

Book Reviews

Tereza Topolovská

***The Country House Revisited. Variations on a Theme from Forster to Hollinghurst*
Prague: Karolinum Press, 2017**

The introduction to *The Country House Revisited* opens, very appropriately, with a quotation from Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945): "And suddenly a new and secret landscape opened before us." Topolovská's study is all about opening up a new landscape whose foundations rest on a communal paradigm: a sense of community that reflects "social, cultural, geographic or historical belonging" (159). The communal perspective is also reflected in the setting of the country house, which is either in the countryside, or at least where the countryside used to be. From this perspective, the country house is contrasted with the city. *The Country House Revisited* brings together the social institution of the country home and a variety of representations in literature of this very English institution.

The first part of the study (part one, introduction; and part two) provides an informative introduction to the history of the country house since 1900. This is followed, in part three, by a discussion of the country home from the perspective of an authentic dwelling as it is represented in literature, and more specifically, in E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) and Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). Part four, "Strangers' Children in the House: Post-millennial Echoes of the Post-war Poetics of the Country House," is the penultimate chapter and the most detailed section of the study. It discusses recent novels, including Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger* (2009), Allan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* (2007), and Sadie Jones's *Uninvited Guests* (2012). The chapter focuses on the decline and transformation of the country house, drawing at the same time important parallels with earlier literary works.

Part four describes the sad fate of so many contemporary country houses, concluding that "they resemble ponderous prehistoric creatures trying to survive as stately homes declaring 'open house' or museums, or otherwise blend in in the form of either a hotel or boarding school" (156). The struggle for survival mirrors that of human beings, Topolovská concludes; the centre is elusive. The loss of the earlier glory of the country home constitutes not only a kind of loss but also a sense of homelessness, which is both personal and communal.

As Topolovská notes, no systematic theoretical study of the relationship between the country house and English literature has been carried out since Malcolm Kelsall's *The Great Good Place: The Country House and English Literature* (1993). *The Country House Revisited* thus fills an important gap.

For the alert reader there are special treasures to be discovered in the texts that form the subject of Topolovská's study; there is, as the study demonstrates, an intricate web of allusions, "ranging from Shakespeare to Edgar Allan Poe, from Henry James to E.M.Forster or Evelyn Waugh" (164). While the historical settings of the works discussed cover the period from 1910 to 2000, there are multiple time lines to be discovered even within a

single novel. The house is separate from the world around it and is not subject to the normal course of time. As houses have been transformed or become derelict, they provide what Topolovská describes as “a versatile vehicle for commentary on global, social, cultural, political and ecological matters” (165). It is clear that *The Country House Revisited* is not to have the last word on the decline of the country house: the fictional representation of the English country house will continue to attract the literary imagination. It is indeed, Topolovská argues, part of “the perpetual human fight for authentic existence” (15). As such, it provides a solid base from which to depart and return.

The Country House Revisited is a well-researched, compact study which nonetheless manages to cover a wide range of issues, from architectural history to national, social and personal identity. It also incorporates a variety of genres, from the pastoral to the gothic, the novel of manners and detective fiction. In addition, Topolovská makes excellent use of a range of internet sites, which include subjects as diverse as early twentieth-century poetry and interviews with contemporary authors. *The Country House Revisited* is a work of high scholarly achievement. It is eloquently written, richly supported by quotations from the various literary works, and fresh in its approach.

The stanza below, quoted in chapter four of *The Country House Revisited*, encapsulates the essence of Topolovská’s study:

Time past and time future
Allow but a little consciousness.
To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time time is conquered (T. S.Eliot, “Burnt Norton”)

The country house is part of time past and time future, the real world and works of fiction. While *The Country House Revisited* will almost certainly not have the last word on the position of the country house in literature, it is certainly an excellent starting point!

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