Rediscovering Women Writers of Wartime London

Rediscovering Women Writers of Wartime London:

Shining a Spotlight onto the Blitzed City

By

Evelina Garay Collcutt

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Rediscovering Women Writers of Wartime London:
Shining a Spotlight onto the Blitzed City

By Evelina Garay Collcutt

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-2946-0
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-2946-5

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

> Compared with the extraordinary wartime cultural boom, the later 1940s were to yield less in the way of literary creation. In sharp contrast to America, France and Germany, and to the British reaction to the Great War, the long-awaited literary response to the Second World War did not materialize.[1]

With this statement, literary critic Patrick Deer directs our attention to the apparent scarcity of literary works written on the subject of the Second World War, a fact that, in his view, was surprising, especially when considering the impact that wartime issues had had on other art forms, such as the cinema, music or different types of visual art. Additionally, when considering the resonance of certain works related to the First World War, for example the publicly acclaimed poems by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon or the novels by Vera Britain, Rebecca West, or Somerset Maugham, we find that, in comparison, the equally meritorious work of British poets Alum Lewis, Sidney Keyes or the novels by Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene, although lauded by literary critics, do not seem to have been so directly associated with the Second World War itself.

However, it is worth bearing in mind that a comparison of the literary output of the two wars may not prove to be appropriate, given the fact that the dissimilarities between the wars may well have generated a different kind of response. For instance, during the First World War the action took place away from British soil, whereas in the Second World War, the aerial attack was focused on the actual cities of England itself, which became the main target of the *Luftwaffe*. Under these circumstances, could it be that the sheer severity of the onslaught, targeted on the citizens themselves and their homes, might have taken its toll upon the literary creative output of this group of writers?

Literary critics Victoria Stewart, Gill Plain and Petra Rau all venture different theories and possible reasons for this alleged literary silence. Whereas Stewart argues that the unique circumstances surrounding the war were the main cause, Plain asserts that other popular artistic and

---

[1] Patrick Deer, *Culture and Camouflage: War, Empire and Modern English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 135.

cultural mediums, such as cinema and radio, had taken over from literature as a means of expressing wartime feelings. For her part, Rau affirms that, stylistically, the 1940s had no literary definition and therefore the writers could not advance as a creative group, placed as they were between the movements of Modernism, Angry Young Men, and Postmodern experiments. Despite this generalised consensus with regard to the apparent paucity of the literary production, there do, in fact, seem to be certain works that have become recognised as classic Second World War literature; such as Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1949), Henry Green's *Caught* (1943) and Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear* (1943). While the work of these three writers does skilfully delineate the intricacies of wartime London, these novels, as I aim to show in this book, are not by any means the only literary works representative of this period.

Certainly, as critics Piette and Rawlinson point out, the literature of the 1940s has suffered from neglect on the part of scholars and is now undergoing a process of revision and revaluation. As Rau also reminds us: "For a long time, the literature of the 1940s languished without much critical attention (…) and yet even the return of mid-century writing to the academic agenda (and publisher's back lists) has not resuscitated every writer of potential interest."[2] Evidently, a more profound investigation into the novelistic output of this period is necessary to increase our awareness with regard to the value of the literary work resulting from the Second World War, so as to be able to refute some of the claims made by critics on the lack of literary activity during this period. With this aim in mind, it really is essential to examine the fictional production of certain little-known female authors, whose work is in urgent need of revaluation.

Within the extended temporal margin of the Second World War, this book focuses on a concrete time limit, the period known as the Blitz (from the German term *Blitzkrieg*), a time-lapse of nine months during which, as is well-known, many English cities were attacked by continual bombing raids. The Blitz began in September 1940, continued throughout the autumn and winter of that year and ended in May of 1941. The ferocity of the attacks resulted in a high incidence of loss of life, as well as severe material damage to many cities in England, such as Coventry, Hull, Liverpool, Portsmouth, or indeed London itself, cities that have borne the scars of the onslaught for years after the contention ended. In addition to the time margins of the period of the Blitz, it is the spatial delimitation of the city of London that is the common urban denominator of the novels under consideration. Certainly, the British metropolis epitomised the

[2] Petra Rau, *Long Shadows: The Second World War in British Fiction and Film* (Evanston, Illinois: North Western University Press, 2016), 10.

strength and resilience demonstrated by the civilian population in the face of the Nazi attack, a resistance to adversity which has since attracted the attention of scholars and the general public alike.

In effect, readers' avidity for more information on those eventful times has led to a considerably prolific historical output, with scholarly works such as Philip Zeigler's *London at War 1939-45* (1995), or the more recent Juliet Gardiner's *The Blitz: The British Under Attack* (2010) and *Wartime: Britain 1939-1945* (2005). Other studies include books on such varied themes as the wartime plight of the East Enders, the experiences of wartime children, the perils caused by the blackout or the insalubrious conditions of public shelters, all of which have helped to create extensive research into the Blitz. Another more personal account can be found in Amy Helen Bell's *London was Ours: Diaries and Memoirs of the London Blitz* (2008), which offers compelling first-hand accounts from a variety of primary sources, and in Jean R. Freedman's *Whistling in the Dark: Memory and Culture in Wartime London* (1999), which includes interviews with the survivors of several, at that time, underrepresented groups, including Jewish people and working-class citizens.

Over the last couple of decades, there has also been an increase of critical work on the writers of the Second World War. Despite claims with regard to the supposed deficiency of wartime literary output, there does not seem to be a lack of critical investigation on those authors that have now become established as classic wartime writers such as Graham Greene, Elizabeth Bowen and George Orwell, or, more recently, Rose Macaulay, Henry Green and Rosamond Lehmann. Well-researched studies include *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (1995) by Adam Piette, *British Literature of the Blitz: Fighting the People's War* (2008) by Kristine Miller and *Modernism and World War II* (2010) by Marina MacKay. A fact that illustrates the growing interest of scholars and critics in the literature of this period is the high incidence of critical studies that continue to appear. To the works mentioned we must therefore add *Literature of the 1940s: War, Post-war and "Peace"* (2013) by Gill Plain and *Long Shadows: The Second World War in British Fiction and Film* (2016) by Petra Rau.

In order to contribute to this ongoing movement towards validating the literary output of the Second World War, my aim in writing this book has been to recuperate the work of certain mid-twentieth century women writers, whose novels offer a clear and nuanced picture of the wartime situation, while at the same time attesting to their significant literary merit. Moreover, these writers also provide us with the opportunity of witnessing and understanding the wartime urban reality from a feminine perspective.

It is undoubtedly true that, with the majority of men away fighting, London became a city with a predominantly female population, a place where women took on an active role, performing both qualified and non-qualified jobs very often for the first time. For many mothers and daughters this situation of intensified public activity also signified an escape from the more entrapping routines of their homes.

These unprecedented changes proved to be a source of inspiration for female writers who, having remained in the metropolis, recorded in their novels the historical moment of which they were the participants as well as the observers. However, although women's involvement in the conflict was often seen as a window of opportunity that could enable them to discover a more dynamic way of life, we should not overlook the fact that their participation was also fraught with difficulties and traumatic situations which often led to feelings of frustration and even despair. What can be asserted, though, is that this unprecedented situation signified the starting point of a veritable voyage of self-discovery for many women, including the authors whose work is studied in these pages, and who were able to explore conflicting feelings and experiences in their novels.

With all this in mind, I will attempt to do justice to the work of some of these women writers and, in so doing, rediscover the narratives of four novelists, Marguerite Steen, Phyllis Bottome, Bryher (Winifrid Ellerman) and Lettice Cooper, whose novels I have chosen due to their excellent portrayal of the Blitz in its different stages and to their inclusion of female protagonists offering a varied and complementary view of the situation of women as regards their development during the contention. Although they differ in their style and characterisation, these are all novels which exhibit a degree of literary prowess while adopting a variety of stylistic forms. In this way, Lettice Cooper in *Black Bethlehem* (1948) and Bryher in *Beowulf* (1956) demonstrate a marked poetic turn in their choice of language, whereas Marguerite Steen in *Shelter* (1941) shows a predilection for a more pungent and direct style, and Phyllis Bottome in *London Pride* (1941) reveals her ability to use vivid dialectical language, as well as introducing humorous pathos.

These four novels are discussed in this book alongside an acknowledged classic, Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1949), which effectively completes the picture of the wartime scene. Bowen, although comparatively neglected herself by literary critics until the 1990s, has since then been the object of a literary revival which has stimulated the writing of a wide spectrum of critical studies on her work (Ellmann (2003), Corcoran (2004), Osborn (2009) and Walshe (2009)). Needless to say, my work has also benefited from the ample research on Bowen, a key figure in wartime

writing, both for her wartime novel and her short story collection, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945).

Conversely, the other writers under discussion in this book have not received much attention from literary critics, who tend to overlook them, sometimes limiting their research to a brief commentary. However, Phyllis Lassner, author of an informative study on women wartime writers, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of their Own* (1998), offers in her chapter, "'This Shuddering Night': The London Home Front of Elizabeth Bowen, Marguerite Steen and Lettice Cooper", a general overview of two of the writers focused on in this book, and Jenny Hartley, whose *Millions Like Us: British Women's Fiction of the Second World War* (1997), includes chapters such as "The Blitz and the Mothers of England" and "From Class to Community in Fortress England", in which she considers the social aspects of the works of Phyllis Bottome and Bryher.

The lack of interest in the works of these novelists may be due to a number of factors. In some cases, it could be due to the writers' political involvement, which for both Bryher and Phyllis Bottome became their main activity, overshadowing their literary output, or it could also have been that they became better-known for other literary works, causing their war novels to fall into oblivion. Phyllis Bottome, for instance, was famous in her day for the anti-Nazi novel *The Mortal Storm* (1939) which was turned into a Hollywood film starring James Stewart; Lettice Cooper for her social comedy *The New House* (1936) and her more regionally based *National Provincial* (1938), while Marguerite Steen's *The Sun is my Undoing* (1941) was undoubtedly a sales hit in her time.

Curiously, none of these novelists were Londoners by birth, although they voluntarily chose to live in the metropolis during the Blitz, so they personally witnessed the kind of events which took place in wartime London and which they narrate in their works. Several of these writers were also involved in humanitarian activities and were therefore particularly involved in the war effort; in some cases, there was also a political motivation in their determination to help refugees, especially the Jewish victims of the war. Regrettably, their novels have, to a great extent, gone out of print and general circulation, though, due to a renewed general interest in wartime writing, undoubtedly spurred on by the centenary commemoration of the First World War, several reprints have appeared recently, although not from major publishing companies.

With regard to Marguerite Steen's novel, *Shelter* (1941), I found a First Edition copy that originally appeared under Steen's pen name Jane Nicholson. However, a new digital copy, attributed this time to Steen, has

been made available by the group Endeavour, the Independent Digital Publisher, in 2015. Similarly, I found an original copy of Lettice Cooper's *Black Bethlehem* (1948) although it is interesting to note that a new edition has been published by PFD Books in 2013. Regarding Phyllis Bottome's *London Pride* (1941), there has been one reprint in 1975, but nothing further. In the case of Bryher's *Beowulf,* this novel was published for the first time in English in 1956, having been previously printed in French in 1948. Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, however, has been reprinted several times and the modern Penguin and Vintage Classics offer annotated editions with introductions and notes.

Additionally, I should explain that the purpose of this book is not only to bring to light the work of a series of neglected authors and works, but also to emphasise the relevance of these texts to the developing field of spatial analysis. Place has frequently been associated with the supposedly static sphere of the inside of the home, whereas space has been related to the more dynamic dimension of the outside. In particular, my examination of the spatial elements of the above-mentioned novels, in the context of war, has been conversant with the questioning of spatial binaries (private/public, inside/out, work/home) characteristic of an important strand of spatial theory today. The way in which these binaries are perceived influences the way in which living space is assessed. The depiction of the urban spaces of war in the texts under discussion, which includes both the changes which took place in the city and the new spaces which emerged during the wartime ordeal, offers revealing insights into the malleability of space and the redrawing of fixed spatial boundaries.

Certainly, the convulsive onslaught which shook the city of London during the Blitz led to new ideas about living space and urban configuration in which the private and public domains suffered a profound transformation, creating a cityscape in which the homes, the street and specific wartime places, such as shelters, became the symbiotic parts of a convulsed scenography. It has been my intention in this book to reveal the ways in which supposedly dichotomous realms may interrelate under the prevailing wartime circumstances, and to show the extent to which literary representations may illuminate us by pinpointing aspects of this ambiguity not yet previously studied.

Furthermore, I have also aimed to show how spatial characteristics highlighted above have a direct effect on the way the women protagonists of the novels experienced life in the London Blitz, focusing on their development and their wartime opportunities. In order to illustrate these points, I have drawn upon spatial theories which shed light on the relationship between binary concepts. Especially useful are the theories

that focus on liminality, when, by referring to liminal spaces, we mean those that occupy spatially transitional and at the same time transgressive demarcations. A liminal space is by definition a threshold that connects two seemingly unrelated spaces, as, for example, the space occupied by a doorway which connects the inside of the house with the outside. These theories of liminality were conceived initially by anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, who also introduced the concept of the rite of passage as a necessary procedure that had to be followed when the individual or group of individuals underwent any process of change, either spatial or time related (represented in this book by the Blitz).

In his work, *The Rites of Passage*, first published in 1909 in French (published in English in 1960), Van Gennep examines the need to find intermediate spaces which tend to dispel the importance of boundaries. He compares man's life with the cycles of nature, insisting that neither the individual nor society can be totally independent from these cycles. Furthermore, he argues that periods of transition are an inherent part of life, "the universe itself is governed by a periodicity which has repercussions on human life, with stages and transitions, movements forward and periods of relative inactivity."[3] In his study he focuses on these periods of transition, denominated rites of passage, and organises them in a schema translated variously as a pattern process or structure. Van Gennep divides the rites into three stages: the first being the "separation" period, which as its name indicates, signals the separation process from the previous stage of security, followed by a "marginal" period, the essential liminal period of transition, and finally the "reinsertion" period in which the individual or group would reinsert themselves into society. This process inevitably calls for an understanding of space as a non-static element, which allows and encourages mobility and change in order for the subjects to be able to enter the liminal passageway, and emerge successfully after the process.

I have attempted to reveal how the different stages that Van Gennep delineated with regard to the rites of passage (separation, liminality and assimilation) can be instrumental in helping us to understand the changing face of wartime reality, and its effect on the populace as perceived in the writing of the times. In this way, the rites of passage consequently encompass firstly the pre-war stage, secondly the Blitz months (as the true liminal stage) and thirdly, the emergent post-Blitz reality.

With this view in mind, I have drawn upon both literary analysis and spatial research in this book, demonstrating how this combined method

[3] Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, (1909) 1960), 3.

can illuminate literary readings while, at the same time, offer a more complete approach to the assessment of urban landscapes. Spatial theorists of the twenty-first century, such as Ali Madanipur and Simon Parker, particularly stress the necessity of focusing on the city as the site where spatial issues may be articulated in all their complexity. Moreover, there is a growing tendency to underline the fact that urban space in general, and living space in particular, has always shown a marked tendency to overcome set boundaries, and that a more apposite study should consider the margins of separation between binaries such as private/public, inside/out or home/work, as being frequently tenuous and indeterminate.

In Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher's influential work *No More Separate Spheres!* (2002), the writers trace the origin of one of the most controversial of dichotomies, that of private/public spheres, to the need of feminist historians of the 1960s and 1970s to create a structure by means of which they could expose the limitations placed on women in different areas of public life: legal, institutional or occupational. However, this constant pairing of the public-male as opposed to the private-female proved to be ultimately detrimental for the development of a non-gendered approach because it has made the effectual "separation" between women and men even more visible. As Davidson and Hatcher explain:

> The separate spheres model has narrowed the possibility that terms and fields occupying opposite sides of these binaries will come into contact and conversation with one another; that is, separate spheres logic creates a structural disincentive for thinking about nation in relationship to home, politics in relationship to privacy, femininity to reason and so on.[4]

Following this line of thought, Joan Scott and Debra Keates published *Going Public: Feminism and the Shifting Boundaries of the Private Sphere* (2004), while Leonore Davidoff in her article, "Gender and the 'Great Divide': Public and Private in British Gender History", warned that the separation of the spheres tends to inevitably connote hierarchy, with one condition being evaluated more positively than the other. Davidoff also explains more fully that:

> Within this dualism people are limited by a falsely universal position. When they are assigned to either category, differential consequences follow in terms of power and access to resources. Such categorising marks

[4] Cathy Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (eds.), *No More Separate Spheres! A Next Wave American Studies Reader,* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002), 20.

> boundaries, providing opportunities for some, constraint for others. Bounded categories tend to become metaphors and are imbedded in language and as images.[5]

Davidoff's positioning helps us to ascertain the detrimental effect of creating dualisms and the necessity of moving towards an increased porosity between the spatial realities, a postulation which becomes especially pertinent when we consider wartime literature, an area of study that needs to be further developed in spatial literary criticism. Spatial studies on 1940s wartime literature are scarce, although recently there has been more activity in this respect. Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson's edited work *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature* (2012), includes a section headed "Spaces of War" and a perceptive chapter by Leo Mellor: "Cityscape: The Bombed City in the Second World War".

In her valuable research, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (2000), literary critic Deborah Parsons postulates the fundamental change experienced in the wartime metropolis, and how traditional definitions of private spaces in the city became obsolete. Parsons points towards a new dimension of urban space marked by the rigours of war, a new spacious public arena for women, namely the city street. She also argues that wartime urban existence leads to feelings of displacement and draws attention to the disorientation felt by citizens during this time, stemming from an enforced altered lifestyle and the lack of a fixed abode. In her own words: "Traditionally feminine private spaces are lost as living spaces become no longer homes, but instead are other people's houses, let as flats to people staying in the city yet bombed out of their own buildings."[6] Parsons' research into the city space of the street offers some very challenging insights into wartime urban reality, which can be applied to the study of the novels in this book.

Other critics, such as Kristine A. Miller, do address private issues in relation to the public circumstances of war. In her insightful essay, "'Even a Shelter is Not Safe': The Blitz on Homes in Elizabeth Bowen's Wartime Writing" (1999), Miller explains that the home during the Blitz became politicised, since the effects of war affected women in a direct way, as the housewife had to integrate wartime measures such as food rationing, ensuring the blackout, and coping with the destruction caused by the

---

[5] Leonore Davidoff, "Gender and the Great Divide: Public and Private in British Gender History" in *Journal of Women's History,* ed.15 (2003), 11-27.

[6] Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 190.

bombing as part of her workload. Although not always outwardly mobile, women's active participation with regard to the management of the wartime home was essential for the country to be able to uphold the home front's defensive strategy. This enabled the country to maintain a certain stability, which in its turn helped to boost the morale of the population and encourage citizens to believe that the war could finally be won. In effect, Miller stresses the continual oscillation between private and public spheres, an interaction that affected all areas of urban life, and that had a marked effect on both the housewife and the female money-earner in different ways, leading to changing ideas with regard to public spaces. As Miller explains in her article:

> As the destruction of homes and the entrance of women into the workforce broke down the barriers between private and public life, attitudes towards domestic space necessarily changed. (…). The British home became a point of convergence between the lives of individual citizens and the turmoil of world politics.[7]

Both Miller and Parsons have written about the special permeable relationship between the spheres of private and public urban life, as well as its effect on the female characters of the works they analyse. In fact, this was a period of British history in which barriers lost their significance in the face of a completely new scenario that encouraged mobility, and an almost revolutionary reorganisation of both the use and configuration of all forms of city space. Recently other critical studies have appeared, the authors of which aim at directing their investigation towards other unfixed dualisms that prevailed during the Second World War, such as those that study the tenuous barrier existing between wartime reality and the imaginary or surrealist perceptions of the same. This is the case with Sara Wasson's *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London* (2010) and Leo Mellor's *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (2011), both of which offer a compelling insight into the gothic and surreal ambiguities of the wartime city, as they appear in the writings of Elizabeth Bowen, Henry Green, Graham Greene or other lesser-known writers and poets such as Anna Kavan, Inez Holden or John Piper.

As I have already briefly outlined, spatial research focused on promoting different means by which to study indeterminate urban spaces has led me to delve into theories of liminality. Van Gennep's work was

[7] Kristine A. Miller, "Even a Shelter is Not Safe: The Blitz on Homes in Elizabeth's Bowen's Wartime Writing" in *Twentieth Century Literature*, ed. 45 (1999), 138-159.

followed many years later by another important investigation into liminality; Victor Turner's *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1967). Our present understanding of the concept of liminality is, therefore, indebted to the work of these theorists whose ideas can be applied to other fields of research, such as literary criticism. Indeed, the application of this theoretical framework to the study of literature has initiated a revaluation of certain works, shedding new light on past research. Particularly successful has been the process initiated by the appropriately named The Gateway Press, a publishing company which has produced works on gothic, popular or science-fiction genres, focusing on a style of writing which is sometimes described as adopting a fringe-like position within the cannon. In effect, these are literary forms supposedly situated between the mainstream and the marginal and therefore said to occupy liminal positions.

One of the main exponents of investigation in this field is Manuel Aguirre, whose co-authored work with Roberta Quance and Philip Sutton, *Margins and Thresholds: An Enquiry into the Concept of Liminality in Text Studies* (2000), has been the prelude to a school of thought held by a number of academics, who have contributed works offering a consistent approach. Subsequent to Manuel Aguirre's work, The Gateway Press have printed three other influential books: *A Place that is not Place: Essays on Liminality and Text* (2000) by Isabel Soto, *Betwixt and Between: Essays on Liminal Geography* (2002) by Philip Sutton and *Mapping the Threshold: Essays in Liminal Analysis* (2004) by Nancy Bredendick. Other scholars have also more recently published work in this field, for example, the co-edited work of Teresa Gómez Reus and Terry Gifford, *Women in Transit through Literary Liminal Spaces* (2013) offers a number of insightful essays on women's literature from Victorian times to the Second World War, constituting sufficient proof of how the theoretical framework of the research into liminal spaces can be applied to works written in different styles and epochs with success.

This theoretical approach can also be applied to wartime literature, wartime, incidentally, being a liminal period in itself, a transitional tunnel which citizens have to traverse until peace is restored. Yet, although it may seem that wartime could, in effect, constitute an ideal vantage point from which to assess issues of liminality, the critical work performed in this investigative area seems to have been very slight to date. In my research for this book, I found a recently published work by Sara Prieto on liminality in the First World War, entitled *War reportage in the Liminal Zone: Anglo-American Eyewitness Accounts from the Western Front (1914-1918),* from 2018. Second World War studies of liminality seem to

be even more scarce, one example being Rebecca D'Monte's essay "Moving Back to 'Home' and 'Nation': Women Dramatists, 1938-1945" included in *Women in Transit Through Literary Liminal Spaces*.

In this book, I have considered the Blitz from a particular angle, as a period which may be represented by a tunnel through which it is necessary to pass by means of following the rites of passage, thus beginning with the novels that address the first weeks and months of the Blitz (autumn 1940) which follow the rites of separation and insertion processes; these novels being Marguerite Steen's *Shelter* and Phyllis Bottome's *London Pride.* The following novels under study are Bryher's *Beowulf* and Lettice Cooper's *Black Bethlehem,* works that focus on the middle months, the darkest and most sombre period of the Blitz (winter and spring) which represent the actual liminal period itself. To finalise I explore Elizabeth Bowen's novel, *The Heat of the Day,* set in the year after the Blitz, 1942, symbolising the reincorporation stage of the rites of passage, within the overarching theme of the transitional status and permeable nature of the wartime city and its boundaries. Several topics for enquiry emerge when examining the novels in question, one of the most powerful being the representation of the home, a place which is destined to suffer a complete transformation during the war.

In fact, during these difficult times a profound and disorientating chasm developed between the idea of a warm and welcoming home (a concept developed by twentieth century philosophers Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard), and the wartime notion of the home as a death trap from which citizens were forced to flee on a nightly basis. In fact, the image of the home suffered a complete *volte-face* and came to be literally invaded by the effects of war, while women's position within it was also reassessed. Their changing role and identity as housewives or mothers during this troubled period has led to revealing literary testimonies. These accounts show the extent to which women had to re-adapt to the circumstances in ways that were by no means always detrimental.

The home space, therefore, evolved into a liminal space that, due to its threatened status, had become transitional and insecure. Many Londoners inhabited impersonal areas of transit, such as rented flats, shared houses or partitioned apartments, all of them locations where the previous sense of belonging had been relinquished. These considerations raise queries regarding the intrinsic value attached to the home as, for instance, whether there were any circumstances under which the Bachelardian concept of the home as a refuge from the outside world could still be maintained, or whether these homes permeated by war (as represented in the novels of the time) had really become merely functional stepping-stones. On this

premise and taking their vulnerability into consideration, I have attempted to discover how the precarious nature of these dwellings affected the protagonists of the works discussed, and what kind of opportunities this more anonymous status of the home might afford for the female characters, bearing in mind the extent to which this liminal condition of this space may have also led to other forms of entrapment.

The situation of the home was altered in many ways, both physical and psychological, and the changes in domestic arrangements also affected the inhabitants and their relationship to each other. For instance, due to the relative absence of men in this predominantly feminine world, the dwelling was often occupied by women living on their own, or together. In some cases, refugees were also received into the home, bringing with them the horror of the transnational reality of war. We shall see whether these new arrangements led to a positive state of affairs from which a solid relationship of mutual help could evolve between the female protagonists of the novels discussed, or whether, on the contrary, these circumstances could lead to conflict, and within the margins of literature, to the home becoming a parallel place of contention.

Focusing on the wartime city itself, which, during the war, became personified, and was referred to in heroic terms by politicians and members of the general public alike, I have also examined the concept of war as it affected the city, and, where relevant, the more existentialist considerations related to war, civilisation, and the city. These issues were particularly prevalent at this time, as well as a certain nostalgia for the past, and a natural wish to preserve emblematic buildings from being destroyed. The street scene is presented to the reader in these novels as a maze of cut-off ways, collapsed buildings and cratered parks in which the disorientated characters attempt to find their place. Under the wartime circumstances, these streets must have given the impression of being overpopulated, full of people continuously spilling out of their fragile houses, who were to be seen roaming the city's shops, cafes and tearooms, establishments that acquired a more 'homely' atmosphere as their owners attempted to cater for the needs of bewildered customers.

With this panorama in mind, it is important to ascertain from the literature of the time, the extent to which catering establishments adapted to the new situation, and how wartime changes increased the spatial porosity and the liminal tendencies of these premises, in addition to the ways in which they were influenced by the dynamics of war. Given the unique circumstances, also under consideration is the way that these conditions in the city, as reflected in the novels, were the means by which women were also able to achieve more independent work opportunities, as

well as taking into account the wartime role of women from different walks of life, with female protagonists that have the most varied of occupations, from the domestic to the professional, as well as examining other issues, such as pregnancy or motherhood in wartime London. Additionally, it is necessary to ascertain the effect of factors such as the governmental control, exerted by means of propagandistic pressure, and the presentation of inspirational role models in the media, had on some of the characters.

Furthermore, within the novels considered, I focus on the intrinsic physical changes that took place in the city. With regard to premises, shops or homes, these places often took on a new identity and were utilised for a variety of different purposes. Public buildings were used as war offices, and parks became training areas for the forces. The need for protection also changed the purpose of buildings, especially those going below surface area. The Underground was utilised as a shelter, as were other buildings that had cellars or basements that were similarly used for the protection of civilians. Other new specific places were erected such as private and public shelters, essentially liminal places of transition. These places offer a marked opportunity for study due to their public-domestic, in-between identity. Their unique positioning generates a series of questions regarding the extent to which these public sites could be transformed, by the necessities of the population, into highly permeable places where the personal and private needs of so many desperate citizens were obliged to converge.

Since the war, shelters have been hailed by historians as encouraging feelings of solidarity between Londoners. In effect, by focusing on the literary representations of the time, my aim has been to discover if the vulnerability of these shelters was just as likely to lead to other reactions and conflicting situations which may have ultimately resulted in a revaluation of the home. Therefore, as well as examining the conditions in the shelters featured in the novels under scrutiny, I have questioned whether other places, private spaces like the home, or public spaces like tearooms, could, under the special wartime circumstances, occupy a liminal or interstitial position, akin to that of the strategically positioned shelters.

Chapter One, “The City at War”, deals with the actual living arrangements of wartime urban reality in order to provide useful background knowledge for the events portrayed in the novels under discussion. As we have already seen, the city of London developed certain characteristics representative of a city at war, and its front-line situation modified the configuration of the city, conditioning the writers of the day

and their reactions to the conflict. The following chapters, in which the novels are discussed, is structured around the different stages of the Blitz, which are understood to represent the rites of passage.

Chapter Two centres upon Marguerite Steen's *Shelter* (1941), the first work discussed in this book. This novel represents the beginning of the liminal voyage, the rite of separation from the state of security prior to the war and the entry into the liminal passageway of the Blitz. It is written partly in the form of war reportage; each chapter being preceded by a simulated newsreel in which snippets of war-related news items or extracts from reports situate the reader within the exact moment of the Blitz. This style confers upon the novel a degree of authenticity as well as a feeling of urgency, as events are presented in rapid succession, creating a backdrop of uncertainty and continuous danger in the first days of the attacks.

By reviewing the author's account of the first weeks of the Blitz, we can observe the reactions of citizens, and the extent to which they relied on safety precautions and specific buildings erected for the protection of civilians, such as the public shelter. One relevant question is whether the shelter fostered feelings of solidarity, or if its unsettling public-domestic dimension contributed to the reigning climate of tension. Another interesting facet of the novel is the heroine's reactions with regard to the stress caused by the wartime circumstances, and her options of professional development, as well as her daily incursions onto the street scene where she becomes a unique kind of *flâneuse.* I also analyse how the main character, Louise Mason, reacts to her difficult home environment and its maintenance, which is particularly challenging in wartime, and her quest for the right kind of shelter, a place where she can feel reasonably safe and comfortable.

Next, in Chapter Three, a step further into the separation rites will be taken with my analysis of *London Pride* (1941) by Phyllis Bottome, a novel which centres on the poverty-stricken area of East London, a part of the city particularly affected by the bombing raids. In this novel, the writer transcribes the Cockney speech with some accuracy, taking the reader to the East End streets, and observing the families that suffered so acutely during the first months of the Blitz. The transcription of a particular dialect of the English language also opens a debate, regarding the way in which a speech variant may confer a status of liminality, or marginality, on the literature written in this dialect, thus assessing its ensuing spatial and idiomatic relationship with standard language. With regard to the characters of the novel, the figure of the mother is studied for its matriarchal and spatial significance, and for the implications which the drama of evacuation had both for the families involved and for the city. Precisely, the role of the city at this stage of the Blitz is also of interest,

and more particularly that of the East End, which contrasts with the West End location of the other novels discussed in this book, as well as the extent of the author's prioritisation of street life and sheltering facilities over the indoor space of the home.

In the novel analysed in Chapter Four, the action takes place within the central part of the liminal passageway and deals with the most acute moments of loss and destruction and its effect on the characters of Bryher's novel *Beowulf* (written in 1941, but not published in the English language until 1956). In this novel the writer adopts the stylistic device of presenting the characters and their psychological reactions to war, in a type of format in which the plot becomes of secondary importance. In this way, the author presents a set of *tableaux* that have as a common denominator the setting: the liminal space of the tearoom, a place where citizens come together, thus escaping from the solitary insecurity of the home and the unpredictable situation in the street. Considering this aspect, I assess the permeable identity of the wartime tearoom and the fluctuating nature of dualisms that emanate from its positioning, as well as commenting on the characters' feelings of nostalgia for the past. In this respect, the importance of the author's friendship with Walter Benjamin and the influence the philosopher exerted on Bryher with regard to issues of place and memory is also mentioned. Finally, I analyse the repercussions that the breaking down of boundaries (private/public, work/home, past/present) have for the characters immersed in the darkest period of the liminal tunnel.

Chapter Five leads me to evaluate the later stages of the liminal passageway in Lettice Cooper's *Black Bethlehem* (1948). One of the main themes of this novel is the attempt to re-establish the traditional values of the home and to a growing need to regain privacy on the part of many citizens. It is supposed to reproduce a diary written by the protagonist Lucy Meadows, thus revealing the necessity for private self-confession at this stage of the war. Although the image of the home seems to recover some of its lost characteristics at this point of the liminal experience, living space could still prove to be a centre of contention, and the female relationships that developed within have been analysed, especially focusing on the situation that evolves when a refugee, Marta, is invited into the home. I have explored this aspect alongside other important themes in the novel, such as ideological or philosophical issues with regard to the war which at this stage still raged unabated.

Chapter Six deals with the last novel which is set in the stage of assimilation of the liminal tunnel, as the Blitz months are over. This chapter takes us to Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1949), and the

challenges faced by her independent-minded protagonist, Stella Rodney, whose highly impersonal rented flat symbolises the relinquishment of all homemaking and housewifely ties. In my analysis, I have considered the ways in which the liminal concept of a transitory living space offers a greater degree of freedom to the protagonist in spite of the pressure exerted on her by other personal circumstances and characters in the story. As Van Gennep and Turner postulate, this stage of reincorporation may prove rewarding for individuals, or in this case, fictional characters. As we can see in the novel, the two main female characters, Stella and Louie, do traverse the liminal tunnel as survivors, as both emerge from their wartime experiences ready to start a new life. Other important themes are mentioned also, such as the propagandistic image of women in the media during wartime, which may present us with quite another aspect of post-Blitz reinsertion.

Moreover, in my conclusion, I bring together all the strands of a study which will take the reader on a liminal voyage in time through the reality of the Blitz and its expression in literature. I have concentrated on bringing to the fore the works of certain women writers whose response to the Blitz turns a spotlight onto the wartime cityscape, throwing into relief the problems and difficulties faced by Londoners by means of the experiences of their fictitious characters. In addition, my objective is to reveal the implications of the wartime spatial realm for the protagonists involved, especially with regard to the binary configuration of urban space, and its alteration in favour of a more permeable relationship between spheres.

Certainly, I hope that my approach, based on a combination of literary studies and interdisciplinary fields such as spatial studies, may be found to be useful and insightful for readers. Finally, I would like to emphasise that the aim of this book is to raise general awareness with regard to the value and scope of women's wartime writing, and, in this way, generate a greater appreciation of the significance of the literary output of the Second World War.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CITY AT WAR: A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

> Cities are nothing without their bodies. When you have destroyed Paris and Oxford what happens to their souls?[1]

As Charles Ritchie asserts, for a city to have no body or substance, to be razed to the ground, seems quite unimaginable. Nevertheless, during the months of the Blitz, the intensity of the aerial attack on London led to a generalised fear that the city might ultimately face total annihilation. The onslaught was so intense that diarists and writers of the day, such as Ritchie, were reduced to the necessity of looking, not just outside at the ruins and debris, but inwards towards the inner recesses of their imagination, in search of other compensations and beliefs. Indeed, if we were ever to allow for a city to have a soul, that city would be London during the war years, as while the Blitz transformed the physical landscape of the buoyant metropolis into a scene of devastation, the spirit of its people rose in defiance of the circumstances.

For the first time in history the actual city became the home front of the contention, and, as such, was the target of merciless bombardment during a time span of nine months, between September 1940 and May 1941. Citizens of London, and of other cities and towns of England, especially those in coastal areas, who were in the direct line of attack by the *Luftwaffe,* were forced to rally and find strategies in order to withstand the assault. The raids caused an unprecedented number of victims and destruction, at the same time disrupting everyday life, which became chaotic and unpredictable. In recent years historians have carried out research in an attempt to ascertain the real figures with regard to the number of victims of the Blitz, as well the data regarding demolished buildings.

---

[1] Charles Ritchie*, The Siren Years: Undiplomatic Diaries, 1937-1945* (Basingstoke, Hants: Palgrave MacMillan, 1974), 77.

Historian Jerry White, for example, recounts in his work *London in the 20th century* how London, by the end of 1940, had suffered 40 per cent of war casualties, with over 13,000 people killed, while within the actual physical space of the city, buildings were also destroyed at an alarming rate: 50,000 houses were demolished in inner London with a further 66,000 ruined in the outskirts of the city. On a more positive note, however, the fact that the city did survive the raids, has resulted in the tendency of historians, politicians, and writers, to constantly personify the city in heroic terms. Indeed, White explains that:

> Throughout all this bombardment, London never came close to the terminal dislocation that the Luftwaffe hoped for and pre-war planners feared. It was so vast, its infrastructure so capable of finding ways round the damage, that it could absorb the blows and get on with life.[2]

There were many ways in which the city fought to maintain the integrity of both its 'body' and 'soul' amid the bombardment. The various reactions to the wartime situation can be illustrated both by documented facts from historians as well as from the essays and literary works by writers and diarists of the day, which show us how specific measures such as the blackout, and the construction of shelters or the destruction of buildings changed the physical face of London. This led to equally profound internal reorganizations in living space which affected Londoners' homes and domestic arrangements, creating a new improvised style of life.

During the contention, the city became a hazardous place to live in. The presence of time bombs, debris and glass on the pavements created a dramatic and unpredictable scene, made even more perilous by collapsing buildings, fires and gas explosions. This harrowing situation, which was already causing an extremely difficult predicament for people during daytime, was exacerbated at night, when the blackout was enforced, a time during which people were faced with a scenario that had all the ingredients of a fully-fledged nightmare.

The blackout, one of the most distinctive features of life during the war, caused a serious disruption of urban life. The absence of electric light in the streets meant that London was shrouded in absolute darkness, only mitigated by the light of the moon on certain nights, and this caused people, walking along the streets, to continuously collide with one another, creating opportunities for robbery, personal harassment and sexual encounters that would never have been possible in well-lit streets. Another unique aspect of the wartime city space was the construction of shelters,

---

[2] Jerry White, *London in the 20th century* (London: Vintage, 2001), 39.

both private and public. Every night a neat procession of citizens flocked to the nearest shelter, although many opted for the underground tube stations or to remain within their own homes, hiding under beds, staircases or kitchen tables. Whichever options they chose, the nightly bombardments subjected Londoners to continual aggression or at least alteration of their normal lifestyle.

During this unprecedented onslaught, buildings disappeared overnight, or appeared the next morning completely uninhabitable, a ruined site in which personal belongings were reduced to dust and debris. This devastation affected the entire city, from the impoverished areas in the East End and the Docklands to the prosperous West End, where many beautiful houses, as well as expensive department stores, were totally demolished. Such a disaster was comparable only to the Great Fire of London in 1666, which according to historical records, resulted in a city space that was completely devastated. Obviously, while this devastation of buildings in the city was the major problem that Londoners had to face, the blackout and the implementation of food rationing also caused much inconvenience and stress.

The Blackout: "A Network of Inscrutable Canyons"

London, during the years in which the blackout was enforced, became, as Elizabeth Bowen described it in the *Preface* to her wartime short story collection, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories,* published in 1945, a "network of inscrutable canyons, in which citizens developed new bare alert senses, with their own savage warnings and notations."[3] The blackout measures led to a re-organisation of the frequently cratered roads that proved, in Bowen's words, to result in a maze of streets that were particularly "inscrutable" for citizens, who felt totally disorientated. This system was implemented before the attack on England actually took place. To envelop the cities in a blanket of darkness was an obvious precautionary measure taken in order to hamper the visibility of the metropolitan areas from the sky, thus impeding the German bombers from being able to effect direct hits on historical buildings or other important strategic sites. Nevertheless, the city of London could not be totally camouflaged on nights with a full moon, as the shining waters of the river Thames always acted as an orientation for the bombers, inopportunely assisting them in identifying targets.

[3] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1945), 5.

This measure, however, involved all Londoners actively in the war effort as citizens had the responsibility of maintaining their homes in the dark, ensuring that the necessary black curtains were in place so that not even the smallest chink of light could be visible from the outside. The ARP (Air Raid Precautions) wardens were responsible for checking that this regulation was complied with by all. One such warden was the novelist Elizabeth Bowen, who worked as a volunteer on a nightly basis for six years. An essential part of her commitment was to check that citizens were fulfilling these obligations; in this way, wardens assumed a role of would-be police officers. They were often unpopular with citizens, who sometimes found their zealous activity overbearing and officious. Historian Amy Helen Bell explains how their role was initially regarded with suspicion:

> The main figure in civil defence was the warden. In the year before the bombing raids wardens were mainly responsible for ensuring that the black-out was kept and imposing fines if it was not, a task that earned them the public dislike.[4]

However, once the war actually broke out wardens acquired added responsibilities for which they were admired and respected, as they effectively assisted the victims of bombing by calling for ambulances and helping them to reach nearby First Aid posts or shelters. Outside in the streets the blackout was also a compulsory norm with which all citizens had to comply. People were allowed to use dim torches so as not to stumble in the air raids, but these had to be kept directed to the ground and to be used as discreetly as possible. The darkened streets caused people to become disorientated, as they were unable to recognize even the most familiar of places. As historian Philip Ziegler relates, the "roads which people… knew intimately became impenetrable mysteries"[5], and accidental mishaps became the standard norm, as for example citizens colliding with one another in the dark, or falling over sandbags and debris left on the streets.

In Ziegler's words, "it was the blackout which impinged most forcibly on the life of the average Londoner"[6] and so it became highly controversial, as accidents and even robberies proliferated. The blackout was also unpopular because it interfered with people's night-time activities, not

---

[4] Amy Helen Bell, *London Was Ours: Diaries and Memoirs of the London Blitz* (London: Tauris, 2008), 93.
[5] Philip Ziegler, *London at War 1939-45*, (London: Pimlico, 2002), 68.
[6] Ibid, 67.

only pleasurable ones like going out to the cinema or dining out, but also duties such as medical care, vigilance or ambulance driving that could help people in need. While the implementation of the blackout was regarded negatively as an inconvenience by London's citizens, it was, however, also a unique phenomenon in a city used to brightly-lit streets. The fact that the metropolis was immersed in total darkness every night meant that the city was constantly enveloped in a mysterious atmosphere which had an aesthetic effect for many people who regarded this lack of visibility not just as an inconvenience, but as a poetic manifestation of defiance. Diarist Negley Farson felt this to be so. When recording the visual effect of the enforced darkness over the city, he confided: "London, when you can see its sky-line at all, seems particularly beautiful under the black-out. And you may read a bitter, sad defiance in its silver stone."[7]

Shelters: A Dubious Search for Safety

As the impending threat of the German attack on the city materialised, it became clear that citizens should not remain at home during the bombing raids, as their homes could hardly offer them the protection they needed. The construction of shelters therefore became a paramount necessity in order to improve their chances of survival during the nightly raids. Nevertheless, although the shelters are considered to be one of the most emblematic features of the Blitz, they were not, in fact, used by a majority of Londoners, who, in reality, preferred to stay within their own homes whenever possible. Historical accounts have left us indications that many people preferred to use their own cellars or basements, or even hide under beds or under the kitchen table, so as to avoid the loss of privacy that the communal usage of the shelters entailed.

For those who had a garden, the Anderson shelters also became popular, although they were far from being really bomb-proof. These shelters consisted of a deep hole excavated in the garden and covered by a tin roof. They provided enough room for a normal family, but were damp and cold and, in the event, did not prove very safe, as a direct hit could be fatal for the whole family. As well as the Anderson type of shelter, there were also private and public shelters installed by the Government, which could house as many as fifty people. These refuges seemingly provided the best option; however, in truth, they did not offer total security and the sanitary conditions, at least initially, were extremely poor. Juliet Gardiner explains the situation:

---

[7] Negley Farson, *Bomber's Moon* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1941), 15.

> Many people preferred the "safety in numbers" illusion and the camaraderie of communal shelters, where the raid outside could be partly drowned out by the talking, Yet the brick-built shelters were increasingly distrusted, and shared all the drawbacks of cold, damp Anderson shelters.[8]

Although these shelters offered a rather dismal picture at the beginning of the Blitz, they did in fact improve as the war progressed and offered better services as far as sanitation and comfort were concerned. As an alternative option, citizens could spend the night in cellars or basements afforded by the restaurants and hotels for their clients. In the first months of the war, Londoners also sheltered in the underground tube stations, although this option proved unpopular with the Government, which preferred the tube stations to be operable and not used as shelters. In any case the underground was not the safest alternative, as there was always the risk of becoming trapped if one of the bombs fell on the entrance doors.

However, many did opt for the tube stations, and eventually the Government had to allow the rails to be used by citizens, in spite of this option proving to be extremely uncomfortable. Historical documentation has left us many images of people sheltering either in the public shelters or in the underground tube stations. However, these cases were in fact a minority, as has been revealed by researchers, who have attempted to investigate the reality of the situation by studying documents issued at the time with regard to the use of shelters. Interestingly, this information shows us a very different picture from that which was previously assumed to be the case. In actual fact, Juliet Gardiner, for instance, indicates that according to the "shelter census", four per cent opted for the underground, nine per cent used public shelters, twenty-seven per cent the Anderson shelters, while the remaining sixty per cent stayed at home.

Destruction and Chaos: A Looter's Paradise

A spectacle that was hard to ignore on the mornings after the nightly raids was that of the streets littered with the personal belongings from homes or the wares from shops. Contemporary accounts also relate that the presence of glass on the pavements from the windows broken during the night constituted another prominent and dangerous feature of wartime London. Likewise, the smell of burning and the presence of dust were also intrinsic aspects of the scene that greeted long-suffering Londoners every

[8] Juliet Gardiner, *The Blitz: The British Under Attack* (London: Harper Press, 2010), 68.

morning. Elizabeth Bowen vividly describes the London streets in her essay "London, 1940":

> Early September morning in Oxford Street. The smell of charred dust hangs on what should be crystal pure air. The whole length of Oxford Street, west to east, is empty, looks polished like a ballroom, glitters with smashed glass. Down the distances, natural mists of morning are brown with the last of smoke. Fumes still come from the shell of a shop.[9]

Bowen's description accurately portrays the image offered by the London streets on the mornings after the bombs had caused havoc in the city. Although the glass, dust and smell of the fumes were some of the unpleasant consequences of the wartime situation, these became secondary aspects in comparison to the loss of possessions buried under the rubble or destroyed by fire. Many of these articles were to be found scattered about on the streets, posing a moral dilemma for citizens, who were tempted to pick up and take what looked like abandoned property.

These circumstances developed into a serious problem for the police officers or wardens on duty, confronted with the difficult decision of how to deal with these "thefts". In fact, looting became an everyday aspect of wartime London, and unfortunately often led to situations that propitiated violent altercations in the streets. Furthermore, it is also true that some of these looters were criminals who took this opportunity to commit serious thefts and so were liable to be punished by law. However, in general, the majority of looters were normally law-abiding citizens who were either pressed by necessity or were just tempted to purloin articles of apparent interest or value. Juliet Gardiner remarks that many looters were simply opportunistic, grabbing whatever they could find of value on the pavements the day after the bombing: watches, jewellery, silverware, radios... etc. She further explains how honest citizens impetuously yielded to temptation in these times of stress and chaos, picking up what seemed like discarded goods.

As a result of the nightly bombing raids, it became customary for citizens to wake up to a picture of general chaos. Even when there was no loss of life involved, Londoners often had to face the traumatic experience of having their homes and lifelong possessions destroyed or badly damaged overnight. Indeed, for those who spent the night in shelters or the underground, there was always the uncertainty of whether they would find their homes still standing, or whether they would have to deal with the

[9] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Virago Press, 1986), 21-25.