CHAPTER 9

Pillars of the Community: The Tripartite Characterization of *High-Rise*

*William Fingleton*

Abstract

This chapter examines the inter-relationships between the primary residents of Ballard’s fictional tower, both in literal and symbolic terms. In *High-Rise*, the reader encounters a tower populated by what is initially described as “a virtually homogeneous collection of well-to-do professional people” (*HR* 10). As the narrative unfolds, the tenants demonstrate variations in characterization that constitute a unique literary experiment. The tripartite focalisation of *High-Rise* is emblematic of a widespread dementia as the perspectives of Wilder, Laing and Royal interweave and affect each other. Though each protagonist stands alone, they are explored as representations of Freud’s cognitive model, as emblems of class consciousness, or as archetypal exemplars of the divergent conditions of pronoia, paranoia or metanoia.

Keywords


The way out is via the door. Why is it that no-one will use this method?

Confucius

In *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction*, Jonathon Taylor argues that “rather than stressing a sociological, political or psychological motivation, J. G. Ballard’s vision is centred upon geography as both the expression and main agent of change in human subjectivity” (91). Ballard’s texts have long demonstrated a link between psychic and physical landscapes as having a mutually affective relationship. *Hello America* (1981) and *The Day of Creation* (1987), for example, both deal macroscopically with this phenomenon, exploring the scenery of, respectively, America and Africa and their ability to invigorate/
repulse/blossom/waste, as appropriate. Ballard’s *The Wind From Nowhere* (1961), *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Drought* (1965), *The Crystal World* (1966), and *Rushing to Paradise* (1994) all focus on the influence of extreme natural landscapes on the populace just as, dialectically, *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974), and *High-Rise* (1975) explore, in finer detail, the ramifications of living in our technological modernity. *High-Rise* is therefore an extreme close-up of an extreme geography, the vertical city and its relationship with its dwellers. Here, the environment is shown to alter the inner perceptions of its residents while simultaneously operating as an outward manifestation of internal psychic processes.

In *High-Rise*, Ballard adopts a tripartite focalization to guide the reader through the fluctuating dynamics of his vertical village. This is atypical of an author who tends to centre his narratives on the perspective of a single protagonist, though it works well in this text as the story concerns the emergence of what Gregory Stephenson calls a “collective psychosis” (81). Not unlike the multiple aspects of the T character in *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), *High-Rise* explores the loosening grip on reality from several perspectives which may be viewed separately or collectively. Travis, Traven, Tallis, and so on, can be read as aspects of a single fractured identity, just as the protagonists of *High-Rise* are primarily emblematic of a generic social type. The characters of Robert Laing, Richard Wilder and Anthony Royal are representative of what is initially described as “a virtually homogenous collection of well-to-do professional people” (*HR* 10); upper-class dwellers of an affluent development by the banks of the Thames. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes apparent that these three men, despite their geographical similitude, are emblematic of philosophies divergent, contradictory and sometimes inseparable.

Wilder, who begins the novel as a dweller of the bottom levels, is portrayed as a brute, a titan, a man mountain; obsessed with his own physicality and need to dominate in corporeal terms. Ballard echoes the Atlas myth as he depicts a man burdened by the immense weight of the heavens/havens above him and his ultimate desire to wreak vengeance on the man he blames for that heft, the architect who lives like an Olympian in the tower’s penthouse, Anthony Royal.

Wilder, initially motivated by professional curiosity, procures a cine-camera and begins an ascent of the high-rise in an effort to document the increasingly berserk territorial disputes that erupt throughout the building. He reinvents himself as a mountaineer, convinced of the righteousness of his cause. The mountain motif is synonymous with Wilder just as Laing and Royal have their own unique views on the building. The cragsman’s basecamp lies in the foothills of the massif on the second floor. As the narrative unfolds, Wilder becomes obsessed with climbing the mountain in terms of a Herculean challenge.