

The Harder They Fall: Should High-Rise Towers be Seen as Modern Towers of Babel?

Laurent Tourrette

James Graham Ballard's *High-Rise*¹, first published in 1975, is one of the most prophetic novels of urban change in science-fiction literature. Long before it became an item of party politics and financial scheming, Ballard set his novel in a redeveloped London dockland. The high-rise block of flats of the title is described as "one of five identical units in the development project and the first to be completed and occupied. Together they were set in a mile-square area of abandoned dockland and warehousing along the north bank of the river." (p. 8)² Not only did Ballard describe the new developments that would come, he also saw that the blocks of flats of the sixties would become homes for the bourgeoisie rather than allow East Enders to be rehoused.

But his novel goes further than that. It tackles the theme of urban alienation and depicts tenants of a luxury apartment block who become warped by the synthetic – and seeming – perfection of their environment: the soporific hum of air conditioning, the artificial warmth and soft sighs of the lift. In the enclosed world of this high-rise apartment building, where middle-class as well as upper-class tenants can enjoy amenities and facilities which range from schooling and swimming pools to grocery stores, how can one understand the new tenants' rapid regression to tribal and extremely violent modes of behaviour? Why do residents reverse the flow of social progress and fall into territoriality, aggression, and barbarism? This paper intends to survey the literary viewpoint James Graham Ballard's *High-Rise* provides us with concerning the impossibility there is for human beings to cope with such a paradigmatic urban environment.

Like Dr Robert Laing³, who is the novel's main protagonist, James Graham Ballard read medicine, although in his case it was for only two years. This choice of a doctor as the main protagonist of the novel is indeed ironical since this "senior lecturer in physiology at [a] medical school" (pp. 10-1) is as sick as anybody else in the high-rise. Surely it is then our duty to replace him and sit by the bedside of the high-rise and its tenants, in order to bring to light the emerging symptoms of their social disease, consider the radical cure the tenants have unconsciously devised for themselves and finally look into the reasons for such a fall into utter barbarism.

The High-Rise and Its Tenants

The High-Rise as a Sick Body

The high-rise is a body of gigantic proportions: there are forty floors (p. 7), fifty residents per floor (p. 24) and one thousand apartments.⁴ (p. 7). Laing's studio apartment, on the 25th floor, is described as an "over-priced cell" (p. 7) – which evokes a body as well as a prison – and, as for the tower, "[t]he internal time of the high-rise, like an artificial psychological time, operated to its own rhythms, generated by a combination of alcohol and insomnia." (p. 12) What is more, "the elevators pumping up and down the long shafts resembled pistons in the chamber of a heart. The residents moving along the corridors were the cells in a network of arteries, the lights in their apartments the neurones of a brain." (p. 40) But this image of a powerful Leviathan turns sour in Laing's vivid imagination in the dissecting rooms of the medical school: "The steady amputation of limbs and thorax, head and abdomen by teams of students, which would reduce each cadaver by term's end to a clutch of bones and a burial tag, exactly matched the erosion of the world around the high-rise." (p. 35) Eventually, "[t]his huge building [the architect] had helped to design was moribund, its vital functions fading one by one – the water-pressure falling as the pumps faltered, the electrical sub-stations on each floor switching themselves off, the elevators stranded in their shafts." (p. 68)

The Tenants as Sick People

The novel opens with the end, with the main protagonist having survived his ordeal and pondering on the events of the last three months, but this happy end is quite misleading with its "everything had returned to normal." (p. 7) Firstly, social madness is contaminating the second high-rise at the end of the novel, and, secondly, Laing seems to find it normal for him to squat on his balcony "beside a fire of telephone directories, eating the roast hindquarter of the Alsatian before setting off to his lecture at the medical school." (*ibid.*) Has Robert Laing become mad, or has the world? As we will see, his folly is not unique in this vertical pandemonium. For instance, to take but one more example from representatives of the medical profession: "Dressing up corpses and setting them in grotesque tableaux was a favourite pastime of the dentist's." (p. 150)

The Social Disease, Its Symptoms and Its Cure

The Symptoms

The process of change is a slow one: "This low-level bickering surprised Laing, but after his arrival at the apartment building he soon recognized the extraordinary number of thinly veiled

antagonisms around him.” (p. 12) And these symptoms imperceptibly evolved into a serious disease “he was surprised that there had been no obvious beginning, no point beyond which their lives had moved into a clearly more sinister dimension.” (p. 7) In the background, insomnia is “a common complaint in the high-rise, almost an epidemic.” (p. 13)

As for Richard Wilder, a television producer, he keeps touching himself to make sure he is still alive: “Laing noticed that he was continually touching himself, for ever inspecting the hair on his massive calves, smelling the backs of his scarred hands, as if he had just discovered his own body.” (p. 15) Wilder, who had once been a professional rugby-league player and was still full of stamina, “was developing a powerful phobia about the high-rise. He was constantly aware of the immense weight of concrete stacked above him.” (p. 48) Warning also comes through the literary device of intertextuality, with the author constantly comparing this colossal building to a malevolent Leviathan as well as to a doomed ship hunting down another Moby-Dick.⁵

Most of these symptoms are not consciously perceived, and neither is the violence which is building up within the high-rise. During a cocktail-party on the roof, the jet-set residents close in on Laing in an unconscious but menacing way, and they are woken up as if from a trance by a fellow resident. They “casually dispersed, like a group of extras switched to another scene. Without thinking, they strolled back to their drinks and canapés.” (p. 26) This aggressive demeanour on the part of the upper-floor tenants seems to be outside the realm of conscience, and it is paralleled by the lower-floor tenants, who, according to that same resident, “were like animals” (p. 27) during the altercation with his wife.

Besides, when things are beginning to turn sour, Laing chooses not to go to work. “He felt fresh and clear-headed, but without realizing why he decided to take the day off.” (*ibid.*) When his secretary expresses regret at his illness, he tells her that he is not ill, but that “[s]omething important has come up.” (p. 28) The same excitement takes over Charlotte Melville, a neighbour of Laing’s from the 26th floor, who does not go to work either and refuses to let her six-year-old son go to his 3rd-floor playgroup “without thinking.” (*ibid.*) “Like himself, Charlotte was waiting for something to happen.” (*ibid.*)

To move on from the symptoms to the disease proper, the author symbolically resorts to an inverted image, telling us that “[a] bottle of sparkling wine [fell] from a floor fifty feet above, ricocheted off an awning as it hurtled downwards, and burst across the tiled balcony floor.” (p. 7) But the reader can only perceive the irony of it when he is told a few pages later that the high-rise’s last apartment has been sold (p. 15) and that, not unlike the Titanic, the high-rise has been christened and is now on its maiden – and last – voyage. The irony is even taken further because not only has this christening been given by the exact antithesis of a figure of authority –

the bottle, still with its wired cork and foil in place, must have slipped from the hands of a careless guest of the party in progress – but also because the wine is “a brand of expensive imitation champagne.” (p. 11) This fake and expensive champagne totally fits a fake and expensive dwelling place no tenants ever call their home. The journey to barbarism has started.

The Disease and Its Natural Cure

This slow process of change ends in a sudden explosion, when the thousandth and last apartment is occupied and the residents “have achieved critical mass.” (p. 15) This expression is also the title of chapter one, and it clearly suggests, through a ‘nuclear bomb’ image, that nothing can be done to prevent this irrepressible urge, that this explosion is inescapable and cannot be contained.

The first characteristic of this social disease is the regression of civilisation. There is “a falling interest in civilized conventions of any kind. None of his neighbours cared what food they ate. Neither Laing nor his friends had prepared a decent meal for weeks, and had reached the point where they opened a can at random whenever they felt hungry. By the same token, no one cared what they drank, interested only in getting drunk as quickly as possible and blunting whatever sensibilities were left to them. Laing had not played one of his carefully built-up library of records for weeks. Even his language had begun to coarsen.” (p. 100) Likewise, “This decline in standards of hygiene Laing shared with his neighbours. Emitted from their bodies was a strong scent, the unique signature of the high-rise. The absence of this odour was what most unsettled him about the world outside the apartment block, though its nearest approximation was to be found in the dissecting-room at the anatomy school.” (p. 107) Another instance of this regression can be found when Richard Wilder is depicted as “[a] burly man with [...] exposed loins lying like a savage among [...] wine bottles, his chest painted with red stripes.” (p. 129)

The physical world seems to be upside down – “[a]lthough the apartment was no higher than the 25th floor, he felt for the first time that he was looking down at the sky, rather than up at it” (p. 9) – and so is their social world: “Below them, on the 9th floor, a children’s party was in full swing. The parents made no attempt to restrain their offspring, in effect urging them to make as much noise as possible. Within half an hour, fuelled by a constant flow of alcohol, the parents took over from their children.” (p. 29) “Residents were barging in and out of each other’s apartments, shouting down the staircases like children refusing to go to bed.” (p. 32)

The residents share a growing feeling of unreality, and they resort to shooting films and taking pictures to compensate for it: “‘They’re all making their own films down there,’ Anne told him, [...] ‘Every time someone gets beaten up about ten cameras are shooting away.’ ‘They’re showing them in the projection theatre,’ Jane confirmed.” (p. 90) “The true light of

the high-rise was the metallic flash of the polaroid camera, that intermittent radiation which recorded a moment of hoped-for violence for some later voyeuristic pleasure.” (p. 109) Even during their sexual act, Wilder left a tape-recorder switched on beside him and Charlotte (p. 130).

But, paradoxically, the high-rise has become their only reality: “For Wilder, this brief period away from the apartment building was almost dreamlike in its unreality. He left his car in the parking-lot without locking it and walked towards the entrance, a growing sense of relief coming over him. Even the debris scattered at the foot of the building, the empty bottles and the garbage-stained cars with their broken windscreens, in a strange way merely reinforced his conviction that the only real events in his life were those taking place in the high-rise.” (p. 59) Although readers might be tempted to think that reality and unreality have been swapped in the tenants’ minds, the truth is that reality has faded away and, by contrast, the obsessive unreality of the high-rise environment has taken the upper hand. When Wilder is unsettled while returning from the television station, “[t]he first sight of the line of five apartment buildings soothed him as usual, providing a context of reality absent from the studios.” (p. 113)

What is more, this shift in their perception of reality goes hand in hand with their pretending that everything is normal in the high-rise: “leaving the high-rise was easier than moving around within it. Like an unofficial subway service, one elevator still travelled by mutual consent to and from the main entrance lobby during office hours.” (p. 101) As a perfect instance of this, Paul Crosland, who is a neighbour of Laing’s and a television newsreader, gives away absolutely no hint of what is happening within the high-rise (p. 96). “Even Helen [Wilder], talking to her mother that afternoon on the telephone, had said vaguely, ‘Everything’s fine. There’s some slight trouble with the air-conditioning, but it’s being fixed.’ This growing defiance of reality no longer surprised Wilder.” (p. 56)⁶

Their fast-growing violence generally goes with wild partying: “Beginning with the lower floors, the parties spread upwards through the apartment block, investing it in an armour of light and festivity. Standing on his balcony, Royal listened to the ascending music and laughter as he waited for the two young women to dress.” (pp. 91-2) “The rough and tumble in the junior school [of the high-rise] had given [Anne] that previously missing sense of solidarity with the other tenants of the high-rise. In the future, violence would clearly become a valuable form of social cement.” (p. 92) “Elegant women lifted long skirts to step over the debris of broken bottles. The scents of expensive after-shave lotions mingled with the aroma of kitchen wastes. These bizarre contrasts pleased Royal, marking the extent to which these civilized and self-possessed professional men and women were moving away from any notion of rational behaviour.” (*ibid.*) But violence is not always linked to wild partying – in the traditional sense,

that is – when for instance a tenant tortures a cat in the presence of Laing: “By some ugly logic the dentist’s pleasure in tormenting the creature was doubled by the presence of a squeamish but fascinated witness.” (p. 111)

The Reasons for Such a Disease

The Building Itself

One of the reasons for such paroxystic violence is the inhuman mass of the building. Wilder’s irrational impulse which made him kill the Afghan hound of an actress he had had an affair with, and whose apartment was on the 37th floor, came from his desire “to revenge himself on the upper storeys of the building [...] in a strange way he had been struggling with the building itself.” (pp. 48-9) When he knew his neighbours’ plan to publicly urinate into the swimming-pool on the 35th floor, he realised that “[t]heir real opponent was not the hierarchy of residents in the heights far above them, but the image of the building in their own minds, the multiplying layers of concrete that anchored them to the floor.” (p. 58) Helen says: “People pick on the children – without realizing it, I sometimes think. [...] In fact, it’s not really the other residents. It’s the building...” (p. 46)

In reaction against its crushing weight, Wilder irrationally decides to climb the building: “He could no longer remember when he had made his decision to climb the building, and had little idea of what exactly he would do when he finally got there. He was also well aware of the disparity between the simple business of climbing to the roof – a matter of pressing an elevator button – and the mythologized version of this ascent that had taken over his mind. This same surrender to a logic more powerful than reason was evident in the behaviour of Wilder’s neighbours.” (p. 60)

The high-rise is not a place to live in, and it is depicted as both the womb that brought about their birth into a new social order, and the tomb that this new social order will lead them to: “The architect must have spent his formative years in a space capsule – I’m surprised the walls don’t curve...” (p. 10) The shelter from real life the high-rise basically represents is easily perceptible in the main character’s reasons for moving in. “For reasons he could not yet explain, [Laing] had been reluctant to give up teaching, and the admittedly doubtful security of being with students who were still almost his own age.” (p. 16) After his divorce, “the purchase of an apartment [...] helped him as well to postpone once again any decision to give up teaching and take up general practice.” (p. 11); “He had come to the high-rise to get away from all relationships.” (p. 13)

Very clearly then, the building welcomes and fosters the real goal of the residents. Like Laing, they were attracted by “its peace, quiet and anonymity,” (p. 7) and they “moved to the security of the high-rise” (p. 9) to enjoy “a subtle kind of anonymity.” (*ibid.*)

The Residents' Reactions

The residents undergo a three-fold change: First, people move into the high-rise to escape society and revel in their individuality – a stage which is outside the scope of this paper. Second, as this escape proves impossible, they form a new society, whose social order relies on clans based on immediate vicinity. Last, these clans break up and the individuals reappear, but in a dehumanised state.

Let us consider the second stage of this evolution, the making-up of clans. “For the first time, people were leaving their front doors ajar and moving casually in and out of each other’s apartments.” (p. 30) As for Laing and his neighbours, “their clan [was] a local cluster of some thirty contiguous apartments on the 25th, 26th and 27th floors. Together they were planning a joint shopping expedition to the 10th-floor supermarket the following day, like a band of villagers going on an outing to an unpoliced city.” (p. 40) Another example of clan behaviour can be found when, “[d]uring the sexual act that followed [between Anthony Royal and an actress, his wife was present and] watched them without speaking, as if she approved, not from any fashionable response to marital infidelity, but from what Royal realized was a sense of tribal solidarity, a complete deference to the clan leader.” (p. 94)

At the beginning of the novel, in the high-rise “[t]he two thousand tenants formed a virtually homogenous collection of well-to-do professional people – lawyers, doctors, tax consultants, senior academics and advertising executives, along with a smaller group of airline pilots, film industry technicians and trios of air-hostesses sharing apartments.” (p. 10) But although the author gives no explicit reasons for it (like more or less expensive apartments), the wealthiest people have bought the apartments on the top floors whereas the less well-to-do have gathered on the lower ones. The reason might well be that the people who buy the flats unconsciously try to conform to the so-called social ladder and the problem is that the high-rise is a ladder which, normally, cannot be climbed. The exceptions are very few and extremely limited. After moving from their first apartment on the ground floor to one on the second floor six months earlier, Helen Wilder wonders: “Perhaps we could move to a higher floor,” (p. 47) which brings about Richard’s comment: “Helen, of course, was thinking in terms of social advancement.” (*ibid.*) Needless to say, they will not move up.

More precisely, Ballard describes the making-up of clans as follows: “In effect, the high-rise had already divided itself into the three classical social groups, its lower, middle and upper classes. The 10th-floor shopping mall formed a clear boundary between the lower nine floors, with their ‘proletariat’ of film technicians, air-hostesses and the like, and the middle section of the high-rise, which extended from the 10th floor to the swimming pool and restaurant deck on the 35th. This central two-thirds of the apartment building formed its middle-class, made up of self-centred but basically docile members of the professions – the doctors and lawyers, accountants and tax specialists who worked, not for themselves, but for medical institutes and large corporations. Puritan and self-disciplined, they had all the cohesion of those eager to settle for second best. Above them, on the top five floors of the high-rise, was its upper class, the discreet oligarchy of minor tycoons and entrepreneurs, television actresses and careerist academics.” (p. 53)

But man is a social being, and the novel depicts the irrepressible and disastrous birth of a new social order along geographical lines. “Laing had noticed that he and his fellow tenants were far more tolerant of any noise or nuisance from the floors above than they were from those below them.” (p. 14) What is more, although he feels an instinctive – and reciprocal – antipathy towards his immediate neighbours on the 25th floor, “an ambitious young orthodontic surgeon named Steele and his pushy fashion-consultant wife,” (p. 11) their relationship gets better at the same pace as the geographical social order grows: “By rights they should have raced each other for the last vacant place, and taken separate elevators to their floor. But tonight each beckoned the other forward in a show of exaggerated gallantry and waited while the other parked. They even walked together to the main entrance.” (p. 24)

Let us now focus our attention on the third stage of the residents’ three-fold change, and return to the individual: “The clan system, which had once given a measure of security to the residents, had now largely broken down, individual groups drifting into apathy or paranoia. Everywhere people were retreating into their apartments, even into one room, and barricading themselves away.” (p. 120); “the open tribal conflicts of the previous week had now clearly ceased. With the breakdown of the clan structure, the formal boundary and armistice lines had dissolved, giving way to a series of small enclaves, a cluster of three or four isolated apartments.” (p. 126); “A fading semblance of civilized order still survived in the top three floors, the last tribal unit in the high-rise. [...] The clans had broken down into small groups of killers, solitary hunters who built man-traps in empty apartments or preyed on the unwary in deserted elevator lobbies.” (p. 133) “Strangely enough, Royal reflected, they would soon be back where they had begun, each tenant isolated within his own apartment.” (p. 134)

But here Royal is not mentioning the tenants' mental collapse after they went full circle, as Wilder's climb perfectly exemplifies. In the beginning, climbing up the tower meant for him climbing up the social ladder: "Wilder had imposed on himself a harder definition of ascent [than moving into an abandoned apartment] – he had to be accepted by his new neighbours as one of them, the holder of a tenancy won by something other than physical force. In short, he insisted that they need him – when he thought about it, a notion that made him snort." (p. 114) By the end of his climb, he has gone mad and completely regressed into infancy, as his reaction when finally reaching the roof clearly shows: "One of the children, an infant boy of two, was naked, running in and out of the sculptures. Quickly Wilder loosened his ragged trousers and let them fall to his ankles. Stumbling a little, as if he was forgetting how to use his legs, he ran forward naked to join his friends." (p. 167) A few minutes later, facing women with knives in their hands, clearly depicted as cannibals,⁷ he, "tottered across the roof to meet his new mothers." (p. 168)

To conclude, if one sentence had to be singled out among the thousands Ballard wrote for this novel, I would certainly suggest the following one: "The high-rise was a huge machine designed to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation." (p. 10) In this deceptively simple sentence lies the ultimate cause of the social mayhem Ballard tries to warn us against.

Moreover, although there is an apparent similitude between the arch-famous Tower of Babel and the high-rises of our modern times, and even if life seems to be equally impossible in either of them, they stand in fact at opposite ends as far as men's intentions are concerned. Contrary to the unfortunate builders of the Tower of Babel, who were thwarted in their attempt to live together in good intelligence and in one city, the residents moving into Ballard's apocalyptic high-rise craved for a life in almost total isolation, and for their disappearance into the anonymity of a high-tech fashionable residence which turned out to be nothing more than a "zoo", a term the author repeatedly uses.⁸

This time, it did not take a celestial intervention to confuse the language of men, since they were not talking to each other – and did not even intend to. By forgetting the very nature of their social self, they forgot their very humanity, and if the Book of Genesis reports on men being "scattered [...] over the face of all the earth,"⁹ it was undoubtedly a more lenient judgement than the one which, according to James Graham Ballard, the Book of Nature has passed on high-rise tenants.

Notes

- ¹ J. G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1975).
- ² All the page references are taken from J. G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (Triad/Panther Books, 1977).
- ³ The name of Robert Laing is a clear allusion to Ronald David Laing, a “British psychiatrist noted for his alternative approach to the treatment of schizophrenia.” (*The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1992, vol. 7, 105) Let us extract from the Laing entry some facts relevant to our study: “In his first book, *The Divided Self* (1960), he theorized that ontological insecurity (insecurity about one’s existence) prompts a defensive reaction in which the self splits into separate components, thus generating the psychotic symptoms characteristic of schizophrenia [...] He further analyzed the inner dynamics of schizophrenia in *The Self and Others* (1961) [...] Among his other works are *The Politics of Experience* (1967), in which madness is viewed as a form of transcendence of the normal state of alienation, [...]” (Ibid.) This last point might well be the scientific core which Ballard transformed into a work of art. Besides, a few words should be said about onomastics in *High-Rise*. Indeed the author relies on the names of the characters to convey information of various sorts. To take but a few examples, architect Anthony Royal is royal indeed in his demeanour and Richard Wilder, an ex-professional rugby-league player, is indeed wilder than the other tenants. Likewise, Mr and Mrs Steele are depicted as extremely cold, unvarying in their ambition and totally impervious to sentiments. A more literary allusion can be found with Charlotte Melville (cf. the influence of Melville’s *Moby-Dick* in endnote 5).
- ⁴ It amounts to twenty-five apartments per floor and around two thousand tenants in all. There are numerous lobbies, as many as twenty standard elevators and a few direct high-speed ones to the 35th floor.
- ⁵ Indeed the novel is fraught with cleverly intermingled allusions to, among numerous other books, Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. For instance “[Mrs Steele] referred to the high-rise as if it were some kind of huge animate presence, brooding over them and keeping a magisterial eye on the events taking place” (p. 40) or “as if in its pelagic deeps an immense creature was stirring in its sleep.” (p. 22) Another literary echo is Coleridge’s *The Ancient Mariner* and its ominous albatross: “Perhaps [the gulls] identified [Royal] as one of their own, a crippled old albatross who had taken refuge on this remote roof-top beside the river?” (p. 79) More generally, Ballard resorts to numerous images of sea travel: “With their safe arrival, Royal felt for the first time that he could relax, like a captain eager to set sail seeing the last of his crew return from shore-leave in a foreign port.” (p. 132) But a captain who worries when in port and relaxes when setting sail is the antithesis of a captain, for a captain is supposed to come safe into port, home or foreign, with his ship and crew. A rare mention of land travel, which reads like an inverted version of Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, completes the metaphor of a doomed voyage, for the book’s readers know by now it is a mock Celestial City that Laing is trying to reach: “Laing ate his slice of bread with methodical slowness. Sitting there on the cracked balcony of tiles, he felt like a poor Pilgrim who had set out on a hazardous vertical journey and was performing a simple but meaningful ritual at a wayside shrine.” (p. 95)
- ⁶ An excellent example of this collective behaviour can be found when a police car approaches the high-rise: “A few residents [...] were pacifying the policemen, reassuring them that everything was in order, despite the garbage and broken bottles scattered around the building.” (p. 131)
- ⁷ This startling charge of cannibalism does require some corroboration. Chapter 18, which is the last chapter in which Wilder appears, sees Royal and his dog discover that, on the open roof, “[...] the whole interior of the play-garden was drenched with blood. The tiled floor was slick with bright mucilage. The Alsatian snuffled greedily,

wolfing down a shred of flesh lying by the edge of the paddling pool. Appalled, Royal stared at the blood-pattered tiles, at his bright hands, at the white bones picked clean by the birds.” (p. 164)

This oppressive and disquieting chapter, aptly entitled ‘The Blood Garden,’ then moves on to Royal being shot through the chest by Wilder, and ends as follows: “[...] In front of him the children in the sculpture-garden were playing with bones. The circle of women drew closer. The first flames lifted from the fire, the varnish of the antique chairs crackling swiftly. From behind their sunglasses the women were looking intently at Wilder, as if reminded that their hard work had given them a strong appetite. Together, each removed something from the deep pocket of her apron. In their bloodied hands they carried knives with narrow blades. Shy but happy now, Wilder tottered across the roof to meet his new mothers.” (p. 168)

⁸ “Zoos, and the architecture of large structures, had always been Royal’s particular interest.” (p. 80); “Looking up at the endless tiers of balconies, [Laing] felt uneasy like a visitor to a malevolent zoo, where terraces of vertically mounted cages contained creatures of random and ferocious cruelty.” (p. 103); “The residents of the high-rise were like creatures in a darkened zoo lying together in surly quiet, now and then tearing at each other in brief acts of ferocious violence.” (p. 127); “Without knowing it, [Royal] had constructed a gigantic vertical zoo, its hundreds of cages stacked above each other. All the events of the past few months made sense if one realized that these brilliant and exotic creatures had learned to open the doors.” (p. 134); “the sounds of the beasts of his private zoo.” (p. 138)

⁹ “Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’ And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.’ ‘So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.’ Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.” (Genesis 11:1-9)