

Dear readers,

My thanks in advance to anyone able to find the time to read my paper near the end of a busy year! Your help is very much appreciated.

The first thing I should say about this paper is that it's still in a very formative and exploratory state, which should make a workshop like this quite useful. I presented some initial musings on the topic in England last year and then left it alone until a few months ago. Since then, the basic idea, which was that of imagining the Blitz as an event in the literary history of (domestic) fiction, has developed in ways I find exciting, but that will also require a reconsideration of precisely where this project fits in my current work. While I had intended the paper to be article-length, the full version is (at present) around 50 or so pages and is, for this reason, also in the process of being split in half. I'll be quite happy to share how I'm planning to divide the paper during the workshop but don't want to divulge in advance, as I'm interested in seeing whether other readers sense the same incompatibility between two modes of analysis as I do. Or whether there are other suggestions for where else I might take the paper(s), what parts seem most salient, most (or least) useful, which need further elaboration, suggestions for further investigation, etc.

So, given that I didn't want to send anyone more than 25 pages of reading with all their other end-of-year work, I've cut the current paper in half and tried to indicate (with square brackets) some of the missing material. Hopefully the paper still proves to be a mostly legible reading experience. In terms of what I left, I focused mainly on the extensive theoretical elaboration of the specific literary history in which I'm trying to make an intervention (or rather show an intervention that may have already been made but has since been occluded). One thing I had to cut out almost entirely, as it develops its consistency throughout the entirety of the piece, is the reading of the suitcase (apparently full of books) that Arthur Rowe carries on an errand in the middle of Graham Greene's *Ministry of Fear*. As there are a few mentions of the device, which I'm using to develop a conceptual thread throughout the piece as a whole, I thought I'd briefly say that this intends to produce a Schrodinger's-cat-like formula that looks something like the following: the reader is in the home like the character is in the novel like the cat is in the box. And Rowe's suitcase, which may contain either books or bombs, is in fact the potentially deadly indifference or conceptual indistinction between the two under the pressure of the Blitz. Again, happy to elaborate further at the workshop, but this formula should at least be a bit clarified by reading the paper.

Finally, I've removed the majority of the footnotes in order to reduce the number of words further. This shouldn't disrupt the reading experience much at all, but I thought I'd mention it in case there are any remnants of this excision in the text.

Thank you all again for reading! I look forward to seeing you on Thursday.

Zach

Blitz-Reading and the Unhousing of the British Novel, or How to Handle Books Like Bombs

Supposing a bomb were to be put under this whole scheme of things, what would we be after? What feelings do we want to carry through, into the next epoch? What feelings will carry us through? What is the underlying impulse in us that will provide the motive-power for a new state of things, when this democratic-industrial-lovey-darling-take-me-to-mommy state of things is bust? (D. H. Lawrence, "The Future of the Novel [Surgery for the Novel—Or a Bomb?]" 154)

... And then the bomb went off. (Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear* 19)

Later in Greene's wartime novel, while recollecting the few personal effects lost in the blast that destroys the rooms he had rented (but never refurnished) in a house among the already bombed-out row of homes on Guilford Street, Arthur Rowe singles out two books kept from childhood, Dickens' *David Copperfield* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, as losses particularly worth grieving. Noting how "the fictitious sufferings of little Nell" had previously given Rowe's "sense of pity" a human character, the narrative now detaches this sense from its focalizing relation, from reading, and figures instead its inhuman roaming amongst "too many objects—too many rats that needed to be killed. And [Rowe] was one of them" (Greene 2005, 74–75). If Rowe is at once monstrous, pitiable, and finally to be rendered disposable, it is because his attachments are untimely. Moved by pity but unable to determine whether the pain he cannot bear is his own or another's—an affective investment endemic to diagnoses of the naive or childish reader—Rowe's violence, and the types of heroism that inform it, are, like his childhood, like his reading, anachronisms from before the last war. "The Little Duke," hero of Charlotte Yonge's adventure novel about the early life of Richard the Fearless, which Arthur first remembers from his youth, then discovers and purchases in the novel's opening pages—and which is cited in the epigraph to each chapter—"is dead and betrayed and forgotten." Because of his characteristic untimeliness, Rowe persists in his attachment to books now blasted out of existence "not so much because he liked them as because he had read them as a child, and they carried no adult memories" (Greene 2005, 12).

What I want to attend to first is how precisely the presentation of Rowe's character corresponds with Lawrence's description of "the monster with many faces," the contemporary novel, as a pitiable "poor thing" that "is really young yet," but also (and at the same time) as the "[p]oor old novel" whose "childishness has become very long drawn-out" (Lawrence 1985, 152–3). Indeed, the occasion for Rowe's recollection of the novels he loses to the first blast is his intent to kill the pitiful, painful, childish but long-drawn-out thing, to end his life. However, he will soon be interrupted from this purpose by the promise of still more books leading him, by way of a ridiculous errand, to a second blast that will deprive him of his adult memories and temporarily resurrect *The Little Duke* as an outmoded adventurer caught up in a spy novel "directed, controlled, moulded, by some agency with a surrealist imagination" (Greene 2005, 81).¹ Notice, then, how Rowe, who in the asynchronous hybridity of his young-oldness seems as if to require the blast that temporarily throws him back into childish reassurance of narrative time, becomes a means through which to test Lawrence's explosive contingency. What if a bomb was put under the novel? Or a bomber over its reader's head as she sits reading at home? What would it mean to Blitz the novel? To produce a Blitz book, then, but not as the makeshift genre that Harrison describes, mostly with disfavor, as emerging "when the heavy raids begin"—not necessarily as a book about the historical event of the Blitz that began in Britain in September 1940 and continued almost nightly until May of the following year—but rather the blitzed novel as a literary historical event that, by rendering the novel destructible, might provide belated but material answers for Lawrence's interwar question (Harrison 1941, p.). To think, for instance, blasts as bookends, blowing literary objects, periods, and even

¹ Yoking the adventure story to the spy thriller or Fifth Column novel with which its genre is formally continuous but ethically and epistemically incongruous, grounded as the spy genre is in present suspicion of secreted (foreign) pasts rather than fearlessness toward an undisclosed but gradually interpretable future, Greene's narrative encompasses much of the polygeneric "conglomeration" that Tom Harrison, in his 1941 review of Britain's "War Books," describes as the "chaotic effluvia of a world confused" (Harrison 1941, 418).

entire histories into and out of existence, and characters (as readers) attempting to childishly recollect their literary remains—to shore up collapsing shelves (and selves) in bombed-out houses—in the aftermath of an explosion that need not necessarily have taken place for the potential of its irruption to devastate the novel’s foundational forms.

For the purposes of this paper, I follow Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* in imagining the paradigmatic form of the novel to be the middle-class household. In my reading of Armstrong, the figure of the house comes to function as a metonymy for the form of modern subjectivity that the writing of domestic fiction by women first produces as “the ordered space we now recognize as the household” (Armstrong 1987, 23–24). Opened as a space of potential political agency for the middle-class woman, the modern subject—our belated wartime reader—is culturally reproduced and becomes dominant through scenes of reading that take place in houses, both inside and outside of novels, by characters who invert the priority of the conventional mimetic relation insofar as their examples are thereafter represented in the cultural and social literacies that condition the everyday lives of their readers.

Armstrong provides a useful instance of how this production of literacies functions, first between readers in novels and then in their disclosure of the “specialized language” of domesticating interpretation to readers of novels, in her reading of the scene in Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Shirley* where “Robert is socialized,” becomes “entirely English,” in reading *Coriolanus* with his cousin, Caroline, by the same process through which “the Bard is transformed by the domestic setting in which he is read” (Armstrong 1987, 215–6). Through their co-sexuating division of “the labor of reading,” Robert takes exception to the “warlike portions” of the play that, he says, are “out of date, or should be,” while Caroline smilingly critiques Robert’s character for “sympathiz[ing] with that proud patrician who does not sympathize with his famished fellow-men.” The purpose of this interpretive effort, claims Armstrong, is to induce in Robert a feeling for Shakespeare—Caroline

ultimately asks Robert “Now, have you felt Shakespeare?”— that suppresses the political content of the play in order to “bring to the foreground the grand current of human emotions;” to produce a feeling for what Woolf calls “human character” that stabilizes, by simultaneously universalizing, naturalizing, and transhistoricizing, the partial, precarious, and historically contingent production of the sentimental reader within the apparent safety of the English household (Armstrong 1987, 218–9). Caroline, then, uses Shakespeare as a means of reforming Robert’s literacies, of domesticating his feelings, in the same way that Rowe uses Dickens’ Nell to humanize his sense of pity, prior to the destruction of his home and books. Indeed, according to a 1942 Mass-Observation survey, the volumes listed above (Shakespeare, Dickens, Brontë) are among those most typically found in wartime middle-class home libraries, which most often contained “some edition of Shakespeare,” who is “more frequently found than the Bible” but “often kept separately, as a special piece of table or sideboard furniture,” as well as “Dickens and other classics” and “the more familiar dead poets” (Mass-Observation 1942, 92). This version of the English home library is the transgenerational setting of what Armstrong calls Brontë’s “house of culture,” which “brings alien cultural materials,” relics of other times and places, into the “domestic framework,” thereby “destroy[ing] their cultural otherness, making it impossible for one to use them to imagine another period in time and another political reality” (Armstrong 1987, 210). In this way, the home library organizes literary history (or its English tradition) as a stable, spatial order that, by virtue of its governing metonymy, because it is set within the home, also organizes, and even nationalizes the personal feelings of its readers and the social relations between them through the household’s reproduction of a “the densely woven fabric of common sense and sentimentality that even today ensures the ubiquity of middle-class power” (Armstrong 1987, 5). And it is precisely the history organized by this modest home library, the scenes of reading and ways of feeling for which it sets the stage, that I hope to materialize by thinking of blasts as bookends. “Put away childish things,” advises Lawrence, yet the Blitz, insofar as

it upsets the order of things, seems also to overturn the temporal orientation of the figure who could provide a future for the novel by blasting books off of the shelves on which they had been kept (Lawrence 1985, 153).

Describing Brontë's work of cultural salvage, her reassemblage of relics left over from those prior modes of representation that domestic fiction renders obsolete, Armstrong refers to the author as a "bricoleur, a trashman of sorts," and it is this work of salvage that the sudden vulnerability of the English home forces readers to fruitlessly repeat (Armstrong 1987, 210). It is the impossible effort of the sentimental reader to put away childish things, to reshelve their books post-blast—after their own lives have been disorganized, the fabric of their social relations frayed—that now defines their untimely and pathetic protagonism in the story of the novel. Because they inherit these newly destabilized structures of feeling, because their lives depend so much on the metonymic bind between inside and outside that previously universalized and communicated their feelings, while simultaneously abstracting the reading matter that informed them, these reading subjects are also now most attuned to (have a novel sense of) the real precariousness of the historical moment that makes the domestic scene unlivable. The warlike parts of the play that Robert finds so out of place, which should be elsewhere or in the past, and so are contemporized and woven into the fabric of English feeling by their reinterpretation in Brontë's novel, now return home, no longer pre-accommodated in being pre-interpreted, to invade the reading of even the most impervious cultural texts. And it is the exposure felt by unhoused readers that reverses the interpretive and mimetic relation between book and reader that is proper to Armstrong's literary history of domestic fiction, in which the reading that takes place within the book restructures the senses and sentiments of the reader outside the book. Instead, the reversal of the same channels of human feeling cultivated by this formerly domesticating relation allows for the nervous excess of the blitzed reader to be returned upon the book, and to pass through the book into the house of culture that books

uphold—inside of which, shelved together, they are historically contextualized—in producing strange manifestations of feeling or desire that reinterpret the matter of fiction as if by way of explosions communicating the devastation outside to the space left inside the book.

I find Armstrong's construction of the middle-class household useful for modeling the literary historical context for the blitzing of the novel as much for the intuitive, perhaps naive, and certainly nostalgic association between books, readers, and their houses—on which the force of her argument depends but that it then does much to denaturalize—as for the formal and political complexity it develops in providing a modern history of these relations. Because these things so easily fit together, because they feel as if they belong to one another, Armstrong's story surprises me most by exposing me to the naivety of the childish attachments that continue to inform many of my own reading habits. To continue the story of Armstrong's reader into the uncertain future of the Blitz only intensifies these attachments as the insecurity of their interpretive, premediatory functions—their inability to adequately explain what is happening in the world outside—nullifies the reassurance of this natural co-belonging. To understand how reading goes on and how stories continue to work when blitzed, you need to understand how readers feel, not only about their reading, but also about the mass of things and people around them, about what I will describe below as the newly assailant or shrapnelled facts of an everyday life no longer confidently at home in England. Interpreting the textual manifestations of the emotional responses of readers requires a sense of the disrupted continuity of the history of their feelings and the resulting untimeliness of their belated emergencies as both long gestating—for the war, of course, did not come from nowhere—yet appearing as if something utterly new. The paradoxical convenience of the Blitz, a way of conceptualizing its temporal and causal condition as both a narratological and literary historical event, affecting readers both inside and outside of books, depends both on the model of the home as a way of contextualizing precisely what the Blitz unsettles, as well as on an

understanding that the structural problems exposed by this unsettlement mostly predate the advent of open war.

I do not look, then, to reproduce the strong causality or “productive hypothesis” of Armstrong’s literary historical claims, but rather to utilize the convenience of her model as a battery concentrating the energies of Blitz readers, which circulate even more intensely around houses and their contents, and especially around books, when threatened by dispossession in wartime (Armstrong 1987, 23). The Blitz renders such containers (books, personal libraries, houses) insecure, and so the very means of domesticating and contemporizing desire becomes the means of exploding this same history by rechanneling the energies it can no longer regulate through the hyper-catheted and volatilized nervous systems of Blitz readers. The reader, insofar as she anxiously incorporates into the novel the bomb she feels already to be overhead, is therefore one possible name that the Blitz provides for the bomb placed under the novel. Focusing on the Blitz-time reception of this prehistory of an everyday domestic life now imperiled, rather than on its former means of production, on reading rather than writing, my paper insists upon the weak causality of mere convenience in order to momentarily suspend the future Armstrong’s history records in her epilogue, one in which the household “has grown more powerful,” and give time instead to a version of the future that her final chapter opens through a reading of Woolf, but that the history she is telling soon forecloses (Armstrong 1987, 251). In this chapter, Armstrong cites Woolf’s “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” an essay on the present condition and future of the novel that is published a year after Lawrence’s prognosis. Armstrong aptly summarizes Woolf’s point as claiming that the reason that “the novel has not been fulfilling its cultural role particularly well [...] is because the nature of social relationships has changed and the interpretive strategies offered by fictional characters [...] have not changed sufficiently to make the world intelligible” (Armstrong 1987, 246). In this essay, as in its companion pieces on “Modern Fiction” and “Character in Fiction,” Woolf is

primarily responding to Edwardian novelists such as Wells, Galsworthy, and especially to Arnold Bennett and what Woolf calls “his magnificent apparatus for capturing life,” his novels of social observation that are, for Woolf, like houses that ask readers to imagine that “because [Bennett] has made a house, there must be a person living there” (MF 8; CF 47). “Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide” (MF 8). Mrs. Brown, the name Woolf gives to the “old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety,” who “is eternal,” who “is human nature,” who represents for Woolf the immortal yet mutable life of character, remains to “be rescued, expressed, and set in her high relations to the world” (CF 47, 51, 54). Bennett is too much of a materialist, or at least the wrong sort of materialist—one who uses yesterday’s tools in service of a present labor—and “it is from the ruins and splinters of this tumbled [Edwardian] mansion that the Georgian writer must somehow reconstruct a habitable dwelling-place” for Mrs. Brown (MB 35).

Despite her propensity to evade material capture, however, and Woolf’s continuing to employ a language of structural accommodation, the problem with representing Mrs. Brown to the world, of expressing and materializing modern character, is less involved in the matter of houses than it is in the matter of fiction. In England, the household or manor is only the paradigmatic form of fiction, continuously recontaining English literary history within a narrative that works by way of houses to inform future novels in much the same way as the novel’s most distinctive English genre, the *Bildungsroman*, informs its future readers through the education and housing of its characters. Yet, in reflecting upon this history, or rather on her lived experience of it, on the “company” of books surrounding her within “a room of [one’s] own—a reading-room, a library, a study”—on books that have been “coming together on shelves” as “casually, as persistently” as “the ordinary processes of life” that have been going on “these many hundreds of years” outside her window—Woolf comments upon how books “are always overflowing their boundaries [...] breeding new

species from unexpected matches among themselves” (“How Should One Read a Book?” 63-4). This essay is an attempt to frame this trouble with genre, of the new species of fiction produced by the lack of hospitable medium (of the book) “between the hostess and her unknown guest on the one hand, the writer and his unknown reader on the other” (CF 48). You see, the trouble with no longer making books like houses, the trouble with the novel as form, is that the writer no longer knows how to finish her work, nor does she have any space remaining in which to receive her reader. In peacetime, of course, this is a problem to think and write through in old houses, in the company of books that seem as if to organically collect themselves upon shelves. But in wartime, and especially in the midst of a war that has returned home, this question of the future of the novel, posed as it is by Woolf in terms of the fate of character in fiction, is made urgent for both writers and readers by the loss of traditional modes of literary-historical gathering, of hospitality and shelter.

Again, the war is not the cause of these troubles, but only a means through which they become more visible, a way of making their solutions most urgent. As Woolf would learn through the long process of writing *The Years*, the novel in which she felt the need for such solutions most acutely, novels tend to end regardless of whether a writer knows quite how to finish them. Even before the outbreak of war, Woolf designates the moment in which “books are to be found in almost every room of the house” as occurring “[a]t this late hour of the world’s history” (63). Read with the future war in mind, the same essay’s concern for picking through “the extraordinary abundance and litter and confusion of matter which lies strewn about” the “complex minds and households of men and women” seems to darkly apprehend the destruction of the order of personal life by wartime, providing one sort of ending for the history gathered by those books that are no longer safely at home in houses (68-9). This essay will isolate several instances of this nostalgic apprehension as a way of handling reading matter that paradoxically looks forward to and can even produce the ends of the historical formations to which readers in wartime continually return,

whether inside or outside of books. Within this paradox is suspended both the literary history of domestic fiction that Armstrong records and the processes of everyday life that this history informs. And the life thus suspended does, of course, have a name: it is the same Mrs. Brown that Woolf had supposed to be eternal. To blitz the novel is therefore to blitz Mrs. Brown; it is to imperil the life of character in fiction. Yet, this formulation of the problem of fiction in wartime entails one further qualification. Mrs. Brown does not figure the “human nature” that Woolf claims for her, nor is the lateness of the hour of history that of the world’s (CF 47). Instead, Mrs. Brown is English nature, a continuous manifestation of those hundreds of years of development in the processes of imbricating the art and life of a people—an Orlando the Obscure. In the same way, the lateness of the hour is that of the English history told by its fiction. The war, then, allows blitzed readers to imagine ways of bringing the story of the English novel to an end. Of course, this particular story of the novel does not finally end with a war that in many ways only reinforces the novel’s narrative enclosures, but what this essay looks to do is recover these imaginings, to reintroduce the accidents, confusions, and affective registers unique to the exposures of Blitz-time, in order to reinhabit this structure at the moment when it appears to become most destructible.

Of course, this claim assumes that there is at least a potential indistinction between planting a bomb beneath the house of fiction and blitzing its reader from above. Attributing the sense and structure of the uncanny to the traumatizing of the novel’s constitutive form and perennial scene of reading, which I will argue the Blitz further confirms as the home, even as this confirmation comes at the expense of this form’s historical security, I also acknowledge that my position commits me to a discomfiting confusion between friend and enemy, compatriot and foreigner, combatant and noncombatant, between reading and bombing or being bombed. For the purposes of determining or reopening the novel’s future, does it matter where the blast is coming from, whether from inside or outside the house? Or, for that matter, whether from inside or outside the book?

The errand that distracts Rowe from his intended suicide can, I think, provide a more concise formulation for the conceptual indistinction that results from the radical materialization of paradigmatic forms of the novel precipitated by wartime—or, rather, of the material conditions for the historical security of this form that, once compromised by the Blitz, induces in readers a retroactive sense of their subjection to the totalizing precarity of the novel's disintegrative function. Because the novel had once housed the reader, because it was and remains even on the Home Front, in the lateness of its national stability, the essential means for representing a specific form of domestic life, for reproducing readers as characters informed by their inheritances in the house of fiction, it now renders these same subjects destructible. Even if they evacuate, there are few places left to go apart from other people's houses, and the final section of this article will point toward some formal and narratological implications of achieving this uncertain refuge. In the midst of wartime precarity, then, the question of the future of the novel is suspended in non-narrative time²—alongside the livability of its houses and the material fragility of the possessions the house contains—between what can provisionally be defined as the vulnerability of its content and the newly emergent volatility of its form.

Separating content from form in order to illustrate the relationship that most obviously results from the exposure of the home to bombing from above, the contents of the suitcase Rowe carries on his errand in the final chapter of the first part of Greene's novel, titled simply "A Load of Books," complicates this relation by activating Lawrence's contingency and instead setting the bomb under or within the novel: the bomb manifests in content, in matter, as book. Happening to encounter a man who identifies himself as a bookseller while he is on his way to throw himself into

² In this context, non-narrative time indexes a form of temporality and narrative progression that works by way of a dislocating sequence of anticipated but also entirely accidental explosions, rather than by developing any coherent, predictable, or inherent narrative logic. As with characters in fiction, then, the form of the novel is suspended in anticipation of the next explosion that might determine its fate and/or future.

the river, Rowe volunteers “to drag a case of [what he is told are] eighteenth-century folios to the room of [a] stranger” at the Regal Court hotel (Greene 2005, 81). Yet another in the sequence of “absurd episode[s]” that string together a plot as fatalistic in determining the future it projects for its protagonist as it is insistently accidental in connecting the sequence of secrets, passwords, surrealistic encounters, and explosions through which he arrives at his destination, Arthur’s opens the door to the room, where he is to deliver the suitcase full of books, and finds only his eventual love interest, Anna Hilfe, who also happens to be the sister of the novel’s antagonist, Willi. I will have occasion to revisit Arthur and Anna’s relationship below in asking questions about what forms of intimacy can be produced outside of the heteronormativizing enclosure of what Armstrong identifies as the domesticating scene of reading, but for now I want to focus attention on the suitcase full of books. Soon recognizing that the entire pretext for their encounter is a set-up, Anna and Arthur, “besieged” on all sides by enemies, and with the world “sliding rapidly towards night,” resolve to wait for the air raid sirens to go off so that they might mix in with the crowd of people seeking shelter in the hotel’s basement. Suspecting that the contents of the suitcase are not what he had been told, Arthur decides to look inside it in the hope that they may be able to use its contents—bricks, perhaps—as weapons. “Then, as the sirens took up their nightly wail, he opened the lid of the suitcase...” (Greene 2005, 91). Although purely coincidental, the sounding of the air raid sirens at the moment of this second blast, which is only registered in the novel by the ellipsis that closes its first section, testifies to the complex temporality of what the novel calls the “convenient blitz,” which attributes all wartime destructions, even those involving the prewar inheritances of personal lives, to the impersonal devastations of the bombers overhead (Greene 2005, 170). Whereas the first blast, deployed by the bombers, destroyed Rowe’s home and his books while (conveniently) rescuing him from the malicious intent of an assassin, the second blast, which appropriately follows upon the familiar overture of the air raid siren, takes place within the room, from within the suitcase apparently loaded

with books, but the convenience of its occurrence, however coincidental, turns the exceptional event of an intended and targeted violence into the type of thing that happens to people going about their everyday lives in wartime—or even while sitting at home and reading something light—Greene’s thriller, perhaps—to take their mind off the war.

“Something light to take my mind off the war:” I borrow this attention to the lightness of reading in wartime from the title of Katie Halsey’s survey of “Reading on the Home Front during the Second World War.” Mostly focusing on contemporary social surveys and personal records, particularly those assembled by Mass-Observation during and just after the war, Halsey delineates how generic and material distinctions between types of reading matter intensify during wartime. These oppositions include serious against light/escapist reading; instrumental reading, whether of manuals (men) or ration books (women), against wastes of time; newspapers against books; works on politics and economics against novels; war books against prewar/peacetime books, defined both in terms of content, whether a book does or does not take the war as its subject, and the quality (or readability) of its paper and print. Halsey concludes by asserting that, despite the different preferences of readers, a consensus nevertheless emerged in “the vivid need that ordinary [people] felt for books and other printed matter during the war years, and the real deprivation they felt when it was not possible to obtain the books they wanted to read” due to the persistent lack of supply occasioned by wartime rationing (Halsey 2011, 98).

I will return to how the gendering of these distinctions paradoxically defines the type of reader I am most interested in below—the kind of reader most attuned to (because she leaves herself most exposed to) the climate of the moment in demonstrating habits so unseasonable for its weather. In this section, I want to focus your attention instead on how the narratological convenience of Blitz-time complicates distinctions between wartime and peacetime in the plotting of light or escapist fictions. Specifically, with an eye toward unpacking the contents of our suitcase, to

determine whether it is filled with books or bombs and whether that distinction matters, I want to notice how the paradoxical framing of Rowe's narrative by the convenience of the two blasts makes it impossible to decide whether the war is incidental to the plot or the plot is incidental to the war. As Mass-Observation's two reports on *Books and the Public* (1942 and 1944) make clear, the preference for light reading, which generally includes romance, historical fiction, adventure stories, detective novels, and thrillers amongst its genres, is motivated by a desire "to get away from personal troubles, from the war, from the present day" (Mass-Observation 1944, 152). For the adventure, detective, and thriller/spy novels, which Greene's novel in part confounds, and which are felt to be more acceptable, or at least less shameful forms of escapism for "serious" (male) readers than what one wartime reader calls "historical and pretty-pretty romantic novels," the mechanism of escape is always the action of "its closely woven plot" (Mass-Observation 1944, 87–91 considers "Detective Stories and Thrillers"). Greene's thriller, however, neither escapes the present day, the war, nor the prewar matter of Rowe's personal troubles. And, in focalizing the plot through the character of a suicidally escapist reader, who exemplifies the inclination "to go back to the leisurely novels of the nineteenth century"³ to the extent that his amnesia blasts him back into the premodern world of *The Little Duke*, Greene forces his wartime reader to be "suddenly taken from that world," the world of adventure, into the bewilderment of a plot—"Jones and the cake, the sick bay, poor Stone ... all this talk of a man called Hitler ... your files of wretched faces, the cruelty and meaninglessness"—in which the ellipses between the surrealistic events of the narrative, the geopolitical setting that should explain them, and their melancholic interpretation by Rowe, our representative reader, irreparably rupture what should be the singular and uninterrupted momentum

³ Cite Maugham here on the preference for 19th century novels, and especially on the curious recuperation of the works of Charlotte Yonge. The reason: "they find in her quiet novels the picture of a peaceful, secure, and easy-going life which, at this distance, looks as if it had been very pleasant to lead. The England she described is gone, never to return" (176).

of the closely woven plot. Greene has chosen the bomb over surgery for his novel. The plot is lure, the book is the booby trap, and Rowe (and through him, the too-serious reader) is the naive boob, the quarry, who has been “sent on a journey with the wrong map,” being the map provided him by his familiarity with the commonplaces of nineteenth century fictions (Greene 2005, 146).

Indeed, it is precisely Rowe’s predilection for old books that allows for the suitcase trap to be set for him despite the apparent coincidence of his encounter with the bookseller. Again, Rowe’s prewar attachments are exploited for the purposes of an ostensibly wartime intrigue, yet the situation of these events in wartime—the irruption of a convenient Blitz, for instance—makes war mostly incidental to the plot. Blasts open up new spaces for insight, necessitate different ways of reading and even otherwise impossible forms of self-reflection that involve the literary history of the novel in the trap set for its reader, but the Blitz is only an occasion for the self-exposure of the reader in the novel—an exposure to the monstrous re-emergence of his own prehistory—rather than the subject exposed. Blasts alone are uninteresting as pure contingencies; only when involved as contingencies in prior histories do they become productive. And this is the contingency that our suitcase epitomizes in confusing prior matter with future catastrophe, domestic sentiment with wartime atmosphere, the superfluity of war to noncombatants, having little directly to do with war and yet feeling its proximity more than they can bear, and the corresponding yet opposing superfluity of noncombatants to a war that renders their personal lives disposable. In the Blitz, books can be read as bombs. Or at least should be handled like bombs if their reader is to survive the paradoxes of their newfound volatility.

[This is the point at which I provide a full elaboration of the contents of the suitcase Rowe is carrying, or rather of the suitcase (which Bowen says the writer should keep packed in the hallway, ready for travel (or evacuation) at moment’s notice) as a type of *mise en abyme* in which the contents of English literary history, of its disordered shelves, are condensed together in a vertiginous, indistinct, and potentially explosive mass. This, I claim, is the problem with fiction’s matter, which is made up of all the wasted energy that can no longer be accommodated by wartime economy.

My explication of this claim, and of the interpretation of “Mysterious Kôr that follows below, depends on Peter Thorsheim’s article on “Salvage and Destruction: The Recycling of Books

and Manuscripts in Great Britain During the Second World War.” Thorsheim notes how wartime salvage paradoxically introduced the imperative to conserve resources and recycle objects deemed useless for the purposes of war—the imperative not to waste—in order to produce weapons that extend the capacity of the nation to further destroy and lay waste. Citing an advertisement published in 1941, loyal Britons were to give up “all your stored up paper. All the old forgotten books – all the old treasured programmes – the useless receipts – sentimental letters – historic newspapers . . . Turn them out in cold blood” and “forget sentiment about yourself” (Thorsheim, 2015). This leads me into a discussion of the interpretive economy of the novel in relation to the general economy at work in wartime—what is valued more or less—and how both economies are in many ways continuous with prewar and interwar economies of an ostensibly peacetime Britain.]

Mary Favret’s *War at a Distance* retrojects the siege narrative of everyday life at war, of a continuous redistribution of imperfectly acknowledged but perpetually assailable facts woven into the patterns of the everyday, via models developed by Lefebvre and de Certeau, into the past of novelistic discourse—Austen’s *Persuasion* is her primary example—in order to show how “war invades the mind” of even the most distant and ostensibly peacetime subjects, bringing “war home not only to everyday bodies, but also to the rhythms of everyday minds—including that of the reader” (Favret 2010, 171). Pursuing this mode of return into the future, into the Blitz, it is notable that the reduction of the distance between the event of war and the war-affected reader does not appear to diminish the need for readers to mediate their experience of war through their choice of reading matter. Despite the war going on above them, the war comes home to many of those living in Britain most emphatically through what it does or threatens to do to the objects that surround them—in causing people to imagine their possessions strewn about the ruin of their home—and books are often instrumental in appearing to secure for each reading subject the proper, prewar, or peacetime order of things. The difference of reading in Blitz-time, then, is neither the immediacy of wartime experience, nor war’s invasion of peacetime leisure, of the supposedly demilitarized zone of Austen’s pleasures, but instead consists in the intensity of the pressure placed on reading’s matter in the bodies and minds of those (readers) in whom books have set up house. Ceasing to appear purely as mental objects, books begin to number among war’s everyday ungovernable facts. Foregrounded in their artifactuality, books in wartime remain bound to the literary anthropology of human

character. They incite, for instance, the growing inhumanity of Rowe's unhoused and bookless pity as a trial and judgement—its verdict, suicide—upon his own outmoded readerly sensibility. Because of the insinuation of the textual in the fabric and flesh of the lives of everyday readers, the materialization of books in multiple and often contradictory ways—as destructible objects, waste, resources for salvage, as both without social currency and as invaluable mementos of prewar identities—extends beyond the object that no longer reliably delimits the domain of fiction and into the lives of characters that are similarly wasted, dispensable, yet also perhaps salvageable for the purposes of the general war effort. Unable to mediate their own factual existence as they mediate the organizations of other persons and objects, due to the material precarity through which they are defamiliarized into brute facts, books threaten instead to assail readers. Reading, then, is capable of absorbing many blows—indeed, it can provide an essential form of care for the wounded—and so remains capable of mediating, of momentarily forgetting, distancing, or at least forestalling the surrounding experience of ongoing war. Yet it cannot accommodate the vulnerability of the factual existence of its material dependency, of books. If the blows and blasts suffered by readers intensify in wartime, the most painful or threatening are those delivered by instruments (turned weapons) on which their hoped-for, remembered but always already misplaced peacetime of reading depends.

[There's a minor gap here that attempts to locate the source of the pain suffered by readers and its redistribution (producing a form of counter-public via shared affectivity) in wartime.]

What, then, are the blows and pains peculiar to reading's superfluous matter? Bowen's "Mysterious Kôr" opens with an image of London saturated by the "remorseless" effect of "full moonlight"—"shallow, cratered, extinct," as if already in the aftermath of its bombing, and so visible, so vulnerable in every element of its moon-brittled surface that "futility of the black-out became laughable." Yet the story quickly informs its reader that German bombers "no longer came by the full moon," and so the promised "threat," appearing as if fulfilled in advance beneath the

cratering moonlight, emanates instead from another “more immaterial” source (Bowen 1981, 728). As if already bombed, then, as if already ruined, yet without needing to suffer any further material alteration: the narrative sets the panoramic scene of “[t]his day between days, this extra tax, [which] was perhaps more than senses and nerves could bear,” before focusing on “a girl and a soldier,” Pepita and Arthur, who move together through this scene with “no destination but each other and [...] not quite certain even of that” (Bowen 1981, 728–9). Pepita gives the atmosphere of this place the same name that Bowen gives to her story, “Mysterious Kôr,” and both recall the name of the lost imperial city from H. Rider Haggard’s late Victorian novel *She*—a place “with no history,” without people, without so much as “a crack in it anywhere for a weed to grow in” (Bowen 1981, 729). While having no general history, Kôr has a distinctly personal history for its author. In a 1947 radio broadcast on the subject of the early influence of *She* on her as both reader and writer, Bowen notes how she “saw Kôr,” the “enormous derelict city” from Haggard’s novel, “before [she] saw London,” and was thereafter “inclined to see London as Kôr with the roofs still on.” Bowen continues: “*She* is for me historic—it stands for the first totally violent impact I ever received from print. After *She*, print was to fill me with apprehension. I was prepared to handle any book like a bomb” (Bowen 1986c, 249–50). In one sense, then, “Kôr’s finality” provides Bowen a foresight that enables her to imagine what London might look like after its destruction, after all of its roofs had come off, even before the outbreak of war. The bombers reactivate this prewar sense of sublime extinction, thereby allowing the scale of their work to become legible by making it continuous with a literary history that has long been complicit in providing both material and propagandistic resources for the imperial prehistory of modern warfare.⁴ But there is another sense in which the prehistory

⁴ As Paul Saint-Amour argues in describing the spectacle of Empire Air Day, an annual RAF pageant that took place in North London during the interwar period, this legibility is instrumental to inculcating in British subjects a sense of both the dreadful imminence and reassuring distance of violence dispensed by air warfare, which was to be seen as permissible in the colonies, as another fact of everyday life that was also, for the

that the bombings reactivate is an exception to the general history in which both books and bombers participate. The violence of Kôr's emergence is, I think, also legible as the consummation of Pepita's feelings about the calculus of waste and conservation, of ruin and salvage, through which the material attachments of personal life become caught up within and repurposed by war's shrapnelling of everyday facts. In one sense, Kôr is a model of efficiency. Where there is no history, where there are no people, neither is there waste. In this way, Kôr is interpretable as the end product of the calculus of rendering superfluous material into instruments for wartime destruction. Disallowing all waste, which it defines as anything personal, anything of a purely sentimental value, and yet producing waste in excess, rendering matter destructible as never before, war ends—its logic is perfected—in London becoming Kôr. Kôr, then, has no people because it has no further time for sentiment; it is inhuman because, as Arthur later says in responding to the question of whether “wanting [can] want what's human”: “To be human's to be at a dead loss” (Bowen 1981, 738–9).

Conceding this loss, does an interpretation of Kôr remain committed to a model of perpetual sterility in describing the dead world that provides Pepita no personal space in which to consummate her desire? Or, as I argue, is there an alternative economy at work in this story—one generated by the same unaccommodated desire—that also operates by way of waste and conservation but fails to obey the totalizing logic of the general war economy? I find evidence for this underground economy in Bowen's preface to *The Demon Lover*, her collection of stories that closes with “Mysterious Kôr,” when she describes the nightly dreams and waking fantasies of wartime as “compensations” for for “the desiccation, by war, of our day-to-day lives;” and her stories as “hallucinations” that function as “an unconscious, instinctive, saving resort on the part of

colonizers, a form of practice for its inevitable deployment in war, as its demonstration was both spectacularized (the Eastern Drama) and routinized at home.

the characters: life, mechanized by the controls of wartime, and emotionally torn and impoverished by changes, had to complete itself in some way” (Bowen (1986b), p. 96; emphasis in original). This mode of everyday resistance, which functions in what Bowen calls the “between-times” that provide space for her stories, involves her characters in doing precisely the work of her readers in “assembl[ing] bits of themselves—broken ornaments, odd shoes, torn scraps of the curtains that had hung in a room—from the wreckage” of their bombed-out houses” (Bowen 1986b, 97–98). The work of fantasy, of hallucination and dreaming, of extreme personal sentiment, is therefore a material labor that takes as its content the waste of superfluous matter in order to demonstrate “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” (Bowen 1986b, 97). Primary among these artefacts of resistance are “the old forgotten books” that the advertisement above advises any loyal Briton to turn out of the house in cold blood. “Everyone here, as is known, read more,” continues Bowen,” and what was sought in books—old books, new books—was the communicative touch of personal life.” Accordingly, foregrounded amongst the material wreckage of personal life are those “stories and poems” with which the newly unaccommodated reader “assembled and checked themselves” in attempting to reorient their narratives by recovering “indestructible landmarks in a destructible world” (Bowen 1986b, 97). *Kôr* is not, then, the space of total desiccation, not where the personal finds itself deprived of any hope for consummation, but rather the space where personal life can be compensated for its losses; it is the waste product and not the end product of the laws of conservation that regulate economies of total war; an afterlife or underground for all that war produces yet fails to accommodate. *Kôr* is what becomes of the story of its readers, of Bowen’s childhood apprehension of the violence of print, after its material dependency, the book, has been rendered superfluous and made waste by the wartime modification of the self-same violence. And this, I think, is precisely what the image of *Kôr*

itself has long apprehended for Bowen in imagining the violence of the imperial city returning home to destroy, amongst all other things, the very medium of its globalizing circulation. Like Pepita, Bowen dreads a destruction for which she is also nostalgic. The unworldliness of the images and feelings that Bowen has cultivated since her early stories, which She taught her to associate with the material of their transmission, is perfected as a modification and rescaling of the uncanny by the convenience of a Blitz that renders the world destructible while feeling to the most sensitive of readers like a homecoming. In her essay “Out of a Book,” a record of her early life as a reading child, Bowen identifies the root of this unworldliness in the “haunting of life by fiction” through which every “real-life scene” reads as if “it has partaken of fiction’s body” (Bowen 1986a, 48–52). Exposing this reader to the world by rendering the domestic scenes of her reading life destructible, the Blitz repeats and extends the violent impact of print, reactivating the para-literacies that taught Bowen to handle books like bombs by radically materializing the paradoxical situation of the book as both volatile and vulnerable, destructive and destructible. If She first materializes the violence in fiction for Bowen, it is the war that explodes its potential. And at the crux of this paradox is the character of the reader, another wartime confusion in reading proximities, another hallucinatory and haunting cathexis produced by childish or naive attachments, and a conjunction on which I shall soon further elaborate, who provides the matter through which the body of fiction achieves its distinctive wartime pathos. There has always been a violence in reading; what the Blitz does is bring this violence back home to the book.

Some questions necessarily emerge from this formulation of the unworldliness of reading in the apparent afterlife of the book. How can a homecoming that arrives as a destruction, which returns the violence of reading by laying waste to the book, also offer the reader personal compensation? Similarly, how can Kôr be full of waste, of the surplus matter and energies of wartime production, yet devoid of anything but the ruins of the “buildings [that] survived people,”

which seem interpretable only insofar as they could refer back to and so also, for Bowen, simultaneously foretell and memorialize the ruination of a way of life that, in the heart of Kôr, leaves no trace of itself (Bowen 1986c, 249)? To answer these questions as a way of returning from the matter of the book to the matter of our own books, which—as you’ll recall—we’ve left in the suitcase in the hall in preparation for departure, for evacuation or homecoming, I propose that the heart of the mystery of Kôr lies in the question of its potential interpretability. Even as it cites Haggard’s novel, Kôr’s origin remains polysemantic. When Arthur comments that he “thought girls thought about people” rather than unpeopled spaces like Kôr, Pepita responds by asking “How can anyone think about people if they’ve got any heart?” registering the Proto-Indo-European reconstruction for heart, *k̑ér*, root of the Greek *κέρ* (*kér*) and Latin *cor*, and then completing the reversal that is also a concealed repetition by remarking that “I always think about Kôr” (730; Chambers 471). Even when interpreted as a space of personal compensation rather than anthropocidal conservation, Pepita has no care (and Kôr no room) for people. Pepita intuits here the potential violence in sentiment, in the capacity for feeling the pain of certain others that, like Rowe’s pity, depends for its integrity on the home that shelters him “from people who might know him,” and on the books that educate, privatize, and then finally mobilize this otherwise errant sense toward reproducing a distinctly imperial form of British character (Greene 2005, 74). While he and Anna await the approach of the foreign conspirators who, he imagines, must be right outside the door—just prior the book-bomb blast that comes from within the room—Rowe responds to the perceived source of the threat with an indignation through which Greene satirically typifies this generalizable character: “This is a civilized hotel,” he tells Anna, and, moreover, “This isn’t Vienna, you know. This is London. We are in the majority. This hotel is full of people—on our side” (Greene 2005, 89). This is precisely the idea of civilization, of people, of London—precisely the domesticated form of British sentiment—for which Pepita has no heart and Kôr no further time.

Regardless of whether Kôr is interpreted as a post-apocalyptic ruin or the hallucinatory refuge of a salvage from salvage—saving what is personal from being rendered useful for the purposes of war—it depends for its emergence upon an inhuman capacity for wasting human potential.

The difference between ruin and salvage, between wasting and conserving, cannot be determined by reading Kôr's remains. No trace of life haunts life's former living spaces. Instead, the model for the form of compensation that Kôr imagines in place of civilizational salvation, instead of the revitalizing interpretation of the material remnant, is registered by another root, *Kore* or *Cora*, the maiden, or an epithet for Persephone, queen of the underworld. Whereas the vector for Persephone's abduction narrative usually depends upon *Ķer-*, another Proto-Indo-European reconstruction that roots the Latin infinitive *crēscere*, to grow, swell, or increase, to return to life after a season underground, Pepita's desire for Kôr reverses the gendering of the bargain by making Arthur the mechanism for turning what Bowen's radio broadcast calls "some inside key," of discovering what the story calls "the password" that enables Pepita to turn and return "to Kôr's finality" (Bowen 1986c, 249, 1981, 740). While Persephone pays a high price for the nourishment of a few seeds, Pepita's compensation for her lost days, for her personal space, for possession and privacy and people, as well as for the sexual consummation of her desires, and even, then, for children, is in excess of the capacity for any individual, any body, real-life or fictional, to bear its surplus. Indeed, Kôr's apparent sterility—again, "there is not a crack in it anywhere for a weed to grow in"—is in this sense a refusal of the imperative to bear children that historically defines the wartime efficiency required of women in the nation's appropriation of their reproductive function. As Woolf remarks in a note to her *Three Guineas*, "one method by which [a woman] can help to prevent war is to refuse to bear children" and thus, citing the opinion of Helena Normanton, "stop the supply of 'cannon fodder'" that appropriates the logic of waste and conservation—recycling waste (people) as weapons (soldiers) in order that they might lay waste to people abroad—for the

purposes of nationalizing reproductive futurism (Woolf 2000, 275n10). In the same way, Pepita, the seed of Bowen's story, abstains from being the medium through which a reader might interpret a future for Man; she refuses to salvage Him from salvage and turns instead, in the final sentence of the final story of Bowen's wartime collection, to all that war has rendered destructible in returning to Kôr's finality. For Kôr, as I argue above, and as Bowen's story makes clear from the beginning, is where the waste matter and surplus energies of the general economy go in producing a day between days, an extra tax, which is more than what senses and nerves can bear. This excess is responsible for the atmosphere of threat that the bombers materialize but that, in their absence, cedes its place to the earlier, "more immaterial" economy of interpretive apprehension that makes London the real-life scene of a haunting by fiction that is not of London's past nor of its future, but of the between-time displacement of its residents into the unbearability of a fiction that provides no objective correlative, neither book nor bomb, through which the sensitive reader could justify or discharge the intensity of their emotions. Kôr does not mitigate the violence of these circulations. Instead, in doing without the means of civilizational reproduction, in altogether dispensing with domesticating forms of subject relation, with the cathexis of reader and book or the co-sexuation of *kouros/kore* (boy/girl), Kôr accommodates these energies without needing to intermittently rematerialize and oppose them through a dialectics of antagonism that makes the logic of wartime efficiency into a mechanism for accumulating matter toward the providential and catastrophic history of total war.

[What follows is a paragraph in which I construe the space of totalization imagined by Bowen's story as a prefiguration of the "atomic" literature of the '50s and '60s, which Saint-Amour (citing Derrida) locates in an essential "effaceability" inherent to everything that has historically been called literature. This extends the figure of the suitcase to imagine a type of mimesis that opens onto a world in the aftermath of an explosion that has always already taken place, leading me to a few more close readings from Bowen, Woolf, and, finally, Elizabeth Taylor.]

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