The House is the Place:
Metaphoric Anacoluthon and Parabolic Narrative in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Visitation*

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In Jenny Erpenbeck's *Visitation* (2010), translated from the German novel *Heimsuchung* (2008) by Susan Bernofsky, a series of character-driven tales follow the story of a house on the shore of a lake known as the Märkisches Meer. The experience of each inhabitant voices their unique relationship to the changing national narrative of Berlin (and the areas surrounding) from the end of the nineteenth century onwards to after the fall of the Berlin Wall. A generalized personae, vis-à-vis the house, embodies each character with a parabolic significance, while reconstructing the history of the landscape both as a place of dwelling and as a residence eventually demolished. For the purposes of this essay, I will concentrate on the chapters that exemplify the interpretive possibilities surrounding the use of parabolic narrative and a working definition of metaphoric anacoluthon: "The Architect" builds a Parable of Profession (21); "The Writer" remembers a Parable of Homecoming (86); "The Subtenants" chart a Parable of Sailing (111); "The Illegitimate Owner" justifies a Parable of Transformation (136); and "The Gardener," who transcends the temporal setting of the other characters, generates a cyclical linking between the house and history, or a Parable of Dwelling. These characters follow along with their own parts in German history, as told through Erpenbeck, yet serve as pieces that prevent the house from following. Parable and the house (both setting and metaphor) allow for the story's appraisal of a tumultuous series of residencies within a larger German consciousness.

Regarding the shifting ownership of place, parables illuminate how the house serves as a metaphor for lack of completion, relating to the ideology of each character. According to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, "anacoluthon" refers grammatically to "a change of construction in the middle of a

sentence that leaves its beginning uncompleted" (67); conversely, Kevin Mills, in *The Prodigal Sign*, structures a definition of parable, in relation to narrative, as "a spot in time that takes the reader out of a broader narrative without severance. It is a following that does not follow: anacoluthon" (21). Although the rhetorical device describes syntax, the characters in *Visitation* become smaller units within the larger meaning of Germany and semantically become stories themselves. The characters are uprooted or return to the house based on the larger political ownership of Berlin: the Gardener is beholden to the owners/tenants; the Illegitimate Owner falls to "civil code of the Federal Republic of Germany, paragraph 985" (Erpenbeck 136); the Subtenants charter the house "after the fall of the Berlin Wall" (112); the Writer, an East German who leased the property for twenty years; and the Architect, who must bury the silverware and flee from the Russian occupation.

The parable, according to *Victorian Parable*s (2012) by Susan E. Colón, "compares one thing to another ... a narrative laid alongside another ... for purposes of illumination or challenge" (3). In her citation of Paul Ricoeur's "notion of parable ... in terms of narrative strategy" (20), Colón relates "that parables can be found among novels and other extended narratives" (20). There exists, she argues, "a widespread critical assumption that interesting ... parables in literature are only to be found in non-mimetic texts" (21). Equally, by defining metaphoric anacoluthon as a way of interpreting the incomplete narrative of the house, Erpenbeck's characters follow history while the house does not; yet the house remains a fixed setting. In other words, as *Visitation* shows, "the realist novel mimics not reality, but how we experience reality" (Colón 27) and must "confront the reader with a particular kind of alterity" (31); consequently, the house in *Visitation* becomes the place of otherness, albeit in a metaphorical anacoluthonic state, serving "to tame the wilderness and make it intersect with culture" (Erpenbeck 18). According to Colón, "the realist novel must be seen as eminently

suited for the use of parabolic narrative" (31). The house speaks and does not speak directly to the interpretive possibilities of parable: the Gardener is caretaker, his life and work interpret and observe the tenant's otherness regarding the house. Erpenbeck creates a space within her realist narrative, illuminating both the readers' and character's ability to experience a dwelling that is away from Berlin and all its metaphoric potential. The unfinished house is both a static and fluctuating place, which can be both/and, as well as neither/nor, depending on the reader and their rendering of *Visitation*.

The Architect's[1] elegiac Parable of Profession introduces the reader to realist portrayals of the house's construction and the instructive theme of "what counts as valuable and what does not" (Erpenbeck 22). Beyond the material action of the Architect "lock[ing] the door" (23), the parallel stream of post-WWII Germany backgrounds the narrative. The Architect flees the house as the Russians advance on Berlin. As the current "householder's" (31) economic ideology "become[s] unmoored from reality" (27), he associates his "house made to measure according to the needs of its master" (24) with "a trap" (27). The "homeland" (27), with "whittled grape leaves ... at the bottom of the bannister" (23) and the "salvaged ... door from an old farmhouse" (23) creates an environment for the house to become an early construction of identity left unfinished as future tenants leave. In the case of the Architect as "someone who builds" (28), the "embodying ... of staying put" (28) ironically severs his ties to the lake-house. The "commission that ... cause[s] his downfall" (23) is the action forcing the Architect to substantiate

[1] The Architect's story begins in the 1930's. A village mayor's family comes to ruin and he survives without an heir, so the mayor divides up his property into parcels: one sells to a Jewish cloth merchant, another to the Architect. The Architect, a Nazi party member, designs and builds a house on this property for his wife and himself. This house then becomes the focal point of the novel: it is eccentric in design, with a hidden closet amongst other features, meant to delight his wife. After twenty years in the house, the couple must desert it during the division of Germany, because the Architect has done illegal business between the two sides. After burying his valuables on the property, the Architect and his wife relocate to the West, and the house is seized.

the metaphoric anacoluthon of the house: he designs the minutiae adorning the house, "affixing his life to the earth" (28), prevented from following the completed project; however, the parable suggests that the "[creation] of an interior" (28) refers as well to individual identity and will always be subject to fluctuating social ideology, particularly according to the idea of ownership. Formally, the Architect serves the novel as a designer for the other character's visitation to the house and its landscape.

As *Visitation* progresses, the reader discovers the over-arching narrative of Berlin's history running parallel with the landscape surrounding Märkisches Meer; however, because of the Gardener[2] and his relationship to the other characters, the wider narrative of Germany elicits indirect response, functioning as a thing-that-happens rather than a core element of the character's experiences, yet it serves as a reason for the character's arrival at the house. In other words, the Gardener, a man with "no other name" (3), binds the sequence of parables to the house; he is "the spot in time" (Mills 21) that dislodges the reader from the narrative of the characters and Berlin's history. Therefore, the Gardener, the most prominent figure in the novel, becomes an "unusually deft" (Erpenbeck 15), "silent" (16), and consistent witness and labourer toward the myriad aspects of universal human experience, as well as a parable that challenges realism. The metaphoric anacoluthon of the house's architecture, building, and conclusion follows the characters throughout their lives, linked together by parabolic narrative, yet does not follow Berlin. According to Mills, a parable is "a story with an exchange value" (31) that opens up possibilities requiring observance of proximity to other parables. The Gardener acts as link and threshold to the other parables, especially between the Architect and the Writer

[2] The Gardener is an enigmatic, nameless character; he is shown mostly during chapters that come at intervals between each of the stories in the novel. He first appears following the Mayor's story and disappears on the eve of the Illegitimate Owner's story. Because of this, the ostensible timeline of his life stretches to an extraordinary length, which, coupled with his silent presence in the background of the novel's various storylines, covers him in an air of mysticism and aligns him with the landscape.

who represent West and East Germany, respectively.

Exile and return figure prominently with the Writer[3], the Parable of Homecoming, elucidating the theme of "the new world ... devours the old one, ... new and old ... living side by side in a single body" (Erpenbeck 92). Parabolic narrative continues the unfinished construction of the house as homeland, yet different than the Architects design, requiring the reader to interpret the idea of ownership: the Writer observes the doctor who "immediately had all the fruit trees cut down" and "put up a large house where the apiary had stood," "not what they'd agreed on" (87). The story that parallels the Writer involves an East and West German state divided by ideology; however, the symbol of the typewriter, held up with the Architect's experiences, relays an ironic standard that furthers the unfinished metaphor of the house: concerning her connection to power, the Writer's experiences with the "generals she had rocked in her arms during her emigration" (87) have less strength than the "typewriter ... that transform[ed] the German barbarians back into human beings" (88). In other words, the Writer finds herself in the current incarnation of the house—dwindling collective property that words cannot repair—which was once the private property of a man who was "the owner of [a] blue spruce," as well as "the dirt clinging to its roots" (30). The Writer's ideology scoffs at the idea an individual could own the landscape, or even the house.

As the landscape changes, the Subtenants[4], the Parable of

[3] The Writer, a German by birth, has been given residency in the house by the East German state due to her communist loyalties. Having leased the house for twenty years at the time of German reunification in 1990, she recollects with some resentment her early wanderings in exile from Germany, how she raised her child under these conditions, and the years she has spent living in the house. As reunification gets underway, she reflects on the meaning of homecoming.

[4] The Subtenants are a married couple who take up residence in a toolshed on the property during the 1990's, the house still tenuously belonging to the family of the Writer. At the same time that the wife learns of a possible sister she had never known about, the Subtenants are struggling with the fact that at some point they will be ejected because the descendants of the Architect's wife will reclaim the property. This change in ownership is part of the tumultuous exchanges that follow the fall of the Berlin Wall. They enjoy sailing on the lake.

Sailing, become an example of residency without ownership and how that relates to "happiness" (120). The husband and wife live on the land at the time when the main house is empty. At the first "opportunity," the Subtenants "set themselves up," "allowed to renovate the workshop down by the water" (112). Their narrative is paired with the time before and "after the fall of the Berlin Wall" (112). Although the separation of East and West Germany figure prominently for the Subtenants and their relationship to each other, "sailing [as] a service" (113) becomes their "beautiful thing" (115). For them, the idea of ownership enmeshes with the unification of Germany, as "their arrangement with the mistress of the house has been only provisionally in effect" (120): the descendants of the Architect's Wife are returning to reclaim a landscape they were separated from. In her description of "subtenant" as "a euphemism for a sort of weed" (120), the characters designate themselves as temporary, something to be pulled up when proper maintenance continues. Ironically, all the characters, even the Gardener, signify the landscape's shifting façade: all people are "weed[s]" (120) that eventually uproot from the land. The Parable of Sailing provides a way for metaphoric anacoluthon to elucidate how an unfinished state can "associate the notion of weed with ... happiness"; the state of happiness and nostalgia do not necessarily follow their intended course.

As the novel nears completion, the Illegitimate Owner[5] exemplifies the progressive restructuring of the house as she seems to complete the upkeep of the place before it returns to the Architect's Wife's heirs. Ownership becomes an arbitrary term, with no experiential relation to the house and landscape. The Illegitimate Owner's final habitation in the house is mixed with legal language. Her "unlawful trespass" acts as a way of remembering, with "exist-

[5] The Illegitimate Owner is the granddaughter of the Writer, and she spent much of her childhood in the house. Her account retraces her memories of the time she spent there, juxtaposed with the legalities surrounding her sale of the house now that the legal battle of its heirs comes to a close. Her section concludes as she leaves the house to its new owners; this is the final account of the house given before its demolition, as told in the conclusion.

ing permeabilities [and] future permeabilities" (140), all the memories of the house. There is still a smell of "peppermint and camphor" (140); the "stairs ... creak at the second, the fifteenth and second-to-last step" (146); and the "key board is hanging, as usual, around the corner next to the heating stove" (137). Although these details have remained constant, their relationship to the tenants of the house creates a metaphoric anacoluthon, which reminds the reader of the shifting ownership across the generations. Even as the illegitimate owner "steps out onto the balcony" and recalls "everything ... just as she always knew it" (141), the ownership of the house questions the signification of phrases like "burden of proof" (140), or "beyond the reach of law" (147). The laws and politics, mostly rendered in the background and running parallel to the parables, allow for the Illegitimate Owner's "past ... to send out tendrils everywhere behind her" (145) challenging the Republic's legalese with her own experiences. The Illegitimate Owner's experience is the Parable of Transformation because she embodies memory and, as the last character narrated before the house's demolition, her recollection of the house binds all the former narratives to the entire story. She follows the previous tenants but does not follow the house.

The Gardener's Parable of Dwelling separates the other narratives with his timeless, cyclical silence. He exists as a constant reminder of the material experiences of the landscape: though it may change "at the householder's request" (31), and the country progresses in flux, the Gardener continues to "water the bare soil of both meadows" (19), or live within and outside the narrative of German culture. The Gardener symbol acts as a caretaker between the wild and civilization. His relationship with the trees gives him a mystical air that brings up the theological roots of parable. As Colón relates, parables are "open to polyvalence," and they are sometimes "complex, puzzling, [and] system defying texts" (12). The Gardener's potential age, eighty-plus years, embodies a parabolic form that reflects interpretation's multiplicity as the reader follows the Gar-

dener who "uproots the bushes ... at the highest point of the newly acquired land" (Erpenbeck 45); who "prunes the shrubs and bushes in the hope that they might bud a second time" (81); who falls off the ladder and breaks his leg" and "after his fall ... no longer able to perform heavy labour" (96); or, who leaves "footsteps ... in the snow" (134) and eventually "is never seen again" (135). The Gardener's servile quality, who wants for nothing, except maybe a "cold cigar stump in his mouth" (112), transcends both memory and perhaps understanding. In terms of his labour, the Gardener never finishes his reworking of the landscape, suggesting that the process of national narrative and ideology transform like the fluid cycles of nature. The Gardener is never owned, yet the narrator's tone suggests, "when the property is expanded, the householder assigns his gardener" (45) certain jobs; however, like all cycles, when the municipality takes over, "they issue a permit to make his residence in the extractor room" (83). The Parable of the Gardener continues as he "tend[s] the now ownerless garden just as before: he fertilizes, waters, [and] prunes" (83), showing that his narrative, featured by metaphoric anacoluthon, moves with the landscape, following only the cycles and demands of nature and not following the political shifts of Berlin before WWII to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In summary, defining metaphoric anacoluthon in relation to the fluctuating tenancy of a house on a lake outside Berlin, as well as the form of parabolic narrative, perhaps lends itself to a wider lens. By looking at the Architect, Writer, Subtenants, Illegitimate Owner, and the Gardener and interpreting their narratives as parables, the reader finds insight into how a house is culture, and how a culture can influence home and roots. The memory of Berlin is fraught with the history of a holocaust, and while Erpenbeck acknowledges this, dedicating the novel to Doris Kaplan and rendering the character of "The Girl" (58), a parable of suffering, she does not focus on it. Parables can illuminate universal truth, yet also confound it; consequently, the typical ideological reflection of Berlin across the twen-

tieth century translates from historical truth to diverse experience, personified within a vacation home. If the house, as a metaphor for the turbulent, twentieth-century culture of Berlin, manifests itself through parable, then only the multiplicity of voices can reflect a neutral way of remembering the city and its outskirts. As the final, systematic, and mathematical demolition of the house—"with a length of approximately 14 meters, a width of approximately 8 and a height of one a half stories" (149)—sinks in, the realist portrayal of a fictional story becomes a space for the continued action of anacoluthon: "When the house is finished, Death enters" (i). The structure of the novel only becomes apparent when the house, as facilitator of metaphoric anacoluthon, deconstructs into its individual parts.

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