



Virtually Being There

Edmund Wilson's Suburbs

The Flat Past

In the age of the Edge City and “revitalized urban center,” of *I ♥ city life* bumper stickers and intersuburban commuting, we know just what to think about old-guard suburbia. The *Ice Storm*-era consensus is clear: let's leave this single-family greensward to robots and Joan Allen. The banal, conventional, and suffocatingly predictable suburbs depicted in *The Ice Storm* (Rick Moody's novel, 1994; Ang Lee's film, 1997) *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), *Suburbia* (Eric Bogosian and Richard Linklater, 1996), and *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998) have replaced, in our imaginations, John Cheever's sad drunks vaulting furniture or portaging from swimming pool to swimming pool.

These new representations, though, are too quick to make suburbia seem a thing apart from today's purportedly heterogeneous America. Our schools, like our neighborhoods, are by some measures more segregated by class and race than they were twenty-five years ago. We find that shocking fact easier to ignore than to reconcile with popular culture's suggestion that homogeneous suburbia is a world well lost. It is easy to extend our pity or—not far removed—our contempt, toward the inhabitants of Hollywood's instant memorabilia or of Rick Moody and Ken Perrotta's plangent fiction. These films and stories depict suburbia as the apt prison for those mid-century middle-class middle-brows who sought homogeneity, and were doomed to find it. Sharply distinguished from our present-day suburbs—with their “healthy mix” of industry, retail, and interspersed residential zones—those bedroom communities recede in our rear-view mirrors, their images becoming ever sharper as they diminish, in one of those familiar visual paradoxes whereby the disappearance of the trees makes the forest's outlines so much easier to make out.

True, it is not only solipsistic memoirs like D. J. Waldie's *Holy Land* that still express nostalgia for suburbia's bygone Levittown whiteness; Disney's *Celebration* attests to current doubts about the traffic, crime, and heterogeneity of exurbia. But by and large "anti-sprawl" rhetoric (Al Gore's populist plank, Portland's zoning) seems to treat 1950's suburban living as a bygone and not a looming evil.

I am not here to exhume suburbia, nor to praise it. But doesn't something ring false about contemporary representations of the segregated, residential suburbs of Evan Connell's *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*? Although this is not a criticism that is often made of Hollywood, it strikes me that all these recent exercises in suburban nostalgia and anti-nostalgia are guilty of being (wait for it . . .) too academic. What *American Beauty*, *Happiness*, and even Lee's visually stunning *The Ice Storm* share with the ivory tower is a sense of relief that suburbia has safely vanished. In that land of the lost, people move, speak, and behave in ways that are funny precisely because they are so comfortably consigned to the ash-heap of history. Suburban films are not all set in the past, but even films set putatively in the present, such as *American Beauty*, might as well be; they feature inhabitants flat and alien enough to dwell in that foreign country.

Why call it an academic failing, this passion for pastness, for charting the mechanical and hence fully comprehensible movements of the dead? Aren't academics, those of us in humanities and social sciences at any rate, committed to recovering and explicating the past, not to flattening it? Yes, but too often with just this same coldness in that act of recovery. The accounts academics have to offer about certain portions of the past too often turn out lifeless, as these movies seem lifeless, because of what might be called an anti-experiential bias.

That bias is this: this past seems so foreign that we cannot imagine living there. I can put together the objective facts (big sedans, identical carpools, housewives clad in saran wrap and beehive hairdos), but subjectivity escapes me. In *Bright Lights*, *Big City* Jay McInerney describes a character failing to imagine what it felt like to be someone else. I can't imagine what it feels like to be her, he says, only what it would feel like for me to be her. Academics know well how hard even simple outward facts are to recover, and often we can't help feeling that somebody else's subjectivity is an order of magnitude harder to conceive.

A reasonable enough feeling, but what follows from that feeling is wrongheaded. Because we cannot imagine ourselves experiencing the suburban past in all its pastness, writers too often seem to conclude that there really was nothing that it felt like to experience that particular form of the past. Only this imagined nullity of experience can explain a range of lifeless (and worse, judgmental) summaries of a bygone life. This is by no means a universal academic problem—for other eras, other places, we may manifest the greatest sympathy and sharpest perceptions. But faced with the finned cars, the crewcuts, the cheerleaders, we academics (and Hollywood filmmakers) revert to stereotype.

Thomas Nagel's famous thought experiment, "What is it like to be a bat?" argued that whether or not we can imagine what having sonar would be like, there must be some experience there, something it would feel like to sense the world by bouncing sound waves off it. Batness is not an objective fact alone, but a subjective experience as well. It seems to me that we have lost faith in that kind of subjectivity for residents of what now seems like a vanished hell; they might as well be bats, or worse. The robots who replace Connecticut housewives in *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975, based on Ira Levin's 1972 novel) are the extreme example of how we void out that bygone interiority. To be a Stepford wife is worse than being brainwashed—it means losing one's consciousness altogether.

This mistaken belief that it feels like nothing to be a 1950s suburbanite seems to me to generate worse consequences than some crummy movies. It spawns a mistaken sense of separation between ourselves and a past that is not even truly past. Successfully recovering this past also means uncovering part of America's present. To make that recovery plausible, though, we need to circumvent the dead-end of pseudohistorical fiction in *The Ice Storm* mould. What we should aim for is to return to the past with a fresh set of eyes.

But how ought we to go about that? To begin with, generously. Hannah Arendt advocates "enlarged perspective" as the only way to make true impartial judgment. "When the mind goes visiting," she writes, we do not simply understand others' perspectives as their narrowest interests would constitute them, but rather we represent them to ourselves, mentally. We do so by incorporating into our evaluation the thought of what our own most sympathetic, most "visiting"

self might think or do, placed in another's position. In short, we tell stories that place others, not ourselves, at the percipient center of a perceptible universe.

I wonder about the absence of such plausible mental visitation in current fiction and film about suburbia. We can move from Ang Lee's lush Connecticut to Eric Bogosian's barren New Jersey without the prospect of a single mental visit to break the monotony. This absence of meaningful subjectivity in suburb-oriented film was brought home to me forcefully by Steven Spielberg's most recent film, *AI (Artificial Intelligence)*. Originally a Stanley Kubrick project, *AI* is in part a rewriting of *The Stepford Wives*, rife with visual echoes of its creepy deracinated Connecticut landscape. In Spielberg's version, it is not the housewife, Monica Swinton, but her child, David, who's a robot. But far from altering the fundamental lineaments of the story, this only heightens Monica's robotic quality. Whether silicon or carbon-based, she turns out to offer us, as she offers David, nothing but a symbol of maternity incarnate.

Monica's maternal love—applied in unequal but homogeneous doses to both David and her "real" son, Martin—empties Monica out and makes the viewer long to find, in David's intense emotion, an antidote to predictability. However, David's ardent love has been coldly coded for by Professor Hobby (the inescapably chilly William Hurt), and called into being by the recital of seven random words: socrates particle decibel cirrus hurricane dolphin tulip. David actually struggles toward a kind of humanity in his flight from his makers and his suburban home, but the movie culminates in a test of his love that serves only to underscore the ultimate emptiness that defines the mother he has loved. In the *machina ex machina* ending, her son has the chance to bring her back to life—but the resurrected Monica turns out to be no more than a projection of all her android son needs her to be. What is it like to be Monica? Even her "loving" son has not asked that question, nor is the audience encouraged to.

The effect of that maternal roboticism is precisely to preclude, just as the *Stepford Wives* does, the notion that there might be something that it is like to be a housewife. In this future with its sleek serene suburbia, there is no way to imagine a human with any interiority that is discovered or plumbed, rather than created, by another's desirous gaze. Brilliant as Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* is, the coldness of

his camera when it depicts the glacial flatness of Sigourney Weaver or the trembling passivity of Joan Allen supposes the same sort of emptiness at the heart of the female suburb dweller. Little wonder that the robotic future-dwellers of *AI* try unsuccessfully to penetrate the minds of the past: viewed from this angle, there seems to be nothing to penetrate.

Clearly, then, the stories our present generation tells about that seemingly irrecoverable land of suburbia past are lacking some vital component. But I don't mean to write a jeremiad against current Hollywood products. With such a strong correlation between chillingly banal representation and the suburbs, some of the problem must lie not in our storytelling but in its subject-matter. Can it be that these movies generate a monotonous blankness because the kind of enlarged mentality Arendt advocates was simply absent in the suburbs themselves?

Perhaps there is no way for us to get inside suburban lives because its residents lack the requisite capacity for extended sympathy. Without a mechanism to generate the sort of sympathy that experience requires, there may be no way for us to recover that experience. This is not quite Nagel's argument about bats: he supposes subjectivity exists whether or not the experiencing subject has the capacity to imagine others' lives. But it does suit Arendt's notion of visiting. The person trapped inside her own narrow interests, refusing the chance to imagine other lives or a transcendent perspective, will not allow another's visiting mentality to lodge within her mind.

Can it be that suburbs allow no visitation rights? This hypothesis, which would explain or even excuse the terminal deadness I'm detailing, does not seem to me entirely absurd. At times Betty Friedan's brilliant *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) seems to be arguing that middle-brow America is so drained of affective identity that an outsider can only throw up hands in horror and turn to conspiratorial explanations. After all, wasn't excessive attachment to one's neighbors exactly what people went suburban to avoid? Consider Lewis Mumford's 1934 description of suburbia: "the collective effort to live a private life." We may look back on the suburbs and focus upon the pressure toward emulation and display, their synchronized lawns and egalitarian, homogenizing promiscuity (production note to suburban filmmakers: be sure to include spouse-swapping, as frequent and as

eagerly anticipated as Tupperware parties). But suburbia's mixing and muddling was counterbalanced, in the minds of its inhabitants, by its promise of sanctioned separation, of a minimum lot-size and maximal self-determination. Suburbs were at their most homogenous in denying their own homogeneity, most collected in shunning any kind of collectivity.

If Mumford is right, then it follows that the "collective effort" involved in creating privacy must always be ignored, even suppressed, lest the paradoxical nature of the suburban desire surface. People head there to find privacy, and the idea that such privacy and the quest for it may be exactly what makes them a part of an aligned multitude is exactly what they do not want to hear. In order not to recognize one's alarming similarity to one's neighbors, then, one institutes a kind of separation that explicitly denies the sort of plausible human reciprocity that Arendt's enlarged mentality depends upon. Go looking for privacy with a horde of others doing the same, and you'll make every effort not to admit that others experience the world the same way you do—you'll prefer not to see, not to know, not to care.

My County, Right or Wrong

If that embargo against mental visiting helps explain current film's failure to comprehend the suburbs, what of the fiction written during suburbia's acknowledged flowering? Edmund Wilson's brilliant satire, *Memoirs of Hecate County* (published in parts and whole between 1942 and 1946, revised in 1959) finds in suburban life something more than Mumford did, something that joins his novel's own ambitions intimately to the ambitions and desires that he sees at work in Connecticut's imaginary Hecate County. Wilson conjectures that the suburb's apparent search for privacy may also turn out to be a quest for a protected space from which to experience the outside world vicariously. The book is cold, judgmental, ruthlessly condescending to middle-brow culture and so-called philistines, overpoweringly sexist in parts. For all that, it offers a fascinating theory about the suburbs that could only come from the sort of onlooker the book's first line refers to as "an uncomfortable neighbor"—a phrase that

tellingly suggests such an onlooker's power to make both himself and his neighbors uncomfortable.

Works of art are satisfying, it has been argued ever since Aristotle, because they are both vividly real and reassuringly imaginary. It is delightful to imagine going extraordinary places and doing improbable things—still more delightful not actually to have to go there and do them. But Wilson suggests that the desire for vicarious escape equally well describes the best-laid plans of a suburban life. He conjectures that suburbs offer both delightful escape from "the overpowering progress of big business" whose money pays for the suburb, and a head-in-sand safety that involves regressing "right back through history" in an effort to avoid one's own real material conditions. Wilson acknowledges the difficulties associated with visiting the consciousness of those who twist and turn to avoid such visitations themselves. Unlike current judgmental retrospectors, though, Wilson recognizes that there is a kind of mental visitation that thrives in suburbia, a kind of sympathetic attachment to other lives that functions very like his own fiction.

There is a history of suburban fictions stretching back at least as far as Thomas De Quincey's remarkable 1834 short story, "The Household Wreck," in which a suburban matron who makes the mistake of going too often into the city is destroyed by being falsely accused of shoplifting. But Wilson's portrait of the place is unique. To Wilson, both stories and suburbs provide a way to retreat from the bother of the real world and to experience others' lives not by connection, but by separation—not as intrusions into one's ongoing daily life, but as a discrete realm of narrative, somewhere far-off. You go to the suburbs, Wilson proposes, in order to experience properly the world you've left behind by going there. Ellen Terhune, one of the housebound victims of this deadly vicariousness, opines hopefully that "some of the most dynamic people . . . can't move at all." Her sentiment is perfectly suburban, and to Wilson profoundly touching. But it is also a clue to suburbia's Achilles heel. It is fatal to remain static in a postwar America of advertising frenzy and "top executives," where "dynamic" is the highest praise. And yet it is only by its stasis (can there be a dynamic stasis?) that suburbia can have any affinity to the aesthetic realm Wilson at least half adores.

Wilson's take on all this is markedly different from two of the other

most memorable writers on American suburbia. John Cheever's stories are beautiful and insightful—with their narrow focus on a few damaged bourgeois and their fascinating margins teeming with other lives whose stories we'll never know—but they never imagine this sort of convergence between suburban life and their own art. And Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* refuses to admit that it is at heart a story of the suburbs. The book was so potent a statement of political failure and social anomie precisely because it expanded suburban practices into a nearly inescapable national pathology. To Friedan, the lonely, trapped, white, middle-class housewife is Everywoman: indeed, you might argue that its vehement denial that its subject matter is primarily suburban only makes the book seem the more suburban. Unlike those two and such other suburban chroniclers as Evan Connell and John Updike, Wilson proposes a way to understand suburban (as distinct from rural and urban) life as defined by the same impulses that fuel novels themselves.

Wilson supposes that both the novel and the suburb offer what might be called virtual dislocation. Both promise privacy for the individual, yes, but only so that she can find a better imaginative life elsewhere. Both suburban living and fiction maximize the sense of departure from one's own surroundings, while minimizing the actual distance traveled. They let you depart without travelling. In the ideal Hecate county seduction, for example, a Hecate county man seduces a Hecate county woman by telling her that her difference from the crowd has already separated the two of them from everybody else:

"You don't belong with ordinary people We neither of us live in Hecate County: we're strangers among all these suburbanites. I'm really only interested in things that don't exist for them: history and art and all that; and you somehow belong to the world of those things."

It is both touching and terrible that her response to the compliment "you don't belong with ordinary people" is to return it immediately: "You're not like other people either." To repeat a line like that is to undo it (see, we are alike in our unlikeness!) yet the effect is what Wilson is after. The seeming deviation into difference from everyone around one is in fact a comforting repetition of exactly the same old

escapes and escapades that the place calls for. The experience of leaving is both perfectly foreclosed and perfectly internalized here: only when we are well and truly confined can we repeatedly enjoy breaking loose in imagination.

Wilson's narrator wants nothing better than to retreat into the safety of domestic enclosure, surrounded by books and artifacts, along with a beautiful woman insulated enough from contemporary mores that she can "remind me of several periods." Both books and lovers fuel a self-contained time travel, back into an era when there were no suburbs. Because the narrator has rejected the suburb, and the suburb has rejected cosmopolitan culture, he can glory in the double negative: the enemy of the enemy of culture must be the friend of culture.

But he ain't going nowhere. Underneath the knowing narrator's grating condescension toward his less-educated neighbors, underneath his crowing flights of intellectual hubris, exists a real affinity, both topographical and spiritual, between the narrator and his "uncomfortable" neighbors. Every gesture of negation the narrator makes is simultaneously a gesture of affirmation to the ideology that brought him and all his neighbors there in the first place. Flight from suburbia into a well-stocked den turns out to be not cure but disease. And the work of art that follows and represents that passage inward, the *Memoirs* themselves, becomes not a representation but a continuation of the problem.

This results in a fascinating implication of Wilson himself into the fiction he weaves.

In those days, what with revery [*sic*] and alcohol and art, I carried so much of dreaming into real life and so much of my real life into dreams—as I have sometimes done in telling these stories—that I was not always sure which was which.

To make too strong a distinction between life and art—even between Wilson's own life and this fiction he creates—would be to miss out on what makes this suburb appealing as well as appalling. Real life shrinks to a series of dreams, a collection of artworks that, tucked away inside one's house, are yet one's only passageway out into the "real life" that exists both beyond and within the sheltered space of imagination and composition.

The Neither World

How did Edmund Wilson ever arrive at such a devastating formulation of the problems with suburban literature, or with literary suburbia? His biography may offer a few clues (or, to be fair, it may not). Wilson was born in 1895, in a suburb of a suburb. Red Bank, New Jersey was a feeder town for Ramsay, a wealthy mansion-studded suburb fifteen miles away, and was by and large filled with the service employees for those wealthy suburbanites. Wilson grew up, then, in a town that was twice removed from the city, but unconnected to the country.

He also grew up in comparative affluence—compared, that is, to other Red Bank residents. His house, like so many houses in his novels and short stories, was large but ugly. Wilson's father, who often stayed locked in his room during bouts of depression, suffered from a morbid hypochondria that led him to have three organs removed (perhaps his appendix, gall bladder, and spleen?). To add injury to injury, Edmund's mother lost her hearing shortly after a doctor told her that her husband was mad. She retreated into a silent world; for the rest of her life Edmund only communicated with her by way of long letters in a handwriting often too bad for her to read.

Though Wilson as an adult inhabited both New York and deep country, he is by origin and training a product of what might be called the neither world, the suburbia that depends upon a cultural ideology of hermetic privacy as much as it depends upon regular commuter trains, reliable roads, and freestanding houses. Wilson, like millions who grew up around New York, Boston, Chicago, and half a dozen other cities in the first half of this century, came to the city from something that seemed like a city but wasn't, and went back to something that now seemed like the country, and wasn't. While in the suburbs, he was caught between a social world he had been trained to feel himself too good for, and a house that couldn't replace that social world, because it was a silent and unhappy sink of all the emotions created by the suburb itself.

Edmund Wilson is known to fame as a literary critic, historian, and New York public intellectual who spent a fraught and a productive life in public conversation and private entanglement with such

luminaries as Mary McCarthy (his wife for a time), Sidney Hook, Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, and other illustrious names. But before all that, he was also F. Scott Fitzgerald's college classmate and close friend. So when he went to work on his first novel, it is not surprising that Jay Gatsby's memorable green dock-end lamp hovered before him. In the largely forgettable and derivative *I Thought of Daisy* (1929) Daisy's light—which in *The Great Gatsby* marked the place where an explorer (or a contemporary suburbanite) could be “compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired”—appears as a streetlight. In Wilson's novel, that lamp comes to stand for all of America, in its loneliness and its comfortable monotony.

Then suddenly I had almost caught my breath—I had been curiously moved by the sight of a single, solitary street lamp on the Staten Island shore. It had merely shed a loose and whitish radiance over a few feet of baldish road of some dark, thinly settled suburb. Above it, there had loomed an abundant and disorderly tree. But there was America, I had felt with emotion—there under that lonely suburban street lamp, there in that raw and livid light.

Wilson apparently took to heart Fitzgerald's peremptory claim in *The Great Gatsby*: that the light of compulsory aesthetic contemplation can make the barren promise of America's suburbs into something quite other than Mumford's dreaded collective privacy. Here Wilson's fiction, like Fitzgerald's, hopes that aesthetic contemplation, if made mandatory, might somehow begin not so much to record as to reshape the world. If the dock-end lamp or street-light's glowing promise is to be believed, invention can, given sufficient strength of belief, eventually be inhabited as if it were real.

By the 1940s, though, when Wilson begins to write the novellas and stories that together formed *Memoirs of Hecate County*, art no longer strikes him as capable of beautifully replacing an undesirable real life. Instead, Wilson now depicts the perpetual dislocation that fiction offers (live in your imagination) as a perfect mirror for the despair and anomie that grips Hecate County. Art, with its vicarious interludes, is the final symptom of the suburban disease. If there is pleasure in this dislocation (and there may be), it is attained only because of the snug mimetic fit. The story that anatomizes futile escapes into a fantasy land is itself just such an escape.

The novel's key chapter, "Ellen Terhune," lays out the paradoxes inherent in any attempt to retreat from a suburban world that is itself already in retreat from the urban world beyond. The chapter is about a series of visits the narrator pays to Ellen, a composer, in her century-old family house in Hecate county. Each time the narrator visits, he arrives at a house spun further back into Terhune's past. As the composer herself nears death, the narrator is traveling back, past her conception, to the dusty world of her parents.

At the story's core is the despair of the suburbanite who wishes to escape suburbia—as earlier in her life she had fled to New York and Paris—but only finds herself caught even more firmly in its vise. By running from suburbia into a fantasy of a protected past, both Ellen Terhune and the narrator look to rescue themselves from the boredom of the suburbs not by expanding but by diminishing their spatial ambit. The attempt to go inward in suburbia in order to emerge in the great world beyond only kills Terhune and convinces the narrator of the futility of escape.

The story is founded on the narrator's predictable suburban feeling of lack: "I would feel suddenly after lunch or dinner that living in the country was hopeless, that I had no communication with other people, and that nothing I was doing meant anything." Here is the self-diagnosis that we expect out of suburbanites. But this plaint has another dimension: the despair is more general than it had first seemed. Even as he rails against the failings of those around him, the narrator actively embraces their rejection of the world beyond the suburb:

Yet on the other hand I could not see any hope in living in the city or traveling: I knew what human beings were—they might be more or less picturesque in their various environments and climates, and to the young this was a source of excitement; but to me, on the verge of thirty, it was desolatingly, incontrovertibly evident that people under any conditions were the same wry pathetic freaks.

The problem of monotony has been made general—as Hecate County goes, so goes the nation, so goes the world. Under these conditions, it is certainly no better to get to the city, for you will find there the same desolation that you thought you could escape by leaving the suburb. "Why should I go to the trouble of moving about among them

in order to observe the shapes that their defects and distortions could take?" It is in the same vein that the narrator concludes the book's final chapter, "Mr. and Mrs. Blackburn at Home," by leaving for the West, taking with him "the fears and suffocations, the drugged energies of Hecate County" into the world beyond, as if to say "I myself am Hecate County."

Arrive Without Travelling

Suburban living, Wilson suggests, makes one believe one's surroundings are exemplary of the whole world, so that one's feelings about the suburb—either placid enjoyment or bored disgust—apply to the world generally. Thus escape to more of the same comes to seem either undesirable (if one is placid) or pointless (if one is disgusted). Under this ideological dispensation, the world narrows from cosmos to subdivision, from subdivision to single suburban house. The narrator's final attempt to escape, by living "outside all that . . . in Greenwich Village or in the forest" ends up with the admission that he has "packed my bad nights with my baggage."

The ostensible saving grace of this uniform grayness is that at the heart of the suburb there is a single house that contains all the treasures of the world, and eventually all its times as well. Within monotony, infinite variety. "Ellen Terhune" begins with a mild and seemingly inconsequential statement of that valuable isolation: "I always felt, when I went to the Terhune house, that I was getting back into the past." The first evidence that the house remains a "vital medium" for a past atmosphere is in the assorted photographs put there by Ellen's grandfather. It goes without saying that "the house was richly lined with the evidences of his pastimes, his studies, and his travels": clearly, the evidence of the temporally and geographically distant is meant to be impressive in the world of jerry-built houses of the suburbs.

The plot unfolds around Terhune's musical disintegration: abandoned by her husband, she has started to write curious unpleasant pieces that the narrator comes over to hear. He senses she is falling apart on his first visit. The next time he comes, he finds Terhune young, serene, and confident, wearing clothes that "were old-fashioned but

very becoming to her" and talking of past musical movements as if they still excited her. On his next visit, he meets only a peculiar little girl who tells him about domestic quarrels in the Terhune family; finally, he meets a bizarre old-fashioned young lady (Ellen's mother, the reader realizes) who asks his help in getting her family's permission to marry an obviously unsuitable man (Ellen's father). In this visit, he hears a stranger play Terhune's curious unsettling music, but now beautifully and triumphantly concluded on a note of hope. Leaving the house, he hears that Ellen has that day died in a lonely hotel room in New York.

The narrator seems to the reader barely capable of understanding the implications of Ellen's retreat into her past, or indeed of his own trip back following her. As she nears death, her time has become unhinged: she, or her thoughts, flee back over the circumstances of her inception and education. But the status of the narrator's intrusion, and of our own, into Terhune's past remains unclear and troubling. Why does the narrator follow her into that self-contained world of the unchangeable past in the museum house?

Consider the lesson the narrator claims to have learned from Ellen's inner flight: why go far away to find the unusual, when it will come to you here, sooner or later? But the reader recognizes, as the narrator does not, the sterile restrictions of this stationary time-travel, which traverses only the narrow tracks of a life lived inside the looking-glass world of the Terhune house. The fundamental appeal of Ellen Terhune to the narrator had seemed at first to have been the difference between her and her sterile suburban surroundings. But in the end she is still restricted, perhaps most restricted when she and the narrator start to flee back in time. In the end, her music, ominously "incommensurable" with that of her contemporaries, is no longer even heard by other Hecate County dwellers, but only by those within her own house, who don't quite understand.

The experience of the narrator, then, is a replication of the reader's own experience in trying to enter a story that is founded in the ultimate isolation of these country homes. The choice of flight—within a house of displaced seasons, of ghost music of the future coming from an 1870s parlor to the 1940s narrator—can end only in sterile monadic isolation. This story is the end of the line for J. K. Huysman's shocking *Against Nature*, which had promised that a secure interior

space could reproduce the whole outside world within its walls. Terhune's house is such a world, and it has as its central premise its own difference from its surroundings: by definition it cannot resemble the shallow world of Hecate County. Its best and perhaps its only attribute is its exclusion of the "indirect lighting" and "tan-backed women" outside. The anti-suburban heart of the heart of the suburb may contain multitudes—but it may also simply be empty.

Long Poems in Big Armchairs

Time travel is the most spectacular way to escape the confines of the suburb, and that effort fails. The remainder of the book catalogues less satisfying ways the narrator proposes to find variety. Its roots in the short story start to show. Like one of Cheever's disjointed novels, the narrative bumps from love affair to cocktail party and back again. The appearance of each new oddball seems to promise, like that "lonely white light," temporarily to free the narrator from the banal closure of suburbia, but none succeeds. Nothing in the book is more predictable than "The Princess with the Golden Hair," the "dirty" episode for which the novel was banned and even burned. In it, the narrator seduces both a prudish suburban matron (using that winning line, "you don't belong with ordinary people") and a sensuous Brooklyn "taxi dancer." The former turns out to be too hypochondriacally self-absorbed to rescue the increasingly whiny narrator. The latter gives him gonorrhea and eventually marries another ethnic Brooklynite, allowing the narrator to retreat to the security of Hecate County and imagine her marriage from afar.

The freak show climaxes, however, in something more interesting. "Mr. and Mrs. Blackburn at Home," the book's final chapter, disturbs the apparent social homogeneity of the suburb by introducing into the party circuit a mysterious and mutable foreign pair. They go by the name of Blackburn to Americans, Chernokhvostov to Russians, Swarzkopf to Germans, and Malatesta to Italians; and they turn out to be the devil and his wife.

Ostensibly, "Mr. and Mrs. Blackburn at Home" is a fairly clumsy supernatural story. But beneath the chapter's supernaturalism, there lurks a sharp satire on the everlasting sameness of suburban exotica.

This begins with the narrator's lengthy speech on the various different sorts of exiles who came to suburbia (e.g. "The most flexible were the Austrians and Russians . . . only the English sometimes took the trouble to look into American history"). The speech seems to promise meaningful distinction, but its real significance is that the narrator can identify the various nationalities only by their behavior once within Hecate County. In a kind of perverse cosmopolitanism, he welcomes those of every nation to join the county, but only because their capitulation to the mores of suburbia reassures him about the ultimate insignificance of the world beyond.

As far as the narrator is concerned, therefore, Mr. Blackburn's most distinctive and reassuring feature is that he keeps growing the same hideously expensive and hideously ugly out-of-season flowers grown by the robber barons who owned his house before him. Even with the devil in the neighborhood, absurd idiosyncrasies repeat themselves in the world of infinite variation and perpetual sameness. What attracts the narrator to Blackburn is not some sort of devilish power to bring the underworld to Hecate County, but his perfect replication of a suburban identity.

With his diabolical mutability, Blackburn might be imagined as darkness visible on the smooth white surface of Hecate County. What he suggests instead, with his flexible name, is that he is as intimately acquainted with Hecate County as with any place else, and as "at home" here. So his arrival functions as sort of flattering legitimization of the suburban milieu—"Suburbia: as inhabited by Satan himself!"

And there could be no more perfect ending to a story in which the devil himself assures us that nowhere is really different from Hecate County than a dream sequence in which the narrator fantasizes that he himself had given the Blackburn's party and lived in the devil's house. The substitution is perfect: the prototypically suburban narrator replaces the prototypically cosmopolitan devil as the host of the parties of Hecate County. Each party with its unique drama, each drama reassuringly like the one before it. In the land of the single story, duplication will be king.

The lesson that the narrator draws from Blackburn's arrival is not that the suburbs are just like anywhere else, but that everywhere else is just like the suburbs. "Ellen Terhune" has already taught readers that most forms of seeming escape from suburbia represent

a capitulation to suburbia's logic of internal flight. Here they are taught a follow-up lesson: that the seeming desire to include the genuinely strange in suburbia may really be a desire to uphold suburbia's power over invaders from the great world beyond.

So the final revelation of a chapter that had seemed to promise a glimpse into the pits of hell turns out to concern the inmost nature of the suburbs. That inmost nature consists precisely, here as in the house of Ellen Terhune, in a controlled desire for an insulated elsewhere. Rebellious characters like the narrator still retain an ardent desire to travel from the safe heart of suburbia to somewhere, to sometime, to anytime and anywhere else. As "The Sick Child," a Randall Jarrell poem of the same milieu and temper, puts it, "All that I've never thought of, think of me!"

But this migration still needs, as a launching-pad, a suburban family house. This is made clear in the book's final scene. When the narrator returns to his own house from the Blackburns' party, he has a dream conversation with a male friend. The narrator remembers books that allowed him to escape briefly and experience the world elsewhere from within the safe confines of Hecate County. The "beauty and pathos" of the narrator's youth revolves around redemptive days spent reading *The Ingoldsby Legends* and *Antiquities of Rome*. The pure presence of his past self lies in absence: when he read, he was "right here in Hecate County" but miles and ages away in imagination.

"I used to hear the whir of the lawnmower and the crack of people hitting croquet balls." "Everything was so quiet and dependable," he said. "There was plenty of time to look at pictures and read long poems in big armchairs. But we can never get back to that now."

"Long poems in big armchairs." The juxtaposition of the literary text and the material substrate is perfectly right. The ideal suburban childhood, in this account, is a sort of nourishing soil that supports the feet of a boy or girl whose head is in the clouds. The internal displacement to imagined elsewhere of the mind depends on a palpable material house with long green lawns. The same kind of house that the devil—or anybody else—will rent when arriving in Hecate County. And from those lawns, the suburban dreamer must dream of being

elsewhere, always comforted by the knowledge that after all he or she is right here. The narrative salutes the collective life of the imagination, lived by private effort on the lawns of a hundred private houses.

You may protest against the parallel this essay proposes. Absurd, you reasonably object, to equate novel and suburb, a daydream and a palpable fact. Novels are finally nothing more than a handful of wood pulp, brought to life as a fantastic retreat only in a lone person's thoughts. But a suburb encompasses thousands of acres and thousands of lives, and is not imagined but hammered, asphalted, and zoned into impersonal existence. Most readers, after all, ignore or reject the preface to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), which proposes that nothing could be a more suitable subject for a romance than a planned community, which is already a kind of living fiction, a collective agreement to believe in something as ephemeral as fiction's own virtual reality. Who would accept Hawthorne's hypothesis that in inventing a community, laying out its roads, streetlights, and regulations, the designers of cities, suburbs, or utopias are treading the same path that novelists do?

You might even argue, contra Wilson, that novels are in a peculiar sense the exact inversion of suburbs. If the suburb posits privacy where collectivity actually exists, the novel posits collectivity in an inescapably private space. The room where I read a novel is my own space, whereas my subdivision is, willy-nilly, a world of visits and exchanges, of social suasion and civic duty.

So you might argue. But Wilson's conviction is that the fantasy life of novel and suburb converge. And in positing that convergence he also offers one way out from the impasse I described in present-day representations of suburbia. Wilson found a way to represent the Arendtian "enlarged mentality" of the suburbs not indirectly, by description, but directly, through the reader's experience of the *Memoirs* themselves. To the question "what is it like to be a suburbanite?" Wilson offers a subjective account. It is to feel what his reader now feels; to read these stories about suburban escape is to experience the same dislocated sense of escape that the vicarious suburbanite experiences.

To be either a novel reader or a suburbanite is to be within the

waking dream. Retreating from the world to experience it properly, one acknowledges the fictiveness of the experience one is trapped inside, but one continues to try to experience the fictive escape to elsewhere, be that elsewhere real or only imagined. If that sounds like bleak escapism, it need not be. After all, there is no objective component to one's experience of an aesthetic sensation. What we imagine we experience, we in fact experience. The suburb's constructed elsewhere is just as real as any of the divine, sublime, beautiful, or jarring experiences that all the various arts labor to supply. And that convergence suggests that, whether it makes for marketable movies or not, there really is a recoverable something that it felt like, and feels like, to be a suburbanite.

