Endless House

Models of Thought for Dwelling

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This is one of four essays that contributed to the written research component of a doctorate which also involved studio practice. Entitled “Endless House: Models of Thought for Dwelling,” each essay brought a different Peter Bruegel painting into relation with a particular building which could be interpreted as a thought model, for its maker. “Endless House,” refers to Frederick Kiesler’s life-work, which retained the provisional character of a working model and was never to be realised in any conclusive or finite way. The reason for choosing the essay form over the more conventional thesis was to resist the assumption that an original claim to knowledge should follow the prescribed and supposedly scientific methods presented in more deductive and philosophical texts. Hence what follows is an approach that looks for ideas to gain precision from their relations.

Chapter 4 – Dwelling

Postcards of places commonly carry gesture of informality; though words maybe chosen with care, their pictorial information is often general, intended to accommodate the varying dispositions of browsers who seek a near record of their encounter. A posted photograph is of a different order; signalling an investment in both the subject and its recipient. Wittgenstein sent Moore a photograph of his house on a Norwegian Fjord. It describes an expanse of mountainside, modulated in dark greys, where just the smallest of gradations describe enormity of scale. On the right, a white burst of water seems to stand alone, its width at the bottom turning into a point at its source. It suggests a moment of origin more pertinent than its natural incident, that out of the blackness of the chemical exposure, some mythic beginning is occurring. It is an elemental picture, where water, rock and vegetation, distinct and exemplary in their idea, converge with horizontal and vertical plains of mountain and lake.

The lake’s surface stretches the width of the picture, meeting the steep gradient with its mirrored surface, turning rock and trees back upon themselves in blurred asymmetry. An impression of theatre might also be implied by this abrupt flattening, the watery stage allowing for what is solid and mineral to be interpreted as scenic cloth, painted to convince the eye of monumental presence.

The house’s place in the picture has been composed carefully: central and facing out. The two frontal windows reflect the same degree of whiteness as the waterfall, giving the impression of a fixed stare, as from some private, nocturnal creature, rigid and alert to exposure. It maybe the limitation of the camera’s lens – its failure to zoom, that results in the building’s minute depiction, yet its effect is to point to the epic, bringing the notion of world to the fore. It looks on with a position of singularity; its isolation, the theme of the picture, the building seems to exist for that single purpose, to be self-conscious alone. To be set apart from the world, to take a position of distance, to make a distinction, to refine what is essential from that which is ill-considered.
out a position of thought. To compose this hut, to paint it in the subjective ‘I’ is in its intention, akin to Wittgenstein’s. The thinker, like the painter, situates himself and decides the place from which to view the world. He wrote:

To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole – a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is thus that it is mystical.

T. S. Eliot

There is the desire then to see the whole, and the need to step back far enough to take it in at once. Here is the gesture of his house. Though not confessed, his art speaks. This is what literature, a claim for separation and retreat that makes wholeness thinkable. It is a primordial position with sympathies nearer to Heidegger’s Black Forest farm than cultivated academia. Heidegger describes the farm with its “overhanging steep roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and that, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of long winter nights.” It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it was made room in its chamber for the halloved places of childhood and the “tree of the dead” – for that is what they call a coffin there: the Totenbaum – and in this way it is designed for generations under one roof the character of their journey through time.

Distinct in the account of this peasant dwelling is the way furnishings mark a pre-industrial time. Provision is made for birth and death by means of a cot/coffin. The presence of an altar corner ensures a constant bended down, where prayers are arranged around a table and devotion to the Godhead observed. The interior arrangement of objects and their use determines the quality of time that we attend. Technology is absent, there is no mention of clock work that might point to the pressing needs of the contemporary moment and distract from a world observed sub specie aeterni. This pursuit of authentic dwelling, so intent on not forgetting, produces imagery vulnerable to parody, as with Thomas Berend’s Haeger, sitting in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, raving to his companion:

In these photographs Heidegger is just climbing out of bed, or Heidegger is sleeping, or waking up, putting on his underwear, putting on his socks, taking a nap of grape juice, stepping out of his log cabin and looking towards the horizon, holding his cap, putting it on his cap, holding his cap in his hands, opening it out, closing it, raising his hand, lowering his head, putting his right hand in his wife’s left hand while his wife is putting her left hand into his right hand, walking in front of the house, walking at the back of the house, walking towards his house, walking away from his house, reading,
Reger takes what was intended as an expression of care, and attention to dwelling and exaggerates it, rendering it absurd. Since Rabelais and before, parody has sought to undermine the ideal, setting the profane against what is high minded and serious. Mocking the forest philosopher in his underpants might be crude, yet the humour covers a legitimate critique of this rural ideal and its dirtier side. Earlier he refers to Heidegger as “that ridiculous Nazi philistine in plus-fours.” Reger himself is an urbane fanatic, a music critic for The Times, passing time between the museum and the Ambassador Hotel, looking at paintings and drinking tea. His daily routine, in contrast to Heidegger, is precise and affectedly refined, described thus:

> Until noon he finds the eighteen-degree temperature at the Kunsthistorisches Museum agreeable, in the afternoon he is happier at the warm Ambassador, which always keeps a temperature of twenty-three degrees. In the afternoon I am no longer so fond of thinking nor do I think so intensively, Reger says, so I can afford the Ambassador.¹⁰

The museum and hotel are two buildings integral to a city, they are buildings we pass through and represent a restlessness more closely aligned with recreation than dwelling. Yet for Reger, these two metropolitan facilities are emphatically places of thought, thought that is governed more by routine, in itself a form of intentional forgetting, than by dwelling. Baths and rooms are replaced by parquet flooring and carpet, temperature is controlled and thinking is presented as a pastime, to be found of, rather than a state of mindfulness. Hence we are presented with dialectical positions of thought, in the form of urbanity versus the parochial, of modernity against the primordial. That this occurs in Vienna, site of Wittgenstein’s other architectural venture, naturally encourages an inquiry into their relation.

Wittgenstein was both intensely invested in the Kunsthistorisches’s design while never intending to live there, conditions entirely different from Norway. As a commission from his sister, it was in keeping with the requirements of a Viennese villa, serving as an architectural project, an exercise in the process of decision and refinement. Its distinctive character can partly be understood in its allegiance to particular architectural conventions while refuting their manners. Hence there is the expected number of reception rooms to bedrooms, the entrance hall and approaching steps. Yet whilst these conditions are met, there appears to be no sympathy for their original purpose in providing generosity or warmth of welcome; rather as if their proportion and arrangement
were more of a problem of logic than a means of abode.

In another novel Bernhard describes a house so tellingly that it is difficult not to recall the Kundmannsgasse:18

When I actually saw the building itself, it still seemed to me like a poorer station, it ran counter to all my ideas of a residential house and its effect, as could scarcely be expected differently, was anti-human. It was therefore anything but a home for anyone about to retire, instead it looked from the outside like a concrete shell for some machine working inside, one that needs neither light nor air.19

Much has been made of Wittgenstein’s links with Adolph Loos and their shared mistrust of ornament, but in Bernhard’s description, a difference is more clearly revealed. The interior/exterior tension in the way Loos’ spaces develop, these shifting levels of floor and interlocking rooms that express their resolution in the buildings’ outer forms, are absent in the Kundmannsgasse. There is no hint that the building is determined or even makes concession to the inhabitants’ desires for comfort or society. Bernhard again,

It was instantly obvious that this plan was a plan designed by a person, feeling and thinking in highly idiosyncratic and totally egotistical feelings and thoughts. Not the least trace of any feminine influence.20

Rather than conveying interior value, one is left with an emptiness, a clarity away that is more severe than can be explained by a theoretical antipathy for embellishment. One senses this house has been reduced rather than built, that originally there were more layers that have been scraped away by an intolerance for compromise; as if negative spaces were being carved from an original solid, no longer extant. This impression of a type of formal sculpture is compounded by the plinth-like base the house stands on and its lack of reference to any surrounding context. Unlike the photograph of W’s hut which is seen from a distance, in relation to its dwelling, looking out onto the world, this villa, despite its numerous windows and grand entrance, remains closed and indifferent, like a problem that has been worked on and completed, it is rendered contained within itself. The effect is a strange autonomy, a sharpness that cuts through nature with cold precision. If Friedrich’s hut sheltered its dark inside from a lifeless front, the Kundmannsgasse’s inexpressive rooms of stone and steel, work to expose any hidden remnant with clarity of thought. This is interiority denied, that everything be brought out into the open, to be clearly and simply seen.

If his Norwegian building has an affinity with the romanticism of Friedrich, the villa is classical in its restraint and abstraction.21 Though urban, it bears no relation to the temporality of the everyday metropolis, rather the sense of its totality—its limited whole, refers to the infinite. It is perhaps this quality of rigorous inexpressiveness more monument than abode, that works to rebel an idea of dwelling most strongly. Returning to Reyer in the Kunsthistorisches, we find him talking of the unease that a modern sensibility has with an idea of the whole. Our greatest pleasure, surely, is in fragments, just as we derive the most pleasure from life if we regard it as a fragment, whereas the whole and the complete and perfect are basically abhorrent to us. Only when we are fortunate enough to turn something whole, something complete or indeed perfect into a fragment, when we get down to reading it, only then do we experience a high degree, at times indeed a supreme degree of pleasure in it. Our age has long been intolerable as a whole he said, only when we perceive a fragment of it is it tolerable to us. The whole and the perfect are intolerable, he said. That is why, fundamentally, all of these paintings here in the Kunsthistorisches Museum are intolerable, if I am to be honest, they are abhorrent to me. In order to be able to bear them I search for a so-called massive mistake in and about every single one of them, a procedure which so far has always attained its objective of turning that so-called perfect work of art into a fragment, he said. The perfect not only threatens us excessively with our ruin, it also ruins everything that is hanging on these walls under the name of masterpiece. I proceed from the assumption that there is no such thing as the perfect or whole, and each time I have made a fragment of one of the so-called perfect works of art hanging here on the walls by searching for a massive mistake in and about that work of art, for the crucial point of failure by the artist who made that a work of art, searching for it until I found it, I have got one step further.22

Reyer appeals to an instinct repelled by attempts at completion or perfection, suspecting that within such aspirations lurk untruths which threaten us with ruin. This inclination can be traced to the handful of thinkers in Jena who built a theory around the fragment’s relation to the whole; contemporaries of Friedrich who understood that to allow room for incompletion and even failure, might speak as poignantly as any notion of a masterpiece.23 Hence the fragment plays the ruin’s minor sibling, recalling what is lost, and evoking the monument without the latter’s oppressive unity. Once broken from the whole, it retains a memory of what has been, while insisting on its independance as a singular thought. This distinctive identity however, should not be confused
with autonomy, for fragments exist in their multiplicity, ensuring there is always an alternative to the final word.

Reading Hegel's short thesis leaves one reflecting on how many of the 'masterpieces' in the Kunsthistorisches Museum might give themselves readily to fragmentation. The portrait he spends most time with is Tintoretto's 'White Bearded Man.' We might try his method of finding some 'mistakes' to bring about the picture's break up, or falling that, playfully single out the hand or focus on some feature of the face. Yet this would more likely deny the chosen piece its fragmentary potential. To single out one definable element only makes it into a smaller autonomous image, while leaving similar parts equally isolated and complete. We might instead look for something less recognizable—a piece of fur collar perhaps, or an indistinct area of beard, that could serve as a more plausible fragment. However, the distance between this remnant and the original picture would make it difficult to retrieve any sense of the whole.

An alternative work in the collection, both convincingly whole and more readily open to thoughts of the fragmentary, is Bruegel's 'Hunters in the Snow.' Though opening onto a unified vista, it is part of a body that records different stages in a year. A particular understanding of time is hence present, one that is continual rather than linear, evoking the fading and renewal of things, implying that each has its place within an ordered cycle. There is attention to climate hitherto neglected by earlier 'Welt Bilder,' whose concern tended to be more cosmic than descriptive. However, the artist does maintain an idea of 'world' that takes it beyond an interest in the specialised landscape. Though nothing in general, and each subject has been intensely observed and set down, the painting is nevertheless constructed as an idea. Everything is accounted for and positioned. The evenly spaced trees serve as columns that hold half the painting taut, a favoured device of perspective that finds its echo in the row of houses behind. A system of frozen reservoirs provides organised spaces of play as the neighbouring river gently makes its way to the sea. Everything is made and presented according to its kind: ocean, mountains, rivers and lakes, hills, trees, birds of the air, vegetation and animals all find their allotment on this single, unified plane.

This was the age of the Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, printed in the same publishing houses where painters sold their etchings. The cartographers' tendency, to embellish their products with isometric buildings or naturalistic renditions of trees for special emphasis, dissolved absolute distinction between landscape and map; and there is something distinctly map-like about the plottings of Bruegel's world. It is in part due to the measured division of each surface, be it the shape of a roof, a field or path, each is connected with uniform care, often denoted by borders of leafless trees, with trunks no thicker than a single hair of the brush. Precision subdues every part of the painting, there are no ambigous passages of paint, where things are hinted or approximate. The weather cooperates in this respect; conditions are crisp, without mist, and the even
Whiteness has turned variable material into abstract interconnecting shapes. Despite the sharp mountain peaks and vertical trees, the impression of the land is one of flatness, as if the artist had arranged parts of his dramatic alpine drawings amongst the surrounding lowlands of Flanders. This virtual act, this cutting up and reassembling of mountain and plain, might serve as the massive mistake Règer so desperately seeks, the dichotomy and means by which a painter can view the world as a limited whole.

Another motif integral to the way we enter this work is the magpie in flight. Having just left the trees it communicates an effortless sweep across the painting’s surface, suggesting we might make a similar survey. It signifies a continuous movement, without cut or montage, and with it, an appeal to the whole. This quality may have been why Tarkovsky used the painting in his sci-fi film Solaris. We encounter it through the eyes of aulant’s wife. It hangs, thick framed, in the space station’s library beside other Bruegel pictures. Yet it is in this image that draws her in, as if it somehow answers her need for an authentic experience of human dwelling. She ‘enters’ the work through a series of framing sequences, focusing on chosen sections of the painting.

With each sequence, the camera begins from a moment close to the surface, where either it proceeds to move slowly back in order to take in more of the picture or to the side. In both instances a new picture is framed, one that is adequate in the information it holds to justify its own composition, but always with further reference to what lies beyond. At times the camera cuts to an altogether different section of the panel, alternatively it gradually fades one scene into another. The effect is to convey the idea of the painting as world, with the camera making do with a part of something infinite.

Tarkovsky has written of his rejection of the principles of montage “because they do not allow the film to continue beyond the edges of the screen”, while in this way a continuum is assured, the detail makes reference to the whole, sub specie aeterni.

It is notable that the camera never presents the painting in its entirety, and it is by way of the detail that this film can approach the work, as if like Regen, the director felt compelled to turn what is whole into a fragment in order to find it tolerable. Yet, there is need of some caution when inter-changing, the term detail with fragment. For they infer different relations to the ‘whole’ and thereby, relations to knowledge. Did Règer understand three operations contained in the detail.

First that of getting closer: one enters into details as one penetrates the rugged core of epistemic intimacy. But this intimacy entails some violence, preserve without any doubt, one gets close up only to cut up, to break down, to take apart. Such is the basic meaning in the French découver, its etymological tenor—a pruning or cutting—and the first definition of it in Litté: ‘the separation of a thing into several parts, into pieces,’ which opens up an entire semantic constellation on the side of profit and exchange, of detail commerce. Finally, through an extension no less perverse, the detail designates an exactly symmetrical, even opposite operation, one that consists in gathering all the pieces together, or at least accounting for them in full. ‘To detail’ is to enumerate all the parts of a whole, as if the ‘cutting up’ had served only to make possible a complete accounting, without remainder—a sum. So a triply paradoxical operation is in play, one that gets closer the better to cut up, and cuts up the better to make whole. As if ‘whole’ existed only in bits, provided these could be added up.

Hence, for Règer, the detail suggests an approach to looking and thinking about the whole where, in coming closer, one cuts a work into parts. There is the assumption that after a close examination, enumeration is possible. A ‘detail’ conveys precision; something clearly defined and brought into focus. There is no ambiguity: rather we ‘look in detail’ for an answer to confusion. Maps for this reason are detailed, they are to be read, and understood, and work to dispel the unerving sense of disorientation; no we may again feel secure in our position. Yet when standing before a painting, there is a moment where, in singling out a detail, the whole is no longer attainable and we are left with only a memory of the work in its entirety. This is when the detail begins to turn to fragment and assumes a different relationship to knowledge, one that “presses it as an absence or enigma or lost memory.” It recognizes that a work always retains for itself a part that is unknowable.

There are indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical. F6.622

The form in which the Truth is laid out is short steps, concise aphorisms that proceed according to a numerical system. Yet, one feels that this is not so much to denote unhindered progress as to pin down and fix the next thought, so as not to lose or allow it to slip. It is as a way of marking one’s steps, to be able to retrace if necessary along what is inherently hazardous. The result is fragmentary, though fragments of thinking rather than fragments of thoughts. For each numbered item has at least one proposition to be considered and judged, to be found true or false. It is a form of precise mapping, of territory once discovered being refined, measured and marked down. Yet perhaps it is that Wittgenstein’s two meditations on dwelling we can find the most bound distinction between the detail and the fragment. The Einhandmangel, so intent on measurement, could be understood as an enumeration of details, a monument to clarity and to ‘what can be said’, while the hut in Norway is altogether harder to place. It no longer exists but for the photograph, its image fading out across the lake. It is this that is mystical.
NOTES
2. The monument of the Kleobula-perched on volcanic crags in Thessaloniki. (See Fig. 8.)
6. Though Wittgenstein's thought is placed within the context of his analytical tradition of Moore and Russell, his interest for a remote dwelling in nature, alongside a concern with each's relation to the world can be seen to be closer in temper to Romantic Idealism and Hölderlin.
10. Wittgenstein's companions, Present, words of the philosopher's intention to sideline himself in howavery away from Cambridge: "We reason for this reason very near to me--but no one else. They are very near for him: firstly, he feels he will do infinitely more and better work in such circumstances, than Cambridge, where, he says, his constant latitude to interruptions and distractions (such as concerts) is as unimportant to him. "Remote," 1991, Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius, Vintage, p. 89.
11. Heidegger, M., Building Dwelling Thinking, Basic Writings, p. 240.
14. Bemmel refers directly to Heidegger's legitimating the National Socialists earlier in the dialectic, "Master in fact always reminds me of Heidegger, of that ridiculous Nazi philosopher in uniform." MRS, p. 41.
21. Simon Critchley notes that, the specificity of the fragment, its uniqueness is that it is a form that is both complete and incomplete, both whole and a part, it is a form that embeds separation into itself. That is to say, the fragment fails. Thus, the success of Jean Ranciérein is the development and deployment of a game that embeds failure within itself, whose completion is incompletion, whose structure is essentially ambiguous." Critchley, S., 2000, "Unveiling Romanticism," in Very Little, Almost Nothing, Routledge, p. 123.
22. 1950, Kunsthandbuch Museum, Vienna.
23. For example, Joachim Polder's cosmic landscapes describing the order of God, man and world, remixed with a rather generalised colouring.
26. She is the memory and materialised incarnation of the cosmic, brought into being by the object of his study--an immaterialisable "thinking" was the planet.
27. "Modernism claims" presents the audience with puzzles and riddles, makes them to deceive symbols, wonder at sculpture, appealing to that time to their intellectual experience. Each of these modes, however, has its own word for word solution: so that (2) that Explication prevents the audience from letting their feelings be influenced by their own reactions to what they see". Andre Taskovskay, 1989, Escaping in Time, Reflections on cinema, Trans. by Kitty Kender-Blak, Faber and Faber, London, p. 119.
29. Ibid.