A S P E C T S O F D W E L L I N G

An investigation into the role of domestic spaces in E.M.Forster's *Howards End* and its influence on my own writing

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Contents

Abstract

This PhD by Publication consist of two parts: Part One is a selection from the body of published work that I have produced since 1991, namely the poetry collections *Householder* (Chatto and Windus 1991); *After The Deafening* (Chatto and Windus 1994), *Island to Island* (Chatto and Windus 1999), *We Were Pedestrians* (Chatto and Windus 2005) and *The Seacunny* (Picador 2012), along with my first three published novels *August* (Chatto and Windus 2001); *I'll Go To Bed at Noon*; (Chatto and Windus 2004) and *A Curious Earth* (Chatto and Windus 2007), known collectively as *The Jones Trilogy*.

Part Two is a contextualizing thesis. In this I examine the role of dwelling and the depiction of domestic spaces in my writing and attempt to situate them within a context of other writing about domestic spaces, with particular focus on E.M.Forster's novel of 1910, *Howards End*. I adopt a personal, autobiographical tone and viewpoint in the early part of this thesis

because this seems to be the most appropriate way of examining the influence of Forster's novel on my own thinking and my writing.

I begin by performing an act of descriptive recall by remembering my own childhood home in North London. *Howards End* begins with a similar descriptive act, and this gives me the opportunity to describe the impact that novel had on me both in terms of my development as a writer, and at a personal level, describing how its mytho-symbolic system interacted with my own family history. After describing my own visit to the house in the early 1980s I look more closely at Forster's personal history of dwelling and what the model for *Howards End*, Rooksnest, might have meant to him. I follow this with a brief survey of the history of the country house in the English novel and the place of *Howards End* within that tradition before charting my own early and unsuccessful attempts at writing novels that addressed similar themes. I then describe how an encounter with Peter Redgrove and his work while I was a student at Falmouth School of Art turned me in the direction of writing poetry. I describe his use of domestic imagery and I look at my five poetry collections, tracing their own uses of such imagery.

The next section returns to *Howards End* for a closer look at the writing itself. In particular I examine Forster's use of water metaphors when writing about buildings, which provides some links to my own ways of thinking about buildings in relation to notions of durability, time and permanence. Another survey of some failed early novels of mine follows before I turn to describing my first published prose works, *The Jones Trilogy* (*August, I'll Go To Bed at Noon* and *A Curious Earth*) and come to the conclusion that as well as echoing some of the themes of Forster's novel, the house in my trilogy is also trying to say something about the importance and nature of artistic creativity.

In chronicling the development of my writing through the numerous failures as well as the successes I hope to show that the creative process is, for me at least, one of constant trial and error, experimentation and risk-taking. I can only estimate that I wrote around nine novels before having my first, *August*, published in 2001 (it was subsequently shortlisted for the Whitbread Fist Novel Award). I hope that this may offer encouragement and reassurance to others that the publishing of novels and sustaining a career as a novelist is a process in which both successes and failures contribute to the overall journey, and that this journey is never one that can be undertaken lightly.

1. Introduction

Perhaps once a year or so I will visit the house where I grew up. It stands at the upper end of a straight, gently sloping road in suburban North London. The road was laid down across open farmland in 1905, part of an extensive wave of development that filled the empty spaces on the map of rural Middlesex, imposing a grid system of geometrical and parallel streets alongside the old lanes that meandered from village to village. The houses are comfortable, well-proportioned dwellings for the moderately well-off, built in a range of styles. At the lower end of the road there is a certain amount of Edwardian exuberance, with white-painted wooden porticos, art nouveau stained glass, double fronted doors and chequer-tiled paths. The corner houses have turrets and spires. As the road climbs, the styles change, there is less exuberance, more restraint. By the time we reach my old house, at the top, there is little decoration. The front elevation is orange brick rising to a gable over the bedroom, a front door to the left hand side under a simple porch. A path of orange quarry tiles in a diamond pattern leads up to it. The house stands alone, being separated from its neighbour by an alleyway. All the other houses in the road are built in the form of a continuous chain, what would technically be called a terrace, though that word

would normally suggest a more working class style of housing. Along with its mirror image on the opposite side, it is the only detached house in the road.

Whenever I visit the house (and it is only ever a passing visit, taking in as much as I can as I walk by, not wanting to arouse any attention by lingering outside) I am always surprised by how different it looks now, from the house as I remember it. I shouldn't be surprised, because I have kept track of its changes over the years, but nevertheless the sense of surprise is always there. I suspect this is because, when away from the house, the older memories I have of it take precedence in my mind. When I think about it, or try to write about it, I find myself struggling with two different houses that vie for my attention – the house in the past and the house as it is now - each coming in and out of focus, trying to push the other aside.

The house in my memory has a light blue door with a leaded window and the house number – eighty-nine – chalked on the wall beside it. The present-day house has a door that is a forbidding black, with the numbers in silver, screwed on, one above the other vertically like a simple sum. Eight plus Nine. Which of these doors do I see now? I open one, only to reveal the other.

Perhaps the most striking difference about the present-day house, is that it is exposed and out in the open. The house in my memory is half hidden behind a front garden that has turned feral. A pyracantha fills the wall to the right of the front door, becoming a sort of natural porch, overhanging it, saggy with orange berries in autumn. A holly bush grows in front of the living room window, and there are clumps of hanging sedge, a flowering currant, a sumac bush. An acacia tree fills the remaining space, eventually taking over the garden, lifting the paving stones in the street and extending its branches half way across the road.

Today all that has gone, and the house stands unprotected, fully disclosed. You can see everything. Even now I feel alarmed by the fact, as though my own secrets had become exposed, and I feel worried on behalf of the house. I want to throw something over it, cover it up.

For a while, when I was doing my A level English, I became obsessed with E.M.Forster's novel of Edwardian families and their houses - *Howards End*. I had left school at sixteen and had not studied literature before, although I had, from an early age, wanted to be a writer and was working on a third novel by that time. I studied for my A level at evening classes while working at various low paid jobs during the day. I was fortunate in that my teacher for this class, Alan

Colbourne, was a Forster scholar and had written a thesis on the musical elements in *Howards End*. Over the weeks of his enthusiastic teaching he opened up the workings of the novel for me in a way that I found bewitching. It was as though a piece of clockwork had been taken apart. I talked to my parents about it, passing on my enthusiasm, and they duly read it, and they became obsessed with it as well. They read it together several times. One evening I remember walking past the half open door of the living room which at night served as their bedroom – they slept on the bed-settee - and I heard my mother reading a line - "*Margaret had often wondered at the disturbance that takes place in the world's waters when Love, who seems so tiny a pebble, slips in.*' (Forster 1910: 178) and my father voicing his approval – 'Oh that's lovely.' My older sister read it as well, and was similarly entranced. It felt that, for a number of years, the whole family had somehow become fused with the world of the novel – we talked about it constantly, we would remark on things in the real world – people or situations – that were reflected in the novel. My mother described how she had always assumed Forster was a rather stuffy, colonial, Kiplingesque figure for whom she'd never had much time, until she came across *Howards End*. The novel seemed to speak directly to her deepest feelings.

There were local affinities with the novel that made it feel special to us. Its settings in London and Hertfordshire, for instance. It made a sacred landscape of the countryside we knew very well. Shropshire, which also features in the novel, was part of a family geography, although the other important part of the novel's landscape – the Dorset coast and Isle of Purbeck, was not somewhere that had any meaning for us as a family. I think, in addition, we saw something of ourselves in the Schlegel's messily bohemian life. Our lives centred on music and literature. Beethoven, at the heart of the novel, was an important connecting thread of interest between myself and my father. But above all I think we all saw something in *Howards End* about the way a family relates to the house it inhabits. It places an almost mystical emphasis on the importance of place, in the form of a bricks and mortar dwelling. Much ink has been spilled on the meaning of the various symbols in Howards End (and it is a novel that seems to work in symbols, far more than any other of Forster's novels)[1]. Especially resonant for me here is the idea that the house and its attendant wych elm stands for the enduring nature of love and the continuity of human relationships (Thomson: 239-240). In the light of this reading of the novel I started to

[1] For some interesting examples see works by Stone and Russell in the bibliography

think about our own house in the same way, with its attendant acacia tree. Mrs Wilcox, who can be seen as embodying those values of place and continuity, seemed analogous to the figure of my own mother, who was also ill at this time, and soon to pass away.

My mother died in 1981 and a few weeks later I left home to start studying fine art at Falmouth School of Art. This was a time of rapid change in the family – my older brother had died the previous year, my other brother moved to Japan and my sister also left home, leaving my father alone in what had previously been a chaotically crowded and busy house. When I returned in the summer it was to a very different household, one marked by absence and a sense of emptiness. We spent quite a lot of time in each other's company, my father and I. We often went driving in the countryside north of London, visiting the villages and places I'd known all my life. Our family had a very distinct and clearly defined personal geography that consisted of places we kept returning to – the villages of Essex and Suffolk, the Chiltern Hills, The Cotswolds, Mid and North Wales and the Welsh Marches. We rarely went anywhere else. It was during one of these meandering drives in the summer of 1982 that my father and I pushed the boundaries a little further. I was keen to add new places to our repertoire of places. The map of the area to the north of London showed a wealth of towns and villages and stretches of countryside that we had not explored. So we worked a course through the greenbelt land that fills the spaces between the big dormitory towns – Welwyn Garden City, St Albans, Luton, Hitchin, Stevenage. This countryside can still feel remote even as the new housing estates expand. St Paul's Walden, Ayott St Lawrence, St Ippolytes, these were all charming, beautifully isolated villages. And then we discovered that we were a little north of Stevenage, and close to the house called Rooksnest, which was marked on the Ordnance Survey map. Rooksnest was Forster's childhood home and the model for *Howards End.* My father was very keen that we should see it, and so with some careful map reading, we found it and pulled up in the lane by the entrance to the drive.

Howards End opens with a description of the house.

> It isn't going to be what we expected. It is old and little, and altogether delightful – red brick…. From hall you go right or left into dining-room or drawing-room. Hall itself is practically a room. You open another door in it, and

> there are the stairs going up in a sort of tunnel to the first floor. Three bedrooms in a row there, and three attics in a row above. That isn't all the house really, but it's all that one notices – nine windows as you look up from the front garden. (Forster, 1910: 19)

There were in fact eight windows at Rooksnest. Like all the other literary tourists who visit the house (we were later to learn), we first counted the windows and were dismayed to find them in deficit. There are only two attic windows, not three. Why did Forster add a third to his fictional version of the house, when so much of the description elsewhere perfectly matched the reality? I haven't been able to find any critic or reviewer who addresses the question, and can only speculate. It is unlikely that the house had been altered, and possible that Forster is simply misremembering. But it is also possible that he made the change for aesthetic reasons, with the fictional imperative carrying more weight here than the biographical, giving a smoother feel to the sentence and a pleasing symmetry to the house. He describes three attic rooms, it would have been awkward to have to account for the missing window. It is also possible that Forster wanted to alter the reality in some way, so that Howards End was not identical to Rooksnest in every respect.

When we knocked at the front door there was no reply and, assuming the house to be empty, we got ready to leave. As we were about to drive off, a car came past us and turned in at the drive. We got out of our car and followed. The car had pulled up outside the front door of Rooksnest and an elderly lady had climbed out. Her hair was tied up untidily, her arms were full of books and folders. She began to open the front door. I was reluctant to impose myself on this elderly woman, but my father was at that time very uninhibited and gregarious, more so since widowerhood than he had ever been before, and walked straight up to the woman and introduced himself, while I remained at the gate. The woman looked a little distrustful at first, and though I couldn't hear what my father was saying he soon signalled for me to come and join him and we were invited into the house.

The woman was Elizabeth Poston, composer and musicologist, whose mother Clementine had eventually moved into Rooksnest with her children when the Forsters vacated it in 1893. The Postons had previously lived at the nearby Highfield House and the families were on good terms. Later in life Forster began paying visits to the Postons at Rooksnest, tentatively at first, then

more regularly. Eventually he helped them to buy the house when the lease expired. Elizabeth Poston was a generous host to us that afternoon, giving us a tour of the three floors, showing us the room that had been Forster's bedroom, the chair in the living room that he liked to sit in. She made us tea and talked to us for an hour or so, creating for us a picture of Forster's visits to Rooksnest, the lively discussions he had with her and her mother over tea, much as we were doing at that moment, sitting in the same chairs.

My father, afterwards, was quite overjoyed by the experience of having sat in the very same chair that Forster had sat in and holding a conversation with one of the author's oldest friends. We could both overlook how inadequate that conversation must have seemed to someone accustomed to Bloomsbury badinage, but we each took something talismanic from the experience. For myself, the moment seemed fortuitous and prophetic. I was eager to discover signs in everyday life that I was destined to be a writer, and this seemed such a sign. An affirmation of my creative path, but also a sign that the novel, *Howards End*, had a special significance. I had been rereading the novel almost continuously for two or three years and had been looking at the world through its lens. Now that I had inhabited, however briefly, the physical space described in the novel, had been given a glimpse of the treasured rooms and alcoves of Forster's own memories, I felt I had been given some sort of special resource that I must not waste but put to the best possible use. It was as though something or someone had invested in me.

The first line of Helen's letter to her sister describing the house contains the essence of the novel. "It isn't going to be what we expected." (19).[2] We immediately understand that something is awry, out of kilter or off balance about Howards End. Helen Schlegel, having accepted the invitation from their new friends, had been expecting something quite different from the Wilcox's country seat. The Wilcoxes are business people. Mr Wilcox made his money buying forests from the natives for a few bottles of gin (277), his sons Charles and Paul are expected to enter the family firm. They drive motor cars in the days when such machines are a turbulent, disruptive novelty. They belong in cities, to the world of commerce and trade. If they were to have any sort of foothold in the country, it would be in some appropriately gaudy and

[2] Subsequent citations from *Howard's End* will provide the page number only, and be given within parentheses within the body of this work.

grandiose mansion, 'all gables and wiggles…and gamboge coloured paths." (19) Their out-of-placeness is embodied in the novel by their susceptibility to hay fever. The same opening letter details delightfully how all the Wilcoxes (apart from Mrs Wilcox, who drifts around trailing hay from her fingertips) are defeated in whatever they do by fits of sneezing, brought on by the large meadow in the next field.

Rooksnest therefore is not the sort of trophy house a wealthy businessman would use to impress his business associates. As such, it didn't seem absurd to me to think of the house as an ordinary house, smaller and more modest than the typical dwelling of the English country house novel. And therefore it didn't seem absurd to consider my own family home as the same kind of dwelling, though one very different in terms of architecture and location. In fact it's ironic to note that in making this comparison I was perhaps forgetting the fact that my house was a component of the suburban encroachment, the creeping 'red rust' on the horizon that haunts the novel (329).

But in making that imaginative leap, in seeing my own house as a place that shared some sort of meaningful relationship with Rooksnest/Howards End, I was making a similar sort of leap that Forster himself had made in seeing Rooksnest as a symbol of ancestral continuity. Forster had no ancestral connection to Rooksnest. It was a property taken by his mother Lily after the death of his father, in 1883 (Beauman 1993: 36). Forster was born in London, at 6 Melcombe Place in the district of Paddington. (The house and the whole area surrounding it was later demolished to make way for a proposed expansion of Marylebone station (Beauman 1993: 4). It was to escape the oppressiveness of city life and the proximity of an overbearing extended family that Lily removed them to a remote part of Hertfordshire, to live in a place where they had no ancestral connections or roots. The sense of continuity and deeper personal values Forster invests in Rooksnest is an imaginative one, born of an attachment he felt as a child growing up in the house.

It can be argued that Rooksnest is, in some senses at least, an 'ordinary' house, in that it is not a mansion or stately home - and it is not a cottage or a hovel - but rather it is something in between. It has history without having high status. It has land, but farmland rather than parkland. These qualities make it a disputed and contestable site, a place that all three of the main parties in the novel can stake a claim in. The wealthy Wilcoxes, the bohemian Schlegels and the

proletarian Basts all struggle to gain or retain a foothold in Howards End. The house itself remains impartial and adaptable, accommodating the Schlegels' furniture as easily as it does the Wilcoxes' motorcar, or Leonard Bast's illegitimate son. In this sense it is a typical country house novel in that it poses questions about rights to property. But for Lionel Trilling the question was a wider one about the country's future. Seeing Howards End as representing England itself, he suggested the novel posed the question 'Who shall inherit England' (Trilling: 102). Forster was so keen on this interpretation of the novel that he used it in his own writings on the subject, "[the novel asks] who shall inherit England, the business people who run her or the people who understand her?" (Richardson: xvii).

Such a description might be accurate, but it can also seem reductive and limiting. Howards End is more than a mere symbol, or rather, it is one among many symbols in a complex and intricately layered narrative. My purpose in this essay is to try to understand how my own writing about houses can be seen partly as a conversation with *Howards End*, and with other novelists and poets who have written about houses as a central theme, and to come to a closer understanding of what houses and dwelling mean in my own work and that of those writers who have influenced me. In so doing I am hopeful that readers of this thesis will dwell on the value and importance of such intertextual conversations in their own writing. As this essay will hope to demonstrate, reading Howards End has had an enduring influence on my writing spanning nearly forty years.

2. Poetry

Howards End takes to an extreme a tradition in English fiction that focuses on the English country house and its inhabitants. This tradition emerges almost simultaneously with the emergence of the novel as a distinctive literary form, when writers like Fielding, Sterne, Richardson, Maria Edgeworth and others began to establish the parameters of this tradition in novels that captured the flow of life in the large powerful families of the English and Irish landed classes. In the nineteenth century the tradition was continued and developed by Jane Austen, Walter Scott, Henry James and many others. In the twentieth century Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* reinvented the tradition in an age when the country house as a focus of social energy and force was in decline. In recent decades the tradition has been reinvented again for a postmodern, post-imperial age by writers like Kazuo Ishiguro (*The Remains of the Day*), Alan Hollinghurst (*The Line of Beauty, The Stranger's Child*), Ian McEwan (*Atonement*), and Sarah Waters (*The Little Stranger*).

While the novels and novelists mentioned above are diverse in their themes and ideas, there can be discerned among them some common threads that identify the country house novel as sharing something more than an architectural commonality. Typically these novels will explore the notion of the country house as a locus of stability and continuity, a repository of sound moral values. They become microcosms of the wider society, the head of the house presiding over a little kingdom inhabited by a wide variety of people and social strata – from the servants and gardeners upwards. Its rooms become a cultural repository containing precious art collections and libraries (Morrison, 2011). A library or at least a bookcase, plays a crucial role in *Howards End.* They might come under threat from outside influences (the Crawfords who invade and cause havoc in *Mansfield Park*, for instance) and there might be a struggle to preserve the values embodied by the house. In the more fanciful extremes of the tradition, the qualities embodied by the house might take on a spiritual or supernatural quality, leading us into the sub genre of the haunted house novel, or the novel of psychological disturbance, so characteristic of Gothic fiction. Perhaps the most striking example of this latter form is in the short story 'The Fall of the House of Usher', by Edgar Allen Poe, in which the house itself seems organically connected to its inhabitant, and to be a physical manifestation of his psychological state. In these kinds of novels and stories the house itself can be thought of as a character, or at least an extension of the human characters.

Howards End can be seen as conforming to all of these conventions of the country house novel – including the Gothic element.[3] It is a novel about the fate of a house, and about the struggle to gain ownership and control over it. As Forster acknowledged, the house represents, in part at least, the spirit of England and Englishness, and his novel asks the question, who shall inherit England – the conservative and materialistic Wilcoxes or the artistic and liberal Schegels? If we can see the Schlegels as of European descent (they have German ancestry), it becomes an Edwardian version of the Brexit debate.

As a young reader of *Howards End* and as a student of the book I will have been aware of these themes and representations, and if I think back now, the desire on my part to do something similar in writing about my own house, must have begged the question – what does my house represent? I might have been tempted at some point to invest my house with similar political or social meanings. The novel I was writing at the time, and which it embarrasses me to now remember, had a strongly autobiographical element – the first of my novels to have such a quality. (Novel No1, written in my very early teens, was a tale of espionage and adventure that married P.G.Wodehouse with John Buchan. Novel No.2 was a surrealist experiment, heavily influenced by Kafka, about a man who inexplicably finds himself thrust into the role of head of a revolutionary movement). My third novel, written in my late teens and completed by the time I was about 20 or 21, after five years of very slow work, was a coming of age story about a young man who grows up in a house very like mine, and attends a series of schools very like mine. Other elements of this character's life are very different – he is part of a fairly conventional family, for instance. I didn't have the skills or the confidence to write about my own family at that time. Instead a heavily fictionalised account of a young man's life emerges. Not having the novel to hand I have only fragmentary memories of its contents, but I think the house in the novel borrowed something of Forster's approach, working a rather laboured symbolic structure into the novel, particularly with regard to the relationship between the house and its garden.

I have described the house's front garden as having an untamed, feral quality – the back garden was the same if not more so. It contained eleven trees, numerous shrubs and fruit bushes, a lawn that was always overgrown. A plum and an apple tree grew close to the house and filled the back windows with the pattern of their interlacing branches. The garden was a domain that

[3] In a memorable scene at the end of Ch 23, for instance, Margaret, alone in the house, seems to feel its beating heart (p.202)

was significant for me in a number of ways, but in this early novel I was keen to see it as a representation of nature restrained by human intervention, a wilderness contained within the rigid boundaries of a suburban garden. The tension between two versions of nature – the untamed wilderness and the cultivated garden – became a dominant theme in this overcomplicated and rather grandiose novel – one that was perhaps not centred on the house itself, but on the domestic space that extended beyond the house. It was a theme I picked up later in my first published novel, *August*, which I'll examine later. It seems to me now that this theme was my own attempt to represent a nature/civilization polarity in the novel, investing the garden of my house with something of the meaning conveyed in *Howards End* by the meadow and the wych elm. Almost as soon as I finished this novel, my confidence in it began to wane, and I never attempted to publish it.

In 1981 I attended Falmouth School of Art. I had not realised when I applied that among the staff there was a teacher of what was called 'complimentary studies', who was a distinguished poet – Peter Redgrove. Much as I regarded the encounter with Elizabeth Poston at Rooksnest as a sign that confirmed my sense of destiny as a writer, I regarded the encounter with Redgrove in a similar way. A famous poet had, as it were, fallen into my lap, and could guide me towards publication and success as a writer. We became friends until his death in 2003, but it was not until the late 1980s, returning to Falmouth after three years in London, that I began to feel an understanding of Redgrove's poetry and to use it as a way of seeing and writing about the world. There is one particular poem that seemed to trigger things for me. The poem is called 'Intimate Supper', and I first encountered it in *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, edited by Michael Roberts (revised by Peter Porter). The poem describes preparations being made for a meal, the 'intimate supper' of the title, not a dinner party, but a meal for two.

> He switched on the electric light and laughed,
> He let the light shine in the firmament of his ceiling,
> He saw the great light shine around and it was good…
>
> He spun the great winds through his new hoover
> And let light be in the kitchen and that was good too…
>
> And skipped to the bathroom and spun the shining taps
> Dividing air from the deep, and the water, good creature,

Gave clouds to his firmament for he had raked the bowels
Of the seamy coal that came from the deep earth.
And he created him Leviathan and wallowed there…

And he set his table with two stars pointed on wax
And with many stars in the cutlery and clear crystal.

The preparations are ordinary everyday procedures – turning on lights, having a bath, hoovering, cooking a stew, lighting candles, pouring out drinks and so on, but Redgrove turns these processes into events of elemental creation, using a language heavily influenced by the King James Bible

There is a sort of comedy of excess in this writing and in some ways it is a poem that is particularly vulnerable to the kind of criticism that was frequently directed at Redgrove – that his work has an undisciplined over-exuberance, what Alvarez called a 'poetical bluster' (Roberts: 117). This poem almost seems to address that criticism by taking it to an extreme and co-opting the voice of God himself. I found myself inhabited by this poem for several months. It may have been something to do with living in Falmouth at the time. Falmouth is a place where light is highly visible, at night the harbour and docks are an array of multi-coloured pinpoints, reflected in the water and in the often wet pavements. The poem seemed to sparkle in the same way, with its candles reflected in the spoons and crystals of the chandelier. I bought a pair of cobra-shaped brass candlesticks and cut crystal wine glasses, and found myself recreating the poem every time I made a meal. And then I began writing poems.

I had written poems before, in phases at school and during my first year at art school. But the poems that I began writing under the spell of 'Intimate Supper' were my first mature work and would go into the first collection I was to publish, five years later. They began as responses to the Cornish landscapes I was immersed in at the time, but I also began to explore domestic landscapes as well, and in the spirit of 'Intimate Supper', tried to invest these with an elemental, organic force. Fleur Adcock, in her *Sunday Times* review of *Householder* noted how the poems, even when they are about nature, suggest enclosed, smothering domestic spaces, 'full of breath, steam, shadows and cooking smells. Even the sea smells of onions.'[4] One poem in particular

[4] Fleur Adcock, *Sunday Times* review of *Householder* 18th July 1991

attempts to describe the interior of a house in purely sensory terms, concentrating – since it is narrated by a blind person – on the non-visual senses.

I can tell rooms
By their door-noises
Which hinge is which.

I learnt the positions
Of light switches early,
Finding them like rare

Useless fruit
At the rooms' edges.
I smell the perfumes

Of the light bulbs.
I know when I am
Right under them

The poem is called 'Householder' and became the title poem of the collection published in 1991 and which won the Somerset Maugham Award that year. Of course the significance of the title is in the way it plays on the idea of someone who experiences their house primarily through a sense of touch. The collection was edited by Mick Imlah, who suggested grouping the poems into named and numbered chapters. The first chapter, 'Window Breaker', for instance, was a miscellany of poems that performed acts of breakthrough or playful vandalism with various cultural norms, such as the title poem which celebrates a shop-window-smashing character, or 'Rough Sea' which explores someone's obsession with stormy seafronts.

The second chapter, 'Householder', grouped together the poems that were concerned, if sometimes in rather oblique ways, with domestic interiors. Many of the titles are self explanatory – 'The Unmade Bed', 'Loft Water', 'Sink Song', 'Gas Fire', 'The Kettle's Story'. 'The Coming of Gas' is about the introduction of gas heating to the house and the closure of the old coal fireplace in the living room and its attendant mantelpiece. Here I feel I must mention another parallel with E.M.Forster that this has brought to light. Forster's father was an architect and had designed an elaborate classical mantelpiece for their home. Forster kept possession of this mantelpiece all his life (his father had died when Forster was only four years old), transferring it from house to house, until it ended up in his modest rooms in Kings College, Cambridge where,

according to a recent article in the TLS[5], it still resides, the rooms Forster occupied having since become part of a common room. My poem 'The Coming of Gas' (Woodward 1991: 34) touches on a similar theme, recording the shock I felt that the mantelpiece was to be removed.

> The white mantelpiece
> With its two empty shelves
> And classical columns,
>
> Its last legs.
> I was frightened when the blue men
> Tore it from the wall
>
> To show that only
> A few black nails
> Ever held it there.
>
> I had thought it was part of the house.

I have recently written another poem, so far unpublished, called 'Morgan's Mantelpiece',[6]which explores the mantelpiece parallels in more depth.

What struck me as curious about the episode is not just that it showed we both had a sentimental attachment to mantelpieces to the extent that we transferred them from one context to another (for a while I saved our mantelpiece and had it in my bedroom), but that Forster seemed to be using the mantelpiece to provide the sense of material continuity that houses themselves, in an age where they are bought and sold like any other commodity, are no longer able to sustain. A mantelpiece is a slightly liminal object, in that it is not quite a piece of furniture, and not quite a part of the house – it is a 'fitting', something in between. It was as if Forster was conveying an actual part of his father's house from house to house, by which means he was conferring on whichever dwelling he lived in, the status of 'ancestral home'. As a subsidiary of this thought I'd like to mention something similar that I have done. In the mid 1980s my father had the roof of the house redone along with various other improvements. This

[5] Anne Kennedy-Smith *Room With a View, on E.M.Forster and the Rooksnest Mantelpiece*, TLS 28th July 2017, No. 5965
[6] see appendix

included the removal of the old chimney stacks. The builders clearly thought the old bricks and pots – valuable items in themselves – were theirs to keep, and they took them away, though I managed to save one of the pots. I have transferred the chimney pot from the old house to every house I've lived in since. It currently holds a plant pot in my garden.

The fourth chapter of *Householder* was called 'Suffolk Interior', and contained poems that were associated with childhood memories, and other pieces more generally associated with childhood. In poems like 'Mandrax' and 'Smoker' I began sketching out the family portraits that would later feature more strongly in my early novels. Among these poems, the poem that gave its title to the 'Suffolk Interior' chapter may have been more appropriately placed in the 'Householder' chapter. This is because although 'Suffolk Interior' is a piece that deals with childhood, it is also a poem that deals with domestic space, and in a manner that was to become central to the way my writing developed.

The starting point for writing 'Suffolk Interior' was the painting *Three Suffolk Towers*, by John Piper. I was at the time interested in using visual art as starting points for poems. The painting was a triptych of church towers, and when I began writing about them I soon found myself exploring certain childhood memories associated with churches. The first of these was of my mother stealing a brass vase from the church of Stoke By Nayland, in Suffolk, and having that vase on a shelf at home for a number of years. The vase was eventually stolen again, by my elder brother, in order to sell for its scrap metal value – at that time he had an alcohol addiction to feed, and would take anything from the house that had scrap value, including the lead piping from the bathroom. Before it was restolen, however, in the poem I see the church vase as having a sacralizing effect on the house – turning it into a holy space, and so this gives me the opportunity to describe our house as a church.

The poem builds through a series of ecclesiastical-domestic images using a liturgically repetitive 'And' at the beginning of nearly every stanza, until a kind of transcendent moment occurs at the end:

> And the darkness that stayed in the loft
> That was roofed in slate slotted
> Like feathers on a rook's back
>
> And all the shadows were so old
> That if you were to remove the walls

You would have a house of dark air still standing.

This closing notion of a house vanishing but in the process leaving a trace that is more enduring than the house itself, was something I was to explore in all four subsequent collections of poetry. Perhaps the poem is trying to say that the social relationships that occur in the spaces of the house are what really make a house, more so than the physical fabric – the walls and roof. The theme of the evanescent house – the house that is on the point of disappearing, that is unstable or temporary in some way, was picked up and developed in subsequent poetry collections.

In *After The Deafening* (1994), which was shortlisted for the 1994 T.S. Eliot Prize, the houses and house interiors are ambiguous, deliberately unsettling spaces. 'A Nocturnal Breakfast', (Woodward 1994: 12) for instance, depicts a typical hotel breakfast table, but in the dark: 'The match has shown/ a breakfast in this room./ The hours are wrong.' In the darkness the cold paraphernalia of the breakfast become an apocalyptic vision – a breakfast rendered strange and meaningless by human absence. 'A Cook's Warning' (ibid: 14) depicts a kitchen as a series of death traps in the spirit of a health and safety exercise: 'Remember, it's your/ home's most dangerous room.' 'Room', (ibid: 38) a poem partly inspired by Rachael Whiteread's sculpture of the same name, performs another exercise in the exploration of a domestic space transformed by human absence, this time as an archaeological remain.

The longer poem, *A Sailor's Thoughts on Dry Land* (ibid: 40) is a more discursive exploration of the notion of dwelling, which instead of describing a particular domestic space, destabilizes the notion of architectural dwellings by uncoupling them from their context of dry land, and considering what effect a seaborne context would have on buildings. Beginning with lighthouses ('A building/ that walks on water'), it compares domestic architecture to boat design, and explores places and buildings, like Venice, that are on the margin between land and water. Ultimately this poem was trying to say, along with poems like 'Room', that the permanence of land-based buildings is an illusion caused by our perception of time.

And the hotel slipped, room
By room, into the sea.
"If you can drown on dry land

then what's the point

Of Atlantic?" he said as their matrimonial
Four-poster voyaged (ibid: 43)

If time was speeded up, the land would appear to move much like the sea, and buildings would sway and collapse.

After The Deafening closes with a poem called 'Lighthouse', in which a character who could be the householder from my first collection's title poem, wakes up to find that his ordinary suburban home has been transformed into a lighthouse, far out to sea.

That night the house
Troubled the householder's sleep
And became a kind of Wolf Rock.

What was the loft was where
The precious light burned…. (ibid: 85)

In the poem this transformation is seen as a positive thing. In contrast to the other houses in the book, which are unstable or on the point of disappearing, the house in 'Lighthouse' has become almost indestructible. Moreover it has become a source of strength and security for a whole community: 'He saw the ships lit up and safe,/ He heard the living captains hailing.' (ibid: 86)

'Lighthouse' immediately follows a longer poem called 'Survey', which describes a house that has been burgled, and which has also been discovered to contain an outbreak of dry rot. In counterpointing that poem of domestic invasion with an image of a house as impregnable fortress against nature and the elements I was perhaps saying something also about the nature of the house as an idea. Although the physical house might be destroyed by rot or criminal invasion, the house as an idea – like the house in 'Suffolk Interior' and the house in 'Lighthouse' - endures. It endures in memory and in the continuing narrative of social relationships that were its most important constituent part. Much as the act of description with which I began this essay, this particular line of thinking in poetry has for me been a means of giving meaning and form to a house that has vanished. It has been a means by which I've tried to understand that nature of the house I grew up in, as it exists now. Gutted of the social fabric of which I was a part, the only enduring material elements of the house are certain physical ones such as the bricks and cement

– and not much else. My poems are, amongst other things, asking the question, what exactly is the house now, and how does it relate to the house I knew and grew up as part of?

My third collection, *Island to Island* (1999), continues the discourse though in perhaps more oblique ways. It was a collection in which I was trying to move away from the free-flowing, free associating verse of the first two collections and instead trying and construct something more formally intricate and intellectually inventive. The dominating influences are W.H.Auden, Robert Graves and Wallace Stevens – poets who had been important to me for a long time but it was in *Island to Island* that I allowed their influence to come to the fore. Auden was important not only for the example of his technical brilliance but also for his thinking on domestic and social spaces. Particularly important was 'Thanksgiving for a Habitat'[7] a sequence of poems in which he celebrates the rooms that comprise the house in Kirchstetten, Austria, where he lived with Chester Kallman.

This rethinking of and interest in form was noted by Stephen Knight in his *TLS* review of the volume, where he writes: 'a number of poems in *Island to Island* are organized by repetition, rhyme and half-rhyme, sometimes to quite hypnotic effect. "Beatrice in a Bivouac' is a beautifully executed lyric, while the recurrence of many of the nouns in 'Revolution of the Viaduct' is a fine example of Woodward extending his range in a manner that does not entirely sacrifice his characteristic timbre…'[8] *Island to Island* explores themes of isolation and exile. The title poem describes an infestation of ants that, one by one, makes the islands of an archipelago uninhabitable. The only way the islanders can survive is to become ant-like themselves. The homelessness of the islanders, and the infestation of their habitats makes this a poem about dwelling, if not about specific houses. The next poem in the collection, 'Beatrice in a Bivouac', goes further than ever before in discussing temporary dwellings. It is an address to a lover who requires a home to be built for her. The narrator suggests a number of temporary dwellings – igloo, wigwam, caravan, cave, shed, shack, den, until, unsatisfied with their temporary nature, he settles on grave, and laments the fact that this is the only truly permanent dwelling. 'Suburban Glass', which immediately follows, describes in sonnet form a more conventional home – the newly built starter home with a conservatory attached:

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[7] *Collected Poems*: 688

[8] Stephen Knight review of *Island to Island, Times Literary Supplement* 26th August 1999

Couples become biographies
As they plan their future flower beds,
Waiting for their apples to be trees,
Turning yellow in their crystal sheds;
Marriages walled in by glassiness
Set in ordinary palaces.

Although this was seen in a recent *TLS* blog entry[9] as a rather positive poem about dwelling, that analysis probably misses the point that the perfect starter home is also something of a sterile museum where life is stifled somewhat.

The collection *We Were Pedestrians,* (2005), which was also shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize, contains a number of poems that examine the meanings of domestic spaces. 'House-hunting' (Woodward 2005: 8) looks at what sort of space a house is when it is between ownership, when it has been divested of all its contents and is literally unoccupied. 'Pen-y-Bryn' (ibid: 3) is about a woman who believes her bathroom has been stolen and hidden in an old mine half way up a mountain. 'Tent Perspectives' (ibid: 17*)* contrasts the solidity of houses with the flimsiness of tents. In addition I include poems that are centred on particular rooms or the absence of rooms. But perhaps the most sustained enquiry into the nature of dwelling occurs in the long poem 'Ecopoesis' (ibid: 60).

'Ecopoesis' borrows from the science fiction genre and tells the story of the future colonization of the planet Mars. I had toyed with this idea a little in *Island to Island* in the poem 'Furnishings' (Woodward 1999: 6), which considers the materials left on the moon by the Apollo astronauts and what their presence on the moon means (do they make it a 'place', for instance). *Ecopoesis* considers the same question – would the arrival of humans on Mars make it into another Earth, or something else entirely? Could humans ever belong on a planet where they haven't evolved? If they did, what sort of place would Mars become? How would humans relate to Mars? Along with lots of technical and scientific detail on the process of making Mars habitable for humans (one actual theory it describes, for instance, is the deliberate crashing of ice-rich asteroids onto the surface. This would not only deliver huge amounts of water, but the impact would heat up the atmosphere by several degrees), the poem attempts to describe the social and economic development of the planet, seen as a haven from an Earth than has become

[9] I have included the URL for this ref in the bibliography although it doesn't seem to be currently active

overcrowded, polluted and uninhabitable. Once the initial terraforming is done, the question faced by the new settlers is how to organise their society – should they model it on Earth, or try to start something new from scratch? Should they develop new forms of architecture? What should their buildings look like? How do they name places? To their surprise, once they have outgrown the original habitats provided by science and have begun to build in stone, they naturally revert to classical forms. But seeing that this might lead to reproducing Earth on Mars they abandon this project and try to let new forms of architecture emerge unselfconsciously.

'Ecopoesis' suggests that architecture is intimately linked to the shape and scale of the human body.

> And we sided in the end with those
> Who wanted to shake the habit
> Of being human and take the chance
> To start afresh and let our buildings
> Somehow grow like the green corn
> That had taken so well, that we should
> Farm our houses and let their form
> Be determined by their time and place.
> And so the ancient cities of Earth
> Made their reappearance.
> We still had our bodies, that
> Was the problem. Houses are somatic,
> Born from our dimensions and habits,
> Ur Nineveh, Babylon, their dumpy
> Ziggurats, trailing plant life, floods…
> It took our cities to remind us
> We were human. (Woodward 2005: 65)

Inevitably, despite their best efforts and a fresh start, the colonizers of Mars do end up reproducing Earth. They have merely gone back in time a few thousand years, with the attendant danger that they will follow the same course of history and end up with a modern Earth eventually. The poem tries to avoid taking an entirely aetiological view of history – the idea that history is a prescriptive set of causes and effects that will always follow the same path – and suggests there is hope and that other outcomes are possible. Rather it plays with the idea that human beings are essentially their bodies, and that wherever they are placed they perform acts of domestication, of ecopoesis (Greek, eco=home, poesis=to make).

In my most recent collection of poetry, *The Seacunny* (2012), I further developed the persistent theme in my writing that deals with the evanescent house, the house that has disappeared or is on the point of disappearing. This was especially the case with 'Life In The House to Be Demolished'. *The Seacunny* has the usual scattering of dwelling-based poems ('Flatland', 'The Seacunny', 'In The Electricity Gallery', 'The Lights', 'Jackdaws'), but 'Life In The House to Be Demolished' takes a more extended look at the question of what constitutes a habitat. It asks a similar question to the one asked in 'Ecopoesis' – why are our homes the way they are?

In 'Life in the House to be Demolished' the inhabitant is driven to distraction by the fact that he lives next door to a field of cows – and also by the fact that he lives in a house from which he will soon be evicted. In trying to resolve the puzzle of why humans and cows live in such different ways he eventually decides to swap places with them. The cows come into the house, while he goes to live in the field. Inevitably he finds the new habitats entirely unsuitable for their new occupiers.

> They traipsed in through the patio doors,
> Like hoodies in a church, bashful and uncomprehending,
> Sweeping ornaments from the mantelpiece with a casual turn of the head.
> (Woodward 2012: 76)

The poem plays with the possibility that, placed in a human habitat, cows will slowly start to become more human, but ultimately the experiment fails and the cows eventually destroy the house completely. Both this poem and 'Ecopoesis', and a number of other poems, seem to me to be saying that houses are so intimately linked to the human body that they can, to a certain extent, be thought of as extensions of the human body.

3. Prose

Howards End may at first glance seem to be a novel in which houses stand for notions of durability and permanence, for the lasting values that are handed down through the generations and that remain untouched by the vicissitudes of contemporary life. In fact there are a number of scenes where the ephemerality of houses and cityscapes are evoked. In Chapter Five, there are several descriptions of buildings that have become featureless shapes against the backdrop of a sky at twilight. Here is one: 'The sun had set, and the backwater, deep in shadow, was filling with a gentle haze. To the right the fantastic skyline of the flats towered black against the hues of evening; to the left the older houses raised a square-cut, irregular parapet against the gray.' (Forster 1910: 53). Here is another: 'Helen's cigarette turned to a spot in the darkness, and the great flats opposite were sown with lighted windows, which vanished and were relit again, and vanished incessantly.' (57) The chapter in which these descriptions occur is the pivotal one of the Queen's Hall Concert, where the misappropriation of an umbrella introduces the Schlegels to the young clerk, Leonard Bast. Forster uses the music of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to introduce a theme – the goblin footfall – that associates Bast with the abyss of poverty that threatens to open up for those who have lost any means of financial support. Much of the plot of the novel concerns the Schlegels' clumsy efforts to save Bast from this abyss. The cityscapes described above perhaps go some way to reinforcing this theme. Not only do they become dark, brooding and perhaps slightly sinister shapes, they also become depersonalised cells winking in and out of existence – a suggestion that the solid ramparts of the architectural city has a fundamental fragility – the whole edifice might collapse at any moment.

The chapter that follows this scene elaborates the idea. We follow Bast as he walks back to his own dwelling south of the river. As he arrives at Camelia Road Forster provides another description of the urban landscape, this time emphasizing the demolition and redevelopment work that was taking place. 'It was the kind of scene that may be observed all over London, whatever the locality – bricks and mortar rising and falling with the restlessness of the water in a fountain…' (59). Forster frequently uses water metaphors when describing London. We are introduced to the Schlegel's London home in Chapter 2.

> Their house was in Wickham Place, and fairly quiet, for a lofty promontory of buildings separated it from the main thoroughfare. One had the sense of a backwater, or rather of an estuary, whose waters flowed in from the invisible sea, and ebbed into a profound silence while the waves without were still heaving. (23)

Chapter 13 opens with a meditation on the flux and flow of London, likening it to a sea: '…and the city herself, emblematic of their lives, rose and fell in a continual flux, while her shallows washed more widely against the hills of Surrey and over the fields of Hertfordshire.' (115) Here there is a close correspondence with my own poem 'A Sailor's Thoughts on Dry Land', (Woodward 1994: 40) discussed above, which uses a similar metaphorical conceit.

'A Sailor's Thoughts on Dry Land' was not written under any conscious Forsterian influence but it is interesting to note that water imagery is used in both cases to elaborate a point about the ephemerality of apparently solid physical structures. Underlying *Howards End* is a concern with the transformative powers of modern capitalism. Both the Basts and the Schlegels live under the threat of eviction from and demolition of their homes. In the modern system of land development perfectly good buildings, not even very old, are pulled down and replaced by larger blocks simply to increase the investment value of the land. Wickham Place is one of those places that will suffer that fate – the newer blocks of flats have already been built, and of course it is the Wilcoxes who move into one of them, becoming, by chance, near neighbours of the Schlegels.

By contrast, in the countryside, there is little change. Buildings like Howards End stand immutable for centuries. The only alteration it suffers is at the hands of the Wilcoxes who convert its stables into a garage. So for Forster it is money that brings about this flux and instability, capitalism that turns buildings into water. In my poem, it is time. All buildings change given enough time, but capitalism will accelerate that process. London in Forster's novel is a place where time is compressed or speeded up, so that what would usually take centuries to occur (the replacement of one built environment with another) happens within a single generation. In Chapter 13, as Margaret contemplates the empty house-to-be-demolished at Wickham Place, and the unjustness of a system that allows a millionaire to build "Babylonian Flats upon it…what right had he to stir so large a portion of the quivering jelly?' Forster uses the

phrase ‘the architecture of hurry’ to sum up this process, in a passage that mixes time, history, archaeology and further water metaphors. (Forster 1910: 116-7)[10]

I had attempted in several never-to-be-published novels, to explore my own thoughts about houses. I had put Forster aside as an influence in my early twenties and stopped reading him altogether, along with other novelists who were important to me at that time, specifically Joseph Conrad and Henry James. For several years I had read hardly anything but those authors but turned instead away from their domestic and documentary realism towards the more exuberant, experimental fiction of writers like Toni Morrison, Angela Carter, Isabel Allende, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and other magic realists. In my mid twenties I wrote a novel for which I had high hopes, called *All The Rooms of the House*. It was written at around the same time as I began writing the *Householder* poems, in Falmouth, under the spell of Peter Redgrove’s poetry and of the colours and lights of Falmouth. The novel was set in that town, renamed St Jude, and concerned the relationship between a plumber and an artist. The title and the fact that the central character is a plumber is evidence enough perhaps of the dwelling-centred nature of the novel. Of its twists and turns I can only remember fragments, but the principal conceit was that each chapter was focussed on a different room of the house. This is probably the reason that an agent’s reader report described it as disjointed. Its theme was the shaping of a domestic space, the claiming of a house as a personal territory, and as a site for romantic love. It was a love story that saw love as a union of the material and the spiritual, the practical and the idealistic, the body and the soul. In that way it betrayed its debt to *Howards End*, in that the practical plumber was a Wilcox to the imaginative artist’s Schlegel. Margaret’s acceptance of Henry Wilcox’s proposal is her attempt to enact the ‘only connect’ epigram of the novel and bring about a union of humanity’s divided soul. In that way Forster’s novel draws on a well-trodden line of thought that goes back to Plato and emerges via writers like Turgenev (his *Fathers and Sons* was another influence on my writing at the time) into psychoanalytic theories of the divided self that became so influential in the period just after Forster was writing. The house in *All The Rooms Of The House* didn’t necessarily stand for anything, but the idea was that for a house to be a meaningful

[10] Perhaps timely here to remind ourselves of the fate of Forster’s actual childhood home, 6 Melcombe Place, demolished for the Marylebone Station development, a project that in the end fell through.

space it has to be inhabited, and preferably by people who are in love. In its crudest terms the argument was that for a house to properly flourish it needs occupants who can both fix the pipes and decorate it nicely.

The novel got to the stage of being seriously considered by an agent who was charmed by the writing but disenchanted by the sometimes intentional absurdities of the plot. The agent's reader, for instance, objected strongly to the fact that several chapters were narrated from the viewpoint of the artist's pet cat.

Other failed novels followed, sometimes wildly experimental and bearing little loyalty to any one particular genre or style but ranging freely between as many as I was reading at the time. They might be best summed up by the fact that they attempted to grapple with and assimilate the techniques of my favourite reading at the time – *Moby Dick*, Rabelais and the French Oulipians (Perec, Queneau). Thus a novel in a realist contemporary setting might suddenly decide to catalogue, in the manner of a Rabelaisian digression, the one hundred and fifty types of dog turd found on the local pavements, and their similarities in appearance to particular foods. At least two novels were so convoluted in their plotting that they became impossible to write. I struggled with one for over fifteen years before finally abandoning it. Much of this experimentalism was perhaps a way of avoiding my real preoccupation, which was the turbulent life of the family I lived in during the early part of my existence.

Three authors were particularly important for me in finding a way of writing about my family – John Updike, Vladimir Nabokov and Marilynne Robinson. Reading Updike and Nabokov for the first time in my late thirties helped me understand that a novel could address the everyday and the mundane while at the same time employing the lyrical and metaphorical devices more commonly associated with poetry. It seemed to me that they acted as a bridge between the experimental baroque of James Joyce and the more restrained forms of English realism. In submitting myself to their influence I felt they might provide a way of channelling a poetic imagination through prose to produce a novel that was still recognizably a novel, and not some horrible mutant form of writing that poets' novels so often turn out to be (I have to reluctantly provide Peter Redgrove's early novels as prime examples of those)[11]. Marilynne

[11] See for instance *In The Country of the Skin* (1973) or *The Terrors of Dr Treviles* (1974) written in collaboration with Penelope Shuttle. To be fair, Redgrove's later novels were more successful handlings of the form.

Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* was important for its theme as much as its language, in that it takes place almost entirely within the confines of a house and uses that setting to enact and articulate a family drama.

My novel *August* (2001) grew out of ongoing autobiographical preoccupations. I had attempted both a conventional autobiography and a memoir in verse of my elder brother. Both projects came to nothing. The conventional biography failed through want of a satisfactory autobiographical voice. I found the first person viewpoint very restricting and whenever I used it I found myself lapsing into a slightly pompous authoritative voice, "Let it not be said…, As we all know…" or else a hopelessly vague tone, "I'm not sure about this but I seem to remember…" Part of the problem I see now was not having read enough memoir or autobiography at the time to get beyond the clichés of life writing. The memoir/poem had more promise. It was based on a box of cuttings and scraps that had belonged to my brother who died in 1980, and was in effect partly a long found poem. But other than transcribing the various texts among the scraps (it was a varied array of material, including several court and police summons, a cat pedigree, letters and lists, school essays and innumerable random ephemera) I had difficulty in knowing what to do with them. The poem I envisioned as a solution was to be called 'Obituaries' and interspersed the found material with an exploration of the language of newspaper obituaries, some real, some imagined. The idea was to make an attempt at summarising a life at the same time as investigating the limits and contradictions in that very process. In the end I felt unable to render the material into a workable poetic form and abandoned the project.

Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* was important in a number of ways. It showed me the importance of placing characters in context – I think *August's* emphasis, in the early chapters, on the family history of the main characters is in part following the example of the early chapters of Robinson's novel, where the central characters are shown to exist within a context of layered relatedness – great aunts and grandparents, in-laws and friends of the family. Reading *Housekeeping* again I am also struck by its use of flood imagery. In chapter Four there is a deluge as the heavy rains follow heavy snowfall and raise the level of the neighbouring lake. With the electricity out the effect is distinctly one of evanescence, of the solidity of the building becoming fluid and fragile, "There were the sounds of dull concussion from the kitchen, and the lace curtains, drawn thin and taut by their own sodden weight, shifted and turned. Sylvie took me by the hands and pulled me after her through six grand waltz steps. The house flowed around

us." (Robinson: 59-60) In the light of the passages above where I highlight Forster's and my own use of water metaphors in relation to buildings, it seemed that Robinson was also using water as a way of expressing the transient and insubstantial nature of physical structures.

In Chapter 8, a pivotal chapter in *Housekeeping*, the two main characters, Sylvie and Ruth, visit a house in the woods that has rotted away and collapsed into its own cellar. At the climax of the novel, to feign their own deaths, they set fire to the house, which proves difficult as it is so damp, and make their perilous escape across the railway bridge over the lake. The house in *Housekeeping* is a fragile unstable structure. Its boundaries are porous (it admits the lake, many of its windows are missing). The house in the woods serves as an example of what it and all houses are, and is certainly true of those in my own writing – temporary structures susceptible to the vicissitudes of time.[12] Sylvie, the drifter aunt who comes to act as mother for the girls Ruth and Lucille after their own mother commits suicide in the lake, represents a kind of rootless free spirit who can't fully adjust to the sedentary, stationary life a physical house demands. Her burning of the house at the end is a symbolic severance from that way of life. As they cross the bridge immediately afterwards, Ruth notes how in the darkness it loses substance, 'the bridge might have created itself under my foot as I walked, and vanished again behind me.' (ibid: 181)

The breakthrough for me in the writing of *August* was to happen upon a specific mode of structural patterning. This patterning was to do with the focus, over a number of years, on the family summer holidays. The title of the novel is a reference to this patterning, for each chapter takes place in the August of a particular year over a period of a decade and a half (1955-1970). The summer holiday is taken at the same place each year, a remote farm on the west coast of Wales where the family camp for two or three weeks. The narrative moves between the two locations of the Welsh farm and the family's permanent home in suburban north London. This gave me an opportunity to explore in more depth some of the themes I've described in relation to my poetry, particularly the temporary or evanescent nature of buildings and dwelling spaces. With the narrative divided between two contrasting locations I was able to consider the relationship between the permanent London home and the temporary canvas home in Wales.

[12] Also important in this context, but outside the scope of this essay, has been the influence of Robert Frost in poems such as 'Directive', and generally the poetry of decay seen for instance in Redgrove's early work

Early in the novel an emphasis is placed on how the tent home and the field it is situated in mirrors the London home. When the mother Colette first arrives in the field, 'she felt she was being shown round an enormous drawing room.' (Woodward 2001: 31). 'When she unlaced its [the tent's] entrance and recognised some of the furnishings of Fernlight Avenue (a blanket, some books, a framed photograph of herself taken twenty years ago), all lit with green, she felt she was discovering the lost treasure of her own life.' (ibid: 32) Later the relationship between London and Wales is extended beyond the farm to include the landscape more generally. On page 194 Colette 'was suddenly alarmed by the fact that the little rock formation on which she was seated looked very like a granite suite of dining room furniture – a table and chairs.' A later chapter examines the relationship between the two locations in terms of time – how it is always discovered on the return to London that the garden has become overgrown in the family's absence, to such a degree it feels as though more time has elapsed than is actually the case. 'It was as though, in Wales, they'd put a foot in eternity, neverendingness, and they'd come back a year later.' (ibid: 197). Later on the same page it is noted that the younger child, Julian, confusedly thinks he's a year older when he returns from Wales. This develops the theme of Wales being a representation of stability and continuity – a place where time literally moves at a slower rate – in contrast to London where time moves at a regular or accelerated rate, where change is frequent and destabilising.

The fragile nature of the tent as a dwelling space is emphasized in Chapter 2, when it is destroyed by fire. In this instance the family then take up residence in a barn, a space which they domesticate with the help of the farmer who supplies spare furnishings from the farmhouse. The tent (a replacement of course) is put to the test in various ways in later chapters, again to emphasise its fragility and flimsiness. In chapter 7, the penultimate chapter, the tent is almost destroyed in a storm and the family have again to resort to a more stable form of habitat, in this case the car, where they spend the night (the tent survives, although badly damaged). The novel ends with a scene that builds around the dismantling of the tent on the final camping holiday.

Forsterian themes of stability and continuity versus flux and instability become explicit in Chapter 3, when the father's thoughts about the relationship between the two places – London and Wales – are described: "Aldous had come to believe that Llanygwynfa and Fernlight Avenue were balanced around a common fulcrum, and that any change in one might cause a similar change in the other…" (ibid: 63) He begins to fear any change in the ancient settlement in Wales,

any encroachment of modernity. The relationship between the two dwellings, tent and house, is further explored in Chapter 4, where the process of retrieving the tent from the loft – its winter storage location - is described. The tent is tested out by being pitched in the garden.

London and Wales are also contrasted politically. The novel takes place at the height of the Cold War, when the possibility of a surprise nuclear attack was a constant and very real threat. Some members of the family find a sense of security in Wales because they believe it must be a long way from any likely nuclear targets, unlike their London home which would be close to a primary target. (ibid: 214) Such is the remoteness of their Welsh 'home' that they wonder if they would even know if a nuclear war had broken out. This is perhaps the point in the novel where the distance between the two locales is most clearly expressed. James, one of the sons, imagines returning home after a nuclear attack, travelling across a radioactive landscape to discover the crater where London had been. (ibid: 214-15) That such a thing could have happened without their knowledge emphasises what different worlds the two locations are situated in, separated by space, time and strategic importance.[13]

All this is to put in context the dynamic of *August*'s narrative, which is the slow disintegration of the family (traced subsequently in the second and third novels of the trilogy), which begins with the death of Colette Jones's mother. This triggers her nervous breakdown, and subsequent addiction to glue-sniffing, sleeping pills, tranquilizers, and alcohol. As the symbiotic relationship between Wales and London is established the novel develops a number of thematic polarities around that relationship – particularly to do with the opposition of house and tent. It could be said there are two versions of the Jones family, the tent version and the house version. The house version lives, at first, a respectable if slightly unconventional life. We first meet Colette Jones carrying out routine domestic chores (hanging out the washing, ibid:7), and while it is described that she feels a little out of place in the neighbourhood she does her best to get along with her neighbours. In the tent version of the family, the pursuit of respectability and the attempts at conventionality are maintained, but are made meaningless by the change of landscape. Colette climbs mountains in casual clothes, for instance (ibid: 194), or in one chapter they bring the family cat on holiday with them (ibid: 178ff). This is not just an issue of inappropriate dress or behaviour, the displacement of the family exposes their vulnerabilities and

[13] Perhaps important to note here how a camping holiday in Wales in the 1960s could mean being cut off from normal channels of media and communication for days or weeks on end

weaknesses. The fragility of the tent makes the tent version of the family particularly susceptible to damage. The death of the grandmother, which precipitates the eventual destruction of the family, occurs while they are in their tent versions of themselves. Indeed it is the fact that the grandmother died while temporarily placed in an old people's home, so that the family could go on their camping holiday, and the fact that her subsequent burial arrangements were badly handled by her older brother in Colette's absence, that induce such extreme feelings of guilt in Colette. The tent and the Welsh landscape are therefore seen as culpable in the main injustice of the novel.

The crisis in the family is taken to a higher level when Colette becomes addicted to glue sniffing. This again is associated with the tent and the farm, because it is through the materials of puncture repair that Colette becomes addicted to bicycle repair glue. In the early days of their camping holidays the older male members of the family cycled to Wales, the mother and younger children going by train, and bicycles remained an important element of the holidays and are a theme that run through the whole book.

The other crisis in the family, the older son Janus's breakdown and descent into alcoholism, also has associations with Wales, though not quite as strongly as in his mother's case. The novel raises the possibility that an early rejection by the daughter of the farm may have contributed to the feelings of isolation that later lead to his breakdown.

While the tent may represent the fragility of the family and its eventual implosion, reflected again in its susceptibility to damage, and its inherent collapsibility (expressed in the final scene when it is dismantled), the more solid habitat of the London home resists the various forms of damage that are inflicted upon it. So although the Welsh farm and its landscape represent for the Jones family a notion of continuity and ancestral rootedness (the father of the family has Welsh grandparentage, though not in that particular region of Wales), it proves a false notion, an illusion, even. As the novel sequence progresses it is the London house that proves the more durable element of their lives. By contrasting it with the fragility of the tent and associating the vulnerabilities of the family with that habitat, the London house begins to take on a Forsterian role in the story, becoming a symbol of continuity and the enduring nature of certain values, much as Howards End does in Forster's novel. The role of the house is developed in the

second and third novels of the series and in the rest of this section I shall look more closely at what the enduring values it represents might be. [14]

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Wales and the camping holidays do not recur in the twenty years that are covered by the second and third novels in the trilogy. Although camping does feature in one chapter of the second novel, *I'll Go to Bed at Noon*, (shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2004), it is not laden with the same significance as in the *August* camping scenes. In *I'll Go to Bed at Noon*, the narrative of family breakdown is continued, with a focus on the conflict between the elder son, Janus, and his parents. The house here fulfils a similar function to that in *August*, retaining its role as a locus of stability and continuity, but as the intensity of the conflict within the family increases, the house's role as a stable centre is put under pressure. Throughout *I'll Go to Bed at Noon* the house is repeatedly damaged, vandalised or written and inscribed upon. In perhaps the most extreme example, the bathroom has its pipework removed by Janus, who plans to sell it for its scrap metal value and thus fund his alcohol addiction.

This not only takes the bathroom out of action as a functioning space (the necessary repairs are too expensive), but initially causes a flood when the bath is emptied. In order to avert a ceiling collapse, Aldous drills holes in the ceiling to let the water drain through, and the effect is very like indoor rain (Woodward 2004: 67). The boundaries of house and world are thus at least symbolically breached (it is not actual rain, of course), and the house has become a structure similar to the one described in *Housekeeping*, one that is porous and unable to keep the elements at bay. The attack on the bathroom also sends the house back in time. Washing now has to be undertaken in a more primitive manner either at the kitchen sink or by transporting pans of hot water upstairs. The bathroom itself eventually ceases to have any ablutional function and becomes a storage/junk room.

Rather than provide a catalogue of all the instances in the novel where the house is put under this kind of pressure, it might be more useful to consider a single extended episode which brings together several different forms of this pressure. In Chapter Five Julian, the youngest son,

[14] an extensive analysis of these issues in *August* can be found in Astrid Bracke's PhD Thesis *Ecocriticism and the Contemporary British Novel: 36-44*

is alone in bed at night while the rest of the family are at the pub. They return later as a drunken ensemble and enter the house by climbing a ladder and crossing the kitchen roof and coming in through Julian's bedroom window (ibid: 95-6). Later in Janus's room, Bill Brothers quickly draws a mural on the wall depicting a woman, Angelica Sweetman, the object of Janus's erotic desires (ibid: 99-100). Angelica's husband sees the mural and is incensed to violence. A fight breaks out during which a dressing table is thrown through a bedroom window to land in the front garden. In these examples the house has become porous again, admitting people through an unsuitable point of ingress (the bedroom window), and ejecting interior matter into the outside areas of the house, also through an inappropriate point of exit. This not only puts the house under pressure as an intact and contained entity, it also compromises its ability to protect and secure its inhabitants. As the trilogy of novels unfolds this safeguarding function of the house is put under further pressure.

I'll Go to Bed at Noon is primarily a novel about the destructive effects of alcohol on a family.[15] I hadn't properly noticed until I was immersed in the research for this PhD that critics also highlighted the importance of the house in my work. As Kassia Boddy noted in her *Daily Telegraph* review, *I'll Go to Bed at Noon* is 'as much the story of a house as of a family…*August* dealt with the relationship between No.89 and its 'geographical twin' (a tent in Llanygwynfa); the new novel focuses on change within the house.' Blake Morrison observed that alcohol provided the family with an alternative set of dwellings in the form of pubs. 'Pubs form as much of a backdrop as the family's ramshackle north London home. When characters are banned from one watering hole, they move on to the next: The Goat and Compasses, the Owl, the Coach and Horses, The Lemon Tree, the Marquis of Granby. There are occasional outings to country pubs, too, though Soho is avoided – the Joneses are bohemian but also suburban.'[16]

Chapter Five also foregrounds another aspect of the house, and one which ultimately enables it to survive and endure, namely its function as a site of creative endeavour and a repository of cultural value. In Chapter Five we find that Julian's bedroom has become a library – a functioning lending library requiring a £1 membership fee (ibid: 95), which reinvents a trope

[15] 'the narrative is mind-bogglingly crisp, resourceful and sometimes hilarious in its descriptions of the myriad ways people drink (melted boot polish doesn't really work, but tomatoes can be turned into sherry).' Maggie Gee *Sunday Times* review 25th July 2004

[16] Blake Morrison review for the *Guardian* 17th July 2004

of the country house novel mentioned earlier, that in representing a microcosm of the wider society country houses tend to have stores of cultural knowledge and value such as art galleries and libraries (see above: 11). This chapter also makes reference to a poem written by Janus in lipstick across his ceiling, and indeed reproduces the poem in full (ibid: 97) At the same time the artistic practices of poetry and painting (Bill Brothers, who draws the mural, is a talented amateur artist), chaotic and disruptive in these scenes, lay the foundations for a more sustained cultural and creative practices that emerge later in the trilogy. Several times in *August* it is noted that Aldous, an art teacher, has used old paintings done on hardboard to repair the house (Woodward 2001: 305). He has already created his own murals in the house (Woodward 2004: 350), and his own paintings hang on the walls. The house thus embodies Aldous's creative energy and this is put under pressure by Janus and Bill Brothers' spontaneous creations referred to above. Janus is also a talented pianist and a whole room of the house is dedicated to housing the Bechstein grand piano, and is in fact known as the music room. These artistic practises – literature, art, music, are all put under pressure during the course of the narrative, perhaps the most prominent example being Janus's physical attack on the piano with a rock (ibid: 311). If, in the Forsterian sense, the house can be said to symbolise or represent anything in the way that *Howards End* represented England, the house in the Jones trilogy could be said to represent the nurturing of artistic creativity.

The final novel of the trilogy, *A Curious Earth* (2007), brings these issues to the fore and offers an idea of redemption. The house is still under pressure and under threat of damage, but in this case the damage is more from neglect than wanton destruction. Aldous now lives in the house alone, is morose and inclined to drink too much. His capacity for creativity has depleted along with his ability to look after the house. The house has also taken on a new role in this novel – as a repository of memories and family history. In the opening chapter Aldous contemplates the kitchen cupboard that contains remnants of his now deceased wife – locks of her hair and her dental plates. He imagines her saliva adhering to the pages of the Green Shield Stamp albums she collected. The cupboard is also a place where nature has begun encroaching. Potatoes left in a cupboard have sprouted and are starting to grow through the cracks around the door. There is the lightest of suggestions here that the wifely residue and the sprouting potatoes

are components of an organic, near-metabolic process through which the house threatens to literally come alive.[17]

The journey Aldous undertakes in the course of the novel, which I will not summarise here, takes him through a series of romantic and near-romantic encounters which serve in part to reawaken his interest in the world of artistic creativity, also aided in part by an encounter with Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and its promise of redemption, and with Rembrandt's portrait of his mistress Hendrickje Stoffels, with its associated story of love achieved late in life. The culmination of these encounters and plot turns is that Aldous makes a decision to not only have the house renovated but to turn it into a commercial art gallery open to the public. He dies before he can complete this project, though it is completed on his behalf by his son Julian. The house becomes not only a repository of artistic and cultural value, but also a full embodiment of it, transformed from a living space into an exhibition space. This echoes the transformation of Rembrandt's house, visited in the novel, from home to museum/gallery. Remdrandt's house in fact becomes something of a role model in *A Curious Earth,* since it was simultaneously a living space, a work space and a commercial space (the entrance area was a gallery/shop). In its final transformation, the Jones house becomes such a manifold space, a machine for living in, becoming something akin to a chapel or other sacred space. We see this especially in a final revelation where Aldous, intoxicated by the paint fumes as he works on the transformation of the house, is on his knees before a vision of his dead wife.

The final scene of the novel goes further than before in bringing about an identification between house and inhabitant, in bringing a house to life and embodying character in the fabric of the house itself. Aldous is painting the floor when he dies, in preparation for the conversion of the house into a gallery. He collapses into the wet paint and dies, and it is several hours before he is discovered, by which time the paint has dried and he has become bonded to the floor by his face. Unable to separate him, the ambulance staff have to cut through the floorboards and he is taken out of the house with a piece of the floor attached to his face, which makes a 'strange shape under the covering blanket'. Aldous has literally become fused with the house and, phenomenologically at least, has become a hybrid man/house entity.

[17] This could be seen as a Gothic element in the novel, along with its closing scenes with their hallucinatory episodes.

At the conclusion of the trilogy, it is revealed that the project to convert the house into an art gallery has not been abandoned as a result of Aldous's death, but has been taken up and fulfilled by his youngest son Julian. The final page of the novel is a 'review' in *Time Out* of the first exhibition - a joint show of Aldous's own art with that of Agnes Florizoone, one of the characters he was romantically involved with earlier in the novel. This act of transformation not only enables to house to act as a symbol of continuity beyond the death of its last remaining inhabitant, it maintains that continuity at the abstract or imaginative level, providing a home for the imaginative products of its inhabitants rather than their physical bodies. The implication is that this continuity will endure indefinitely.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay I have attempted to trace the elements of household and domestic imagery in my work as a poet and novelist, and to understand these in relation to the key influence of E.M.Fortser's *Howards End*. "Meaning", for a writer, or any other creative artist, is often something that emerges from the finished work in a retrospective sense. In other words, we cannot know if Forster set out to write *Howards End* with the idea in his head that the house should represent England, but the critic Lionel Trilling observed that he did. For my own part I can say (as far as I can remember) that I didn't intend the house in my trilogy of novels to stand for artistic creativity as an important and enduring human value, (or anything else) but that in my re-reading of the novels in the light of its influences, that is what seems to me to be happening.

I have found this process very useful, rewarding and even surprising. The surprise is partly to do with the way in which these themes can be traced and connected across the different areas of my writing – fiction and poetry. It feels reassuring to me that the exploration of what can seem like a narrow set of concerns has resulted in a varied and complex body of work. If there had been space in this essay I would, I think, have been able to take the study further to examine my more recent work, and I would have been able to observe the conversation continuing. My novels *Nourishment* (2009), *Vanishing* (2012) and *The Paper Lovers* (2018) all engage with the theme of domestic space in contrastingly different ways. Both of my short story collections, *Caravan Thieves* (2007) and *Legoland* (2016) contain stories that investigate the nature of domestic spaces, but they lie far outside the scope of this essay. This is also true of the wealth of fiction by other writers who have dealt with these themes, a survey of which I might have embarked on if this had been a conventional PhD, along with the philosophical literature that impinges on the subject. Gaston Bachelard's the *Poetics of Space* and the philosophy of Merleau Ponty and Heidegger, along with the work of my former anthropology tutor at Manchester Tim Ingold have played an important role in the way I have developed thoughts about my writing in relation to habitation and space. But early on I decided, with the restricted word limit available to me, that it was important to tighten my focus as much as possible, and so have concentrated on the key influence of *Howards End.*

As an analytical tool, a domestic-space centred approach has, for me, opened new doors in how I read and interpret fiction. I have become particularly alert to the built environment of a

novel and wonder how the characters in that novel relate to the domestic spaces they inhabit. To give one example, in recently rereading the works of Joseph Conrad I noted that his little-known first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, is named for the house its central character built as an act of brash over-confidence in his abilities as a trader. The novel plays subtly and not so subtly with the transformation of domestic spaces, in a way that is unusual for Conrad, whose characters are often transient or even homeless. Rereading classic fiction in this way will, I am sure, light up unexpected corners of their architecture and might serve as the basis for some future critical writing projects.

I began this essay with an attempt to reconstruct the house I grew up in, and I have observed that much of my writing has been a process of trying to understand that house, and my relation to it. I sometimes wonder if I have allowed myself to become too preoccupied by this subject matter, especially at the present moment (I am writing this in September 2020), when political and ecological instabilities threaten to become overwhelming. Nevertheless, people continue to live in houses and to eat, drink and do things. I hold to the view that the best way to write about the world is to pay close and detailed attention to what is near to hand. My early poetry can be regarded as an attempt to discover the sort of elemental forces that Ted Hughes wrote about, but in the apparatus of domestic plumbing rather than the animal kingdom.[18] Similarly my fiction deals with the quotidian world of households and their occupants, but through that close examination reaches, like Aldous at the end of *A Curious Earth* (I hope), towards something more lasting and universal.

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[18] 'Utilities such as gas, electricity or piped water are treated as awesome, elemental forces' Tim Dooley, review of *Householder*, *TLS* 22nd November 1991

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Appendix

M O R G A N ' S M A N T E L P I E C E

At birth, give every man his own mantelpiece,
For him to sit at the root of, thinking – what next?

And then to carry round with him
For the rest of his life, from one home

To the next; Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells,
Weybridge, West Hackhurst, King's.

A spiritual alcove, a place for the less loved,
And if your new room has no fireplace,

Still you will nail your mantelpiece above
The space where it would have been.

Mine was not like yours, no Tuscan gravitas.
Fluted legs, not columns exactly, in white

That supported two shelves, but with enough
Character to make me feel the shock

Of its absence when one day it wasn't there.
I oversaw the task of bringing it in

From the cold, my father and my brother
Taking one upended leg each, hauling

The dead body (probably stuffed with tenners
Someone joked – the woodwork that had

Faced the wall unpainted chilled
With its rawness), then up the stairs

To its new resting place, my bedroom,
Where it lived, unattached, just propped

Against the wall, or on the floor, upside down.
I claimed it had been a friend, when asked,

Indulging a childish sentimentality,
That I held conversations with the Mantelpiece

That it had a human name, though when pressed
could only come up with 'Fred". And a surname?

"Henry." "Henry?" "-son" "Fred Henryson?"
Though in my room, I was troubled

By the mantelpiece's firm, blank silence,
Not reticence or coyness, just the empty

Gape of brainlessness. A triumphal arch
Commemorating nothing. The fire

That should have burned was cold wall.
It was itself burned, in the end, I think

In an extravagant bonfire. What turn in me could
Have put my friend to the flames?

I had outgrown that shelf
And it was time to know what next.