Analele Universității „Ovidius” Constanța. Seria Filologie Vol. XXXII, 2 / 2021

WARTIME SPACES IN ELIZABETH BOWEN'S "SUNDAY AFTERNOON"

N. Belgin ELBIR
Atılım University, Ankara, Turkey

Abstract: *This article examines the treatment of space and time in the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen's wartime short story "Sunday Afternoon" (1941), to discuss how the use of spatiality and spatial images in the narrative discourse of the story enables her to convey the social and physical reality of the Second World War, and the psychological, interior states and anxieties of her characters, revealing their sense of dislocation and disorientation caused by wartime conditions. My argument is inspired mainly by Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope" and Gaston Bachelard's definition of the house as "psychic space." The protagonist of the story is an Anglo-Irish man who is on a visit to his old friends in Ireland from London, where his home has been destroyed by the Blitz. He is soon to return to his Ministry job in blitzed London and to an uncertain and frightening future. I argue that the setting of the story, the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy big house and its environs in neutral Ireland, becomes a Bakhtinian chronotope where, as Bakhtin puts it, "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (84), and the house portrayed as a familiar and well-remembered space that takes the protagonist back to his past functions as an image that, in Bachelard's words, "bespeaks intimacy"(72). Thus, the depiction of wartime spaces in "Sunday Afternoon" gains historical and personal significance that merges the past, present and future, and serves to emphasize the convergence of public and private moments of crisis.*

Keywords: *Elizabeth Bowen, "Sunday Afternoon," Second World War, spatiality, temporality, the Anglo-Irish big house, chronotope*

In Elizabeth Bowen's wartime short story "Sunday Afternoon" (1941), one of the guests in the house the protagonist is visiting refers to the war as "an outrage" (693) and says: "There is no place for it in human experience; it apparently cannot make a place of its own. It will have no literature" (693). Occurring in a literary work by a writer whose "wartime fiction is among the most innovative and most admired of all World War II literature" (Davis 30), this remark ironically draws attention to the story itself as a testimony to the ability of literature, and of Bowen herself, to make a place for war in human experience. As critic Neil Corcoran states, Bowen was "a writer deeply engaged with some of the most urgent matters of both personal and public history in her time” (14), and this engagement is most forcibly apparent in the work she produced during the war. Another critic, Hermione Lee, remarks:

> Elizabeth Bowen’s personal vision of contemporary life, which she repeatedly characterizes as dislocated, dispossessed and denatured, was confirmed on a vast scale by the Second World War. Her idea of a spiritual disinheritance was now made brutally palpable. (4)

In the preface “The Demon Lover” which she wrote to the American edition of her collection of wartime stories, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945) which includes “Sunday Afternoon,” Bowen refers to the engagement with the human experience of the war as a priority of all writers. According to Bowen, personal life “put up its own resistance to the annihilation that was threatening it” (97). She adds that “to survive, not only physically but spiritually was essential” and that “every writer during this time was aware of the personal cry of the individual” (97). In a later passage she writes, “The search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world led many down strange paths” (97), and continues, “writers followed the paths they saw or felt people treading, and depicted those little dear saving illusory worlds. I have done both in THE DEMON LOVER stories” (97). She also provides a clue to the major terms and features of her way of depicting these worlds, in the following extract from the same preface:

> These are all wartime, none of them *war*, stories. There are no accounts of war action even as I knew it – for instance, air raids…These are, more, studies of climate, war-climate, and of the strange growths it raised. I see war (or should I say feel war?) more as a territory than as a page of history: of its impersonal active historic side I have, I find, not written. (95)

While stating her choice to focus on the effects of the war on individuals rather than giving an account of the war itself, Bowen is emphasizing that she sees and renders war, the contemporary reality, in terms of not only in its temporality, “wartime” (95), but also its spatiality, as “a territory” (95). In her wartime stories, this “territory” is represented in specific locations and places that contain the “little dear saving illusory worlds” (97), most often in England and Ireland. These wartime spaces are inhabited by wartime individuals who experience the war as a time of personal crisis, and struggle to survive spiritually as well as physically.

The sense of an intense personal crisis, expressed in the “personal cry” (97) of individuals could, Bowen believed, best be depicted in the short story, rather than in the novel. “For Bowen, perhaps the short story could best capture the psychological intensities and broken temporalities of the war” (Piette 66). In fact, Bowen found that the short story as a literary form, in its capacity for dramatic presentation, is more suitable than the novel to portray moments of crisis. In another preface, “Stories by Elizabeth Bowen” (1959), she writes that she does not feel that the short story can be used for the analysis or development of character, since “in the short story, treatment must be dramatic – we are dealing with man, or woman or child, in relation to a particular crisis or mood or moment, and to that only” (129). An essential element of this “dramatic treatment” is, as she underlines in her autobiographical “Pictures and Conversations” (1975), the “*where*” of her stories, for “what gives fiction its verisimilitude is its topography” (282); characters “operating *in vacuo*” are, in her opinion, “bodiless” (282). Therefore, she makes use of spaces charged with historical and personal significance, that make the experience of personal crisis visible.

In this study I will discuss how the use of spatiality and spatial images in the narrative discourse of “Sunday Afternoon” enables Bowen to convey the reality of a particular historical moment of crisis, the Second World War, and the psychological, interior states and anxieties of her characters, revealing their sense of dislocation and disorientation caused by wartime conditions. My argument draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, his term to describe the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84), in his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (1937-1938, 1973), and Gaston Bachelard’s definition of the house in his *The Poetics of Space* (1958) as a domestic space that stores memories of our past and is thus associated with our sense of identity. The protagonist of “Sunday Afternoon,” Henry Russel, is an Anglo-Irish man who is on a visit to his old friends in Dublin, Ireland, from London, where his flat has been destroyed by the Blitz. He is soon to return to his ministry job in blitzed London and to an uncertain and frightening future. I argue that the setting of the story, the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy big house and its environs in neutral Ireland, becomes a Bakhtinian chronotope where “time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (Bakhtin 84). The house, portrayed as a familiar and well-remembered space that takes the protagonist back to his childhood and youth, functions as an image that is, in Bachelard’s words, “a ‘psychic state’” (72), and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it “bespeaks intimacy” (72). Thus, Bowen’s representation of wartime spaces in “Sunday Afternoon” gains historical and personal significance that merges the past, present and future, and dramatizes the convergence of public and private moments of crisis.

The dominant space, the main setting of the story, is an Anglo-Irish big house on the outskirts of Dublin which belongs to Mrs Vesey, a member of the

Anglo-Irish landed gentry. However, since the story centres on a short visit by Henry Russel from London, where war is actively raging, to Dublin and back, an English space and the threat posed by the war are ever-present in the background. Although the actual war is absent from description, its reality permeates the wartime spaces portrayed in the story, bringing together moments in time and space across the Irish Sea by means of spatial juxtaposition. As the trope of the visit makes clear, the protected world of the big house estate exists within a wider world of raging war and political conflicts. Mrs Vesey's house is a place with a particular historical significance, since it belongs to the Anglo-Irish gentry, a class whose history is part of Irish history and British imperialism. In other words, the house invokes an old past of Irish history and politics representative of the Anglo-Irish heritage, Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and its decline. As Adam Piette observes, the house is presented as a place where "the ageing remnant of Anglo-Irish culture is struggling to comprehend the brutality of wartime conditions at the old imperial centre, London, from their neutrally becalmed vantage point" (69).

The house is not where Henry was born, but it is a place closely bound up with his sense of identity. It is a house where he used to spend time as a child, the home of a close friend of his family, and the guests gathered in the house on the afternoon of his visit are people of his social group, "old friends in whose shadow he had grown up" (691). As such, Mrs Vesey's house takes Henry back to his childhood and the social life of people of his class. Henry's experience in this particular domestic and social space is charged with significance and meaning in relation to the past and present. The story dramatizes the protagonist's growing awareness of this, and reveals the conflicts that he experiences with regard to it. The Anglo-Irish house in Dublin visited during wartime is, in this sense, a Bakhtinian chronotope since it is a place where space and time are bound together, a limited and isolated place in which the dimensions of time and space are compressed. According to Bakhtin, in the chronotope "time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh" (250); the chronotope "provides the ground essential for the showing forth, the representability of events" (250). And in Bakhtin's opinion, this is due "precisely to the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers – the time of human life, of historical time – that occurs within well-delineated spatial areas" (250). In "Sunday Afternoon," through a narrative discourse that constructs the Anglo-Irish house in the story as a "well-delineated" space, Bowen represents the dislocated wartime individual, giving her readers one of the "disjected snapshots – snapshots taken from close up," as she described her wartime stories in the preface "The Demon Lover" (99). She makes extensive use of spatial images to dramatize her characters' interiority and the relations between them, intensifying the chronotopic "connectedness" of wartime and wartime space. She is thus able to create a space-time that enables her to portray, from a historical perspective and in visual terms, the impact of the war, a political and public event, on the private lives of individuals, in a way that demostrates the absence of strict boundaries between the two.

Since the house is the main spatial area in "Sunday Afternoon" and the plot is concerned with the wartime anxieties and fears of becoming exposed to a world at war, without the security of a safe home, Gaston Bachelard's theory and concept of the house as a place of protection and belonging complements Bakhtin's argument in bringing out the significance and meaning of Bowen's treatment of space and spatial experience in the story. Bachelard believes that "Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are 'housed.' Our soul is an abode (xxxvii). According to Bachelard, "by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms,' we learn to 'abide' within ourselves" (xxxvii). Bachelard's concept of the house is, in fact, highly relevant to Bowen's own views concerning the importance of the idea of home, especially during the war. It should be remembered that Elizabeth Bowen's engagement in her novels and stories with houses has a personal aspect, in terms of her own class and family (who were members of the Anglo-Irish gentry). Bowen was born in Ireland, in Bowen's Court, "an Anglo-Irish family estate which she inherited on the death of her father and occupied from 1952 until 1960" (Kershner, Jr. 408). In one of her wartime essays, titled "The Christmas Toast is 'Home!'" (1942), she writes:

> War makes us more conscious, anxiously conscious, of the value of everything that is dear and old. Now we are fighting for those very traditions we took for granted in years before. In so far as home is a material thing – a house – we must face it that this may be demolished at any time. For some of us, this has already happened. And some homes that have not been hit by bombs have had, all the same, to be given up (at any rate for the time being) because of the war. In those cases, have we been left with nothing? Is "home" gone? No, assuredly no. Homes are much more than rooms and tables and chairs. Homes wait in our hearts till we can make them again. (128-129)

Home, in this passage, is associated by Bowen with traditional values. The villa in "Sunday Afternoon" is also a place of "those very traditions" taken "for granted in years before" (128). In other words, it is one of the "indestructible landmarks in a destructible world" ("The Demon Lover" 97). Yet, it is, at the same time, one of "those little dear saving illusory worlds" ("The Demon Lover" 97) that Bowen said she depicted in her wartime fictions. Through focalization that reveals the house in the story as social and psychic space, Bowen is able to create a sense of the "illusory" quality of the traditional way of life of its inhabitants from the beginning of the story. In fact, the entire story is informed by the focalizing character's consciousness of the significance of the spatio-temporal context of his experience. It is by remembering the past and observing the people he is visiting as they move and interact in this familiar space that Henry comes to realize his need for the sense of belongingness and security the house represents, and his predicament as an individual caught up between an illusory past and a frightening present and future.

From the beginning of the story, Henry's perception of space and spatial orientation is depicted carefully. The opening lines of "Sunday Afternoon" establish Henry as a guest from London welcomed as a storyteller from the actual war territory across the sea; his friends expect him to tell his experiences, but as Mrs Vesey warns, "nothing dreadful" (691). Although the scene appears to be peaceful, Henry is observant enough to notice the tensions caused by news of war, which are made visible in the spatial features of the scene:

> Drawing a cane chair into the circle, he looked from face to face with concern. His look travelled on to the screen of lilac, whose dark, purple, pink-silver and white plumes sprayed out in the brilliance of the afternoon. The late May Sunday blazed, but was not warm: something less than a wind, a breath of coldness fretted the edge of things […]. The coldness had been admitted by none of the seven or eight people who, in degrees of elderly beauty, sat here full in the sun, at this sheltered edge of the lawn: they continued to master the coldness, or to deny it, as though with each it were some secret *malaise*. An air of fastidious, stylized melancholy, an air of being secluded behind glass, characterized for Henry these old friends in whose shadow he had grown up. (691)

The "coldness" they deny or try to control, acquires figurative significance, implying the "climate" of the war and the "dreadful" news that Mrs Vesey and her guests do not want to hear. "The sheltered edge of the lawn" is supposed to isolate and shield them not only from the literal "breath of coldness" of the May afternoon, but metaphorically from the "coldness" of the reality of the war as well. The entire passage is a dramatization, in spatial imagery, of the illusory nature of the old manners of the Anglo-Irish gentry, which Henry had left behind when he went away to London to work in a ministry. Henry's placing himself in the middle of the "circle" in which his friends sit, enacts, by this deliberate spatial arrangement, his relation to them as both belonging in their group, and being alienated from them. In spite of his position among them as a temporary visitor who can observe them with some detachment, however, he feels "as he sat down, how insensibly he had deserted, these last years, the aesthetic of living he had got from them. As things were, he felt over him their suspended charm" (691). He is shocked into a sudden awareness of his nostalgia for the civilized, orderly and disciplined life that Mrs Vesey and her guests represent, and begins to feel its attraction. From a Bachelardian perspective, the spatial image "suspended charm" becomes "suspended time," that is, as Bachelard states, "favourable to more psychological treatment" (24) since it transforms the temporal progress of the story into space. For Henry the "suspended charm" is the remembered charm of Mrs Vesey's villa, what used to charm and attract him there as a child and a young man. This is also historically significant, as it refers to the "aesthetic of living," a quality associated with their class position as formerly privileged members of Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. The participle "suspended" also implies anxiety and a sense of tension; a sense of waiting for something to happen. Until the end of the story, Henry continues to feel this charm over him, influencing his thoughts and responses. As the story approaches its end, the suspended charm will work, filling Henry with a sense of nostalgia for the past. As will be explained below, the story will end when Henry's sense of crisis reaches a climax, making detachment no longer possible.

As a matter fact, Henry had started to feel the effect of this charm before he joined his friends on the lawn:

> The democratic smell of the Dublin bus, on which he had made the outward journey to join them, had evaporated from his person by the time he was half-way up Mrs Vesey's chestnut avenue. Her house, with its fanlights and tall windows, was a villa in the Italian sense, just near enough to the city to maket he country's sweetness particularly acute. Now, the sensations of wartime, that locked his inside being, began as surely to be dispelled – in the influence of this eternalized Sunday afternoon. (691-692)

Bowen has introduced in the above passage another kind of social space; a modern, urban, public space, the "democratic" space of the Dublin bus, that contrasts with the space of the estate, which embodies the class privileges and distinctions the Anglo-Irish gentry wish to uphold. On the "democratic" Dublin bus, social distances the gentry valued and wished to preserve were erased. The threat posed by the war to these privileges and distinctions is what Mrs Vesey and her guests would like to be protected from. The idea that the Second World War would change class relations and contribute to the creation of a new world was, in fact, becoming widespread at the time. Kristine Miller describes how this idea was first formed:

> The Blitzkrieg on the United Kingdom during the Second World War was the most direct attack on civilians in British history. As London and other British cities came under siege beginning in September 1940, the common cause of national defense seemed to reduce distance between soldiers and civilians, to resolve differences between men and women, and to repair divisions between leisured and working classes. Politicians and the media emphasized the unifying and leveling power of the Blitz, labeling the conflict a "People's War" and claiming that wartime changes in gender roles and class relations might lead to postwar social reform. (1)

Such changes would most likely have unfavourable and socially disruptive effects on the already marginalized and isolated Anglo-Irish gentry. The spatial arrangement and elements of Mrs Vesey's villa, and the characters' relation to them dramatize the social norms that govern this world. The strained atmosphere, implied in images such as the "breath of coldness" (691), the "sheltered edge of the lawn" (691) and "an air of being secluded behind glass" (691), draws attention to the characters' fears, not only of the physical violence of the war but of its social consequences. The appearance of Mrs Vesey's young niece Maria makes the strains and fears more clearly visible. Maria disrupts the spatial arrangements, right from the beginning when she steps out of a window and sits on the grass at Mrs Vesey's feet (692). She immediately fixes her eyes on Henry and begins to question him about the war and London, asking him if it is "so frightening" (692-693). One of the guests, Miss Ria Store, "the patroness of the arts" (692), warns Henry to be careful, or he would find Maria hiding in his baggage, which would cause "embarrassment, at an English port" (693). In her desire to leave Ireland in order to experience the actual conditions of the war in London and witness at first hand the changes that would lead to a new world, Maria represents the younger Anglo-Irish generation's contemptuous attitude toward the elderly people and their social norms. The Ascendancy big house bestows identity on its inhabitants, it is a world where everyone knows their place and feels secure in deeply rooted values and roles. For the young like Maria, however, this means a lack of freedom. So she protests against the strictly-defined roles defined by this traditional world. She regards it as old fashioned, and is excited by the idea of a new world.

In the dining room, Maria stands against the mantelpiece, and watches Mrs Vesey and her elderly guests "take their places at the round table" (694). The round table, like the circle in which they were sitting on the lawn when Henry first arrived, is a spatial image that reinforces the sense of these people belonging together, as if they were drawing strength from the proximity provided by the circular physical space. After the others are seated, Maria crosses the distance she had deliberately established between herself and the older generation. Her intention to become friends with Henry because he is from the warzone and can help her there, is imaged in the spatial features of the particular scene, and Henry perceives this as his focalizing consciousness registers her wish to place herself next to him so that she could talk to him about London: “She came forward and put her hands on two chairs – to show she had been keeping a place for him” (694). Henry, however, has mixed feelings about Maria: “Everything Henry had heard said had fallen off her – in these few minutes all by herself she had started in again on a fresh phase of living that was intact and pure” (694). With the “suspended charm” of the past over him, he cannot share the young girl’s excitement for a “fresh phase of living.” What he feels instead is “the ruthlessness of her disregard for the past, even the past of a few minutes ago” (694). Maria’s attitude exacerbates Henry’s sense of being dislocated. While he is aware of the distance between himself and these old friends, signified by the literal space between England and Ireland and expressed in his statement that the visit is only a holiday for “one cannot stay long away from wartime London” (693), he also has a strong regard for the past. In this particular space, he is, as it were, suspended between conflicting worlds and worldviews, between the past and the present. As scenes unfold, evocations of Henry’s present life in wartime London merge with remembrances of the past that he used to share with these old friends. The domestic space becomes familiarized for Henry especially when the party goes inside from the garden. The dining room, in its capacity for social interaction, corresponds to Bakhtin’s chronotope of the salon, a chronotopic motif that he associates mainly with the nineteenth-century novel (246). In “Sunday Afternoon,” time “thickens” in the dining room, within the dynamic relationship between reminders from the past and the present. The conversation at the table turns to Henry’s bombed out flat in London and forces him to explain what had happened. When Lady Ottery, another guest, asks him if it is true that he had lost everything, he replies, “It’s true that I lost my flat, and everything in my flat” (694). His friends find it difficult to imagine how he could live now without all his “beautiful things” (694). From their perspective, destruction of solid things, which they evidently regard as markers of their traditions and power, signifies destruction of their values and way of life. “It happens to so many people” (695), Henry tells them. Miss Store’s comment is: “But not to everyone,” since she sees “no reason, for instance why it should happen to me” (695). She goes on to ask him if he “can feel that that is life” (695). Henry’s answer illustrates his acknowledgment of the reality of the war, a historical reality that her friends wishfully consider irrelevant to their lives. He says: “I do. I may be easily pleased. It was by chance I was out when the place was hit” (695). He adds: “You may feel – and I honour your point of view – that I should have preferred, at my age, to go into eternity with some pieces of glass and jade and a dozen pictures,” but he is “very glad to remain. To exist” (695). In her preface “The Demon Lover” referred to above, Bowen describes the emotional state of people who lost all their possessions in the following words: “You used to know what you were like from the things you liked, and chose. Now there was not what you liked, and you did not choose” (97). She says people whose homes had been blown up “assembled and checked themselves from stories and poems, from their memories, from one another’s talk” (97). Like these people, Henry does not choose, but tries to assemble and check himself from his memories stored in this intimate space that is full of reminders of the past. By remembering them, and by perceiving and making sense of the spaces that store them he is shown to be making a brave effort to survive “not only physically but spiritually” (“The Demon Lover” 97). Hence, he is very alert and sensitive to the physical elements of the particular space, to the objects in it, and to the acts, gestures and responses of the people around him. At the table, another spatial disruption is caused by Maria when she makes a gesture to disagree with the importance the elderly people attach to “beautiful things” (page) and accidentally upsets some tea on the lace cloth. She then tries to rub the cloth, shaking “a petal from the Chinese peony in the centre bowl on to a plate of cucumber sandwiches” (695). Henry notices that “this little bit of destruction was watched by the older people with fascination, with a kind of appeasement, as though it were a guarantee against someting worse” (695). The details of the tea table such as the “lace cloth” and “cucumber sandwiches” are part of the traditional, civilized routine of these people’s lives, symbols, however trivial, of the social values for which Maria has very little respect. Towards the end of the visit, another similar symbol of this civilized life, the piece of chocolate cake that Henry is offered, serves to awaken in him vivid memories of his childhood, and thus connects the present moment with moments from the past:

> For chocolate layer cake, the Vesey cook had been famous since Henry was a boy of seven or eight. The look, then the taste, of the brown segment linked him with Sunday afternoons when he had been brought here by his mother; then with a phase of his adoloscence when he had been unable to eat, only able to look round. Mrs Vesey’s beauty, at that time approaching its last lunar quarter, had swum on him when he was about nineteen. In Maria, child of her brother’s late marriage, he now saw that beauty, or sort of physical genius, at the start. In Maria, this was without hesitation, without the halting influence that had bound Mrs Vesey up – yes, and bound Henry up, from his boyhood, with her – in a circle of quizzical half-smiles. In revenge, he accused the young girl who moved him – who seemed framed, by some sort of

> anticipation, for the new catastrophic *outward* order of life – of brutality, of being without spirit. (695-696)

In the above passage, by means of a narrative discourse made up of omniscient narration and free indirect thought, Bowen presents, to use an expression from her preface "The Demon Lover," "an overcharged subconsciousness" (95). The passage is, indeed, a representation of how, in a Bachelardian sense, the house becomes an "intimate space" which beckons "intimate" memories stored in the subconscious to come back, prompted by the presence of reminders from the past. The slice of chocolate cake, a symbol of domesticity and hospitality, brings back – in Proustian fashion – memories of the world Henry had left behind. This world of the past he contrasts with the new world of brutality that so excites young Maria. His feeling of dislocation deepens: "At his age, between two generations, he felt cast out. He felt Mrs Vesey might not forgive him for having left her for a world at war" (696). His conviction that he has to go back to London is complicated by a sense that he has betrayed his friends, and his past. As Davis states, Henry is caught between two historical moments represented by two generations: "the fossilized past of Mrs Vesey and his old Irish friends and the younger Maria who desperately wishes to become part of history and participate in the war" (40).

The ending of the story depicts a moment of intense and painful personal crisis for Henry, as he waits for his bus to Dublin, and has a conversation with Maria, whom he finds waiting for him "on his way down the avenue to the bus" (697). This is the chestnut avenue that led to Mrs Vesey's villa at the beginning of the story, and the bus is the vehicle with the "democratic smell" that took him up there. In his emotionally perturbed state after the visit, Henry experiences a sense of the impossibility of his situation at this place of transition, very similar to Bakhtin's chronotope of the "threshold," from the safety of the familiar house to the brutal and yet inescapable present and the uncertain future. Bakhtin defines the "threshold" as being connected with "the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold)" (248). Henry is not, in fact, in a position to make a life-changing decision; what creates a crisis for him is his powerful desire to stay, although he is both dispossessed and dislocated. Since the house of his past has been delineated as a wartime space, subject to the upheavals of the war, its safety is no more than an illusion. As for the present, he has to be satisfied that he exists, as he says to Miss Store at the tea table, "on any level" (695). Despite his full awareness of this fact, Henry cannot help regarding Maria's plans for her future in London and her determination and eagerness to get away from her home "destructive and horrible" (697). Maria's disdain for his old friends and their way of life when she sends "a look back to the house"

(697) leads to his sudden realization that all he wants to do is to stay: "[...] on his entire being, the suspended charm of the afternoon worked. He protested against the return to the zone of death, and perhaps never ever seeing all this again" (697). He feels an overwhelming sense of nostalgia for the "charm" and security of home: "The moment he had been dreading, returning desire, flooded him in this tunnel of avenue, with motors swishing along the road outside and Maria standing staring at him" (697). He thinks: "with nothing left but our brute courage, we shall be nothing but brutes" (697). At the end of the story, Henry gets on the bus and is "quickly carried away" (698). There is nowhere else for him to go. Bowen's wartime spaces in "Sunday Afternoon," after all, offer her characters no "indestructible landmarks in a destructible world."

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