

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Interpretations on an Interior

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Abstract:

This article explores the relationship between place and page in the context of Arnold Bennett's (1867-1931) writing practice. Bennett is, perhaps, most famous for being the subject of Virginia Woolf's critique of Edwardian detailism, which in its tendency to describe characters through a meticulous inventory of homes and interiors missed, in Woolf's view, the vitality of life. Yet Bennett's literary detailism is intriguing for what it suggests about the role that his own interiors and interiority play in the production of literary texts. Drawing on the work of Diana Fuss (2004), which urges us to consider the significance of the material spaces of composition to the shaping of intellectual labour, this paper examines how the materiality of Bennett's interiors, particularly that of his French home Les Néfliers, was a powerful partner in his writing practice. Through an exploration of where Bennett wrote and how his places of writing were arranged and decorated, this article considers how material design and spatial order were integral agents in Bennett's literary composition.

Keywords: literary practice, interior, Arnold Bennett, literary geography

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Introduction

Histories of geography have long been interested in the relationship between the place of the discipline's happening and the texts that get written within and about these places. The contention among geography's historians is that the *where* of geography matters to the *what* of geography (Barnes 2004; Livingstone 2003; Lorimer and Spedding 2005). It is a body of work that is inspired by Bruno Latour's (1987) research on science in action. Latour's premise is that science comes to us as a smooth, coherent, rational entity. It is, to borrow another of Latour's terms, a black box: a reasoned, given whole that masks its own practice, its own social genealogy. As a result, we are accustomed to think of scientific knowledge as universal, replicable and categorical. If, however, we explore the practices that go into the making of this black box, including the spatialities of these practices, the whole nature of scientific knowledge takes on a different hue. We begin to see it as something made by, and contingent upon, the specificities of its place: institutional norms, the patterns of power, networking and alliance-building, and the exchange and construction of information, reveal science's making to be chaotic and ragged, and its knowledge to be far from certain or rational.

The purpose of this paper is to pose a very similar set of questions in relation to the practice of imaginative forms of writing. As I have argued elsewhere, the doing of science and the doing of imaginative literature have different relationships to place (Saunders 2010). Where the former regards being-in place and seeing-for-one's-self as bound up with the production of truth and veracity, the latter positions the relationship between the real and the imagined as one of authenticity rather than verisimilitude. In consequence, to ponder the place of literary practice is not to ask, as early work in literary geography did (Darby 1948; Gilbert 1960), how closely the real aligns with the imagined, but rather, to consider how the places of literary practice function within the creative process. In posing the question in this way, I follow the work of other literary geographers (Brace and Johns-Putra 2010; Saunders 2010) in seeking to recognise that writing creatively is more than what goes on in those places where pen is put to paper. However, this article is particularly interested in the material places where pen is put to paper, for rarely are these places isolated garrets or ivory towers; rather, they exist within social worlds. Spending time in these places and attending to their materiality – to what winds up in these places, to who gathers within them, and to how they are laid out and designed – discloses something of the way in which place, and the things that happen within place, matter to the happening of imaginative writing.

It is to these questions that this article turns, taking as its starting point the material world that was inhabited by the English writer, Arnold Bennett (1867-1931). Bennett had a varied literary career, and while he may not be widely known today, he was one of the most popular and successful writers of his day (Drabble 1975). In 1914 Bennett published *The Author's Craft* a guide on how to write fiction. A central element within this work was the importance that Bennett attached to geography as a prelude to writing. Ostensibly, he meant a cognisance of place as setting, but of particular interest here is the persistent significance

that Bennett attached to the organisation of his own place of writing: to the assembly, fashioning and arrangement of his domestic interiors and the way in which these mattered to his literary practice. Before exploring these interiors and what they might have meant to Bennett's literary making, this article turns to examine the broader relationship between place and literary creation.

Literary Interiors

This article is not the first to turn its attention to the place of imaginative writing. In *The Senses of an Interior*, Diana Fuss (2004) probes the relationship between interior spaces, both psychological and architectural, and creative lives. The premise of Fuss's text is that the where of literary labour is of central importance to the nature of its happening and its meaning. It discusses the work of four writers, Emily Dickinson, Sigmund Freud, Helen Keller and Marcel Proust, whose literary lives span the 1850s to the 1960s. This period is significant, for whether they were engaged in poetry, prose or psychoanalysis these writers were performing their work at a time when the interior, as a space apart from the exterior public world and as a place of mental dwelling, was under construction (Benjamin [1930] 1999; Rice 2007). In consequence, Fuss's work 'opens a window onto...author[s] and text[s], reminding us that what we may at first perceive to be the timeless and universal truth of writing cannot be so neatly extricated from the complex particularities of spatial and material origins' (2004: 2).

Fuss's interest in the interior is part of a resurgent interest in the world that comes before the text. It is a world that, for much of the twentieth century, remained outside the purview of literary scholars. The influence of the Romantic Movement, with its emphasis on creativity as the work of a lone consciousness – and therefore, elusive, ephemeral, and unknowable – remained strong. Alongside this, New Criticism with its rejection of authorial intentions and, more recently, post-structuralism's pronouncement of the death of the author directed attention away from the world of the writer and towards the world of the text (Barthes 1977; Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946). Fuss's work, however, is part of a broader attempt to recover the world of the writer as something more than a footnote to textual meaning. It is an effort with two main strands. The first comes from textual studies, which has long been interested in texts as social acts, as things made rather than merely interpreted (McGann 1991). Much of this work has focussed on the social world post-text or, more precisely, post-manuscript. This is a world inhabited by editors, typesetters and publishers whose professional practices become inscribed upon the finished manuscript in material and substantive ways. The second directs its interest to the other side of the text, to the world before the text as an extant, material entity. Work on this side is somewhat sparser. Influence studies, with its interest in tracing the social relationships that shape the creative process and become encoded within the finished text is, perhaps, the most developed (see Farrell 2001).

On this side though, critical study is also seeking to free itself from the finished text as the focus of meaning and embrace, instead, the textual fragments and discontinuities that are part of writing's making. Sally Bushell's (2009) research is indicative of this trend and has sought to uncover the compositional materials that come before the written word: the rough drafts, the revisions and the manuscripts that go into its making. Although these works are not driven by a spatial perspective *per se*, influence studies' emphasis on social relationships and Bushell's concentration on the physical page as the centre of meaning probe the significance of context and experience to textual practice. A more explicit attunement to the relationship between place and creation emerges in Catherine Brace and Adeline Johns-Putra's (2010) consideration of inspiration. This, as they recognise, is a difficult thing to pin down, but emerges through ongoing negotiations between self, place, character and imagination. The spatiality of this relationship is, they observe, in need of further elucidation and in concluding they call for greater attention to be given to the spaces in which being a writer and doing writing occur.

In underlining the importance of material space to composition, Brace and Johns-Putra's work returns us to that of Fuss. The question inevitably arises, though, of what a geographical perspective can add to our understanding of the relationship between creativity and the literary interior. In answering this question it is useful to begin with the recent work of Sheila Hones (2014), which solicits literary geographers to embrace spatial theory to the same degree they do literary theory. Hones draws inspiration from Doreen Massey's (2005) conceptualisation of space as a product of interrelations, a dimension of coexistence and a process of becoming, and uses this concept to argue for the novel as both an outcome and an on-going process of intricate spatial relationships. Where Hones has focussed predominantly on the spatialities that come after the novel, this article argues that a greater sensitivity to the spaces that precede the text can enrich our understanding of the relationship between creative lives and interior spaces. Thus, what literary geographers bring to studies of the literary interior is a cognisance of the relationality of interior space. It is not enough to know what occurs therein; we also need to know how these spaces are themselves produced and through what kinds of social and spatial relationships. The interior is not just a stage; it is interwoven into the being and the doing of the writer. Writing, as I have noted elsewhere (Saunders 2010), is a process of *longue durée*; and, as Brace and Johns-Putra observe, 'being a writer goes on beyond the act of writing and also occupies spaces other than those in which the writing goes on' (411). Thus, while this paper is interested in the place where pen and paper meet it recognises that what happens in the study or writing room is not always easily uncoupled from what happens in the other social spaces a writer inhabits in their day-to-day life. To draw out these ideas it is time to turn to the life and work of Arnold Bennett, and examine his literary interiors through a more explicitly geographical lens.

Arnold Bennett's Interiors

The writers that guide Fuss's examination of the interior were living and writing at a time when the nature of the interior was undergoing mental and material transformation. Arnold Bennett's writing career fell firmly within the middle of the period Fuss considers, beginning with the publication of *A Man from the North* in 1898. However, unlike the writers Fuss considers, Bennett's work is rarely noted for its psychological depth or stylistic innovation. Indeed, he is a writer often placed 'outside modernism'; one who did not experiment with a turn inwards towards interior consciousness and an identity-based political aesthetic (Ardis 2002; Paxton 2000).¹ Nor was Bennett noted for the quirkiness of his interiors in the way that Freud or Proust were. Despite being one of the foremost writers of his day, few photographs exist that document the various homes Bennett inhabited. That said, Bennett's interiors were subject to another form of critique. In 1924 Virginia Woolf's now famous essay, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* ([1924] 1959), appeared under the imprint of the Hogarth Press. This essay, the development of a number of earlier pieces, took Bennett to task for the nature of his prose, which was, Woolf argued, comparable to well-built houses in which nobody lived. Woolf carried this domestic analogy further, deriding what she saw as Bennett's detailism: his tendency to describe character through a detailed inventory of houses and homes, which in its focus on material facts missed life itself.

The quarrel between Bennett and Woolf over aesthetics has been explored extensively elsewhere (Castle 2015; Squillace 1997); yet it is worth reminding ourselves of its lineaments not least for the way it was impelled by different senses (and values) of the interior. Woolf's main criticism of Bennett focussed on the psychological weakness of his prose; he rarely got beneath the skin of his characters. Thus, we know much about the detail of their lives, about what they looked like and where they lived, but when we try to move beyond the solidity of their lives, to enter their homes or their minds, the characters crumble and fade: there is nothing beyond the material world to get hold of. Bennett, in turn, was critical of Woolf's retrenchment of the lived in favour of what he termed 'fancy' and 'padding' so that characters never seem quite present (1929: 5). Where spatial interiority is a cipher for psychological interiority in Woolf's thinking, for Bennett the spatial interior is a way of narrating the self and disclosing its multifaceted nature.

It is unsurprising, then, that houses are afforded such centrality within Bennett's fiction; although Woolf's critique was inspired by *Hilda Lessways* (1911), it is *Clayhanger* (1910) that develops through a series of houses both material and imagined. The novel follows Edwin Clayhanger's interest in the building of his family's new home, 'to Edwin it was not a house, it was a work of art, it was an epic poem, it was an emanation of the soul' (Bennett [1910] 2000: 169) and it was an emanation that altered his very perception of architecture:

[He] had always looked on a house as a front-wall diversified by doors and windows, with rooms behind it. But when Mr Orgreave produced his first notions of the new house Edwin was surprised to find that he had not even sketched the front. He had said, 'We shall be able to see what the elevation looks like when we've decided the plan

a bit.' And Edwin saw in a flash that the front of the house was merely the expression of the inside of it. (170)

Houses, for Bennett, were not a substitution for character; they were part of one's character and life. Inspired, to some extent, by naturalism, which regarded the material world as an inextricable influence on character and action, Bennett saw where one lived, how one lived and how one arranged one's material possessions to be expressive of personality, identity and self-development (Lehan 2005). This aesthetic idea was not confined to Bennett's imagined world; it was, as we shall see, a formative influence on his domestic world.

Assembling the interior: Bennett's home-making practices

In 1903 Bennett moved from London to Paris, believing the latter city to be a more conducive environment for creativity. Soon after his removal to Paris, Bennett wrote to his friend and fellow novelist, H.G. Wells, observing that 'I have got a charming little flat here, & furnished it myself' (8 October 1903, in Bennett 1968: 182). Throughout much of 1904 he records regular trips to 'my "Empire" shop', buying on one occasion 'two occasional tables, a candlestick, and a flower-glass, all strictly Empire. I have now done buying furniture. I only want bibelots and things' (2 June 1904, in Bennett 1932: 178). Empire furniture took its name from the Napoleonic Empire of 1804-1814. In style it was imposing and opulent, heavy and dark. It was often made from mahogany or ebony and richly patterned with symbols and motifs. Undoubtedly this was an interior rich in signification, but what is also apparent is Bennett's care for his interior. It was a care that was ostensibly material, for Bennett's interiors arose not through random happenstance but through painstaking assembly as objects were identified and arranged in-line with an overriding aesthetic. Yet, the very process of assembly discloses a pre-condition of dispersal and disassembly, and in navigating between the two, the cares of Bennett's material world fold themselves together with those of his mental world. It is at this moment of enfolding as one world intrudes upon and potentially upsets the other, that we catch up with Arnold Bennett and consider the implications this doubling of the interior – as material and mental space – has upon his writing practice.

It is to the Villa des Néflers, the house Bennett rented in Avon-Fontainebleau soon after his marriage to Marguerite Soulié in 1907, that we turn first. Bennett had begun searching for a new home in the autumn of that year, visiting Avon-Fontainebleau one wet, November day. Despite the weather he took 'distinct pleasure in examining [...] [the] houses' and quickly 'fell in love with the one I liked, and at once, in my mind, arranged it as it ought to be' (26 November 1907, in Bennett 1932: 269). Bennett and Marguerite took up residence at Les Néflers in April 1908, but it took Bennett several weeks to organise the house to his taste: 'I haven't yet arranged my days here. I am doing no reading, no fine writing, no disciplinary thought of any kind. It is true that I still spend about two hours a day in working at the arrangement of the house' (2 May 1908, in Bennett 1932: 288). Throughout May the interior arrangement of Les Néflers came to disrupt Bennett's working routine. On 17 May

1908 Bennett and Marguerite returned home to find the 'house overrun with ants'. While this invasion caused some disquiet, it was the subsequent arrival of new carpets which, while 're-arousing our pride in our toy house', required Bennett to forego his 'afternoon sleep in order finally to arrange the second spare room' (17 May 1908, in Bennett 1932: 290). The full import of such seemingly minor events becomes evident as the month wears on:

To-day I seemed to get a little nearer the state of mind and the mode of life that I have aimed at [...]. I have finally got my brain far better under control [...] [but I am] haunted by dissatisfaction at the discrepancy between reason and conduct! No reason why conduct should not conform to ideas of reason, except inefficient control of the brain. This I am always preaching, and with a success of popular interest too, I cannot perfectly practise. It is the clumsiness of my living that disgusts me. Half an hour in the morning in complete concentration on the living-through of the day, and I should work wonders! But this all-important concentration is continually interrupted – interruptions which weaken it; sometimes deliberately abandoned for concentration on matters of admittedly interior importance. (23 May 1908, in Bennett 1932: 291-2)

Les Néfliers is an interior in the making and one whose making unmakes and disarranges Bennett's mental interior. The process of making the interior is very much one of assembly that involves removal companies, carpet fitters, self-reflection and personal action, not to mention the local wildlife and the temporalities of the building itself.

Exploring Les Néfliers through the lens of assemblage thinking, as a space in composition and therefore in a perpetual state of experimental flux (Anderson et al. 2012), gives insight into the transformative and performative nature of the interior. Assemblage thinking is increasingly used within the social sciences to explore the world as process rather than product, as something in the making rather than as something made. Thus, assemblage approaches reject conceptions of the world as a set of pre-given properties and binary entities (such as inside/outside), and instead, turn their attention to the often messy ways in which people, things and processes gather and assemble in the moment (Anderson and McFarlane 2011). What this means, in the context of Les Néfliers, is that the house was not a static container into which the Bennetts simply moved. They may well have imagined it to be an ordered idyll, a perfect place for artistic and married life; but through the process of moving and making it becomes in ways not necessarily anticipated. Thus, it was not a blank slate awaiting inscription, but a restive, resistive agent. Thomas Gieryn (2002) has suggested that buildings in the process of assembly are symbolically weak structures. The process of making generates so many different possibilities, discontinuities and opportunities that buildings have little power to order or express social (or mental) life. The same could be said of a building's interior; as yet it symbolises nothing but itself, although it proffers many opportunities for development. Thus, the on-going (and for Bennett the frustratingly unfinished) nature of Les Néfliers – the lack of order, of things not out of place as such, but as yet having no place and the process of finding places – is, to borrow from James Ash's

(2009: 2109) work on screen geographies, 'productive of its own...way of creating attention and bringing different worlds into being'. These are not the worlds Bennett necessarily wants, but in making them possible the process of assembly proffers previously un-thought possibilities.

Let us turn at this point from Bennett's unfinished domestic interior to his mental interior, for the two are, as Fuss (2004) and Charles Rice (2007) demonstrate, intimately enfolded in one another. The disruptiveness of *Les Néfliers* could be taken as little more than procrastination on Bennett's part, although the wider point is that place and the (dis)organisation of place matters to the very happening of practice. Equally important though, is what Bennett was actually practising at this time. Since the middle of 1907 he had been working on the novel that would become *The Old Wives Tale* ([1908] 2007), and which would be published in the autumn of 1908. Bennett always liked to break up his longer compositions with briefer works, such as articles and short stories, but during the writing of *The Old Wives Tale* he was, as Margaret Drabble (1975) observes, particularly productive. He wrote two short novels, *Helen of the High Hand* (although this was not published until 1910) and *Buried Alive* (1908), multiple articles and short stories, he contemplated a book of poetry, finished writing a play with the novelist Eden Phillpotts, saw his play *Cupid and Commonsense* appear on the London stage and wrote a couple of books of popular philosophy. In a sense, what transpires in this period of domestic disassembly and assembly is an intensified mental flitting from one project to another; an inability to settle to any one task for more than a moment, with the result that many different imagined worlds are begun and worked upon, with some coming to fruition and others being put to one side. It was only at the end of May, when Bennett believed he had organised his house as he wished, that he returned to *The Old Wives Tale*, completing it in August of that year. What this suggests is that the assembly of one interior is productive of the disassembly of another; putting his home in order dispersed Bennett's concentration, inhibiting sustained work on his longer-term projects but facilitating those shorter texts that rarely required more than a few days of work. Thus, interiors in-assembly may disassemble others, but in so doing they can give birth to alternative assemblages and ways of going-forth.

Fashioning the interior: the play of influence

Bennett's fastidiousness in respect to interior design was of relatively long standing. At the turn of the century, while still living in Britain, Bennett had taken out a lease on Trinity Farm. The farm, located in Hockliffe, Bedfordshire, was Bennett's measure of his own literary success. Until 1900 he had been editor of *Woman* magazine as well as writing a number of short stories, essays and his novel, *The Man from the North* (1898). It was his growing literary success that encouraged him to give up the editorship in 1900 in order to turn his hand to writing full-time and freelance. A house in the country seemed to offer him all the accoutrements of a successful writer at this time. John Galsworthy, for instance, was to rent a country house in Manaton, Devon; H.G. Wells had a home in Sandgate, Kent; Eden Phillpotts lived in Torquay; and Thomas Hardy lived just outside Dorchester, Devon:

country living was in vogue. Bennett knew all of these writers, either personally or by reputation, and he emulated their lifestyle and their determination to remove from London in order to write (Drabble 1975). The spaciousness of Trinity Farm also enabled Bennett to provide a home for his ailing parents and recently bereaved sister. During his editorship of *Woman*, Bennett had become familiar with the currents of fashionable design and had developed very particular artistic ideas. What is more, he was unaccustomed to compromise, becoming very fastidious about certain aspects of the farm's interior decoration:

With regard to the papering, it is understood that I should be at liberty to spend 2/6 per piece for the living-rooms and 1/6^d for everything else. It is absolutely essential that I should be at liberty to choose my own patterns from the firm of Essex & Co., in Victoria Street [...] I am extremely particular about the wall-papers that I have to live with, & only this firm sells the artistic patterns which I require. (24 August 1900, in Bennett 1968: 136)

We will return to this artistic wallpaper in a moment, but what is emerging from this letter and from Marguerite Bennett's (1925) recollections of Bennett's obsession with interior design, is a picture of a writer quite intransigent over his interior and used to getting his own way. Another instance of this stubbornness arose when Bennett cohabited with his sister Tertina and brother Septimus in Fulham. The three shared a house, paid for by Bennett, from 1897 to 1900, and in a letter Bennett wrote to his friend John Rickard a sense of his control is clearly evident: the house's glory is its 'two studies...one for poetry, the other for prose! Try to grasp that. They wanted to seize one of the studies as a place convenient to put a sewing machine in! God! I said 'No' to that' (8 December 1897, in Bennett 1968: 95). Although Bennett's correspondence suggests his single-minded control over the unfolding of these spaces, it is also clear that numerous others were implicated, often in very material ways, in the fashioning of these interiors.

Houses have long been seen as sites of what we might, after Nicolas Bourriaud (2002), call relational aesthetics: spaces in which art is made and encountered in highly social ways. Within London, houses frequently played host to literary salons where writers could share ideas, network with publishers and benefit from advice and even financial support (Vadillo 2007). Outside the metropole residential hubs developed wherein writers could come together as friends rather than professionals. One such was H.G. Wells' house in Sandgate. This was part of a network of houses through which a loose association, subsequently termed the Romney Marsh or Rye Circle (Farrell 2001), was sustained. Alongside H.G. Wells, this group included Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Edith Nesbitt and Stephen Crane. These writers visited one another, hosted literary notables and together came to exert a significant influence on the development of a modernist aesthetic. At Trinity Farm, however, there was another kind of relational aesthetic at play, what Jenny Sjöholm (2013) might call 'invisible socialities'. These are the wider frames of reference, expectation and influence that seep into and shape not only work practices but ideas of what a work place should be. It is a

concept that draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) notion of the spaces of possibles – the traditions, disciplinary problems and intellectual concepts that define and motivate a subject area. Inclusion (and success) within a subject field depends upon recognising and working with these prevailing ideas. Conventionally, 'invisible socialities' will manifest themselves in how a writer references past work or past masters, nods to particular traditions or demonstrates certain aptitudes and styles. It is also evident though, I argue, in the way writers emulate, in very material ways, particular subject identities.

Let us return to Bennett's insistence on his particular choice of wallpaper from Essex and Co. We do not know what these artistic patterns were, but one of the chief and exclusive designers for Essex & Co., at this time was Charles Voysey. Although perhaps best known for his architecture, Voysey had a broader design interest and his wallpaper designs were strongly influenced by both the art nouveau and the arts and crafts movement (Jackson 2007). Voysey's wallpaper came to be noted for its use of clear, bright colours, strong friezes and simple motifs (Latimer 1988) and has led some to suggest that his designs, like those of William Morris, were complicit in moving pattern design away from the historicism of the Victorian period towards flatter, less intrusive designs in which shadow and relief were absent and greater simplicity prevailed (Pevsner [1936] 1991; Vallance 1892). By 1896, as *The Studio* magazine observed, a "Voysey wallpaper" sounds almost as familiar as a "Morris chintz" or a "Liberty silk" (E.B.S. 1986: 209): it was shorthand for the height of interior fashion. Four years later, when Bennett was moving in to Trinity Farm, Voysey was engaged in designing what was to become 'Spade House', for Bennett's friend H.G. Wells. This, along with Bennett's lifelong interest in design and his familiarity with the currents of interior fashion, given the centrality of these themes to the content of *Woman* magazine, make it highly probable that it was the work of this designer that he required. If this is the case, we begin to discern some of the invisible socialities present within Trinity Farm's interior. The material presence of these influences points to the way in which Bennett's interior is a negotiated space. It is one negotiated not through his most immediate or proximate relations, but rather through a relational aesthetic that is based upon an imagined version of the self and its inhabitation within a particular community of praxis. As Daniel Miller (2008) has suggested, the stuff of our homes, the things we collect therein are conduits to history and geography. They leapfrog the now and the immediate allowing us to conjoin ourselves to other times and places. Thus, choosing an interior scheme was not merely a question of securing what one liked, admired or found close-at-hand; it was, Ann Anderson (2013) points out, about gaining access to the imagined community of aestheticism: of being recognised as an individual (and an artist) of good taste. An interior, therefore, needed to signal belonging to a world that often lay far beyond its four walls or immediate neighbourhood; it needed to script one's credentials in highly material and tangible ways.

Not enough is known about the interior décor of Trinity Farm to push this relationship too far at present. What is known though, is that despite Bennett's insistence upon a particular aesthetic for the house, its making was not a straightforward process.

Nearly two months after penning his letter to the letting agent for Trinity Hall, A. W. Merry, regarding his artistic wallpapers from Essex and Co., Bennett writes again to complain that the owner, Mr Adams, was proving difficult over the execution of his chosen interior:

I chose the papers, & now it turns out that Mr. Adams wants more discount than Messers. Essex will give. Mr. Adams says that if I choose to pay the difference I can have the papers. This is of course ridiculous. The difference is some 6/- odd. The delay is getting serious [...] More than half the house is uninhabitable & the delay in every department of the repairs is gross. (12 October 1900, in Bennett 1968: 140)

This spat between Bennett and Adams crystallises two inter-related processes at play in the fashioning of the interior. Firstly, it points to how the interior is enmeshed within a power geometry (after Massey 1994).² Most obviously it reveals Bennett's lack of currency as an author-figure. Thirty years later, at the height of his fame, Bennett had interiors designed for him by Marion Dorn, one of the preeminent textile designers of the early twentieth century. In 1900, however, Bennett's authorial status did little to invite such favour; he was still a struggling writer, relatively unknown, particularly in the area in which he had chosen to reside, and as such unlikely to acquire the privileges that go along with celebrity. What is more, it was evident that having to pay the difference for his chosen wallpapers was going to be difficult. Thus, for those on the periphery of the artistic circles of the time, fashioning an artistic interior was a delicate undertaking. Interiors, as Rice (2007) argues, travelled, but they travelled most easily when assisted by reputation and income. Bennett had neither of these in abundance in 1900 and so the making of his interior was often one of compromise and collaboration, as factors other than the aesthetic came to fashion its development.

It is Bennett's friendship with H.G. Wells that reveals the second dimension of the interior's power geometry. Bennett's move to Trinity Farm has been seen as an attempt to emulate the modes of inhabitation common among his more successful literary contemporaries. Yet, as Drabble (1975) observes, the choice of Bedfordshire was an odd one, for in comparison to the other counties surrounding London there was little to recommend it socially or aesthetically. It is likely that the main determinant of Trinity Farm was cost comparative to the rest of London's rural hinterland, with the result, Wilfred Whitten records, that at Trinity Farm Bennett was between two worlds (Whitten in Bennett 1968: 139). He had not quite left the conventional middle-class home of his Staffordshire childhood, but nor had he fully entered the more progressive world of the literary avant-garde (139). The gentlemanly spat over the wallpaper is partly indicative of Bennett's hybridity within this cultural world, but so too is the choice of Bedfordshire: each was a compromise, but each was also part of a typology of belonging; another staging post within the development of an authorial identity. Trinity Farm and its interior became a space of organised striving in which competing ideas of authority were inscribed and played out: struggles arose, subject positions were moulded and attempts were made to close the distance between artistic worlds.

A sense of this striving is evident in Bennett's literary labours at this time and was most clearly expressed in a letter he wrote to the nature writer George Sturt several months after his arrival at Trinity Farm:

I fancy I have sort of settled down to a literary life, pure & simple. My nearest approach to journalism is reviewing, & of this I do a great deal. My facility in it steadily increases, & so, I think, does the quality of my articles. I have a book of criticism all ready for printing, & it ought to make a bit of a stir; but Grant Richards has had it for months, & neither I nor my agent can get a definite answer out of him. I am on the point of getting angry at the swine. (10 February 1901, in Bennett 1968: 145)

Bennett was obviously productive but this productivity was of a particular kind, predominantly reviewing and literary criticism. A little later in the same year H.G. Wells wrote enclosing a copy of his non-fiction work *Anticipations*, with the friendly request that 'if it takes you [...] do something to propagate my gospel' (25 November 1901, in Bennett and Wells 1960: 25). This suggests Bennett's reputation in the journalistic field, but as Bennett's reply makes clear, he was in need of help to penetrate the literary field. In his reply, Bennett reminded Wells of his promise to introduce Bennett to his literary agent, J. B. Pinker (13 December 1901, in Bennett and Wells 1960). This Wells did, and from the close of 1901 Pinker began to act on Bennett's behalf. Interestingly, one of Pinker's first recommendations was that Bennett continue to endorse Wells' work, doing so in an article for *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. The strategy was seemingly one of establishing reputation by association and of writing one's way from the world of journalism into the world of literature. Bennett's choice of publisher also reflects his status on the fringes of the literary world. Grant Richards was a relatively new publishing house (it had only been established in 1897) and one that tended to be favoured by new and rising names. Few writers stayed with the publisher once they had established their literary reputation, preferring to move on to the likes of Chapman and Hall and Fisher Unwin (Brockman 2004). During his time at Trinity Farm, then, we see Bennett gradually writing his way into more significant literary circles, or closing the gap between his world and that of his literary peers. Yet, as his letter to Sturt and his early commission from Pinker remind us, Bennett's reputation needed to be built through apprenticeship both in cognate fields and to more experienced authors.

Arranging the interior: furniture and bibelots

Bennett's move to Trinity Farm and his insistence on a particular decorative order was about generating a specific affect: a vision of who Arnold Bennett the author was. This was not a process unique to Trinity Farm; each of Bennett's homes underwent a process of internal manipulation that was expressive of his subjectivity. If we return to Les Néfliers, Bennett's marital home in France, the textual register of his decoration is supplemented by a visual one that reveals something more about his process of interior arrangement and the affects he sought to generate. Recent work on the geographies of architectural practice sees the process

of design and inhabitation as something more than the search for homeliness or belonging; rather, it examines place-making, or home-making, as the production of certain forms of affect (Jacobs and Merriman 2011; Kraftl and Adey 2008). Affect is ‘a sense of push in the world’ (Thrift 2004: 64), something that happens to ‘catch people up in something that feels like *something*’ (Stewart 2007: 2). As such, affect emerges from the relations between different bodies rather than being immanent within any one person or thing. There is a possible tension here, however, between the way in which interiors are shaped by one’s identity while simultaneously affecting this sense of identity. It is a tension that begins to dissipate when we understand interiors as always in process; we may take days out to decorate and design them but interiors are always evolving as stuff accumulates, things are rearranged and colours and patterns fade with the passage of time. At the same time, how one is caught up in the interior will itself vary over the duration of inhabitation. On arrival one may be overwhelmed by the place and it is only over time that one begins to exert oneself on the interior. The interior, then, is always a canvas in the working out of identity; its significance is never fixed for it is always being refreshed and reassembled, allowing it to be affective and affected.

The canvas of a writer’s room, Fuss (2004) observes, is often replete with material things – books, artefacts, technologies and mementoes – that catch up the self in reverie, memory, fantasy and daydream, and animate intellectual labour. If we peer into Bennett’s writing room at Les Néfliers we find a style that a friend had earlier described as: ‘Empire, verging on the Louis-Philippe. His taste struck me as being very good, but erring on the side of reticence. Now I should love it; one gets less flamboyant as one gets older’ (Joll n.d.). Bennett’s writing room (Figure 1) houses a desk in the Empire style and this is juxtaposed with a chair that in its curved and softer form is more in the Louis-Philippe style. Alongside this, the room is notable for its pale colour scheme with the only hint of colour coming from the suggestive edge of the curtains that are evident on the left-hand of the photograph. In France at this time, furniture was intimately bound up with ideas of taste and social power (Auslander 1996). Where it had previously been indicative of political power, the growth of mass production and consumption in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had transformed furniture in to a signifier of social status and good taste. An interior was moulded to convey and catch up selves in the perpetuation and circulation of social capital. It was not just pieces of furniture and their provenance that were important, though; so too was their spatial arrangement. Interior design manuals and the work of aesthetes like the de Goncourt brothers, for instance, were strong influences on the fashion for stylistically harmonious and historically cohesive rooms (Lasc 2013; Rich 2003). There is evidence of this in other rooms within Bennett’s home, which contained a salon very much in keeping with the striking dignity of the Empire style (Figure 2). Thus, the historical and stylistic pastiche within Bennett’s theatre of composition seems a little out of keeping.



Figure 1. Bennett's writing room, Villa des Néfliers. Image courtesy of Keele University Library, Arnold Bennett Papers, ABK 35.



Figure 2. The Salon, Villa des Néfliers. Image courtesy of Keele University Library, Arnold Bennett Papers, ABK 35.

The pastiche of Bennett's writing room may well be expressive of his love for routine. As Fredrick Marriott observed, Bennett would always follow the same route on his morning walk in order to lessen the risk of distractions (Marriott n.d.) and the same idea may well apply to the interior of his theatre of composition. An interior simple in its layout and organisation, and one that emphasises comfort rather than cohesion, precludes sensory excitement and closes down opportunities for daydreaming and fantasising, allowing Bennett to focus on his writing. This may be one reason why the desk is against the wall rather than in front of the window, for a window view could potentially distract Bennett from his purpose of writing. The austere layout and design of the room is, however, convoluted somewhat when we look to Bennett's biblioteking.³ The bibelots, or knick-knacks and decorative objects that adorn the room, such as the pictures on the wall, the vase of flowers just visible over Bennett's left shoulder, the letters and papers scattered across the desk and the small bookcase on the desk's edge, all suggest distractions. Studies are often considered the natural home of collections, clutter and material gatherings, facilitating free associations and a creative thought process (Fuss 2004; Rice 2007; Sjöholm 2013); yet this grates somewhat with Bennett's predilection for routine and order. However, Bennett's bibelots are not simply assembled at random. The pictures, for instance, are arranged symmetrically; at

the centre there is a large landscape painting flanked on either side by two smaller pictures, the upper one slightly larger than the lower one, which is, on both sides, a head and shoulders portrait image. At the bottom and seemingly unifying the two sides is a smaller picture on a landscape orientation. The whole effect draws the eye downwards towards the desk. Within the context of the pictorial arrangements in the home of the de Goncourt brothers, Pamela Warner (2008) argues that such symmetry was intentional, serving to foster aesthetic contemplation, to catch one up in a mental something or somewhere, by focusing and contracting the viewer's field of vision. This gives the *biblot* a somewhat different inflection, for rather than operating as a distraction that takes the mind off in new directions, it focalises and concentrates artistic intentions. Bennett was greatly influenced by the artistic ideals of the de Goncourt brothers, modelling his journal on theirs and admiring their naturalistic style (Drabble 1975). It is not unlikely, therefore, that their influence crept into Bennett's approach to interior design and the manner in which this was integral to the building and expression of his authorial identity.

Importantly though, Bennett's preoccupation with interior design was not about generating a public identity *per se*; rather, it serves as a means of catching the self and turning it from the world outside to the world inside. This returns us, then, to where we started, for in arranging his interior Bennett appears to be trying to create and secure a mental and material space, or black-box, which generates particular affects. Things were arranged within to foster productivity both on the page and in place: through his day-to-day compositional practices which, in turn, contributed to the fashioning of his reputation abroad. Tracing Bennett's interior arrangements allows us insight into some of the practices and processes that go into the making, or *catching*, of the interior as a black-box: a space few literary scholars choose to enter. What it reveals is that the practices of assembling and arranging transgress spatial confines; Bennett may well have been keen to order the material space of his study, but just a cursory peek into this room demonstrates that the things that wind up here have ideological genealogies and international trajectories that make the walls of this writing space always, and necessarily, permeable.

Conclusions

Thus far, this article has said relatively little about Bennett's represented spaces: the interior spaces he so painstakingly detailed in *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessmays*, and which have, partly as a result of Virginia Woolf's critique, led in some ways to his marginalisation within literary scholarship. It has, instead, focussed on what Henri Lefebvre (1991) would term his lived spaces; the sites of his spatial practices, of which writing was one. In concluding, though, it is worth saying something more about the relationality between the lived spaces and the represented spaces – for Bennett was an inhabitant of both.

It is via a detour to Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the chronotope, the representation of space-time within the narrative world, that we come at this relationality. According to James Kneale (2011), Bakhtin saw public spaces – streets, market places, doorways and so forth –

as the transformative, or threshold spaces within a novel. It was in these spaces that things happened, action moved on and events unfolded. In contrast, interior spaces were inert; they held-up and slowed the action, functioning more to fill than unfurl time. If we return to Les Néflers, to Trinity Farm and even to the brief visit we paid to Bennett's first flat in Paris, the transformative spaces of his life, and the spaces he registered and wrote about quite extensively in his journals and letters, were these lived, interior spaces. It was here that he tried to forge his literary credentials, his authorial identity and to fashion spaces in which he could work productively. That spaces such as these were so integral to Bennett's own life should make us reevaluate Woolf's accusation of detailism in relation to the representation of these spaces within his fiction. Take, for instance, the London lodgings that Richard Larch occupies in *A Man from the North*. These are presented to us in detail;

[...] a long, rather low room, its length cut by the two windows [...] between the windows a table with a faded green cloth, and a small bed opposite; behind the door an artfully concealed washstand; the mantelpiece painted mustard yellow, bore divers squat earthenware figures, and was surmounted by an oblong mirror framed in rosewood [...] The walls were decorated with a pattern of giant pink roses. ([1898] n.d: 4-5)

The effect is to make the reader tangibly aware of the solidity of the room. More than this though, the representation of these interior spaces was bound up with the development of character. The interior of Larch's room was not a way of gaining access to his consciousness but it was a way of measuring his self-development; the interiors he inhabited were fulcrums of change and energy within both plot and character. As the novel moves on we encounter Larch through a series of interiors which, as Robert Squillace observes, 'create different perspectival contexts' in which the character develops and which 'produces very different impressions' (1997: 25). Through this prism, Bennett's interior detailism is a way of allowing us access to the plurality and peculiarities of character: to the inconsistencies of self in time and space. As the novel closes we find Larch outside not inside a house. With his literary and romantic ambitions spent, being on the wrong side of the door suggests the limit of character development: Larch can go no further. In going into his house he turns his back on the world outside.

Let us close by folding this relationship back on itself once more and returning to my point of departure: that composition takes place within material locations and the objects that crowd these places. The manner in which interior spaces are decorated and the nature of their organisation and orientation are critical influences on how writing happens, is prevented from happening or is envisaged as happening. This article, however, has demonstrated that the interior space of composition is something more than the three-dimensional space enclosed by the walls of the study. Instead, the space of composition pulses with artistic connections that push beyond the confines of these walls to encompass the house's other inhabitants, both visible and invisible, the house's relationships to broader

artistic circles, and the ties between the lived and represented spaces of the house. The nature of these pulsations is not always straightforwardly artistic, though. Being a writer and doing writing are two different things, as is writing as a relative novice vis-à-vis writing as an established and recognised author. Thus, interior concerns, both material and psychological, are contingent upon time and place; how the interior matters to writing – and to character – must attend to the span of an authorial career and to its unique patterning of everyday life.

Notes

1. Identity-based political aesthetic is used to register the difference between the often explicit social politics that tend to be associated with the novels of Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells and John Galsworthy and the subtler reflections on identity, particularly gender and sexuality, which haunted modernist fiction.
2. The term ‘power geometry’ was coined by Doreen Massey in *Space, Place and Gender* to explain how different social groups were placed and affected differently by the flows and mobilities of globalisation. Some, often the more affluent, were able to move unimpeded and at speed around and through the world. In contrast, the poorer within the world were often isolated by their inability to access communication technology and high speed travel.
3. Bibelot is a French term for knick-knack, collectible and curiosity. During the nineteenth century the word came to encompass the wider practices of collecting, classifying and describing. Bibelots became a popular trope within French prose writing during the latter half of the nineteenth century, in part to help express the nature of character, but also as expressions of the growth of material culture itself, as a result of industrial manufacture and mass consumption. See Janell Watson (1999) for a detailed discussion of bibelots and bibeloteering in relation to literature.

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