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The Modernists: Translating Between Fiction and Architecture

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The Modernists: Translating Between Fiction and Architecture

Kotryna Garanasvili

There are hardly two forms of art more different than literature and architecture — different in their final expression, at least. But despite the difference in their external form, they are closely interrelated. Architecture is an integral part of the majority of literary works, its most evident function is to serve as a dwelling for the characters; as a rule, they live and act within a variety of buildings. But it does not end there — instead of remaining a passive background, architecture goes on to convey significant literary ideas.

This connection is especially compelling in creative writing. Carefully considered, development of architectural spaces makes for an extremely rich technique for constructing literary meanings. I have chosen to build them up in *The Modernists*, a novel that focuses on architects themselves, bringing my own creative work into the analysis and seeing how theoretical ideas about the link between architecture and literature can be developed in the creative process to make the work of fiction an extension of these ideas. Accompanied by a commentary, the extracts from the novel will illustrate how the architectural and literary planes intertwine to construct particular meanings.

The interaction between architecture and literature breaks down the barriers between the two artistic expressions, or at least constructs bridges between them.¹ As proposed by Aarati Kanekar, an equivalence of meaning can be found between the signs of architectural and literary expressions, which both feature a notion of logical construction.² Parallels can be found even in their structural arrangement. For instance, Katja Grillner and Rolf Hughes, originally trained in architecture and creative and critical writing respectively, assert that architecture and literature share an analogous composition: if, in architecture, a ‘passage’ is a transitory space that takes the viewer from one space (or room) to another, in literature, it is accordingly a particular section of the text.

¹ David Spurr, *Architecture and Modern Literature* (Michigan City: University of Michigan Press, 2012), p. 3.

² Aarati Kanekar, *Architecture's Pretexts: Spaces of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 5.

Therefore, certain passages in a verbal text can be compared to spatial volumes.³

Architectural spaces can convey essential thematic aspects of literary works. They fulfil a wide range of functions in various works of fiction: from revealing the inwardness and complex feelings of the characters to serving as models to structure the society and providing an ideology. Serving as a mirror of the characters is one of the most important functions architecture performs in literary works. Building on Yuri Lotman's concept, the depiction of a built space in literature can reveal insights to the characters' identity — both their inner life and the way they present themselves to others.⁴ A memorable example is the case of Jay Gatsby's manor, which Fitzgerald describes as 'a huge incoherent failure of a house'.⁵ The architectural disharmony of the house represents the inadequacy of its owner and his essential failure to achieve his vision. In turn, architecture reflects the nature of human relationships — for example, the way someone's spatial arrangement is perceived by another person defines their particular connection and their understanding of each other.

Built spaces are also capable of producing intense feelings and emotional reactions in people who are experiencing them. Buildings can exert a strong psychological response, as David Spurr reveals through J.G. Ballard's presentation of the Heathrow Hilton hotel⁶: this building is revealed to hold the ability of changing people's inner state, altering their emotions and even acting as a substitute for emotions.⁷ In addition, the built environment can exhibit complex human emotions and inner states — for instance, a chaotic arrangement of spaces can illustratively signify a disturbed inner turmoil.

The functions achieved in literary works through architectural codes are multiple. Above all, architecture provides a rich reservoir of semiotic signs, embodying a multidimensional reality and offering a universal model that can be applied in creative writing to discern corresponding meanings.

The possibilities that the depiction of architectural spaces offers are employed in *The Modernists*. Set in near future, the novel explores virtual reality (VR) technology — established to create a very

³ Katja Grillner, Rolf Hughes, *Room Within a View: A Conversation on Writing and Literature* (Amsterdam: OASE Foundation & NAI Publishers, 1999).

⁴ Yuri Lotman, *The Symbolism of St. Petersburg and the Problems of Urban Semiotics*. In: *Cultural Semiotics* (Vilnius: Baltos Lankos, 2004), pp. 332-349.

⁵ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Green Light, Kindle Edition, 2011), p. 179.

⁶ David Spurr, *Architecture and Modern Literature* (Michigan City: University of Michigan Press, 2012), pp. 246-247.

⁷ Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interviews*. Vol. 1. (Milan: Charta, 2003), p. 60.

detailed replica of reality and used by the architects to design buildings. It revolves around a complex relationship between two different generations of architects during the time of rapid technological development that brings into question the conventional understanding of architecture and its future. The protagonist, Anthony Champneys, is an aspiring apprentice of a legendary and reclusive architect, Daniel Caswell. Anthony is a perfect craftsman of the VR technology but suffers from imposter syndrome when it comes to his own art. His main task is to transform Caswell's designs into the VR and act as a middleman between Caswell and his clients. The dynamic changes dramatically when both architects enter a contest for a building that attempts to change the very concept of architecture. In this contest, Anthony and Caswell are no longer co-workers but rivals. Architectural spaces perform a variety of functions in the novel, intensifying its themes, revealing the nature of the characters, their interactions and complex relationships, as well as their intense emotional life.

The following selected non-consecutive passages focus on the relationship between Caswell and Anthony: it is at the centre of the novel, and serves as a means to develop its main themes. Both characters use the most personal architectural arrangements of their homes as a means of expressing their way and view of life. Caswell's own home is very understated, faceless and does not reveal anything of his personality:

Anthony remembered how surprised he was upon seeing [Caswell's] apartment for the first time — quite contrarily to any possible expectation, it was strangely simple. It was not a lack of taste or expense that this simplicity arrived from. The apartment was rather conventional, lowbrow even. For a moment Caswell seemed to him to be walking around like a wild animal, domesticated and put into a large enclosure.

However, Caswell expresses his personality through every building he designs. These buildings are even capable of revealing the parts of him that he does not display when interacting with other people:

They were warm, now already old-fashionedly cosy, decorative in their complexity. It meant that he was, or could be, like this too. Did all his warmth go into his creations, was it the only way to express it?

Meanwhile, Anthony's small apartment betrays his status as a young professional at the start of his career, as well as his careful attention to convention and peer pressure. The apartment is exactly as

it is supposed to be — containing the kind of furniture and elements of decoration that are trendy and well-liked among people of his status and position, and therefore acceptable. He establishes himself as an immaculate part of the environment and community that surrounds him, taking careful precautions not to stand out — he dresses in the way everyone else does, engages in every activity that is considered proper or reputable, painstakingly perfects his skills and is generally cautious to fully perform his role — mainly as the executant of a greater artist's work, a member of a prestigious architectural institution. At one point, he even observes his apartment — his only truly personal space throughout the novel — considering whether it would be different if he belonged to a different kind of community and trying to decide how much of the architectural arrangement depends on his own person. Ironically, this contemplation is provoked by a surprise visit of a person who has a great influence on Anthony; he is encouraged to look at his space the way that the other person — not just a random observer — would see it, and reconsiders his own character and inner world as he carefully goes through every object in the apartment and the architectural whole that they form:

He tried to make it as aesthetic as possible — as much as the limited space allowed him. He wondered how his space would look like if he had followed a different path, was influenced by different ideals. What if in his circle, decoration such as ivory lamp posts and thick leather was not valued or even acknowledged — different symbols would have had different meanings, and the arrangement of his living space might have been something else entirely.

These depictions of the characters' architectural spaces correspond to Lotman's concept: architecture serves as a reflection of identity and the way it is perceived by outside observers, providing additional layers of meaning to characterisation.⁸

The selected passages are connected by the same building, presenting its different expressions in the two scenes, in turn reflecting different nuances of the characters' personalities and emotions and their changing relationship. In the first scene, Anthony is walking through one of Caswell's designs, a space perfectly familiar to him, looking for possible flaws to be fixed and making sure everything is as it is supposed to be, corresponding to the Caswell's original vision. This particular architectural space

⁸ Yuri Lotman, *The Symbolism of St. Petersburg and the Problems of Urban Semiotics*. In: *Cultural Semiotics* (Vilnius: Baltos Lankos, 2004), pp. 332-349.

also reveals everything that makes Caswell's style distinctive. Caswell's personality is revealed through this building: he is an extremely reserved person, and so the architectural signs of his design and things that they might signify is the only way for Anthony to comprehend his character. As Anthony passes different rooms of the building, they add up to a picture representing Caswell and how Anthony views and understands him.

In the second scene, the same place turns into something unexpected and threatening, presenting the hostile aggression that an architectural arrangement is capable of exuding — the threat is produced by the very fact that it is no longer familiar and its limits are unclear, reflecting the emotional impact that the built environment can have on an individual experiencing it as well as the inner state it can illustrate.⁹ The change in the architectural environment also depicts the changing nature of the two characters' relationship. Where the experience of the building is calm and familiar in the first scene, it changes as their rivalry makes Anthony discover Caswell's personality traits he did not suspect before. Consequently, Anthony rediscovers the person that this space represents, which alters the appearance of the space and adds to Anthony's emotional response. The shift in his emotional reaction sharpens the growing tension between the two characters and how one is perceived by the other. The reason for the deep impact this experience of architecture has on Anthony is related to his own personality. Anthony defines himself as a 'transparent glass' — he is merely a mediator between VR technology and the other person's creative ideas but never uses it to execute his own work. His renunciation of his own personality causes him to identify with the person whose works he transforms into a different medium — in this case, he becomes Caswell — while his own identity is lost somewhere in between.

As shown through the examples, architectural spaces serve as a compelling creative writing technique. They are able to perform various literary functions, such as revealing the emotional reaction it brings out in the characters, reflecting their inner life and their relations to each other. Mindful consideration and deliberate employment of these functions can be effectively adapted in creative writing to communicate the messages and intensify the main themes of the literary work. Architecture turns into an intricate part of the creative process — the architectural expression

⁹ David Spurr, *Architecture and Modern Literature* (Michigan City: University of Michigan Press, 2012), pp. 246-247

and the literary expression intertwine, influencing each other in a variety of dynamic ways. It is essentially an active exploration of the relationship between the two art forms that prove to be very closely connected.

The Modernists (excerpts)

He was walking down a long airy corridor.

It was quiet, and the only sound in the sounding space around him was that of his own steps. The walls were glaringly white. But the windows and the view that opened out — thick brown leaves and grey stems — had warmed them up, making them glisten imperceptibly like a rough crystal.

The building was almost empty, aside from a fixture here and there — a roll-top desk, a leather couch, a waxy dark green pot plant, all emphatically large and bulky. All seemed to be placed here by something other than natural purpose, as if there was a different role they were performing — to see how they'll look like, to give the impression how they'll go with the building, or to point to the function of a certain room.

He walked on, moving slowly up the copper corkscrew staircase — just as bulky against the white setting. The landing was carpeted in moss green, and from this point, colours were turning warmer still, and the emphatic clearness of the first floor was being replaced by decoration — copper and wood — that was growing, straight away, on the walls, the ceilings and the ground, as if the building was slowly pulling on a dull, warmly glistening casing.

As he crossed another open corridor stretching out into a vast common space, which was suggested by a few more leather couches and heavy leather armchairs to be a living room — without these signs of furnishing, it was just as empty, high-ceilinged and already weighty with decoration, made still solely of wood and copper — he opened a double door at the end of the room.

The place where he appeared differed from the rest of the building in a striking contrast. This difference would be enough to confound anyone, let alone the technical part. The space was composed of nothing else but glass, opening a view to the same autumnal trees. Like it was hanging in the air. The only thing to return it into reality was, standing in the corner of the room — for one

couldn't realize this as a room at once — a massive piano. And, of course, the door. What had already become domestic, earthly, even weighed down in the building, was broken here suddenly and solidified into something of an unearthly, weightless interval.

But he never slowed down and he crossed the room — or rather the tunnel — without looking around or pausing to look at the half-grey, half-fawn landscape that, in this case, was not seen through the windows of the room but was the room itself. Instead, he turned away, opening another door, proceeding to other empty, white rooms that finally led to a terrace. From the terrace, another corkscrew staircase went down to a garden. As he was coming down, his every step sounded onto the pipy copper.

The garden was cold and austere. Crunching under his feet were the pebbles of a pathway that led through the bare, flat scenery. By now, anyone would have noticed there was something strange about the place. But only now had it become so clear. Trees didn't throw shadows.

From the inside, this was not visible, or perhaps it was harder to notice, but now the openness of the garden left little room for deception. This only caught his gaze for a second, and without turning it away, he pulled out a portable screen from his pocket, on which he made some notes before going ahead.

The garden, endless at first glance, started to change slowly, like it was shrinking. With his every step the colours turned bleaker, the trees, as if affected by a strange optical illusion, looked more like smudges of spilled paint, spreading and fading and decaying into countless bits that were not massed into anything. As he kept walking away from the building, the whole space was fading and smudging still, until it turned blindingly white, with an almost imperceptible surface texture, like ridged paper or chalky paint, and completely empty, save for long lines extending farther outwards — bright and rough contours at first, and then gradually thinning pencil threads.

That day in the lab, going through the new and almost version of Ivy building, Anthony was confronted with an unexpected obstacle.

At first, everything was going on as usual — he crossed the entrance and the hall room, checking

whether there were no small inaccuracies, then turned down the corridor towards the further spaces of the house that needed more work.

The corridor was long, gallery-like, and, in keeping with Caswell's style, filled with warm, very faintly golden light. Before he reached an archway opening at the end of the corridor, he realized suddenly that something was changed. The change was rather still awaiting — he couldn't have explained what made him feel that way. As he proceeded, the feeling that something was wrong grew stronger still.

On the outside, everything was the same, but he felt he had stepped in a different space, like temperature had dropped suddenly. Then, almost immediately, he saw that the corridor was extending too far — or perhaps his steps slowed down, as if walking had suddenly become very hard. He reached the archway finally — and here he noticed that the walls had lost their faint colour. They were more intensely, more obviously white. They were even, but not smooth — the texture was inexplicably coarse, like rough paper. You could only see the bumps of the texture from very close up. Its roughness could only be felt now.

For a moment, he reached for the touchscreen, wondering if he should make a note of this change, which seemed natural, rather, as though the software had consistently replaced the colour he had chosen with a different one. He was doubtful. This had never happened before. But this explanation was, of course, the most rational one.

The door was waiting at the end of the corridor, as always, and he turned to it quickly, caught by agitation if not concern whether the alteration of colour continued behind it as well. He opened the door, and it was there — gleaming just as intensely, everywhere. There was no sign of his colour spectrum. Everything had changed. Now he was disquieted. He increased his pace, almost running upstairs. But again he was affected by that strange, baffling difficulty of movement — the stairs seemed to drag on without end. He looked back and saw a long row of treads he had already moved past.

It was clear then that something was terribly wrong.

The stairs brought him to a large open landing, from where three corridors led to different directions. He couldn't recognize these lines anymore. They were not his. Spaces appeared in the house

that he had never put there. He felt at a complete loss as to how much room they took, and how they were arranged — there was nothing to suggest what they were. They were utterly unfamiliar.

The only way was to go forward. He made his way across the landing in a few quick steps. He went down one of the corridors — it ran straight, then turned suddenly left, then right, broken into bends, so sharp instant that unless you slowed the pace, they could send you slamming against the wall. Then it levelled out again, and Anthony began walking faster, but the corridor was shrinking — disproportionately, in an accelerated way, until it became so narrow he could barely squeeze through. In a moment, the space expanded again to the size of a vast hall.

It was completely empty save for a single door. He didn't have another choice but to go to the door and open it quickly. A small passage showed up behind it, and another door that looked exactly like the previous one. Anxious about what he might find on the other side, he opened it. But all he saw was another passage — and another door. Then another one, and another one. He heard them shut quietly behind his back before landing up in front of a new one. He was opening them, faster and faster, with growing impatience. They were opening endlessly, leading nowhere. Passages between them were becoming narrower still. Soon, he hardly had room to hold out his hand to another handle. All doors looked the same — plain and white, handles gleaming dully in the whiteness.

He was reaching, automatically, for another handle and wobbled suddenly, almost losing his balance, finding himself at the top of a long flight of stairs. The stairs extended downward this time, wide at first, narrowing gradually, winding in a spiral. They didn't seem attached to anything — it was as though they hung down from invisible vertical strings.

He raced down the stairs — the treads made no sound, he could only just sense them under his feet, like they were evaporating into the air. He didn't hear a sound — not even his own steps. But the silence was just as scratchy as the texture of the walls — indescribably rough.

Then, without warning, the treads under his feet turned to a flat declivity, and he had to grab the rail to keep him from falling over. The declivity led him to another plain, strangely disarranged space, narrow, with an immensely high ceiling. The only way was to another long, gallery-like corridor, almost the same as the one at the beginning.

Windows started emerging on both sides of the walls — only indications of windows, schematic openings against the long lines. They kept extended forward, and he could make out something in the distance — shadowy and rectangular, resembling an entry to a yard, or a garden, or some other outer space — it was impossible to tell, but it looked like a way out. It was the only choice, and unthinkingly, he headed in that direction.

But the closer he got, the blurrier this rectangular shape was becoming. He seemed to be moving upwards, although he couldn't see how — as though he was going up the stairs on invisible treads. The lines became rugged, and even more than that — they were austere, almost confrontational. As if they wanted to get rid of him with the same vigour that he wanted to escape from them. They melted and faded as they stretched further, turning into thinning pencil traces, traces left by someone else.

He realized then that what he had taken for a garden, or a yard, or another entrance, was simply an accumulation of these lines. Only one thing could lie behind it — the extending white space. He thought suddenly that he had been expecting it secretly all this time. Now all that separated him from was this schematically formed passageway. But it was too late — he had already stepped over it.

It was then that the truth sank in, and the realizing he had appeared in that space, with no evident way out, he felt himself sent into a state of terror that he had never felt before.

He had never confronted it so bluntly, so inescapably before. He had only seen its edges, distant glimpses he'd catch on the corner of his eye before looking away, like someone trying not to look directly at the sun. He perceived it in his thoughts, not his sight. In this way, it was always implicit, to some extent, at least; although it did undeniably exist, the comprehension of its existence was theoretical, unverified by actual experience. Now he was placed in an absolute confrontation with it.

Enormous emptiness flowed from it. It was senselessly white, soundless, weightless. There was nothing to connect it with the surrounding objects — no reason for it to exist. It couldn't be registered by any sense. Yet it was there — with its persistent presence. The worst part was a lurking suspicion that it was not empty at all — that it contained something that couldn't be seen, only felt, like the rough surface of the seemingly smooth walls.

He stood beside that emptiness, in a stupor, unable to move. A few blood-curdling moments

went by. He pulled back then, reaching to grab on a jamb of the entrance, grasping nothing but air. His hand went through the thinning pencil line. He had forgotten there was a descent behind him, and the moment he started to fall uncontrollably down, he was finally able to remove the eyepiece.

...then he suddenly realized he was back, finding himself in the laboratory again, catching his breath. His heart was pounding as though he had run miles at a great speed, not naturally but driven by some external force. His brow had broken out in a sweat. He was barely gasping for air. He had to lean down and hold on to his knees with slightly shaking hands to keep his balance. Still catching breath, in long, convulsive gulps, his eyes closed, he struggled not to collapse on the floor. He stood like this for a while, until black spots stopped leaping in front of his eyes and his vision cleared up.

He slowly discerned parts of the real world around him, separate objects, parts of his own body that seemed foreign, unreal — not just to him, but in general. The space of the lab, vaguely familiar, stretched out around him, its whiteness brought back to reality by its clearly defined walls. He turned back, groping for the door handle, and stumbling out into the corridor.

He sat, or rather slumped down in one of the niches on the worn red carpet, feeling his hand with he clung to it sink into its plushy softness. He would sit there after his every visit to the lab — never in a state like this. He pressed his other hand against his throbbing temple. He could hardly hear a sound save for muffled hum of his own heartbeat.

Every external sound and distant voice were irritating, as though his mind was incapable of processing anything. By some miracle, no one walked by. He sat like this until the hum started to weaken. Only then was he able to move.

He stood, holding on to the wall beside him, then turned towards the bathroom — like many times before. He turned the tap on, watching the water run down in a brawling stream. He ran his fingers in a few quick movements through his hair, wiped his face with a handkerchief. His hands were still slightly trembling. He stood clenching the edge of the sink. Looking up, he met his own gaze in the mirror; for a minute, it seemed unrecognizable.

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