



Facultade de Filloxía

Departamento de Filloxía Inglesa e Alemá

Spatial Liminality in Elizabeth Bowen's Short Fiction

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Santiago de Compostela
Curso Académico 2016-2017



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A blue ink signature of Andrés Miranda Acuña, consisting of several fluid, overlapping strokes.

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Autor

A blue ink signature of Jorge Sacido Romero, featuring a stylized 'J' and 'S' with horizontal lines crossing through them.

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Introduction

This essay is devoted to the analysis of liminal spaces in Elizabeth Bowen's wartime short fiction. It pays special attention to three pieces collected in *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945) in which liminal spatiality clearly determines characters and their actions, namely: "The Demon Lover", "Mysterious Kôr" and "Ivy Gripp'd the Steps". The concept of "liminality" was first coined in the field of anthropology to refer to people going through a transition from one state to another within the social structure — which is systematically arranged according to laws, customs, conventions and ceremonials — and express their ambiguous and indefinite attributes through a wide range of symbols in any given society where social and cultural transactions are ritualised.¹ Nevertheless, the concept soon transcended the realm of anthropology and started to be used in literary criticism, among other things, for the "exploration of both temporal and spatial dimensions", since "liminal zones appropriate their own chronological, systematic, or spatial extension and dramatize the contradictory interrelation between heterogeneous systems" (Achilles and Bergman, 2005: 6). This allows for "a spatial and temporal interconnectedness" which Bowen explored in her wartime fiction (Achilles and Bergman, 2005: 7).

Elizabeth Bowen was well-aware of the fact that writing short story commits the artist to the "poetic tautness" characteristic of the genre, a "condensed novel" in origins that "needed a complex subject and depended for merit on the skill with which condensation had been effected" (Bowen, 1994: 256-257). As Achilles and Bergman observed, "on account of its very brevity and often episodic structure, the generic liminality of the short story privileges the depiction of transitional situations and fleeting moments of crisis or decision" (2005: 22). Space thus becomes a liminal concept in short fiction, fused to the subsequent aspects of the narrative rather than detached from them. This is particularly relevant in Bowen's wartime fiction, the subject of which is the fragmented reality of the Blitz, where physical and temporal limits dissolve and space in particular is radically transformed by systematic bombings.

¹ Turner, 1991: 95.

London, where Bowen had fixed her residency years before the war, bore the brunt of the Blitz, which historians divide into two periods: the intense Blitz (September 1940 — May 1941), and its lighter coda (June 1944 — March 1945), popularly known as the “Little Blitz”, during which time the German V1 and V2 rockets sporadically hit the British countryside (Corcoran, 2003: 785). Devastation turned the urban landscape into a shapeless mass of ruins and blurred physical limits, which allowed Bowen for the exploration of the interstices of life in wartime London as a horrible experience of the liminal.

The stories under scrutiny here bear profound historical connections for which contextual information must be provided. The choice of corpus was made on account of the limited space of this essay to explore three stories that are particularly rich in terms of liminality and historical references written by an author whose prose is stylistically dense and required analytical elaboration. This essay is divided into three chapters and a final section with the conclusions. The first chapter, which is also the longest, deals with the study of liminal domestic spaces as the defining element of Bowen’s conception of wartime houses. In the second chapter, urban liminal spaces are analysed from the point of view of illumination. The third chapter gives account of liminal spaces that are product of wildlife invading and modifying the urban landscape. As a result, the extension devoted to both urban and domestic spheres is well-balanced. Furthermore, close attention will be paid to the way in which urban and domestic spaces interrelate. This study concludes with an outline of my conclusions where lines of further research are sketched.

Chapter 1: Elizabeth Bowen's Wartime Houses

This chapter is devoted to the study of liminal spaces that illustrate Elizabeth Bowen's conception of wartime houses, paying special attention to the way in which such conception is attached to the aesthetics of the Urban Gothic of the Second World War. More specifically, I will focus on the "uncanny" as one of its major defining features. I will likewise be dealing with Bowen's subversion of the idea of the "home front", assumed as part of the official rhetoric of war during the Blitz in the UK. Then, I will proceed to examine how all these elements interact in a selection of liminal spaces from the story "The Demon Lover". Special attention will be devoted to everyday objects, furniture and other domestic facilities. Finally, the chapter will close with an outline of my conclusions.

1.1. Urban Gothic of the Second World War: The Subversion of the "Home Front" in Elizabeth Bowen's Uncanny Houses

The involvement of the UK in World War I, the first conflict in the history of modern warfare, demanded an exhausting and unprecedented amount of civil sacrifice that went beyond a titanic military effort. Although the country remained territorially off the front line, civilians suffered the consequences of war to such an extent that the conflict went down in history as "The People's War" (Neiberg, 2004: 42). In spite of the fact that "it was still the armed forces which did most of the fighting and most of the dying" (Bond, 1998: 168), the British government was forced to reach "the twin goals of keeping a massive military machine in the field and [...] feed, clothe, and sustain the morale of a home front that had been turned into an armory" (Ciment, ed., 2007: 3). Only those nations that managed to organise their home fronts successfully — meaning those civil activities that contributed to the war effort — "could withstand the strains of war" (Neiberg, 2004: 42). A well-organised economy of war required drastic restructuring that entailed restrictions of all kinds as well as prices and wage freezes. Trade and labour associations began to exert a heavier influence upon politics, and the incorporation of women to factory work was needed to compensate for the demographic

disaster that left a whole generation of young men seriously depleted,² a fact that gave wings to the suffragist movement. Besides, the raise of Bolshevism in Russia, the fall of the Great Empires — Austro-Hungarian, German and Ottoman — along with the weakening of the French and British empires, reshaped civil national conscience in the war's aftermath, paving the way to a post-imperial era in the history of the UK.³

On the contrary, the German air raids made urban battlefields out of many industrial cities in England and Northern Ireland throughout the first stages of World War II, hence the “home front” became even more liminal a concept, not easily distinguishable from the “military front”: “‘home fronts’ were as directly involved in the war as the ‘military fronts’ and indeed often suffered more” (Bond, 1998: 168). Consequently, a heroic depiction of the British home front was assumed as part of the official wartime propaganda, especially during the London Blitz. In her 2010 study, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War (Dark London)*, Sara Wasson reflects upon how the familiar home became a space for the metaphorical representation of nation and national identity:

While nations' stories of their past are often staged in public spaces — battlefields, places of government — their stories of the present are often imaginatively staged in private domestic interiors, a natural consequence of the cornerstone of national identity being the sense of ordinary people living alongside each other. One of the most powerful metaphors for a nation is that of the familiar home, the structures of public authority mapped onto home's (usually patriarchal) figure of authority. (Wasson, 2010: 106)

Sara Wasson speaks about a “‘Gothic of the Second World War’ which subverts mythologies of nation” and whose “tropes and forms mark moments of fracture in the national mythologies of wartime home, city and fellowship” (2010: 1). This specific manifestation of the Gothic in the twentieth century is a rewriting of nineteenth-century Gothic literature by authors from a nation which, for the second time in the life of many, experimented the horrors of a worldwide conflict, this time within its own

² Measures were taken to encourage enlistment in the UK, such as the creation of “Pals Battalions”, which guaranteed men who enlisted together that they would not be separated during the course of the war. As a result, entire towns were virtually depopulated (Neiberg, 2004: 44).

³ The Easter Rising (1916), for instance, spread the seed for the Anglo-Irish war, which would eventually lead to the constitution of the Irish Free State in 1922, one of the biggest challenges to the colonial-based superiority of the British Empire in the twentieth century.

frontiers. Thus the home devastated by military action became a privileged locus of the Gothic.

Perhaps because of her Anglo-Irish origin, Elizabeth Bowen was one of those writers who refused to endorse the official patriotic depiction of domestic spaces. One cannot obviate the influence that Bowen's Court, the family estate in County Cork (Ireland), exerted upon her writing as a pivotal space to which she constantly turned her eyes back. Maud Ellmann establishes an interesting connection between Bowen's feelings towards her family estate and the Gothicism that permeates her domestic spaces:

The Big house vampirised its owners; at the same time, it nourished the vampires of Irish fiction. The lonely mansions of Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker are set in countries far-flung as Transylvania, and belong to an international Gothic tradition, but the undead bear a strong resemblance to the Anglo-Irish: confined in their Big Houses, feeding off their tenant farmers, and sentenced by the Act of Union to living death [...] And if the Big House made the Bowens blind, there is a strong suggestion that it also made them mad, by encouraging their tendency to fantasy. Yet Bowen transforms this hereditary curse into a gift, enlisting fantasy to reconstruct in words the great stone edifice of Bowen's Court. (2004: 51)

As a child, Bowen witnessed her father's periodic mental breakdowns, at some extent linked to his inability to provide for the estate. In spite of being often uninhabited — at that time the Bowens used to spend their winters in Dublin —, Bowen's Court demanded large amounts of money to be maintained, as if the lives of the proprietors were weaker, ghostly surrogated to the house's possessive and more animate existence.⁴ Bowen's uncanny houses are, indeed, personified or, at a certain extent, characterised as living beings, whose existence is not only independent from its owners', but even stronger.

Also in connection with the influence that Bowen's Court exerted upon the author's Gothic conception of the home space is the idea of "dislocation", which is certainly meaningful for Elizabeth Bowen's wartime fiction. Ellmann claims that the

⁴ Ellmann, 2004: 50.

term “recurs like a chronic symptom throughout Bowen’s work”, due to the fact that “while the Bowens created their own centre of gravity in Bowen’s Court, they never overcame their dislocation from the countryside they dominated” (2004: 51).

Many Londoners underwent a similar process of dislocation because of the war. 2.25 million people became homeless only in London from September 1940 to May 1941.⁵ There is something of liminal in the notion of “homelessness”,⁶ especially in times of war, for it triggers mixed “thoughts of home and dispossession, the homely and unhomely, property and alienation”, closely tied to the notion of the “uncanny” (Royle, 2003: 6). Even those lucky enough to keep their homes learnt that they would not be safe in there anymore, as they often had to take refuge either in the underground or the countryside. The former offered protection for those who remained in the city, but for many it was also a source of fear of the type Sigmund Freud described in “The Uncanny” as “the most uncanny thing of all”, namely, “the idea of being buried alive by mistake” (1955: 244).⁷ In her essay “London, 1940”, Elizabeth Bowen reflects on this uncanny fear that led many Londoners to refuse to take shelter in the underground: “We can go to the underground — but for this to be any good you have to go very deep, and a number of us, fearful of being buried alive, prefer not to” (1986: 23). As for those who opted for leaving the city, many found their houses totally or partially destroyed on returning. The violent transformation of the home’s anatomy removes everything that is homely in it and, consequently, deprives the home of its former familiarity, leaving a gap to be filled, as Bowen maintained,⁸ by hallucinations and ghostly presences. As a result, the home space turns into a powerful source of *uncanniness*. A direct witness of the Blitz, Bowen had first-hand knowledge of all these different kinds of dislocation through her own experience of the war as well as through testimonies she gathered from her fellow Londoners. In “The Demon Lover”, for instance, it is through the eyes of a woman who re-enters her bombed house that the reader perceives the *uncanniness* it exudes due to its lost familiarity.

⁵ Ciment, ed., 2007: 786.

⁶ The notion of “homelessness” generated by war is important in Elizabeth Bowen’s wartime stories such as, for instance, “Mysterious Kôr”, in which a couple of lovers wander the streets of London in search for a private place for their own, or “Sunday Afternoon”, whose protagonist’s flat was bombed out of pieces along with all his belongings.

⁷ The fear of being buried alive brings the subject back to an intra-uterine stage (Freud, 1955: 244).

⁸ See below section 2.2 (37-38) regarding the idea of the “saving hallucination” in Elizabeth Bowen’s wartime fiction.

Characteristic of Elizabeth Bowen's construction of Gothic domestic spaces is the powerful uncanny atmosphere she creates, intimately related to the notion of "liminality". According to Nicholas Royle, "the uncanny has to do with a secret encounter" with "something that should have remained secret and hidden but has come to light", disturbing "any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside". Therefore, "the uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality" (2003: 2). A thorough exploration of the intricacies and nuances of the concept "uncanny" in Freud,⁹ along with its connection with Gothic domestic spaces in the English literature of the war years, goes beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that, in order to stress the liminal nature of the concept, Sigmund Freud defined the term "uncanny" — Ger. *unheimlich*, 'unfamiliar', 'disturbing' — as an ambivalent concept not straightforwardly opposed to its antonym — Ger. *heimlich*, 'familiar', 'comfortable' — but, sometimes as complementary or, even, coincidental: "Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*" (Freud, 1955: 226). The uncanny is, indeed, the experience of the liminal where ends meet and dissolve.

According to Freud, the uncanny may arise either from repressed material that is brought back to the present, or for what had already been overcome in the past but returns to push the subject back to a former stage of psychic development. The return of the repressed, characteristically Gothic,¹⁰ materializes in Bowen's uncanny houses, where the present horribly merges with the remnants of a decayed past. The house works as a liminal passage that connects traumatised characters with the origins of their traumas, usually related to, or accompanied by, memories of the First World War.

Bowen thus incorporates the defining features of the Urban Gothic of the Second World War to her wartime fiction in order to create spaces that subvert or counteract the official rhetoric of war:

⁹ It must be taken into account that literature addressed the issue of the "uncanny" way before the psychoanalytic discourse did. Freud resorted to E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale "The Sand-Man" to articulate his theory of the uncanny. As the Austrian neurologist said, "Everywhere I go I find a poet that has been there before me".

¹⁰ "The Gothic reflects the return of the repressed, in which subconscious psychic energy bursts out from the restraints of the conscious ego" (Kilgour, 2006: 3).

The Gothic characteristically constructs homes as places of alienation, hallucination, haunting and madness. In the case of period fiction of Second World War Britain, the domestic Gothic subverts a key national myth of the war: the notion of the home as war front, literally and figuratively, on which Britons would fight with a sense of national identification with the war effort. Bowen's fiction narrates wartime domestic interiors as places of twofold strangeness, terrains occupied by an alien and malevolent intelligence in which linear time collapses. Her uncanny houses undermine the dominant wartime narrative of heroic domestic endeavour, for Benedict Anderson's theory of the nation as "imagined community" assumes a particular notion of time: members of the nation have a sense of simultaneous lives continuing alongside their own, even if those fellow-members of the nation are merely imagined and never met. (Wasson, 2010: 27)

As she refused to endorse the official literary representation of the home, Elizabeth Bowen was inclined to subvert a series of cultural principles that shape human conception of domestic spaces and trigger, when broken, the reader's reaction:

Because spaces contain multiple cultural semantizations, they can function allegorically and/or metaphorically to expand the meaning of the narrative as a whole. They mediate our response to a text by suggesting schemas and scripts from our cultural memory and knowledge. The places where a narrative is set make possible an understanding of its larger import because places are heavily coded with associations from cultural memory [...] Because of their cultural codes and linkages with cultural memory, the visibility of places and settings is readily available for symbolic transfer. (Brosch, 2015: 100-101)

Clearly, Bowen's interpretation deviates from Bachelard's definition of the home as an oneiric space. For Bachelard, a home is a place experienced in both its virtual and real dimensions by means of thinking and daydreaming. Our experiences of the first place we consciously inhabit forge our individual conception of the home, which is at the same time inscribed in a broader cultural background common to all individuals. When we move somewhere else, we recreate this ideal by projecting on it our own understanding of the home space in order to feel comfortable and protected.¹¹

¹¹ Bachelard, 1994: 5-6.

As a result, “an entire past comes to dwell in a new house” (Bachelard, 1994: 5). The oneiric dimension of a home outlasts its own materiality and creates the illusion of belonging and stability for the dwellers, an illusion that vanishes in Bowen’s wartime houses.

1.2. “The Demon Lover”

“The Demon Lover” takes the lapse of a few evening hours in the life of Kathleen Drover, a middle-aged woman who, after having left for the countryside, is back in London under the excuse of recovering some personal objects from her shuttered house. Once in, she puzzles at a letter whose presence there borders on the supernatural. In the letter she is told to wait for someone who simply sings “K”. As the reader is to learn, “K” is an old soldier-lover of hers, presumed dead in World War I, who wants her to meet him at a non-specified hour that she is supposed to know. The letter confronts Mrs Drover with a traumatic experience of her youth, a binding promise she had made to the aforementioned lover on that very day twenty-five years before, on his being mobilised.¹² Finally, the ghostly lover emerges from the streets as a taxi-driver to take Mrs Drover back with him. The story is partially based upon and named after a Scottish ballad¹³ in which the Demon, after having been absent for seven years, returns to take his mistress back on the rights of a vow they had made. Although the woman is married and has two children — like Mrs Drover — she reluctantly agrees to leave with him. As they are heading to hell in a ship with no sailors, the Devil wrecks it and the lady drowns.

The opening sentence — which is a good example of Bowen’s stylistic condensation consubstantial to her mastery of the short narrative form — provides the reader with information about time, space, character and the justification of the action: “Towards the end of the day in London Mrs Drover went round to her shut-up house to look for several things she wanted to take away” (Bowen, 1999: 743). Temporality is likewise liminal: it is neither day nor night, but “towards the end of the day”, and the time of the year is “late August”, approaching the transitional moment between the

¹² About what young Kathleen promised, nothing is said in the text. In any case, Bowen’s “The Demon Lover” follows the classic plot of the lovers who, before the war separates them, swear fidelity to each other and promise to reunite once the war is over. The story finds its ancient source in the Greek myth of Troilus and Cressida, famously rewritten by Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare.

¹³ Ballads were a common source of inspiration for Gothic writers since the end of the eighteenth century (Kilgour, 2006: 4).

summer and autumn seasons. Mrs Drover's outfit subtly reminds the proximity of the autumn: "The pearls her husband had given her on their marriage hung loose round her now rather thinner throat, slipping in the V of the pin wool jumper her sister knitted last autumn as they sat round the fire" (1999: 745). Elizabeth Bowen felt inclined to set her wartime stories in the autumn or, at least, at a time close to it.¹⁴ In her essay "London, 1940", she reflects on this issue in a way that links the autumn to the domestic realm and the need for shelter:

Autumn seems a funny time to be bombed. By nature it is the hopeful start of the home year. The colours burning in the trees and weed-fires burning in the gardens ought to be enough. Autumn used to be a slow sentimental fête, with an edge of melancholy [...] In autumn, where you live touches the heart — it is the worst time not to be living anywhere. This is the season in which to honour safety. (1986: 23)

During the first autumn of the Blitz, London was raided for seventy-six consecutive nights (Ciment, ed., 2007: 785), leaving hordes of people unprotected when shelter was most needed. According to the temporal references provided by the narrator, Mrs Drover must have left her home around that time, for she still dwelled there when she was given the jumper, almost a year before her return in 1941 and exactly twenty-five years after she had seen her lover for the last time in 1916. The wave of destruction that shattered London during the hardest part of the Blitz parallels the biological cycle of nature, by virtue of which the autumn might be interpreted as a liminal season when the rhythm of nature slows down leading to the winter. Furthermore, several allusions are made to an unstable weather, a combination of sun and rain that creates a suffocating pathetic fallacy that nearly frames the action of the story, adding to the protagonist's state of anxiety: from the initial remark that "it had been a steamy showery day: at the moment the trees down the pavement glittered in an escape of humid yellow afternoon sun" (Bowen, 1999: 743) to the one near the end on Mrs Drover's departure: "the pavements steamily shone" (1999: 748).

At the beginning of the story, Mrs Drover crosses her former street, deserted because of the raids, where she feels estrangement instead of familiarity:

¹⁴ It is important to bear in mind that World War II broke out in late summer (September 1, 1939).

In her once familiar street, as in any unused channel, an unfamiliar queerness had silted up; a cat wove himself in and out of railings, but no human eye watched Mrs Drover's return. Shifting some parcels under her arm, she slowly forced round her latchkey in an unwilling lock, then gave the door, which has warped, a push with her knee. Dead air came out to meet her as she went in. (1999: 743)

Mrs Drover feels like a stranger “in her once familiar street”. The scene of her former daily life emanates an “unfamiliar queerness” which also permeates her home. At this point, the reader explicitly witnesses the oxymoronic combination that defines the uncanny — ‘familiar’/‘unfamiliar’ — at play in direct confrontation as part of the narrative. The use of words bearing the prefix “un-” strikes the eye in this passage — “unused”, “unfamiliar”, “unwilling”. The prefix translates the oxymoronic meaning of the term “uncanny” to the description of the narrative space, which inspires Mrs Drover a feeling of estrangement arising from a familiar source.

Shortly afterwards, Mrs Drover reaches her door, literally a threshold in the Latin sense of *limen*,¹⁵ the liminal passage *par excellence*. She crosses the threshold not into one of those oneiric spaces Bachelard spoke about, but into one of Bowen's wartime uncanny houses, dispossessed of its status of home. Mrs Drover finds the door hard to unlock, as if the lock — synecdoche for the house — were “unwilling” to let her in. The use of the term “unwilling” suggests the personification of the house as an autonomous entity endowed with its own existence, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter (cf. 9). The characterization of the house as a living being reinforces its uncanny nature, turning it into an alien entity whose stronger self-existence subjugates Mrs Drover's: it is the house that decides whether to let its owner in or not. Moreover, the fact that Mrs Drover has lost the touch of the lock symbolises her disconnection from the space that used to be her home, thus highlighting the uncanny and unfamiliar nature of the house. This tiny but significant gesture goes against Bachelard's definition of the home: “But over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years, [...] the feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands” (1994:15). We assume, following

¹⁵ “**Limen**: a threshold; the head piece or foot piece of a doorway, the lintel or the sill (*limen superum et inferum*)” (Lewis, 1988: 1066).

Bachelard, that Mrs Drover's inability to unlock the door symbolises a more significant loss: that of her home, as it ceased to be the space on which to project her past habits.

When Mrs Drover opens the door, the degree of "deadness" raises, for it is higher in the house than it was in the street: "dead air came out to meet her" (Bowen, 1999: 743). Bowen expands the pathetic fallacy by means of extending the dead and dehumanised urban atmosphere — "no human eye watched Mrs Drover's return" (1999: 743) — into the domestic sphere. Furthermore, the air coming out of the house as an exhalation might be reiterating the Gothic personification of the house as a breathing being.

As Mrs Drover makes her way in, more liminal elements are unveiled: "The staircase window having been boarded up, no light came down into the hall. But one door, she could just see, stood ajar, so she went quickly through into the room and unshuttered the big window in there" (Bowen, 1999: 743). Among the many elements making up the domestic space, the staircase is one of the most powerfully liminal, for it connects the house vertically from cellar to garret, allowing for a reading of the house's anatomy in terms of vertical polarity or opposition between upper and lower spaces. Bachelard believed cellars to be less rational spaces, related to darkness, fears, subterranean forces and obscure entities, while upper spaces are easily rationalised, for they are associated with the idea of shelter and protection provided by the roof.¹⁶ Actually, when Mrs Drover runs into the letter, whose presence on the hall table she is unable to explain by rational means, she rushes upstairs before even trying to open the envelope or taking a look at the writing: "She took the letter rapidly upstairs with her, without a stop to look at the writing till she reached what had been her bedroom, where she let in light" (Bowen, 1999: 744). It is perhaps the mysterious circumstances that surround the letter what urges her to look for a stable, well-lighted and more rational space to read it, as if she needed the house to assure her that the letter is real and not a product of her imagination.

Likewise, the liminal nature of windows is also significant. The view of a house whose windows have been boarded up is powerfully Gothic, a metaphorical coffin that contains and keeps dead air, dead memories and a dead past inside.¹⁷ Instead of

¹⁶ Bachelard, 1994: 17-29.

¹⁷ See the quotation in section 1.1 (9), in which Maud Ellmann refers to the Anglo-Irish as "coffined in their Big Houses".

providing the house with ventilation and illumination, they deprive it from receiving any living influence from outdoors, as membranes thickened to the point of being impenetrable. The lack of ventilation adds to, even more, creates the dead atmosphere of the house. Being deprived of their liminal nature, windows assume the function of boundaries separating, rather than connecting, inner from outer spaces. In addition, the fact that the owners had taken the trouble of nailing up the windows denotes a futile — though fiercely humane — attempt to fight the unstoppable forces of change, in some way connected to their need for stability and preservation of their past. Pointless as it might be, the act of boarding up the windows of a house that will probably be destroyed in the air raids answers to the dwellers' deeper instinct of conservation. They try to keep the space in which their memories are contained from being spoiled or looted, which would mean the fall and corruption of their past and the cut of the material thread that keeps them connected to their former lives.

Mrs Drover attempts in the following passage to retrieve her past from the traces left by the objects that have been removed from the room:

Now the prosaic woman, looking about her, was more perplexed than she knew by everything that she saw, by traces of her long former habit of life — the yellow *smoke-stained up*, the white marble mantelpiece, the ring *made* by a vase on the top of the *escritoire*; the bruise in the wallpaper where, on the door being thrown open widely, the china handle had always *hit* the wall. The piano, having gone away to be stored, *had left* what looked like *claw-marks* on its part of the parquet. Though not much dust had seeped in, each object wore a film of another kind; and, the only ventilation being the chimney, the whole drawing-room smelled of the cold hearth. (Bowen, 1999: 743. Italics are mine)

Mrs Drover feels perplexed as she witnesses the decayed remnants of a lifestyle she does not enjoy any longer. The objects that had been removed from the room are distinctively liminal, for they are still present as if it were *in absentia*. Being those objects neither present nor absent, the marks they left as well as the memories they evoked are floating on a sort of spectral dimension through which Mrs Drover's mind transits. The oxymoronic semantic component of the term “uncanny” is at play again, implied in the antithetical allusion to a series of absent presences. Moreover, the words highlighted in italics endow the objects evoked with a rising degree of activity

— “smoke-stained up”, “made”, “hit”, “left” — which borders on violence, as suggested by the “claw-marks” on the parquet. In addition, a connection is made between the terms “hearth” and “earth” in spelling — the former contains the latter — and because of the alliteration of the /θ/ sound [hɑ:θ]-[ɜ:θ], and also between “hearth” and “heart” [hɑ:θ]-[hɑ:t], almost identical in spelling and pronunciation. Such association reinforces the pathetic fallacy, for “cold hearth” is rather close to “cold heart” and “cold earth”, both bearing death and burial connotations. Elizabeth Bowen thus conceives the wartime house as a space markedly liminal, a sort of middle passage where past and present, physical absence and physical presence intermingle. It is this temporal overlapping what engenders the whole storyline in “The Demon Lover”.

It is important to take into account that the story is narrated by an extradiegetic — third-person — omniscient narrator, though focalised through Mrs Drover’s mind so, as readers, we tread the ground she treads and see what she sees.¹⁸ The protagonist is able to recall the missing objects by the marks they left, but no memories can be evoked from them, for they are not connected to an “actual” past tied to the objects’ materiality. Therefore, the story underscores the protagonist’s estrangement at her own house by going through a thorough enumeration of the marks on walls and floors left by the objects that have been removed from the house. The familiarity of these objects, which incarnated Mrs Drover’s former habits of life, would have been unquestionable before the war, but once they are gone, their remnants hint at the uncanny side of ordinary life.

The objects that remain in the room have undergone a similar process of estrangement from the familiarity they used to convey. For Mrs Drover, they wear “a film of another kind” (Bowen, 1999: 743) due to the dust that has sipped in the room, not a great amount but enough to alter the surface of the objects in comparison with how they used to look when clean. Slight physical changes have led to deeper changes affecting the emotional background of the objects. Consequently, the physical sphere of reality cannot be dissociated from the psychic as a source of *uncanniness*.

In light of the protagonist’s first reactions, it is clear that her past does not dwell the house any longer, which redounds in the loss of its familiarity. This is made evident

¹⁸ From now on, when alluding to technical notions concerning narratology, we will follow the nomenclature suggested in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Hühn, Peter, et al., hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn.

in the next quotation, from the moment immediately succeeding the flashback which I will discuss later on:

As things were — dead or living the letter-writer sent her only a threat. Unable, for some minutes, to go on kneeling with her back exposed to the empty room, Mrs Drover rose from the chest to sit on an upright chair whose back was firmly against the wall. The desuetude of her former bedroom, her married London home's whole air of being a cracked cup from which memory, with its reassuring power, had either evaporated or leaked away, made a crisis — and at just this crisis the letter-writer had, knowledgeably, struck. The hollowness of the house this evening cancelled years on years of voices, habits and steps. (Bowen, 1999: 747)

The image of the cracked cup,¹⁹ highlighted by the alliteration of the /k/ sound [krækt kʌp], is strongly liminal in its metaphorical representation of memory as a fluid leaking from its cracked container, which is the wrecked house, to the street. Spatial liminality is implied in the passage of the past from a domestic to a public domain, and its relevance to the plot is essential, because this liquid connection established between inner and outer spaces justifies the re-emergence of the lover from the streets as a taxi-driver, either as a product of Mrs Drover's hallucination or not. In case he is so, then both the lover and the letter must be read in an epistemological key as psychic projections of Mrs Drover's hallucination,²⁰ emphasised by the subjective point of view the narrator adopts upon Mrs Drover. In fact, Bowen might be suggesting Mrs Drover's mental instability in the phrase "cracked cup", almost homophonic with the phrasal verb "cracked up"²¹ in its past tense, due to the alliteration of the sounds /k/, /ʌ/ and /p/ [krækt kʌp]-[krækt ʌp]. On the contrary, if neither of those elements were construed as hallucinations, then one could argue for an ontological clash of two parallel worlds in "The Demon Lover", much in tune with the dominant mode in Postmodernism. This last interpretation might be used in defence of Elizabeth Bowen's liminal status as an

¹⁹ There is another allusion to cracked houses in the story "In the Square" (Bowen, 1999: 699).

²⁰ Bryan McHale ascribes hallucination to the epistemological dominant the modernists practiced in order to justify the introduction of fantastic elements in their narratives. In the following quotation, McHale discusses hallucination in relation to Leonard Michael's "Mildred": "the four characters have just dosed themselves with recreational drugs, so this examination and consumption of the womb could be a joint hallucination. (This reading, however, instead of accentuating actually neutralizes the ontological tension, shifting the problem into an epistemological key, so to speak.)" (2004: 137).

²¹ "Crack up: suffer an emotional breakdown under pressure" (Soanes and Stevenson, eds., 2005: 1890).

interstitial writer, as argued by Irene Iglesias,²² halfway in between modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. It goes beyond the scope of this essay to delve into considerations of such magnitude, however, even assuming those elements as hallucinations it would be too categorical to utterly deny the postmodernist element in Bowen's wartime fiction, for hallucinations reach peaks of exacerbation in the exceptional context of war, especially the letter, which seems to acquire physical corporeity.

In addition, the idea of fluency implies transition as well as loss, and so does the suggestion of a change of state — “evaporating” denotes dissipation and vanishing, as if memory were an evanescent entity. Besides, it perfectly connects physical damage with its emotional outcome. Maud Ellmann highlights the presence of “images of leakage and effluvia” (2004: 153) in Bowen's novel *The Heat of the Day*, which are used to portray a wartime reality that is permeable and fluent. Ellmann goes as far as stating: “This is a novel about leaks, about the porousness of architectural and psychic space, about the failure to keep secrets in, intruders out” (2004: 153). Apart from the cracked cup in the previous quotation, similar images can be seen in the story, as mentioned above in this chapter: “it had been a steamy showery day: at the moment the trees down the pavement glittered in an escape of humid yellow afternoon sun” (Bowen, 1999: 743) and then: “the pavements steamily shone as Mrs Drover let herself out by inches from her own front door into the empty street” (1999: 748). Bowen takes advantage of such images to construct a pathetic fallacy that enriches her narrative.

Elizabeth Bowen was fully aware of the link existing between furniture and past. Maud Ellmann states, in connection to Bowen's novel *The Death of the Heart*, that “the purpose of furniture is to remember” (2004: 142). This idea is incessantly beating underneath the surface of any of Bowen's wartime stories, and it is made evident in the quotation above. Ellmann refers to Bowen's furniture as a relic that embodies the transformation of matter into meaning. It bears an emotional baggage and has material corporeity, operating “as a synecdoche, rather than a metaphor, of time gone by, partaking of the very substance of the past” (2004: 142). Objects are endowed with meaning to the point of being essential to survive both physically and spiritually in the

²² Irene Iglesias argues for a “shift in focus from a modernist poetics [...] to a postmodernist one” in Bowen's fiction, in which “the greater coherence and cohesiveness of high modernism is weakened to the point of prefiguring a postmodern aesthetics” (2012: 56).

devastated wartime London. Bowen witnessed first-hand how Londoners tried to remove little pieces from the debris of their bombed houses, moved by a strong desire for conservation and stability:

People whose homes had been blown up went to infinite lengths to assemble bits of themselves — broken ornaments, odd shoes, torn scraps of the curtains that had hung in a room — from the wreckage. In the same way, they assembled and checked themselves from stories and poems, from their memories, from one another's talk. [...] Every writer during this time was aware of the personal cry of the individual. And he was aware of the passionate attachment of men and women to every object or image or place or love or fragment of memory with which his or her destiny seemed to be identified, and by which the destiny seemed to be assured. (1986: 97)

The attachment to mundane objects explains why Mrs Drover feels threatened by the emptiness of her bedroom, the most intimate part of her house and former centre of her conjugal life. She deliberately goes there in search for emotional support to read the letter, but the room fails to provide her with the reassuring power of memory she expected to find, for it is empty of furniture. The physical emptiness of the house denotes, consequently, a deeper emotional vacuum.

Through a decisive analepsis occurring in Mrs Drover's memory, the story moves backwards to the time when her farewell encounter with her lover took place, back in 1916. The flashback bridges the two major conflicts of the twentieth century, by means of which connection Elizabeth Bowen puts Mrs Drover face to face with a traumatic experience of the past that she did not fully overcome. It is the "return of the repressed", a theme of the highest relevance in Elizabeth Bowen's wartime fiction, of which "'The Demon Lover' stands as the brilliantly economical paradigm" (Corcoran, 2004: 158). We will approach this issue from the point of view of spatial liminality through the exploration of the concept of the "infected zone", a spatial frame where both temporal and spatial liminality operate at their highest level, for the flow of linear time is broken and the present revolves around the causes of old traumatic experiences.

Brian McHale defines the term "zone" as a type of heterotopia, that is, a space that accommodates many incommensurable and mutually exclusive worlds, a structure created by juxtaposing different worlds of incompatible architecture in which the law of

the excluded middle has been broken. As a result, a structure emerges that cannot be considered a world, for it breaks the basic rules of world-building.²³ Though concerned with postmodernist fiction, McHale's definition is useful as a starting point to understand the concept of the "infected zone", used by Sara Wasson to refer to Bowen's interpretation of the domestic space as a vanishing point where objects cease to convey memories and elements from the past and present merge horribly:

The idea that time is linear and memory is cumulative is challenged by a dreadful present, an "infected zone" where objects no longer trigger memories. The zone sees linear time challenged in two ways: objects are leached of their history and past merges horribly with present. The onset of war saw many writers produce nostalgic autobiography depicting the past as idyllic refuge but Bowen sees the past in more negative terms, less creatively productive than the present: 'there it stands, there it lies, mounting, extending, never complete'. In the 'infected zone' of the wartime fiction, the past contaminates the present. (2010: 122-123)

Past and present merge, indeed, at Mrs Drover's house, and there are also different spaces at play: that of her family house, where the episode narrated in the flashback takes place, and that other of her conjugal residence, "this quiet, arboreal part of Kensington" from where she evokes the former (Bowen, 1999: 746). Nevertheless, this last idea needs clarification, because these two spaces do not merge with each other, as it is common in postmodernist fiction, but rather the latter triggers the protagonist's invocation of the former, which emerges as a mental landscape. Mrs Drover's family house resides in her memory as part of her subjectivity, making the difference between Bowen's infected zone and the postmodernist zone, achieved by applying some of the rules of construction/deconstruction of spaces defined by McHale, which require an explicit or consummated spatial overlapping of some kind.²⁴

The outcome of Bowen's use of the infected zone as a technique for narrative world-building is, certainly, terrifying. Sara Wasson notices a clear connection between this recessive flow of time and the author's intention of subverting the idea of the "home front":

²³ McHale, 2004: 43-45.

²⁴ Namely: juxtaposition, interpolation, superimposition, and misattribution (McHale, 2004: 45-48).

Benedict Anderson argues that feeling part of a nation requires having a sense of stories unfolding simultaneously alongside one's own, a sense forged by newspapers and realist novels which construct narratives of simultaneous living. The nation is a unified collective moving through time, "a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history". Time is frozen, distorted or interrupted by the past. These disturbing interiors contradict the dominant home front rhetoric which constructs the domestic sphere as a place of triumphant collective labour. (2010: 122)

There is a clear spatial opposition between the lawn in the outside and the interior of the family house, emphasised by their contrasting illumination. While the former is dark and gloomy, the latter is warm and safe, as well as comfortably well-lit. The lugubrious lawn seems to embody Mrs Drover's fear of giving herself to a man who — she believes — will soon be dead, as inferred from the brief dialogue the two lovers maintain:

"You're going away such a long way."

"Not so far as you think."

"I don't understand?"

"You don't have to," he said. "You will. You know what we said."

"But that was — suppose you — I mean, suppose."

"I shall be with you," he said, "sooner or later. You won't forget that. You need nothing but wait."

Only a little more than a minute later she was free to run up the silent lawn. Looking in through the window at her mother and sister, who did not for the moment perceive her, she already felt the unnatural promise drive down between her and the rest of all human kind. No other way of having given herself could have made her feel so apart, lost and forsworn. She could not have plighted a more sinister troth. (Bowen, 1999: 746)

On the contrary, the drawing-room stands in the distance for the spatial projection of Kathleen's ideal of safety. There is room for consolation in there, provided by her mother and sister. To be at rest again, she must cross the garden, conveniently transformed into a liminal space, a sort of no-man's-land where she is left unprotected at the mercy of forces she cannot control:

Turning away and looking back up the lawn she saw, through branches of trees, the drawing-room window alight: she caught a breath for the moment when she could go running back there into the safe arms of her mother and sister, and cry: “What shall I do, what shall I do? He has gone.” (Bowen, 1999: 745-746)

Mrs Drover defines the vow she took as the most “sinister troth”²⁵ she could have plighted as well as an “unnatural promise”, to which she agreed only to be free to run home, but nothing is said about the promise itself. Young Kathleen could have agreed to marry the soldier on his return from the war.²⁶ Neil Corcoran argues that Kathleen could have sworn that either she would wait for her lover to return even if reported missing, or that she would follow the instructions specified in the letter and meet him at the hour arranged twenty-five years before in spite of believing him dead.²⁷

Actually, Mrs Drover does not remember their relationship to have been romantic at all: “He was never kind to me, not really. I don’t remember him kind at all. [...] He was set on me, that was what it was — not love” (Bowen, 1999: 748). Neil Corcoran regards the relationship between the two lovers as sadistic, as the next quotation confirms:

The young girl talking to the soldier in the garden had not ever completely seen his face. It was dark; they were saying goodbye under a tree. Now and then — for it felt, from not seeing him at this intense moment, as though she had never seen him at all — she verified his presence for these few moments longer by putting out a hand, which he each time pressed, without very much kindness, and painfully, on to one of the breast buttons of his uniform. (Bowen, 1999: 745)

His attitude towards her is certainly unloving and violent in a sadistic way. He hurts her hand and seems to remain in the distance on purpose to coerce her. Actually, she never gets to see his eyes, which is the same as not seen his soul — “as though she had never seen him at all”. Mrs Drover felt obliged to vow to him for some reason,

²⁵ Freud’s “The Uncanny” is usually translated into Spanish as “Lo Siniestro”. Actually, ‘sinister’ is one of the definitions of the term “uncanny” that Freud collects in his essay from dictionaries of various languages, in this case, from a French dictionary: “French: (Sacks-Villate). *Inquiétant, sinistre, lugubre, mal à son aise*” (1955: 221).

²⁶ “**Troth** 1: **pledge** (or **plight**) **one’s troth**: make a solemn pledge of commitment or loyalty, especially in marriage” (Soanes and Stevenson, eds., 2005: 1890).

²⁷ Corcoran, 2004: 161.

although she could not say what it was: “What did he do, to make me promise like that? I can’t remember — But she found that she could” (Bowen, 1999: 748). In fact, she felt overwhelmed by the situation to the point of desiring him already gone: “This was so near the end of a leave from France that she could only wish him already gone” (1999: 745). According to Corcoran, young Kathleen’s desire for sadistic pleasure was the reason that moved her to make such a promise. The critic bases his theory on the insistence with which Mrs Drover looks at the weal that one of the buttons of her lover’s uniform had left on her hand the night they said goodbye to each other: “she instinctively looked for the weal left by the button on the palm of her hand” (Bowen, 1999: 748). Corcoran interprets the weal as a “kind of erotic stigma, a token of her subjection to him” (2004: 162). Therefore, what the letter returned to Mrs Drover, according to Corcoran, was “her own long-repressed sexual desire” (2004: 162). The weal also resembles a stamp pressed against the woman’s body in order to seal the truth, which happens to be a startling image.

As mentioned in reference to the marks in walls and floors, traces are important liminal elements in the story. The weal in the passage above furthers the importance of the trace in relation to the organisation of events in “The Demon Lover”. Bennet and Royle observed the way in which traces structure events in Bowen’s *The House in Paris*, in which novel the “momentary effacement” of a mark left by a couple of lovers pressing their hands against the grass “is referred to a number of times as a complex figuration of the event, its consequences and the possibility of being known” (1995: 58). Although the trace is perishable, it has projection in time, so that “an event — holding hands — can become known by the consequences of another event”, producing “consequences — traces — through other events” (1995: 59). In *The House in Paris*, the trace works as a string passing through the beads of a chain of events. For instance, the trace foretells the birth of the offspring product of the night in which the couple made love: “If a child were going to be born, there would still be something that had to be [...] He would be the mark our hands did not leave on the grass” (Bowen, 1987: 153). In “The Demon Lover”, it is the weal left in Mrs Drover’s palm by a button on her lover’s uniform the trace that structures the chain of events from the moment of the lovers’ last farewell to the subsequent return of the demon lover, mediating twenty-five years between both: “She remembered with such dreadful acuteness that the twenty-five years since then dissolved like smoke and she instinctively looked for the weal left by

the button on the palm of her hand” (Bowen, 1999: 748). The moment of awareness when Mrs Drover realises that an event in the past can stain the future arises in her a sort of uncanny dreadfulness²⁸ — “dreadful acuteness” — that Karen, the protagonist of *The House in Paris*, also feels: “I should have to do what I dread” (Bowen, 1987: 153).

When the present of the story is resumed, Mrs Drover leaves her house and makes her way backwards through her former — once familiar — street:

The rain had stopped; the pavements steamily shone as Mrs Drover let herself out by inches from her own front door into the empty street. The *unoccupied* houses opposite continued to meet her look with their damaged stare. Making towards the thoroughfare and the taxi, she tried not to keep looking behind. Indeed, the silence was so intense — one of those creeks of London silence exaggerated this summer by the damage of war — that no tread could have gained on hers *unheard*. Where her street debouched on the square where people were living, she grew conscious of, and checked, her *unnatural* pace. Across the open end of the square two buses impassively passed each other: women, a perambulator, cyclists, a man wheeling a barrow signaled, once again, the ordinary flow of life. (Bowen, 1999: 749. Italics are mine)

This last episode parallels the opening of the story and reinforces its structural circularity. Mrs Drover crosses the same threshold or limen that had led her in, gliding passively streetwards: “Mrs Drover let herself out by inches from her own front door into the empty street”. Bowen transmits the impression that Mrs Drover is leaving an empty place for another, there being no sharp distinction implied in the transition between inner and outer spaces, as if both the house and the street were part of the same vacuum. She also revives the feeling of vulnerability from the farewell night at the lawn, once again compelled to cross in solitude a liminal passage that leads to the promise of a safer place — “towards the thoroughfare and the taxi”. Words bearing the prefix “un-” — “unoccupied”, “unheard”, “unnatural” — reappear in this passage, translating the oxymoronic meaning of the term “uncanny” to the description of the narrative space where Mrs Drover experiences again the feeling of estrangement arising from a familiar source. Her failure in the quest for re-enchantment with her past is

²⁸ “The subject of the ‘uncanny’ is a province of this kind. It is undoubtedly related to what is frightening — to what arouses dread and horror” (Freud, 1955: 219).

ultimately confirmed. Moreover, the personification of the other houses in the neighbourhood is suggested, furthering their Gothicism: “The unoccupied houses opposite continued to meet her look with their damaged stare” (Bowen, 1999: 749). Though empty, the street threatens Mrs Drover and observes her movements, so she feels compelled to look behind: “she tried not to keep looking behind” (1999: 749). The square, where the usual pace of ordinary life is restored, contrasts vividly with the desuetude of her devastated street — the term “debouch” suggests debauchery, as if life in the square were indulgent. The fact that Mrs Drover finally makes it to the taxi releases, momentarily, the growing tension generated by her approaching appointment since the church-bell was heard for the first time striking six: “Behind the blanked of the rain the clock of the church that still struck six — with rapidly heightening apprehension she counted each of the slow strokes” (1999: 745).

The taxi stands for Bowen’s reinterpretation of the ship the devil used to carry her lover away in the ballad.²⁹ It is the last liminal space in the story, merely transitional as any other means of transportation meant to be always on the move. It is also an enclosed, familiar and protective space where Mrs Drover expects to be carried away safely from her dreadful house. Unfortunately, the promise of Mrs Drover’s “true solace of release from apprehension” turns, in the last paragraph, into the apotheosis and consummation of her fears, as it becomes an “unfamiliar and claustrophobic” space where she “fatally commits herself to a driver ”who drives her to the unknown” (Corcoran, 2004: 162). They finally make eye contact, so Mrs Drover is at least able to infer his intentions, although the lover’s face remains occult: “Through the aperture driver and passenger, not six inches between them, remained for an eternity eye to eye” (Bowen, 1999: 749). Right afterwards, Mrs Drover is taken away in the taxi.

The ghostly lover embodies the return of the repressed, which finally materialises in a liminal space that is paradoxically familiar at the same time. The return bears both national and personal echoes. At an intimate level, it crystallises in Mrs Drover’s maturity young Kathleen’s “terrified panic before the persistent violence of this man, which she may once have desired, of which she is now in mortal dread” (Corcoran, 2004: 163). Mrs Drover is also dispossessed of her own self, driven off and

²⁹ "I have seven ships upon the sea, / the eighth brought me to land, / with four-and-twenty bold mariners, / and music on every hand" (www.eecs.harvard.edu/~keith/poems/demon.html).

at the mercy of this mysterious being, whose intentions towards her we ignore as much as we do about his own nature. Although the narrator is not conclusive in this respect, we are drawn to think of the driver as some kind of other-worldly being that incarnates “the otherness”, the unfamiliar — *unheimlich* — that intrudes in the realm of the familiar — *heimlich* —, which both the taxi and the house symbolise. Domestic spaces thus protect Mrs Drover against the unfamiliar: she had run to her house as a young girl in search for protection the same as she ran to the taxi when she realised that her house had lost its familiarity.

Reading Bowen’s story in broader national key, we may argue that it is not only Mrs Drover who is “intruded upon — and by someone contemptuous of her ways” (Bowen, 1999: 744), but also the whole British homeland at war against a foreign enemy. Significantly enough, the lover is a former soldier in World War I who symbolises “the culturally repressed which returns, with extreme violence, bringing death once more in its wake” (Corcoran, 2004: 164). He stands, as mentioned above, for the “otherness”, the foreign unfamiliar other that bursts violently into the familiar realm of the nation.

To conclude, “The Demon Lover” proves Elizabeth Bowen’s wartime houses to be liminal spaces marked by a Gothic element resulting from the influence, on the one hand, of the aesthetics of Gothic literature and, on the other, her own experience of the home space at both war and peace contexts. Bowen conceives wartime houses as cracked cups from which memory leaks out and merges with a dehumanised and devastated urban landscape. They are defamiliarised spaces, void of past and unhomey in their inability to accommodate familiar life and trigger memories. In addition, Bowen’s wartime houses are haunted by the return of repressed experiences — or desires —, which re-emerge to the surface in the shape of hallucinations that attempt to fill the blanks of a fragmented wartime reality. In these houses, displaced characters experience the uncanny, understood such experience as a cross-boundary process by virtue of which the subject transits a sort of spectral dimension in order to reconnect themselves with a past that personal objects and furniture are unable to convey. Memories swing in this dimension, the perception of linear time is suspended and physical boundaries are blurred. Traces are vital to allow the passage from physical to mere evocative existence in this story, but they fail as a means to access memory.

Finally, Bowen's wartime houses can be read in national key as the metaphoric representation of the falling national mythology they subvert.

Chapter 2: Illumination

This chapter explores Bowen's use of light as a major device for the creation of liminal spaces in her wartime fiction. I devote the following pages to observe, in the first place, how the author achieves the dilution of physical limits in London's urban landscape by taking advantage of the peculiar illumination of war, a combination of blackouts and moonlight. I will provide, for such purpose, a short preamble that frames Bowen's narrative use of illumination within the general literary context of the Urban Gothic of the Second World War in British wartime fiction. This will also help to clarify how the urban landscape, along with citizens' view upon it, were horribly reshaped under the light of war. I will also be dealing with the way in which this sudden and dramatic transformation triggers the passage from an empirical to a fantastic world in the story "Mysterious Kôr" as a means of compensation for a daily experience upon a traumatising wartime reality. Secondly, I will pay attention to the effects of urban illumination permeating the domestic sphere, also in relation to "Mysterious Kôr". Finally, an outline of my conclusions will close this chapter.

2.1. Under the Light of War

As a writer, Elizabeth Bowen had an eager interest in the way in which light can be affected by night:

All day — speaking for these islands — our tone of living is conditioned for us: rain-light, sunlight, penetrating fogginess, or a metallic sunlessness that lets nothing through. But after twilight, we can create circumstance. [...] We can arrange our lighting. We work like sculptors upon these blocks of pregnant darkness rooms have become. We can control shadow: place, check, and tone light. The response from a light-switch, the bringing in of a candle is acute, personal as a perception. (2008: 26)

The war hit London with a downpour of blackouts, fires, dense smoke curtains and emergency lightning, which thwarted such capacity to "create circumstance" in the dark. As a thorough observer of wartime reality, Elizabeth Bowen was fully aware of the effect that severe changes in illumination exerted upon urban and, extensively,

domestic spaces. Furthermore, devastation not only affected London's urban planning at an architectural level, but also changed the visual perception that Londoners had upon their city.

Sara Wasson states that "the blackout transformed even day light interiors into dark, claustrophobic chambers [...]" (2010: 105) and the peculiar illumination of war that canopied the city by night, transformed the urban battlefield into a sort of morbid visual spectacle:

Louis MacNeice admits that taking a stroll after one particular destructive air raid, he "could not help — at moments — regarding it as a spectacle", and he admires "the shifting pattern of water and smoke and flame... as subtle as the subtlest of Impressionist paintings". The blackout, too, produced visual marvels. Chiang Yee recalls, "I have often been out during the black-outs in order to find pleasure out of the darkness. The slender red, green and yellow crosses of the traffic lights never fail to thrill me" and photographer Bill Brandt is similarly enchanted by the blacked-out city, avering that "The darkened town, lit only by moonlight, looked more beautiful than before or since". (2010: 33)

As a result, the illumination of war offered new opportunities and original ways for the *flâneur* to interpret the city, who readapted to wartime reality. Charles Baudelaire modelled the figure of the *flâneur* in his poetry, whose origins are to be found in Monnier's physiologies and E. A. Poe's detective fiction. Walter Benjamin typified Baudelaire's portrayal of the *flâneur* as that of an urban wanderer who enjoys observing the intricate social fabric. As a hero detached from the mass, he has something of watchman and detective at the same time, and his original environment is the urban jungle of Paris, adapted by Baron Haussmann's planning to the necessities of the ambler: broad sidewalks, boulevards, gas and, eventually, electric lighting, etc., everything combined with the rise of department stores and the consolidation of the consumer society, which took private life outdoors. Cafes, news-stands and terraces were some of the stages from where the *flâneur* analysed and interpreted the city.³⁰

The female protagonist in "Mysterious Kôr", Pepita, might be taken as a wartime *flâneur* in the sense that she wanders the streets of London producing her own

³⁰ Benjamin, 2006: 66-96.

interpretation upon the urban landscape, though nothing she sees pleases her. Moonlight falls crudely on the ruinous, unfamiliar streets of London, leading Pepita's eyes straight to the outcomes of devastation in a sort of commercial fashion, like electric bulbs highlighting the shape of the goods on display in a store window to catch the eye of the *flâneur*.

Another war-phenomenon of the highest relevance is the blackout. Blackouts were officially introduced in the UK the day Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Conceived as a prophylactic measure, the point of the blackout was "to make it difficult for passing aircraft to identify their location by city lights" (Ciment, ed., 2007: 786). As air raids intensified from September 1940 onwards, blackouts became increasingly frequent in London, interrupting pre-war lifestyle and hardening the circumstances of everyday life in the city. For instance, transportation was so difficult in the dark that basic consumer goods, which had been rationed already, were even harder to find.³¹

In the UK, especially in London, people's confidence upon the nation's strength also suffered the consequences of the blackout: "The darkness, too, unsettled people's relationship with their city and capital. Pre-war urban illumination had become closely tied to rhetorics of nationhood" (Wasson, 2010: 34). As a major technological breakthrough, urban illumination was soon identified with the collective effort of a nation walking futurewards unitarily and unflawed. Sara Wasson provides some examples on how this achievement was soon related to national consciousness from advertisements of the time as, for instance, a bulb commercial that prayed: "'Mazda: The Nation's Light'" (2010: 35). The wreck of the public lightening system thus threatened national mythology at a public level, the same as the transformation of the home into a battlefield did at a private, domestic one. It must have been, for Bowen and her contemporaries, a shock to see their capital drowned in darkness for the first time in the history of public lightning, for they belonged to the first generation that assumed as natural the view that electric light offered upon the urban landscape: "Our century is light-conscious, as was no other" (Bowen, 2008: 42), of which "Mysterious Kôr" gives good example.

³¹ Ciment, ed., 2007: 934.

2.2. “Mysterious Kôr”

The story takes the lapse of a night in the lives of a couple, Pepita and Arthur, and the former’s flatmate, Callie. It opens with the lovers wandering the streets of London with “no destination but each other” (Bowen, 1999: 822). They are bound to spend the night at a narrow flat Pepita shares with Callie, a prudish young girl she dislikes who refused to leave the place for the night. Pepita is unwilling to go there because she longs for privacy to spend the night with her boyfriend, a soldier on leave. As they walk the devastated and deserted streets, Pepita lays down a bridge between London and Kôr, the mythical kingdom in H. Rider Haggard’s *She: A History of Adventure*. The notion of liminality is already detectable in the very intertextual nature of the tale and crystallises in the passage from one narrative space to the other. The moon, only source of illumination for both London and Kôr, enables such passage.

Bowen’s ability to exploit the possibilities of moonlight as a creator of liminal spaces is already apparent in the story’s opening paragraph:

Full moonlight drenched the city and searched it; there was not a niche left to stand in. The effect was remorseless: London looked like the moon’s capital — shallow, cratered, extinct. It was late, but not yet midnight; now the buses had stopped the polished roads and streets in this region sent for minutes together a ghostly unbroken reflection up. The soaring new flats and the crouching old shops and houses looked equally brittle under the moon, which blazed in windows that looked its way. The futility of the black-out became laughable: from the sky, presumably, you could see every slate in the roofs, every whited kerb, every contour of the naked winter flowerbeds in the park; and the lake, with its shining twists and tree-darkened islands would be a landmark for miles, yes, miles overhead. (Bowen, 1999: 821)

The first words in this story, “full moonlight”, state firmly the importance of moonlight in the description of spaces. Shortly after that, Pepita quotes the following lines from Andrew Lang’s sonnet “She”, dedicated to his friend H. Rider Haggard and inspired by his novel, in which Kôr is also described as a moonlit city: “Mysterious Kôr thy walls forsaken stand, / Thy lonely towers beneath a lonely moon —” (Bowen, 1999: 822). Moonlight is thus introduced as a connector that enables the passage from one spatial frame to the other. The fact that Elizabeth Bowen decided to access Kôr through

an indirect quotation instead of going straight to the source — Haggard's *She* — reinforces the connection between both spaces, for it provides the identification with a necessary nexus. In addition, the quotation furthers the liminal nature of the text, for it adds another layer of intertextuality to its literary framework.

Moonlight creates, from the opening passage onwards, a strong connection between both cities not only in terms of space, but also at a temporal level. London, for instance, is said to look like “the moon's capital” for it is a capital flooded in moonlight, but also because it is a sort of wasteland resembling the lunar surface: “shallow, cratered, extinct” (Bowen, 1999: 821). The omniscient third-person narrator describes London's urban landscape as “extinct”, whereas Pepita thinks of Kôr as a city without a past: “I think of it all the time — a completely forsaken city, as high as cliffs and as white as bones with no history —” (Bowen, 1999: 822), which is “not really anywhere” (1999: 823). Actually, Bowen refers to Kôr in the “Postscript” to the American edition of *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* as “a pure abstract empty timeless city” (1986: 96). The identification of London with Kôr implies, consequently, the suspension of the linear flow of time and reversion to a stage in which war cancels history. Nothing in London moves either backwards or forwards, but remains in an odd stiffness, the same as in Kôr, a city drenched in its own timelessness. Then, Pepita refers to Kôr in the following terms: “Mysterious Kôr — ghost city” (Bowen, 1999: 822), alluding to the eerie hues — typically Gothic — that also dye London's night, giving them both an air of dehumanization and arrested time: “now the buses had stopped the polished roads and streets in this region sent for minutes together a ghostly unbroken reflection up” (1999: 821).

As the passage unfolds, the light that shines from London's moon reveals itself as a force unkind and even hostile to the lovers, unwantedly searching and suffocating; it drenches and searches the city and seems to plot secretly against them, leaving no private nook for the couple to stand out of its omnipresent sight: “you could see every slate in the roofs, every whited kerb, every contour of the naked winter flowerbeds in the park” (Bowen, 1999: 821). Its impact upon London is described as “remorseless” (1999: 821). As a projectile hitting the ground, it emphasises the outcomes of destruction and proves futile human efforts to palliate devastation: “The futility of the black-out became laughable” (1999: 821).

Then the passage underscores the liminal power of illumination: “The soaring new flats and the crouching old shops and houses looked equally brittle under the moon, which blazed in windows that looked its way” (Bowen, 1999: 821). The city looks homogeneously ruinous and fragile under the moonlight. This catastrophic levelling exemplifies the failure of public lighting to reinforce the mythology of the British nation. The aesthetics of public lighting was conceived to offer a magnificent view upon the city, exploded for propagandistic purposes in order to highlight the glories of the past and praise modernity in the shape of monuments and new buildings. Those were conveniently silhouetted by the light, hence individualised from one another. There is not such delimitation of spaces in “Mysterious Kôr”.

London is portrayed as the devastated heart of an imperial nation on the verge of being defeated, reduced to an undifferentiated mass of ruins that fails to provide its citizens with symbols that underpin their falling imperial confidence. It is in this sense that the three literary works — Bowen’s, Haggard’s and Lang’s — are connected according to Laura Lojo Rodríguez, for Bowen shared Haggard’s concerns about destruction and imperial crisis,³² which Lang had actualised in his sonnet by inserting his own evaluation of *She*:

Like Haggard and Lang, Bowen produced “Mysterious Kôr” in years marked by a profound sense of crisis and disenchantment which, in Bowen’s case, was enhanced by the horrors of the Blitz War in London. Haggard, Lang, and Bowen articulate their respective narratives as a literary response to such disenchantment, shaped as a quest-myth of ‘re-enchantment’ which departs from a civilization on the verge of collapse to a mythical destination. (2014: 1)

“Mysterious Kôr” thus brings former Victorian fears of invasion and imperial disintegration to a contemporary context:

³² It was Ayehsa’s plan — the female sovereign in Haggard’s *She* — to marry one of the characters and travel to England in order to usurp Queen Victoria’s throne. Bowen recalls the following passage from the novel in her reflections on *She*: “Marriage to Leo, and return to England to take over the government of that country was her programme. Says Leo: ‘But we have a queen already.’ ‘It is naught, it is naught. She can be overthrown!’” (Bowen, 1986: 249).

Bowen's "Mysterious Kôr" also lays bare the anxiety of foreign invasion and eventual annihilation: the 1940s witnessed to the revival of older Victorian fears in the face of London's destruction, which functioned as a synecdoche for the disintegration of Imperial Britain. (Lojo, 2014: 7)

Bowen turns her eyes to Kôr under such critical circumstances, and so does Pepita. Kôr is one of those "fantasies of perfect worlds", as Maud Ellmann calls them (2004: 51), populating Bowen's wartime fiction. Kôr's nature is fantastic and mythical, expanding the scope of the story's liminal setting. There is not only a flow of spaces, but also a trans-dimensional flow between the empirically-based London and the mythical Kôr, which is only accessible through fantasy. Behind this fantasy hides the protagonist's arduous quest for compensation. It is the feeling of disenchantment, to which Laura Lojo refers in the quotation above, what Pepita tries to compensate for. In fact, disenchantment is a key concept in this story as well as in the sonnet "She": "*The world is disenchanted*", quotes Pepita from Lang's poem (Bowen, 1999: 823). It is not, however, escapism what triggers fantasies in Bowen's wartime fiction, but a stronger instinct of survival that impels characters to preserve their sanity and regain control over reality: "to survive, not only physically but spiritually, was essential", asserts Bowen in the "Postscript" to the American edition of *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1986: 97), in which she discusses more thoroughly the idea of the "compensatory fantasy":

The hallucinations in the stories are not a peril; nor are the stories studies of mental peril. Hallucinations are an unconscious, instinctive, saving resort on the part of the characters: life, mechanized by the controls of wartime, and emotionally torn and impoverished by changes, had to complete itself in some way. It is a fact that in Britain, and especially in London, in wartime many people had strange deep intense dreams [...] dreams by night, and the fantasies — these often childishly innocent — with which formerly matter-of-fact people consoled themselves by day were compensations. (1986: 96)

The mythical kingdom of Kôr fills the gap that a disturbing lack of certainties had left in Pepita. It helps her to cope with the daily experience of war by putting together again the pieces of a fragmented wartime reality, and works as her own indestructible landmark within a destructible world:

The search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world led many down strange paths. The attachment to these when they had been found produced small worlds-within-worlds of hallucination — in most cases, saving hallucination. (1986: 96-97)

Kôr is a certainty for Pepita, so much so that she imagines the strength of its walls in opposition to the weakness of London's ruins: "it's very strong; there is not a crack in it anywhere for a weed to grow in; the corners of stones and the monuments might have been cut yesterday, and the stairs and arches are built to support themselves" (Bowen, 1999: 823). Shortly afterwards, she refers to Kôr as "the one city left: the abiding city" (1999: 823).

As a fantasy, Kôr also satisfies Pepita's need for privacy to relieve her sexual frustration, which arises from Callie's refusal to leave the flat. Deserted as she imagines it to be, Kôr emerges as a place for the lovers alone:

"But to think about Kôr *is* to think about you and me."

"In that dead place?"

"No, ours — we'd be alone here." (Bowen, 1999: 824)

There Pepita could experiment sexuality at its full and satisfy Arthur's proposal of populating Kôr, free from the repressing moral that Callie embodies:

"I don't know about 'next', but I do know what we'd do first."

"What, Arthur?"

"Populate Kôr." (Bowen, 1999: 824)

A connection is made between Haggard's original depiction of Kôr and Bowen's later interpretation of it, which works as a mental landscape to compensate for the repressing western attitude against female sexuality.³³ In *She*, the exploration of Kôr, an unspoiled realm lost in the heart of Africa, bears the nineteenth-century load of erotic fascination for exploring and colonising, giving loose rein to the fantasies of the coloniser in exotic and exuberantly sexual places, free from the metropolis' restrictive laws and moral codes. Pepita wants to get rid of the restrictions imposed upon sexuality she suffers in wartime London and flee for the unknown, the mysterious Kôr she

³³ Lojo, 2014: 13-16.

fancies. Sexual neurosis and war are, consequently, related by means of literary referentiality that, according to Neil Corcoran, “complexly intricates human sexuality, and more particularly sexual neurosis, and war” (2004: 153). That implies the existence of liminal spaces, because intertextual references materialise in the spatial transition from London to Kôr.

Pepita’s words in the quotation above complete the process of identification between London and Kôr: “we’d be alone here” (Bowen, 1994: 824). Nevertheless, I still prefer not to talk of a factual mixture of worlds as in postmodernist fiction, for such identification is, in “Mysterious Kôr”, product of Pepita’s fantasy with which she — and the story — invests the city in ruins with a layer of power and coherence. Pepita is well aware of the fact that she is fantasising, therefore she deliberately furthers the liminal nature of London. Her words puzzle Arthur, who blames the time they had spent in the Underground for her confusion, as if the entrance to the tube station were a sort of trans-dimensional gate, a liminal passage connecting two different ontological planes. To such connection contributes the fact that they had lost track of time down there:

“What, you mean we’re there now, that here’s there, that now’s then?” [...] “You ought to know the place, and for all I could tell you we might be anywhere: I often do have it, this funny feeling, the first minute or two when I’ve come up out of the Underground.” (Bowen, 1999: 824)

Visual terms also permeate the description of the urban acoustic atmosphere, creating a sort of inter-sensory liminality or liminality of the senses that extends the scope of spatial liminality from the visual to the acoustic dimension of space: “However, the sky, in whose glassiness floated no clouds but only opaque balloons, remained glassy-silent” (Bowen, 1999: 822).³⁴

Bowen exploits synaesthesia to achieve an effect of acoustic corporeity, intensified by the contrast between the transparency of the sky and the opacity of the balloons. This is a silence of menace that announces future air raids after a period of misleading tranquillity,³⁵ thus testing the composure of the Londoners in a way that

³⁴ Balloon barrages were used to prevent enemy bombers from flying at a low height, so they missed their target (Ciment, ed., 2007: 786, 1068). They ruled London’s sky during the Blitz, changing drastically the urban landscape. In this passage they contribute to intensify the air of hovering menace.

³⁵ Lojo, 2014: 9.

resembles the time preceding the raids, popularly known as the “Phoney War”, when pre-war anxiety spread confusion and hysteria all over.³⁶ In order to put this dense atmosphere into words, Bowen describes a thick and heavy silence that is almost visible: “Something more immaterial seemed to threaten, and to be keeping people at home. This day between days, this extra tax, was perhaps more than senses and nerves could bear” (Bowen, 1999: 821).

Elizabeth Bowen lived the interstitial period of calm between the most intense Blitz and the “Little Blitz”. It is even probable that she wrote “Mysterious Kôr” at some point during that period.³⁷ In any case, her ardent interest in describing the mechanisms of wartime life would have led her to make visible the acoustic atmosphere of general hysteria that swamped London in those days.

Later in the story, a turning point is reached marked by a change in focalisation and space. The lovers have finally given up wandering and the spatial frame has shifted to the little flat Pepita shares with Callie, who the narration is focalised through. The space is markedly liminal at both visual and acoustic levels, what increases Pepita’s anxiety, for she is definitely compelled to give up her hopes for privacy. Pepita falls out of touch almost completely with the world outdoors, being pushed away from Kôr. The flat stands for her physical and moral incarceration.

At a visual level, moonlight keeps working as a connection between the world indoors and the one outdoors, a nexus between the domestic world of darkness and moral repression and Kôr, the promise of Pepita’s relief. In spite of Callie’s efforts to keep the flat in darkness, piercing beams of overflowing moonlight seep in her bedroom: “blue-white beams overflowed from it [the outside], silting, dropping round the edges of the muffling black-out curtains” (Bowen, 1999: 827). Callie feels uncomfortable with the light coming in: “she did not like sleeping so close up under the glass” (1999: 827), and shows her preference for darkness: “Wanting to savour darkness herself, Callie reached out and put off her bedside lamp” (1999: 827).

In like manner, sharing her bed with Pepita is, for Callie, a sacrifice she affirms would have preferred not to make, for she needs to be protected from physical contact:

³⁶ Brayley, 2005: 26-27.

³⁷ “Mysterious Kôr” was published in 1945 and added to the American edition of *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*. The stories were written between the spring of 1941 and the late autumn of 1944 (Bowen, 1986: 94).

This sharing of her bed with another body would not be the least of her sacrifice to the lovers' love; tonight would be the first night — or at least, since she was an infant — that Callie had slept with anyone. Child of sheltered middle class household, she had kept physical distances all her life. (Bowen, 1999: 827)

Furthermore, she makes efforts in order to avoid trespassing Pepita's side of the bed: "Now she got in and lay rigidly on the bed's inner side, under the hanging hems of the window curtains, training her limbs not to stray to what would be Pepita's half" (Bowen, 1999: 827).

Callie believes in her moral superiority and feels that it is her duty to preserve it, even if that means to take advantage of her authority over Pepita as the proprietor of the flat. The imposition started from the very moment she refused to leave the apartment, although she was perfectly aware of the fact that to stay would mean to be playing gooseberry with the couple: "it wouldn't be proper, would it, me going off and leaving just you and Arthur; I don't know what your mother would say to me [...] I shall not mind playing gooseberry, really, dear" (Bowen, 1999: 827). When a searching moonbeam leaks in through a gap the curtains had left uncovered, Callie takes it as a threat to the values she endorses, what scares her: "A searchlight, the most powerful of all time, might have been turned full and steady upon her defended window [...] Once gained by this idea of pressure she could not lie down again" (1999: 828).

Callie enjoys taking "a proprietary pride in Arthur" (Bowen, 1999: 826) and she contents herself with reflecting the love of the others: "Sharing the flat with Pepita [...] she had been content with reflecting the heat of love" (1999: 826). However, at the same time she refuses to experiment, she feels attraction to the light that illumines Pepita's side of the bed, as tempted by her roommate's rebellious attitude to sexuality: "Her half of the bed was in shadow, but she allowed one hand to lie, blanched, in what would be Pepita's place. She looked at the hand until it was not her own" (1999: 828). Neil Corcoran states that Callie feels attraction for Pepita as a woman. The image of Callie's illumined hand lying on Pepita's side of the bed is certainly striking, and the moonlight might be lighting up the truth about Callie's desire. A part of Callie's body crosses a limen or boundary pushed forward by an irrepressible desire she fails to acknowledge. Corcoran regards her attempts to approach Pepita as "intimations of a perturbedly unselfknowing lesbian sexuality" (2004: 157), a theory that is reinforced at

the end of the story when, after having talked to Arthur in the dark, Callie feels comforted by the heat Pepita's body irradiates: "A certain amount of warmth had travelled between the sheets from Pepita's flank, and in this Callie extended her sword-cold body" (Bowen, 1999: 834). Corcoran's theory might explain Callie's cruel attempts to prevent Pepita from making love with Arthur — notice the homophony Callie/callous: ['kæli]-['kæləs] — as well as her conservatism, for it might be the case that she was trying to hide a divergent sexuality from the public eye under a veil of morality. Moonlight being reflected upon the bed builds a wall that divides both moral worlds, a boundary that Callie fleetingly crosses. Her efforts to keep her bedroom in darkness are proved to be futile, for light always finds its way in. It was Bowen's believe that "Light has something saving about it, like pure water. And it does enter; nothing can keep it out" (2008: 42). Hence Pepita would not be the only character in need for relieving her sexual frustration, since Callie would suffer from (self-)repressing her sexual appetites.

The architectural distribution of the flat — Callie's tacit accomplice — also contributes to Pepita's moral castration and suggests the dismemberment of the old Victorian splendour:

In this flat you could hear everything: what was once a three-windowed Victorian drawing-room had been partitioned, by very thin walls, into kitchenette, living-room, Callie's bedroom. The living-room was in the centre; the two others open off it. What was once the conservatory, half a flight down, was now converted into a draughty bathroom, shared with somebody else on the girl's floor. (Bowen, 1999: 826)

The walls, thin partitions that let the sound go through from one room to another, do not give the lovers a chance for private conversation. Moreover, the fact that the bathroom is draughty suggests that Callie's flat is not properly detached, which reinforces the liminal atmosphere of the space, where the lack of privacy makes of the lover's relationship a matter of public domain.

In conclusion, spatial liminality, closely related to the story's intertextual nature, allows us to see how the mechanisms of compensation for the traumatic experience of life in wartime London — the saving hallucination — work in Bowen's short fiction of the war years, in this case, aimed to lower the psychological pressure caused by the

characters' unresolved sexual frustration. Furthermore, Bowen's expertise in the use of illumination also works as a means to represent her concerns upon the uncertain post-war future of the British nation, confronted with the return of old Victorian fears regarding the apocalyptic loss of its colonial power.

Chapter 3: Wilderness Invading the Urban Landscape

Chapter 3 is devoted to the analysis of liminal spaces where destruction and abandonment triggered the paradoxical — and even exuberant — bloom of wildlife out of the ruins of war. This chapter completes the analysis of the effects of war on the urban landscape initiated in Chapter 2, and how those affect characters and threaten national mythologies. For such purpose, I will first provide a short introduction to this phenomenon in relation to the Urban Gothic of the Second World War. I will then proceed to analyse these picturesque spaces in more depth by discussing Bowen's story "Ivy Gripp'd the Steps". Finally, I will outline my conclusions to this chapter.

3.1. A Gothic Nature

Among the many outcomes of the bombing over London was a rush of wildlife into the urban landscape that took place almost unnoticed, creating interesting liminal spaces where vegetation and small animals emerged from the ruins and mixed with them.³⁸ Many Londoners wondered about the origins of this phenomenon, astonished by its rapid proliferation:

The great fire raid of 29 December 1940 almost annihilated the central City in a blaze which has been described as the closest Britain ever came to the firestorms of Dresden and Hamburg, and by 1944, the wreckage was overgrown with flowers, and deer and hens were taking refuge in the ruins. R.S. Fitter and J.E. Lousley saw "the profusion of wild flowers, birds and insects to be seen on the bombed sites of the city is now one of the sights of London," [...] The wonder receiving most comment was the plenitude of blossom. H.V. Morton marvels, "The speed with which vegetation draped itself over the bomb damage surprised many people. Where did the flowers come from? [...] Had the seeds always been blowing about, but had they been unable, in that wilderness of stone, to

³⁸ The church of St Dunstan-in-the-East, London, is perhaps the most paradigmatic example abiding. The church was seriously damaged in the Blitz of 1941 and it was decided in the year 1967 to turn it into a public garden. It finally opened its doors in 1970. The garden stands as a curious example of wildlife emerging out of the ruins, conveniently arranged for recreational purposes. (www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/city-gardens/visitor-information/Pages/St-Dunstan-in-the-East.aspx).

find anywhere to germinate and grow?” Churches, printers’ shops, antique stores and entire streets became wilderness. (Wasson, 2010: 6)

The savage transformation of the urban landscape was tied to a sense of disintegration and eventual collapse of the western civilization.³⁹ It implied the fear of regression to a more primitive state in evolution, when humans lost control over nature and were forced to live undifferentiated from any other animal. Consequently, Gothic presentations of racial degeneration were further confirmed. The fear of nature regaining the urban landscape evinced the weakness of human attempts to endure and resist the passage of time. An example of this can be seen in “Ivy Gripped the Steps”, in which story an uncontrolled wilderness devours the protagonist’s past along with the last remnants of a whole era of splendour in British history. That is the Edwardian Era (1901-1914), whose downfall came with the outbreak of World War I. Embodied in the figure of Queen Victoria’s eldest son, Edward VII (1841-1910), it was famously defined by Samuel Hynes as a “leisurely time when women wore picture hats and did not vote, when the rich were not ashamed to live conspicuously, and the sun really never set on the British flag” (1968: 12). Hynes’ words identify the Edwardian ideal of splendour with colonial power and the rule of a wealthy, aristocratic and male elite that settled on the standard for social prestige and whose company pleased the king very much.

Despite the luxurious lifestyle of the upper classes and the situation of — relative — economic and political stability that Britain enjoyed at that time, the reign of Edward VII was also marked by the outbreak, in 1905, of the militant phase of women’s suffragist movement, the rise of the Labour Party in the general election of 1906, and the increase of industrial unrest, which brought along with it frequent strikes and millionaire losses.⁴⁰ It was a time of deep changes in the UK which would eventually debouch into the atrocities of the First World War. In this tale, Bowen gives proof of the inability of the Edwardian generation, epitomised by Mrs Nicholson and the grotesque Admiral Concannon, to adapt to the new order.

³⁹ Wasson, 2010: 5-7.

⁴⁰ Cannon, ed., 2002: 333.

3.1. “Ivy Grippled the Steps”

“Ivy Grippled the Steps” is contemporarily set in September 1944, close to the end of World War II, although the story is, in its greater part, a flashback that goes back to the time preceding the outburst of World War I. Its protagonist, Gavin Doddington, takes a leave to visit the coastal town of Southstone, right after the government lifted the prohibition of visiting coastal areas, which had been declared as war zones of mandatory evacuation: “The decline dated from the exodus of 1940, when Southstone had been declared in the front line [...] The lifting of the ban on the area had, so far, brought few visitors in” (Bowen, 1999: 773).⁴¹ Gavin, defined by Neil Corcoran as “a middle-aged, deeply isolated, and, it is implied, voyeuristic and alcoholic” (2004: 151),⁴² returns to behold the scene of the “Edwardian episode that has crippled his faculty for love” (Bowen, 1986: 97).

Such scene is the old majestic house where he used to spend short holiday spells as a child. The house belonged to Mrs Nicholson, an old acquaintance of Gavin’s mother and the object of his earliest passion, an episode that Corcoran defines as “a kind of seduction and a kind of betrayal by a middle-aged woman” (2004: 151). At that time, Mrs Nicholson was a widow who maintained an affair with Mr Concannon, an admiral who desperately pursued his last chance to acquire military glory, which he would eventually find at the expense of his own life. Abandoned, ruined and half-covered by a mighty ivy-plant which is exuberantly in fruit, the big house stands for the last remnants of both an extinct era of splendour in the history of the UK and the experience that had traumatised Gavin, turning him into a “cynically manipulative serial seducer” (Corcoran, 2004: 156) who “had not often set off on a holiday unaccompanied” (Bowen, 1999: 775).

⁴¹ According to Brayley (2005: 25-27), people from large industrial cities and coastal towns in the east of England were evacuated in mass to the countryside from the last months of 1939 onwards as part of the preparations for war.

⁴² Gavin’s alcoholism helps to articulate the story’s narrative frame. The extensive flashback which constitutes the text’s main body, starts when Gavin leaves a bar and ends with him intending to go back to one: “The idea of this as a pilgrimage revolted him: he remained in the bar till the bar closed” (Bowen, 1999: 775). “Should he go straight to the station, straight back to London? Not while the impression remained so strong. On the other hand, it would be a long time before the bars opened” (1999: 799). It is suggested that Gavin turns to alcohol to forget about his past, as well as to deny the true reasons for his comeback to Southstone. Also his voyeuristic facet connects him with the urban *flâneur*, as far as this comparison can be sustained, being him in a small town rather than in a large, cosmopolitan city.

We are told in the opening paragraphs about some properties that have been “requisitioned” and some others that “stayed empty” (Bowen, 1999: 773), but all of them have been abandoned, thus left unprotected against the homogenization of the urban landscape by a rush of wildlife that blurs its features and dissipates the air of social distinction that used to characterise Southstone as a resort for the upper classes, turning it into an unrefined, wild landscape. The front gardens have become a mass of “overgrowth” crashed by fallen “portions of porches or balustrades” (Bowen, 1999: 773). Vegetation even started to devour the memory of war, going over “the tangles of rusty barbed wire” that dye the grass and “the concrete pyramids” sunk into the soil and covered-up by the leaves the chestnuts dropped, standing everything as the last remnants of the fear for an invasion that never took place (1999: 773).

The story begins with the description of a liminal space that epitomises the wild transformation of the urban landscape. It revolves around the ivy, first word in this opening passage, in a way that reminds how moonlight was introduced in “Mysterious Kôr” (cf. 34):

Ivy gripped and sucked at the flight of steps, down which with such a deceptive wildness it seemed to be flowing like a cascade. Ivy mattered the door at the top and amassed in bushes above and below the porch. More, it had covered, or one might feel consumed, one entire half of the high, double-fronted house, from the basement up to a spiked gable: it had attained about half-way up to the girth and more than the density of a tree, and was sagging outward under its own weight. (Bowen, 1999: 772)

In spite of the fact that Southstone is not the large city of London, nor is the house ruined by direct effect of the raids, it can be seen in the description of the ivy that Bowen was concerned with the wild transformation of the urban landscape. Unlike the stories that are set in London, in which the effects of the raids take precedence over the rest, in “Ivy Gripped the Steps” the bombing remains in the background: “there were no complete ruins; no bomb or shell had arrived immediately here, and effects of blast, though common to all of Southstone, were less evident than desuetude and decay” (Bowen, 1999: 773). It is implied that the physical desertion of the town as well as the abandonment of a whole lifestyle caused the calamitous state of the house and favoured the rush of wildlife out of its ruins.

Words like “sucked” and “consumed” highlight the voracity of the plant, more than a tree in density, which even bends at its own weight. There is something brutal and abnormal in its fecundity, as if nature were pushing out fiercely all traces of humanity by feeding, through sterile bricks and stones, on the past that dwells the house:

To crown all, the ivy was now in fruit, clustered over with fleshy pane green berries. There was something brutal about its fecundity. It was hard to credit that such a harvest could have been nourished only on brick and stone. Had not reason insisted that the lost windows must, like their fellows, have been made fast, so that the suckers for all their seeking voracity could not enter, one could have convinced oneself that the ivy must be feeding on something inside the house. (Bowen, 1999: 722)

Neil Corcoran regards Gavin’s revisiting Southstone as a “‘retour’ [...] in which, far from annihilating his past, which might have been his expectation of this return, he is himself annihilated by it” (2004: 153). Gavin’s trip to Southstone is, indeed, a “tour of annihilation” (Bowen, 1999: 799), for it is also his past, closely tied to the house, what the ivy feeds on.

The ivy might be read, on the one hand, as the representation of Gavin’s sexual thwarting, which he had been dragging from his early childhood and finally flowed, in his maturity, into the sexual neurosis that consumes him: “the ivy of the story’s title grips the steps of the house in which Gavin came to painful knowledge of adult sexual behaviour just as the poisonous ivy of that knowledge has gripped his own sexuality since” (Corcoran, 2004: 156). Gavin’s frustration is also related to the tight connection existing in this story between the two World Wars, what leads us back to the theme of the “return of the repressed”. Corcoran noticed that “the entrapments of sexuality, and the obsessional return to its sources, are accompanied by reminders of, or returns to, the First World War” (2004: 156). Such connection keeps the first conflict beating underneath the surface of the second, in the same way that the origins of Gavin’s sexual neurosis persist in his maturity, as suggesting that “the culture itself, as well as individual psychologies, is trapped in a repetitive or serial pattern: the ‘affair’ of war is made to rhyme with the ‘affair’ of sex” (Corcoran, 2004: 157). The return of the repressed shatters Gavin’s capacity to overcome traumas of his past. Hence, past and

present meet at the house, a liminal space in which cultural history and Gavin's personal story entangle.

On the other, the ivy might be read in key of a broader national context with universal repercussions that involve Gavin. World War II put the UK on the verge of losing its imperial glory, embodied in this almost-extinct Edwardian house that the ivy — metaphorical representation of war — consumes: “The process of strangulation could be felt: one wondered how many more years of war would be necessary for this to complete itself” (Bowen, 1999: 722). Such situation parallels the one lived in Britain during World War I, therefore it is not only Gavin, but the whole nation that is confronted with the return of long-repressed fears. Bowen alludes to the story of the house as if it were a piece of literary work, a narration that entangles Gavin's own story with the colonial history of the UK — the longest narration of all — by virtue of the enumeration of former proprietors scattered all over the British Empire, from its heart — London — to its remote confine — Singapore —, across some unspecified spot in England:

The late owner's death in some other part of England must have given effect to a will not brought up to date, by which the property passed to an heir who could not be found — to somebody not heard of since Singapore fell or not yet reported anything more than “missing” after a raid on London or a battle abroad. Legal hold-ups dotted the world-wide mess [...] But also he [Gavin] attached himself to the story as to something nothing to do with him. (Bowen, 1999: 774-775)

The liminal location of the house, detached from the rest but still part of the architectural ensemble of the avenue, just in front of the theatre that “crowned and terminated” it majestically (Bowen, 1999: 772), made of it the most expensive and distinguished. Southstone's frivolous society is geographically arranged in a way that burdens the houses with the load of rivalry:

By five o'clock, in September, Mrs Nicholson's house cast its shadow across the avenue on to the houses opposite, which should otherwise have received the descending sun. In revenge, they cast shadow back through her bow window. (Bowen, 1999: 793)

Paradoxically, it is the fact that the house is detached what leaves it unprotected, bearing the brunt of abandonment. But even the Gothic fate of the house, though adverse, seems to endow it with a touch of distinction: “It was thus perhaps just, or not unfitting, that it [the house] should have been singled out for this gothic fate” (Bowen, 1999: 773). Bowen seems to be suggesting that the only possible outcome for a glorious past is a ruinous future. The embodiment of a ragged splendour endowed by old-fashioned national values, Southstone is condemned to disappear under a thick mass of vegetation, and it is implied that not even the current change in the course of war could change that: “It was now the September of 1944, and the accumulation of the Invasion victories, gave Southstone its final air of defeat” (1999: 773). The fate of the town along with the nation’s, are tied to the house’s Gothic fate, which both singularises and condemns it, and so is Gavin’s own personal fate by virtue of the emotional bounds that attach him to the house.

Finally, the motif of the “railings” in “Ivy Griped the Steps” deserves some comment. As seen in Chapter 1, Bowen was fond of building liminal domestic spaces by means of exploding the uncanny effect that marks and traces create as a consequence of the removal of objects and furniture. Something similar happens with railings in Bowen’s urban landscapes, for the author takes advantage of the fact that they were frequently removed from streets, parks and even private yards in World War II, especially in large cities, in order to recycle the iron for military purposes. In “Ivy Griped the Steps” the proliferation of wildlife joins the removal of the railings to create liminal spaces that can be read in national key.⁴³ The fact that all the railings in the avenue were sacrificed on behalf of the collective war effort is referred to early in the story:

Lines of chestnut trees had been planted along the pavements, along the railed strip of lawn that divided the avenue down the middle — now, the railings were, with all other ironwork, gone; and where the lawn was very long rusty grass grew up into the tangles of rusty barbed wire. On to this, as on the concrete pyramids [...] the chestnuts were now dropping their leaves. (Bowen, 1999: 773)

⁴³ Bowen also utilises the motif of railings in the story “In the Square”: “I say, I thought they were taking the railings away from squares; I thought the iron was some good” (1999: 689). The railing is a limen that avoids both private and public domains from getting into contact leaving, when removed, the houses unprotected from the threats of London’s urban battlefield.

Although the division is still visible, it is considerably blurred by the removal of the railings, the overgrowth and the chestnuts dropping their leaves on to everything. Nature started to bury the avenue as it buried half of Mrs Nicholson's house. Moreover, without railings, properties are left unprotected at the mercy of nature's all-consuming power. The Gothic nature in "Ivy Gripped the Steps" threatens with erasing all traces of human existence.

Among the properties in the avenue, Mrs Nicholson's is the only one that keeps its railings, which exemplifies the ultimate loss of its role within the British national context, for it was not even required to contribute to the war effort: "Nor, apparently, had there been nobody's business to authorise the patriotic sacrifice of the railings" (Bowen, 1999: 774). The utter abandonment of the house confirms, to a certain extent, the fall of the British imperial splendour, leaving no place for old glories in post-war Britain. Gavin belongs to such mass of ragged glories, also unable to contribute to the war effort and hardly expected to adapt to the new order for being too old — as proved by his failure in seducing a young girl at the end of the story — but, at the same time, too young to be responsible for the collapse of the former establishment.

Ornamented railings are also connected to the theme of the "return of the repressed". They work as a window through which Gavin can access his past, covered up but not yet fully erased by the ivy, as buried alive. Gavin manages to touch the pattern of the ironwork, accessing long-forgotten memories. Consequently, the railings contribute to further the connection between past and present:

Gavin Doddington, prodding between the strands of ivy, confirmed his impression that that iron lacework still topped the parapet of the front garden. He could pursue with his finger, though not see, the pattern that with other details of the house, outside and in, had long ago been branded into his memory (Bowen, 1999: 774)

It is thus fair to conclude that the impact of World War II upon the British urban landscape affected people's relationship with both urban and natural worlds. Wildlife, horribly blooming out of ruins, created interesting liminal spaces that were soon populated by an exuberant and hostile nature, which wartime writers like Elizabeth Bowen represented through Gothic lenses. In "Ivy Gripped the Steps", Bowen takes

advantage of such nature to build a liminal space where past and present meet and flow through to one another, bringing the repressed back to the contemporaneity of the story. This passage confronts, on the one hand, the protagonist with the traumatic experience that crippled his faculty for love, leaving him adrift in a sea of alcoholism, misogyny and emotional vacuum. On the other, it also faces the British nation with the origins of its own downfall, which go back to the months preceding the outbreak of World War I, by which time its social fabric was already corrupted, and ended alongside World War II, a “full stop” in the narration of the British history after a “last galvanized moment forward” (Bowen, 1999: 799).

Conclusions

In light of the previous argument, it is fair to conclude that liminal spaces play an important part in Elizabeth Bowen's portrayal of the mechanisms of life in a fragmented reality of war. The analysis of "The Demon Lover", "Mysterious Kôr" and "Ivy Gripp'd the Steps" reveals Bowen's ability to tie both action and characters to liminal spaces. Those allow for the exploration of wartime reality as a thick fabric of stories, lives, spaces and times that incessantly merge with each other in both devastated domestic and urban landscapes where limits are blurred and everything seems to converge at an interstitial physical and psychic space. Liminality is a defining feature of the way in which Elizabeth Bowen, the civilian, experienced the Blitz, and what she successfully conveyed as a writer. Her statements in the "Postscript" to the American edition of *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* are unequivocal:

I felt one with, and just like, everyone else. 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, 1986: 95)

Liminal spaces were also approached in this essay according to their capacity to trigger mechanisms of daydreaming, hallucinations and compensatory fantasies of perfect worlds such as Kôr, which altogether shape Bowen's theory of the "saving hallucination", conceived as an act of "resistance to the annihilation that was threatening" (Bowen, 1986: 97). By virtue of the connection existing between Bowen's saving hallucination and spatial liminality in her wartime fiction, liminal spaces fit in her understanding of the act of writing fiction in times of war as one of resistance: "I wonder whether in a sense all wartime writing is not resistance writing?" (Bowen, 1986: 97). But not only do Bowen's liminal spaces reflect the hallucinatory processes of wartime life, but also allow for the exploration of female sexual desire and frustration, as seen in "Mysterious Kôr" and "The Demon Lover", or male sexual discomfiture in "Ivy Gripp'd the Steps".

Furthermore, it was also analysed in this essay the way in which liminal spaces contribute to the cultural and historical dimensions of the tales collected in *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*, which altogether compound Bowen's history of the Blitz.⁴⁴ As a matter of fact, the author reflected on the historical dimension of her volume in the "Postscript" to its American edition, and she did so by comparing the stories with flying particles in a way that metaphorically evokes the debris after the air raids and emphasises the liminal nature of civil life in times of war: "They [the stories] were flying particles of something enormous and inchoate that had been going on. They were sparks from experience — an experience not necessarily my own" (Bowen, 1986: 95). Therefore, spatial liminality endows Bowen's wartime stories with unity and cohesion.

Nevertheless, Bowen's exploration of liminal spaces goes further than the immediate historical context in which the stories were conceived, since spatial liminality channels the externalization of the author's concerns about the future of the British nation, at that time perilously uncertain, by bridging different times of crisis in Britain's history. This is made particularly clear in "The Demon Lover" and "Ivy Gripp'd the Steps", in which stories liminal spaces work as temporal passages between the First and Second World Wars. In "The Demon Lover", Bowen's uncanny depiction of the home space — which is characteristically Gothic —, subverts the idea of the "home front", a cornerstone in the British victory over the Germans in World War I and metaphorical embodiment of the nation being invaded by a foreign enemy who, as the Germans in World War II, re-emerges from the past like an unhealed wound. Whereas in "Mysterious Kôr", Bowen provides her own assessment on Haggard's and Lang's old Victorian fears concerning the disintegration of the British Empire, and so does she in "Ivy Gripp'd the Steps" by focusing on the rusted scraps of the Edwardian Era.

To conclude, I would like to suggest future lines of research which might further the study of spatial liminality in Elizabeth Bowen's short fiction. On the one hand, it is the exploration of Elizabeth Bowen as an interstitial writer between Modernism and Postmodernism,⁴⁵ for it is my opinion that liminal spaces might reflect the change from epistemological to ontological concerns in Bowen's writing, as advanced by Irene Iglesias in her 2012 study. On the other, it is the exploration of Bowen's wartime

⁴⁴ Corcoran, 2004: 164-165.

⁴⁵ See above section 1.2. (19-20).

domestic spaces from a female perspective as, for instance, in “The Demon Lover”, where the subversion of male authority and the rebellious attitude of women to their incarceration in the domestic realm is suggested, much in tune with the subversive point of view that Gothic literature provided upon domesticity, to which Maggie Kilgour refers in *The Raise of the Gothic Novel* (2004: 6).

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