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## 'Stella Gibbons, ex-centricity and the suburb'

Outside the window, rows of little houses and gardens went past, with occasionally one of those little ruins that may be seen all up and down the railway lines of Greater London since the autumn of 1940, and in the blue sky the balloon barrage was anchored low above the roofs and gleamed pure silver in the evening light. The train was just leaving the suburbs and the barrage and entering the unprotected country. Shame, thought Alicia, who, like many other people, was rather fond of the balloons.

- Stella Gibbons, *The Bachelor* (28)

In *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992), John Carey writes: 'The rejection by intellectuals of the clerks and the suburbs meant that writers intent on finding an eccentric voice could do so by colonizing this abandoned territory. The two writers who did so were John Betjeman and Stevie Smith' (66). Whilst Carey's insight forms a useful starting point for this discussion, his restriction of the suburban literary terrain to just two writers must be disputed. Many other names should be added to the list, and one of the most important is Stella Gibbons, who wrote in - and about - the north London suburbs throughout her career. Her novels resist the easy assumption that suburban culture is unchallenging, intelligible, homogenous and highly conventional. Gibbons's fictional suburbs are socially and architecturally diverse, and her characters – who range from experimental writers to shopkeepers - read and interpret suburban styles and values in varying and incompatible ways. At times, she explores the traditional English ways of life which wealthy suburb dwellers long for and seek to recreate; at other times, she identifies the suburb with the future, with technology, innovation and evolving social structures.

In Gibbons's best-known book, *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), there are no suburbs, only the two extremes of central London and deepest Sussex. Nevertheless, as Raymond Williams notes in *The Country and the City* (1973), there is a 'suburban uneasiness, a tension of attraction and repulsion' (253) in *Cold Comfort Farm*'s attitude towards the countryside and toward the literature which celebrates it. The novel's complex response to both rural England, on the one hand, and the ultra-modernity of interwar London, on the other, is what makes it – in effect – a suburban text.<sup>1</sup> Yet, like Gibbons's other books, *Cold Comfort Farm* refuses to endorse any singular or stable suburban viewpoint; the tendency of her oeuvre is to construct the suburb as a place which expands the range of possible points of view on British modernity.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Gibbons wrote several novels focusing more explicitly on suburban environments: *Enbury Heath* (1935), *Miss Linsey and Pa* (1936), *My American* (1939), *The Bachelor* (1944) and *Bassett* (1946).<sup>2</sup> These fictions pay detailed attention to the forms of domestic and professional work which sustain suburban existence, as well as to the impact of war on this lifestyle, and they combine affectionate celebration of the pleasures of the North London environment with a certain dismay at the ecological effects of the expanding city. For Gibbons, the suburb offered an ideal vantage point for exploring both urban modernity and countryside traditionalism, and for observing both literary modernism and the vestigial Romanticism of popular rural fiction. Her suburban location also correlates with her ex-centric positioning in relation to metropolitan literary culture and her resistance to processes of canon-making and consecration.

This essay will explore the pre-war and wartime suburban geographies mapped out in three novels, *Miss Linsey and Pa*, *My American*, and *The Bachelor*, a selection which reveals the range of Gibbons's perspectives on London and its environs. The discussion will examine the alternative modernities which are constructed in these novels as well as their continued

investment in pastoral visions of England, arguing that the negotiation between these two impulses marks the narratives as intermodern. Gibbons's fiction upsets dualities between intellectual and bourgeois; urban and rural; modern and traditional; modernist and middlebrow; and it also challenges the gendered discourses which have reinforced these dualities. In this sense, she reinvents the suburb as a crucial site for the development of an intermodern aesthetic.

### **Intermodernism and the Suburb**

The suburban fiction of the early decades of the twentieth century was positioned between two influential literary paradigms: metropolitan modernism and regional writing. Stella Gibbons's novels share in the regionalists' nostalgia for a disappearing rural England, but simultaneously participate in the modernist engagement with the new, whether in terms of social organisation, architecture or patterns of consumption. Gibbons's relation to the modern is best understood in the framework of the new, more expansive definitions of modernity developed by recent research on early- and mid-twentieth-century culture. In her 2004 book *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity*, Judy Giles argues that: 'the paradigmatic public space of modernity has been the city [...] with the result that the private sphere has frequently been understood as a refuge from the modern, a repository of traditional values' (4). Countering this assumption, Giles takes as her starting point the contention that 'responses to "the modern" are to be found not only in narratives of the public city but also in stories of, for example, the home, consumer relations, married sexuality, domestic service' (4). Lynne Hapgood adopts a similar approach in *Margins of Desire: The Suburbs in Fiction and Culture, 1880-1925* (2005), suggesting that if we accept that modernism was an urban phenomenon, then 'the shifting of literary locations to the suburbs can also represent the desire to forge a different kind of modernity, an alternative to

High Modernism, through more co-operative and popular literary forms' (10). She argues, further: 'The way in which the horizontal expansion of the suburbs challenged vertical social hierarchies is mirrored in the challenge an expanding suburban culture posed to established literary values' (5). In their suburban texts, intermodern writers such as Stevie Smith, John Betjeman, Elizabeth Bowen, E.M. Delafield and of course Stella Gibbons pose exactly such a challenge, both to the aesthetic of metropolitan modernism and to the nationalist ideology of the rural idyll. By the 1930s, modernism – the radical avant-garde of two decades earlier – had been transmuted into the dominant prestige artistic form; that is, it had become identified with 'established literary values'. Regional fiction was also, for nationalistic reasons, accorded a special prestige during the interwar years.<sup>3</sup> It was possible, therefore, for intermodernists to move the frontier, to discover in the suburban terrain the best possibilities for the regeneration of cultural values.

As part of their resistance to dominant literary paradigms, intermodern authors countered the tendency to associate suburbs with damage. Many influential Edwardian and interwar writers from across the range of political commitments and literary styles deplored the destruction of the countryside by housing estates and expanding transport networks. Preoccupied by their perception that a supposedly authentic English culture (strongly identified at this time with the rural) was being obliterated, these writers failed to acknowledge the suburb's potential to embody progress by improving the health and quality of life of the lower and middle classes. In *Howards End*, E.M. Forster's narrator says of a station a short distance from London: 'The station, like the scenery, struck an indeterminate note. Into which country would it lead – England or suburbia?' (29-30). The passage in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930) describing Nina's nausea on looking down from an aeroplane at a view of 'straggling red suburb; arterial road dotted with little cars; [...] some distant hills sown with bungalows; wireless masts and overhead power cables' (171) is a

frequently cited expression of disgust at the homogeneity and ugliness of the suburbs. A less well known – and, in the context of the novel as a whole, more ambivalent - example comes from Rosamond Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets*: 'Every time I come along this road there's a fresh outbreak of bungalows', the heroine Olivia laments, adding: 'England gets squalider and squalider. So disgraced, so ignoble, so smug and pretentious' (24-25).<sup>4</sup> This hostility to the suburb is founded partly on an assumption that the monotonous repeating designs which structured suburban developments corresponded to the habits of mind of the people who lived there.

Such judgements are strongly inflected by class: that is, by a contempt for salaried workers, who constituted a large proportion of the suburban population, and a fear of their increased visibility and influence. But the class identity of the suburb was, in fact, neither stable nor clearly defined. In their construction, land was redistributed into small units, offering each family on a street a property and a plot of land which were at once individually theirs and yet exactly the same as everyone else's. Hapgood comments: 'This process of individuation became a formidable barrier to the vertical strategies of class hierarchy, social engineering and political grouping' (4). The attempt to define suburb dwellers in class terms is further complicated by the broad reach of the term 'suburb', which embraced residential areas from the leafy and spacious to the congested and jerry-built. In the different boroughs of interwar London, the standard and style of living varied enormously. John Carey's comment on Betjeman is useful here:

What makes Betjeman distinctive [...] is the emotional intensity with which he invests the suburbs. This takes the form of love or hatred, according to the age of the suburb concerned. The older suburbs, and the even older countryside they replaced, shimmer in a nostalgic haze [...]. Modern suburbs, on the other hand, are monstrous

[...] harbouring the mixed bag of atrocities with which Betjeman associates progress – radios, cars, advertisements, labour-saving homes, peroxide blondes, crooked businessmen, litter, painted toenails and people who wear public-school ties to which they are not entitled.

In Gibbons's suburban novels, no such clear chronological distinctions are maintained. Her narratives certainly delineate the pleasures of affluent and spacious suburbs and contrast these with conditions in the more cramped, deprived areas of London. But her scenes of ugliness are generally set in decaying Victorian terraces rather than in new commuter developments, and – unlike Betjeman – she rarely deplors the vulgarity of suburban tastes. Labour-saving devices, radios and cinema are in general endorsed, because they increase the amount and quality of leisure available to the lower and middle classes. Gibbons's fictional suburbs are populated by a mix of characters with divergent educational and class backgrounds, and indeed, much of the interest of her narratives derives from her subtle distinctions among various suburban architectures and lifestyles.

### ***Miss Linsey and Pa (1936)***

The narrative energy of *Miss Linsey and Pa* derives largely from its geographical movements through London and its environs. At the beginning, the middle-aged Miss Linsey and her elderly father are forced to leave their home in Pitt's Lane, an imaginary village on the north-western edge of London, due to the diminishing profits of their greengrocer's shop. They move to a squalid boarding house in the fictional Radford Street, which is located in Holloway, near the Caledonian Market. Here, their cousin Len and his father keep a shop. Miss Linsey takes a job housekeeping for two literary women living in Bloomsbury (Dorothy Hoad and Edna Valentine Lassiter), and subsequently a position as childminder to an



educated, socially progressive family in St John's Wood (Giles and Perdita James). The Radford Street boarding house, however, proves to be the death of 'Pa', who is pushed out of a window by a mentally unsound fellow resident. Finally, Miss Linsey is rescued by her brother Sam, who takes her back to Pitt's Lane.

In the first chapter, Len remarks that Miss Linsey has to 'come to live in London and get a job' (10). To some extent, the novel sustains Len's distinction between Pitt's Lane (country) and Holloway (city), but it also traces the social and infrastructural changes which were gradually collapsing this distinction. A convention established in the early twentieth century was that anywhere within reach of the Underground system, but outside of zone 1, could be classed as a suburb, so that Holloway might arguably count as one of the innermost suburbs while Pitt's Lane, where a new tube station has just been opened as the novel begins, is indisputably transforming into an outer-edge suburb. *Miss Linsey and Pa* offers no stable perspective on urban modernity and the expanding suburbs, but rather a series of incompatible, subjective visions of a rapidly altering metropolis. The different characters hold varying views, with Miss Linsey's being the most complex, while the narrator's discourse is often ironic and sometimes difficult to decode. The reader is left to decide for herself which accounts of London are being affirmed and which satirised.

The primary interest of the story depends on the drama and colour of suburban streets, and Gibbons reveals what John Carey, referring to the work of Stevie Smith, describes as 'a taste for suburban sensations' (67). At the same time, the narrative – especially in its earlier phases - evinces a distaste for suburban sprawl which almost aligns it with the horrified, conservative responses of Waugh or Forster:

Pitt's Lane was only three miles from the tramlines and shops of Finchley, but until 1933 it was still a village. Then the owner of Pitt's Lane House sold the mansion and

its grounds to the builders, the villas on the Pitt's Lane Estate grew like mushrooms (but were less to be desired), a branch of the Underground ran out there – and London had a new suburb.

There were, of course, minor results of this event. Some charming meadows and old trees were destroyed; but we are used to that in England and we do not mind because we have plenty more. Dealers in antiques bought the wrought-iron gates of the house and the mantelpieces carved by Sovani in 1740 with Cupids and myrtle; and Mr Harry Linsey was driven out of business by the Wholesale and Retail Fruiterers Association, Ltd. (25)

Despite these changes, Pitt's Lane remains a semi-rural location, with birds, trees and access to the open countryside. By contrast, Holloway is in general represented as a most depressing place, where 'the horizon was hidden by dull roofs, square or twisted chimneys, blackened walls and dingy windows' (12). The Linseys' lodgings feature 'a broken gas mantle, a rusty gas-ring, sickly pink walls from which in several places the paper hung damply, and scuttling beetles' (22). They have very little privacy, and are continually vulnerable to the intrusions and demands of their landlady and her other lodgers. Gibbons's unappealing representation of the boarding house constitutes an implicit affirmation of the modern suburban lifestyle to which the Linseys aspire. The early twentieth-century suburban ideal was one of comfort, modernness and above all privacy: the new garden cities and housing estates mainly consisted of semi-detached houses with modern conveniences and individual gardens, each designed to house a nuclear family with no servants.

In *Miss Linsey and Pa*, then, the conventional duality between country and city becomes a duality between inner and outer London. A third element is added with the scenes set in bohemian households in Bloomsbury and St John's Wood, but these set-ups are invariably

ridiculed. Perdita James, under pressure from her social set, feels obliged to attempt free love and peculiar new methods of childrearing, and the accounts of her attempts to raise her daughter as if she were a primitive child are ludicrous and almost surreal. She is eventually persuaded to embrace a more traditional mode of marriage and motherhood. Similarly, the novelist Edna Valentine Lassiter (known in the early chapters as E.V.) apparently subscribes to the idea that 'no story could end happily; every intelligent novelist knew that' (p. 112). Eventually, though, she acknowledges a longing to make her heroine 'have a healthy baby without any details, and to write a long description [...] of same having its bath' (p. 112). Her repressed instinct, in fact, is to write a book very much like *Miss Linsey and Pa* itself, which has a happy ending and contains several descriptions of an appealing baby. Instead, Edna Valentine decides to enact this plot herself, and she leaves her companion Dorothy, gets married and gives up writing

Perdita and Edna Valentine are both redeemed from their forced and painful 'modernness' through the sane, practical interventions of Miss Linsey. The posturing, highbrow Dorothy Hoad, however, is beyond rescue. She considers that 'most women were cows' (61), wears jewellery of 'fiercely modernist design' (55), and dresses in men's clothes. Dorothy Hoad repeatedly interrupts conventional romance plots and disrupts family structures: she forces Edna Valentine to continue writing gloomy, shapeless stories, seeks to involve her in a lesbian partnership, and tries to prevent her engagement. Interestingly, Dorothy is also identified with the serious modernist's contempt for the masses. Accidentally passing through Radford Street, she decides that it 'was not a place where a sensitive and intelligent person would be from choice'. Buying cigarettes from Len's shop, she observes:

how mechanically he got out the packet, without interest, lifelessly. Like an automaton. But that was what their lives made of these victims of the economic

system. They became automata: wireless-educated, cinema-thrilled, fed on tinned food, having no deep contact with Beauty, without which Life was only existence.  
(54-5)

Len, Miss Linsey and Pa are indeed obliged to eat tinned food and entertain themselves at the cinema: this is all they can afford. But they are not in the least like automata; indeed, they all appear far more sensitive to beauty than is Dorothy Hoad. They, too, are pained by the ugliness of Radford Street, but each finds a private vision of loveliness there: Pa is enchanted by the birds kept by the owner of the boarding house, Len likes to look from his window at the tower of the Caledonian Market, 'soaring with curved eaves like a Chinese building against the turquoise sky of April' (p. 12), and Miss Linsey thinks 'how pretty the lit shop windows looked', and admires 'the new leaves trembl[ing] in the rings of lamplight at dusk' (p. 75). The novel – like many other intermodern narratives - awards considerable dignity and agency to respectable lower-class characters such as Miss Linsey, Len and Sam, and thus Gibbons resists the modernist insistence that suburban living and popular culture turn the lower classes into an unindividuated mass.

Certain manifestations of the modern, then, are emphatically rejected in *Miss Linsey and Pa*. They include unconventional sexual relationships, educational experiments, bohemianism and aspects of the modernist aesthetic (particularly the rejection of closure and happy endings). Suburban modernity, on the other hand, is represented ambivalently. The text reveals anxiety about the obliteration of the countryside surrounding London, and also about the ugliness and squalor which are generated in the inner suburbs as wealthier Londoners move further outwards. On the other hand, the new pleasures of suburban life are evoked in Miss Linsey's blissful re-settling in Pitt's Lane with Sam and his little boy Freddie. They are pleased by the arrival of a cinema there, and also by the planned construction of a

'gargantuan' (342) block of flats whose inhabitants will be potential customers for Sam's wireless shop. Sam, the narrator remarks, 'believed in progress' (342). There is an edge of irony here: Sam's point of view is set against the equally legitimate alarm of other Pitt's Lane residents at the destruction of their peaceful village. Nevertheless, Sam's version of progress is affirmed more strongly than that espoused by the supposedly radical characters such as Perdita James and Dorothy Hoad.

In the context of the debates of the era, this juxtaposition of different concepts of 'progress' takes on a politicised meaning. Judy Giles asks:

Why, given that many of the ideas that underwrote twentieth-century town planning originated with radical or socialist thinkers and provided improved living conditions and a better quality of material life for so many in the first sixty years of the twentieth century, has suburbia been so consistently denigrated by those who espouse democratic, socialist, Marxist and broadly left-wing sympathies? (32)

Her suggested answer is that the condemnation is related to 'class divisions and anxieties at a specific historical moment as well as to gendered ideas about time and space', which have led to a perception of the suburb as a feminised space of 'mediocrity, passivity and homogeneity' (33). Stella Gibbons's novels counter this perception, presenting the suburb as a place of enterprise, variety and dynamism, and identifying the suburb dweller with the future. The Linseys' newfound prosperity results directly from their ability to adapt to the requirements of modern lifestyles: at the start of the story, the traditional family business collapsed because of competition from the larger retailers attracted by the new housing estates, but by the end, the Linseys are successfully appealing to the spending power of the newly arrived homeowners. The novel's final scene traces Miss Linsey's contentment to the combination of natural

beauty, modern amenities, and domestic warmth which define her home in the outer suburbs: 'It was just half-past seven on a clear, sighing moonlit night through which the leaves came rocking down; and the green and red lights of the railway, a mile off, looked very near and bright when Miss Linsey and Freddie had peeped out of the window at them while she was putting him to bed' (342). This contentment is a little precarious – will there always be space for trees in Pitt's Lane, and will the tall new buildings eventually shut out the view of the moon? There is an element of anxiety here about the liberal narrative of progress; nevertheless, if there is to be progress, the novel suggests, it cannot simply be driven from the wealthy metropolitan centre. Rather, it will necessarily depend on the dynamism and adaptability of the suburb.

### ***My American (1939)***

The integration of a solitary woman of precarious gentility into a prosperous, loving home also forms the basic plot of *My American*, though the protagonist, Amy Lee, is a very different kind of heroine from Miss Linsey. At the start of the novel, Amy is a child living with her intelligent yet unsuccessful father on a meagre income in Highbury Fields, North London. By the end, she is a famous author of bestselling novels, sharing a large New England house with her American husband, Bob Vorst, whom she first met at the age of twelve, when he was visiting London. The intervening chapters alternately unfold Amy's and Bob's lives. Bob is from a prosperous, socially elite family, but a car accident leads him to become involved with a criminal gang. As for Amy, on the death of her father she is adopted into the already large family of a neighbour, and subsequently earns a living as a clerk in the office of a boys' paper, *The Prize*. She also continues to write the thrilling, gothic stories which have always absorbed her, and once she begins to publish them, she rapidly attains wealth and popularity. A lecture tour of the US introduces her to the adult Bob, and they fall

in love. A series of dramatic events connected with drugs and kidnapping intervene before they can marry.

Kristin Bluemel argues that the writers she classes as intermodern are 'importantly eccentric and radical [...] because they consistently resist inhibiting, often oppressive assumptions about art and ideology – about standard relations between literary form and sex, gender, race, class, and empire' (7-8). This argument would certainly apply to many of Gibbons's novels. Her depiction in *My American* of the success of a working-class, female author is unusual in itself; Amy's early exclusion from the literary establishment is emphasised by the contrast between her status and that of her employer at *The Prize*, Lord Welwoodham, whose private income enables him to act as arbiter of literary taste. In order to publish her work in *The Prize*, Amy must disguise her gender: she signs her first submission 'A. Lowndes', and the editor simply assumes that the story is by a man. By the end of the novel, however, the literary scene has changed, and Amy buys the ailing *Prize*. She broadens its appeal so that girls too will enjoy it, reducing the number of adventure stories and including domestic realist fiction.

The *Prize's* shift in literary mode parallels the shift in Amy's own attitude to life. As a girl, her solitariness arose from her preoccupation with her imagined worlds:

Day by day she cared less for people and more for imaginary pictures so strong that they were more like feelings or dreams than ideas inside her head. [...] If she was lonely, she did not know it. The dream-images in her mind absorbed her interests and affections with dangerous ease, as anyone who has ever lived with such phantoms will immediately recall their power to do. *Empty, vast and cold were the halls of the Snow Queen. They were all lighted up by the vivid lights of the aurora ...* (131).

This account addresses a reader who can empathise with the protagonist, but the passage also clearly suggests the perils of such detachment from ordinary life. Amy's fantasy life feeds directly into her bestselling novels. Gibbons's critique of Amy's (and her readers') dangerous absorption in the sensationalised narratives of popular culture might at first sight seem to be connected to the strictures of intellectuals such as the Leavises and the Frankfurt group, who argued in different ways that popular fiction and the mass media degraded emotional responses and produced a false consciousness and passive acceptance of the existing conditions of life.<sup>5</sup> But in fact, Gibbons turns out to be concerned more with straightforward moral values and with literary form. She has some of her American characters accuse Amy of 'glorifying criminals' (378) and making 'bad men and bad ways fascinating to our boys and girls' (297). Also Bob, drawing on his own sordid experience of gangs and criminals, tells her that her stories simply aren't convincing because she has no personal knowledge of the underworld she describes.

Once she experiences real danger and fear in her own life (when Bob is nearly murdered), Amy can no longer create fiction out of these things, and encounters writer's block. But as she settles into marriage and motherhood, she turns to 'stories of family life', which reveal 'the variety and interest of every day' (436). Gibbons points out the economic implications of this choice: 'she could no longer be called a rich woman [...]; her new kind of book did not immediately prove so popular as her former kind' (430). Eventually, though, she wins a large audience, explicitly identified as female, and presumably also suburban. Her stories charm readers because of their authenticity: they 'communicated (because she herself felt it) to the passing of an examination or the breaking of a betrothal the excitement she had once given to escapes from death and last-minute rescues' (436).

Amy's 'second manner' (436) is not wholly concerned with American home life; she also draws on her memories of London and English domesticity. Indeed, she always viewed



London with the eyes of an artist, even if – as young writer – she did not understand its potential as material for fiction. The early chapters of *My American* include detailed, evocative descriptions of the North London streets as they appear to Amy:

She took in the golden windows of the shops, the cold winter smell of the celery piled outside a greengrocer's, the lovely face of Dolores Costello gazing out dreamily from a cinema hoarding. Amy loved walking in London; yet hardly knew that she loved it. Unnoticed as a leaf, [...] she moved lightly along, in a dream, but a dream in which she noticed a thousand funny or frightening or pretty things and people. (10)

Amy turns her gaze on the suburb, investing it with sensuality and vibrancy, and this mode of vision marks her out as an artist.<sup>6</sup> Her vision of London breaks through conventional ways of seeing, discovering excitement in the material suburb and the dramas which unfold there:

Amy was leaning out of the Highbury sitting-room window to get a breath of fresh air, staring at the glittering lights sweeping upwards on the hills of Hampstead and Highgate and the roofs glistening with frost under the small violet moon [and ...] feeling how exciting was the scene spread before her.

Suddenly the side door of the house slammed and she looked down. Dora Beeding ran down the street with no hat on towards the public telephone box on the corner. Amy could hear the quick sound of her high heels on the pavement as she ran and once she slipped on the frost and only just saved herself from falling. (54-55)

Dora's mother is shortly afterwards taken in a taxi to give birth, and the following chapters explore the daily life of the working-class Beeding family, in which Amy assumes a share.

Their meals, living space, household routines, and childcare practices are all detailed, as well as the operation of the bakery they own. This preoccupation with the daily lives of working people clearly marks out Gibbons as an intermodern writer, and the closing pages of the novel suggest that Amy too will begin to address such subjects in her books.

The relationship between Amy's writing and Stella Gibbons's is complex. In the early part of her career, Amy's literary aesthetic is not inspired by her local surroundings, and her approach is implicitly contrasted with Gibbons's own. The domestic material and suburban landscapes which form so much of the matter of *My American* differ markedly from the romantic, highly-coloured and terrifying adventures recounted in Amy's stories.<sup>7</sup> But in order to prove that the best fictions are set in worlds with which the authors are familiar, Gibbons ends up in a contradictory position. Her own novel includes extended sequences set in America (a country she had not visited), and one of its plotlines concerns crime, violence and illicit sex. To reject such subject matter, she has first to represent it, and indeed, the narrative momentum of the episodes about Bob's involvement with the gang only underlines the appeal of thriller plots. And yet, the scenes set in London and its outskirts are certainly the most memorable and effective parts of *My American*, so that while the novel engages with other narrative modes, it finally affirms both realism and the suburban imaginary.

### ***The Bachelor***

*The Bachelor* centres on a recently built seven-bedroom family house called Sunglades, in a village four miles from 'St Alberics' (clearly St Albans) in Hertfordshire. The name 'Sunglades' has pastoral overtones, but also an unmistakably suburban ring, as befits a house of the 'pseudo-Tudor' type (79). 'Mock-Tudor' houses were modelled on the architecture of a pre-urban England, while the larger structures of suburbs and garden cities were inspired by the ideal of *rus in urbe*, that is, the recreation of a rural lifestyle within a city by means of

small private gardens and tree-lined streets. The people who live in Sunglades – a middle-aged brother and sister, Kenneth and Constance Fielding, and their cousin Frances Burton – attempt to construct a rural idyll in a location only twenty miles from London. They enjoy walking in the woods, and Constance maintains flowerbeds while Kenneth spends his evenings tending the fruit and vegetables. Their adoption of rurality as style is part of their aspiration to the traditional lifestyle of the leisure class, emblematised in the walled kitchen garden, which formerly belonged to a now-demolished country house, Treme Hall.

The narrator draws attention to the social changes which have led to the proliferation of houses like Sunglades:

Because St Alberics was only twenty miles from London, none of the villages within five miles of it had a traditional, full village life. Improved communications, death duties, and the decline in agricultural industries, together with the building of many large handsome houses by wealthy people who had no interest in their nearest village, had reduced Treme, Cowater, Blentley and the rest to shells of villages; not deserted or decaying, but flourishing (especially since the war) with a mock-suburban life. (43)

The phrase 'mock-suburban' suggests the colonisation of rural England by suburban styles: an interesting reversal of the traditional perception of the imitative quality of the suburban aesthetic. But Gibbons points out that as London gradually connects itself to the small communities surrounding it, these villages become imitation suburbs, rather than other way around.

In exploring the economic and social relations which underlie the leisure and comfort enjoyed by the Fielding family, Gibbons also invokes the larger contexts of war and empire:

Kenneth Fielding and his two sisters, children of a solicitor owning an old-established firm in St Alberics, had inherited in 1920 a comfortable fortune, left to them by three very wealthy old aunts. It was invested in sound undertakings in the western parts of the British Empire, and since the war, despite the crushing income tax, the Fieldings had not found themselves noticeably less comfortable. Kenneth continued to attend the offices and nominally direct the firm that his grandfather had founded but as the years went on he tended more and more to lead the life of a retired soldier of independent means, and to leave the active management of Fielding, Fielding and Gaunt to Mr Gaunt. (23)

The relative luxuriousness of life at Sunglades astonishes the eastern European refugee, Vartouhi, who arrives to live there and provide domestic help. Her industrious labour in the house (which is minutely detailed) contrasts markedly with the idleness of Constance and Frances, whose reluctance to do their own housework emphasises their embattled sense of class identity. They also refuse to engage in the democratic and socially-levelling activity of war work. Constance, a pacifist, convinces herself that in employing Vartouhi she is furthering international understanding, though in fact her action represents a self-interested solution to the wartime shortage of domestic servants.

The unavailability of servants forced a re-evaluation of middle-class femininity, which could no longer be understood in terms of a leisured lifestyle supported by the labour of working-class women. Vartouhi's inclusion in *The Bachelor* emphasises that the privileges enjoyed in the Home Counties and the more prosperous margins of London are based, as Judy Giles puts it, on 'class inequalities that were reproduced daily [...] at the very heart of private (and feminised) life – the middle-class home' (86). The figure of Vartouhi gestures, in addition, towards a further set of inequalities based on race or ethnicity. Chiara Briganti and

Kathy Mezei, who describe *The Bachelor* as 'unjustly neglected', point out that it represents an exception to the general tendency of 1930s and 1940s domestic novels, which rarely 'incorporate issues of migration and foreign domestic spaces into their surprisingly insular portraits of home' (29). (*Miss Linsey and Pa* is another exception, since one of the Radford Street lodgers is a black man, who helps Miss Linsey on the night her father dies.) In *The Bachelor*, questions of national identity and international relations repeatedly invade the domestic sphere. They are addressed directly in the conversation of Richard, a young friend of the Fielding family, who is committed to Communism movement and gives away most of his money to support prisoners from the Spanish Civil War. A different set of political opinions is explored in Constance Fielding's discussions with her Swiss friend Doctor Stocke, author of didactic plays about European reconstruction. He makes an extended stay at Sunglades, despite the resistance of Kenneth, who dislikes: 'Foreigners all over the place', and particularly objects to a 'neutral' being accommodated in his home (263). Constance, on the other hand, finds foreigners more congenial than lower-class British people, and takes Vartouhi in on purpose to fill up one of her spare bedrooms so that she need not house any more evacuees from London. Constance's pacifism forms a stark contrast to Vartouhi's vehement opinions on the enemy nations responsible for the invasion of her country: 'I go to the Fedora Pictures to see some Germans and some Italians and some Japanese all blown up. Is a varry good thing' (226). *The Bachelor*, then, dramatises a range of perspectives on war, without entirely endorsing any, and its larger purpose is to explore the impact of international conflict on domestic relations.

Foreign spaces are briefly represented in the novel, in the opening and closing sections set in the imaginary country of Bairamia, Vartouhi's homeland. These scenes are not really integral to the narrative, though, and the true role of Bairamia in the text is to enable the celebration of an idealised rural England. For Richard, in love with Vartouhi, Bairamia

briefly provides a vision of romance. She tells him that she misses the 'little red flowers and white flowers in the mountains in my country', and the hot sun and blue sea (148), and he is enthralled. But he soon begins to reflect:

if an Englishwoman told a Bairamian that she lived in a country where there were green meadows with rivers where blue and yellow flowers grew, and stone churches a thousand years old whose bells rang above black trees, that would seem as romantic to him as Bairamia does to me. (149)

This idyllic description is lent added poignancy by the awareness that the English landscape was under continual threat from bombs and potential invasion.

The scenes in Bairamia are not the only ones which move outside the domestic setting. The characters frequently travel to London or to St. Albans, which was already in effect a suburb of London. The sub/urban landscapes of the war years are evoked in a manner which recognises their tendency to ugliness whilst also acknowledging unexpected beauties. 'St Alberics' is described as follows:

The scene was softly coloured and cheerful and pleasing to the eye, although there was not a single completely beautiful object in sight except the evening sky. The pale old houses were marred by huge advertisements sprawling across them, shouting at the people to Dig for Victory and Save Fuel, and the newer shop-fronts were either in the Diluted Gothic style of the early nineteen-hundreds or copies of brick Regency fronts that looked flat and mean; yet the ancient shapes of the streets were charming. They were like the beds of old streams: the weeds on the bank vary in thickness or type and trees are cut down or new ones grow, but the path of the water remains much

the same [...]. Every now and again there were alleys leading into paved courtyards where geraniums and pansies and beans grew in window boxes outside ancient little houses, or a flight of worn steps led down to a smooth lawn. ... It is nice to get out of London, [Betty] thought, even though it is such a little way out. (39)

Nostalgia for a picturesque but vanishing England is clearly legible here, especially in the references to imitation Gothic and Regency buildings. They are implicitly contrasted with the supposedly more authentic, traditional English style embodied in the little old cottages with their steps worn by generations of feet treading the same path.

The organic community suggested in the comparison between streets and stream beds is being obliterated by the commercial and political pressures which are brought together in the enormous advertising posters.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, though, the posters demand that the people of England should return to the practices of an earlier agrarian age, becoming self-sufficient by growing their own food, and walking rather than driving. These new behaviours temporarily recreate an old-fashioned atmosphere:

This evening the High Street was crowded, but crowded with people, instead of the lengthy procession of cars coming out from London that would have been passing through it at this time three years ago. Women were wheeling perambulators down the middle of the road and there were many horse-drawn vehicles. (38)

It is interesting that this nostalgic scene is suddenly rendered strikingly modern by the appearance of 'a graceful dog-cart driven by a girl in a sweater and trousers' (38). The whole passage describing St Alberics is ambivalently positioned between an embracing of the modern and a wistful consciousness of the past, and this is also true of the representation of

suburban landscapes elsewhere in Gibbons's 1940s writing. The self-consciousness and sophistication of her fictional evocations of wartime nostalgia mark her out as an intermodern writer, who is concerned to explore the 'different kind of modernity' (Hapgood 10) located beyond the limits of the inner city.

### **Coda**

For her first novel, *Cold Comfort Farm*, Stella Gibbons won the prestigious Femina Vie Heureuse prize.<sup>9</sup> Her response to the award reveals how little she had sought or experienced public notice. In her correspondence with the Honorary Secretary of the committee, Winifred Whale, Gibbons warmly expresses her surprise and gratitude, but misapprehends the nature of the presentation ceremony, asking if it is a private meeting and whether she might bring her husband. It was in fact a large invitation-only event, which was widely reported in the London papers, and winners could submit a list of personal guests. Gibbons invited twelve (mainly her relatives), and expressed concern that this might be too many, whereas another winner, Charles Morgan, had no compunction at inviting 170 acquaintances and minor celebrities.<sup>10</sup> Gibbons's subsequent letters to Whale reveal her alarm at the prospect of the acceptance speech, and she asks for suggestions as to what she should talk about,<sup>11</sup> indicating her total inexperience in public appearances. Following her award, Gibbons was invited to become a member of the prize committee, but declined on grounds that she was too busy;<sup>12</sup> the real reason may have been her tendency to resist the institutions of canon-making, which of course include literary prizes. Also, Gibbons's identification with her suburban home seems consonant with her choice to remain on the fringes of metropolitan literary culture, and to critique it sceptically in her novels.

Many modernist writers contemptuously associated the suburban with the mediocre and the feminised. I would argue, by contrast, that the suburb can be productively associated with



the intermodern, and both can be viewed as sites of subtle yet far-reaching subversion and challenge. The work of writers such as Gibbons, Stevie Smith, or Elizabeth Bowen resists critical attempts to read suburban writing as the lesser half of either urban high modernism or romantic nationalist ruralism. Their intermodern perspective disrupts accepted critical paradigms, since they locate themselves in a literary no-man's land, between urban high modernism and pure pastoral, between the experimental and the realist. For these writers, intermodernism offered a special point of view from which to observe both the conventional and the eccentric, both high and popular culture, and also to reflect on the spaces between them. As Judy Giles points out: 'Suburbia, as much as the city against which it is often defined, is [...] both a product of modernity and a space in which the dilemmas and contradictions of modernity can be articulated' (33). It is, therefore, an ideal space for the intermodern writer.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have discussed this aspect of *Cold Comfort Farm* in detail elsewhere. See Hammill, 'Cold Comfort Farm'; Hammill, *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture*, 167-173. In the second discussion, I align Gibbons's work with the middlebrow as well as invoking the newly developed term 'intermodernism'. It is beyond the scope of this essay to define the differences between middlebrow and intermodernism, since middlebrow is a highly complex and perhaps overdetermined field. It embraces an enormous range of cultural production and extends beyond intermodernism in both geographical and chronological terms. But it is problematic because it has frequently been used in a derogatory sense. Whilst I would not wish to detach Gibbons from the broad and extremely relevant context of middlebrow culture, the more restricted category of 'intermodern' is especially helpful in interpreting the novels I discuss here.

<sup>2</sup> Several of Gibbons's later novels are also set in the North London suburbs: *Here Be Dragons* (1956), *A Pink Front Door* (1959), *The Charmers* (1965), *Starlight* (1967) and *The Woods in Winter* (1970). Whilst these retain many of the preoccupations of her 1930s and 1940s work, certain shifts in emphasis can also be detected, correlating with the altering social structures of the post-World War II decades.

<sup>3</sup> Anthea Trodd writes: 'The classic status enjoyed by rural writing in this period derived from the insistently diffused belief that the real England was rural England [...] in which continuity with the past was still clearly visible' (103). A common love of the countryside, as articulated in rural writing, was constructed in political discourse as one basis for national unity.

<sup>4</sup> Olivia, who is envious of the lifestyle of the leisure class, is herself obliged to work. She assists in a photographer's studio, but sporadically and without enthusiasm. She emphasises that her employer is an artist and not commercially successful (78), thereby distancing herself from the profit-based labour of most office workers. The novel explores and weighs, rather than simply endorsing, Olivia's view of suburbs.

<sup>5</sup> F.R. Leavis propounded his campaign against newspapers mainly in *Scrutiny*, but see also Leavis and Thompson, 3 et passim. Q.D. Leavis presented popular fiction as the enemy of serious reading and intellectual engagement (see *Fiction and the Reading Public*). The Frankfurt theorists proposed that commercialised culture had seduced the masses, negating their revolutionary potential.

<sup>6</sup> It also suggests an interesting connection with interwar advocates of modernist visual art, who pointed to its potential for disrupting habitual ways of seeing. Frank Pick, a high-ranking transport executive who hoped that the posters he commissioned from modernist artists for display on the London Underground would transform the aesthetic sensibilities of the metropolitan public, wrote in 1927: 'There is a conventional way of looking at things which it is hard to disturb. There is a protective habit in city dwellers of not looking at things at all

which is fortunate otherwise they could hardly go on living in some cities. Posters come to disturb or destroy such habit or convention' (Frank Pick, "Underground Posters" (1927).

London Transport Museum archives, B6 Box 4, Copy A, p. 3. Qtd in Saler 100.)

<sup>7</sup> A biographical note: as Reggie Oliver points out, 'Amy as a writer is Stella, but without her sophistication or intellect; and to create her character, Stella projected her immature, adolescent self into Amy's adulthood. Amy writes romantic adventure stories of the kind that Stella wrote at the age of twelve, based on Rider Haggard and Ouida.' (160).

<sup>8</sup> In this period, there was a new emphasis on town planning, and leading planners such as Patrick Geddes and Raymond Unwin argued that urban planning must be organic, that is, must be guided by the principle of the interdependence of all things in nature. Unwin and Geddes were influenced by the arts and crafts movement of the nineteenth century: John Ruskin, William Morris and others correlated art and design with the laws and forms of nature, and insisted on the subordination of art to social and moral purposes. This was contrary to the high modernist concept of art as autonomous and detached from social reality (see Saler 21, 107).

<sup>9</sup> During the interwar years, the English-language Femina prize was awarded annually by a committee of French women of letters, 'for the best work of imagination in English published during the year by an author, whose work has hitherto, in the opinion of the committee, not received sufficient recognition. (Femina Vie Heureuse Papers. Cambridge University Library. MS Add. 8900. Item 2/1/1. Terms of reference.) The winning book was chosen from a list of three submitted by a second committee of English women. For more detail on the prize, and the selection of *Cold Comfort Farm* as winner, see Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture* 173-178.

<sup>10</sup> FVH Papers. Folder 5/5 Letters From Prize-winners.

<sup>11</sup> FVH Papers. Folder 5/5 Letters From Prize-winners.

<sup>12</sup> Noted in FVH Papers. Item 1/2/38. Minutes, 21 Oct. 1936.

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