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Tereza Topolovská

The Country House Revisited

Variations on a Theme from Forster to Hollinghurst

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KAROLINUM PRESS
Karolinum Press is a publishing department of Charles University
Ovocný trh 560/5, 116 36 Prague 1, Czech Republic
www.karolinum.cz

Layout by Jan Šerých
Set in the Czech Republic by Karolinum Press
First edition

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of the Czech Republic.

ISBN 978-80-246-3672-6
ISBN 978-80-246-3696-2 (pdf)

The original manuscript was reviewed by Associate Professor Ladislav Nagy (University of South Bohemia, České Budějovice) and Professor Milada Franková (Masaryk University, Brno).

Charles University
Karolinum Press 2017

www.karolinum.cz
ebooks@karolinum.cz

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In memory of Anna Grmelová

Cue-Titles

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1. Introduction: The Country House Revisited

And suddenly a new and secret landscape opened before us.
(Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 39)

More than the work of the great architects, I loved buildings that grew silently with the centuries, catching and keeping the best of each generation, while time curbed the artist's pride and the Philistine's vulgarity, and repaired the clumsiness of the dull workman. In such buildings England abounded, and in the last decade of their grandeur, Englishmen seemed for the first time to become conscious of what before was taken for granted, and to salute their achievements at the moment of their extinction.
(Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 260–1)

The standing of the house as a literary symbol, setting, motif and subject reflects its vital role in human life. The focal point of this monograph is literary renditions of a typical English variant of this phenomenon, the country house, in twentieth and twenty-first century fiction. Both its contemporary standing and previous development are studied in the wider historical, cultural, philosophical and literary contexts. The diversity of the literary portrayals, which feature stately homes as well smaller, less ostentatious forms such as ancient converted farms, reflects the resonance of the country house in English culture. Whereas the opening of this work traces various theoretical approaches to the house in general, be it through architecture, philosophy, spatial poetics, history or literature, the following sections evolve exclusively around the country house. First, it is interpreted from the perspective of attempts at authentic dwelling in the countryside performed in two different novels, namely E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) and Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). Although these works herald current, post-millennial

ecological anxieties, it is the following part of the book that revolves around contemporary variations on the theme, such as Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger* (2009), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger*'s *Child* (2011), and Sadie Jones's *Uninvited Guests* (2012), stressing predominantly the various types of decline and transformation of the country house as well as their firm, intertextual ties with their literary predecessors.

A number of publications and monographs concerning various aspects of country houses, predominantly their cultural, historical or artistic significance, is published every year. Nevertheless, works dealing specifically with country house fiction and the relationship between the country house and English literature are relatively scarce. No systematic theoretical study has been published since Malcom Kelsall's 1993 contribution, *The Great Good Place: The Country House and English Literature*. However, both the country house and country house fiction have been discussed by prominent authors, such as Raymond Williams in his seminal work on the conception of rural and urban existence within the English tradition, *The Country and the City* (1973). There he marked the country house as an exclusive, temporary answer to the conundrum of human existence, the choice which needs to be made between "necessary materialism and necessary humanity" (Williams, 293–4). This dilemma tends to materialise in many ways: as the difference between the working week and the weekend, between work and leisure, or between the city and the technological processes associated with it and the countryside and its natural way of life. Despite the fact that some country houses originally were purely functional regional, feudal centres, the majority of them have offered a solution to the existential struggle between isolation and society, nature and technology, or, last but certainly not least, the country and the city. This conception elucidates the massive popularity of these places amongst the aristocracy and, later, nineteenth-century capitalists who either bought the residences from the impoverished gentry or built their own versions of stately homes.

Moreover, this type of settlement partly echoes Williams's insistence on the necessity of perceiving the country and the city as complementary parts, whose permanent division inflicted a wide range of negative effects on both of them. Hence, the country house, merging the advantages of both rural and urban existence, has inspired a number of imitations: from country cottages and semi-detached or detached suburban villas inspired by the aestheticism of the great country houses, to the emergence of Metroland, built on the premise of mobility and allowing an easy fusion of idealised countryside and fast-paced city centres. Despite

Williams's rather reductive description of the country house as a settlement attempting to solve the existential struggle, in all its possible permutations the country house stands out as a unique phenomenon, which has inspired, besides a wealth of literary creation, a considerable amount of all kinds of artistic endeavours over the centuries, ranging from architecture and interior and landscape design, to painting and sculpture.

This monograph delineates the manifold results of the transformation of the conception of the country house and its twentieth and twenty-first literary representation, country house fiction. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the idealised, mythical form, which symbolised orderly relations between the aristocracy and their tenants, was replaced by an understanding of the country house that highlights its abstract meaning as the embodiment of history as well as its role in the formation of national identity. Nevertheless, the contemporary stately home is a symbol under siege, struggling to find a place in the modern world, no longer satisfied with its publicly ascribed role as pure relic from the past or imitation of a socially and economically superior lifestyle.

In the wider social context of contemporary architectural theory introduced in the first chapter, the country house is primarily understood as a house, with all the twentieth-century implications of its necessity in human life, its integrating, centring properties, and its complex historical and cultural dimensions, as well as its treatment and position within contemporary architectural theory and practice. Seen from this perspective, the country house reflects the universal artistic and practical effort to move from residing to dwelling, understood as "existing in a human manner" (Heidegger, *Poetry*, 154) and therefore serves as a perfect vehicle for the analysis and interpretation of the various possible forms such an effort might take. This endeavour has inspired numerous literary portrayals but it first required the redefinition of the phenomenon of the country house. No longer restricted to stately homes and manor houses, the country house has embraced all kinds of countryside dwellings ranging from old, converted farms and cottages to sea-side villas. The country house has become the subject of detailed architectural scrutiny, practically, theoretically, popularly and literarily. In fiction, the houses are renovated, redecorated and sometimes even built, and the amount of suspicion towards modernist tendencies may only be explained with reference to the surviving vestiges of the old country house ideology which promoted orderly, hierarchical relations between the house and its surroundings, the house and its tenants, and particularly the tenants and their master. Any sign of abandonment of the remnants of this traditional approach

is seen as potentially disruptive and unorderly, or even ungodly; there is no place for novelties which would mean a discontinuity with the past and the best of its heritage. Some of the descriptions of country houses, e.g. that one which McEwan presents in *Atonement*, even emphasise the ugliness of the Victorian houses in question, as if to echo the popular interpretation of their aesthetic as fraudulent and vulgar and to accentuate their "newness" as compared to the ancient, historical sites they often replaced. On the contrary, other works, such as Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* (1934) or Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* reflect the effort of some theoreticians and historians to refute such a stance and an appreciation of Victorian architecture is consequently presented as implying emotionality and sensitivity, or even traditionalism, not necessarily bad taste.

The traditional, historical form of literary creation connected with the country house, the country house poem of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with its tendency to idealise and mythicise the relationship between the house, its master and the tenants, has influenced modern country house fiction in a number of ways. For example, there is an inclination to situate the plot in summer, a typically pastoral setting partly reviving the idyll, with its eternal days of summer, or "days of peculiar splendour" (Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 23) to quote Evelyn Waugh, a vocal admirer of these places. The guests tend to abound in country house fiction and this may also be seen as an echo of the country house poem in which guests and visitors come to the house as if to highlight its welcoming, gracious character. What is more, both types of literary portrayals are frequently written from the perspective of a guest and the outsider perspective highlights the exclusivity of the experience of living comfortably in the countryside. The perception of guests, who know that the duration of their stay is restricted, both intensifies the experience and points to the fact that not many people are entitled to such a privilege for a longer period of time. Nevertheless, this alien observer is, notwithstanding their unbecoming origin, often a central protagonist of the plot, mirroring the historical position of a poet guest visiting his patron.

The twentieth and twenty-first century depiction of the country house in fiction reflects shifts of social, cultural and economic paradigms. Great country houses of the past had been tied to the aristocracy, which, especially from the period after the end of the Second World War until the 1970s, lost most of its political and economic power and therefore a great deal of public hostility. No longer the subject of possible public criticism and resentment of the nature of their living arrangements,

the aristocracy began to systematically exploit its possessions – many houses were sold, transformed, or opened to the public. Seeking new employment for spaces which, stripped of their original significance and function, became suddenly unsustainable and thus could only survive through a transformation into public spectacle: "Growing numbers of owners declared 'open house' and sought to profit from a gentle resurgence of popular interest in history of all kinds" (Mandler, 5).

Thus, the aristocracy's estates acquired a new role in society and became emblems of a new social and economic order, no longer serving only as idealised representations of their owners and their social class. The nature and the relative standing of country houses within English culture have transposed them into the domain of public interest. Country houses are often imagined as symbolising the country values of "old England" (Lucas, 71), which is boosted further by the booming success of various TV series such as ITV's well-known adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* or the recent sweeping success of the idealising period drama, *Downton Abbey*.[1] The former was broadcast for the first time in the gloomy years of economic recession in the 1980s and the latter, with its first episode airing in the autumn of 2010, once again coincided with the aftermath of an economic crisis. There is a multitude of possible explanations for their immense popularity. The first, most obvious one might be that they present a retreat from depressing reality. However, these pretty pictures of an orderly social hierarchy might also serve is as an ideological glamorising of subservience.

In general, country houses in the original sense of "stately home" have not ceased to fascinate the public and guarantee the existence of the National Trust.[2] This idealised perception may elucidate the enormous popularity of stately homes both as sights and as subjects of various artistic renditions, ranging from a multitude of fictional, as well as non-fictional accounts of its existence to TV series. Non-fiction on the subject tends to take a historiographic approach and present life in country

1 Richard Vine laments the end of *Downton Abbey* and the gaping hole it left in the Sunday schedule in his article "Downton Abbey Review: The Glorious Fantasy of Britain Comes to an End" published in *The Guardian* on 26 December 2015. Besides praising the outstanding performances of some of the actors, he draws attention to the nature of the prevailing social contentment of the protagonists, who perform their duties without ever questioning their positions in the hierarchy.

2 In order to further promote local tourism in England, the year 2016 was named the "Year of the English Garden". Promoted by the *Visit England* website, it features guided visits of famous gardens on the occasion of the 300-year anniversary of Capability Brown, a famous garden and landscape designer, known as "the Shakespeare of the gardening world".

houses in all its complexity and variety. Individual places are approached from the point of view of their architectural properties, daily routines, the collection, analysis and classification of thousands of letters produced by their inhabitants and ubiquitous guests, poems and artworks, all of which map out the range of transformations they underwent, amplifying the grandeur of their artistic inventories, and pointing to the unknown or the dark sides of their history or to the personal histories of their owners.

The existence of the country house has been logically conditioned by its situation in the countryside. Literary production that authentically represents the countryside and does not limit it to the position of an inspiring backdrop, was rehabilitated by Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*. He was nevertheless less optimistic as far as the viability of country house fiction was concerned. He described the middle-class detective story as the only possible and plausible future for the country house novel as these places tend to gather together a heterogeneous group, as does the plot of a typical detective story. The twentieth-century country house in fiction became a backdrop, an interchangeable setting for the complicated relations of its temporary inhabitants, with the focus shifting from the house and its symbolism to the untying of the knot of entangled relations. According to Williams, this literary development led to a reduction of the country house's importance and vitality, since it only provided a suitable space for events which had been prepared elsewhere and which would be resolved elsewhere: "It is not a sad end; it is a fitting end. The essential features were always there, and much of the history that changed them came out of them, in their original and continuing domination and alienation" (Williams, 250).[3] Its role, according to Williams, was reduced, both in reality and in fiction, to a purely instrumental one, which is reflected in its transition into an indifferent setting for a public school, museum, hotel, or secret police headquarters. At the same time, their status as symbols of power or success was maintained, with the real source of their funding situated conveniently elsewhere.

Another aspect which, from Williams's viewpoint, affected the importance of the future role of country houses was their exclusivity. Not

3 This persuasion concerning the concentration of decisive social powers, although only temporary, is echoed by Stevens, the embodiment of the perfect butler and the unreliable narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's 1989 novel, *The Remains of the Day*: "... although we did not see a great deal of the country in the sense of touring the countryside and visiting picturesque sites, we did actually 'see' more of England than most, placed as we were in houses where the greatest ladies and gentlemen of the land gathered" (Ishiguro, 4).

only is the maintenance of these places economically demanding, but their position in the countryside requires the mobility of their inhabitants. If the countryside is to retain the qualities for which it is valued, it naturally indicates the absence of a larger number of commuters. The peaceful solitude of the countryside was threatened at the beginning of the twentieth century by the ever-expanding sprawl of suburbs, which represented a solution to the universal demand for the beneficial effects of life in the countryside. From the ecological point of view, if life in the countryside is to remain peaceful and harmonious and the natural environment unspoilt, it requires a sparsity of population and is therefore mutually exclusive with it becoming the living arrangement for the masses, which adds to its exclusivity. Romantic communing with nature seems to be destined to remain highly selective in terms of the intellectual and also economic disposition of those who embrace it. All these factors are projected with growing urgency into fiction, where they provide fertile soil for the depiction, questioning, re-valuation and re-definition of the various nuances of the pastoral of the country house, the delineation of which became, particularly in the post-war period, an increasingly demanding and delicate task. Post-war social and political changes, which gradually severed the ties binding the country house to its culture-specific and class-restricted reading as an emblem of national identity, opened it to a varied, more complex and consequently multi-layered interpretation and enabled its employment as a more universal, versatile metaphor of dwelling. Therefore, the precarious nature of stately homes and the considerable widening of the definition of the country house did not lead to the ultimate decline anticipated by Williams, it actually meant that country house fiction acquired a whole new dimension, spanning a range of unexplored topics. The country house ceased to be the embodiment of an ideal, and its definition broadened considerably to include many different types of permanent or temporary dwellings as well as a variety of approaches to the phenomenon, considerably expanding the spectrum of works suitable for analysis.

Accordingly, the chapter on E. M. Forster's novel, *Howards End*, and Iris Murdoch's novel, *The Sea, The Sea*, stresses the parallel focus on alternative, diminutive versions of the country house and it also provides an estimate of the actual degree of the physical, cultural and social change heralded by the alteration of the portrayal of the country house in fiction. As living in a country house typically presupposes living in the countryside, it offers the opportunity to challenge the stereotypical qualities typically associated with the rural mode of living, such as automatic

communion with nature and authenticity of existence. At the same time, it elaborates on the theme of the growing subtlety involved in the exploitation of one class by another, which does not necessarily mean the strengthening of a traditional stratification.

The next part follows Alan Hollinghurst's subversive pastiche, *The Stranger's Child*, as it accentuates the spatial and textual affinities between its literary forerunners, such as E. M. Forster or Evelyn Waugh, and contemporary examples of country house fiction of the beginning of the twenty-first century, including Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*, or Sadie Jones's *Uninvited Guests* (2012), revisiting its original seat, the stately home. Their thematic intersection is the crumbling microcosm of the house, whose attempts at dignified survival or noble decline they explore and question. Its imminent material decline and gradual slide into the impersonal spaces of hotel or school institution provide both physical metaphors of the historic state of the country house and an acutely decadent poetics of decline. The painfully striking physical distortion of the house, which stands in sharp contrast to the aspirations of its builders and owners, evokes ruminations upon the nature of time and its passing. With events revolving around the house as a dying star at the centre of the novel, alternately threatening implosion, imprisoning the tenants gravitating towards the centre, or explosion, scattering them eternally into the great unknown, leaving a treacherous void behind, the struggle to maintain a fragile equilibrium acquires the existential dimension of the perpetual human fight for authentic existence.

2. (Country) House since 1900

2.1 Building, Writing, Thinking

Architecture will no longer be the social, the collective, the dominant art. The great poem, the great building, the great work of mankind will no longer be built, it will be printed.
(Victor Hugo, qtd. in *Unpacking my Library: Architects and Their Books*)

The role houses assume in literature is patterned on their role in the lives of humans. From the point of view of human existence, a house embodies an archetype. Its vitality is projected into the depth and width of the spectrum of its influences. The study of the house stipulates the need for an interdisciplinary approach in order to embrace its complex role in human life. Despite the number of possible perspectives of study this phenomenon enables, three have been determined as pivotal: architectural, philosophical and, naturally, literary. The twentieth century has acknowledged and accentuated the interconnectedness of these three disciplines, especially owing to the works of Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard. The emphasis which philosophy, architecture and literature put on the dependence and mutual conditioning of houses and humans reflect the essentiality of this connection. The current practice can be seen as further developing their gradual merging. Contemporary architecture is preoccupied with a semantic approach to buildings, which are read and interpreted as signs. The growing level of abstraction and involvement of semantics in architecture imply its linguistic turn. At the same time, the frequency of employment of building terms in literature indicates its architectural turn.

The literary perspective generally mirrors respect for houses and their role in human life. Given its flexibility, it endows the fictional houses with a spectacular array of qualities and interpretations. Despite their

variety, some of the properties might be designated as predominant. First and foremost quality of the house, given its place and importance in human life, is the ability to integrate. Gaston Bachelard, a French philosopher and literary critic, the author of the seminal study of intimate spaces as they are reflected in and by literature, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), highlights the integrating properties of a house: "in the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being" (Bachelard, 7). Apart from that, the house shelters and, to a certain extent, even conditions existence, producing a body of images which provide human life with the notion of stability, as it is a "human being's first world" (Bachelard, 7).

Bachelard's emphasis on the binding properties of the house, of the vital importance of the spaces which allow for daydreaming, such as nooks or corners, and his insistence on the metaphysical dimension of a house, which represents a microcosm of the world, is echoed in several essential texts by the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger. He, via the example of the Black Forrest Farm, introduced another principal function of houses as having the ability to preserve "the fourfold, to save the earth, to receive the sky, to await divinities, to escort mortals – this fourfold preserving is the simple nature, the "presencing", of dwelling. In this way, then, do genuine buildings give form to dwelling in its presence and the house this presence" (Heidegger, *Poetry*, 156). It is the house which allows for dwelling, both in the practical and existential sense. This fundamental role of the house in the lives of humans is in both cases tightly connected with literary production. From Bachelard's perspective, houses and their recollection allow for daydreaming. Heidegger insists on the poetic nature of measure-taking, building and dwelling, since: "[p]oetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling" (Heidegger, *Poetry*, 216). Both approaches resonate with highly distinctive yet similar themes. Houses, or buildings, are seen as distinctive "letting dwells", conditioning and conditioned by human existence: "A house without people has no dimensions. An enclosed space, a box" (Mawer, *Glass Room*, 308); "A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space" (Bachelard, 47). The involvement of humans in all the processes and the absolute dependence of houses on their treatment and perception by humans are specified by highly influential and distinctive theoretical perspectives which strengthen the ties between the abstract, the poetic and the material, and determine the direction of contemporary architectural thinking.

As Adam Sharr points out in his interpretation of Heidegger's texts from an architectural point of view, few philosophers have spoken or written exclusively for an audience of architects. In Heidegger's case, the most marked occasion was the lecture "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" he gave on the occasion of *Darmstädter Gespräch*, a conference focused on the theme of "Man and Space," which was held in Darmstadt in August 1951. Besides the text of the lecture, there are others, which he wrote on the subject and which further accentuate its meaning, the 1950 essay "The Thing" and 1951 "... Poetically, Man dwells..." They are essential both from the perspective of the interpretation of Heidegger's conception of architecture and their influence on contemporary architectural theory and practice.[4] Sharr considers these texts, although they are the least quoted ones amongst philosophers, to be the most architectural of his writings, stressing the importance of immediate experience. With translations into a number of languages and continual reissues, these works have influenced, if not shaped, much of the architectural theory and practice in the second half of the twentieth century. At this point, however, Sharr stresses the degree of controversy surrounding the philosopher. Heidegger was a member of the Nazi party and his naming as a rector of Freiburg University in 1933 coincided with the rise of the fascists to power. Despite his resignation from that post the following year, his romanticising approach to the rural and his resolute rejection of technology before, during and after Nazism, made him and his thoughts "skat[e] dangerously close to fascist rhetoric of 'blood and soil'" (Sharr, *Heidegger for Architects*, 2). Nevertheless, Heidegger's influence on Western architecture remains an irrefutable fact. Sharr metaphorically compares the impact to an infection. The effect of a mild infection might be irritation, with the possibility of both positive and negative outcomes. Generations of architects and architectural thinkers, such as Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa, Peter Zumthor, Alvar Aalto, or Dalibor Vesely, Rowan Moore and Karsten Harries, have projected Heidegger's ideas in their works, more or less prominently. Directly or indirectly, they have been forced to ponder human experience and environment from a different, humanist and immediate perspective. These echoes might be considered beneficial. However, the radical, unconditional application of his conception is analogous to a serious infection with its disastrous results. Both Heidegger's converts and his critics insist on the importance of

4 Sharr claims that while "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935), *Being and Time* (1927) and "Art and Space" (1971) elaborate architectural thought more or less prominently, they do not equal the intensity and forthrightness of the three texts from the fifties.