

**Ben Davies, The Complexities of Dwelling in Ali Smith's *There but for the*****Abstract**

This article offers a sustained exploration of dwelling in Ali Smith's *There but for the*. Focusing on the way the character Miles locks himself into a family's bedroom, I argue that this move transforms a "spare" room into a significant gathering place. As part of his disruptive move, Miles also removes himself from dominant forms of activity and productivity, thereby offering an image of dwelling that is not motivated by capitalist routines of labour and profit. More abstractly, Miles' form of dwelling opens up a space for thought; both characters and readers are invited to "take the measure" of Miles' dwelling, as well as their own. Correlatively, the text is an intricate dwelling space, offering an important and challenging phenomenological invitation to the reader to dwell within and upon the relationship between language, space, time and thought; the text invites the reader to think about dwelling and being in contemporary society.

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Towards the beginning of his essay “...Poetically Man Dwells...” (1954), Martin Heidegger states: “our dwelling is harassed by the housing shortage. Even if that were not so, our dwelling today is harassed by work, made insecure by the hunt for gain and success, bewitched by the entertainment and recreation industry” (211).

Unfortunately, such observations are still very much apposite today. The global financial crisis that began in 2007 and the subsequent (ideological) drive for austerity in the UK and elsewhere, has led to, or rather exacerbated, various problems related to dwelling, to, as Heidegger defines it, “the way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 145).

Correlatively, loss of jobs or job security, lower incomes, lower standards of living, the reduction of public services, *should* all lead to a re-analysis of how, where and even why we live and dwell.<sup>1</sup> In the UK, perhaps the most provocative piece of legislation concerning housing is what is popularly known as the “Bedroom Tax.” As a result of this legislation (which came into effect in 2013), “working-age” tenants living in social housing who have a “spare” bedroom face a choice: see a reduction in their Housing Benefit payments or relocate; they either try to manage extra costs or they are forced to move out of their current home and neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike this legislation, which never considers questions of dwelling to any purposeful degree, a spare bedroom does open up space for thinking about dwelling in Ali Smith’s 2011 novel *There but for the*. Telling the story of the way in which a guest, Miles Garth, locks himself into the spare room of a nice, genteel Greenwich house, *There but for the* sets up what could be seen as an experiment in dwelling; the text offers sustained attention to dwelling, as well as an example of how to dwell otherwise. Making room and dwelling are the problematics I wish to dwell upon here, reading *There but for the* alongside Heidegger to argue that Miles transforms a

“spare” room into a “central” concern, a significant space and gathering place. Correlatively, the complex structure and form of *There but for the* shapes the text itself into an intricate dwelling space, one that opens up ways to think about and experience the relationship between literature, time, space and thought. The text is, I shall argue, a particularly intricate spatiotemporality within which the reader is invited to dwell. Consequently, this text metonymically gestures towards the importance of the time and space of reading itself.

### **Making Space**

The main event of *There but for the* occurs at the Lees’ contrived “annual alternative dinner party” (18), to which they invite people with whom they usually do not socialise; in previous years, guests have included Muslims, Palestinians and a Jewish doctor. During this form of false hospitality that includes and excludes invitees simultaneously, Miles, who is actually only a guest of a guest, removes himself from the table and locks himself into an upstairs spare bedroom. As a result of this simple act – which belies the Lees’ artificial hospitality – the spare bedroom is transformed into a room with which the owners and eventually members of the public and the media become preoccupied; the room changes from being an unimportant, unoccupied, spare room into a physically and symbolically significant space.

Moreover, the spare room is the main space of the text, as Miles’ occupation of it narratively connects – and is the impetus for – the four major strands of the novel: “There” (which focuses on Miles’ onetime friend Anna Hardie); “But” (which looks at Mark, a man Miles meets at the theatre and the one who invites him to the dinner party); “For” (which turns to the elderly and dying May Young, the mother of Miles’ girlfriend who died when the two were teenagers); and “The” (which tells the story of

the “preternaturally articulate” [57] young Brooke Bayoude who accompanies her parents to the Lees’ dinner party, also without invitation).

Through its focus on a spare room and the transformation this space undergoes as a result of Miles’ move into it, *There but for the* foregrounds the very type of mistaken inversion of dwelling and building that Heidegger repeatedly calls attention to throughout his work. In “Building Dwelling Thinking” (1954), for instance, Heidegger writes: “we do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is, because we are *dwellers*” (146). For Heidegger, our dwelling, our *being-in-the-world*, should lead to building, not *vice versa*. More importantly, the two should not be seen in terms of a straightforward means-end relationship; rather, dwelling and building overlap and inform one another. By prioritising building and focusing on mere structures, however, humans hinder their very ability to dwell and *be-in-the-world*. Significantly, the spare bedroom in *There but for the* is initially simply a space to which no significance, including narrative significance, is given. As the word “spare” implies, the room was and is surplus to the Lees’ requirements, and it is only discussed in relation to Miles’ *staying-within-it*; the Lees themselves do not inhabit this space; the room does not inform their sense of dwelling. But unlike those in the UK affected by the “Bedroom Tax,” the Lees can afford the luxury of having such space, of owning space that can be left unoccupied and that is not essential to their needs.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Gen Lee jokingly tells her dinner guests that she and her family are lucky as they own enough rooms so as to be able to avoid each other’s viewing habits. Moreover, Gen Lee discloses, the spare room is a room not for the family but for (welcome) guests: “there is lovely, lovely furniture in there. It is a really outstanding spare room in there. Everybody who has stayed there has told us so” (20). Somewhat inadvertently, then, Gen Lee’s comments reveal the

role she assigns the room. To her, it is almost simply an empty container for furniture; furthermore, it is a room, however “outstanding,” that she learns about – becomes aware of – only from visitors, not from her own daily life within her own house. Rather than being fundamental to their life and their dwelling, the Lees’ spare room is at once both a form of empty Newtonian space and a symbol of class, status, money and possession. The Lees confuse possession and building for dwelling, a common and terribly problematic mistake to make in a time of catastrophic refugee crises, mass homelessness and other forms of human displacement.

In contrast to the visitors who are invited to stay in the spare room, Miles is a stranger whose move into the room ultimately emphasises the essential relationship between space and dwelling. Once Miles begins to occupy this space, it is no longer an insignificant, extra room, merely a “spare” room in a house. Rather, by dwelling within the room and in particular by locking himself in (at least initially) and outstaying his welcome, Miles creates a boundary that at once stops people from entering but also marks “that from which something *begins its presencing*” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 152). Almost paradoxically, then, Miles lets the space of the room appear – “presence” itself – by closing it off: the boundary metaphorically marks the room off and displaces it from being simply an ignored room for guests and furniture. The formation of this boundary, moreover, “presences” Miles himself (albeit as a quasi-absent “presence” for most of the text), the crowd that gathers outside the Lees’ house in support of Miles and his way of living (“the Milo Multitude, the Milo Masses” [311]), as well as the four titular narrative strands. Whilst little narrative space is given over to Miles in the spare room itself, his stay in the room gives “presence” to Anna (There), Mark (But), May (For) and Brooke (The); these characters are all connected to Miles’ life and his stay in the spare room. Miles’

move into the room therefore gathers narrative entities together – characters and their stories – as the spare room is the space around and through which the narrative is structured and the strands come into their presence, their textual space and being. Miles' dwelling is a form of "staying with things," and his dwelling transforms the spare room itself into a "thing," in the sense that "gathering or assembly, by an ancient word of our language, is called 'thing'" ("Building Dwelling Thinking" 151). As a result of Miles' *stay-within-the-room*, then, the room becomes the mainstay and gathering space of the text. It is transformed from being some form of abstract space that is merely characterised by its dimensions, extension and ability to contain "lovely furniture" into a type of a space that gathers things and makes room for dwelling.

As well as – and indeed because of – the way in which Miles' dwelling transforms the space of the spare room and thereby creates a space for gathering, his dwelling also offers an alternative image to dominant modes of contemporary occupation and living. Specifically, Miles upsets Gen and Eric Lee (the "generics" [29] who synecdochically represent the bourgeois middle class) and their space; he disrupts and dis-places them and thereby uproots patterns of living based upon capitalist modes of production, consumption and profit. In contrast to these patterns of living enjoyed and endorsed by the Lees and their neighbours, Miles' dwelling is characterised by a lack of activity or "usefulness," and consequently, he returns dwelling to the sense in which it "signifies: to remain, to stay in a place" ("Building Dwelling Thinking" 144), even if in a somewhat mundane and exaggerated form. Indeed, in the text, this literal "staying-in-place" is somewhat humorously conveyed by the way in which Miles cycles on an exercise bike in the room – he cycles miles but he remains in the room and goes nowhere; his is a form of cycling that provides an image of activity without productivity. As his main form of activity, Miles' cycling

epitomises how he himself has stepped outside the capitalist concern with productivity and the division of time into industrious units; as Anna thinks, Miles may well have “invented the perfect rent-free way in a recession to be regularly fed, at least for a while” (29). Most notably, Miles’ form of dwelling, his staying in place, inactivity and un-productivity, contrasts acutely with the Lees’ work, and he and the couple function as representations of opposing modes of living. Gen Lee is a “freelance Personnel Welfare Coordinator for people who work[ed] in Canary Wharf” (15) and Eric Lee works at “the Institute for Measurement and Control” (15): one partner keeps the financial sector operational; the other enhances methods of measurement and control. Eric Lee in particular, then, exacerbates what Heidegger diagnoses as the “curious excess of frantic measuring and calculating” (“Poetically Man Dwells” 226) that upsets our ability to dwell. Unfortunately, however, what Heidegger sees as “curious” has in our own time become an embedded hegemonic apparatus; measurement and calculation are now essential instruments of late capitalism. As with National Health Service targets in the UK and School and University “league tables,” such “measures” tend to create rather than reflect “reality.” Moreover, they are used to manipulate, sanction and punish individuals and institutions, as is conveyed by the seemingly innocuous syntagm “Measurement and Control.” Together, then, the Lees directly uphold the norms and workings of present-day capitalism – a renewable workforce, productivity, profit and the conjoined forces of measurement and control.<sup>4</sup>

The alternative mode of occupation Miles’ going nowhere and doing nothing represents is beyond the comprehension of the “generics.” Gen Lee, for example, writes in an email to Miles’ long-lost friend Anna: “I/we have absolutely no idea whatsoever why Mr Garth has chosen to barricade himself into our house” (10).

Whilst Gen Lee cannot fathom Miles' actions, however, Miles' dwelling clearly provokes and stimulates those who come to gather outside the bedroom window, even if the latter somewhat co-opt him for their individual causes, projecting onto him a variety of desires and needs; "Miles" and "Milo" are ultimately empty signifiers. Moreover, Miles' decision to move into the room – and his lack of activity once there – counteracts the commonplace way in which we lose sight of dwelling, of how, as Heidegger says, "dwelling is not experienced as man's being . . . is never thought of as the basic character of human being" ("Building Dwelling Thinking" 146). Indeed, Gen Lee's bewilderment itself indicates the very disruptive potential of Miles' dwelling. His move into the spare bedroom makes space for thinking about dwelling, and as a result, Miles can be seen in a similar light to one of Heidegger's "wayfarers" [who] must first wander their way to house and table . . . not . . . primarily for themselves, but for the many, because the many think that if they only install themselves in houses and sit at tables, they . . . have arrived at dwelling" ("Language" 198). As a character or literary device, Miles can be seen to wander to (an unknown) larger-than-needed house and (a not-altogether-welcoming) table. Unlike the wayfarer, however, Miles occupies the Lees' spare room and remains for a considerable length of time; he is far from being a fleeting visitor. Moreover, it is in part the very duration of his *stay-within-in* the spare bedroom that turns out to affect the many as much as – or even more than – it does himself; indeed, Miles is portrayed as being rather indifferent to the whole situation. Even Gen Lee, a representative of "the many," eventually goes some way to pondering the effects of Miles' dwelling in her *Guardian* "Real Life" column, where she writes: "it is strange having a stranger / in the house with you all the / time. It makes you strangely / self-aware, strange to yourself" (106). Despite venturing towards the potential force and effect of the



uninvited stranger, however, Gen Lee immediately provides the qualification “except this is *our* house / which makes it all seem unfair and unnecessary” (106). She falls back onto the values of private property and possession – as well as special pleading or “nimbyism” – and she is unable to move beyond simply registering the “strangeness” of the stranger and the situation.<sup>5</sup> Gen Lee’s inability to dwell within the space Miles’ stay in her spare room makes for thought is ultimately represented by the various ways in which she tries to co-opt and make money from the situation, which includes producing a play and selling “Milo” merchandise. Therefore, instead of allowing the strangeness of the stranger to open her up to new modes of thought and dwelling, to make her estranged from her everyday sense of dwelling, Gen Lee reverts to her comfort zone, returning to capitalist norms, strategies and ends, turning Miles into a brand; she turns away from the possibility of dwelling within the space made open by Miles, which is opened up by his closing himself into the spare room.

The challenge or provocation to thought prompted by Miles’ dwelling is, however, taken up more readily by other characters in the text, and Anna Hardie in particular welcomes the “call to thinking” Miles’ dwelling invites. Reflecting upon Miles in the spare room after she visits the Lees’ house to talk to him, for instance, Anna begins a sustained meditation, thinking: “imagine the relief there’d be, in just stepping through the door of a spare room, a room that wasn’t anything to do with you, and shutting the door, and that being that” (66). As well as marking the beginning of her meditation generally, Anna’s “imagine” also expresses her desire for, or at least her consideration of, the same sort of seclusion. Her “imagine” further operates as the opening to her thoughts about dwelling specifically, which range over practical considerations – “what would you do all day?” (66) – more philosophical questions – “did he want to know what it felt like to *not* be in the world?” (66) – and

also the possibility that Miles is performing a stunt, “some wanky kind of middle-class game” (66). Regardless of the answers to these questions and queries – which are never given, just as the reason for Miles shutting himself in the room is never given – Anna’s reflections invite the reader to consider the significance of Miles’ dwelling as well. From the first “imagine,” the reader is welcomed to follow Anna’s thoughts, wondering with her about Miles’ *stay-within-the-room* and the form of dwelling this stay creates. When Anna realises and acknowledges that “Miles . . . was making her join in all over” (67), therefore, she is also marking the reader’s possible participation as well.

The depiction of Anna’s reflections shows how Miles’ form of dwelling makes space for thought (without outcome or answer), and it thereby underscores the type of crucial nexus Heidegger reiterates of dwelling, thinking and being – a nexus that can, moreover, be “unproductive.” Consequently, Miles’ occupation of, and dwelling within, a spare bedroom in an unknown couple’s house should be seen as a hospitable move, one that contrasts markedly with any “invitation” to attend the Lee’s “annual alternative dinner party.” Moreover, his life within the room shows how – in contradistinction to Heidegger’s claim that “we do not merely dwell—that would be virtual inactivity” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 145) – we can “merely dwell” and that such a form of dwelling can be transformative in itself. Specifically, Miles’ form of “mere” dwelling disrupts other characters’ everyday, unexamined dwelling, calling them to dwell upon his (in)actions. Correlatively, the reader too is at least invited to “take the measure” of Miles’ dwelling and, as a result, possibly their own as well.<sup>6</sup>

### **Textual Dwelling**

During her meditation upon Miles’ situation, Anna turns to language, asking herself:

What would happen if you did just shut a door and stop speaking? Hour after hour after hour of no words. Would you speak to yourself? Would words just stop being useful? Would you lose language altogether? Or would words mean more, would they start to mean in every direction, all somersault and assault, like a thuggery of fireworks? Would they proliferate, like untended plantlife? Would the inside of your head overgrow with every word that has ever come into it, every word that has ever silently taken seed or fallen dormant? (66)

Anna's contemplation of words and language begins with her questioning their role in a scenario such as Miles', after which she focuses on the utility of language and then the possible absolute loss of language itself. Having considered the entropic and privative effects Miles' dwelling may have upon his relationship with language, Anna's thought shifts to reflect upon the unruly potential of language in such a situation. During this turn, Anna thinks about language in terms of an intensity of meaning – a sort of explosive hyper-semanticism. Switching to more organic imagery, she also imagines words behaving and spreading like wild life forms, which challenge human autonomy and control. More generally, Anna's mode of thinking progresses by a series of questions, thereby emphasising the intimate relationship between language and thought, the way in which humans think through and in language – how we dwell. Indeed, the proliferation of her questions, like the proliferation of words she imagines may result from Miles' situation, shows how she herself is experiencing *being-in-and-with-language*, of speaking to, and thinking with, oneself – the very thing she is thinking about. Moreover, the fact that Anna's thoughts upon language are prompted by Miles' situation illustrates how she questions the essential relationship between language and dwelling, and by extension, language, dwelling and thought: her thoughts focus on the way in which language shapes our “being-in-the-world,” our mode of existence. Consequently, this moment of meditation captures and conveys an intimate relationship with and to language, how, as Heidegger

proposes, “language belongs to the closest neighborhood of man’s being” (“Language” 187). Anna’s language thought experiment is ultimately phenomenological; her meditation considers our *being-with-words* – through words – rather than simply semantics.

Despite the phenomenological approach to language evident in Anna’s meditation, much of the narrative portrays characters being highly verbally alert, dexterous and skilled. Various characters discuss metaphor and translation and, most notably, they make an abundance of puns, thereby actively manipulating language. Anna and Brooke in particular delight in puns, and a discussion they have on puns even turns into a pun itself:

What exactly is a pun therefore? the child said.  
What exactly is a pun *there* for? Anna said. (52)

Whilst there is a sense in which such characters appreciate, delight in and even reveal to one another the potentiality of language itself, their linguistic swiftness can appear somewhat contrived, especially when it comes to nine-year-old Brooke.

Consequently, the narrative presents these characters as being in control of language, which is one of the major misconceptions Heidegger identifies as an impoverishment of man’s ability to dwell. “Man acts,” he writes, “as though *he* were the shaper and master of language, while in fact *language* remains the master of man. Perhaps it is before all else man’s subversion of *this* relation of dominance that drives his nature into alienation” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 144).

At the textual level, however, *There but for the* complicates such control over language and displays how depicted mastery of language at the diegetic level can lead to language’s mastery over man. Indeed, as a linguistic entity, the text itself is a response to, in and with language. Moreover, its highly playful relationship with, and

response to, language opens up an exploration of the ways in which language shapes our *being-in-and-with-the-text*, disclosing how readers dwell within and respond to a textual-linguistic realm, how language shapes us, not *vice versa*. Beyond characters' puns and word play, the text constantly discloses how language can dislocate, disrupt and displace us as readers. For example, in the chapter "but" the seemingly simple word "but" is the subject of a conversation between Miles and Mark, set out as follows:

Miles: Yeah, but the thing I particularly like about the word but, now that I think about it, is that it always takes you off to the side, and where it takes you is always interesting (175).

As Miles explains to Mark, the word "but" moves us. Acting almost as a type of disruptive linguistic event, diversion or turn, "but" changes the initial direction of the sentence. Within the narrative, this exchange once again portrays a particularly sensitive appreciation of language. Simultaneously, however, this particular diegetic example takes the reader somewhere interesting and unexpected; it spatially and temporally dislocates and displaces the her, taking her off somewhere and sometime else.<sup>7</sup> In the text, the disruptive power of the word "but" is, moreover, performatively enacted by the way in which Miles and Mark's discussion of the word is set out in dialogue or script form; their dialogue acts as a "but" to the flow of conventional narrative prose – it takes the reader "off to the side," as it were. This double disruption of readerly expectations is also put into play when Miles writes a note about the meaning of the word "but" to Mark. The note begins with a seemingly abrupt "but" before the reader has the chance to realise that this is a definitional statement concerning the meaning of the word "but" itself as well as an opening form of address:

But  
 (my dear Mark)  
 as promised  
 is very occasionally a preposition but is mostly a conjunction (195)

Placed between the chapters “but” and “for,” this note is not simply a text-within-a-text; it is also an intra- or in-between, interstitial, text. Given its form and its position within the overall text, then, the note acts out some of the definitions of “conjunction” it supplies: it combines and connects itself with the preceding and following chapters; *but* it also disrupts the move from one chapter to another, creating a pause, a narrative, structural “but.” It is a disjunctive/conjunctive textual space in which the reader dwells momentarily, being at once shaped and moved by language and textual form.

The use of parentheses throughout the text offers a further and sustained example of the way in which the text displays both the power of language and how it disrupts a simple, straightforward reading process. Throughout the text, parentheses are used for a multitude of purposes, including the usual giving of additional information and inserting an aside. More intriguingly, however, they are also used to mark off lengthy and important sections of the narrative. For instance, Anna’s memory of her teenage friendship with Miles is narrated completely within parentheses. Similarly, the entire dinner party scene and Miles’ move into the spare bedroom – the main happening in and impetus for the overall narrative – is also parenthetically contained. Given their parenthetical mode, these sections could be seen to be “put in beside” (*OED*) and placed alongside the other parts of the narrative. Indeed, there is a sense in which these parenthetical narratives are a form of “interval,” “interlude” or “hiatus” (*OED*) to those sections not in parentheses. However, the frequent presence of parentheses in this text questions the very idea of

textual priority – returning us, perhaps, to the difference between “main” and “spare” rooms – and location, for it could alternatively be argued that the non-parenthetical sections “sit beside” those in parentheses, that the parenthetical sections “give presence” to the rest of the text. How the reader chooses to see the ordering of these narrative elements notwithstanding, the presence of these parentheses invites her to consider textual positioning and levels, types of discourse and even textual modes of being. Furthermore, their presence, together with the non-parenthetical sections, helps to create the impression of a complex, textual space. The reader moves between, in and out, of these layers, rather than simply across the text in linear fashion.

Consequently, the reader is at least invited to dwell upon and in the very textuality of *There but for the*, a text whose mode of being is far from straightforward, fixed or stable. Ultimately, then, this text can be seen as a particularly intricate dwelling; it is a “kind of building,” a “poetic creation, which lets us dwell” (“Poetically Man Dwells” 213), albeit not simply or without disruption.<sup>8</sup>

The conceptualisation of the text as a complex spatiotemporality (or, indeed, a form of poetic building in which one dwells) becomes more credible when one turns to structure – both chapter structure and the overall structure of the text. At both levels, “blank” pages open up and offer the reader time and space. Each chapter, for instance, takes its heading from the novel’s elliptical title, which is also the first word of the first sentence of the chapter: “There,” “But,” “For,” and “The.” Significantly, however, there is a two-page break between the chapter headings/first words of the sentence and the remaining part of the opening sentence. Whilst seemingly simple (indeed this may be mistaken for a publishing preference), this textual layout and the effect it has on the reading of these opening sentences should not merely be dismissed; certainly, we should not treat these intervening “blank” spaces as nothing,

at least not in the negative sense of nothing. Rather, the spaces between the first word of the opening sentence of each chapter and the rest of the sentence are an important part of the textual space that is *There but for the*; they occupy both time and space, and they are as much part of the sentence, and therefore the text, as are the words either side of the blank pages. Moreover, as Mark Currie argues in “Ali Smith and the Philosophy of Grammar” (2013), the “chapter titles . . . are both on the outside (as names) and the inside (as beginnings) of sections” (49). Extending this logic, it must follow that the intervening space between the chapter title/start of the chapter and the rest of the opening sentence is also a type of indeterminate space, at once inside and outside its section. Similarly, the blank pages at the end of the text are also a type of indeterminate “spare” space.<sup>9</sup> Despite their possible accidental nature, these blank pages at least have a connection to the diegesis, resonating as they do with Brooke’s thoughts about the notebook in which she records daily events; “it might be a good idea,” she thinks, “to leave some pages blank at the end in case there is anything else that happens, in case the history isn’t over” (335). Furthermore, the blank pages come between the “ending” of the narrative where Brooke sits down to read the story Miles writes to her as part of a game they play together and – via a series of epigraphs – that very story, which opens the text. Set out on unnumbered pages, this opening story itself seems to be some form of fictional paratext, and it is somewhat uncertainly connected to what follows, thereby accentuating the complexity of the text-as-dwelling still further.

Taken either as individual moments or together as a whole, such textual aspects emphasise a relationship with language, a phenomenological approach to reading, over a more straightforward interaction based upon understanding and semantics. Indeed, these spaces create the sense that the text is an intricate folded and



(un)folding space; *within* these breaks/gaps/spaces, the reader dwells and moves in and out of the respective chapter or, in the case of the blank pages at the end, the overall text. As the reader attends to the textual object and realm at such moments, she is not confronted with words and their meaning; rather, she is invited by the blank spaces, the gap, the pause, into a space and by that space to think about how she dwells within the space of the text (and within language more widely). She is invited, by (and into) this space, to slow down and think about textual structures and spaces, to think, as Anna does in her drawn-out meditation, about language – how it works, how it exists and how it informs her sense of being. Ultimately, then, these blank and seemingly empty pages open up spaces upon and in which the reader can dwell. Moreover, the blank pages at the end of the text also gesture towards a return and cyclicity, as well as open-endedness. Synecdochically, they open up (to) the openness and intertextuality of literature more widely, potentially leading the reader back to Miles' story, another narrative, another text. They gesture towards both the “poetic” dwelling space of this particular text and the greater dwelling space of the poetic and the textual more universally.

### **Temporal Horizons**

Throughout his work, Heidegger designates time as a “horizon” to Being. Indeed, on the very first page of *Being and Time* (1927) he connects his two major concepts through this metaphor, writing: “our provisional aim is the Interpretation of *time* as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being” (19). As a horizon, time is a boundary or bounding circle, which may offer a contact point with “Being” and provide some sort of conceptual access to it, as well as fixing certain conceptual limits. The horizon is something “visible” but elusive, a vanishing point that at once

fixes and escapes our conceptual gaze. Time as a type of elusive, shifting horizon likewise runs across and throughout *There but for the*. As a setting and backdrop, Greenwich – and Greenwich Park with its famous meridian line in particular – is positioned as a common boundary or point of contact to many of the events that occur in the text; Greenwich, and therefore metonymically time, unites all the major strands that make up the narrative. Time is, then, both a prominent subject within, and the horizon of, *There but for the*'s narrative, providing a sightline and an intangible marker to the text. Bound up with this second horizon, however, time is also a complex and complicated dimension of the text itself; it is not simply a diegetic focal point or even just a narrative boundary. Rather, the text itself is a spatiotemporal dwelling, one that invites the reader to *stay-within-it* temporally, even if only temporarily.

In terms of the first horizon, the setting of Greenwich Park is portrayed not as a site of temporal precision and calculation but one that reveals how time is never straightforwardly present or simple. It “presents” time as unruly, imprecise and disruptive, as something that cannot be measured exactly, wholly known or controlled. When Brooke visits Greenwich Park, for instance, she contemplates how the format of the twenty-four-hour Shepherd Galvano-Magnetic Clock “means that sometimes it is actually nothing o’clock” (280). Moreover, the narrative portrays the acts of measurement that took place at Greenwich predominantly through Brooke’s perspective, which gives them an imaginative, rather than a purely scientific tint. Echoing Anna’s earlier provocation to think about dwelling, Brooke, for example, invites the reader to dwell upon the relation between the world, the cosmos and time:

Imagine if all the civilizations in the past had not known to have the imagination to look up at the sun and the moon and the stars and work out that

things were connected, that those things right in front of their eyes could be connected to time and to what time is and how it works. (355)

Far from undermining scientific achievement, such inflections and interpretations give to these discoveries a sense of wonderment and imagination, thereby counteracting the tendency to reduce such efforts and discoveries to mere calculation, number or utility. Correlatively, the temporal imprecisions and disruptions depicted in the text, combined with Brooke's imaginative take on time and astronomy, gesture towards the incomplete, partial and even ineffective aspects of temporal measurement and control, opening the way to a more "poetic" understanding and appreciation of time and temporality, one beyond "frantic measuring and calculating." Indeed, the textual-temporal horizon of Greenwich is, so to speak and to cite, "out of joint," and it thereby conjures the complexity and richness of temporality, as opposed to both its division into precisely measured sections or amounts and its capitalist reduction into units of labour, productivity and profit. Time, the text articulates, is not necessarily something that can be measured precisely or "made present" to us. Correlatively, the text conveys how dwelling's temporal "measure-taking is no science" ("Poetically Man Dwells" 219) or, at least, not only science. Far from being a straightforward and common point of connection, then, the text emphasises how time is ultimately an elusive, shifting boundary or marker to our dwelling, its potential stability as a horizon resting in its very instability.

Interlaced with such diegetic concerns, the other, and much more complex temporal horizon is that of the text itself and the time of its own reading. The narrative metonymically opens up the temporal demands of reading generally and its own temporal demands more specifically through its depiction of Brooke's experience of reading a second-hand copy of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

(1907). As she leafs through the text, Brooke becomes obsessed with a series of pencil circles that have been drawn around various words. For her, these circles, and her inability to discover the rationale behind them, slow down and disrupt her reading of the novel. In her efforts to decipher any potential code or meaning, Brooke writes down the circled words and notes that the first letters of these words spell “Tempppf” (297); interestingly, she omits the letter “o” from the first word “ostentatious.” At once random and seemingly meaningless, the letters at least visually point to “time” or the temporal. They could in part be read as an abbreviation of “temporary” or even “temporal” (“temp”), or they could be seen to conjure up time itself, via the Latin “*tempus*,” or closer still, the French “*temps*.” Regardless of how these random letters are interpreted, the episode serves to show that Brooke herself experiences a particularly slowed down, disrupted reading process; she has to dwell upon words, language, text. Indeed, Brooke experiences a specific combination of temporal and literary demands, which is yet a further indication of *There but for the*’s temporal preoccupations and, moreover, the temporal exigencies literature and reading can place upon us.

Of course, Brooke’s maddening reading experience is a specific, heightened and individual one; one, moreover, not created by narrative so much as reading – and writing – practices. Despite the particularity of this episode, Brooke’s reading experience can, however, be seen as an intense version of more “straightforward” reading, in which words (their meanings, connotations and arrangements) make demands of their readers. Moreover, her specific reading experience can be seen to anticipate the difficulties, challenges and temporal demands *There but for the* itself poses to its reader – the way in which it calls for thinking- and dwelling-within the text. Indeed, through both its content and its complex forms and structure, *There but*

*for the* itself is challenging, and it at least endeavours to resist easy consumption and understanding. As part of this resistance, the text repeatedly calls attention to the complicated relationship between tense and narrative time. For example, both Anna and Mark are described in relation to previous situations: “she sat in the future” (64), “Mark sat on the park bench, way in the future” (182). Inversely, Brooke’s day out in Greenwich (12<sup>th</sup> April 2010) combines present-tense narration with a series of historical headings, including: “*History Of What Brooke Bayoude Thinks About While She Runs Across Park Towards University*” (319) and “*History Of Education Part I*” (321). Such examples, combined with the text’s more explicitly “unconventional” structural elements, at least invite the reader to think, and to think specifically about time and the temporality of narrative. Moreover, such moments draw attention to the way in which narrative texts exist as dense, complicated blocks of time containing past, present and future all together.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, *There but for the* emphasises the way in which texts generally – and itself specifically – are particularly convoluted and “thick” spatiotemporalities in which readers dwell, as opposed to units of meaning merely to be decoded.

As a complex dwelling or intricate space-time, *There but for the* at least endeavours to make its reader slow down, to dwell within it, and to think about time and the time of narrative specifically. Consequently, it is “meta-temporal”; it is a temporal entity that calls attention *to* time as well as calling *for* time.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the combined effect of the text’s diegetic concerns with time and its structural complexities points to the way, as the dead character in Ali Smith’s essay/novel *Artful* (2012) writes in a series of planned lecture notes, “books themselves take time, more time than most of us are used to giving them. Books demand time” (30).<sup>12</sup> In particular, the complexity of its structure disrupts our usual reading practices and

stifles speedy consumption, possibly even providing a heightened example of how, as the dead character in *Artful* also says, books “go at their own speed regardless of the cultural speed or slowness of their readers’ zeitgeist” (30). In contrast to film or music, of course, the time of reading is not set by the medium itself. However, *There but for the*’s structural and formal complexities gesture towards the way this text requires time and a temporally drawn-out commitment.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the text thereby offers time to the reader; the text invites the reader to linger and dwell with(in) it, offering a form of phenomenological invitation beyond mere semantics and comprehension. Consequently, *There but for the* positions time as a complex double horizon. On the one hand, there are the text’s internal horizons – a subject of consideration and a uniting, if complicated, connective thread via the location of Greenwich; on the other, there is the complex and extended external horizon of the text’s own reading. As much as a text can, *There but for the* disrupts its reader and invites her to slow down and take time in her reading of the text; it at least attempts to create a time and space in which to dwell. This “external” horizon of reading is, however, created by “internal” textual qualities, and any strict or straightforward internal/external binary therefore collapses during the reading of the text; time is part of the text itself and its own reading. Ultimately, then, the *text-as-dwelling* itself creates, or at least gestures towards, an extended “horizon” for the protracted time of its own reading – the reader’s stay-within-it.<sup>14</sup>

### ***In Lieu of a Conclusion: What is the Point of a Book?***

Towards the end of the narrative, Brooke finally enters the spare bedroom and talks with Miles. Their conversation soon turns to literature, books and stories, with Brooke asking: “what is the point of a book, I mean the kinds that tell stories? If a story isn’t a

fact, but it is a made-up version of what happened . . . what is the *point* of it?” (345). In response to these legitimate questions – which at present often come more sinisterly and in rhetorical form from the mouths of utility-obsessed politicians – Miles says to Brooke: “think how quiet a book is on a shelf . . . just sitting there, unopened. Then think what happens when you open it” (345). Realising that Brooke is not satisfied with this response, Miles next proposes the writing game, telling Brooke to write a story and “see what happens in the process” (346); for her part, Brooke says that Miles must also write a story. The question concerning “books that tell stories” (one possible and partial, if crude, formulation for “literature”) therefore spawns two responses, one concerning the potential of reading and one that points to both the creative response of reading and the never-ending creation and circulation of text.

In relation to *There but for the* specifically, an alternative answer to Brooke’s question is that both the story of Miles’ “stay” with the Lees and the text itself invite sustained reflection on dwelling. The former tells of Miles’ dwelling in a spare room; the latter is a complex dwelling space. Neither has an obvious “*point*” as such; nor do they provide an answer to any dwelling crisis – past, present or future. *There but for the* is not programmatic; it does not tell us *how* to dwell otherwise. In a similar vein, this essay has at least attempted not to press for a specific form of dwelling. The reading put forward here does not – *contra* the “Milo” crowd – assign to Miles’ *stay-within-the-room* a particular meaning. Rather, it shows how Miles’ stay disrupts those around him and provokes questions concerning our usual, commonplace assumptions about dwelling, time and space.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, this essay demonstrates how the text gives a sense of the possibilities and potentialities of textual dwelling. Opening this text is to enter a particularly intricate “poetic” dwelling space, in and across which we

are invited to “take the measure” of our own dwelling as a result of the text’s complex form and structure, its spatiotemporality, its internal/external horizons. Consequently, the text returns us to the fundamental question of dwelling, to the relationship between language, thought, time and space. It invites us to consider such relations, both through its content and, somewhat less directly, through reading and dwelling within it as a poetic space; in short, through our phenomenological *stay-within-it* as a textual dwelling. *There but for the* offers a particular and heightened textual form in which to dwell, one that at least invites thought about the importance of literature, reading and dwelling in contemporary society more generally. Such dwelling is not easily measurable; nor, moreover, is it necessarily or straightforwardly “productive.” Such an invitation is one that should, therefore, be accepted, and accepted most speedily by our current politicians if they are not to exacerbate endlessly the conditions that harass our ability to think, read and be – in short, our ability to dwell.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> As reported by the BBC on 29 March 2016, over 7000 library jobs have been lost since 2010 and 343 libraries have been shut (Wainwright *et al.*). See Ali Smith’s 2015 *Public Library and Other Stories* for a series of poignant and elegiac reflections on the important cultural and democratic space that is the public library and the closure of many such spaces under the UK’s 2010-15 Coalition Government.

<sup>2</sup> The changes to Housing Benefit in the UK were made following the assent of the 2012 Welfare Reform Act. For a detailed overview of this legislation, see Wilson.

<sup>3</sup> On 23rd February 2014, The *Guardian* newspaper reported that there were more than 11 million empty houses across Europe, which they claim is “enough to house all of the continent’s homeless twice over” (Neate, par. 1); 700,000 of these empty



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houses were in the UK (par. 2). Given the fact that there are so many empty houses – and homeless people – governments would do well to focus on questions of how we live and dwell, and not simply on “Help-to-Buy” schemes or new building projects. A return to the fundamental question of dwelling is also essential when it comes to helping refugees and asylum seekers. For recent work by Ali Smith on the plight of refugees, see “So far (the detainee’s tale)” and Smith *et al.*, “It Can No Longer Be Ignored.”

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, one area where the government has chosen not to take and make certain measurements is the “Bedroom Tax.” Rather, the legislation actively avoids defining what a bedroom is and how big or small a bedroom must be. As a result, tenants are susceptible to having the number of bedrooms in their property altered – be it for good or for ill.

<sup>5</sup> The trope of the unsettling stranger is one that is well established in literature and other cultural forms. In relation to Ali Smith’s work in particular, Patrick O’Donnell argues that “from *Hotel World* to *The Accidental*, we can observe a development in Smith’s discourse of contingency that manifests an increasing dependency on ‘the accidental’ to rupture the homogeneous narratives of self, family, nation and world such that a future beyond these, different from these, might come to pass’ (99). *There but for the* is, I would argue, part of this “discourse of contingency.” “Nimby” is an English acronym meaning “not in my back yard.” It denotes specific unwillingness for something to occur or change in one’s own vicinity or area.

<sup>6</sup> For Heidegger’s use of this and related phrases, see in particular “. . . Poetically Man Dwells . . . .”

<sup>7</sup> Analysing the rhetorical figure of aposiopesis in “Even the Title: On the State of Narrative Theory Today” (2014), Nicholas Royle reads Miles’ response – and the title

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of Smith's novel more generally – as a form of “veering,” which, he explains, “is a figure for the strangeness of reading and the time of reading, for the unfinished movement and uncertain play of narrative” (4).

<sup>8</sup> As David Spurr for one claims in *Architecture and Modern Literature* (2012), a sense of dislocation may be fundamental to all literature, as well as architecture. He writes: “in general, what we witness in both literature and architecture is the search for a new sense of dwelling generated by the experience of uprooting and displacement without seeking to escape from the truth of that experience” (250-1).

<sup>9</sup> Here and throughout, I refer to the first hardback edition of *There but for the* published by Hamish Hamilton in 2011.

<sup>10</sup> On the complexities of the relationship between narrative time and tense, see, for example, Brooks, and Currie, *About Time*. In the latter, Currie also provides a highly insightful discussion of how narrative texts involve both the unfolding of temporal sequence and a block-universe type of temporality. In “Ali Smith and the Philosophy of Grammar”, Currie turns his attention specifically to the temporal complexity of *There but for the*, writing: “this is, I am going to argue, the point of this book: to stage the process of reading against the process of writing. This is the core paradox of all written stories that I referred to earlier between the complete temporal sequence that a book represents and the unfolding of that sequence in the process of reading. This dynamic of the ‘always already’ of writing and the ‘not yet’ of reading seems to me to lie at the heart of Smith’s exploration of both reading in particular and time in general” (53). On the temporal complexities and block-like structure of Smith’s shorter fiction, the reader may wish to see Davies.

<sup>11</sup> As a term, “meta-temporal” may help to designate narratives that specifically focus on time, whilst acknowledging that texts are always in themselves temporal entities.

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See Currie for his discussion of the inadequacy of Ricoeur's distinction between texts "of" time and texts "about" time (*About Time* 2-4), and West-Pavlov who, writing against Currie, argues that all narratives *are* temporal (*Temporalities* 98-9).

<sup>12</sup> *Artful* was originally delivered by Ali Smith as a series of lectures at St Anne's College, Oxford, in January and February 2012; it was published later the same year.

<sup>13</sup> Once again, the lecture notes of the dead character in *Artful* offer an eloquent assessment of current reading habits and the temporal requirements of reading. They read: "we do treat books surprisingly lightly in contemporary culture. We'd never expect to understand a piece of music on one listen, but we tend to believe we've read a book after reading it just once. . . . Books need time to dawn on us, it takes time to understand what makes them, structurally, in thematic resonance, in afterthought, and always in correspondence with the books which came before them, because books are produced by books more than by writers; they're a result of all the books that went before them" (30-1). If nothing else, reading and studying literature should be seen as a temporal demand or, indeed, opportunity, something that should not be speeded up or "fast-tracked." Universities, too, should be spaces that offer time to read and think slowly, rather than simply part of a speedy road to employment, profitability or "productivity."

<sup>14</sup> Approaching the subject of slow from the opposite direction as it were, in *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age* (2013), David Mikics argues for the pleasure and importance of reading, and reading slowly in particular. His book is both a championing of, and guide to, slow reading. As he puts it, "such reading demands time from you" (10).

<sup>15</sup> As many commentators and writers have noted, the Occupy movement likewise aims to transform spatiotemporal practices and regimes, whilst operating outside of a

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specific demand-led approach to a new form of politics and way of living. See, for example: Taylor, Cessen, *et al.*; Chomsky; Bayer; and Mitchell.

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