

## **The Stories We Tell: Uncanny Encounters in Mr Straw's House**

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*'Man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.'*

(Geertz 1973, 5)

This article combines a phenomenological approach – a description of the experience of the lived world (Merleau-Ponty 2002, ix) – with an investigation into the role of memory, storytelling and narrative in heritage production.<sup>1</sup> The case study through which I want to explore the dynamic between the experiencing subject's emotional and imaginative investment (Brooker 2007, 429) and the experienced object is my own encounter with a heritage site, Mr Straw's House, a National Trust property in the North of England, which I visited in the summer of 2013, at a time when the UK Coalition Government's 'austerity' rhetoric was at its peak.<sup>2</sup> According to Rebecca Bramall, "'Austerity Britain" (1939–54) has been used as a representational resource and point of comparison and analogy in the discourse of austerity that emerged in the wake of the 2007–8 global financial crisis' (Bramall 2013, 1), fanning a middle-class nostalgia for the fashions, designs and sentiments

associated with times of hardship, thrift and frugality, which Mr Straw's House seems to epitomise.

This article builds on the work that has been done in the context of critical heritage studies which looks upon heritage not only 'as a series of discursive practices [but also through the] interconnectedness of people, things and their environments' (Harrison 2013, 113). In doing so, it is part of a broad shift in focus towards 'affect and emotion as essential constitutive elements of heritage making' (Smith and Campbell 2016, 444). My approach is therefore in part a response to Smith and Campbell's call for further research in this area:

If we accept that heritage is political, that it is a political resource used in conflicts over the understanding of the past and its relevance for the present, then understanding how the interplay of emotions, imagination and the process of remembering and commemoration are informed by people's culturally and socially diverse affective responses must become a growing area of focus for the field (Smith and Campbell 2016, 455).

Where I draw on supplementary material such as fellow visitors' or attendants' responses (in situ and online), it is to show that I am not only reacting to the house (and its former inhabitants' traces) but also to other people's interactions with it which they shared with me during my visits or with a wider public by publishing them online (in journals, on YouTube or sites such as tripadvisor). While this article is largely an autoethnographic analysis of the site based on these primary data (notes, photographs) collated during my visits, I am also engaging with 'paratexts' (Genette 1997; Gray 2010, 16) that represent the institutionally-

sanctioned narrative of the National Trust, such as the official guide book and National Trust website.

The article traces how different narratives are generated and constructed through the interactions between a visitor's personal investment, a heritage site and the socio-cultural context in which these interactions takes place. In the UK, the National Trust is one of the most important institutions whose work has both the authority and the reach to establish a consensus view of the past. However, it still has to resonate with the personal experience and memories, the sensibilities and values of their target audience because 'the success of a narrative presentation in a tourism destination [...] depends on the tourists' involvement, willingness, and ability to actively participate in the storytelling experience' (Chronis 2012, 445). But what happens in a shifting political climate when the social and economic contexts that condition visitor responses change and target audiences become more diverse (in terms of nationality, ethnicity, class etc)? The fact that some visitors' experiences will jar with the narrative framework provided by the National Trust does not necessarily preclude personal engagement and emotional investment, on the contrary, it can elicit strong reactions in visitors and trigger processes of meaning-making that digress from or even conflict with the authorized narrative. Visitors need to be understood as active story-builders in their own right.

My curiosity was certainly piqued by what I experienced as the discrepancies between the authorized narrative provided by the National Trust, with its sanitizing exclusions and invisibilities, and the far more complex stories Mr Straw's House tantalisingly hints at. Even so, this is *not* meant as a tug of war between different master narratives – the institutionally-sanctioned framework supplied by heritage professionals and the subversive

readings put forward by myself, the scholar, vying for authority. Rather, my project is about understanding Mr Straw's House as a 'multiply coded' site (Brooker 2007, 430) prompting interpretations and efforts to establish meaning which result in a range of narratives. While I am arguing that the site invites and enables certain readings, my aim is not to reveal the 'truth' behind a sanitised tourist destination but to explore how I make sense of a physical location, how meaning is generated and shaped as narrative not necessarily as a subsequent activity but as part of the experience itself.

I am interested in the hold heritage sites such as Mr Straw's House can exert, why and how they elicit imaginative, empathic and emotional investment and how visitors enrich these sites 'through "other-directed" acts of textual communion, making them special and transforming them into sites of play and carnival' (Brooker 2007, 429). As the focal point of a network of competing and even conflicting narratives, these sites can be experienced as disconcerting, even uncanny. Confronted with an alienating defamiliarisation of the comfortingly familiar and the sense of self it underpins, visitors are forced to negotiate cognitive dissonance which can result in withdrawal or denial. But it can also challenge them to rethink their (dis)engagement with the site and trace the entanglement of their personal desires and fears with hegemonic fantasies and displacements. The stories we tell as meaning-making devices need to be read in the context of the socio-cultural conditions in which they were formed (particularly in relation to class, gender, ethnicity etc), but also for their affective and emotional underpinnings. Building on Chronis's (2012, 448) argument, that what is needed is 'deeper rather than extensive understanding of a tourist experience', I have chosen an autoethnographic approach.

Autoethnographic research can mean different things to different people and for this article I interpret it as a method which requires a reader response that goes beyond mere ‘acquiescence or dismissal’ (Freeman 2015, 14). The two main narratives, which I am going to explore, indicate my own positionality as a literature, media and memory studies scholar invested in museums and heritage sites that simultaneously speak of trauma and nostalgia, of the compulsion to repeat and the compulsion to return (Royle 2003, 2). The aim that drives the article is not primarily to interrogate my own investment in these sites, but to ask how productive this investment is, what it enables me to see and to describe and where its limits are. I would claim that this investment has allowed me to explore how processes of othering (the fabrication of a sexual, racial, and/or political ‘Other’) are enacted in the domestic sphere as an act of alienation, masking and disavowing our own complicity in networks of oppression and abjection. This ‘othering’ finds expression through the paradigm of ‘doubling’ which bears echoes of Freud’s definition of the uncanny [‘the unhomely’] as ‘something familiar [“homely”, “homey”] that has been repressed and then reappears’ (Freud [1919] 2003, 152).

My aim is to explore the heritage site not as a ‘place’, that is, in Michel de Certeau’s terminology, a static relationship of pre-ordered objects, but as a dynamic ‘space’ (1984, 117) in which mobile elements and actors – objects, curators, guides, audiences – intersect and interplay. This is the attempt to go beyond an understanding of heritage as unidirectional acts of instruction and manipulation (Smith and Campbell 2016, 447) and to acknowledge (un)conscious collaborations and unplanned encounters that create an affectively charged atmosphere (Brennan 2004, 1), encouraging meaning-making and creative narrativization in visitors. Sites such as Mr Straw’s House enable relational performances through which

visitors enact their imaginative and empathic investment in the past. These performances can be based on embodied memories just as much as on collectively shared and even canonised cultural memory. However, even deeply personal memories, fantasies, fears and desires can only be understood as relational, as they originate from and operate within the frameworks of a specific sociocultural environment (Halbwachs 1992, 38). This is important as heritage has become reconceptualised not only as a collection of artefacts or customs (tangible or intangible heritage) but as a “process” of passing on and receiving memories’ (Smith 2006, 2).

The idea ‘that museum visitation takes on elements of performance’ is certainly nothing new (Kidd 2011, 4; Rees Leahy 2011, 31; Bagnall 2003). Visitors are not only spectators but also actors, engaging with the space and interacting with each other in performances which range from projecting and acting out to witnessing their own and other’s responses and reflecting on them. Involuntary affect usually flows from and through people as precognitive perception and empathic contagion, for example when we unconsciously read people’s facial expressions or their body language (Waterton and Watson 2014, 83). However, unmetabolised affect is still socially mediated and can be transformed ‘into something potentially nurturing and generative of emotional thought’ (Asibong 2015, 94; see also Thrift 2009). While all too often an attempt is made to reduce these performances to educational tools that reinforce social norms, stereotypes and national myths, the encounters taking place at heritage sites are unpredictable and can potentially enable the materialization of something that exceeds preexisting affinities and affiliations, something that imagines ‘as yet unsuspected modes of being’ (Diamond 1996, 2).

My readings of Mr Shaw's House are not only intended to add additional layers to the authorized heritage framework provided by the National Trust. Reflecting on these readings allows me to show how a deeply personal and affective response to this heritage site is still shaped by 'schematic narrative templates' (Wertsch 2008, 123) and culturally, politically and economically mediated by the conditions of 'austerity Britain' (Waterton 2014, 76). While affect determines my investedness in Mr Straw's House, it is through the interpretative grids of the gothic novel, 'austerity nostalgia' (Hatherley 2016a, 18; see also Bramall 2013, 22) and 'post-colonial melancholia' (Gilroy 2004, 108) that I attempt to make sense of a fascination with these kinds of heritage sites which point towards family secrets and taboos but resonate with collective trauma. My responses are neither framed as representative nor symptomatic, in the sense that they are not necessarily going to be shared or replicated by other visitors. But they provide insight into relational encounters between embodied and cultural memory, between specific 'modes of emplacement' (Beranek 2011, 112) and the heritage framing of the historic site. As such, this becomes a case study of a specific constellation of identity, memory and space and the attempt to trace this constellation or rather these *constellations*.

I am interested in the way in which a museum or heritage site can function as a 'dream space' (Kavanagh 2000, 3) that triggers 'personal associations, memories, imaginations, senses, and emotions about the past', which 'allows for lateral and creative thinking, for [...] leaps of fantasy, [opens] up feelings and thoughts long buried [and lifts the] lid on our memories.' (Kavanagh 1996, 3f). As a dream space the heritage site can affect daydream and play but can also become a site of displacement: in the sense that the audience feels taken out of its comfort zone but also in a psychoanalytic sense, as an unconscious

defense mechanism that allows visitors to simultaneously disavow and redirect, voice and silence their unspeakable fears and desires in a complex manoeuvre which is not adequately described by simply calling it nostalgia. I would argue that heritage sites such as Mr Straw's House are not unambiguously experienced as either troubling and disturbing *or* comforting and reassuring, but can evoke a complex mix of affective responses which, in heritage terms, do not allow for neat categorizations into sites of 'dark tourism' and 'difficult heritage' (Macdonald 2008, 1) on the one hand and rose-tinted, regressive nostalgia on the other.

#### Narrative 1: Mr Straw's House as a National Trust Property

In the following I will be tracing the stories that are told and those that are silently enacted in the attempt to attract audiences and market Mr Straw's House as a heritage site. Museum and heritage studies would classify Mr Straw's House as a historic house museum, with recent years having given rise to specific theories and practices categorised as 'house museology'.<sup>3</sup> But even if I were to be content with the National Trust's comforting narrative of No. 7 Blyth Grove, Worksop, as a nostalgic time capsule, it would still be a house with an identity problem: it is neither a luxurious stately home nor has anybody famous ever lived there, and as such it is an ill fit with the majority of Historic House Museums or National Trust properties. Together with Birmingham's Back to Backs and Liverpool's The Hardmans' House it is a rare example of a National Trust property which promises a glimpse into the lives of 'ordinary people' of the first half of the twentieth century (Samuel 1994, 160). Just as the kitchen and servant quarters of large stately homes have received increasing interest from the visiting public, a form of nostalgia spreads which is less country house and more kitchen sink, curious about the darker and more unsavoury aspects of the past.<sup>4</sup> Here the openly



intrusive voyeurism encouraged in visitors is not so much directed onto public figures and grand families, but legitimised by an interest in social history. Mr Straw's House, a shopkeeper's home, is presented as the model of an English middle-class domestic interior at the beginning of the last century. A celebration of the unique and exceptional gives way to a discourse on representational typicality<sup>i</sup> while at the same time being promoted as an extraordinary experience of a time capsule – strangely familiar (*'heimlich'/'heimisch'*) and yet unfamiliar (*'unheimlich'*/uncanny) at the same time (Freud [1919] 2003, 132).

Like many other visitors, I wasn't quite sure what to expect when I first went to see Mr Straw's House in 2013. The official National Trust guide book promises: 'entering the house today, one steps back three-quarters of a century' because 'down to the 1932 calendar on the wall of the dining room, there is hardly a trace of the last 60 years' (Mr Straw's House 1993, 3). While it is true that the house was never modernised after the Straw family had moved in in the 1920s, it was nevertheless constantly inhabited for six decades up to the 1980s. And these 'lost decades' are certainly reflected in the fully stocked food cupboard (figure 1) at the top of the stairs which features products familiar to most of the visitors who grew up in the UK and even those who live here now like myself: from tins of Lyle's Golden Syrup and jars of Bovril to A1 Steak Sauce this could be the larder of an elderly (and very frugal) relative. Food appeals both as a source of actual nurturing and a form of emotional consolation through the associations it might hold from childhood comforts to echoes of a shared collective past. This is certainly one of the ways visitors are invited by the National Trust to engage with the house: to experience it as a comfortingly familiar and familial home, full of objects which resonate with embodied memories and instill a sense of kinship and belonging, a desire for unproblematic rootedness in an unbroken vernacular tradition and

national history. However, I have also seen visitors recoil from the larder as it sparks simultaneously ‘sensations of repugnance and attraction’ (DeSilvey 2006, 320): food has not only life-giving and life-enhancing qualities, it is also prone to mould, putrefy and decay, even to turn toxic. Preserved food, on the other hand, which, in the attempt to prevent this natural process of decomposition, can still be eaten after decades, has the capacity to repel beyond all rational thinking. While the rest of the house speaks of a more or less successfully arrested development, the food cupboard is the closest the house comes to bringing visitors face to face with organic, relentlessly changing and transforming matter on the one hand and its ‘unnatural’ preservation on the other: an entombed body, skeletal, rotting or mumified.

Depending on the visitors’ perspective, they might describe the two brothers, Walter and William Straw (the singular in ‘Mr Straw’s House’ is oddly deceptive), as hoarders and misers, as eccentrics or social historians and archivists of the everyday, as caught up in a *folie à deux* or as thoroughly disturbed individuals. The National Trust simply describes them as ‘averse to change’ (Mr Straw’s House 1993, 3). The guide book explains that after their parents’ death (the father died in 1932, the mother in 1939), the brothers ‘settled down to a life ordered by routines that were not to alter for the next 40 years’ (Mr Straw’s House 1993, 7). Walter, the younger brother, took over the local family grocery, providing a living for both brothers, while William stayed at home to do the cooking, cleaning and gardening. They literally did not move on: their home was never renovated or modernised, everything was kept in its place down to the furniture and decoration their parents had chosen when they bought the house in 1923. They never acquired a telephone, radio or television, and never got married, but mimicked the conventional heterosexual setup of a male provider and a female

caretaker, except for the fact that the older brother insisted on an official salary for his responsibilities as a homemaker.

After Walter died in 1976, his chair remained *in situ* next to the fire, where William still read the newspaper every evening. By the time he went into hospital in 1985 he had labelled and catalogued most objects in the house, and on those stickers explained what they were – an amateur historian musealising his own life. The family line ended when William died in 1990. Despite being too frugal to pay for National Trust membership while he was alive, he left the contents of the house to the Trust while the house itself went to his neighbour who occupied the semi-detached other half. The National Trust, at first at a loss about what to do with the contents which were too modest to be used for their stately homes, decided that they wanted to make ‘every effort to preserve the house exactly as it was found’ (Mr Straw’s House 1993, 4): the brothers had more or less sealed off their parents’ bedroom and their mother’s sitting room, their father’s hats and coats still hanging on the pegs in the hall (figure 2), his pipes and tobacco pouch next to the mantelpiece in the dining room, the calender on the dining room wall for the year 1932, when their father had died. The Trust decided to buy both Nos 5 and 7 Blyth Grove: one operates as the time capsule, the other as a visitor reception and small museum with glass-cased photographs and belongings of the family, literally spilling the contents of drawers and bureaus. Like the split-personality of our relationship to the past, the one is the controlled and ordered musealisation of a family history, the other – while every attempt is made to contain it – its uncanny darker side: the Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde of heritage (figure 3).<sup>5</sup>

Narrative 2: Haunted House. The Gothic Story

Following Bachelard's concept of 'topoanalysis', which he defines as 'the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives' (Bachelard [1958] 1994, 8), I will suggest that Mr Straw's House can be experienced as an externalisation of psychosocial formations, of unprocessed affects and uncontained spillage of relational trauma, alluded to by the attendants in whispers and off the record, as a site which bears testimony to death and bereavement, to ordinary and yet intolerable family drama and transgenerational trauma. In short, I will read my interaction with the house as a gothic story.<sup>7</sup>

The haunted house is a central trope of the Gothic, in which ruin and decay are conceived as 'picturesque'. It is used to externalise and spatialise the disturbing aspects of a psychodynamic closely associated with the bourgeois family. As a subtle critique of this very specific psychodynamic, the Gothic provided a counterdiscourse to the sentimental novel of the eighteenth century that celebrated the feminine home and intimate family unit as the ultimate retreat and safe space away from the relentless demands of the masculine public sphere. The house was established as the central character through which repressed desires and fears are located in 'the secret that has *not* come to light, but nevertheless makes its presence felt' (Smith 1992, 286) and haunts the master of the house who keeps it 'carefully hidden in a secret room, [...] or his closet. The house comes to stand for the mind, its hidden rooms are the secret recesses of its owner's thoughts and emotions' (Bauer 2016, 24).

Something similar is at work in Mr Straw's House where the National Trust's narratives around the tight family unit make the past comfortingly familiar but then become 'infected' with the ambiguity of the bourgeois family and its unspeakable anxieties. At first glance, the house appears harmless enough: more M.R. James than Ann Radcliffe, this inconspicuous Edwardian semi-detached suburban home does not possess any of the gothic

paraphernalia and trappings which reveal it as a tomb for the living dead. And who are these living dead anyway? The parents – kept alive and present through their possessions, their clothes, their habits – or the brothers themselves? And what about the rest of us, wandering around the house, exploring the indeterminate space between the dead and the living, between desires and the (idealised) lost objects to which they were or still are attached?

The small exhibition in the other double of the semi-detached house only provides hints as to some of the troubling events the family experienced: photographs show that there was a third brother, David, who died in infancy in 1903; both William and Walter had served in WWI; and William had lost his teaching post in London in 1937 but stayed on till his mother's death in 1939, catching the train back to Worksop every Friday afternoon. The National Trust is keen to contain the narrative and to reassure its visitors, painting a picture of a close knit family disrupted by the death of the father: 'William Straw [...] died suddenly while gardening. The blow was so devastating to the family that they allowed nothing to be changed in the house from that day forward' (Mr Straw's House 1993, 4). While the National Trust concedes that the brothers were slightly eccentric and isolated, the exhibition insists that they were neither recluses nor hoarders, claiming that they kept only selected items, but clearly they could not be described as collectors either. The fact that they did not merely hold on to all kinds of everyday items but also preserved them in situ speaks of a fetishistic investment in those objects and their capacity to soothe and comfort. The National Trust's narrative leaves many questions unanswered and provides no satisfactory explanation as to what motivated the brothers' behaviour – a curiosity that clearly drives a lot of the interest that the house receives, and that is also echoed in the journal of the *British Heritage Society*, which picks up on the gothic mystery but reads it like a detective novel:

Poking around 7 Blyth Grove is fascinating, a chance to uncover the lives of the family that once lived there. Did Florence's grief over the loss of her husband kick-start the process by which the house was preserved? Were the boys trying to create a shrine to their father and mother? Did they always intend to create a historical record for future generations, befitting their interest in local history? There are clues scattered around the house in abundance to help historians solve the puzzle of why this became the house that time forgot. (Reeves 2015, 34)

One of those clues Reeves refers to are the parents' wedding clothes which the brothers laid out on the parental bed between newspapers: in this case the brothers did not so much 'preserve' but actually stage a scenario they could only have put in place postmortem, that is *after* the death of both parents. The silences which accrue around unspoken taboos are almost visible voids, only touched by the bored volunteers' whispers of family secrets; like indiscreet servants, flattered by the visitors' interest, they cannot resist the temptation to pass on their gossip on the family. One of the volunteer attendees told my visitor group in hushed tones that the wedding clothes were in fact removed by the National Trust. When asked why the brothers might have done such a thing in the first place, she suggested tentatively: 'as a way of storing them flat?', echoing the guide book but with as much doubt in her voice as was mirrored in the faces of the visitors who were either too polite or too disturbed to question her explanation. Later conversations with fellow visitors revealed that I was not the only one who was uncomfortably reminded of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (US 1960), the mummified mother in the cellar and of course the less memorable, but much more apt scene,

in which Marion intrudes into Mrs Bates's bedroom where the impression of her body on the empty bed can still be seen, an absence indicating her presence as both dead and very much alive. To me, the wedding clothes stand in for the parents' bodies on their wedding night and signify the brothers' conception, but they are also the 'exquisite corpse' of the sons' repressed desires. And in this instance the language in the guide book is uncharacteristically revealing: it speaks of the brothers' treatment of the house as an act of 'embalming'. In fact, what they seem to refer to is specifically the embalming of the mother's body: 'Seven years later Florence Straw, the boys' mother, also died and the embalming was complete' (Mr Straw's House 1993, 3).

How fitting that the carpet on the hallway stairs shows an Egyptian design which became popular after the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 (figure 2): 'Like a commemorative monument, the incorporated object betokens the place, the date, and the circumstances in which desires were banished from introjection: they stand like tombs in the life of the ego' (Torok 1994, 114). Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham describe how individuals can become haunted not only by a failure to recognise loss and their own repressed desires but also by 'the tombs of others [...] a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious' (Abraham 1987, 288f), unspeakable family secrets as well as atrocities committed in the name of the nation, which are 'both known and yet crucially *not* known' (Smith 1992, 294), at once familiar and yet strange. Suspended between life and death, the brothers guard this crypt so it can go unnoticed and thus undisturbed, marked only by the 'phantom', fake traces to ward off any attempt to disclose the crypt in which the secret lies buried.

However, it is not my aim to detect and decode the ‘phantom’, to pathologise the brothers or label their embalming process as any weirder than that exercised by the National Trust on behalf of their members and in the name of national heritage. Could we not argue that the National Trust is sanitizing the brothers’ obsession (quite literally in elaborate cleanings during the winter months closure<sup>8</sup>) not only because they want to be able to promote their home as a ‘time capsule’ but also because they feel mimicked in their own activities and see their distorted reflection in the mirror? Caitlin DeSilvey among others has criticised heritage conservation that privileges stasis, arrested decay and preservation over an approach which she terms ‘entropic heritage’ and in which ‘sensations of ambiguity and aversion’ are not defused but highlighted and worked through (2012, 256). Beyond the nostalgic surface, Mr Straw’s House emanates an affective force field that resonated with my own grief after my mothers’ death just a few months prior to my first visit. But rather than interpreting the nostalgic surface as the false varnish that sentimentalises a deeply troubled family history, I would argue that both nostalgia and trauma are deeply intertwined and cannot be separated – our ghosts not only haunt us, they can also be comforting to us.

In contrast to Abraham and Torok’s project, my aim is not to unearth or elicit the ghost’s secret and restore it to the order of knowledge, a quest which also lies at the heart of the gothic novel and later became the driving force of the mystery and detective novel: what happened in Mr Straw’s House? I could of course take on the role of the detective (Freeman 2015, 9) who researches the family history, or the role of the psychoanalytic therapist trying to make sense of unspoken events, such as the death of one of the three Straw brothers as a small child and the effect it might have had on the mother and the whole family. What am I to make of the fact that in the narrative supplied by the National Trust it is the father’s death



which is seen as the trigger for the cathectic deprivation into which the brothers settle, and the mother (and her possessions) somewhat pale in significance. The visitors' attention is drawn to the father's coats in the hallway, his pipe and tobacco hanging at the mantelpiece, the 1932 calendar on the wall signifying arrested time shows the year in which *he* died. Just like the gothic novel the National Trust's narrative of Mr Straw's House concentrates on the patriarchal lineage and sidelines the influence of the mother on the family dynamic. And yet, the death of the younger brother points towards the dead mother complex (Green [1983] 1986) as the heart of the psychic apparatus externalised in Mr Straw's House. André Green's notion of the 'dead mother' describes a traumatic disruption of maternal relatedness, for example when a mother becomes fixated on her dead child and emotionally unable to relate to her living children. Her children will experience her as psychically dead but still cling to her in a 'tight embrace' in which 'the entombed child finds solace, a shelter that offers the certainties of death over the vagaries of life' (Sekoff 1999, 115).

This would be one attempt to resolve the mystery and reveal Mr Straw's House as a crypt and as a symptom of the 'illness of mourning' that afflicts both mother and sons. But Freud's distinction between healthy mourning and pathological melancholia is rather absolute (Freud [1917] 2001) and the denouement in the detective story is usually suspiciously unsatisfactory: the feeling persists that by uncovering and naming the culprit, something else gets covered up. The house's or the ghost's secret 'is not a puzzle to be solved; it is the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future' (Davis 2013, 58). The 'curious woman [... who] questions male hegemony over knowledge and domestic space' is 'a hallmark of the Gothic' (Bauer 2016, 12) and yet the Gothic as counter-discourse hides as

much as it reveals: while my experience of Mr Straw's House enabled me to engage in and reflect on a performance of unresolved loss and mourning through the paradigm of the Gothic, this has resulted in an increased awareness of its limitations both as a meaning-making and a heuristic device. It instigates 'acting out' just as much as it encourages 'working through', and while it allows me to confront what is considered abject, it also panders to my inclination to rationalise and simultaneously defer my response indefinitely.

### Narrative 3: Austerity Nostalgia or 'Keep Calm and Carry On'?

The nostalgia evoked by the National Trust's discourse on Mr Straw's House as a 'time capsule' is historically vague insofar as it is not directed onto a specific decade or period. Rather, it clusters around slogans which indicate a distinctive combination of moral certainties and attitudes ('tenacity in the face of adversity', 'dignity in hardship') associated with 'Austerity Britain' (1939-54) and reflected in popular trends that range from the TV programme *Call the Midwife* (BBC1 2012-) to 'Make do and Mend' fads, 'Keep Calm and Carry On' retro marketing and 'Dig for Victory' allotments. Rebecca Bramall speaks of an 'iconography of austerity chic, embodying the material and affective attributes of homeliness, comfort, frugality, simplicity, utility and nostalgia' (2013, 22). Owen Hatherley, describing a similar phenomenon, has coined the term 'austerity nostalgia' or 'nostalgia for a new kind of bleak' (2016a, 18).<sup>9</sup> In aesthetic terms, this nostalgia refers to a period which broadly ranges from the 1930s to the 1970s. It draws on sentiments which allow for a convenient conflation of Blitz spirit and an indistinct nostalgia for a benevolent, paternalistic post-war state with the current authoritarian and anti-egalitarian ideology of a neo-liberal conservative government. In this conflation, spending cuts and the rolling back of the welfare state are not

justified in political or economic terms (which can be criticised and opposed), but through the evocation of what Raymond Williams described as ‘structures of feeling’ (1977, 128).

Probably the best known item of ‘austerity nostalgia’ is the ever-present ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ poster that has spawned myriad spin-offs not just in the UK. It was commissioned in 1939 by the Ministry of Information as part of a wider poster campaign designed to boost morale, but was not mass-produced until 2008 when it gained popularity, seemingly epitomising Britain’s response to the global financial crisis, the recession and ultimately the Coalition Government’s ‘austerity’ policies. Its message evokes the ‘Blitz spirit’ rhetoric of universal sacrifice, stoicism and common purpose (‘We are all in this together’). In the case of Mr Straw’s House, the supposedly benevolent statism of the ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ slogan is taken to a new level, which, I would argue, exposes the ways personal and collective melancholia, but even more importantly, melancholia and nostalgia, are entangled and intertwined in these ‘structures of feeling’ which are reactions to and ways of negotiating experiences of loss and trauma.

The National Trust’s manicured version of the ‘time capsule’ serves a narrative of a past in which visitors can feel at home and from which they are supposed to derive comfort, simply because they recognise it as familiar and familial. What is silenced in this scenario is that time is only ever experienced as arrested in trauma, which signifies the inability to escape the clutches of a disturbing and unprocessed past. The Trust downplays the fact that Mr Straw’s House did not just survive untouched since the 1930s, but is the result of the brothers’ decision against any form of change, reflecting their state of melancholic stasis, of repetition without progression or transformation in which the deceased are not allowed to pass away. When the family had moved into a newly built house, Florence Straw had

overseen an enthusiastic program of technologocial and aesthetic innovations: ‘the electrical system was modernised, an up-to-date bathroom and kitchen installed, the house was decorated throughout with new carpets, wallpaper and paint. It was the height of contemporary fashion’ (Reeves 2015). It was a moment in time when the inhabitants had quite literally bought into the promise of a brighter future, a hope that was thwarted not just by the parents’ sudden deaths and the family’s way of dealing (or rather, not dealing) with bereavement, but by a more general demise that speaks of a collective loss and inability to mourn, resonating with what Paul Gilroy has diagnosed as ‘postcolonial melancholia’ (2004, 108). According to Gilroy, the response to imperial decline was a collective amnesia and identity crisis that manifested itself through a morbid and neurotic preoccupation with heritage (cp. Wright 2009). In the context of ‘austerity nostalgia’, this decline gets associated and covered up with Britain’s ‘finest hour’: rather than confronting and working through the violence and the pain of empire and decolonisation, the mythical memory of World War II and the Blitz spirit serves as a screen memory to ennoble the national decline of the post-war period. It paints the picture of a victimised, but ultimately resourceful Britain, in the face of an ‘invasion’ that has come to carry largely unspoken racial and ethnic connotations.

Here I have to come back to and take an even closer look at Mr Straw’s larder (figure 1) to find the skeleton in the closet: an easily overlooked bottle of ‘Camp Coffee’. In 1876, Paterson & Sons Ltd began production of a coffee compound essence in Charlotte Street, Glasgow, which they marketed as ‘Camp Coffee’. It is said to have originated when the Gordon Highlanders requested a coffee drink that could be easily served up from campaign field kitchens in India. The original label reputedly shows Major General Sir Hector Macdonald, known by millions as ‘Fighting Mac’, hero-worshipped for his

campaigns in Egypt and South Africa, being served by his Sikh manservant. By the 1980s, the manservant had lost his tray, and in 2006 the label was changed with both of them sitting down in a companionable way to share a cup of coffee (figure 4). For some this is a sign of changed attitudes, for others ‘political correctness gone mad’, and while it is understandable that the company no longer wishes to promote the master-servant days of the Raj, it can also be seen as a way to whitewash British colonialism into an enterprise benefitting the whole imperial family.

But the story behind the label gets even more intriguing: Sir Hector Macdonald shot himself in the head in his bedroom at the Hotel Regina in Paris on 25 March 1903, minutes after reading a front-page story in the New York Herald suggesting he faced a ‘grave charge’ – a Victorian euphemism for homosexuality. It was claimed he had conducted gay affairs with a Boer prisoner of war and with four Ceylonese young men – inadvertently giving a whole new meaning to ‘camp’ Coffee. Even after his death, the discredited general continued to have a hold on the popular imagination:

Rumours spread that, tired of his treatment by the Army, Macdonald staged his suicide to assume the identity of a German cousin, August von Mackensen, who was of a similar age and reported as being ‘gravely ill’ at the time of the suicide attempt. Von Mackensen, who rose to the rank of field marshal in the Prussian army, miraculously recovered and suddenly discovered military skills he had not previously possessed. German propagandists wasted little time in perpetuating the idea of a betrayal by Macdonald in leaflets dropped behind British lines during the First World War. (Milmo 2006)<sup>10</sup>

The brothers' closet might speak of privately inhibited and publically ostricised homoerotic desire, but even more importantly it points towards the fact that 'the discursively powerful fiction of masculine supremacy is based on structures of homosocial intimacy which constantly struggle to dissociate themselves from some 'other' – women, heterosociality, homosexuality – and fail' (Bauer 2016, 25). In this reading of unspoken personal fears and desires I locate the hidden connections between familial trauma and postcolonial nostalgia (Walder 2011, 2). It reveals the psychosocial dimensions of the processes of 'othering', where the psychic and the social do not so much operate analogously, but inform and enable each other.

#### Conclusion: The Uncanny Double

I could go on finding alternative ways of performing in and engaging with Mr Straw's House, producing yet more narratives in what Royle describes as the uncanny 'compulsion to tell, a compulsive storytelling' that is 'destined to elude mastery' (Royle 2003, 12 and 15). But in the end what strikes me most is the endless string of doubling which my encounter with the house has produced: the two brothers Walter and William Straw as horders and archivists, as unique and typical, the two semi-detached houses acting as museum and as time capsule (the Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde of heritage), Hector MacDonald suspected of faking his death and taking on the identity of his German cousin August von Mackensen to fight in the First World War on the side of the Germans. What I would like to argue in this concluding section is that the complex and conflicting affects, feelings and emotions, tied up in my empathic encounter with Mr Straw's House, should be understood through this dynamic of

othering, alienation, abjection and doubling. Mourning and melancholia and most importantly, trauma and nostalgia, do not so much operate as mutually exclusive reactions (disturbing *or* comforting), but have to be held in mind together, their conjunction marked by the uncanny.

While Freud associates the uncanny (the ‘familiar that has been repressed and then reappears’; Freud [1919] 2003, 152) with the self that becomes ‘duplicated, divided and interchanged’ (Freud [1919] 2003, 142), he discards this as a insufficient explanation in and of itself. Even so, the double signifies the unresolved ambivalence that strong emotions of desire and fear, love and hate, can be directed onto the same object on which our survival and well-being depended at one point, and that this object can be nourishing and protecting (inviting a feeling of nostalgia), but also violent and destructive (and therefore potentially traumatizing). The same goes for the subject who not only carries responsibility for her personal actions but is also implicated in systemic violence and injustice. The uncanny allows for these conflicting emotions and positions to be held in suspense: the double is both an ‘energetic denial of the power of death’ and simultaneously an ‘uncanny harbinger of death’ (Freud [1919] 2003, 142). The experience of the uncanny marks the site of this unresolved and repressed conflict, the desire to return to the womb as the beginning of all life and as a symptom of our death wish. In that sense the uncanny also ‘helps to make visible that which is culturally invisible’ (Jackson 1981, 69), such as silenced ‘deviant’ desires and sexualities or unacknowledged nostalgia and melancholia. The uncanny is enabling, because it defamiliarises the familiar and makes the conditions of alienation and estrangement visible, revealing the fundamental complicity between trauma and nostalgia. But it can also be experienced as dangerous in its demand to relinquish mastery as it exists only in the

disturbing slippage between waking and dreaming, imagination and reality (Vidler 1992, 11), thereby undoing ‘the factitious monological unity of the ego’ (Royle, 2003, 16).

Mr Straw’s House enables uncanny encounters in which visitors can discover the unfamiliar beneath the familiar and hold potentially conflicting reactions (disturbing/comforting) in suspension. Some of the voices which I channelled in my encounter with the house are reflected in the discourses around ‘austerity nostalgia’ and the ‘gothic story’: ‘austerity nostalgia’ is the attempt to explain the appeal of Mr Straw’s House as part of a wider popular phenomenon in which nostalgia for collective stoicism and a vague, melancholic sense of national loss and decline is both celebrated and disavowed. The Gothic fantasy, on the other hand, concentrates on the personal and the familial, on the individual’s unprocessed traumas and desires. The Egyptian carpet on the stairs of Mr Straw’s House symbolises the ‘heart of darkness’ for both of these intersecting narratives: the ‘dark continent’ problematically associated by Freud himself with the unconscious, and the legacies of the British Empire which are written out of a cosy and politically exploited version of austerity nostalgia. It reveals how ‘the spectres of colonial pasts haunt the postcolonial present’ (Gillian Rose 2010, 103) in which the personal meets the political and the feeling of alienation morphs into a fear of the ‘alien’.

The gothic trauma narrative and the nostalgic austerity narrative are not two contesting or even alternative readings deflecting attention from another. Rather, they coalesce in an engagement with Mr Straw’s House which reveals the psychosocial dimensions of my response: how the paradigm of the bourgeois family informs concepts of national belonging and how a seemingly innocuous fad of austerity nostalgia points towards a national trauma that sustains and is sustained by intra- and interpsychological dynamics.



It is not only in the anxious and melancholic public mood, which characterises the first decades of the twenty-first century, that this slippage between the nostalgic and the traumatic can be found. But the desires and fears which inform ‘austerity nostalgia’ are enmeshed in a structure of feeling that is marked by the temporality of trauma: a terrifying frozen time, a debilitating enthrallment, an inability to envisage a future that holds anything different to that which is already in existence. So rather than pit the ‘dream spaces’ against the cognitive space that serves the heritage site’s educational mission or allows for an ideological critique of this mission, I suggest that it is necessary to work through the entanglement between the personal and the social, between trauma and nostalgia, between affect and politics. A failure to do so would mean missing the opportunity to use the past as a resource for resistance (Bonnett 2010, 169) to the status quo’s naturalisation and normalisation of a highly problematic present.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Annette Kuhn, Fiona Candlin and Rebecca Dolgoy for their comments on various drafts of this article.

<sup>2</sup> The Coalition Government comprised the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats and ran from 2010-15. In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis the Coalition Government presided over swinging and controversial cuts to public sector budgets in the name of austerity.

<sup>3</sup> ‘To the despair of specialists and connoisseurs, most visitors to house museums visit, not to appreciate the finer details of Tudor panelling and Georgian portraits, but to engage in creative fantasy [...] Following the trend towards seeing museum visitors as active creators of their own visitor experiences, informed by personal history and agendas, they can be viewed as coming to mine the place for the raw materials of imaginative bricolage, and then to share the experience with their family and friends [...] These inspirations are to be found below stairs, as much as on the piano nobile, in closets as well as gardens, in frescoed ceilings, and at the same time in mass-produced wallpapers. The challenge is for house curators to let go of received truth as the only vector of understanding.’ (Young 2007, 76).

<sup>4</sup> Literary examples include Jo Baker’s novel *Longbourn* (2013). But how much (and what kind of) difficult histories can the public handle in their heritage sites? This could be compared to the problems National Trust audiences had with the history of slavery in some

temporary exhibitions during the 2007 bicentenary of the British abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Smith, in his *Wealth of Nations* (1776), was allegedly the first to portray the English as a nation of shopkeepers: 'To found a great empire for the sole purpose of raising up a people of customers, may at first sight, appear a project fit only for a nation of shopkeepers. It is, however, a project altogether unfit for a nation of shopkeepers, but extremely fit for a nation whose government is influenced by shopkeepers.' (*The Wealth of Nations*, Glasgow, 1976, Book IV, section vii. c.) For a more recent example see Sian Ellis 'It's All in the Family: The Nation of Shopkeepers' (2016).

<sup>6</sup> The National Trust kindly granted permission to use photographs of Mr Straw's House.

<sup>7</sup> For other examples of Gothic readings see the YouTube clip by ObsoleteOddity entitled 'Time Capsule House! – House Frozen in Time after 83 years' (accessed January 10, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0trCoIxb20/>.

<sup>8</sup> This is in fact a difficult balancing act; not least because the house has to be clean for visitors and yet not too clean to simulate a lived-in feeling of a house inhabited by two elderly bachelors.

<sup>9</sup> What could also be termed 'misery nostalgia' finds its outlet not only in the heritage industry but also in design and fashion, for example the fashion label 'Workhouse England' where designs are inspired by Victorian photographs and the clothes worn by workhouse inmates: 'The materials are raw. The colours are earthy and textured. We have deconstructed then rebuilt in order to instil a sense of history.' Workhouse England (accessed January 10, 2018). <http://www.workhouse-england.co.uk/workhouse-england--ethos.html/>.

<sup>10</sup> This tale of privilege, homosexuality and treason bears echoes of the Cambridge spies, in particular Guy Burgess, who acted as a double agent during the Cold War period and eventually defected to the Soviet Union.

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Figure 1. Larder in Mr Straw's House



Figure 2. Mr Straw's House – hallway and staircase with Egyptian carpet



Figure 3. 5-7 Blyth Grove, Worksop, Nottinghamshire



Figure 4. Changes in Camp Coffee label