Reclaiming Space: Buildings in Modernist Literature and Film

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Reclaiming Space: Buildings in Modernist Literature and Film

by

Sreenjaya (Ria) Banerjee

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Reclaiming Space: Cities in Modernist Literature and Film

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Sreenjaya Banerjee

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This dissertation argues that modernists like Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and Alain Resnais construct literary and filmic works that rely on interruptions and elliptical narration to gesture towards an aesthetics of modernity that counters the interest in monoliths concurrently shown by architectural modernism. This is particularly evident in the context of the war memorial, where regimented public memory is countered by the artistic works discussed through their emphasis on private memorials that are changeable, contingent, and mutable. This is a fundamentally altered vision of twentieth century modernity than that embraced by the architectural mode.
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To my parents

In memory of Professor Eddie Epstein

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I. Reclaiming Space: Buildings in Modernist Literature and Film

Personalizing the City: Modernist Depictions of Public Space

The twentieth-century city is an idea made concrete, anonymous built space turned into places that provoke citizens’ recognition and affective responses. London, Paris, Berlin: the names stand in a metonymic relationship with the larger concept of Western European modernity. These places are inseparable from the specter of modernity to the extent that an examination of the urban landscape is always already an attempt at delineating the characteristics of modernity as a whole. The city’s built spaces simultaneously generate significations on two levels: the public, where they convey bigness and grandeur of built space, multitudes of humanity; and the private, in which an individual experiences places in a smaller level— inhabiting rooms on certain streets, visiting libraries and shops, stopping into a disused church, or bicycling down streets that are known, no longer anonymous or disorienting. Conceptions of modernity as a mode of urban life in the first half of the twentieth century stem from the interaction between these two levels of experience, the public and private. Following Benjamin, modernity is characterized as a series of shocks to the psyche, but whether that alienates the ordinary man to the breaking point, or opens him up to the ineffable multiplicity of lived experience, depends in large part on the role allotted to the personal within representations of public urbanity in the twentieth-century metropolis.

By devoting much attention to the city, especially its physicality and built structures, modernist literature elevates space into place, from mere setting into a generative device for reflection about the city as a contingent, endlessly renewed site of memory. Particularly looking
at literary and filmic works that respond to the two World Wars in the interwar and postwar period from 1922-1963, this study pays attention to the ways in which buildings, interiors, and the urban landscape are characterized in selected works by Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and Alain Resnais as sites of personal memory that offer a corrective to officially sanctioned memorials of the interwar and postwar periods. These works are mutable in form, and in them, memory itself is contingent or fallible rather than a reliable and unproblematic act of bringing past events to mind. These works insist that any knowledge of the past is a memory-image (to borrow Henri Bergson’s term) that is intrinsically influenced by the present circumstances of recalling. Their linguistic and formal experiments, particularly the use of elliptical and disjunctive narrative, emerge out of a modernist suspicion that language is interpolated into extant structures of socio-cultural and economic power; hence, to evade linguistic registers is in a sense to circumnavigate the axes of authority and set up alternate potentialities. In other words, to offer a different story (history) is a process of reinterpretation (of the past) that is fundamentally political and oppositional.

The early twentieth century saw a drive to define this new era in literature, the arts, socio-cultural and scientific life in ways that were often at loggerheads with each other—for instance, the fragmentary, diffuse descriptions of the remembered past in literary and filmic modernism counters the clarity and precision of a materialist view in which the mysteries of the physical world are increasingly cleared away. In light of empirical discourses that valorize progress above all else, the works I examine in subsequent chapters can be usefully read as arguments for a particular type of modernity that provides room for aspects of lived experience that are ineffable, inchoate, and felt in extra-linguistic ways. Rather than reactionary sentimentality or nostalgic fuzziness, this is a forward-thinking political, ethical stance (clearly with Woolf and Resnais, less
so in the case of Eliot, whose political opinions develop and change significantly over the 1930s and ’40s).

Against narratives of progress driven by scientific and technological advances which accrue around principles of transparency and clarity, in which the average city dweller is an anonymous part of large systems beyond her control, modernism pits its collection of flâneurs and beggars, middle-class wives and prostitutes, derelicts, suicides, priests, and bank clerks to reclaim and reify the mundane in art. Modernism ties the cityscape to the human body with links of emotion and affect to turn the public and impersonal into the opposite; it argues against a simplistic understanding of modern life as squalid and deadening that, ironically, it was itself partially responsible for propagating. The image of the dangerous city, a place of strangers, overly machinistic and yet Siren-like and captivating, are culled from fin-de-siècle and modernist literary output and permeated disciplines as diverse as psychoanalysis, sociology, and architecture in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.¹ Moving away from this reductive view of urban life, modernism as a genre embraces the environment from which it emerged. Its heroes and heroines struggle for individuality and personhood within the city, only rarely leaving its limits.

Modernism displays a deep regard for the affective potential of the personalized cityscape even while it characterizes this topos as uncanny or deterministic. In the following, I begin with

¹ While instances of this attitude to modern life sourced from literature abound in a variety of disciplines, a personal favorite misquote is in comments by Raymond Ledrut, a sociologist working in the field of urban semiotics. Ledrut poses a question that modernist literature also implicitly asks: “How and through what struggles, in the course of what class action and what political battle could urban historical action be reborn” (133)? Ledrut is not hopeful about the state of extant urban life and sees little hope of a renewal of personal agency in modernity as is. His expression of this idea ventriloquizes T. S. Eliot in a way that seems to be common in disciplines other than literature: “London, Athens are ‘unreal’ says T. S. Eliot [sic]: for they have lost, at least for a time, their relation to historical action” (131-32). This kind of reductive reading of the literary modernist standpoint as a whole based upon a few lines from Eliot’s earliest poetry propounds the view of modernism as an aloof, elitist, and humorless movement that a closer study of it dispels.
Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922), which can be read as a literary memorial for its eponymous protagonist who is shaped (and, I venture to say, ruined) by his education and killed in the Great War. The narrative is steeped in loss and presents a characteristically modernist form of melancholy in which it is impossible to look back at the past without noticing its many faults, or even to look at Jacob without seeing him as simultaneously sublime and rather stuffy. For Woolf the pacifist, the act of remembrance is painfully compromised because it is implicated in positivist masculinist discourses of power and war, which she later indicts in no uncertain terms in the non-fictional *Three Guineas* (1938).

In Chapter III, I examine three of Eliot’s dramas from his middle period as a playwright (*Murder in the Cathedral*, 1935, *The Family Reunion*, 1939, and *The Cocktail Party*, 1949) as an effort to recuperate sites of contingent memory through attention to built spaces. Although Eliot doesn’t mention the World Wars in his plays, his protagonists’ search for selfhood within a compromised, limited modernity in the first two plays is of a part with the disillusionment and massive trauma of the Great War; in the last, the genre of the drawing room play is so mutilated that it emerges as a disorienting, confusing place. A measure of the shifting and mutable nature of *The Cocktail Party* is its success both on Broadway and in avant-garde European theaters, dramatic circles which are normally mutually exclusive. Like modernity after two wars of such massive scope, Eliot’s drawing room, doctor’s chambers, and the city of London are at the same time perfectly “normal” and deeply disturbed. In each play, Eliot presents the audience with a monolithic site such as an English manor house, as an image of rigid class associations and belief systems. The dramatic action subsequently dismantles this manor into its constituent parts: musty rooms, unused hallways and empty corners reveal crevasses and crannies of resistant ethics in what looked, in fallible memory, like the epitome of upper-class respectability. An encounter
with the true nature of these built spaces, i.e., the metaphorically dismantled manor house rather than its monolithic image, leads characters towards epiphanic revelations of purpose. In outright or covert religious leaps of faith, Eliot’s protagonists achieve a new kind of selfhood or individualism that Jacob is denied in Woolf’s vision of the wasted generation of the Great War. They cast off the burden of learned discourses through a profound encounter with built spaces and renewal of perspective; their reevaluation of place mirrors the larger cultural desire for revision, reevaluation of personal history and future outcomes during the inter- and postwar periods.

In the last chapter, I examine two films by Alain Resnais that problematize the physical locations of Auschwitz and Boulogne-sur-Mer in postwar France, using cinematography and editing to render them uncanny and fragmentary, like the memory-image itself. Night and Fog (1955) and Muriel, or The Time of Return (1963) continue examining the preoccupation with memorializing and recuperation discussed in the earlier works. Both Resnais’ movies are directly concerned with remembered pasts, the public memory of Auschwitz in documentary form in Night and Fog and the fictional, private recollection of Hélène Aughain’s first love affair some twenty years past in Muriel. Influenced by the experimental, poetic techniques of storytelling in the French nouveau roman, Resnais evokes memory-images that are disjunctive and jarring and refuses to let the past become a safely distant and singular narrative image. These films refuse neatness in narrative form and offer a counternarrative to the monolithic image of political resistance in Vichy France propagated in the postwar era, for instance in Muriel through a focus on the rebuilding of the city of bombed-out Boulogne. Ultimately, Resnais shows that the past is a banal story of violence, betrayal and short-sightedness rather than a romance of passion—Hélène’s small revelation about her old love affair mirrors the larger truth about France’s
historical implication and continued political aggression in Algeria. Here is history repeating, simultaneously as heartfelt tragedy and as dark, ludic farce. Resnais’ work embraces the compromised circumstances of modernity and urges a reconciliation that does not assuage the pain, but continually protests past and present violence. Whereas the previous texts show limited hope for the modernist subject—Jacob Flanders dies, misunderstood by almost everyone he meets; Eliot’s characters find it difficult to sustain their epiphanic decisions in the contemporaneous world, and also die in grotesque ways. In contrast, the figure of Hélène holds out some hope for continuing to live within urban modernity. In this sense, these texts constitute a spectrum of responses to the challenges of memorialization and authentic personhood in the previous century.

For this study, I have delineated literary modernism as the years 1900-1945 and focus on the two British modernists as a way to assess the role that literary output plays in defining the idea of modernity. In this, I draw on the critical stance of two studies that have recently appeared in the *PMLA*, Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz’s “The New Modernist Studies” from 2008 and David James and Urmila Seshagiri’s in “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution” from 2014. The first of these extends the scope of modernist studies, urging critics to consider the field “expansively,” particularly in terms of global political developments such as the breaking up of Imperialism. Although the impact of colonialism is not a defining focus of this study, the dramatic works of Eliot are clearly responding to crises in British nationalism, as I discuss in Chapter III. Resnais too is intimately concerned with French colonialism, using the device of banality to protest the violent colonial enterprise. James and Seshagiri are a similarly important pre-text of this study because of their awareness of the limits of modernism per se in “the decades between 1890 and 1940 [which] repeatedly emerge as the chrysalis for modern
literature’s form-breaking work” (91). They also argue that besides works that can clearly be labelled postmodernist, there remains a significant body of work that they name “metamodernist.” Their example is of writers in twenty-first century Britain who are clearly responding to the works of Woolf, E. M. Forster, et al., carrying on an exploration of modernist concerns without the postmodern emphasis on playful paranoia. The term “metamodernist” usefully locates a penumbra of influence within which I place Alain Resnais, who does not directly respond to Woolf or Eliot, but whose work is informed by the tenor of modernism and its critical attitude towards definitions of modernity and memorialization.

Recent critical thought has taken up questions of war and memorialization on the one hand, and analyses of internal spaces as reflections of individuality on the other; this study brings the two parallel strands in criticism together to argue that it is the attempted assertion of individuality on the cityscape in face of impersonal political maneuvering and war that are the aim of the alternate practices of memory-making in modernist literature and film. David Spurr’s recent Architecture and Modern Literature (2012) broadly connects movements in architecture and literature, which I draw on in my readings of Woolf and Eliot. In Warped Space (2000), Anthony Vidler examines the connections between built spaces and internal psychology, usefully explicating the connection between architectural thought, built spaces, and the mental conditions produced by modernity. My study extends his insight into the realm of artistic production, positing aesthetic experiments in form as ethical responses to the deterministic principle of transparency that informs so much popular and applied scientific discourse in the first half of the twentieth century. Talia Schaffer and Victoria Rosner have recently written on the emergence of domestic, feminized interiors into public discursive realms such as literature, fashion and interior design; I build on their analyses to suggest the extent to which Jacob is a relic of late-Victorian
and Edwardian education and thought, himself a defunct site of memory in the advancing modern era. Morag Shiach has examined the foreshadowing of death in Jacob’s rooms, and Tammy Clewell and Bette London have examined the nature of mourning in Woolf’s work and public memorialization in 1920s London. This clarifies the relationship between the compromised physical spaces that Jacob inhabits and his confused interiority, leading to the argument that the structures of thought he has been trained in mirror those that provoke so much ire in Woolf’s pacifist view.

Another current trend in literary criticism has been to recuperate the figure of the modernist writer against a persistent image as elitist and unconcerned with political and social conditions of the time. Bonnie Kime Scott, Christina Alt, and others have recently shown how Woolf can usefully be read within an ecocritical context to advance a critique of masculinist Victorian educational models and repressed attitudes to sexuality; in the same vein, David Chinitz, Cassandra Laity, and others have urged readers to resituate Eliot as a figure deeply interested in popular culture and invested in the everyday life of his adoptive homeland. In the excellent collection, Ruins of Modernity (2010), Svetlana Boym traces the isomorphism between nature, architecture, and the human body, the ramifications of which this study takes up in detail in the works of Woolf, Eliot, and Resnais. Boym offers a definition of modernist nostalgia that draws on Benjamin and is particularly useful, as a sideways look at the past that refuses the comfort of restorative nostalgia. This radically different perspective avoids recycling romantic notions of a picturesque past and instead dwells in the difficult awareness of a compromised, debased memory-image. Emma Wilson and Michael Rothberg offer recent readings of Resnais and the implications of postwar rebuilding and memory-making to advance the idea of an implicated subject of mass trauma, refusing a clear distinction between perpetrator and victim of
crime which Resnais so successfully negotiates in *Muriel*.

The connection between literary modernism and the cinematic aesthetic of Alain Resnais can be traced through his association with French *nouveau romanciers* like Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras, who saw themselves as influenced by, and continuing, trends in the literary modernism of James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, and Samuel Beckett in Paris of the 1950s. This last is a particularly important bridge figure between the English-language and French literary traditions directly (as a named literary predecessor as well as fellow author who shared the same publisher at Éditions de Minuit) as well as indirectly, in that an important commentator on Resnais and postwar cinema such as Gilles Deleuze also wrote at length on Beckettian exhaustion and the peculiar politics of renewal in his dramatic works. These comments merely begin to sketch the complex symbiosis between the literary, dramatic, and cinematic arts which is beyond the scope of this study. Still, it is interesting to note that Walter Benjamin and his friend, the erstwhile architect-turned-cinema and cultural critic, Siegfried Kracauer, are similar bridge figures who theorized about modernist literature and culture as well as the radical potential for the renewal of aesthetics as ethics in the medium of film. It is this renewal of an aesthetics of built space that the current study examines or, to extend the architectural metaphor, dwells in.

**Literary Antecedents: The Modernist Imaginary in Poe, Rilke, and Benjamin**

Fin-de-siècle and modernist\(^2\) writers were far from condemning the city and modernity in

\(^2\) Here, I adhere to a chronologically bound definition of modernism as restricted to the first half of the twentieth century, with the further distinction that Continental and British fiction in the period approximately from 1890-1910 (including works of key figures like Huysmans and Wilde, influenced by Baudelaire, as well as the subsection of
luddite fashion, an attitude reflected in an early antecedent text like Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” (1840). The Man of the Crowd, a paradoxically decrepitable figure who wears a second-hand cloak yet carries a concealed diamond and dagger at his belt, is inconceivable outside of mid-nineteenth century London. His indefatigable prowl provokes an intense obsession in the narrator that is an admixture of fascination and fear, in the way that a good book preoccupies the mind of the close reader. However, the Man is a locus of story that doesn’t invite the casual reader: Poe’s story twice explicitly describes the Man as a book that “does not permit itself to be read” using a German phrase to heighten his foreignness in already-alien London for Poe’s American readers. As if prefiguring modernist writing generally, the narrator is singularly persistent in his attempt to “read” the Man whom he follows, but the ultimate message of this human “text” remains immanent rather than explicit. Poe plays with his American reading audience’s entrenched agrarian fear of the enormous European city in this story (Levine and Levine 292). This London is rendered unheimlich, uncanny in Poe’s description—it is the narrator’s home, where he has been sick and is now convalescing “in one of those happy moods which are so precisely the converse of ennui” (101) until he meets the Man and goes on a long and ultimately fruitless chase down dark streets lit with the “fitful and garish luster” (105) of gas-lamps, one of whose “wild effects” (106) is to “enchain” (105) the narrator to his voyeuristic spectatorial role.

The Man’s true purpose is never revealed, although it seems that he craves the recycled air of a crowd to breathe freely; he utters a “gasp as if for breath” (107) and throws himself into a

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women decadents like Rachilde and George Egerton) preserves its independence from modernism proper in its peculiar aesthetic preoccupations and ought to be separately defined as the literary fin-de-siècle. Traces of their aesthetic and formal innovations are manifest in the work of Eliot, Henry James, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, and Djuna Barnes, but retains its unique aesthetic and formal conventions that protests the elided difference between these and the so-called high and late modernism.
group of theater-goers, losing “the intense agony of his countenance” (107) for a moment in their company. In the busy marketplace with which the Man seems “well acquainted,” he “entered shop after shop, priced nothing, spoke no word, and looked at all objects with a wild and vacant stare” (107). This stare, later glossed beautifully as the look of the flâneur by Benjamin, is otherworldly in the sense that it doesn’t utilize the bazaar for any ostensibly commercial purpose. Modernism as a genre retains an ambivalence towards commerce generally, but the works I discuss in the following chapters draw on what can be called this aesthetics of antithesis, in which the purported use (or use value) of an object is inverted within the artistic imaginary. The Man of the Crowd’s voyeuristic gaze at the bazaar is divorced from the urge to possess, as if constituting a different, oppositional system of valuation from that of the crowd.

The implication in Poe’s mysterious vignette is that the Man, and the narrator who trails him as if faced with an uncanny doppelganger, are modern men (and modernist creations) in being natural inhabitants of the cityscape and intimately bound to it by affect—a shortness of breath being perhaps the ultimate sensory indication of dependence that requires no linguistic counterpart. The Man doesn’t need to speak to others, nor to his obsessed follower, to impart this sensory information. Prefiguring a technique that later becomes common in modernist literature, the Man retains his autonomy as a cipher within the text. With only a perplexed narrator as guide, an examination of his actions uncovers no logical motivation. After the opening paragraphs, which play on the biases and assumptions of Poe’s reading audience to set the story in motion, the text abandons, even denies, any attempt to “make sense” of it. This refusal to accede to the common sense assumption of causality, in which the attempt to discover does indeed lead to a momentous discovery at the moment of narrative climax, becomes increasingly important after the turn of the twentieth century. Woolf, for instance, uses the unchained
narrative—episodes not bound by causal links, but instead a series of emotive flashes—to brilliant effect in *Jacob’s Room* to question the validity of the pervasive logic of common sense, as does Resnais in the medium of film. Eliot’s drama also elides causality as it repeatedly breaks narrative conventions—the murder mystery, the detective story, and the drawing room drama turn into narratives of spiritual quest in surprising ways. Even Eliot’s decision to write dialogue in verse that sounds like prose in *The Cocktail Party* is a linguistic device that circumvents the assumptions of common sense, which demands a distinction between the two forms. Writing poetry to mimic prose on stage seems a needless artistic intervention, but this defiance of sense is, of course, the point. Poe is antecedent to these later experiments in structural dismantling and warped form in that he connects the cityscape to this directionless narrative which doesn’t culminate in a clearly-defined resolution.

Finally, Poe’s story is important to the analyses that follow in its use of the epigraph, a misquote from Jean de la Bruyère’s *Les Caractères* (1688). The older text is a series of character studies written in a Christian moralizing vein, and the irony of Poe’s usage is that “The Man of the Crowd” eschews a clearly-defined moral standpoint as well as narrative clarity. The epigraph introduces the text: “Ce grand malheur, de ne pouvoir être seul” [“Such a great misfortune, to not be able to be alone”] (101), with the untranslated French adding a suspect cosmopolitanism for Poe’s Anglophile readers. Beyond this however, the line seems at odds with the story because of its assertion of sympathy for the Man of the Crowd, as opposed to the exhausted perplexity of the narrator who decides at the end that “[i]t will be in vain to follow” (109). Since the epigraph isn’t directly connected with the narrative text, it functions as a metacomment whose import remains unstated. Poe here uses a device that becomes increasingly prevalent in modernism, of the fragment that shapes and colors the text gesturally. The Man himself has a meaning that can be
read but not by the narrator himself, because “es lässt sich nicht lesen” (109). The narrative is not so much a vehicle for meaning but a gesture towards possible readings, all of which remain undefined (e.g., is the Man a criminal? Is he purely a figment of the narrator’s imagination, or does he have an independent existence? And so on). The polylingual text and its suspicion of storytelling dilute the connection between language and meaning: the French and German (and Greek) phrases, even when untranslated, convey impressions to readers while the English sentences circle around a narrative mise-en-abyme that is never clarified. The political critique advanced by Woolf, Eliot, and Resnais follows in this tradition of oblique, gestural commentary in which language is suspect. Their fragmented narrative style is appropriate because it pits itself against popular political rhetoric, which is emphatic and monolithic in its message. As memorials to the lost past, too, these texts retain their faith in the gestural as a better form of remembrance than stolid sites of memory. By repeatedly presenting characters whose absence is left unexplained and whose memory is mutable (and not always positive), these texts point to the fallibility of the memory-image and the ungraspable nature of time past.

Rainer Maria Rilke’s The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge (1910) draws on Poe’s uncanny tone in its depiction of the struggling writer in Paris, and locates its resistance to extant “common sense” modes of perception in the built spaces of the cityscape. It moves even further away than Poe’s story from a narrative form that culminates in a climax and resolution, preferring to dismantle the conventional pattern and instead present narrative shards and debris. While Poe’s story is diffuse, set in nighttime streets, Rilke’s novel—really a collection of Malte’s fragmentary, disconnected impressions—extends the uncanny into the light of day. Malte is horrified by people in hospital waiting rooms and entranced by dusty shop windows that are ignored by the crowd; in a sense, he is the bifurcated personality invoked by Poe, the narrator
and the Man, recombined into an uneasy whole. Malte can neither sit still in isolation nor keep away from “the streets, which ran towards me viscid with humanity” (48). He imagines the crowd as a sticky, gelatinous mass that absorbs him as he “impatiently tried to force [his] way forward” (49). Poe’s narrator extracts himself cleanly, even abruptly, as he breaks away from the Man of the Crowd and ends his story; Rilke’s narrator knows that there is no withdrawal. He, like the narrators in Woolf, Eliot, and Resnais, is a fully implicated subject of modernity.

One episode from the Notebooks is particularly important in light of my examination of the relationship between literary and architectural representations of the city as site of memory. “Somewhere or other” (46) during his haphazard walk through Paris, Malte chances upon a blind vegetable seller pushing a cart of produce and followed by his wife. As the man shouts out his wares, it becomes clear that he has cauliflowers to sell but being blind, he can’t be sure of when he passes a house that will buy. He is prodded by his wife to vary the rhythm of his shouts as they walk down a residential street. The reason for this is that the houses aren’t spaced at regular intervals down the street. Some of them have been torn down and others propped up while repairs are being made. The banality of the vegetable seller is an indication that this is an ordinary street in a quiet part of town, so Malte’s imagination is exceptional in stopping to regard the scene in such detail. As he looks around, he sees “houses that were no longer there… that had been pulled down from top to bottom” (46) while others next to them remain standing. This is an ordinary sight in any large city, and perhaps even more so in Paris with its history of large-scale reconstruction, but Malte can’t pull himself away. He adds, “But it was… not the first wall of the existing houses [that he saw], but the last of those that had been there. One saw its inner side” (47). This too is nothing to comment upon in row houses, which usually share a common dividing wall between discrete buildings. Despite the truism about modernism embracing the
detritus of modern life, one wonders why Malte is troubling to describe the scene in such detail, particularly as he seems repelled by it: “there still remained, along the whole length of the wall, a dirty-white area, and through this crept in unspeakably disgusting motions, worm-soft and as if digesting, the open, rust-spotted channel of the water-closet pipe” (47). The water pipe sends a frisson of disgust through Malte that is akin to the shock of modernity that Benjamin later theorizes as being the central condition of modernity.

Malte’s disgusted response establishes an antithetical aesthetics that gives displeasure its value, because through this negative affective response he realizes that the “stubborn life of these rooms had not let itself be trampled out. It was still there; it clung to the nails that had been left, it stood on the remaining handsbreadth of flooring, it crouched under the corner joints where there was still a little bit of interior” (47). The people have gone, their waste has been flushed away, furniture and clothes removed, and still, something of their essence has remained: “the clammy, sluggish, musty breath,” “the middays and the sicknesses and the exhaled breath and the smoke of years, and the sweat that breaks out under armpits… the stale breath of mouths… the fusel odor of sweltering feet” (47-8). Also remaining are “[t]he sweet, lingering smell of neglected infants… the fear-smell of children who go to school, and the sultriness out of the beds of nubile youths” (48). These captured moments construct a sensual, visual (and even olfactory) narrative about lived experience that parallels Malte’s own abortive attempt at writing the story of his past. The narrative presented by the walls (which Malte “reads” sensually rather than verbally) is more successful than the written attempt to construct a linear history of Malte’s childhood. The “notebooks” are a record of Malte’s failed attempt, which he ultimately abandons, but the walls “framed by the fracture-tracks of the demolished partitions” (47) recount impressions of lived time that are more authentic than any in Malte’s abortive narrative. With
this, Rilke anticipates an insight that is particularly forceful in the works of Woolf, Eliot, and Resnais: that the buildings and objects of urban modernity are steeped in a different experience of time, imagined here as a counter to the precision of clock time. They serve as records of time even when the human subject has disappeared—an insight that decenters human agency and envisions the individual as a much smaller motivator of modern life than is conventionally assumed. Mute, debased material reality (the peeling paint, the fractured wall) captures and contains the untoward moments that a triumphalist vision of human progress doesn’t include: sweat, dirty feet, the neglect and fear of children, the forbidden “sultriness” of young bodies. Time, in this instance following Joseph’s Frank’s classic critical formulation, becomes spatialized in the modernist epigrammatic novel. In an imagistic way, the logic of common sense, the precision of measured time, and the dominant rhetoric of politics and violence are posited against Malte’s sensitivity to affect, his flânerie, and his misremembrances. Although Malte is panicked and fear-wracked throughout this work, that is accepted as a part of the successful creative process; fragmentation is part of a broader project of representing the world anew, moving away from the fixities of conventional nineteenth century novelistic production. Rilke, borrowing something from the myth of the genius from Romanticism, erects compromised figures in order to truthfully contemplate the conditions of modernity.

An implicit assertion in what follows is that literary modernism is deeply rooted in the experience of the common man and its insights are relevant to contemporary urban life.3

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3 While modernists like Joyce, Yeats, or Woolf are celebrated for their sympathy with the human condition, the case of Eliot is still up for debate. Feminist critics like Cynthia Ozick (1989) and Sharon Stockton (1997) are unconvinced of his humanity, foregrounding his problematic political statements in the Interwar years, and Cassandra Laity notes that Eliot’s prominent public role and association with “a monolithically elitist, masculinist, and reactionary conception of early modernist culture” (2004, 2) has prevented his “resituation” within the more nuanced gender contradictions of his own milieu. Robin Grove (1995) and David Chinitz (2005) are among those who see Eliot reaching towards the lay audience, while for M. Serena Marchesi (2009), his popularity with...
Contrary to its hackneyed characterization as insular intellectualism, modernism is a genre whose attention to the built spaces of the city intimately ties together the body, mind, and external situation of its characters. The chapters that follow show how Woolf and Eliot respond to contemporaneous cultural debates through elliptical experiments in prose and drama during the Interwar years; the last chapter on Resnais considers the effects of the modernist orientation toward the city in the 1950s-60s, theorizing how their continued attention to built spaces constructs responses to nationhood and postwar memorializing that critique dominant political and economic discourses. In more than one instance these texts record cases of powerlessness and death, both spiritual and literal, gesturing towards an affective response that arises out of the emotions but avoids sentimental nostalgia. The texts examined in the following chapters foreground the politics of linguistic production using a variety of narrative techniques: elliptical descriptions that delay readerly satisfaction (Woolf); poetic verse that masquerades as prose, betraying audience’s expectations (Eliot); and, cinema that uses the technique of the slow pan to construct impossibly linked sequences in a new cinematic idiom (Resnais). Ultimately, they present situations that do not allow themselves to be “read,” to echo Poe’s characterization of the Man of the Crowd. Like Poe’s narrator, they demand affective responses to the situations they describe in face of the breakdown of an external logic of narration.

Continental avant-garde theatrical groups indicates the extent to which his work was deeply experimental rather than reactionary.

4 Resnais’ films are examples of what Deleuze, echoing Bergson’s formulation of the memory-image, calls “the time-image.” Deleuze defines this as a postwar outgrowth that challenges the idea of cinema as being fundamentally dependent on chronology. Instead, the “camera consciousness” of Resnais’ aesthetic allows the camera to move at will, no longer chained to the descriptive function; breaking the imposed bounds of normative logic, the camera becomes an extended meditation on “the functions of thought” (23). For Deleuze, this is a feature of modernist cinema; my examination of Resnais shows the extent to which this is a continuation of literary modernist conceptions of the narrative eye, transmigrated into the specific medium of the cinema. Film historians like Roy Armes (1968), and more recently, Mary Ann Doane (2003) and Johannes von Moltke (2010) have examined the role of cinema within modernist studies broadly conceived, showing how questions of representing history are central to cinematic experiments as to literary ones. Putting the separate lineages of literary and cinematic modernism together to notice moments of overlap uncovers the theoretical exploration of place over the twentieth century in artistic media that self-consciously borrow from each other.
To walk through the cityscape like Malte is to think and, even more, to remember. *Flânerie*, that ruminant state of mind usually defined as a state of abstraction, is actually an extreme attention to one’s surroundings. Malte, like the narrators of Poe’s short story and Woolf’s elliptical novel, notices what the crowd otherwise overlooks. Similar to Resnais’ filmmaker in *Muriel*, Bernard, the *flâneur* is a close reader of the city who finds value in what has escaped the ordinary eye. His consciousness is bared to the city and, in Bergsonian terms, his memory-image is particularly triggered by the cityscape. Benjamin, another avid walker in the modernist city, typifies the *flâneur’s* look as “a gaze that appears to see not a third of what it takes in” (4) in “A Berlin Chronicle” (written 1932, pub. 1970). His emphasis on the appearance of *flânerie* automatically positions the reader as a viewer with a distanced, outsider’s perspective on the *flâneur*; it sets up a scenario of watching the looker that occludes the figure instead of revealing some essential aspect of his nature through narrative omnipotence.

The difference that Benjamin hints at here, between “taking in” and seeing, is rooted in language where the sensory information from the eye is interpreted through our perceptual apparatus and “seen.” But when language is implicated in dominant structures of power, to be seen in this way is to be implicated within a socio-cultural system that the *flâneur* avoids: recall the Man of the Crowd, who seems to draw sustenance from crowded bazaars but speaks to no one, and prices or buys nothing. Although Benjamin’s writing is chronologically not antecedent to the Woolf and Eliot texts I examine (as it is to Resnais’ films), his formulations serve as a useful guide through the shared concerns of the material that follows. Passages from “A Berlin Chronicle” revel in the inclusion of private memory in public spaces, and show how the literary imagination interrupts the architectural concreteness of the city, positing sites of memory in the most banal locations. The affective potential of these personal sites of memorialization become
all the more powerful for being commonly overlooked, having no overdetermined meaning for
the people at the bazaar. Prefiguring the exploration of Boulogne in Resnais’ *Muriel*, Benjamin’s
essay of memory in Berlin raises darker questions about the parallels between the reconstruction
of history and accompanying changes in the topography of the cityscape: in a profound way,
“The catastrophes and sufferings of the past, present and future are located within the spaces of
the city” (Gilloch 57). Rebuilding the cityscape is to rebuild history and memory as well.

“A Berlin Chronicle” is a posthumously published sketch whose restless memory-fueled
circuit of Berlin rooms, houses, and streets brings to mind the walks that Malte takes around
Paris. Adult remembrance, Benjamin points out, is a process of unlearning the rigid conventions
of common sense. The “art of straying” in memory circumvents educational processes to return
to “a dream that had shown its first traces in the labyrinths on the blotting pages of my school
exercise books” (9), in a manner that recalls Benjamin’s fascination with the Surrealist method
of circumventing normative ways of seeing. Benjamin’s repeatedly evokes the contrast between
his sheltered childhood of school and home life, parents and nannies, and the adult exilic
consciousness (by the early 1930s, he would already be considered an outsider in the city of his
birth, and would soon have to leave permanently for Paris). This kind of dream-like return to
doodles and inkblot drawings, a turn away from systematized learning, is a guiding principle in
*Jacob’s Room*, where students’ and dons’ rooms in Cambridge reflect the complacent rigidity of
their thoughts and their inability to abandon themselves to a childlike dream state. Jacob’s essays
are boring rather than profound because he cannot, like the Benjaminian narrator, return to

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5 This reading of Benjamin’s piece is necessarily limited by the constraints of my overall purpose; however, it is
interesting to note that a difference exists between this “chronicle” and his essays, “Naples,” “Moscow,” and *Berlin
Childhood around 1900*. In those instances, Benjamin parallels the experiences of a child with that of a newcomer to
those cities, and in the book, presents “individual memories [that] are neatly ordered in a static if not mannered way”
(Demetz xx). “A Berlin Chronicle” is, in contrast, an anxious text with missing sections and elisions that betray, or
foreshadow, the impending crisis of Berlin under the National Socialists.
straying. One of the curious details about the young Jacob is his habit of staying out late catching butterflies; this hobby, an outgrowth of the Victorian emphasis on educational pleasure activities, is taken to extremes by the young boy who sometimes stays out till almost midnight, surely no longer chasing insects. The adult Jacob loses this ability to wander; even when he takes long walks with his friends after a party, they incorrectly recite lines of ancient Greek poetry. Their criticisms of modern life and their own friends and social activities, are confined to the sphere of talk. Woolf elaborates on Benjamin’s point, that talk (in which they parrot ideas they have learned to value) is no alternative for the silent dream of proper flânerie.

Benjamin’s recollections of Paris are less anxious and fraught that those of Berlin. Discussing an insight that occurred to him one afternoon, Benjamin insists that “it had to be in Paris [that this occurred], where the walls and quays, the places to pause, the collections and the rubbish, the railings and the squares, the arcades and the kiosks, teach a language so singular that our relations to people attain... the depths of a sleep” (30). Here, the cityscape is breaks down into component parts that propagate a visual-sensual language that bypasses spoken communication in a state akin to “the depths of sleep”. In Eliot’s dramatic works, built spaces like churches, manor houses, apartments, and doctor’s chambers are similarly dismantled into an affective resistance—for him, to dwell in the immanence of religious belief. For Eliot as for Benjamin and Woolf, normative linguistic production propagates dominant ideologies; he experiments with literary (dramatic) language to abandon the merely spoken in favor of meaning-making that is slippery, immanent. The fractured perspective that does not yearn for wholeness, the dream-like dissociative view that eschews the practical, common sense world is a source of strength for Eliot’s drama. His embrace of the ephemeral takes on political ramifications, for instance in the accretion of a specific idea of Britishness in Murder in the
Cathedral immediately preceding the Second World War. Even in The Cocktail Party, the
sudden death of a Christian missionary in an imaginary colony shows both the bravery of her
decision to have faith, and the uselessness of the colonial enterprise to make sense of her
motivations or those of the natives.

The colonial enterprise is a monolith that Resnais’ Muriel also tries to dismantle. Bernard
Aughain, the stepson of Hélène, is shown to have recently returned from Algeria deeply
disturbed by the torture and violence that he was made party to while there with the French army.
Bernard returns home to find Boulogne changing rapidly with postwar reconstruction, and the
jubilation of rebuilding is coupled with a rhetoric of political forgetting, in which the memory of
French collusion with the Nazi government is slowly evaporating. Bernard finds himself losing
his bearings in this environment—the actor Jean-Baptiste Thiérrée’s dark eyes stare out of his
thin face as if on the brink of a massive emotional collapse. Bernard retreats into the old,
medieval part of Boulogne that is largely free of the new reconstruction; he also begins to film
the cityscape incessantly as it changes, particularly one new apartment building that is useless
because it is slowly subsiding into the ground upon which it was built. Benjamin prefigures
Bernard’s location of an emotional center in the interrupted topography of Boulogne—the earth
rent by gaping holes where foundations are being laid, the skyline uneven because of half-built
structures rising into the air, and memory-images that abruptly intrude on the present as citizens
frequent new cafes and shops to talk about the prewar establishments they have replaced.
Bernard’s method of inserting himself into this cityscape attests that public and private are no
longer separate and marked off as such; they are contingent, contestable, and blend into one
another in a continuous extension of meaning-making.

Benjamin suggests that it is perhaps impossible to write autobiography anymore, defining
this as a document that “has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life”; instead, in “A Berlin Chronicle,” he offers reminiscences that talk “of a space, of moments and discontinuities” (28). He differentiates between the actual past and the recollected past, the latter “the months and years [that] appear... in the form they have at the moment of recollection” (28). Berlin, the space of the city, is the sensual engine that engages and drives his memories, so much that the atmosphere of the city threatens to overpower its people and give them “only a brief shadowy existence” (28). Bernard’s sense of people is similarly flattened, and Benjamin provides a fuller explanation of why this young man thinks of his own filmmaking as a process of “collecting proofs” rather than telling a story. The tyranny of the story—like the imperative of obedience among troops, the condoning of state-sanctioned violence under colonial rule, and the normalizing effects of straightforward nostalgia, are to be avoided at all costs if any truthful encounter with the past is to be attempted. Bernard and his stepmother Hélène are, in this sense, the last of the modernists.

Place and the Urban Imaginary in Twentieth Century Architecture

The other discipline that is intrinsically concerned with the twentieth-century cityscape is architecture. Literature and the plastic arts were exploring ways to “freeze time” into “tiny slices... as self-contained units” (Crouch 27) in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, fragmenting one of the basic ordering units of socio-economic life into debris and discrete shards as part of a sustained critique of the visual politics of modernity. Meanwhile, architecture in Western Europe was profoundly influenced by the monolithic skyscrapers of Chicago and other rapidly expanding US cities during what Christopher Crouch terms “the Machine Age” of the
twentieth century. In conceptual terms, modern European architecture tended towards the singular and crystalline at the same time as so much artistic production gravitated towards the shifting and evanescent. In this section, I give a brief overview of the main architects and movements from 1922-1963, concurrent with the literary and filmic works on which later chapters are based.

Le Corbusier is a polemical figure in this architectural landscape, influencing the Bauhaus group in Germany and the Continent and the Modernist movement in architecture overall in the decades from 1920 to the late 1950s. His influence on British architects is more limited, but his vision of the modernist monolith recurs throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Critics often consider the similarities between Le Corbusier’s aesthetic vision and that of a polarized fictional architect, Howard Roark from Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* (1943) for his love of massive structures that use only straight lines. Vladimir Paperny offers the more moderate view that, although Le Corbusier’s many theoretical tracts were undoubtedly influential (both on architects and writers), modernist architecture as a whole did not single-mindedly embrace the hard and simple lines that Roark finds compelling (42). Almost all modernist architects did “want their buildings to be as tall as possible,” Paperny notes. In the words of the architect Louis Sullivan, the ideal building must be “tall, every inch of it tall. The force and power of altitude must be in it, the glory and pride of exaltation must be in it. It must be a proud and soaring thing, rising in sheer exaltation so that from bottom to top it is a unit without a single dissenting line (qtd. in Paperny 43). Le Corbusier, following this statement from Sullivan’s “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered” (1896), even found the buildings in New York of his day too small.

Daniel Herwitz echoes Paperny and Anthony Vidler to suggest that although Le
Corbusier cannot be accused of all the excesses of modernist architecture (particularly since the number of commissions he finished is quite small), he nonetheless “does arrogate to modern architecture the right to reduce Paris, the most cosmopolitan city in the world, to ashes so that something more ideal can be built in its place” (234). The idea of demolishing Paris is nothing new, but the architect positioning himself as a social visionary is. In modernity, “monuments and utopian plans are two sides of the same coin: monuments signal the conversion of ruins to power, and utopian plans signal the power to ruin modern life so that it might be converted into something more monumental” (Herwitz 234). All of this, it must be stressed, is even imaginable because of the devastation in Europe brought on by war, which haunted everyone and invited radical social change.

As the discussion of Rilke and Benjamin above indicates, the monumentalizing machinistic ethos of modernist architecture is particularly problematic to literary and filmic modernism. The enormous structures created by the architectural imaginary to populate the metropolis are repeatedly dismantled in the literary consciousness. In the later 1950s and early 1960s, architecture finally discarded this adherence to monuments, and turned toward make-shift shelters and contingent spaces as exemplified by Eduardo Paolozzi’s contribution to the *This is Tomorrow* show of 1955, where he put together a “room” and a patio using discarded building materials collected from the streets of London (discussed below). However, architecture is fundamentally a discipline grounded in the concrete: even at its most experimental, it cannot hope to embrace contingency and mutability in the same ways, and to the extent, as literary and filmic works. In order to leave the drawing board and manifest itself as built environment, architecture necessarily relies upon an alliance with commerce, too. Because of this constraint, the vision of modernity advanced by the architectural eye even later in the twentieth century
remains essentially conservative and profoundly different from that offered by Woolf, Eliot, and Resnais, who are less constricted by their material needs.

Starting from this observational standpoint, I offer a series of contrasts in this section between concurrent architectural and literary and filmic productions. In my reading, the literary/filmic modernist eye turns the entire expansive site of the city into its personal memory-place, which is why I focus on theorizations about the cityscape in architectural writing instead of only on writing about sites of memorialization. The Man of the Crowd, Malte, even Walter Benjamin, walk the city tirelessly, as if tramping through streets is a measure of affective ownership. Recollections—evoking related emotions of happiness, anxiety, grief, modernist melancholia, and anger—are not confined to significant sites in this imagined scheme. The entire city of Boulogne turns into a generative source of memory-making for Bernard in Muriel; similarly in Jacob’s Room, London and Cambridge broadly (as well as the enclosed rooms taken by Jacob) are implicated in the protagonist’s failed attempt at attaining selfhood. Large public spaces are evoked in these works and turned into private sites of signification, as when Thomas Becket in Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral reimagines Canterbury Cathedral as an integral part of his personal spirituality and salvation. Recalling Benjamin’s evocation of the lost city of his childhood, the literary and filmic imaginary elides the difference between the public and private; architecture, on the other hand, particularly from 1930-1960, reasserts this distinction as an important aspect of social planning.

In much the same way that literature theorizes about the effect of built spaces on the individual psyche, architecture seeks to mold lived experience for citizens. Le Corbusier notes in his influential manifesto of urbanity, Urbanisme, The City of Tomorrow (1924), that town planning is “the mirror of authority” and “the decisive act of governing” (viii). Hence,
architectural production—even if putatively democratic—is implicated in the processes of governance that Woolf, Eliot, and Resnais are critiquing, explicitly and otherwise. Their oppositional aesthetic and ethical stand cannot be accommodated in Le Corbusier’s vision of the unity between architectural forms and the principles of governance. This, however, doesn’t prevent him from equating his practice with artistic production. He writes that poetry, like architecture, is “a human act,” perhaps the act which defines the twentieth century (1). The architect doesn’t see an essential separation between the two disciplines: he seems to trust that, following the Platonic ideal, false poets who propagate incendiary lies have been driven from the polis, so that all those who remain are interested in conserving the values of extant society. As the history of modernist literature shows (particularly in the critical reevaluation since the 1990s), this is a naïve assumption. The liberal, resistant aesthetic of the genre tends to outstrip its conservative elements. Lying—in the sense of not offering a singular resolution, or offering several contradictory impressions without privileging any single one—is a common narrative device used in the works I study. Deleuze, discussing Resnais and Orson Welles, goes so far as to assert that the forger is the central figure in modernist cinema, pointing to the volatility of modern cinema’s narrative stance and its abandonment of authorial omnipotence. Contingency and mutability in truth, as opposed to monumental singularity, is the defining feature of twentieth-century “poetry.” It follows that the vision of modernity this espouses is very different from Le Corbusier’s assumption of their sameness simply because they are both “human acts.”

Can architecture be compared to storytelling? Both are constructions, in the sense that smaller units of brick and stone, word and image, are used to create a larger edifice that generates a new set of significations. Both are material representations of metaphysical ideas, insofar as a story exists as printed matter. Both expound a vision of lived experience, and are
implicated in shaping them. From medieval churches that defined belief through their physical structure, to the modern skyscraper and its vision of human utility and progress, buildings have always generated a system of significations at least as complex as those of conventional storytelling. Svetlana Boym observes that “[s]ince antiquity, there has been an isomorphism between nature, architecture, and the human body” (58); this synecdochic quality of architectural production lends itself to generalized statements such as the above by Le Corbusier. Even broken architectural spaces seem laden with import, as “[r]uins embody anxieties about human aging, commemorating our cultural endeavors and their failures” (Boym 59). I extend her observation to add that the ruined (i.e., fragmented, compromised) consciousness of the modernist artist/narrator views the cityscape as a whole in anxious terms, no longer restricting itself to sites of ruins. This is particularly evident in the works of Woolf and Resnais who, despite their own pacifist stance, consider the modern subject guilty by implication of violence and atrocity on public and personal levels. This consciousness privileges commemoration, itself debased as a memory-image interpellated by the present moment and its problematic cultural production. It dwells in failure, not because it is attracted only to the negative aspects of modernity, but because so much of Western European modernity is built upon the bedrock of moral, ethical, and aesthetic failure.

In contrast, Le Corbusier’s 1929 Villa Savoye is a pristine white box-like building raised off the ground on plinths and with windows on all sides, whose design and construction show no consciousness of this compromised state of modernity. Conceived as a modernist take on the French country house built in a Parisian suburb, the Villa’s target “audience”—because Le Corbusier thought of the architect as a kind of curator of the building’s interiors as well as its exterior views—is the modern man with appropriately developed sensibilities. Corbusier takes
this imagined subject of modernity on a “promenade architecturale” through the spaces of the house; it is designed with several levels connected by ramps, so that to get from one part to another, the inhabitant has to walk along prescribed routes in the interior (Scala n.p.). Le Corbusier was an admirer of the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, whom he met in 1928, and sought to apply Eisenstein’s idea of the cinematic montage to his own architectural practice (Kiyak 163). The Villa Savoye is important to this study for two reasons: the first, it proved influential on European architecture and its principles were embraced by the German Bauhaus school, with whom Le Corbusier was loosely associated into the 1930s. Second, to look at the Villa Savoye is to see a building that raises itself off the ground and revels in its own insularity. It is an exercise in control over its surroundings through curated view from the inside, and with manicured lawns on the outside that emphasize the distinction between the building and the countryside. It shows little interest or consciousness of the trauma of the Great War, and exists in a clearing of its own—theoretically as well as literally, it sits in the middle of a lawn that was cleared out of the surrounding forest and distances itself from its context.

In its formal principles, the Villa Savoye is the anti-ruin that establishes itself like a white albatross resting upon the greenery. It devalues the openness of the natural landscape that Woolf describes in Jacob’s Room as the site of an alternate feminine value system; it intrudes on its surroundings and sets itself apart, contrary to Eliot’s evocation of Canterbury Cathedral which is a familiar landmark and incorporated into its surroundings as a shelter for the parish. The Villa Savoye’s serene physical confidence displays none of the contingency or consciousness of change that informs Resnais’ film about rebuilt Boulogne. This early apotheosis of architectural modernism expresses a diametrically opposite view of modernity, presenting a white monolith simultaneously as these other artistic works explore the modern man’s fragmented grasps at
individualism.

From 1922 onwards (i.e., concurrent with the publication of *Jacob’s Room*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Eliot’s *The Waste Land*), Le Corbusier proposed a gigantic apartment city known as the *Ville Radieuse* as fit habitation for the modern city. In these, “a population density of 400 persons per acre [would be] housed in superblocks raised off the ground… Later versions pushed the density up to 1200 persons per acre in 60-storey skyscrapers” (Pawley 25). Frank Lloyd Wright, who earlier admired Le Corbusier, detested this vision of modernity, in which he “saw architecture enacting the physical submergence of the individual into the group” (Pawley 25). During this decade, Wright withdrew to the US and propounded a vision of modern Arcadia that was in its own way as deterministic as Corbusier’s *Ville Radieuse*, despite their avowedly progressive vision. Historians of architecture note that although Le Corbusier and his adherents in the European architectural scene theorized about newness, actual architectural output in the interwar era lagged behind the plastic arts in terms of experimentation (Branzi 437). In 1924, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe wrote in a Corbusian vein: “The individual is losing significance; his destiny is no longer what interests us. The decisive achievements in all fields are impersonal and their authors are for the most part unknown. They are part of a trend of our time towards anonymity” (qtd. in Pawley 25). For Woolf, Eliot, and later Resnais, this trend toward anonymity is precisely the loss of the human element in modernity that it held as imperative to counter through repeated assertions of personality and individual memory on the impersonal space of the city. Le Corbusier’s *Ville Radieuse* had to be dismantled in the figurative imagination.

In Germany, the Bauhaus school of architecture and the arts was committed to Le Corbusier’s theories about successful design along the principles established in the Villa Savoye and plans for the *Ville Radieuse*. Headed by Mies from 1930 until it closed in 1933 under
pressure from the National Socialists, the Bauhaus consisted of architects as well as artists like Paul Klee, whose “Angelus Novus” (1920) inspired Benjamin in formulating the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), and Wassily Kandinsky, who was involved with the school from the early 1920s to 1932 before he left Germany for Paris. Although the influential Bauhaus artists aimed for “a ‘life of the spirit’ beyond the utilitarian” (Ledrut 127), their work still embraced the monolithic built structure which, in the literary imaginary, suffocated the spiritual life of urban dwellers. Mies’ Barcelona Pavilion (a structure commissioned by the Weimar Republic for the International Exhibition in Spain, 1929) is held as an example of the best principles of modernist architecture and has none of the fluidity or contingency of so much other contemporary formal artistic experiments. The structure itself was torn down shortly after the International Exhibition ended, but photographs show it to be a building of clean lines made of iron and glass, “floating” on a flecked plinth of travertine stone. Since it was intended to be a pavilion in which visitors could rest for a while before going on through the exhibition, it has clear entry and exit points. There are two pools of water, but the floor plan shows that these are carefully contained at two ends of the structure, demonstrating an investment in the “modernity of reason” (Branzi 439).

Like the Villa Savoye, Mies’ Barcelona Pavilion seems to hold the chaos and strife of Europe in the 1920s at a distance, providing an alternate space that might allow the modern subject to escape into its cool lines, but does not insist on encountering the degraded material

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6 In Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries, Mark Nixon reminds us that when Beckett visited Germany in the winter of 1936-37, Kandinsky’s abstract expressionist paintings were among the pictures he took particular pleasure in seeing for himself. Although biographer Anthony Cronin pegs Beckett as an apolitical figure based on his letters, Nixon and others have noticed that his private diaries show a keen awareness and disgust for the totalizing rhetoric and systematic rewriting of history in Germany of the late 1930s. Kandinsky and others delighted Beckett because they were banned as immoral by the Nazis. Although the Bauhaus school did not change the tendency of monolithification in interwar architectural production, the artwork produced under its auspices would have important aesthetic resonances in the postwar era.
reality of modernity. Alan Powers suggests that the development of a “technocratic, urbanized society” was so momentous that “between 1900 and 1930 more hope was invested in architecture’s ability to bring the emerging condition of the world under control and to rescue it from disaster than at any previous time” (10). This explains why, when other art forms were celebrating illogic and unreason, upholding the carnivalesque aspects of contemporary urban experience, modernist architecture sought to defend and consolidate the city by building monuments which were to be “new cathedrals of modernity” (Branzi 438) in an assertion of “its distinct and over-reaching craziness” (Powers 10). As Nikolaus Pevsner’s Buildings of England and Pevsner Architectural Guides (begun in 1940s; pub. 1951-74) record, British architecture after World War I largely preferred replicating non-dramatic Georgian styles (Atkins 44). While in Germany, the defeat after World War I “had the effect of accelerating architectural change, it was the opposite for the British” so that “British [architectural] Modernists in the 1930s were relatively unadventurous in their use of space” (Powers 13). In an unpublished paper from 1939 titled “The Modern Movement,” Pevsner writes that “it can safely be said that spatial movement is not what British architects wish to express in their buildings” (qtd. in Powers 13) because of the lack of open floor plans or other innovations that encouraged free circulation of people inside the building.

Lytton Strachey, a contemporary of Virginia Woolf and part of the Bloomsbury circle, describes the Victorian distrust of circulation between rooms in a 1922 essay about his childhood home at 69 Lancaster Gate (unpublished paper discussed in Holroyd 3-18). In effect, such hierarchical differentiated interiors were “physical realizations of social divisions” (Rosner 63), a trend continued in architectural production of the Edwardian era. In Chapter III of this study, I discuss how Eliot’s writing about London’s churches in the late 1920s and 1930s was part of a
wider national desire to enhance an enclosed image of Britishness to counter the perceived dangers of Continental influences. In the 1940s and immediately following World War II, Eliot’s political thinking grew less moralistic and more humane. *The Cocktail Party* uses the device of circulation between rooms of the doctor’s chambers to present a picture of humanity trapped within the maze of modern life, as well as its potential to leave that enclosed system. It accommodates those who choose to remain within the safe circuit of London doctors’ chambers, clubs, and drawing rooms as well as the few who reject those spaces altogether and embraced a radically different faith-based life.

After the Second World War, the belief in a modernity of reason and progress was fundamentally challenged. Architectural modernism seemed to be making a gradual accommodation away from its monolithic severity of line, despite the New Brutalist movement of the 1950s, which reacted against softness and the picturesque and attempted to return to the roots of European modernism of the 1920s (Powers 232). This trend was evident in the “This is Tomorrow” exhibition held at London’s Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1958. There, in an installation named “The Patio and Pavilion,” sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi constructed a temporary room made of found objects, stones from the roadside, and walls made of polished aluminium. Paolozzi’s pavilion, in contrast to the confident lines and clean serenity of Mies’ glass, marble and travertine Barcelona Pavilion, was a provisory structure in which architecture “had become a fragile membrane,” its robust belief in the modernity of reason “transformed into a rickety shack reflecting uncertainly upon itself” (Branzi 439). Other developments in this vein included proposed constructions by the avant-garde Archigram group, formed in London in 1960, such as the Plug-In City (1964, one year after *Muriel*) which imagined a modern city that was modular and movable, made up of sectional buildings that could “plug into” utility grids in endless
combinations. This aesthetic of incompleteness recognized the constantly-shifting needs of urban living, so that buildings were imagined as fragmentary component parts to be arranged into different configurations in different locations.

Even later, in the 1970s and ’80s, Bernard Tschumi and the architectural deconstructivists sought liberation from the Bauhaus movement and embraced a vision of modernity that was based upon contingent mutability of landscape and the principle of rhizomatic plurality. The temporary, ruin-based aesthetic of Paolozzi’s “The Patio and the Pavilion” began a process of reevaluation in architectural production in “practices such as rehabilitation of older buildings; the rediscovery of the importance of the street… the empowerment of ordinary building users to the point of building their own homes… and a need for buildings to save energy” (Powers 233). Post-Modern architecture embraced a self-reflexive critique of modernity that moves architecture as a discipline away from the excessive mechanization and anti-individualism of Le Corbusier and Mies. The sister arts of sculpture, painting, film, and literature played a significant role in advancing this critique of modernity that architecture finally turned towards. In the trade publication Design Book Review, the architect Andrea Kahn offers a vision of the role of architecture vis-à-vis modernity in 1992 that has several striking differences from the statements of Le Corbusier and Mies quoted above. Writing about the need for a “grounded theory” that turns away from aesthetic preoccupations and applies itself towards lessening political, economic or social inequality, Kahn states: “[T]o attend to the work of architecture we must first seek out what we do not see—that the art of construction goes beyond appearances… our work is not simply a matter of drawing and following the line” (qtd. in Dear 11). To go beyond “drawing and following the line” is to eschew the “trend of our time towards anonymity” that Mies enthused over in 1924. To “seek out what we do not see” aligns with the intention of the literary
modernist, and recalls Benjamin’s statement about the gaze of the flâneur from “A Berlin Chronicle.” The Benjaminian distinction between what the gaze takes in, and what it can translate into the language of seeing, emphasizes the ephemerality of the world, the transience that envelopes and surpasses its solidities. It is only by engaging with what extends “beyond appearances” can architecture, like literature and film, properly address the ethical imbalances that distend the modern world.

**Dwelling in the “Commonly Thought Small”: Memorialization in the Modernist City**

As I have mentioned, the texts I examine in the following chapters present a spectrum of responses to the twin challenges of the search for selfhood and authentic memorialization during the interwar and postwar periods in England and France. In the decades between 1920 and 1960, the social and psychological trauma of the World Wars meant that it was increasingly difficult for the average citizen to locate herself in a cityscape that felt ugly and alien. Pre-1914, an encounter with the disorienting city was a necessary step in the development of a writerly aesthetic—as the above examination of Poe and Rilke suggest. However, most significant post-1914 modernist writing about the city is riddled with anxiety and the consciousness of terrible, impending loss in the manner of Benjamin’s “A Berlin Chronicle.” Not only was it increasingly difficult to assert one’s individuality in an architectural environment that arbitrarily denied it, but the large scale of death after both wars meant that the imperative to remember the dead was magnified and became politically fraught. The “commonly thought small” is Woolf’s phrase that locates where modernist authorial attention is drawn—to the nobodies who fill cities and towns, the small epiphanies and tired tragedies of their lives, away from the big names that populate
history textbooks and towards the numbing banality of the ordinary person. However, it is precisely through attention to the “commonly thought small” that modernism advances its harshest critiques of extant society. It embraces the mundane and reifies it, holding it in narrative attention to render it memorable.

Alain Resnais raises the question of remembrance in both Night and Fog and Muriel; in each instance, he confronts the difficult fact that even a culture shaped by the consciousness of terrible violence, such as France in the post-World War II era, can complacently allow similar violence to continue in a different context. Resnais’ cinematic dismantling of the internment camp at Auschwitz and the rebuilt city of Boulogne, uses different techniques to interrupt the continuity of anonymous space and focuses viewers’ attention on narratives that seek to relegate the messiness of the past into ordered, contained, memory-images. Resnais’ films remain messy in this sense, because they resist the urge to tell a singular story. Muriel, for instance, ends irresolutely; even Hélène, the narrative focal point who has a moment of clarity at the end of the movie, is abandoned without an account of the implications of her revelation about the banality of her life. The cinematic text leaves its audience with the trace notion that Hélène’s insight is crucial and that the banality of lived experience is not to be repudiated, but embraced. In a political climate that works by exclusion, i.e., French not German, French not Algerian, the Résistance not Vichyites, and so on, Hélène takes comfort in reaching a point of similarity with others. If her grand passion is banal, repeatable, then so are her experiences of pain and betrayal; reversing the formula, the torture of the Arab girl that Bernard witnesses also becomes another banal (in this sense) experience of pain. It ceases to be an incident of political necessity and joins the pool of all human atrocity towards other humans. Banality sheds its pejorative assumptions as the extremely-personal generates resistance to public ulterior motives such as France’s
colonial ambitions.

Eliot’s plays, although not directly involved with either of the wars, share Resnais’ sensitivity to the built environment that gestures to its political conscience. The epiphanies of his major characters involve a withdrawal into the personal locus of religious conviction where Thomas Becket, Harry Monchensey, and Celia Coplestone each decide to wait for what the divine brings. Eliot’s formulation rejects so-called common sense and embraces a narrative style that refuses to present a clear resolution. This diffuseness is part of Eliot’s larger argument for the inclusion of the ineffable in modern life and his move away from the purely empirical. While architecture seeks to build giant monoliths to progress based on science and technology, Eliot eschews the limited view of socio-cultural progression based only on the visible. He differentiates between the quality of (religious) waiting and (secular) passivity, to suggest that going against common sense is a measure of faith in some instances. In an era of mechanized killing and large-scale political machinations, Eliot locates an alternate value system in the religious epiphanies of his protagonists. The crucial moment of clarity in these plays comes after what can be thought of as a re-education, when characters who have so far inhabited spaces mindlessly reencounter their built environment anew. Harry, for instance, who has always disliked the perceived stuffiness of Wishwood Manor as an imposition on his freedom, is led by his Aunt Agatha to reevaluate his relationship to the place. Recalling the insight of Malte Laurids Brigge as he watches “stubborn life” continue to exist in torn down rooms long after their inhabitants have left, Harry finds that life persists beyond himself in a metaphysical way. Such a reeducation involves abandoning preconceived notions of the world and trusting intuitively in the immanence of divinity. It is this need for re-education, albeit in a rigorously secular worldview, that Woolf first explores in Jacob’s Room.
In the chapter that follows, Woolf shows that the titular Jacob is shaped and hobbled by his education, which has taught him to value the social circuit of masculinist Clubland and to devalue the feminine realms of emotionality and sexuality. Radical thought doesn’t simply manifest itself, Woolf suggests; habits of thinking are first learned from teachers who seem to have all the answers. Language controls this process implicitly through a web of signifiers, and explicitly, through social markers like vocabulary, diction, and command over multiple languages. Jacob is schooled in Latin and Greek; he attends Cambridge and is influenced by certain of his professors. He endlessly proselytizes in the manner he has been taught, researching and writing a series of tedious essays. His rooms, in keeping with early twentieth century fashion, should have been the fullest expressions of his creative inner selfhood. Instead, they reveal a gap in Jacob’s learned sense of self by being furnished according to tastes he aspires to have. The succession of rooms he inhabits have the air of quotations copied into a notebook and memorized. The quotation becomes a powerful defamiliarizing device in the hands of modernists like Joyce, Benjamin, and Beckett; in this relatively early text, Woolf reveals the closed nature of the unselfconscious quotation and the impotence of youth that has been taught to parrot opinions rather than understand.
II. *Jacob’s Room*: Affective Reason and the Failure of Reeducation

This chapter focuses on Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922) to suggest that the novel presents two kinds of overlooked spaces: those that are built and rigid, steeped in time, and those that exist outside human conceptions of time. Cambridge and London rooms in dormitories and clubs are examples of the first kind of built environment—they are associated with masculine hierarchies and social organizing principles such as education, conventional propriety, and political maneuverings that led to World War I. Such rooms, and the people in them, are engaged in creating an aggressively propagated view of modernity that is countered by the Parthenon or the open spaces of the English moor, which are feminized, resistant spaces that serve as a critique of the dominant social and cultural institutions that led to the Great War. Woolf offers the view that contemporary architectural spaces are collusive with human attempts to order time and memory whereas ancient spaces resist such attempts and expose their hollowness through an atemporal affective neutrality. Jacob Flanders is an unreliable guide through this terrain. The novel mourns his loss deeply, and at the same time exposes the limits of his understanding and his fatal dependence on the conventions of Clubland that the narrative ironizes and rejects. Jacob is the locus of the “commonly thought small” in the narrative universe as an ordinary young man of his time. Jacob’s family, his admiration for certain professors, his ambition to join the London literati, his ambivalence about sexual exploits, and finally his travels in Greece and death in the war are all ordinary and, in that sense, forgettable. However, the loss of Jacob is presented as being so affectively fraught that it is impossible to ignore. The narrator’s willingness to, on the one hand expose Jacob as a limited and pompous character and, on the other, to mourn his loss sincerely articulates a paradoxical position that critiques “the desire to master loss through the
order of representation” (Clewell 208). The narrative’s act of remembrance embraces the mundane and everyday to propagate a new aesthetic mode of literature coupled with an alternative ethical value system. It follows the logic of this feminist reappraisal of literary convention that Jacob, who is the apotheosis of the generation of 1914 in many ways, emerges towards the end of the novel as a feminized figure who abandons masculinist “talking, talking, talking” (JR 40) for a profound discomfited silence.

**World War I Memorials: The Cityscape and Modernist Melancholia**

The end of the Great War began a rapid proliferation of monuments to the war dead across Britain, beginning with Edwin Lutyen’s Cenotaph at Whitehall in London. Emphasizing the mass nature of the tragedy, Lutyens’ monument bears no names and has the dates of World War I (and later, World War II) inscribed in Roman numerals on two sides below two carved wreaths. It is a simple structure first built out of plaster and wood for the Victory Parade of 1919 that became unexpectedly popular with mourners, so that the originally temporary edifice was redone in white limestone from Dorset and officially unveiled in 1920 by the king and continues to be a site of the official Remembrance Service in London each year. Historian David Cannadine writes that “by the end of the week [of 11 November 1920, second anniversary of the Armistice], it was estimated that one million people had visited the Cenotaph and the graveside [of the Unknown Warrior at Westminster Abbey], and no less than 100,000 wreaths had been laid either in the Abbey or in Whitehall” (Cannadine “War and Death” 224). Lutyens’ memorial served as a model for other cenotaphs (Gr., “empty graves,” symbolic site of remembrance that take no individual names or contain any interred remains) across the country and, through
Britain’s Imperial influence, across the world including in Canada and India.

*Jacob’s Room* can fruitfully be read as the anti-Cenotaph because of its insistent grounding in the personal history of the young man. It resists the romanticization of the war dead that reached near-hysterical peaks in the cultural imaginary of the early 1920s. The novel as an alternate site of memorialization retains an affective fluidity missing from public sites of remembrance, which admit of only a small range of emotional responses when faced with the monument. Within the sphere of the personal, Woolf’s narrative voice can muse on questions that are disallowed in more hallowed sites of mourning: “But how far was he a mere bumpkin? How far was Jacob Flanders at the age of twenty-six a stupid fellow?” (*JR* 154). Woolf’s depiction of Jacob mirrors the symbolic emptiness of Lutyens’ memorial, to the extent that early reviewers of the novel were loath to call it that at all⁷; however, in its range of responses to Jacob, the novel actually reinstates a “new bereaved sincerity” (*Clewell* 206) against the overblown rhetorics of remembering the lost generation of 1914.⁸

Diary entries from November 1918 show that Woolf valued the sense of prosaic communality that developed during the war: “Instead of feeling all day & going home through

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⁷ Christine Froula provides an overview of critical responses to *Jacob’s Room* that I draw upon here. For instance, Rebecca West saw Woolf as “at once a negligible novelist and a supremely important writer” (qtd. in Froula 69); others found “no narrative, no design, above all, no perspective” (qtd. in Froula 69) as negative aspects of Woolf’s novelistic enterprise. In contrast, to my eyes, it is these aspects of the novel that make it experimental and also affectively powerful. I agree with Froula’s comment: “The novel’s early readers… mistook the dismantling of the story for neglect ‘to put it together,’ its strategic abandonment of storytelling for narrative failure, its paratactic analytic method for an impressionist ‘rag-bag’” (69). To see *Jacob’s Room* as having “no perspective” is to fundamentally misread it, as my later discussion of Woolf’s “Modern Fiction” essay tries to make evident.

⁸ See London 51-57 for more on the slew of publications of works by the war dead over the 1920s. The popular public sentiment can be summed up in the following lines from E. B. Osborn, editor of the volume *The New Elizabethans: A First Selection of the Lives of Young Men Who Have Fallen in the Great War* (1919), who writes with an outpouring of sentimentality: “They were all scholars and sportsmen and poets—even if they did not write poetry, they had a conviction that life ought to be lived poetically. They had the Elizabethan exuberance” (qtd. in London 51). By 1924, Woolf was able to class these posthumous commemorative publications of unrevised poetry and private journals, saying, “The war has made us familiar with the type of book” in which friends attempt to record what the dead young man “was to them, and to adumbrate what he might have been to the world” (qtd. in London 53). *Jacob’s Room* joins in this sub-genre self-consciously, careful *not* to define what Jacob was to those who knew him or to adumbrate what he might have been. Its careful resistance to rhetorical outpourings about Jacob, its puncturing of his character with incisive irony is to this end.
dark streets that the whole people, willing or not, were concentrated on a single point, one feels now that the whole bunch has burst asunder & flown off with the utmost vigour in different directions” (D1 217). There is a touch of distaste in the last phrase that likens the population to a flock of birds, all chattering “with the utmost vigour” now that the gravest danger was over. In 1920, Woolf recalls seeing an acquaintance “going down the Strand the night of the Cenotaph” in what she describes as “a lurid scene, like one in Hell. A soundless street; no traffic; but people marching. Clear, cold, & windless. A bright light in the Strand; women crying Remember the Glorious Dead, & holding out chrysanthemums. Always the sound of feet on the pavement. Faces bright & lurid… A ghastly procession of people in their sleep” (D2 79-80). Her description turns familiar locations in central London into uncanny, silent and hellish sites of illusion.

Even her more prosaic descriptions make a dislike of the Cenotaph evident. Her diary entries of July 1919 record that she avoided the Victory Day parade and celebrations for being “calculated & politic & insincere” although her servants reported that it was “the most splendid sight of their lives” (D1 292). Betraying more than a trace of class snobbery, she adds, “But I don’t know—it seems to me a servants festival; some thing got up to pacify & placate ‘the people’” (292). For Woolf, the Cenotaph demanded a repression of varied and mutable human personality into a singular, valorizing memory-image of the dead; at the same time, it perpetuated “the wartime disjunction between combatant and civilian experience” (Trumpener 1097). In Chapter IV, I show how Alain Resnais takes up a similar question in the aftermath of World War II in his documentary and fictional films, about the perceived divide between perpetrators of violence and its victims, of combatant and civilian experiences. Resnais complicates this simple division—as Woolf also gestures towards—by relating in Muriel the violence of Hélène and Bernard’s civilian experience of the bombing of Boulogne, no less
traumatic than the boy’s later experience of war in Algeria. Woolf’s sense of “the whole people” during the War as “concentrated on a single point” reflects the way that extreme violence implicates an entire population, those at the front lines as well as those remaining at home, working “all day & going home through dark [blacked out] streets” (DI 217). Resnais explores this implicated subjectivity, already present as an aspect of Woolf’s reaction to the War, with great sensitivity in works from the 1950s and 1960s to advance a vision of acutely compromised modernity in which the human subject continues to struggle for selfhood.

In both cases of Resnais and Woolf, consciousness of the tenor of wartime and the desire to avoid sentimental depictions of loss in its aftermath results in drastic formal experiments that were not always well-received, as the critical response to Jacob’s Room shows. Walter Benjamin theorizes about this relationship of form to content in his essay, “The Storyteller” (1936), in which he discusses the decline of oral and epic storytelling formats and the rise of the bourgeois novel. Benjamin differentiates between storytelling, in which teller and audience are interpolated because the teller has been a listener first who subsequently moulds the story in retelling, and the format of the novel, which enforces a rigid distinction between author and reader, teller and listener. The fluidity of the older tradition was eroded, for Benjamin, “With the [First] World War [when] a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?” (84). The experience that they cannot communicate is the massive scale of modern death. As an enduringly ineffable state, the moment of death confers a certain authority to the dying: “[S]uddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is the very source of the
story” (94). Peter Brooks elaborates this is “that death that we will never know in our own lives, that which, through the figuration of a fictive life, gives us an image of what might constitute meaning” (84). Even in 1910, Rilke’s Malte Laurids Brigge recounts the death of his maternal grandfather Count Brahe as a roaring, epic thing that took over the quiet and aloof old man in his last days as if this manifestation of death was a separate living entity in its own right. During the Great War, historical accounts of which tell of soldiers killed out of carelessness or poor planning, their bodies rotting in the trenches so that the living slept next to or on top of them, slipping on decomposing remains as they entered or left, death becomes senseless. There is no chance to observe it taking over a family member, or even to recognize “the unforgettable” emerge in the face of the “poor wretch” who is about to depart except in the most sentimental of accounts. The men who returned from this war grew silent, as Benjamin observed, because there was no way to communicate the immensity of this changed perspective. The conventional novel, being unable to properly communicate the nature of death after the Great War, is similarly unable to convey meaning that evaluates and places death within a symbolic context. This is a failure to carry out an ethical imperative and, for Benjamin, is a failing of the novel as a genre.

Benjamin, writing with the growing consciousness of violence on an even greater scale, frames his comments about the novel in absolute terms against the “liberating magic” (102) of the fairy tale, which engages the mature reader in a process of unlearning adult skepticism in order to feel again as children do, that nature is intrinsically aligned with man. For him, the meandering narratives of the Russian short story writer Nikolai Leskov are the best examples of writing that does not fall into the paralysis of the novel format and retains the playful resistant ethos of the fairy story. Woolf, writing in England of the 1920s, uses a different set of cultural referents to discuss a similar failure of the popular novel which, in her reading, is just as
“calculated & politic & insincere” (DI 292) as the celebratory political rhetoric of the interwar years. In the essay “Modern Fiction” from The Common Reader (1925), she argues emphatically for a new kind of “spiritual” literature to counter the “materialist” urge in popular writers like Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy. Her example of this new form is Joyce’s Ulysses, then appearing in episodic form in The Little Review, which she grudgingly allows as being more moral than populist fiction; she also approves of Hardy and Conrad among her contemporaries in their attempts to portray truth. Benjamin might have described this dichotomy using terms other than materialist and spiritual, but the import of his later essay echoes her complaints from 1925.

The problem with materialist fiction, Woolf says, is that it is too little concerned with the spirit. For instance, Bennett turns out perfectly constructed works that leave no room for the spirit. The terms of her critique are significant:

Mr. Bennett… can make a book so well constructed and solid in its craftsmanship that it is difficult for the most exacting of critics to see through what chink or crevice decay can creep in. There is not so much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards. And yet—if life should refuse to live there? …His characters live abundantly, even unexpectedly, but it remains to ask how do they live, and what do they live for? (CR 147-8)

The terms of Woolf’s criticism are surprisingly similar to Benjamin’s from the passage quoted above. Both place ultimate importance in the question of meaning—“what do they live for?” (my italics). Bennett’s fiction is particularly frustrating to her because of its formal solidity that makes a perfect room out of his work. And yet, this room is not “spiritual” (Woolf’s term) because it doesn’t accommodate all the vagaries of the spirit. It is poor literature because it exists in spite of that indefinable quality, “life,” which includes the disgusting and dirty as well as the
noble and celebratory.

Woolf then suggests that “the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it” (CR 150), and fiction that accurately engages with the real must move away from literary conventions to accommodate the new kinds of “stuff” of the modern reality. Two months after the publication of Jacob’s Room, in December 1922, she writes to an aspiring novelist about the need for experimental literature in much the same terms: “The human soul it seems to me orients itself afresh every now & then. It is doing so now. No one [i.e., readers as well as writers] can see it whole therefore” (L2 598). She is critical of attempts to impose an external structure on messy lived experience through conventions such as the narrative arc of the traditional bildungsroman. Life, which has been fundamentally changed, must be reencountered through fiction, then “accepted on new terms with rapture” (L2 599).

Vincent Sherry locates a textual uneasiness in Jacob’s Room in the circumstances of Woolf’s writing. Her championing of art that rejects the tyranny of plot carries a recognition that conventional fictional forms have grown out of a worldview that no longer applies, and which represent “the failing strength of an [entire] intellectual and political institution” (Sherry 239). But the exultation of new beginnings was more complicated for Woolf than for contemporaries like Pound or Eliot by the personal loss of her brother Thoby, himself influenced by their father, Leslie Stephen, an intellectual who espoused “the instruments of reason” as a “spiritual leader or moral guide to the vagaries of human life and feeling” (Sherry 237). “To a contemporary, Leslie Stephen represented ‘the very type, or mould, of so many Cambridge intellectuals’” whose “ambitious program” to establish secular morality as the basis of right reason led to “the development of a sensibility that might be labeled ‘manly logic’” (Sherry 236). For Woolf, to reject outright those men in clubs and Cabinets in their belief in logic and reason would be to
also reject this paternal (and paternalistic) legacy.

It is an oft-stated critical truth that *Jacob’s Room* is a novel about loss but it bears repeating that it is primarily concerned with what is gone (Jacob, World War I, Woolf’s brother and father) rather than what is emergent, including its formal innovations. This is Woolf’s first attempt to represent the horror of the Great War (also taken up in *Mrs Dalloway*, 1925, and *To The Lighthouse*, 1927, which follow), and her criticism of the machine of war is complicated by her sense that embracing the new involves losing what is beloved yet obsolete of the past. Woolf’s look at the past, which I follow Svetlana Boym to see in terms of a compromised, modernist nostalgia that is distinct from the sentimental, unselfconscious valorization evident in a large number of war-related publications in the 1920s. This form of nostalgia is adamantly not restorative, basing itself in a continued relationship with grief and loss rather than diagnosing these emotions as if they ought to be cured. Alex Zwerdling notes that Woolf highlights the inscrutable features of Jacob to portray “the sense of someone who remains a permanently unknown quantity” (909) that, as Tammy Clewell argues, advances an “ethics of anticonsolatory mourning” (208). In a very different context, T. S. Eliot argues for a similar attitude towards modernity that resists diagnosing the fragmentation and alienation of the modern subject. Whereas Eliot proposes an embrace of Christianity as an alternative to the overarching cultural desire to somehow return to a pre-World War I state of innocence and thus be made whole again, Woolf stands in the comfortless space of the secular ineffable. *Jacob’s Room* is a novel about the senselessness of losing what has already slipped through one’s fingers.

Hence, even though Woolf recognized the need for the “disestablishment of rationalist language” (Sherry 239) in *Jacob’s Room*, she is not purely celebratory about the accompanying rejection of literary conventions and the potentiality of the new formal freedoms. J. Scott Bryson
notices “a keen ambivalence” exists in her writing in that she “points out both the limitations and the destruction that result from an attempt to use art to order the world” (Bryson 593). Jacob’s Room, even more than the much-discussed To The Lighthouse, performs this keen ambivalence. It recognizes “the inefficiency of reason’s appeal to history” (Sherry 237) but also mourns the inadequacy of the “rational capacity, which Thoby had brought into such exceptionally promissory form.” This same outmoded ability also “locates the range of possibility and loss in which Jacob’s death resonates” (Sherry 239). By showing Jacob’s limited understanding of his situation and highlighting his appeal to readerly affections, the novel records a failure that moves with regret towards a broader critique of the social and cultural institutions that left such men so unprepared.

Jacob’s Room extends this argument through its formal innovations. It refuses to foreground the Great War as a more conventional novel might because it refuses to “take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small” (CR 150). Instead, the novel searches for formal freedom to do away with conventions of plot and genre and reflect reality more precisely by dwelling in the supposedly insignificant. This novel seems to reach across the years and respond directly to Marshall Berman’s sense that “we don’t know how to use our modernism… Our century has nourished a spectacular modern art; but we seem to have forgotten how to grasp the modern life from which this art springs” (24). Born out of a consciousness that life, perhaps ungraspable, still needs to be represented within the form of the novel, Jacob’s Room brilliantly explores an unimportant character who would be “commonly thought small” as a way to reinstate the lost power of the story and its telling.

Mentions of war brewing, although central to the tragic structure of the text, are buried
under veiled references to smaller political events: for instance, although doomed from the opening pages by dint of his proleptic last name, Jacob Flanders is never shown to enlist. Instead, the passage of time in the novel and his brewing desire for action are hinted obliquely as he reads *The Globe* one evening: “Jacob took the paper over to the fire. The Prime Minister proposed a measure for giving Home Rule to Ireland. Jacob knocked out his pipe. He was certainly thinking about Home Rule in Ireland—a very difficult matter. A very cold night” (98). Jacob’s mind is wandering at the time of reading (on Florinda’s sexual deception, as it happens) and that “certainly” emphasizes his absent-minded performance of the ritual of newspaper reading. Home Rule for Ireland never recurs as one of his particular concerns; rather, this news serves to pin the date of Jacob’s reading at early-1912, when the Home Rule Bill was introduced to Parliament. Since the question of Irish Home Rule was completely set aside with the advent of the War, this is another example of Woolf’s insistence on the “commonly thought small” over the politically “big” markers of time. Vara Neverow notes that another way she includes the War is through mentions of domesticated horses and cavalry, which relates the emasculated, doomed horses of the army with a “transgressive and secretive sexuality” (Neverow 119) that rears up against the homogenized and censored world of clubs and Cabinets.

In Woolf’s estimation, the institutions “commonly thought big” have a masculine flavor, what she calls “the other side” of “men in clubs and Cabinets” (*JR* 155) who construct narratives (fictitious, historical) and dictate aesthetics suited to their own purposes. The built space of the social club plays an important role in English and even American fiction from the first half of the twentieth century as a place (for men, usually) to lunch and take rooms, but also as an ideological institution in which membership requires acquiescence and conformity. Perhaps the most damning critique of the closed and rigid nature of Clubland appears in colonial accounts of
the “sahib club” such as in E. M. Forster A Passage to India (1924) and George Orwell’s Burmese Days (1934), but it also makes an appearance in Eliot’s The Cocktail Party as the place to which Edward Chamberlayne retreats once he realizes that his wife Lavinia has manipulated him into speaking with a psychiatrist about their marriage. Even in this small dramatic point, the masculine tenor of Clubland stands out clearly: it is an alternate space from the domestic which consciously heightens its own importance in part by seeking to contain the feminine, sometimes through ridiculous measures such as only allowing women into certain drawing rooms but not the dining or residential facilities.

Elaine Showalter makes the same observation in Sexual Anarchy (12), going on to show how the exclusionary places—and ideology—of networked Clubland displayed a fear of feminine sexuality against which the feminist movement and its iconic New Woman figure set themselves in England (Showalter 19-37). Jacob meets some women such as Jinny Carslake who belong to the liberated cult of the New Woman, and admires them from a distance. For his own sexual and emotional needs, however, he still prefers the limited intellect and experience of Florinda or the prostitute Laurette, whom he can impress with his learning and worldly knowledge of art and culture, limited as those are. Alongside social clubs, Cambridge, where Jacob learns his love for ancient Greek, is another geographical locus of rigid, logocentric masculinity. Although he never lives at a club like Eliot’s Edward Chamberlayne, Jacob aspires to one day do so. It is part of the peculiar narrative irony of the novel that it manages to retain a basic sympathy for him even as it declaims furiously against the institutions and ideas he holds dear. It does so in part by highlighting the differences between highly structured built environments like clubs, university grounds, and furnished rooms versus the nighttime English moors of remote Scarborough and Cornwall or the Parthenon in Athens.
These latter are repeatedly characterized as feminine spaces of silence and ellipses that resist the reproduction of conventional patterns of thought and language. The masculine-inflected spaces of Cambridge and London are sustained by family wealth and commercial interests—she makes clear in *Three Guineas* (1938) that boys like Jacob are schooled on the strength of what she names, with bitter sarcasm, “Arthur’s Education Fund” (4), the A.E.F. that accommodates the education of the brother at the expense of lessons for his sisters. In another passage, she imagines a potential donor to a women’s college rebuking the headmistress of that school for not sufficiently allying with commercial and industrial developmental interests:

Cambridge may be quoted as an example of the practical results with come from Research for its own sake… What has your college done to stimulate great manufacturers to endow it? Have you taken a leading part in the invention of implements of war? How far have your students succeeded in businesses as capitalists? How then can you expect ‘very handsome bequests and donations’ to come your way? (32).

This later text, written as Woolf watches Western Europe fall into another devastating war, uses the nonfictional format to angrily declaim a system that she ironizes in fiction in *Jacob’s Room*. The passage above shows that education, war, and commerce are always allied in her social imagination as props that sustain each other. It becomes increasingly significant, then, that Woolf’s feminine spaces are commercially useless, moors that are too thick with stones and buried remains to plough into farmland, or a monument such as the Parthenon, which stands in modernity like an eternal symbol of defiance against the time-bound concerns of Clubland. In Woolf’s configuration, as I explain in more detail below, these sites function as repositories of the past, metaphorically collecting experiential time spent by lonely women walking them, and literally absorbing the buried bones of remembered and forgotten lives. They recall Rilke’s
evocation of the remaining wall of a pulled-down row house in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*: once all commercial value is decimated, the wall is revealed in its most essential function, as a repository for stubborn life that persists despite attempts to reduce and control it.

**Cambridge: Forms of Fiction and the Flattening of Affect**

*Jacob’s Room* is a literary stripping away of engendered associations from the places they infest. In the way that constructed plots are a “tyranny” restricting freedom in fiction, learnt modes of thought are a tyrannical restriction of the free flow of ideas. Stripping away associations becomes the first step in thinking freely, and Jacob’s most profound confrontation with the Parthenon, which occurs on his second view of it after the first romanticization has worn off, leaves him shaken because it contrasts the pettiness of his imagined constructions (the “commonly thought big”) alongside the stolid uncaring stones, which reveal these concerns to be minuscule when considered in light of human history as a whole. Jacob has been taught to think of Ancient Greek culture as protective, as if it were an outgrowth of his Cambridge years, but instead it reveals itself to be supremely indifferent. The rational, anthropocentric universe of “the men in clubs and Cabinets” is displaced in favor of a universe that recognizes the smallness of human will.

To parse the ways in which Cambridge—which the novel populates with otherworldly dons who recite Ancient Greek and Latin texts to their students—is nonetheless implicated in the world of Clubland and war, it is worthwhile to linger over the description of one particular professor, Sopwith, with whom Jacob is particularly enamored. In Woolf’s description, Cambridge represents a conglomeration of social and sexual signifiers that together generate
socially-sanctioned meanings in much the same way that Oxbridge does in A Room of One’s Own (1929). It represents a particular sequence of learning and forms of access; like the semi-fictional narrator in A Room, Jacob also finds that “the inevitable sequel” to Oxbridge is the British Museum (ROO 25), where he frequently goes to copy out passages or research essays he hopes to publish. Indeed, Jacob is so well-trained and well-suited to this environment that as he grows older and more set in his ways, friends and lovers increasingly compare his profile to the fragments of busts from the Elgin Marbles. Francesca Kazan has pointed out in some detail that as the narrative progresses, Jacob seems to turn to stone, rendered into a “corporeal icon” (Kazan 714) for a past era. Rather than a source of interior strength, Jacob’s longing for the Greek way develops into a symbolic expression of his broken tools for navigating modernity.

The narrative voice is loaded with irony when it describes Cambridge as a beacon of knowledge drawing students like insects that creep up to a “lantern under a tree” in a forest (JR 32). The light that spills out of professors’ rooms is also described: “Is it not simple, or pure, or wholly splendid, the lamp of learning, since if you see [the professors] there under its light (whether Rossetti’s on the wall or Van Gogh reproduced, whether there are lilacs in the bowl or rusty pipes), how priestly they look!” (JR 39-40, my emphasis). The lamp of learning collapses differences in interiors furnished according to individual tastes; rather than illuminating the differences between unlike rooms and picking out the particularities of each, the light washes them in its warm yellow and renders them same, all equally “priestly.” Simplicity and purity, normally construed positively, here has the effect of a sketch whose aesthetics use of too-simple lines erases important distinctions between its real-life subjects. This flattening effect of the light becomes significant when compared to the description of Jacob’s own rooms. As I discuss in the following section of this chapter, his rented apartments are stiffly Victorian and formal, contrary
to the growing conviction in fashionable and avant-garde circles that interior decoration could be a new forum in which to most fully explore an individual’s internality by defying convention and giving free reign to her tastes in fabrics, decorative accents, and layout of rooms.

The decorative impulses of cosmopolitanism dramatically modeled by Oscar Wilde at the fin de siècle are out of place in Sopwith’s rooms, in which students traditionally assemble after classes to converse and, Woolf adds, are sometimes served chocolate cake. Cambridge presents itself as the only and best source of enlightenment—“We are the sole purveyors of this cake”—(39), she ironizes. It convinces Jacob, and also provincials like Chucky Stenhouse with “[t]alking, talking, talking” that “everything could be talked—the soul itself slipped through the lips in thin silver disks which dissolve in young men’s minds like silver, like moonlight” (40). Professor Sopwith is hypnotic to the young undergraduates, and Professor Cowan sings Virgil and Catullus “as if language were wine on his lips” (41). Sopwith and Cowan are Cambridge in a sense, its natural inhabitants and fit expressions of its masculinist ideology. Unlike the woman professor Miss Umphelby (Woolf is careful to note that she is barred from an academic title), who is an uncomfortable recent addition to the university environment, the Sopwith and Cowan have inhabited their rooms for generations of students. In Woolf’s characterization of them, the individual and the architectural import are inseparable.

Jacob is too romantic about his education to be objective about his professors’ socio-cultural peculiarities. Instead, and in keeping with the particular expectations of this experimental novel, the most nuanced response to Cambridge comes from Chucky Stenhouse, an “unsuccessful provincial” (41) and fellow student whose impecunious situation mirrors Jacob’s own. Stenhouse is drawn to Professor Sopwith like a moth to a flame despite the embarrassment of being addressed by his first name. There is a petty-minded menace in the professor’s calling
him “Chucky,” a reminder of long-established hierarchies of class and education in his refusal to address the younger man formally. Still, these hierarchies have begun to dissolve with the increasing economic power of the small businessman and so, Stenhouse persists in his pursuit of education and culture. In those long evenings Sopwith twines “stiff fibers of awkward speech—things young men blurted out—plaiting them round his own smooth garland, making the bright side show, the vivid greens, the sharp thorns, manliness” (41). He recalls the “manly logic” of Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen (Sherry 236) in his proselytizing. For plaiting and arranging what they have said in half-understanding, for giving them a clear and singular vision of adulthood that they can believe in, these young men worship all he stands for.

It is only when Stenhouse buys his newspaper the next day and catches the early train back to university that “it all seem[s] to him childish, absurd; the chocolate cake, the young men; Sopwith summing things up.” Sopwith is providing them pat responses, hardly listening to their blurs except to weave their words into his own. Like a bad writer of fiction, Sopwith pays little heed to his raw material and instead tyrannically imposes his preconceived ideas on his students’ words. His method of adding up all the knowledge he deems necessary and leaving out what he doesn’t need echoes the clinical manner of the researcher at the British Museum who frustrates the narrator of A Room. That researcher made “the neatest abstracts, headed often with an A or a B or a C while [the narrator’s] own notebook rioted with the wildest scribble of contradictory jottings” (ROO 30). The narrator of A Room is distressed and humiliated by her inability to come to similar precise conclusions, but it is exactly that riotous, living disorder that is reality itself.

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9 Jacob’s Room has been read by critics, including Vincent Sherry, Elaine Showalter, and Tammy Clewell, as a literary eulogy for Woolf’s beloved brother Thoby Stephen, who died of illness in 1906. In light of this reading, Sopwith’s logic recalling that of Leslie Stephen indicates some of Woolf’s own conflicted loyalties in turning personal experience into fiction. For instance, despite her affection for both the father and brother whose deaths she mourned deeply, perhaps all her life, Woolf would not have been blind to the fact that Thoby’s education was financed by the Stephen household’s “A.E.F.,” so that his time at Trinity was bought at the expense of further Greek lessons for herself or drawing lessons for her sister Vanessa.
Sopwith’s summations point to Woolf’s criticism of Arnold Bennett’s fiction in 1925; both propound philosophies that are so airtight that “not so much as a draught [enters] between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards” (CR 147). In a socio-political situation that is being tossed about by the forces of war and death, in which meaning has retreated into the arena of silence, this hermetically sealed room is ideologically irresponsible (to put it mildly) and dangerous (as Jacob’s history shows).

Sopwith is a writer constrained, “not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall” (CR 149), inexorably repeating the same patterns of thought he was himself taught. There is a taste of old hat in Sopwith’s “vivid greens,” and sometimes Chucky Stenhouse thinks that his silver disks of knowledge “tinkle hollow, and the inscription read a little too simple, and the old stamp look too pure, and the impress always the same—a Greek boy’s head” (41). Sopwith’s ideology is aggressively masculine and allows no room for tarnished metals, messy emotions, or the censored threat posed by sex. Stenhouse acknowledges what Jacob never explicitly does, that Cambridge as an institution confers material benefits that perhaps outweigh even its intellectual gifts. Stenhouse never appears in the narrative again, but this clear-sighted “unsuccessful provincial” is more adept at living in the modern world than Jacob, as shown in the calm calculations he makes for his future. Suspecting Sopwith but still respecting the benefits that the institution confers, he vows to “save every penny to send his son there” (41).

The narrative asserts that any woman meeting these professors, divining a “priest” whose worldview leaves neither room nor agency for her, “would, involuntarily, despise” (41)¹⁰ him.

¹⁰ See Froula 74-75 for an excellent analysis of Woolf’s narrative voice in *Jacob’s Room*. Rather than read this feminine voice as simply like or unlike its author, Froula suggests that this essayist-narrator “does not passively submit to the ‘feminine’ position assigned her but memes it (in Irigaray’s sense), parodies it, exploits its potential for
just like the narrator in *A Room* despises the scholars who imperturbably makes notes in neat columns, as if ineffable knowledge can be contained with enough patience and notepaper. But simplification has its attractions. Old Miss Umphelby, who sings Virgil just as well as the men, nevertheless attracts fewer student followers than Cowan. What she would most like to say in elucidation of the text, the details of “men’s meeting with women which have never got into print” (42), cannot be made explicit to her students. The essential “thing she might have said in elucidation of the text [is] forever left out,” and the novel presents her crucial question almost as a frivolity: “But if I met [Virgil], what should I wear?” (42). This throwaway thought is hardly weighty literary criticism in the mode of Sopwith et al., but it is central to the text’s resistance of conventions of thought and writing that occlude felt experience. If Virgil is to be confronted as felt experience, without the intervention an amorphous “taste,” then such questions are just as legitimate as the so-called serious ones.

Tied to convention yet privately wanting to escape its confines, Miss Umphelby reads those ancient texts in a spiritual way (to recall Woolf’s term for better storytelling) even though she cannot take the final step out of materialist (i.e., conventional) readings into a fully-Joycean pleasure of embodiment. Her half-realized attempts to bring the ancients off their lofty pedestal are more truthful to her text, but are ultimately disappointing to youths like Jacob who arrive searching for clarity from them. The distance she wants to erase by bringing Virgil into

resistance and critique, takes it apart and discards it like the social masquerade it is” (75). Several years later, *Three Guineas* invokes a similar essayist-narrator to angrily protest the senselessness of war and the need for a new kind of education that is essentially rooted in pacifism.

11 Bourdieu, contrasting the experimentations of the *nouveau roman* against the staidness of what he terms the “popular aesthetic” (5) in the late 1980s, echoes Woolf’s critique in more explicit terms. He says with an almost Joycean/Rabelaisian glee about the body’s functions: “The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane” (7). In the case of Miss Umphelby, this “profane” extends to include the specifically feminine, and works to “fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (Bourdieu 7) between herself and the other professors.
modernity, is precisely what Jacob and his friends crave. *Jacob’s Room* is the locus of the realization that no antidote or elixirs exist and the ineluctable modality of the visible can only be confronted.

Jacob’s unthinking acceptance of his education and its value system is finally tested and found lacking when he has removed himself from Cambridge and London, the rooms and the ideologies of those places. In his hotel room in Greece, Jacob dimly thinks:

…it is the governesses who start the Greek myth. Look at that head (they say)…

everything appropriate to manly beauty… the Greeks caring for the body as much as for the face. And the Greeks could paint fruit so that birds pecked it. First you read Xenophon; then Euripides. One day—that was an occasion, by God—what people have said appears to have sense in it; ‘the Greek spirit’; the Greek this, that, and the other…

The point is, however, that we have been brought up in an illusion.

Jacob, no doubt, thought something in this fashion, the *Daily Mail* crumpled in his hand; his legs extended; the very picture of boredom.

‘But it’s the way we’re brought up,’ he went on.

And it all seemed to him very distasteful. Something ought to be done about it…

They wore evening-dresses, and talked nonsense—what damned nonsense—and he put his hand for the *Globe Trotter*, an international magazine which is supplied free of charge to the proprietors of hotels (137-8).

In this extended passage, Jacob connects the frivolity of his social scene with the love for the Greeks inculcated in him, so that all manner of learnt responses are revealed to be problems of “the way we’re brought up.” It is significant that Jacob includes governesses in his diatribe although he refrains from condemning his professors. He is only comfortable with the feminine
when it is maternal (his mother, governesses, even Sandra Wentworth Williams, his older mistress) or easily dismissible (Florinda, Laurette), and throughout the novel, he is shown trying to avoid baring himself to feminine interrogation. Still, in the transient space of the hotel room, having thrown aside a newspaper and abandoned his pursuit of a certain version of masculine engagement, Jacob takes the first steps towards a critique of education that Woolf expounds in full force in *Three Guineas*. It is part of the tragedy of this novel that Jacob never pursues this idea further. Unlike the protagonists of Eliot’s plays (whom Woolf would have hated for the religious nature of their epiphanies), Jacob cannot sustain his reevaluation of the built environment that has physically and ideologically shaped and sheltered him.

Jacob has been groomed to join networked Clubland, without his realizing that to belong to such a place is to distance an integral part of himself. These masculine spaces are plaited together with “talking, talking, talking,” and exclude the feminine into the place of silence. Woolf’s sense of outrage at this is evident in an early passage from 1903: “[W]omen of the world are equally at home everywhere—(not at all, that is to say) & we are confined to no one set in particular. This explains why it is usual for us to come into a room, & after shaking hands with our hostess, sit silent all the rest of the evening. We always seem to be outsiders where everybody else is intimate” (*A Passionate Apprentice* 167). Surprisingly, Jacob’s own experience of social situations mirrors his author’s. At dinner with the Durrants, Jacob daydreams at table without adding anything to the conversation. On more than one occasion he leaves social events at dawn, “between four and five o’clock in the morning” with a friend intending to talk “about something sensible” (*JR* 75) to take away the taste of “damned nonsense” (*JR* 138). It goes without saying that this “nonsense” includes the threat of sex and marriage, which the all-night parties are designed to foster.
Each time he tries to break the cycle in which he is trapped and turn towards the “sensible” thing that might rescue him, he returns to the scraps of Greek he recalls from his monkish education at Cambridge. The narrator ironically notes that he knows “no more Greek than served him to stumble through a play. Of ancient history he [knows] nothing” (JR 76); yet, his education gives him the “boastful, triumphant” conviction of his beliefs, his suitability for his place in the world, and his need to protect the most precious parts of himself from the outside world. Confronted with the growing needs of his own sexuality, he reacts with shame and a desire to flee from desire. Jacob’s Room shows that accepted notions of taste make the body into a contested site of struggle (Bourdieu 2, 7). Sara Ahmed builds on the idea of “affective differentiation,” a value judgment favoring one cultural object over another, to show that it “is [actually] the basis of an essentially moral economy in which moral distinctions of worth are also social distinctions of value” (Ahmed 35). In other words, Jacob’s estimation of the moral and immoral (in his culture and himself) has a veneer of timeless “worth” in his eyes; however, the perspective of the women who people this novel, and Jacob’s own confrontation with the Parthenon reveal that there is nothing timeless about his morality, which is merely based on “social distinctions of value.”

Flush with a first look at the monument he has idealized for so long, Jacob writes to his friend Bonamy: “I intend to come to Greece every year so long as I live… It is the only chance I can see of protecting oneself from civilization” (146). He realizes that there is something deeply wrong with his times that he must protect himself against. His notion that “something was wrong” (JR 105) is, I explain below, tied to his uncomfortable exploration of sexuality, first with Florinda and then the prostitute Laurette. Woolf shows that Jacob’s fragments of misremembered Greek plays place him in a specific socio-cultural milieu, but they are a poor shield against the
horrors he must face. He has been taught to confront life by withdrawing a portion of himself from it, so that wanting to take a holiday from “civilization” is the most natural thing to him. In reality, this withdrawal from one’s context is shown to be impossible.

Sopwith’s harmless, learned speeches are recontextualized by the novel to reveal their synecdochic relationship to the larger socio-cultural arena of violence and war. Additionally, the novel attempts to elide the system of language and thought it is implicated in by retreating into silence. In contrast to Jacob, who is eager to fit his ideas into essays for newspapers’ opinion and editorial pages, Woolf presents the wordless epiphanies of women. These are typically not timely—for instance, Mrs. Jarvis’ existential questions do not have the relevance of Jacob’s essay on censorship. They are presented imagistically, their meanings remaining half-obscured even to readers, as in Sandra Wentworth-Williams’ “trance” in which she floats “from the particular to the universal” (JR 153) to see oranges hanging on a tree that look like “brief balls of yellow” as if recalling explosions of the war that will soon consume Jacob, and thinks of “kisses on lips that are about to die” (JR 153). The narrative avoids further logical explanations for the interconnections between image and idea and withdraws from the explicit.

Mrs. Durrant—mother of Jacob’s friend Timmy, and Clara, whom Jacob is mutely in love with for much of the narrative—is presented as a woman who holds her own in Clubland. Unlike Betty Flanders or her friend Mrs. Jarvis, Mrs. Durrant plays hostess to important political figures in London and divides her time between the city and the family’s country estate in Cornwall. She is imperious in a way that Betty Flanders can never be, and assumes masculine characteristics to the full extent allowed her as a woman of a certain class. Yet, the narrative allows her deepest spiritual moments an intense privacy that allies her with the feminine world of silent feeling and serves as an excellent example of Woolf’s elliptical style:
Mrs. Durrant let the reins fall slackly, and leant backwards. Her vivacity left her… Her mind skimmed leagues as the ponies climbed the hill road. Forwards and backwards she cast her mind, as if the roofless cottages, mounds of slag, and cottage gardens overgrown with foxglove and bramble cast shade upon her mind. Arrived at the summit, she stopped the carriage. The pale hills were round her, each scattered with ancient stones; beneath was the sea, variable as a southern sea; she herself sat there looking from hill to sea, upright, aquiline, equally poised between gloom and laughter. Suddenly she flicked the ponies so that the boy Curnow had to swing himself up by the toe of his boot (55-6).

Like the boy Curnow who accompanies her, readers are taken aback at the abruptness with which this passage ends. Poised between gloom and laughter, Mrs. Durrant occupies a similar position as the textual narrator who simultaneously considers the joy of Jacob’s being and the horror of his loss. Mrs. Durrant’s mind skims leagues—not through space, but time. The roofless cottages and mounds of slag can equally be relics of the past, weather-beaten dwellings and burial grounds, as much as indications of future desolation. The overgrown gardens cast a shade on her mind, as if sheltering her briefly from the bright lamp of learning that otherwise dictates perceived impressions. Rooted in the particular, the geographical locus of her meditation allows a kind of freedom Jacob’s thoughts never have. The narrative retreats from Mrs. Durrant, creating a private space for her as she sits “looking from hill to sea” where concrete words don’t intrude and there is absolutely no “talking, talking, talking.”

**London: The Threat of Sex and Jacob as an Edwardian Relic**

In the chapter so far, I have outlined the ways that Woolf characterizes a Cambridge
education as much more than the acquisition of knowledge. The physical site of Cambridge, especially Sopwith’s room where he offers his students cake in exchange for their devotions, is a place marked by cultural and social positions which his own foregrounding of the ancient texts is designed to erase. Morag Shiach reminds readers that “the spatial is integral to the production of history, and thus to the possibility of politics” (62), so that even Sopwith’s chocolate cake is a reminder of “significant cultural and social advantage” (Shiach 63). Jacob’s rooms are stamped by the network of expectations he has been trained for and are thus “the most certain architectural expression[s] of his cruel demise” (63). Even beyond the proleptic import of the rooms as representative of an era, it is startling to note the extent to which Jacob’s rooms are not expressions of the man that he is, but the one that he hopes to become. As Woolf’s text is careful to note, Jacob is not yet of the wealthy middle classes, and has to work at a profession (that horrible tainted word) in order to keep himself in rooms. Hence, the rooms are not only another indication of his impending demise, but also the abortive site of his attempts at attaining a limited version of selfhood.

Below is the only extended description of Jacob’s room in Cambridge, which bears close attention; the narrative omits close descriptions of his London rooms, as if to suggest they were continuities of this first failed attempt at achieving and expressing a measure of selfhood through interior decoration. Presumably this is the first room Jacob has to himself, away from brothers (at home) and fellow students (at Rugby):

Jacob’s room had a round table and two low chairs. There were yellow flags in a jar on the mantelpiece; a photograph of his mother; cards from societies with little raised crescents, coats of arms, and initials; notes and pipes; on the table lay paper ruled with a red margin—an essay, no doubt—“Does History consist of the Biographies of Great
Men?” There were books enough; very few French books; but then any one who’s worth anything reads just what he likes, as the mood takes him, with extravagant enthusiasm. Lives of the Duke of Wellington, for example; Spinoza; the works of Dickens; the *Faery Queen*; a Greek dictionary with the petals of poppies pressed to silk between the pages; all the Elizabethans. His slippers were incredibly shabby, like boats burnt to the water’s rim. Then there were photographs from the Greeks, and a mezzotint from Sir Joshua—all very English. The works of Jane Austen, too, in deference, perhaps, to someone else’s standard. Carlyle was a prize. There were books upon the Italian painters of the Renaissance, a *Manual of the Diseases of the Horse*, and all the usual text-books. Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there (38-9).

This description begins with three pieces of sitting room furniture so generic that they sound the equivalent of modern dorm-room furniture. The next sentence sweeps around the room as if the curious narrator is standing at the center and taking a look around, hoping to get at the essence of the young man who inhabits this space. He seems to be athletic, sociable, and fond of his mother, although it is subsequently revealed that Jacob and Betty Flanders’ letters were a source of some anguish for both, neither really saying in them what they would like. Jacob regards his mother’s letters as a duty rather than a means of communication, and his mother senses him withholding what is most important. When Jacob is on his travels in Greece, she complains to her friend Mrs. Jarvis that his letters tell her “really nothing that I want to know” (139). What she would most like to know is about his emotional and sexual life but this, like Miss Umphelby’s questions about Virgil, cannot be asked or written about. There are photographs from the Greeks on the
wall, perhaps including a tacit element of homosocial desire. If “architectural meaning is not a rational or formal question of proportions but rather something that ‘originates in the erotic impulse itself’” (Spurr 36, qting Pérez-Goméz), then this room creates meaning through avoidance because the erotic impulse is precisely that which is not acknowledged in this spartan place.

Betty Flanders’ picture on the mantel is thus more a nod to propriety than an expression of deep filial affection. Similarly, the mezzotint on the wall indicates Jacob’s aspirations rather than his own taste—Joshua Reynolds’ fame as an eighteenth century portraitist was in part because he allowed multiple prints to be made from engravings of his work, which were themselves somewhat improved by the unacknowledged skills of his engravers. The print is thus a manifestation of the commodified aesthetic, where mass-produced (or here, multiply-produced) objects reject the aura of authenticity and instead provide “both the exclusive and the accessible” (Outka 10) for customers who want an object whose original they can’t have. Jacob’s taste in art is constrained by his means, indicating his desire for the extravagance that a friend like Timmy Durrant, sustained by a substantial “A.E.F.” from the family coffers, can easily afford.

The contrast between this and contemporary literary descriptions of interior spaces highlights the wretchedness of Jacob’s Edwardian aspirations at a time when alternate aesthetic (and their related ethical) systems were beginning to proliferate. Talia Schaffer has written about the aesthetes’ intrusion into the Victorian interior as “the exaltation of everyday female duties to

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12 Woolf’s brother Thoby met Lynton Strachey at Cambridge, and the latter also grew to be a close friend of Woolf’s (he is supposed to have suggested that she marry Leonard Woolf, relieved that his ill-considered marriage proposal was rejected by her). It is possible to see Strachey’s homosexuality latent in this depiction of Jacob’s internal space in the inclusion of the “photographs from the Greeks”; his previous sailing trip with Timmy Durrant and the close friendship with the homosexual Bonamy throughout his adult life are other similar hints. However, the novel as a whole seems to suggest that whatever Jacob’s sexual proclivities were, his monkish education encouraged him to view them all with distaste. Both hetero- and homosexual sex are shameful to him, and things he can never openly express to himself, much less his mother.
high art” (73), and Victoria Rosner notes that domestic redecorating was, after Wilde, a fashionably “masculine” occupation and Jacob in her reading is an example of “the new male homemaker” (27) who invests his personality into his room without adhering to a preexisting design philosophy. She contrasts the (Victorian, defunct) desire for privacy with the (modernist, new) desire for self-expression, reflected in both aesthetic choices and the materials used in furnishing these rooms. However, as this reading of Jacob’s room hopes to make evident, the furnished rooms in Cambridge and then London (as well as the hotel rooms he lives in while in Greece) hardly display evidence of homemaking, especially as there are scant scenes of Jacob at home at all. Besides the passage above, an elliptical description of his rooms is given when the girl Florinda visits him for their (perhaps first) sexual encounter. In that scene, the narrative is shaped using the device of Betty Flanders’ letter, which had arrived by the evening post and which Florinda takes upstairs with her; the focus is on the mother’s desire to really know her son, and the frustration of this wish as Jacob and Florinda retreat into the bedroom and shut the door, leaving readers with the unopened letter at a table in the sitting room.

Hence, it seems more appropriate to read Jacob as a Dorian Gray-like figure who pursues “a vision of bachelor life free of the restraints of marriage” that “retains a nostalgia for the serenities of Clubland” (Kaye 57). Like Dorian, Jacob’s tragedy also “consists in refusing to see himself mirrored in the social realm” (Kaye 57), although the particulars of this defunct desire for privacy are quite different. The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) can be read as a cautionary tale about the intricate link between interior spaces and a search for selfhood, specifically in terms of the love that dare not speak its name. It is significant that Jacob’s closest friend Bonamy, perhaps the only one who understands him well and to whom he writes (or plans to write) a series of letters about Greece, accompanies Betty Flanders to her son’s rooms after his
death. In a reversal of the narrative commonplace in which the queer is denied and excluded, Bonamy is present at this final scene but Jacob’s female lovers are not because of the stiffly formal propriety the latter has always maintained with his mother. The narrator notes the characteristics of this room as if in an aside, but its paralleled import is clear: “The eighteenth century has its distinction. These houses were built, say, a hundred and fifty years ago. The rooms are shapely, the ceilings high; over the doorways a rose or a ram’s skull is carved in the wood. Even the panels, painted in raspberry-coloured paint, have their distinction” (JR 211). Jacob’s admirers repeatedly call him distinguished as well, with a note of appreciation that the narrator herself doesn’t share—as I noted above, the association of Jacob with icons like the Elgin Marbles are designed to indicate his limitations rather than strengths. Like Jacob himself, the rooms valorize a certain vision of masculinity that is hopelessly outmoded. While pregnant Florinda is exiled to the public café of Verrey’s, it is the “bon ami” to whom Betty Flanders addresses her helpless anguish which make up the very last lines of the novel: “What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?” she asks, holding out “a pair of Jacob’s old shoes” (JR 212).

The gestural quality of the closing scene of the novel, in which the ontological impress of Jacob is the closest access the narrator allows to mourn his loss, recalls the public symbolic hollowness of Lutyens’ Cenotaph at Whitehall, carved with laurel wreaths—another debased symbol of heroic masculinity like “a rose or a ram’s skull”—on two sides and on top. That architectural structure encloses an anonymous mise-en-abyme at its center which subsumes individual personality into a generalized whole; Jacob’s shoes, on the other hand, are emphatically his own. Even in his room at Cambridge, which is described in so much more detail than the apartment in London, takes on a gestural quality as the narrative harps on the particular desires of Jacob as if to counter the anonymous tendencies of the popular public memorial. For
instance, on the table lies “ruled paper with a red margin—an essay no doubt—“Does History Consist of the Biographies of Great Men?” It is typical of the elliptical style of this novel that what is most crucial to Jacob right now, that he feels impelled to write an essay on, is mentioned but not included within the text. Even after leaving Cambridge, Jacob continues researching at the British Museum and writing essays on topics such as censorship in literature (which he is against). Essay-writing is an aspirational exercise because Jacob wants to join the London literati he has been educated for, even though he has no money to his name and must hold an office job to pay for expenses. Similarly, the manual on diseases of the horse is part of an effort to know what an upper-class upbringing would already have taught him; riding to hounds is expensive, but also expected of the person Jacob hopes to be. The narrative ruefully notes that the only book by a woman in this collection are the works of Jane Austen, perhaps unread because they seem to be there “in deference… to some one else’s standard.” Even the prints on the wall are “all very English,” as if the images are not important in themselves but for their associations with a particular brand of nationalistic taste-building.

The question of whether History consists of the lives of Great Men has important implications for a novel about the Great War that appears in the interwar period, and Woolf is mindful of the threat of political demagoguery. In Jacob’s Room, this desire to circumvent

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13 Theodor Adorno, writing in Minima Moralia during the Second World War in the grips of a still-larger horror, decries the cult of the individual and argues fervently against seeing “History” as an ordered sequence of events affected by single entities. To him, the cult of the individual, the monad who simultaneously creates and reflects the order of the world from which he emerges, reconfigures and perverts social structure: “Society is seen [by such people] as an unmediated community of men, from whose attitudes the whole follows, instead of as a system not only encompassing and deforming them, but even reaching down into that humanity which once conditioned them as individuals” (149). The very individualism that begins with a critique of society leads, in front of Adorno’s horrified eyes, to the seizure of power by the very same individuals and a loss of personal power and autonomy for the population at large. The humanity that impels individualism is thus lost to brute political force. Although Woolf cannot have known about the Frankfurt School, and would perhaps have resisted being associated with their brand of masculinist social critique if she had, Adorno’s view of history is close to her own. Tammy Clewell adds that Woolf’s aesthetic response to the war, that “art must be stripped of compensatory literary tropes in order to soberly confront the horror and politics of manufactured deaths… looks ahead to a post-Holocaust vision of art theorized by
rhetorical outpourings of sentiment and political blather are physically associated with the English moors upon which so many women walk in dissatisfaction through the moonlit darkness. If the men in clubs inhabit the lit spaces of Cambridge and the British Museum (wherein the light flattens affective differences and enforces ideological conformity, as in Sopwith’s chambers), then their obverse, housewives with little education and less social agency, are associated with the open moors, which like the Parthenon have remained impartial repositories of human life for centuries past. Jacob has physical rooms in his mother’s house at Scarborough, at Cambridge in student lodgings, in London, and so on, but he is given ideological freedom in none of those places. It is only at the tail end of the novel, when he first discovers the pleasure of being alone, silent, and lost, that he momentarily touches the feminine resistant space occupied by Mrs. Jarvis and her like.

Jacob, reading Marlowe in the British Museum, rails against the Masefields and Bennetts of modern fiction, echoing his author’s disgust with “modern” fiction, but ends up making the mistake of holding himself apart from this criticism as if he is not of a part of the same debased modernity. The narrator is not slow to puncture his overblown sense of himself, momentarily aligning itself with the only avowed feminist that Jacob seems to know:

Don’t palter with the second rate. Detest your own age. Build a better one. And to set that on foot read incredibly dull essays upon Marlowe to your friends. For which purpose one must collate editions in the British Museum. One must do the thing oneself. Useless to trust to the Victorians, who disembowel, or to the living, who are mere publicists. The flesh and blood of the future depends entirely upon six young men. And as Jacob was one

Theodor Adorno” after Auschwitz (214). Art, for Woolf as for Adorno, can no longer responsibly console readers or redeem its subjects. This insistence on confronting compromised reality is perhaps the most important insight that literary modernism provides in its fictional depictions of war.
of them, no doubt he looked a little regal and pompous as he turned his page, and Julia Hedge [“the feminist”] disliked him naturally enough (107).

In this passage, the effect of Jacob’s education is manifest in his uncritical use of the imperative voice. He has been taught to critique both the Victorians and his present time, and to invest faith in only his circle of friends; he has been cultivated as an individual who “must do the thing oneself” (my italics), and taught to see the world as something to stand apart from, diagnose, and fix. Julia Hedge, who recalls the narrator in A Room, immediately dislikes him for this air of complacency, and the teasing irony of the narrator (this passage begins: “Youth, youth—something savage—something pedantic”) together serve as a warning against Jacob’s received ideas.

The city of London in Jacob’s Room is imagined as an assemblage of roads and landmarks, millions of nameless rooms and their individual aspirations stretching from the city center into the poorer districts and working class suburbs. It is a “palimpsest which incorporates fragments of different imagined pasts and futures” (Britzolakis 135) whose polysemic nature contradicts Jacob’s prescriptive stance towards history-making as referenced in the essay he writes at Cambridge. Britzolakis further comments that Woolf’s interest in war memorials, more fully explored in her fiction and essays from the late 1930s, actively reconstruct “the temporalities of the urban built environment in an attempt to recover a shared meaning for anonymous mass death” (135). She highlights the way that Woolf’s evocation of loss spills over the entire city, refusing to be neatly confined to the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Cathedral. In its excessive nature, it recalls Mrs. Durrant’s view of the Cornish moor and seas where the past and future commingle by overflowing imposed chronological “sites” of past, present, and future. Woolf gestures at this excess without attempting to reduce it
to language. Britzolakis points out that in *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus Smith “resists narrative and indeed linguistic assimilation” through techniques of “non-verbal, preverbal or schizophrenic forms of communication” (138). It is in a similar space outside of language that *Jacob’s Room* situates its critique of the war. The unsaid in the everyday, and specifically the threat of sex, constantly threaten to upend Jacob’s carefully-wrought linguistic divisions between himself and his peers, the Ancient Greeks and modernity, the masculine and the feminine.

The most explicit example of Jacob’s limitations is in his interaction with Florinda, an artist’s model and perhaps-prostitute whom he befriends in London. Carrying a nickname given to her by an artist friend and without any familial surname, the improvident Florinda has neither good friends nor an independent income. In his patronizing way, Jacob thinks her a naïf who “could no more pretend a feeling than swallow whisky,” a “little prostitute” with “inviolable fidelity” (94). Looking at her one evening, he decides that “[b]eauty goes hand in hand with stupidity” and finds her suddenly very vulgar: “In spite of defending indecency, Jacob doubted whether he liked it in the raw” (82). Jacob is drawn to her, but his Cambridge education has trained him to deny the sexual instinct—watching her, “He had a violent reversion towards male society, cloistered rooms, and the works of the classics; and was ready to turn with wrath upon whoever it was who had fashioned life thus” (82). Jacob is too much “formed in accord with the Liberal belief in the speakable reason of things” (Sherry 274) that is a cornerstone of late Victorian political thinking, and reacts with confusion and anger when that sanitized world view is interrogated by the “profane” (in Bourdieu’s sense of the bodily and taboo) in his own desires. He cannot abandon his faith in reason any more than overcome his lingering distaste for the animalism of sex.

Florinda brings his inflated ideals down to touch the messiness of lived experience,
serving as both reminder and critique of the monkish world to him represented by Cambridge. She is the only poor, pregnant, single woman in this text and thus a symbol of the unlettered, biologically-determinate, class-oppressed feminine. Presented in “collages of modernist fragments—bits and pieces, or a rapid series of apprehensions,” she (and Fanny Elmer to a lesser degree) are “characters in crisis or survivors of trauma—outsiders in search of a survivable system” (Scott 9). She is a crucial part of the book’s arguments for different structures of knowledge and learning to “[protect] oneself from civilization” (JR 146). She is abject even compared to the other women in the text, and her thoughts are hardly as weighty and charged as theirs: Mrs. Durrant and Mrs. Jarvis display depths of passion and insight beyond her. Fanny Elmer is more educated, taking up a Fielding novel on Jacob’s recommendation (he gives Florinda a Shelley poem that she barely gets through, 78-9). Jinny Carslake is more confident and capable, a New Woman reveling in her urban freedoms, and Sandra Wentworth Williams is both older and more sophisticated.

Despite all this, Florinda instinctively knows what the text euphemistically calls the fact that Jacob “had grown to be a man” (JR 139); as far as it tells such things clearly, the narrator indicates that she is his first lover. In a sequence where arguments about architecture, love, and the tyranny of inculcated values are pulled together, Florinda carries Betty Flander’s letter, arrived by the late post and waiting downstairs, up to Jacob where “seeing the hand,” he leaves it “there under the lamp, between the biscuit-tin and the tobacco-box” while they “shut the bedroom door behind them” (JR 92). The narrative voice remarks that “[t]he sitting room neither knew nor cared” about that shut door, but “if the pale blue envelope lying by the biscuit-box had the feelings of a mother,” it would be disturbed by “the obscene thing, the alarming presence, and terror would come over her as at death, or the birth of a child” (92). To “a woman with three
children living at Scarborough,” the vision of Jacob stretched out with Florinda would be “inexcusable, irrational.” At the end of the passage, Jacob and Florinda emerge from bed manifestly un-evil, un-harmed: he looks “amiable, authoritative beautifully healthy,” and she yawns a little and arranges her hair. Only then does he, finally, read his mother’s letter (92).

Betty Flanders has been instrumental in arranging a better life for her son, sending him to Latin lessons as a boy and paying for his schools; she turns down at least one marriage proposal for the sake of her sons, and has an unconsummated romance with Captain Barfoot presumably for the same reason. Hers is “the eternal conspiracy of hush and clean bottles” (twice repeated, 13) and she never leaves that world even when her sons are fully grown. The novel opens with her writing a letter to the Captain while she and her young sons are on holiday in Cornwall, and in that instance too, she cannot say all that she wishes to. She stops, and a teardrop falls on her last full-stop, making the ink run across the page with things unsaid. Letters are, for Woolf, the thwarted “unpublished works of women” written with a “nib cleft and clotted” (JR 91) by the material limitations of their sex and the conventions that govern their propriety. Betty Flanders, bound by convention, cannot produce more than a record of her own impotent love; her son is of a part in his own way, limited to what he can articulate.

The passage reveals what Jacob himself will experience at the Parthenon, that the sitting-room, the table lamp, the old house itself are “brick and wood, soaked in human sweat, grained with human dirt” (92), but not with human values. Recognizing their impartiality reveals the human egotism of hearing the door’s creak as a protest against the so-called sin in the next room; the blue envelope would protest like Betty Flanders if it had her emotions, but it does not. Thus the narrative drives a wedge between objects in their particular objecthood, and the emotions they are assumed to have. The letters, the furnished rooms, even the empty untillable moors are
repeatedly shown in terms that separate them from the linguistic transferred epithets ascribed to them. The moors literally and metaphysically record the lives of the people who live close by—in the things they lose in the fields, the emotions they expend, and finally, their bones when buried—but these spaces resist any effort to impose a time-bound (and therefore, human) order on them. The moors “accept all that” (JR 133), just as they accept, but remain indifferent to, the attempts of a little church that sits on them to impose a time-bound record of death on the vast unmarked stretch of “time and open air”. As Jacob realizes at the Parthenon, experiential time cares naught for the egotism of the clock face.

Through a sensitivity to built places in urban England (the void of the Cenotaph, clubs, universities, Jacob’s and others’ rooms) and unbuilt places in its rural districts, Woolf exposes that “culture is not just a common code, or even a common repertoire of answers to common problems… but rather a whole body of fundamental schemes, assimilated beforehand, that generate… an infinite number of particular schemes, directly applied to particular situations” (Bourdieu 233). Even more importantly, she insists that the extant “infinite number of particular schemes” are insufficient for the changed circumstances of modernity. In Three Guineas, as I mentioned above, she offers an explicit statement of this insight in describing an imaginary school for women that would serve as an alternate mode of education from that found at Oxbridge. The beginning of Woolf’s essay ventriloquizes the potential donor who demands to know how far this proposed school has colluded with commerce and the industry of war, the implication being that since it has not, it doesn’t deserve the guineas of donation that it is petitioning for. This first section is straightforward parody of the masculinist viewpoint, written with typical Woolfian verve (i.e., outrage). But in the latter half of her imaginary letter, Woolf proceeds to “discuss… the sort of education that is needed” that would instill the proper “respect
for liberty and hatred for war” (33) that Woolf insists is the need of the day.

Because the college is new, and poor, it must embrace its own conditions beginning with its building. Woolf continues the argument about the impact of physical sites on interiority that is begun in Jacob’s Room. As Jacob is shaped by his rooms and his socio-cultural circumstances, so are the future students of this women’s school. Therefore, she declares,

Let it be built on lines of its own. It must be built not of carved stone and stained glass, but of some cheap, easily combustible material which does not hoard dust and perpetrate traditions. Do not have chapels. Do not have museums and libraries with chained books and first editions under glass cases. Let the pictures and the books be new and always changing. Let it be decorated afresh by each generation with their own hands cheaply. The work of the living is cheap; often they will give it for the sake of being allowed to do it (33-34).

It is significant that Woolf imagines this building as specifically opposed to the educational and institutional monoliths of Oxbridge, where “this is locked up and that is chained down; where nobody can walk freely or talk freely for fear of transgressing some chalk mark, or of displeasing some dignitary” (34). Rather than the plodding conversations of Sopwith’s room and the hesitant, suppressed voice of Miss Umphelby, the building that would house this college would be “open and easy” (34). Woolf’s secularity inserts itself in her suggestion to not have chapels (and recalls that Jacob once thinks that allowing women into a service at King’s College Chapel is akin to bringing a dog into church!). Finally, rather than chain, encase, or corral knowledge into closed stacks at libraries, she recommends doing away with this form of worship as well, so that the women who emerge from such a school would not be limited by their education as Jacob is by his. Their quests for individuality and selfhood would be successful, because it would be
housed in a cheap, modern, contingent house that could change itself (“decorated afresh by each generation”) as times changed.

In the first chapter of this study I mentioned that the urban imaginary of an architect like Le Corbusier was planning monoliths and monuments to express the spirit of twentieth century modernity, enormous self-contained housing estates in which each need of urban life would be sectioned off and provided for. Woolf’s imaginary school categorically pits itself against this vision of living in controlled, prearranged segments: “[T]he new college, the cheap college… [should not] segregate and specialize, but… combine” because it aims to be “a place where society was free; not parcelled out into the miserable distinctions of rich and poor, of clever and stupid; but where all the different degrees and kinds of mind, body, and soul merit co-operated” (34-5). Without the architect’s ambition to allocate space for every potentiality (and hence, to control them), Woolf imagines a utopian place in which to study “only the arts that can be taught cheaply and practiced by poor people; such as medicine, mathematics, music, painting, and literature” (34). In this vision, even the supposed distinction between the fine arts, writing, pure and applied sciences dissolves into nothingness.

However, Woolf is always rigorously realistic. She is keenly aware that even such an imaginary exercise is frivolous because it invokes an entirely unrealistic dissolution of carefully-erected boundaries between the disciplines, the genders, and social classes. The inflammable school building will never exist because (masculinist) progress has labored to use stone and stained glass to demarcate differences between those within its sanctioned purview and those outside it. In a gesture of supreme irritation, Woolf announces that the guinea any prospective donor might send to such a school should be earmarked for “Rags. Petrol. Matches.”:

Set fire to the old hypocrisies. Let the light of the burning building scare the nightingales
and incarnadine the willows. And let the daughters of educated men dance round the fire and heap armful upon armful of dead leaves upon the flames. And let their mothers lean from the upper windows and cry, ‘Let it blaze! Let it blaze! For we have done with this “education”!’ (36).

It is a scene that recalls the fire at the end of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), which burns Thornfield Hall to the ground and blinds the supremely-confident Mr. Rochester during his attempt to save the wife he had kept chained up in the attic. Woolf imagines this school—and its utopian ideals—going up in flames as an older generation of women burn up, their daughters feeding the fire. To revert to the circumstances of *Jacob’s Room*, this scene colors any reading of Betty Flanders as a well-intentioned mother, adding an “incarnadine” undertone to her role in shaping Jacob and her other sons into the men they are. These wives of educated men and their daughters are self-aware and liberated, even if it is in the senseless ecstasy of immolation. Jacob remains the unselfconscious son of an unselfconscious mother.

Florinda is the agent and locus of Jacob’s confrontation with his own sexuality that refuses to be bound by intellectuality. She is at one extreme of unschooled womanhood whose other pole is Miss Julia Hedge, the well-schooled feminist. Florinda knows very little compared to Julia; subjected to the power structures governing socially-sanctioned sex, she ought to be the smallest, the most powerless being in this text. Yet, following Woolf’s sense that what is “commonly thought small” is a better measure of worth than the monumental obelisks of masculinity, Florinda is not completely emasculated and powerless. For instance, immediately after Jacob patronizingly thinks of her as a prostitute with a heart of gold, helplessly truthful about her love for him, he sees her “turning up Greek Street upon another man’s arm” (94), in a moment of delicious narrative irony that punctures the young man. Jacob is racked with jealousy,
as the sight of Florinda haunts him, driving him to the real prostitute Laurette. Even she allows him to sustain his careful avoidance of the sexual and vulgar, talking to him about the Marbles in the Museum and riding. Only when he leaves, he has to finally confront what Florinda becomes an insistent reminder of: “that quake of the surface… which threatens to spill the whole bag of ordure, with difficulty held together, over the pavement.” He has the profound sense that, “In short, something was wrong” (105).

Susan Harris has written that Woolf’s novel self-censors Jacob’s sexual life to comment upon the functionings of power. For Harris, drawing on Foucault, the novel is complicit in Jacob’s disgust with Florinda because her low stature “makes it possible for sexuality (and anyone identified with it) to be apparently ‘banished from reality’” (423-4). That this artificial (censored, then normalized) reality is created and sustained by Jacob’s love of the Greeks extends Harris’ reading to suggest that Florinda (and the frustrated Julia) represent an alternate system of value from Jacob’s old professors, emblematic of particular social and economic class positions. The struggle of Florinda against Professor Sopwith, that she will inevitably lose, is a larger struggle between two principles of valuation, in Bourdieu’s terms a disguised socio-cultural struggle over the question of “taste.” By highlighting the throwaway nature of Florinda’s tragedy as compared to the aching loss of Jacob that suffuses the text, the novel sharply questions the standards that allow such a simple division of events into the macrocosmic (i.e., public, political, death at war) and the microcosmic (personal, domestic, an unwanted pregnancy). Hence, Florinda and the professor are implicated in Woolf’s critique of the tyranny of plot conventions that writers are subject to, conventions that are themselves the result of a system of value.
The Parthenon and the Moors: Linguistic Resistance to the Commodified Aesthetic

*Jacob’s Room* is a literary experiment that, Janus-like, grimly looks both backwards and forwards. It is informed by the consciousness of a new age even as it meditates upon time past, and it is silent when it can neither embrace the old nor reject it completely. Interior decoration and design of built spaces are analogous to linguistic expression where style is implicated with culture, either as a manifestation of the old or as an attempt to move into the new. Open fields become significant spaces of silence because they resist being marked and signified. Jacob’s rooms actually indicate a paradoxical lack of space and freedom for him, so that each iteration of his lived environment resonates with what he has been taught. When he travels to Greece, having left behind friends in Paris and finding himself alone for the first time, Jacob sinks into silence like a stone. His end is inevitable still, but his discomfort comes as a minor epiphany to readers who have grown accustomed to his limitations. In the final tragic turn, which occurs in a series of literary snapshots, this heightened affective mode—where we acutely feel the loss of Jacob, despite his tendency towards portliness (which might otherwise be humorous) or his poor treatment of women (which is ugly)—ensures the resonance of loss itself, and brings out the elegiac aspect of Woolf’s writing.

The biggest problem with the light of learning as represented by Cambridge is its flattening of affect. Instead, Woolf calls for a different kind of seeing that includes darkness and half-tones. On the question of whether Jacob is a bumpkin, the narrator muses, “It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done” (*JR* 154). In the twilight of hints, it is possible to see Jacob as more than a silver disc with one definite and particular value. In the deterministic, masculine universe he has been marked,
but in the shadowy feminine one, he can be both bumpkin and savant.

This insight into character is also related to spaces in a typically elliptical manner, as the text asks us to reconsider conventionally demarcated worth in both people and places. Chapter Twelve restlessly covers ground from one imagistic episode to another in a parallel to the protagonist’s movement across Eurasia. This technique forces the reader to contend with narrative time made into contiguous space, as it skims leagues as in Mrs. Durrant’s vision upon the moors. It is at this point that Jacob has his first experience with complete silence: “Stretched on the top of the mountain, quite alone, Jacob enjoyed himself immensely. Probably he had never been so happy in the whole of his life” (JR 144). Although the narrative frequently ventriloquizes his thoughts when he is alone in his sitting room, it withdraws from him here, leaving him truly alone as it has previously done for Mrs. Durrant.

A kind of stripping away of the conventional modes of thinking and seeing occurs on small and large scales in this novel along the lines of spiritual, truthful fiction that Woolf delineates in “Modern Fiction.” Consider the following example, which resonates because of its minuteness—it is entirely built with bit-players who have no other obvious impact on the narrative. Mrs. Pascoe is a tenant of the Durrants who is described by some tourists walking by: “Her face was… hard, wise, wholesome rather, signifying in a room full of sophisticated people the flesh and blood of life” (54). To the tourists, her life in a lonely corner of Cornwall smacks of the quaint and romantic. They say to each other, “‘Look—she has to draw her water from a well in the garden’” (53). The tourists perceive her as the other half of a dialectic they themselves inhabit, constructing a story about the “wholesome” honest villager to contrast with their urban sophistication. However, the very next line exposes their essentializing for what it is: Mrs. Pascoe “would tell a lie, though, as soon as the truth” (54). The tourists have been fooled by the
story of the picture of Mrs. Pascoe, failing entirely to grasp any real truth about her. Their desire for a tidy picture, an artwork that egotistically seeks to order and contain the entire lived experience of another person’s life, leads them far away from the truth.

This concern with pictures that distort reality informs much modernist thought, as if the advent of motion pictures made modernist literature doubly aware of art’s ordering function and the dynamics of power in a still image. James Joyce famously tried and failed to run a movie theatre; D. H. Lawrence has written scathingly about “photographically-developed perfection” that turns the eye away from true vision and turns “[t]he picture of me, the me that is seen” into the essential “me” (“Art and Morality” 1925, 165). For Lawrence as for Woolf, this aesthetic choice (“perfection”) is essentially an immoral substitution of the visible for the entire story. Returning to Mrs. Pascoe, the tourists inflict a preconceived story on her and fail to “relate a style [here, of living] to its own norms of perfection” and therefore are “condemned to sterile interrogations or to… fictitious debates” (Bourdieu 239). Positivist approaches that insist on the primacy of the visual over the metaphysical are suspect, especially when they insist that the “protocols of logic [meet] those of social and ethical behavior” (Sherry 236). Ethical behavior, like good literature Woolf suggests, must be built on principles of liberty and anti-violence, but remain essentially flexible and combustible so as to remain relevant and useful in modernity.

New structures of education are required to resist the old structures of power. Jacob and his contemporaries, however, are powerless to withdraw from the system they are implicated in. Christina Alt’s study of lepidoptery in the novel points to the complex ways that Woolf uses natural plant and animal motifs to comment upon Victorian ideals of self-improvement through education. As a child, Jacob is a collector—his first action in the book is to pick up the bottom half of a sheep’s jaw that he finds on the beach. He has just spied a man and a woman lying
together, and finding the sheep’s jaws establishes, in Bonnie Kime Scott’s reading, the primordial connection between sex and death that conventional education tries to efface from experience. When he is older, he collects butterflies, sometimes staying out so late that it is past midnight by the time he returns home. Alt notes that Jacob is encouraged in this for the same reason the Stephen children were, based on the Victorian conviction that collecting insects or plants was an improving activity for children. For Alt, this is crucially related to the Imperialist impulse to capture and codify as well as re-place and recontextualize: even this childish activity reproduces hegemonic structures of power that the text is critical of. Since the “renunciation of capture is central to Woolf’s literary project” (Alt 133), its formal and narrative experiments are part of the “renunciation” which is a political act.

“Talking, talking, talking—as if everything could be talked” (JR 40) is a manifestation of the positivist philosophy of Sopwith that, in Jacob, asserts itself in endless copying of passages and essay-writing. In contrast, the narrator insists that most “words have been used too often; touched and turned, and left exposed to the dust of the street” (JR 93). Those words that we really seek nestle “sweet beneath the leaf” hidden “close to the tree” and only visible at dawn (93). For Woolf, those sweet, new, hidden words hold out the possibility of true communication. Never having gained access to the new, sweet words, Jacob is also denied true individuality. In this, he is different from other modernist protagonists who achieve psychic and sexual liberation like Lawrence’s Paul Morel (from Sons and Lovers, 1913) or the gamekeeper Mellors (from Lady Chatterley's Lover, 1928). Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, similarly, recovers and renews his relationship to his language and education to grow out of stasis towards a potentially new, creative phase of life. Jacob’s degraded creative output, the boring essays writes in order to be well-known in London society, are from a consciousness never comes into its own at all, as a
writer or an individual. In this sense, Jacob is a strangely feminized figure of unrealized potential who remains silent and uncomfortable until death.

Allison Pease suggests that Woolf exploits the layout of the Victorian house to advance a metaphorical understanding of women’s limited social role from her earliest novel, The Voyage Out (1915). Indeed, Pease’s analysis of Rachel Vinrace’s boredom bears striking similarities to the evocation of Jacob, further highlighting the feminization of Jacob that seems to occur simultaneously in the novel as his monolithification. Woolf writes that Rachel’s vacuity is the fault of the “way she has been educated... [which is] as the majority of well-to-do girls in the last part of the nineteenth century were educated” (qtd. in Pease 111). Even in this first published novel, Woolf betrays a concern with education that she engages with so vehemently in the interwar years. Further, Rachel—and, I would argue, Jacob—are subject to what Pease calls “the fallacy of the individualist argument,” by which, “if one can be trained to be [an individual], if systems create individuals, are there in fact individuals?” (Pease 111). Implicated into this already-frustrated search for individuality and selfhood, Jacob follows the narrative trajectory of women like Mrs. Durrant and Mrs. Jarvis in slowly abandoning his reliance on talking and writing and retreating into the purely affective. This process is so sudden (it takes place almost entirely in the last days of his trip to Greece) and complete, that even the inquisitive and probing narrative voice cannot access his ultimate decision to enlist in the war.

Just arrived from Paris, flush with the chatter of his friends there, Jacob enters Greece constantly editorializing: “‘You ought to have been in Athens,’ he would say to Bonamy when he got back” and “[make a] comparison between the ancients and moderns, with some pretty

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14 Extending Kazan’s insight about his slow ossification into a “corporate icon” (7140, Jacob can be read as a statuesque Lot’s Wife, stricken for the sin of looking back at the past at a time when the imperative is to move forward
sharp hits at Mr. Asquith—something in the style of Gibbon” (136). He is in constant
competition with the voices he has internalized: “It is highly exasperating that twenty-five people
of your acquaintance should be able to say straight off something very much to the point about
being in Greece” (JR 137), he thinks with exasperation as he sets out to collect impressions with
the sole objective of displaying them to admiring eyes later. This is the Jacob readers expect, a
somewhat shallow young man chasing a particular kind of social and cultural capital—the new
side of Jacob that revels in silence has not appeared yet.

Already an enthusiastic essay writer, Jacob collects sights and impressions that he twines
into garlands for himself, imitating not only the tastes but also the methods of his Cambridge
professors. The landscape speaks to him, but he is busy commentating for an imagined audience.
Only gradually he finds “how tremendously pleasant it is to be alone; out of England; on one’s
own; cut off from the whole thing” (141). He climbs to the top of lonely mountains in the intense
Mediterranean afternoons, but instead of planning a letter, thinking about what to say to friends,
or plotting the next essay, Jacob descends into a deep silence. In keeping with the ironic spirit of
the novel, the Grecian afternoon landscape takes him farthest from his ideals and is perhaps
closest to the spiritual muteness embodied by Florinda. The shaky feeling that he had in London
after intercourse with Laurette, that “something was wrong” (105), returns in full force in his
confrontation with the Parthenon.

The essay writer, the copier of passages from Marlowe, finds himself robbed of words.
Confronted by the “extreme definiteness” (JR 148) of the Parthenon and those obdurate stones
on which “the emotion of the living breaks fresh… year after year” (161), Jacob’s egocentric
security is broken. Even to himself, he calls it “this sort of thing” without being able to elucidate
further. It becomes impossible to write his accustomed guarded letters to his mother, and to
Fanny he only sends postcards. Even with Bonamy, something stops him from asking his friend to rush to Athens and share “that uneasy, painful feeling, something like selfishness—one wishes almost that the thing would stop—it is getting more and more beyond what is possible” (161). Cambridge had shown Jacob and Stenhouse that it was possible to climb ladders both of learning and social standing. It gave them the power of Greek against their deadening day jobs; only now, Jacob feels trapped by these circumstances in the face of the Parthenon. Adding to this tumult are his love for Sandra and the attendant problem of sex.

Jacob continues thinking in disjointed sensual fragments, severely discomfitured: “—the sight of Hymettus, Pentelicus, Lycabettus on one side, and the sea on the other, as one stands in the Parthenon at sunset, the sky pink feathered, the plain all colors, the marble tawny in one’s eyes, is thus oppressive” (149). Betty Flanders has had similar trance-like moments upon Dodd’s Hill, as does Mrs. Durrant in Cornwall with the boy Curnow at her side, and Mrs. Jarvis on her rambles on the moors at night. In dealing with “this sort of thing,” feelings that refuse to be quelled with simple common sense or by reading the newspaper, Jacob is at his most feminized and at a complete loss. He loses the accumulated baggage of his education and is confronted by “an unseizable force” that is lived experience. Like an assiduous novelist, he tries but can “never catch it” in language because “it goes hurtling through [his] nets and leaves [him] torn to ribbons” (156). Florinda is the true priestess of this unseizable force in her animal sexuality and untutored thoughts, her mawkish letter-writing and her dullness. Years after Jacob is gone, mad Jinny Carslake shows strangers her box of ordinary pebbles picked off the road, beribboned by that unseizable force herself. But looking steadily at the stones, she knows what Jacob only dimly senses, that “multiplicity becomes unity, which is somehow the secret of life” (131).

There are two important historical encounters with the Parthenon that particularly bear on
the ideas I want to forward in this study: the visits of Sigmund Freud (in 1904) and Le Corbusier (in 1911). In both cases, the monument had been pored over and studied so much through drawings, pictures, and literature at school that each man found himself simultaneously eager and terrified about confronting the thing itself. Freud was in middle age when he finally made his trip but Le Corbusier was twenty-four, about the same age as Jacob when he arrives in Athens; writing in 1948, the architect termed the Acropolis “l’espace indicible,” as unable to express his impressions of it in words as Woolf’s protagonist. For the psychoanalyst and the architect, the experience was transformative but singular—neither returned to recreate that primal experience. Instead, both dedicated themselves to erecting different kinds of monuments of dogma (since Le Corbusier wrote far more prolifically than he designed, his output is also primarily literary) as if, Anthony Vidler suggests, to counter the extreme sensation of agoraphobia that the encounter with the ancient site stirred in them (50-64). I find Vidler’s interpretation particularly resonant in the context of Jacob’s encounter with the Parthenon—could the sensation that he is unable to name also be a kind of agoraphobia when faced with the boundlessness of lived experience? Could Le Corbusier’s retreat into monumentalization help explain Jacob’s state of mind when he enlisted in the war of 1914?

In answer to these questions, Woolf only offers the insight of Jinny Carslake, that when seen in the proper light, multiplicity becomes unity; perhaps this is to say that, in her madness, Jinny (i.e., Virginia?) glimpsed a way out of the paralyzing agoraphobia that grips Jacob. “Unity” is a word that carries connotations of nationalism and militarization, particularly in the context of the war; however Jinny, like Woolf, seems to understand the word differently from its commonplace meaning. In this vision of modernity, multiplicity is not to be feared but to be embraced. An alternate vision of unity arises out of the fragments that make up Jacob’s Room,
one that leagues apart from the silent, hellish processions its author had regarded with horror on
the Strand. Instead of massive public mourning in front of the Cenotaph in which individuality is
lost and the assorted cares of the assembled are reduced to an anonymous “sound of feet on the
pavement” (D2 79), Woolf offers a set of shoes and an unanswered, perhaps unanswerable,
question. What, really, can be done with Jacob’s shoes once he has died? In its mundanity, Betty
Flanders’ question recalls the silliness of Miss Umphelby’s wondering about what to wear if she
were to meet Virgil. In its absolute unanswerability—because really, how do the shoes continue
to be Jacob’s if the person himself is lost—they are an enduring challenge to the certainties of
Clubland and war.
III. Dismantling Patterns: Combating Modernist Architecture in T. S. Eliot’s Middle Plays

Reading the middle plays of T. S. Eliot with an eye toward their emphasis on the architectural reveals a literary effort to unravel the positivist tenets set forth by proponents of modernist architecture. By dismantling constructions both real and metaphorical—built spaces reduced to discrete parts, genre conventions adopted and then broken apart, and linguistic patterns driven to their limit and made gestural—these plays are part of the literary reaction to modernity that is far less celebratory and more multi-dimensional than its counterpart in architecture. Literary modernism generally, and these plays in particular, arrest the vision of society as spiraling upwards beyond the grim past on wings of technological progress. Eliot reads the modern world as irreparably fractured, a disjunct his plays insistently bring audiences to confront. Putting aside an impossible yearning for wholeness in modernity, and discounting attempts by sciences like psychoanalysis (which Eliot calls “analytic psychology”) to affect a cure for the same, Eliot instead urges a modernity informed by Christianity. His theatrical vision has often been approached as deeply conservative, but focusing on the ways in which it approaches built spaces like cathedrals, manor houses, and sitting rooms, reveals the extent to which Eliot’s plays discard conventional thought and action.

This chapter looks at the significance of buildings and architectural forms in the latter half of Eliot’s career, from 1935-1949 when he worked most diligently as a playwright. His reputation as a poet is so overwhelming that it is usual to read his plays in conjunction with his poetry, especially the towering *Four Quartets* (1945). This chapter relies on such critical exegeses but focuses on three of the plays as an independent sequence: *Murder in the Cathedral*
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(1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), and *The Cocktail Party* (1949).\(^{15}\) Each crucially centers around one built space: Canterbury Cathedral, Wishwood Manor, and the psychiatrist’s chambers. By integrating these unmoving locations into his plays, Eliot depicts buildings as physical repositories of time past, bricks and walls that arrest and soak in that moving vector force in an imagined situation that recalls Rilke’s image of the torn-down row house walls from 1910. By arresting time as it were, Eliot not only advances his religious agenda; using verses that mimic prosaic speech and abandoning his early Classicism for the genre of the drawing-room play, he asks audiences to reflect critically upon the expectations imposed by their viewership.

In allowing the dramatic settings to overwhelm theatrical conventions that typically limit their onstage role, Eliot presents a sequence of plays that deconstructs contemporary theatre by removing the tyranny of closure and resolution required by genre. In the previous chapter, I have shown that Woolf depicts specific spaces such as Professor Sopwith’s rooms in Cambridge or Jacob’s rooms in London, only to undo their social and psychic resonances, inspiring an affective understanding of the young protagonist. Jacob seems never to quite fit into his rooms with the level of comfort that he ought; his undoing is presented to us as a failure of imagination and masculinity. Eliot, by contrast, places his protagonists, Thomas Becket, Harry Monchensey, and Celia Coplestone, in rooms that help them confront the uncomfortable and illogical. An encounter with built spaces leads to an epiphanic dismantling of their established ways of life and a renewal of personality in these men and woman.

In my reading, the built spaces in these plays still time. To see time as having and not-having motion has particular Christian resonances, but Eliot goes further to suggest that the

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\(^{15}\) I leave out the first two plays, *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932) and *The Rock* (1934) because they are fragmentary (particularly Sweeney); I also omit the last two, *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958) because they don’t have the same degree of thematic and topical unity as the middle plays.
determinism of human life—for instance, that Harry Monchensey will inherit Wishwood Manor—is a fallible conceit. Destiny in this sense is fundamentally limiting, since Harry’s truest purpose, like that of Celia in *The Cocktail Party*, is to live without the volition of personal ego, waiting for where the divine leads. It is no coincidence that these characters remove themselves from the flow of ordinary urban life only after confronting the past they have tried to avoid, which has remained waiting cipher-like in old, built spaces. In each case, the building encloses a multiplicity of purposes: as I explain below, the Cathedral is simultaneously a performance space (for the first production of *Murder*), the site of Thomas’ murder, and the key to a transcendent notion of time. This generative wealth of signification is at odds with contemporaneous architectural notions such as those of Le Corbusier, who planned buildings that fulfilled their given functions in designated areas and disallowed the kind of alternate uses of space in Eliot’s vision. If modernist architecture can be characterized as that which encourages transparency and invites the disinterested eye to surveille, then modernist literature is its obverse, that which finds value in privacy, the lack of simplicity, and in Eliot’s specific case, delights in a faith that requires a devotional leap that is entirely obscured to human logic.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Woolf presents the central figure of *Jacob’s Room* as being too much in thrall of his times. His rooms, rather than displaying his tastes and personality, his internal furniture so to speak, tell of his aspirations. They reek of Clubland in a

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16 In this, Eliot tends surprisingly close to a contemporary, D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence’s fiction also shows human beings in modernity to be blinded by egotism, a wilfulness that convinces them of their power to control their lives and loves. As in the case of Hermione in *Women in Love* (1920), Lawrence’s men and women repeatedly conflate their own stubborn will (in her case, to inspire love in Rupert) with a Schopenhauerian understanding of the immanent, unknowable will of the world. I have argued elsewhere that the same pattern asserts itself in his Taos stories, which record their protagonists’ failed attempts to become will-less, and end in much hopelessness and violence. Hence also his portrayal of ideal sexuality, where the body responds without thought, animalistic (i.e., wordless) in desire and circumventing the articulation of wants. Eliot shows a grudging admiration for Lawrence’s work in a 1927 piece for *La Nouvelle Revue française*, but after 1933’s *After Strange Gods*, he fears that Lawrence would appeal to those not sufficiently able to cope with the intricacies of Christian morality (Atkins 29).
novel that is resistant to the certainties and positivism of the same. When Jacob encounters the Parthenon, he is on the brink of discovering an epiphanic freedom brought about by a complete decentering of his private struggles through his confrontation with that monumental space. He feels an acute discomfort at this but is killed in the War before developing this nascent insight further, leaving behind “listless… air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain” (179). Eliot, writing later in the interwar period, presents a sequence of plays in which certain characters rise above their temporal binds into the space denied Jacob.

It is perhaps an indication of the extreme closeness of their vision, but certainly not their methods, that Woolf wrote caustically about Eliot’s plays in private correspondence. She was so much affected by her contemporary’s attempts in stagecraft that her own last work, *Between the Acts* (1941) can be read as a critical, secular rejoinder to Eliot’s religious vision of the crisis of modern life. Peter Middleton notes that the similarities between their work extends beyond that book and his plays; he likens Septimus Smith’s insights to Eliot’s theories of time in *Four Quartets*, concluding that where Eliot differs from Septimus’ desperate vision is in finding a melancholic masculinist stance which is “a new form of the martial spirit” and introduces “the redemptive possibility of restoration in a ‘refining fire’” (96) at the end of “Little Gidding.” Indeed, Eliot’s drama is insulated from the darkness that hovers around the edges of Woolf’s prose; even the depicted deaths accumulate a significance that robs them of the aching affect of Woolf’s 1922 eulogy.

**Literature versus Architecture: Built Spaces and a Critique of Modernity**

When *Murder in the Cathedral* appeared onstage in 1935, it asserted itself in two
struggles that were distinct from the overwhelming nearness that hindsight assigns to the Second World War. The first of these is Eliot’s sense of the need for religion in modern life; the second is the struggle of modernist literature against the principles of modernist architecture, the history of which reads like a tussle over the concept of modernity as each discipline asserted itself as most fitted to express and extend the potential of this new era.

The poetry on which Eliot’s reputation is largely based is justifiably called elitist, and his conversion to Anglicanism was widely derided as similarly exclusionary and distanced from the concerns of modernity. The poet formally converted to Anglicanism in 1927 and became an active member of his church. In 1928, he declared himself a classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion, a statement that heightened his critical reputation as the relic of a particularly comfortable upbringing. However, Eliot’s religious turn is not merely an about-face from contemporary notions of progress. For one, it was a deeply social impulse, and not at all a monkish aloofness from contemporary life (Chinitz 152). Eliot himself writes, “Surely it is the great task of the religious artist, musician, and even the creative writer, to realize religious feeling in the terms of his own time” (“The Value and Use of Cathedrals in England Today” 9, my italics). Cassandra Laity admits that although contemporaries like Yeats and Joyce have been reclaimed by critics for their “careful articulation in the complex gender phenomena of their time... Eliot’s unusually prolonged association with a monolithically elitist, masculinist, and reactionary conception of early modernist culture may be among the chief critical obstacles to his resituation in the sex/gender/erotic contradictions of his own milieu” (2). Eliot’s writing includes few women, who are most usually read as debased or limited beings presented with a mixture of revulsion and fascination. As I argue below, the women of his dramatic works are problematic not because of their gender, but because of their faith or the lack thereof. In The
Cocktail Party, Eliot presents a martyred figure in Celia whom he valorizes to the same extent as Thomas or Harry; it is perhaps evidence of the poet’s softening, more humanistic vision over the 1940s that Celia emerges out of his canon as a vehicle of narrative sympathy. The three plays I discuss clearly show this turn towards the contemporary in their subject matter, and in this essay I attempt to look beyond the poet’s sometimes reactionary political opinions (he briefly supported the divine right of kings, for instance) to the playwright’s real concern with the state of modern society and his pressing sense that one must confront the ineffable instead of deriding it using the language of science.

I digress to give a brief example of the possibilities of the “resituation” of Eliot that Laity and Gish call for, using an example from the essay, “Lancelot Andrewes” (1926), an otherwise dry treatise on the relative merits of Bishop Andrewes (the same who oversaw the translation of the King James Version of the Bible) against John Donne’s poetic sermonizing. Eliot writes,

Donne had a genuine taste both for theology and for religious emotion; but... [h]e is not wholly without kinship to Huysmans.... He is dangerous only for those who find in his sermons an indulgence of their sensibility, or for those who, fascinated by ‘personality’ in the romantic sense of the word—for those who find in ‘personality’ an ultimate value—forget that in the spiritual hierarchy there are places higher than that of Donne (187).

Eliot’s invective against “personality” is familiar from “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1921), and is shared by many high modernists—recall Woolf’s distaste for Professor Sopwith in Jacob’s Room, who relied on the weight of his personality to ensnare the unformed thoughts of his young students. In light of the Second World War, this skepticism takes on even greater urgency. In a short, intense passage titled “Monad” in Minima Moralia (1951, trans. 1974), Theodor Adorno writes of how social acceptance of the cult of the individual actually restricts
true freedoms of individuals in society by inexorably leading to “where power is seized by the strongest” (150). Adorno was living through the horror of knowing first-hand that to be fascinated with “‘personality’ in the romantic sense of the word” is to prepare to lose individual autonomy. Eliot could not possibly have prepared for the full manifestation of this second calamitous war, but it is possible to read in his more obscure theological works a concern for the general public (albeit interlaced with some scorn for those who base their secularism on “the dogmas of science of which we have read in the newspapers” [184]).

Eliot’s defense of London’s churches is intimately tied to the concern that his later theatrical productions explore in the populist medium of the stage: a refusal to “defer to the [mere] fact” (MC 212) at the expense of what cannot be easily understood. As early as June 1921, he opposed the destruction of nineteen London churches in his column for The Dial magazine. In that brief commentary his concern seems to be more aesthetic than religious, but he carves out their necessity in opposition to the cost-benefit analysis of commercial ventures:

Probably few American visitors, and certainly few natives, ever inspect these disconsolate fanes; but they give to the business quarter of London a beauty which its hideous banks and commercial houses have not quite defaced… [T]he least precious redeems some vulgar street, like the plain little church of All Hallows at the end of London Wall. Some, like St Michael Paternoster Royal, are of great beauty (“London Letter” 690-91).

Matthew Bradley has suggested that Eliot’s aesthetic stand is that of the flâneur who eschews commonly held ideas about monetary worth and utility in favor of what Bradley terms “churches for art’s sake” (196). Bradley echoes the famous call of Wilde and the literary decadents at the fin-de-siècle, suggesting a continued concern for aesthetics between the two movements that
modernists like Eliot and his friend Pound were anxious to elide. It is significant that both before and after his religious conversion, Eliot’s critiques of modernity insistently converge around physical sites like churches (here) and cathedrals (in *Murder*).

By 1927, and certainly by the time *Murder* was written and performed, Eliot’s aesthetic sensibilities were more firmly subservient to his religious purposes. In 1934, he was commissioned to write a play named *The Rock*, which received forgettable critical reviews. The emerging playwright’s own dissatisfaction with it can be measured by the fact that he only saved the choruses for inclusion in his collected works, saying the rest of the play was not completely his own work. I differ from critics such as Stockton and Ozick in their evaluation of this evolving body of dramatic work; they see Eliot as a fascist reactionary and anti-feminist, but by the late 1930s, he was forced to moderate his own views in light of fascism, making his social criticism “more considered and even charitable” (Scott 70). The content of the plays broadly follow this progression too, from the overtly religious content of *Murder*, to the mediated urbanity of *Party*.

*Murder* clearly has a religious impetus in its writing. It was commissioned as part of the Canterbury Festival, an annual celebration of the Cathedral’s religious and historical significance begun in 1929, and the play was first performed inside the monument. It should be noted that although Eliot’s faith seems to have the weight of centuries behind it, and his choice of Thomas Becket as protagonist seems to align Anglicanism against the Church of Rome since the twelfth century, religious and other rituals in Britain were actually relatively new. In a detailed study of tradition and the British monarchy, historian David Cannadine has noted that British traditions of church and state were remarkably poor even at the beginning of Queen Victoria’s rule. In the years 1877 to 1897, royal occasions become more elaborate imperial ones (i.e., tied explicitly with Britain’s colonial power). Ecclesiastical ritual and ceremony also “changed markedly” so
that “[b]ishops began to wear purple cassocks and carry pastoral staffs. Vestments, surplices, incense and altar candles became increasingly common in cathedrals and city churches… [and] the motive was in part to appeal to the working-classes” (“The Context of Ritual” 131). Cannadine goes on to quote the archbishop of Canterbury saying, in 1887, that as a result of the pomp and circumstance, “days afterwards, everyone feels that the socialist movement has had a check” (qtd. in 132, my emphasis), as if this—rather than the religious motive—was the primary aim of the ceremony.

In the 1920s and ’30s, when authoritarian regimes undertook massive rebuilding operations in Rome, Berlin, and Moscow (as well as the democratic rebuilding of Washington, D.C.), the heightening British sense of ritual and tradition defined the country against the “strident, hysterical novelty” (Cannadine 147) of its international enemies. José Harris adds that because of the severely limited experience of the European mainland by the middle- and lower-class Britons, who most often travelled there as soldiers, or who met Europeans as refugees and migrants escaping continental tyrannies, the opinion developed in the late 1930s and 1940s that “far from being the ‘cradle of civilization,’ Europe was a peculiarly violent, dangerous and uncivilized place” (46), against which Britain defined itself as distinct and safe. In this light, Eliot’s defense of London’s small, ill-attended churches take on a political relevance it seems to eschew in favor of otherworldly concerns. Cannadine’s contextualization broadens the so-called narrowness of Eliot’s vision of modernity so that although the latter’s religious impulses seem anachronistic in the modern world, and much of his poetry carries a certain timelessness that is not bound to the materialist everyday, his work is revealed to be anything but otherworldly. Harris adds that, although Eliot championed the idea of Europe as the “cradle of civilization,” he was horrified at the contemporary turn it was taking and sought to establish Britishness as the
remaining bastion of cultural values. Eliot was particularly aghast, Harris notes, at the idea that European culture might be best exported to the US in order to flourish; to him, his abandoned homeland was too irredeemably conservative (53). Thus, innovative art and culture had to be nurtured in Britain alongside assertions of a distinct British nationhood. Participating in the Canterbury Festival of 1935 was part of this broader exercise in creating and propagating an authentic British nationalistic tradition; in arguing for the Christian faith, he was continuing in a suspicion against “the socialist movement” that was partly philosophical and partly political (Britain and Russia being historical and contemporary rivals).

Even Party’s interest in psychoanalysis is interwoven with this social-religious impulse. In the essay, “Religion without Humanism” (1930), Eliot writes:

Analytical psychology… can do little except produce monsters, for it is attempting to produce unified individuals in a world without unity; the social, political, and economic sciences can do little, for they are attempting to produce the great society with an aggregation of human beings who are not units but merely bundles of incoherent impulses and beliefs (112).

For Eliot, the sciences attempt to render whole what is fundamentally not. Humanity is “incoherent,” and so is the world as a whole. The human subject cannot exist as “unified” in a “world without unity” because the two do not fit. Humanity becomes monstrous because it is not of a part with the world of animals and objects, which presumably do not have the same desire for secular wholeness. Instead of trying to force an external logic—which is necessarily time-bound, since the extent of human knowledge has always been delimited by time—this passage encourages the modern creature to look beyond himself at the divine. Such an ostensibly universal message is laden with political undertones in Europe of the 1930s.
This inwardness, or perhaps backward-looking aspect, in British public life and Eliot’s thinking was reflected in another always-prevalent aspect of the urban everyday: modern architecture. Alan Powers has argued that because of Britain’s insularity, its architectural developments only followed Continental developments to a limited extent (as I discuss in Chapter 1). Ken Worpole adds that a new concern of town planners and social reformers in England and on the Continent alike became to build buildings with balconies and tanning decks to expose the human body to the sun. Although some advocates of this “new role of the body in European culture referred back to the ideals of ancient Greece… others privileged a concept of the Aryan body, managing to conflate racial histories of Nordic and Germanic peoples into a single genetic lineage” (14). In line with Eliot’s fears about European culture, Walpole writes that, “There is no doubt that the concern with the perfectibility of the body was often interwoven [in architectural and social planning theories] with a concern for the new ‘science’ of eugenics” so that “illness itself came to be seen as decadent and morally culpable” (14). It would be going too far to suggest that Eliot did not have fascist tendencies of his own, but it would err too far in the other direction to discount the import of his modified politics in the late 1930s and 1940s. In this light, it is not surprising that when art historian Nikolaus Pevsner embarked on a project to document the buildings of England in the 1940s, his study of London architecture found that the English favored period imitations and Georgian styles that disregarded the political, economic, and technological advances of the twentieth century (Atkins 46). If Eliot’s plays are first and foremost part of a struggle of the religious against the secular, then the second skirmish they are involved with is disciplinary: In time, would modernist literature truly speak for the age, or would modernist architecture? Their religious impulse is, perversely enough, a measure of their
radicality\textsuperscript{17} following the thought of the French philosopher Simone Weil, whose work Eliot read as reconciling a series of contrary ideas in its “conjunction of Christian and Judaic moral theology, community and cosmopolitanism, spirituality and practical social action, classical and avant-garde philosophy” (J. Harris 54).

Since the early years of the twentieth century, and certainly by 1929, architects like Le Corbusier were aggressively promoting the need for a new kind of metropolis as well as a new kind of modernity, one that would sweep away the cobwebs and narrow alleys, the filth and clutter of the nineteenth-century city. Writing on “The Street” for the newspaper \textit{L’Intransigeant} in 1929, Le Corbusier notes the “full horror” of the peopled city streets where every aspect of human life “pullulates throughout their length.” He continues, “The street wears us out. And when all is said and done we have to admit it disgusts us” (trans. and qtd. in Vidler 61). For Le Corbusier and his adherents, the era for this “Balzacian mentality” was past, and the metropolis of the future demanded a new transparency. Implicit in such attempts at defining how built modernity looks is the assumption that new forms of living spaces would lead to new modes of lived experience.

Modern architects such as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright saw themselves countering in different ways “the increasing hegemony of the printed word, if not the movies” to “rediscover the authentic roots of cultural and social expression” (Vidler 58). Architects, curiously echoing a young Eliot’s comments on the Unreal City, found little to save in the old manifestations of urban life. They advocated buildings that combined inside and outside seamlessly, allowing the natural forms of the landscape to dictate the flow of the built structure. They called for transparency to uncover spaces that had previously been hidden, in what Vidler

\textsuperscript{17} Woolf, for one, never saw Eliot’s creative production in this light. For her, he remained a reactionary who would remain always on the side of authority
interprets as an extension of Benthamite panopticism. In privileging transparency over artistry, allowing function to completely dictate form without any attempt to embellish, Le Corbusier was, in effect, turning his buildings into subjects. Vidler writes that his principle of transparency “finally render[s] buildings subjects: subject to space, absorbed and dissolved in it, penetrated from all sides by light and air, undercut by greenery, roofs planted as gardens in the sky” (62).

This direction in modernist architecture is at odds with concurrent trends in modernist literature, which is most often engaged in critiquing this rhetoric of subjectification. As I have shown in the previous chapter, Woolf uses the device of the furnished room to critique the linked processes of education, taste-making, and fervent nationalism in the mind of its young occupant. It is possible to read Jacob’s Room as a sustained argument against reification, in that Jacob’s ordinary life and untimely death highlight how restricted his horizons are despite significant outward social advantages. I argue in this chapter that Eliot depicts built spaces in his plays to emphasize the necessity for freedom from human, time-bound patterns of thought and action. This philosophy of waiting demands a trust in abstruseness that is contrary to Le Corbusier’s emphasis on transparency. The private epiphany of Celia in Party, which is conducted entirely off-stage, leaving her motivations and psychic state entirely conjectural, is similar to Woolf’s depiction of the unspoken epiphanies of Mrs. Jarvis or Mrs. Durrant. It goes without saying that these two authors differ in their specific literary methods and convictions; however, they stand against the crystalline unity of purpose encapsulated in Le Corbusier’s planned buildings.

Eliot himself was not a complete opponent of social planning in all forms, and sustained a close friendship with the educational sociologist Karl Mannheim, who was a proponent of the British wartime planning movement. Eliot shared Mannheim’s prescriptive view that in face of the collapse of pre-existing communities, interventionist policies were needed to revive
communal life. But the terms of Eliot’s vision are significantly different from Le Corbusier’s vision of enormous block-like residential cities, with designated spaces for residential, communal, and work life. On the contrary, as José Harris writes, Eliot’s idea for regenerative interventions (as opposed to Corbuserian “wholesale replacement”) would “focus on families, communities, voluntary organizations, and small self-governing municipalities… rather than on uniform national or international programmes” (54). The goal was not “a trans-national continent of ‘abstract Europeans’, but a multiplicity of mutually interacting local cultures, that would combine broad cosmopolitan sympathies with deep communitarian ‘roots’” (54). A “monolithic national scheme” was to be avoided, as were monoliths to house that spirit. The poet who campaigned against the demolition of London’s defunct churches would have recoiled from Le Corbusier’s desire to demolish the old street “that disgusts us,” in religious and also aesthetic terms. As “Tradition and the Individual Talent” makes clear, the force of genius grows organically out of the old into the new, and Eliot writes in 1942 that: “A people without history / Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern / Of timeless moments” (“Little Gidding” 142-144). In other words, history is a time-bound ordering of what is timeless for the ultimate, divine perception. The nightmare of history must be reckoned with before arriving on its far side to confront the divine. 

Le Corbusier’s dream of “crystal towers which soar higher than any pinnacle on earth,” and office buildings that are “translucent prisms that seem to glitter and float in the air without anchorage to the ground” seek to sweep away history from the space of the metropolis as if the nineteenth century was only so much rubble. This is so necessary for the architect that “[r]eason, and reason alone, would justify [these] most brilliant solutions and endorse their urgency” (trans. and qtd. in Vidler 61-2). But for a modernist writer like Eliot, the very loss of “anchorage” would
render these buildings problematic; their transparency and the resulting lack of privacy would turn such constructions dangerously mechanistic rather than ideal.

Writing a critique of this Corbuserian vision in 1973 (trans. 1986), the French urban sociologist Raymond Ledrut praises the polysemy of the urban city, but finds that the city is a space dissociated from its own history, bringing up the youthful Eliot to express his dismay:

[In the modern city,] historicity no longer signifies involvement in history, but only the opposition between the old and the new.... The city no longer speaks to its inhabitants of the things they have done to exist and to assert themselves in their being, nor of the things they could or should do together in order to exist in a true and new existence.... London, Athens are ‘unreal’ says T. S. Elliot [sic]: for they have lost, at least for a time, their relation to historical action” (131-32).

Having spent his adult life in Paris and then London, Eliot drifted away from his early espousal of the image of the Unreal City towards a more sustained attempt to affect reform through engagement with popular entertainments. This strain of cultural criticism puts Eliot in the tradition of Coleridge, Arnold, and Ruskin before him, and the contemporary projects of Yeats and Pound, whose main impact “has been (as Mill observed of Coleridge) to reaffirm those permanent traditional, individual, and spiritual values which are threatened by materialist instrumental change and its Benthamite advocates” (Scott 63). Influenced by Kant and Schiller, and very much by F. H. Bradley, Eliot stands among this group against the transparent displays of Le Corbusier’s ideal buildings.

Woolf depicts Jacob’s various rooms as a collection of aspirations, expressing the tastes of someone he wants to become. Ledrut seems to be reflecting on Jacob’s impotence when he comments that the modern citizen “thinks of the city in terms of commodities and pleasure, but
in each case historical action eludes him” (133). He makes the attempt at display, and loses his interiority. Michael Tratner pegs the pervasive cultural emphasis on display as the reflection of an economic climate, and argues that in the twentieth century, the principles of Keynesian economics valorize debt-taking in an unprecedented way. Going into debt, which used to be anathema to the middle classes, is reconfigured into a positive thing by the high capitalism of the mid-twentieth century. It is entirely fitting that Le Corbusier’s plans detailing a “translucent prism” are for an office building, in that the changing nature of globalised commerce most clearly requires an appropriately changed setting. It is in keeping with the logic of Eliot’s combative modernism that it strives against this move through representations of the architectural.

In 1938, in response to England’s capitulation to Hitler’s demands in the Munich Agreement—Chamberlain’s desperate bid to avoid war with Germany—Eliot wrote in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939): “Was our society… assembled around anything more permanent than congeries of banks, insurance companies, and industries, and had it any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends?” (64). Eliot’s criticism reaches beyond its religious particulars into a more general cultural anxiety which is “not a simple criticism of a government, but a doubt about the validity of civilization” (Scott 62). Literary modernism did not necessarily set itself for or against particular governments or economic systems; but its espousal of doubt meant that it was wary of the certainties propounded by them on both sides of the spectrum. In Eliot’s later works, this wariness is encapsulated in the still air of the Cathedral, drawing rooms, and offices.
The Myth Shattered: Ricoeur and the Onstage Eliot

Eliot’s plays show a solidity of setting that is markedly different from that of his early poetry. In the plays, the buildings are physical sites of waiting. The cathedral is a concrete site of shelter, and becomes a philosophical symbol for the religious life. In the secular environment of Wishwood Manor, time also waits, made dense like the close air in stuffy rooms for a return of the prodigal, an epiphany or a resumption. The doctor’s office in Party is a maze of interconnected rooms, reflecting the vicissitudes of the human psyche which compartmentalizes lived experience and erects doors to ignore or avoid the fullness of things. Both Thomas and Harry must wrestle and reconcile with the spaces of the play; similarly, the attendees of the cocktail party must travel through the maze of the doctor’s chambers to come to their separate realizations, particularly Celia, who arrives at her religious ecstasy and eventual death.

Paralleling an insight that Malte arrives at after his encounter with Paris in Rilke’s The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, Eliot presents the state of waiting as the purest human condition. He distinguishes this religious feeling from secular waiting (passivity) or avoidance: Thomas, Harry, and Celia arrive at the former only after they have broken out of the paralysis imposed by the latter. They reject the bonds of determinism and the everyday concerns that Thomas names life’s “patterns,” simple repetitions of a dominant theme. He says of the poor women who make up the Chorus:

They know and do not know, that acting is suffering
And suffering action. Neither does the actor suffer
Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
In an eternal action, an eternal patience
To which all must consent...
That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action
And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still
Be forever still (182).

In the first lines, Thomas demarcates a difference between knowing and not-knowing which grows in the following lines from a particular recognition of the suffering of the women who have taken shelter by the Cathedral, to a more general postlapsarian sense of suffering, until knowing and not-knowing become linked to the wheel of time itself. Knowing—in the human sense of certainty—is restricted to the turnings of the wheel, or the perceptual universe; not-knowing, on the other hand, is where the wheel is still, at its very centre as it moves, where the ineffable rests. Instead of merely repeating their lives in the patterns of others, Eliot’s protagonists surrender to the final wait of divine will that is unknowable yet manifest.

The buildings in these plays serve as points of pure “waiting.” They resist interpretation in that they allow a multiplicity of meanings to simultaneously exist. The cathedral, for instance, is the site of Thomas’ Christmas Day speech, his impending murder, his future tomb, a twentieth-century tourist spot, the site of the play’s performance, and finally, a mute architectural manifesto of faith. Within the diegesis of the play, in the year 1170, the Cathedral already contains its own past and future, as the Fourth Tempter’s speech indicates. Eliot’s use of a historical story in Murder amplifies his vision of the need for the Christian divine in modernity. Thomas Becket’s true story is accorded the status of a modern myth—a story whose historical accuracy is less important than its cultural significance. Eliot’s insistence on the unknowability of Thomas’ fate breaks the pattern that the story must follow. It is therefore thematically important to hold to the Christian belief that the “success” of Thomas’ offstage death—whether his heart is clean and his martyrdom pure, or whether he succumbed to “do[ing] the right thing
for the wrong reason” (MC 196)—is not yet resolved. Eliot involves his faith into this play to such an extent that it becomes an intrinsic thematic part of the play.

For Paul Ricoeur, “Myth begins whenever the moral consciousness attempts to transpose into the sphere of interiority a logic of punishment which has only juridical meaning and which rests on the double presupposition of the exteriorization of freedom in a thing and of the external connection between wills in a contract” (367). In other words, a temporal law begins to take on the aspect of a myth when the moral consciousness absorbs a juridical decree as if it is a divine one, thus transferring it from the field of external correlates to an internal, psychic one. For Ricoeur as for Eliot, faith is an internal psychological leap, and the man who believes he ought to be punished is living in a confused world where the juridical and the spiritual have become unfortunately enmeshed.

Ricoeur says that mythmaking involves a reworking of the past that turns previous human experience into either a harmless story or an immutable tradition in the present, but as Eliot’s characters find, the past is neither harmless, nor absolute. To shatter a myth, Ricoeur suggests, is to refuse to turn it into either of these certainties. Eliot’s decision to use the story of Thomas Becket at Canterbury, and his subsequent attempts with the drawing room play—which bring to mind the lighter fare of Noël Coward, especially for contemporaneous audiences—can be read as forays into shattering the extant myths of modern society. Eliot doesn’t allow an easy resolution in any of these plays—one theater critic in The Spectator, reviewing Murder in 1934 at the Westminster Theatre echoes a character from Reunion to frankly admit: “I am beginning to feel, just beginning to feel, That there is something I could understand, if I were told it” (Verschoyle 16). Ricoeur helps understand the need for this irresolution, and Eliot’s deeply experimental stagecraft in plays that otherwise seem stilted or oddly light-hearted.
The playwright’s refusal to clearly “tell it” is precisely what Ricoeur might name the depiction of a myth shattered, which stands like a memorial to “a transcended past, on which one can confer neither the status of an illusion… nor that of an eternal law” (Ricoeur 376). This statement reaches the crux of Eliot’s purpose: the past is neither an ephemeral fantasy nor merely material reality. Human history is a constructed sequence of events that seeks to understand the divine through categorization and causality; the past itself is no “eternal law” unto itself. To break the imperatives of this construction is the playwright’s ultimate message. When Thomas hauls himself into his final destiny, whether to be saved or damned, he trusts implicitly in, and waits for, a higher power. To realize that Murder is a work of theatre that categorically refuses closure is to see the avant-garde in this otherwise staid piece.

The architectural places in these plays, sites of waiting, provide the physical as well as ideological space for each character’s attempt to transcend the merely human. The process is perhaps clearest with Murder where the religious setting is a memorial, albeit not in the strictly usual sense since it is a memorial that marks the site of “an accession to the sacred” (Ricoeur 376). The cathedral is a site of hope, metaphoric “ruins” (in their refusal to resolve into a completed story) to remind the audience of “the logic of superabundance” (Ricoeur 374). For Eliot, this “superabundance” is missing in the secular world and is reasserted through the patience of the built structures that record and hold past time. These plays taken together dramatize the impossible bigness of the divine in the face of human time, and the peace that comes from reconciliation between the two and makes a memorial of despair.

Waiting: Dismantled Buildings and the Dissolution of Egotism
The centrality of Canterbury Cathedral to *Murder* is asserted by its inclusion in the title, and further by its categoric invocation as site of the tragedy in the first line of the play: the Chorus takes its place on stage saying, “Here let us stand, close by the cathedral. Here let us wait” (175). The entire play and its dramatic action (Thomas’ soul searching and eventual decision) revolve around this monument and, in a sense, finish it by turning it into twice-consecrated ground. The women take up their place to wait, as waiting lies at the heart of this play and informs its humanistic and religious themes: the waiting of the Chorus for the return of their spiritual father; Thomas’ waiting to return to his flock and resolve the conflict with his king; and finally, the quintessential, Christian waiting that man must endure within the temporal on his way to the eternal. The opening lines, the alliterative resolution to here stand and here wait, collate space and time so that the cathedral no longer remains a mere site in which events occur. It is implicated in the act of waiting, an intrinsic part of it, and begins to swell above eventhood.

Eliot’s choice of the Cathedral as literal and figurative setting is especially appropriate for a play that repudiates expected time- and ego-bound responses in favor of the unknowable. Thomas rejects his tempters, whose wiles and schemes are decidedly applicable to present times, within a cathedral building that stands anachronistically estranged from the perceived conditions of modernity. Such medieval buildings represent a “purity of spirit” as they stand “marooned like great albatrosses in the midst of European industrial cities” (Spurr 6). Spurr’s simile is particularly evocative in the context of *Murder*, because the play is asking for precisely that realignment which sees something ungainly and decontextualised, a marooned albatross, as having great value. As Cannadine explains, the British embracing of tradition and the past was a political expedient in its nationalistic self-definition vis-à-vis Europe; for Eliot, this look
backwards is further related to the role of faith in the era of modernity and scientific progress.

Spurr’s examination of architecture in modernism suggests that although some descriptions of built spaces urge the conservative strain in literature—where art affirms social values and construction, others (his example is the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel) make up the literary tradition of critique and revolt (12-13). Spurr’s comments are particularly helpful for noting that “the interrelation of geometric forms, volumes, and surfaces as concrete values in themselves works against a hierarchical tradition in architecture, which subordinates all the parts and forces of a building into a single, dominant principle” (29). Vidler notes Le Corbusier’s desire to make buildings into subjects, and Spurr points out that its obverse, literary modernism’s focus on bricks and mortar, walls, rooms—a building dismantled, in a sense—pushes back against that unitary focus of the architectural eye. I show below that Eliot dismantles built structures at crucial moments in each play, forcing audiences to reckon with an uncomfortable multiplicity on the levels of plot, genre, and language.

Before tackling Eliot’s vision of ecstatic waiting, it is useful to parse his attitude to patterns—repetitious cycles of thought, action, and lived experience. The first step that each of the three plays takes is to stop the mindless repetition of patterns through a disruption: in *Murder*, this is Thomas’ meeting with the king’s envoys who will surely kill him; in *Reunion*, it is Harry’s decision to return to Wishwood Manor after a long absence; and in *Cocktail*, it is Edward’s wife, Lavinia’s, abrupt disappearance on the eve of a planned cocktail party at their house. These lines from *Reunion*, by Harry’s Aunt Agatha, voice that crucial first step:

[On Harry’s return:] ...at Wishwood he will find another Harry.

The man who returns will have to meet

The boy who left. Round by the stables,
In the coach-house, in the orchard,
In the plantation, down the corridor
That led to the nursery, round the corner
Of the new wing, he will have to face him—
And it will not be a very jolly corner.
When the loop in time comes—and it does not come for everybody—
The hidden is revealed, and the spectres show themselves (229).

There are a number of points of interest in this longer passage, the first of which is thematic. Agatha’s speech clearly points to the necessity to re-encounter oneself in the spaces of one’s youth—“the loop in time”—thereby also implicating Wishwood into the action of Harry’s eventual epiphany as Canterbury Cathedral is integral to Thomas’. Her words themselves loop around the built spaces of Harry’s youth, down and around the outside of the house before circling inside. Eliot’s religious vision accounts for two modes of being, the temporal human and the timeless divine, and it is only through a deep shock that characters are moved to recognize this. Existence unfolds as if it is a wheel on an axle, the movement impelled by human will, yet the centre remaining still. Any idea of a “pattern” is confined to the human level only, the level at which the wheel seems to “turn” even though it is, on a grander scale, “forever still.”

On a formal level, it is worth noting this passage for its display of Eliot’s advancing command over poetry that mimics the patterns of prose speech. Here and in subsequent passages, it is possible to see how the stiffness of poetic meter gradually dissolves from *Murder* and *Reunion* into the cadences of the drawing-room in *Cocktail*. The point is not that Eliot is using the theatrical conventions of prose better, but instead, that his poetry itself adapts and changes to become indistinguishable from ordinary prose. In a poet constantly and rather tiresomely accused
of elitism, it is surprising to find this kind of malleability of form, and underscores Francis Fergusson comments from as early as 1949, that “Murder in the Cathedral, considered simply as a modern play, owes a great deal to continental theatre-poetry, which I have sampled in the works of Pirandello, Cocteau, and Obey” (27). This comparison to early absurdist and experimental playwrights (André Obey being perhaps the lesser known of them, but closest to the Eliot of Murder in his reworkings of mythic poetic dramas to make them relevant to the interwar period) is an acute early reading of the radical, covert juggling of linguistic form that Eliot carries out in these middle plays, particularly in a critical climate that was deaf to its possibilities.

The “patterns” which Thomas calls both action and suffering in Murder are the time-bound political machinations in which he is embroiled. Eliot hardly refers to the trouble between Henry II of England and his erstwhile friend and ex-Chancellor except to show how little the pull of the temporal now affects Thomas. Plot in this play is held at a teetering distance, both crucial and not. Without it, the audience would miss Thomas’ central dilemma of whether to support the king against the Pope; on the other hand, an overdependence on plot would mean that the play remains trapped within the deterministic, this-worldly causal relationships it would like to eschew. Instead of direct exposition of its historical particularities, the story reveals itself in allusions, through digressions and hints. It is indirectly revealed that Thomas has been away for the last seven years, in France trying to raise support for the Pope against his erstwhile friend, the King of England. He returns to Canterbury knowing he is to die; with one eye on the immanent will of his god, he refuses to take ordinary precautions against this. He receives four Tempters, then sends them away; then four Knights arrive to slay him. In what looks like a dangerous passivity to modern viewers, he commands his Bishops to unbar the doors of his private
chambers—a holy place is not a fortress, he says—and is dragged offstage to his predetermined end.

Eliot’s play recalls a similar production by Tennyson named *Becket*, which was performed posthumously at Canterbury as well, and achieved some popularity—there is a beautiful lithograph that appeared in the *Illustrated London News* of June 5, 1897 showing the Victorian actor, Sir Henry Irving, reading passages from Tennyson’s play in the restored Chapter House of the Cathedral. Tennyson’s *Becket* is a Romantic hero, and it is worth noting this treatment of the same material to amplify the departure that Eliot makes. He “echoes Tennyson, but without any of the original objective references to history,” i.e., the background of the struggle between Thomas and the king, an account of the destitution of the people, and so on; thus, he turns Tennyson’s metaphors into the Chorus’ “subjective vision of hell on earth” (Marchesi xxv). Aside from the modernist dislike of Romantic and Victorian literary traditions, Eliot’s decision to turn Tennyson’s “objective references” into a “subjective vision of hell on earth” destabilizes the nature of objectivity itself. It sees all suffering as time-bound, against which Thomas stands in relief as he rejects his Tempters attempts at amelioration.

The first three tempters offer Thomas ways to manipulate patterns within time. The first promises “the good times past, that are come again” (184); the second offers to return him his Chancellorship, because “Power is present [i.e., more immediate, more important]. Holiness hereafter” (186); the third offers him the alliance of the Barons against both the king and the Pope so that together they might end “the tyrannous jurisdiction / Of king’s court over bishop’s court / Of king’s court over baron’s court” (189). Past, present and future only hold as concepts on the circumference of the wheel of time in Eliot’s theology but not at its centre: holiness is not “hereafter” but everpresent. Thomas’ staunch “No!”’s fend off these tempters without hesitation.
because such concerns have ceased to affect him.

Then, a sinister fourth Tempter advises him to “Fare forward to the end.” Rather than sway him into temporal concerns, this fourth offers him the prize of martyrdom, the “glory after death” (191) in terms of a vision of the future in Canterbury Cathedral: “Think of pilgrims standing in line / Before the glittering jewelled shrine, / From generation to generation / Bending the knee in supplication” (192). This tempter, unlike the others, knows full well that Thomas’ dreams are tied to martyrdom and the built space of the cathedral, and that he is prepared for infinite faithful waiting. By including the architectural space of the cathedral in the vision he paints, the Tempter sees beyond the present into a time when, truly, lines of pilgrims actually will (and do) file past the tomb of Thomas Becket. By focusing on the cathedral as Thomas himself has, this Fourth Tempter sees beyond the veil of the present time; however, this temptation also remains bound in time to visions of the pilgrims to come, and cannot make any conjectures about a final revelation.

This metaleptic telescoping of time destabilizes the idea of a temporally-restricted moral certitude. Towards the end of Part I, the characters experience their moral struggle as a physical “heaving to parturition” (194). Canterbury Cathedral seems to rock and sway with the words of Thomas, the Chorus of women, the priests and the Tempters. “All things are unreal / Unreal or disappointing,” they declare, listing events and awards, achievements and honors that ring hollow: the prizes given at a children’s party, the scholar’s degree, the statesman’s decoration (194). But what does remain, solid and to be defended, is the Cathedral. Speaking alternate lines in unison, the Chorus and Priests chant: “Is the window-bar made fast, is the door under lock and bolt?… Does the torch flame in the hall, the candle in the room?” (194). Finally, the Chorus calls out to Thomas to save himself and therefore save the “partial shelter” that the women have built
and use for “sleeping, and eating and drinking and laughter” (195). When Thomas gives his Christmas Morning speech (the Interlude), it is contrary to what his flock has asked for, but in keeping with Eliot’s orthodoxy: a partial shelter is all that modernity provides. Thomas’ sacrifice of himself adds the depth of faith.

Put another way, the women who wait by Canterbury Cathedral are passive in the pejorative sense of the word, humiliated and violated by masculine, temporal power; but the Cathedral—and Thomas, who becomes an extension of it—wait without fear or false humility, beyond the ken of human suffering. Thomas’ speech draws together the diverse threads of metaphor Eliot has woven into this unconventional pattern:

…for every evil, every sacrilege,

Crime, wrong, oppression and the axe’s edge,

Indifference, exploitation, you, and you,

And you, must all be punished. So must you.

I shall no longer act or suffer, to the sword’s end.

Now my good Angel, whom God appoints

To be my guardian, hover over the swords’ points (197).

The first, second, and third “you”s are presumably for the three assembled groups of Chorus, Priests, and Tempters, who have all committed sins of omission and commission. But with the fourth and final “you,” the play breaks the fourth wall to turn on the watching audience. At the first performance in 1935, within Canterbury Cathedral, this must have been particularly uncanny. Thomas—who “no longer act[s] or suffer[s]”—waits in faith as the first act ends. Forced to mimic him in the seats, the audience waits for what will unfold in the coming act.

What follows is a strangely plotted ending that belies audience expectations. Thomas’
death would be common knowledge to any audience of this play, and in its valorization of a doomed figure the first part of the play seems to align itself with a recognizable tragic structure. All three of the plays I am concerned with here have been discussed as modern-day renditions of Greek tragedies, and *Murder* is paralleled to Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (Leach 14-18). However, this seems a forced comparison because Eliot uses classical tropes—in *Reunion*, the Eumenides particularly feel like a leftover from Aeschylus too—while breaking away from established patterns of stagecraft and pacing. Hence, in all three, epiphanies occur offstage, and the ostensibly tragic structure of *Murder* and *Cocktail* dissolves into an ending that refuses a cathartic resolution. *Reunion*, which seems to follow a comedic structure, also denies the closure of resolution. The plays refuse the usual, temporal unities that dictate theatre; instead, in them “[t]emporality becomes as it were, a purely physical limit of apprehension, which conditions but does not determine the work and whose expectations are thwarted and superseded by the space-logic of synchronicity” (Frank 207). In other words, the plays are staged in time, and therefore are limited by temporality. However, the logic of what Joseph Frank calls “synchronicity,” where events occur simultaneously rather than in a causal sequence, and exist on a spatial plane not a linear trajectory, is what impels the work. In this sense, time itself is dismantled.

The only concession to a resolution in the usual sense is in the Chorus of women coming to an awareness of the role of the spatial, and thus to understand the decision Thomas makes. Critics have commented that “aestheticized female body… becomes… a stand-in for material chaos in general and class, labor, and gender displacement and democratization in particular” (Stockton 376), but it seems to overstate the case that the “violent invasion of this body by some transcendent and/or abstract force articulates the attraction that writers like Eliot, Yeats, Pound, and Forster felt towards totalitarianism” (Stockton 376). In this instance, at least, the corporal
violation of “the women of Canterbury” where they are “torn away, subdued, violated / …
Mastered by the animal powers of spirit, / Dominated … / By the final ecstasy of waste and
shame” (MC 208) is not an excuse for establishing totalitarianism. Rather, it is the moment when
the women finally admit they have always known the right of Thomas’ actions. His offstage
death and their acceptance of his decision renders his unconventional heroism into something
akin to what Ricoeur names a myth “shattered.” Without the established formal markers of the
tragic structure (Thomas is no Oedipus or Antigone), his death having achieved nothing in the
immediate time frame, the audience’s affective response to Thomas’ story does not allow it to
settle into the complacency of harmlessness or immutable tradition.

One of the recurring concerns of this study is to examine how each text circumvents and
subverts the workings of sentimental nostalgia, which looks for a moment of resolution in order
to consign the problematic past into a safe iteration of unquestioningly-held values. In different
ways but through sustained attention to architectural spaces, Woolf, Resnais, and Eliot look
backwards at the past, or at contemporary situations through the lens of modernist nostalgia,
which is categorically different from the complacency of sentimentality. In the previous chapter,
I follow recent criticism to suggest that Woolf refuses closure of the mourning process to insist
upon a reevaluation of modern life. Eliot echoes her in refusing to see the broken subject of
compromised modernity as having an illness or disease that can be diagnosed and cured through
advances in modern psychoanalysis or social planning. Resnais follows this line of reasoning to
insist on the persistence of human violence towards humanity despite the lessons of World War
II. Dwelling in the context of postwar France, his works evoke the history of the country during
the war in all its messiness and disillusionment; they pit themselves against the widespread
rewriting of history that has tended away from considering a difficult multiplicity towards
monolithic understandings of good and bad, victim and perpetrator. Eliot’s plays, steeped in the
“logic of superabundance” (Ricoeur 374), seem out of place in the secular and uncomfortable
literary and filmic sites of memorialization that Woolf and Resnais erect, but they are equally
concerned with reflecting their ideological opposition to monolithification in public life through
radical innovations in form and content.

To return to Murder and the shattered myth of Thomas Becket, it is significant that the
Chorus locates its own reevaluation of Thomas’ sacrifice in terms of a message that was always
already present in familiar places, as if waiting to be properly read:

… Have I not known, not known
What was coming to be? It was here, in the kitchen, in the passage,
In the mews in the barns in the byre in the market place
In our veins our bowels our skulls as well
As well as in the plotting of potentates
As well as in the consultations of powers (MC 208).

This passage begins by acknowledging what every member of the audience already feels, that
nothing can prevent Thomas’ death. But as the lines progress, it is as if a rising hysteria leads to
a rupture of the classical tragic sequence, and then of the logic of order and listing itself. The
commas disappear and the women forget their pauses. Kitchens and passages, all their daily
spaces, contain tacit knowledge that has been conveyed to veins, bowels and skulls without the
intercession of language. These lowest of the low, the poor women of Canterbury, pierce through
levels of social stature and statecraft, inner chambers and guarded doors, to see the “plotting of
potentates” and the “consultations of powers.” At their most humiliated, the space that shelters
them is revealed as the true mirror of their internal spaces where faith abides.
Faced with certain death at the hands of the king’s emissaries, the Knights, Thomas repeatedly commands his bishops: “Unbar the door! unbar [sic] the door!” (212). Before his murder, he shouts about opening the doors of the Cathedral’s inner chambers a total of seven times, furious that his priests “defer to the facts” (212) and lock the intruders out. Thomas, waiting in faith, is sure of only one thing, that he will “not have… / The sanctuary, turned into a fortress. / The church shall protect her own, in her own way, not / As oak and stone; [because] stone and oak decay” (211). Here the Cathedral finally emerges in its full power as ultimately fully beyond deferring to temporal “facts” as well as to “decay.” Oak and stone might rot and erode, but Thomas’ sacrifice stands like an eternal reminder of atrocity. There is no reconciliation in Thomas’ final vision, or a gentle drifting away into religious ecstasy: rather, there is anger that remains unassuaged in much the same way as, for Woolf, the loss of Jacob remains at the end of her narrative like an unstanched wound.

Unbarring the Door: Listening to the Houses that Listen

Eliot’s three late plays dwell upon the space between humanity’s physical limitations and its desire for the divine; in each, a character is asked to trust the divine to the ultimate level, eschewing the known and human in favor of the unknown, limitless, and painful—Eliot’s modern-day mystics suffer gruesomely for their faith. Space contains time, and the cathedral or country manor holds residues of the humanity that has passed through their walls. What Harry realizes in Reunion, an insight that becomes even clearer in Party, is that instead of being subject-spaces with delimited purposes, these rooms and buildings are symbols for the need to rethink one’s relationship to lived experience: in effect, that plays ask their audience whether
they will be like Harry, who rejects the determinism of fated patterns, or his dull brother John, to whom he leaves Wishwood Manor; like Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne, reconciled to their limitations in their London apartment, or like Celia, who dies a horrible death in Kinkanja immersed in her higher purpose. Per Eliot’s cosmogony, it is easier in modernity to be John, Edward, or Lavinia; it is ideal to be like Thomas, Harry, or Celia.

Like Thomas, Harry is shown at the beginning of *Reunion* returning home after a long absence. The return to one’s own parish, or home, bears great significance in both plays; the danger implicit in Harry’s decision, and the necessity of it, is reflected in how he returns to his ancestral home as like drawn to like: “I am the old house,” he proclaims, “With the noxious smell and the sorrow before morning, / In which all past is present, all degradation / Is unredeemable” (234). Although he proclaims that he is the old house, but he is actually a very small part of it. Harry’s melodramatic self-flagellation in the last two quoted lines is exposed for what it is: baseless self-pity. Rather, as his aunt Agatha suggests, “It is possible / You are the consciousness of your unhappy family, / Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame” (275). Harry is not at the centre of his own story, and the house contains the history that he must discover. Wishwood Manor teaches Harry is to give up his own ego. The story he thinks the house represents, the life it symbolizes and the demand it makes on him by dint of inheritance, are only the ones his mother has tried to craft out of her failed marriage and sorrow. Wishwood Manor remains an old repository of lived time much deeper in signification than his mother, Amy, can imagine or impose.

A focus on the component parts of the house dismantle its monolithic import in Harry’s mind, making it less of an obstacle to his salvation and more a conduit. At the opening of the play, Harry sees his personal history arranged into a pre-arranged narrative. His desire to remove
himself from the patterns of temporal determinism echo Thomas Becket’s stubborn desire to
open the doors for the Knights against so-called common sense:

Family affection

Was a kind of formal obligation…

One had that part to play.

After such training, I could endure, these ten years,

Playing a part that had been imposed on me;

And I returned to find another one made ready—

The book laid out, lines underscored, and the costume

Ready to be put on (276, my emphasis).

Harry is made a subject in this metaphorical book, just as Wishwood Manor has itself been
assigned the specific function serving as the family estate. In another moment of metalepsis,
Harry’s decision to set aside the preordained decisions is mirrored by the text, which also
gradually moves away from the detective story it begins as, and evolves into another kind of
genre entirely.

Wishwood, like Canterbury Cathedral on a smaller scale, dismantles the forward motion
of time and waits until Harry returns to confront his unmediated past. The Chorus of aunts and
uncles (separately a befuddled lot) speaks the truth in synchrony:

In an old house there is always listening, and more is heard than is spoken.

And what is spoken remains in the room, waiting for the future to hear it.

And whatever happens began in the past, and presses hard on the future…

All twined and tangled together, all are recorded (270-1).

Wishwood holds together unconnected images—treble voices, mown hay, the sounds of wailing,
chopping wood, a whisper, “All twined and tangled together, all are recorded.” The play here confronts that very human desire to sort out and straighten the tangles of past and present. Wishwood Manor refuses that desire for neatness, for beginnings and endings tied together in dramatic harmony. In it, time resides “twined and tangled together,” as messy as lived experience necessarily is. It resists the ordering function of conservative art, which upholds social values and conventions. Like the Tower of Babel of David Spurr’s (and Benjamin’s) conception, its dismantled, pooled time-images tell a bleak tale of fractured causality and hidden motives.

Thomas in *Murder* has the strength of his medieval religious convictions to lead him beyond despair; but Harry, like Celia, has to be urged to take his first steps toward freedom by figures such as a trusted aunt or a doctor of psychology. In “Poetry and Drama” (1951), Eliot writes a critical exegesis of their actions:

> It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action... there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus... For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where the guide can avail us no farther (*SP* 145-5).

The “fringe” of feeling is, for Eliot, unavoidably religious, but his articulation is surprisingly secular, perhaps in line with the mellowing nature of his socio-political opinions that Peter Dale Scott notices in the post-War writings. It is interesting here that, unlike Woolf’s struggle against
art’s ordering function, Eliot is comfortable with the way that any artwork imposes a “credible order” upon reality—because in his worldview, there is “an order in reality.” Like Agatha for Harry, Doctor Harcourt-Reilly for Celia, and ultimately, like the theatre arts for his audience, the guides that lead the way to the selva oscura must fall back as Virgil does. The audience, like Thomas, Harry, and Celia, must confront the darkness alone and emerge on the other side into the private space of clarity and faith. Robin Grove comments that “one use Eliot made of the opportunities the action of theater allowed was to devise and perform rituals of extinction” (162)—the extinction of chronology, of guidance, and finally of egotism.

Critics have pieced together what exactly happened to Harry’s dead wife (Hamalian 109), to surmise a situation similar to that in Daphne du Maurier’s 1938 romantic thriller, Rebecca, where the husband is wracked by guilt at having done little to save his debauched first wife from drowning, a fact uncovered under sensational circumstances by the good second wife. A comparison to du Maurier’s book underscores how much Reunion borrows from popular fiction: the widower protagonist with a murky past (Harry); the torrid love triangle between Harry’s parents and his aunt (hence the enmity between Amy and Agatha); even the comedy of manners suggested by the aunts and uncles are familiar tropes to the average reader and theatergoer. To complete the scene, Wishwood Manor “broods over the family reunion of destinies, and, as in classic detective-fiction, the two acts are set, the one in the drawing-room, the other in the library, amid a circle of witnesses, some cognizant, some ignorant” (Grove 166). The stage seems set for a murder mystery, especially given the playwright’s love for pulp detective fiction.

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18 David Chinitz provides an overview of critical responses to Murder in remarking upon “the play’s oft-noted elements of detective fiction,” which incorporates “several lines from Conan Doyle’s ‘Musgrave Ritual’ into the dialogue” (135). He concludes, however, that in “its diction and cadences, and arguably in its form, the play approaches the poetry of the church service, a cultural form no less familiar to contemporary audiences than, say, music hall or ‘thrillers’” (136). Reunion has an even tighter parallel to crime fiction, as the following section shows.
But whereas in du Maurier’s *Rebecca* the entire plot hinges on the second wife uncovering the secret of the first, in *Reunion*, what happened to Harry’s first wife remains immaterial and no second wife establishes herself at all. Harry’s driver Downing only confirms that the first wife was “always up and down” and that “a very few cocktails / Went a long way with her Ladyship” (240). As he inches towards his own epiphany, Harry forgets his mawkish sentimentality over a wife he never truly loved. Instead, he decenters himself from his story, saying: “Perhaps my life has only been a dream / Dreamt through me by the minds of others. Perhaps / I only dreamt I pushed [my wife]” (275, my italics). He sees himself finally as a vessel for older wrongs and other guilt. His aunt Agatha agrees: “What we have written is not a story of detection, / Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation” (275). The deterministic, cause-and-effect structure of a crime story is dismantled and reassembled into a play about personal salvation.

Harry’s moment of clarity is akin to Celia’s in *Party*, with the difference that she becomes a missionary while her previous incarnation hesitates to put a name to his inner mandate to go elsewhere, away “from a world of insanity…/ Somewhere on the other side of despair” (FR 281). And although *Party* ostensibly uses psychoanalysis and parts of the talking cure to address the problems of its characters, it is significant that the “doctor” does little more than make a preliminary diagnosis: the patients are to find their own way after that, in accord with Eliot’s Virgil/Dante parallel discussed above. The plays contain the difficult injunction to “not… clear your conscience / But to learn how to bear the burden of your conscience” (CP 357). At each stage, Harcourt-Reilly offers the choice to continue forward or return to the ordinary life, the peace that Edward and Lavinia choose for themselves. He says frankly to Celia that her “condition is curable,” even for those who, like her, have felt how lonely ordinary people
are, and who carry an “emptiness” within themselves, that sense of “failure / Towards someone, or something, outside [themselves]” (362). The doctor, like a priest, can do no more than gesture at the way forward; it is upto individual will to determine to become will-less.

Harry’s physical journey away from Western European urbaneity is a mirror of his journey into “the other side of despair,” a space of waiting that is closely akin to hope. Indeed, it is to place the supreme emphasis on hope that Eliot embarks on such a complex process to break apart the “patterns”—literary-theatrical, linguistic, as well as experiential patterns, by relying on which individuals become trapped in a cyclical existence.

**Dismantling the Theatre: From Eliot to the Avant-garde**

The previous sections have given some idea of the ways in which Eliot dismantles contemporary literary patterns of plot; his decision to turn the drawing-room play into an intense examination of the religious life is another way that he upturns expectations of genre, in that expectations are a form of patterns weighing down the mind. The dissolution of linguistic patterns is evident in all three plays, but perhaps most in *Party*, where lines of verse so closely resemble everyday speech that it is almost impossible to catch their rhetorical cadence without seeing the words on the page. If despair can be characterized as that space where one is confronted by the impossibility of a given enterprise, then Eliot’s versification of prose speech patterns goes to the very brink of despair in terms of pushing the distinctions of meter and rhyme, emptying them of meaning. At that point, the audience can either move forward unknowingly into that space “beyond despair,” or it can retreat into the certainties that hold true outside the theatre. It is the peculiar genius of *Party* that it contains both models: Celia, who
surrenders herself to the divine, and Edward, who retreats into his placid domesticity still knowing that “[t]here was a door / And I could not open it. I could not touch the handle” (342), but who still lives “a good life” with his wife, knowing “they do not understand each other, / Breeding children whom they do not understand / And who will never understand them” (Harcourt-Reilly’s lines, 364).

Paul Ricoeur, whose Christianity bears some resemblance to Eliot’s own religious sense, differentiates between two kinds of religious sentiment, one based on the logic of superabundance and the other on the myth of punishment. Ricoeur explains the difference as being that of understanding, the same as between Celia and Edward: “Whoever could understand the ‘how much more’ of the justice of God and the ‘superabundance’ of his grace would thereby be finished with the myth of punishment and its logical appearance” (375). Towards the end of Party, it is revealed that Celia was taken by insurgents in Kinkanja and “she must have been crucified / Very near an ant-hill” (381). If these lines are to be a Noël Coward-like joke, there is an edge of mad laughter to them. If taken seriously, they have been harshly criticized by those who find in the mythical Kinkanja a ridiculous notion reeking of a “mid-nineteenth century churchman’s notion of Darwinism” (Asher 114), a view shared by “the postwar popular imaginary” as well as Eliot’s apologists who either “accept uncritically his notion of the savage ‘other’ or treat the natives as inconsequential figures” (Brewer 51). Certainly, Eliot mentions a mythic place where a horrible death occurs, but what is most striking is—besides the ineffectiveness of the colonial lawmakers to even comprehend the motives of the natives—the complete lack of resolution that Celia’s death brings. Rather than reconstructing “the values informing the White imperial subject in a comforting manner, leaving the belief in the divine right of the British to racial ascendancy unchallenged” (Brewer 52), the play provokes an
affective response to Celia’s death that renders the colonial project a hollow sham. Death doesn’t valorize her, who is in a place beyond human praise or condemnation—and this is the central point. It is nothing other than egotism for Edward or Peter to call her death a “waste,” because in Eliot’s religious framework Celia’s death, like Thomas’, can only be evaluated by the divine.

Harcourt-Reilly shows the cyclical nature of this (secular) reasoning: “[B]ecause you think her death was waste / You blame yourselves, and because you blame yourselves / You think her life was wasted” (385). In a literary move that recalls Woolf’s method in *Jacob’s Room*, where the affective response to the loss of Jacob highlights the closed confines of Clubland and its ultimately stultifying air, Eliot uses the off-stage loss of Celia to insist upon the circularity of human egotism, the pompousness of Clubland which claims to be able to arrange and maneuver everything for the better. Earlier in the play, after a fight with his wife, Edward leaves home to stay at his club assuming that she would therefore remain in the dark about his whereabouts; it is in keeping with this later, more severe crisis, that even in that instance, Lavinia punctures Edwards self-importance: she knows his location full well and was “going to leave some shirts there for [him]” (357). Clubland allows little room for its members, if ideological freedoms can be likened to open spaces, and per Eliot’s theodicy, the colonial project is yet another rhetorical cover for not-understanding. In its violence and emphasis on force, it goes against the volitional end of volition he advocates. In Ricoeur’s terms, it is a system that propagates the myth of punishment as the engine of faith, but both he and Eliot want to move beyond that into what the former terms “superabundance,” and the latter more prosaically calls “Love”:

Who then devised the torment? Love.

Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hand that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.

We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire (“Little Gidding” 144).

In asserting that “Christian martyrdom is no accident,” Thomas Becket is aware of this “superabundance” in the face of which all human conceptions of abundance, of rightness, of morality or certitude become insignificant. Time at the centre of the wheel is achronological, ahistorical, vast like space itself, and if we are to understand that, then we must also see punishment as a juridical concern. Punishment thus becomes “an economy which ‘marks an epoch’” (Ricoeur 376). In the figure of Celia, the myth of punishment takes on the status of “the memorial” (376), a transcended past.

The cathedral thus emerges as a necessary, perhaps the most necessary ruin in the entire topos of Murder. Even more than Thomas’ sacrifice or Harry’s personal quest, the cathedral defies demythologization through (human) logic just as it knows its own insignificance in the face of (divine) justice. It is a part of many stories, both medieval and modern, but it resists them all the same. It simply waits. The doctor’s chambers in Party with its many rooms and interconnected doors is also such a symbol, its importance clear in the amount of stage-time devoted to impressing upon the audience its sequence of waiting spaces, chambers, and passages. The opening of Act II, for instance, contains a repeated set of “instructions” from Harcourt-Reilly to his Nurse-Secretary about when and where to show his patients Edward, Lavinia, and Celia (344), and later in the same act, Julia and Alex are also implicated into the maze of his office. In the previous plays, corridors and hallways have been alluded to but never included to
this extent into the stagecraft. In the Victorian house, each room was assigned a specific purpose and intercommunication between the rooms seen as suspicious and inconvenient by contemporary architects (Rosner 65). Social striations were reflected in this broken circuit, and movement necessarily curtailed. In Cocktail, circulation is not only the norm, it is anticipated, managed (the doctor’s callers have to wait until his secretary sends them in on a schedule known only to the two of them), and finally, an exit is provided according to individual needs. If the doctor’s consulting room is where the unconscious is central—and Harcourt-Reilly recalls the Freudian talking cure, although no divan is mentioned—then its entries (two, a main and a side door) and exits (multiple, as patients leave to go home or be taken to various sanatoria) highlight the limited potential of analytic psychology. The doctor’s chambers are a theatrical trap: masquerading as the reassuringly familiar for audiences, yet tacitly undermining the same through their formal underpinnings.

The covert experimentalism of this sequence of plays made them popular with avant-garde directors even though with the clear exception of Cocktail (which appeared on Broadway featuring Alec Guinness and on London stages in 1949-50), the plays weren’t remarkable commercial successes. Marchesi offers Murder’s production history: “[P]utting on Murder in the Cathedral was, from the start, a welcome task for experimental directors on the Continent—the French premiere of the play (1945)... was directed by Jean Vilar, while the Italian first production (1948) was by Brechtian director Giorgio Strehler” (xix); in 1972, the Royal Shakespeare Company also produced a Brechtian version of the play (xixn). She speculates that this might be because Eliot, Brecht, and the Continental avant-garde theatre in general “shared an interest in music-hall and lower dramatic genres, where defamiliarization was not theorized upon but extensively practiced” (116). Although Eliot’s religious agenda at first seems the opposite of
Brecht’s Marxism and use of shock value, this essay has shown the potential for deep innovation in Eliot’s theatrical work—as recognized by these stage productions.

In these final sections of my argument, I return to Eliot’s poems for a brief segue. Although this essay has shown that his theatrical works stand independently of his poetic works, the dominant cultural influence of *Four Quartets* means that for most audiences, the playwright would first and foremost be the poet. John Xiros Cooper notes that “as the most authoritative work of literary art written by the most celebrated author-sage of the 1940s, *Four Quartets* helped to re-orient subjectivity and to establish, despite Eliot’s explicit doctrinal purposes, the new ideological conditions for what was to come in North-Atlantic culture for the next three decades” (181). If literary modernism can indeed be seen as struggling for control of modernity itself, wanting to define its times, then Eliot’s towering work decentered subjectivity in the realm of poetry for a large audience; his theatrical works more covertly do the same.

Raymond Ledrut who, significantly, cited Eliot’s Unreal City in support of his sociological-semiotic observation that the modern citizen is dissociated from historical action (quoted above), criticizes Le Corbusier’s brand of functionalism for producing inhospitable buildings, and praises the Bauhaus functionalists and Gropius for “recogniz[ing] that aesthetic meaning cannot be reduced to functional meaning.” These architects “appealed to another order of signification, that of ‘the life of the spirit’ beyond the utilitarian” (127). It is difficult to avoid a kind of triumphalism as the unity of modernist architecture is replaced by postmodern comfort with multiplicity and the ineffable. As Michael North comments, cultural reintegration comes “through modernism, through what Habermas calls ‘the subversive force of modern thought itself’” (175). Eliot, despite his anachronistic religious sentiments in an increasingly secular world, remains at the center of this “subversive force” of thought, ceaselessly interrogating the
fixities and complacencies of modernity.
**IV. Contingency and Mutability of Memorials in Alain Resnais’ Early Films**

Alain Resnais is something of an anomaly in the context of Woolf and Eliot because of his status as an auteur of cinema rather than a writer of literary modernism. However, as I have suggested in previous chapters, Resnais’ aesthetic bears important resemblances to the reencounter with modernity through built spaces of Woolf and Eliot and extends their insights. Like them, Resnais is closely concerned with memorialization and cultural memory practices. He is as critical of sentimental nostalgia for the war dead in the 1950s-60s as Woolf, who avoided the Victory Day parades past the Cenotaph in 1920. My discussion of Eliot’s work in the previous chapter shows the importance of the trope of the shattered myth, which refuses closure in the narrative and thus insists on a continuous engagement with the changing circumstances of modernity; I suggested that Eliot’s depiction of Thomas as a shattered myth relies on an encounter with the true nature of built spaces. In secular terms, Resnais also insists upon shattering extant cultural myths: for instance, Hélène Aughain’s grand passion interruptus in *Muriel or, The Time of Return* (1963) is revealed to be tediously mundane instead of the radical break with conventions of love that she had imagined. In a parallel storyline, her stepson Bernard is shown traumatized by an episode of torture that he takes part in while in the French army in Algeria. Resnais interweaves the personal with the public to the extent that both Hélène’s old flame and Bernard’s involvement with violence and state-sanctioned torture are rendered utterly banal; the film depicts mundane situations and places but refuses to reify them.

The following sections address *Night and Fog* (1955) and *Muriel*, which are formed by Resnais’ interest in how built spaces are damaged by war and reshaped by postwar
reconstruction. The first is a short documentary feature in which a focus on the confinement areas, watch towers, and cement walls and ceilings of Auschwitz propagates a spatial sensibility that contrasts the physical solidity of built structures to political and historical postwar rhetoric in the 1950s; some things, the film asserts, cannot be said and their import remains extralinguistic, gestural. In *Muriel*, the process of rending the fabric of sentimental language continues with a depiction of the port town of Boulogne-sur-Mer, whose medieval fortressed parts escaped damage in the Second World War but the newer port areas were decimated by Allied fire against occupying German troops. Boulogne is named “une ville martyre” (a martyred town) in the movie, whose glamorous new plate-glass store displays, overstocked grocery stores, cafes, and souvenir shops are contrasted to the indications of the past that persist: the fortress walls behind which Hitler’s troops barricaded themselves, new street signs bearing names like “Avenue 8 Septembre” (the day Italy surrendered after Allied bombing) and “Place de la Résistance,” and the new apartment buildings still emerging out of the rubble of bombing and construction.

Most important of all is the “subsiding house,” which the movie shows to be an enormous apartment building that was hastily built on land that is sinking, rendering the entire structure uninhabitable (it remains unclear whether the building Resnais filmed actually was inhabitable, but it looks deserted). The film returns to this ugly, blocky modernist building several times visually and through mentions in the narrative, surrounding it with an alternate set of significations—instead of representing the spirit of French progress and national distanciation from complicity with the Germans, it is reinterpreted in the film as a site of uselessness that negates this larger socio-cultural interpretive thrust. Recalling the value that Woolf placed in untillable fields and open spaces in *Jacob’s Room*, this commercially-valueless building emerges in Resnais’ film text as a stubborn reminder of French involvement with the Vichy government
as well as its ongoing oppression in Algeria (whose resistance movement, in Resnais’ imaginary, closely parallels France’s own a decade earlier). Resnais grounds his iteration of modernist
nostalgia in a reencounter with built spaces, whether the seemingly-abandoned grounds of the
concentration camp at Auschwitz or the bustling streets of rebuilt Boulogne. Resnais’ vision is
essential to this study because he is able to imagine a way to struggle forward within the
compromised circumstances of modernity. In a sense, Eliot’s Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne
from Party are Resnais’ only concern; in his films, there is no Thomas or Celia to idolize, and
not even a Jacob on whom to focus the affective power of continual mourning.

The girl Muriel, who seems at first to be a locus of deeply-felt loss, is revealed to be
largely invented—Bernard comes upon her when she has already been tortured beyond her
senses, he never finds out her real name or who she is, and although there are a few glimpses of a
young dark-haired woman among his personal papers and photos, the body he admits torturing is
faceless, spilling open like a sack of potatoes, he says. Hence, the mise-en-abyme that Resnais
constructs around the girl Muriel is even more dizzying than the ungraspable nature of Jacob’s
lived experience. In the earlier narrative, the young man had a corporeal existence, made friends,
was loved, if not really understood; here, the woman is already rendered almost inanimate by the
time Bernard happens upon her. The empty “subsiding building” is one side of a dichotomy that
underpins the narrative whose other pole is the empty space occupied by the unknown girl on
whom Bernard fixates. Hélène and Bernard are muddled survivors on the brink of mental
collapse, pushing forward in banal modernity. Following Saikat Majumdar, it is possible to read
this insistence on banality as a “contrarian aesthetic mode” that is part of modernism’s
experimental radicality but is “just as significantly rooted in the social experience of colonial
modernity” (4-5). Resnais’ documentary feature Night and Fog was controversial upon its
release for not presenting the experience of the Holocaust as Jewish suffering, instead allying it with “humanity’s neverending cry” (the last narrated words of the film); Muriel continues this refusal to compartmentalize violence perpetrated by human beings on others by foregrounding the similarities between the occupying Germans of the 1940s (who were on a colonizing mission on the European mainland) and the French mission in Algeria in the 1960s.

Resnais’ work incorporates multiple narrative perspectives, schisms and gaps in film plot, and impossible linkages of time and space—techniques that readers of literary modernism would be familiar with—to repeatedly interrogate the human relationship to memory in postwar France.19 In Night and Fog, he perfects the cinematographic technique of montage, in which two or more discrete tracking sequences are filmed with the camera moving at similar speeds and then stitched together during postproduction to create an impossible continuity between images that cannot exist outside the diegetic world, linking the distant past to the present. In Muriel, instead of connections, he emphasizes jarring disconnections through editing visual sequences in

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19 As I have mentioned previously, a lineage can be established between the literary modernists and Resnais’s aesthetic through his association with the French nouveau romanciers who counted James Joyce, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, and Eliot himself as formative influences. Resnais, who worked repeatedly with practitioners of the nouveau roman like Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras, displays an affinity with the Anglophone modernists of this study. The tenor of his films also reflects a certain modernist attitude in bringing together so-called high and low art forms. For instance in Toute le mémoire du monde (1956), a documentary short about the closed stacks of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Resnais posits knowledge in a metaphysical way, as an undifferentiated sea that exists independently of the human researcher. It is only in the eyes of the researcher—when a particular book is called up to be read while another remains ignored on the shelves—that knowledge is differentiated into better or worse, reliable or not. Resnais punctures this highly theoretical look at the space and function of a library with shots in which Dick Tracy and Mandrake comics are prominently positioned on top of some old newspapers so that the viewer cannot help but notice them. This visual device puts the so-called low art of the comic book on the same plane as the library’s holdings (Resnais went to considerable lengths to avoid being caught as he sneaked his comics in and out of the strictly-regulated back rooms), recalling Woolf’s notion that the “commonly thought small” is ultimately no less important than what is commonly valued as important.

Marie-Claire Ropars reaches a similar insight in her analysis of Hiroshima Mon Amour (1959), when she claims that because of the interaction between Marguerite Duras’ script and Resnais’ filmmaking, the movie ties the “two chains” (174) of the literary and cinematic together. Therefore, it “provokes a contamination between literature and cinema which profoundly disturbs the generic specificities, thus putting an end to the innocence of cinema and, also, to the complacency of literature” (174-5). Although I am not completely in accord with Ropars’ characterization of the “complacency of literature” since my reading of literary modernism as a reaction against complacency broadly defined, I find her explanation that Resnais’ cinema is a new commingling of the literary and cinematic to be resonant.
flashes, the effect of which is to deny the linear ordering of time into discrete segments of past and present. In each case, Resnais resurrects the memory-image, a recollection of past time that is indelibly marked by the present moment of recall. This technique spatializes time by presenting two otherwise-distant moments contiguously; in Resnais’ treatment, it has the effect of radically altering the viewer’s perceived relationship to the past by bringing it uncomfortably close to the present. A reencounter with places, in Resnais’ films, invariably implies a re-vision and review of the past.

For instance in *Night and Fog*, one memorable sequence begins with archival footage of a closed goods train rolling down the tracks through the countryside in the daytime and, in the next shot, arriving at Auschwitz “dans la nuit et le brouillard” (in the night and fog).20 The scene is uncanny—in the sunlight, the train looks like an ordinary goods wagon; because of the grainy footage it might even be empty except we know that it is not, as the narrative also informs us. The same train at night arrives at the camp, cutting diagonally across the left side of the frame and is lit from the right by fog lamps. There are silhouettes of the heads of four guards carrying what look like long-barreled rifles standing at attention along the right side of the frame. At night, the boxy wagons look even more ominous and the light filtering through the fog portends horror. This scene lingers for a few seconds, then a hard cut transitions into a full-color daylight shot of the train tracks in the cinematic present, showing the disused rails overgrown with weeds.

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20 Vincent Pinel claims that Resnais shot the second scene himself, along with some other key shots in black-and-white (qtd. in Raskin 145). For Emma Wilson, this complicates the sequence described above, blurring the distinction between past/black-and-white and present/color; hence, the film moves “between two modes of representation, two approaches to the experience of the camps” (28). Rather than detract from the uncanny aspect of the scene, this blurred approach heightens the disorientation of the viewer who is looking for a stable narrative. It would not push the point too far to resurrect the comparison that Woolf draws between the stable truths of Professor Sopwith and the wavering of Miss Umphelby when teaching Vigil. Students, like viewers, ordinarily crave a stable narrative that follows a recognizable form. *Night and Fog*’s uneven reception among audiences—censored upon release but later widely screened and incorporated into secondary school curricula (Wilson 24)—points to the changing nature of national self-perception in France, and a cultural climate that eventually moves away from the binaries of the 1960s into the recognition of both anti-semitism and racism as wide-ranging phenomena in the 1990s.
The camera mimics the speed of the train in the previous shots even though the angle of view has changed, and the narrator asks, deadpan, “Today, on the same tracks, the sun shines. We go slowly along them, looking for what?” In French, Jean Cayrol uses the phrase, “à la recherche de quoi?” Resnais’ camera highlights this aspect of re-searching or re-viewing something familiar and mundane (train tracks) that are imbued with negative affect because of the foreknowledge of what they connect. This recalls Freud’s explanation that the uncanny mode relies on a reencounter with familiar objects in abnormal situations giving rise to the uncanny sense that the world is fundamentally askew. However, the same tracks as the train puts the camera in its place, as if this might reveal some trace of humanity that was missing from the previous long shot views (it does not). The entire sequence, from a black-and-white daytime to foggy night and once more into the Technicolor day, holds together because the speed of motion in the shots create a sense of continuity between images. As Bersani and Dutoit argue, this technique telescopes time and brings the past and present uncomfortably proximal, the Nazi past “repeated inside our sensory collaboration with the film” (187). Separately, the black-and-white sequences are ghastly, but the color shots look serene and peaceful as if the land has healed, and with it, so have its people; but Resnais’ editorial intervention refutes this serenity. Rather than show a

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21 Freud’s recounting of the mechanics of the uncanny is based in affective spatial reencounters, with the suggestion that the negative feeling (such as in the stories of E. T. A. Hoffmann) is grounded in a resistant aesthetics/ethics. He writes, “Towards real experience we [readers] generally adopt a uniformly passive attitude and succumb to the influence of our material environment. To the writer, however, we are infinitely tractable; by the moods he induces and the expectations he arouses in us he can direct our feelings away from one consequence towards another, and he can often produce very different effects from the same material” (157-58). The key point of invoking the uncanny mood, therefore, is for Freud the establishment of a new way of feeling about “the same material” that we, as readers of the cityscape, take for granted in quotidian existence. Resnais’ purpose in evoking the uncanny in Night and Fog undoubtedly stems from a similar desire to “direct [viewers’] feelings away from one consequence towards another,” most clearly in a reappraisal of the continuing presence of suffering and trauma in Western European society despite the enormity of the Holocaust. Freud’s definition of this mode is, interestingly for my purposes, grounded in the act of looking and being seen—in this sense, the uncanny is the province of the flâneur whose gaze, following Benjamin, “takes in” more than it “sees”. If the doppelganger or double is the paradigm of the uncanny, then Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” is as resonant with Freud’s exploration as Hoffman’s “The Sandman,” using the alienating effects of that strange encounter to suggest a different way of encountering the cityscape and its normative significations.
violent history laid to rest, the landscape purports a continued menace that is momentarily quiet but ever-present. Resnais’ control of diegetic time highlights the normalizing tendency of everyday life towards past trauma. By eliding gaps in time, it insists on combating the potent combination of indifference and fear that saturates every brick and beam at Auschwitz. “Words are insufficient,” Cayrol’s commentary says, to understand Auschwitz, because meaning is a function of logic and language, while the senselessness of death (to recall Benjamin’s terms from “The Storyteller”) in the camps robs the experience of meaning, consigning it to silence because of the insufficiency of words. Bersani and Dutoit suggest that Resnais’ technique is a “Stalled Movement” (the title of their chapter on his work) but, as I argue below, it is possible to read beyond the stasis of their notion of “a negative ethics and aesthetics” so that “we learn to look not just against ourselves but also with the world” (Silverman 412). By presenting film as text (rather than dependent on a literary source text, or mimicking literary or artistic conventions from the other arts), as Marie-Claire Ropers claims, Resnais gestures towards a movement beyond stalled negative space.

Like his mobile camera, Resnais’ protagonists are restless. In Muriel, Hélène and Bernard walk, run, bicycle, and ride a horse as if driven by some mad impulse towards motion. The screenplay specifies that “Hélène will not stop moving about, going to and fro. She will seem uneasy, she takes something up, loses herself with hundreds of small deeds, makes a mistake, comes back as if she has forgotten something” (trans. and qtd. in Wilson 98), so that this central character mirrors the restless energy of the landscape that is anxiously rebuilding its historical signification through “hundreds of small deeds” and through many individual acts of “forgetting something.” Like the characters in Eliot’s Party who circulate through the openings and exits of the doctor’s chambers, the characters in Muriel sense that they are trapped in their circumstances
and roam the cityscape to find some way out. Neither Hélène nor her stepson have the strength or desire of Celia or Harry (from Reunion) to abandon their current ways of life and embrace a religious role. Their encounter with the built environment is a confrontation with personal emblems and reminders that are being erased, such as the Folkestone Hotel at which Hélène was to have met her lover Alphonse Noyard many years ago. She missed that assignation before Alphonse went off to war (indeed, it remains unclear whether it was Alphonse or his brother-in-law, Ernest, who had asked to meet her there); the hotel no longer exists except as a street sign for the Rue de Folkestone shown in the disjointed shots of Boulogne mentioned above. Hélène and Bernard traverse these compromised spaces and memories, slowly losing all their blinkered complacencies over the course of the fortnight that Muriel depicts.

The following sections of this chapter provide some biographical and theoretical background on Night and Fog and Muriel or, The Time of Return before turning to analyses of the films themselves to suggest that Resnais’ exploration of the nearness between the horrific and the domestic insists on a renewed confrontation with the processes of memory. The films’ refusal to allow memories to sediment into comfortably established solidities is related to their auteur’s sensitivity to the continued colonial oppression by a population that recently suffered the same. Before segueing into those sections, however, I offer a historical occasion of rebuilding that is particularly resonant in light of Resnais’ aesthetic and ideological stance, contrasting his efforts to relinquish determinacy and inhabit the realm of the aesthetic to deliver a gestural message. Around 1923, Adolph Hitler began holidaying in a tiny village some miles outside of Salzburg, Austria, and a decade later, he bought a small house there. After large-scale renovations made in consultation with his favored architect, later also his Armaments Minister, Albert Speer, this chalet was converted in 1936-37 into an imposing holiday villa named the Berghof.
According to Barbara Lane, Nazi Germany was unique in that its sanctioned architects were given powers far beyond the norm in democratic societies and allowed to embark upon fanciful projects of expansion and rebuilding. An architect like Speer could “aspire to control design in the Reich as a whole” (285), albeit with limited success. The plans to rebuild Berlin that were released in 1937 included so many fanciful and large buildings that “Speer, and perhaps even Hitler, must have known they were unbuildable” (Lane 299). Both architect and dictator were interested in enormous modernist monoliths on the one hand and ancient ruins on the other, maintaining a peculiar double-vision about the eventual destruction of their own handiwork. The renovation of the Berghof, although retaining its external resemblance to a (very large) mountain chalet, reflects Speer and Hitler’s desire to control the generative process of signification by framing the landscape within an imposed external interpretation.

The most interesting feature of the Berghof renovations in light of this is the large picture window that Hitler had widened and extended to the basement, through which he was able to see the Untersberg mountain which was famed in German legend “for its association with mighty but sleeping kings” (Kaplan 245). Although the Berghof was not a modernist building in the sense of Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, Speer owed an unacknowledged debt to the architectural modernists for his aesthetic leanings (Lane 299-301). Behind Hitler’s picture window, it is possible to see echoes of Le Corbusier’s idea of a promenade architectural, in which inhabitants moved through the Villa Savoye experiencing a series of curated views designed by the architect. The window offered a carefully managed view of the mountain and surrounding countryside, and the Berghof renovations overall made the building more imposing in relation to the village.

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22 Through a contortion of facts, they imagined a unity between Aryan and Roman traditions that they sought to extend through architecture into culture. Hitler was so enamored of Roman ruins that when he visited Mussolini in 1938, the latter specifically arranged a nighttime tour of the city’s monuments spectacularly lit up in the dark (Baxa 144; Hell 182-184).
nearby and the other villas built in the surrounding areas. The Villa Savoye was a site-specific construction that highlighted its separation from, and control of, the landscape in its ivory white color, raised stilts, and plain manicured lawn that extended on all sides; the Berghof used a different idiom to a similar effect. The picture window also had an important connection to cinema culture because of the dictator’s habit of covering it to screen films when required.

The Berghof was razed in the 1950s to erase its associations with the Third Reich, and Speer’s domed Great Hall in Berlin was bombed at the end of the war. There is a sense of poetic justice in the historical events that followed: when the hall was bombed in 1945, the exterior stone surfaces exploded to reveal the iron and metal construction underneath. The Third Reich’s attempt at associating itself with Ancient Roman architecture was as spurious as its desire to link Aryan and Roman cultures. The bombs revealed the hollow centers of the Great Hall’s pillars, and created an ugly ruin; for Hitler and Speer, both of whom admired the massive solidity of ancient ruins like the Pantheon in Rome this was a fitting, if miniscule, reminder of the hollowness of their ambitions. There is no evidence that Resnais was aware of these events, or that he consciously responded to Hitler and Speer’s desire for monoliths in his insistence on providing fractured mosaic cinematic constructions. What remains interesting is to speculate how the radical cinematic experiments of the postwar era, from Italian Neorealism in the mid-1940s and 1950s to the French New Wave in the 1960s, were reacting to the control of vision, and the related control of architectural spaces promoted by the Nazis.

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23 Eric Rentschler, in his discussion of German film productions under Goebbels in 1944-45, discusses a 12-minute short named Brutalität in Stein (1961) in an aside, as a response to those wartime productions. This film—appearing only two years before Muriel—used discarded fragments of Nazi moviemaking to contrast the present-day “decayed remnants of Nazi structures in the Nuremberg Zeppelinfeld with the pomposity of Speer’s edifices and the giganticism of Hitler’s architectural fantasies” (424). Hence the short uses the “Nazi garbage pile of history” to show the extent to which “the heroic style, monumental appeal, and large scale of depleted and unfinished structures bear witness to misguided grand illusions” (424).
Resnais’ “Caméra-stylo”: Rewriting the Conventions of the City Film

Resnais’ relationship with buildings and the cityscape extends back to his earliest amateur work, as he reveals in an interview for Les Lettres française in 1959: “The first feature-length film I made, which is heaven knows where today, was on Paris. I shot it in 16mm during 1946. I wanted to express what I had discovered at the age of twelve. It was a sort of diary; later that sort of thing was called ‘caméra-stylo’” (Armes 33). In biographical terms that reflect an interest in “writing” the city, Resnais shows himself to be deeply sensitive to the literary mode when choosing collaborators to generate film scripts. His collaborators include Alain Robbe-Grillet (Last Year in Marienbad), Marguerite Duras (Hiroshima Mon Amour), the poet Jean Cayrol (Night and Fog, Muriel), and the science fiction writer Jacques Sternberg (Je t’aime, je t’aime). However, Resnais remained hesitant to describe himself as more than a director. When an interviewer jokes about the common practice in which “the minute a director changes a comma in a text he signs his film, ‘A film by,’” Resnais explains: “I think of myself as a director. I take the responsibility of a director” (Chalais “Television Interview” 1961).

Further, as Marie-Claire Ropers reminds us, Resnais’ words can be misleading because of the complex process he put his writers through while producing a script. For Hiroshima as well as in Muriel, Duras and Cayrol went through a rigorous process in which they produced a

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24 The term caméra-stylo (camera-pen) was coined by the French critic and director Alexandre Astruc in raising the status of the film director to that of an auteur of cinema, and marks the emergence of a new kind of filmmaking that is assertive of its own distinct language and idioms. Hence, Resnais’ use of this term marks him as a conscious participant in the auteur theory of cinema, despite his protestations in other forums that he considered himself only a director and not a writer. With the caméra-stylo, directing intrinsically involves “writing” in one’s individual style.

25 In a study of the contemporary reception of French New Wave films, Geneviève Sellier notes that Resnais’ Hiroshima Mon Amour triggered a strangely divided critical response, perhaps based on his famed fidelity to the script. Unlike most directors, Resnais resisted the impulse to change or write new lines while filming, and gave his collaborating screenwriters full writing credit which might be why a number of critics praised the movie’s directorial prowess but panned Marguerite Duras’ script for being overly stylized and emotionally exhausting (50-51).
separate story that complements the film script. Rather than adapt an existing story into the script, Resnais demanded that the script exist *alongside* the literary text as a partial explanation of it. Hence, the back story of Hélène’s family life and how she comes to live in Boulogne are omitted from the film text (and script) but recorded in Cayrol’s published notes to the script. Because of the dual existence of a script that records the plot of the film, and notes that record the vagaries of its story, a “reading” of these films “is a reading and a writing” because it “inscribes into the film a reminder of the missing book, the existence of which the film both prevents and presupposes” (Ropars 175). This seems like a needless complication that delights in half-revealed stories until one realizes that this method makes the film into text, “not because it includes a text [i.e., a script based on a novel], but rather because it incorporates a textual apparatus which deprives the written text of its autonomy” (Ropars 175-76). It “lays the film open to the invasion of an off-screen space, by definition hidden” (Ropars 176), without privileging the off-screen (textual) more than the on-screen. It is perhaps fanciful, but difficult to resist reinterpreting Ropars’ point in relation to Hitler’s picture window based on her metaphor of an “invasion” of off-screen space. It is as if an uprising of the mythical kings who slept under the Untersberg (and with whom Hitler was fascinated) seek to break the confines of diegetic space as defined by the frames of the window. In *Muriel*, the promenade architecturale is attacked by the film text, shattering the proscribed walk into the mosaic of fragmented images (the mosaic is an image that Resnais has used to describe the film, and the term is supported by critics like Armes, Ropars, and Wilson).

The simple filmic adaptation of a literary text, in which the former repeats the latter, imputes a monolithic authority to the source text, and Resnais’ method sets out to dismantle this
hierarchy. This urge to deny the literary text’s authority over the cinematic one reestablishes to an extent the dynamic form of storytelling that, according to Benjamin, had been lost after the First World War. In the terms of his essay, “The Storyteller,” novelistic production is essentially hierarchical because it hinges on a clear division between the writer and reader, unlike in earlier oral traditions; however, by blurring the lines between teller (the literary text) and the told (the film text), and in allowing the latter to retain its autonomy (turning the film into a teller independently of the literary text), Resnais’ films tend towards what Benjamin characterizes as the dark attraction of the fairy tale. Meaning, for Benjamin, resides in fairy tales because in them death still has meaning and import that it is denied by the massive losses of the two wars.

Resnais’ decision to exclude Hélène’s and Bernard’s back story from the film but allowing it to exist separately takes on a crucial importance—it is perhaps the only way in which to rescue the death of the unknown Algerian spy, the one who has lost her identity and on whom an odd English name is foisted, from the utter meaninglessness into which it would otherwise descend. On a formal level as well as through plot, Muriel contemplates the mise-en-abyme of the dead girl without withdrawing into apathy or sentimentality; the filmic memorial to her insists on confronting the compromised modernity from which it arises.

The twentieth-century city has always fascinated cinema, and Resnais is not alone in attempting to decode (or perhaps, recode) urban space through the camera, recording “a kind of empirical evidence for an understanding of urban space… [that] only emerges through a visual-spatial critique” (Abbas 142). Bernard’s constant filming of city life is based in this notion that it

26 Resnais’ method anticipates a number of postmodern film “adaptations” of literary texts, in contrast to the Merchant-Ivory style of literary adaptations which display a slavish reliance on their source even at the risk of stunting their cinematic idiom. In contrast, Michael Winterbottom’s Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story (2005) is an example of how the cinema can operate as text independently of its literary antecedent. Winterbottom’s film is on one level a re-enactment of Laurence Sterne’s novel, but by shifting its focus to metafilmic concerns (it is a film about making the film), it avoids privileging the literary over the cinematic. Like Resnais’ films, it remains in a tension vis-à-vis the novel it emerges from.
is only through filming that a “visual-spatial critique” can emerge. Film historian Tom Gunning reminds us that in so doing, Bernard is part of a tradition of recording everyday life that goes back to the earliest films: “The first film shows were primarily ‘big city’ affairs... audiences fill[ed] vaudeville halls from busy city streets in order to see projected on screen—busy city streets” (unpublished paper qtd. in Weihsmann 8-9). The mediated spectacle evoked by the caméra-stylo reproduces the mundane to show the momentum of change in urban Europe in early documents such as the Lumière Brothers’ shorts, and often through the use of fragmenting visual devices like the close-up, “sensitize[s] us... to the possibilities that lie dormant in a hat, a chair, a hand, and a foot” (Kracauer 264). Writing in 1960 and describing an aesthetic method parallel to Resnais’, Siegfried Kracauer marks this ability to create distance between the viewer and her everyday surroundings as film’s major advantage over the stage, which inevitably centers on the actors: “In using its freedom to bring the inanimate to the fore and make it a carrier of action, film only protests its peculiar requirement to explore all of physical existence, human or nonhuman” (265). Resnais’ close-ups of Hélène’s restless foot tapping, an unknown woman’s and on a door handle, Bernard’s fingers as they pour coffee or hold up a cup “contributes something momentous and unique—it reveals how [these body parts] behave under the impact of utter despair” (Kracauer 266). By displacing the human actor and his face as the central focus of the narrative, Resnais embraces the full potential of cinema to reflect the hollowness of human ego in its constructed capitalist milieu.

Mary Ann Doane notes in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* that the bursting apart of cinematic time and long-held plot trajectories comes at a crossroads of advances in psychoanalysis, rail travel, telegraphy, statistics, and physics. All the advances in these disciplines combine at the end of the nineteenth century to construct a temporal space that is far
more mutable and traversable than previously assumed. Time became traversable and subject to external control in the editing room. In this way “by using portions of historical time... cinema builds up historical time, hence the always-already-given historiographical character of cinematographic time” (Gaudreault 95). This aspect of cinematic art, that it almost invariably contains indexical traces of eventhood, is why this new medium was soon employed to elide the difference between time past and historical reconstructions of memory-images: “[E]arly exhibitors advertised the cinematograph as a historiographe” (von Moltke 399), relying on the simplistic adage that the camera never lies. Contemporary fictional films generally continue this trend, erasing their own constructed nature through the use of editing and cinematography.

In contrast, however, Resnais’ films insist upon revealing the lies of the camera as the above discussion of a sequence from Night and Fog shows: “To be sure,” Kracauer reminds us, “any camera revelation involves recording, but recording on its part need not be revealing” (262). Switching between color and black-and-white and interpolating filmed sequences with archival footage so that they become difficult to distinguish from one another, Night and Fog highlights its manipulations of historical fact to invite a reflection upon historiography. The audience must confront the fact that “just as the director and cinematographer must seek out locations and stage profilmic space, so the historian must travel into the past to retrieve objects she can then discuss” (von Moltke 400). Framed views are always assertions of power and bias,

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27 I say “almost invariably” because it is possible to conceive of a film that is ‘pure’ imagination and not based on the recording of any actual reality at all—such as, perhaps, a film that is entirely artificially generated using CGI. Another example of a film that contains very few indexical traces of historical time is Resnais’ documentary short Van Gogh (1948), a twenty-minute overview of the artist’s life entirely made up of filmed sequences of scenes from his paintings using zoom-ins and -outs, cross cuts between details from different canvases, and small-scale pans across the canvas. Perhaps the only real event in such a film is the act of filming itself, and the act of recording the voiceover narration—even it cannot avoid the nightmare of history from which it is trying to awaken.
as I suggested above in my discussion of the Berghof’s picture window; to counter it, Resnais fixates on a choppy, fractured view of the “subsiding house” in *Muriel*.

The cinematic spectator is often asked to travel with the camera through ruined spaces, suggesting a contentious relationship between cinema and memory. Benjamin even likens the audience to a traveler amongst ruins in “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936, repub. 1955). Significantly, as the passage below makes clear, the cinematic traveler is acutely conscious of her surroundings as everyday habits lose their grip on the spectatorial consciousness when seen at a remove, “lowered” or “lifted” by the camera:

> [T]he film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling… Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man… the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftngs, its interruptions and isolations, it extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses (236-37).

Benjamin’s likening cinematic production to psychoanalysis as an introductory device that breaks the conventions of habituated seeing recalls Eliot’s conception of the role of “analytic psychology” in modernity, so that in *Party*, Dr. Harcourt-Reilly is a dramatic device who clears
the cobwebs and presumptions from patients’ eyes to prepare them for their spiritual awakening. Celia Coplestone finds her spiritual center and leaves for Kinkanja while Edward Chamberlayne does not and remains in London with his wife, but both are introduced to their “unconscious impulses” by the ministrations of the doctor, who displays a similarity to the camera in his ubiquity and level of access into the interiors of these characters’ houses and minds.

Benjamin’s likening of everyday locations like “taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories” to a “prison-world” shows his debt to Marx and his sense that film can liberate the common man from the entrapments of working life. Resnais’ films, although avoiding the party line, are also informed by the consciousness that the ordinary man is trapped in his alienation into destructive habits. This explains Hélène’s domestic arrangements for her guests, which appear at first “alarmingly implausible” (Wilson 100)—she seems to have made no arrangements for their stay; the antique bed she offers Alphonse, who is quite tall, looks impossibly cramped to sleep in; and she is so much in the grips of her gambling habit that she abandons her former lover as soon as dinner is over to head to the local casino. The point, for Resnais, is not that Hélène is a bad host (which, given that her home is also the shop from which she sells antiques, is oddly appropriate), but that she is subject to the tyranny of the everyday. In reading this film, the audience is insistently confronted with its own implication in the habits of viewership and of living.

Resnais shares with Woolf and Eliot (and Poe, Rilke and Benjamin) an eye for the architectural, using the forms of the city and its buildings to theorize about their mute witnessing of urban life. Deleuze seems to have this connection between built spaces, lived experience, and the memory-image in mind when he declares that Resnais’ films investigate the “architecture of time” (104). In his reading, Resnais’ films (and postwar, modernist cinema overall) interrupts
any attempt at the seamless movement from past to the present by breaking up time into “sheets of past” (119), discrete instants which are woven into an artificial narrative construction (123) shaped by an aesthetics of disruption. Resnais in cinema erects alternate sites of remembrance of the Second World War through attention to the cityscape as a whole and interior spaces such as Hélène’s apartment or the cement bunkers at Auschwitz in particular. In its final moments, Night and Fog reminds us about the trauma of the concentration camp that, “We pretend it all happened only once, at a given time and place.” In French the last phrase, “à un seul temps et dans un seul pays,” emphasizes the perceived singular nature of the site of aggression. Just as time is not linear, as Deleuze notes, eventhood is not unique either. Both Resnais’ films that I discuss in this chapter insist on resemblances and parallels, demolishing singularity in all ways. Emma Wilson suggests that Muriel works through “an effect of infection and contamination” (100), so that the insulated domesticity of Hélène resonate with the trauma of the dead Arab girl. Both Night and Fog and Muriel maintain that there is no single time or country which is more horrible than the others; all of Europe and the world is implicated in this degraded, compromised postwar modernity. Domesticity is no more or less banal than torture and war.

Resnais’ sites of memory, particularly in Muriel, recall the idiosyncrasy of the Benjaminian flâneur who creates a personal memorial in public space when he turns a grocery shop in “A Berlin Chronicle” into a reminder of a dead grandfather, “solely because the first name of its owner, like his, was Georg” (Reflections 43). Almost identically, Bernard from Muriel roams through the rebuilt streets of postwar Boulogne on his bicycle, filming it as it transforms, imbuing each public site with personal signification. As Bernard repeatedly returns to the same spots in the town, he constructs a filmic edifice not to progress and renewal, but to memory’s tendency to falsify and misconstrue. Resnais’ films hence reinforce Deleuze’s
assertion that in cinematic modernity, the forger is “the character of the cinema” (132)\textsuperscript{28} as cinematic art becomes increasingly sophisticated in its representations of a manicured reality. The real hero is unseen and uncredited, a forger whose hand is insistently revealed. Bernard’s memorial, like Woolf’s in Jacob’s Room, allows a range of affective responses: anger, hatred, fear, and repressed sexuality are as much part of it as impotent grief. As if reiterating Deleuze’s insight on cinematic modernism, it recognizes that “there is no value superior to life, life is not to be judged or justified, it is innocent” (138). Instead of culminating in a finished story, this filmed memorial remains contingent and impermanent as an ethical protest against the dominant socio-political imperatives that seek to categorize some lives as more worthwhile, and some atrocities as more shocking. The modernity expressed in Resnais’ early work—changeable, uncomfortable, sometimes ghastly, but insistently without illusions—draws on earlier works of text and stage to evolve an idiom that is entirely cinematic. It sets out to demolish the fixities of taverns and metropolitan streets, offices and furnished rooms, railroad stations and factories, rendering reality itself fluid and unstable.

Night and Fog: Ethical Contingency and the Holocaust Narrative

\textsuperscript{28} This comment is drawn from Deleuze’s discussion of Orson Welles, but applies fruitfully to thinking about Resnais’ work as well. Deleuze remarks on the Nietzschean quality of cinema’s critique of truth: by dwelling on the figure of the forger (as in Welles’ Citizen Kane, cinema echoes Nietzsche’s critique of truth, that “the true world does not exist, and, if it did, would be inaccessible.” Deleuze declares that “there is no value superior to life, life is not to be judged or justified, it is innocent” (138). This insight is particularly apt for Night and Fog, which refuses to pigeonhole Auschwitz as a Jewish tragedy and instead connects it with mankind’s continuing cry of horror. Deleuze also seems to have Night and Fog in mind when he asks, “What remains? There remain bodies… [and] Power” (139). In Muriel, too, the affect of the Second World War and Occupation in France is insistently reinscribed as the same horror felt by occupied Algerians. There is no distinction, nor justification—political rhetoric is deflated in face of this gaze at bodies, bare life, and the operations of power on them.
Filmed only a few years after the Second World War, *Night and Fog* is engaged in trying to respond to great tragedy without dishonesty or aestheticization. It resists articulating the history of the concentration camps as a separate aberration in human history, and immerses itself in the pathos of suffering without allowing viewers any cathartic release. It self-consciously problematises both filmmaking and viewership/voeurship by making abrupt transitions from black and white film stock into color and back again. Resnais’ work from this period can be read as a sustained attack against fixed and stable structures of organization on a number of levels: his restlessly moving camera dismantles the buildings it watches; his cinematographic method dismantles the principles of continuity editing and conventional narrative structure; and finally, he dismantles ideological monoliths to advance a vision of mourning and memorialization that differs markedly from the state-sanctioned processes of recuperation and remembrance.

Its resistant ethics accounts for the mixed reception that it encountered with censor boards and audiences. After a difficult filming process—Resnais succumbing to nightmares and Cayrol falling seriously ill almost to the point of a nervous breakdown (Wilson 25), the film was subjected to the French censorship board who demanded a change be made to one scene in which a French officer is shown collaborating with the Nazis. Naomi Greene points out that French censorship in the 1950s continued to operate on principles “put into place in July of 1945,” which was “concerned not only with morality [as is film censorship in the US] but also, and perhaps above all, with politics” (35). Resnais’ “distinctly left-wing stamp” hence encountered problems with the board (Greene 35). A compromise was reached about the offending scene (a beam was superimposed on the frame that supposedly obscured the officer’s uniformed képi), and it went to Cannes, but it was banned from the Film Festival in 1956 because of an official German protest and France’s continued nervousness about the implications it raised about French
wartime collusion with the Nazis. Lynne Higgins relates that “Resnais was told that his film was incompatible with the ideals of the Fifth Republic” (52).

The film was instead screened that year outside the official festival roster, and profoundly discomfited audiences with its harsh look at the situation of the inmates—bodies wasted away until limbs looked like broken branches, open mass graves, buckets of heads, and most fear-inspiring of all, the scarred cement ceiling of a gas chamber which showed traces of panicked fingers even in that obdurate material. Most striking of all is the absence of any human faces. Kracauer has suggested that cinema allows audiences to see how parts of the body “behave” independently of actors’ faces and dialogue, adding a dimension to storytelling that goes beyond the stated; in Resnais’ short documentary, there is no such humanity in the body parts surveyed. The emaciated arms and legs, a frame that shows so much human hair that it seems to undulate like the sea: these images are mutely oppressed by the weight of their suffering. Instead the walls and bunkers, cement ceilings, whitewashed rooms, and overgrown train tracks emote the terrible complicity with the German project. François Truffaut wrote in Cahiers du cinema after the screening at Cannes that Night and Fog “the most noble and necessary ‘film’ ever made, throws us into shameful confusion and redirects our thoughts and feelings” (trans. in Wilson 26).

It is because of this perhaps that the film also quickly became popular within Germany despite the German government’s protest at Cannes. Andrew Hebard writes that within months, “it was being shown at film festivals and film clubs in the major German cities,” public figures like the president of the Berlin House of Commons and the chairman of the Federal Bureau for the Press, Film, and Radio supported publicly supported it, the latter releasing “a statement proposing that the government should support free screenings of the film to all civil servants”; in the popular press, a “flurry of articles and editorials… put the film directly into the public light
(87-88). In France as well, the film was slowly incorporated into the culture at large, being screened in schools and appearing in TV specials. However, prominent Jewish critics including Claude Lanzmann, whose Shoah (1985) is another landmark attempt at understanding the Holocaust in film that takes a very different approach from Resnais’ documentary, have criticized its “hesitation and unclear values,” its “sickly uncertainty” (Wilson 27) and withdrawal from its Jewish context.

Since twentieth-century modernity is inextricably urban, Resnais’ explorations of modernity are set in and around cities. In Muriel, Hélène corrects Alphonse when he remarks that he never thought she would settle in the provinces, saying, “A port town isn’t exactly provincial.” Even Auschwitz, although set in the outskirts of the small Polish town Oświęcim, is so connected by networks of transportation and ideology to Berlin that it is fully implicated in that vision of modernity. In this, Resnais’ work is in the tradition of the Italian neorealist and German Trümmerfilm movements but remains distinct from both. These earlier filmic movements, occurring in the immediate postwar era of the mid- to late-1940s, transform “rubble into representation” (von Moltke 405). In contrast, Resnais’ aesthetic of the cinematic urban insists on maintaining a tension that disallows aligning rubble with a single representative idea.

Night and Fog is intimately concerned with two problems of cultural criticism pointed out by Adorno in Prisms. Firstly, that “[t]he critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today” (34). Adorno points to the central problem Resnais attacks—how can one speak of trauma in an honest way, without memorializing, without dishonest nostalgia for times past. Second, if poetry and art serve as a commentary on their times, then they must necessarily confront the fact
that they are themselves implicated in the same moment they critique. *Night and Fog* is a film that self-consciously problematizes both filmmaking and viewership/voeuurship through its formal structure as well as content.

This unsettling, difficult space of compromised complicity that is shared between Nazi perpetrators, filmmaker, and viewer is established in the opening sequence. The first shot of the film is of a colorful field: “An ordinary landscape,” the narrator says as the camera cranes down to show a barbed wire fence. This dark irony is repeated again: “An ordinary road” is first shown directly and then through the fence, while the voiceover informs us that “this is the way to a concentration camp.” The uncanny is strong in these images because of the quiet normalcy of the color frames despite their chilling import. The juxtaposition of the everyday with the horrible, which are repeatedly shown to be close together instead of polar opposites, is also the ordering motif of the archival images in black-and-white and the color ones; as I have discussed above, the seeming opposition is undermined “to fundamentally confuse our ideas about past and present to such an extent that by the end of the film the commentator is able to ask while referring to the SS, ‘Are our faces so different from theirs?’” (Hebard 94).

“By making all the film in black-and-white,” Resnais says in 1956, “I was afraid of obtaining from these old stones, barbed wire and leaden skies a filmic romanticism that would not have been at all genuine. The colors and silent parts are there to show the difference. Besides in one’s memory one thinks a little bit in grey, in any case a less distinct color” (qtd. in Armes 50). To avoid the complacence of a remembered event situated in the distant past, Resnais chose to work with Eastmancolor film stock because of its brighter, more saturated colors. Framing footage of the past within the image of the present, *Night and Fog* presents audiences “not simply with the past, but with the relation between the present and the past—in other words, with
memory” (Hirsch 115). Hence, for Joshua Hirsch, the documentary “rejects both the notion of the archival image as a window onto history and the notion of the image of the present as a window onto memory. [Resnais] constructs a cinematic theory of historical consciousness from the montage relations between the image of the present and the image of the past” (116). These “montage relations” are diametrically opposite in spirit and tone to the controlled views out of Hitler’s picture window at Berghof or even the proud detachment of the Villa Savoye.

In his documentary work, Resnais tends closest to Kracauer’s idealized vision of the cinema: “Film brings the whole material world into play... It does not aim upwards, towards intention, but pushes towards the bottom, to gather and carry along even the dregs. It is interested in refuse, in what is just there—both in and outside the human being... To which end? That remains to be seen” (qtd. in Hansen 447). Hansen reminds her readers that in German, the word *Abhub*, refuse or detritus, is “part of the Jewish-gnostic intellectual imagery of the German twenties,” and Adorno uses the same term in 1931 to invoke Freud, “as an authority for the epistemological turn to the... refuse of the phenomenal world” (447n). Kracauer’s Marseille notebooks, from which Hansen translates the above comments, were written in that port city where he was waiting with his friend Walter Benjamin in hopes of securing passage to the US and leaving behind Occupied France. By this time, Benjamin had already written his important essay on Charles Baudelaire, showing the extent to which modernity is driven by the engine of high capitalism. Benjamin’s depiction of Baudelaire as an oppositional social poet is surprising (the French poet is otherwise often reported to be a drunk, gambler, and cad) and bears a striking resemblance to Resnais’ self-positioning as the “writer” wielding his caméra-stylo to valorize outcast figures and the detritus of modernity in a criticism of bourgeois values.
For Deleuze, normal movement of the camera “subordinates the time of which it gives us an indirect representation” while foregrounding ulterior concerns about plot and emotion. In contrast, he approvingly notes that Resnais’ use of cinematography and editing subvert continuity so that viewers remain trapped in a past that refuses to be subordinated to the present. This aberrant depiction of cinematic time “speaks up for an anteriority of time that it presents to us directly, on the basis of the disproportion of scales, the dissipation of centers and the false continuity of the images themselves” (Deleuze 37). In the postwar period, reconstruction of Europe was occurring at the same time as a large thrust in memorialization. Museums and other sites of memory propagated one version of history, reifying and in the process, anaesthetizing it as a deviation. In France particularly, postwar reconstruction attempted to ameliorate French collusion with the Nazis during the Vichy years, as well as the State-sponsored oppression of Algerians in a brutal and ongoing colonial enterprise.29 Hebard suggests considering the film in terms of “an anxious politics that does not work against the ambivalence of traumatic aporia, but works within it” (92). This formulation recalls my analysis of Woolf’s politics of mourning in Jacob’s Room, which “takes the traumatic ambivalences of memory as the object of its procedural operation” (Hebard 92), being careful to avoid characterizing trauma as an illness to be cured through mourning. Since idyllic invocations of the future have become as problematic

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29 Interestingly, one of the sponsors of Resnais’ documentary was the foundation, Réseau du souvenir who was also responsible for commissioning Georges-Henri Pingusson to build the Memorial to the Martyrs of the Deportation (completed 1962) on the Île de la Cité in the heart of Paris. That monument also displays a complex understanding of the processes of memory. Patrick Amsellem has detailed the public and journalistic reaction to this monument dedicated to all, not just French or Jewish, deportees; negative reactions included outcry over the lack of fanfare and speeches at its opening ceremony, as well as distaste for the monument’s somewhat covert location (33-36). Although located at the tip of the island, it is hard to see the Memorial from afar without plaques to point the way. Because of its design as a below ground, almost bunker-like, space it is possible to have a picnic on the park above without being aware of the Memorial below. However, this covert aspect as well as the Memorial’s claustrophobic entranceway, its dimly lit memorial chambers, and the iron gate that overlooks the Seine all align it, to my mind, with an interrogation of memorialising that evokes the unbroken tension of Night and Fog.
as those of the past, Resnais’ modernist nostalgic subject looks sideways, as if considering what has been lost through an oblique gaze (Boym 59).

Such memorialization leaves no room for sentimentality—Resnais’ images are taxing to look at as his camera stares at piles of human remains from archival photos. Each vertically dense photograph “seems reminiscent of the patterns and experimentation of Western art, yet [are] also shockingly unrecognizable as it refers to actual human experience” and hover at the edge of one’s recognition, an unheimlich, uncanny, uncomfortable site of memory (Wilson “Material Remains” 106-7). Wilson argues that Resnais’ reconstructed images spill over and beyond their frame, refusing to be contained by it. They show “the incommensurability of these images in relation to perceptions of human identity and experience… In their move toward abstraction, they challenge the viewer to suspend the desire to make sense and to respond with the senses” (109). Rather than offer the comfort of a particularized tragedy, Night and Fog’s French-language narration insists on seeing the tragedy of the war in a totalizing light.30 Resnais’ concrete walls and ceilings, like Rilke’s, feel steeped in the “stubborn life of the rooms”. Wilson further argues that “In their move toward abstraction, [these images] challenge the viewer to suspend the desire to make sense and to respond with the senses” (109). In its call to “respond with the senses,” Night and Fog engages in an affective criticism of the cultural context from which it emerges.

At the end of Night and Fog’s thirty minutes of unblinking consideration, Wilson comments, “Whether or not the images captured are authentic or staged, Resnais edits those images together in a bid to unsettle how and what we see, to make the visceral shudder of the

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30 David Coury shows how Paul Celan appropriates Cayrol’s elliptical French subtitles in the German translation, turning them into more explicitly Jewish references, but the French original purposely resists the particularity of the trauma experienced by a single religious or national group; in this, it also recalls Pingusson’s Memorial mentioned in the previous footnote.
indeterminacy of living and dead matter, a moment of unknowing and undoing of the viewer” (102). Deleuze notices Resnais’ use of the affective mode as well, noting that in his films, “feelings plunge into the past” rather than any single protagonist or narrator; finally, “Feelings become characters” (Deleuze 124-5). In its call to respond with the senses, Night and Fog engages in a vicious criticism of the cultural context from which it emerges, a repudiation of the monolithic impulses of modernity, which would reassure its participants that the horror of the Holocaust was safely contained. In its final minutes, the film reminds viewers:

[T]he hollows and mass graves [are filled with] a frigid and muddy water, as murky as our memory. War nods off the sleep, but keeps one eye always open... Who among us keep watch from this strange watchtower to warn of the arrival of our new executioners? Are their faces really different from our own? ...With our sincere gaze we survey these ruins, as if the old monster lay crushed forever beneath the rubble. We pretend to take up hope again as the image recedes into the past, as if we were cured once and for all of the scourge of the camps... We turn a blind eye to what surrounds us and a deaf ear to humanity’s never-ending cry (Resnais, Night and Fog).

Within the displaced urbanity of the Auschwitz camp, the beasts of war lie sleeping; when they awake, Resnais and Cayrol suggest, they will once again surprise us with their power because of the “sincere” assumption that the comfortably dated ruins signify that the creatures are safely dead.

* Muriel, or The Time of Return: Dismantled Narratives and Affective Buildings
In *Muriel*, the slumbering monster of war is back once more, albeit obliquely. The setting is postwar Boulogne being rapidly reconstructed. Jean Cayrol, who also wrote this script, says that this aspect of the film is crucial:

Boulogne is... a town after a drama. There are two towns, the old one spared by the war and the reconstructed town, the topography of which the old inhabitants cannot recognize... In Boulogne everything is false and at the same time everything is real. It’s a town where you cannot settle for a moment... [in the same way.] Hélène and Bernard cannot keep still for a minute (trans. and qtd. in Armes 128).

From its conception in the script, the film elaborates on this connection between the principle characters and the city they live in. In terms of plot as well, Boulogne is central: a sea port and medieval fort town that the Allies lost control of in 1940, it was the site of a massive Allied air strike in 1944 that left most of the newer parts of town decimated and led to the surrender of the German troops stationed in the fortified medieval city area. Hélène speaks of finding M. Aughain and his son, Bernard, in a building that was reduced to rubble presumably after this 1944 attack—Boulogne, even in this detail, is a problematic site whose devastation is due to Allied, rather than enemy, attack. Hélène takes both father and son in, the latter then a young boy who was so traumatized by the bombing that for a time, he wouldn’t let her out of his sight; eventually, she marries the father. Bernard grows up and eventually joins the French armed mission in Algeria, where he becomes complicit in the torture and death of a young Arab in the Algerian resistance. He never finds out her real name—his troop mates call her Muriel—but her presence haunts him and heightens the sense of Boulogne as a site of betrayal.

At the beginning of *Muriel*, Hélène sells antiques out of her apartment, gambles in the evenings, usually losing heavily, and has a companion in Roland du Smoke, a reseller of
architectural elements (old doors, window frames, staircase banisters, and the like) from demolished buildings. Out of some impulse, Hélène writes to her first lover, Alphonse Noyard, whom she hasn’t seen in the past twenty years. Alphonse comes on a visit from Paris with his mistress Françoise, whom he introduces to them as his niece. It is revealed in the final few minutes that Alphonse’s wife and her brother Ernest have been supporting him financially, and he has made this trip desperately looking for a quick way out of debt. For Alphonse too, Boulogne is an important place—a large transportation hub, it is well-connected to other parts of Europe. At the end of the movie, Alphonse jumps on a bus for Brussels, once again avoiding his debts and responsibilities and betraying those closest to him. Boulogne, town and idea, affect each of these characters by forcing them into a confrontation with their true motives.

I began by differentiating between space and place in Chapter 1, where the former is empty and the latter imbued with personal, affective meaning. In the instances I have discussed in previous chapters, characters have encountered architectural constructions in new ways in order to break away from conventional thought and action. In Muriel, we are confined to the urban context but a parallel reconfiguration of so-called space also occurs, for instance when the useless “subsiding building” becomes a symbol for all that is wrong with postwar rebuilding. This building is described in some detail by the improbably named du Smoke, whom Alphonse testily calls “the demolition man.” In fact, du Smoke is the opposite of a demolitionist; he rescues the detritus of demolition, carefully stacking his warehouse with what he calls “bits and pieces of buildings.” Du Smoke is, in this regard, akin to Baudelaire’s rag-picker—like that unassuming figure of urban capitalism, this bit player in Resnais’ film has a crucial role in identifying hidden value in junk. He defies conventional sense and taste that has deemed certain buildings worthless; he picks up dismantled building parts, renews and reintroduces them back
into the system of exchange. Even he, however, cannot salvage the mute reminder of atrocity that the “subsiding building” becomes: “It will be an ugly ruin,” he says. “Not even a window latch for me to salvage” (Resnais, *Muriel*).

This ugly subsiding building is a recurrent feature of Resnais’ wordless flashes of the cityscape, and features in Bernard’s metafilm of the reconstructed Boulogne. This apartment building is both enormous and unusable, because it was built in a hurry on ground that is slowly sinking. It is a symbol akin to Eliot’s defunct London churches, that defies common sense, which demands that buildings always fulfill their purposes. In its stubborn uselessness, it resists cultural rhetorics of rebuilding, recuperation, and progress. The subsiding building is a mise-en-abîme at the centre of Resnais’ filmic text, a hollow centre without meaning. In my outline of *Muriel* thus far, it can be seen that the film is a network of parallels: old and new Boulogne, the Second World War and the Algerian War, Hélène and Françoise, Alphonse and Bernard, Bernard’s lover Marie-Do and his memory of Muriel, Bernard’s metafilm inside Resnais’ film, and so on.

Continuing the careful patterning that underpins the film’s elliptical narrative format, we are confronted with two mise-en-abymes: the subsiding house and Muriel herself. The only information we know about the girl Bernard calls Muriel is through his relating the episode of her torture and death to the Stableman. By the time Bernard encounters the girl, presumably an Arab informant the French are trying to get secrets from, she is already unable to speak. Robert, Bernard’s friend from Boulogne and fellow army man, seems to be in charge; Bernard recalls that he lit a cigarette and turned to her as she screamed. Her real name could hardly be Muriel, which is an odd name for the French (as Hélène comments) and certainly an anomaly in Algeria. In Cayrol’s words, like Boulogne itself, “everything is false and at the same time everything is real” about Muriel. Leslie Hill adds that “[w]hat is represented on screen by the film is made
unstable and fragmentary by that which the camera cannot represent… [Muriel’s] silence is not merely a chance circumstance as far as the film is concerned, for it is constitutive of its very possibility as a fiction” (802).

All other information about “Muriel” comes from the spied pages of Bernard’s diary, the torn edges of old telegrams, and some old photographs that spill out of the book that Alphonse flips through. It is no accident that this veteran of the Second World War is the narrative instrument through whom the atrocities of the Algerian War are revealed. Alphonse is fond of denying his abandonment of Hélène twenty years ago by insisting that the War separated them, and he responds to Bernard’s obvious scorn with sanctimonious comments of how much harder his tour of duty was than that of the younger man. In both instances, Alphonse is unproblematically the victim in his version of events, either as the jilted lover who couldn’t follow Hélène even if he tried, or as the soldier with bad rations and no transistor radio to amuse him during his service. By showing Alphonse to be a liar as well as snoop, and in whom there is not much sensitivity to violence or empathy for Bernard’s experience, Resnais’ text follows a critical thread in French literary and artistic output of the 1950s and 1960s which collated the trauma of the French during World War II with the contemporaneous experience of the Algerians. As Martin Evans notes, the Algerian Résistance had covert French sympathisers, many of whom were previously in the Résistance of the 40s. In 1960, Resnais was a signatory of the “Manifesto of the 121” which declared the Algerian Occupation to be unjustified and sympathised with their war for independence (Abidor n.p.). This document also overtly links the Algerian Occupation to the German one, and the plight of Algerian freedom fighters to the underground French Resistance. Other recognisable names who signed this document included Duras and her husband Robert Antelme, Robbe-Grillet, Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Maurice
Blanchot. It is therefore not surprising that when Bernard finally shoots Robert in a fit of impotent rage, the film remains completely sympathetic to him. His crime does not ameliorate what was done to Muriel, but it satisfies the same primitive illogical urge for vengeance in the audience.

It is tempting in the post-War climate and under the heady influence of the “Vichy syndrome”—a time in which French public sentiments tended to ignore any collusion with German occupation and perpetuated the myth of a unified resistance to Nazism (Rothberg 1243)—to minimize the responsibility of each citizen to combat atrocity. Eichmann’s trial, also in 1961, encouraged political progressives in their palimpsestic superimposition of “Europe’s contemporaneous experience of the limits of its colonial project—here represented especially by the Algerian War of Independence and the autonomy of African nations” on Holocaust memory. “[H]owever,” Rothberg continues, “this vision would soon be obscured by the increasing institutionalization of a more monolithic understanding of the Nazi genocide as radically unlike any other historical event” (1232). Resnais’ Night and Fog and Muriel, the Réseau’s Memorial to the Deportees, and the “Manifesto of the 121” are only a few documents that resist this dominant cultural impetus to rebuild, memorialize, and enshrine the Holocaust into an aberration in the history of Europe. Bernard’s fragmentary memorial to Muriel—a collection made up of the scrawled notes, photographs, telegrams that Alphonse finds, some filmed sequences that he shows the Stableman, and tape recordings of his Army friends laughing—are so fragmented that they hardly tell a coherent story. His memories of Muriel are tinged with guilt and a taboo erotic longing (Sontag 25). In their repudiation of sense-making, they avoid the monolithic institutionalization that Rothberg mentions. In so doing, it avoids Alphonse’s complacent inhabiting of the role of the victim; Bernard is the cinematic expression of Rothberg’s implicated
subject; unlike Eichmann and the Nazi overseers from Night and Fog, he cannot say that the atrocity of Muriel was not his fault. Bernard takes no false comfort in merely having followed orders.

Formally, Muriel mirrors the disjointed memorial of Bernard. Although divided into five separate acts, the film purposely mimics the fragmentation of modern life. Resnais has called it “a film in facets... made up of mosaics” whose jumpy shots were premeditated: “I think that Jean Cayrol and I adopted this form of narrative as soon as the script exceeded fifteen typewritten pages. It is not something imposed at the editing, the shooting already corresponded to the final result” (trans and qtd. in Armes 126). Characters hardly seem to hear each other when they congregate at the dinner table; they don’t answer each other or abruptly leave. In every aspect of the mise-en-scène, and perhaps especially in Delphine Seyrig’s portrayal of Hélène, life itself seems to be made up of bits and parts that don’t quite fit together. Critics have called Muriel a detective story after Truffaut, who noted all the visual references to Hitchcock in the film as well as Resnais’ personal fascination with the earlier filmmaker. However, Muriel’s twinned mise-en-abymes erect a hollow space at the centre of this film that recalls Eliot’s Reunion in its refusal to correspond to the conventional detective story. Since it provides no spectacle of violence at all, it “refuses to address its viewer as a voyeur” (Hill 802). If there is any trace nostalgia in this film, it is only of that peculiarly modernist kind that circumvents sentiment and monolithification.

As Bernard rides his bicycle through Boulogne, he films its reconstruction and the falsification inherent in its recuperative practices. He tells Hélène, “I don’t want to be a filmmaker, I’m only gathering proofs”—proofs that become a contingent memorial to historical events. In a metatextual parallel, Bernard’s film (which we don’t ultimately see) does what Muriel as a whole intends: problematises the idea of narration, refuses the easy harmonies of
story, and therefore renders uncomfortable both the filmmaker’s and the viewer’s complacencies about their collusive roles vis-à-vis everyday atrocities and war. Sontag calls this a “literary procedure” that explores the structure of Hélène and Bernard’s emotions through formal means (25-6). She continues, “Does it work? As a literary idea, perhaps. As a cinematic idea, I don’t think so” (25). Although Resnais’ techniques are saturated in the formalism of the *nouveau roman*, it is difficult to fully agree with Sontag’s assessment because Resnais achieves effects that would be impossible except in film.

Consider, for instance, the sequence in which Hélène leads Alphonse and Françoise back to her home from the train station. The characters walk as if in separate worlds—an extreme long shot shows them walking together, but subsequent medium shots show them singly, each in their own worlds. Their conversation is stilted as they go through the new parts of Boulogne. Françoise stops to admire a shop window, saying, “I’m glad it’s not just a small town after all!” The visuals cuts to a brief montage of daytime shots, completely at odds with the dark streets they are walking through. But what we see is both mute and crucial: a brief montage about ten seconds long of pockmarked street signs on walls that have withstood two recent sieges, and shiny new street signs bearing new names such as the Place de la Résistance. These images flash an ironic rejoinder to Françoise’s words, referring viewers back to Boulogne’s tumultuous history and the recent re-emergence of fashionable shops and full display windows.

“No author is less bound up in the past,” Deleuze says of Resnais. His “is a cinema which, in an endeavour to sketch the present, prevents the past from being debased into recollection” (124). In a town where people proclaim they “haven’t forgotten [their] street just because it was bombed” even as they scramble to rebuild and efface, only the mute built spaces hold on to actual eventhood. In one of the final sequences, Alphonse’s exposé as a crook is
represented by a series of quick cross-cuts between the scene in Hélène’s dining room (where all the main characters are assembled) and the “subsiding house.” The enormous building with its empty windows appears as a monolith to counter the ongoing reappropriation of the past. Even if the human gaze is enmeshed by the commodity fetish, and although the modern condition seems to have robbed man of any clarity of vision—the mechanical eye can hold still and see what man simply glosses over. It is the genius of Resnais’ conception that puts the void of Muriel at the centre of this complex web.

All this is not to suggest, however, that Muriel doesn’t have a clear, albeit complicated, moral centre or a firm conclusion despite its fragmented, mosaic style. The concluding moments of the film show all the characters who were brought together at the beginning, scattered in different directions. Françoise has broken up with Alphonse and disappears back to Paris; the fraud Alphonse, who had been tracked down by his brother-in-law, gives this man the slip and boards a bus to Brussels as if at random, driven by the blind urge to escape reality; Bernard, who has shot Robert, has a final encounter with Hélène to say goodbye. It is unclear where he will go without any money and the murder hanging over him; it is unlikely he’ll reach New Caledonia, as he had declared at the beginning of the movie. However, the moral centre of the film was never the unstable boy wracked with guilt, but his stepmother, flighty and restless as she also is.

None of the other characters show any real change through their encounter with Boulogne—the Parisians leave with only a tourist’s comprehension of the nature of the city, and Bernard is already radicalized at the film’s opening. Only Hélène has a realization, that her own yearning for a grand passion and a romanticized past is itself unfulfilling. At her lowest moment, when she feels her whole life to be a failure, she berates herself and her apartment to du Smoke: “I wanted it to be extraordinary and wild,” she says, breaking down in face of the reality of its
banality as a shabby shop for antique furniture. Her summons to Alphonse had been with a similar expectation it would lead to something extraordinary and wild. However, Sontag reminds us, “In high art, banality is the modesty of the inexpressible” (25). The story Hélène wanted for herself traced the peaks and lows of a nineteenth-century novel, with its valorization of the first love and its demand that life follow a neat, orderly narrative in which important moments correspond with climactic ones. In the fortnight that Alphonse spends with her, he reveals himself as a tedious imposition on her life. They perhaps become lovers in that time, but there is no sublime personal space between them. When Alphonse tells her about his next lover after their separation, she realises that the girl’s story was almost identical to her own. At the beginning of this encounter, this exasperates her; but by its end, she breaks off a conversation with Alphonse and muses almost to herself: “It’s nice to think it’s a common enough story [une histoire banale], really.”

Boulogne again reasserts itself as a place of both lies and truths: when all the characters scatter, Hélène runs to a part of town far from her house, into the medieval walled city. As the film follows her through the twisted, disorienting streets, Hélène realizes that what she had thought to be a formative moment, a first love and first deception, is the smallest in a full life that includes a mysterious feud with the tailor to whose house she rushes at the end. The film drops viewers into the middle of that narrative thread without any introduction or explanation, nor does it offer any conclusion to the episode. At the very end of Hélène’s story, we are shown the impossibility of coherent narrative, and the foolishness of any attempt to live life as if it follows rigid, arbitrary conventions of storytelling. Mirroring this insight, Resnais turns normal filmmaking wisdom about form on its head as well. Unlike a conventional movie, Muriel offers no establishing shots that could help viewers understand the layout of Hélène’s apartment. It
seems to have a number of rooms and many doors; visitors sometimes lose their way in it, and viewers certainly cannot locate entrances and exits easily. But right at the end, as its final pan shot, the film offers an establishing shot through the point of view of Simone, Alphonse’s beleaguered wife, yet another stranger who has just arrived in town. This delayed solution to the mystery of Hélène’s apartment ties it to the cityscape of which it is a part, implicated and unsatisfactory.
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