of the more striking recent examples, tenants of Newham Council in east London received notices that, as a result of gentrification, the estate could no longer afford to keep rents at an affordable, public housing rate. Newham Council's solution was to sell the estate to a Midlands council in Stoke-on-Trent. Tenants were told to relocate or become classed as "intentionally homeless," which would prohibit them from receiving government assistance. In a cultural era dominated by the soothing costumes and melodramatic plot twists of *Downton Abbey*, one hopes that new fiction writers emerge who observe, as Bowen did in 1944, that "the old plan for living has been erased," and that they write in the manner of her hopeful reconstructive vision, as if they would "look out through glass" ("Calico Windows" 184, 186).

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