Elizabeth Bowen's «Mysterious Kôr»: narrating the Blitz outside the Myth's paradigm

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Abstract

As some historians are deconstructing the «Myth of the Blitz», little credit is given to the capacity of wartime writers to see beyond the British government's propaganda. Angus Calder states that the literature of the time offers limited material for us to understand what individual experience was really like during the bombings, since only a few authors work outside the Myth's paradigm. This analysis suggests a much more sceptical view of Britain at war in Elizabeth Bowen's short story «Mysterious Kôr» (1942). I highlight how the representation of a Gothic metropolis and the hallucinatory visions of frightened Londoners reject the traditional values of Blitz culture.

Keywords: Blitz, Myth, propaganda, national memory, Elizabeth Bowen, gothic.

«Mysterious Kor» de Elizabeth Bowen: la representación del Blitz más allá de los paradigmas del mito

Resumen

Mientras algunos historiadores están deconstruyendo el «Mito del Blitz», se le da poco crédito a la capacidad de los escritores de la segunda guerra mundial de ver más allá de la propaganda del gobierno británico. Angus Calder sugiere que la literatura de la segunda guerra mundial ofrece poco material para entender cómo fue realmente la experiencia individual durante los bombardeos, ya que pocos autores trabajan fuera del paradigma del «Mito». Este análisis sugiere una visión mucho más escéptica de Gran Bretaña en guerra en el relato corto «Mysterious Kôr», publicado en 1942 por Elizabeth Bowen. Destaco cómo la representación de una metrópolis gótica y las visiones alucinatorias de londinenses aterrorizados rechazan los valores tradiciones de la cultura del Blitz.

Palabras clave: Blitz, mito, propaganda, memoria nacional, Elizabeth Bowen, gótico.

This paper presents Elizabeth Bowen's «Mysterious Kôr» as an ideal case study for the critical analysis of the representation of the Blitz in literature. At a time where some historians suggest that the term «myth» better encapsulates the meaning

accorded to the «memory» of the Blitz, little credit is given to wartime middle-class writers in terms of the capacity they had to see beyond the British government overwhelming propaganda. Angus Calder believes it necessary to critically rethink our collective memory of the Blitz, stating that we have been ignoring «how frightening and confusing the period from April 1940 through to June 1941 was for the British people» since «the Myth stands in our way, asserting itself, abiding no questions» (1991:18). Yet, whilst he wishes to deconstruct the image of a wholly patriotic country united in adversity by analysing political speeches and Mass Observation reports, he seems to imply that the literature of the time offers very little material for us to understand what individual experience really was like during the Blitz. Calder explains that «the writer, who can (most can't) step outside conventional discourses and paradigms, is in a position to defy the Myth's status as an adequate and convincing account of human feeling and behaviour» (1991:143). He then goes on to state that only very few writers «work outside the Myth's paradigm», unlike poets like Louis MacNeice who dared to «express with both eloquence and caution the challenge and hope involved for citizens as they tried to order their war experiences» (1991:143-4).

It certainly is true that a large part of British wartime writing is «related to the negation of apocalyptic projections» (Rawlinson 2000:71) and participates in the construction of the mythical national memory in the way it «mobilises the manpower and morale on which the sovereignty of the country depends» (2007:2). War becomes an enriching spiritual experience through which people all come to bond with each other, thus the enemy or the wounded body is absent from a large number of texts narrating the Blitz. In terms of women's literature particularly, novels are dominated by the figure of the powerful working-class matriarch who fearlessly participates in the war effort, such as Mrs. Barton in Phyllis Bottome's *London Pride* or Mrs. Anstruther in Susan Ertz's *Anger in the Sky*. The bombings bring «positive» change in Jane Nicholson's *Shelter*, where «the blitz kills but is also the scene of fresh life, new friendship and above all community» (Hartley 1997:20). Yet, one should not fail to notice the much more sceptical views of Britain at war in perhaps lesser-read works. Elizabeth Bowen, a prolific Anglo-Irish novelist and essayist, is a particularly good example. Best known for her 1940 novel *The Heat of the Day*, Bowen's work is mainly discussed in terms of her focus on surveillance, spying and lack of privacy in wartime. What is less looked at is the large number of short stories she published, especially the ones found in the «War Years» sections of her collected short stories. At a time where Churchill is praising the courage of the people in Britain's «finest hour», Bowen is writing stories of fear, extreme loneliness and disillusion. Often including gothic and phantasmagorical elements to her work, she depicts a gloomy London in which terrified, lost souls are willing to escape the war through dreams. Here I aim to highlight how a middle-class female writer did indeed portray war Britain in a way that largely contradicts the BBC reports of high morale and uncritical admiration for war heroes. I focus on the 1942 short story «Mysterious Kôr», in which a young woman and her soldier-lover walk through the streets of destroyed London and start dreaming about the imaginary imperial city of Kôr. I first analyse the representation of the capital as an unsafe Gothic metropolis, before exploring the depiction of the Londoners in the short story.

One of the main ideas the Blitz spirit relies on is the strong pride of the British in their land. Particularly in England, the countryside is a central feature of national symbolism and rural images are often used to trigger patriotism and allegiance to the country. A feeling for country life is «supposed to relate to a feeling for the Nation according to the dominant ideological schemas circulated particularly from the nineteenth century [when the European states were starting to be established as such] onwards» (Mischi 2009:109). Furthermore, «this dual identification of Nation and countryside is captured in the vocabulary as «countryside» contains 'country'» (Mischi 2009). At the centre of Churchill's speeches is the repeated idea that the British landscape is an essential constituent of the nation which must forever be defended come what may. Here, the most famous sentences of his 1940 speech «We Shall Fight on the Beaches» as an example of the discursive power of landscape imagery:

> We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender. (in Copeland et al. 1999:439).

As Jeans explains, «a landscape is never so valuable as when it is under threat» (1990:249). Nostalgia for a rural past can be «a socially binding form of memory, a memory for society» (Dames 2001:15). The imagery of the English countryside can appear to «encapsulate priorities set by nature rather than current events» and seem to offer «a timeless and indestructible conceptual retreat» to people in times of war (Boyes 1993:181). In the midst of conflict, British culture turns to its rural roots searching for continuity and stability.

During the Blitz on cities, this mythical image of the British countryside widened to urban landscapes. In an attempt to «prevent civil insurrection amongst a population psychologically unhinged by the enemy's air force» (Rawlinson 2000:71), propaganda (not so) discreetly kept quiet about the physical damage to the urban population and focused on landmarks like St-Paul's Cathedral or the Big Ben. The hurt body is absent from the radio and the newspapers in order not to feed eventual imaginary catastrophic scenarios. Instead, the appeal to communion and unity around the fight for victory in centred on the fear of monument destruction. Rawlinson explains that the wound's invisibility is also a feature of artistic productions of the time: «wartime art's focus on buildings, not bodies, must be related to the negation of apocalyptic projections» (2000:71). In James Hanley's novel *No Directions*, the artist Stevens disregards the «great shuddering arse» of an agonising bombed victim to enjoy the view of «the city rocked with outrageous power» (1943:139). Similarly, the poet Louis MacNeice writes he is «half appalled» and «half enlivened» by a «fantasy of destruction, in the face of a spectacle [...] on a scale which [he] had never come across» (1941:118). The aesthetic spectacle of a city in ruins stirs a sense of patriotism as well as astonishment and marvel. The translation from the human to the architectonic is a way to make war more apprehensible to people as «war's delight of the senses veiled atrocity» (Rawlinson 2000:78). For the

government, not lingering over the lost lives or heavily wounded victims of the bombings was also a way of reinforcing the validity of war actions and war aims in popular consciousness. Violence on architecture is turned into resistance and «brings home», connotes social cohesion, as even though millions of civilians' homes are damaged, a sense of pride is constructed around the still-standing monuments. The possible destruction of buildings like Saint- Paul's cathedral leads to an «ideology of spectacle and the legitimation of state violence» (Rawlinson 2000:77). In the name of defending their cathedral, the Londoners are prepared to die fighting fires and whole-heartedly support the bombings of cities in Germany. Alan Ross writes that «London became a world capital [...] an emblem of freedom and culture» (1950:n. p.), to the point where provincial towns «appeared to be jealous of London bombs» (Calder 1941:108). The heavy focus on the aesthetics of buildings and landscapes is therefore a recurrent device in many Blitz novels.

Elizabeth Bowen's «Mysterious Kôr» is centred primarily on this idea of the prevalence of the metropolitan ruin over the human body. In the short story, the author extensively describes London in ruins, destroyed, yet she makes no mention of casualties, «excluding war's human calamities» (Rawlinson 2000:83). In the bombed city, there are no corpses, there is no allusion to wounded victims and not one reference to a lost loved one. Architecture dominates the text in a very urban atmosphere. Still, one should notice Bowen does not depict London nostalgically and her work is not a dithyrambic portrait of the city, as she writes about a terrifying, «ghostly» town (1983:728). In the very first paragraph, from a bird's eye view, the reader is invited to scrutinise a city which is «shallow, cratered, extinct». The dead town has been stripped from its colours as we stare at the «whited kerb» and «tree-darkened islands» in the park. From above, «for miles, yes, miles, overhead» the city is a black hole on Earth. It is not awe-inspiring like the White Cliffs of Dover or the bright beaches of the South Coast, but uninviting and weakened. London is vulnerable in fragile in what we understand is a cold winter –«he naked flowerbeds»– and looks «brittle». The «soaring new flats» just like «the old crouching houses» can no longer offer shelter from the bombs as «there was not a niche left to stand in». London is at the mercy of the Moon who «drenched» and «searched» it. The defeated city has given up and is left uninhabited. The following paragraph also conveys a strong sense of loss. The city has lost its people— «people stayed indoors» and no one crosses the «gateless gates of the park», its sound—not a voice, not a note from a radio escaped and its light—in the sky float «no clouds but only opaque balloons». Even the enemy has deserted, as the Germans «no longer came» to drop their bombs over the London roofs.

Not only is the city helpless, it is threatening and dangerous to its own population. Bowen established a gloomy atmosphere with strong Gothic influences throughout the story. From the «full moonlight» to the «ghostly» reflections (1983:728), the woman who «edged round a front door and [...] timidly called her cat» whilst the clock «set about striking midnight» (1983:731), from the cold that «crept up» Callie (1983:733), people whose furtive shadow disappear quickly, «dissolved in the street by some white acid» (1983:729) to Pepita sleeping «like a mummy» (1983:737), all the elements of a ghost story are there. The city is anxious and frightening. Sara Wasson explains

Bowen is reusing some of the dark literary fantasies of the end of the nineteenth century because authors in *fin-de-siècle* London such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker and more importantly H. G. Wells, also shared «a preoccupation with the prospect of apocalyptic future war» (2010:5). The writer might be linking the anxieties of late-nineteenth-century Britain to that of Blitzed London to depict wartime reality, reusing some of the particular emotional colouring of the Gothic—terror, anguish, paranoia, insanity. Both eras shared the same fear of degeneration[1] and destruction. In H. G. Well's *War of the Worlds*, London is decimated by gas, a «Black Smoke» which is «death to all that breathes» in a city that is, as in Bowen's «Mysterious Kôr», «gaunt quiet» (2005:88). Wartime London «saw Gothic tropes become literal». The previous century's fears of a destructive modernity and evil industrialisation leading to racial decline were confirmed in the 1940s. Deserted streets were plunged in darkness, people sought for refuge underground, children were buried alive in their home.

Thus, the Gothic atmosphere of Bowen's short story is primarily structured around the reference to the imaginary city of Kôr. Kôr is a ghost town in an unknown place, which Bowen directly borrowed from Rider Haggard's 1886 novel *She*. In fact, Pepita quotes the exact verses from the poem *Kôr* by Andrew Lang, placed directly before the text in most editions of the novel. In *She*, a first-person narrative that follows the journey of Horace Holly and his ward Leo Vincey to a lost kingdom in Africa, the imperial city of Kôr is indirectly compared to London. Elizabeth Bowen saw Kôr before she saw London, and therefore was inevitably «disappointed» by the ruined capital: «I was inclined to see London as Kôr with the roofs still on» (1962:234). An interesting comparison can be made between Haggard's paragraph describing Kôr and Bowen's description of London:

> Court upon dim court, row upon row of mighty pillars – some of them (especially at the gateways) sculptured from pedestal to capital – space upon space of empty chambers that spoke more eloquently to the imagination than any crowded streets. And over all, the dead silence of the dead, the sense of utter loneliness, and the brooding spirit of the Past! How beautiful it was, and yet how drear! [. . .] Bright fell the moonlight on pillar and court and shattered wall, hiding all their rents and imperfections in its silver garment, and clothing their hoar majesty with the peculiar glory of the night. It was a wonderful sight to see the full moon looking down on the ruined fane of Kôr. [...] The white light fell, and minute by minute the quiet shadows crept across the grass-grown courts like the spirits of old priests haunting the habitations of their worship – the white light fell, and the long shadows grew till the beauty and grandeur of the scene and the untamed majesty of its present Death seemed to sink into our very souls. (Haggard 1991:263)

In Bowen's text, the city has lost its «majesty», its «glory», its «splendour» and its «beauty». There are no «mighty pillars» but «brittle» houses, and Death is not an

[1] During the war, the British government expressed concern that the shelter system might create a 'deep shelter mentality', with people descending into the earth and never coming out, therefore hampering the war effort.

awe-inspiring presence that highlights the grandeur of the scene but a terrifying, destructive entity. Not only does the reference to the city of Kôr accentuate the darker and unfavourable side of the capital, it also suggests a distorted experience of spatiality and temporality. London is not Kôr but Kôr is London, Kôr belongs to the past and London to the present but both cities are dead—»What, you mean we're there now, that here's there, that now's then?» (1983:730). Kôr is a city «with no history» that has paradoxically been there for «thousand of years» (1983:729), yet is «not really anywhere» (1983:730). Baldick argues that one of the Gothic genre's main features is a «fearful sense of [historical] inheritance [...] with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration» (1992:xix). Pepita's reference to Kôr reflects her fear of the future in a world where progress is paradoxically bringing humanity to an end.

Whilst Bowen's work could be seen as illegitimately focusing on abstract concepts triggered by the vision of destroyed buildings, I would argue that these architectural wounds can also refer to more concrete harm, as they may suggest altered flesh. Human physical pain is absent from the short story, but the absence of casualties reinforces the loss of life caused by the bombs. London is a corpse, «drenched», «searched», «extinct» and «naked», it is everybody's murdered body. Death is everywhere in the short story, as «the buildings strained with battened-down human life» and «two sets of steps died». The city is deserted but the cemeteries are full as couples are complaining about «sharing a grave». An anonymous critic very justly explains that the artist «never abandons the human scene from the realms of pure abstraction» (Anonymous 1943:116). The Gothic description of London in «Mysterious Kôr» is not simply an aesthetic consolation. When Arthur wonders why Pepita won't stop thinking about Kôr, «I thought girls thought about people», she replies «How can anyone think about people if they've got any heart?». This is Bowen explicitly making sense of the absence of victims in her text. As Cathy Caruth explains, any attempt at verbal representation of trauma will inherently resist narrative, because of the very nature of trauma itself (1995). Bowen is not avoiding representation, she is heavily suggesting death and despair by resorting to imagery, symbolism and a convoluted narrative.

Elizabeth Bowen's imagery of metropolitan ruin works outside the mythical Blitz spirit's paradigm and propaganda of urban British pride. Through setting up an atmosphere of despair and anxiety as well as questioning the stability of space and time, two major tropes of Gothic literature, she conveys a similar strong sentiment of anguish as late nineteenth century literature. In «Mysterious Kôr», «gothic tropes and form mark moments of fracture in the national mythologies of wartime home, city and fellowship» (Wasson 2010:1). Bowen's prose conveys a sense of «desolation, passivity and sterility» (Medoff 1984:77), reinforced by her allusions to the city of Kôr. The short story is a particularly good example of Punter's idea that «Gothic is a mode—perhaps *the* mode—of unofficial history» (1996:187).

This leads me to the second part of my analysis, where I focus on the depiction of the Londoner's (lack of) individuality in wartime. The Myth of the Blitz generally suggests the idea that morale was constantly good during the war. The British never

lost faith in their government and army, and bravely carried out their daily tasks without fail every morning after a night of air raids. The propaganda film *Britain Can Take It!*, which shows people walking cheerfully past bombed-out houses, is a good example of the means through which Churchill's government spread moral obligations of courage and solidarity. Recently, careful studies of the Mass Observation reports have started showing signs that, after having sustained bombing, many people found «their world was turned upside down» (Townsend 1989:289). Accounts from Coventry saw «a great depression and open signs of hysteria», Bristol recorded people feeling «Let down by the Government» (M. O. Report in Ponting 1991:164). The population in Plymouth found it difficult to stand the bombing and that «sooner or later the morale of other towns will go» (ibid.). Many M.O. reports showed citizens «arguing for immediate surrender» (Mackay 2002:77). Calder explains that it took decades to reach a point when the Myth could be questioned, as there is very little evidence of texts that contradict the Myth. The M. O. reports just mentioned were censored, dismissed, or readapted, and most of what was published by «careful diarists» fits into the Myth. Calder then states that any «literate, thinking person» was confronted to a «moral problem» during the Blitz: «day by day you either believed the evolving Myth (which showed at each stage how Britain was invincible), or you relapsed into scepticism and fears». When you recovered from such an aberration, the Myth had already «moved ahead to help you onwards» (1991:120). This implies an internal dilemma for people who question their own feelings should these not necessarily match the «national norm».

It seems that Elizabeth Bowen could see beyond the Myth and did not «take for granted a broad overview» (Calder 1991:120) supplied by Churchill's speeches and the BBC. In «Mysterious Kôr», Pepita, Callie and Arthur do not show any sign of high morale, rather the opposite. They can be seen as symbols of a disillusioned youth, fearfully staring at the dangers of modernity and having no issue other than wanting to escape it through dreaming. Pepita hallucinating is «not a peril [...] but an unconscious, instinctive, saving resort» (in Denman 1992:63). The young Londoner in the short story explains what «set [her] off hating civilization» is that «*The world is disenchanted*» (1983:730). The young woman is faced with the realisation that the progress of humanity has led to «whole places» being blown «out of existence». She seems to have reached a point of total hopelessness where the world is risible— «I should laugh». Similarly, Arthur sarcastically quotes army recruitment propaganda: «Well, well: join the Army and see the world» (1983:731). His world is limited to a short-lived present, as he lives in constant fear of it ending, «I don't know about 'next'» (1983:731). The young soldier is angered by the orders and ideals of a repeated «they», «they forget war's not just only war, it's ears out of people's lives that they'-ve never had before and won't have again» (1983:738). To him, «to be human's to be at a dead loss» (1983:739). Thus, there is no other choice for them but to take refuge in «a spiritual bomb shelter, a place for the soul to seek safety when there is literally no refuge for the body» (Medoff 1984:78). Hallucination becomes a private place to escape in a city where the concept of privacy has lost all meaning.

During the Blitz, private and public spheres merge together. Behind the government's ideal of «community» and «solidarity» are confused people deprived of their

intimacy. Callie, Pepita's housemate, is the perfect example of «the great antithesis between the external fact and the internal reality, between the objective condition and the projection of an internal world where feeling alone reigns» (Mitchell 1966:41). Callie is the «guardian of that ideality which for Pepita was constantly lost to view» (Bowen 1983:732). She is an innocent, virgin young woman who naively talks about romantic love during the black-out and makes small talk about hot tea. She sits «like an image» and seems to only see reality partially, «through a veil of inexperience» (Medoff 1984:78). Her presence makes the atmosphere unbearable and suffocating, both physically (the couple cannot share a bed) and psychologically (Callie is constantly asking questions), for Pepita and Arthur who have nowhere else to go. Callie is the theoretically perfect example of an optimistic, cheerful Brit in the war. Yet this London flat is empty of any sense of community or unity. All characters resent each other's presence and Callie feels «repugnance» and «shyness» (Bowen 1983:733) at the idea of sharing a bed with Pepita. She is stuck in a flat «where you could hear everything» and where the bathroom is «shared with somebody else on the girl's floor» (1983:732). Callie has «kept physical distances all her life» and now has to cope with a loss of intimate boundaries. Callie is the perfect example of a Londoner following the «moral obligations» and the «courageous behaviour» imposed by the Myth.

What Bowen describes is a city similar to a prison-like environment, and often refers to the idea of imprisonment. In «Mysterious Kôr», London can be seen as city which functions as what Foucault named «heteropia» (from Greek *topos*, «place» and *hetero*, «other»). London is space of *otherness*, neither here nor there, which follows different rules from the world outside it. Foucault described these spaces as sites in which «all the real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted» (1984: par. 14). Wasson very subtly suggests that «wartime Britain was rich in heterotopias of deviation aiming to house, restrain and reform individuals deemed deviant from the norm» (2010:53). During the First World War, «the state established a hold over its citizens which, though relaxed in peacetime, was never to be removed and which the Second World War was again to increase» (Taylor 2004:1-2). In Bowen's story, one's every move seems to be subjected to the rules and pressure of a superior authority. All the characters must act «in accordance to the rule of the house», are «obliged to turn off the wireless» (Bowen 1983:733) and live in complete darkness. You take your boots off because «the people below us—» (1983:736). Practical as well as social conventions prevent the lovers from spending the night together as «it wouldn't be proper» and «I don't know what your mother would say to me» (1983:733). Pepita «owes it» to Arthur «to be cheerful» (1983:732), in a city where individuality is crushed and people end up walking the streets «with no expression at all» (1983:729). London in «Mysterious Kôr» does not match Churchill's description of the courageous city, in fact it is the portray of three people unable to run away from each other in a flat where «hominess» is «evaporating» (1983:733). Even though they «refused to be here», they have the moral obligation to. It seems towards the end of the story that even Callie is aware of her fraudulous behaviour, as she asks Arthur: «can't wanting want what's human?» (1983:738) and loses «her own mysterious expectations» (1983:739).

I hope to have highlighted how Elizabeth Bowen's representation of the Blitz works outside the paradigms of the Myth, as defined by Angus Calder. Through Gothic imagery and a distorted sense of time and space, Bowen challenges the spirit of high morale and unity and the typical values of Blitz literature. Davis explains that «in Bowen's hands, stories of unsettled pasts and ghostly returns function as anxious ruminations on the near future, distress signals from the world to come» (2013:44). Bowen looks at «the psychological impact of war, the emotional mending that goes on when people find themselves under attack» (Medoff 1984:80).

Bowen strived to accentuate the Londoners' individuality. What is more open to interpretation is whether or not her stories of the Blitz are stories of hope or stories of despair. «Mysterious Kôr» ends on three lonely young adults convincing each other to seek refuge in an imaginary city. This stresses the need to escape, but also the possibility of a better world. Perhaps Bowen, like Pepita, believes that «this war shows by no means that we've come to the end. If you can blow whole places out of existence, you can blow whole places into it» (1983:730).

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