

J. G. BALLARD'S PARABLE OF CIVILIZATION

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- UFMG -

Later, as he sat on the balcony eating the dog, Dr Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous months.

With that striking statement in the blandest prose, Ballard's novel High-Rise<sup>1</sup> begins. The story that follows is a flashback of three bizarre months in which the rich residents of a huge, 40 storey block of flats slowly descend into barbarism. The High Rise is the latest architectural marvel for the affluent upper-middle class: doctors, corporation lawyers, executives, and, on the lower levels of the building, TV producers, airline pilots, and so on. All services, including supermarket, liquor store, hairdressers and extras like swimming pools, sculpture garden, elementary school, are a part of it, so that one needn' even leave the building, an ironic notion once the story gets underway. One by one these services and luxuries break down or are abandoned, and rather than a mass exodus the seemingly perverse inhabitants are all the more induced to stay. The building is seen by Dr Laing as the creator of a "new social type":

a cool, unemotional personality impervious to the psychological pressures of high-rise life, with minimal needs for privacy, who thrived like an advanced species of machine in the neutral atmosphere. (p. 42).

This analysis, too, will become ironic when the new social type indeed emerges, but quite the opposite of an advanced species of machine. Dr. Laing (an allusion to Ronald?) himself is attracted to the place in the aftermath of his divorce. He has sought an environment whose appeal is that it was "built, not for man, but for man's absence" (p. 29).

The High-Rise is, or becomes, a richer symbol than the usual alienating concrete building of urban architecture, though it is that, too. Another main character is Anthony Royal, one of the designers of the building, who inhabits a penthouse on the top-floor, which he comes to think of as his throne room (Royal) from which he lords it over the lower orders. Of course, these are not peasants but jewellers and tax-accountants, yet he despises them for being trapped into their good taste (p. 96) and sees, like Laing, the building as a mid-wife for a new social order in which rebellion would be a break-out from conventionality and conformism. Royal's point of view is that of the aristocrat scorning the bourgeoisie. Richard Wilder (Wild-Man), on the other hand, lives on one of the bottom floors, whose geography reflects its inhabitants' rung on the social hierarchy. He is in the beginning seen as the leader of the proletariat storming the bastille of the upper floors. He soon discards this role for more satisfying ones of his own choosing and sets himself the mythic quest of climbing alone to the top of the building at a time when that once simple operation has become perilous and nearly impossible. At the beginning of the crisis, he drowns a dog in the swimming pool during a power failure:

As he held its galvanized and thrashing body under the surface, in a strange way he had been struggling with the building itself (p. 58).

He could not remember when he had decided to make the dangerous ascent — a kind of parody of the descent into the underworld mythic heroes usually make — and he had no idea of what he was going to do when he got there, but he had in some way to take on the building as a personal challenge to his manhood. Powerful of body as well as determined (he considers himself the strongest mentally and physically of all the tenants), he is himself aware of the mythology of his undertaking (p. 71).

The conflict begins innocently enough as a number of complaints about the huge building's faulty services, all trivial things in themselves but in the self-enclosed community of the High-Rise, subtly leading to conflicts between residents which soon polarize into a more general conflict between floors. A kind of class war develops between the upper and lower floors. The upper and richer, more snobbish residents who literally and figuratively look down on the Lower, with their broods of children (the Uppers have only expensive pets) and rowdy, unruly ways. The Lower feel the physical and figurative weight of all those floors above them, like an oppressed class whose lack of privileges (their cars are further from the building) and better physical condition reflect their status. In this situation, the middle-class is the middle section of the High-Rise, "made up of self-centred but basically docile members of the professions" ... (p. 63) They are content to merely observe the conflict at first, until they are forced to forge alliances with Uppers or Lower. They serve as a buffer between the combat zones and are afraid of having their access to their floors cut off (a danger from below) and their apartments attacked and vandalized (which can come from either direction), though they had originally been anxious for approval from the upper levels, whose "subtle patronage ... kept the middle ranks in line" (p. 63).

Wilder, a Lower and a former Rugby-league player, calls the High-Rise "a high priced tenement", which forms a contrasting point of view with Royal's "fur-lined prison." But the building defines itself in multiple ways. Its "animated presence" is compared to a living organism, the elevators the "pistons in the chamber of a heart." The people in the building are "cells in a network of arteries, the lights in their apartments the neurones of a brain" (p. 47). Although this metaphor is not carried through, on one level it is true enough: the building is obsessively self-contained, all the more so when its survival becomes threatened by the warring elements. It clings to life despite growing internal attack.

As the conflict grows and aggression mounts, radical leaders emerge from each faction and political metaphors become common. Primitivism is revealed as bands or clans of "villagers" form, as possessions began to be vandalized and robbed, and the circles close in on themselves for mutual protection. Violence, as with primitive peoples, becomes "a valuable form of social cement" (p. 109). Royal sees the political situation differently from his lofty vantage point. He and his future rival, Pangbourne (pang-born), a gynaecologist, plan to impose upper floor superiority and the building is seen by them as a geo-political realm:

Once we've gained a foothold there [i. e. the central mass] we can play these people off against those lower down - in short balkanize the centre section and then begin the colonization of the entire building...

A military situation thus develops with barricades, random destruction of services and abandoned apartments, refugees, sporadic raids, and especially night-fighting. The day, or a

few hours of it, becomes the time of an informal truce and during the "brief armistice of four or five hours they could move about" (p. 120). The relapse into barbarism is marked off by the passing of the hours. In the morning some residents get up and dress to go off to their jobs in the city, but as the night approaches they rush back to the increasingly clannish atmosphere where the threat of beating matches the limitations of movement and concern with territoriality. Eventually, no one leaves any more and the cutting off from the outside civilized world is complete. Telephone lines are cut and police are sent away, no complaints being registered! Lights and electrical services become haphazard as a literal and figurative Dark Ages sets in. Wilder and Royal begin to be seen as leaders of rival clans. Former squash partners, they slowly stare each other down and begin to square off for an ultimate confrontation on the roof, which Wilder is throughout as determined to breach as Royal is determined to hold. Even Laing in the middle levels feels exhilarated by the reassuring darkness, which becomes "the natural medium of life in the apartment building" (129). For Wilder, whose obsession begins to take on deviant forms as he ascends, "only in the darkness could one become sufficiently obsessive, deliberately play on all one's repressed instincts" (p. 142). For Ballard does not give in entirely to his parable of barbarism. His savages are after all upper-middle class Englishmen, and their regression is seen as well in the psychological language with which such men are familiar in the late 20th century. Even Wilder, the "proletarian" wild-man, can speak this language:

... Wilder was convinced that the high-rise apartment was an insufficiently flexible shell to provide the kind of home which encouraged activities, as distinct

from somewhere to eat and sleep. Living in high-rises required a special type of behavior, one that was acquiescent, even perhaps slightly mad. A psychotic would have a ball here, Wilder reflected (p. 62).

It is against this "de-cerebration," presumably, that the residents have trashed the building facilities. What at first seems fantastic, that a bunch of rich, civilized tenants of a luxury apartment building would start behaving like street punks, makes sense in a certain psychological context. Their gradual regression into primitive behavior is actually invigorating to them, it puts a new vitality in their lives that had been missing in their over-civilized routines and banal adulteries, their total alienation from man's basic values and primitive instincts. Here is the social critique of the novel as well as the explanation in the novel's terms of why the authorities are never informed of the goings-on even by the victims within the High-Rise. The residents have undergone a profound transformation, and even with real physical danger (or perhaps because of it) they really like it. The bizarre anarchy within the building begins to become more real to them than the civilized outer world, and one by one they abandon their jobs and connections with friends and relatives outside the building: mail is left unsorted and telephones are gone dead.

The novel can be read, indeed, as a parable of the decline of civilization and civilized values. The last thing to go is television, as the last man to leave the building is a TV announcer. Even so, TV is watched (with the sound turned down) by battery-power, the cave-man in MacLuhan's global village turned back on himself. Huddling in their barricaded apartments, they vainly await news of their own liberating rising, but

receive only the unreal news of an unaware, distant outside world. Barbarism is made evident by the falling standards of hygiene. The inhabitants stop washing and grow to enjoy their own ganey smells and the garbage-infested corridors and apartments of the building, a more authentic man recovering his olfactory sense from the alienating deodorants and "expensive after-shaves" of his civilized, T.V. self:

The dirt on his hands, his stale clothes and declining hygiene, his fading interest in food and drink, all helped to expose a more real version of himself.  
(p. 118)

The environment reflects this new social order. The High-Rise itself is described as a "cliff face" and individual apartments take on the look of "caves" in which rearranged "family" and clan groups cower in mutual protection and fear. The committee meetings of the upper floors are "in effect tribal conferences":

Here they discussed the latest ruses for obtaining food and women, for defending the upper floors against marauders, their plans for alliance and betrayal. Now the new order had emerged, in which all life within the high-rise revolved around three obsessions - security, food and sex (p. 161).

Darkness, as mentioned above, becomes the preferred medium for action, and most significant of all, there is a declining need for that most important of civilized symbols: money. Residents forage for food in the ransacked apartments of others, seeking out hidden food caches, and eating even pet food off the empty

shelves of the sacked supermarket. Laing, the middle-class man, abducts his sister from her drunken husband in some ambiguous sexual rite where his fantasies can be given full play. The new order includes new sexual and family arrangements and the old civilized order does not escape criticism:

Her calm face gazed down at Wilder reassuringly. She had accepted him as she would any marauding hunter. First she would try to kill him, but failing this, give him food and her body, breast-feed him back to a state of childlessness and even, perhaps, feel affection for him. Then, the moment he was asleep, cut his throat. The synopsis of the ideal marriage.  
(p. 189)

Sex and violence are linked for both Wilder and Royal. Royal's wife Anne is shaken from her aristocratic social superiority by an attempted rape. This invigorates her into social solidarity with the other tenants, especially women, and even her husband's open infidelity with her friend becomes part of a social pact. Royal, who has thought of himself as "lord of the manor" and awaits the revolutionary struggle with Wilder, is defeated in a minor power play by Painbourne through a woman's trick. He retreats into himself, taking Wilder's abandoned wife as his personal servant, and identifies himself with the white predatory birds that have come to hover over the death-throes of the High-Rise. In the unreality of the besieged upper-class, Royal seals himself up in his penthouse, even from his natural allies. But he too is subject to the metaphors of savagery and in his own way fascinated by them. An architect who has always been interested in the structures of zoos, he realizes that he has finally achieved a "gigantic, vertical zoo" in the



High-Rise (p. 159).

Wilder, in the meantime, pursues his ascent-quest in fits and starts. The higher he goes, the more perverse he becomes, as if the temptations are too much for unaided strength. But he takes refuge in his resemblance to a powerful savage. Urinating in a bath-tub, he spies his genitals in a mirror:

He was about to break the glass, but the sight of his penis calmed him, a white club hanging in the darkness. He would have to dress it in some way, perhaps with a hair-ribbon or tied in a floral bow (p. 151).

Right after this incident he gets drunk on two bottles of wine he finds and rapes the owner of the apartment, recording the sounds on a tape-recorder, and painting his chest with stripes of the red wine, the tape recorder reminding us that the struggle takes place in an apartment building, not a forest. When Wilder first began roaming the building, he had conceived the idea of doing a TV documentary on its declining services and the human response. He eventually gives up the idea of the documentary and begins to wield his camera as a club in corridor skirmishes. The mounting sacks of garbage in the corridors, apartments, and finally elevators show the residents to be "faithful to their origins" (p. 159) despite their adoption of barbarian ways.

The residents disdain the use of firearms in their possession by unspoken agreement. Their weapons are those of cavemen: clubs and spears. When their canned food runs out, they resort to eating dogs. Pangbourne, the modern gynaecologist teaches his allies birthcries, and Wilder has recorded his own primitive grunts as well as the sounds of his victims. When

he is nearing the top, he beats off an old woman and her daughter and makes a meal of their roasted cat. When he tries to speak to them, he "found himself grunting, unable to form the words with his broken teeth and scarred tongue" (p. 188). Regression to an infantile stage of unbridled Id is seen as the goal. Dr. Laing watches his neighbor, Steele, torture cats or fashion cross-bows from piano wire and the shafts of golf-clubs:

For weeks all he had been able to think about were the next raid, the next apartment to be ransacked, the next tenant to be beaten up. He enjoyed watching Steele at work, obsessed with these expressions or mindless violence. Each one brought them a step closer to the ultimate goal of the high-rise, a realm where their most deviant impulses were free at last to exercise themselves in any way they wished. At this point physical violence would cease at last. (p. 177).

A jeweller had fallen to his death from the top floor but no one had paid heed. When the apartments and halls are spattered with blood and corpses begin to appear, not much attention is paid either, for, before the neutral point is to be reached, the violence must escalate to the extent of Pangbourne and allies playing the execution game of "Flying School" (p. 167), where they send captured tenants from lower floors hurtling to the ground.

The climax of the novel comes when Wilder and Royal meet at the top in their duel for supremacy. Royal waits with his white Alsatian hound (the one Laing is munching on in the beginning of the novel) and his white gulls, dressed in his white safari

jacket. This may be an allusion to Melville's sailor, whose white jacket distinguished him from his mates. Royal's pride in the bloodstains sustained in combat also reminds one of Crane's "red badge of courage". Such literary allusions may seem far-fetched, but William Golding's Lord of the Flies does brood over the whole novel and, indeed, High-Rise is a sort of adult, urban version of the earlier book.

Royal is appalled to find his domain has been intruded on by a group of women, and the sculpture garden that he had designed for the use of the building's children is drenched with blood and scattered with bones picked clean by the birds, a kind of rooftop cemetery. When the two leaders finally meet, Wilder shoots him with a hand-bag pistol he had taken from the old woman's daughter, the first fire-arm used in the building's battles. But his mood had not been one of confrontation but of childish play. Wilder thought Royal was playing with him until he was struck by Royal's flung cane: "The strange, scarred man in the blood-printed jacket lying on the steps behind him had not understood his game" (p. 197). Having attained by now complete infantile regression with his successful ascent, Wilder meets a group of refugee children playing in the garden and their mothers, including his own wife, who had formed a clan of abandoned women and taken refuge at the top. Again, he fails to understand what he has accomplished in reaching the summit:

In their bloodied hands they carried knives with narrowed blades. Shy but happy now, Wilder trotted across the roof to meet his new mothers (p. 198).

Like most modern horror stories, Ballard's novel takes the clue from the eminently reasonable prose of Kafka to describe bizarre events. Ballard's style is suitably straightforward

and earnest, like Kafka's not without a certain black humor. He is also capable of the striking simile. An old woman flung to the ground by Wilder in his ascent is seen thus:

She lay there stunned, like a dishevelled duchess surprised to find herself drunk at a ball (p. 186-7).

Here is Royal's snobbish wife Ann:

She rode the elevators as if they were grandly upholstered gondolas of a private funicular (p. 87).

And the same women, under stress:

The childlike strains in her character had begun to come out again, as if she was suiting her behavior to the over-extended mad-hatter's tea-party that she had been forced to attend like a reluctant Alice (p. 84).

In an anti-climactic epilogue, the novel returns to the middle regions of Dr. Laing, as he is roasting Royal's dog (over a fire of telephone directories) for his two women. He had found Royal dying on one of the middle floors and helped him to the holocaustal swimming pool filled with bones and dismembered corpses. He reflects that "some of the residents had reverted to cannibalism." This final vision is one of a world after a nuclear holocaust. The few survivors, immune and indifferent to the scenes of death and destruction round them, live on at the most basic level of animal existence. The two women are near starving but the importance of infantile fantasy has in Laing's case also increased, the women "treating him like two governesses in a rich man's ménage, teasing a wayward and

introspective child" (p. 102). He plans to tip the balance of domestic power in his favor by getting them addicted to morphine, of which he has a small supply, and by their continuous dependence on him for food and basic necessities. He begins to think of returning to normal life, even his job at the medical school, after cleaning up and furnishing one of the apartments, happy with his "new-found freedom." But the mocking light of this ending is to be taken as the dawn of "the day after" in a brave new world. As Laing looks out at another high-rise in the distance, he sees a power-failure on one of the floors and the torch-beams moving in the darkness

as the residents made their first confused attempts to discover where they were. Laing watched them contentedly, ready to welcome them to their new world (p. 204).

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> London: Jonathan Cape, 1975. All page numbers refer to this edition.