Architecture and Modern Literature

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An End to Dwelling: Architectural and Literary Modernisms

The Buster Keaton movie One Week (1920) is a possibly unintended but nonetheless effective allegory of a twentieth-century predicament. In this, Keaton’s first independent film, he and Sybil Seely play the roles of newlyweds who build their new home, to be assembled according to numbered pieces delivered in a box. The honeymoon starts to go wrong, however, when Sybil’s jilted lover secretly alters the numbers on the pieces, so that what ends up being built looks today like a grotesque parody of a Frank Gehry design (fig. 2): walls jutting out at wild angles, trapezoidal windows, tilting columns, and an ill-fitting roof. When a storm comes up, the house begins to spin like a top, throwing its inhabitants from room to room. The wind eventually dies down, but then disaster arrives from another quarter: the couple learns that they have built their house on the wrong lot; the right one is across the railroad tracks. As they try to tow the tottering structure across the tracks, a train arrives and smashes it to bits. In the final scene, Keaton puts a “For Sale” sign on the ruined pieces.

Keaton’s dark comedy brings to modern audiences a series of themes that may resonate with their lives: the commodification of shelter, the pathetic effort to build a “home,” and the doomed attempt to sell the ruined remains of this project. His images are emblematic of a set of conditions to which both architectural modernism and literary modernism are forced to respond: big-scale industrialism, social fragmentation, the commodifica-
tion and mechanization of everyday experience. Walter Benjamin claims in 1936 that since World War I “experience has fallen in value”; the traditional human relations that make storytelling meaningful have been subverted and contradicted by unprecedented and incommensurable developments in civilization itself. As the title character in Robert Musil’s *The Man without Qualities* (1930–42) expresses it, “There’s no longer a whole man confronting a whole world, only a human something (*ein menschliches Etwas*) moving about in a general culture” (234).

As art forms, literature and architecture share a profoundly ambiguous and yet productive response to these conditions. In his essay “Experience and Poverty” (1933), written the year that Hitler became chancellor of Germany, Benjamin points out that writers like Bertolt Brecht and architects like Adolf Loos are equally motivated by “a total absence of illusion about the age and at the same time an unlimited commitment (*Bekenntnis* to it)” (*Selected* 2:733). Their disillusionment is not just with political events, but

Fig. 2. Still from Buster Keaton’s *One Week*, 1920.
with the poverty of experience itself, and with the attempts to mask this poverty by the bourgeois aesthetic values of the nineteenth century—attempts represented, for example, by the Jugendstil and Biedermaier styles in design, by the Deuxième Empire and Gothic Revival in architecture, by Victorian sentimentality and the chic aesthetic of the interiors in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Against these styles, the commitment of artists like Brecht and Loos lies in a vision of the age that faces unflinchingly the poverty of experience but not at all in the manner of the late-nineteenth-century realistic novel. Rather, they seek a new aesthetic relation to the world based on an unprecedented existential condition. This is the common ground shared by the modernist movements in literature and architecture.

In architecture, disillusionment with nineteenth-century aesthetics is to be found in Loos’s attacks on ornament and kitsch in his essay “Ornament and Crime” (1913) and in Le Corbusier’s call, in *Towards an Architecture* (1920), for order, geometry, and purity of form: “spirit of order, unity of intention” (75). In literature, we find similar impulses in Ezra Pound’s insistence on the clarity and economy of the poetic image. Just as Loos rejects ornament and kitsch in architecture, Pound rejects sentiment, abstraction, and rhetoric in poetry. Another point of intersection between the two arts is to be found in Le Corbusier’s idea of the open plan, or *plan libre*, according to which the design of a building evolves outward according to a “primary rhythm” belonging to its inner function: “[T]he plan proceeds from inside out: the exterior is the result of an interior” (75). Developing this idea, Mies van der Rohe defends it against the charge that *plan libre* means absolute freedom: “That is a misunderstanding. The free plan asks for just as much discipline and understanding from the architect as the conventional plan” (quoted in Norberg-Schultz 366). We can compare Mies on *plan libre* to T. S. Eliot’s 1917 essay on *vers libre*: free verse does not mean escape from meter, but mastery of irregular meter; it does not mean liberation from rhyme, but liberation of rhyme from conventional forms (*Selected Prose*, 31–36). We might say that in *vers libre*, as in *plan libre*, form follows function. These are not, however, mere questions of style: in each case, we see the reinvention of artistic form based on the conditions of human existence as it is actually lived.

If we see modernist architecture as an expression of contemporary human existence, we begin to understand why one of its great projects is the demystification of “dwelling,” that idealized conception of space that promises rootedness, permanence, and a womblike removal from the ex-
perience of modernity. It is important, however, to distinguish *dwelling* from words of similar meaning such as *living* or *inhabiting*. From at least the time of the Renaissance, *dwelling* has had sacred overtones in English, as in the King James version of the opening line of Psalm 90: “Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations.” The associations of dwelling with sacredness and eternity last well into the nineteenth century. Thus Ruskin in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849): “Our God is a household god as well as a heavenly one; He has an altar in every man’s dwelling” (VIII:227). As so often happens in English, however, the modern meaning of a word conceals a strange history, in this case one that actually contradicts what the word has come to mean. *To dwell* comes from the Old English *dwellan*, meaning “to go astray, be misled, be hindered.”

This etymological ambiguity is to my purpose, for what I wish to demonstrate is that for modern architects and writers alike, the traditionally idealized concept of dwelling is a false promise, one that modern art forms reject in order to strive for a more authentic definition of human existence in its spatial dimension.

The concept of dwelling became a literary and philosophical preoccupation precisely at that moment when it was no longer possible as a way of life. The concept itself is most lyrically evoked in Heidegger’s essay of 1951, “Bauen Wohnen Denken” (Building Dwelling Thinking), in which the German verb *wohnen* is given a meaning very close to the English *dwelling*. As his ideal symbol of *das Wohnen*, Heidegger presents us with the picture of a farmhouse in the Black Forest that has been the dwelling of peasants for two hundred years. Rooted in the earth, open to the sky, and furnished with the work of patient craftsmen, the house represents the ideal of human dwelling in complete harmony with its surroundings. Heidegger originally gave this lecture in Darmstadt, a city that lay in ruins after the war: a Royal Air Force (RAF) attack in September 1944 had destroyed most of the city, killed twelve thousand inhabitants, and left another sixty-six thousand homeless. Invited to speak in the *Darmstädter Gespräch* series on “Man and Space,” Heidegger addressed an audience composed mainly of architects preoccupied with the practical work of rebuilding the city. For them, the *Wohnungsfrage*, the question of dwelling, was a matter of the urgent need for shelter, so Heidegger’s evocation of the Black Forest farmhouse must have seemed both strange and irrelevant to the purpose at hand. It is not that Heidegger completely ignored the *Wohnungsfrage* as his audience understood it. He begins his lecture by admitting that in the present housing crisis one is lucky to have a place to live; he reaffirms the
need for practical and affordable housing open to the air, light, and sun. But he also asks the question whether such housing ensures dwelling (wohnen) in the deeper sense of man’s fundamental relation to the conditions of his being, such as we might imagine to have once been the case for the dweller of the Black Forest farmhouse. For Heidegger, the Black Forest house stands as a countersymbol to the modern condition of spiritual homelessness. The real crisis of dwelling therefore lies not in the present housing shortage but in the fact that human beings are always in search of dwelling in this deeper sense and that they must ever anew learn to dwell. To this is added the problem of consciousness: man’s homelessness (Heimatlosigkeit) lies in the fact that he does not yet understand the urgency of the real crisis of dwelling in this spiritual sense. Yet Heidegger concludes with a consolatory thought: “[A]s soon as man gives thought to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer” (161). Like his contemporaries in literature and architecture, Heidegger calls for an authentic reflection on being, in the space as well as in the time of modernity.

Heidegger’s reflections find an echo in Derrida’s 1998 homage to Maurice Blanchot, entitled Demeure (Dwelling). In this essay, Derrida points out that literature has no essence or ideality of its own; the radical historicity of literature—the fact that its identity is always only provisional and granted only by external circumstances that are themselves subject to change—means that literature has no safe dwelling place: “[I]t doesn’t occupy a place of dwelling if ‘dwelling’ designates at the very least the essential stability of a place; it dwells only there where and if in another sense: it remains in debt (à demeure), having received notice to pay (mise en demeure)”(29). Literature has no place of its own. Wherever it resides, it is always being asked to pay up or move on. Similarly, dwelling is always both conceived of and experienced in a manner that is historically contingent. Dwelling, in other words, does not dwell in the stable essence of its own ontological place; we may say of dwelling what Blanchot says of the truth, that it is nomadic.

In this chapter I wish to explore the question of dwelling as it arises in some representative literary texts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I hope to demonstrate that the literary reflection on dwelling passes from a nineteenth-century nostalgia for dwelling in the traditional sense to liberation from this nostalgia by various narrative and rhetorical means, including a new consciousness of urban space. This process passes finally to a renewed confrontation with the absence of dwelling, where modern writ-
ing strives to relieve the misery of homelessness by giving thought to it. This general movement in literature coincides historically with architecture’s movement from nineteenth-century historicism through the various phases of architectural modernism. To cite just one example, according to Siegfried Giedion, the constructions of Le Corbusier are made as light and airy as possible because this is the only way to put an end to the “fatal patrimonial monumentality”—in other words, to the traditional concept of dwelling that literally weighs so heavily in the history of architecture (Bauen in Frankreich 85).

The kind of dwelling that Heidegger recalls nostalgically is close in spirit to the architectural visions of Victorian writers like Walter Pater and John Ruskin. For Ruskin, one of the fundamental principles, or “lamps,” of architecture is what he calls the “lamp of memory.” This is architecture’s memorial function; it preserves the historical past, as in the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe but also in those domestic dwellings that are a memorial to the ancestral past of their inhabitants: “If men lived like men indeed, their houses would be temples . . . in which it would make us holy to be permitted to live” (VIII:226). At his first view of a “Swiss cottage,” or old-style farmhouse, on the road between Basel and Schaffhausen, he finds it to be “tangible testimony” to

the joy of peasant life, continuous, motionless there in the shadow of its ancestral turf—unassailed and unassailing, in the blessedness of righteous poverty, of religious peace. (xxxv:113).

Dwelling takes place here in deeply privileged space and time, far removed from the crowded tenements of industrial England.

As Ruskin’s general views on architecture are well enough known, let us turn to his contemporary, Dickens, a writer somewhat better acquainted with the crowded tenements of London but seldom read as an architectural writer. Dickens’s novel Bleak House (1852–53) is intensely architectural in its preoccupations. Its great panorama of Victorian society is presented as a triangular relation among three scenes of the built environment. The first is the urban legal district of Temple Bar and Lincoln’s Inn, of courts of law whose institutional corruption is reflected in the smoldering tenements nearby. At the center of this district is the Court of Chancery, “which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire” (13). Second, there is the sinister country house, Chesney Wold in Lincolnshire, emblematic of a sterile aristocracy and rivaled in ghostliness only by Edgar
Allan Poe’s House of Usher. Finally, there is Bleak House itself, a dreamlike refuge from these other scenes of England’s ruin. It is described as follows by Esther Summerson, the novel’s young heroine.

It was one of those delightfully irregular houses where you go up and down steps out of one room into another, and where you come upon more rooms when you think you have seen all there are, and where there is a bountiful provision of little halls and passages, and where you find still older cottage-rooms in unexpected places, with lattice-windows and green-growth pressing through them. (78)

This is all one sentence whose loosely periodic structure imitates the rambling passage through this pleasing labyrinth of a house. The furnishings of Bleak House are similarly eccentric—a profusion of mangles, three-cornered tables, Hindu chairs, china closets, scent bottles, paper flowers, pin-cushions, needlework, velvet, brocade—in short, all of the Victorian bric-a-brac that makes this domestic space into a richly upholstered projection of the fantasy life of its inhabitants. Bleak House is the middle-class counterpart to another of Dickens’s architectural wonders, the little fisherman’s house in *David Copperfield* (1849–50), made out of an old boat. This eccentric dwelling is presented as the perfect realization of David’s childhood fantasy: “If it had been Alladin’s palace, roc’s egg and all, I suppose I could not have been more charmed with the romantic idea of living in it” (28).

If in *Bleak House* Esther is the honorary mistress of her guardian’s house, its resident spirit is Harold Skimpole, Dickens’s parody of the poet and essayist Leigh Hunt. The aging Skimpole is the eternal child, a figure of pure enjoyment, coveting nothing and asking only that others know the joy of generosity by providing him with all the little luxuries of country-house life. The gentle irony with which Dickens treats this genius loci of Bleak House is one sign, I believe, of his ambivalence regarding the fantasy of the house itself. Dickens’s social vision is keen enough to realize on some level the unreality of Bleak House. Others have remarked on the unreal, uncanny nature of Bleak House in terms of Dickens’s vision of social reality, but here I would like to consider it in the light of architectural theory. In its labyrinthine eccentricity and its profusion of exotic furnishings, Bleak House serves as a kind of architectural extension and affirmation of a Victorian fantasy.4

However, the symbolic function of Bleak House as a privileged space is undercut at the end of the novel, when John Jarndyce, the benevolent mas-
ter of the house, builds a perfect dwelling for Esther, his ward, and her new husband, Woodcourt. This new house is in fact a second Bleak House, an uncanny double of the house that up to now has been distinguished by its uniqueness. Reproduced in this manner, the ideal dwelling is in fact commodified, offered in an unacknowledged exchange for Esther’s continued attachment to her guardian after she has chosen to marry a man of her own age rather than Jarndyce himself. The easy reproducibility of the house also tends to undermine its status as an ideal dwelling: unique, authentic, and rooted in a special place. The second Bleak House calls into question the myth of dwelling represented in the original Bleak House by submitting it to the logic of seriality, by permitting the thought that this “original” is in fact based on some earlier model, thereby opening up a process of potentially infinite reduplication, which in turn suggests that the ideal of dwelling is something imagined, constructed, and contingent rather than being an organic, ineluctable bond between human beings and the earth.

I find it significant that among the more than forty illustrations for this novel produced by Hablot Browne under Dickens’s supervision, not one gives us a proper view of Bleak House itself. The frontispiece of the first book edition depicts the brooding Gothic manor of Chesney Wold, not bright Bleak House with its three-peaked roof. It is as if to represent Bleak House in graphic, visual form would be to destroy its immaterial, phantasmatic status. Of course, both Bleak House and Chesney Wold are products of Dickens’s novelistic imagination. But Bleak House is inscribed within the narrative framework itself with a certain dreamlike status, rendering it doubly imaginary. We are thus faced with the following paradox: by producing an exaggerated idealization of the figure of dwelling, Dickens tends to subvert the bourgeois Victorian aesthetic that he appears to celebrate. To register the fantasy of ideal dwelling as such is implicitly to relegate it to the realm of the purely imaginary, just as Ruskin’s own vision of dwelling, the Swiss cottage, can be realized only within the framework of a sacred space far removed from the realities of nineteenth-century England, or, for that matter, of Switzerland.

The qualities of private fantasy embodied in Bleak House are precisely those that come under attack by the modernist movement. In Das Passagen-Werk (The Arcades Project), Benjamin argues that the nineteenth-century private interior is the culmination of a process of alienation brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The theory is that the private individual is alienated from the dehumanizing conditions of the work-
place, and so he creates a domestic space apart from and opposed to this workplace where he can freely indulge in the fantasies of his own subjectivity. Hence the emphasis on ornament, knick-knacks, and materials such as plush, designed to capture and preserve the trace of the dweller.

The nineteenth century, like no other century, was addicted to dwelling. It conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling’s interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet. . . . The twentieth century, with its porosity and transparency, its tendency toward the well-lit and airy, has put an end to dwelling in the old sense. (Arcades 220–21)

Benjamin’s larger point is that the nineteenth-century womblike interior, far from satisfying the individual’s desire for an authentic subjectivity, merely increased a sense of alienation from the real conditions of existence. Again, such a response is recorded by Musil, whose principal character wearily contemplates the interior of the little rococo château he has had renovated at great expense: “All these circular lines, intersecting lines, straight lines, curves and wreaths of which a domestic interior is composed and that had piled up around him were neither nature nor inner necessity but bristled, to the last detail, with baroque overabundance” (134).

The initial project of modernist architecture, then, was to break open this inner space, clean up its lines, clear it of clutter, and let in light and air. This process had already begun, in fact, in the London of Dickens’s day. When Dickens was writing Bleak House in the early 1850s, the most popular public attraction in England was the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, built in 1851 to house the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry. Designed by Joseph Paxton, the Crystal Palace was basically an immense greenhouse made of three hundred thousand panes of glass supported by a skeletal framework of thin iron beams. Although iron and glass roofs had appeared in the Paris arcades as early as 1822, the Crystal Palace promised much greater possibilities for these materials, and was immediately recognized as a completely new kind of architecture.

With the twentieth century, then, modernist architecture seeks to create a new interrelation between interior and exterior. Its principles are those of open space, transparency, freedom of movement, the dissolution of mass, the disappearance of historicizing masks and symbols, and the breakdown of hierarchical and domineering spatial effects. Frank Lloyd
Wright’s buildings open out into the landscape in a subtle and organic way that consciously avoids the domination of surrounding space that we see, for example, in the Palace of Versailles or Castle Howard in North Yorkshire. Many of these principles are given technical definition in Le Corbusier’s “Cinq points d’une architecture nouvelle” (Five Points of a New Architecture, 1926): (1) structural weight is to be borne by pillars instead of walls, (2) flat roofs maximize interior space and preserve green space as gardens, (3) the plan of each level is independent of the others, (4) and windows extend horizontally across the facade, which (5) remains free of the weight-bearing structure (Conrads 120–21). In his writings on urban planning, Le Corbusier also introduced the notion of trafic différencié (differentiated traffic), according to which the built environment is designed for varying speeds and rhythms of life (Norberg-Schultz 362).

Le Corbusier made it clear that his project went beyond a merely technical program: it represented a new way of life, a revolution in consciousness. Where Heidegger finds rootedness in traditional architecture, Le Corbusier finds paralysis.

Out of mere words, we make things whose meaning and form are arbitrarily fixed and immobilised—a glossary of themes appealing to the most permanent ideas, which we then petrify into immovable attitudes: roof, village, belltower, house, etc.; stone, rock and earth; hands. (Manière de penser 18)

We need no clearer statement of the intended continuity between architecture and language, and of the symbolic economy in which certain materials signify a profoundly conservative ideology, which Le Corbusier calls “le culte du souvenir,” the cult of memory (18). If the building materials of stone, wood, and earth or brick carry the symbolic charge of hearth and fatherland, then an entirely new set of values is implied in the new materials of steel, glass, and reinforced concrete. Giedeon called these materials the “subconscious” of modern architecture; they allowed for a new conception of architectural space, one no longer concerned with representational facades and monumental volumes. Rather, the traditional mass of the house was dispersed into a more loosely connected design of rectangular planes. This redesign brought into play an unprecedented degree of interpenetration between the interior and exterior space, as well as between the varying levels of a building (Espace 30). The consequence in symbolic terms was to diminish every traditionally hierarchical order governing the use of space and materials. Architecture, then, transcends notions of patrie or Heimat.
in order to become international; it embraces open space; and it decenters axial order, moving the dweller away from the hearth and putting him or her at the window, where the gaze is naturally directed outward.

If we look at modernist literature in the light of these ideas, it is true that we do not see much interest in the kinds of houses being built by Wright and Le Corbusier. However, we do see what I believe to be a more fundamental correspondence of certain principles as formal and thematic features of literary modernism: transparency, the interpenetration of interior and exterior, the rejection of historicizing symbols, and the breakdown of the hierarchies that traditionally order human experience and, by extension, the structure of works of art. An important dimension of literary modernism is the mise-en-cause of the nineteenth-century notion of privileged space—whether this notion is applied literally to architecture and landscape or figuratively to the nature of the subject. In one work after another, from Proust to Beckett, the subject is opened up and exposed to the elements of modernity. What is revealed in this process, however, is not the inner Xanadu of romantic poetry but rather a space essentially continuous with the outside, itself composed of the elements of a symbolic universe that exists independent of any subject. The inner space of the subject turns out to be a constituent part of the symbolic universe to which the subject is just that—subject and not sovereign. The point is not merely to expose the modern subject as a mere automaton jostled this way and that by forces beyond the subject’s control, like Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd.” Rather, it is ultimately to come to terms with this condition, to work through it toward a more authentic relation to existence. In this respect, literary modernism is like psychoanalysis—there is no question of a cure, but at least we can learn to live with our symptoms.

It is in this light that I would like to consider Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time), 1913–27, a work whose excavation of modern subjectivity is carried out through a richly architectural system of figuration. If the “cathedral” nature of Proust’s work has become a critical commonplace, the proper sense of this metaphor has nonetheless been frequently misunderstood. Adorno observes that in Proust’s work the relation of the whole to its parts is not that of an overall architectonic plan to its realization in concrete detail. Rather, Proust revolted against “the brutal untruth of a subsuming form forced on from above” (*Notes* 1: 174). Proust has a predilection for the Gothic precisely because, unlike classical architecture, it cannot be apprehended in its unity;
too much of it is hidden away in an irregular and asymmetrical profusion of elements. Proust thus puts his faith in the *non confundar*, the “uncombined,” in his unreserved surrender to things in their natural coherence (*Zusammenhang von Natur*) (174). On one hand, this quality as a formal principle would seem diametrically opposed to Le Corbusier’s call for the “spirit of order, unity of intention.” On the other hand, the natural coherence of Proust’s work is perfectly in keeping with the architectural principle of a “primary rhythm” and a “plan libre” that takes form from the inside out and breaks down the conventional divisions between inside and outside. The effect of such a procedure is to destabilize the traditional notion of dwelling, in fact to redefine dwelling in a modern sense, as a continual process of displacement.

From the very first page of his work, Proust creates a multiple analogy of the book, the self, and architectural form. The narrator tells how as a child falling asleep at night his reflections on the book he had been reading would take a peculiar turn: “[I]t seemed to me that I myself was the subject of the book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V” (1:3). The idea of the self as a church introduces the notion of the narrator’s rich inner life as a space to be entered and explored in all the complexity of its structure. From this point on, he will return frequently to the topos of architecture in his analysis of human subjectivity.

In Proust, the structures of desire are rendered in terms of architectural space: on the level of narrative, interior spaces provide a refuge for the expression of forbidden desires, while on a figurative level they allegorize both the hidden nature of such desires and the manner in which they are brought to light through a process of penetration and exposure. I am referring here to the numerous scenes of voyeurism in Proust’s novel. In the opening volume, the young narrator finds himself outside Montjouvain, the country house of the deceased musician Vinteuil. Through a lighted window, he watches Vinteuil’s daughter making love to her female friend before her father’s portrait, an image the two young women take pleasure in abusing as part of a sadistic ritual (1:159–61). In a later volume, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, the narrator watches from a window of his parents’ house as, in the courtyard, the Baron de Charlus engages in an elaborate flirtation with the waistcoat maker Jupien. When the two men go into Jupien’s shop, the narrator moves to an adjacent room in order to hear the violent sounds of their sexual encounter (3:6–16). Again, in the final volume the narrator finds himself on an upper floor of an obscure hotel where, hearing muffled
cries from an isolated room, he peers into the room from a hidden opening. What he sees inside is a lurid scene of sadomasochism, in which Charlus is being vigorously flogged with chains and whips (4:394–96).

Each of these scenes depends for its effect on the arrangement and above all the interpenetration of architectural spaces. In each case, an act of transgression is made possible by an interior space thought to be concealed, but which is in fact open to view from an adjoining space, the space of the voyeur. It is true that scenes like this are not new in literature. They are well known to readers of eighteenth-century fiction, they belong to the repertoire of the licentious novels of Sade and Laclos, and they occur in lighter form as the “bed-trick” scenes in the works of comic authors like Fielding. But Proust’s voyeurism goes beyond these precedents in that it does not rely wholly on the vices of the secret witness and his stealthy gaze. These belong to a conventional voyeurism that depends for its gratification on maintaining the distinction between inside and outside, concealed and revealed, and so preserving the frisson of scandal. Proust’s voyeuristic scenes, however, are rendered in such a way as to undermine these distinctions by a process of analysis, by working through the dynamics of transgression. And so in each instance the narrator arrives at an understanding that allows him to see sexual transgression as something more than mere vice. In Mlle Vinteuil’s profanation of her father’s portrait, he sees an essentially respectful daughter because the pleasure of sacrilege can belong only to those who hold sacred the things they profane: virtue, the memory of the dead, daughterly duty. In Charlus’s seduction of Jupien, what at first appears grotesque is rendered intelligible and even natural by the narrator’s sudden realization that Charlus is in essence “a woman,” that is, one of the secret race of men whose temperament and desires are feminine. Finally, in the scene of sadomasochism, Charlus’s vice comes to be interpreted as having a certain virtue; the country boys whom Charlus hires to whip him bear a striking resemblance to his estranged lover Morel. By thus preserving the figure of Morel in these sad rituals, Charlus remains in his way faithful to the memory of that young man.

In addition to the interpenetration of spaces represented by these scenes and the narrator’s interpretations of them, Proust also thought of these passages in a more figurative manner related to the form of his composition, as supporting the architecture of his work as a whole. According to Proust, the poet Francis Jammes advised him to suppress the infamous Montjouvain scene, an episode he found shocking. But as Proust explains
in a 1919 letter to François Mauriac, “I have so carefully constructed this work that this episode in the first volume explains the jealousy of my young hero in the fourth and fifth volumes, so that by tearing away the column with the obscene capital, I would later on have brought down the vaulted ceiling” (Lettres 21–22).

More generally, the figurative dimension of Proust’s use of architecture can be seen as a modern extension of the classical *ars memoria*, in which a complex object of knowledge could be safely stored in the memory by assigning its parts to the respective rooms of an imaginary house. In Proust, however, this model undergoes a twofold transformation: first, its organization is based not on the assignment of discrete categories to a correspondingly divided series of inner spaces but rather on the mutual permeability of such spaces and categories. Second, the memory to be reconstructed is not an object of merely intellectual knowledge but rather a profoundly disturbing experience—in effect a primal scene—the traumatic elements of which the narrator must recombine and reinterpret as a form of insight into the workings of human nature. In doing so, he acquires a deeper knowledge, as well as an altered sense of what it means to be at home in the enigmatic world that he inhabits. The effect is both cathartic and salutary in ways not unrelated to the liberating effects intended by the masters of modern architecture.

If architecture figures in Proust as a metaphor of inner desire, it figures in Joyce as the concrete embodiment of modernity itself. *Ulysses* is a work that gets its characters out of the house and into the street, where they are confronted not with dwelling in its domestic sense but with their existence in urban space, the very scene of modernity. Le Corbusier’s notion of an architectural space designed for differentiated speeds and rhythms echoes a remark made by Walter Gropius on his design for the Bauhaus School in Dessau in 1926: “The imposition of axial symmetry gives way to a vital equilibrium of free and asymmetrical groupings” (quoted in Norberg-Schultz 370). This is not a bad way to understand Joyce’s Dublin, as well as the structure of *Ulysses*. Joyce shows us a single day in which his characters wander through the space of the city at their respective speeds and rhythms, their paths intersecting occasionally and as if by chance. This plan allows for a break with conventional narrative development, while it also diminishes social distinctions and class difference. In the street, persons of all classes stand at the same level, equally subject to the gaze of the other. At the same time, the space of the city becomes continuous with
that of consciousness itself, effacing the distinction between subject and object. Here is a passage from chapter 8, which Joyce designated informally as the “architectural” chapter.

Trams passed one another, ingoing, outgoing, clanging . . . squads of police marching out, back: trams in, out. Those two loonies mooching about. Dignam carted off . . . Cityful passing away, other cityful coming, passing away too: other coming on, passing on. Houses, lines of houses, streets, miles of pavements, piledup bricks, stones. (8:484–86)

Almost imperceptibly, these lines shift from an anonymous, objective point of view to the consciousness of the novel’s main character, Leopold Bloom, thus performing on a textual level the interpenetration of inside and outside, of the subjective and objective universes. At the same time the shifting, associative flow of consciousness in Joyce is shown to be a function of the ceaseless movement of the city, whose traffic comes and goes, whose structures rise and fall like the formations of thought itself.

Joyce’s profound loyalty to the scene of modernity as one of ceaseless reconstruction leads him to a merciless parody of the traditional myth of dwelling, exposing it as something that can only be realized in a banal and commodified form. The penultimate chapter of *Ulysses* reveals Bloom’s “ultimate ambition” to be the ownership of

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thatched bungalow-shaped 2 storey dwellinghouse of southerly aspect,
surmounted by vane and lightning conductor, connected with the
earth, with porch covered by parasitic plants (ivy or Virginia creeper),
halldoor, olive green, with smart carriage finish and neat doorbrasses,
stucco front with gilt tracery at eaves and gable, rising, if possible, upon
a gentle eminence with agreeable prospect from balcony with stone pil-
lar parapet over unoccupied and unoccupyable interjacent pastures and
standing in 5 or 6 acres of its own ground. (17:1504–12)
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Bloom’s dream house, with its imaginary address of “Bloom Cottage. Saint Leopold’s. Flowerville,” is the twentieth-century real estate agent’s update of Bleak House or of Ruskin’s Swiss cottage. In Joyce’s deconstruction of the myth of dwelling, its true nature in the twentieth century turns out to consist not in the righteous joys of peasant life but in the frantic pursuit of middle-class leisure activities: snapshot photography, gardening, tennis, do-it-yourself carpentry, the reading of “unexpurgated exotic erotic masterpieces,” and the “discussion in tepid security of unsolved historical and criminal problems” (17:1599–1600). The roots of dwelling are exposed as
being not in the earth but in the accumulation and circulation of capital; hence this passage is followed by a long paragraph, written entirely in contractual language, stipulating the terms of a mortgage loan from the “Industrious Foreign Acclimated Nationalised Friendly Stateaided Building Society” (17:1658–59). The point is that Joyce’s parody of dwelling ends by affirming another, more vital relation to architectural space, that represented by the city itself as the scene of encounter with the reality of experience.

Joyce’s representation of urban space in terms of multiplicity, seriality, and circulation finds a counterpart in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), published three years after *Ulysses* and based on a similar structuring principle: the movements of a series of characters through the space of a city (in this case London) on a single day in the middle of June. In contrast to Joyce, however, Woolf is more precisely concerned with a dialectic between domestic space and the urban landscape, especially as this dialectic implies the freedom of feminine consciousness. In Woolf, the recurring motif of this relation between inner and outer space, as well as of conscious freedom, is the figure of the window.

One can hardly underestimate the importance of the window and glass in the discourse and practice of modern architecture. Already in his 1909 essay *Brücke und Tür* (Bridge and Door) Georg Simmel finds in the very nature of the window as a human artefact an object whose symbolic significance goes beyond its practical value. The window is ordinarily made for looking out, not in. Like the door, it marks the transition from a spatially limited interior to an unlimited exterior, and so in an existential sense it symbolizes the place of the uniquely human, poised on the border between finitude and the infinite. In a more concrete sense, the modern innovation of non-load-bearing facades meant that they could be entirely transparent, thus solving in a quite natural way the problem of interior illumination that had existed since the beginning of human history. Among the early modernist visionaries of architectural transparency was Bruno Taut, who designed a Glashaus for the 1914 exhibition of the German Werkbund. This in turn inspired Paul Scheerbart’s novel *Glasarchitektur* (1914), where glass construction symbolizes the society of the future. Scheerbart argues that a higher culture can only come about through architectural transformation, which for him means the introduction of glass, “which admits the light of sun and moon and stars not only through a few windows, but through as many walls as possible, walls made of glass” (Kruft 372). Later, the great master of the medium proved to be Ludwig
Mies van der Rohe. His buildings in the form of glass boxes and towers embody an almost spiritual approach to construction, in which the material of glass unites surface and light, the material and the immaterial (Frampton, “Modernisme” 44).

The architecture of *Mrs Dalloway* is the dull stone masonry of Westminster, with its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century houses. Woolf has no interest in modern architecture as such, and the utopian manifestos of modern architecture in particular should not be confused with the aims of modernist writers like Joyce and Woolf. However, Woolf shares with her architectural contemporaries a passion for the dematerialization of solid boundaries and for the interpenetration of interior and exterior space. The impulse of the novel’s opening passage is that of, precisely, an opening out and a dissolution of the barriers to desire. Clarissa Dalloway stands at the open window of her house and reflects that for that evening’s party “the doors would be taken off their hinges.” This architectural image opens simultaneously onto the exterior space of the city (“what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach”) and the interior space of her memory, for the scene recalls to her how, as a girl, “she had burst open the French windows at Bourton into the open air” (3). The door between memory and actuality, inner and outer spaces, is taken off its hinges. Both the remembered gesture and the present one, however, stand in contrast to the tomb-like hall of the house, “cool as a vault” (37), or to the confined space of the attic room where she sleeps alone on a narrow bed: “There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room” (39). As Clarissa ventures forth into the city to buy flowers, she embodies the freedom of movement enjoyed by middle-class women in the modern city. The nearly ecstatic pleasure she derives from the sensations of urban space serves to compensate for the sterility of her domestic life.

If the window stands for this opening out of feminine desire, it also serves to affirm the “odd affinities” (200) that unite Clarissa on a profound and mysterious level with the people and things around her. Near the end of the novel, she stands at the window once again, alone for a moment during her party. It is dark now, and she has just learned of the suicide of a young stranger whom we know as Septimus Warren Smith. The young man has thrown himself out of a window in an act that Clarissa imagines as one of defiance, of “an attempt to communicate” (241–42). Across the street, in the room opposite, she is surprised by the sight of an old lady staring straight at her from another window. The old lady is going to bed; at last she puts out the light. Clarissa, now contemplating the darkness that
passes over the house opposite, thinks of the young man who has killed himself by throwing himself out of a window; she feels “glad that he had done it, thrown it away while they went on living” (244). The scene is rich in the way it uses architectural space to stage Clarissa’s confrontation with the conditions of her own existence. She stands in a room apart from her guests, but her gaze is directed outward, toward a female figure opposite who returns her gaze, as if in a mirror image. It is a remarkable moment in which the gaze of the other appears as Clarissa’s own gaze directed back at her: however, the old woman’s gaze is neither entirely Clarissa’s own nor that of the other. The point is that the window scene creates a moment in which the difference between self and other is suspended, thereby effacing this boundary in a kind of revelation that also effaces the boundary between life and death. Then the light goes out in the house opposite, and in that sudden darkness Clarissa sees her own death. But death here is not the confinement of the tomb; rather it is the final suspension of difference, the breakdown of barriers. The thought of death unites Clarissa with both strangers, the young man and the old woman: “There was an embrace in death.” I find it significant that this vision is seized through the enframing device of the window, by a feminine gaze directed outward and away from the patriarchal order of the domestic interior—the house of Mrs. Richard Dalloway, hostess to the prime minister. The gaze that passes through one interior, across open space, and into the inner space of the other, stands as a figure for Woolf’s ideal of a unifying feminine consciousness.

The figure of a woman standing at the window is symbolic of a certain feminine stance that we find elsewhere in Woolf. Here we are reminded that the traditional ideal of dwelling is inseparable from a certain idea of the feminine—the femme au foyer, herself a bodily extension of the warmth of the hearth, yet one that is confined to the walls of the dwelling. Woolf’s novels consciously subvert the notion of dwelling that includes the femme au foyer while seeking a sense of permanence that does not depend on the enclosure of domestic space. Her characters represent the attempt, however fleeting and tentative, to be at home in the world. The opening section of To the Lighthouse (1927) is called “The Window.” It is here that Mrs. Ramsey, wife and mother, has the occasion to reflect on the world of social difference: “The real differences, she thought, standing by the drawing room window” (14). These are differences of rich and poor, high and low, “things she saw with her own eyes, weekly, daily, here or in London, when she visited this widow, or that struggling wife” (15). Woolf’s emphasis here is on the feminine consciousness of the feminization of poverty, one that...
can be acquired only by a gaze directed outward from the purely domestic sphere. Mrs. Ramsey, however, is not merely an observer of social reality. She also bears witness to a sense of the permance of being, a sense confirmed by the light reflected in the window: “something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the force of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral” (142).

As an opening onto exterior space, Woolf’s window joins the domestic sphere to the social; as a reflecting surface, it serves as the place of fusion between the material and the immaterial dimensions of Woolf’s world. Finally, it is through an uncurtained window that the narrator of A Room of One’s Own (1929) surveys the London streets (124). In order to write, Woolf says, a woman needs money and a room of her own. But the point is worth making that this celebrated essay is not about feminine self-enclosure. Rather, it is about creating a position from which the world at a given historical moment can be observed and rendered by a feminine consciousness. And so she looks out her window to see what London is doing on the morning of 26 October 1928. Woolf makes it clear, however, that the glass is transparent both ways: as she observes the world, she also exposes herself to its view. The window has no curtain. The woman wears no veil. She looks at London face to face.

At this point I want to return to Benjamin’s essay “Experience and Poverty” in order to lay the groundwork for discussing a rather different response to the conditions of modernity from that which we find in Joyce and Woolf. In that essay, Benjamin speaks of modern civilization as composed of people “who have grown tired of the endless complications of everyday living . . . to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point in an endless horizon” (Selected 2:735). An important artistic response to this state of things has been that of the tabula rasa, the ruthless clearing away or emptying out of all forms of value so that the creative spirit can begin again. This art of “insight and renunciation” is found equally in architecture and literature. Rather than idealizing the material of glass in the manner of Scheerbart, Benjamin finds it to be something cold and sober, “a hard, smooth material to which nothing can be fixed” (2:733). Scheerbart with his glass and the Bauhaus school with its steel create rooms in which the human being leaves little or no trace.

This idea has been taken up more recently by the Italian theorist Massimo Cacciari, who sees the history of twentieth-century architec-
ture as the concrete embodiment of the spirit of nihilism. Architectural nihilism, in Cacciari’s terms, is an even more radical renunciation of the myth of dwelling than my examples have shown up to this point. It annihilates the spirit of place in favor of an abstract geometrical conception of space, it destroys all that is “collected,” and its movement is one of “universal displacement” and “radical uprooting.” Cacciari finds this architectural movement to be essentially necessary given the historical conditions it expresses. He admires, for example, the antiornamental effect of Loos’s 1911 Michaelerplatz building in Vienna, with its bare, stripped-down facade (161). This building, with its simple windows and bare, whitewashed walls, was regarded by Loos’s contemporaries as “nihilistic” (Heynen 91), just as they called his Café Museum (1899) “Café Nihilismus” (Cacciari 111). Cacciari also admires the glass towers of Mies, of an absolute transparency that no longer violates the interior but “appears henceforth as the meaning of the thing that it has helped to destroy” (190). Quoting Rilke’s Seventh Elegy, Cacciari renounces the possibility of being consoled for the loss of dwelling and place, finding instead, in the empty space left by the destruction of these things, “das atmende Klarsein,” breathing clarity (174).

The literary counterpart of the architecture of nihilism is the austere, lucid work of writers of the second generation of modernists such as Jean Rhys and Samuel Beckett. Their deliberate flatness of style, their renunciation of lyricism and “fine writing,” is the literary equivalent of Loos’s relentless antiornamentalism. In this particular respect they show the influence of Eliot more than of Woolf or Joyce. The deadpan voice is the authentic expression of a world emptied of dwelling and bereft of place. Eliot’s 1920 poem “Gerontion” revives the metaphor of the house as an inner space of memory, but here, unlike what happens in Proust’s work, memory no longer bears fruit; it has the lifelessness of “reconsidered passion.” Only vanity now guides the mind through the house of memory, with its “cunning passages, contrived corridors, / And issues,” and the only remaining “Tenants of the house” are “Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season” (Collected 31–33). In the voice and the architectural setting of this poem, Eliot has set the stage for the later work of Beckett.

Before examining one of Beckett’s plays in this light, I would remark that the theater is the perfect hinge medium between literature and architecture. That is, in the theater, a dramatic text is performed in an architectural space specifically adapted to this text, in the form of stage set, backdrop, lighting, and so on. When the scene represented is the Battle of
Agincourt, the actual theatrical space may be nothing more than a limitation to be overcome. But in the case of an interior scene, what is represented is pretty much what is in fact there: an architectural space represents itself. Consider the opening stage directions of Beckett’s *Endgame* (1958).

Bare interior.
Grey light.
Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn.
Front right, a door. Hanging near door, its face to wall, a picture.
Front left, touching each other, covered with an old sheet, two ashbins.
Centre, in an armchair, on castors, covered with an old sheet, *Hamm.*

One could hardly conceive of a better expression of architectural nihilism. The bare interior is the literal staging of an architectural tabula rasa that resists all traces of human dwelling, while doing away with every “collected” object to which an aura still clings: the picture, for example, is turned to the wall. In the course of the play, Hamm will throw away his toy dog, the last object to which any of his affection still attaches. The gesture is reminiscent of a scene in Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) where Anna Morgan, the down-and-out woman of the streets, smashes a picture of a little dog entitled “Loyal Heart” (137). These little dogs are the last survivors of the kitsch objects that once abounded in the Victorian interior.

In *Endgame,* whatever qualities of shelter or domesticity are suggested by the very notion of an interior are here negated, not only by this bareness but also by the absence of difference between interior and exterior. Hamm, who is blind, directs Clov to look out of the windows, which can only be reached by means of a stepladder. The windows are placed above eye level because they serve no purpose, there being nothing on which to open out. Modern architecture’s destruction of the barrier between inside and outside here is given a new, if entirely negative, meaning. Thus at the window stage right, Clov reports, “Zero . . . all is . . . corpsed” (25). At the other window, a featureless sea. There is literally nothing to see in the sense that what Clov sees is the landscape of nothingness, which as such is indistinguishable from the bare interior.

The sense of displacement and uprooting defined by Cacciari is likewise enacted on Beckett’s stage. It has, for example, no traces left of place—of an identifiable landscape or setting with its own location and history: all of this has been abstracted from what is now just space. The
sense of displacement, which here means the annihilation of place, is enacted in the constant if pointless movement about the stage, and by Hamm’s obsessive attempts to occupy the exact center of the room. The notion of rootedness, meanwhile, is parodied in the figures of Nell and Nagg, literally rooted in their ashbins. To portray rootedness as consignment to the dustheap is implicitly to assert a profound sense of uprootedness. Finally, the overall structure of the play is one of a systematic evacuation: it begins with a bare space that is emptied out even more completely, with the extinguishing of Nagg and Nell, the discarding of various props, the hesitant departure of Clov, and the veiling and the silence of Hamm, who is finally frozen in a brief tableau.

How are we to understand this negativity in terms of the problematic of dwelling that Beckett and his architectural contemporaries have inherited from the nineteenth century? An answer to this question is suggested by Slavoj Žižek in *The Fragile Absolute*, where the negativity of empty space constitutes, paradoxically, a fundamental component of the structure of sublimation. His version of this structure consists of two elements: a sacred space, cleared out and exempted from the circuit of everyday economy; and a positive object, which, by virtue of filling this space, is elevated to the dignity of the sublime. In Lacanian terminology, these two elements are designated respectively as the Void and the Thing. In traditional, premodern art, the problem was to fill in the Void, thereby fulfilling the conditions of the Sublime. Vestiges of this premodern aesthetic are to be found in Ruskin, for example, where the “righteous poverty” of Swiss peasant life takes place in a similarly sacred space of dwelling.

Today, however, we can no longer count on the existence of any sacred space, either in the concrete physical sense or in the structure of our symbolic universe. If the problem for traditional art was to fill in the Void, the problem for modern art is one of creating the Void to begin with, this clearing in the midst of a world hostile to anything sacred. The space of modern art, according to this logic, can only be occupied by the most minimal, leftover object: the remainder, the piece of trash. A more sublime object is not available and in any case would not be possible without an adequate space of the sacred; only an object utterly devoid of the sublime can “sustain the void of an empty place,” whose purity depends on its being distinguished from the elements that fill it out (Žižek 26–27).

Here I think we have a key to understanding the trash that occupies Beckett’s theatrical space: the characters in ashbins, the soiled handker-
chief, the sawdust, the fleas, the urine, the stink, the dialogue of asides and throwaway lines. The point is to create a space emptied of all value as the necessary condition for the sacred in a world where no actual object or discourse can fulfill that role. As we have seen, modern architecture, too, has cultivated empty space as well as open space. What might be seen as the fulfilment of nihilism, however, should rather be seen as an essential move in the dialectic of the Sublime.

_Clov_: Do you believe in the life to come?
_Hamm_: Mine was always that. (35)

Hamm replies to the question of faith with a wry confession of failed expectations in his own life, on which the curtain is about to close. His reply expresses a hopelessness to which the emptiness of the stage set, and the austerity of the play as a whole, are perfectly adapted. But it would be an error to interpret Beckett’s art of negation in a purely nihilistic sense. It is more properly seen as a work of ascesis, in the tradition of the _via negativa_ that goes back at least as far as Saint John of the Cross. However, the difference between sixteenth-century and modern forms of ascesis is that the latter have an essentially social character. As Adorno argues in “Trying to Understand _Endgame_,” modern forms of ascesis, whether literary or architectural, are related more to the spirit of the age than to the Holy Spirit (Notes 1:241–75). Such works constitute a form of resistance to the oppressive character of modern social reality. In the very purity of their negation, they therefore carry an element of promise, the promise implied in the courage of an unswerving commitment to the age combined with a total absence of illusion about it. It is in this negative way that modern art finally refers, however distantly, to the promise of that other, as yet uncreated world, the life to come that always was.