

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## A ‘tottering lace-like architecture of ruins’: the Wartime Home in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*

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**Abstract:** Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day* (1949) is a novel permeated with the architectural ruins of the Second World War. This article is concerned with the shock effects the war had on Bowen’s understanding of the material world and the resultant implications for the late modernist narrative strategies she employs in *The Heat of the Day*. Drawing on theoretical understandings of space and place from cultural geography, I focus critical attention on the marked *materialities* of the novel. I consider the extent to which Bowen’s representation of the domestic interior resists the notion of the Heideggerian dwelling place and instead exposes the stark deracination of the wartime individual. I also draw connections with the strained, disjunctive style of the narrative – a style that Bowen (1950) explains is ‘to a certain extent intended. I wanted . . . a smashed up pattern with its fragments invecting on one another’ (238) – arguing that it shares continuities with the stylistic anxiousness of early modernism. Bringing these points of focus into dialogue with recent debates about wartime literature and the periodization of modernism, I show how Bowen (re)constructs, out of the wartime ruins, a deeply unsettling late modernist portrait of the fractured domestic landscape of 1940s London.

**Keywords:** ruins, materiality, Elizabeth Bowen, late modernism, wartime, home

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## Introduction

When emphasising the importance of ‘imperturbable *things*’ to ‘civilization’, the narrator of Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Death of the Heart* (1938) concludes that ‘the destruction of buildings and furniture is more palpably dreadful to the human spirit than the destruction of human life’ (191-2). It is precisely this anxiety about the material world that underpins Bowen’s subsequent novel, *The Heat of the Day* (1949).<sup>1</sup> In this novel, Bowen weaves a plot of espionage and treason into a story of personal displacement and betrayal, demonstrating how the wider political arena of the war infiltrates the domestic interior and exacerbates the condition of modern urban homelessness. *The Heat of the Day* begins in September 1942 and ends almost exactly two years later, just after the Normandy landings in 1944. There is also an extended flashback to 1940, which details the protagonist Stella Rodney’s blossoming romance amidst the rapidly changing landscape of the Blitz. Although direct depictions of the Blitz occupy a relatively small proportion of the novel, architectural ruins permeate the narrative throughout, as Bowen negotiates the ruined configurations of her characters’ transient wartime lodgings.

This article is concerned with the shock effects the war had on Bowen’s understanding of the material world and the resultant implications for the narrative strategies she employs in *The Heat of the Day*. Focusing primarily on Stella’s temporary flat in Weymouth Street – a prominent space throughout the novel – it will consider the extent to which Bowen’s representation of the domestic interior strongly resists Heidegger’s notion of the dwelling place and instead exposes the stark deracination of the wartime individual. I also seek to draw connections with the strained, disjunctive style of the narrative – a style that Bowen (1950) explains is ‘to a certain extent intended. I wanted . . . a smashed up pattern with its fragments investing on one another’ (283). This article will therefore unpick the ways in which Bowen disturbs conventional narrative form, showing how she (re)constructs out of the ruins a deeply unsettling late modernist portrait of the fractured domestic landscape of 1940s London.

## From Uncanny Themes to Material Forms

Moments of Freudian uncanniness (Freud 1919) can be traced throughout Bowen’s wartime fiction. Indeed, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle (1994) note the ‘uncannily dramatic qualities’ (84) of *The Heat of the Day*, which they argue powerfully secure the novel within the genre of ‘blitz-writing’ (94). Petra Rau (2009) similarly acknowledges the pertinence of the uncanny in Bowen’s fiction, drawing specific links with the spatial and psychological symptoms of the war: ‘War is uncanny not only because it literally opens up the home to the strange experience of public conflict, but because it reveals the Freudian *Unheimlichkeit* at the core of this home’ (184). Significantly, Bowen directly witnessed the uncanniness of wartime whilst patrolling London’s blitzed streets as an Air Raid Precautions warden (Glendinning 1977: 128). In the Preface to her celebrated collection of wartime short

stories, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945), she comments on the ‘strange growths’ which arose at this time and which contributed to a sense of living ‘with every pore open’ (95):

It seems to me that during the war the overcharged subconsciousness of everybody overflowed and merged. . . . Sometimes I hardly knew where I stopped and somebody else began. The violent destruction of solid things, the explosion of the illusion that prestige, power and permanence attach to bulk and weight, left all of us equally, heady and disembodied. (Bowen 1945: 95)

Wartime London is, according to Bowen, a place in which people and spaces begin to overlap with one another. She thus diagnoses an uncanny blurring of boundaries – between self and other, inside and outside, private and public, familiar and unfamiliar – as the predominant spatial and psychological symptom of the Blitz; and it is precisely this uncanniness that is translated into the strange, and strained, events that characterise her wartime fiction. Yet given that the uncanny has been employed as an interpretive lens elsewhere in Bowen criticism (Bennett and Royle 1994; Hoogland 1994: 107-205; Wasson 2010: 105-29), my aim in this article is to offer a complementary reading that embraces the uncanniness of Bowen’s wartime work whilst refocussing critical attention on to the *materialities* of the narrative.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as much as Bowen’s (1945) Preface to *The Demon Lover* appeals to the uncanny, it also foregrounds London as a place of ‘solid things’ whose ‘bulk and weight’ (95) might collapse into rubble at any time. Taking a literary geographical approach to the equally marked materialities of *The Heat of the Day*, I will employ interdisciplinary understandings of space and place from cultural geography: a field of study which, according to Mike Crang (1998), examines how cultures ‘come together in particular places and how those places develop meanings for people’ (2-3).

Although cultural geographers have long been interested in the material world, recent developments in the field have called for a reinvigorated, ‘critical, theoretically informed approach’ (Jackson 2000: 9-10) to understanding the role materiality has to play in everyday life (Jackson 2000; Anderson et al. 2003: 5; Crang 2013; Lorimer 2013; Horton and Kraftl 2014: 200-21). Alongside this, there has also been growing interest in what Ben Anderson and John Wylie (2009) refer to as the ‘affective materialisms’ of everyday life (319). Moving away from Crang’s (1998) focus upon meaning-making, such non-representational theory seeks to ‘capture the “onflow” of the everyday (Thrift 2008: 5) and is thus more concerned with the world of ‘unreflexive’ habit (Anderson and Harrison 2010: 7) and ‘pre-cognitive’ experience (Thrift 2008: 5). By reconfiguring understandings of space and place to give ‘equal weight to the vast spillage of *things*’ in the world (Thrift 2008: 9), non-representational theory repositions the human body as one of many relational elements in what Nigel Thrift (2008) refers to as the ‘hybrid assemblages’ (9) of everyday life. Consequently, the ‘*turbulence*’ (Anderson and Wylie 2010: 320) of matter is foregrounded and things are no longer conceived as inert, passive objects, ascribed meaning only through human thought and

perception, but are instead understood as vital agents in the world – a key idea that now underpins current thinking in the field of thing-theory (Brown 2001; Latour 2005; Bennett 2010).

Noticeably, recent geographic scholarship on ruins has foregrounded the way in which processes of ruination expose the vital turbulence of matter (DeSilvey 2006; Edensor 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). As Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor (2012) point out, a cultural geographic approach to ruins helps to complicate and challenge the seductive and alluring qualities of '[r]uin-gazing' which, since the eighteenth century, has become the 'preserve of an elevated aesthetic sensibility' (466) and thus augmented a particularly romanticised view of the ruin. Coining the term 'ruinophilia', Svetlana Boym (2010: 58) acknowledges the twenty-first-century legacy of this strange fascination; but, crucially, reasserts that, for all their alluring beauty, ruins 'give us a shock of vanishing materiality' (58). Boym's emphasis on the materiality of ruins is important; yet such sites do not necessarily represent a vanishing materiality but rather, as Anderson and Wylie (2009) suggest, a violently changing one. Ruins thus offer new ways of interacting with and understanding the world as they disrupt the 'predictable and regular distribution of objects in space' (Edensor 2005c: 311).

Collectively, these recent theoretical reappraisals of ruined matter provide a particularly useful critical apparatus for approaching and analysing Bowen's textual representation of ruins. Critics have noted the curious 'literary animism' (Inglesby 2007: 306) of Bowen's fiction, in which domestic objects appear to have an 'integrity' and 'independen[ce]' of their own (326). This animism arguably intensifies in Bowen's wartime work as she grapples with the turbulence of the ruined interior and is something also felt at the level of style in the 'strange affinity between words and things' that 'sometimes thwarts or hinders our search for deeper or hidden meaning' (Osborn 2006: 194). Shifting attention on to the unreflexive and immersive realm of everyday experience, non-representational theory helps to develop understandings of the ways Bowen attempts to capture the disorientating experience of ruined wartime space through a disruption of meaning-making and an emphasis on the affective qualities of her fractured narrative structures. As Leo Mellor (2011) explains in his study of twentieth-century bombsites, '[r]eading – and writing – the ruins of war requires the material spaces cut violently into the city fabric to be acknowledged and understood' (203). In drawing its resources from these unstable architectural structures, *The Heat of the Day* provides important insight into the condition of urban space in 1940s London.

Discussing how literature impacts geographical understanding of cultural landscapes, Mike Crang (1998) argues that fiction provides 'another set of geographical data' by offering insight into 'the richness of human experience of place' (43). This idea is particularly resonant in light of the more recent questions raised in literary studies about the ways in which geographical practice likewise informs the interpretation of fictional texts. Andrew Thacker's (2005) 'critical literary geography', for example, utilises interdisciplinary understandings of space and place to illuminate the significance of the spatial elements of literature: it 'brings texts . . . back to the *materiality* of socially produced spaces: the "where"

of texts is variously located in the brute *matter* of social space' (59, emphasis added). Central to Thacker's approach is an emphasis on literary form and style; like cultural geographers, who now understand that the material world plays a dynamic role in the formation of a culture and isn't simply a product of it, he argues that '[l]iterary texts represent social spaces, but social space shapes literary forms' (Thacker 2005: 63). Thacker adopts the term 'textual space' (63) to encapsulate this dynamic relationship, in which the concrete materiality of literature's social and historical moment is tied productively to the innovative literary strategies employed by authors responding to a specific cultural milieu.

Bowen's prose lends itself particularly well to this sort of critical and theoretical scrutiny for, as Susan Osborn (2006) observes, it is characterised by a 'strange materiality' and 'Braille-like tangibility' that 'realizes itself not solely as a style to be looked *through* but as a style to be looked *at*' (193-4). There is thus great literary and geographical value to be found in drawing links between the material character of the spaces that form the basis of Bowen's work and the materiality of the prose itself. In doing so, I aim to expand understanding of the ways the wartime domestic ruin permeates both the theme and form of Bowen's novel. Moreover, bringing these points of focus into dialogue with the recent debate about wartime literature and the periodization of modernism, I will position the novel as a late modernist response to catastrophic urban change. Showing how Bowen resists recourse to the Heideggerian dwelling place, I will argue that, in both theme and style, *The Heat of the Day* represents the wartime individual as an anxious, fragmented, and homeless subject who is unable to belong.

### **Modernist Anxiety and the Second World War**

Bowen's anxieties about wartime architecture are immediately evident in *The Heat of the Day* in the description of London's blitzed buildings in the novel's opening. Bowen describes the 'tops of Regency terraces' which, 'in their semi-ruin', are 'shells: the indifference of their black vacant windows fell on the scene, the movement, the park, the evening they overlooked but did not seem to behold' (*HD* 21). Such a description is something of a recurring motif in Bowen's fictional negotiations of domestic architecture. In her critical response to the Anglo-Irish Big House in *The Last September* (1929), for instance, Danielstown is described as a 'cold shell' with a 'hollow-looking' interior (87); whilst in *The Death of the Heart* (1938) the problematic upper-middle-class household is represented in the form of 'insipidly ornate, brittle and cold' Regency terraces, which 'look hollow inside' (14). For Bowen, the image of the hollow shell becomes a potent symbol for what is lacking in domestic life.

However, Bowen's recycling of this architectural motif in *The Heat of the Day* possesses a different function to her earlier novels for, rather than being a fierce point of critique, it communicates her anxieties about the catastrophic effects of the Blitz and the problematised capacity to dwell in London during the Second World War. The wan stupor of the anthropomorphised terraces is representative of the spatial and psychological trauma – described by Bowen (1945) as a 'heady and disembodied' state (95) – generated by war's

incomprehensible architectural destruction. Rendered as precarious and insubstantial material forms uncannily similar to the disembodied wartime individual, the Regency terraces are left reeling in the aftershock of the Blitz.

Anthony Vidler (2001: 1) argues that anxiety is a central tenet of modernism's negotiation of urban space. In 'Air War and Architecture' (Vidler 2010), he discusses architectural modernism in particular, noting how Le Corbusier's famous urban plans of the 1920s and 1930s were conceived, in part, 'as effective defences' against future aerial bombing (35). Such concerns proved to be well-founded, of course, when 'the technological advances' of the Second World War turned the 'anxiety about being bombed into oblivion' (32) into a palpably real and diurnal threat. As a result, Vidler argues that, unsurprisingly, 'one cannot help sensing anxiety' in the 'reconstruction plans' (30) for cities across Europe between 1945 and 1950. Following the violent destruction of the urban fabric during the war, Europe's bombsites became 'the ground on which a new practice of architecture had to be constructed' (33): a practice that self-consciously sought to set up a stake against architectural oblivion. Yet, due to the sheer scale and incomprehensibility of urban destruction, society was struck by 'a strange, almost hallucinatory state of business as usual', which saw this purportedly 'new' practice of architecture largely based on Le Corbusier's 'grand pre-war plans' (33).

According to Vidler (2001), the anxieties of architectural modernism are equally evident in the 'vocabularies of displacement and fracture, torqueing and twisting, pressure and release' (1) employed by avant-garde artists responding to the dislocating shocks of urban modernity. The fragmented style of the high modernist novel is a prime example of how the literary modernists contributed to these warped vocabularies. Yet, in contrast to the persistence of modernism in post-war architectural practice, the outbreak of the 'Second World War has remained', according to Mellor, 'a persuasive end point' for literary modernism (2011: 4). This fixed viewpoint is evident in Tyrus Miller's (1999) influential account of late modernism: whilst recognising the post-war 'second wind' of architectural modernism, he argues that, in sharp contrast, 'literary modernism peaked much earlier and . . . much more feebly' (10). By extension, Miller figures late modernism as a dissociative movement in which writers, such as Samuel Beckett, pull away from their forebears through 'satiric and parodic strategies' that 'weake[n] the formal cohesion of the modernist novel' (19). Although persuasive, however, Miller's account offers only one particular view of late modernism, which does not help to situate the anxiousness of Bowen's wartime work. In viewing late modernism 'in tandem with', rather than part of, 'the still developing corpus of high modernism', Miller has a tendency to elide the continuities between the anxiety still evident in the late modernist novel, such as Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, and the warped vocabularies that Vidler (2001: 1) argues are so central to high modernist art.

More recently, Marina MacKay (2007) and Mellor (2011) have drawn important connections between the war and the development, rather than demise, of literary modernism in the mid-century. MacKay (2007) considers the extent to which both early and late modernism employ 'fractured and estranging modes' (9) to concentrate on civilian,

rather than combatant, experiences of war. Just like early modernism, which ‘works indirectly and inwardly: renouncing totalising and documentary ambitions . . . to expand the categories of what constitutes historical experience’ (8), late modernism ‘urges a reshaping of what counts as the literature of war in order to include authors who were not combatants and texts that are not “about” war in any straightforwardly mimetic way’ (6). Building on this, Mellor (2011) suggests that it is the ‘ruined city’, as in architectural modernism, that not only provides the ‘material’ for writers in the mid-century, but also operates as ‘the background and inescapable condition of possibility for late modernism itself’ (5).

This necessary recalibration in the periodization of late modernism helps to situate Bowen’s wartime work for, as Thomas S. Davis has noted, it ‘contain[s] very little of the actual war’ (2013: 30). In her Preface to *The Demon Lover*, Bowen (1945) confirms this as a deliberate, ethical choice, explaining that ‘[t]hese are all wartime, none of them *war*, stories [...]. These are more studies of climate, war-climate’ (95). Addressing the inherent problems associated with artistic representation, Bowen sets herself apart from other wartime practitioners: whereas ‘[p]ainters have painted, and photographers . . . have photographed, the tottering lace-like architecture of ruins’, she ‘cannot *render*, . . . only embrace’ (99). As David James (2007) notes, Bowen here ‘reminds us . . . that war-photographers were prone to embroider the Blitz: zealously portraying, even fetishizing, shock-impressions’ (704). Instead of providing a romanticised document of the war, Bowen (1945) stresses how she offers only ‘isolated, . . . particular’ moments through ‘spot-lighting faces or cutting out gestures’ (99). Aligning herself with a modernist impulse towards inwardness and indirection, Bowen paves an ethical pathway through the Blitzed streets by providing fleeting impressions of the wartime individual.

Bowen’s ‘ethical conscience’ (James 2007: 704) had particularly significant consequences for the formal qualities of her literary output during the war. Although the first five chapters of *The Heat of the Day* were written by mid-1944, she abandoned them until the war ended, finding the dislocations of everyday life utterly incompatible with a continuous prose form.<sup>3</sup> Instead, she found that the short story, in its capacity for multiplicity and fragmentation, lent itself more readily to the intensity of wartime experience. In the Preface to *The Demon Lover*, Bowen (1945) describes her stories as ‘flying particles’ and ‘sparks from experience’, which ‘came through with force and rapidity, sometimes violence’ (94-5). Employing the language of warfare – or, as Kristine A. Miller (2009) puts it, the ‘imagery of shrapnel’ (28) – Bowen (1945) emphasises the spontaneity, almost inevitability, of their production, finally reflecting that at this time, ‘it would have been impossible to have been writing only one book’ (95).

Nevertheless, when London lay in ruins at the end of the war, Bowen was able to return to the novel form and complete *The Heat of the Day*. Just as the bombsites enabled urban planners to realise the pre-war plans of the architectural modernists, Bowen similarly took inspiration from London’s domestic detritus and reassembled a novel which, like Le Corbusier’s tower blocks, offers an important insight into the legacy of modernism in the post-war period. Such an undertaking was not without difficulty, however, as it involved the

arduous task of weaving the intensity and fragmentation of both wartime experience and the short story form into a single, continuous narrative. The result of this can be seen in the wildly disjunctive style of *The Heat of the Day* which draws its resources from the fragmented forms of high modernism, re-employing the warped vocabularies Vidler (2001: 1) argues are so central to artistic representations of urban space at the beginning of the century. In the sections that follow, I aim to extend this line of enquiry by undertaking close readings of the novel's material anxieties in order to provide detailed evidence of Bowen's late modernist innovations.

### **The Ruination of Home**

As part of his history of the domestic interior, art and literary critic, Mario Praz, provides a visceral account of the palpable bombed landscapes of the Second World War:

shattered ruined buildings, the hollow orbits of windows, and fragments of walls, houses split in two with the pathetic sight of some still furnished corner, dangling above the rubble, surrounded by ruin: pictures hanging on broken walls, a kitchen with the pots still on the stove and there, in what must have been a drawing room, a sofa. (Praz 1964: 13)

Out of this scene of domestic ruination, where structurally defined rooms appear as mere conjecture, Praz (1964) argues that 'houses will rise again, and men will furnish houses as long as there is breath in them' (18). Commenting on this optimism, Charles Rice (2007) draws a connection with Martin Heidegger's seminal thinking by suggesting that Praz 'sees dwelling as an eternal condition which always finds its materialization in the furnishing of an interior' (21). Such a statement recalls Heidegger's (1951) famous claim that '*in* dwelling [mortals] persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things' (155). The material and the eternal are here brought together as Heidegger reveals a profound investment in the longevity of the physical world.

A similar eternalising spirit can be found in Bowen's (1942) wartime essay, 'The Christmas Toast is "Home!"', in which she argues that 'home still goes on' and 'shows its unrivalled power to refresh and to rest us, to reassure and to cheer' (76). Yet whereas Praz, following Heidegger, remains committed to the material world in the face of conflict, Bowen places emphasis elsewhere. In a letter to Virginia Woolf in October 1940, she explains the dramatic effects the Blitz has had on her understanding of the material world: 'When your flat went did that mean all the things in it too? All my life I have said, "Whatever happens there will always be tables and chairs" – and what a mistake' (Lee 1986: 216-7). Unlike Praz, Bowen (1942) surrenders her vision of home as a 'material thing' (20) and instead finds courage in social relations. This becomes evident when she questions whether 'we [have] been left with nothing? No, assuredly no. Homes are much more than rooms and tables and chairs. . . . Above all, the home means people' (20).



Such an affirmative statement is surprising given the darker and more complex negotiation of domestic ruination in *The Heat of the Day*, where the wartime home does not endure in either material or social terms. The publication history of the essay helps to account for this stark discrepancy in authorial attitude; it originally appeared in the 1942 edition of the popular women's magazine, *Homes and Gardens*, meaning that Bowen would have been working under strict editorial constraints (Hepburn 2008: 434). Bowen's overly insistent tone of conservatism therefore evidences a strained attempt to espouse the publishing spirit of the time which, as Cynthia L. White (1970) describes, provided 'buoyant cheerfulness' for periodical readerships (123). On return to her novel after 1945, then, Bowen was free from these publishing restrictions and able to begin working through the disheartening and problematic reality of the wartime home.

In *The Heat of the Day*, we are told that Stella Rodney has taken her flat in Weymouth Street 'furnished, having given up the last of her own houses and stored her furniture when the war began' (*HD* 23). Stella problematizes Praz's (1964) claim that 'man will save from the rubble a stool or a tree stump on which to rest from his labors' (18), for although the flat is filled with innumerable objects – 'chintz . . . armchairs and sofa', 'low tables', 'alabaster lamps', a 'fragile escritoire' (*HD* 24) – such furnishings are anything but a reflection of her dwelling. As the narrator comments, 'she had the irritation of being surrounded by somebody else's irreproachable taste' (24). The accumulation of material detail therefore embodies the claustrophobic, estranging nature of Stella's impersonal surroundings, something reflected in the verbs used to orientate her few authentic possessions: her books are '*wedged* among those not hers' and 'two photographs' remain unframed and simply '*[p]ropped* on the chimneypiece' (24, emphasis added). These possessions are as precarious as the semi-ruined terraces in the novel's opening and ultimately symbolise Stella's transitory lifestyle, where the clutter of domestic life bears no relation to her personal identity.

Davis (2013) draws a link between such a loss of possessions and a loss of the self, arguing that 'dispossession' in Bowen's wartime work is figured as 'subjective erasure' (39). This is strongly evident in the description of Roderick's return to his mother's flat, for only his pyjamas remain whilst '[e]verything else of his had gone into store, to limbo' (*HD* 49). Experiencing a profound sense of dispossession, Roderick feels that the flat does 'not look like home; but it looked like something – possibly a story' (47). The indeterminate language here helps intimate the ruinous structure of the space, for as Boym (2010) observes, '[a] tour of ruins leads you into a labyrinth of ambivalent . . . that plays tricks with causality' (58). Although not ruined per se, Stella's flat is the converted top floor of a building 'otherwise in professional . . . occupation' (*HD* 23) and thus fails to offer a conventional and, for Roderick, comforting configuration of domestic space. The narrator observes that '[i]n this flat, rooms had no names; there being only two, whichever you were not in was "the other room"' (51). Such ambiguous spaces generate the disrupted causality Boym draws attention to: 'Proceeding into what *he* saw as the drawing-room', Roderick is 'confounded by there being no one right place to put down a tray' (51-2). Finally, he is forced to take up the role of 'detective' (52) in order to search for clues about how to inhabit this bewildering space.

In his discussion of industrial ruins, Edensor (2005c) suggests that the disrupted causality of ruined spaces ‘offers opportunities to engage with the material world in a more playful, sensual fashion’ (Edensor 2005c: 325). Unfortunately, Roderick is unable to engage with Stella’s flat in this way, instead experiencing a complete failure of the imagination: ‘He gave up, placed the tray on the floor and himself on the edge of the sofa’ (*HD* 52). As White (1970) observes, wartime soldiers often returned home ‘wanting to find things very much as they had left them’ (133) and this is clear in Roderick’s vexed reaction to the flat. Negotiating an entirely different spatial milieu to Edensor’s less intimate industrial ruins, Roderick reveals the limitations of bodily play in a space so heavily invested with desired notions of security and familiar routine.

Furthermore, the furniture in the room intensifies Roderick’s vexed relationship with the flat, for whilst sitting on the sofa he is struck with the feeling of being ‘surrounded by what was lacking. Though this particular sofa backed on a wall and stood on a carpet, it was without environment’ (*HD* 55). This description sharply recalls Heidegger’s explanation of Dasein in *Being and Time* (1927), which employs the image of a chair standing next to a wall in order to set out the principles behind the fundamental human condition of ‘*Being-in-the-world*’ (Heidegger 1962: 78). Heidegger argues that ‘in principle the chair can never touch the wall, even if the space between them should be equal to zero’, because ‘[a]n entity . . . can be touched by another entity only if . . . the latter entity has Being-in as its own kind of Being’ (81). For Heidegger, material things play a crucial role in everyday life; but they do not possess any agency of their own and, instead, are only rendered meaningful through human use and encounter. Such thinking is initially evident in Roderick’s reaction to the sofa, as he perceives it to be as wanting as the domestic objects in Praz’s scene of blitzed ruin; it ‘might have been some derelict piece of furniture exposed on a pavement after an air raid’ (*HD* 55). Surrounded by unfamiliar things, Roderick, like Stella, does not dwell because Weymouth Street is not for him a home.

However, despite acknowledging the profound impact that things have on everyday life, Heidegger’s eschewal of the agency of matter fosters an unproductive binary between humans and things, which non-representational theory, particularly thing-theory, has since worked hard to undo (Thrift 2008: 159). Jane Bennett’s (2010) theory of vibrant matter has been particularly influential in this respect. Positing ‘the capacity of things . . . not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’, Bennett (viii) theorises a form of materiality that resituates humans and things on an equal footing. This idea that material objects can interfere with, and not just be reflective of, human life resonates particularly well with Bowen’s often-commented upon, but rarely theorised, ‘literary animism’ (Ellmann 2003: 5-8; Inglesby 2007: 306; Osborn 2007: 232-33; Plock 2012: 290).

In Weymouth Street, Stella and Roderick are at the mercy of the electric fire whose ‘electric elements, vertical hot set lips, grinned away at the empty end of the room’ (*HD* 56). The unsettling shadow cast by this hostile, animate object devours Stella’s photographs on the mantelpiece, rendering them ‘two dark unloving squares’ (24, 56). Obliterating Stella’s

only remaining possessions, the fire transforms them from representations of personal identity into symbols of the Rodneys' subjective erasure. Importantly, Stella and Roderick do not appear consciously to perceive the grinning fire or its ominous shadow; something that is reflected in the fire's independent syntactic position within the sentence. Represented in this manner, the fire functions in the text as an 'actant' – a term originally coined by Bruno Latour and used by Bennett (2010) to describe 'a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman . . . which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events' (viii). Not simply a product of paranoia or psychological projection – although it could still be read in this way – the animacy of Bowen's fictional objects makes a direct appeal to the vitalism of ordinary things in daily, domestic life. In this instance, it helps to establish – at both the level of content and form – a sense of unsettling and turbulent wartime space.

Bowen's representation of objects is not new in this respect, as throughout her entire oeuvre she attends to the vibrant, often unsettling, materiality of the physical world (Hepburn 2008: 1). However, it does gain new currency in light of the artistic developments of mid-century domestic fiction. As Alison Light (1991) argues, women's interwar fiction displays a shift toward 'an increased consciousness of the materiality of domestic life' in which 'home takes on an almost independent character, often a negative one, and becomes a protagonist often warring with the heroine' (137-8). It is not surprising that this shift develops between the wars for, as I have already touched upon, ruination makes the 'thingness' of things more apparent. In normal daily life, this 'thingness' tends to be taken for granted; as Edensor (2005b) suggests, objects that are regularly and predictably distributed in the world are '[u]sually unreflexively apprehended' and thus 'consolidate a sense of being in place' (97). Indeed, in 'The Thing', Heidegger (1949) discusses dwelling in terms of 'thinging', a process that establishes 'nearness' with the surrounding world and usually 'conceals its own self' (175) in such a way so as to allow things to become habituated within the domestic environment (Casey 1998: 273).

However, when this domestic environment is disrupted – when things, such as the sofa or fire in Stella's flat no longer perform their 'thinging' or 'nearing' harmoniously – then both processes become more noticeable. As archaeologist Þóra Pétursdóttir (2012) observes, '[t]he undisciplined ruin confronts our customized habit of dealing with things as tamed domesticated possessions. . . . They appear to us in ways never noticed, exposing some of their unruly thingness' (46). In Bowen's novel, domestic things help expose the ruinous, uncanny spatiality of the wartime home. Unlike the 'unfamiliar and enigmatic' objects of Edensor's (2005c: 321) industrial ruins, which hold the potential to 'resonate with a powerful beauty' and become 'akin to pieces of sculpture' (321), Bowen's objects are vital and unmanageable actants that exist in vexed relation to their human counterparts.

Moreover, in this respect, *The Heat of the Day* exemplifies how the thematic shift toward unruly thingness in interwar fiction extends into and beyond the Second World War to become a matter also of literary form. Inverting the expected position of subject and object in her sentences, Bowen confuses any easy distinction between the animate and

inanimate by ascribing the passive mood to humans and anthropomorphic attributes and active verbs to her supposedly inert material things (Ellmann 2003: 7, 67). As such, her fictional worlds can be reconceived through the concept of the domestic assemblage, which reconceives human and non-human actants as equally constitutive elements of the everyday and thus produces ‘new senses of space’ (Thrift 2008: 16).<sup>4</sup>

### The Language of Ruins

Not only is it the unsettling ‘thingness’ of things that contributes to the materiality of *The Heat of the Day*, however, but also the strange tangibility of the words themselves, which are forever brought to the attention of the reader through their stylistic complexity (Osborn 2006: 193). As Anna Teekell (2011) observes, in being ‘riddled with inversions, ellipses, subjunctives, and double or even triple negatives . . . the language [of the novel] is contorted almost to the point of unintelligibility’ (61), a characteristic which has attracted considerable, often conflicting, criticism.<sup>5</sup> In this section, I am interested in countering the more negative of these accounts by exploring the specific effects of Bowen’s irregular and complex prose style. In particular, I analyse the function of linguistic negation in order to elucidate the connection between space and words in the novel; a relationship which I argue is entirely central to Bowen’s modernist response to the ruins of war.

When commenting on the overwhelming stylistic complexities of *The Heat of the Day*, critics have tended to focus on the Blitz flashback in Chapter Five of the novel (Lee 1981: 166-8; McCormack 1993: 224; Pong 2009; Mellor 2011: 157-8; Teekell 2011: 67), which becomes hauntingly poetic precisely because of its unrelenting repetitions of negated words and phrases. A sentence such as the following exemplifies this complexity and demonstrates the way Bowen provides an ethically oblique glance towards the wartime dead:

Absent from the routine which had been life, [the dead] stamped upon that routine their absence – not knowing who the dead were you could not know which might be the staircase somebody for the first time was not mounting this morning, or at which street corner the news vendor missed a face, or which trains and buses in the homegoing rush were this evening lighter by at least one passenger. (*HD* 91-2)

Bowen invokes the image of normal daily routine, only to remove any possibility of it through sustained syntactic negation: her repeated use of ‘not’ intimates the emptiness of staircases and street corners, untrodden by absent persons. Recalling Bowen’s (1945) description of the ‘strange growths’ of wartime (95), the accumulation of negatives in this passage strongly contributes to the representation of London as an uncanny space of blurred boundaries.

Drawing on the work of Simone Fullagar (2001), Edensor (2005c) discusses the boundaries of ruins in terms of the permeable body, noting that when moving through ruined spaces ‘the body is rendered porous, open to the impacts of matter, is a “threshold or passage”, characterized by “multiple surfaces open to other surfaces” through which

“strange substances” are able to “cross the subject’s own boundaries” (326). In the above passage from Bowen, the multiple negatives contribute to this idea of the porous body by eroding the boundary between the living and the dead – the corporeal and the spectral body. As Teekell (2011) observes, “[a]ll those negatives add up to a world that is defined by absence rather than presence. London becomes defined by unreality rather than reality” (67). As well as contributing to an ethical embrace of wartime, Bowen’s linguistic choices help to textually construct the city as an urban ruin, which is, by Edensor’s (2005c) definition, a ‘haunted spac[e] replete with ghosts’ (328).

Bowen’s use of negation is employed to similar ends in her representation of domestic space, as she highlights the profound effects these blurred boundaries have on the idea of home. In Chapter Five, she draws attention to the ‘glassless’ sash window of Stella’s lodgings which ‘r[uns] up with a *phantom absence* of weight’ (*HD* 93, emphasis added). The morphological and inherent forms of negation here problematize Stella’s relationship with the window, which, according to Bowen (1942) in “The Christmas Toast is “Home!””, is an important architectural feature due to its threshold capacity: ‘Windows . . . admit light and refreshing air; I look out through them; they frame for me pictures of the outside, ever-changing world’ (21). Providing a protective physical barrier between inside and outside space, windows simultaneously allow a dialogue between the two. In the novel, Bowen disrupts this threshold capacity by using negation to foreground the missing pane of glass. Shattered into ‘non-existence’, it allows the ‘grit’ in the blitzed air outside to ‘drif[t] on to [Stella’s] dressing-table’; whilst psychologically, it allows in the ‘hush of the square’, which she conflates with the death-like imagery of a ‘church-yard’ (*HD* 93). Lacking any protective architectural integrity, Stella’s bedroom is infiltrated by the horrors of war.

A parallel can be drawn here with the function of the window in Weymouth Street. The narrator explains that by 1942 the ‘first generation of ruins’ from 1940 ‘took their places as a norm of the scene’, resulting in a ‘deadening acclimatization’ which sees the ‘insidious echoless propriety of ruins’ becoming ‘malarial’ (*HD* 92). Bowen translates this disease-like climate on to the interior of Weymouth Street by negotiating the blackout, an event that Mellor (2011) argues ‘submitted shades, shadows and glimpses’ to the formerly well-lit city (139-40). Besides ‘providing wartime verisimilitude’ (Teekell 2011: 75), the blackout curtain in *The Heat of the Day* allows Bowen to negate the spatiality of the room and thus expose its ruinous qualities:

The room lacked one more thing: apprehension of time. Inside it the senses were cut off from hour and season; nothing spoke but the clock. The day had gone from the moment Stella had drawn down the fitted blinds and drawn across them the deadening curtains: now nothing took its place. Every crack was stopped; not a mote of darkness could enter – the room, sealed up in its artificial light remained exaggerated and cerebral. (*HD* 56)

At first, the allusion to a lack of seasonal time creates a sense that Stella's room is safely insulated from the outside pressures of war. Indeed, Christopher Woodward (2002) argues that 'in ruins, movement is halted, and Time suspended', meaning that a ruin offers 'a still point' in a 'spinning world' (36). Like Bowen, who supposedly figures the removal of outside time in Stella's room as a release from the anxiety of the unfolding war, Woodward (2002) figures a 'dilapidated bridge' as a welcoming 'refuge from a suburban time-clock' (36).

However, Woodward's view of ruinous temporality opposes more recent thinking in cultural geography about the turbulence of ruined matter. Despite arguing, like Woodward, that 'in the ruin, the object enters a different temporality', Edensor (2005c: 317) stresses that decay and degeneration, if anything, emphasise the transience of ruined matter which is forever 'in a state of becoming something else' (219). Returning to Bowen's representation of Weymouth Street, then, it is important to note the 'artificial' and 'exaggerated' (*HD* 56) nature of the room. Stiling every sentence with a colon, semi-colon, or dash, Bowen generates an overwrought syntax of causality which, in comparison to the description of Roderick's entry into Stella's flat, now becomes threatening in its excess rather than its lack (Boym 2010: 58). Moreover, Bowen inverts the protective function of the blackout curtain (Teekell 2011: 75) through her repeated use of the morphological negative, 'nothing', which reveals how, far from being impermeable, the room has already been infiltrated by deadened public life. The room is not a reassuring still point in the spinning world of war, but rather a space that has been consumed by the turbulent forces of wartime ruination and thus collapsed in on itself to create a malarial void – what Teekell refers to as 'something blitz-riven: a no-place' (78). As a central spatial element in Bowen's psychopathology of wartime, then, Weymouth Street contributes to the 'leaks' and 'porousness of architectural and psychic space' that Maud Ellmann (2003: 153) sees as characterising the novel as a whole.

There are, therefore, important connections between the novel's running theme of ruinous spatiality and the negated formal constructions Bowen employs. Yet there are also significant and noticeable effects of this dynamic relationship between theme and style on the reading experience itself. As studies in the field of psycholinguistics and literary semantics have shown, there are specific mental processes involved in the cognition of linguistic negation (Nørgaard 2007). As Nina Nørgaard explains, the cognitive processing of negatives 'involves not just the establishment of a proposition, but the establishment of a proposition *and* the cancellation of it', meaning that the reader must expend 'more time and energy' on the reading process (37). An equivalent complication in cognition occurs whilst perceiving ruined landscapes; as Boym (2010) suggests, the 'remainders and reminders' of ruins 'make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never took place' (58). There is thus a direct parallel between the cognition involved in perceiving ruins and that demanded whilst interpreting textual negation.<sup>6</sup>

As the emergence of non-representational theory has shown, however, experiencing ruins is not limited to meaning-making alone. Applying this idea to Bowen's textual representation of ruins helps advance current understandings of linguistic negation in literary studies beyond the prevailing standpoint of their being 'a significant meaning-making

resource' (Nørgaard 2007: 35). Despite suggesting that ruins invite the observer to imagine alternative spatial possibilities, Edensor (2005c) stresses that they are also greatly ambiguous spaces that are 'largely inarticulate in that they suggest multitudes of scenarios but only offer possibilities to surmise, to assemble conjectural memories, things we half know or have heard about somewhere but are just beyond grasp' (329). Experiencing ruins can have more to do, therefore, with the disorientating affective and sensual characteristics of what Edensor (2005a) terms 'immanent immersion' (837). Rather than existing as sites for conscious thought and perception, ruins are complex spaces of diverse and 'sensually charged' (837) materialities that often confuse, rather than sharpen, mental comprehension.

To this end, Edensor (2005a) considers the implications ruins have for the narration of bodily experience. In doing so, he emphasises the strict resistance toward linguistic coherence that this process necessarily entails:

ruins foreground the value of inarticulacy, for disparate fragments, juxtapositions, traces, involuntary memories, uncanny impressions, and peculiar atmospheres cannot be woven into an eloquent narrative. Stories can only be contingently assembled out of a jumble of disconnected things, occurrences, and sensations. (Edensor 2005a: 846)

Such a description strikingly resembles Bowen's personal account of her artistic intentions for *The Heat of the Day*. In interview with Jocelyn Brooke, she explains how she wanted her novel to structurally resemble 'the convulsive shaking of a kaleidoscope, a kaleidoscope also of which the inside reflector was cracked' (Bowen 1950: 283). Moreover, when challenged by her editor about the novel's unusual stylistic qualities, Bowen responded that 'I'd rather keep the jars, "jingles" and awkwardnesses. . . . They do to my mind express something. In some cases I *want* the rhythm to jerk or jar – to an extent, even, which may displease the reader' (Ellmann 2003: 166).

Returning to consider the Blitz passage from Chapter Five of Bowen's novel, then – or indeed any of the examples of uncanny domestic space discussed here – we see that Bowen's complex, fractured prose style and frequent use of linguistic negation purposefully invites obliquity and confusion. As Teekell (2011) explains in her response to Chapter Five, 'Bowen's syntax forces the . . . reader . . . to re-read . . . the sentences themselves for meaning. . . . The reader must sift through the shape of the sentences to decode the information they present' (62, 67). Quite often, however, this information is not quite grasped, as the negatives disrupt the flow of conventional sentence structure to the point of confusing the reader's ability to interpret the scene or events being narrated. Bowen's textual ruins therefore purposefully appeal to the 'inarticulacy' of physical ruins, which Edensor (2005a) explains, 'is not an impediment but rather an opportunity to construct narratives that are not contained by form or convention' (846).

## Conclusion

If, as Philip Crang (2013) argues, cultural geography is interested in ‘the changes that happen to a thing . . . : both material changes and “translations” in the thing’s meaning’ (288), then a literary geographical approach to wartime fiction has much to learn from this disciplinary approach. Tracking the turbulent material changes and translations in meaning of London’s ruined landscape in Bowen’s novel lays bare the shattering effects the Second World War had on the social, spatial, and psychological configurations and understandings of the domestic home. Yet if, following Thacker (2005), we ‘also reverse the movement, and understand how social spaces dialogically help fashion the literary *forms* of texts’, then the emerging ‘textual space’ (63) of Bowen’s novel offers important insight into the ‘literary landscape’ of the time, which, Mike Crang (1998) reminds us, ‘is not a mirror held up to the world but a complex web of meanings’ that in fact helps ‘create ways of seeing the world’ (57).

Moreover, by opening up this form of literary geographical thinking to interdisciplinary ideas of vibrant matter and affective experience in non-representational theory, the ambiguity of ruins can be foregrounded, leading to a more nuanced understanding of both wartime dislocation and literary form. As this article has shown, the inarticulacy of ruins becomes, in Bowen’s novel, the driving force of literary language and a means for reproducing the vexations of wartime in prose form. Consequently, a literary geographical analysis of *The Heat of the Day* allows for an intervention in Bowen studies by offering a theoretically informed challenge to those critics who read Bowen’s complex style in terms of unproductive opacity and imprecision.

Instead – adding weight to the already emerging, yet still underdeveloped, re-readings of Bowen’s twentieth-century innovations (Osborn 2006) – this article demands that the narrative strategies Bowen turns to in *The Heat of the Day* be read as a direct response to the anxiousness of wartime. It is by developing the warped vocabularies of the early modernists that Bowen is able to find purchase in the overturning world of the mid-twentieth century and capture something of the ‘tottering lace-like architecture of ruins’ (Bowen 1945: 95) that (de)structured 1940s London. By deftly weaving the spatial, psychological, and affective symptoms of the ruinous urban landscape into the contorted textural quality of her novel’s form, Bowen (re)constructs a narrative architecture as anxious as the cultural milieu in which she is writing. *The Heat of the Day* can therefore be read as a deeply complex response to the burgeoning materialities of the ruined wartime home as well as a prime example of late modernist innovation in the post-war period.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Subsequent references to this edition of *The Heat of the Day* will be given in parentheses, preceded by *HD*.
- <sup>2</sup> See Lorimer (2013: 32) for a discussion of the significance of the plurality of this term in recent geographical thinking.



- <sup>3</sup> For an extended discussion of the difficulties Bowen had with writing the novel, see Glendinning (1977: 149) and Lassner (1990: 120).
- <sup>4</sup> In his account of space, Thrift (2008) sets out to replace Heidegger's notion of 'nearness' with that of '*distribution*' in order to de-centre the human body as 'the main geometer of the world' (17). This is not to say that things are any less unruly in a relational account of ruined space; rather than the thingly nature of things becoming more apparent through the disruption of nearness, it become so through the less regular and predictable redistribution of both humans and things, which is, relationally, just as disconcerting for the human beings involved.
- <sup>5</sup> For prime examples of contending viewpoints (positive and negative, respectively), see McCormack (1993: 224) and Kreilkamp (1998: 165).
- <sup>6</sup> Christensen (2001) is the only critic who directly picks up on this function of negation in Bowen's work, arguing that 'Bowen's much criticised double negatives . . . in fact convey more nuances than the corresponding positive working' (103).

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