

Linda Khatir

*The Tudor house*



Listing: Grade: II\* HIGHER STREET Dartmouth, No.5 Tudor House

"Merchant's house with shop. Medieval site. Main house c1635 but parts of rear may be earlier ... Well-preserved one-bay ornamental front, jettied with ends of the side walls corbelled out at each floor and gabled roof...Windows are mostly original, mullioned, reglazed with iron casements and containing diamond panes of leaded glass...Oriel window on five brackets carved mostly as fabulous beasts... an exceptionally well-preserved high-quality merchant's house".

Press coverage (2011)

"Among the buildings destroyed in Fairfax Place were 16th Century Tudor buildings with English Heritage Grade I and Grade II\* listed status"

"English Heritage will work with the local authority to help to assess the damage to the original fabric of the buildings and begin the process of identifying what can and cannot be salvaged from the fire".

"The roof has fallen in and fallen down through the building. The facade is still there but the 16th-century plaster ceilings have all gone."

"Charred remains, blown-out windows, and debris from the roofs of the buildings lay in the street after fire crews spent 22 hours battling the blaze".



My first remembering of the big and orange orange, is that it needs both hands to hold it. I remember taking it to my quiet place, the space inside and underneath a round table top-toe in dark red chenille; the quiet crawl space where I sit and dream in the dark. I hear voices outside but stay quiet, rolling the ball with both hands round my crossed legs, breathing in the hot oily smell of it.

My next remembering is from a few years later. Every day I run with my brother, we soar like gulls down hills and steps, taking them two three four at a time. We run between the bells, leaving home as St. Saviours strikes the quarter and arriving with the hand bell that calls us to assembly.

Today, the second day of the orange, the big one strikes nine as we pass Charity House and the small one is already quiet. Today my brother can't fly, can't run, can't walk. We turn the corner and sit on the steps of the Tudor house, waiting for the breathing to return, his face grey.

I feel a drop of water from above and look up to find a fabulous beast staring down at me, then another to its left and right and more above and on each side. Each has claws or hooves, bulging eyes and sharp teeth. Some have crowns around their necks and grinning horse mouths, while others have beaks like birds, pointed breasts, male genitals or tails. All of them have elaborately carved blocks on their backs, supporting the heavy leaded windows diamond paved in pale green.

As we wait for the breathing to return the big and orange orange rolls by, making its way slowly towards the town. I close my eyes breathing in the hot oily smell of it.



As a child I ran past it with my brother to beat the bell, and more recently I came to visit its remains, photographing the spaces inside and outside. I talked with the team working to undo its ruin: carpenters and masons who read history in scraps of wood and stone. Examining blackened A-frames, beams and bricks, they talk about the burnt and broken things, how they were formed, what tools had been used, and how the newly revealed fragments now serve to validate the skills of the earlier artisans.

They talk about stair heights, plank widths, the wood used for doors and window frames, the design and positioning of handles, the spaces inside fireplaces, and the small bricks newly exposed as part of the towering chimney stack. They say these once served as ballast for the Spanish Armada - and the long wooden structure holding up the spiral staircase most likely a mast. Some of its rises have long holes carved into their undersides, making no sense as stairs, but perfect sense as part of a ship's rigging.

They talk about the time the house was first built (the 1400s) and the time the newer parts were added (the 1600s). They say the walls were once upright, but are now bowed with time.

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It is now nearly two years since I wrote that, and more than a year since I wrote the story about the orange and the fantastic beasts. My words are now a funeral rite - the ring of the bell, the beat of the drum - an *archi-text*<sup>1</sup> built from fragments of other texts, held in place by a scaffold of words and spaces.

The day of the fire, I thought of the big and orange orange and saw it rise again from the ground to burst through the windows above and below the grinning creatures - the ringing shards of *glas*<sup>2</sup>, a tolling bell, a death knell; the same bell, fifty years later in the same place.

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida J. 1976

<sup>2</sup> Derrida J. 1986

The metaphors land as I write and supplement my story with images, shifting attention away from the present towards the past. Thoughts enter the text beyond my control, and my memories are undermined then rebuilt by this intrusion. Because of this my writing becomes a site of contradiction - of fantasy and truth, the one arguing with the other.

In the writing, the house is both real and fictional - a dual space where deconstruction takes place beneath and beyond the facade. Like the house, my language has a structure with its own internal and external systems, on entering these structures my movements through the text are affected, and in turn affect them. As I stumble over words, the structure begins to break down, doorways and steps are pushed to breaking point, only to collapse as new openings appear.

At times the blackened inner spaces come together overwhelmingly as the *abyme*<sup>3</sup> - an abysmal space where anything and nothing is possible. There is no discernible structure to guide me from entry to exit. Instead I make my way blindly, taking my memories apart to find a way out.

Returning to the outside, the fantastic beasts grin down on the crowd; their purpose is unknown but in terms of visual interest, they serve the building well, showing off the wealth of the merchant who once owned the house. Ornamentation suggests something superficial, but their role is more important than that.

Immanuel Kant's discussion of ornament as either intrinsic or extrinsic to a concept, work or body<sup>4</sup> (in this case the house ) is later critiqued by Derrida who discusses the uncertainty of trying to separate work from non-work, painting from frame, building from ornament and so on. Kant saw ornament as a contribution or attachment, as something outside of the main work (the *ergon*), whereas Derrida suggests that the ornament (which is part of the *parergon*<sup>5</sup>) is not wholly outside but exists with, and in the work, working with it, working in it, affecting it from all sides.

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<sup>3</sup> Derrida J. 1978

<sup>4</sup> Kant I

<sup>5</sup> Derrida J. 1987

This is where the fantastic beasts do their work. They are both ornament and structure. More than a year after the fire, they still hold up the walls and windows. Without them the heavy structure would collapse into itself, destroy itself. Without them the house would no longer exist.

The windows supported by the beasts separate and join the outside and the inside. On the day of the fire the small diamond panes burst outwards in the orange heat, scattering the steps below with small green shards, the same steps where I sat as a child in the rain, deafened by the bells as I watched the big and orange orange roll by.

Now, looking at the shards of glass at my feet, inside and outside are one and the same - mutually dependent and indistinguishable.

When it comes to windows, how do you differentiate between what is part of the building and what is not? How do you differentiate between *parergon* and *ergon*, and what about the fantastic beasts? How do you differentiate between a support that supports another support?

The carved wooden creatures support the stone oriel window structure, which supports the leaded window frame, which in turn supports the individual diamond panes. How do we separate one support from another - which of these, if any, is (in Kantian terms) the *ergon*?

My mind wanders to the glass topped museum box or vitrine. Its structure and name suggests a supportive role, a container for other things, its usual position means it is often looked down upon, its purpose to protect and show off things more important than itself.

Like the window, the vitrine has a sheet of clear glass that both joins and separates inside and outside, the glass serving as access and barrier, its thin thickness a contradiction.

The *parergon* works in this in-between space - against the *ergon* as much as with it, both apart and a part, and like the Spanish mast in the staircase and the punctuation in the text, it is the structural link that holds the (w)hole together.

The *Parergon* is at the same time threatening and essential to the story of the Tudor house - the grinning beasts, the warm smell of the orange, the clanging bells and the diamond panes all a part of that space, re-marking the original, working from the inside, outside, across and around, pressing against words, affecting them, and extending the work beyond its original structure.

As in writing, the Tudor house holds onto, and depends on things more powerful than itself, even if that something verges on the indescribable or the monstrous ... with that in mind, in comes the *pharmakon*, another of Derrida's words.

The *pharmakon* is a strange ghostly force<sup>6</sup> - at the same time poison and remedy, magnificent and grotesque. It is a force that - just as I go to close the blinds - appears on the other side of the glass, twisting and sucking at the truth - always and already at work in the work.

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<sup>6</sup> In his discussion on Derrida's 'différance' and 'supplément' Nicholas Royle uses the expression: 'strange, ghostly force' to describe the conscious and unconscious processes at work in the making of a mark or text

