

# Outside the Interior

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**H**E ALSO REMEMBERED WHEN he was about eight years old standing at the top of the stairs and looking down them and hating himself and the black stockings he had on. His associations showed that the interior of his parents' house had always seemed specially gloomy to him—"dead," in fact—and that he held himself responsible for this gloominess—or rather for the destruction inside his mother's body and his own, symbolized by the gloomy house.... (Klein, "Effects" 266–67)

This reminiscence by a melancholiac, Mr B, is conveyed to us by Melanie Klein, who of course puts a certain spin on it. The word "symbolized" effectively obliterates the phenomenology of an embodied self situated within an interior. For the boy that Mr B once was is hating not so much his abstract situation as the fact of his physical situatedness—within his own body in the first instance, and, beyond that, within a larger body, the house, that holds him inside the enclosed field of his perceptions. That this house has "always" seemed gloomy to him implies a certain priority: it becomes more cause than effect, and less of a representation than a baffling and material presence. Consequently, the melancholy described by Klein's patient becomes difficult to situate. Is it, as he indicates, *within* his body and, if so, in what sense? This interiority is something that he

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feels—that undoubtedly many of us feel. Yet the familiar idea that we have an “inside” is put into question by Klein herself, who refers to “a complex object-world which is felt by the individual, in deep layers of the unconscious, to be concretely inside himself, and for which I and some of my colleagues therefore use the term “‘internalised’ or an internal (inner) world” (“Mourning” 362). Klein’s words for the site of that feeling, the “deep layers of the unconscious” already imply an inner core. But the unconscious need not always be the deepest layer of the psyche; what we are most unconscious of is perhaps the overwhelming barrage of stimuli at the surface of our perceptions from which we select according to conscious models, leaving the rest unattended. Among Freud’s various topographical models of the psyche is that of the domestic interior, as Diana Fuss has pointed out; she quotes a passage in which Freud disconcertingly reverses our usual sense of the unconscious as the deepest inner point:

Let us therefore compare the system of the unconscious to a large entrance hall, in which the mental impulses jostle one another like separate individuals. Adjoining this entrance hall there is a second, narrower room—a kind of drawing room—in which consciousness, too, resides. But on the threshold between these two rooms a watchman performs his function: he examines the different mental impulses, acts as a censor, and will not admit them into the drawing-room if they displease him. (*Introductory Lectures* 295; quoted in Fuss 6)

The unconscious here is no heart of darkness, but an exterior space, an entrance hall where stimuli jostle for admission to consciousness, depicted as the ego’s inner citadel and moreover as a specific interior décor, the decorous drawing-room.

If unconscious stimuli, in Freud’s model, come from the outside, we are returned to the dark at the top of the stairs, and to Klein’s patient who stands there in an epiphany of loathing that encompasses both his own body and the house that encloses him. It seems as if we have here two kinds of interiors—the psyche within the body, the body within the house—nestled within each another like concentric circles. But topographically each of these interiors is created by an exterior that encloses it; every interior is also an exterior. Thus a house’s so-called interior decoration is really exterior decoration, an attempt to express or even define the psychic interior through choices projected on objects external to it and on walls that are outside it, even if they are conceived of as turning inward rather than facing out. And in the case of the psyche, we cannot maintain for long the notion that it selects from among contending external stimuli

which ones are to be admitted to the inner drawing-room. For the psyche is invaded from the start by structures ranging from the primal dynamics of the senses to family romances, to cultural and political assumptions, and all of these structures structure the psyche in turn. If, at a certain point, the soul selects her own society, she does so according to tastes and tendencies that at an earlier time have largely been selected for her, in a sense *are* her.

I seem to be on the brink of a classic deconstruction of the interior: the inside is the outside, the outside is the inside. But my debt is not so much to Derrida as to Merleau-Ponty and his notion of *chiasmus*: “once a body-world relationship is recognized, there is a ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside” (*Visible and Invisible* 136). Among the influences contributing to the current interest in interiors, phenomenology plays a leading role. For phenomenology’s focus on the ways we experience objects and spacial relationships is well suited to the kinds of questions that are contained within, as it were, any room. While these questions are philosophical, they are also literary, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the two. Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (recently reissued) is a case in point. It is a phenomenology of houses and enclosures—an ambitious enough project—and it is more than that. For Bachelard is, after all, attempting a “poetics”: literature provides many of his examples, but he is also suggesting that a phenomenology of enclosure influences the logic of our imaginations.

If there is such a phenomenology of enclosure, and specifically of the house, there is nevertheless a history of the degree to which that becomes imaginatively articulated, in literature as well as in houses. The nineteenth-century interior is the prime example of this. Walter Benjamin is fascinated by the way that “the nineteenth century, like no other century, was addicted to dwelling” (*Arcades* 216). The word *addicted* reflects Benjamin’s notions of how the most respectable interiors of that era evoked, in their crowded eclecticism, the effects of hashish, producing what he calls “phantasmagorias of the interior” (9). So pervasive is this inward turn that in “Dream Kitsch” Benjamin can write, “What evolves, in the confrontation with a particular milieu from the second half of the nineteenth century—in the dreams, as well as in the words and images, of certain artists—is a creature who deserves the name of ‘furnished man’” (4).

This issue of *ESC* is devoted to some of these “certain artists,” and not only in the nineteenth century. Between its covers you will find a variety of approaches to the problem of interiors, in several senses of that word;

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yet all of these senses are anchored in the world of sense, in the physicality of rooms and their furnishings. Given Benjamin's observation, it's not surprising that essays on the nineteenth century dominate the issue—though in ways that are far from homogenous, as demonstrated by the following brief survey of those essays.

Poe is ahead of his century when in 1840 he writes “The Philosophy of Furniture”—a short article that nevertheless offers a complete theory of interior decoration in terms of a desired aesthetic and psychological effect, one of dreamy repose. Yet, as Jacob Rama Berman points out in his “Domestic Terror and Poe's Arabesque Interior,” a similar décor is used in many of Poe's stories for an effect of terror; and it is Berman's project to account for this ambiguous Orientalism. Another interior decorator is Jane Eyre, who decorates the rooms of Moor House and later appreciates Rochester's taste in interior décor—that is to say, the man's own interior—while in *Villette* it is Lucy Snowe's interior life that is intertwined with the life of things. In “Rearranging Furniture in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*” Michael Klotz analyzes such incidents in Brontë through a wide range of nineteenth-century theories of décor. Bärbel Tischleder's “Literary Interiors, Cherished Things, and Feminine Subjectivity in the Gilded Age” deals with smaller items of furnishing such as china. Applying a methodology from the neighbouring field of object studies—Bruno Latour's notion of the ways that objects are made to embody certain social expectations—Tischleder expands from a single saucer to a full tea-set, to the arrangements of a whole household, to what might today be called a “lifestyle.” In “The Secret Rooms of *My Secret Life*” Deborah Lutz reads the sexual lifestyle of a late-Victorian confessional classic through the rooms that its narrator prefers to inhabit in the course of his erotic adventures, rooms where the boundaries between entering and being entered are blurred by peepholes and secret doorways. These brothel interiors, she argues, reflect another interior, that of the pornographer himself. This brief house tour of the nineteenth century may recall for us how many of its authors were also interior decorators, either furnishing their own houses obsessively, like Balzac or Edmond de Goncourt, or writing books to advise others on how to do this: not only Morris and Ruskin, but Harriet Beecher Stowe (*The American Woman's Home*, 1869) and Edith Wharton (*The Decoration of Houses*, 1902).

Yet for all this, Benjamin may be right when he says that “the first person to grapple with the enigma of the nineteenth-century interior” is Proust (*Arcades* 216). And perhaps the reason for this is that Proust simultaneously describes rooms and dissolves them: the rooms become

translucent, as it were, revealing the way in which interiors are phantasmagoric in a number of senses of that word. One of these senses applies to a certain optical entertainment popular in the nineteenth century, the projection of magic lantern slides (Castle *passim*). In the following passage, Proust describes how a projected image adapts itself to the contours of his room:

If the lantern were moved I could still distinguish Golo's horse advancing across the window-curtains, swelling out with their curves and diving into their folds. The body of Golo himself, being of the same supernatural substance as his steed's, overcame all material obstacles—everything that seemed to bar his way—by taking each as it might be a skeleton and embodying it in himself: the door-handle, for instance, over which adapting itself at once, would float invincibly his red cloak or his pale face.... (8)

For Elaine Scarry the insubstantiality of this image creates, by implication, the contrasting substantiality of the room on which it is projected, and this sense of solidity, Scarry argues, is essential for the building up of what she calls “vivacity” in a reader's imagination (11–16). Vivacity in turn is essential for the experience of fiction. If we are going to go “into” a book's world, that imaginative interior must in some way be contained, just as our existence in the real world is contained within, indeed defined by, our interwoven perceptions. Ortega y Gasset, in his “Notes on the Novel,” argues that fiction's purpose is not to broaden our horizons, as Library Week posters might have it, but to narrow them: if a novel is successfully to remove us from the preoccupations of our lives it must block these out, he says, with “a dense web of innumerable minutely told details” (89). The novel, that is, must practise a form of interior decoration, furnishing at the same time the fictional interior within which the reader is to be situated, and the reader's own interior apprehension of that. What distinguishes Proust's description above from the usual furnishings of a novel, though, is that it allows us to become aware of the process by which fictional furnishing takes place. For if this passage, as Scarry maintains, demonstrates how a fictional interior is created, it also demonstrates the way that imaginative fictions, like that of Golo, may overlay an external reality. So Virginia Woolf, in *To the Lighthouse*, gives us Mrs McNab's memory of Mrs Ramsay as if it were a magic lantern image projected on the house's interior:

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She could see her now, stooping over her flowers; and faint and flickering, like a yellow beam or the circle at the end of a telescope, a lady in a grey cloak, stooping over her flowers, went wandering over the bedroom wall, up the dressing-table, across the wash-stand, as Mrs McNab hobbled and ambled, dusting, straightening. (156)

Admittedly, many modern and contemporary novels do not furnish their inner spaces or even situate them very clearly: the novels of Samuel Beckett are one example, as Glenn Willmott reminded me in a recent paper. This produces a certain effect, one that depends on deflecting the questions we ask any time we enter a novel—questions like “Where am I?,” “Who am I?,” “What is going on?” The fact that these remain largely unanswered produces more than a reader’s frustration: the questions take on metaphysical resonances, and the reader’s homelessness within the novel reflects a broader sense of existential homelessness. This strategy could not have its emotional and intellectual effects, however, if there were not, even in this jaded and ironic age, a deep longing to be enclosed within an interior that accords with one’s sense of self, that in a way *provides* the sense of self—even if the self concerned is that embodied in the fiction we are reading rather than one’s own, presumably non-fictional, self. The media have recently noted an increasing tendency toward “cocooning,” the creation of interiors that speak to one’s sense of self and one’s comforts. Within these enclosures, people gather reassurance, making minimal contact with the bewildering, alien, even dangerous world outside. If this sounds regressive, such is not always the case. James Merrill’s rooms, as Sara Lundquist shows in “An Aesthetics of Enclosure,” are luminously affirmative, even suggesting that their interior forces can affect exterior events. Judith Caesar’s “American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri” considers interiors from both sides. In one of Lahiri’s stories we have a fine old house that is reassuringly stable, for reasons of tradition rather than trendiness; in another we have a similar house, but now split into a disconcerting assemblage of living spaces that are neither one thing nor the other, neither private nor public. In both these cases—indeed in all cases—the physical interior reflects a psychological interior, is its exterior manifestation. Finally, the essay that begins this issue, Jennifer Blair’s “Surface Interiorities” spans the seventeenth century to the present in her analysis of a paradigm of the interior life, the convent. She analyzes not only the paradoxical relationships of interiors and exteriors but also those of representation, itself capable of being viewed as a dynamic of interior and exterior.

Because of this unstable chiasmus between exterior and interior, we will never find ourselves as securely *within* as we would want. The first interior was the only one that more than embraced us, was fused with us. Yet that interior betrayed us. It narrowed claustrophobically until what had been the security of enclosure became an oppressive and terrifying threat. This only ceased with our sudden entry into an alternative terror: an apparently unbounded space, chilly and filled with strange sounds and shapes. It's a psychoanalytic commonplace that at some level we all seek to return to the first prelapsarian interior. So when our ancestors entered caves and took possession of them, it was doubtless not only for the practical reasons of shelter from the elements and from marauding beasts; it was also a way of creating a bounded space within an unbounded world without shape or ending and, consequently, always edged with incomprehension. The cave was comprehensible, it was familiar, it was *ours*. And on its walls we made marks that had a strange kind of magic to them, because they were able to make us see in those marks, and past them, what they were not: animals and hunters and spears and death. This was not interior décor, but those earliest cave paintings nevertheless had something in common with the rooms depicted in the glossy pages of decorating magazines today. Both are material reflections of human desires. And no desire, perhaps, is greater than this one: that the world should reflect back to us the self that we are, or that we aspire to, or think we have chosen. We want our surroundings to corroborate us.

This desire could not exist if there were not a corresponding fear, or a number of fears. Perhaps, for all our years in the world, there is a part of us that still feels that it is a strange place; nor do we have a right to be reassured that it is otherwise. It may indeed be the ultimate purpose of those other marks that are words on a page to remind us of how unfamiliar the world is, once we step outside the comfortable systems we have built in order to make sense of it. If this kind of de-familiarization is, as Victor Shklovsky argued, literature's very reason for being, it may also be that of literary criticism. Returning to even the most comfortable "readerly" texts—those that invite us to enter their interiors and are often replete with fully furnished interiors—we can obtain a new sense of what is at stake in interiority, whether we are dealing with the furnishings of a room or of a mind. And we can begin to see something of the dynamic by which we construct interiors for ourselves while never being able to fully enter them. Yet if we must always stand somewhat outside the interior, that is not a position without its rewards: a detached eye allows us to see more

clearly what is enclosed within literature as well as beyond it, the great reckoning implicit in any room.

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