

Writing (in) the Spaces of the Blitz:
Spatial Myths and Memory in Wartime British Literature

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the literary response to the Second World War and the Blitz in Britain. I argue that the physical spaces and landscapes of wartime Britain offered writers a metaphorical vocabulary for addressing war's devastating consequences and imagining a possible future. From the late 1930s to the early 1950s, experimental, popular, and amateur writers alike responded to the extreme circumstances of aerial attack in innovative ways that reveal an unexpected convergence in the preoccupations of modernist highbrow and routine middlebrow writing in a time of war. A comprehensive study of Blitz writing substantially alters narratives of midcentury modernism, war writing, and British literary history.

Blitz writers, generating a new type of battlefield text by and about non-soldiers, remade the physical spaces of England and transformed their symbolic value. In their work, air raid shelters, bombsites, and ruins become new catalysts for social and ideological encounters, which are also played out in more traditional literary spaces. Houses and domestic space are thrust from the private into the public sphere and lose their reassuring associations under threat of destruction. Bombed London and its urban spaces seem threatening and unreal, demanding imaginative rebuilding. The countryside invites a return to pastoral imagery as a way to address the war's challenge to English history and identity.

Texts that demonstrate the complex memory work associated with these spaces include Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, Rumer Godden's *A Fugue in Time*, Henry Green's *Caught*, Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, Patrick Hamilton's *The Slaves of Solitude*,

James Hanley's *No Directions*, Rose Macaulay's *The World My Wilderness*, Mollie Panter-Downes's *One Fine Day*, and Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*, along with lesser-known poetry, fiction, diaries, journalism, and propaganda. This project uses such texts to reconstruct a literary geography of the home-front experience in World War II Britain and create a memorial landscape that recalls how the air raids and bombings were understood and remembered during and immediately after the war.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In every nation men and women have shown themselves undeterred by the horrors of aerial war. But here in this tight little island, we weren't sure that it would apply to us. After all, Spain, Poland, Belgium, France were inured to warfare, battle had recurred so often on their territory, that they were trained to face it. But here where life had always been so secure and peaceful, where the last battle was fought in 1745, could we take it.¹

The Second World War occurred in a cultural and memorial climate shaped largely by the First World War. The horrors of the earlier war are recorded on the very land of the Western Front, where “remembrance is part of the landscape.”² Memorials and cemeteries dot the region, and the trenches and mine craters preserved as sites of memory offer vivid reminders of the battles that took place there. The war

left the topographical legacy of a countryside shaped by the violence of the conflict and continuing to yield its detritus.... Even today, crop markings indicate the presence of bunkers and underground munitions deposits, and at certain times of the year the fields of Picardy show zigzagging bands of whiter soil: the result of the underlying chalk beds having been disturbed by the trench lines and artillery bombardments. Every year, on average, nearly two thousand tons of munitions, equipment, and other detritus continue to be unearthed by plowing, or otherwise find their way to the surface of the former battlefields, in what is called the ‘iron harvest.’... Hence, the physical landscape of the Western Front still records the violence visited upon it.³

The physical spaces of the First World War remain vital to the formulation of its history and memory, and the sites that still exist today offer an evocative anchor for the story of the war.

¹ Warner, “Journal under the Terror,” 22 September 1940.

² Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 1.

³ Larabee, *Front Lines of Modernism*, 189.

This project began in part as an attempt to define an analogous landscape that “materially testifies”⁴ to the Second World War as experienced in Britain. Where, I wondered, does one go to remember and reconstruct the Blitz,⁵ a battle without a battlefield in the usual sense? Our understanding of the Second World War and the Blitz is shaped by the spaces they created and redefined, but these spaces lack a physical geography equivalent to the trenches and battlefields of the Western Front to testify to their ongoing existence and importance. I aim, therefore, to reconstruct a literary geography of the home-front experience and make legible the ways the Blitz is written into the landscape and inscribed upon cities in subtle and symbolic ways. This is the landscape that inspired a new type of battlefield text by and about non-soldiers, and as such it reflects transformed ways of looking at the physical spaces of war. In this dissertation, I set forth a three-part argument: First, the textual spaces present in Blitz writing, especially in Blitz fiction, provided a conceptual vocabulary for writers to express the effects of the war, just as the physical landscapes of the First World War furnished the metaphorical vocabulary necessary for modernist writing to address war’s devastating consequences.⁶ Second, Blitz writing demonstrates the changes undergone by powerful spatial symbols put under pressure by the circumstances of war. And third, this writing generates a textual landscape that remains in place of the spaces the Blitz destroyed. The texts themselves are sites of memory reflecting how the Blitz was experienced and remembered before the creation of the historical studies and monuments that dominate our narratives of the war today.

⁴ Larabee, *Front Lines of Modernism*, 189.

⁵ “Blitz” is now applied retrospectively to the entirety of the bombing campaigns begun in the summer of 1940, but the term actually came into being as the event unfolded. Susan Grayzel explains that “the early months of the war gave rise to the phrase ‘Blitzkrieg,’ or ‘lightning war,’ to describe the rapidity of the German conquest of Poland” but “the term ‘Blitz’ as a way to refer to aerial bombardment and particularly to the aerial attacks on Britain would not emerge until nearly a year later” (Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire*, 277).

⁶ See Larabee, *Front Lines of Modernism*.

What is the landscape of the Blitz?

Walking the streets of London during my most recent visit, I found myself searching constantly for the physical record of the battles that took place above and within the city. While a few signs do remain—some of which I will describe shortly—evidence of the Blitz exists largely in the absence of affected spaces.⁷ That is to say, it is the transformation of London’s architectural and economic topography that bears witness to the violent destruction that took place there, and one must know the city’s history to recognize the role of these factors beyond normal urban development. An experienced eye can identify telltale signs in the form of sprawling postwar housing estates or clusters of incongruously modern office buildings in historic neighborhoods; large areas of the badly damaged City of London and the devastated East End, for example, were rebuilt from the ground up in the years following the war. But to a casual observer, the streets and skyline of London do not testify to the presence of war, and the Blitz does not have an immediately obvious concrete presence in the city.

That said, if you were to look closely while traversing London, you might glimpse an occasional remnant of the Blitz. I wish to briefly visit some of these sites because they are important reference points for a broader discussion of Blitz spaces: they indicate where and how the imagery of the Blitz stays with us in the present, but they are largely transformed from their wartime condition and stripped of context that might indicate how such spaces were perceived and inhabited during the Blitz. Furthermore, most of the purposeful monuments and memorials connected to the Blitz were installed long after the war ended, a fact that must be recognized in

⁷ This is true of many blitzed regions of Britain, although Coventry is a notable exception. Because of the concentrated, almost total destruction suffered by the historic city center—which led Britons to coin the term “Coventried” or “Coventrated” to describe the fate of a hard-hit area—postwar reconstruction is more obvious than in London. Also, the remains of Coventry’s devastated cathedral still stand alongside its replacement as an iconic memorial for the Blitz.



Figure 1: Druid Street Arch Bombing marker. Personal photograph by the author. 6 May 2013. This plaque marks the site of a railway arch bombing near London Bridge station.



Figure 2: Memorial for the Bethnal Green disaster. Personal photograph by the author. 6 May 2013.

order to avoid oversimplifying the complex problem of Blitz memory and obscuring the alternative means by which Britons sought remembrance during and immediately after the war.

In a search for urban artifacts of the Blitz, you might see a faded “S” painted on the side of a brick building to indicate a shelter nearby, or perhaps a small plaque under a railroad bridge commemorating those who died after a bomb shattered the arch overhead (Figure 1; this particular plaque was placed in 2003). You might spot some memorials dedicated to particular groups of people, such as a statue near St. Paul’s Cathedral—unveiled in 1991 as a monument to the firefighters who worked to protect the city during the Blitz but later rededicated in memory of peacetime firefighters as well—or the memorial outside the Bethnal Green tube station (Figure 2). The latter, a 2013 addition that supplements a plaque placed over the station entrance twenty years earlier, remembers the 173 people killed in March 1943 during a stampede down a narrow, rain-slick staircase during an air-raid alert. This was arguably the most devastating civilian accident of the war, though far from the deadliest single incident of the Blitz.

A few ruins remain in the City, where the “Second Great Fire of London” raged the night of December 29 to December 30, 1940, and where many of Christopher Wren’s and other historic churches burned in the conflagration. The tower of St. Alban’s, now a private residence, stands alone and unmarked on a pedestrian island in the middle of Wood Street. The foundations of St. Mary Aldermanbury lie nearby, but the rest of the ruins were, strangely, shipped to Fulton, Missouri, in the 1960s to be re-erected as a memorial to Winston Churchill. Although a historical plaque and informational sign in the former churchyard make passing mention of the 1940 bombing, the surrounding garden is now dedicated largely to the publishers of the first Shakespeare folio. The ruins of Christchurch Greyfriars (Figure 3) and St. Dunstan in the East (Figure 4), more of which remain than of St. Mary, were also converted to public parks in 1989 and 1971, respectively; their signage indicates their destruction in the Blitz, but there is little in



Figure 3: Christchurch Greyfriars. Personal photograph by the author. 6 May 2013. The ruins are now a public park. The tall, wood-framed planter boxes mark the former locations of columns supporting the roof.



Figure 4: St. Dunstan in the East. Personal photograph by the author. 4 May 2013. This site is also a public garden.



Figure 5: Memorial to the civilians of East London injured or killed during the Second World War, Hermitage Riverside Memorial Garden. Personal photograph by the author. 6 May 2013.

their appearance to reveal the violent nature of their decay: jagged edges have been smoothed and cemented over, pathways paved, and flowers planted. The ruins might well be romantic set pieces in an elaborate garden. St. Dunstan in particular embraces a romantic aesthetic, with exotic plants blooming around the gaping windows and wires anchored to the walls to aid vines in climbing the ruined stones.

To the east of these ruins, in a riverside park in Wapping, stands a memorial for civilians of East London killed in the Blitz (Figure 5). This 2008 installation, combining symbols of peace with contradictory elements of painful absence and commanding monumentalism, is one of the few dedicated to a general civilian population in memory of their suffering and losses in wartime Britain. But most of the attention it draws seems to be in the form of vandalism, which necessitated the recent addition of a tall, iron fence that obscures its visual impact. A 2005 monument along the Victoria Embankment in Westminster serves as a higher-profile space for Blitz memory (Figure 6). Though dedicated primarily to the aviators who fought the Battle of Britain, the memorial also features civil defense workers and depicts the efforts and losses of those on the ground. Such memorials, while modern, employ elements of historical Blitz spaces—including the iconic image of the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral standing amidst fire and smoke—and work to make visible again the physical conditions of blitzed Britain.

These sites join with other modern, partial reconstructions of the Blitz experience to give form to a fragmented sense of the Blitz’s physical and spatial impact. The Imperial War Museum (IWM), for instance, narrates the political dimensions of the Second World War and the British home front via the Cabinet War Rooms, and invites visitors to “travel back in time”⁸ in The Blitz Experience, a walk-through diorama of a darkened London street complete with explosive sound

⁸ “The Blitz,” *1940: London’s Finest Hour*.



Figure 6: Details from the Battle of Britain monument. Personal photographs by the author. 6 May 2013. Clockwise from top left: St. Paul's Cathedral surrounded by smoke, a family in an Anderson shelter, civil defense workers in the aftermath of an air raid.



Figure 7: "Blitz kitsch" for sale in the gift shop of the Cabinet War Rooms. Personal photograph by the author. 5 May 2013. Museums and historical sites sell reproduction propaganda posters, ration books, ID cards, ARP leaflets, and children's evacuation tags as mementos of the Blitz.

effects and shattered buildings. A similarly conceived but now closed⁹ attraction, Winston Churchill's Britain at War Experience, offered mockups of notable wartime spaces like air-raid shelters, the Underground, and a BBC radio studio. Celebrating "the adventure of war torn London" and recreating the Blitz "in all its fury with special effects highlighting the sights and sounds, the artifacts, and even the dust and smoke of an air raid at its height,"¹⁰ this interactive museum fully embraced and commercialized the Blitz kitsch (Figure 7) that the IWM's immersive exhibit hints at.

Literary landscapes

I do not wish to overlook the existence or understate the value of these ruins and memorials that are found in London (and those like them throughout Britain). But I believe these remnants and reminders are largely decontextualized and hidden away—many are unmarked or little known and difficult to locate—leaving literary accounts to recreate the spaces of the Blitz. While the remaining physical spaces offer distorted and retrospective fragments of Blitz geography, written accounts provide context for a more complete mapping of blitzed Britain by filling gaps in memory and imbuing both surviving and absent spaces with their symbolic implications. These texts constitute an essential part of the memorial landscape that formed during and immediately after the war, one now accessible only through such documents.

The principal impression left by literature of the Blitz is of how deeply the circumstances of British life and thought were affected by war's invasion of the home front. The Blitz rewrote the meanings around symbols of place and space in British culture. Spaces that had powerful, long-term symbolic meanings in literature were recast by the new category of bewildering and violent

⁹ The Britain at War Experience closed in January 2013 due to redevelopment of the immediate area. There are as yet no plans to reopen in another location.

¹⁰ Winston Churchill's Britain at War Experience (site discontinued).

events taking place within them. The war, by altering the context and conditions of British writing, led to reimaginings of literary images and motifs, as in Donald Hughes's poem "Tiger":

If William Blake lived now and chanced to meet
His friend the "Tiger, Tiger, burning bright"
After black-out time in a city street,
I wonder if he'd say "Put out that light!"¹¹

Hughes reframes Blake's famous poem to humorous effect by casting Blake in the role of a zealous ARP warden concerned more with enforcing black-out restrictions than with reliving the powerful aesthetic experience Blake imagines in the original poem (or, for that matter, with the peculiarity of finding a tiger roaming the city). At the same time, Hughes leaves to the imagination the frightening implications of a city street and a dangerous forest merging, as they did symbolically during the Blitz. Hughes's flippant allusion to Blake suggests the difficulty of appreciating an older literary tradition and aesthetic in harsh new circumstances, bolstering Adam Piette's claim that some British intellectuals "translat[ed]...the Blitz into book-burning,"¹² seeing the "fire both as cunning terrorist action and as destroyer of culture and civilized values,"¹³ for the fire destroyed culture both by ruining its material components and by making it seem hopelessly irrelevant to the realities of war. The ways writers describe their wartime world is evidence of, if not the wholesale destruction of culture, then at least significant changes to it. Their work rebuilds the burned cities and landscapes of the Blitz, but with a symbolic architecture altered by changing cultural values and memories.

The spaces of Blitz writing work to articulate an idea of what a postwar future will mean: how to be English (or British) during and after the war, whether the traditions and narratives of the English past can retain their power and continuity, how a home or a city will look and function,

¹¹ Hughes, *Blitz Bits*, 7.

¹² Piette, *Imagination at War*, 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 47.

what these places will signify in a changed world. In short, how to continue inhabiting a battleground. Elizabeth Bowen, in late 1946, described Henry Green's novel *Back* as having "a subject far from unusual this year: that of a former prisoner of war returning to the old scenes in England, trying to pick up the threads of his old life."¹⁴ In the time of the Blitz and Britain's subsequent recovery, writers did something much like Green's protagonist: they returned to old scenes, to vital spaces of English literature and cultural memory, to pick up the threads of identity and tradition and weave them together in a new pattern necessitated by the war.

Blitz literature in scholarship

At present, the history of the Blitz and the nature of war writing intersect in only a small, albeit growing, body of scholarship.¹⁵ This dissertation thus aims to enter into conversation with existing work on World War II writing and fill a critical gap in the study of twentieth-century British literature. Most extant work on the topic deals with the most canonical of Second World War writers—Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh—to shape its accounts of British literature during the war. Scholars' conceptual preoccupations tend toward literary intertextuality or, if reaching beyond textual material, to the social environment and consequences of the war. Sebastian Knowles, for example, focuses in part on challenging the perception of World War II literature as middlebrow or mediocre by linking key examples structurally and linguistically to Milton, and in part on the real-life purgatory of waiting in wartime London (for bombs to fall, or the all-clear to be sounded, to turn the lights back on, to receive provisions, for advances abroad,

¹⁴ Quoted in Lee, Notes on "Books Reviewed by Elizabeth Bowen," 292.

¹⁵ Examples of works that establish the existing bounds of this subfield are Sebastian Knowles's *A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War* (1990), and Adam Piette's *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (1995), as well as more recent work like Marina MacKay's *Modernism and World War II* (2007), Lyndsey Stonebridge's *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture* (2007), Kristine A. Miller's *British Literature of the Blitz: Fighting the People's War* (2009), Patrick Deer's *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature* (2009), and Leo Mellor's *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (2011).

for news of friends and family members, etc.) that parallels the purgatorial nature of contemporaneous novels. Similarly, Marina MacKay connects the form of the literature she studies to both the historical particularities of its time and to earlier texts. In MacKay's case, the earlier texts are the aesthetic experiments of modernism, which she argues inform the way British writers experienced and wrote about the war.

This project extends the reach of existing scholarship in several ways. First, it brings the issues of space and memory to the forefront. These topics frequently appear in literary criticism and cultural histories, but they have not been extensively studied in connection with World War II-era British literature. The work of Patrick Deer, a scholar of war literature and war culture, does address in relevant but limited ways issues of memory and national culture; as such it provides a starting point for a more extensive examination of collective memory as it relates to social and political geographies in World War II England.¹⁶ Second, the project narrows the focus from British World War II literature generally to Blitz literature representing home-front violence, allowing literary texts and historical details to be analyzed in greater depth. Kristine Miller's monograph on the "People's War" appears to be the only recently published book dedicated exclusively to Blitz literature, and the project outlined here both takes Miller's study as a model and serves as a companion to it. Miller focuses primarily on the effects of class and gender on Londoners' experiences of the Blitz, exploring how the idea of a "People's War" actually played out on the ground and what it meant for different types of people, while my project is concerned with the actual space of the city, attempting to articulate how the Blitz changed the structures and landscapes of England and how those altered spaces either serve or undermine a memorial

¹⁶ The political and cultural significance of space in twentieth-century literature is discussed in books like Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker's collection *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, Cultures, Spaces*. But such studies address mid-century modernism and World War II only minimally. The geography of World War II, then, is another area in which my dissertation might expand current conversation.

function.¹⁷ Third, and finally, the project expands the body of texts under examination by including alongside canonical selections infrequently read novels authored by women or characterized as popular writing. In this regard my work is a recovery project, aiming to build an archive of lesser-known Blitz writing and place it in conversation with recognized works. Together these three choices shape a dissertation that covers significant new ground in the conversation about memory, art, and civilian experiences in the Second World War.

Chapter summaries

Most of the texts discussed in the following chapters were written between 1939, the beginning of the war, and the early 1950s. This project aims to survey a wide range of wartime writing but cannot cover every facet of British literature written during the period of the Second World War. As a result, the focus is primarily on literature that depicts bombings and their aftermath in order to demonstrate the consequences of air raids for life in a civilian battleground. I use the term “Blitz” loosely, referring not only to the period from September 1940 to May 1941, which is usually understood as the Blitz proper, but also to the “Little Blitz” of early 1944, the attacks by V-1 flying bombs and V-2 rockets¹⁸ late in the war, and the scattered incidents of bomb violence throughout. In short, this study addresses various instances of home-front violence in Second World War Britain as a complex but related group of events and experiences.

Chapter two lays the historical and theoretical foundation for examining the literature of the Blitz by describing the conditions of total war¹⁹ and the common and deeply resonant idea of

¹⁷ The construction and representation of space are connected in many ways to gender and class, of course, and those considerations will play a part in the project, although they are not central concerns.

¹⁸ These “V-weapons” were explosives launched at Britain from the coasts of France and the Netherlands between 1944 and 1945. V-1 flying bombs (popularly known as “doodlebugs” or “buzz bombs”) were unmanned, jet-powered missiles, and V-2 rockets were extremely destructive ballistic missiles.

¹⁹ Susan Grayzel succinctly defines “total war” as it appeared in the Second World War (and, to a lesser extent, the First World War, which foreshadowed what was to come): “War was *total* when the distinction between combatant

the British home front as a site of battle. The material spaces of the Blitz as formulated in literature—the shelters in which people took refuge during air raids and the ruins left behind by bombs—reinforce this figurative battlefield paradigm, challenging the pervasive mythology of the British people’s idealized resolve with the spaces’ complex, painful associations.

Chapter three examines the motif of the blitzed house, arguing that the dramatic changes in wartime lifestyles and the blurred lines between public and private roles and spaces are embedded in portrayals of wartime homes. Because of the house’s close literary association with memory, houses threatened or destroyed by violence raise compelling questions about the continuity of individual identities and family histories in times of war. This chapter aims to show that attempts to imbue the bombed house with a reassuring memorial capacity fall short, undermined by the more frequently occurring portrayals of houses as sites of fear and anxiety and as territory newly occupied by war and its demands.

Widening the spatial framework of the previous section, chapter four focuses on London as a symbolic space in Blitz literature. Many texts characterize London as a largely illegible landscape, a space that can no longer be recognized or navigated after the dramatic changes of the Blitz, and suggest the parallel dislocation of ways of life and being in the city. At the same time, London texts present unreal or imagined versions of the city as experiments in envisioning and redefining its possible future existence.

Finally, chapter five posits a relationship between Englishness and the physical landscape of the nation in the context of the war and in response to aerial attacks and threatened invasion.

Literature that imbues the land with the fundamentals of English history and identity represents a

and non-combatant ceased; when babies in cradles in London fell victim to bombs deployed from enemy planes; when states had to plan to ameliorate, while admitting they could never prevent, catastrophic damage inflicted potentially on all civilians” (*At Home and Under Fire*, 319).

wartime return to consoling pastoral fantasies of the land's permanence in the face of political and social instability.

In focusing primarily on British experiences with German bombing, I do not wish to overlook or underestimate the devastating circumstances and extreme violence suffered by others involved in the war, whether via fighting on non-European fronts, the heavy Allied bombings of civilians in Germany and Japan, the German occupation of continental Europe, and most of all, the atrocities of the Holocaust. I have chosen to tell a British story because of the unique literary situation: the literature of the Blitz has a fascinating relationship to the longer history of space in British literature. To my knowledge, other European traditions lack a similar literature about air war that would allow for a thorough comparison within the scope of this project.

It is my hope, however, that the implications of my work here will bear on broader questions about war and its effects on civilian and domestic spaces. The problems of what a home means when it is no longer a safe space and how people make sense of living in a site of current or past violence resonate in many other contexts, and can be the foundation for further study of literature dealing with the Second World War and subsequent twentieth- and twenty-first-century conflicts.

CHAPTER TWO

Imagining the Home Front

The blitz was total war. Its intensity and inescapability made it possible to call the Second World War “the people’s war,” in which, in the words of the poet Robert Graves, a soldier “cannot even feel that his rendezvous with death is more certain than that of his Aunt Fanny, the firewatcher.”¹

The evacuation of Dunkirk, claims Barbara Euphan Todd² in her Second World War-era novel *Miss Ranskill Comes Home* (1946), left a permanent mark on Britons’ memories of those now-famous beaches. But it was not only the meaning of that particular French shore that was transformed; rather, the very idea of a beach gained a meaning and power unique to wartime: “In twenty-four hours the word ‘beach’ had changed in value: and lost its power to call up a holiday. The men who had come from that place would never be quite the same again,”³ nor would, presumably, the people whose seaside holidays were now occupied by images of desperate and dying soldiers. In this passage Todd suggests that the events of war have the power to profoundly alter the way people think of their surroundings via the accretion or erosion of associated images and values. Writers like Todd drew on these associations that developed in wartime culture and embedded them deeper within the shared narrative of war.

War changes perceptions and representations of space, both in its particular and in its abstract manifestations. Just as the events of Dunkirk and Britain’s patriotic response turn the beach into a cultural signifier, literature also shapes the remembered contours of spaces in which civilians experienced the war. In this chapter I explore the physical and sensory dimensions of the

¹ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, xiv.

² Barbara Euphan Todd was best known for writing children’s books. *Miss Ranskill Comes Home* is her only adult novel.

³ Todd, *Miss Ranskill Comes Home*, 149.

British home front, particularly during the Blitz, and analyze the literary and cultural uses of commonly evoked spaces and places. I will first lay the foundation for subsequent chapters by reviewing the role of literature and space in Blitz memory and surveying the literary environment and output in wartime Britain, then explain how writers contributed to shaping a physical and symbolic home front. I argue that the literary spaces, both imagined and material, that define the Blitz are created by the collective efforts of wartime writers and vividly register the challenges—physical, emotional, social, aesthetic—introduced into daily life by the war.

Writing about the civilian experience tends to be spatially bound and grounded in physical surroundings. A unifying characteristic of home-front and Blitz literature is a preoccupation with physical realities: frequently rationing and food shortages, but also bombed houses, air-raid shelters, and the black-out. These texts aim to make sense of the Blitz experience—to connect it to the past and the future, to understand shifting class and social structures, and so on—by attributing new mythologies and meanings to the spaces in which people lived out the war. In their literary forms, these spaces become powerful venues for representing and exploring the abstract changes that accompany war's more obvious effects, and, as we will see in later chapters, the particular manifestations of space in literature demonstrate the pressure the war put on existing cultural and literary paradigms.

Civilian Britain as a whole was physically transformed by the events of the Blitz. Paul Fussell points out that “the Second World War, total and global as it was, killed worldwide more civilian men, women, and children than soldiers, sailors, and airmen.”⁴ In Britain specifically, military casualties did not surpass civilian casualties until several years into the war. In *British Literature of the Blitz: Fighting the People's War*, Kristine Miller writes that “despite efforts by the

⁴ Fussell, *Wartime*, 132.

Royal Air Force (RAF) and anti-aircraft gunners” to fend off German bombers and destroy missile launch sites across the Channel, “the damage was significant.” Historians estimate that in the Blitz of 1940 to 1941 there were 43,685 deaths,⁵ while Miller calculates that the V-weapons developed later in the war

caused 6184 deaths and 17,981 injuries in Britain. In total, the German bombers and V-weapons damaged or destroyed over 3,500,000 homes, killed at least 60,000 civilians, and injured more than 86,000 people on the British home front. Before 1943, more British civilians than soldiers had been killed or wounded; by the end of the war, civilian fatalities equaled almost 25 percent of military fatalities, while the number of wounded civilians was more than 33 percent of the number of wounded soldiers.⁶

Furthermore, figures on civilian injuries include only those treated at hospitals or first-aid posts⁷; no records exist to indicate the extent of minor physical injuries or of emotional and psychological damage of any type. Most of those who were not injured or killed knew someone who was, many also suffered loss or damage to their homes and belongings, and all experienced the remaking of their physical and sensory environments due to shelters, air-raid sirens, relocation, conscriptions, and civil defense and ARP (Air Raid Precautions) work. By some estimates, at least one-sixth of London citizens were homeless by the end of May 1941,⁸ and the resulting community dislocation and housing shortages in London and other damaged areas—which stretched from Aberdeen to Cornwall, along the coast from Swansea to Hull, across the Midlands, and across England’s major cities and ports—continued throughout the war and beyond. The Second World War on the British home front, one air-raid warden and writer recalled, was “a domestic sort of war... It happen[ed] in the kitchen, on landings, beside washing-baskets; it [came] to us without us stirring a

⁵ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 185.

⁶ Miller, *British Literature of the Blitz*, 2. It must be acknowledged that the toll of air raids on German civilians was even heavier; German civilian deaths caused by Allied bombing raids surpass British civilian losses to German raids by a factor of ten, and the most devastating events—like the attacks on Dresden and Hamburg—could kill tens of thousands of ill-prepared citizens in a single raid. See Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 371–72.

⁷ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 23.

⁸ North, “World War II,” 437.

yard from our own doorsteps to meet it.”⁹ It inscribed itself in the contours of natural and human landscapes, reshaping the reality and the symbolic afterlives of their central spaces.¹⁰

Remembering the Blitz

Because space and memory are closely linked, written accounts of the Blitz that are place-oriented serve a significant memorial function in the cultural consciousness. Few historical sites and prominent memorials connected to the Blitz exist in present-day England—and those that do typically draw on more recent approaches to remembrance rather than reflecting the perspectives and preoccupations of the 1940s—so textual spaces are the primary, de facto sites of representation and memory. My concern in this and subsequent chapters is not how accurately literature portrays the spaces of the Second World War or the Blitz, nor whether the writers of these texts worked with a particular memorial purpose in mind, but rather what associations they attach to the spaces of the Blitz and how their writings shape the way these settings might be remembered.¹¹ I aim to present an understanding of Blitz space in various dimensions by observing how both material and imagined spaces reflect and challenge each other¹² in historical and literary accounts.

⁹ Strachey, *Digging for Mrs. Miller*, 47.

¹⁰ Many historians and cultural critics argue that the Second World War, in part because of its global reach and the direct involvement of civilians, was an exceptional event that changed everything about the modern world. The same has been said of the First World War, however (Larabee, *Front Lines of Modernism*). Hew Strachan argues that the latter “was the war that shaped the world in which we still live” (*The First World War*, xvii), and Paul Fussell writes that the Great War “detaches itself from its normal location in chronology and its accepted set of causes and effects to become Great in another sense—all-encompassing, all-pervading, both internal and external at once, the essential condition of consciousness in the twentieth century” (*The Great War and Modern Memory*, 321). I point this out neither to diminish my own claims about the significance of the Second World War nor to contend with the established understanding of the First. Both wars were profoundly transformative and disorienting, but in different ways and for different populations.

¹¹ For the purposes of this project, I will adopt the two common uses of the term “space” “in the context of literary analysis: references to ‘real’ material or geographical spaces on the one hand and spatial metaphors that visualize non-spatial concepts or relations on the other” (Eigler and Kugele, *Heimat*, 5-6). “Space” will typically refer to a material or metaphorical site defined by a particular meaning or function.

¹² I base my approach in part on Henri Lefebvre’s conception of space, which includes three divisions: physical space, representations of space, and imaginative space. David Harvey helpfully defines these as, respectively, “the space of experience and of perception open to physical touch and sensation,” “space as conceived and represented,” and “the lived space of sensations, the imagination, emotions, and meanings incorporated into our everyday lives and practices”

The London Blitz, as well as other air attacks throughout Britain, argues Amy Helen Bell, is “what Pierre Nora calls a *lieu de memoire*, a place of primary importance in the memory of the war, and a space in which participants, historians, and the creators and inheritors of national memory continue to thrash out new meanings and new applications for the memory of war.”¹³ More concretely, the spaces of the Blitz are in themselves *lieux de memoire*, the material foundations on which writers anchor their reflections and build their visions of the war’s future meanings. Blitz literature, in creating of a geography of memory, treats both actual and imagined spaces as potential sites of memory, and this fixing of its component spaces in writing is part of what identifies the Blitz itself as a *lieu de memoire*.

Blitz spaces, though, are unpleasant sites to remember. Although the Blitz created many potential sites of memory, Britons as a collective did not wish to remember primarily loss and death. Thus, in imagining the home front, writers navigate the tension between two conflicting memorial imperatives: to remember life before the destruction of the war, and to remember the Blitz itself. Their writings act in place of public memorialization and so deal candidly with the aspects of the Blitz that people did not want to relive. Drawing on the interest in physical structures that arose in reaction to the changing physical spaces of the nation, literary texts work together to construct a memorial terrain that engages these complicated feelings about the war via their representations of built (and unbuilt) space. Because of this, the fates of spaces, material and immaterial, in the Blitz have implications for memory in and of the war.

(Harvey, “Space as a Key Word,” 8). In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre posits a relationship between real and mental space; this connection is the basis for an analysis of space as both a creator and a product of the social, economic, and cultural forces surrounding it. The spatial perceptions and metaphors with which we link physical and conceptual spaces have a transformative influence on the way we understand the systems that undergird society and shape past, present, and future.

¹³ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 199.

Andreas Huyssen argues that “the strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias.”¹⁴ These traces hold a place in the imaginary via their relationships to specific spaces. Gaston Bachelard explains in *The Poetics of Space*, and Nora might agree, that “memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are.”¹⁵ My study of Blitz memories and their meanings across time and space, however, demonstrates powerfully that memories are not static at all. The impulse to affix memories to spaces—to anchor them to seemingly motionless locations and objects and thus assign consistent meaning—is further evidence of their inherently dynamic nature. The paradox of memory as a flexible category and process often anchored to specific sites prompts challenging questions that Blitz writers struggle to address. What is the fate of memory, of the accumulated past and its symbols and values, when the system that has created and sustained it is put under pressure? When the spaces to which memories are fixed transform or disappear in the face of total war, particular visions of the past and their relevance for the future are inevitably challenged.

A limitation of Nora’s template for memory is simply that: it is a template that cannot account for the individuality of memorial responses in different places and times. The specific traumas of the Blitz and the unusual nature of the spaces to which Blitz memory is affixed warrant a more complex framework that allows for memory that is both anchored and flexible. A more nuanced approach to sites of memory also allows us to see how they function differently for the purposes of memory, memorialization,¹⁶ and remembrance. Blitz writing, fiction and nonfiction alike, tends to memorialize by recalling and reflecting on trauma and loss, but it also promotes

¹⁴ Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 7.

¹⁵ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 9.

¹⁶ I use the term “memorial” throughout to refer to formal and informal sites, objects, and processes of memory. James Young suggests that while a monument is necessarily an object or installation with a specific purpose, the concept of memorial is much more broadly encompassing: “There are memorial books, memorial activities, memorial days, memorial festivals, and memorial sculptures.... I treat all memory-sites as memorials” (*The Texture of Memory*, 4).

remembrance, a term Jay Winter uses to describe the reconstruction and use of the past to cope with the present and think about the future.

The topography of the Blitz is largely one of erasure and absence, defined by the parts of a landscape or cityscape that have been damaged or destroyed rather than by those that remain. Ruins and rubble obviously carry ghostly reminders of their former outlines, and some surviving landmarks—like St. Paul’s Cathedral at the heart of the City of London, the area that fell victim to a conflagration sparked by incendiary bombs on the night of December 29, 1940—become more prominent because their surrounding contours have been flattened. Even spaces that continue to stand or are newly formed during the war cast their shadows and our attention onto the empty spaces nearby. One cannot imagine entering an air-raid shelter, for example, without acknowledging the potential fate of the building from which one has fled. The physical and symbolic absences that characterize the blitzed home front demand closer attention and compel the creation of memory narratives. This chapter, like most of this dissertation, deals primarily with concrete, present spaces—for these are what the English inhabit and describe in their accounts of the war—but awareness of the gaps, absences, and inverses implicit in account after account is essential to formulating a modern sense of the home front’s spatial realities.

Retrospective narratives built around the spaces of the Blitz frequently invoke the idea of the “People’s War”—a struggle in which all civilians from all walks of life were empowered citizen-soldiers fighting valiantly with and for each other—despite its reductive implications and elision of individual memories. Much work has been done to dismantle the totalizing effects of the “myth of the Blitz,” which Angus Calder defines as a narrative received largely from wartime propaganda that highlights citizens’ stoicism and collective sacrifices while simultaneously concealing unheroic and criminal activities that occurred during the Blitz and disregarding the actual disparities in degree of suffering. This collective version of the Blitz discounts the wide range of personal

feelings and experiences reflected in historical records and writings and fails to give credit to the people of Britain for their practical and nuanced acknowledgments of the war's realities, as scholars like Kristine Miller and Amy Helen Bell have demonstrated.

Nevertheless, narratives like that of the "People's War" do inform individuals' accounts of their own surroundings and memories; in reality, what became a reductive myth was still generated from the experiences and accounts of real people. As Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird argue, "personal testimony is not simply a window on the past"; "memories are formed through a complex process of interaction between an individual's experiences and publicly available constructs, including prior accounts of similar experiences."¹⁷ In the case of the Blitz, personal recollections and other writing composed during the war are subject to this effect even without the inevitable shifts in memory caused by time and distance: "while later memoirs and oral histories inevitably frame wartime experience within a more comprehensive set of existing narratives and images, accounts of the Blitz written in the 1940s demonstrate a keen awareness of their relationship to the dominant cultural ideology of a People's War."¹⁸ Because those experiencing the Blitz did so along with neighbors, co-workers, fellow shelterers, journalists, and politicians, they had access to an array of voices and experiences that influenced their own perceptions of the immediate spaces of the Blitz they occupied as well as the general picture of the war's effects throughout the country.

The status of Blitz writing generally, as part documentary record and part subjective commentary influenced by the cultural narratives in circulation, reflects the conflicting ideologies of the time and offers a window on the implications of a truly collective event for the concept of collective memory. Susan Sontag contends that "what is called collective memory is not a

¹⁷ Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*, 14. See also Miller, *British Literature of the Blitz*, 4.

¹⁸ Miller, *British Literature of the Blitz*, 4.

remembering but a stipulating; that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened.”¹⁹ Sontag’s definition is largely true of “official” memory work, that which constructs public narratives to suit a particular purpose, and some Blitz writing does participate in simplified, stipulating memory about the “myth of the Blitz.” But taken as a whole, the large body of writing about the Blitz defies Sontag’s reductive definition, presenting a collective story formed from the bottom up by the ongoing contributions of numerous diverse voices. There still exists in some historical writing and public memorial narratives, though, an impulse to reproduce a limited collective memory of the Blitz—a stipulation of how and to whom the Blitz happened and why it matters—and thus it remains essential to examine the ways a collective idea of the Blitz and the writing about it inform each other, both now and in the past, and to widen the view of the voices and ideas that contribute to our current understanding and memory.

Expanding the collective story of the Blitz requires letting existing accounts and records speak through our preconceived notions about their history and continuing to build an archive of texts by recovering those that have been largely forgotten. It also requires acknowledging there is no one “real story” of the Blitz that we can tell. We should be suspicious of historical or literary works that claim to have uncovered the true story. The reality of the Blitz and what it meant to Britons can never be fully accessible, and while the “myth of the Blitz” does not contain the entire story, it is nevertheless part of the story, for it shaped and was shaped by the actual experiences of people at the time. We cannot recreate the complex interactions between this myth and reality; we can, however, look to wartime remembrances to reconstruct an idea of when it did and did not represent the experience of life during the Blitz.

¹⁹ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 86.

The need to do so is acknowledged in the gradual and ongoing scholarly shift toward studying marginalized voices and experiences in Blitz and other wartime writing and culture, but a continued broadening of the relevant historical narratives involves recognizing that both memory and the literary representation of the Blitz are closely linked to place. The spaces and places of the Blitz are the foundation for the memorial landscape built by writers. I believe examining representations in and of these places and spaces is the best way to open up Blitz writing to broader interpretation, to acknowledge the many versions of the Blitz experienced by people of different classes and ways of life, and to place this body of literature in conversation with a literary history of English life and identity.

Literary Responses

“Where are the war poets?” was a common lament circulating in the media during the early years of the war. In 1941 Cecil Day-Lewis famously responded in verse, implying that he and his fellow writers could not compose “immortal verse” in support of the war; to do so would be to sacrifice artistry to propaganda. Day-Lewis’s response seems predicated on the idea, explained by Marina MacKay as a common interwar assumption,²⁰ that war writing is necessarily *anti-war* writing and thus a war to which poets did not wholly object could not be written about. Paul Fussell explains the perceived silence in a slightly different manner, not as the result of poets’ rejecting morally necessary warfare as an appropriate poetic subject but as a consequence of their protesting the war itself; Fussell offers as an example Kurt Vonnegut, who was unable to write about Dresden until decades after the war. “If loquacity was one of the signs of the Great War—think of all those trench poets and memoirists—something close to silence was the byproduct of experience in the Second War,” explains Fussell in *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World*

²⁰ MacKay, *Modernism and World War II*, 10.

War: Rather perplexingly, since the war was discussed and written about a great deal even as it happened, Fussell insists that “so demoralizing was this repetition of the Great War within a generation [that] no one felt it appropriate to say much, either to understand the war or to explain it.”²¹ As Peter Conrad puts it, “This was a war to which literature conscientiously objected”²² by resisting its representation.

In recent years, however, scholars have increasingly acknowledged that Fussell’s claim of literary silence during the Second World War is simply not true. As in the First World War, soldier poets like Keith Douglas and Alun Lewis wrote from the war front, although war poems from the later period are admittedly fewer in number and on the whole less memorable than those written in the previous war. On the British home front, though, where the potential extent of war’s incursion into civilian life had only been hinted at in the First World War, literary production in fact grew, especially when accounting for the proliferation of firsthand accounts recorded in memoirs and journalistic writing and the novelty of small-circulation magazines published by ARP and firefighting divisions.²³ Recalling the time between September 1940 and May 1941, the worst months of the Blitz, one diarist observed in December 1941 that people were already “beginning to look up that period as passed & are even writing books about the months of Blitz as if they will not come again.”²⁴ This unstated assurance that the Blitz was over proved to be unfounded, but the impulse to record and remember began early and continued throughout the war. The Blitz drew civilians into unexpected proximity with war, and this new experience for Britons demanded its own literary response dedicated to documenting, challenging, and reimagining the consequences of war’s entry into the spaces of their daily lives. As historian Amy Helen Bell has demonstrated in

²¹ Fussell, *Wartime*, 132–33.

²² Quoted in Fussell, *Wartime*, 133.

²³ These magazines often feature humorous content, and their titles reflect the circumstances of the Blitz and the work of their sponsoring organizations: *Barrage*, *The Blackout*, etc.

²⁴ Carver, Personal diary, 31 December 1941.

her study of autobiographical writings about the Blitz, those who recorded their stories “saw themselves as participants in a moment of change”²⁵ and collectively “wrote and rewrote the history of the...Blitz.”²⁶ Their writings implicitly recognize the “significance of London [and its counterparts throughout the country] as a *space* and *place* during the raids”²⁷ and play a part in imaginatively reconstructing the spaces around them.

The conditions of the war did not lend themselves well to literary production. “In its physical effects alone,” points out cultural historian Robert Hewison, “the war was a difficult time for literature.” Publishers faced rations that allowed them only forty percent of the pre-war paper supply (what paper they could procure was typically of poor quality), and bombs destroyed twenty million books in London publishers’ warehouses (five million of those in one night alone).²⁸ Not only did the publishing industry struggle, but literary and cultural institutions suffered as well: the Blitz destroyed more than 400 libraries,²⁹ and institutions lost significant portions of their collections, including 150,000 books destroyed in the British Museum Library and 30,000 bound volumes of newspapers lost at Colindale Library.³⁰ Yet in spite of censorship, rationing, and bomb damage, Patrick Deer claims, library usage and book sales were extremely high and, contrary to the claim of artistic silence and intellectual scarcity, more literature was in circulation during the Second World War than the First.³¹

The nature of the war did challenge existing traditions of war poetry and other war writing. As Michael North explains, there was little demand for writing that questioned and criticized “basic

²⁵ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

²⁸ Hewison, *Under Siege*, 24-25 and 35-37. See also Calder, *People’s War*, 511-12.

²⁹ Deer, *Culture in Camouflage*, 11.

³⁰ Hewison, *Under Siege*, 29.

³¹ Deer, *Culture in Camouflage*, 11-12.

war aims while most of the casualties were civilians, one's friends, family and potential readers."³²

The type of poetry often written in response to the First World War or the Spanish Civil War thus seemed an inappropriate response in Britain under the Blitz. Some writers and critics felt that "neither the patriotism of Rupert Brooke nor the pity of Wilfred Owen was appropriate to a new war, being fought on new terms."³³ British writers did not on the whole avoid addressing the horrors of war, nor did all accept a simplified, black and white vision of the conflict, but many accepted the premise of a necessary war and focused their artistic energies on recounting the experiences of civilians and participating in the war effort themselves. Much of the war writing of the time thus consists of "true-life accounts and thinly fictionalised stories of warfare, the Blitz and the Fire Service," which found publishers and readers from the very beginning of the war. These stories tended to be published quickly, perhaps seeming unambitious and un-self-conscious about form, but this approach can be interpreted as a part of the genre's polemical point³⁴: to engage real people and authentic stories, to democratize the experience of war writing, to avoid putting aesthetics above the events as they happened, however impossible these goals might be in reality.

The Second World War did not provoke the same types of experiments associated with the First World War—for example, this war did not prompt its own *Blast*—and much of the writing it inspired is formally and stylistically routine. In 1941 journalist and anthropologist Tom Harrisson even called the many Blitz accounts then being published "a cataract of tripe."³⁵ But just as the literary and artistic developments of the Great War were driven by what was new at that moment—trench warfare, mechanized weaponry, the horrifying images of No Man's Land—the notable literary shifts that came with the next war reflected what was new in that engagement—air

³² North, "World War II," 444.

³³ Hewison, *Under Siege*, 97.

³⁴ North, "World War II," 448-49.

³⁵ Quoted in Knowles, *A Purgatorial Flame*, xiii.

warfare and large-scale attacks on non-military targets. “It was the civilian experience of war that was so characteristically new in this case,”³⁶ argues Michael North, and thus the literature that emerged from the civilian experience is innovative in shifting the terms of literary engagement with routine tropes of English life, as I demonstrate in subsequent chapters.

Amidst the difficulties of production and the shift in literary dynamics—away from a story of war told primarily or exclusively by soldiers toward one shared by non-combatants—a great deal of literature concerned with recreating the home front emerged. Though much of this writing is of the quotidian type Harrison so disliked, some of it does contain surrealist, mythical, and uncanny elements.³⁷ North argues that unlike the more straightforward memoirs and journalism, novels like James Hanley’s *No Directions* and Graham Greene’s *The Ministry of Fear* “attempted to render the civilian experience of war in more thoroughly formal terms”³⁸ and creatively “explore the negative side of the wartime truism that ‘nobody can be alone any more’” in unsettling ways.³⁹ The formal elements of these and other experimental literary Blitz texts—notably, Henry Green’s *Caught* and Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*—place them more immediately than true-life accounts in conversation with prominent place-bound strands of English literature and modernist thought. Fiction enabled these novelists to describe spaces in symbolic and exploratory ways, but non-fiction Blitz writers often adopted the same themes, images, and attitudes. This notable convergence underscores the depth of the Blitz’s influence of language and space. To examine the intersection of the Blitz’s literary response, both popular and highbrow, and the spaces it created or reshaped is to identify some of the broader implications of the war for English thought and memory.

³⁶ North, “World War II,” 444.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 449.

³⁹ Ibid., 450.

The Home Front

During the Blitz, Britons developed a rich cultural and literary figuration of the home front to explain the experience of a population of civilians under fire. The home front, traditionally a space separated from battle and its dangers, developed into an imaginative space that, through the language and imagery of war, helped to make sense of a peculiar and bewildering situation in which one could be both at home and under attack. In this figuration, the home front was an actual second front, and destruction, death, and ARP work were accepted as part of combat. The space of the home front, which encompasses the many other locations and symbols that compose Blitz materiality, was recorded and interpreted by numerous writers and observers, and their diversity of perspectives contributed to the imagining of the home front as a space of action vital to the war. The ways in which the Blitz is popularly remembered rely heavily on the figuration of a particular type of home front—one with cheerful, patriotic civilian soldiers fighting in the streets—but the ambivalence of actual written accounts complicate our understanding of this overarching Blitz space. These accounts suggest that the key to the strangeness of the home front is not merely in its likeness to a battleground, although metaphors of trenches and battlefields convey aspects of the Blitz experience difficult to express in other terms, but also in the dissonance inherent in the oxymoronic conflation of home space and battle space.

On July 15, 1940, N. V. Carver⁴⁰ recorded a succinct observation in her diary: “All quiet on the Home Front so far.” Carver’s allusion to Erich Maria Remarque’s popular and powerful 1929 novel about the Great War reveals a changing view of the home front. By 1940, the home front was not the opposite of the war front, a place to which one could escape for safety, but a site of

⁴⁰ Carver was a supervisor at London’s Central Telegraph Office who kept a detailed personal journal from August 1939 to December 1945, in which she recounted her experiences with the Blitz and wartime life. Her journal is now held in the Imperial War Museum’s documents collection.

further instability and potential violence. In retrospect, Carver's statement also signals with irony that a war front, whether the Western Front or the blitzed home front, seldom remains quiet for long, and Carver's home front did not. Less than two months later, the protracted bombing of English cities by the German Luftwaffe began. A few months after that, and well into the worst period of bombing Britons would face during the war, on April 21, 1941, Phyllis Warner⁴¹ apprehensively climbed the stairs to the rooftop of her workplace for her shift on fire-watching duty.⁴² "Now for the front line, chaps,"⁴³ she told herself as she set her teeth and prepared for the undoubtedly nerve-wracking ordeal of spending the night atop a building as raiders raining incendiaries and high-explosive bombs passed overhead.

Patrick Deer argues that by late 1916, the third year of the First World War, "the trenches were engraved on the imagination of the metropolis."⁴⁴ By 1940, they were engraved on the metropolis itself in the minds of those who saw English cities as a new Western Front populated by a civilian army. Pre-war planning for the anticipated air raids discouraged the transformation of open spaces into trenches because it "might have been frighteningly reminiscent of the Western Front,"⁴⁵ a concern that proved prescient but was eventually ignored out of necessity. The language used to prepare for and describe the Blitz experience is, as Amy Helen Bell has noted, indebted to the collective memory and the literary traditions of the First World War. A natural outgrowth of this historical and cultural touchstone is the use of battlefront or trench imagery to express a situation of violence and danger; see, for example, Sydney Vosper's 1942 painting *Queer*

⁴¹ Phyllis Warner, like N. V. Carver, kept a wartime journal now held by the Imperial War Museum. In addition to participating in government and ARP work, Warner also published several articles in *The Washington Post* about life in England during the Blitz.

⁴² After serious fire damage to parts of the city, businesses were required to provide nightly fire-watchers. These individuals would monitor buildings during raids and put out or report fires sparked by incendiary bombs.

⁴³ Warner, "Journal under the Terror," 21 April 1941. Warner's story also highlights the fact that on this new front, women were on the front lines along with men.

⁴⁴ Deer, *Culture in Camouflage*, 32.

⁴⁵ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 53.



Figure 8: Vosper, Sydney Curnow. *Queer Vegetation!* 1940. Imperial War Museum, London. *Imperial War Museums*. Web. 4 September 2013. © IWM (Art.IWM ART LD 2001)

Vegetation! (Figure 8), which features an elderly couple resting on a park bench and gazing into a No Man's Land of barbed wire. In the case of the Blitz, this language and imagery becomes more than a metaphor. Winston Churchill declared in 1940, "The fronts are everywhere. The trenches are dug in the towns and the streets."⁴⁶ In lending the weight of authority to the image of trench-lined streets—primarily figurative, although some public areas were home to shallow trench-style shelters dug for protection from flying debris during air raids—Churchill's words encourage identification of home with battlefield, civilian with soldier, and private domestic life with public service and shows of bravery.

The streets-as-trenches motif appeared in writing from the very beginning of the war, hinting at the lines of continuity drawn between the events of 1939 and those of two decades prior. Though we now hear the idiomatic expression "in the trenches" in reference to hard work or experience, the Oxford English Dictionary indicates this was not common usage until well after the Second World War. Its presence in wartime writing, then, indicates a conceptual link between two very different sites of war. In a letter to the editor printed in *The Times* on September 5, 1939, a man invokes the comparison when he predicts that "the strain upon the occupants of what might be termed the civil trenches will be almost as great as that imposed upon those who man the firing posts."⁴⁷ Given the symbolic power of the trenches in the wake of the First World War and their status as widely familiar reference points for war, their extension into this urban metaphor seems inevitable.

The collapse of widely disparate conceptual spaces and the merging of distinct categories of life experience suggest that traditional values and ways of life were challenged by the threat of invasion but also, simultaneously, by the radical response to the threat and to the circumstances of

⁴⁶ Cannadine, *Blood, Toil, Tears*, 181.

⁴⁷ Dean, "To the Editor," 6.

war. By forcing violent conflict into the home front and imposing restrictions on the way people lived and interacted, the war stripped away expectations of safety and stability typically associated with home. The expectation of safety and domestic comfort at home in England existed as a function of social, economic, and racial privilege, so in some sense the Blitz was a democratizing experience: even the privileged faced danger and instability. Similarly, women and other non-combatants without positions of influence could contribute more substantively to the collective war effort than ever before and claim a sense of influence and belonging previously reserved for soldiers and leaders.

Angus Calder and Amy Helen Bell have made clear that, despite the alleged equalizing effects of air raids, all did not suffer equally during the Blitz. Disproportionate damage and casualties struck industrial areas that were densely populated with members of the working class who possessed fewer resources with which to build shelters or voluntarily evacuate. But it is still true that all faced danger more immediate than they did when fighting remained across the Channel, as during most of the previous war. The idea of all England taken over by trenches below and aircraft above offered a compelling visual framework for mapping the tensions and anxieties of wartime, which manifested themselves in literal fights, including the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, as well in the figurative battles writers used to illustrate clashes of individuals or ideas.

As the Blitz proceeded, the symbolism of the “civil trenches” became more physical and specific. The expression “civil trenches” was no longer merely a loose designation for a place where war work happened and losses occurred, as it may have been for some early on. Instead, in an eerily apt topographical parallel, use of the phrase evoked images of city streets lined with heaps of rubble and under fire from above. Meanwhile, in the print media, labeling someplace the “battlefield of Britain” became a shorthand method of declaring it an important site of courageous war work as well as technological or artistic progress occasioned by the war. Newspapers’

celebratory declarations aimed to spin the threatening and demanding realities of living in a war zone into a positive narrative. The next generation of artists, declared an editorial in *The Times* referencing paintings by London firemen, “are being trained on the battlefield of Britain.”⁴⁸ Another affirmed, “The daylight skies over the Home Counties are... the battlefield of Britain.”⁴⁹ By labeling these spaces as literal battlefields, journalists elevated their actual and symbolic importance and emphasized the value of the work done within them.

Battlefields, particularly those of the First World War, furnished writers with common imagery for portrayals of urban environments, as seen above and in descriptions of London in chapter four, and of coastal towns and beaches, many of which were considered vulnerable to invasion and were therefore evacuated, mined, and lined with barbed wire and bollards. The title character in Barbara Euphan Todd’s *Miss Ranskill Comes Home*, upon returning to England after spending several years shipwrecked on a small island, finds the beaches of Hartmouth and Teignmouth made ugly by tangles of barbed wire.⁵⁰ These places, which might otherwise have evoked nostalgic childhood memories or the comfortable familiarity of the island home she left behind when returning to England, instead offer only intrusive reminders of war. Miss Ranskill’s isolation and confusion when thrust into a mystifying world of air raids and rations; her lack of home, friends, and money; her legal status as one lost at sea and presumed dead; and the failure of those around her to comprehend her plight without leveling suspicious accusations, leave her lost in a No Man’s Land of domestic life. Tangles of barbed wire inevitably recall the contours of a First World War battlefield and become for Miss Ranskill a visible representation that the current battle is never far from home in its effects.

⁴⁸ “Eclipse of the Highbrow,” 5.

⁴⁹ “Country Silence,” 5.

⁵⁰ Todd, *Miss Ranskill Comes Home*, 88 and 189.

While England—and especially the air above it—did become a battlefield in the fundamental sense as the location of clashes between enemy armies, as evidenced by the erecting of barricades and anti-aircraft batteries, the domestic front also experienced militarization in less threatening but still unsettling ways. For example, new bombers and other military equipment were sometimes displayed in public squares to raise morale and funds. N. V. Carver recorded in her diary the events of “Salute the Soldier” week, during which “tanks & armoured cars rumb[ed] down Ludgate Hill—amid the cheers of the citizens” and visitors to “St Pauls ‘Arena’...had a jolly demonstration of A.A. [anti-aircraft or “ack-ack”] Guns, searchlights & Radiolocation” that was “very exciting & real.”⁵¹ In an odd moment of disconnect, she expresses enthusiasm about the “real” trappings of an embattled space, the very sights and sounds that usually prompt tension and worry when used as intended. In an entry written only a few months earlier, Carver expresses her distress at the “horrible sameness”⁵² of each raid and, later that year, notes upon returning to London from a trip that it is “not nice to be home again in the Battlefront.”⁵³ Her ambivalence about the different aspects of battleground England suggests the difficulty of bridging the gap between the ontologically divergent spatial categories of home and battlefield. In attempting to explain life in a space under attack, users of battlefield language highlight the impossibility of normal existence occupying the same space as the constant threat of death without distortion to the underlying sense of what is real.

A battlefront paradigm, and its accompanying shifts in perspective, also pervades home-front literature in more subtle ways, appearing as a frequent metaphor for all manner of conflicts and emerging in violent language used to describe everyday scenes. In Mollie Panter-Downes’s

⁵¹ Carver, *Personal diary*, 27 and 31 March 1944.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 20 February 1944.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9 August 1944.

One Fine Day, as I show in chapter five, the language of war penetrates the English landscape such that ordinarily pleasant garden scenes play host to vicious clashes between competing plant species. In Henry Green's *Back*, a wounded soldier returns home to an England of "blood-coloured brick,"⁵⁴ where an acquaintance must "[pilot] him through the traffic"⁵⁵ as a plane through an aerial skirmish and where he falls in love with a woman whose visitors leave her feeling "in a state of siege."⁵⁶ In Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*, the tense atmosphere of wartime manifests itself beyond the immediate events of war; the reconnaissance missions, evasive actions, and covert operations in which Arthur Rowe engages are drawn from the narrative of war and placed in a London mystery tale, suggesting the ability of the war to enlist noncombatants and expand its territory into all aspects of life, as London streets and hotels become the trenches through which Rowe is hunted. Patrick Hamilton's *Hangover Square* similarly illustrates an England remade in the image of a battlefield even before the emergence of openly violent air raids. For Hamilton, the places and relationships his characters inhabit exhibit the darkness and suspicion that might characterize a war zone.

Hamilton's other wartime novel, *The Slaves of Solitude*, published in 1947, emphasizes the identification of civilians with soldiers when it portrays commuters departing from their train as an "army of home-seekers, in full attack."⁵⁷ These militant commuters, forceful and unified in purpose, reveal the humorous potential in over-identification—the mission of the "army of home-seekers" ostensibly has nothing to do with the war and casts its soldiers as absurd in their single-minded pursuit of a mundane goal—but also underscores the depths to which war became the predominant filter through which routine, domestic actions were viewed. Furthermore, Hamilton's

⁵⁴ Green, *Back*, 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁷ Hamilton, *The Slaves of Solitude*, 2.

visual permits a more frightening extrapolation: an attacking army headed for home calls to mind the very real fear of German attacks on British homes that many harbored during the war and indicates the anxieties embedded in battlefield metaphor.

The Times reported on April 28, 1941, that Winston Churchill had spoken in his latest broadcast of this home-front battlefield in and around London. The prime minister reportedly said:

The sublime but also terrible experiences and emotions of the battlefield, which for centuries have been reserved for the soldiers and sailors, are now shared for good or ill by the entire population. All are proud to be under the fire of the enemy.

Old men, little children, the crippled, the veterans of foreign wars, aged women, the ordinary hard-pressed citizen,...the sturdy workman with his hammer in the shipyard or who loads the ships, and the skilful craftsman, the members of every kind of A.R.P. service, are proud to feel that they stand in the line together with our fighting men.⁵⁸

Churchill's long list of citizen soldiers, ranging from children to air-raid wardens, hinges at its center on the ordinary citizen, emphasizing the key role that average people played in the war effort (or at least the key role that the government and proponents of the myth of the "People's War" wished to present in order to aid morale and encourage volunteer efforts). By rhetorically placing the full range of noncombatants on the front line along with traditional combatants, Churchill emphasizes civilian spaces as a primary location of combat.

The notion of England, and London in particular, as a battleground pervades Blitz literature, suggesting the need for a radical recharacterization of conventional space in order to capture a mood of anxiety and the nearness of death. That writers resort so often to describing cities under attack reveals the novelty of urban, civilian-targeted warfare, and imagining England as a battlefield provides the vocabulary and conceptual framework to make sense of the circumstances. Recasting civilian space as a battle front also allows writers to make an implicit claim

⁵⁸ "Prime Minister's Heartening Speech," 4.

regarding the involvement and importance of ordinary people: their experiences are fully a part of the war, and their contributions, losses, and sacrifices are as real as those of combatants.

The Material Blitz

The material spaces that define the British civilian experience during the Second World War, particularly as represented in literature, challenge idealized visions of the home front embraced by propagandists and embody its more troubling realities. While most civilians shared some common elements of the experience, the particulars of where they lived, worked, and sheltered dictated a significant share: whether they were from an urban or rural area; if Londoners, whether they lived in the East or West End; how many and what type of people shared their living space; and which ARP resources they had access to. For example, many rural Britons felt they did the true work of the war, taking in troublesome evacuees, billeting soldiers, and raising crops and livestock; city-dwellers, on the other hand, sometimes claimed that only they, as the primary targets of German air raids, truly understood and were affected by the worst of the war. Neither view, of course, was universally held or even true: farms and villages were not entirely safe from bombs, and the cities were filled with people working hard for the war effort and dealing with disruption to their homes and routines. Air-raid shelters were also a common differentiator in people's firsthand experiences. Some civilians preferred not to shelter at all, while others were fortunate to have reinforced basements or gardens in which they could install private shelters. Still more joined thousands in deep London Underground tunnels or crowded into public street-level shelters.

In addition to the range of shelter options eventually made available (featuring equally wide-ranging levels of safety and comfort), the war prompted the creation of other new spaces to serve the functions of wartime. Some, like many shelters, were purpose-built, some transformed and repurposed existing places, and still others emerged spontaneously as the natural result of new

patterns of movement. The latter category is perhaps best represented in Blitz writing by the long and ubiquitous queues that formed outside shops. English people, particularly women, spent hours waiting to obtain rationed or rare food items and household goods; the queues in which they often stood came to stand as a symbol of the waiting that pervaded daily life—waiting for taxis and buses, waiting for news, waiting for bombs—and served as a hub for the exchange of information and gossip. Ration lines, along with air-raid shelters, the euphemistically labeled “rest centres,”⁵⁹ the factories and fire stations into which large segments of the population entered for the first time, the storage facilities that housed bombed families’ salvaged belongings until they could be permanently relocated, and the Home Guard and warden posts that appeared in cities and villages throughout Britain: these places and spaces defined the civilian experience on the home front, shaping the paths, routines, and relationships that carried people through the war.

War, Susan Sontag insists, “evacuates, shatters, breaks apart, levels the built world”⁶⁰ in ways both metaphorical and material. Britons on the home front recorded the changes to their surroundings in dramatic terms that suggest they saw the alterations not only as adding unfamiliar spaces to their world but also as fundamentally remaking existing space. One recalls that “parks and other open spaces were disfigured by hastily dug trenches in which people were supposed to take cover if an air raid caught them away from home.”⁶¹ Photos taken after raids show disfigurement in the form of twisted steel girders protruding from piles of rubble like broken bones. In her short story “Clocks,” Esther Kreitman, a Polish Jewish writer who lived much of her

⁵⁹ “Rest centres” were temporary accommodation, often located in evacuated schools or other large public buildings, for people bombed out of their homes.

⁶⁰ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 8.

⁶¹ Crossley, “A Middle Class War,” 20. Crossley wrote this memoir, which narrates her experiences in London during the war, much later in her life, but it captures many details of wartime existence.

life in London and experienced the Blitz,⁶² more viscerally depicts a similar disfigurement of space: at a bomb site, “the earth lay there like a corpse prepared for an autopsy, its innards wet and glistening. Sewage pipes were sticking out everywhere, like intestines falling out of an open belly.”⁶³ Labeling these wartime parks as “disfigured” and the damaged ground as corpse-like emphasizes the exceptional conditions under which spaces deviate from normal appearance and function and suggests the traumatic injury done to places that help to shape the lives and identities of the people who use them.

The constraints of domestic wartime surroundings manifest themselves in adaptations to rituals and traditions. According to a holiday-themed propaganda film screened in West End cinemas and in the United States under the title *Christmas Under Fire: The Story of England in the Year of the Blitz*, “there’s no demand in England for large trees this year [1940]. They would not fit into the shelters, or into the basements and cellars with their low ceilings.”⁶⁴ Christmas trees, like other aspects of non-war life, must be scaled to fit within the physical realities of the war and their meanings remade in this new context. In a more dramatic instance of tradition constrained by bombing, a newlywed couple shared during a 1940 radio program their story of getting married the day after a severe raid. The bride’s house was destroyed while she spent the night in a shelter, but family members and neighbors helped to dig out what remained of the dress, shoes, and cake, allowing the wedding to go ahead.⁶⁵ The event occurred despite the Blitz, but only after the physical trappings had been consumed by and then extracted from the wreckage of what would at another time have been a comfortable place of refuge and preparation.

⁶² Kreitman was the sister of better-known writers Isaac Bashevis Singer and Israel Joshua Singer. Kreitman’s London stories were only recently translated from Yiddish into English and thus would not have been available to British readers in the 1940s when they were written.

⁶³ Kreitman, *Blitz and Other Stories*, 127.

⁶⁴ *Christmas Under Fire*, 1.

⁶⁵ “London Wedding Blitzed.”

The connections joining distant spaces together also fell victim to the circumstances of the Blitz, as bombs severed infrastructure links, petrol for personal use was strictly rationed, and even travel that remained physically possible was discouraged. Even within their own towns, people found that leaving their homes or places of work was complicated by the additional burden of gas masks and the need to reach safe spaces by nightfall. Although restaurants and clubs often maintained their own shelters for the use of patrons and many places of entertainment were open throughout most of the war, nightlife was constrained by black-out restrictions, safety concerns, and preoccupation with war work. During the early days of the war, before people had grown accustomed to the conditions and government restrictions on public gatherings were eased, the options were particularly limited. Mollie Panter-Downes wrote in September of 1939 that Britons had “accepted a new troglodyte existence in which there are few places of entertainment, no good radio programs, little war news, and nothing to do after dark except stay in the cave,”⁶⁶ which was safer than wandering about in the blackout. Giving up the pre-war period’s relative ease of travel seemed to trap Britons in an archaic, physically and symbolically restrictive space.

While day-to-day travel was difficult, relocation due to evacuation, enlistment, conscription, or rehousing was extremely common: records indicate that as many as 60 million address changes occurred during the war—this in a civilian population numbering only about 38 million.⁶⁷ The geographical instability of the British populace, along with the presence of refugees who arrived from the continent throughout the war, further exacerbated communication difficulties and restructured communities. As a result of these ongoing changes in the ways people lived, interacted, and traveled in the spaces of their neighborhoods and cities, the social geography of Britain was remapped (even as pre-existing conceptual maps continued to inform perceptions of

⁶⁶ Panter-Downes, *Letter from England*, 14.

⁶⁷ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 111.

the war's effects). An obvious topic for civilians recording the Blitz was "the damage to the physical geography of London" and other affected areas. "The meanings [that writers] ascribed to the changed space were profoundly indebted to cultural attitudes towards the geography of London and its 'slum' neighborhoods. People writing during the Blitz described a unique wartime social geography of London"⁶⁸ in which people occupied different roles and spaces than in their pre-war lives.

Often during the war the precise state of threatened or damaged spaces was left to the imagination, as censors restricted details about the locations of raids and the extent of the damage done in order to preserve civilian morale and prevent enemy forces from confirming the efficacy of their attacks. A Mass-Observation report⁶⁹ from 1941 indicates that "there has been widespread criticism of official communiqués about air raids, especially their minimisation of damage and casualties in such phrases as 'slight material damage'. Many people have seen with their own eyes evidence that falsified these bulletins."⁷⁰ This was particularly true in the case of large-scale incidents,⁷¹ such as the V-2 rocket strike on a Woolworth's department store in 1944, after which details about the seriousness of the damage and the number of casualties were withheld until nearly the end of the war. A similar case is the tragedy of South Hallsville School, which received a direct hit while hundreds of civilians bombed out the previous night were waiting there for assistance; the West Ham Council declared 73 dead, but unofficial estimates place the toll at more than 400.

Writers' fictional or retrospective accounts fill in the gaps of ruined spaces and suppressed

⁶⁸ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 8.

⁶⁹ Mass-Observation is a social research initiative, founded in 1937 by Tom Harrisson, Humphrey Jennings, and Charles, that studied and recorded everyday life in Britain and amassed a large amount of data about Britons' experiences, opinions, and morale during the war.

⁷⁰ M-O A, TC Air Raids, 6/H, "Morale and Air Raids," 3.

⁷¹ "Incident" was the official term chosen to denote explosions and other bomb-related events. John Strachey drily observes, "[This] official description of the effects of a bomb...cannot indeed be held to convey very graphically the consequences of a bomb. Just the contrary. The word is wonderfully colourless, dry and remote; it touches nothing which it does not minimise. And this, it may be supposed, was what recommended it conclusively to the authorities" (Strachey, *Digging for Mrs. Miller*, 14-15).

information by offering alternative, concrete images of the spaces in question in place of impersonal, circumscribed, or absent official accounts.

Wartime fiction reveals the perceived influence of the Blitz over the physical and sensory world. In John Owen's *Blitz Hero* (1942), one character observes "signs of ruin accumulating upon her senses,"⁷² as if these elements do not merely exist around her but are actually gathered and absorbed into her being. Mass-Observation received a memo, dated September 1, 1940, just before a period of prolonged and severe raids began, entitled "Memo on the Senses re. Air Raids." This document, excerpted below, details aspects of the raids that might "accumulate upon [one's] senses."

Touch. This has not yet acquired great specific application.

Where bombs fall the physical effects of Blast etc on the mind, and the anticipatory idea of wounds might be gauged as against Sounds & Sights.

Under this heading would also come the comfort to be derived from the wearing or carrying of tin hats and gas-masks, holding hands in Shelters, etc.

Smell (& Taste) Inv[estigator]: doesn't know that this enters into the pictures at all as yet, but in the event of Gas being used it certainly will.

Sound. Sirens, Bombs, Gunfire, near and far, the Stuttering note of German planes, etc.

Though there is so much in the way of Sounds, Inv: suggests that--

Sight Is the most important medium for reactions.

In spite of the vastly increased danger the need to look seems to amount almost to a compulsion with many people.

If invited to watch a plane caught in searchlights, an aerial dog-fight, or even flashes, only the very sensible or very nervous would resist the temptation.⁷³

⁷² Owen, *Blitz Hero*, 66.

⁷³ M-O A, TC Air Raids, 6/H, "Memo on the Senses."

Many of the sensations reported by the observer arise from the nature of citizens' physical surroundings: proximity to urban centers and defense zones determines the intrusiveness of noise from airplanes and anti-aircraft guns, and the use of shelters entails many senses, including the touch referenced above as well as limited ability to see what is happening outside and, as reported by diarists and Mass-Observation contributors, the overwhelming smell of many people crowded into a poorly ventilated space. Although the writer of the above "Memo on the Senses" did not anticipate the importance of smell in the aftermath of air raids, it turned out to be a significant sensory element. In addition to the fetid (and often remarked upon) stench of crowded and unsanitary shelters, bombing itself was said to have a distinctive smell: it included the scents of pulverized bricks and mortar, explosive residues, domestic gas, and burning wood, "but the whole of the smell was greater than the sum of its parts. It was the smell of violent death itself."⁷⁴ These accumulating sensory responses became defining characteristics of key spaces.⁷⁵

Another character in *Blitz Hero* regards the bombs as having the ability to shape his physical reality to the point of annihilation: they were the "thing that could not merely kill him but blot him out of the physical world altogether, so that no particle could be identified."⁷⁶ The violence of war is construed here as possessing the power to unmake the physical world, to literally alter the spaces of reality. On the other hand, in *Digging for Mrs. Miller* (1941), a series of short stories based on John Strachey's experiences in civil defense, the ARP warden Ford finds that the Blitz reshapes not the physical world itself but his place within and perceptions of its spatial

⁷⁴ Strachey, *Digging for Mrs. Miller*, 100.

⁷⁵ Virginia Woolf's October 1940 musings on the risk of death in an air raid offer another vivid and horrifying tour of the sensations that might accumulate in moments and spaces of danger: "Oh I try to imagine how one's killed by a bomb. I've got it fairly vivid—the sensation: but can't see anything but suffocating nonentity following after. I shall think—oh I wanted another 10 years—not this—& shant, for once, be able to describe it. It—I mean death; no, the scrunching & scrambling, the crushing of my bone shade in on my very active eye & brain: the process of putting out the light,—painful? Yes. Terrifying. I suppose so—Then a swoon; a drum; two or three gulps attempting consciousness—& then, dot dot dot" (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 5*, 326–27).

⁷⁶ Owen, *Blitz Hero*, 130. Owen's remark seems, in retrospect, to foreshadow the 1945 atomic bomb attacks on Japan.

dimensions. In picturing the trajectories of the falling bombs whistling around him, “Ford was making a practical acquaintance with the third dimension on a large scale. His night-scape changed its shape. It became, not just a flat expanse of slate-pale roofs, but a solid cube of moonlit night, four miles high, and merely floored by the city’s roofs and streets.”⁷⁷

The widespread dislocation and destruction of the home front—not distant military sites but historic space and living space—sets the tone of some writers’ responses to the war in general. E. M. Forster wrote in 1940, “I don’t want to lose” the war, but “I don’t expect Victory (with a big V!), and I can’t join in any build-a-new-world stuff. Once in a lifetime one can swallow that, but not twice.”⁷⁸ The rhetoric of a postwar new world had abstract social and political dimensions, as it did during Forster’s first encounter with it, but the second time proved overwhelming, even impossible to believe in, in part because it entailed the building of a new physical world as well.

Preparation for functional reconstruction required acknowledgment and acceptance of the often arbitrary results of air raids, which varied widely depending on severity, location, preparedness and advance warning, and type of weapon used. Everyday people, Paul Fussell argues, mistakenly if unconsciously clung to the conviction “that bombs are precisely ‘aimed’ and that thus their damage makes interpretable sense.”⁷⁹ While some German bombs and rockets did strike their targets, many more went astray or were meant only to cause general chaos and loss of morale. The impulse to analyze the bomb damage in search of meaningful interpretation underlies many written accounts, both as an attempt to make an irrational and unpredictable experience rational and predictable and as a means of reassurance in the face of nearly constant danger. Many diarists and Mass-Observation participants recall keeping their spirits up with “comforting mantras

⁷⁷ Strachey, *Digging for Mrs. Miller*, 46.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Fussell, *Wartime*, 131.

⁷⁹ Fussell, *Wartime*, 17.

about a bomb having your name on it, and if it did, you were doomed, if it didn't, you'd be all right—there was nothing you could do either way.”⁸⁰ When a bomb has your name on it, when your time has come, they assured each other with dark humor, it will not matter whether you are hidden in a shelter or standing exposed on the street. The randomness behind the locations of bomb strikes and the failure of logic to explain how some are killed by direct hits on shelters while others survive near misses in the open forces the development of coping mechanisms: in this case, the fatalistic but oddly comforting notion that a bomb could be aimed for anyone in particular.

Because actual bomb damage so often does not make interpretable sense, literary responses construct meaningful alternative narratives about damaged or threatened spaces. *Blitz* literature attempts to make sense of these spaces and to recreate them in some form, whether to remember or to revise the experience. By connecting spaces under stress to their past and future formulations and meanings, *Blitz* writing seeks to make sense of the overwhelming and irrational present and reveals its effects on spatial symbols. Writers working during the war found that it affected the process and content of their writing, helping to shape the physical spaces and conditions both internal and external to the production of a text. In the preface to *Blitz Hero*, for instance, John Owen writes, “One night a shell splinter entered the room in which by day this book was being written.”⁸¹ Owen’s shell splinter suggests the physical aspects of the *Blitz* that entered into writing on more than one level and merged real and fictional spaces.

Spatial constructs make particularly apt symbols for wartime writers because they exploit the easy parallels between shattered buildings and infrastructures and the crumbling societal norms those structures once bolstered. The war, as one writer saw it, “altered...English society as a whole.... Those Victorian virtues of stability and discrimination, so badly cracked in 1914, were

⁸⁰ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 184.

⁸¹ Owen, *Blitz Hero*, v.

finally broken and tossed into the dustbin during the Second World War”⁸² like so many bits of bomb debris. Perspectives varied, of course, on which particular social values and characteristics fell away and whether the net effect was positive or negative, but the figurative evocation of material spaces and structures—like cracked foundations and broken walls—facilitated exploration of the war’s meaning for British society and identity.

The subsequent sections of this chapter comprise analyses of spaces and spatial symbols central to the lived experience, literary representation, and collective memory of the Blitz on the British home front. These examples demonstrate more specifically the types of textual spaces writers built to respond to the world around them and the ways in which narratives are constructed on and around the foundations of these spaces. Each space, in literal and conceptual forms, serves not simply as part of the trappings of wartime realism and a setting for stories, but also as a means of shaping and transmitting complex and sometimes conflicting responses to the Blitz. In attempting to recreate and make sense of the physical and spatial components of wartime life, Blitz writing reveals anxieties about the past and future, critiques of social issues, and shifting paradigms about modern Britain. These are threads that run through nearly all literature written around the time of the Blitz and that weave the symbolic landscape of the more broadly conceived, long-lived literary spaces explored in the chapters that will follow.

Shelters

The air-raid shelter functions as a common signifier of the Blitz, and, for those who lived in the places most affected, a constant visual and physical reminder of the war’s effects. It is also a spatial anchor for a common theme of the “People’s War” ideology. The myth that the people of Britain shared equally in the suffering and work of the war and banded together with confidence

⁸² Bentley, “South Kensington,” 171.

and resolve is, as noted previously, at best reductive and in many ways blatantly false. But the notion had its utility for wartime propagandists, and it remained an appealing and consoling lens through which to view the horrors of war in retrospect. Because shelters were often public and shared, they seemed ideally formed to promote a leveling effect and helped to generate the illusion that the war was breaking down class divisions and harmoniously unifying people of all types together in a common cause. As the author of the 1941 novel *London Pride* puts it, during a scene in which the child protagonist eats sandwiches with his family in an East End shelter, “it was as if all London sat there, sharing this gigantic picnic.”⁸³

While the Second World War did signal major social changes, shelters were generally not the spaces in which social barriers were challenged. Diaries and Mass-Observation reports reveal, in fact, that the conditions and populations of London Underground and other large, public shelters reinforced socioeconomic prejudices and that classist attitudes drove many middle- and upper-class Britons to avoid such places. Given the reality of wartime class dynamics, air-raid shelters as depicted in literature can be more realistically understood as the site of breakdowns in personal rather than societal barriers. These barriers did at times have socioeconomic elements, but they also involved the meaning of privacy, the definition of domestic space, and the nature of gender relations.

The *New Statesman* estimated that during the height of the Blitz in late 1940 and early 1941, between 70,000 and 200,000 people took shelter each night in the London Underground.⁸⁴ Many thousands more throughout the country sheltered in private Morrison or Anderson shelters,

⁸³ Bottome, *London Pride*, 129.

⁸⁴ Hewison, *Under Siege*, 34. At the height of the Blitz, “a ‘shelter census’ of London’s central area...showed that there were 177,000 people sheltering [in the underground]—that is, around 4 per cent of London’s population, which compares with 9 per cent in public shelters and 27 per cent in Anderson shelters” (Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 85).

above-ground public shelters,⁸⁵ and reinforced cellars and basements. The near universality of sheltering during the Blitz—although of course the facilities and experiences varied, and some people used shelters only rarely—means that shelter scenes are ubiquitous in Blitz literature. Most novels and memoirs seem to feature at least a passing description of a night spent in a shelter, and some, like James Hanley’s *No Directions* (see chapter three), are constructed almost entirely around the act of taking shelter and the qualities of anxiety and vulnerability that pervade spaces used for such a purpose.

Some civilians recorded sentiments similar to those promoted in the official war narrative, suggesting it was a widespread and appealing idea, if not entirely accurate. Phyllis Warner claimed that “this blitzkrieg is breaking down many a class barrier and promoting all kinds of odd friendships, for community sleeping has started a new and bizarre form of social life.”⁸⁶ While true that “community sleeping” and other ARP activities led people to interact and develop friendships with those they might not have met under other circumstances, sometimes including people of other classes, such connections generally involved those living or working within the same neighborhoods. Even relationships that did surmount social barriers thus tended to be limited in closeness and in radical intent.

Often the unusual relationships forged in shelters during air raids were temporary, which limited their impact on broader social dynamics. J. L. Stevens recalls in her memoir that during the Blitz “it was recognized that if you were caught anywhere you could take refuge—no one minded that a perfect stranger would suddenly descend into their shelter”⁸⁷ and go his or her own way at the

⁸⁵ This type of shelter was broadly disliked and distrusted. Under certain conditions, the brick walls could collapse due to the force of a bomb blast, leaving the concrete ceiling to collapse on shelterers in what was gruesomely dubbed a “Morrison sandwich.”

⁸⁶ Warner, “Journal under the Terror,” 1 November 1940.

⁸⁷ Stevens, “Wartime Experiences,” 2. Stevens’s brief memoir recounts her experiences as a teenager during the Blitz, including being bombed out of her home, and as a member of the Women’s Land Army later in the war.

end of the raid. In Mollie Panter-Downes's short story "It's the Reaction" (1943), protagonist Catherine Birch finds comfort and intimacy in sheltering on the lower floors of her building and rolling out mattresses next to her neighbors each night, but she is disappointed when the raids end and her friends return to acting like the perfect strangers Stevens references. In Catherine's case, the lack of privacy and the sharing of living space are uncomfortable but welcome. Although the relationships she enjoyed do not last, Catherine's altered sense of personal privacy and space does, leading her to live out the remainder of the war hoping not for the class revolution that some see portended by the shelters but instead for a more modest shift in social norms.

While shelters figure most prominently as tools for exploring the questions raised by social proximity, other writers reference shelters in a more physical sense, framing them as sites of primitive existence (or even fear of death and burial). Barbara Euphan Todd's *Miss Ranskill*, when dragged on her first night home into a converted cellar to shelter from an air raid, feels comfortable for the first time since her bewildering journey from her desert island to wartime England. Observing the simple provisions of the shelter—"three camp-beds, each with a bundle of rugs," "a paraffin stove and a little oil-cooker and a couple of deck-chairs,"⁸⁸ and shelves containing books, tinned food, and basic cookware—Miss Ranskill is "amazed, for, to her, this cellar was an Aladdin's Cave of delight. If it could have been moved to the island, she...would have had all [she] could possibly have needed."⁸⁹ For Miss Ranskill, the shelter offers a simplified existence, an ideal refuge not only from air raids but also from the overwhelming and complicated society she is trying to rejoin. In the bigger picture of the Blitz, Miss Ranskill's shelter and her reaction to it reveal the

⁸⁸ Todd, *Miss Ranskill Comes Home*, 143.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.



Figure 9: Bathurst, Charles J. *An Interior—Canning Town*. n.d. Imperial War Museum, London. *Imperial War Museums*. Web. 4 September 2013. © IWM (Art.IWM ART LD 5878)

Note the Anderson shelter surrounded by rubble at bottom left.

disconnect between the values and expectations of the English people and what the conditions of war afforded them in terms of social, geographical, and physical mobility.

Todd's conception of the shelter space, representative of wartime life in general, as austere and primitive is subtly evoked in the account of a rescue-team member who, during heavy bomb attacks on the Isle of Dogs, encountered a "couple of dozen people excavated from buried Anderson Shelters,"⁹⁰ corrugated metal structures installed partially underground in private gardens. Anderson shelters, if properly installed, could generally withstand the force of nearby blasts and falling debris but were not a guarantee of safety (Figure 9). Rescuers "worked much in the same way," John Strachey writes in his lightly fictionalized account of the ARP front lines, "as archaeologists open up the debris of millennia; but this was the debris of seconds."⁹¹ This archaeological language, reminiscent of Mollie Panter-Downes's description of shelterers' "troglodyte existence" spent largely in "caves,"⁹² suggests distance and isolation rather than the intimacy that features in stories of unexpected friendships. The "debris of seconds" emphasizes the destructive power of a blast, which can do the work of millennia in reducing the lives of shelterers to fragments without form or identity and with only a faint and tenuous link to the present and future. Rescue-excavations also illuminate the dark side of relationships facilitated by the need for people to shelter together. Any newfound understanding gained across socioeconomic lines was virtually meaningless if the shelterers did not ultimately survive their encounters.

A September 1940 Mass-Observation survey found that many Londoners feared becoming relics to be excavated, so to speak. Shelters could both provide refuge from and exacerbate their

⁹⁰ Regan, Personal diary, 4.

⁹¹ Strachey, *Digging for Mrs. Miller*, 30.

⁹² "Troglodytes," or "troggs," was a common label for people sheltering underground and could be used humorously, to acknowledge the primitive lifestyle the Blitz had imposed, or derisively, to ridicule those who, out of fear or poverty, spent much of their time living on Tube platforms. The term appears in Mass-Observation reports, journalism, and even quotes from Winston Churchill.

fears. One woman admitted, voicing the thoughts of many others who disliked spending air raids indoors, including in the much-maligned and questionably constructed surface shelters, “I get a fatalistic feeling about it all. I don’t like the idea of being buried alive, or suffocated.”⁹³ Another woman, though, found comfort in secluded shelters: “As long as I don’t hear I don’t worry,” she told the observer. “If I hear planes I think my last hour’s coming. I must be hidden away somewhere where they can’t get at me.”⁹⁴ In accounts of air-raid shelters, both fictional and otherwise, writers echo this hope of escape by hiding away in protected spaces—the very presence of shelters in wartime cities and within texts themselves signifies preparation and survival—although an undercurrent of doubt emerges when failed shelters must be reframed as potential tombs, as suggested by the ghostly and skeletal figures in Henry Moore’s drawings of Tube shelters⁹⁵ (Figure 10).

Phyllis Bottome’s *London Pride* conveys this ambivalent view in a description of Docklanders’ reactions to the bombs bursting above them: “It was a queer sight in the Shelter; all the men and women and children throwing themselves face downwards on the earth, as if they wanted it to rise up and cover them.”⁹⁶ In the terror and chaos of the raid, the people seem to simultaneously embrace the shelter’s proximity to the earth and mistrust its ability to protect them. The wish for the earth “to rise up and cover them” implies a disturbing dual longing: to seek additional safety deeper underground (“the only safe Shelters were the Tubes,”⁹⁷ Bottome writes, echoing the conviction of many real Londoners) and to bury themselves, to be protected by death from further pain and fear.

⁹³ M-O A, TC London Survey 1940, 5/B, Responses to questionnaire, 2.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁵ Moore’s interest in drawing shelterers seems to be related to this eerie, primitive aesthetic, for he “grew bored with working in the tube when regimented bunks were installed and the occupants no longer appeared like ‘a white-grub race of troglodytes swathed in blankets’” (Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 158).

⁹⁶ Bottome, *London Pride*, 91.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.



Figure 10: Moore, Henry. *Women and Children in the Tube*. 1940. Imperial War Museum, London. *Imperial War Museums*. Web. 4 September 2013. © IWM (Art.IWM ART LD 759)

The imperfect reality of sheltering—that shelters were not always nearby, did not always have enough space for everyone who wished to enter, and were still vulnerable in the case of a direct hit by a bomb—challenged the notion of shelters as unpleasant but reliable refuges. Poet Donald Hughes suggests as much in a darkly comic couplet entitled “Safety Last” (1941):

“The shelter’s well within my reach.
It won’t take long to...” (end of speech.)⁹⁸

In Hughes’s lines, the generic shelter represents a vague assurance of safety that breeds complacency and veils the dangers of living in the Blitz even well within reach of shelters. And ultimately, even shelterers who did find cover and survive the raids were not free from the confusing, unsettling implications of shelters’ rearrangement of space and social relationships.

Ruins

Muriel Spark’s *The Girls of Slender Means*, a postwar novel published in 1963 and an exploration of the suppressed consequences of war that rise to the surface over time to further rearrange space and relationships, opens with a vision of ruins: “The streets of the cities were lined with buildings in bad repair or in no repair at all, bomb-sites piled with stony rubble, houses like giant teeth in which decay had been drilled out, leaving only the cavity. Some bomb-ripped buildings looked like the ruins of ancient castles until, at a closer view, the wallpaper of various quite normal rooms would be visible.”⁹⁹ Spark’s vision of the blitzed ruinscape attests to the continuing power of such space in the decades after the war, for it can immediately contextualize a postwar narrative and call up the necessary tone and setting. As a symbolic space, the ruinscape reflects the residual wounds of war as well as the relationship between postwar England and its past. It invokes the ongoing evolution, prompted by the war, of ruins as a cultural idea tied to but

⁹⁸ Hughes, *Blitz Bits*, 6.

⁹⁹ Spark, *The Girls of Slender Means*, 3.

not made safely distant by the ancient past or imperial nostalgia. *The Girls of Slender Means* demonstrates a perspective that emerged in Blitz writing of the 1940s and 1950s: the failure of pleasurable, romantic ruins to translate into a violent modern context and retain a reassuring connection to grand narratives about the past. Although in Spark's novel the violence is more distant and there is "absolutely no point in feeling depressed about the scene,"¹⁰⁰ the physical space is disfigured and decayed, the buildings "bomb-ripped" to expose the destruction of routine, private life.

I address ruins in passing in other chapters, for they are a recurring symbol for Blitz writers, but here I explore war ruins in general as misplaced artifacts that are bewildering to their contemporaries accustomed to viewing ruins as historic. Ruins of the past are sites of memory, but the uncomfortable presence of ruins resulting from recent violence rather than the passage of time complicates this relationship. The ruins of the Blitz, as represented near the time of their creation, are continuously suspended in the process of memory formation and attribution, and thus act as facilitators of uncertainty concerning the fate and legacy of their own society rather than enablers of more distant myths about the Romantic past or the rise and fall of ancient civilizations. Blitz ruins in literature are primarily spaces that register ambivalence about how to understand and remember the war. Despite the familiarity of ruins as a symbolic space, the ruins of the Blitz are difficult to interpret and accept as a physical record because they evince a traumatic recent past.

Unlike bomb shelters, ruins were already part of Britons' cultural discourse on memory at the time of the Blitz. It is from ruins that we often write history, and as such these spaces tend to serve as symbols of "pastness" and as relics far removed from the concerns and realities of the present even as they provoke thoughts about the present and future. While the "semantic

¹⁰⁰ Spark, *The Girls of Slender Means*, 4.

instability of the ruin”¹⁰¹ leaves the symbolic space open to varying interpretations and to political and emotional exploitation, “our ruin gaze is informed by centuries of images and their interpretations”¹⁰² and most uses draw on the narratives of ancient empires and on the Romantic themes of writers and artists like William Wordsworth and David Caspar Friedrich. But nineteenth-century Romantic ways of looking at ruins were necessarily changed by the ruins’ literal presence in wartime Britain and by the need to memorialize a recent past.

Traditional artistic representations of ruins tend to fall into three primary categories: “the ruin as a vehicle to create a romanticizing mood,” “the ruin as document of the past,” and “the ruin as means of reviving” earlier spatial concepts,¹⁰³ according to architect and art historian Paul Zucker. Zucker particularly celebrates ruins for their ability to evoke the sublime in ways that the original buildings could not. These categories, however, are complicated by circumstances like those of the Blitz. They also, particularly in the context of new ruins and ongoing violence, raise moral questions about the ethics of representation and the relationship between aesthetics and history. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle ask, for example, whether “the aestheticization of the ruin belittle[s] the human suffering that it connotes.”¹⁰⁴

While it would be reductive to suggest that all ruins in art are purely aesthetic, with no relation to human suffering, their cultural currency draws heavily on visual nostalgia. Some Blitz writing unambiguously employs Romantic imagery in its descriptions of the ruins. Jean Crossley, who lived in London during the war, observes in her memoir that “as time went on, some of the

¹⁰¹ Hell and Schönle, *Ruins of Modernity*, 6.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰³ Zucker, “Ruins—An Aesthetic Hybrid,” 120.

¹⁰⁴ Hell and Schönle, Introduction, 6. The exploitation of ruins to create an “imperial imaginary” (Hell, “Imperial Ruin Gazers,” 176) in Germany occurred concurrently to the Blitz, as Albert Speer’s theory of Ruin Value promoted the building of structures whose ruins would someday stand as monuments to the greatness of the Third Reich. The Nazis’ approach to imperial ruins unquestionably belittles the human suffering they perpetrated in violently wrought ruins throughout Europe. In Britain, however—and perhaps also among German civilians and refugees—ruins as catalysts for grandiose literary narratives about the past and future break down in the face of an uncertain present.

[bomb] sites sprouted weeds, bushes and wild flowers and were taken over by birds, butterflies, small animals and stray cats. There was one particular site in the middle of Bond Street that I would go out of my way to visit. It looked like a grotto in a romantic 18th century painting.”¹⁰⁵

Writing about Blitz ruins tends to strike an ambivalent note, at times aestheticizing the ruins, as in the case of the Crossley’s Bond Street grotto, but never able to leave human suffering far behind because of its physical and temporal proximity. During the Blitz, ruins and rubble became part of the English terrain. Yet for many other observers, unlike Crossley, these ruins were unable to “create a romanticizing mood” while still associated with the violent means of their creation. Compared to their recent state of wholeness and viewed as inextricably tied to the shattered remains of lives mirrored in their fragmented condition, the ruins represent a destruction or emptying of the past, rather than a document of it. They represent fears for the future of the empire and civilization that produced them, drawing more on ruin narratives that mark the ends of empires rather than those that bring their spaces and histories back into shared consciousness.

The war forced ruins into the cities and into the daily routines of people accustomed to encountering dramatic ruins only in paintings or on country walks. Newly ruined spaces, like Britain’s blitzed cities, force their viewers into a tension between the impulse to place the ruins into existing narratives and the realization that these narratives depend on temporal and mental distance from destruction and decay. The pastness of old ruins allows viewers to imagine (whether accurately or not) that violence did not play a part in their decline, but as Rose Macaulay writes in *Pleasure of Ruins*—published in 1953, while Blitz ruins still lay throughout the country—the new ruins of “shattered” abbeys “were murdered bodies, their wounds gaped and bled.”¹⁰⁶ In the aftermath of the air raids, people in heavily bombed cities throughout England developed a fraught

¹⁰⁵ Crossley, “A Middle Class War,” 32.

¹⁰⁶ Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins*, 454.

and ambivalent relationship with their ruined surroundings. In encounters that cannot evoke “delight in decayed or wrecked buildings,”¹⁰⁷ they found ruins without pleasure because the fate of those buildings was threatening, signifying potential or actual personal loss.

Blitz ruins were not without their attractions, of course. While some found the act of touring the ruins—the precursor to twentieth-first-century “ruin porn” that aestheticizes poverty and decay—in poor taste, others found it compelling. Imitating the ancient trope of the ruin-gazer, who seeks out the remnants of past structures and cities, this disaster tourist of sorts became a dark, wartime incarnation of the *flâneur*. Wartime diaries and Mass-Observation reports overflow with people drawn to the spectacle of ruins (“taking a Roman holiday,” as some put it¹⁰⁸): devoting Sunday afternoon walks to investigating the latest bomb damage, taking visiting friends on cycle tours of the worst-hit neighborhoods, obsessively marking the locations of ruins on maps. Their morbid fascination exposes deep confusion about how to approach these new landmarks. The ability to celebrate their spectacle depends largely on an attitude of detached and purely aesthetic interest, but for those whose own homes had been ruined, such sights took on a painful immediacy.

Rose Macaulay’s novel *The World My Wilderness*, published in 1950, projects a vision of England’s ruins after the war, during which the author’s own home was destroyed, and embodies the conflict between ruins as gently reminiscent of the past and ruins as violent intrusions on an expected present and future. Seventeen-year-old Barbary has been sent from France, where she grew up among resistance fighters, to adopt the formal and civilized English life of her father and stepmother. Feeling out of place and restricted by the norms and expectations imposed on her, Barbary finds refuge in the shattered and overgrown ruins around St. Paul’s. To Macaulay, who

¹⁰⁷ Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins*, xv.

¹⁰⁸ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 341.

“liked to insist that ideas for novels came to her as places,”¹⁰⁹ Barbary’s attachment to the ruins is a consequence and evidence of their displaced status. They, like Barbary, exist outside a conventional sense of culture and history. While Barbary’s experience could be the basis for a critique of English society’s restrictive mores, it also reveals the impossibility of assimilating the wild and romantic—comforting interpretations of ruins that might help to make sense of their presence—into a modern collective consciousness scarred by total war. Barbary finds refuge and healing in the ruins, but only because she did not experience the Blitz firsthand and is thus not subject to the anxiety and ambivalence they register for others.

Barbary, to whom the “stony rubbish seemed natural,”¹¹⁰ finds her “spiritual home” (*WMW* 57) in a place with “no roof but the sky” (53). Along with other outsiders like criminals and deserters, she makes her

way about the ruined, jungled waste, walking along broken lines of wall, diving into the cellars and caves of the underground city, where opulent merchants had once stored their wine, where gaily tiled rooms opened into one another and burrowed under great eaves of overhanging earth, where fosses and ditches ran, bright with marigolds and choked with thistles, through one-time halls of commerce, and yellow ragwort waved its gaudy banners over the ruin of defeated business men. (56)

Barbary’s ruins are home to the ghosts of their former occupants and offer reminders of the distant past, but their present and future are blank, allowing her to seek simple refuge and natural beauty. Her brother, more conventionally English, also sees a space without a future life and meaning, but he cannot connect with the aesthetic pleasures Barbary finds in the same ruins because to him the ruins signify only suffering and loss:

He looked across the horrid waste, for horrid he felt it to be; he hated mess and smashed things; the squalor of ruin sickened him; like Flaubert, he was aware of an irremediable barbarism coming up out of the earth, and of filth flung against the ivory tower. It was a

¹⁰⁹ Fitzgerald, “Introduction,” xi.

¹¹⁰ Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness*, 52. Cited hereafter in the text as *WMW*.

symbol of loathsome things, war, destruction, savagery; an earnest, perhaps, of the universal doom that stalked, sombre and menacing, on its way. (252)

For Barbary the ruins are freedom, at least until reality sets in in the form of a fall and serious injury; Barbary's encounter with the destructive potential of the ruins underscores Richie's sense that the ruins represent the destruction and suppression of meaningful spaces as "the jungle pressed in on them, seeking to cover them up" (254) and complete the process of erasure. In the ruins Richie confronts the contradictory desires to clear away the mess and squalor, loathsome reminders of the Blitz, and to restore and preserve what the vegetation threatens to conceal.

In *The World My Wilderness*, the ruins of the Blitz are suitable as a refuge and a romantic retreat only for one not fully a part of English society. For those invested in a British historical narrative and identity and who have experienced the consequences of the war's violence, these spaces depart dramatically from idealized ruin representations. Rather than offering any comfort in their beauty or familiarity, they primarily express uncertainty about the future of British life and civilization and fear for its negation in the face of further violence. As the ruins crumble and decay, they prompt confusion about whether and how to remember their fate. Continuing to relive their violent and destructive ends disallows structural and metaphorical rebuilding, but sweeping the ruins away or relegating them to the status of historic remnants means erasing a still-painful experience and betraying the memory of those affected. Macaulay writes that among the ruins of *The World My Wilderness*, "the margins of the present broke crumbling and dissolved before the invading chaos that pressed on" (*WMW* 152), suggesting that the present world—the world that entered into war disjointed and disorienting and emerged from it broken—mirrors the state of the ruins: the condition of both conveys instability and uncertainty.

Blitz writers' ruins are most often harsh and dangerous places. "New ruins are for a time," writes Macaulay in *Pleasure of Ruins*, "stark and bare, vegetationless and creatureless; blackened

and torn, they smell of fire and mortality.”¹¹¹ Bare and smelling of mortality, new ruins do not readily lend themselves to incorporation in morale-building narratives or assertions of immortality. Bombed buildings and disfigured landscapes offer a screen onto which concerns about how England, as well as individual lives, will be perceived and remembered can be projected. While this type of reflection is often part of ruin symbolism, the impulse is not usually so fraught. Memory constructed from great temporal distance—by the ruin-gazer who comes long after the destruction—is far less anxious and destabilizing than is remembrance occasioned by facing one’s own ruins. The type of memory thus evoked by these spaces is not nostalgic or peacefully contemplative, nor is it a tool of imperial prowess; rather, it is fear of transience and erasure, the destruction of history and memory.¹¹² Blitz ruins are a concrete manifestation and symbol of both past English life and the violence of war, putting those who wished to remember, preserve, or restore them in a difficult situation. Neither meaning could be preserved or erased without affecting the other.

Many Britons were relieved that Rome was spared destruction by German forces, but others expressed disappointment that anyone would worry about Rome without mourning the irreplaceable landmarks actually destroyed in London—“just as old & historical & nothing saved our City”¹¹³—seeming to fear that the erasure of these places from stories and conversations would entail their erasure from memory. Because in this context ruins represent what is past, dead, and over, the ruins’ presence disrupts the narrative of British survival and resilience. Their literary

¹¹¹ Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins*, 453.

¹¹² Hitler explicitly identified this as a goal of the Blitz: in a speech on September 4, 1940, he reportedly proclaimed that “when they [the British] declare they will attack our towns on a large scale, then we will erase theirs.” See Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 7.

¹¹³ Carver, Personal diary, 4 June 1944. Note the irony in fearing the ruin of ruins in Rome while struggling to accept the presence of newly created ruins in Britain.

appearances give voice to otherwise unstated challenges to this simplified account and reveal ambivalence about how to record and remember the material consequences of the Blitz.

In writing about the Blitz, authors draw on the unique spaces and physical circumstances of the home front to articulate common attitudes and anxieties. The textual spaces constructed in literature house the symbolic meanings attributed to their real-world counterparts, revealing experiences and associations that underlay—and challenge—much of the collective memory now held of the Blitz. These spaces and places are the anchors for the stories writers tell, whether of individuals confronting their own vulnerability, as in the case of Catherine Birch or Nona Ranskill, or of a society struggling to conceive of a future life and identity after war, as in the case of the Blitz ruin-gazers. In the subsequent chapters, I extend this analysis of textual spaces to symbolically rich locations that existed prior to the Second World War and prompted unique interpretations and literary representations during the period.

CHAPTER THREE

Bombed Houses: War in the Private Sphere

It's the houses that are mesmerizing me. I've no control over the saucy things. Houses are alive.¹

In a feverish stillness, the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions.²

A March 1939 column in *The Observer* recounts the mystery of the “dead houses of Bayswater.” “No knockers or chimneys,” proclaims the headline. “Dummies in a square.” According to the piece, these are “two of the queerest houses in London,” and “no one has seen a light for many years in Numbers 23 and 24.”³ The writer surveys the peculiarities that, on close examination, set these houses apart from others in the square, and eventually reveals the explanation: a railway tunnel runs beneath the houses, which were gutted during rail construction and left as mere fronts to preserve the aesthetic of the neighborhood.

The dramatic phrase “dead houses” carries more weight in retrospect, as it unintentionally foreshadows the thousands of houses soon to “die” or be abandoned in the face of bombs. The finality of the anonymous writer’s assessment that “the dead houses of Bayswater are unmistakably dead”—humorous in its redundant simplicity—could apply equally well to the houses of Bermondsey or Chelsea or Clapham in the wake of the Blitz. Yet representatives of these houses, like many other houses in the British literary tradition before them, appear repeatedly in the writing of the period, living on as printed ephemera if not brick-and-mortar structures.

¹ Forster, *Howards End*, 123.

² Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” 141.

³ Our Special Representative, “Dead Houses of Bayswater,” 11.

“In Britain, we live and breathe houses,” write Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft in the introduction to their essay collection *Our House: The Representation of Domestic Space in Modern Culture*. “We talk about them all the time; we watch television programmes about them; we read magazines about them; we spend large amounts of money buying them and doing them up.... Images of the house appear everywhere, bearing upon contemporary life in a great variety of ways.”⁴ Smyth and Croft argue for the centrality of the house in British culture past and present. If the house writ large accommodates and facilitates complex social dynamics and human practices, looking to its representation in popular and artistic cultural mediums for insights about the culture is a natural interpretive step.

Pointing out the increased frequency of owner-occupation in the latter half of the twentieth century—up to 70 percent in 2001 from 26 percent in 1945—Joe Moran argues in the same collection that “in post-Second World War Britain, houses have been of huge symbolic and cultural importance.”⁵ Certainly British home ownership in recent decades has contributed to evolving relationships between people and their houses in the cultural realm, but to suggest the house’s symbolic significance is of recent origins is to overlook a long literary and cultural tradition. And given the timing of the remarkable shift Moran identifies in housing dynamics, the period of the war is itself a particularly important moment in the cultural history of houses, as it lies between centuries of traditional British domestic life and the development of modern, affordable housing and social welfare programs in conjunction with influential new class dynamics. Besides marking a transitional period, the events of the war contributed to skepticism about the stability of a traditional ideal home.

⁴ Smyth and Croft, “Introduction: Culture and Domestic Space,” 11.

⁵ Moran, “Houses, Habit and Memory,” 31.

This chapter briefly addresses the concept and history of the house in modern British culture but focuses primarily on specific writers' portraits of houses. It considers how, in literary portrayals, the Second World War's blurred boundaries between home front and war front alter the idea of private, domestic space, and how the personal elements of home life participate in a broader memorial narrative. In each of the novels discussed here, memories of the Blitz are in some way mediated by the houses in which the narratives are set. The texts differ, however, in their treatments of those memories: Do bombs engrave memories onto the physical structures of the houses, or do they destroy the evidence of existing memory? Do domestic spaces like family homes function as private archives that recall individual loss, or are they broken open to represent or contain a shared experience? This chapter traces these differences and seeks to offer an account of the memorial function of bombed houses in Blitz literature. The texts under examination here also provide insight into an important dynamic implicit in their preoccupation with private spaces: each house might be considered a study in microcosm for the fading distinction between war front and home front, public space and private space,⁶ and collective memory and individual memory in wartime London.

The house, long regarded as a vital symbol in English culture, was put under pressure—literally and metaphorically—by the Blitz. Writers' declarations of the death of this important symbol serve as a vivid and revealing expression of the destabilizing influence of the Blitz, demonstrating the breakdown of home as a construct of comfort and safety and the inability of bombed houses to uphold a social norm of private domestic life.⁷ This chapter examines three

⁶ Adam Piette writes in *Imagination at War* about the unprecedented (in English history) ways in which the war invaded the private realm. His analysis of that dynamic is a useful resource in reading the conflation of public and private space in these novels. Also relevant is a chapter in Gilbert and Gubar's *No Man's Land* on World War II-era women writers and the destruction of domestic space.

⁷ This norm is firmly embedded in twentieth-century thought, although it is admittedly of relatively modern origin: "the concept of home as a private retreat first emerged in the lives of bourgeois families in eighteenth century France and

novels about houses during the Blitz. *Take Three Tenses* (1945), by Rumer Godden, memorializes an idealized family home that attempts to offer assurance of stability and permanence; *No Directions* (1943), by James Hanley, presents the darker essence of the Blitz experience and overturns the comforting symbolic history of the house; and *The End of the Affair* (1951), by Graham Greene, rejects the concept of the house's memory and converts the private spaces of home into figurative commons in a representation of their brokenness, both as physical structures and as literary symbols under pressure. As a widely read, canonic text, *The End of the Affair* anchors this discussion in the context of midcentury modernist literature, while placing the novel into conversation with Godden's and Hanley's works enables a more complex and nuanced look at its commentary on the war. Together these novels illustrate the wartime transformation of a cozy, nostalgic symbol into a site resistant to interpretable memory and characterized by fear, anxiety, destruction, and horror. As *Washington Post* correspondent and memoirist Phyllis Warner wrote in November of 1940, "some of our proverbial expressions are going to need revising. 'as safe as a house,' for example."⁸ While the form and degree of the wartime threat to houses varied according to their inhabitants' geography and socioeconomic status, the realities of

England, and...its development was closely linked to...new ideals of domesticity and privacy"; domestic literature "that explores intimate, private spaces of the mind and society often set within a middle-class household and home" is a still more recent development (Briganti and Mezei, "Reading the House," 838).

⁸ Warner, "Journal under the Terror," 16 November 1940. Another expression that warranted reconsideration was "keep the home fires burning" (after the popular song of that name). After the Munich crisis of 1938, the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) distributed posters urging Britons to "keep the home fires *from* burning" (Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 10). Comic poet Donald Hughes addressed the same concern—and eventual reality—in 1941 with "Fire":

During what was, I'm afraid,
 Rather a destructive raid,
 With large factories on fire—
 Then it was I heard a choir
 In a concrete shelter singing
 Most harmoniously, bringing
 Concrete evidence that they
 Did not suffer from dismay.
 But the song I heard them sing
 Was perhaps not quite the thing,
 Not too terribly discerning.
 It was "Keep the home fires burning!" (Hughes, *Blitz Bits*, 5)

displacement and destruction, the inability to feel safe at home, and the exposure of private lives were felt to some degree by nearly all Britons, prompting a shift in the meaning of home for a country at war.

Houses in British Literature and Culture

While the abstract sense of “home” as a place tied to identity or belonging does emerge in wartime rhetoric and memorial efforts, this chapter uses “home” on a smaller, more concrete scale, referring primarily to the physical structures and spaces in which people dwell. Antoinette Burton, in *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, actually links these two senses of home, acknowledging that anthropological and historical scholarship commonly considers the home to be central to social identity and to structures of familial and national belonging. Although Burton writes about feminism and postcolonialism in relation to twentieth-century Indian women, her concept of the house as an archive demonstrates a useful application of archival concepts to literary spaces more broadly. She notes that for some writers “the house is the foundation for memory,”⁹ and argues that a text can itself be “an enduring site of historical evidence” in which a writer’s (or, I might add, a character’s) “memories of home” “act—for us—as an archive from which a variety of counterhistories” to the prevailing narrative can be drawn.¹⁰ If discourse and reality are understood “not as opposing domains but as a vast, interdependent archive,” then “the importance of home as both a material archive for history and a very real political figure in an extended moment of historical crisis” like the Blitz becomes evident.¹¹

⁹ Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*, 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The house can illustrate, as Gaston Bachelard declares, “the topography of our intimate being,”¹² revealing much about the individual lives and minds of its occupants. But it also extends beyond “the domestic, as the household is both a microcosm of society and an active agent instituting change within that society.”¹³ Literary houses necessarily register the complex and varied circumstances in which they are built and occupied. “From the beginning the house and the novel are interconnected,” argues Philippa Tristram in her class study *Living Space in Fact and Fiction*. “The plan and appearance of houses, the way they are furnished,” she writes, “mirror the social values of their time; but the best [houses] define themselves against those values, inheriting the past, receiving the present, but shaping the future. The same can of course be said of a great novel.”¹⁴

The country house is the quintessential image that bridges British literature and architecture, serving as a material archive and political figure. It is an iconic setting for literature of the nineteenth century that continues to be a “national literary obsession” (Morrison) in the present, from *Wuthering Heights* to *Mansfield Park* and into the twentieth century with *Howards End*, *Crome Yellow*, and *Brideshead Revisited*. The conceit emerges even in contemporary works such as Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* and Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* and finds its popular zenith in the television phenomenon *Downton Abbey*.¹⁵ Why does the country house hold such lasting appeal for audiences? Private dwellings and domestic spaces are the settings for intimate stories about love and family life; at the same time, the framing of the manor house as quintessentially English allows them to be read, accurately or not, as expansive documentation of

¹² Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xxxii.

¹³ Barile and Brandon, *Household Chores*, xiii.

¹⁴ Tristram, *Living Space*, 1–2.

¹⁵ Further evidence of the cultural power of the literary house and our lasting fascination with it are the prevalence of spin-off creations like tourist trips to houses that stand in for famous settings in films, fan fiction revolving around literary houses, and even a game on the popular website *Sporcle* that involves matching literary homes with the novels in which they appear.

and commentary on English society and the English past. These stately homes contain not only the individuals whose relationships are thoroughly detailed but also projected, possibly invented, memories of the time and place they are understood to represent. They are imagined to “epitomize the English love of domesticity,...continuity and tradition” and are celebrated as places kept “intact in times of adversity.”¹⁶ The vulnerability and violent deaths of many such houses in the Second World War disturbed their symbolic continuity, for even houses that can survive social change and economic difficulty are no match for bombs and invading armies.

Houses and memory in modernism

Although the (country) house novel has antecedents in earlier periods of British literature, the use of houses as stages for history and containers for memory clearly draws on more recent modernist impulses as well. E. M. Forster’s *Battersea Rise* and Virginia Woolf’s “Great Men’s Houses” demonstrate this preoccupation with the stories a house can be made to tell. The hostility and urgency implied in depictions of wartime houses emerge as a natural extension of Forster’s and Woolf’s tactics. The violence and instability that accompanied World War I, the Irish War of Independence, the Spanish Civil War, and other pre-World War II conflicts—as well as the numerous destabilized and shifting elements of modern technology, politics, and social structures—prompted innovative artistic responses that prefigure the midcentury motif of bombed houses. Certain voices of modernism respond to upheaval by cataloging objects and memories that represent private lives and by redefining physically and ideologically vulnerable structures like houses in light of modern consciousness. A preoccupation with destruction, fragmentation, and ruins appropriately sets the stage for the World War II era’s more specific but no less fraught efforts to cope with unstable circumstances. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,”

¹⁶ Mandler, *The Fall and Rise*, 1.

writes T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, a line that might easily describe the novels of Godden, Greene, and others whose portraits of houses attempt to bear up crumbling walls and raise fallen roofs in a more abstract but lasting form.

Modernist literature—and Blitz literature—tends to draw on one (or more) of three particular modes of presenting memory via domestic space. The first is the association of memories with everyday objects, often those found in the home. This Proustian model, in which individual objects or physical details trigger memories and emotions, appears in recollections of wartime commonplaces, like ration books and tin hats, as well as valuable items that were in short supply, like eggs and oranges. For many writers and memoirists, the triggering objects are those that characterized their wartime lives in modified homes and shelters.

The second mode is the textual cataloging of objects in a home. The accumulation of objects features in much of Joyce’s writing, particularly *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, encyclopedic collections of images, ephemera, and sounds. Consider the “Haunted Inkbottle” from *Finnegans Wake*, the name by which the “house O’Shea or O’Shame” is known: it contains, among other things, “burst loveletters, telltale stories..., alphabeticformed verbage..., ahems and ahahs, ineffible tries at speech unassyllabled..., once current puns, [and] quashed quotatoes.”¹⁷ The “Ithaca” episode of *Ulysses* contains similar catalogs within the Blooms’ home: of Leopold Bloom’s books, including commentary on arrangement and condition¹⁸; of the items on his kitchen shelves¹⁹; of the contents of his desk, enumerating dates and sources of letters and various other documents in finding aid-like detail.²⁰ Along with *Finnegans Wake*, Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, which provides one of the most immediately recognizable instances of an archive functioning within a

¹⁷ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 183.

¹⁸ Joyce, *Ulysses*, 582.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 551–52.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 592–93.

work of literature, demonstrates the continued presence of the house-archive motif in midcentury modernism. The living spaces of these texts share their function as repositories for collected memories as well as their concrete nature. Not merely abstract catalogs of memories or ideas, these textual archives inhabit physical spaces within homes: the “house O’Shea,” Bloom’s desk, the drawers and boxes in Krapp’s den. While such collections of memory objects in houses did not originate in the twentieth century, they appear frequently in modernist texts and are particularly compelling in experimental writing dealing with fragmentation and loss.

The third mode is the accumulation of memories—voices, thoughts, sensations—in a domestic space. The modernist impulse toward a more abstract accumulation of significant memories or evocative references—the shoring up of fragments against ruins—in rooms and houses is illustrated in Woolf’s *Night and Day*, where Katharine and Mrs. Hilbery work in a study steeped with memories and images of the past: “Quiet as the room was, and undisturbed by the sounds of the present moment, Katharine could fancy that here was a deep pool of past time, and that she and her mother were bathed in the light of sixty years ago.” Katharine then listens to the noises of the present moment—motor cars, voices—that filter in to be captured in the room: “Rooms, of course, accumulate their suggestions, and any room in which one has been used to carry on any particular occupation gives off memories of moods, of ideas, of postures that have been seen in it.”²¹ This room does not merely receive moods and ideas but actively curates and redistributes them, the influence of this abstract archive shaping the work and thoughts and sensations of those who occupy the space at any later point. The private spaces of homes and their connection to memory serve an important function in much of Woolf’s subsequent work, as well, including

²¹ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 99.

Jacob's Room, *Orlando*, and *To the Lighthouse* (and, of course, *Between the Acts*, as will be discussed in chapter five).

Modernism presented both ideological and aesthetic inspiration for writers reimagining the home and its place in modern life. Victoria Rosner points out in *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* that many writers, “influenced by new trends in British design...sought to undermine and even reconstruct the form of the home in order to redefine its purpose and meaning”²² and revitalize “the spaces of private life.”²³ Modernist literature both reflects and generates the spaces of the modern home: it “draws a conceptual vocabulary from the lexicons of domestic architecture and interior design” and “exposes the fundamental role of the built environment in creating the categories we use to organize and understand who we are,” but it also plays a role “in the work of imagining a post-Victorian reorganization of private life to accord with changing social customs.”²⁴ What Rosner’s study neglects to address are the dramatic consequences of the Second World War’s reorganization of private life for late-modernist homes and texts.

Although “the home has long possessed strong symbolic value in literature,”²⁵ private life is, admittedly, “an amorphous category that changes over time”²⁶ in terms of its role in imaginative literature, its scope and definitions, and the perceived boundaries between private and public. In truth, British concepts of private life and their symbolic presence in literature were in flux well before the war. The marked effect of the Blitz, though, was to simultaneously assist in continuing to turn writers’ focus to the environment and meaning of the home even as it undermined—powerfully if not permanently—both conventional home life and Rosner’s “new domesticity,”²⁷ in

²² Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture*, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

which expectations of privacy and stability are implicit even alongside an experimental and unstructured aesthetic. Blitz writing retains the characteristic modernist catalogs and attention to built environments, but it also demonstrates an impulse to reach back to a pre-modernist idea of cozy, domestic home life for comfort even as that idea's power to survive and console is shattered by bombs.

Domestic space in times of war or violence

An intriguing characteristic of many houses and domestic spaces in British literature, particularly those representing times of violence or uncertainty, is that they are not merely settings or backdrops for human action but instead characters in their own right. Portrayed as somehow alive and often as having agency, these houses exert an observable force in the narrative through their presence or absence. These buildings live, breathe, speak, remember, and die. While this chapter does not deal exclusively with what I call living houses, the motif and its connotations are a recurring theme.

Dying houses specifically, and with them dying pasts, seem to enter the literary lexicon of the twentieth century via Ireland. More specifically, the burnings of hundreds of Irish big houses by members of the IRA in the early 1920s provided evocative symbolism for writers dealing with tensions around Irish governance, Anglo-Irish socioeconomic dynamics, and heritage and identity more broadly. The houses prove ideal settings for the unfolding of issues deeply intertwined with the idea of home and all its layered connotations, as well as matters of private belief and personal freedom. It was “only when it was on the verge of disappearance [that] the Big House [became] a major theme in Irish literature,” not merely as a setting or theme but often as a character itself²⁸; in this, the literary big house predicts the attention paid in British literature to houses threatened by

²⁸ Genet, *The Big House in Ireland*, x.

the Blitz. The status of these houses as characters that influence the mood and action of the literature emphasizes their historical and artistic power: they are not mere examples of space as “a geographical given, empty or meaningless, a static stage on which the real drama of human history unfolds in time,” but “dynamic, flexible actor[s] playing a crucial role in the creation of social life.”²⁹

Elizabeth Bowen’s 1929 novel *The Last September* builds toward the off-stage torching of the Naylor family’s Cork estate and neighboring country homes. Hints of violence and veiled references to other burnings pervade the text, but they are not realized until the final moments, with the understated “death—execution, rather—of the three houses.”³⁰ Bowen’s vivid portrait of one of the consequences of Anglo-Irish conflict, while colored by both her own relatively privileged Irish upbringing and the many years she spent in England, largely stays clear of political agendas. Rather, Bowen accepts the impossibility of painting a black and white version of events and critiques the English gentry and officers in their indifference to the motives of the Irish who oppose their presence. *The Last September* is not an elegy to the dead house or British colonialism; instead, it illuminates by violent means the deeply personal stakes of the conflict and the vulnerability of all that is represented by the literary house. W. B. Yeats’s *Purgatory* also deals with the burdens and failures of the past by projecting them on a ruined house. This play frames its revision of the past as a project of eugenics instead of anti-colonialism, but in both *Purgatory* and *The Last September* houses die along with the legacies of the families or groups who inhabit them. Written in 1938, *Purgatory* would have evoked for its viewers and readers associations with the deaths of the great houses not many years before.

The dead houses of *The Last September* and certain Blitz novels are a natural counterpoint to living, agential houses and arise in part from a Gothic motif of houses killed by

²⁹ Shafi, *Housebound*, 17.

³⁰ Bowen, *The Last September*, 206.

literal or symbolic violence. *Jane Eyre*, in the tradition of the Gothic novel, predicts the burned Irish houses of 1910s and '20s in its characterization of Mr. Rochester's destroyed manor. Upon Jane's return to Thornfield, she compares her experience of expecting "a stately house" and finding instead "a blackened ruin" to that of a lover believing his mistress to be asleep and then realizing she is "stone-dead."³¹ Bronte's analogy dramatizes the destruction and its consequences by personifying the house, in much the same way that later writers personified their blitzed houses. Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, a Gothic novel published much later, in 1938, draws the burned mansion motif into the twentieth century and an atmosphere of impending war. Manderley, the house in which *Rebecca* is primarily set, is a character in its own right, invested with personality and meaning, and du Maurier seems to mourn its violent death: the novel concludes with an image of the sky lit up by the crimson flames—"like a splash of blood"³²—consuming Manderley. Du Maurier's interest in the lives of houses is evident in a 1946 essay about the house that inspired Manderley. Although *Rebecca* was written before the war, du Maurier reframes the story of its real-life counterpart in light of the Blitz, noting that "no bombs had come her way, yet she looked like a blitzed building. The shutters were not shuttered now. The panes were broken. She had been left to die."³³ The powerful notion of dead and dying houses pervaded du Maurier's wartime thinking, extending even to those spaces not direct victims of war violence. As Sara Wasson demonstrates in *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London*, a Gothic sensibility like du Maurier's infiltrated the familiar spaces that were the setting for war and contributed to a symbolic vocabulary that used the death of significant spaces to signify the changes war wrought.

³¹ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 432.

³² Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 386.

³³ Du Maurier, "House of Secrets," 398.

The death of houses in British and Irish literature, and especially during uncertain times of war, became shorthand for the death of families, traditions, or ideologies, whether on an intimate, domestic scale, in the manner of *Rebecca*, or through broader sociopolitical commentary, as in *The Last September*. In the Blitz and other aerial attacks on British targets during the Second World War, the dead house found its full realization. Not only were innumerable dead houses part of the actual experience of the war, but their image provided a motif perfectly suited for addressing death and violence as well as shifting ways of life and social structures. Thus it is unsurprising that the language of broken and dying houses emerges again and again in literary treatments of the war: “little cadavers,” Elizabeth Bowen calls the “lines of bomb-damaged villas...left to rot”³⁴; “the little homes were dead,” “blackened and empty skeletons,”³⁵ writes John Owen.

With regular raids on English cities and villages in addition to more conventional military targets, the tactical strategies, role distinctions, and spatial boundaries that once guided the logic of war no longer applied: the differences between contrasting concepts like public and private, urban and remote, and home front and war front shifted and faded. Civilians became soldiers on the home front; private homes and their backyard shelters became the trenches of a new urban battlefield, symptomatic of what Susan Grayzel calls “the domestication of modern war.”³⁶ These homes were routinely swept into the category of public space³⁷ by their forcible involvement in the war, and the homes became a site of conflict and trauma unprecedented in modern British history and unique in its simultaneously individual and collective meanings. World War II was not the

³⁴ Bowen, “Regent’s Park” 158.

³⁵ Owen, *Blitz Hero*, 141-42.

³⁶ Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire*, 315.

³⁷ The movement of homes from private into public categories of space has one postwar analogue in the form of council housing. The shift toward large-scale development of public housing estates, which dramatically altered the physical and social landscape of Britain, reflects both the reality of a destructive war that caused a severe housing shortage and the reality of a new approach to government.

first or only war to take place on British soil or to specifically target civilian populations, but the new military technologies allowed it to be the most extensive and devastating such war in British cultural memory. The Blitz left 2.25 million people in Britain homeless,³⁸ making it a particularly extreme and literal embodiment of the changing status and idea of home. Given the vulnerability of homes, the war understandably became an occasion for thinking back on the past lives and meanings of houses.³⁹ Not only were homes routinely threatened by bombs, but other aspects of their physical nature were destabilized as well. Mass-Observation reported that, during the Blitz, “the speed with which people have topographically rearranged their homes, breaking the elementary tenets of British life, needs no underlining.”⁴⁰ Spatial changes in British homes, whether via the remaking of homes to facilitate shelters or refuge rooms in which people spent the majority of their time or, more simply, via relocation, altered the topography of individual domestic existence as well as British life more broadly.

Britons’ sense of vulnerability and their direct participation in the gritty realities of war shape the way homes are described in personal accounts and in literature. Their attitudes toward these former domestic refuges emerge in descriptions of the spaces and in the memories shaped around them. Given the challenges and uncertainties of pre-war and wartime life, Britons were primed to see images of leaning walls, missing roofs, cracked foundations, and sagging floors as ready-made metaphors for personal, social, and political instability that affected home life. Gaston Bachelard focuses his phenomenology of domestic space on pleasant, comforting images of home, rather than the fractured images known to witnesses of the Blitz; “the space of hatred and combat,”

³⁸ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 116. This number accounts only for the destruction of houses between September 1940 and May 1941, a period that saw particularly rapid obliteration of homes (40,000 destroyed or seriously damaged each week in the first two months of the Blitz); still more were affected by subsequent attacks.

³⁹ Novels like Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* and Doris Leslie’s *House in the Dust* feature such reflective flashbacks framed by glimpses of their respective houses in wartime.

⁴⁰ M-O A, TC Air Raids, 5/E, Observations on changes.

he writes, “can only be studied in the context of impassioned subject matter and apocalyptic images.”⁴¹ The Blitz, however, brought these categories—the domestic and the apocalyptic—together and shattered the pleasing image of home, replacing it with a fractured symbol of anxiety, loss, and the end of private life, all aspects of wartime homes. To writers and thinkers like E. M. Forster, “the two world wars appear...both literally and metaphorically as massive, destructive forces leading to the loss of home.”⁴² The celebrated country houses⁴³ were among the most visible victims of these destructive forces. Some suffered bomb damage, but many more were invaded and “desecrated”⁴⁴—as implied in *Brideshead Revisited*—by heavy wartime use: large homes were requisitioned to house soldiers, evacuated schools, military hospitals, government departments, and valuable items from art collections and archives,⁴⁵ which often resulted in physical harm to the premises and also remade or eliminated their domestic spaces.

An ARP warden in the novel *Blitz Hero* (1942) confronts the war’s destruction of home more bluntly when, as he walks the streets of his city, “an echo rang in his ear of ‘Home, sweet home.’ There’s no place—no place like home.”⁴⁶ For those bombed out of their houses, home was—literally—no place. In a broader sense, “the old British idea of home [was] destroyed.”⁴⁷ While the “old British idea of home”—that “a man’s home is his castle,” that home comprises a house and town and country to which one belongs and in which one feels secure, that a family and its memories can be linked to a home for generations—is itself a simplistic fantasy, it is one that held great cultural currency and against which the effects of the Blitz were measured.

⁴¹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xxxii.

⁴² Stierstorfer, Introduction, viii.

⁴³ Country houses were traditionally celebrated, although by the time of the war many were under-resourced, if not already sold or demolished, and the country house as an institution was fading in public estimation.

⁴⁴ Mandler, *The Fall and Rise*, 311.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁴⁶ Owen, *Blitz Hero*, 141.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

Personal stories

The paradox of bombed houses lies in a shared and easily transferrable assault—the stories of houses bombed in London are in most respects virtually the same as those in Coventry, Liverpool, or even the countryside—perpetrated on very intimate and private sites. For civilians, the destruction of their own or a neighbor’s home was often their most concrete experience of the war’s effects, and their reactions to these incidents reveal the uniqueness of this moment in which the domestic was under threat in an unprecedentedly direct and physical way. The cliché “hit close to home” becomes literal in such cases; bombs falling on or near one’s house not only threaten property and physical safety, they also crudely highlight the vulnerability of private spaces and lives.

In the online archive of the BBC’s *WW2 People’s War*, a public history project that collects personal stories about the Second World War, including many about bombed houses, some homes survive the war in good condition and others are “saved” by fast-acting residents putting out fires. Most of the houses written about, though, are badly damaged or entirely demolished. In both cases, survivors and their descendents recall the houses in affectionate terms, describing their fates in vivid detail and regretting the lost memories and possessions the houses contained.

Nita Goldstein, in a story posted by her husband, Ron, recounts “the night our house was sliced in half.”⁴⁸ In setting the scene—“the time was 7.45 pm on the 9th of October 1940 and Hitler had evidently decided it was important to his war aims that our lovely Victorian house in Dunsmore Road should be destroyed that night”—Goldstein sets up a narrative in which those directing the war would strategically and purposefully target a civilian dwelling. This sense of individual violence expresses the weakening security found in personal refuges and demonstrates

⁴⁸ Goldstein, “The Night Our House.”

the shrinking gap between perceptions of private wartime experiences and large-scale, public maneuvers.

In “Looking for Grandma’s House,” Elizabeth Mallinson shares a brief memory of attempting to visit her grandmother in another part of Liverpool. But, Mallinson writes, “When we [she and her brother] arrived at Grandma’s street we could not find her house as a land mine had dropped and obliterated the area.” They searched for her home “by walking along the pavement, recognising the black and white check tile leading to the doorsteps of every house and counted along till we came to her house but it was not there: there was just a pile of rubble.”

Particularly striking is Mallinson’s recollection of surveying the area after realizing her grandmother’s house was missing: “When we turned round to look at the other side of the street it was as if someone had taken the wall off a doll’s house so that we could see the furniture and the wallpaper and all the contents of someone’s home.” In the moment Mallinson describes, she implicitly notes the absence of a physical barrier between private and public spheres. Her description of the house as a “doll’s house,” in which the structure is suddenly made fragile and incomplete and the contents visible from afar, echoes many other written accounts that employ the same analogy tinged with vulnerability and exposure. In such moments, when an observer looks into a house torn open or a home becomes a shelter for strangers, the private lives and possessions of the residents are in public view. Such houses become functional extensions of streets, squares, and other gathering places and are made part of the collective experience and memory of the bombing. This dynamic—the forcible movement of the home’s interior into exterior public space—plays a part in formulating literary responses to such events, in part because it concretely expresses the ambivalence associated with “the state’s ability, indeed its obligation, to intrude into the home

in the name of national security [which] was the air raid's primary consequence...from the First World War onward."⁴⁹

The fragmentation of homes and the ideas they stand for was evident at bombsites as well as storage facilities for salvaged belongings and even in the replacement housing to which more fortunate "bombees" relocated. A Mass-Observation report on a bomb incident in Hastings saw the domestic consequences of the war in the piles of personal effects stored by the local council: "The sight in these storage sheds...was heart rending. So many homes, piled up like so much old junk, and with those prized, and sometimes intimate, objects sticking out for all to see."⁵⁰ N. V. Carver was similarly disheartened by the unstable nature of home, particularly after being bombed out of her own house. While contemplating furniture arrangements and placing books on shelves in her new accommodations, she wearily laments in her diary, "What is the use, anyhow. We might be blown up any night again."⁵¹ "This would be a very nice house," she admits, "if one could take a real interest in it."⁵² But for Carver, as for so many others, a house cannot be made to stand for comfort and privacy, family and memory, when at any moment it might be broken open and its inhabitants driven out.

Bombed Houses in Blitz Novels

Blitzed houses would seem to function as model memorial spaces: they represent both the specificity of individual and familial suffering, through the personal stories set in them, and the shared experience of a whole population, when described as ordinary spaces interchangeable with the other houses around them. Some of the texts that follow demonstrate this adaptability, encouraging their readers to do as Michel de Certeau suggests in *The Practice of Everyday Life*

⁴⁹ Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire*, 6.

⁵⁰ M-O A, TC Air Raids, 9/F, "Report on Incidents," 2.

⁵¹ Carver, Personal diary, 14 October 1940.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 16-19 October 1940.

and individualize the quotidian aspects of culture and the objects it produces to make them their own.

The bombed house in literature depends for its memorial function on the Bachelardian idea that certain architecture can produce certain kinds of thought. In the case of house memorials, this thought includes the mythology of homes as safe spaces that can absorb memories and preserve a particular way of life. The memorial capacity of written spaces is also reinforced by close links between past and present, as memorials are explicitly intended to recall the past and bring it into close contact with the present as well as take the present into the past when viewers modify memorials' agendas and narratives according to their own perspectives and preconceptions.

While the literary attribution of such power to domestic spaces is a compelling idea and an understandable impulse in times when narratives of history or identity are challenged, the Blitz ultimately undermines the symbolic values on which such a concept depends. For many Britons, the Blitz, rather than strengthening connections between past and present, weakened those ties, creating conditions that had no historic analogue and could not be adequately described. Romantic notions of home life, already challenged by the social and economic realities of the twentieth century, were shattered, leaving the house ill-equipped to function as the meaningful symbol and memorial it might otherwise have been. The death of the house as a particular symbol in the time of the Blitz is evident even in the types of houses wartime novelists chose to write about: while Rumer Godden, who tries to uphold a cozy commemorative approach to home life, constructs her novel around a long-time family home, James Hanley and Graham Greene set their stories in cramped, shared houses occupied by transient residents, underscoring the physical and abstract pressures of the war on living conditions. While the Blitz did not mark an absolute change in the house as a symbolic structure in British fiction—indeed, it still carries many of its comforting, idealized associations in some contexts—it was a moment of particular stress that revealed the

vulnerability of domestic space and led to deformations of the symbol in writing and art of the time.

*Take Three Tenses: A Fugue in Time*⁵³

“The house, it seems, is more important than the characters. ‘In me you exist,’ says the house.”⁵⁴ Thus begins Rumer Godden’s *Take Three Tenses: A Fugue in Time*, a 1945 novel in which Godden weaves together an urban setting, witnesses to war, meditations on time and consciousness, an experimental structure, and a house with its own narrative agency. After more than ten printings within its successful first two years of publication, the novel quickly faded from the public and critical radar and fell out of print. Rumer Godden is now remembered chiefly as a writer of children’s books, and *Take Three Tenses* primarily as the basis for the 1948 film *Enchantment*.⁵⁵ Although the novel was offered in Godden’s 1998 obituary in *The Times* as a standout example of her “feeling for roots and traditions, for the continuity of families and old houses,”⁵⁶ it is understudied as a war novel that posits a reassuring vision of domestic life carrying on amidst and beyond the Blitz.

Godden’s novel stands as an earlier exercise in Penelope Lively’s goal for *A House Unlocked* (2001): to “see if the private life of a house could be made to bear witness to the public

⁵³ Originally published in Britain as *A Fugue in Time*, the novel was introduced in the United States with the expanded title. I will hereafter refer to the novel as *Take Three Tenses* because the majority of my references pertain to a U.S. printing.

⁵⁴ Godden, *Take Three Tenses*, 3. Cited hereafter in the text as *TTT*. According to Hassell Simpson, “For many years and through many books, the actions of Rumer Godden’s characters sometimes appeared less important than the houses in which they occurred.” Simpson specifically mentions *Take Three Tenses*, *China Court*, and several of Godden’s children’s books (*The Doll’s House*, *The Mouse House*, and *Home is the Sailor*) (Simpson, *Rumer Godden*, 106–7).

⁵⁵ Godden indicated that the film bears little resemblance to the book; when the film was released, Godden “hardly recognized it” (Chisholm, *Rumer Godden*, 201). The novel was also adapted for the stage, in this case by Godden herself. The Rumer Godden archival materials in Boston University’s special collections include a manuscript of the dramatization. I have been unable to locate information about the play, apart from a *New York Times* notice announcing the acquisition of the production rights by a London firm.

⁵⁶ “Rumer Godden,” 23.

traumas of a century.³⁷ The house at the center of *Take Three Tenses* is a repository for individual memories and family histories and stands as a stoic observer of the ebb and flow in every aspect of its surrounding milieu. Mapped onto the house both figuratively and concretely are one hundred years of London history, establishing the house, and, by extension, the novel itself, as a site of memory. This reading poses the novel as a potential *lieu de memoire*—a memorial for World War II and for midcentury London. Although Godden undertakes the composition of the novel as a project of familial memory, her choice to set the central action of the story during the Blitz positions the text as public memorial in part. The Blitz serves as an ideal occasion for Godden to reach into Britain's recent experience and shared memory and create a family home that is also a touchstone for reflecting the public, collective experience of the Blitz. In this case, and in the case of life during the Blitz generally, the private merges with the public, as Londoners cross their usual social and geographical boundaries, look into the gaping remains of each other's houses, put their personal routines on display in shelters and ration lines, and read their own memories and experiences into the stories of other people and houses.

Yet Godden's house does not reflect the full extent to which the fading distinction between public and private destabilized homes and the anxiety and destruction wrought by bombs shattered illusions of permanence. Instead, it offers a consoling fantasy of a space that lives on through bomb strikes and deaths. *Take Three Tenses* exemplifies the symbolic value of the house, an idea Godden grasped for in response to the damage and trauma of the Blitz. But ultimately assertions of that value fall flat (as suggested by the novel's failure to persist as a memorial text despite its initial popularity) for those experiencing and writing about the fear and darkness they encountered firsthand in their houses during the Blitz.

³⁷ Lively, *A House Unlocked*, xi.

Godden was born in Sussex but spent most of her formative years in India, which she visited frequently and wrote about throughout her life. Godden spent neither World War I nor World War II in the United Kingdom. Living with her grandmother in London upon the outbreak of the First World War, she was sent back to India by November 1914 “for fear of the Zeppelin raids.”⁵⁸ Similarly, although she and her family had been living in England throughout much of the 1930s, she left Europe with her daughters in 1939.⁵⁹ They remained in India until 1945, and it was there that Godden wrote *Take Three Tenses*, her only novel set in World War II England.⁶⁰ Much of Godden’s work reflects her firsthand experiences as a British national in India, so *Take Three Tenses* is unusual in that it depicts events Godden could not have witnessed and represents a formal and thematic departure from her other work of the period.⁶¹ While *Take Three Tenses* paints a compelling portrait of London, Godden’s absence from England for the entirety of the Blitz results in a novel that does not resonate with other Blitz accounts and romanticizes the figure of the family home even as writers in England lamented its failure and death. “Why try and write about a house in London when you are living in Kashmir?” Godden later wrote in an autobiography. “But I am obsessed by it.”⁶² Perhaps her geographical distance enabled the novel’s expansive temporal landscape, it also limited her portrayal of the Blitz. *Take Three Tenses* (and *China Court*, considered its companion novel) demonstrates successful explorations of themes—like the nature of time and “the hidden links between the generations”—

⁵⁸ Simpson, *Rumer Godden*, 18.

⁵⁹ Sources vary on the precise timing: Le-Guilcher and Lassner say Godden left for India in June 1940 (*Rumer Godden*, 12).

⁶⁰ This information is drawn from chronology found in Simpson’s *Rumer Godden* (11) and checked against other biographical sources.

⁶¹ Godden maintains some thematic continuity in writing about memory, family relationships, and time and space, but she does not focus elsewhere on London or war.

⁶² Godden, *A Time to Dance*, 195.

first introduced in Godden's earlier works⁶³ but perhaps at the cost of a Blitz portrait that acknowledges the complexities of home and family life in wartime.

For most critics, Godden's novel is in fact a treatise on domesticity and family relationships. The novel's potential for historical commentary and memorial function are secondary or absent from their discussions. Hassell Simpson sums up *Take Three Tenses* as a novel that "recounts in an original and very striking way a century in the life of a London house based, [Godden] says, on her...grandmother's home."⁶⁴ This approach is typical of the limited scholarship on *Take Three Tenses* in failing to consider its function as a war text and its attempt to revive a powerful literary symbol under threat. Lynne Rosenthal, like Simpson, is taken with Godden's experiments with time and her representation of families and domestic spaces in *Take Three Tenses* but does not consider the text as a war novel; indeed, the fact that the novel's present time is set as 1940 and the novel ends with a bomb striking the all-important house receives only a cursory mention in Simpson's study and none at all in Rosenthal's.

Other scholars acknowledge the modernist influences in *Take Three Tenses* but also discount the importance of its historical setting. In a recent collection of essays on Godden's work, Le-Guilcher and Lassner characterize *Take Three Tenses* as "a novel where modernism and realism merge" and raise "questions about whether Godden's novel is an attempt to domesticate modernism."⁶⁵ One essay in their collection focuses exclusively on *Take Three Tenses*: Victoria Stewart's "An Experiment with Narrative? Rumer Godden's *A Fugue in Time*." In a more thorough and rigorous analysis of the novel than exists in earlier scholarship, Stewart examines Godden's experimentation with narrative structure and time. She attributes Godden's portrayal of

⁶³ Rosenthal, *Rumer Godden Revisited*, 10.

⁶⁴ Simpson, *Rumer Godden*, 28.

⁶⁵ Le-Guilcher and Lassner, *Rumer Godden*, 14.

the house and characters to “a focus on time, as opposed to history or memory,” and asserts that “despite the historical markers that are discernible throughout,” the objects and voices that accumulate in the novel do not “evok[e] a specific epoch or place.”⁶⁶ But in fact, the Blitz is central and essential to the text. Godden marks 1940 as the novel’s present and builds the narrative toward the final, climactic scene in which the house is bombed. The moment co-exists with past and future in Godden’s temporal scheme, but it is the point around which the rest of time and the central narrative hinge.

In addition, Stewart sees Godden’s simultaneous tenses as “a consciousness able to see beyond the immediate moment and to exceed the powers of memory”⁶⁷ and therefore reads the novel as not being concerned with memory. To transcend the limits of individual human memory, though, is not necessarily to negate or preclude a memorial function; rather, it is what enables memorialization. Finally, Stewart’s reading leaves some unanswered questions: for example, if “human notions of progress” are “insignificant in the face of this measure of the passage of time,”⁶⁸ what does it mean when a single human event disrupts the temporal landscape of the narrative? If “the legacy of previous generations is...signified by their material remains”⁶⁹—in the case of the bombing, remains that rupture the sameness of the simultaneous tenses and leave physical scars and ruins—are those human notions and experiences still insignificant?

Because most of Godden’s previously published writings are set in India or other distant locations, they were thus seen as exotic and not personally relevant for most of her British and American readers. *Take Three Tenses*, on the other hand, uses concrete objects and specific

⁶⁶ Stewart, “An Experiment with Narrative,” 82.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

voices to ground the setting in the everyday biography of a house and family that resembled many of her readers' own. While working on *Take Three Tenses*, Godden wrote in a letter to her sister,

My mind is a flotsam of figures, sums—I have a perpetual anxiety that makes me constantly check my pass book—of dusters and meals, lessons, codliver oil, Moon on heat and firewood. What the war seems determined to teach me is to become an ordinary woman, something, I see now, I have always shirked before—“Miss Godden has a horror of the commonplace,” one reviewer wrote.⁷⁰

Whether or not the trends in Godden's earlier writings truly amount to a “horror of the commonplace,” the new direction taken in *Take Three Tenses* serves a distinct purpose given its setting and subject matter. In presenting a largely commonplace family residing in a commonplace home and living the commonplace lives of Londoners, Godden fashions a memorial space primed to receive the memories of characters and readers alike and reinforce the symbolic value of the house to transcend time and death. She acknowledges that although her setting is quotidian, it is the war that has prompted and enabled the project, lending urgency to the task of documenting typical lives in the face of death and disruption.

Godden's preoccupation in *Take Three Tenses* with theories of time stems in part from her interest in J. W. Dunne, whose work she read and pondered while composing the novel. In *An Experiment with Time*, originally published in 1927, Dunne, whose background as an aeronautical engineer influenced his philosophical writings, poses the idea of “serial time” and experiments with viewing time and consciousness as multidimensional rather than linear, arguing that all time is eternally present. Godden acknowledges the influence of Dunne's ideas in developing the temporal scheme for *Take Three Tenses* when she writes during the composition process, “I have become fascinated by Dunne's Theory of Time in which time is all one, not

⁷⁰ Godden, *A Time to Dance*, 217.

divided into past, present, and future.”⁷¹ In the author’s note for a 1976 reissue of *A Fugue in Time*, Godden indicates that “Dunne’s Experiment with Time” is a “theme that has always intrigued [her].” “Past, present, and future,” declares Godden,

are co-existent if only we could see it: if you are in a boat on a river you can only see the stretch on which your boat is travelling—a picnic party on the bank perhaps: a kingfisher diving. What you traversed before, passing willows, a barge tied up, cows in a field, as far as you are concerned, is gone; what lies around the next corner—a lock working, a man fishing—is hidden but, were you up in an aeroplane, you would see all these at once—the willows, the barge, the cows, picnic party, the diving kingfisher, the lock, the man fishing.⁷²

She explains further, “In *A Fugue in Time* I have taken the part of being up in the aeroplane, seeing three generations of a family at once, all living in a house in London, their stories interweaving, as themes do in a fugue.”⁷³ *Take Three Tenses* is constructed around this figuratively aerial sense of time: while the relative placement of features in a landscape remains constant when viewed from the air, the experience of them is no longer geographically decontextualized.

Similarly, while past, present, and future still exist in linear relationship to each other in the text, the details of each interval and their relationships to each other can be viewed simultaneously.

The fascination with the aerial gaze in midcentury British culture is undoubtedly tied in part to the expanding military role of aircraft, and Godden’s characterization of her novel’s point of view as that of the aeroplane is particularly disturbing because it is, in fact, the aerial gaze that threatens to destroy the house when it comes in the line of fire during an air raid. The concept enables Godden to develop a schema for the representation of time that unlocks the novel for her, but it also reveals her insensitivity to the frightening implications of airplanes and the aerial gaze for actual Londoners in the Blitz. Godden’s troubling use of aerial perspective undermines the novel’s

⁷¹ Godden, *A Time to Dance*, 194.

⁷² Godden, *A Fugue in Time*, 5.

⁷³ *Ibid.* One of her memoirs includes a similar explanation: “My story is written from the point of view of the aeroplane and covers three generations of a family living in the same house in London, not told consecutively but mingled together” (Godden, *A Time to Dance*, 194).

memorial capacity. It also implies that, while Godden struggled consciously with many aspects of the book's composition, she did not consider as carefully how to construct a symbolic space that would resonate with those living in Britain during the war.

"I must have written that book eight times, often in despair," she later recalled, "before I found the key: by putting the past into the present, the present into the past it worked—and more remarkably no-one, not even the critics noticed the shifts; the whole had miraculously blended."⁷⁴ And the tenses do blend—their shifts are at times almost imperceptible, adding to the sense that the past and present exist in a reciprocal relationship to each other—such that "the tenses are merely guideposts when one accepts the permanent availability of past and future as well as present."⁷⁵ But a novel in which an idealized house can withstand the effects of bombs by drawing on its closely bound past and future ignores the fact of tens of thousands of houses that did cease to exist and took much of their past with them, thanks to the very technology that inspired Godden.

Another significant influence on *Take Three Tenses* is T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which addresses both the survival and the death of houses. Godden selected an excerpt from "East Coker" as an epigraph, and her protagonist reads and quotes from the poem throughout the novel. This intertextuality underscores Godden's preoccupation with the concepts of home and time. The opening lines of "Burnt Norton" are reminiscent of Dunne's theory of time: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past."⁷⁶ In "East Coker," the importance of home and intimate relationships are linked to this loose interpretation of time. "Home is where one starts from,"⁷⁷ writes Eliot, and "Love is most nearly

⁷⁴ Godden, *A Time to Dance*, 216.

⁷⁵ Simpson, *Rumer Godden*, 67.

⁷⁶ Eliot, "Burnt Norton," lines 9–10.

⁷⁷ Eliot, "East Coker," line 190.

itself / When here and now cease to matter.”⁷⁸ This is the formula Godden upholds for a house and family in which all time exists continuously and simultaneously.

Elsewhere, however, Eliot expresses the pressure of passing time, writing of “Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l’entre deux guerres* / Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt / Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure.”⁷⁹ *Take Three Tenses* is an experiment in these attempts to use words to express memory between and during the two wars, but Godden does not convey the urgency that Eliot and other wartime writers seem to feel about their attempts to articulate their experiences. Each moment of Godden’s novel could be, as Eliot writes, “a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate”⁸⁰ and on the impulse to forget or render inexpressible, but *Take Three Tenses* does not acknowledge the barrier to communication and remembrance that Eliot explains in *Four Quartets*: “Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden” of memory and expression, and “Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still.”⁸¹ *Take Three Tenses* assembles straining words in a continual attempt to remember, but language, like time, is fluid, and definitive understanding and memory are impossible to verify.

Take Three Tenses draws heavily on “East Coker” in its explication of home and private life, but Godden and Eliot differ on a key point. While in “East Coker” “Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended, / Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place / Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass,”⁸² Godden’s house seems exempted; it must remain as a record of what has occurred. Eliot continues, “Houses live and die: there is a time for building / And a time for living and for generation / And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane.”⁸³ Here Eliot

⁷⁸ Eliot, “East Coker,” lines 200-1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, lines 172-74.

⁸⁰ Eliot, “East Coker,” line 179.

⁸¹ Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” lines 147-54.

⁸² Eliot, “East Coker,” lines 1-5.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, lines 9-11.

acknowledges the decay of words and memories and the death of houses, whereas Godden offers a fantasy of their immortality. Godden's deployment of Eliot seems to have unforeseen consequences for her novel's meaning: his words provide a foundation for the memory project but also introduce cracks in its base.

The central premise of *Take Three Tenses* is that the Dane family, who have occupied the same house at 99 Wiltshire Place for nearly a century, have dwindled to a single surviving member, Rolls, who faces eviction from the home to which he feels deeply attached and cannot imagine leaving. While Rolls discontentedly awaits the inevitable, he navigates his relationship to past and future, respectively, by reviewing memories of his childhood and hosting his great-niece Grizel who is in London with the American military. The narrative begins and ends in wartime and is temporally grounded throughout by references to the Second World War's effects on the characters and surroundings.

Past and future are both mediated by the house, which seems to contain the ghosts of its former residents and their collected voices and memories, and to which Grizel feels connected although she has never before visited it. The echoing voices of multiple generations lead us through and beyond the family's century in residence. Simpson describes the house as "a garrulous old building"⁸⁴ and "the sum of all the lives it has sheltered."⁸⁵ In its relentless collecting and repeating of voices and moments in time, "its function of memory resembles a sort of chronic total recall."⁸⁶ The voices participating in this recall aid the narrative in transitioning seamlessly from one tense—past, present, or future—to another. The family members gradually disperse and pass away, eventually leaving only Rolls alone with the house and its memories—"in the house, the past is

⁸⁴ Simpson, *Rumer Godden*, 63.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

present,” says the narrator (*TTT*7). But while this seems the end of the Danes and of the house, the narrative gradually discloses as it moves freely through time that Grizel will eventually marry the great-nephew of Rolls’s lost love and occupy the house with her family, continuing the relationship with 99 Wiltshire Place as a spatial anchor. The house’s continued survival is a defiant reaction to the threat of the Blitz. Godden makes a particularly hopeful gesture with her projection of Grizel’s future, because Grizel not only survives the war that brought her to London but finds her new life and family as a result.

The familial memory of the house has roots in Godden’s own past. “I have always loved houses and have written books around them,” she stresses. “My grandmother’s in London, though not as large, was the house in *Fugue in Time*.”⁸⁷ This inherent nostalgia sets the stage for Rolls to reminisce as “footfalls echo in the memory” (*TTT*6). The house’s various rooms absorb the sounds of the Danes’ daily lives, storing them up against times of vulnerability and reflecting them back in quiet moments: “When Roly goes to school and is called Rollo the nursery is empty. No one knows why the sounds of the sea, once known to the shell, should still be there, but no one can deny that it is” (47). Songs also figure prominently, with lines and refrains breaking into the text through the novel. Like objects and images, sounds accumulate in the house: “There is a crystal in the chandelier that sings, gives out a chime whenever a certain note is struck on the piano, or when a voice in singing reaches top D. There are many songs in the house: popular songs and hymns and carols; sentimental evening ballads; the songs Lark studies when at last she is given lessons; there are nursery songs and rhymes; and there are poems” (17). These traces of a comfortable, if imperfect, home life ground the house during the war, allowing it to transcend the moment of threat and draw on the past to maintain a sense of security.

⁸⁷ Godden, *A Time to Dance*, 185.

The songs and other echoes of footfalls and conversations remain closely tied to the histories and relationships of those who lived there, the house seeming to possess all of the Danes, physically present or not, by virtue of their ancestral connection to the place. Even Grizel, who visits Wiltshire Place only as an adult, finds that while there she “felt as if invisible threads were fastened from different places in it to her; some of the threads vibrated easily, some hung slackly and some jerked actually” (TTT94).⁸⁸ The narrator argues on behalf of the family early in the novel that “families possessed houses—not houses the family” (5). The subsequent pages effectively refute this insistent claim of independence: “‘We existed before you, you see,’ the family might have said to the house; and the house, in its tickings, its rustlings, its creakings...might steadfastly reply, ‘I know! I know. All the same, in me you exist’” (8–9). The family’s memory has become so intertwined with the physical house that the house is essential to recalling and memorializing their existence and their experiences. 99 Wiltshire Place, like many of Godden’s fictional houses, is an “active force in human life.”⁸⁹

Although the house is active most evidently in the private lives of the Dane family, this house, like the others that will be explored in this chapter, also participates in a broader wartime breakdown of distinctions between private and public life and personal and collective memory. In *Take Three Tenses*, as in *Four Quartets*, the tensions between the collective and the individual, the immutable and the fleeting, the static and the dynamic are evident. While the house echoes individual voices, these voices join to create a larger narrative. While memories of other people and events come and go from Rolls’s consciousness and the narrative trajectory throughout the

⁸⁸ According to Simpson, “In crucial times of birth or death, marriage or divorce, Rumer Godden’s characters, especially the women, discover that their lives are no longer entirely free but are and must be bound inextricably to other lives” (*Rumer Godden*, 56). This is true, I would argue, as much for the male characters in *Take Three Tenses* as for the female characters. Rolls Dane, at the end of his life and facing death in the Blitz, reflects on these unavoidable connections, particularly those related to “crucial times” such as marriage and death.

⁸⁹ Simpson, *Rumer Godden*, 28.

novel, they reside permanently in the house. And while the house remains in the same location in space for a century or more, it sees physical changes—most notably damage during the Blitz—and changes in the nature and composition of the stories it holds and echoes back to its residents and readers. These stories necessarily reflect the constantly evolving sum of what the house has experienced and observed over the course of its existence—an archival “signification through accumulation,” in the manner of the musical fugue for which the novel is named.⁹⁰

Overwhelmed by the historical consciousness she has unexpectedly entered into by visiting London and her great-uncle, Grizel complains, “Everything here, even the charwoman, seems to link up with something else.... Nothing seems to be only itself in England” (*TTT* 93). While she initially wonders if she “contain[s] anything else but self” (152), Grizel eventually appreciates that “all things are interrelated”⁹¹ and realizes “what she really was: infinitesimal; a grain in the sand” (148) of her family, of society, of all history. Also prompted by the echoes in the house, Rolls considers his position: “What was I? What did I do? Where was I?” (68), he asks himself, opening his memory and consciousness to help define and be defined by the memories that surround him up until the moment of his death. The interconnectedness Grizel and Rolls sense not only among the people and objects in the house but also within all of England, where nothing is “only itself,” suggests the war’s tendency to bring people and their individual stories together into shared spaces and public life. It also, however, elides the diverse reality of Blitz experiences and the circumstances of families less privileged than the Danes.

Take Three Tenses attempts to engage the collective lives of other Londoners by presenting a memorial reflection—not universal, certainly, but wide-ranging—of their experiences. *Take Three Tenses* recounts the modifications in the house’s surroundings over the course of its

⁹⁰ Stewart, “An Experiment with Narrative,” 91.

⁹¹ Rosenthal, *Rumer Godden Revisited*, 23.

century-long history with the Danes, the changing nature of the traffic that passes by, and the small developments in everyday life—such as the transition from coal delivery to electric power. Rolls, although not living in the house for most of his adult life, insists on updating and maintaining it. “You put in electric light. Why did you Rollo? You never used the house,” he is asked. “I didn’t want it to miss anything,’ said Rolls slowly. They were silent and, round them, the house, that did not miss the smallest thing, manifested itself in stirrings, rustlings, tickings, the train vibrations, the sound, again, of a mouse” (*TTT* 164–65), followed by a collection of fragmented voices evoking the conversations that have occurred in and around the house over the years, voices “from the past, present, and future” that “speak out of the rafters of the old house in which all time is eternal.”⁹² The house is thus not only a repository for familial memories but also a record of the changes in its surrounding culture and the lifestyle it affords. Stewart suggests that because Godden wrote the novel during wartime, “anxiety about the possible destruction of material things could be encoded here, and could itself express anxiety about other, potentially much graver losses.”⁹³ Rolls’s anxiety about the loss of the physical house and its contents as well as its voices and memories reflects an unspoken fear of what is lost in wartime, a fear managed in part by cataloging the house’s experiences as if to assert control over its surroundings and ensure permanence.

The house’s presence during the air raids of the Blitz is, of course, the most prominent example of its role in collective historical memory. After a raid ends and the all clear is sounded, the dust clears to reveal that while an adjacent house has collapsed, “Number 99 stood still” (*TTT* 250). At this moment “there was a dead silence. But the house was not silent; nor dead” (*ibid.*). In a sense, the damage sustained by the house is necessary. Had the house not been struck in the Blitz, it would have missed something by existing through a deeply significant event, and one

⁹² Rosenthal, *Rumer Godden Revisited*, 23.

⁹³ Stewart, “An Experiment with Narrative,” 91.

formative for London's cultural and historical memory from that point forward, without concretely recording its effects. The novel's ending assures the reader that the house will continue to live and remember indefinitely: "And the house continues in its tickings...; the ashes will fall in its grates, its doorbells ring; trains will pass under it and their sounds vibrate; footsteps will run up the stairs, along the passages" (251). The closing line—"In me you exist," says the house" (252)—might be directed at Rolls as the last Dane descendent in residence, who has died in the blast but whose memories will theoretically be retained by the structure. It might also apply equally to all of London, whose history the house has ceaselessly watched and recorded.

The house still stands in spite of damage, but in the moments following its injury Godden introduces a contradiction. The house ostensibly maintains its identity and meaning, but when the structure is broken open, the voices absorbed into its walls over the years rise and spread throughout its surroundings, perhaps to mingle with the voices and memories of other bombed houses. The words seem to emerge from the walls along with dust and debris, echoing, "*We thought it was going to end to-night, but it isn't. It is going to live. 'I am the house dog.' 'I am the house cat.' 'They eat Larks in Italy.' 'I should like never to see our own dining-room again'*" (TTT 251). Although life will continue in the house, the falling bombs cut short the life of its last resident and release the voices and images of the house's past. The Blitz thus makes incomplete, if not entirely unsustainable, the notion of the house as a thorough archive of memory and experience. The myths and meanings associated with private and family life are instead forced out of individual homes and into shared space.

No Directions

In the introduction to James Hanley's 1943 *No Directions*, Henry Miller describes the novel in vivid and jarring terms dramatically different from Godden's consoling family history:

“The book is one long roar of oceanic trash drowned in a green jungle of cracked ice, dementia, hysteria, vomit, flames and hallucination.”⁹⁴ Other descriptions imply the same sensory disorientation in less shocking terms, focusing on the novel’s portrayal of the “fear, absurdity and chaos”⁹⁵ of the Blitz and classifying it as “one of [Hanley’s] most astounding works,” “a novel with dazzlingly bold attempts at...defamiliarization.”⁹⁶

Hanley moved to London in July of 1939 to write plays and documentaries for the BBC, and later lived in a furnished flat in Chelsea—a setting very similar to that of *No Directions*—from August 1940 to January 1941, where he experienced some of the heaviest bombing of the Blitz. He left England while the Blitz was still underway, however, and wrote and published *No Directions* while living in Wales.⁹⁷ Known primarily as a working-class writer, Hanley’s work has been linked with that of other 1930s “proletarian realists,” but it also defies categorization and challenges the idea of modernism as antithetical to working-class realism.⁹⁸ What little scholarly criticism there is of Hanley’s war writing and of *No Directions* specifically focuses on the quality and diversity of characters, the novel’s stream-of-consciousness narrative mode, and its portrayals of the horror of the Blitz. I wish to take up the latter point within the physical and conceptual framework of the house in which the book is set. John Fordham argues that to read *No Directions* as an examination of these themes is to miss the class issues embedded in the text⁹⁹; at the same time, to privilege class above all other concerns is to miss the broader implications of what Hanley has to say about the material experience of the Blitz. This experience inevitably intersects with

⁹⁴ Miller, Introduction, v.

⁹⁵ Hewison, *Under Siege*, 45. See also Piette, *Imagination at War*, 72.

⁹⁶ Wade, “James Hanley,” 308.

⁹⁷ Hanley wrote two other novels connected to the Second World War, *The Ocean* (1941) and *Sailor’s Song* (1943), and also worked on an unpublished sequel to *No Directions* (Stokes, *The Novels of James Hanley*, 200), about which little is known.

⁹⁸ Fordham, *James Hanley*, 1.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

class, and Hanley presents a narrative with more socioeconomic diversity and consciousness of what the Blitz meant for working-class Britons than many other Blitz writers do (including Godden and Greene), but *No Directions* also speaks powerfully to overarching concerns about wartime home life and domestic space.

No Directions draws on Hanley's encounters with sailors and the sea, his history as a soldier for the Canadian forces in World War I, and his experience of the run-up to World War II and the Blitz itself. While the novel is set almost entirely in a single boarding house in Chelsea during one night of the Blitz, Hanley's unsettling imagery transports scenes from London to the icy wastelands of a sailor's hallucinating mind. The perceived setting, while externally constrained by the house and the nearby streets, proves to be unstable; so too are the novel's narrative perspective, which moves among characters in disorienting shifts, and its sense of time, which seems to speed up or slow down according to the nearness of the planes overhead.

Whereas the house in *Take Three Tenses* is expansive, gathering voices and connecting the family across generations, the house in *No Directions* is constrictive and disorienting, its inhabitants trapped within it but alienated from each other even as they dwell in close proximity. The memorial function of Godden's project is to capture the voices and experiences of people over time; Hanley's represents the sensations of a single experience, suggesting the exceptional conditions under which the house's inhabitants live. If "private, domestic space [is a] frame and metonym of inner, psychological space,"¹⁰⁰ then Hanley's Chelsea house reveals an abnormal psychology of intense anxiety.

In Hanley's novel, individual relationships, the history of the house, and the larger context of the war are secondary to the anxiety and tension in the moment of danger. Like journalist Hilde

¹⁰⁰ Briganti and Mezei, "House Haunting," 149.

Marchant, who observed families coming up from the shelters after a raid to find “the roots of their homes turned to the sky,”¹⁰¹ Hanley turns the conventional literary symbolism of the house, including the consoling portrayal embraced by Godden, upside down in a disorienting and frightening portrait of a night in the Blitz.

Like Godden’s portrait of 99 Wiltshire Place, Hanley’s rendering of a house in Chelsea reveals a building with a life and character of its own. An early passage catalogs the sounds and events in the life of the house:

The kettle left on the gas-jet spluttered, rattled its lid. The gas-fire in the small living-room drenched with its heat. Somewhere behind the wainscoting a mouse pattered about. Flies buzzed around the naked light bulb, the light glared down on them. The man snored, she seemed hardly breathing. The tropical birds on the wall-paper, perched and poised, seemed ready to burst into song, the background of deep foliage shimmered under the room’s heat.... Above their heads feet endlessly paced the floor, the telephone bell went on ringing below the stairs, but these two were secure, beyond staggering worlds, over a frontier in time.¹⁰²

This catalog of sounds reads like some passages in *Take Three Tenses*, although the sounds of *No Directions* exist in the present rather than being collected over time. Even so, the list conveys a sense of long-term accumulation, and the language of “beyond” and “over a frontier in time” suggests a sort of timelessness, as if these sounds and activities always have been and always will be occurring and we glimpse only a moment of their ongoing existence. The sounds initially offer a source of surprising stability in the face of imminent destruction.

Yet the sounds of that destruction are what ultimately fill the house after words bounce weakly from the walls and mundane domestic noises are silenced or drowned out by those of violent intrusion: sirens, plane engines, shattering glass, and explosions. These “avalanches of noise struck downwards” (*ND* 85), demonstrating the pervasive and destructive power of sound. In one

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 28.

¹⁰² Hanley, *No Directions*, 18. Cited hereafter in the text as *ND*.

moment, spoken words even lose their status as sounds in the face of the bombers' approach: one woman in the house "didn't hear what [the sailor] said..., she was thinking of sounds. She thought she heard them now, far distant, faint, but the prelude to thunders; she sat up suddenly as through struck, remained motionless" (43). Words and conversation, so central to the comfortable image of home and to the traditional house novel, cannot be heard in Hanley's house. A few pages later, the sounds she fears hearing become undeniable: "'The bombers,' she said, suddenly cold all over, they made her feel like that, a cosmic coldness, mysterious, terrifying" (52). The run-on sentence and the list of increasingly intense feelings in her stream-of-conscious thoughts indicate the rapidly building panic that accompanies the increasing volume and momentum of the sounds themselves. The sounds—"swollen, torrential sound, filling house and room, flooding stairway, deluging sound" (71)—invade the space and redefine the dimensions of the house and the domestic lives it encompasses and represents. The structure may remain standing, but its meaning—social, political, ideological—is altered.

Sounds elicit such pointed and long-lasting fear because they signal a state of suspense: danger is near and could strike at any moment, but whether and when are impossible to know. Sounds preoccupy those in the house, such as Gwen, a visitor who ends up drinking in a stranger's flat with the sailor. She thinks, after the planes have passed by, "I hope they don't come over again." Hanley continues, "She stood quite still, she shuddered, thinking of sounds" (*ND* 39). It seems strange that Gwen would shudder while thinking of sounds and not bombs, when it is the latter that poses an actual threat to her.

Even though sound itself cannot kill as a bomb can, Hanley grants the sound a great deal of power over his characters. Sound is not just heard but also felt, and it is the farthest-reaching aspect of a bomb blast. When a bomb falls, it strikes in one place, but the air-raid sirens, the plane's engines, the bomb's detonation are heard far beyond. Thus the house offers no protection or even

illusion of safety, for it seems to sit always on the front line of aerial warfare, even when the bombs fall far from it. As one character thinks, “You waited, you knew this sound would spread, rise and fall, make ever widening circles, you knew this mentor of your time, of a city’s time. It could not belong anywhere but here” (*ND* 71). The power of the sound emerges clearly in Hanley’s descriptions of it as an embodied force:

There was no place this sound could not reach, yet it could not be touched, you felt it behind you, pushing you up, up quickly to where he was, pushing you, a thing, yet you could not touch it. You thought of city’s loneliness, it might be that cry, and then you said, no, loneliness has no voice, never had, never could have. You said, this is an emanation. Rising and falling, pouring in, far spreading sound. Some sort of cry from stone, those strangled shapes? Perhaps a cry from these, pride sucked from their bone. All the songs in hell sung, all the sounds known, but you could not name this sound. A lawless sound, outside all music. (71)

It is “a long sound, deep, you could measure the length, depth of this, it is difficult to classify and describe,” and “you knew it would come, but it was not music, nor any bird’s cry, nor that of stone” (*ibid.*). In other words, it is not part of the natural domestic soundscape of a house but a foreign and invasive entity forcibly entering into a space of ostensible peace and privacy. Knowledge that the sound will come disturbs the illusion of peace by drawing the house into a makeshift battlefield and negates the expectation of privacy and comfort by forcing the residents into the cellar together.

The sound effectively fragments and infiltrates the house’s defenses, to the point that even before a bomb strikes, the structure seems fragile: doors refuse to close, rooms feel like hollow shells, and the roof overhead is described only in vague and distant terms. When the inevitable explosion comes, blowing open the front door and killing the sailor, the moment of impact is marked by “sounds [that] deafened them” (*ND* 134). The house, unlike many of its literary predecessors, is not shaped and brought to life by memories, conversations, or people but by

imagined sounds and the anxiety they induce. These sounds, more than the words with which the novel is composed, characterize the experience of reading *No Directions*.

Still, words are the literary bricks that make up a fictional house. For Hanley they are also animated entities that occupy and define the space. They both fill the space and are scarce. This house, unlike Godden's, does not speak the words back; although the rooms are "word-choked" (*ND* 66), "words seemed at a premium" and "you had to be sparing" (116), as if the house does not retain words as reflections of memories but drains them of their meaning. What use is an archive of words that cannot be spoken, understood, or reused? Hanley constructs a domestic repository of voices and memories that are already meaningless, trapped in their time and place of creation and incomprehensible outside of that moment. The inaccessibility of the words in *No Directions* suggests not only the incomprehensible chaos and fear of the Blitz but also the futility of realistic recollection and representation. The truth of the Blitz in this novel is sensory; Hanley privileges the memory of an overall collective sensation and leaves aside details of time and place, individual responses, long-term consequences, and efforts to explain or find meaning in the events. The title itself reinforces the sense of incomprehensibility that permeates the novel: the characters have little sense of direction in their movements, and the sounds and signs of destruction seem to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. The timeline of a single night leaves the reader without a larger narrative in which to ground the account.

The appearance and dimensions of this house—not to mention the events of the night—are unclear to both its occupants and the reader. Instead of allowing a clear view of the setting, Hanley presents language as a type of sonar, in which the sound of words reveals the dimensions of the space: "Words echoed back to you when you spoke. So, working slowly, from bottom upwards, you reached the heights, and it was shell. 'Shell,' she thought, 'hollow.' How high the words climbed, up to the roof, then heavily fell, like swooping birds" (*ND* 116). In this space, words and

memories drift and swoop around without being absorbed, just as in an experience of fear and trauma they would be difficult to recall and process.

The novel's chaos gains momentum as the raid continues and the house's occupants seek shelter away from the sounds and dangers of the Blitz. But rather than a reassuring communal retreat in the safest part of the house, they find further failure of the domestic ideal. If occupying the house itself is disorienting and dehumanizing, entering the cellar beneath it is even more so. When Richard, a warden, asks his wife whether she went down to the cellar in his absence, she responds in the negative. "I feel safer here," she explains. "Down there nothing seemed to have any meaning" (*ND* 18). Despite being less safe physically, the house, through its echoes, still gives an illusion of emotional safety and meaning in the midst of the attack. The cellar, on the other hand, erases the distinctions between people and leaves only anxiety. Consider the thoughts of the residents who retreat to the cellar—on a "journey ending endlessly" (109)—for shelter: Lena, while waiting for Clem to rejoin her, "sat quite still. She was like floor, like wall, stone to this stone" (141). "Talk about a cave," says Mrs. Frazer. In this cave, Emily is "lost in a vastness," a "feeling of endlessness, of nothing but height, depths" (103-4). Meanwhile, "Celia still slept. They looked down at her, but she was nothing, she had become disembodied, she was part of the cellar" (129). The cellar consumes its occupants, leaving them lost and empty rather than safe and secure.

How Hanley's characters occupy—or merge with—the space of the physical house is suggestive of how people occupy symbolic or living structures generally. The *No Directions* house restricts the range of motion of its occupations and defines the size and shape of the novel's world. Occasional scenes take place in the surrounding streets of London, but these moments feel like mere gasping breaths of fresh air before the actors are drawn back to the simultaneously claustrophobic and cavernous house. It is possible to read the house as a microcosm of London or

even Europe in wartime. People have been thrown together in enclosed spaces, limited in their resources and range of motion, and aided in cultivating a perpetual mood of anxiety.

This state of affairs lends itself well to an illustration of a foreign threat invading private consciousness, that is, the abstraction of distant political tensions crystallizing in the concrete and quotidian gestures of daily life. The drunken sailor who is drawn into the house off the street when the air-raid sirens begin finds himself at one point in the night “hugging himself in, feeling suddenly cold, thinking of ice, seeing it rise, white, then bluish, towering, great walls, sheets, layers, a world of it, blue, shining, cold, silent, where no man was” (*ND* 56). His confusion about his surroundings is both darkly humorous and revealing. To imagine great expanses of ice—a frozen “No Man’s Land”—while inside a house is to acknowledge the danger and isolation of both spaces. The sailor senses the violation imposed by the bombs aimed toward this house and others like it. The treacherous and uncaring landscape suggests a once-distant threat brought into the city and even into the supposed safety and privacy of home.

The threat and danger clearly pervade the house, but what are their effects on the house as a potential archive of memories and experiences? Hanley’s approach seems, in some ways, to subvert memory work. Hanley makes each character’s experience equally traumatic and equally inaccessible, and the disorienting nature of the narrative makes it difficult to extract memory, unless the memory is merely of disorientation itself. In this Hanley’s writing contrasts markedly with Godden’s, which has such an explicit agenda of familial memorial that becomes intimately tied to war memory. Hanley constructs a similar setting, providing a house as the space needed to anchor memory, and recounts related events, and yet leaves the reader grasping to understand exactly what is happening and who the characters are. *No Directions* suggests that it is impossible to comprehend and acknowledge the experience of each individual. To avoid a reductive or totalizing account of a night in the Blitz, we are left only with fragmented impressions. When an

account, fictional or otherwise, is always already distorted and incomplete, a memory of distortion and fragmentation is perhaps the truest reflection of the history and experiences contained in a particular space.

The house in *No Directions*, in a very different way from 99 Wiltshire Place, engages the reader's own memories and perceptions. Reading *No Directions* is an immersive experience. Drawn into the confusion of characters and voices, the reader is apt to experience disorientation and anxiety to mirror that of Hanley's characters. But as a memorial, Hanley's blitzed house features no directions to aid in interpretation, just as its inhabitants find themselves with no guide or escape, but rather places the viewer in open dialogue with the novel's version of narrative power and emotional truth. Hanley upends the idea of the house as an interpretable measure of loss and a comforting memorial place. Godden's hopeful, reassuring fantasy of the bombed house serves to cast the distress and failure of Hanley's in sharp relief. The symbol that Godden found so evocative is for Hanley a disturbing reminder of the death of that which the symbol represents.

The End of the Affair

Graham Greene's postwar novel *The End of the Affair* (1951) portrays another essential side of the death of the Blitzed house. In this text, Green shares Godden's and Hanley's attention to the wartime shift that turned private spaces central to the experience of blitzed Britons into public spaces. But like *No Directions*, *The End of the Affair* challenges Godden's hopeful symbolism by featuring houses that fail to serve as containers for consoling, immortal memories. In *The End of the Affair*, the failure comes not from sensory fragmentation and pervasive fear but from the transformation of private space into a public commons.

The central event of the novel is an air strike that damages the home of the protagonist, Maurice Bendrix. Air raids destroyed Greene's own house during the Blitz, and the fictionalized

account of a similar event in *The End of the Affair* suggests the centrality of that experience to Greene's wartime life. For Maurice, and perhaps for Greene and many of his fellow Londoners, the destruction of a home shapes and defines his relationships and his memories of that period. While *The End of the Affair* is ostensibly about Maurice's affair with Sarah Miles, the wife of a civil servant, and about their respective experiences with God and religion, the war and the bombing in particular drive their actions and define the spaces they inhabit, facilitate the beginning and end of their relationship and provide the structure for reflection and commemoration. The war is, as Maurice notes, an "accomplice in [the] affair."¹⁰³

Over time, as Maurice engages a private investigator, attempts to reconnect with Sarah, and, after her death, grows close to her husband while they try to understand her recently discovered faith, Maurice's account repeatedly returns to the site of the bombing. The loss of Sarah and the damage to his home are conflated in one site that continues to exercise a traumatic effect not bound by time. Like *Take Three Tenses*, *The End of the Affair* features a nonlinear narrative in which the timeline seems unclear and unimportant. The bombing remains the definitive point on which the text hinges, but Maurice moves about in time with little concern for sequence as he presents his story through flashbacks, letters, and diary entries intermingled with moments from the present. As he says in the opening line of the novel, "A story has no beginning or end; arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead" (*EOTA* 3). All moments in time are presented as inseparably linked, unified by simultaneously occupying a particular space.

Each element of the novel is also linked by its relationship to the bomb—a V-1 flying bomb, in this case—that does the damage and initiates the central events of the story. In one of Sarah's

¹⁰³ Greene, *The End of the Affair*, 67. Cited hereafter in the text as *EOTA*.

diary entries, from July 1944, she writes that while speaking with a colleague of her husband's, she "couldn't think of anything to talk about but the V-1s" and "longed suddenly to tell everybody about coming downstairs and finding Maurice buried" (*EOTA* 119). Sarah thinks of the V-1s and Maurice in the same moment, linking her closest brush with the violence of the air raids to a deeply intimate and trying moment in her private life. Yet she later admits that she "doesn't like the peace," which she supposes makes people happy because "there were no more bombs" (127).

While *The End of the Affair* is built largely around the events that happened in Maurice's house, it is less intent on exploring the meaning of a particular domestic space than are *Take Three Tenses* and *No Directions*, and thus presents the house as largely figurative. In a sense, though, this reinforces the novel's point about domestic space, that the Blitz could strip away the specificity and meaning of individual homes, turning them into public and generic spaces. As a house symbolically turned inside out, Maurice's flat, where he lives among "the relics of other people's furniture" (*EOTA* 4), exposes his life to outside view. Conversely, the adjacent Common, where he frequently encounters Sarah's husband, brings outside lives and memories in. What happens beyond the refuge of Maurice's flat, particularly in regard to his personal relationships, exerts a tangible, physical influence on the space; no longer a private refuge, his home becomes subject to invasion by outside influences and the contaminating evidence of outsiders' presence. Upon agreeing to allow the private investigator he has hired to follow Sarah to visit his home if necessary, Maurice "immediately felt as though [he] were admitting some infection to [his] own room." Maurice feels certain that the "man's presence would be like dust over the furniture and stain [his] books like soot" (24).

The climax of the house's transformation comes with the V-1 blast that damages the building and ends the affair. Sarah, finding Maurice lying on the stairs and believing him to be dead, kneels to pray in what becomes, in the moment of destruction, a religious space. After

promising God she will not see Maurice again if he is allowed to live, Sarah leaves the combination house and church in its shattered state. A pane of ugly stained glass that survives the bombing reappears throughout the text as if to reinforce the transformation of the home into a figurative church. After the crisis, Maurice recalls, “The glass from the windows crumbled under our feet. Only the old Victorian stained glass above the door had stood firm. The glass turned white where it powdered, like the ice children have broken in wet fields or along the sides of roads” (*EOTA* 82). Fields and roadsides, like churches, are public, visible, and vulnerable, and for Maurice during the Blitz, the distinction between such spaces and his house weakens. Much later he writes, “I closed the stained-glass door behind me and made my way carefully down the steps that had been blasted in 1944 and never repaired. I had reason to remember the occasion and how the stained glass, tough and ugly and Victorian, stood up to the shock as our grandfathers themselves would have done” (4). “Nothing but the stained glass,” he thinks, “was the same as that night in 1944” (179). While the decorative stained glass survives, the functional steps continue to crumble, an overt suggestion of the instability Maurice faces while traversing the ground between his private and public lives as a result of the war, his affair, and his profession as a writer. As Maurice’s own memories and ties to the crumbling elements of his home fade, the prominence of the Victorian stained glass asserts its claim to represent the history and function of the space. No longer merely the site of the Blitz’s domestic consequences, the damaged house remakes itself as a symbolically shared space with visual reminders of its spiritual function and figurative history.

The house’s failing infrastructure and Maurice’s increasing discomfort living there presage its ultimate emptying of personal, domestic meaning. Both Godden and Hanley fill their spaces with personal memories, albeit very different in nature, but Greene’s is sapped of private, domestic significance by its destruction. Maurice appears distressed not so much by the physical damage to his home as by the brokenness it implies in his feelings and memories. He confesses that “the

pendulum of [his] desire swung tiringly to and fro, the desire to forget and to remember” (*EOTA* 173), and reflects that “the repairs to the house were part of the process of forgetting” (180). As the repairs wipe away the reminders of Sarah and the rest of Maurice’s private life, her eventual death leaves him with little to remember her by. “She had lost all our memories forever,” Maurice thinks, “and it was as though by dying she had robbed me of part of myself.... It was the first stage of my death, the memories dropping off like gangrened limbs” (171). In Sarah’s style of living, “nothing was ever allowed to remain as a token of past taste or past sentiment” (11), and the same was true in her death, coming as it did soon after the destruction and depersonalization of the Blitz. Once, while waiting anxiously for a letter from Sarah, Maurice calms himself with the thought that “in wartime letters are lost” (89). So too are houses, with their living presence and stored memories, lost in wartime, Greene suggests.

The transition of Maurice’s house from a private home to a generic bombsite leads him to move away—to live with Sarah’s widower in a house undamaged and still home to a few lingering remnants of her. Maurice describes the building that houses his former flat not as “my home” or any other personal designation but merely as “the house with the ruined steps” (*EOTA* 239), characterizing it with great finality as fragmented and traumatized, a failed refuge from physical and emotional violence. The house joins the other sites nearby that provide the basis for Maurice’s wartime mode of viewing his surroundings. He frequently references structures notable primarily, even exclusively, for their devastated condition. He returns to the neighborhood of a hotel he and Sarah once visited, which “had been blasted to bits, and the place where [they] made love that night was a patch of air” (51). On another occasion, he watches Sarah make her way past “the bombed bookshop” (156). And after Sarah’s death, he pictures her lying alone upstairs and recalls that “once in the blitz [he] saw a man laughing outside his house, where his wife and child were buried” (178). The events of his own life map onto and lead him to think of other spaces whose

meaning derives purely from their state of destruction. His own home eventually becomes just another one of these landmarks, part of the landscape and a public reference point for others like him.

Greene's chosen epigraph for *The End of the Affair*, a quote attributed to French writer Leon Bloy, addresses the effects of pain on a person: "Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering, in order that they may have existence" (*EOTA* 1). Maurice finds these places in his own heart throughout the novel; on a larger scale, he also contributes to bringing the literary or symbolic bombed house into existence as a unique place that emerges from suffering on the World War II home front. In Sarah's house, "even vacancy was crowded with her" (201), just as the gaps, holes, and ruins in other literary houses are crowded with the lives of those who occupied them. Maurice's flat, on the other hand, ends up dead and empty. Although Maurice continues to associate the location with Sarah, the space itself is stripped, by both the blast and the subsequent repairs, of the cozy domestic associations and personal memories central to house symbolism. The resulting space, figuratively public and generic, is no more than a doll's house, the analogy of choice for so many witnesses who saw homes broken open and turned inside out¹⁰⁴ to expose their now-anonymous private lives to public view.

The consequences of the war for private homes and lives similarly pervade Elizabeth Bowen's short story "In the Square." While the house at its center still stands and is inhabited by its owner, its location is that of an "extinct scene," "acrid with ruins."¹⁰⁵ Inside the house are "dead

¹⁰⁴ Jan Struther, the creator of the character Mrs. Miniver, employed similar imagery to describe the condition of home and private life in wartime Britain: "We did not envisage a war," she explains in her introduction to a book about British women and air raids, "in which the entire domestic life of one of the most domesticated countries in the world would be turned inside out and upside down.... There is scarcely a habitation in the land—scarcely a cottage or a castle, a luxury flat or a tenement dwelling, a country vicarage or a suburban villa, a back-to-back or a but-and-ben—which has not been forced to change the whole rhythm and pattern of its daily life" (Introduction to *Women of Britain*, 6-7).

¹⁰⁵ Bowen, *The Collected Stories*, 609.

room[s]” existing in “functional anarchy,”¹⁰⁶ for the house has ceased to exist or operate according to the norms of comfortable, orderly domestic life. This is in part because, as the home’s original resident reveals, “the house seems to belong to everyone now,”¹⁰⁷ open to all who can make a claim on its space. Without an exclusive connection to the house, “one has nothing except one’s feelings.”¹⁰⁸ In this brief portrait of a house transformed, Bowen reinforces the perception illustrated by Greene that the war allowed the public view to filter into private domestic spaces and replace their being—their collections of personal memories and associations—with a collective, generic existence that leaves them feeling empty and dead even when still inhabited.

Conclusion

In a 1912 guide, *Famous Houses and Literary Shrines of London*, A. St. John Adcock opens his preface by declaring, “Nothing could be deader or emptier than an unoccupied house of whose former inhabitants we have no knowledge.”¹⁰⁹ One effect of house novels that capture a particular historical moment is to repopulate a limited historical world with imagined inhabitants and thus provide an entry point for understanding and memorializing the event. In the context of the Blitz, however, the relationship between house novels and memory is complicated by the disruption of the cultural values and symbolism that portray the house as a highly personal site capable of absorbing and communicating the feelings of its inhabitants.

In the Blitz novel, houses are broken open, emptied of their voices and memories, and stripped of reassuring connotations. Dead and dying houses instead convey the fractured and alienating nature of wartime home life. They represent a private existence fraught with uncertainty and danger, in conflict with conventional domestic roles and routines, and lived communally and

¹⁰⁶ Bowen, *The Collected Stories*, 610.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 612.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 615.

¹⁰⁹ Adcock, *Famous Houses*, v.

largely in public view. While Blitz novels do repopulate houses, responding to matters of war and instability on a manageable scale and making sense of wartime changes in domestic lives and personal paradigms, they mark a definitive break with the continuity of the house as a powerful literary symbol.¹¹⁰ They illustrate the inadequacy—even inappropriateness—of such symbolism in a period when both the physical reality and the cultural ideal of home were under threat.

¹¹⁰ The house has likely never been a stable symbol, and it often registers social and other changes happening around it. But the *idea* of its stability has been quite persistent, allowing it to moderate change with elements of comfort and familiarity. The war challenged this idea on an unprecedentedly large and literal scale, for in the moment of greatest need for a symbol of stability the Blitz proved the impossibility of this appealing fantasy.

CHAPTER FOUR

Unreal City: Navigating London in the Blitz

Nowhere in London is pleasant because everywhere are the ruined landmarks of personal and national vulnerability.¹

“O London, where have you gone?”²

London Can Take It!, one of the most famous propaganda films produced by the British government during the Second World War, paints a cinematic portrait of a city defined by its citizens' solidarity in the face of German bombing and its resistance to total destruction. This short film, released by the Ministry of Information in 1940, features an admiring voiceover by American journalist and war correspondent Quentin Reynolds, who claims to be a “neutral reporter,” even as he speaks of himself and the Londoners as “we” and celebrates, accompanied by an alternately sober and triumphant musical soundtrack, the “greatest civilian army ever to be assembled.” Not a work of neutral reportage at all, *London Can Take It!* was in fact designed to simultaneously boost morale in Britain, persuade Germans that London was withstanding their attacks, and encourage supportive sentiment in the United States. (The government also hoped to convince Franklin D. Roosevelt to enter the war and provide official military support to the British.)

The Ministry of Information's carefully orchestrated tour of London combines footage of iconic landmarks like St. Paul's Cathedral, Big Ben, and Trafalgar Square with quotidian street scenes, and shocking images of ruins and rubble.³ Each of these views of London asserts itself in an

¹ Miller, *British Literature of the Blitz*, 29.

² Hoult, *There Were No Windows*, 221.

³ Some of these aesthetic choices might be a result of censorship policies. As Amy Helen Bell has indicated, “at the height of the Blitz, the chief censor required that each panning shot of London ‘start from an undamaged

unsettling mix that attempts to cobble a unified account out of the chaos of a city under siege. In this film, that account is largely defined by London's nightly transformation into a battlefield populated by a civilian army, a city "dressed for battle": "These civilians are good soldiers," Reynolds declares, and it is this "People's Army" that is really fighting the war. Even those who do not serve as firefighters or wardens or ambulance drivers, who instead spend their nights in shelters, do so "as their part in the defense of London." The experience of the film places viewers alongside the civilian soldiers, building anticipation of the impending battle and drawing them into the visual and aural chaos of searchlights trained on the approaching planes and guns illuminated by periodic explosions.

When morning comes and German bombers—"creatures of the night"—"scurry off" like so many rats into the sewers of the city-battlefield, the city awakes to peace and the "heroes by night" return to their day jobs. The film's characterization of London, at night overtaken by battle while the trappings of normal civilian life are hidden inside shelters and behind blackout curtains, now shifts to personification. The narrator declares admiringly that "London raises her head, shakes the debris of the night from her hair, and takes stock of the damage done. London has been hurt during the night," but like a great fighter, London stands up after being knocked down. It is difficult to imagine that Reynolds's insistence that "a bomb has its limitations" and "can only destroy buildings and kill people" was particularly comforting to those being bombed. He readily acknowledges and in the same moment dismisses thousands of deaths and denies the existence of any fear in order to assert Londoners' courage and determination.

This vision of London and the experience of its people is reductive, both in terms of the effects on English civilians and the geographical bounds of the conflict. The film restricts the entire

building...conclude on an undamaged building and...not linger over damaged buildings" (quoted in Bell, *London Was Ours*, 27-28).

scope of the war to what occurs in London (with the exception of brief references to RAF bombings on strategic German targets), setting the city as the focal point for fighting and loss as well as triumph and survival. In this way the film circumscribes the war as concrete and localized, inviting viewers to identify with Londoners and enhancing the impact of the film's message. This simplified war fought only in the streets and air of London furnishes a manageable, digestible narrative and, perhaps most importantly, appears eminently winnable. But many literary portraits of London, as will be seen in this chapter, suggest a city less readily mapped, navigated, and understood.

London lies at the heart of most accounts of the Blitz and the civilian wartime experience generally, whether or not those accounts do explicit political or ideological work. Country Britons, Anglo Indians, Americans, and others with English roots closely followed news from London. For some, London stood in as a microcosm of Britain—or even of all European countries under threat from Germany—and the damage and trauma it suffered were seen as the expression of the collective anxiety that spread among its residents and watchers. London thus became, for writers, a metonymic space, an “archive-city,”⁴ a container for memory of events. This chapter examines how writers both within and beyond London portrayed the city at war and how they contributed to mythologies about the nature and meaning of the city and city life. While London was by no means the only significant target of the Blitz and later air raids, the only important site to memorialize as such, or the setting for all literary accounts of the air raids, it does provide the background for the greatest number of these texts and thus is a logical place to begin studying the literary afterlives of bombed cities.

⁴ Donald, “Inner London,” 261.

The writers of primary interest in this chapter are those who express through their portrayals of London and its people the unreality of the city—those whose versions of London run counter to a literary historical narrative in which literature shapes, reflects, and even *is* the true London. In these texts, blitzed London stands apart from the London of previous memory; the texts might refer reminiscently to this past space, but their present is an exception. Essayists and cultural commentators like George Orwell and Mollie Panter-Downes remark again and again in their writings that the character and behavior of Londoners are different under the threat of bombing.⁵ The people are described at various points as more garrulous, more anxious, more cheerful, and more disheartened than the archetypal Londoner would be otherwise. Orwell extends this observation further in his assertion that the Blitz marks a moment of massive social change. In January 1941 he declared, “On that day in September when the Germans broke through and set the docks on fire, I think few people can have watched those enormous fires without feeling that this was the end of an epoch. One seemed to feel that the immense changes through which our society has got to pass were going to happen there and then.”⁶ Much of the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen, along with work by Patrick Hamilton and Henry Green, occupies fragmented and alienating versions of blitzed London, suggesting that observations like Orwell’s and Panter-Downes’s apply not only to the people of London but to the city itself. The “unreal cities” of these works convey the strangeness of occupying a city that no longer looks, feels, or functions in the way its people are accustomed.

Of course prewar London was not historically or geographically uniform, nor could a period of a few years create a space that resembled nothing before or since. But a confluence of factors—total war, place annihilation, challenges to life and hope—made wartime London feel

⁵ See, for example, Orwell’s *The English People* and Mollie Panter-Downes’s *London War Notes*.

⁶ Orwell, quoted in Gardiner, *The Blitz*, xiv.

different. Much of the writing penned in and about London during that time adopts this framework in order to explore the subtle consequences of the city's condition and the transition of its people into an abnormal way of viewing, traversing, and interacting with its spaces. This chapter will examine several modes of defamiliarizing London that are present in Blitz literature, focusing on how writers employ modes of engaging with urban space and how, reflecting the material conditions of the actual city, they destabilize the foundations of London's representation in literature. The instability—of geography, appearance, navigation—that defines London as perceived by characters or writers of Blitz literature reflects the instability of wartime London's future, both as a functioning city and as a symbol.

The texts discussed in this chapter attempt to cope with and represent the Blitz and thus to understand its impact on the future of London. They reveal both their uncertainties about a post-Blitz city and their projections of its continuity in the face of an overwhelming material and metaphorical break. The imagery and language of disorientation—the sense of being lost or finding oneself in a surreal or unfamiliar place—provide a powerful vocabulary for writers to convey their experiences of living out the Blitz in London. Representing apparent unreality is part of the struggle to build a new reality and to make a place where one has been annihilated. To record the city post-destruction, post-apocalypse is to begin imagining its continued existence. The creation of the unreal post-Blitz city attempts to fulfill the need to imaginatively reconstruct London and its symbolic value even while acknowledging the continued reality of loss and absence. In doing so writers both uphold and complicate the hopeful slogans that appeared in wartime exhibitions to proclaim that “London's desecration is also London's splendour” and “her ruins are the ramparts of freedom.”⁷

⁷ M-O A, TC Propaganda and Morale, 5/B, Report on “London Pride” exhibit, 1.

Urban Warfare

Contrary to some popular narratives about war, urban warfare that targets civilians was not a twentieth-century innovation. Although for much of modern Western history war consisted primarily of engagements between armies in remote areas, attacks on cities have been a feature of war from iconic ancient conflicts up to the present, and “civilian and domestic spaces” in cities are reemerging now as “geopolitically charged spaces.”⁸ The twentieth century did introduce flight and therefore aerial bombardment into the mix, but London was not the first city to suffer its effects. Despite a prohibition on targeting civilians with aerial weapons established by the Hague Convention of 1907, such methods were used in colonial areas of North Africa and Asia as early as 1911, in limited ways during the First World War, and most famously on Guernica in 1934.⁹

The geographer Ken Hewitt, who coined the term “place annihilation” to refer to attacks calculated to destroy entire spaces and populations, sees “a direct reciprocity between war and cities.” He argues that “the latter are the more thoroughgoing constructs of collective life, containing the definitive human places. War is the most thoroughgoing or consciously prosecuted occasion of collective violence that destroys places.”¹⁰ The city at war or under attack thus plays host to the collision of contradictory human impulses toward cooperation and violence, construction and destruction. Such circumstances obviously change the physical structure of the city but they also challenge the characteristics that identify that space as urban and force its people to reconsider what it means to occupy what might in extreme cases remain a city in name only. This concept lends itself well to a reading of Blitz novels, allowing the devastated London of literature to stand in for the actual city and represent the fear of physical and cultural annihilation.

⁸ Graham, “Introduction: Cities, Warfare,” 5.

⁹ Bishop and Clancey, “The City-as-Target,” 59; Graham, “Introduction: Cities, Warfare,” 3.

¹⁰ Hewitt, “Place Annihilation,” 258.

In many literary accounts of war, in fact, cities are “synonymous with civilization,” and air raids thus threaten “to destroy not only the citizen but also civic life.”¹¹

Susan Sontag, in 2003, wrote troublingly of the effects of war on a city: “To be sure, a cityscape is not made of flesh. Still, sheared-off buildings are almost as eloquent as body parts.... Look, the photographs [or texts, I would add] say, this is what it’s like. This is what war does. War tears, war rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins.”¹² Sontag’s words could easily apply to many of the victims of twentieth-century “urbicide”—or “the deliberate denial, or killing, of the city,”¹³ for after all, “being chiefly human, cities can be killed”¹⁴—Kabul, Dresden, Beirut, Sarajevo, or Grozny as well as London. Sontag’s condemnation of war’s destruction is vivid and captures some of the horror of urban warfare and place annihilation, but she misses the mark in equating buildings with bodies and rubble with body parts, implying that they are equally horrifying. Her comments demonstrate one of the pitfalls of talking about war retrospectively, particularly when one has not experienced it firsthand. And yet, oddly, Sontag’s personification of war-ruined buildings echoes that of Blitz writers.

English memoirist Phyllis Warner wrote in April of 1941 that “shops, houses, restaurants, hostels, offices, churches, have all gone in a vast indiscriminate slaughter.”¹⁵ Another Londoner expressed a similar feeling in a letter to a friend in September 1940, writing that “the pleasant life and shape of London seems to be being murdered before one’s eyes.”¹⁶ To these women, like Sontag, the spaces that comprise a city are victims of war, but their wartime context allows them to

¹¹ Goebel and Keene, *Cities into Battlefields*, 6.

¹² Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 8. See also Graham, “Introduction: Cities, Warfare,” 1.

¹³ Graham, “Introduction: Cities, Warfare,” 25.

¹⁴ Spiller, quoted in Graham, “Introduction: Cities, Warfare,” 1.

¹⁵ Warner, “Journal under the Terror,” 19 April 1941.

¹⁶ Letter from “Helen,” 22 September 1940.

see the condition of their cities more clearly as a visual metaphor for the suffering of people who live and gather in them.

The Tradition of London Literature

The literary London of the war is actually many Londons: the front line of the “People’s War,” a collection of empty ruins, a breeding ground for fear and tension, a place of freedom from crowds and routines. The truth of wartime London, while impossible to fully understand and capture, is of course more complex than any of these myths would suggest, but they are nevertheless useful. Because London carries so much representational power in thinking and writing about the Blitz, recharacterizing the metropolis allows writers to map out their primary preoccupations in a high-stakes setting. Remapping London in each novel as a space characterized by particular moods, events, and ideologies, the writers discussed in this chapter offer their characters and their readers dramatically different ways of experiencing the same city. While Blitz authors are particularly invested in portraying the effects of war and violence on the city, they also participate in the more general impulse to manage change and traumatic events with future-oriented certainty. They acknowledge a London that can be harmed but can also be continually reimagined in the wake of damage.

“The city is a text, waiting to be read and written or rewritten in literary terms,”¹⁷ and London readily invites this textual engagement. In a 1949 anthology of literary excerpts about London redundantly titled *London is London: A Selection of Prose and Verse*, D. M. Low celebrates writing that is not merely about London as a particular setting or topography. Rather, he selects examples that “emerge as phenomena of London, and of London only. They possess

¹⁷ Preston and Simpson-Housley, “Writing the City,” 320.

Londinity.”¹⁸ While the precise meaning of Low’s invented term “Londinity” is unclear, the effort to determine what London means in literature and what literature means for London is not unique to Low or his postwar moment. Numerous volumes about literature written in and about London have been published, most focusing on London’s sixteenth- through nineteenth-century literary scenes, and London has for centuries been both a source of inspiration and material for writers and a lens through which readers and scholars interpret and understand their works. London serves as one of the more prominent examples of a city with an extensive and varied textual life.

Whereas nineteenth-century London literature, despite its frequent themes of secrets, surprises, and horror, tends to depict the city as fundamentally concrete and knowable, twentieth-century literature, particularly modernist texts, tend to explore the city as abstract and unknowable.¹⁹ Literary accounts of the Blitz represent a further extreme of this tendency in their ambivalence regarding the reality of London as people know it. Aesthetic responses to the city inevitably vary across time and space, but the group of texts from which I have drawn material for this chapter are particularly notable in their making London into types of spaces that at times bear little resemblance to the metropolis it is.

In an essay about London literature in the first half of the twentieth century, Leo Mellor views this modern prose through a spatial lens. Mellor argues that much modern London literature demonstrates a preoccupation with underground space both literal, by visiting places like railway tunnels, and metaphorical, by “unearthing...hidden lives and their poverty as a theme for political, aesthetic, and moral writings”²⁰ (although these themes clearly have pre-twentieth-century origins). Another theme Mellor identifies is that of the aerial gaze, again both literal and metaphorical in the

¹⁸ Low, *London is London*, 17.

¹⁹ Phillips, Introduction, 3; Snaith and Whitworth, “Introduction: Approaches to Space and Place,” 17.

²⁰ Mellor, “London and Modern Prose,” 203.

form of texts about walking, mapping, and other ways of broadly experiencing the city. Both of these spatial trends attempt to bridge the problem of London's fundamental unknowability and the desire of writers to represent and understand London—and the two perspectives intersect during the Blitz in ways not acknowledged by scholars. Even in a rapidly modernizing and globalizing literary world, London as a concept helps to influence views of British life in peacetime and wartime; the modern fragmentation of the London image into the complex strands Mellor hints at does not keep “the imaginative representation of London” from continuing “to shape British literature.”²¹

Such fragmentation carries certain risks for memory, as aspects can be lost or manipulated. “Second World War writers,” argues Patrick Deer, “confronted the disturbing consequences of futuristic technologies of violence for memory, individual and collective. The last war had seemingly produced a surfeit of memory, as Paul Fussell has influentially observed. But this second total war threatened to overwhelm, even destroy, the individual's capacity to remember.”²² Yet the futuristic technologies of media and communication emerging alongside those of violence enabled more immediate and widespread—even global—encounters with memory, as well as a wider range of voices contributing to the narratives that would be remembered. In terms of the home-front experiences of Londoners, the capacity for collective memory, while certainly challenged and at times overwhelmed, nevertheless benefitted from dispersal—the simple fact of that memory's being shared by so many. Never before was London's destruction, which occurred several times in its long history, so well documented.

Extensive documentation and witnessing of devastation from the war years helped to embed images of destruction (both actual and imagined) within the cultural consciousness and

²¹ Manley, Introduction, 1.

²² Deer, *Culture in Camouflage*, 3.

facilitate their common presence in writing and art. In a study of twentieth-century British writing and popular culture, Antony Taylor argues that “the image of catastrophe is integral to the image of London.”²³ Because London is “home to many of the symbols of nationhood and Britishness,” writes Taylor, the city as a “backdrop to national calamity provides a short-hand for state, nation and government in crisis.”²⁴ While not true of all London literature, Taylor’s observations indicate that wartime writing fits readily into a tradition of using London, with all of its power as a cultural symbol, to explore the implications of disaster. Sebastian Groes suggests as much when he identifies Ian McEwan’s 2005 novel *Saturday* as a contemporary installment in a succession of texts that are indirectly about war and violence (in the case of *Saturday*, the ongoing war in Iraq, which McEwan subtly links to other wars). *Saturday*, along with T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Rebecca West’s *Return of the Soldier*, Ford Madox Ford’s *Parade’s End*, Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, and—most importantly in this context—Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*, addresses “the topic and effects of war obliquely by capturing the peculiar climate and the effects it has on personal lives, and not the actual war scenes and violence on the front.”²⁵ *The Heat of the Day* is in fact less oblique in its references than Groes suggests because London during the Second World War was the site of “actual war scenes and violence”; even so, Bowen’s novel revolves primarily around London’s “peculiar climate” and war’s effects on personal lives.

Some texts, on the other hand, do focus explicitly on these scenes of war and violence within London. These frame the status of the city and the action of the characters as if it were a conventional battlefield and they conventional soldiers. Certainly the day-to-day lives of Londoners continue in the background, but the prevailing narratives involve images of fire and ruins,

²³ Taylor, *London’s Burning*, 174.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁵ Groes, *The Making of London*, 160–61.

disrupted spaces that no longer serve their original purposes, and people whose civilian routines are subsumed by their roles—official or otherwise—in defending their posts.

Unlike D.M. Low, who proclaimed that “London is London,” I propose that the London of many wartime novels cannot be so simply defined or be characterized by its “Londinity”—its adherence to a historical essence. While setting their novels in the city is both historically and artistically purposeful and shapes much about their narratives, the writers of these texts often displace and defamiliarize their versions of London. The unreal literary London is less a portrait of a city than an imaginative space born of war’s psychological and social effects and expressing anxiety about London’s future meaning and condition. The various iterations of a textual wartime London demonstrate a range of ways of defamiliarizing and mythologizing London, such as the construction of a metaphorical city in which physical damage and destruction represent the state of its residents’ minds, relationships, and collective consciousness, and the establishment of a battleground in which every space and action is radically reframed in terms of combat.

Battlefield London

What makes London a unique site of inquiry is the intersection of a military strategy in which a city and its civilians were not just collateral damage but the actual targets of the relatively new and efficient technologies behind aerial attacks (airplanes, incendiary bombs, long-range missiles) and a remarkably large and varied body of writing in response. The latter portions of this chapter will focus on how selected texts lay out the scorched, ruined parts of London, whether directly or indirectly. The city in general “has always been an important literary symbol, and the ways in which a culture writes about its cities is one means by which we may understand its fears

and aspirations,”²⁶ and writing about blitzed London in particular serves as an essential window onto the culture of wartime. Bombed cities, and London in particular, were and still are the most recognizable symbols of the British home front during the Second World War. As Stephen Spender explains in a 1943 book of war images, “In this war, by ‘War Pictures’ we mean, pre-eminently, paintings of the Blitz. In the last war we would have meant pictures of the Western Front.... The background to this war, corresponding to the Western Front in the last war, is the bombed city.”²⁷

Although the blitzed city was, by 1943, the predominant visual reference point for the Second World War, First World War imagery of the battlefield, and more specifically of the trenches, did not disappear from war’s artistic backdrop. Rather, it continued to inform individual accounts of the Blitz as well as the collective narrative through which the events are commemorated. In an August 1939 Mass-Observation report, even before war had been officially declared, rail passengers traveling from Dorchester to London are described as feeling that “they are moving into war.”²⁸ This temporal and geographical movement toward war centers on London, presciently understanding the capital as a war zone well before the first bomb was dropped. As Tom Harrisson, one of the founders of Mass-Observation, writes, “Here, life on the home front recalls life in the trenches during the Great War, when soldiers lived with the dead underfoot.... As one working-class man exclaimed upon seeing his first blitzed home in London, ‘We’re in the front line! Me own home—it’s in the Front Line.’”²⁹ “Surrounded by the dead and dying,” explains Kathleen Miller, “many civilians began to feel that they were fighting as soldiers in a People’s

²⁶ Preston and Simpson-Housley, “Writing the City,” 317.

²⁷ Spender, Introduction, 5-6.

²⁸ M-O A, TC Air Raids, 1/H. “On the way to London,” 1.

²⁹ Harrisson, *Living through the Blitz*, 76.

War,”³⁰ a concept that readily took hold among the general population as well as among propagandists, as evidenced by its use in *London Can Take It!* and other government productions. The constant danger of injury or death, the memories of body parts protruding from debris, and the work of carrying dead and mutilated bodies from the rubble of bombed houses placed Londoners in their own version of the trenches.

Patrick Deer writes that “during the Second World War a fully fledged British war culture emerged triumphant in time of national crisis, offering the vision of a fully mobilized island fortress, loyal empire, and modernized war machine ready to wage a futuristic war of space and movement,”³¹ with London at its heart. So powerful was this official narrative of the war—and, closer to home, the Blitz—argues Deer, that in some ways poetry and novels were peripheral to the wartime culture boom, which was dominated by media from sources like the BBC, the British film industry, the Ministry of Information, and Winston Churchill.³² Literary writers, whose work served a different function from those recording and memorializing the First World War, had to make another space for their voices.

Whereas “official” war culture relied heavily on tropes of air power and mechanized warfare in its cinematic, radio, journalistic, and artistic productions, the unofficial culture represented in part by writers like Bowen and Green often eschewed dramatic images of power in favor of more nuanced and subtle representations of London and responses to the events of the war. Unlike much of the best-known literature of World War I or the Holocaust, which aims to put into words trauma and suffering both concrete and intangible, Blitz literature is not necessarily writing of witness to the same extent. Because the experience of the air raids was shared by

³⁰ Miller, *British Literature of the Blitz*, 3.

³¹ Deer, *Culture in Camouflage*, 2-3.

³² *Ibid.*, 9.

millions and communication technologies made accounts readily available to many readers beyond the regions targeted, the literary texts about London in the Blitz are not concerned chiefly with conveying the details of the events. In many cases, the context and specific details of the Blitz are secondary to more abstract elements, such as projections of how Londoners experienced the bombed city, hints of its effects on perception and communication, and detached or even conspicuously absent accounts of the expected ruins and fires. These elements do contribute to the construction of a collective memory of the Blitz but do so largely by evoking an atmosphere rather than by recreating particular scenes in the manner of the official war culture.

The effects of the Blitz on the spatial experience and representation of London stem first and most obviously from Air Raid Precautions (ARP) projects to provide protection in the form of covered trenches and shelters throughout the city. Even before ruins and bomb craters became landmarks, these new spaces forced the conceptual remapping of London and changes to the nodes that influence ways of perceiving and moving about the city. In the fall of 1939, for example, it was already common for details about ARP facilities to lead classified ads in *The Times*. Advertisements for available flats, hotels, and schools reassuringly announce on-site shelters or nearby trenches as key amenities: “‘safe’ area,” “complete A.R.P.,”³³ one minute from the nearest public shelters.

Journalistic and other firsthand accounts also emphasize the disorienting effects of the Phoney War³⁴ and the Blitz early on. On the eve of war, a Mass-Observation contributor recorded an anecdote that illustrates the navigational consequences of the blackout: “On the previous evening obs[server] had been in the ‘Standard’, a public house somewhere in Piccadilly Circus. He

³³ Advertisement for Wells Cathedral School, *The Times*, 19 Sept. 1939.

³⁴ “Phoney War” is the name given to the period between the declaration of war and Germany’s invasion of the Low Countries (September 1939 through May 1940) in which the Allies undertook few major military operations and the air raids on Britain, which were expected to begin immediately, had not yet happened.

determined to try and find it again without asking, as a test of the efficacy of the black out in putting one off the track. but although he traversed the whole Circus and went a little way each street branching off, he failed to find it.”³⁵ Familiar landmarks disappeared into darkness under the conditions of the blackout, altering the spatial experience of the city. Mollie Panter-Downes, in a column reporting more generally on the conditions in and around London on September 10, 1939—the first week of the war—described with both amusement and wariness a rapidly emerging ARP dystopia in which a child sternly assured her mother, “It’s all right, Mummie. I know what it is. It’s a gas mask and we put it on when they bomb us.”³⁶ By February of 1940 Panter-Downes was able to write that “every day another bit of life joggles back to something near normal,”³⁷ but even a cursory review of her later writings and other accounts shows that “near” never becomes “fully” and that even a near-normal state was inevitably temporary. Even in periods of relative quiet, Panter-Downes reflected, “the life that everyone is living at the moment [is] dreamlike.”³⁸ In late 1943, while recounting aspects of the public debate about postwar planning, Panter-Downes acknowledged that many people would resist efforts to relocate them to the suburbs, as they disliked “the thought of being anything but Londoners.”³⁹ Yet the London of that moment, and what it meant to be a Londoner, had already changed dramatically in the years since the war began.

In a detailed wartime diary, N. V. Carver, a middle-aged Londoner who worked in a telegraph office throughout the war, reflects on the state of London one day after the declaration of war. Even on September 4, 1939, long before the Blitz’s concrete incursion into the pathways and hubs of the city, Carver found her route through the city thrust into confusion. Of her first time stepping out in the blackout, she wrote, “I was paralysed & lost all sense of direction”; “everything

³⁵ M-O A, TC Air Raids, 1/B, “Crisis (West End),” 2.

³⁶ Panter-Downes, *Letter from England*, 13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

³⁹ Panter-Downes, *London War Notes*, 298.

seemed on the wrong side or moved away from its proper place.”⁴⁰ Carver, like most Londoners, eventually regained her bearings to some extent and was able to travel in the blackout, but her diary entries reveal her ongoing discomfort with the necessity of doing so. She tried whenever possible to return home from work before the blackout, thus avoiding the anxiety and disorientation that never ceased accompanying her journeys in the darkness.

Later, of course, this difficulty was compounded by the effects of the bombs, as Carver learned firsthand. On September 15, 1940, shortly after the start of the Blitz, she recorded a journey in which “the Bus zig-zagged in & out of the Norwood Rd as a heavy bomb had fallen.”⁴¹ The following day, she noted again that “unexploded bombs in streets cause the buses to turn & twist so that I was almost lost.”⁴² Unexploded bombs, along with craters, rubble, infrastructure damage, and rescue efforts meant train and bus lines out of service, street closures, buses that unexpectedly stopped mid-route, and long detours on foot. Carver’s writing highlights not only the superficial inconvenience of this new reality, but also the more subtle effects on her sense of belonging and feeling at home in the city, where even routine journeys carried the risk of becoming lost or stranded. The repeated emphasis on the challenges and occasionally dangerous misadventures that came with her travels also suggests a deeper struggle to navigate the war and make sense of how it would reshape the city of London in ways beyond the material.

Apart from the physical difficulty of travel, Carver found the character of London transformed generally from the very start of the war. The police in gas masks and ARP personnel in tin hats lent “a sinister touch to poor old London,” and “everybody & all familiar things & jobs seemed so unreal.”⁴³ The writer’s experience of both London and language failed to provide a

⁴⁰ Carver, Personal diary, 4 September 1939.

⁴¹ Ibid., 15 September 1940.

⁴² Ibid., 16 September 1940.

⁴³ Ibid., 4 September 1939.

vocabulary beyond that of unreality. In Carver's initial reaction, her wartime London and all familiar things within it are separated at the moment of war's outbreak from what they were before. Her brief but expansive list—"everybody & all familiar things & jobs"—reveals one overwhelmed by rapid, successive realizations that every part of one's life and home is suddenly and irreversibly altered. Physical disorientation became, for Carver as for others, the means of expressing the shock and unreality that come with living in an urban battlefield.

Disorientation and impeded movement due to bomb damage affected not only average civilians, but also those engaged in urgent civil defense and aid work, like the rescue teams assigned to dig victims out of collapsed buildings. Locating particular sites was difficult because "the streetscape would often have been dramatically changed by a bomb explosion: houses jostled into each other, familiar landmarks gone, with only piles of rubble where they had once stood. It was confusing, anxious work"⁴⁴; workers of all types "wandered through streets they thought they knew, took routes they could have sworn they would have been able to follow blindfold, they had taken them so many times before, but found themselves disorientated and lost, the cityscape cruelly disfigured and confusing."⁴⁵ With transport and communication links severed throughout the region, the capital became "a London whose commodities were restricted and whose neighborhoods were contracted. The metropolis in this image is reduced to groups of self-contained villages."⁴⁶ This new spatial arrangement undid the contact and exchange fundamental to city life.

The challenges of travel and navigation continued throughout the years of the war, particularly on train routes between London and the southern coast. Important buildings were

⁴⁴ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 109.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁴⁶ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 23.

camouflaged, roadblocks meant to slow an enemy invasion restricted routes and slowed travel times, and the routine removal of all signage from train platforms and roadways confused regular Londoners as well as the hypothetical invading force. Englishwoman Jean Crossley even notes in a memoir that “booksellers destroyed their stock of maps” and “if anyone asked the way one wondered whether one ought, as a patriotic duty, to misdirect them.”⁴⁷ Crossley, who worked in London, writes that during the Blitz

train travel turned into a kind of surreal nightmare. Leaving from a London terminus—always crowded—you first had to locate your train by instinct or by asking the ticket collectors at all the barriers. In the Black Out you could scarcely see where you were going, because the lights were so dim.... In the worst days of air raids trains would run hours late or be cancelled without warning. They were unheated, overcrowded, far from clean, there was never anything to eat or drink even on the longest journey and, of course, they were blacked out at night. There would be a dim, blue light in the corridor and in the carriage too unless the bulb had been smashed or stolen. You could barely make out your fellow passengers—let alone read—and had to fight against falling asleep for fear of missing your stop. In 1940, threatened with invasion, name boards and all other means of identification had been removed from stations all over the country as well as all the signposts on the roads. They were none of them replaced until the end of the war.... Getting out at the right station was bad enough in daylight if you did not know the line well. In the dark it seemed to be simply a matter of luck.⁴⁸

Not only to be in London but also to travel to or from it is, in this account, an exercise in uncertainty and anxiety. The city becomes an obstacle in navigation rather than an aid to it and a place from which one cannot seek refuge.

Concerns about the stakes of this changing, disorienting London inform literature that explores the urban battlefield via metaphors about memory and familiarity. In one of these, the 1944 novel *There Were No Windows*, by Norah Hoult, an Irish writer who lived in London during the war, the main character, Claire Temple, exists in a No Man’s Land created both by the Blitz and by her old age and memory loss. Hoult crafts a parallel relationship between Mrs.

⁴⁷ Crossley, “A Middle Class War,” 28.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

Temple's mental state and the condition of London, in that both are progressively deteriorating. London no longer looks as it once did, and this reality is emphasized more powerfully by Mrs. Temple's inability to understand what has happened to make this so. She roams the city, wondering why she sees no familiar faces and why certain landmarks are absent; she is disoriented by the blackout, ignores the air-raid sirens, and confuses the current war with the previous one. "O London, where have you gone?" she cried out in her heart,"⁴⁹ realizing that the London she knew, which she thought had gone on without her, has actually ceased to exist. This realization "opened a crack in her world through which she viewed with horror for a few moments an abomination of desolation that was all about her."⁵⁰ Yet even those who are fully aware of the circumstances stumble in the blackout and find they can no longer travel familiar routes. Mrs. Temple ostensibly does not recognize the city she once knew well because of her memory loss, but her condition also serves as a symbol for the collective loss of recognition and memory that comes with the destruction of so much of a place.

As the Blitz was happening, even moments of seeming normalcy were turned unreal as a result of when or how they occurred, a disconnect that would fit readily into Mrs. Temple's baffling inner world. For example, the circumstances and means of some Londoners were such that they could live as if free of the risks and restrictions of the Blitz. Some of the steel-framed luxury hotels, many basement clubs, and the Turkish baths (converted into a "luxurious air-raid shelter"⁵¹) became scenes of relatively extravagant dining and dancing. An American journalist, Ralph Ingersoll, remarked that such scenes were "an overdone movie, beautifully costumed but badly directed by a man who had made B movies all his life. There is too much reality in London

⁴⁹ Hoult, *There Were No Windows*, 221.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Hewison, *Under Siege*, 34.

for make-believe.”⁵² The bombs made the streets surreal, but in comparison to the harshness of these outdoor scenes, the revelry of those who could afford it seemed even more bizarre and disorienting.

“It was like some kind of fantasy world,”⁵³ recalls one Blitz survivor about the burning buildings she saw in London’s streets. Similar sentiments come from those learning of the devastation from outside the city: “It’s like the films, only we never thought it was true, on the films,” a Mass-Observation observer records hearing. “We never thought we’d see it like in the cinema,” marvels another, and with more sobering specificity, “This reminds me of a horror film.”⁵⁴ “With all this, there was a feeling of unreality,” recalled a London man reflecting on the spectacle of fire and smoke that followed the heavy raid of September 7, 1940. “I couldn’t believe it, it was like a film being shown before our eyes.”⁵⁵ In a more graphic instance of the violence of the Blitz seeming unreal, Len Jones tells of finding his house blown up after a raid and discovering bodies of people he knew in the rubble behind it. His instinctive reaction was to deny the reality of the horrible sight: “I struck a match, and tried to burn my finger. I kept doing this with a match to see if I was still alive. I could see, but I thought, I cannot be alive. This is the end of the world.”⁵⁶

Apocalyptic imagery seems for many onlookers to have been the only adequate means of describing the conflagrations that roared through the city after major bombing raids. In a BBC broadcast on September 7, 1940, for example, a reporter stationed atop the BBC Broadcasting House describes a scene awe-inspiring and oddly beautiful but also “almost like the Day of Judgment as pictured in some of the old books.”⁵⁷ “Just like the end of the world,” is the

⁵² Quoted in Hewison, *Under Siege*, 34.

⁵³ Museum of London, Video installation featuring oral histories.

⁵⁴ M-O A, TC Air Raids, 9/T, “Attitude of Non-evacuees.”

⁵⁵ Bernard Kops, quoted in Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 22.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 27.

⁵⁷ Chalmers, Tom. “The Blitz: Black Saturday.”

description given by another witness to an air raid, a statement that now lends itself as the title of a community history project.⁵⁸ In one account contributed to the Mass-Observation project, the witness “emotionally...expected Armageddon: he described later a destruction to fit this picture.... The flames of fire against the smoke of burning buildings had coloured his whole imagination.”⁵⁹ These are the images that occur again and again in memoirs and museums, defining a collective memory of blitzed London and demonstrating that the surreal is not only a literary device but a mode of expression with which Londoners of all types sought to make sense of their city.

In a discussion of Second World War literature characterized by its own “easily recognisable sense of wartime dislocation,”⁶⁰ Merlin Coverley identifies *Hangover Square*, *The Heat of the Day*, and *Caught*, among others, as novels in which anxiety, unease, and disorientation—in other words, a “heightened sense of unreality”⁶¹—infect familiar scenes and relationships. Each of these novels, furthermore, “treat[s] London as something more than a mere backdrop”; it “becomes a character in its own right.”⁶² Like many of the houses from chapter three, this space has a representational life of its own. A focus in scholarship on the peculiar, anxious, disorienting London in the novels of the late 1930s and early 1940s can draw out the more subtle and complex ways in which the war and the Blitz in particular are shown by writers as shaping the character of the city. Such a reading of London Blitz texts offers a needed supplemental narrative to the more impersonal version of events—represented in materials such as bomb maps⁶³ and news reels—that focused on measurable outcomes like piles of rubble, death counts, and participation in

⁵⁸ Loewe, *Just Like the End*.

⁵⁹ M-O A, TC Air Raids, 6/H, “Extract from a private voluntary letter,” 1-2.

⁶⁰ Coverley, *London Writing*, 20.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁶³ In the London County Council’s records of bomb effects, for instance, maps of the city are color-coded in swathes to indicate the severity of the damage; the city is literally remapped and reinterpreted in terms of damage rather than the usual map features.

civilian services. My examination of these novels expands on the nature of their defamiliarization and begins to create a narrative of how writers managed a singularly destructive event while looking to the possible future of the city.

The primary effect of these texts is not to illustrate life during the Blitz or capture a moment in the history of London but instead to disorient the reader, to create a space that does not map onto any expected version of London, to suggest that the London of the Blitz marks a significant departure in the aesthetic, functional, and psychosocial character of the city. Inhabiting wartime London, for example, was a vastly different sensory experience than occupying London or most other cities at another time. Blackout requirements enforced beginning in September of 1939, along with the noise regulations and the evacuation of millions of children and mothers that followed, stripped the city of many characteristic sights and sounds. The London of the Blitz thus stands in defiance of the work by theorists such as Georg Simmel indicating that “sensory abundance has always been a hallmark of cities”⁶⁴ and that cities are characterized in part by ease of movement.⁶⁵ The blackout in particular seemed to be, as Phyllis Warner writes, “the negation of city life.”⁶⁶ Although London has often been used as a metonym for the rest of England, Vera Brittain argued “that London in 1940 was fundamentally different from the London of the past and the rest of England.” To Brittain, “London was the new battlefield of the modern war” and therefore was as unknowable and unimaginable to non-Londoners as the trenches of the First World War were to those who had not experienced the Front.⁶⁷

The remainder of this chapter examines three progressive manifestations of wartime London’s unreality. First, Patrick Hamilton’s *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947) serves as an example

⁶⁴ Wasson, “A Network of Inscrutable Canyons,” 77.

⁶⁵ Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life.”

⁶⁶ Warner, “Journal under the Terror,” 7 October 1940.

⁶⁷ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 13.

of typical London portrayals during the war. Hamilton articulates the guarded reactions of those living in and near London to its new and unfamiliar qualities, offering an account both amusing and poignant in its attention to the mundane consequences of wartime displacement. Next, Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948) paints a more complex and abstract urban portrait devoid of certainty and dependent on anxious impressions. Bowen's London in this novel is hazy, not from its usual smog and smoke but from the increasing sense that it is a foreign place. In some of Bowen's short stories, London comes into focus through the haze but appears fantastical, almost surreal, highlighting the beautiful or violent otherworldly quality of the city under attack.⁶⁸ Finally, Henry Green's *Caught* (1943) takes up the surreal aesthetic of apocalyptic London but also in effect challenges itself and the entire enterprise of Blitz literature. Green's novel calls into question the ability of any text to describe a London that is both unrecognizable and subject to the endless distortions of the war and of memory, and undermines the very idea of London as a coherent symbol. As a group, these texts address the problem of how to represent the Blitz and how to define London in its altered condition. They characterize the city's incongruity with its past lives and meanings on a spectrum ranging from strange, with a general sense of the uncanny, to unreal, challenging concrete knowledge and perception, and finally to unknowable and even unrepresentable. Some of the texts confront London via all of these stages of defamiliarization, others employ one or two modes, but all remake the city's symbolic geography as a way of articulating the trauma of the Blitz and trying to imagine what lay ahead for London.

⁶⁸ Amy Helen Bell notes that "London's sublime destruction was one of the main metaphors in writing about the Blitz. Terrible beauty was a striking metaphor for the danger, contingency and unreal visual beauty of the raids: the lights of the planes, guns, and fires against a blacked-out sky" (*London Was Ours*, 34).

Patrick Hamilton: Distant London

Patrick Hamilton's best-known war novel is probably *Hangover Square* (1941), a psychological thriller set in London during the tense period when the war seemed imminent but was not yet officially underway. But Hamilton addresses the war experience of Londoners more directly in his humorous and neglected novel *The Slaves of Solitude*, which features the mishaps and frustrations of Miss Roach, a boarding-house dweller driven out of London into the fictional suburban town of Thames Lockdon by the bombing of her flat.

London is conspicuously present throughout the narrative, but *The Slaves of Solitude* contains no rich or detailed portrait of London proper, no descriptions of London streets and scenery. Although Miss Roach once lived there, feels proud of having been a "1940 Londoner,"⁶⁹ and still commutes by train to her job in London each day, the conversations and thoughts of the novel's characters only occasionally drift in the direction of the city not far down the river from their home. The narrator of the novel rarely accompanies Miss Roach on her days in London; the action instead picks up when she exits the train station in Thames Lockdon. In these portions of the novel, it is the idea of London that occupies a particular space along Hamilton's Thames rather than a concrete representation. This pseudo-London, with the help of occasional references to Miss Roach's bombed flat, abstractly evokes memories and associations tied to the Blitz in order to form an indistinct, variable version of the city. This treatment of London resembles an uncomfortable moment in which Miss Roach's fellow lodgers studiously avoid looking at her and "their way of not looking at her...was a way of looking" (*SOS* 151). *The Slaves of Solitude*, in keeping to the periphery of London life, ends up focusing intently on London and on the strangeness that spreads from it during its wartime existence.

⁶⁹ Hamilton, *The Slaves of Solitude*, 29. Cited hereafter in the text as *SOS*.

When Hamilton does characterize London in direct terms—as in the book’s opening paragraph, an interesting choice for a text in which London’s presence and proximity are reinforced primarily by its conspicuous absence—it is as a monster. Each morning this “crouching monster” breathes suburban workers in “through an infinitely complicated respiratory apparatus of trains and termini” and, “in the evening, exhale[s] [them] violently” (*SOS* 1). This monster metaphor suggests that wartime London has acquired a life of its own and controls rather than represents the rest of the country. It also emphasizes the fear and danger Londoners faced in entering the city, particularly for those who were not “exhaled” to the suburbs each evening. Hamilton’s monstrous rail system and navigational confusion illustrate the “surreal nightmare”⁷⁰ that became a wartime reality for commuters and travelers to and from London.

The London of *The Slaves of Solitude* is also “the world of war and affairs” (*SOS* 83), a microcosmic dimension of the wartime city and a place of mysterious knowledge just beyond the grasp of those outside its geographical borders. This description is less surreal than that of London as a monstrous force but equally distancing. The temporal boundaries of wartime London also divide those who can conceive of its atmosphere from those who cannot, for even the dawn that rises over greater London “disclosed another day of war” and bore “no more resemblance to a peace-time dawn than the aspect of nature on a Sunday bears a resemblance to the aspect of nature on a weekday” (61). Hamilton’s description of the morning reflects conflicting impulses to respond to the circumstances with irony and with earnestness. On one level the passage is certainly sarcastic, mocking overblown declarations of all that has changed with the coming of war and ineffectual ways of trying to describe its effects, for nature of Sunday is actually no different from nature on a weekday. At the same time, Hamilton seems to recognize that the wartime dawn does

⁷⁰ Crossley, “A Middle Class War,” 18.

somehow feel different, however impossible that different is to logically articulate. The dawn itself, he writes, has been made by the city's exceptional circumstances "to alter its normal mode of existence"; this hyperbole gestures to the intangible ways war changed the conceptual spaces and emotional experience of London. The brief early-morning easing of blackout restrictions that allows a few lights to shine in windows offers what seems like "a brief resumption" but is actually only an "imitation" of "the days before the war" (ibid.). These days of the past cannot be revisited or recreated but only imitated, an action that lacks authenticity and completeness. Even in his occasional nods toward a more brightly lit and easily navigated past London, Hamilton sets the present city apart as hazy and ill-defined in both physical and conceptual form.

The London that Miss Roach used to inhabit no longer exists, and she feels displaced in the unreal London that emerges in its stead. Miss Roach, Hamilton writes, "would have gone back to London if she had known where to go, or if she had not still feared guns and bombs at night" (*SOS* 8). Her reasons for living in Thames Lockdon understandably include fear that the air raids will return, but the explanation offered is more complicated: she stays away largely due to her disorientation, for the city's geography has been altered and she no longer knows her way. By the end of the novel, Miss Roach decides to return to London after all, but her final scene takes place in an extravagant hotel where she has impulsively chosen to stay until she can find a home. She is "dismayed" and "intimidated" by her double room with its private bathroom and horrified at the thought of being disturbed by the hotel staff. The hotel offers comfort but feels foreign to Miss Roach, representing a London detached from the city of her past and the effects of the air war and thus illusory. Even so, her return indicates a wish to look forward and to occupy a space transformed but still alive.

Elizabeth Bowen: Unreal London

Elizabeth Bowen, who lived much of her life in London, including the years of the war, produced some of the most memorable and extensive literary treatments of wartime London and the Blitz. *The Heat of the Day*, published in 1948, offers a subdued but powerful portrayal of the atmosphere of London during the war. The feelings and motivations of Bowen's characters are threaded through with the effects of the air raids despite the concrete events of the Blitz remaining largely in the background. Many of Bowen's wartime short stories, published as *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* in 1945, also depict London in portraits created or inflected by the war.

Bowen's literary perspective of London during the war was undoubtedly influenced by her own experiences, most notably her work for the Ministry of Information in which she gathered information about Irish attitudes toward the war (Bowen was born in Ireland and inherited a family estate there) and the bombing of her London home in 1944 while she was at work on *The Heat of the Day*. Much of Bowen's writing focuses on the contours of place, and her characters and their perceptions are shaped by the spaces they occupy. A few years before the war, Bowen wrote in a letter to Virginia Woolf, "I believe I may only write novels for the pleasure of saying where people are"; "places are so very exciting; the only proper experiences one has."⁷¹ In the postscript to her wartime stories, Bowen further explains that she experienced the war as a mostly spatial phenomenon: "I see war (or should I say I feel war?) more as a territory than as a page of history."⁷² This innovation—creating a new wartime dimensionality and representing the Blitz as more territory than time—is one of Bowen's most provocative contributions to midcentury modernism and part of her significance as a Blitz writer. Writing the Blitz as a space can be

⁷¹ Bowen, Letter to Virginia Woolf, 26 August 1935.

⁷² Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree*, 95. This spatial notion of the Blitz is also manifest in the popular wartime sentiment that Londoners were all "in it together."

understood as a tactic to psychically contain the experience of the raids and the associated destruction. In Bowen's new dimensionality, her characters can step in and out of this territory, alternately consumed by the strangeness and unreality of their surroundings and existing in alternative, imagined Londons.

The Heat of the Day

"War's being global meant it ran off the edges of maps; it was uncontainable."⁷³ Bowen refers in this declaration to the difficulty of grasping what happens in each theater of a global war. But war also runs off the edges of maps in that, as a spatial or geographical phenomenon, its effects spread from the two-dimensional records of its presence to the three-dimensional reality of those who inhabit its space. For Londoners, the war was not lines and figures on a map but forces dictating the shape of the space it occupied and the nature of people's engagement with that space.

Elizabeth Bowen wrote *The Heat of the Day* over eleven years during and after the war. An account of political and personal espionage, the novel captures a powerful sense of anxiety and tension pervading Bowen's London. The details of the war and even the air raids on London initially feel distant and of little concern to the novel's main characters. Bowen introduces Stella Rodney as a long-divorced mother of a soldier; her son, Roderick, spends most of the novel training elsewhere in England, though not engaged in combat, and while Stella herself is employed by a government agency, Bowen provides no details of her work or its relevance to the war. Robert Kelway, Stella's lover, is suspected of supplying intelligence to Germany, and the solitary Harrison is a counterspy investigating Robert and simultaneously attempting to win over Stella. Despite the centrality of the war to their respective lines of work, it is the resulting personal danger and interpersonal tensions that remain Bowen's focus throughout (though these are clearly products, in

⁷³ Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, 347. Cited hereafter in the text as *HOTD*.

part, of wartime life). References to political and military situations surface only enough to lend the weight of fear to the situation and furnish a metaphorical underpinning for the experience of place—for London in *The Heat of the Day* might be understood as a spatial manifestation of the feeling of “being misled and deceived by reality, as well as losing landmarks and certainties.”⁷⁴

Ever present in Bowen’s novel are the shifting contours of the cityscape, although the shifts are often subtle and occur beneath the surface, manifesting themselves only in the changed movements of characters. Near the end of the novel, after Robert’s death and Stella’s visit to Roderick outside the city, Bowen explains the whereabouts of each character as the result of seismic shifts. “There can occur in lives a subsidence of the under soil,” she writes, “so that, without the surface having been visibly broken, gradients alter, uprights cant a little out of the straight” (*HOTD* 339). While the natural movement of the earth provides a useful symbol for changes in the interior and interpersonal landscapes of the human consciousness, in the context of the Blitz it also references the way the land subsides after heavy impact, fire, or collapse. The shifting gradients in *The Heat of the Day* cannot only be those in Stella’s own life. They are the literal and symbolic distortions of collective London: a largely absent population, a permanently altered skyline, a compromised infrastructure, a way of life that moves people together or apart in unfamiliar patterns.

Much of Bowen’s language in *The Heat of the Day* evokes fear, violence, and death, yet encounters with these as direct consequences of war are few. As Celine Magot argues,

Elizabeth Bowen does not give an account of the war in action; neither does she depict the visible effects of the bombs falling on the city. The ruins, the homeless people, the shelters seem to be taken for granted. What she tries to capture is impressions—the sensations that Londoners drew from their wounded city and the changes brought about by the bombings in the way the city is felt. She depicts a loss of landmarks and boundaries.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Magot, “Elizabeth Bowen’s London,” para. 2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

The war seems embedded in Stella's routine movements throughout the city, both as a result of years of preoccupation with it and, perhaps more urgently in this novel, as metaphor for the social and psychological condition of Bowen's characters. A sense of danger and darkness envelops the London scene from the beginning of the novel, where the routine passage of time ushers in night and autumn as "enemies" (*HOTD* 3). Later, in our first introduction to Stella's home, Bowen writes that "silence mounted the stairs, to enter her flat through the door ajar; silence came through the windows from the deserted street. In fact, the scene at this day and hour could not have been more perfectly set for violence" (22). Unlike many other Blitz novels, here there is no constant soundtrack of plane engines and falling bombs. Even the sound of V-1 flying bombs, or doodlebugs, which are mentioned in passing, is not a frequent presence. And the violence for which silence has set the stage is not that of war; rather, Stella anxiously awaits a visitor whom she distrusts. The silence and suspended violence of this moment are adapted from the distinct wartime scene but suggest much more about Stella's isolation and her detached anxiety. Bowen reveals a similar dynamic in Stella's thoughts about her son, particularly her "fear that the Army was out to obliterate Roderick" (50). Roderick's army service has yet to take him away from England or into any immediate danger. Like his mother, he seems most affected—most at risk of being obliterated, so to speak—not by the physical danger of war but the atmosphere and expectations that pervade Bowen's representation of English life.

The hazy, vague manner in which Bowen alludes to the war's physical dangers extends also to the simple physical surroundings of her characters in London, suggesting detachment not only from the idea of the war but even from the spaces vulnerable to it. During a brief leave, Roderick visits his mother and fantasizes about Mount Morris, his inherited estate in Ireland, as an escape from his discomfort about his mother's impersonal flat and her relationship with Robert. "The

reality of the fancy,” Bowen writes, “was better than the unreality of the room.” The sofa on which he lies is “without environment”; “it might have been some derelict piece of furniture exposed on a pavement after an air raid” (*HOTD* 57). The comparison of the unreal sofa to an item damaged and abandoned in the aftermath of a bombing suggests both Roderick’s inability or unwillingness to engage with the war as fully real and the use of the Blitz as a recurring metaphor for the psychological condition of certain Londoners. That is to say, the damaged city both reflects and contributes to the brokenness of its people’s identities and interactions; as Céline Magot observes, “reality is transformed by the characters’ own visions of the city.”⁷⁶

Even when Stella is in familiar places, her view of the city is often constricted, distorting physical reality. A limited view of the city is one of the shared experiences of wartime London, given the blackout guidelines that darkened streetlights, windows, headlights, and train cars, forcing Londoners to “[open] street doors conspiratorially” (*HOTD* 43) and minimally to prevent the escape of light. This routine, collective loss of vision—and the resulting inability to accurately comprehend one’s surroundings—is never far from Bowen’s narrative consciousness in *The Heat of the Day*, and frequent passing references to the blackout indicate the extent to which its distortions and secrets are embedded in the visual and spatial fabric of London. In other cases, though, Stella’s limited view is of her own making. In an early scene, Stella stands at her window holding the black-out blind-cord. “She made a loop, through which she looked at the street” (20) with restricted vision that parallels her perception of the city’s condition more broadly.

Stella’s travel to Ireland to oversee the management of Mount Morris prompts her to recognize London’s strangeness with more clarity. Outside the city, Stella feels that she has lost her sense of time and space, has experienced an “unearthly disassociation” (*HOTD* 196), yet her

⁷⁶ Magot, “Elizabeth Bowen’s London,” para. 4.

return to London provides no corrective anchor. Instead she is engulfed by a feeling of London's darkness and density, a sense that London is a hermetic space of another dimension toward which the train hurtles as an intruder, the passengers "hurling themselves on London" (201) in a manner suggestive of a bomb. The predominant impression from Stella, after traveling farther from London than she has in years and perhaps recalibrating her perspective by geographical distance and contact with her own past, is that London is not itself. The disembarkation of the train passengers brings to mind the "arrival of shades in Hades" (ibid.), and riding home in the car Robert has hired, Stella imagines herself as a prisoner of the vehicle and the city. The buildings around her resemble "architecture improbable in London" and of the neighborhood through which they ride, Stella insists that she has "never been wherever *this* is before" (206). The overall impression is of Stella's being lost and imprisoned in an unreal facsimile of London that mirrors her internal anxiety and instability.

As the novel proceeds, Bowen's London slips further into impressions and unreality, impossible to map, navigate, or even describe in a concrete, pre-war manner. After a day in the country, Stella feels that it "seemed to have followed her back into London," "undoing the reality of the city" (*HOTD* 138) through a forced comparison to a neutral time and place outside the immediate reach of the war. Having been briefly anchored elsewhere, Stella realizes that her London reality is tenuous, questionable at best. Her relationship with Robert is the primary lens through which she views and experiences her London life, but Stella's unspeakable suspicions about him introduce cracks into the foundation of her entire perception of this life they share in the city.

Not only is London experienced in *The Heat of the Day* as an abstractly psychological space, its landmarks and boundaries figured by characters' feelings and interactions, it possesses the mutability of a non-physical space. To Stella, Harrison, or Robert, each subsequent season or

year brings a new city, shaped by the experiences of the war to that point. There is no static London to stand as a permanent point of reference for what is “real,” for it is different in every moment. Looking back on the “apocryphal” autumn of 1940, Stella thinks:

No planetary round was to bring again that particular conjunction of life and death; that particular psychic London was to be gone forever; more bombs would fall, but *not on the same city*. War moved from the horizon to the map. And it was now, when you no longer saw, heard, smelled war, that a deadening acclimatisation to it began to set in. The first generation of ruins, cleaned up, shored up, began to weather—in daylight they took their places as a norm of the scene. (*HOTD* 100; emphasis added)

In this passage Bowen asserts the transience of each moment in wartime London, where all aspects of day-to-day life—not to mention life itself—are constantly under threat. Not only does the Blitz inaugurate a new London, but the V-1s and V-2s that come later in the war fall on yet another different city. The ruins take on the air of the commonplace in the new London despite their marking an exceptional condition, distorting illusions of reality and both literally and figuratively fragmenting visions of the city. In Bowen’s disoriented and disorienting description of London over time, however, are traces of forward-looking hope. London will continually remake itself, allowing for an imagined, albeit unfamiliar and fragmented, future.

Louie Lewis, a factory worker who crosses paths with Harrison and Stella, also observes the foreignness of the perpetually transforming city around her. Giving voice to Louie’s consciousness, Bowen writes, “Think, now, what the air was charged with night and day—ununderstandable languages, music you did not care for, sickness, germs! You did not know what you might not be tuning in to, you could not say what you might not be picking up—affected, infected you were at every turn” (*HOTD* 278). London becomes unreal to Louie because it is virtually impossible for her to navigate. She does not understand the aural cues around her, and she is continually infected and remade at every turn, prevented from forming a stable foundation for her place in the city. Louie frequently finds that she does not know where in the city she is—which bar she is meant to

meet a friend at or how to find her way home alone from a place to which she has been led. When she searches for Stella's house, she cannot recognize it despite having been there before. "The chattering variation of the architecture, from house to house, itself seemed to cheat and mock her—she looked at" the features of the houses, "outwitted" (328). Louie's London, like Stella's, is not concrete but a shifting space formulated by her encounters with and impressions of Harrison, Stella, and others she meets.

Stella shares Louie's progressive breakdown of the mental maps and signposts that help one to navigate London, despite having lived there much longer than Louie has. When Robert asks where Stella had gone with Harrison the last time she saw him, the night before Robert confesses to spying for Germany, she cries in response, "I don't *know*... It might have been anywhere; even a girl we met there [Louie] thought she was somewhere else" (*HOTD* 319). In Stella's distractedness and desperation to make sense of the circumstances surrounding her relationship with both Robert and Harrison, she loses the ability to recall and navigate the city. Stella's disorientation echoes the sentiments of diarists like N. V. Carver, who surveyed the City of London from a rooftop on December 30, 1940, the day after the conflagration that destroyed most of the area around St. Paul's Cathedral and came to be called the Second Great Fire of London. Carver records feeling that "it was very difficult to distinguish one place from another,"⁷⁷ for all of the usual reference points were absent or unrecognizable. Bowen translates this perspective, ubiquitous among those experiencing and writing about the Blitz, into the condition of confusion that pervades *The Heat of the Day*.

The morning after Robert's leap or fall from Stella's rooftop, the Allies land in North Africa, bringing enthusiastic talk and celebratory bell-ringing to London. The strangeness of the

⁷⁷ Carver, Personal diary, 30 December 1940.

novel's London temporarily lifts with the death of a treasonous citizen and a change in the tide of war. The proximity of events makes Robert a symbolic, larger-than-life threat without whom Germany falters and London again resembles its prewar state. On the day "set for victorious bell-ringing," "the bell's sound was not as strange or momentous as had been expected: after everything these were still the bells of the former time." Yet the "people began turning away from the illusion" (*HOTD* 327), "because they knew it must" fade; for Louie, "they rang false" (328). The power of this sensory encounter—the familiar but long-unheard sound of church bells—evokes an illusion of normalcy, of London returning to itself. But Bowen does not allow any such moment to recover the city from its state of disorder, although its existence indicates that London's disordered state is itself unstable and changeable.

The passage in which Bowen sets the scene for Harrison's last visit to Stella, long after Robert's death, demonstrates a similar process of illusion and fading on a smaller scale. An air raid, during which Harrison travels through the city, is portrayed with incongruously cozy domestic imagery:

Harrison, back again, stood in the middle of a street, otherwise empty, illuminated by a chandelier flare. During the pulse of silence between the overhead throbbing and the bark of the guns, the flare made the street like a mirrored drawingroom. Above where Harrison stood, peering at something jotted on an envelope, white-green incandescence flowed from the lovely shapely symbol, which slowly descended as it died—the sky to the east reflected flamingo-pink nobody could have taken to be the dawn; the west was jagged with flames. (*HOTD* 355)

The gentle, reassuring language of the first sentences makes the street into a safe and comfortable space: a drawing room, illuminated and incandescent. Yet the throbbing and bark of bombs and guns linger on either side of the moment, and Harrison is disoriented, struggling to read a note that likely contains Stella's address. These hints of continued violence and confusion erupt dramatically into full acknowledgment of the illusory and escapist nature of the scene with the final line. The "lovely shapely symbol" gives way to a horizon "jagged," broken, and burning, an

acknowledgement of “the indifference of the embattled city to private lives, the exiguousness and vagueness of everybody’s existence among the ruins” (109). The eastern sky, typically the location of literal and figurative sunrise, seems in this moment to offer only menacing uncertainty that hangs in perpetual tension with what Bowen knows will be the continued existence of the city.

The Demon Lover

Set in 1941 and published in Britain in 1945, “The Demon Lover” captures a brief evening scene in wartime London—but a London overlaid with ambiguous supernatural elements suggesting the same anxiety and dislocation that afflict *The Heat of the Day*. Mrs. Drover lives with her family in the country but visits her unused London house on a trip to the city. As Mrs. Drover walks toward the house, she finds the street no longer familiar: “In her once familiar street, as in any unused channel, an unfamiliar queerness had silted up; a cat wove itself in and out of railings, but no human eye watched Mrs Drover’s return.”⁷⁸ The queerness occupying the street comes not merely from Mrs. Drover’s time spent away but from a peculiar presence that has taken the place of the former inhabitants and rendered the space unrecognizable and vaguely threatening. The London street, in Bowen’s description, is sufficiently altered by circumstances of the Blitz as to no longer be a normal, bustling urban space.

The scene established outside the house provides a disquieting background for Mrs. Drover’s discovery of a mysterious letter from a former lover whom she presumed dead after the First World War. Mrs. Drover’s reading of the letter, with its reminder of a promise to meet, prompts a further change in her surroundings: the sunlight fades as “the clouds sharpened and lowered,” she feels “intruded upon,” and “tenseness prece[des] the fall of rain.”⁷⁹ The feeling of

⁷⁸ Bowen, *The Collected Stories*, 661.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 662.

intrusion seems contrary to the emptiness and silence of the atmosphere—“one of those creeks of London silence exaggerated this summer by the damage of war”⁸⁰—but perhaps offers an attempt to express the contradictory experience of inhabiting London during the Blitz. Life in the city is both intimate and anonymous, silent and deafening.

Both the street and the silence are described in terms of natural features: a silt-filled channel, a flowing creek. When the taxi driver—implied to be the “demon lover,” though whether he is human or supernatural is left open to interpretation—accelerates away with Mrs. Drover, it is “into the hinterland of deserted streets.”⁸¹ In personifying the destruction of the past and the war(s) as an evil being, Bowen makes concrete and manageable the terrifying unreality of wartime existence, for the unknown future Mrs. Drover speeds toward requires her to physically confront the horrors of blitzed London. One of Bowen’s best-known short stories, “The Demon Lover” captures a London that is a waste land marked by remnants and ruins of the past but also host to a new and possibly threatening future.

Mysterious Kôr

Published in the same collection as “The Demon Lover” and Bowen’s other wartime stories, “Mysterious Kôr” features yet another London reimaged in fantastical, surrealistic terms. Although the story does not say so explicitly, Kôr is presumably the abandoned imperial city from H. Rider Haggard’s 1887 novel *She: A History of Adventure*. As historian Peter Stansky points out, Bowen read *She* as a child and later spoke about it during a 1947 radio show. Bowen reflected that she “saw Kôr before [she] saw London”; “the idea that life in any capital city must be

⁸⁰ Bowen, *The Collected Stories*, 666.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

ephemeral, and with a doom ahead, remained with” her.⁸² In the context of the Blitz, Kôr provides both a reminder of potential decline and a reassuring fiction of legendary continuity.

London under an unusually bright full moon “looked like the moon’s capital—shallow, cratered, extinct.”⁸³ A lunar landscape not only provides a fitting metaphor for a silent city full of ruins and lit only from above, it also lends the setting a sense of cosmological time and space, distancing London from the knowable, measurable world. Pepita, taking a moonlit walk through London with a soldier on leave, offers an alternative comparison with similar effect. Quoting lines by an unnamed poet about the lonely, abandoned city of Kôr, she states simply, “This is Kôr.”⁸⁴ The reframing of Pepita’s present-day London as a fantastical, ancient metropolis suggests distance or dissonance in inhabiting a city so different from what it had been only a few years before, but it also evokes the notion alluded to in Bowen’s radio talk that to imagine any empire or nation is also to acknowledge its inevitable end.⁸⁵ “As long as people have lived in cities, they have been haunted by fears of urban ruin,” writes philosopher Marshall Berman. “Every city on earth is ground zero is somebody’s doomsday book.”⁸⁶ The Blitz offered Londoners a frighteningly close brush with the potential reality of such fears.

As Pepita fantasizes about London as Kôr, she and Arthur debate the poet’s intention regarding Kôr’s reality. In the world of the poem, does Kôr actually exist, or is it a legendary but mythical place that is not anywhere at all? Their exchange casts uncertainty on the reality of London, where one can be surrounded, grounded by the city and yet feel transported to an entirely different time and place. Seemingly unconcerned with degrees of reality, Pepita declares,

⁸² Bowen, quoted in Stansky, *The First Day of the Blitz*, 127.

⁸³ Bowen, *The Collected Stories*, 728.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 729.

⁸⁵ In *Ruins of Modernity*, Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle similarly frame the powerful role played by images of destruction and ruin in the formation of national identities, collective memories, and communal life.

⁸⁶ Berman, quoted in Graham, “Introduction: Cities, Warfare,” 27.

referencing the destruction from which she and Arthur have found a temporary reprieve, that “if you can blow whole places out of existence, you can blow whole places into it.”⁸⁷ Pepita hints here at the fanciful potential for places no less real than London itself to emerge in its stead, but her statement also suggests a more fundamental anxiety about the city in its vulnerable state. If swathes of London can be so readily reduced to rubble, the entire place loses its sense of permanence and stability. If a metropolis can be wiped out, as so many rightfully feared London might be, how real could it have been to begin with? Even so, Pepita’s reflective fantasy offers some reassurance for the imaginative continuity or rebuilding of the city around her and conveys the constructive potential of the “mythical intensity” that, for Bowen, characterizes “existence during the war,” “heightened for dwellers in cities under attack.”⁸⁸

Henry Green: No Real London

Henry Green’s *Caught*, written during the Blitz and published in 1943, carries the unreal London trope even further through its disavowal of the protagonist’s own reality, calling into question his and other Londoners’—perhaps even Green’s—ability to perceive and recall what they witnessed during the air raids. In *Caught*, London does not merely feel dislocated because of unreliable sensory information; rather, its narrator distrusts the ability to sense, know, or represent at all. In this *Caught* echoes the claim of John Owen’s *Blitz Hero* that “a bomb can effect the most frightful disintegration, not of walls and street surfaces alone, nor even of the bodies of humankind, but of the stable mind.”⁸⁹ *Caught* focuses primarily on the experience of Richard Roe and the men and women he works with while training as a member of the Auxiliary Fire Service. The period between the outbreak of war and the beginning of the Blitz is, for Roe, a time of anxiety and

⁸⁷ Bowen, *The Collected Stories*, 730.

⁸⁸ Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree*, 182.

⁸⁹ Owen, *Blitz Hero*, 193.

suspended animation in which he waits for what he will later think of as the “real” London. Although most of the book’s action takes place during the months preceding September 1940, *Caught* is most often remembered for its apocalyptic vision of London on fire; the novel’s final section, narrating a large raid, reinforces the strangeness of the setting, a London in which no one lives or acts as they normally would, and transforms the reader’s understanding of the preceding pages.

Roe remains preoccupied throughout the novel with what is and is not “real.” When he is called upon at the beginning of the war to serve shifts on duty as a firefighter, he feels “certain of death in the immediate raid he expected to raze London to the ground,” and “he might have been sighing goodbye to adored unreality”⁹⁰ by sending his son, Christopher, to the country in the care of his aunt. The dismissal of his previous life and acceptance of his possible death signal the start of reality for Roe, but he finds that the endless waiting of the Phoney War is no more authentic: “He did not consider that his life in the station, what little he had, could at any time be real” (28). Continuing to chase reality, so to speak, into and around London, Roe does not recognize that his perceptions and memory in fact veil reality. “When the blitz began,” for example, “flame came to be called ‘a light,’” among the firefighters. “They talked of ‘putting the light out’ instead of ‘getting the flames down’” and avoided thinking of “the moth’s suicide it was for firemen” (48).

Notably, though Green himself was a firefighter during the war, he does not directly depict the bombings and subsequent fires within the narrative. The novel covers the preparation for and aftermath of Roe’s firefighting, but the actual raids are presented only at several removes by Roe as he struggles to explain retrospectively what it was like to be there. This distance casts doubt on the narrative but, even more strikingly, Roe’s account is bluntly declared unreliable by periodic

⁹⁰ Green, *Caught*, 28. Cited hereafter in the text.

interruptions in his story. As Roe struggles to explain to his sister-in-law, Dy, what he saw and experienced in London, Green interjects long, parenthetical revisions that add to or alter the details of the account. During his first night on duty during a raid, Roe explains, “we were ordered to the docks. As we came over Westminster Bridge it was fantastic, the whole of the left side of London seemed to be alight.” The next paragraph challenges his story: “(It had not been like that at all)” (*Caught* 176), and continues in a more detailed, and presumably superior, description of the scene.

While an ostensibly omniscient perspective, this parenthetical voice is unknown and subject to the same distortions Green attributes to himself and to Roe. The corrections in parentheses present a more thorough version of events but also feature a fantastical tone, outlining apocalyptic images in eerily surreal terms. Green writes that against the conflagration, “(...warehouses, small towers, puny steeples seemed alive with sparks from the mile high pandemonium of flame reflected in the quaking sky. This fan, a roaring red gold, pulsed rose at the outside edge, the perimeter round which the heavens, set with stars before fading into utter blackness, were for a space a trembling green)” (*Caught* 177). Later, “(The puddles were hot, and rainbow coloured with oil. A barge, overloaded with planks, drifted in flames across the black, green, then mushroom skin river water under an upthrusting mountain of fox-dyed smoke that pushed up towards the green pulsing fringe of heaven)” (182). These descriptions feature an aesthetic more artful than Roe’s, offering an ethically neutral perspective seemingly free to present the horrifying scene as beautiful but at the same time shifting farther from any recognizable or precedented vision of London and from the experience of people on the ground.

Henry Green, in a brief prefatory note to the novel, offers the disclaimer that his characters, while “founded on the reality of that time, are not drawn from life.... In this book only 1940 in London is real,” he claims. “It is the effect of that time that I have written into the fiction of

Caught” (4). But what is real about Green’s 1940 in London is impossible to determine. Roe finds amusement in thinking “how different the real thing is to what we thought it was going to be” (*Caught* 175), but the version he tells is not the “real thing” either. The city and his memories of it are layered with distortion, prompting his repeated exclamations that “it was so fantastic” (180), “that fantastic night” (193). Roe wants to claim that this London is real but seems aware on some level that to recall reality is beyond any Londoner’s grasp, leaving the city open to being endlessly reimagined and rewritten. “The extraordinary thing is,” Roe muses to Dy, “that one’s imagination is so literary. What will go on up there to-night in London, every night, is more like a film, or that’s what it seems like at the time. Then afterwards, when you go over it, everything seems unreal” (174). By thrusting London into a state in which nothing seems real or familiar, the Blitz fractures Roe’s ability to perceive and describe things as they are. He explains, “Only the point about a blitz is this, there’s always something you can’t describe, and it’s not the blitz alone that’s true of. Ever since it happened I feel I’ve been trying to express all sorts of things” (179–80).

In *Caught*, the reality of blitzed London—how the city truly looks and feels—is inscrutable at best, forcibly altering the way the reader reads and makes sense of the world of the Blitz. Even the novel’s title reflects the impossibility of physically or conceptually navigating the blitzed city, the usual maps and portraits of which have been replaced by an unrecognizable and confusing space whose status as “real” London is continually called into question. Just as Roe is variously caught in his job, in the fire station, or at the flaming docks and his fellow Londoners are caught in shelters and on the streets, *Caught* itself represents the state of being trapped by faulty memory and the inability to articulate what is real. It exposes the inevitability—even the necessity—of London’s being written again into existence, if it is to exist at all.

Conclusion

My aim is not to argue that these texts fail at providing an “accurate” or “real” account, were that even possible, but to weigh the implications of Londoners’ *experiencing* the city and the events of the Blitz as unreal. The fictionalized Londoners imagined by Hamilton, Bowen, and Green struggle to navigate the space of the city and of their own experiences. Failing to fit these events into an existing scheme of what London and city life are like, they instead resort to the fantastical or abstract as an alternative way of writing their own reality, present and future. Photos and firsthand accounts of the Blitz portray the city variously as post-apocalyptic landscape, collection of ruins, wasteland, junkyard, or war zone, but all of these alternative spatial conceits are defined in part by people’s inability to reconcile them satisfactorily with any extant idea of London. London Blitz writing is overwhelmed by the lack of familiar things in the midst of a massive spatial and sensory shift. The choices of language and atmosphere that emphasize this, whether consciously or not, represent a revealing and compelling impulse to defamiliarize and recharacterize wartime London as temporally and spatially divergent—as a space with unstable political and symbolic status. This London serves as the spatial parallel to the exceptional conditions simultaneously gripping the capital—the heart and symbol of the nation—in less direct but equally influential ways, as the vicissitudes of war infiltrate every aspect of city life.

Most simply and strikingly, each of the texts presented in this chapter demonstrates that the changing skyline and streetscape of London—buildings demolished, streets closed, landmarks moved or destroyed—brought with them changing modes of perceiving and navigating the city. The breakdown of architectural order and the failure of existing physical and mental maps to guide one safely through London prompted corresponding confusion in the city’s symbolic maps. And the influence is reciprocal: in struggling to make sense of the experience of the Blitz, these texts

illustrate the struggle to make sense of London itself, mapping the confusion and foreignness of being under siege onto their portrayals of the city.

After the war, in a postscript to the American edition of her wartime stories, Elizabeth Bowen wrote:

I do not think that the *dessication*, by war, of our day-to-day lives can be enough stressed. The outsize World War news was stupefying; headlines and broadcasts came down and down on us in hammerlike chops [a second blow after the initial impact of the bombs], with great impact but, oddly, little reverberation. The simple way to put it was: "One cannot take things in." What was happening was out of all proportion to our faculties for knowing, thinking and checking up.⁹¹

Bowen hints in this statement and narrates in much of her wartime writing the partial "place annihilation"—or the fear of it—of a long-lived and powerful literary space. London ultimately survives in better shape than many people expected, but these writers will not allow us to forget the security and familiarity that were destroyed. The London of the past, for many real and fictional Londoners, was annihilated and they were left in the ruins of somewhere they no longer recognized and had to recreate. Witnessing London's deformation and representing its unreality is, in a sense, making a new reality: creating a new place where one seems to have been annihilated.

Literary London, like London proper, would survive the war and continue to appear in many incarnations. But texts like *The Heat of the Day* and the others discussed in this chapter point toward the sudden death and disappearance of the city as a symbol of community and continuity. The official war narrative contained in *London Can Take It!* and similar materials promotes the idea of London as unified and resilient, but literary and personal writings complicate that story by emphasizing the vast differences between prewar and wartime London. These differences include the obvious and concrete, but they go far beyond to reveal a complex and visceral sense of displacement. While never an uncomplicated symbol of British people and

⁹¹ Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree*, 96.

British life, London's meaning seems bifurcated by the war. It is simultaneously an emblem of hope and resistance and an embodiment of the anxious and unmoored, a representation of all that has changed in what is familiar and understood.

Blitzed London—the ultimate modernist city as hell or purgatory, Eliot's “unreal city” brought to life—carries with it profound uncertainty about what the city's long-term fate and legacy will be. In *The Ministry of Fear* Graham Greene evokes the ruins of Pompeii in describing the London landscape, while in *The Walls Do Not Fall*, part one of *Trilogy*, H.D. thinks of Thebes.⁹² Drawing parallels to monumental ruins is both fatalistic and hopeful: it casts London as shattered, but with walls that may yet stand for centuries. Both Greene and H.D. reveal in these writings an anxiety about whether London will ultimately be ruined in every sense of the word and what the collective memory of its culture and meaning will be. And perhaps, though London survives, the anxiety is not misplaced. Even the historical legacy of the Blitz itself is elided in the years following the war by vast rebuilding projects that conflate “Blitz and blight” and build a type of architectural forgetting into the fabric of the city.

In the promotional video *The Changing Face of London*, released in 1960 to advance reconstruction and planning initiatives around the city, children climb on “the vanishing ruins of the outdated and the unwanted.” The narrator proclaims proudly that these “citizens of tomorrow watch the world of their grandfathers swept away,” seemingly forgetting that the air raids are actually what swept that world away long before and left the ruins and uninhabitable buildings to be cleared now. A close-up shot of a machine operator shows him decisively pulling a lever to swing a

⁹² H.D. spent the war in London and experienced the 1940 Blitz. Placing *The Walls Do Not Fall*, a wartime work, in conversation with the iconic ruins of the past, H.D. includes this dedication: “for Karnak 1923/ from London 1942” (Forché, *Against Forgetting*, 188). Karnak, part of the ancient city of Thebes, is a temple complex located in present-day Egypt; 1923 is the date of H.D.'s visit to the ruins, of which she was reminded by the condition of London after bombing.

wrecking ball into an old building in much the same way a soldier or airman would pull a trigger or drop a bomb. This unintentional mirroring of the Blitz, particularly when placed alongside images of residual war damage, demonstrates an unsettling blindness to the effects of sweeping away any mention of the Blitz in favor of narratives of progress. In the context of this production, the Blitz truly is a period of exception: once the war is over and London has returned to functioning as a city rather than a battlefield, the ruins, remains, and memories of the war no longer make sense. They must instead be recast as the routine result of time's passing and as surmountable obstacles to normal progress, effecting the erasure of both the old London and the true means of its destruction.

As a global city, twentieth-century London represents the success of modern society but also becomes victim and symbol of its failure. The inability of wartime Londoners to recognize and navigate their city corresponds to the failure of the promise of modern society, in that World War II signals in part a breakdown of ethical principles and ideals of European unity. The complex legacy of Blitz literature underscores Henry Green's understanding that to maintain a coherent and meaningful account of wartime London is impossible. At the same time, it encourages reliance on the writing of unreality and uncertainty as both an inscrutable portrait and the truest version of the blitzed city—the imaginative basis for rewriting its future existence.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wartime Pastoral: Englishness and the Land

The English landscape itself...is the richest historical record we possess.¹

Mollie Panter-Downes's 1947 novel *One Fine Day* is a portrait of a rural English village recovering from war. Panter-Downes's characters frequently declare, as if to reassure themselves and each other, that "the war [is] over" and "everything [can] get back to normal again."² They dismiss the war's hold on them, to avoid dwelling unnecessarily on an episode that has interfered with their way of life and that they would rather ignore, but Panter-Downes leaves no doubt that although the war may be officially over, it is still very much a part of the present. Although "the danger had passed," the village "had been invaded" (*OFD* 2) during the war, and this invasion, in both literal form as bombs and symbolic form as new ways of life and modes of Englishness, had altered the iconic English landscape. Panter-Downes, along with other wartime writers who grapple with the question of what it means to be English in a traumatic and vulnerable situation, subtly links these two modes of invasion, positing the bombed landscape as fundamental to understanding traditional English identity and forging its postwar alternatives. *One Fine Day* exemplifies the wartime and postwar impulse to revive the tradition of defining Englishness in terms of the land, providing a geographic definition of Englishness that resists the destructive, constricting consequences of war.

¹ Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, 14.

² Panter-Downes, *One Fine Day*, 69. Cited hereafter in the text as *OFD*. Paul Saint-Amour describes this type of insistence on the war's being over as "assert[ing] closure as an ongoing psychic performance rather than testifying to it as an accomplished historical fact" ("Air War Prophecy," 141).

The central texts in this chapter are *One Fine Day* and Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*. Both are set in the shadow of air raids, whether still impending or residing in recent memory, and in villages outside London (although some characters routinely move into and out of the city, traversing a divide that delineates distinct atmospheres and mindsets about the war). The texts feature places that were once peaceful settings, removed from violence and informed by visions of an ideal English way of life, but are brought by the war into the paths of the planes that threaten destruction not only of physical sites but also of what those spaces—the hilltop views, country houses, and quiet villages—might represent. The violent language that interposes itself into the superficially idyllic descriptions of gardens and pastures in *One Fine Day* exemplifies the subtle ways in which the Blitz fundamentally changed conceptions of space for the writers and characters of these texts. The violence of the aerial bombs leaves its mark on the literal landscape, as did the mines and shells of World War I, and on the language of description and remembrance, creating a memorial to the Blitz in both locations.

Two major concepts are in play throughout this chapter, which reaches beyond London as the primary site of Blitz narratives to focus on the surrounding countryside. First, the idea of a national identity—and the nuances of an English past that makes its people who they are—is embedded in many literary depictions of English countryside. The country is often portrayed in literature as a quintessentially English space, a space that captures and represents vital aspects of English national life and memory. Second, while World War II is notable for its unprecedented impact on urban civilian populations, the war also reached beyond the bounds of the city, bringing lasting consequences in terms of physical damage as well as altered senses of space. While the Blitz was generally a campaign against London and other major cities, German air raids reached smaller towns and numerous villages in between: of the 60,000 civilian air-raid casualties Britain suffered during the war (the majority before December 1941), approximately half occurred outside

London.³ This reality would have broken down any initial sense that the violence of war was limited in its reach among civilian populations and altered the imagined geography of the country as people reconsidered their proximity to London.

If the literary countryside is in some way emblematic of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century “Englishness” and captures much of the sentiment and ideology associated with that identity, then the bombings of villages and rural expanses leave their marks not only in texts’ descriptions of the land but on their portrayal of English consciousness. Virginia Woolf, Mollie Panter-Downes, and other writers depicting rural England in wartime employ strains of ruralism, and its accompanying history and nostalgia, to shape identity and memory and to offer a cultural and ideological defense of Britain to supplement its military defense. Part of the war, that which deals with the social and cultural implications for English civilians, was thus fought in artistic portrayals of the land, where writers and artists struggled to retain or regain control of the land’s value and meaning for the nation. These writers draw on historical myths of pastoral Englishness to reframe the experience of the land. Ubiquitous literary images of idealized country life frequently emerge in times of crisis; they provide consolation for the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution and urbanization (and, eventually, globalization). In the mid-twentieth century, they respond to the crisis of a world war and the threat of invasion. The ways in which the landscape is employed to shape wartime and postwar British identity as stable and historically grounded are the focus of this chapter.

In this chapter, I first discuss the tradition of defining English identity in relation to the physical spaces of the country, then examine selections from the *Britain in Pictures* series and examples of wartime propaganda as case studies in the centrality of these ideas for the wartime

³ Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 184.

project of national identity. I then turn to selected literary texts and their franker, more complicated portrayals of English landscapes. Early wartime poetry and literary reportage demonstrate the initial responses of some English writers to threats against both English land and values: they incorporate the language of war into their descriptions of the country and suggest that the threat of attack has consequences beyond the physical. *Between the Acts* illustrates and also challenges such uses of the rural landscape in broadly engaging history and shaping identity in the run-up to war. Finally, *One Fine Day* builds on rich interactions between geography and identity, presenting a universalized, symbolic portrait of rural England and attempting to reclaim the land and redefine it for a postwar nation. While not meant to form a fully unified or representative narrative, these texts together indicate the evolving ways authors wrote about the landscapes of England throughout the decade spanning the war. Wartime literary landscapes are canvasses on which writers project the effects of violence and loss, illustrating the vulnerability of ideas of nation and identity that rely on the land. Virginia Woolf in particular critiques the impulse to seek comfort in the land, presenting England and its historical landscape as human constructs and not enduring entities. Nevertheless, as Mollie Panter-Downes suggests, focusing on the land as a stable foundation for Englishness offered consolation during and after the war. It allowed the land to be an open symbol, ready to be revived and relied upon in whatever circumstances the war created.

Landscape and Englishness⁴

Landscapes as cultural constructs

The opening ceremonies of the 2012 London Olympics featured an epic presentation of English history directed by Danny Boyle. This spectacle, carefully composed to present an ideal national mythology, opened with a peaceful scene evoking the green and pleasant land of English pastoral. It is unclear whether Boyle's pageant meant to sincerely idealize this iconic scene or whether the scene was a self-conscious gesture to a popular idea that would be complicated and compromised by the subsequent introduction of industrialization and technology (represented by stylized set pieces and modern cultural references). In either case, the rural landscape serves as the foundation for a symbol of national pride that conveniently sidesteps the history of an empire that once occupied many of the nations now represented in the stadium by their own Olympic delegations. Boyle's production asserts the power of culture to shape a landscape and affirms the land's power to define a country and a people, offering consolation and reassurance when confronting either a difficult past or an uncertain future.

The original usage of the word "landscape" typically carries the sense only of a picture or view of scenery, not of the scenery itself. The modern usage did not become common until the nineteenth century.⁵ With this etymology in mind, it seems natural to consider any attempt to define, explain, or represent a landscape as shaped by perception and perspective. All landscapes

⁴ In the context of art history, according to some scholars, "ideals of Englishness, of a national and cultural unity, either disregarded or sought to subsume all other identities within the British Isles by the end of the nineteenth century" (Corbett et al., *The Geographies of Englishness*, ix). David Matless similarly writes that when "discussion moves abroad, Englishness and Britishness become almost interchangeable" and that "England is assumed to be the heart and head of the British Empire" (Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 19). This seems also to be the case in the literature of the Second World War and especially the Blitz, hence my focus primarily on "Englishness." When the texts I examine deal with ideas of nation, they tend to do so in terms of England. Although it was not only the English who participated in or were affected by the war as part of the United Kingdom, England seems to stand in for the whole in some cases or, in others, to be seen as the most important and relevant entity for memorialization because it was most directly in the line of fire.

⁵ "Landscape, n.," *OED Online*.

are in some sense pictures, artificially framed even when presented as objectively observed. A landscape in literature or art is not simply a specific tract of land but a creative imagining of a setting and of people's place within that environment. In other words, because of their symbolic function and the effects of their selective framing, "landscapes are culture"⁶ and are "important to the myths and memories" of a society.⁷ In 1955, historian W. G. Hoskins published *The Making of the English Landscape*, which was received as the definitive text on the subject to that point. Hoskins's title emphasizes the purposeful interference of humans in constructing a landscape—pointing out that it does not naturally emerge but is made—and especially in shaping a uniquely *English* landscape, one intimately linked with English culture.

As David Matless explains in *Landscape and Englishness*, defining a landscape—whether its ownership, representation, name, or use—always involves issues of not only pleasure and aesthetics but also power and authority. Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern argue in their introduction to *Landscape, Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* that notions of memory and of place are the crucial elements that together shape identity⁸ and that scholars can "use history and memory to explore the economic, political and social events that impact perceived visions of landscape."⁹ "Landscape" as defined by Stewart and Strathern includes "perceived settings that frame people's senses of place and community,"¹⁰ not merely their visible surroundings. As such, landscape's power in literature and memory "resides in it being simultaneously a site of economic, social, political and aesthetic value."¹¹ To represent a landscape in literature is to evoke all of these values on some level, and this integrative concept of landscape allows for textual interpretations

⁶ Stewart and Strathern, Epilogue, 236.

⁷ Burden, "Introduction: Englishness and Spatial Practices," 21.

⁸ Stewart and Strathern, Introduction, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 12.

that incorporate the historical, political, and social factors shaping perceptions of particular landscapes.

Because of the complexity of land as an anthropological entity, the language used to write about landscape is always laden with questions of identity and power, and “the intertwining of landscape and sense of Englishness”¹² naturally involves matters of class, race, gender, and citizenship. To define Englishness as a particular mode of coexisting with the land is to prescribe, exclude, and even invent elements of English life. Given this, what is the nature and extent of the cultural and memorial payoff for revisiting the definition of rural Englishness in the context of the Second World War?

The first half of the twentieth century saw a strong interest in linking—perhaps even conflating—landscape and Englishness. Two themes around which debates about Englishness cohered during that period (and still do in the present) are “the sense that there is a specifically English landscape and an English concern with, and way of representing that landscape” and the idea “that there is a unique history of the nation, a particular and resilient national character.”¹³ These themes play a part in attempts to reconcile what it means to be both “English” and “modern,” a significant tension of World War I-era modernism, and a concern renewed in the cultural output of World War II, during which threats to English land were even more immediate and the accompanying social changes more radical.

Matless argues that modern ideas about landscape began to form between 1918 and 1950, partly in reaction to the two wars and the accompanying threat of invasion. He rightfully attributes the resultant intertwining of land and Englishness to ruralism, nostalgia, and a concern about articulating and preserving English heritage. Pericles Lewis, in *Modernism, Nationalism, and the*

¹² Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 14.

¹³ Corbett et al., *The Geographies of Englishness*, xii.

Novel, explains the concern with nation and identity in a slightly different way, arguing that modernist writers in particular developed an interest in their “collective ability to shape their own destinies” as a race or nation.¹⁴ These impulses and the constructions of identity derived from them, though significant in modernist and midcentury writing, have a much longer history in English thought and literature that must be acknowledged in order to fully understand the position of wartime landscape writers.

Landscapes and literature

Writing about London and other cityscapes constructs a literary England that revolves largely around what happens in the city, as shown in previous chapters, but landscapes and rural life also have a significant presence in British literature. This chapter is concerned with landscape as defined against cityscape: characterized not by the absence of human presence and influence but by the close interaction of natural and human elements that occurs in rural settings. In the literary English countryside, a village, farm, or roadway can be part of the rural landscape as much as the wild regions of the British Isles are, because the people who build and inhabit such spaces exist in cooperative proximity to nature rather than covering up natural features with their own developments, as in the case of London’s famously hidden rivers. During the mid-twentieth century, the balance between land and human depicted in so much literature faced challenges due to wartime damage and postwar planning and reconstruction—both of which, ironically, have destructive effects on landscapes. In order to unpack the relationship between landscapes and Englishness and the factors contributing to its perceived threats in light of the war, this section briefly surveys the literary history of English landscapes and addresses ways of invoking the land for political and cultural uses around the time of the war. The ultimate focus is on the point where

¹⁴ Lewis, *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel*, 3.

these lines of thought converge: the projection of landscape and Englishness in wartime literature with a particular emphasis on the construction of identity. The link between these is the basis for a literary assertion of permanence that aimed to help Britons cope with the consequences of war.

It is important not to “lump all cultural expressions of ruralism together as representing a simple, nostalgic and conservative longing for a ‘rural idyll’”¹⁵; even the most nostalgic material and gestures tend to be grounded in complex impulses, and the function of nostalgia is itself not simple.¹⁶ Rural England contains many landscapes and even more ways of imagining their significance. Even so, all are imbued with cultural meanings that share common elements, and there are predominant strains of ruralism within English literary history. The pastoral tradition of Romantic poetry provides the most famous formulation, which tends to set the terms for any discussion about the relationship between English land and identity in the literary imagination. The landscape as portrayed in pastoral literature often contains representations of simple, idealized country life and celebrates living close to nature. From a common Romantic perspective, human life in its most natural and noble form requires a connection to the land, and ideal civilization is founded on this relationship. Literature of the early nineteenth century often “evokes an organic national society, its history rooted in place”¹⁷—and thus less vulnerable to political and ideological conflict—and presents the effects of Enlightenment-era developments in agriculture, transportation, and land management on political and class structures.¹⁸

Despite claims of archetypal timelessness, even writing held up as capturing quintessential Englishness, when read in context as Katie Trumpener and David Gervais demonstrate, reveals landscapes and identities marked by temporal and geographical specificities, to say nothing of the

¹⁵ Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷ Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*, xii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

fact that over time, the England put forth by the Wordsworthian tradition “actually included less and less of England as it was.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, for much of English literary history the country landscape has carried certain associations and its images have been deployed to illustrate or critique aspects of national identity and to reinforce traditionally English values and character in times of crisis like the Second World War. For example, as Robert Burden points out in an introduction to an essay collection analyzing literary manifestations of landscape and Englishness, “the fate of the country estate” is often “seen as symptomatic of the condition of England.” He furnishes Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Ben Jonson’s “To Penshurst” as examples of texts in which “country life expresses the dominant social and moral values.”²⁰ This is equally true of Blitz writing, in which country settings represent both the vulnerability of the land and its ultimate stability.

In the nineteenth century, increased industrialization, changes in agriculture, and movement of the population toward cities prompted major shifts in the perceived role of the land in defining English life and identity. “Rural England,” writes David Gervais in *Literary Englands: Versions of ‘Englishness’ in Modern Writing*, “was no longer the reassuring pastoral of the poets” and “could no longer be taken to epitomise modern England at all”²¹; George Eliot and her contemporaries often identified rural England primarily with the past.²² This description of the movement away from idealizing rural England as the home of true English character and values is largely true of twentieth- and even late nineteenth-century literature, which often is unconcerned with rural life or depicts it in a more nuanced if not openly questioning or satirical manner.

¹⁹ Gervais, *Literary Englands*, 8.

²⁰ Burden, “Introduction: Englishness and Spatial Practices,” 18–19.

²¹ Gervais, *Literary Englands*, 7.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

But still the land emerges powerfully as a symbol for England and a setting for exploring questions around identity. W. H. Auden's "In Praise of Limestone," for instance, has been called a "postmodern pastoral"; it features a devoted portrait of a natural landscape and elements of nostalgia along with, paradoxically, dissolving features.²³ Auden composed the poem in 1948 about the Mediterranean landscape he came to know while staying in Italy, but the features he describes also look like those of his native region: "He remarked in a letter to a friend that Italy resembled his '*Mutterland*,' the limestone Pennine hills of northern England."²⁴ The limestone illustrates for Auden the porousness of memory and history and enables an inventive approach to the pastoral and a more complex definition of the land's relationship to modern life and identity.

This precedent, read alongside the counterintuitive trend in mid-century wartime texts of returning to idyllic depictions of the countryside, suggests a complicated evolution of England literary landscapes. Rural England writ large retains power and currency in these wartime texts despite their modern context because it represents a turn toward the past and nostalgia to provide a foundation for meaning and stability in a violent, unpredictable, fraught day-to-day existence. This sense of Englishness suggests continuity, a hopeful thought in a time when people feared for the future of their nation.

Wartime landscapes

In any time and place, "the cataclysm of war remakes landscapes,"²⁵ and the landscapes of war in the popular imagination are often scarred and desolate. The trenches and No Man's Land of the First World War defined a generation's image of warfare and linger still in our cultural

²³ Emig, "Lust in the Ground," 41.

²⁴ Auden, quoted in Mendelson, "The European Auden," 56.

²⁵ Helphand, *Defiant Gardens*, 16.

consciousness. War poets wrote of “the earth...rent and torn,”²⁶ wires that rattle “like rusty brambles or dead bine,”²⁷ a “menacing scarred slope,”²⁸ and, of course, the poppies that “grow/ In Flanders fields.”²⁹ The more familiar and less treacherous landscape of home also appears in some poetic responses to the war. A. E. Housman wrote of those killed, “Here dead we lie because we did not choose / To live and shame the land from which we sprung” (*The Wordsworth* 40).

Rupert Brooke expressed a similar nationalist attachment to English land in “The Soldier”:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England’s, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.³⁰

While less overtly celebratory than Brooke, Edward Thomas also honors the English landscape in his war poetry. Thomas’s poems project a subdued nostalgia for the villages, trees, and birds of rural England, but the nostalgia is complicated by its inherent reminders of human mortality and of the war being fought across the Channel. Bundled firewood reminds the speaker in “Fifty Faggots”³¹ that he cannot control either nature or the war and might not live long enough to be warmed by winter fires. The man of “Man and Dog,”³² traveling through the countryside of England, is grateful to be sleeping on the ground in fields rather than in trenches. And “The Cherry Trees,”³³ in which petals are strewn over the grass “as for a wedding,” ends with the recollection that “there is none to wed,” presumably because so many young men have died in the

²⁶ *The Wordsworth Book*, 1. From Richard Aldington’s “Bombardment.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10. From Edmund Blunden’s “The Zonnebeke Road.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 98. From Siegfried Sassoon’s “Attack.”

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 48. From John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields.”

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

³² *Ibid.*, 115–16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 122.

war. These are only a few examples of the many poems Edward Thomas wrote on such themes. In each of them nature surfaces in order to prompt reflection on the effects of war, but at the same time, nature exists beyond human life, living on indefinitely and shaping the land on its own terms.

When the Second World War's bombs reached the English countryside, the scarred landscapes of war, as described by Sassoon and many other soldier-poets, began to overlap physically with the rural landscapes of pastoral England, like those favored by Edward Thomas, exerting new pressure on both iconic images. Political, social, and ideological concepts in circulation during the Second World War—including rural evacuation schemes and renewed emphasis on farming and gardening—encouraged wartime interest in the countryside and rural life, despite their having become unfamiliar or obsolete to many English people during the twentieth century. The general sentiment throughout the twentieth century was that “country Englishness was to be valued as a thing of the past,”³⁴ yet the tropes of country England retained a strong presence in popular imagination and literature. This regression indicates the appeal of an escape from the present and of an imaginary time in which people only needed the land and not the cities and institutions most threatened by the Blitz.

John Betjeman wrote in 1943 that bombing had “built up an affection for the old towns of England among those many who formerly thought little about them.”³⁵ This renewed affection arose under the threat of destruction, which apparently prompted reflection on the cultural and historical significance of such spaces and a return to valuing the small towns, villages, and countryside of England as cultural treasures and part of a collective identity. The war prompted a moment “in English history when the landscape needed to represent something essentialist about

³⁴ Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 193.

³⁵ Betjeman, *English Cities and Small Towns*, 41.

the national culture” and provide “a consolation for the horrors of war.”³⁶ Land thus became a symbol of unity, self-sufficiency, and authenticity.

One of the predominant conversations of the day about how to view and use land focused on the perceived threat not of bombing but of reconstruction, which also raises questions about the viability of a nostalgic, idealized identity and emphasizes the distance between that ideal and modern reality. David Matless chronicles in detail the practical and ideological debates about planning and preservation efforts that Betjeman feared would destroy any remnants of history and identity the bombs had left behind. The tension over the preservation of historic landscapes and structures represents on a smaller scale a broad conflict between order and improvisation as well as the centuries-old tension between traditional values and ways of life and the impulse to redefine Englishness in terms of modern technology and progress. While plenty of writing from 1940s Britain captures the latter tendency, writing that is concerned with issues of memory and carries the weight of the past tends to take the former, more nostalgic approach. Contemporaneous literary responses to the Blitz and the war fall definitively on the side of the land and the past, avoiding celebration of technology that might be taken as celebration of the destruction it enabled.

A popular wartime song, “There’ll Always Be an England,” cashes in on the nostalgia that ties an idealized rural past to an essential English character. The lyrics, made famous by singer Vera Lynn, assure listeners that

There’ll always be an England—
While there’s a country lane;
Wherever there’s a cottage small
Beside a field of grain.³⁷

³⁶ Burden, “Introduction: Englishness and Spatial Practices,” 24.

³⁷ Parker and Charles, “There’ll Always Be an England,” 2.

Songwriters Ross Parker and Hugh Charles define England simply as the sum of its traditional landscapes: country lanes and cottages alongside fields. Portraying the survival of the nation as dependent purely on the continued existence of these spaces offers a reassuring sense of resilience and continuity (never mind that country lands and landscapes in general are not necessarily permanent), shoring up the myth that the land contains all that is needed to define and sustain England.

Civilians awaiting the inevitable air raids and uncertain of the war's outcome found comfort in this wartime strain of pastoralism. They looked to landscapes and landmarks to define England and ensure its survival in some form. Jean Crossley, in her memoir, wrote of her thoughts on visiting Baggy Point in Devon just before the declaration of war: "The comforting thought came into my mind that it, at least, would survive. Its passive bulk had been there for thousands of years, unchanged by violent storms and heavy seas, unaffected by wars and disasters that had destroyed whole empires and changed the world."³⁸ Another woman, in a letter to a friend evacuated to the United States, expresses similar feelings: "We are lucky to have places like Aviemore to go back to, places that are, and will always be unchanged and unchanging in the face of time and war." She underscores the importance of rural life and the natural landscape by positioning the land as central to identity and love of country. "There is something to be said," she muses, "[for] a love of country which is not the empty patriotism of the flag-wagging kind but a deep inherent love of the land and earth and the fields and trees that make up this island."³⁹ For Britons like these, the figures of the land and the countryside functioned as powerful symbols for a resilient nation and offered consolation in the face of great uncertainty and change. In a revealing anecdote from Leonard Woolf's *Downhill All the Way: An Autobiography of the Years 1919-1939*, Woolf also

³⁸ Crossley, "A Middle Class War," 12.

³⁹ Letter from "Georgie," 12 July 1940.

affirms the land and nature as a source of hope and perspective. When Virginia called out to Leonard in the garden one day, telling him that Hitler was speaking on the radio, Leonard continued planting irises rather than coming inside; he declared that they would be “flowering long after [Hitler] is dead.”¹⁰

England is neither a monolithic entity nor a fundamental, collectively-agreed-upon concept, and the country stereotype has never actually been a part of the lives and identities of many English people. Furthermore, as Matless demonstrates, the values and characteristics that constitute the “real England” depend on whom one asks. But the writers discussed in this chapter do treat England writ large as having inherent meaning and significance that is vulnerable to war’s destructiveness but ultimately resilient. Writers, journalists, and politicians promote the idea of an England tied to its past and its land—which are themselves linked—during a war that demands a sense of unity and common purpose. Gervais points out that one poem from Donald Davie’s 1973 collection about England “has more to do with our memories than our lives.”¹¹ This comment applies equally well to the English landscape as presented in wartime literature. England is a concept that is continually rewritten, and each incarnation in literature says much about the memories and identities being constructed in a particular time and place. In its Blitz-time incarnation, the England defined by the land allows for a new way of being English that resists destruction and does not rely on the trappings of empire and class.

¹⁰ Quoted in Buchan, *A Green and Pleasant Land*, 208.

¹¹ Gervais, *Literary Englands*, 10.

Promotional Literature

Britain in Pictures

Britain in Pictures, a series of books written by various literary and political luminaries and published primarily during the 1940s,⁴² offers a glimpse into a patriotic narrative about Britain's social history and the cultural significance of everything from chess to hospitals and essayists to rivers. The series is presumably inspired in part by the war and attempts to build up national pride and reassert a shared sense of identity in the face of a national threat. Of particular relevance here are the volumes dealing with the English landscape and with life in the country. These texts collectively uphold the tradition of celebrating rural and village life as quintessentially English. They suggest that to experience the countryside and see its scenery—never mind that the view changes quite dramatically depending on the geographical region of England one is in—is to connect with one's personal and national heritage and to better understand the meaning of Englishness (in this case, Englishness seems to be predicated on age and continuity, "simple" living, and proximity to nature).

This pastoral mythology is evident, for example, in *English Villages*, which was published in 1941, early in the war but at a time when many needed a morale boost and a reminder of memories of idyllic, rural England instead of the violent accounts coming from blitzed cities. Edmund Blunden—given his experiences in the First World War, no stranger to the emotional weight of war and the value of language for constructing and preserving memory—contributed *English Villages* to the series. Even in Blunden's earlier war poems, his affinity for rural landscapes is evident, anticipating the subtle connections he draws between land and memory and identity in *English Villages*. Blunden's history connects this text to other narratives about wartime landscapes

⁴² This series is now popular among collectors, who try to gather copies of all 132 volumes.

and is part of a broader imperative—embodied controversially and most famously by Rupert Brooke and his “corner of some foreign field/ That is forever England”—to offset loss by linking memory to the land. Blunden invokes this response to trauma and loss directly when he describes a village memorial to soldiers of the Great War. “Here [in the country],” he writes, “these men, or boys, are not forgotten” but “are always somewhere about our houses or farms” attending to fields and orchards.⁴³ By asserting the presence of dead soldiers in the English villages from which they came, rather than in London or Europe, where they would be largely anonymous, Blunden ties memory to the land and the personal relationships English people have with it. Even in the memory of friends and family that constitutes the soldiers’ rural afterlife, the dead men continue to work and connect with the land: the land is what keeps them alive, so to speak. Blunden utilizes the closeness of memory and rural landscape in the context of an earlier war to predict a form of memory constructed as the Second World War unfolded.

English Villages begins by acknowledging the powerful and positive impressions of visitors to England’s large cities, but Blunden quickly shifts his focus away from London, where many readers’ attention would presumably have been in 1941, and declares that the best of England is found in its rural villages. He celebrates the history and tradition reflected in country life, unchanged in many ways for centuries and a “living relic”⁴⁴ of English identity from a seemingly simpler time. Formal memorials, such as the monuments that became ubiquitous throughout England after World War I, are newer, but Blunden points to older structures like bridges and churches and even to the land itself as historical records. Blunden’s portrait of English villages, illustrated with paintings of hop gardens, rivers, trees, and skies, is as much about the surrounding country as about grammar schools and guest houses. Shared hilltop views link generations, and

⁴³ Blunden, *English Villages*, 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

hop gardens host memories of the families who return year after year. “Village folk,” according to Blunden, “have treated Nature kindly” and thus forged a relationship with the land. “We do not remember everything, it is true,” he continues, but “quite a number of fragments of history continue as parts of our life,”⁴⁵ many of which are embodied by features of the landscape: quarries, bramble bushes, ponds, hills.

For Blunden, recognition of the countryside’s ownership of the English past is crucial. The English village, he suggests, with its distinctive attitude toward life and history (a characterization he aims to support with his examples but never pointedly defines), will save the nation. He predicts that during the postwar recovery and renewal, the village might prove “the salvation and fulfillment of England”⁴⁶ as the English try not merely to “escape into ruralism”⁴⁷ but to be a part of rural life and its attendant respect for the “earthy earth.”⁴⁸ Precisely how this will save England is not clear, but Blunden makes a passionate case for the central place of the rural landscape and country life in English heritage and for the preservation of rural England. Such spaces are sites of memory that continually reconstruct a sense of the nation’s past and that also record the changes that come during and after the war in the midst of which Blunden wrote.

Both cultivated and wild land figure in this abstract idea of being one with nature. Peter Bicknell, in *British Hills and Mountains* argues that “the fells are not remote from man,”⁴⁹ meaning they are physically accessible but also that they are presumably part of human consciousness and identity. While Bicknell describes scenes that “have changed little in the last two hundred years,”⁵⁰ he expresses less of the romantic certainty of other writers that the English landscape is stable and

⁴⁵ Blunden, *English Villages*, 20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁹ Bicknell, *British Hills and Mountains*, 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

unaltered, a long-lasting manifestation of true Englishness. He recognizes that specific natural features can be transitory, whether due to natural occurrences or human intervention. But he nevertheless aligns with Blunden and, as we will see, Woolf and Panter-Downes, in positing a significant relationship between the land and its inhabitants. This is where his primary use of the land as a tool in constructing and describing an English identity emerges. In depicting one region, for example, he presents this idyllic portrait of the human-nature interaction:

The sensuous smooth spring quality of the turf is maintained by the sleek well-fed sheep that graze on them; the rounded wind-trimmed clumps of beech have been grown by man; his farms, his churches and his villages nestle into their folds; and everywhere the traces of pre-historic man remind us of the long continuity of human contact with the chalk hills. It is humanised landscape at its best.⁵¹

This land, argues Bicknell, is shaped by human presence. Blunden might argue that the reverse is also true: people are shaped and defined by the land they maintain and nestle into. In his poetic modern pastoral about the symbiosis of the English people and country, Bicknell maneuvers patriotic sentiment toward his agenda of conservation. If the continuity of human contact with the hills is what made Britain what it is, and if the land holds the memory of lost loved ones, his readers might, he seems to hope, be more motivated to preserve and enjoy these spaces. Preserving the land of England becomes politically and emotionally linked to a timely desire for preserving its people, who rely on that land for their identity.

Even in John Betjeman's *English Cities and Small Towns*, the impulse to celebrate and preserve the countryside creeps into lengthy passages in praise of city life. For example, Betjeman opens the book with the dramatic claim that "not the most magnificent scenery, misty mountains, raging seas, desert sunsets, or groves of orange can compensate for the loss" of various urban

⁵¹ Bicknell, *British Hills and Mountains*, 20.

landmarks.⁵² This hyperbolic dismissal of stereotypically beautiful scenes of nature seems incongruous, though, when he later answers the question of what makes English towns so attractive with the hypothesis that “it is because English people who live in towns retain the country talent for gardening.... Thus it is that the country seems to creep right into the town.”⁵³ It seems that even one who prefers city to country feels a connection to the land and sees this affinity as an important characteristic of English people. Betjeman repeatedly references “the Englishman’s love of the country,”⁵⁴ suggesting that the idea is neither outdated nor irrelevant in the mid-twentieth century but a universal inevitability. “It is,” as Betjeman later declares, “nearly every Englishman’s ambition to have enough money to live in the country,”⁵⁵ and this ambition is allegedly undampened by the war. In Betjeman’s view, bomb craters on one’s land are points of pride and no damage is irreparable for those who live close to the land.

English Cottages and Farm-Houses, by C. Henry Warren, contains a similar emphasis between the lines on the landscape, despite its ostensible concern with human-built structures. One cannot truly appreciate the English scene, Warren insists, without understanding the geological makeup of the country, “the bones across which [the ‘smiling face’] of England is stretched.”⁵⁶ From these bones come houses that “seem to grow out of the landscape”⁵⁷; Warren presents these houses in context of the land they are built on, rather than as discrete entities, emphasizing the extent to which English existence has been intertwined with the land for centuries. He even speculates that perhaps the appeal of cottages and country life to many English people comes from

⁵² Betjeman, *English Cities and Small Towns*, 7.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁶ Warren, *English Cottages and Farm-Houses*, 17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

“inherited memory,”⁵⁸ whether via ancestral ties or more abstract attachment to national myths of history and identity. This memory seems to be prompted and perpetuated by the land, transcending the temporal limits of generations and shaping the identities and lives of those who possess it.

As in most of the wartime *Britain in Pictures* volumes, Warren’s allusions to the conflict happening behind the scenes are generally brief or indirect. Warren refers to coastal areas as “the flat no-man’s-land where pasture and water interlace, so that cows at graze and yachts at anchor seem equally expected.”⁵⁹ The phrase “no man’s land,” while centuries old, was not closely connected to war until World War I. That Warren would use these words in wartime is striking, as it suggests that the collision he illustrates between land and sea or nature and technology involves implicit violence in which something is necessarily lost or destroyed and spaces are made uninhabitable. This challenges the approach many of these texts suggest for bridging human and natural spaces for the purposes of memory and identity formation. It also, however, demonstrates how subtly the vocabulary of war infiltrates routine encounters with the landscape.

If there were any lingering doubt about the prominent role the English landscape plays in this history of human dwellings, Warren concludes with a passage from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* about the Delectable Mountains. The final line of the book, cementing the English mythology of chosen lands and their significance for the people who occupy them, is the declaration that, like the Delectable Mountains, “it was Emanuel’s Land!”⁶⁰ Each of these books, written to reinforce

⁵⁸ Warren, *English Cottages and Farm-Houses*, 42.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 48. In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Bunyan writes that when his pilgrims ask “the name of the country,” “they said, it was Immanuel’s Land; and it is as common, said they, as this hill is, to and for all the Pilgrims” (61–62). Although Bunyan’s descriptions of the Delectable Mountains are conceivably based on what he knew of English hills, he does not explicitly locate them in England. Warren, then, transports the mountains and their attendant mythologies—that they are pleasant and restful; that it is there, on the way to the “Celestial City,” that pilgrims are introduced to valuable knowledge and virtues—into an English setting for his own purposes.

national unity and promote pride in English accomplishments, situates the English landscape as directly related to understanding and preserving the nation's history. Thus land, in the context of this war, carries the currency of cultural memory, and as the literal landscape is altered by evacuation, bombs, and reconstruction plans, so too is the topography of memory and history, destabilizing and demanding renegotiation of present and future identities.

Government propaganda

After the first two years of the war, when the worst of the Blitz had passed, many writers transferred much of their focus from the English landscape to the international scene: the entrance of the United States into combat, conflicts in Asia and the Pacific front, the changing political environment, and shifting opinions of Churchill in light of global developments. Nevertheless, writers of journalism, literature, and propaganda alike kept the domestic landscape in view as they covered topics like the “Baedeker blitz” and agricultural initiatives. In publications from throughout the war, military and government officials promote strategic uses of physical land, while writers strategically evoke the idea of the land in texts to comment on the meaning of the war for English identity and life.

The most visible and widely disseminated example of this strategic land use is the British government's encouragement, through policy and propaganda, of domestic agriculture projects: homegrown produce, the Women's Land Army (WLA), and so on. The WLA, an organization that placed women as farm workers in order to increase food production, recruited many of its “Land Girls” from urban areas. WLA rhetoric used in recruitment often included idyllic portrayals of rural life and presented farming as a way for women to do their patriotic duty. Here again we find the idea—reproduced this time in the official war culture—that to live in the countryside and work on the land is to connect with and serve the nation.

Mollie Panter-Downes reported in a *New Yorker* column in May 1942 that fine weather and positive reports from the English countryside (compared to gloomy projections about German agricultural production) prompted farmers to “think that even English soil is going to turn in something special in this critical summer.”⁶¹ The soil here is made an active participant in the war effort, with its determination to assist with “something special” during a critical period. The myth of the land as participating in English identity and maintaining a relationship with its people comes to life in Panter-Downes’s brief statement.

The Ministry of Agriculture sent similar messages to the general public, emphasizing the symbolic and practical importance of the English landscape. Posters produced for the Ministry’s “Grow Your Own Food” campaign feature slogans such as “use spades not ships,” “every available piece of land must be cultivated,” and “dig for victory” (Figure 11). In these statements, the land takes on an essential role in the narrative of the war effort. Land use is not merely prudent or economical, it is urgent. Victory hinges on not only ships and planes but also spades and pitchforks. One such poster implores English people to “lend a hand on the land at a farming holiday camp” (Figure 12). The image combines butterflies in the foreground, a bright blue sky, and a cheerful-looking family on holiday with the more unsettling outsized pitchfork lifting a piece of furrowed land—and with it, the guest farmers. The visual symbols of pleasant rural existence echo centuries of idyllic landscape paintings and reinforce the celebration of country life as desirable and authentic. At the same time, the pitchfork suggests that the workers and their harvest are in the hands of a much larger force, put to work by their nation to save the very land on which they stand.

⁶¹ Panter-Downes, *London War Notes*, 231. Good weather can be both a morale-booster and a liability, though, as Panter-Downes indicated in February 1943, when she wrote that the “Germans have been taking advantage of the favorable weather to drop in again on rural southern districts” (269).



Figure 11: Tunbridge, Mary. *Dig for Victory*. n.d. Imperial War Museum, London. *Imperial War Museums*. Web. 6 November 2013. © IWM (Art.IWM PST 0696)

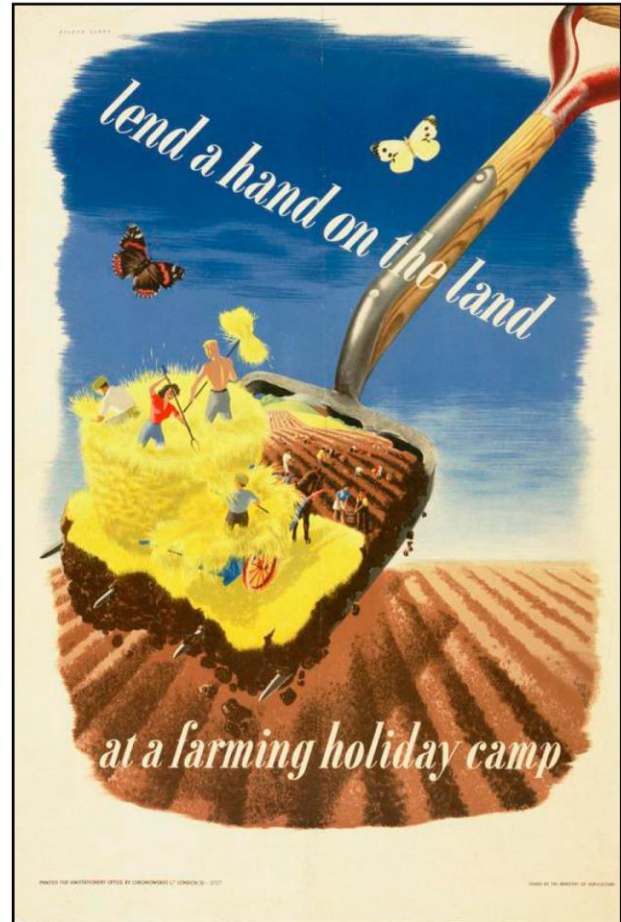


Figure 12: Evans, Eileen. *Lend a Hand on the Land*. 1943. Imperial War Museum, London. *Imperial War Museums*. Web. 6 November 2013. © IWM (Art.IWM PST 0143)

Two posters released by the National Savings Committee, though they have a different purpose, also employ the visual rhetoric of country Englishness. One, featuring a young woman surrounded by small pictures of herself engaging in various leisure activities, claims that “war savings will bring [dreams] to life” (Figure 13). The figure appears to be a modern woman interested in high fashion and exotic travel, but even so, one of her dream images centers on a simple country scene. In the imagined view, she stands near a quaint country cottage holding a bunch of freshly gathered flowers. The most central image and among the most colorful, this rural dream stands out and maintains its appeal even as the status and future of country life are in flux.

The second poster by the National Savings Committee also strategically employs nostalgia-inducing rural iconography to promote a mostly unrelated agenda, but takes this tactic a step further. Here a mother walks through a field with her two happy children and their energetic puppy. A small farmhouse or cottage stands in the background. All of this, claims the text, is “worth fighting for” and “worth saving for” (Figure 14). A series of implied messages underlie the explicit statement: the war is being fought for the sake of English land as well as the children, these children are content because they are playing in the countryside, this family’s country walk represents an ideal postwar dream, their surroundings contain the most precious parts of the English experience. In short, the image sells a specific (albeit superficial) idea of what happy English life looks like, and this idea is constructed from threads of nostalgia, mythology, and nationalism linked to the English landscape.

Even Winston Churchill, in his addresses, strategically utilized a rhetoric of land use and preservation to gain the confidence and support of the English people, recognizing, perhaps, the emotional capital and symbolic value invested in talk about English landscapes and geography. In

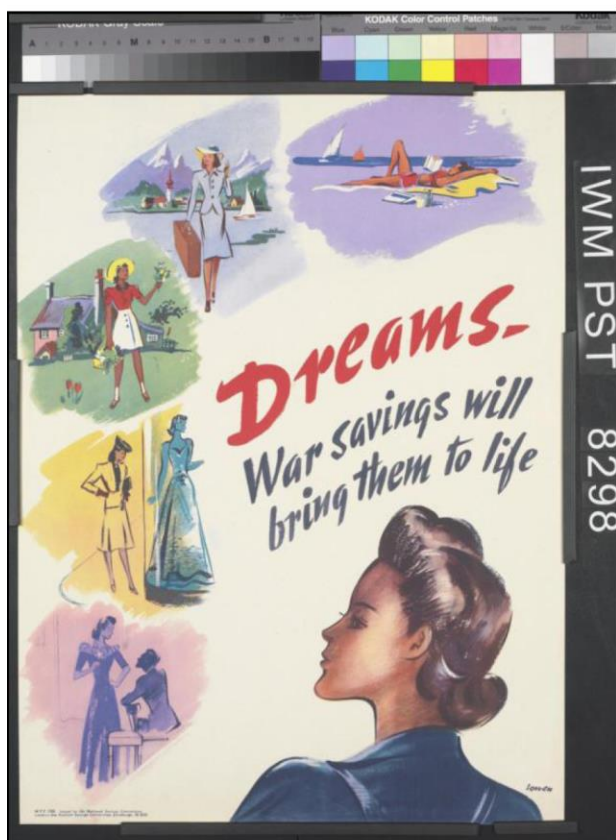


Figure 13: Lowen. *Dreams—War Savings Will Bring Them to Life*. National Savings Committee, 1939. Imperial War Museum, London. *Imperial War Museums*. Web. 6 November 2013. © IWM (Art.IWM PST 8298)



Figure 14: *Worth Fighting For; Worth Saving For*. National Savings Committee, 1944. Imperial War Museum, London. *Imperial War Museums*. Web. 6 November 2013. © IWM (Art.IWM PST 16425)

several of his addresses, most notably the famous speech known as “Their Finest Hour,” delivered in the House of Commons on June 18, 1940, Churchill repeatedly refers to Britain as “this Island.” With only two exceptions in the text of “Their Finest Hour,” his use of this phrase is evidently purposeful. While Churchill does not elaborate on the features of the island’s landscape and scenery, his geographical emphasis suggests implicit importance and value in the very land that comprises England and the rest of Great Britain. Churchill’s labeling Britain a capital-I Island does not merely make a reassuring tactical point about the difficulty of a full-scale German invasion, it turns a basic geographical term into a proper noun that makes the landscape fundamental to the nation’s definition and character and unifies its people under a simple geographical criterion.

The attitude of exceptionality and ownership toward the British landscape conveyed by Churchill’s “this Island” resembles the rhetorical position utilized by the Army Bureau of Current Affairs with its “Your Britain” campaign, which presents scenes from British landscapes to promote identification with national goals. One series of posters, by artist Frank Newbould, focuses on a traditional, rural view of the nation, exploiting positive associations between country land and Britishness in order to promote patriotic feelings (Figure 15). Newbould’s pictures of rolling hills, a country fair, a village green, and other idyllic scenes present a pastoral Britain in the style of travel posters, the genre for which Newbould was best known. Presenting specific sites from England in this way to its own people reveals, on the one hand, the distance of rural districts and the pastoral ideal from the real lived experiences of twentieth-century British people. On the other hand, it elevates these scenes to the status of heritage symbols, important parts of the national identity and historical narrative and worthy of remembering and preserving.



Figure 15: Newbould, Frank. "The South Downs." *Your Britain: Fight for It Now*. Army Bureau of Current Affairs, 1942. Imperial War Museum, London. *Imperial War Museums*. Web. 6 November 2013. © IWM (Art.IWM PST 14887)



Figure 16: Games, Abram. "A School in Cambridgeshire." *Your Britain: Fight for It Now*. Army Bureau of Current Affairs, 1942. Imperial War Museum, London. *Imperial War Museums*. Web. 6 November 2013. © IWM (Art.IWM PST 2907)

A second set of “Your Britain” posters, by Abram Games, contrasts strongly with the first by advocating a futuristic, technological vision of the nation. In these posters, images of modern buildings, including a school, a clinic, and a housing complex, rest amid the ruins of older structures. But even here, with a predominant focus on social change and advances in human services, hints of attention to the landscape emerge. While the background ruins are surrounded by darkness or elements of industrial urban life, the future projects meant to define a potential “Your Britain” restore grass, trees, and blue sky, as if to suggest that a new Britain worth fighting for will bring its people back into contact with nature. In the education-themed image (Figure 16), the only intact and full-color item in the ruined school is a map of the British Isles still tacked to the wall, further implying that in spite of destruction, lost traditions, and changed ways of life, the geography and landscapes of the nation will remain constant and continue to define its identity in some fundamental way beyond the end of the war.

Land and Identity under Threat

Air strikes in rural areas were frequently framed by writers as attacks on fundamental English identity and values, even though it is urban scenes that now stand in for the experience of British civilians generally during the Second World War. The interpretive move that links the vulnerability of land and that of English society makes sense given the literary and historical tradition of connecting Englishness with the land. The sense of violation that attends portrayals of air strikes is intensified by the accompanying rude awakening to the reality that the country was not necessarily a safer place to be than the city, contrary to what was thought in the early stages of the war. Thus many wartime narratives address issues stemming from the perhaps misguided setting apart of the countryside as safe and special. Representing the dark side of rural nationalism are those narratives that emphasize xenophobia or militarism in the country. The disorientation of

Londoners evacuated to the countryside and their clashes with country dwellers suggested to the latter that their poor urban counterparts did not truly represent or belong in civilized English society. Country houses and estates were requisitioned for use by the military, reinforcing a claim on the land by official arms of the government and asserting continuity between political and cultural definitions of the nation. In more positive narratives, on the other hand, city-dwelling children became acquainted for the first time with country life and the natural landscape of their nation, thus gaining an appreciation for some grand idea of England and earning their place in that collective identity.

Many literary texts written during the years of the war, like the promotional texts discussed previously, indicate the connections drawn consciously or unconsciously between threats to the physical land of England and threats to the concept of Englishness. A brief survey of such literature, however, reveals conflicted responses to the ideological ruin (or morale-building fortress, depending on one's perspective) of the nationalist mythologies established and exploited by propaganda. In poetry written early in the war, poets wrestle with the implications of linking land and identity in wartime, in *Between the Acts*, Woolf critiques popular narratives about the land, and in the postwar *One Fine Day* Mollie Panter-Downes considers both the physical scars of war and a hopeful interpretation of the land as an inclusive, forward-looking basis for identity.

Violent landscapes in poetry

Recall that the Second World War was—and still is—frequently characterized as a less literary war than the First World War. “Where are the war poets?” became a common refrain, expressing disappointment at a perceived lack of attention to social and artistic duty, not to mention collective suffering, among writers. But several collections of war poetry were published during the years of the war, suggesting interest in such work among both writers and readers. Many

of these wartime poems help to conceptualize the importance of the land for Englishness, a task for which poetry is well suited, given the English tradition of pastoral landscape poems. *Poems of This War by Younger Poets*, published in 1942, positioned itself as a direct response to current events. The anthology does attempt to represent a particular war in the broader context of war literature, but given its publication in the midst of the war and its themes of seeking courage, hope, and life in wartime, it is most preoccupied with its present: *Poems of This War* is a book for 1942. The title suggests a focus on the challenges and traumas of its time rather than an attempt to craft a contribution to future literary memory. The collection also refutes the idea that there are no poets of the Second World War. This war—the book’s editors assume its readers will know exactly which war they refer to—inspired its share of poetic accounts and by 1942 was well on its way to becoming a rich source of literary material, just as the previous war. Edmund Blunden, who wrote the introduction to *Poems of This War*, marshaled his credibility as a soldier poet of the First World War to usher in a new, “younger” generation of war poets.

The poems represent a range of settings and perspectives, with many focusing on the experiences of soldiers or city-dwellers, but elements of nature and landscape are evoked at least briefly in nearly every poem; unsurprisingly, those written in memoriam contain a particularly large number of flowers, birds, and mountains. This section examines some of the poems that engage most closely with the war and its implications in relation to land and nature. In “September Holiday,” Clive Sansom writes that

All Nature’s agents image war to me.
Even that butterfly above the ditch
Flutters with sinister intent; a bee
Heavy with honey, drones at a bomber’s pitch.⁶²

⁶² Ledward and Strange, *Poems of This War*, 10, lines 1–4.

The title sets the scene spatially and temporally. The speaker is on holiday, presumably in the country (the Cotswolds, we learn at the end of the poem), and a holiday in September would, whether intentionally or not, have evoked for many readers the September in which Great Britain declared war. September 1939 marked the transition from nature's being simply nature to each of its components' being imbued with more violent or menacing associations—all “imag[ing] war,” as Sansom writes. On the eve of war, the normally charming and comforting surroundings of rural England are the surface on which fears and anxieties are projected during this holiday gone wrong.

While a heavy-handed expression of the war's emotional and psychological effects, the poem illustrates in detail war's ability to infiltrate and reframe perceptions of formerly mundane or even pleasant scenes. The text foreshadows the way in which the language and imagery of war invade Mollie Panter-Downes' descriptions of the English landscape and country life in *One Fine Day*. The poem, written at or near the beginning of the war, and the novel, written afterward, demonstrate the war's depth of influence on language, as the effect extends in both directions beyond the years of the war. In “September Holiday,” the land becomes a site of memory when the speaker links the feelings and images expressed to a specific period of time. The poem's landscape setting both provides a stage upon which to express fears and is itself under literal threat.

Sansom's comparisons between images of nature and war in the landscape continue to accumulate:

The distant tractor furrows for attack
Trenches meticulous as a general's plan.
Those corn-shocks rest like rifles in a stack;
That sheaf ungathered is a fallen man...
Nothing is simple now, nothing immune
From war's contagion, time's conspiracy.
Throughout the sunny Cotswold afternoon
All Nature's agents image death to me.⁶³

⁶³ Ledward and Strang, *Poems of This War*, 10, lines 5-12.

The tractor, infected by war's contagion, seems to have acquired agency and intent as it digs trenches, suggesting war's ability to actively co-opt the trappings of peaceful rural life as well as England's anxiety about whether the countryside could become a site of violence and destruction. Both this anxiety and the overlaying of a battlefield plan on a rural landscape indicate the continued influence of the First World War on frameworks for understanding war. In the previous war, many of the best known and most devastating engagements took place among the farms and villages of France and Belgium. While trench warfare would not be the definitive image of combat in the Second World War as it was in the first, its history makes it an evocative concept to use in describing landscapes, and it is understandably the default visual vocabulary for Sansom to employ while writing at the outset of war.

The meticulousness of the trenches echoes the steady and precise form of the poem. Its four quatrains of rhymed iambic pentameter suggest order, in the senses of both regimented militarism and the predictability of familiar settings, which collide in this poem. Oddly, in line six—"Trenches meticulous as a general's plan"—the final feet break into anapestic meter, altering the poem's rhythm with their extra syllables. This line reads like a rupture or flaw in the plan, where anxiety changes the momentum of the line and forces the acknowledgment, heightened by war consciousness, that the best-laid plans can end in death and loss.

Other poems in the collection similarly inscribe the violence of war on the natural landscape. In "Hedgehog in Air Raid," Clifford Dymont writes of the terror of nighttime, describing an encounter with the simultaneously vulnerable and threatening hedgehog and its "coat of lances."⁶⁴ Both the speaker and the hedgehog listen for the "cracked twig of danger"⁶⁵ as Dymont

⁶⁴ Ledward and Strang, *Poems of This War*, 28–29, line 31.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, line 27.

subtly compares airplanes to sharks in the sky, highlighting nature's menacing analogues in war. Alan Rook's poetry, too, hinges on the conflation of natural, nostalgia-inducing landscapes with the technologies and anxieties of war. Rook's ironically titled "The Retreat" contains the ominous declaration that even "in the eyes of a daisy, or the timelessness of trees / Lies fear. Death haunts the flowers and cities."⁶⁶ Rook emphasizes with these lines the fragility of daisies, despite their cheerful connotations, as well as trees, despite their apparent strength. Both are subject to death—and neither stands a chance when faced with aerial bombs. Even more importantly, Rook's sentiment suggests a vision of the war's influence that extends its reach beyond the cities, where information and fear both spread easily, to the country, symbolized by the flowers but no longer allowed their associated innocent pleasure.

Adding support to Panter-Downes's emphasis on the rural experience of early-wartime fear, these poems construct not only a particular lens for remembering anxiety among rural English people but also a new and ambivalent way of viewing the country itself. No longer a natural refuge, a place of pleasant memories, or a setting for developing Romantic individualism, the country has merged with the human machinery and machinations of war and its fundamental components are infected with death and danger. As Alex Comfort warns in "Fear of the Earth," "The woods grow perilous."⁶⁷ The peril found in Comfort's woods differs from the sublime vision of danger in nature in that it inspires an ongoing state of fear rather than moments of awe.

One poem near the end of *Poems of This War*, Bertram Warr's "Working Class," does take a turn toward a sublime image with its simultaneously macabre and hopeful portrayal of a post-apocalyptic landscape. After stating with certainty that cities will fall and decay, the poem concludes with these lines:

⁶⁶ Ledward and Strang, *Poems of This War*, 24, lines 18-9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 46, line 3.

But a wind will spring up to carry the smells away
and the earth will suck off the liquids and the crumbling flesh,
and on the bleached bones, when the sun shines,
we shall begin to build.⁶⁸

While cities are vulnerable and temporary, here the earth is the permanent foundation for memory and civilization. The land—along with the wind and sun—plays a vital and active role in human affairs and enables recovery from devastation. Warr’s concept of nature is not necessarily violent itself, but nature absorbs the effects of violence and mediates the human experience of war.

History and ruralism in Between the Acts

The efficacy of nature’s mediation is called into question in Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, set at an English country house in the shadow of imminent war and centered on a pageant presenting English history—an “anachronistic gesture” “perfectly suited to the tenets of English civic nationalism” during the war, Jed Esty points out.⁶⁹ The existence of a connection between the English countryside and the history of English national identity could not be more apparent, although Woolf characteristically leaves the precise nature of the land’s metonymic significance for the idea of Englishness undefined. The novel’s premise suggests that the coming war, in both the anxiety that precedes it and its potentially devastating consequences, will interfere with and perhaps permanently alter the English conception of historical identity. How does the collective imagination adapt itself, Woolf seems to ask, to the threat of being discontinued? As if emblematic of the disruptive potential of war, in *Between the Acts* “the unity of physical spaces and the continuity of the narrative are constantly being interrupted.”⁷⁰ *Between the Acts* theorizes the ways in which Englishness adapts—successfully and unsuccessfully—to the reality and aftermath of an

⁶⁸ Ledward and Strang, *Poems of This War*, 87.

⁶⁹ Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, 55.

⁷⁰ Snaith and Whitworth, “Introduction: Approaches to Space and Place,” 2.

altered narrative and examines how those changes are recorded and reflected in characters' interactions with the country's landscapes.

While some pastoral texts read as paeans to pristine land largely untouched by human influence, *Between the Acts*, like Bicknell's *British Hills and Mountains*, accepts the reality of human-formed landscapes—particularly evident in a time of alien ruins and bomb craters—and therefore concerns itself largely with people in its portrait of the land.⁷¹ The “England” of the novel and of the pageant within it centers on the actions and memories of English people, although the landscape itself still figures prominently. The novel takes place entirely in the English countryside, and the relationship between the land and the English people, both modern and historic, drives aspects of the pageant and shapes the perspectives of many characters. Marina MacKay argues that the novel “makes rural England stand for the whole country”⁷² as it explores the complexities of history construction and the fear of imminent degeneration into violence. While an overstatement in suggesting that Woolf defines the country so narrowly, MacKay's comment draws attention to the way Woolf layers many aspects of history and identity onto one imagined moment in time and space. I aim to expand on and complicate MacKay's observations about the relationship between Woolf's country village and the country as a whole.

Set in 1939 and published after Woolf's death in 1941, *Between the Acts* is not a war novel in the sense that it chronicles the effects of the war and attempts to make sense of the experiences

⁷¹ Here Woolf allows for a complex and human landscape, although in some other writings she does idealize and romanticize the land. In her diary she records her pastoral contentment upon visiting the Monks House garden for the first time: she felt “a profound pleasure at the size & shape & fertility & wildness of the garden. There seemed an infinity of fruitbearing trees; the plums crow[d]ed so as to weigh the tip of the branch down; unexpected flowers sprouted among cabbages. There were well kept rows of peas, artichokes, potatoes; raspberry bushes had pale little pyramids of fruit; & I could fancy a very pleasant walk in the orchard under the apple trees, with the grey extinguisher of the church steeple pointing my boundary.... O but I've forgotten the lawn smoothly rolled, & rising in a bank, sheltered from winds too, a refuge in cold & storm; & a large earthen pot holds sway where the path strikes off” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 1*, 286). Woolf appreciates the human details in the landscape—the well kept rows and the earthen pot—but also celebrates its wild and natural elements.

⁷² MacKay, *Modernism and World War II*, 23.

of soldiers and civilians, as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Jacob's Room* do for the First World War. But *Between the Acts* was written as Woolf listened to air raids over England, and it subtly registers the anxieties and uncertainties that pervaded the collective English consciousness on the eve of World War II as well as communicating a sense of urgency in regard to reexamining and redefining the role of history in English national identity. Woven throughout the novel are Woolf's implicit equation of rural life with Englishness and her acknowledgement of the fear that "the imminent outbreak of war [will threaten] the calm of the English village, Englishness, tradition."⁷³ The timing of the novel's composition and its references to airplanes, darkness, and other hints of coming war identify it as an incisive, albeit indirect, response to the Blitz and its effects on the land. Some early readers of *Between the Acts*, in fact, knowing the condition of England in 1941, interpreted the novel as intensely concerned with the English landscape in wartime. A reviewer for *The New Republic* wrote that although Woolf rarely mentions the war in *Between the Acts*, "the spirit of war broods over the novel, and one feels at every moment that bombs will soon be crashing through the museum cases [the writer's metaphor for idyllic rural England]. Factories will rise on the site of the wrecked cottages; the green lawns will be an airfield."⁷⁴

Yet scholarship analyzing *Between the Acts* in the context of the Second World War tends to focus not on the novel's powerful portrait of the English landscape, but instead on its vision of time and history and its predictions of violence—both key to Woolf's representation of war but incomplete as interpretive lenses. The novel simultaneously reproduces and satirizes a flattened version of English heritage, in which history begins only in the medieval period, peasants happily dance with Elizabethan lords, and each image or event is neatly symbolic. Woolf herself does not seem to take the pageant's superficial narrative seriously as she counters notions of progress with

⁷³ Southworth, "Women and Interruption," 50.

⁷⁴ Cowley, "England Under Glass," 440.

her tale of decline, and Mark Rawlinson, in *British Writing of the Second World War*, characterizes *Between the Act's* version of history as quite different from “wartime cinematic visions of English history”⁷⁵ that celebrate a mythologized, propagandistic English past and future. In MacKay’s description of *Between the Acts*, the war “becomes a fight for the preservation of a sanitised past” against “the official strain of anti-conservative and socially reformist rhetoric of the wartime administration,” as in Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*.⁷⁶

Noting that Woolf, after losing her London residences to bombs and frequently hearing planes over her Sussex home, knew “that modernist homelessness could become more than a metaphor,”⁷⁷ MacKay suggests that *Between the Acts* is “obsessively ethnographic” because of the vulnerability Woolf saw as accompanying both German offensives and domestic-led social change. From this perspective, the novel’s “long-range view of history that looks as far back as the Domesday Book and the last invasion of ‘English’ soil”⁷⁸ is an attempt to catalog and preserve a sense of history in the face of threats to the existing way of life or appealing ideas about a past way of life. Rawlinson and MacKay neglect to examine the ambivalence about this history and its importance that is embedded in Woolf’s portrayal of the land and rural life. Her portrait of an English village is both a preservationist gesture and a critique of the human relationship with the land. Similarly, the land in *Between the Acts* is both an anchor for historical memory and evidence of history’s inadequacy in times of threat.

Patrick Deer argues that recent scholarship on World War II literature has “tended to emphasize the traumas of wartime and to find in Woolf’s work a confirmation of this darker

⁷⁵ Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War*, 195.

⁷⁶ MacKay, *Modernism and World War II*, 127.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

revision of historical memory.”⁷⁹ Yet in her wartime writing and other work, Deer claims, Woolf resisted the hardships of war, promoting pacifism, challenging official war culture, and addressing a larger audience in her efforts to communicate the darkness and traumas and “make an ethical intervention into the conduct of the war.”⁸⁰ MacKay takes a more nuanced and persuasive view of Woolf’s pacifism, arguing that although Woolf maintained peaceful ideals, this war forced her to awaken to a pragmatic acknowledgment—or a “guilty compromise”⁸¹—regarding the necessity of defending European citizens from aggression. Perhaps this clash of ideology with reality in part drives the conflicted and confused voices of *Between the Acts*.

Much of this body of scholarship acknowledges the novel’s rural setting and suggests that the countryside signifies or stands in for the nation as a whole, but scholars rarely look more closely at Woolf’s portrayal of the land in relation to the formation of history and memory. Jed Esty’s reading of *Between the Acts* in *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* is a notable exception in his attention to pastoral imagery. Esty explains Woolf’s anachronistic use of the village pageant as an experiment in redefining Englishness in terms of “authentic” heritage and communal rituals linked to rural life. Arguing against a prevailing scholarly trend, Esty insists that Woolf, in *Between the Acts*, is not wholly dismissive of nationalism and shared identity. While skeptical of nationalism, particularly when rooted in martial or imperial aspirations, Woolf also expresses an affinity for England and its traditions⁸² and explores the viability of an experiential and geographically defined Englishness. As Esty puts it, Woolf employs the form of the pageant in order to “reestablish the nationalism of shared experiences (pastoral

⁷⁹ Deer, *Culture in Camouflage*, 203. Deer cites Adam Piette and Sebastian Knowles in particular.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ MacKay, *Modernism and World War II*, 31.

⁸² Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, 86.

memory) against the nationalism of shared goals (imperial mission)⁸³; in this redefinition of Englishness, “the pastoral culture of Lucy Swithin...reassert[s] itself against the imperial and patriarchal politics of Bart Oliver.”⁸⁴ Implicit in Esty’s argument is a recognition of the land as an alternative basis for identity. Bearing in mind Esty’s conclusions about Woolf’s ambivalent approach to English heritage, I aim to make explicit the role of the land in her experiment.

Woolf’s approach to the English landscape and its function in the novel can be succinctly defined as an instance of “progressive aspirations...articulated in a traditional idiom,”⁸⁵ to borrow a phrase from MacKay. Woolf draws on the idiom of ruralism, and her commentary on English history and the coming war cannot be fully appreciated without examining the role she grants the land in that history. In *Between the Acts*, ambivalent relationships with the country landscape parallel similarly ambivalent relationships with the past, and the land becomes the site upon which new narratives of Englishness are written. Woolf selects a setting understood as “authentic” in which to parse out her conflicted approach to nationalist sentiments and stories.

The title of *Between the Acts* suggests that the novel’s most important conversations and interactions occur between the acts of the pageant and between the events that make up a popular, and selective, historical narrative about what it means to be English. It also instructs the reader to find significance in reading between the lines, living between the wars, and waiting between aeroplane sightings and air raids. Much of the novel, in fact, is liminal: its characters are caught between past and future, unity and detachment, reality and illusion, speech and interruption. These conflicts and paradoxes shape the text’s approach to war. Woolf expresses the tension between recognizing the horror of war and accepting a pragmatic view of the circumstances. In part

⁸³ Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, 90.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

because of its relationship to the moral positions implied in Woolf's earlier war writing (particularly about the First World War, but also the Boer War and the Spanish Civil War), *Between the Acts* is burdened too with the conflicting pulls of past and future, both of which are essential in preparing for what might come and remaining grounded in a shared tradition. Along the way, the novel demonstrates a need to hold to this identity and history in a time of instability and, simultaneously, the impossibility of doing so.

"Civilisation has shrunk,"⁸⁶ wrote Woolf in her diary in September 23, 1939, three weeks after the British declaration of war. This sense of contraction plays out in the single-day setting of *Between the Acts*, in which Miss La Trobe and the villagers attempt to contain all of English past, present, and future. The play, a village production to benefit the local church, offers a reductive and farcical account of English history that is echoed throughout the novel by Mrs. Swithin's compulsive reading of *Outline of History*, which frames the text at beginning and end. Both Mrs. Swithin's book and Miss La Trobe's pageant aim to contain history and tradition, to make it a comprehensible tool with which to define themselves and the nation. "History" is a caricature, invoked in simplistic terms as an unquestioned social value and unifying concept.

Grounding history in the physical landscape is one mode of making that history concrete and interpretable. In *Between the Acts*, the land makes history visible, even as it transcends history's bounds. According to Lucy Swithin and her *Outline of History*, the beginning of Englishness and English history is rooted in the shaping of the land itself. Mrs. Swithin thinks of the time "when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one" (8), concluding that history truly began with the separation of England from Europe. Other aspects of nature mark the continuity of the landscape throughout history, even as evidence of human life

⁸⁶ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 5*, 237.

began to appear. Mice, insects, and swallows are more comfortable in the centuries-old barn at Pointz Hall than are people. The swallows in particular, Mrs. Swithin thinks, have come every year since “the Barn was a swamp” (103), drawing the structure into a much longer history of the land. The “Barn” itself—always capitalized in the text as if to suggest its symbolic status—reminds the villagers of a Greek temple. It is a record of human history amidst the continuity of nature, as well as a shrine to the glorified tradition living from the land.

Actors in the pageant sing as they work: “digging and delving,” “for the earth is always the same” (*BTA* 125). At the same time, the landscape around Pointz Hall bears the marks of history: “you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough” (4). The earth remains, transcending the dictates of history, but Woolf nevertheless allows history, and particularly war, to change the land, which is a record of England and Englishness. The unpredictable weather on the morning of the pageant is an apt metaphor for the uncertain climate of war at the time of Woolf’s writing. “Here came the sun—an illimitable rapture of joy, embracing every flower, every leaf,” Woolf rejoices. Immediately afterward, “in compassion it withdrew, covering its face, as if it forebore to look on human suffering” (23). Like the clouds, aeroplanes eventually darken the landscape with their shadows and disrupt the pageant’s ritual evocation of tradition. Can an identity rooted in pastoral heritage, Woolf seems to ask, resist or survive the darkness of war?

The novel and the narrative of the pageant within it are shaped by its characters’ and viewers’ relationships to English history and to the land on which it takes shape. While the primary interactions occur “between the acts,” these are constrained by the play, which sets the terms and timing of any action outside the historical survey. Even the play itself seems caught between the rigidity of a particular interpretation of the past and the complete uncertainty of the future as represented by hints of impending war and the final twist in which the players turn mirrors toward

the audience. The pageant is preoccupied with endings—of scenes, eras, lives. The refrain of one song tells of the coming of winter, when “this day” “will be over, over, over,” and the “glow on the log” replaced with ice and ashes,⁸⁷ bringing death to the land. The song conveys a sense of morbid urgency, a need to enjoy the moment and cling to the comforting distortions that make up so many historical narratives in order to prepare for the future, which cannot yet be known or controlled through selective interpretation of events and imposition of meaning.

Lines of songs and dialogue from the pageant interact with offstage action and conversations among the novel’s characters. The aforementioned song, for example, is followed immediately by retired officer and Pointz Hall owner Bartholomew Oliver’s knocking “the ash off his cheroot,” echoing the ash of the previous lyric (and, incidentally, sending burnt traces of empire—the cheroot is traditional in India and Burma—to join the English soil), and rising. Lucy Swithin responds to his unstated “It’s time to go” with “So we must” (*BTA* 118). In this moment, Oliver and Mrs. Swithin unconsciously enact the inevitability of endings. Their interruption of the play, one of many in the course of the novel, imposes a sense of divided attention and disjointed narrative. The play continues in the background and against the background of the English landscape, constraining the movement of characters, but their attention comes and goes. In the face of uncertainty and in a mood of unstable purpose and identity, their relationship with a once satisfying and now inadequate account of their past begins to dissolve.

The liminal, disjointed events that make up *Between the Act*’s narratives are framed by the natural landscape, which gives them structure and value.⁸⁸ Setting the scene for the novel, Woolf writes, “Nature had provided a site for a house” as well as the “stretch of turf half a mile in length

⁸⁷ Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 118. Cited hereafter in the text as *BTA*.

⁸⁸ Even as nature’s indifference undermines many human attempts to make meaning, as John Whittier-Ferguson pointed out to me.

and level” (*BTA* 10) that would become the stage for the play. This passage portrays the land as consciously engaged in human life, shaped by and shaping its presence, and therefore a proper backdrop for an account of English history. Such a relationship justifies a close link between geography and culture and establishes the logic for conflating defense of land and defense of a community’s memory and identity. Nature in fact enables the very existence of English history as well as the national character shaped through its retelling. Unfortunately for the residents of Pointz Hall, its builder eschewed nature’s proffered site and instead placed the house in an adjacent hollow, an unfortunate location, exposed to the wind. The circumstances of Pointz Hall suggest occasional failures to properly connect human culture to the landscape and a misalignment between the ideals and realities of English life. Woolf grants a brief glimpse of Oliver as he “surveyed the landscape—flowing fields, heath and woods. Framed, they became a picture” (13). Framed by the expectations and meanings imposed on it by a particular interpretation of its history and a narrow vision of the life within it, the landscape becomes flat and static, a representation of a temporally bound ideology with cultural and political utility but not a dynamic, independent entity.

As the artificial and inadequate past conveyed by the play (foreshadowing Danny Boyle’s more technically complex but similarly campy and ahistorical twenty-first century pageant) contracts the spatial and temporal bounds of the novel, so too does its vision of the future: “the future shadowed their present” (*BTA* 114). Under threat from future bombs and development, the power of the country as a meaningful stand-in for the past is challenged and with it the pastoral myth of English character and contentment and the status of England itself. The novel is scattered with hints of war, like bomb shrapnel embedded in a literary landscape, and characters wonder about what might happen, reminding each other to keep together “if the worst should come” (198). The injunction to “keep together,” whether sentimental or sincere, grasps for a community capable of remembering what has been and bearing what is yet to come. “Things look worse than ever on

the continent,” says an anonymous villager amongst the chatter following the pageant. “The aeroplanes”—twelve in formation that had recently flown over the heads of gaping villagers—“made one think” of possible invasion (199). The pageant stands as a desperate attempt to define and immortalize a national identity and history before they are altered by outside forces, whether those forces are other empires or merely social change and modernization in the form of the new homes imagined rising from the familiar land: “each flat with its refrigerator...not an aeroplane to vex us; all liberated; made whole” (182-3). While this vision of the future is sold with promises of freedom and wholeness, *Between the Acts* demonstrates distinct unease about the consequences of reconstruction,⁸⁹ as implied by the ellipses that mark the unfinished thought with ambiguous emotion. To change the shape of the landscape, for whatever reason, is necessarily to revise the identity so closely entwined with it.

Changeability and uncertainty prevail in this contracted, single-day projection of the national mood, and the novel’s main characters, reacting to their own memories and associations, attempt to draw away from the history evoked by the play and from the subtle, tense apprehension about what may come of the land around them. They confront both the necessity and impossibility of holding to a shared sense of identity in a time of crisis. Working through the flaws and failures of a popular narrative is an important part of the village’s collective approach to impending trauma. At the pageant’s end, when the audience recognizes themselves in the present moment, they are forced into reflection on the meaning and legitimacy of their cultural memory. It is only after this reflection that the coming war is confronted in immediate and personal terms rather than through detached references to far-away events. Turning the mirror on the gathered villagers not only reveals their discomfort with the reflection of the artificiality of their existence but also allows

⁸⁹ MacKay, *Modernism and World War II*, 34.

us to read the novel's final scenes as the next installment in the play—the modern contribution, in which war requires that the version of history presented is challenged and interpreted, and people's relationships to the past, future, and each other shift.

Ultimately Miss La Trobe and the villagers at Pointz Hall are pitiable in their misguided attempts to glorify history and present a unifying myth of English country and civic life, and the play is a largely unintelligible farce not to be taken seriously by the audience, Woolf, or the reader. Miss La Trobe herself considers the play a failure (*BTA* 209), and at the production's end, the audience disperses and the play becomes “invisible” (213). Although *Between the Acts* is set in the weeks before the declaration of war, Woolf wrote the novel with full awareness of what 1939 and 1940 would bring. That is to say, the sense of trauma mapped onto the text reflects an immediacy and urgency occasioned by its retrospective composition. Given this, the failure of the play to communicate predicts that the war will destroy not only the land and the peace but also the ability to engage with and preserve history in a meaningful, unifying way. War strips away history, not only by killing people and reshaping places but also but imposing anxiety, complicating communication, inhibiting new memory, and reverting to distorted past memories.

As if in desperate resistance to the destruction to come, the history presented in Woolf's pageant does not include the army. Colonel Mayhew wonders why, musing, “What's history without the Army, eh?” (*BTA* 157), but in doing so he misses the point: history is inevitably subjective, and Woolf's is a version that works against the totalizing effects of military-driven narratives. Woolf's exclusion of the army is both a misrepresentation and a broadening of history, eliminating a significant element but calling out the impulse to revise history through a military lens in times of war. Most fundamentally, it signals the novel's underlying premonitions about war, its urgent need to imagine a country outside of war's influence, and its ultimate failure to do so, as

signified by Colonel Mayhew's comment and by the intrusion of planes and thoughts of war into the pageant.

Given the misrepresentation and whitewashing of history that happens throughout Miss La Trobe's pageant, Woolf certainly does not suggest that an inability to engage with a nuanced view of history is a new development prompted by the war. But wartime life does, perhaps, encourage a certain blindness to this inability. During the war, culture, propaganda, and literature alike overlooked class distinctions and myriad other social issues and adopted to varying degrees the consoling myth of a unified people who have always lived in wholesome closeness with each other and the land.

Even so, given the complexities of wartime governance, politics and government can fall short of adequately defining the identity around which the people are to rally. Woolf takes up the question of politically determined Englishness through nationalistic and ideologically charged conversations that take place between the acts of the pageant, and she considers the implications of an Englishness based on increasingly unstable social characteristics. But the novel overall gestures toward a geographic sense of Englishness. This way of framing identity, which Mollie Panter-Downes embraces more fully in *One Fine Day*, offers a simpler and more open symbol, one that highlights continuity and inclusiveness rather than demanding adherence to a particular social structure or political ideology. Despite Woolf's own "passionate attachment to the land itself" in the novel,⁹⁰ *Between the Acts* grapples with the idea of land as an organizing principle for a national culture and identity, asking how important it is to have shaped and lived from English land versus simply lived on it. The novel ultimately implies, through its treatment of Miss La Trobe and the impending European war, that Englishness comes from the land but requires a longer and deeper

⁹⁰ Zwerdling, "Between the Acts and the Coming of War," 229.

connection than mere inhabitation, making the land a fitting symbol for a rhetorically open but practically closed community that lacks power over its ultimate fate.

With its gestures to the flaws in the historical narrative and uncertainty about the figure of a consoling future England, *Between the Acts* actively destroys the propagandistic caricature of English history and people's attempts to rally using this version of English identity. Such narratives are inadequate and part of the shrinking phenomenon Woolf noted in her diary. As the sky grows dark near the end of the novel, landmarks disappear from sight and there is "no longer a view"; instead, "it was land merely, no land in particular" (*BTA* 210). Stripped of signs of history and human life, the landscape is no longer England in any meaningful way. The land continues to exist but is emptied of the cultural forces that define it and free from the illusion that it can preserve and protect Englishness against the threat of invasion, modernization, or forgetting.

Country life in wartime correspondence

The impulse, however flawed and ambivalent, to represent England through its landscape informs Mollie Panter-Downes's journalistic reports from England, although Panter-Downes is more hopeful than Woolf in imagining a way to both critique and embrace pastoral nostalgia. During the early stages of the war, she repeatedly depicts the countryside as synecdochically standing for the whole of the nation and as a place both threatening and under threat, not merely a source of nostalgic imagery and motivational slogans.

Panter-Downes produced writing steadily throughout the war. In addition to short stories and her novel *One Fine Day*, she also contributed regularly to the *New Yorker* through her "Letters from London" column, of which hundreds of installments were published between 1939 and 1984. Her work as a correspondent has been collected and republished, and small presses have rereleased selected fiction, but her writing has, on the whole, attracted little critical attention.

Yet her letters provide an account that was read widely and considered by American and English readers alike to represent a fundamental English perspective and experience. For decades Panter-Downes was an important representative voice of England, seeking to translate English experiences for a sympathetic audience. Whether constructed explicitly to do so or simply viewed as such by readers, these texts offer a universal account of Englishness, English suffering, and English strength. Mollie Panter-Downes does not pretend to represent the entire English experience during the early years of the war, working to present a varied and nuanced account instead of totalizing propaganda, but her task places her functionally in a representative position and her collected letters serve as a detailed foundation for the construction of common Blitz narratives on both side of the Atlantic. Contrary to Woolf's skeptical view, Panter-Downes's embraces the land as a source of comfort and preservation of Englishness.

It is interesting, then, to note that despite her column's title, Panter-Downes did not actually reside in London during the war. She lived in a small village and traveled by train to and from the capital to gather information, once explaining that "when she came to write her London letters for the *New Yorker*, she always felt it was an advantage to be based outside the capital. 'I write from a little distance.'"⁹¹ In a sense, then, although "London" was the ostensible face of the English war experience, Panter-Downes wrote her accounts from and often about the country.

One recurring theme in her letters is the role of land in the English people's sense of stability and identity. She imagines, for example, that "millions of British families, sitting at their well-stocked breakfast tables eating excellent British eggs and bacon, can still talk calmly of the horrors across the Channel, perhaps without fully comprehending even now that anything like that

⁹¹ "Mollie Panter-Downes," 23.

could ever happen in England's green and pleasant land."⁹² William Blake's "green and pleasant land" (and the eggs and bacon it helps produce) are central to Panter-Downes's picture of English permanence and to her millions of families' sense of identity. England is geographically distant from the continent, but it also differs, apparently, in having pleasant and iconic landscapes embedded in its collective consciousness. The importance of ties to the land is apparent in Panter-Downes's more critical assertion that "there are still people with property who...consciously or unconsciously...expect to go on living in the same old England."⁹³ In this portrait of the English character, it is property, a stake in the landscape, that upholds one's identity and way of life. Panter-Downes does acknowledge that it is "certain that the end of the war will find a changed—perhaps better, possibly a less pleasant—England in which Englishmen will no longer be able to give their loving and undivided attention to the cultivation of their gardens."⁹⁴ Even here, though, the relationship to land is paramount and a defining characteristic of the English. The inability to fully enjoy and devote oneself to natural surroundings is a symbolic marker of change in the meaning of Englishness.

Loss of land and changing relationships with the landscape are demonstrated poignantly as Panter-Downes recounts country-house and village dwellers' responses to early domestic invasions in the form of requisition orders allowing civil servants or military personnel to occupy private residences or, more often, requests to take in evacuees seeking shelter in the presumably safer countryside. Panter-Downes relays the landowners' lament: "The Englishman's home is no longer his castle but a place that can be commandeered at a moment's notice if the state needs it. Landowners must be prepared to give up their land" (*LFE* 151). The sense of land as a shared

⁹² Panter-Downes, *London War Notes*, 17.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁹⁴ Panter-Downes, *Letter from England*, 164. Cited hereafter in the text as *LFE*.

good possessed by the nation rather than an individual aligns with a sense of land as a key entity in nation-building and collective storytelling. While not a celebration of the individual, as found in some Romantic pastoral, this modernized ruralism celebrates the land as a resource for pursuing a national objective.

Panter-Downes employs the well-established idea of the country as England, positing one village as representing all other villages and villages as representing the entire nation. She begins one letter by writing, “This is written in a village which is exactly like thousands of other villages all over England” (*LFE* 179). Her attempt to universalize and unify the English experience continues in her declaration that “in this tiny, sleepy, and ancient corner of England there’s a spirit which is as important for England’s future as anything that is happening in any of the far corners of the Empire today” (184). For Panter-Downes, the country is the origin of the most important qualities of Englishness.

In her account for the *New Yorker*, Panter-Downes paints the English war experience as in fact beginning in the countryside. Although London eventually suffered the heaviest casualties and would be remembered as the center of civilian losses, Panter-Downes’s contemporaneous account of the Blitz actually promotes and further reinforces the popular old notion of country life and landscapes as central to Englishness. Her “Letters from London” disperse the important experiences and feelings of the war’s first months among country people and villages, suggesting they are the first and fundamental representatives of what it means for England to be at war and its land to be under threat. War soon becomes part of everyday life in her stories, woven organically into the fabric of the countryside as a newly fundamental component of Englishness. Even the most remote and quiet places, she insists, were “not a stone’s throw, as the bomber flies, from some camp, airdrome, ammunition dump, or aircraft factory” (*LFE* 154–55), putting farms and villages in the paths of bombers and leading country people to joke about going to town for a good

night's sleep (187). Some country dwellers, Panter-Downes writes, harbor "a slight feeling of superiority to all those ignorant Londoners...who don't yet know what a bursting bomb sounds like" (182), since by the time nightly air raids began in the summer of 1940, according to Panter-Downes, "rural areas [had] had far more alarms and actual bombings than the cities, and...many people who fled to country retreats when the war broke out [had] been in the thick of it" (176).

Though the Blitz on London soon followed and became the focus of foreign onlookers, Panter-Downes's columns do not allow her readers to forget that rural Englanders, in many cases, felt the effects of the bombs first. By placing the rural experience alongside the urban, Panter-Downes grants it an important place in cultural memory. Though the title of her letters from London promises dispatches to satisfy curiosity about the state of the capital, Panter-Downes supplements this with an alternative view of the most important setting and story. An unspoken premise of her approach is that London is not England. To understand the English war experience, one must glimpse the land and the lives of those who live among its farms and villages, and Panter-Downes consistently portrays the land as the primary site for exploring the meaning of the war for Englishness.

One Fine Day as postwar pastoral

In *One Fine Day*, as in so much other wartime writing, aerial bombs leave their mark on the language of description and remembrance as well as on the literal landscape. Violent language invades superficially idyllic descriptions of gardens and pastures, illustrating the intrusion of war's violence into one woman's consciousness and the quotidian details of her life. This novel was first published in 1947 and presents a portrait of postwar life in the manner of *Mrs. Dalloway* and the day novel. The novel features a stream-of-conscious narrative, mostly from the perspective of Laura Marshall, who struggles to maintain her house in a village outside of London just after the

war. Over the course of one day, while going about her daily errands, Laura reflects on the future of her home, family, and country. She finds that despite her efforts to dwell in the present and future, though, the past invades in unspoken ways and the residual violence of bombing raids and other evidence of war alter the physical and social topography of England. Because the land Laura and her fellow Englishmen and women occupy is so closely linked to their national identity and its attendant norms, the visible remnants of the war symbolize a fundamental shift in social mores, lifestyle expectations, relationships with those of other nationalities, and definitions of Englishness.

One Fine Day, like *Between the Acts*, features a country setting that stands in for the whole of England, a move that depends for its effectiveness on the long literary tradition of representing England in this way and the wartime revival of English ruralism examined previously. The novel contains a microcosmic construction of postwar English life and attitudes, in which Panter-Downes uses the village environment to comment on broader societal changes. While the novel ultimately lacks a clear and viable reimagining of the nation in light of so many changes, it does attempt to redefine “England” apart from its social structure and manage the damage to the land and the collective identity. Panter-Downes compares the effects of the war on the natural and human spaces, and concludes that the landscape is the key to preserving English life and identity.

“True is it that we have seen better days,” reads the epigraph to *One Fine Day*, a line drawn from *As You Like It*. The novel thus opens with an acknowledgment of the war and its aftermath, a nod to the text’s commemorative function. But the quote selected by Panter-Downes is also a concession to reality by one nevertheless unwilling to be defeated—an elliptical rallying cry to reassure her readers that while, yes, England has “seen better days,” its people will pull together and continue on. Indeed, Panter-Downes’ obituary remembers *One Fine Day* as a book that, to the author herself, “was not just a cosy picture of village life, but a ‘hymn in praise of England still

being there, a Te Deum [a hymn of praise] at the wonder we won the war.”⁹⁵ While not a Te Deum free of dissonant tones—for Panter-Downes paints a picture of a village still suffering the losses and anxieties of the war—it ultimately ends on a hopeful note.⁹⁶

The novel’s first chapter, a prologue of sorts, sets the scene and neatly previews the text’s thematic arc and conclusion. No characters appear in these pages, the reader’s first hint that the stories of individuals are of less concern than the larger legacy of English resilience such stories are meant to illustrate. Instead of first introducing Laura Marshall, her family, and the neighbors she encounters throughout the day, Panter-Downes begins with Wealding, a village “no great distance from the sea” (*OFD* 1) and overlooked by Barrow Down, a geographical feature that appears repeatedly in the narrative. Despite Wealding’s proximity to the sea, and by extension to the continent and the war that only recently ended there, the village “turned its face away from the blue towards the green” and lay protected where “the presence of the sea could be felt only as a sort of salty vibration in the air” (1). These salty vibrations offer only the subtlest reminder of the violence and fear that once came from the direction of the sea. Wealding, and its inhabitants, prefer to turn away from such memories and carry on with their lives.

As the prologue continues, the effects of violence assert their hold on Wealding and its environs. In euphemistic language, we see the consequences of war and neglect: “felled trees,” sagging rails, the “arsenical glare” of buttercups, and in the village, “signs of an occupation by something, an idea, an emotion” (*OFD* 1). And then, more directly: the village’s “perfect peace was, after all, a sham” (2). The war is over but the occupation continues; the immediate danger of air raids from across the sea has passed, but the village has been “invaded” by “uneasiness,”

⁹⁵ “Mollie Panter-Downes,” 23.

⁹⁶ *One Fine Day*’s account of wartime and postwar life in an English village likely resembles Panter-Downes’ own experiences living near Halsmere, Surrey during the same period of time.

represented in concrete form by barbed wire, sandbags, and a bombed cottage littering the landscape. Once a “perfect village in aspic” that drew motorists and artists to take in the image of a quintessential English landscape, Wealding’s substance has “slightly curdled and changed color” (2).

But in the last two paragraphs of the prologue, the mood shifts once again. Atop Barrow Down, where “man had long ago been obliterated by the green armies of fern, the invading foxgloves” (*OFD* 2) (again the language of war), “something said I am England. I will remain” (3). This bold declaration evokes a larger postwar question about identity and nationalism, and for Panter-Downes the scene on Barrow Down is fundamental to redefining these concepts for the English people. But the assertion comes from the land itself. What it means to be England and to be English, then, according to Panter-Downes, seems to have little to do with human lives and human intervention and everything to do with the land. It is capturing a view of the landscape and allowing the land to speak that restores hope and tranquility to the text. In the final paragraph, Panter-Downes turns to the language of peace: Barrow Down is quiet, the air is brilliant, and the lark is joyous. The “bounty of another day” (3) has come to England and represents a celebration of survival and recovery, for even in the face of destruction and dramatic change, what is fundamental about the nation persists.⁹⁷

The main body of the novel follows the arc established by the opening pages: a perfect, protected space is threatened and damaged, and although forever changed, it survives. This common narrative shaped much literature and propaganda during and after the war. What is compelling about Panter-Downes’s version is its vision of the war’s long-term consequences and

⁹⁷ As we will see, the “something” that is England and will remain is never really defined. Clearly it is not London or villages or human-built structures or a class system, but what exactly it is and how humans are to interact with its natural elements is not clear.

their implications for concepts of class and nation. With a narrative involving only one day and a few characters, Panter-Downes imprints language with marks of war, navigates the postwar social upheaval, and changes the color and curdles the substance, so to speak, of memories.

Panter-Downes and her characters make repeated, unconvincing assertions that the village is peaceful and comforting, the war is over, and life can get back to normal: in short, that Wealding has “turned its face away from the blue.” The English people of Panter-Downes’s imagination resist the effects of the war even as they live in its shadow. They avoid explicit reminders of their losses, as in the case of Bob Watson’s photograph. Laura’s daughter, Victoria, while visiting a friend’s family, observes that their dead son’s picture resides in the uncomfortable, lifeless, rarely used parlor. Victoria, preferring the warmth and comfort of the kitchen, thinks that “it was a shame that [Bob] had been banished to the front parlour, past which even the animals, the cat and the old terrier, sheered in a hurry as they made for the fire and the shabby rag hearth-rug” (*OFD* 148). The “banishment” of the picture indicates the extent to which Panter-Downes’s villagers willfully tuck away memories of the war into abandoned corners of their homes and minds. Instead of confronting these losses, they hold tight instead to their idealized memories of pre-war English life.

As a last resort, when they cannot deny what they have seen and experienced, they take comfort—and sometimes, unexpectedly, disappointment—in recalling that at least they are not in London, where the ruins left behind by the war are so much more literal than the violent imagery and sense of anxiety that pervade their rural homes. Laura’s home may be falling into disrepair—“decaying,” as she once describes it (*OFD* 119)—without a permanent staff and sufficient funds, but its condition is infinitely preferable to the “rooms in London that were now dust” from which Laura imagines hearing “the voices of people who were now dead” (12). A stray bomb may have occasionally fallen near Wealding, leaving Laura to feel after the war that “the long nightmare was over” and “planes were no longer something to glance up at warily” (143), but for much of the war

Laura listened to these same “German planes [grumbling] every night, peaceful and regular as a line of buses, scorning [Wealding], going on to drop their loads on the cities.” Laura seems to both appreciate and regret that “she had never had even that taste of danger” (120).⁹⁸ Everyone knows that the war brought death and destruction; even so, certain villagers are disappointed that their fantasies of facing down a German invasion will remain mere fantasies, and Laura’s husband, Stephen, seems unhappy without the sense of purpose and urgency the war granted him. The period of recovery is, ironically, more bleak for him than was the war. With her repeated references to the effects of bombs on London and occupation on the continent, Panter-Downes asserts the need to keep loss in perspective even as she argues that the upheaval suffered by those further from the conflict’s epicenter is a real and legitimate consequence of the war.

Even as the novel puts forth its claims of a return to normalcy, it undermines them with its plain portrayal of a country feigning indifference to permanent change. The war is not “out of sight, out of mind” (*OFD* 26), as Laura’s part-time housekeeper says of the shards of a broken teacup—which suggest the shards of a past England and, more literally, Blitzed cities. Wealding and the novel, in fact, are full of visual and emotional reminders. Laura tends to pass quickly over these thoughts, but she is frequently reminded of her former cook, killed in London; the returning husbands and sons and daughters of various villagers; the soldiers who once passed through the village headed to war and one of whom now passes through to hike the English countryside; and the planes that still fly overhead.

Furthermore, there is a veritable barrage of linguistic reminders and violent images in nearly every scene, from the “debris of breakfast things” (*OFD* 11) to the “tyranny of sleep” (16).

⁹⁸ This experience contradicts Panter-Downes’s wartime claims in her *New Yorker* letters about the dangers of country life, the latter of which might be explained in part by a desire to dramatize stereotypically English settings for the benefit of her American readers.

These subtle and indirect expressions of traumatic memory emerge in descriptions of common domestic activities: Laura's attempts at cooking involve a "small army of basins" and end with her "mopping up the ruins" (61), and Victoria reflects that she often comes home to find Laura absorbed in her "raids of tidying up" (154). Warlike images also shape the language in which characters themselves are described: Laura's hair turned grey in front over the course of the war, but the back was "still fair and crisply curling, like rear-line soldiers who do not know that defeat has bleakly overtaken their forward comrades" (17). In a less military but equally evocative example, Laura sees "shocking," "blackened ruins" (43) behind a villager's smile. The observation simultaneously offers a grotesque image of decaying teeth, a reminder of the destruction left in London and other Blitzed cities, and a hint of mental and emotional wreckage behind the "Britain Can Take It!" façade. Even the war's secondary effects, such as suspicion of foreigners and anxiety about espionage, manifest themselves in figurative language: flowers displayed in a marmalade pot by Victoria's dirndl-clad teacher are "lost and strange" (28), "exiled and foreign-looking" (29), and children peering through a trellis are "spies in the undergrowth" (29). These images demonstrate the extent to which the war provided visual and linguistic vocabulary to describe every aspect of life and formed the lens through which *One Fine Day's* characters continue to view their daily tasks and interactions even though the war has ended.⁹⁹

Particularly obvious in their wild, ruined, violent overtones are Panter-Downes's depictions of the spaces inhabited by the English villagers. The open countryside itself bears some marks, but it is the domesticated spaces—gardens and houses—that appear most affected. The Marshalls'

⁹⁹ Other notable examples of Panter-Downes's mapping of the language of war onto an ostensibly peaceful scene include an armchair that gives "a loud creaking report" (*OFD* 15), shoppers returning from their errands in town characterized as "returning pilgrims who had sustained great dangers" (39), a hiker setting off "at a soldierly pace" (40) to "assault the peaceable, rabbit-guarded strong-point of Barrow Down" (39), an elderly man seen as a "prisoner" in his frail body (41), and a lawn left with "bare patches of burnt leaves" after "over-heavy-handed sprinkling of lawn sand" (62) as if the victim of a horticultural air raid.

garden, for example, once filled with well maintained roses, is overgrown and unmanageable now that the family no longer employs a regular, able-bodied gardener. Stephen Marshall, particularly bothered by the state of the yard, notes that “It seems almost to bear a grudge” (*OFD* 5), presumably for the neglect it has suffered since the war began. Grass and weeds cover the rose beds; even after clearing, they “bl[o]w in again relentless, twirling, creeping, choking with nooses of fine bone-white fibre” (5). This violent and sinister portrayal of a customarily pleasant place continues over several paragraphs that narrate “a vegetable war to the death...green in tooth and claw” (6). Tennyson’s famous expression undergoes a color change here to humorous but unsettling effect, as plants come to life as conscious, mobile agents of aggression.¹⁰⁰ These flowers, far from the serene, well-behaved blossoms of a conventional garden,

rampaged and ate each other, red-hot poker devouring lily, aster swallowing bergamot, rose gulping jasmine. Cannibals, assassins, they sat complacent with corners of green tendrils hanging from their jaws. The cut-throat bindweed slid up the hollyhock and neatly slipped the wire round its throat. The frilled poppy and the evening primrose seeded themselves everywhere, exulting in the death of Chandler [the late gardener].¹⁰¹ (6)

The plants in the Marshalls’ garden reenact the human violence of the previous years in vivid detail, perhaps representing the brutality inherent in the natural world but more strongly suggesting the anxious and defensive perspective from which Stephen views the perverse remnants of the pre-war life for which he is perpetually nostalgic. The garden’s determined rebellion against human control also sets up a contrast between Panter-Downes’s portrayals of the natural English

¹⁰⁰ Panter-Downes’s reference to Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A.H.H.* suggests an additional thread of continuity between nineteenth- and twentieth-century pastoral imagery. This image, of sinister landscapes and creepy elements of nature, serves as an alternative to the traditionally idyllic pastoral. It emerges frequently in writing about Darwinian concepts and other innovative ways of understanding the natural world, a form of ruralism adapted to communicate and confront anxieties about science, technology, and the relationship between nature and modern human society.

¹⁰¹ This passage contains shades of the disturbing violence attributed to nature in parts of *Between the Acts* as well. See, for example, Giles Oliver’s encounter with a snake choking on a toad: “blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion” (Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 99). In this case, unlike the garden scene in *One Fine Day*, nature’s violence prompts an act of human violence, Giles’s stamping on the snake.

landscape, which withstands the war well, and of the domesticated one, which is left in disarray, a distinction I will revisit later in this discussion.

Other small signs of disrepair among Wealding's roadways and gardens emerge throughout the novel as well, reinforcing the sense of damage done to the land and thus England. These fissures in the carefully constructed trappings of English society, especially the quaint and "authentic" country life, reveal more than shabby surroundings. Lines of passing army trucks have torn holes in the drive at an estate (*OFD* 122), and along one road, trucks have "bashed gaps" in a wall protecting a field beyond. Though the trucks themselves are gone, "the gaping holes remained" (99). The holes act as a de facto memorial—an empty space that prompts reflection on the political and personal consequences of war and on what the trucks that left the marks represent. Furthermore, the image illustrates an objective for the text as a whole. The war is over, yet the damage and losses are permanent. *One Fine Day* thus attempts to create a way to comprehend the changes and move on, acknowledging the physical and figurative impressions the changes create even while moving around those marks in search of more solid ground.¹⁰²

Even the Marshalls' house, the domestic space so intimately connected to questions of identity and class, is (if not literally, like the London houses Laura thinks of occasionally, then figuratively) fragmented, faded, and broken open by the upheaval around it. Like the house in *Take Three Tenses*, Laura's house seems to have a life and a voice of its own. This house, though, does not welcome its residents, rather withdrawing and becoming less hospitable through the day

¹⁰² Another novel about wartime life in a rural village, Jocelyn Playfair's *A House in the Country* (1944), demonstrates a similar tension between the quiet continuity of rural life and the harsh reminders of the Blitz. In one illustrative passage, Playfair writes,

It was Sunday, a fortnight after the bombs had fallen on Brede Somervel. In that fortnight the village had returned gently to its normal, uneventful life, a life so rooted in traditional calm that even the raw scars left by the bombs were becoming merely part of the scenery, scarcely more noticeable than the new ditch a farmer was digging at the bottom of his orchard or the new bit of spile fencing that had recently the iron railing round the churchyard. Only the ruin of old Northeast's [the gardener, whose wife died in the raid] cottage stood, as if withdrawn and self-conscious in its untidy charred state, as a reminder of the swift tragedy of war. (186)

in which the novel takes place: “I am not at home, said the house coldly with blank eyes and pursed lips. I am a desirable residence no longer desirable” (*OFD* 58–59). Although the house is said to pulse with some “faint arterial life” (59), it is largely silence and melancholy, occasionally sighing under the “undomestic sky” (15).

Just as the sky seems disconnected from the domesticity it overlooks, the house too occupies a liminal space between home life and the nature that surrounds the village.¹⁰³ As time and resources run out, and the house’s support and nourishment are removed, Laura finds that it is “possible to hear the house slowly giving up, loosening its hold, gently accepting shabbiness and defeat” (*OFD* 13), and fading into nature as birds, butterflies, and spiders readily make their way in and out. The image of the house fading into its surroundings, being overtaken by the more natural and lasting landscape, extends even further when “the pretty, hospitable house seem[s] to have disappeared like a dream back into the genie’s bottle, leaving only the cold hillside” (12). At one point Laura even refers to the house as “the domestic cave” (132), acknowledging a flaw in the foundation (81) that upholds the house and sustains her way of life and stripping the space of its familiar, homey quality.

A larger country house in the area meets a similar fate, as Laura discovers when she visits. Initially Laura notes that the past “could be seen here as something living which did not stop abruptly, but went on, stretching out the present, on into the future” and describes the Canadian huts on the grounds (presumably constructed when the property was requisitioned for military use) as simply the “contribution of another war” (*OFD* 105). This optimistic introduction to the house suggests that it is not doomed to fade but that it will be a memorial that links the present reality of

¹⁰³ Of course, how “natural” much of the English countryside is could be disputed, given the length and scope of human influence on the land, not to mention debates about what actually constitutes a “natural” landscape. I use Panter-Downes’s sense of natural or wild space as that outside the village and not actively developed or cultivated.

war with the past and future of England via a familiar icon of English society and country life. One of the last family members connected to the property confides his happiness that the house is “not going to be quite dead” (104). Although its long-time tenants cannot keep up the estate and are moving on, the building will live on as a group home.

But only two chapters later, at the end of Laura’s visit, the house is declared dead after all (*OFD* 122): it is “uninhabited, rotting away, staring with blank eyes” and “already a ruin” (105). “Taking Cranmer apart,” as one character explains, is “a dreadful job...when a house ha[s] been there so long, when so many people and saved and stored everything carefully for centuries, letters, journal, estate accounts, locks of hair, shreds of silk, sentimental rubbish of all sorts” (112). This type of collection, a museum of past lives, has no place in Panter-Downes’s postwar England. Its contents are rubbish, and at any rate, the house itself is dead and therefore lacking any context or value system that might lend the objects significance. The house, already taking on “an impersonal look,” declares, “I have no more secrets, I shall have no more stories” (120), suggesting a space that is merely utilitarian and devoid of symbolic or personal significance.

In Rumer Godden’s writing, the house and its voices remain even when the structure is broken open. But here, the house is silent and disappearing, leaving the land to survive in symbolic significance. For Godden, family and individual memory, the moments and actions that define everyday life, are imbued with memorial function. For Panter-Downes, though, these fall away in favor of a more abstract, transhistorical memory that exists largely apart from human agents, as if to suggest the incomprehensible scale of the war and its effects. The house itself crumbles away not to reveal small memories but to conceal them, to demonstrate and aid in the obsolescence of a certain class and lifestyle. If anything, the memories signified by the dying structures suggest only the irrelevance and unsustainability of the life they housed. For Panter-Downes, the history and memory that matter are those that leave signatures in the landscape and recognize the primacy of

the land over the constructs, social and architectural, that obscure it and intervene in humans' interactions with it.

The war's disproportionate effect on English domestic space in the text is emblematic of the changes in society and daily life that Panter-Downes illustrates throughout the novel. She implies that wartime societal changes did more to alter the contours of traditional small-town and rural England than did the actual bombs. The English world of a particular class, of the Herriots (Laura's family) and Marshalls, has contracted and is in ruins. Some of the changes in their way of life are, of course, straightforward and universal postwar experiences, such as the food shortages and rationing that consume Laura's thoughts as she runs her morning errands in town. The shop counters are often bare after swarms of coupon-bearing women descend like locusts (*OFD* 32), and Laura—"haunted by toothsome ghosts of food" (34)—daydreams repeatedly about dishes she has enjoyed in the past and can no longer have (presumably because certain ingredients are hard to come by, but also because she no longer has a cook to prepare them or time to travel abroad in search of foreign delicacies, reasons obviously not part of the experience shared across classes).

Other changes in the fabric of English government and society, however, Panter-Downes presents as freeing to those of lower classes even as they require Laura and her type to alter their expectations and relinquish their disappointment¹⁰⁴: the difficulty of finding household staff, the increasing geographical and social mobility of lower classes, and so on. Panter-Downes hints at these shifts in one pointed scene in which Laura visits with the Cranmers (the owners of the soon-to-be-vacated manor). The final lines of the chapter describe a favorite painting of English ladies and gentlemen who seem to declare that they will "for ever inherit the earth. Thus should life be, they said.... Thus will life always be, stated their healthy confident faces" (*OFD* 114). But their

¹⁰⁴ Whether Laura's and Panter-Downes's attitude is one of uncertain welcome or merely resignation is less clear.

declarations are cut short and undermined by the final, definitive sentence: “But in a minute there was nobody in the room but Aunt Sophia” (ibid.), a frail, aging, and deaf relative. Those who can readily see and hear the obvious changes in their circumstances have moved on from the fantasy of the painting, leaving only the old and infirm, who can do little for themselves and who are not expected to live long. The postwar elderly elite are mere relics of an earlier age of confident entitlement on whom the imperial chapter will close.

Yet even as Laura recognizes the inevitability of change, she struggles to “keep up a way of life which had really ended” (*OFD* 139), a life represented by formal meals in the dining room and half-hearted efforts to maintain the grandeur of the house. Difficulty in facing change is even more apparent in Laura’s reflections on her parents and their home. The Herriots are not only accustomed to the old England of empire and elitism (they have always kept up appearances, despite not being terribly wealthy themselves), Mrs. Herriot in particular cannot seem to grasp that it no longer exists. In the Herriots’ house, the past “was pressed like a dry butterfly between the glass of Edwardian photograph frames” (105), flattened and dead but preserved in object and memory as a faded facsimile for Mrs. Herriot to gaze upon. She seems to be “perfectly at home” (102) with artifacts and portraits for the very reason that they allow her to occupy an illusion, an old England now gone.

Laura thinks of her father’s associates, who lived amidst “photographic evidence of the past,” dwelling in their memories, while her mother felt certain that “the Herriot world would last forever” (although “only Mrs. Herriot believed that it was still lasting”) (*OFD* 78). What defines this Herriot world, aside from its fixation on images of the past and its disengagement from present and future? Panter-Downes’s detailed description of the Herriot home provides a glimpse of the England that the Herriots claim and that *One Fine Day* attempts to replace with a narrative removing human actors and their flaws from the landscape. Visiting her parents’ home, Laura

thinks, is “like going back to another world, seen through the nostalgic lens of world catastrophe. Nothing has altered here, said her parents’ home” (67). The “nostalgic lens of world catastrophe” suggests that this older world looks more appealing simply because it was free from the immediate aftermath of war. That is to say, characters like Laura and her family struggle to adjust but they know, at the same time, that the old England was not necessarily better than the present. From this realization arises Laura’s preference for an England defined geographically and geologically rather than socially or politically.¹⁰⁵

Of course, the Herriot house’s assertion that nothing has altered is disingenuous. The interior may be the same, with its pictures and the past pressed in glass, but the world around the house and its context as a location of English identity have changed. An undercurrent of anxiety coupled with the social changes the Herriots will inevitable confront emerges in the details of the house: much of its aesthetic is formed around the “solidity of mahogany and teak which denied the world’s quaking foundations” (*OFD* 68). The presence of these tropical woods hints at the Herriots’ nostalgia for empire and its role in their worldview as a fundamentally and permanently English establishment. Just as the Herriots’ worldview and value system overshadow the negative consequences of their way of life, the house’s “photograph frames were more real than the yellowing Edwardian features they enclosed” (*ibid.*). Just as the frames are more real than the people pictured inside, the framework of national history seems at times more real and more lasting than the details of individual lives and stories. The house itself, when put in such damning perspective, is illusory. It is filled with souvenirs of empire—Army chests and native weapons, a leopard skin and animal heads, pictures of Kashmir—as is, to a lesser extent, Pointz Hall in

¹⁰⁵ Laura does not avoid social and political issues entirely, of course, but she prefers a definition without politicized terms. Panter-Downes misses, perhaps, the inevitably politicized nature of landscape, particularly when it is linked to definitions of a state. This matter is complicated further by the distinction between England as a historical and cultural nation and the United Kingdom as a political entity.

Between the Acts. The objects of the Herriots' nostalgia, drawn from the landscapes of distant places, are no longer a relevant part of English identity except as relics in old houses.

Of course, the afterlife of imperialism—its residual effects and its troubling place in English identity and historical narratives—is not so easy to disavow as Panter-Downes would imply, but through the home she envisions for Laura's parents she makes a case for the war as a catalyst in moving England away from its imperial past and for a certain class and generation's need to confront this shift in the geography and meaning of their country. "The Herriot and the Marshall worlds were now flawed and shrinking" (*OFD* 82), Panter-Downes writes; in fact, "the British Empire seemed to have contracted into the modest white house" (67). The house as a microcosm of empire belies the true scope and undomestic nature of the imperial past, but it also demonstrates the shrinking, isolated influence of imperial ideology in a world in which the balance of power and the priorities of Britain have dramatically changed.

The war forces a vision of the future in which England's global influence has narrowed and English identity confronts the need to redefine its fundamental traits. This language of shrinkage and contraction linked to a sense of collective identity and place in the world sounds similar to that of Virginia Woolf when she wrote that "civilisation has shrunk," and such language appears throughout *One Fine Day*. "Life suddenly contracted" (*OFD* 90), writes Panter-Downes, and later, "the world had contracted to domestic-house size" (116). "Contracted" suggests a life that has narrowed or tightened, perhaps in the sense of predicting the decline of empire or even simply the scarcity of resources at home. It also, however, suggests withering or decaying, in which familiar English life, after years of being reduced and broken down, has been forced to alter its scale and turn from modern markers of civilization to the land to regain access to its roots.

As the formal, staid structure of English society dissolves into a more natural—and perhaps, to Laura Marshall and those like her, threatening—arrangement, the original natural landscape, in

contrast to the domesticated land that seems to turn wild along with English society, bears its scars without collapsing into ruin and remains rich with life. The land absorbs attacks safely, and Laura can “think comfortingly of the fields which would take the splintering shock, the hills which would shudder but would not fall on the sleeping child” (*OFD* 80). Like the ancient Roman stones that Laura thinks of as signatures on the landscape, the bombsites are merely another mark of time and presence, altering the contours of the land and serving as containers for memory but not changing the fundamental essence of the countryside. In Panter-Downes’s formulation of bombed England, it is the man-made landscape that suffers most; the natural landscape, the one presented as more truly “England,” survives. Panter-Downes’s characterization of Englishness recalls much of the Ministry of Information’s motivational wartime propaganda with its insistence on survival and resilience. It must be noted, though, that given the nature of Panter-Downes’s England, the declaration of survival seems a conditional claim, one that applies only for a particular type or part of the country.

The climax of *One Fine Day* centers on Laura’s climb up Barrow Down, the upland that “reared its head” (*OFD* 39) defiantly over the village and from which she looks out across the countryside. Her climb begins as a mundane errand—to fetch her runaway dog—but as she turns for home, “it was suddenly immensely important that she...should climb Barrow Down” (133). After reaching the peak, Laura “dropped her gaze into the great humming bowl of England which lay at her feet. It startled her by being so much vaster than she remembered. For it was years since she had climbed up here—no, not since the first summer of the war,” on which occasion “Laura could not remember giving much attention to the view” (135–36). In distracting her from the view and keeping her from climbing a figurative hill to consider her home and its meaning, the war has suppressed the holistic and essential understanding of England with which Laura now attempts to

connect. With the war over, Laura can again capture in her imagination an England that is not merely bombsites and rations but an ancient and vital source of life.

Barrow Down also serves as an important symbol of England for Laura's husband. Stephen recalls that while away from home during the war, he thought of the hill often: "In some peculiar way it had come to mean England for him" (*OFD* 165), and although he dreams sometimes of living abroad, he acknowledges that "he would never leave England" (157). Stephen's love of country is not framed in terms of political ideology or personal heritage but rather connection to the land. Thus the countryside figures as a means to escape the present moment and its complex recasting of government and class. Through Stephen, Mollie Panter-Downes proposes an idea of England that transcends these changeable characteristics. Of course, the landscape itself is hardly stable and permanent. Its contours shift and evolve under the influence of natural forces and human intervention, notably war, in this case. But on the time-scale of a single human life, landscape takes on an aura of timelessness and permanence, offering a natural contrast to the seeming volatility of human-made spaces, relationships, and ideas and acting in this text as an antidote to the destabilizing effects of war.

As Laura puts it, in a thousand years, "if the Germans had come...Barrow Down would look the same on a hot summer day" (*OFD* 125), a suggestion that complicates further the concept of nation. If we take Laura at her word, while keeping in mind her emphasis on Barrow Down and its environs as fundamentally English, "England" now seems to her defined less than ever by political divisions or ethnic identity. Even under German occupation, Barrow Down would be the same, would represent England. Is this a gesture of reassurance—an assertion that something of her identity and heritage would have remained had the war's outcome been different (and thus always will remain in the future)? Is it a radical political statement about the inability of governments and their artificial borders to own and define the land? In either case, Laura takes comfort in the

relative stability of this geographical feature, a point to which she can anchor her life and sense of self.

The mapping of meaning onto the land does not stop with the contours of the hills. The novel also suggests at times that the dirt itself is England and that it becomes one with those who live with and in it, like Old Voller, the gardener, whose “toes would take root in England, his fingers would splay down comfortably into the soil” (*OFD* 41). A later description again portrays Voller as made from or like the earth: “the back of his neck was earth-coloured and seamed with deep lines and furrows” (170). Through his relationship with the earth, he supposedly engages with fundamental Englishness. This connection evokes the long literary tradition of defining England and Englishness from a pastoral perspective, romanticizing the earthiness of those who work and understand the land. Laura, too, longs to be part of it the English earth, to be “down in it” (179), to reconnect with this tradition of defining oneself and one’s identity by the land on which one lives.

As she lies “stretched out on the grass looking at England” (*OFD* 139), again painting her particular view of the countryside in synecdochic relation to the whole of the country, Laura listens for the voice that spoke in the opening pages of the novel. The voice from the land speaks again for the collected English people, reiterating the popularly promoted claims of survival and resilience that circulated during and after the war: “It was the summer voice of England, seeming to say...we are at peace” (142). “The long nightmare was over, the land sang its peaceful song” (143). “We are at peace, we still stand, we will stand when you are dust, sang the humming land in the summer evening” (143). The “bowl hummed with all its voices” (144). Characterized as the “summer voice,” the imagined voice exemplifies the attempted return to bright and lively everyday life that follows a period of victory and rebirth. It emphasizes peace, speaking the collective relief at the war’s end, echoed more strongly with the addition of “all its voices” near the end of the passage. Most interestingly, the voice claims enigmatically that “we will stand.” There is much in

the text to support interpreting this claim to mean that the land will remain when the people, along with the houses and memories they occupy, are gone. Recall that the Marshall home and Cranmer are described as silent, fading, and dying, the opposite of the vibrantly singing land. But given the postwar setting, the song clearly also refers to hope that England will stand when the Third Reich no longer exists. While acknowledging the transience of human life and societal trappings necessitates understanding the mortality of her own people, Panter-Downes willingly does so. Because she has created and elevated an England independent of human presence, her own implied mortality does not lessen the defiance with which she celebrates England's survival and predicts Germany's downfall.

The land Laura sees from Barrow Down, with its declarations that it is England and will survive, stands in for the cumulative experiences and history that took place upon it, and asserts with finality that to be English is to be part of the English landscape and connected to English land. The relationship posited between land and Englishness has three significant implications: First, it upholds the previously discussed reassertion of victory over Germany and its allies, in terms of military conquest as well as the triumph of Wealding's civilians, who coped successfully with the war's effects on their lives. Second, it suggests a disavowal of imperialism, the decline of which arguably began with (or was hastened by) changes in the global balance of power during and after the war. By firmly asserting the nature of English identity as rooted in the land of the British Isles, Panter-Downes metaphorically brings the historical and cultural narrative back home, so to speak, in support of a wartime identity firmly based in the English countryside and English villages. She offers this narrative to replace the one to which Laura's parents, with their house full of imperial relics, still cling. While embracing a Britain without the complications of empire seems a progressive move, a side effect of the text's disavowal is the inherent dismissal of the parts of English history that take place off the island; striking a balance between conflicting approaches to

the history of colonialism will of course prove a vexing problem for British memory and identity formation, and Panter-Downes's approach merely hints at the literary and historical implications.

Third, and finally, the landscape-nation relationship in *One Fine Day* suggests that the war actually enabled a more fundamentally unified national identity—or at least expresses hope for such a change. In the novel, the reactions of people to the war parallel those of the land, and not only in their basic claims of survival. The Marshalls' garden, which in Laura's and Stephen's eyes has not survived the war well, thrives with "vitality [that] was indeed monstrous" (*OFD* 5). While the people of Wealding do not exhibit much vitality, still facing their day-to-day challenges of rationed goods and tank-damaged roads, the text is threaded through with acknowledgment of changes and hope that they will be for the better. Perhaps the domestic landscape simply recovers less readily than the natural one. Or perhaps the wildness is itself the recovery, representing a return of the garden to a more natural and unified state, one in which it is part of England and not artificially kept apart. In this hopeful view, just as the Marshalls' garden becomes more like the natural, wild countryside, an outmoded version of stuffy, class-oriented English life is evolving into a more unified and vibrant identity.

Such an idealized and simplistic formulation, of course, does not go without challenge and critique in the text. Laura and Stephen, as representatives of proper pre-war English families, are frustrated by and even afraid of the garden's growth, just as they are frustrated by their inability to find domestic help and afraid of the poorer villagers with whom they no longer know how to interact. But their daughter serves a fascinating function as a member of a younger generation embracing, even preferring, the wildness of the garden and of the England in which she is growing up. Mollie Panter-Downes's own politics are unclear, and Victoria's attitude may or may not represent Panter-Downes's views about the future of English life. But *One Fine Day* has an unmistakable subtext of generational differences in facing social change.

Victoria, ten years old in the novel, would have grown up knowing and remembering primarily wartime life. But while Mrs. Herriot sighs that “this frightful war has eaten up everything” (*OFD* 72), “the war had flowed past [Victoria]...never pulling her into its currents” (68). Victoria’s nonchalance about the war itself and her nostalgia for the simpler, more intimate and less formal way her family lived in those years reveal a simultaneously naïve and necessary perspective that enables her to accept instability and challenges to tradition. Victoria admires her friend Mouse Watson and her family’s way of life. Undeterred by ideas of tradition, propriety, or class, Victoria feels perfectly at home in the Watson kitchen, free from the stiffness of formal meals prepared by servants. Victoria also loves the overgrown yard in all its shaggy vibrancy, its “tunnels of green gloom through which one could creep comfortably” (10) with an agility mirroring her ability to move easily through the troubled, shifting, complex new England. In this optimistic reading, Victoria’s embrace of the wild garden is both a symptom of the war’s depth of influence and a gesture of hope: she is an English child who will “inherit the earth” (85), the English dirt beneath her feet, by being in tune with the landscape of her home and the memories it contains.

The space that remains to bear record and to serve as a repository for shared memories in Laura’s England is the landscape itself: the language of description embeds the trauma of war into hills, plants, the sky, the very contours of the land; these holes in the land visibly depict what cannot be spoken. The landscape, which will outlast the memory of any individual, speaks in place of people, asserting its voice and permanence and defining the England that the postwar generation will shape and experience.

While Laura wonders throughout *One Fine Day* about how to maintain her house and provide for her daughter, she does not directly pose the questions that unavoidably arise in response to the language she applies to her surroundings: What does it mean to be English after the war, and what are the long-term consequences of radical transformations within the collective

consciousness? What can be done with the detritus of war scattered throughout fields and along roadways, and will her daughter, Victoria, grow up knowing only fear and ruins? How does one remember, or how does one move on?

In the end, Panter-Downes fails to demonstrate definitively what her sense of Englishness is actually about and how Wealding will carry on. But she introduces a delicately linked network of ideas, not unique or radical but thoughtful in their application to a single day in a single village, meant to support shared memory and identity: the English people of her novel must discover their ties to the past, even while eschewing or acknowledging the loss of some parts, and their connection to the land. The value of the land is no longer dependent on its remaining pure and undamaged. England could not protect its land from the Blitz any more than from industrialization or modernization, but Panter-Downes suggests that the land can survive these changes without sacrificing its essential force.

In doing so, she makes an implicit claim that England, especially its younger generations, will adapt to postwar life, taking the scars in stride and embracing a new social order, and that a national identity's symbolic power is not contingent upon being unscarred or maintaining tradition for its own sake. Her refrain communicates brave determination to take what comes and a claim that the essence of her England is not defined by changeable, manmade social and physical structures and so cannot be undermined by aggression or destruction. Hers is an interpretation of the postwar moment that celebrates the search for a way to make sense of the less literal ruins and to find a strong sense of national identity now that a "traditional" pre-war way of life is obsolete and the wartime unity of a common cause is fading.

Conclusion

The country setting of *Between the Acts* stands in for England as a whole, but the version of history for which the rural landscape serves as a background and helps to define is unstable and inadequate. Woolf's acknowledgment of the malleability of perspective in regard to land and country life enables her wartime experiments in nostalgia, which invoke old images and associations for the sake of constructing meaning for people facing imminent danger, even if this comfort and its source are only temporary. Set after the danger has faded, *One Fine Day* embraces the power of landscape in place of human attempts to remember their history and shape their identities, like the village pageant in *Between the Acts*. Compared to the temporary nature of individual lives and memories, history written in the land serves as a more adaptable form of memory that can mean whatever it needs to and will continue to exist in spite of who occupies the space. Within this framework, Panter-Downes provides a longer-lasting model for reconnecting with the land and forming a new concept of the nation. *One Fine Day* is a hopeful, postwar response to Woolf's early wartime ambivalence. While not entirely satisfying in its simplistic approach to land and identity, it establishes a symbolic scaffold for anchoring ideas about Englishness and rebuilding a connection to the land in the wake of war.

Reworking pastoral imagery involves drawing on a myth about the past to shape a new ideal for the present and future. This new ruralism offers a way of defining an England without empire, with new housing and planning schemes, and with fading class and gender divisions. While reaching for a more fundamental Englishness, though, wartime ruralism reveals its shortcomings. Recovery and reconstruction continue to exert pressure on this mythology. Although the land is in some ways an open symbol, the identity based on it maintains certain social and economic requirements such that many are excluded from its provisions of Englishness. Furthermore, the pressure of war complicates the very concept of the land, breaking down the divisions between

what is natural and human and leading to the conclusion that human life, in violence as well as peace, has always influenced the way we experience land as well as the land itself.

In spite of all this, the new landscape—the postwar pastoral—has power as a symbolic space in art and writing. As David Matless indicates, idealized rural England was seen by the time of the war as a thing of the past. But perhaps that is exactly why it had such power during the tense and uncertain years during and after the war. The idea of country Englishness as desirable, timeless, and fundamental to the nation's being stood for a safer time and thus emerged in various constructions of the English experience as something to sustain people under threat and to carry with them into the future.

All of these texts, despite their varied approaches to defining the relationship between the land and the English people, indirectly emphasize the remarkable resilience of the land itself as well as the mythology around country Englishness. By doing so, Woolf, Panter-Downes, and the other writers presented here illuminate the relationship between cultural geography and literary studies by reading history into both land and language. Their writings challenge the idea of the war, and the Blitz in particular, as happening mostly to London and Londoners and thus expand the frame of civilian memorials. They supplement the conversation prominent in wartime about the political identity of the nation with a parallel narrative about changes in the nation's prevailing cultural, anthropological, historical identity. And they both critique and embrace nostalgia, revealing a regressive turn for consolation toward an idea that was largely inaccurate and irrelevant but powerful in its reach. They articulate the impulse to, when faced with fear of destruction, look to seemingly simpler and safer ways of life and to search for stability and permanence in one's surroundings, helping to explain a counterintuitive turn in otherwise characteristic late modernist literature.

CODA

In the midst of danger and uncertainty of the Blitz, Rumer Godden's aptly named character Pax declares, "You have to think, I think, that anything we do in any time, the smallest thing, like ordering the paper to come every day or promising to go out to dinner next Wednesday week, or getting a new tube of toothpaste, particularly the large size that lasts twice as long, is an act of faith. It is an act of faith to think or hope or plan, but I intend to go on doing it" (*TTT* 222). For the writers I have read and studied and written about during the last three years, recording their experiences and creating stories of the war was a profound act of faith in the future of their community and world. To physically and textually inhabit the spaces of the Blitz, to record and remember them, and to attach meaning to their material and symbolic iterations was to preserve a sense of hope and begin working out a new way to exist in those homes, cities, and landscapes. Their works make up the memorial landscape of the Blitz, parsing the brutal and disturbing alchemy of a war in which the substance and meaning of spaces were transformed: homes became bomb shelters or tombs, cities became ruinscapes, and the countryside became a battlefield.

Of course, changes to the symbolic spaces of Britain were of less importance to civilians than the Blitz's more immediate threats. In the fall of 1940, *Time* magazine lamented Londoners' facing great sadness at having "the past bombed out of their lives"¹—a claim Phyllis Warner calls "plain hooey."² In Warner's wartime response to *Time's* assertion, she does not deny the damage done to the ideals and spaces of the past but points out that those around her were more

¹ Quoted in Warner, "Journal under the Terror," 10 June 1941, and Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 361.

² Warner, "Journal under the Terror," 10 June 1941.

concerned with the destruction of lives and homes than of the abstractly figured past. Juliet Gardiner reiterates Warner's dismissal, pointing out that "the losses caused by the blitz were far more profound and far more widespread" than the destruction of landmarks. "They encompassed loss of life, of home, of workplace and of hopes for the future. Thousands of people's worlds were blown apart by the bombs."³

Historical and literary evidence indicates that many Britons did feel that their ties to a past Britain and their own past lives were severed by the war, but focusing on these ruptures was not the primary response. Rather, those writing the Blitz acknowledged the damaged and distant past but strived to cope with the realities of their present and future lives. Even as the war was being fought, Britons were imagining a world after the war, showing that planning and portraying a material future could help to offset the loss of home, workplace, and future hopes, if not life. The July 1941 issue of *Architectural Review* declared, "In due course we shall presumably again be, in a sense, at peace, but we shall not be *back again* at peace. We shall be living in a world as different in its own way from the world before the war as our present war-time world is."⁴ Here space and built structures register the effects of war and serve as symbols of a changed world but also mark its future promise. Although the spaces of the Britain and the Blitz were so powerfully altered by the war, they also had the potential to shape a different world in their reconstructed peacetime forms.

Nevertheless, the consequences were felt long after the war, even after rubble had been cleared and homes had begun to feel safe again. While these delayed costs of war are troubling, people's relationships to the spaces of daily life are, of course, even more fraught in places where civilians are presently under attack. The Second World War offered the first large-scale instance of this, but the subject resonates now as well, in a time when the world is confronting the ethical,

³ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 361.

⁴ Quoted in Gardiner, *The Blitz*, 372.

political, and military implications of aerial warfare targeting vulnerable civilian populations. Although generally not intentionally pursuing civilians as both German and Allied actions did in World War II, drone strikes and rocket attacks continue to mark homes and cities as battlegrounds and non-combatants as collateral damage. On November 1, 2013, BBC correspondent Lyse Doucet spoke of a war-torn Damascus that, in its physical state, could resemble London or any of dozens of other cities disfigured by aerial weapons in the last 75 years. Doucet described parts of the city as a wasteland, saying, “You can go to neighborhoods...where not a single building, house or a shop has been left without gaping holes,...completely blackened, roofs torn off and not a single person to be found.... And then you walk to the next neighborhood and its lively and bustling and people—with difficulty, it has to be said—but they are still going about their daily lives.”⁵ This unpredictable, physically disjointed war zone offers a concrete analogue for the immaterial and arbitrary devastation that affects those whose homes and lives are under fire.

One of the foremost lessons of the Blitz is that wars are not experienced only by soldiers. That the consequences of war extend far beyond its immediate participants seems an obvious observation to some, yet our historical and memorial discourses still frequently forget the full breadth of war’s devastation. As Lynne Hanley has written, “If we ignore the devastation wreaked by war on women, children, civilians, animals, the land, buildings, bridges, communications, the entire fabric of family, social and civilized life, we can perhaps construe the makers of war to be its victims, but this requires that we imagine the world of war to be inhabited only by soldiers.”⁶ The writing of the Blitz vividly illustrates the effects of war on all of the entities Hanley names, particularly civilians, the land, buildings, and the fabric of civilized life.

⁵ “Syrian Civil War Rages On” *Here and Now*.

⁶ Hanley, *Writing War*, 31.

John Strachey, air-raid warden and writer, declares an imaginary toast in *Digging for Mrs. Miller*: “To London, to Chungking and to Coventry; to Guernica and Birmingham; to Warsaw, to Bristol and to Rotterdam; to Liverpool and to Madrid; to Dover and to Corfu; to wherever bombs have fallen; to wherever men have resisted and endured.”⁷ In each of these places, and many others since, bombs have remade the landscape and people’s place within it. May those men—and women—who have endured bombing be able to materially and symbolically rebuild the spaces of their homes and lives and gain a place in the global memorial landscape of war through our attention to their stories.

⁷ Strachey, *Digging for Mrs. Miller*, 147.

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