

English Architectural Landscapes and Metonymy in Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child*

Bart Eeckhout
University of Antwerp

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Recommended Citation

Eeckhout, Bart. "English Architectural Landscapes and Metonymy in Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.3 (2012): [<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2042>](http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2042)

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Volume 14 Issue 3 (September 2012) Article 8
Bart Eeckhout,

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss3/8>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.3 (2012)

Thematic Issue ***New Work on Landscape and Its Narration***

Ed. Sofie Verraest, Bart Keunen, and Katrien Bollen

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss3/>>

Abstract: In his article "English Architectural Landscapes and Metonymy in Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child*" Bart Eeckhout analyzes Alan Hollinghurst's novel in light of Hollinghurst's interest in architectural representation. Eeckhout analyzes the novel's principal scenario of architectural change in the course of the twentieth century and postulates that Hollinghurst employs unconventional genre codes and queers the social realist novel, the family saga, and the country house novel. Eeckhout analyzes *The Stranger's Child* as a comedy of metonymies which impresses upon its readers the structural necessity of diverse perspectives, labyrinthine metonymical constructions, and the dynamics of place. Further, Eeckhout argues that Hollinghurst dramatizes for his readers how desire impels narratives, landscapes, and human interactions alike in ways which afford only passing moments of aesthetic enchantment and provisional insights along the way.

Bart ECKHOUT

English Architectural Landscapes and Metonymy in Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child*

For a literary-critical contribution to this special issue on narrativity and built-up landscapes, one could do worse than select a case study by Alan Hollinghurst. Although Hollinghurst has made his name primarily through his detailed descriptions of homosexual lives, his stylistic elegance, wit, and deeply allusive responses to the literary canon, the attention he has been paying to architectural spaces has been no less consistent. His small, painstaking oeuvre stages and investigates architecture in multiple ways. This penchant is already evident from the surprising title of *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), and from the fact that his narrator-protagonist there worked for the Cubitt *Dictionary of Architecture*. *The Folding Star* (1994) continued this interest by being grafted onto Georges Rodenbach's Symbolist novella *Bruges-la-Morte*, in which the labyrinthine city architecture becomes a mood-determining and plot-driving protagonist. In *The Spell* (1998), one of the protagonists is an architect asked to restore a High Victorian country house designed in a "rogue Gothic" style (52). Hollinghurst's most famous novel, the Man Booker Prize-winning *The Line of Beauty* (2004), revolves around the protagonist's life in a Tory politician's Kensington house, and sets this lavish space off from a black lover's working-class home, a banker's Victorian country house, a tacky 1980s apartment, and a treacherously pleasant *manoir* in the south of France. Even the single short story Hollinghurst published in between his fourth and fifth novels, "Highlights," depicts an architectural trip to Rome, undertaken by a middle-aged man and an escort boy.

The Stranger's Child is thus the work of a novelist with more than twenty years of experience in fictionally constructing architectural spaces and reflecting on their narrative functions. In the language of Ansgar Nünning's "cultural narratology," Hollinghurst is an author acutely aware not just of "the cultural functions of narratives as crucial ways of world-making" (67), but of how this world-making depends to an important degree on the narrative handling of architectural spaces. As one reviewer suggests, "Few novels since EM Forster's *Howards End* have accorded so much significance to bricks and mortar. ... Still fewer have been bold enough to convey, as Hollinghurst does, just how completely the English experience their own property, and others', as cementing much more than their origins or contingencies. Homes can, and do, dictate outcomes and even destinies" (Canning, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-strangers-child-by-alan-hollinghurst-2298468.html>>). This may seem like a tall claim to make, yet if one deals with its environmental determinism cautiously, without lapsing into simplistic spatial causalities, it does manage to convey how in Hollinghurst's complex narrative weave, architectural spaces "perpetually act and interact dynamically with individual lives," as the same review suggests. And the language of the review does something else that will preoccupy us in the remainder of this essay: it extrapolates, without apparent hesitation, from the specificity of Hollinghurst's narrative to the general cultural perspective of "the English" and their "experience." Such an extrapolation is not just structurally enabled by all literature, which achieves its uniqueness by speaking "singularly of both singularity and generality" (Derrida, "Strange Institution" 68); in this case, it is actively invited by Hollinghurst at various junctures in the text. Picking up on this would-be synecdochic aspect, one could indeed argue that *The Stranger's Child* does not just set out to tell the lives of a diverse range of characters whose condition may be interpreted through the lens of their transforming architectural surroundings; here, we may also turn the claim around by proposing that the novel seeks to understand a century's transformations of the English landscape through the narrative staging of a range of individual life stories. The novel consciously does both: it tells the story of English landscape transformations through the stories of a number of Englishmen whose lives in turn derive a fair share of their meaning from the transformations registered in their surroundings — in a manner that makes the two inseparable and partly interchangeable. And it makes these perspectives intrinsically dynamic, in the sense of mutually influencing and reinforcing, as well as unstoppable and uncontainable. It does this especially by placing the perspectives on a temporal axis in which the present moment proves to be always already divided against itself through its connections with the past and the future.

I argue that *The Stranger's Child* does more, then, than offer a fictional rumination on the fickleness of biography writing — its ostensible subject at the level of plot organization, which revolves around various stages in the life and afterlife of Cecil Valance, an aristocratic poet killed during World War I and modeled partly after Rupert Brooke. The novel does more even than remind us of the longstanding centrality of the genre of biographies in English culture at large, or how this genre is invariably informed by ideology, subjectivity, and politics. It also presents us with the biographies of a handful of architectural spaces and landscapes whose synecdochic Englishness is sometimes insisted upon. And it writes these biographies with the implicit conviction that the narrative tools of fiction are entirely relevant to reflect on such spaces and landscapes.

Before looking into the cultural scenarios that *The Stranger's Child* makes available for critical reflection, however, we should understand why this is a treacherous novel at the level of genre. On the face of it, the book joins several traditions that some are inclined to regard as old-fashioned. With its nearly six hundred pages, its wealth of characters followed over several generations, its central interest in the vagaries of an English country house, and its stylistic realism, the novel looks suspiciously like a combination of antiquated genres: the "grand narrative" in the tradition of Victorian social realism that brings together elements of the family saga and of the nostalgic country-house novel. Those who misread it in this manner, or who feel that it cuts too close to the respective genre conventions, are likely to sympathize with James Wood in *The New Yorker* when he deplores how *The Stranger's Child* is "randy for antique" (Wood <http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2011/10/17/111017crbo_books_wood>). Yet this is to miss how the novel twists and undercuts fundamentally the aforementioned traditions in ways that come much closer to a deconstruction or queering of them. To be sure, Hollinghurst relishes in exploiting genre conventions. But he puts them at the service of a novel that ultimately wishes to achieve a very different, unconventional effect: what we get is a pseudo-grand narrative that combines a pseudo-family saga with a pseudo-country-house novel.

Any reader familiar with Hollinghurst's work knows this is an author who loves to scrutinize hegemonic cultures not by staring them straight in the face but by approaching them indirectly, concentrating on their peripheral effects and symptoms. In *The Line of Beauty*, for instance, Thatcher England is presented through the blinkered perspective of an onlooker with an overdeveloped sense of aesthetics and an underdeveloped sense of politics. Although *The Stranger's Child* differs fundamentally from its immediate predecessor by switching the focalization from a single Jamesian center of consciousness to a variety of such centers, it approaches its topic no less obliquely. If it gives the impression of restoring some of the grand narrative of nineteenth-century realism, it does so by punching enormous holes in it, rendering the narrative fundamentally elliptical, fragmentary, and open-ended. Between the five episodes Hollinghurst elaborates and that are set, respectively, in 1913, 1926, 1967, 1979-80, and 2008, there is no traditional narrative continuity: the world in which we are thrown at any one of these moments is a strikingly different one, with new characters and greatly changed contexts. The continuities that do gradually surface need to be detected frequently through close reading. And the larger portrait that thus emerges proves to be both constituted and constrained by time, which always takes the upper hand over any attempt at rounding off the narrative. In other words, there is no grand narrative at all but only a series of tentative ones propelled by the reader's desire for narrative closure that is sometimes actively sabotaged by the text. The underlying world view is less nineteenth-century than modernist in the Proustian sense: it insists on the endless flow and losses of time.

What Hollinghurst dramatizes – often humorously, at times poignantly – are the epistemic gaps in the construction of life narratives, whether these happen to be about individual people or about buildings and architectural landscapes. In interviews, he likes to emphasize how the novel deals with the unknowability of private lives, and that he tried to keep "a lot of space around" the five episodes "in which they resonate" (Hollinghurst qtd. in Mullinger, <<http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/entertainment/articles/2011-07/01/gq-books-alan-hollinghurst-the-stranger-child-review-the-line-of-beauty>>). Along the same lines, his idea was "to write a multi-generational family saga where all the multi-generational family saga was *left out*" (Hollinghurst, Personal Interview). His handling of the *topos* of the country house is no different: although repeatedly nodding at it, he never

allows his narrative to join the notoriously nostalgic, anti-modern, and anti-urban take on the English country house that we know from studies such as Richard Gill's *Happy Rural Seat* and Malcolm Kelsall's *The Great Good Place*.

There is an important aspect of historical revisionism to Hollinghurst's ironical approach that squares well with queer theory's insistence not just on non-heteronormative sexualities, but on the fundamental uncertainties that riddle the social construction of sexualities, as well as on attempts to subvert the cultural norm of the biological family – what Lee Edelman in *No Future* critiques as the hegemonic logic of "reproductive futurism." After all, the disconnections between the novel's five episodes were directly inspired by the "question of what the shape of one's life is if one doesn't settle down and have children. Some people do have those clear markers of the passage of time and generations, which a lot of gay people are less bound by" (Hollinghurst qtd. in Stokes <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/a9229750-9cbe-11e0-bf57-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1mpy0Le2J>>). In a way, Hollinghurst works out fictionally what a queer theorist such as Judith Halberstam argues theoretically: that there are "queer times" and "queer spaces" that may be pitted against the preferred temporalities and spatialities of heteronormativity. The latter ideology tends to privilege those who build their lives around reproduction, marriage, and longevity, and who create and move within private and public spaces that coincide with heteronormative time markers. By contrast, the novel's alternative, "queer" organization of kinship histories is evident in multiple ways: far from being a simple family saga, the narrative plays with uncertain biological connections, unexpectedly reconfigured family units, and secret love relationships (both hetero- and homosexual, in and out of wedlock). By the same token, the habitual identifying link between houses and families that dominates the tradition of the country-house novel is ruptured: the architectural spaces whose very partial life stories we are offered display no continuity of possession or inhabitation. The continuity that is supposed to lend a unifying identity and history to such spaces is implicitly questioned by the narrative and shown to be a cultural fantasy on the part of those who temporarily inhabit them and impose their own logic of (self-)possession upon them.

This unconventional approach, which has clear affinities with deconstructive and queer reading practices, rests on yet another subversion – that of dramatic irony. Hollinghurst grants us the pleasures of dramatic irony by organizing the narrative chronologically and initiating us into various private moments: as readers we are privileged in that we witness secret and intimate scenes up close, which allows us at all times in the later narrative to know what other or aging characters do not and cannot know, or, just as often, misremember or choose to misrepresent. Yet this procedure is in turn continually undercut: if Hollinghurst entertains us through the mechanics of dramatic irony, he frequently also withholds its easy comforts. In the absence of any authoritative extradiegetic narrator or anybody willing to plug the holes in our understanding of what has been going on, we are left riding waves of not-quite-certain dramatic ironies. In this sense, *The Stranger's Child* is also a pseudo-historical novel: the paradox of its many narratives is that they return us time and again to the uncontainable slippage of the here and now, which automatically destabilizes our belief we could somehow secure any historical past.

My choice of the adjective here – "uncontainable" – is deliberate. For the final and most important structural aspect we need to understand about *The Stranger's Child* is its radically metonymical organization. This builds a significant link with Hollinghurst's use of architectural spaces. As the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor suggests, "Architecture has its own realm. It has a special physical relationship with life. I do not think of it primarily as either a message or a symbol, but as an envelope and background for life which goes on in and around it, a sensitive container for the rhythm of footsteps on the floor, for the concentration of work, for the silence of sleep" (Zumthor qtd. in Unwin 26). Terms such as "envelope" and "container" are typical of an essentially metonymical logic of signification. In the traditional opposition between metaphor and metonymy as tropes of identification, metaphors are taken to establish identity on the basis of an equivalence (the logic of the symbol dismissed by Zumthor as spurious in the case of architecture), whereas metonymies are taken to establish identity through association and contiguity: they follow the syntagmatic logic of the chain and prefer to work with, among other things, envelopes and containers as carriers of meaning. The most treacherous of metonymies – the type to which the abstract nature of language irrepressibly

invites — is the figure of synecdoche, which identifies part with whole and allows the two valences to switch positions. It is this way of signifying that makes book reviewers respond to the novel's synecdochic winks by jumping to the conclusion that *The Stranger's Child* "maps the thousands of changes to befall England, Englishness and English subjects across the past hundred years" (Canning <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-strangers-child-by-alan-hollinghurst-2298468.html>>), effects "a moving commentary on English decline" (Wood <http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2011/10/17/111017crbo_books_wood>), or constitutes a "state-of-England novel" suggesting that "the decay of its architecture ... shows how badly off the nation is. As the houses decay, the people become ever more dingy" (Lynch <<http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/review-the-strangers-child-by-alan-hollinghurst-2805628.html>>).

Yet in spite of such formulations (some of which are obviously too pat), these same reviewers have not always credited how very basic the metonymical drive in this novel really is. It is as if Hollinghurst wanted to push E.M. Forster's famous principle "Only connect!" to the point of overdetermination. *The Stranger's Child* is hyperconnected: it is shot through with sundry types of connection that all require lateral processes of interpretation. In the *London Review of Books*, Christopher Tayler sums up a few of these strategies when he writes: "As well as the parallels between Cecil's reputation and the Sawle and Valance residences, *The Stranger's Child* has an intricate armature of doublings, foreshadowings, James-style withholdings, Proust-style 'ways' ('the country way, and the suburban way') and leitmotifs, one of them literally Wagnerian" (Tayler <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n15/christopher-tayler/the-rupert-trunk>>). The book's metonymical deep structure is announced by its very title, which stitches the primary image of biological offspring (the child) together with a qualification that throws doubt over its validity (it is a stranger's child). This metonymical chain of ultimately uncontainable associations is further enhanced when the verse-lines from which Hollinghurst's title is lifted are quoted in the novel itself as part of Alfred Tennyson's "In Memoriam": "Till from the garden and the wild / A fresh association blow, / And year by year the landscape grow / Familiar to the stranger's child; / As year by year the labourer tills / His wonted glebe, or lops the glades; / And year by year our memory fades / From all the circle of the hills" (stanza qtd. in *The Stranger's Child* 68).

Once we start paying attention to this copious use of association and contiguity, we notice how the novel is really a comedy of metonymies played out at different levels. At the macrostructural level, the first three episodes are all situated consciously on the margins of major political moments to which they are fleetingly tied: the scenes take place on the cusp of the First World War (Part One), in the build-up toward the Great Strike (Part Two), or just before the passing of the parliamentary bill legalizing homosexual encounters (Part Three). At the thematic level, the novel explores how human memory continually builds unstable and unreliable chains to the past, until we come to agree with the octogenarian Daphne's assessment that memories are "only memories of memories" (*The Stranger's Child* 496-97). Just as conspicuously, Hollinghurst deploys an arsenal of devices for presenting his characters metonymically. Not only does he indulge in characterization through contiguity (starting with Cecil Valance's fetishized body linen and the mess he makes of his guest room at Two Acres), he clearly also loves to link characters through kissing scenes (Harry and Hubert, Cecil and Daphne, Cecil and George, Dudley and Daphne, Daphne and Revel, Peter and Paul), all the while making sure such intimate links are short-circuited again through accompanying or subsequent moments of revulsion, alienation, and detachment. In the same fractured metonymical manner, he likes to convey sexuality and desire through Freudian displacements (the cigar scene in the hammock at Two Acres), or he will replace bodies by their reproductions (the sculpted marble tomb by which Cecil's body is displaced and the secret of "the celebrated *membrum virile*" that it hides [155]).

Like pieces on a chessboard, moreover, characters in the novel are moved around, made to serve metonymical roles and switch positions. Daphne marries the brother of the man she was really in love with. Little Wilfrid mixes up dead biological uncles (Cecil and Hubert) with co-opted ones (Uncle Sebby and Uncle Revel), and the language in which he acknowledges his error — "an honourable uncle" (232) — itself enacts a metonymical glide away from the word he really intends: "honorary." Characters' identities are confused, as Paul Bryant experiences and occasionally exploits to develop a

questionable identity of his own. Character parallels are invited through identically worded descriptions: both Dudley in the 1920s and Mr. Keeping in the 1960s "had a bad war," and about both Cecil and Revel the dementing George blurts out they "would fuck anyone" (*The Stranger's Child* 456, 461). Most glaringly, however, characters are connected synecdochically to their country. George, who may be interpreted as the embodiment of homosexual secrets long suppressed from official versions of English history, makes his name as a historian by writing *An Everyday History of England*. Paul's sensationalist biography of Cecil, which among other things discloses George's affair with the poet, is called *England Trembles* — no doubt in response to George's book. And we are told that Dudley Valance sold Corley Court because he felt "England ... was a changed land" (396).

The writings produced by so many characters in the novel are similarly hyper-connected. When Dudley writes his satirical country-house novel, he gives it a metonymical title, *The Long Gallery*, which in turn inspires his ex-wife Daphne to call her memoirs *The Short Gallery* (and those memoirs, typically again, choose to convey the author's life through a displaced series of portraits of the important men in her life). When in the final 2008 episode a number of suggestive letters are discovered that belatedly establish a connection between Harry Hewitt and Cecil, the discovery leads to a wild goose chase to Harry's nearly ruinous house that makes the protagonist in this episode, Rob Salter, hit a literal and figurative wall: at the end of the novel, instead of the closure of a great revelation, Rob carries away from the house nothing but the metonymical smell of the backyard fire's smoke on his hands. Such an open ending is only fitting for a novel constantly haunted by the fleeting presence of Cecil's poem "Two Acres," which is conveyed incompletely through quoted bits, variants, and later additions that never allow the text to congeal and achieve the closure of metaphorical identity — just as the contents of the poem are ambiguously connected to the "you" it addresses, and just as the text installs in its seemingly bucolic environment the "wild dark path of love / Whose secrets none shall ever hear" (52).

Now that we understand the novel's larger project of setting up countless metonymical connections only to have them disturbed again and shown to be treacherous, we can finally look at what the most elaborate landscape scenario in the book is able to tell us about the relations between narrativity and the perception/conception of landscapes. Although *The Stranger's Child* takes us into a range of buildings and landscapes, I must limit myself here to one of the two principal scenarios with which we become acquainted early in the novel, which means in the early half of the twentieth century. This scenario presents us with an aristocratic country house, Corley Court, lording it over an estate of three thousand acres: we watch it being redesigned inside from its original High Victorian style to a set of boxed-in modernist rooms, and meet the building and grounds again in the second half of the twentieth century, when they have been converted into an elite prep school. As a metonymical device for characterizing protagonists, this space contributes substantially toward Hollinghurst's characteristic dissection of the workings of class in English society. The word "estate" is not derived from Latin *status* for nothing. The connection with the modern-day meaning of "status" is repeatedly on display in the text, yet the fictional role and life of this estate is much richer than an analysis of class and status might suggest.

Because every one of the novel's 39 chapters is focalized through a participant character and we have to make do without an omniscient narrator offering extensive descriptions of the settings, we need to piece together our own cognitive maps of Corley Court as we find it inhabited and experienced by characters. This may already remind us of an obvious experiential point that is of considerable importance nevertheless to discussions about the relation between narrativity and architectural landscapes: the challenge for the reader who tries to piece such a built space together over the course of sometimes hundreds of pages is such that it gives this reader a palpable sense of the categorical difference between, on the one hand, the holistic narratives (typically a combination of drawings, floor plans, images, and text) developed by architects about the spaces they construct, and on the other, the much more ephemeral, partial, and confused narratives of individually lived experience through which we perceive and conceive of everyday spaces around us.

To investigate the case of Corley Court, we should start by sketching the terrain first: we are moving into Berkshire, one of the old "home counties" in the south of England that stretches to the west of Greater London. The country house and surrounding estate the reader is expected to puzzle

together goes back to the 1870s and is a High Victorian extravaganza typically built for the newly rich who, like the Valances, were raised to the first level of aristocracy under Queen Victoria. Hollinghurst makes sure we remain aware of the family's recent wealth and peerage, and how their home is both a class and a fashion statement despite its consciously sought-after look of being "sunk in habit and history" (151).

Even without attempting an exhaustive inventory of the estate's and the house's components, we need a substantial paragraph to flesh out this landscape. The grounds leading up to the house start with a lodge-house and several miles of trees belonging to the Park; on the unvisited outskirts are an uncertain number of farms. Closer to the house, we come upon the High Ground (an immense lawn), greenhouses, a fishpond, a stone arch, a flower garden with rose arches and maze-like hedges presenting a "compass of decisions" to strollers (134), flagged paths and gravel paths, and a wealth of decorative statues. The house itself is copiously pinnacled, turreted, and gabled, with the walls presenting nervous polychrome patterns of red, white, and black brick. There is an oriel window in one of the upstairs bedrooms, a clock in the central gable under a pale stone banner displaying the Valance motto ("Seize the Day") and a porch in front. We enter through a dark oak door into a huge hall with a fireplace in the shape of a castle, a battery of hall chairs, large paintings of landscapes with cows, and in the middle a massive if functionless oak table, beyond which we find the great square stairwell with its grand central stairs decorated with gryphons and wyverns. Off the hall is a long passage with still more paintings of cows and a pianola. The sheer variety of downstairs rooms suggests something of the size of the building: besides the separate chapel attached to the side, reached through a glassed-in arcade, there are at least the library, the oriental dining-room (with a gaudy décor of mirrors and gilding), the drawing-room, the smoking-room, the Gentlemen's Lobby, the morning-room, a separate set of rooms used by the old Lady Valance, the cloakroom, the marble and mahogany washroom, and the uncertainly located servants' dining-room. The Valance coat of arms appears in many of the Gothic windows and an arsenal of antique clocks chimes through the rooms. There is a grand piano, various objects carry the preventive imprint *Stolen from Corley Court*, and there is no shortage of window-seats. Upstairs we find a series of rooms with individualized names, such as the Yellow Room and the Garnet Room (with a grand bed), but also a study, a linen-room, and a laundry-room that gives access to the roof. There are various backstairs as well as unexplored cellars and attics. The domestic staff at Corley consists of twenty servants according to Daphne in 1926 (140), although this number rises to thirty-five by the time she is in her eighties and reminisces about her days there (473).

Hollinghurst wanted Corley Court "to be a real test of the enthusiast's mettle" (Personal Interview) and in the novel the building comes in for scathing dismissals as a "Victorian monstrosity" (268) and "a violently Victorian house" (528), but before we consider its contested architectural pedigree any further, we might already sum up the transformations it undergoes in the rest of the century. Late in the book, we learn that the house was requisitioned as a military hospital during World War II, then sold in 1946 and turned into a prep school for boys. By 1967, the only Victorian insides surviving intact are the library, the chapel (with the attraction of Cecil Valance's marble tomb), and the central staircase. Otherwise the building is much changed: the rooms downstairs have been boxed in and converted into six classrooms, with floors covered in brown linoleum; a housekeeper's room has become the music-room, the cook's bedroom has become the sick-bay, and one of the main bedrooms now serves as the headmaster's sitting-room. Outdoors the floral maze has been removed, a small rockery added by a pupil, there are playing fields including a cricket pitch, a cricket pavilion, an Ionic temple to house pets, and boys' gardens. In the estimate of an enthusiastic young man who is by then living and teaching at the school, Peter Rowe, "the house was perfect for a boarding-school — secluded, labyrinthine, faintly menacing, with its own tree-lined park now mown and marked out in pitches. No one, it was felt, could want to live in such a place, but as an institution of learning it was pretty much ideal" (269). Since Peter is a closeted gay man, such ironical observations are easily multiplied, as when boys' schools of this kind are taken to be queer by definition: "In a public school the queer ones didn't generally need to rebel, they fitted in beautifully" (296).

If *Two Acres*, on the analogy of Rupert Brooke's *Old Vicarage in Grantchester*, acquired literary fame coincidentally — because Cecil's poem composed during a single brief visit was turned into a

national emblem after his death in the trenches — Corley Court's relation with poetic production is less bound by coincidence: this estate simply demands literary attention. From childhood onwards, Cecil composes Brooke-like poems about his ancestral home because, in his own words, "The place seems to call poems forth — somehow!" (65). This formulation runs strikingly parallel to how Cecil is himself recollected after his death: as "someone who commanded description, which was a rareish thing, most people going on for years on end with not a word written down as to what they looked like" (154). Flamboyant architectural landscapes designed for aristocrats expect to receive artistic attention as much as their owners do: this is their way of affirming cultural privilege. Daphne, who comes to live at Corley by marrying Dudley, even feels as if the house "had in a way chosen her" (141). And when Peter Rowe, who is among the early few to develop a fondness for its Victorian excesses during the sixties, weighs the idea of writing a biography about Cecil, he "looked at the house, as if it enshrined the mystery and in its Victorian way imposed the task" (363). A house like this, with its exhibitionistic dramaturgical staging, imposes the task of writing biographies about its inhabitants.

Such a house, moreover, also invites being used as a fictional "gauge for all sorts of social change" and "questions of taste" (Hollinghurst, Personal Interview). The most conspicuous motif around which Hollinghurst raises questions of changing taste is that of the "jelly-mould domes" in the ceiling of the oriental dining-room. He appears to have gotten his inspiration for these from a country house in Devon called Knightshayes, designed by the eccentric High Victorian architect William Burges. There, almost immediately after the house was finished, one of the ceilings full of such lavishly decorative domes was boxed in by the owners to be rediscovered only a century later (Hollinghurst, Personal Interview). The jelly-mold domes are brought up for the first time in the 1913 episode at Two Acres, where they serve as an emblem of the snobbish attraction exerted by the distant romance of Corley — both to George, who has seen them, and to Daphne, who has not (20, 98). By 1926, however, when Cecil has already been dead for years and the time of romance is over, the dried-up George has lost his enthusiasm for them: he is now more inclined to mock "the egregious grotesqueries of the Victorians" (140) and feels that a "dispiriting odour, of false piety and dutiful suppression, seemed to rise from the table and hang like cabbage-smells in the jelly-mould domes of the ceiling" (147).

The pointlessly elaborate aesthetic luxury of the ceiling comes to be associated clearly with the character of Cecil, who loved them, so that it is not too absurd to interpret them also as a coded form of queer architecture — the more so since a link of this kind is suggested when Peter Rowe in 1967 expresses his interest in the jelly-mold domes to Paul Bryant and follows this up by saying, "I think Cecil was probably queer, don't you?" (356). This kind of eroticization of architectural styles and their encrypted associations is beautifully extended by Hollinghurst in the narrative line he pursues about Corley's makeover in the 1920s. After the war, Cecil's brother Dudley has come to despise the house's frivolities and decides to have the rooms modernized. This allows Hollinghurst to work his architectural image in a variety of ways. For one thing, the boxing-in of the jelly-mold domes comes to serve "as a kind of larger metaphor for suppressing all sorts of inconvenient or over-colorful aspects of the past" (Hollinghurst, Personal Interview). As Corley's headmaster in the 1967 episode comments, "When Sir Dudley Valance covered it up he knew exactly what he was doing" (345). But the novel stages a number of complicating ambiguities here. Roaming through the 1926 episode, for instance, is the sexually ambiguous figure of Mrs. Riley, the fashionable interior designer in charge of the house's transformation — what she herself describes as "improving Corley" (179). She has already been tackling the drawing-room, boxing it in, painting it an off-white color, and changing the furniture so that the whole thing looks like "some extremely expensive sanatorium" (113). Those with stronger ties to the past (including to the dead Cecil) are unhappy with the radical metamorphosis, though Dudley in his memoirs will congratulate himself on how "a modern brightness and simplicity effectively overlaid the ingenious horrors of an earlier age" (438).

What makes this plotline so compelling is that Hollinghurst forces us to consider an unusual range of possible motivations for the appeal of architectural minimalism during the 1920s and the sometimes aggressive anti-Victorianism with which the new style was accompanied in England. Handbooks of architectural history will offer their stereotypical scenarios for this shift in taste. But by elaborating a complex case study in fictional form, Hollinghurst provides a felt sense of the difficult simultaneity of

spoken and unspoken motivations — and of their undecidabilities. At the most obvious macropolitical level, we are invited to see the war-injured Dudley's eradication of his Victorian heritage as the work of a traumatized "lost generation" wishing to break with the value system of the nineteenth-century British Empire that had culminated in the Great War, and performing the break with considerable symbolic violence (note, however, that the text itself also allows us to question such an easy grand narrative by insisting that Dudley's character was already dark and caustic before the war: the sarcasm inherent in modernism's destructiveness was psychologically pre-established in his case before any geopolitical cataclysm happened to reinforce it). An equally obvious sociological motivation for which the text provides evidence is that minimalism may simply be a fashion: Mrs. Riley's dress code makes her "a sort of advertisement for her room; or perhaps the room was an advertisement for her" (123); she appears "almost laughably fashionable, a pearl-coloured cloche hat pulled down tightly on her black bob" (146); and Hollinghurst satirizes the fact that she holds Wagnerian opera in contempt and confesses to being neither poetical nor literary (122, 176). Such commonly acknowledged motivations for the agon between architectural modernism and its Victorian predecessors, however, are extended here by a subtle psychological nexus of familial and sexual motivations. Dudley's symbolic attack on his family home also turns out to have Freudian overtones befitting the era in which this part of the story is set. It appears to be partly motivated by competition with his dead brother Cecil, who as the oldest born would have inherited the estate and likely would have guarded it in its pristine condition. It is informed, furthermore, by an Oedipal wish to clean out the house after the death of Dudley's father. And it constitutes an indirect critique of Lady Valance's tyrannical regime as well as her cranky belief in séances as a way of communicating with her dead son.

These troubled family relations in turn mesh with more strictly libidinal drives. If Corley's outrageous High Victorianism proved susceptible to a queer reading, the same ironically applies to modernism's supposed alternative. Far from setting up a simplistic opposition between a crypto-eroticized Victorian architecture and an asexual modernism, Hollinghurst cleverly manages to queer both styles. Here the modernist architect Adolf Loos's attack on ornamentation comes to mind, especially in Theodor Adorno's reading of it as deriving from Loos's "disgust with erotic symbolism" (10). Yet in the case of Corley Court, the relation between sexual drives and architectural transformations is more ambiguous than Loos's precedent suggests. Although, for example, the boxing-in of the queer jelly-mold domes may be read as an allegory for the Valances' posthumous attempt to cover up Cecil's sexuality, the allegory is more polysemous than this: it may also figure Dudley's own attempt to keep his same-sex desires closeted after the death of a friend in the trenches left him traumatized. The general wartime trauma to which the symbolic violence of the modernist makeover might theoretically be attributed might thus also act as a smokescreen for a much more personal sexual drama. And then there is still Mrs. Riley's sexuality: for a while, Daphne suspects this paragon of the 1920s modern woman to be after her husband, only to find she has been misreading the woman's sexual energies all along. As soon as we come to understand that Eva Riley is sexually interested in Daphne rather than Dudley, we are again forced to recalibrate our perspective on the relation between eros and architecture. All of a sudden, the minimalist architectural style Eva embodies invites a further reading in terms of her lesbian desire both to make a clean cut with the past and to develop a style that makes her desire unreadable — or that presents a blank slate upon which a new text may be written, much as Eva proposes to redesign Daphne herself, in more senses than just sartorially.

Corley Court is a space, then, with a lot of ins and outs, not just literally. When in the fourth episode the old Daphne lies in her bed thinking of the past, she mulls over the fate of so many books she has read: they appear to give back only dim recollections, like "a coloured shadow at the edge of sight, as vague and unrecapturable as something seen in the rain from a passing vehicle: looked at directly it vanished altogether" (498). Such is the way also with the nexus of architectural landscapes and sexualities Hollinghurst explores in his novel — those "stately homes, and homos, of England," as one reviewer quipped (Miller <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8579150/The-Strangers-Child-by-Alan-Hollinghurst-review.html>>). It is a nexus that appears to be best served by narratives organized along the essentially metonymical axis of texts. This is the axis, after all, along

which desire is also said to run in Lacanian psychoanalysis, where the figure of metonymy is related directly to the force of desire. It makes sense, then, to turn to Catherine Belsey's study of fictional enactments of desire to understand, finally, how Hollinghurst's novel joins a long tradition of "stories that [Western] culture acclaims" and that "can be read as indicating not only a dissatisfaction with official, institutional values, but also a delight in the power of textuality to defer closure, to postpone the knowledge which would restore to the *cogito* the solipsistic mastery it so eagerly seeks" (41). Belsey's perspective is poststructuralist and so it squares well with some of Derrida's ideas on the similarities between architecture and writing. "There is no building," notes Derrida, "without streets leading towards it or away from it; nor is there one without paths inside, without corridors, staircases, passages, doors. And if language cannot control these paths towards and within a building, then that only signifies that language is enmeshed in these structures, that it is 'on the way'" ("Architecture" 319-20). Derrida concludes that language "has always had a certain connection with habitability and with architecture. This constant 'being on the move,' the habitability of the way offering no way out entangles you in a labyrinth without any escape. ... As Mallarmé puts it, '*ce qui a lieu, c'est le lieu*' ... This also means that the construction of architecture will always remain labyrinthine. The issue is not to give up one point of view for the sake of another, which would be the only one and absolute, but to see a diversity of possible points of view" (320-22). It is this structural necessity of diverse perspectives, labyrinthine metonymical constructions, and the dynamical taking place of place that *The Stranger's Child* is able to impress upon us by fictional means, reminding us once again how desire impels narratives, landscapes, and human interactions alike in ways which afford only passing moments of aesthetic enchantment and provisional insights along the way.

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Author's profile: Bart Eeckhout <<http://www.ua.ac.be/main.aspx?c=bart.eeckhout>> teaches English and US-American literature at the University of Antwerp. His interests in research include contemporary literatures in English, queer studies, urban studies and architecture, and Anglophone modernist poetry, in particular the figure of Wallace Stevens. He is editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*. Eeckhout's books include *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing* (2002), *Wallace Stevens across the Atlantic* (2008; with Edward Ragg), and *Wallace Stevens, New York, and Modernism* (2012; with Lisa Goldfarb). E-mail: <bart.eeckhout@ua.ac.be>