EXTENSIONS --
SPACING POSTMODERN TIME AND DISTANCING POSTMODERN PROXIMITY:
ELIZABETH BOWEN, GIANNI VATTIMO AND THE END(S) OF MODERNITY

by

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Abstract

EXTENSIONS -- 
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Kasey Allain Cummings

For almost fifty years, readers of Elizabeth Bowen’s wartime novel The Heat of the Day have been mystified by this odd culmination of her attempt to write a ‘present-day historical novel’ recreating the experience of the Second World War in London. The novel was to comprise ‘the ideal vehicle for her memory’ of the war, in response to the ubiquitous fear of artists and critics alike that the novel creating “a picture [of the war] which [could] not be effaced by tomorrow’s newspaper” (Calder-Marshall, et al “Manifesto”) would not get written. However, the question remains -- why is war inscribed in the text as a marginal background event? The peculiarity of the text with its figure-ground shift has frustrated at least as many readers as it has pleased. And yet, over the fifty years of its reception, one discovers an increasing emphasis on the philosophical and allegorical aspects of Bowen’s text. And thus, the effect of this history of the text’s reception (its Wirkungsgeschichte) can in turn be read as a repetition of the shift or movement detected within Bowen’s wartime text itself -- namely, the shift from epistemological or modernist questions and concerns to ontological or postmodernist ones.

This paper is motivated in part to offer yet another reading of Bowen’s mysterious wartime text. Following the conjecture that the Second World War represented an emotional, spiritual, and intellectual crisis for Bowen, this paper reads it as being both a crisis of representation and a ‘clarifying moment,’ or a moment of disclosure which foregrounds the interpretive aspect of human existence. This reading of the text is then linked with the postmodern philosophical framework prompted by Gianni Vattimo’s theory of hermeneutic ontology, following the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In texts such as The End of Modernity and Beyond Interpretation, Vattimo studies, in his words, “the relationship that links the conclusions reached by Nietzsche and Heidegger in their respective works... to more recent discourses on the end of the modern era and on post-modernity” (“Introduction” to The End of Modernity 1). In an extension of Vattimo’s understanding of this relationship then, this paper both spaces postmodern time and distances postmodern proximity through its reading of an existential context shared by the acute triangle of the writers under consideration: Heidegger (1889-1976), Bowen (1899-1973), and Vattimo (1936-). As such, this paper offers a unique contribution to Bowen studies, as well as expanding the critical and methodological approach to war writing as a category. And finally, it contributes to an opening horizon of postmodern critical practices as formulated by Vattimo.
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**Part I From Circumscription to Inscription: Bowen’s Twilight World**

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**Intermission: Extension**

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We have relied on our childhoods, on the sensations of childhood, because we mistake vividness for purity; actually, the story was there first -- one is forced to see that it was the story that apparelled everything in celestial light. It could lead to madness to look back and back for the true primary impression or sensation; those we did ever experience we have forgotten -- we only remember that to which something was added.

Elizabeth Bowen "Out of a Book" (1946)
In exploring the history of philosophy, Heidegger showed that the inheritance we receive from a given thinker is the nucleus he leaves us of what is still to be thought, not acquired results but ways thinking feels called on to follow again and again. Is ontological difference, which Heidegger undoubtedly held to be quite central to his own thought, a nucleus of this kind?

Let me give a little hint on how to listen. The point is not to listen to a series of propositions, but rather to follow the movement of showing.

Martin Heidegger *On Time and Being* (1969)
This paper is about risk. And in this, it betrays its own risks.

The concern involves placing the debate on postmodernism in a historical context as an argued proposition of the birth of postmodernity. This is an effort which can also be described in a doubled way, as both the locating of a postmodern practice in a theory of postmodernity, and the historicizing of a postmodern theory in a practice situated at the ‘beginning’ of postmodernity. As such, this paper extends a postmodern dialogue between texts which are traditionally conceived as being mutually exclusive of one another in the effort to demonstrate ‘the historicizing of a postmodern theory in a practice and a postmodern practice in a theory of postmodernity, of the birth of postmodern.’ This is an effort which can also be described in a doubled way, as the locating of both time in the location of Elizabeth Bowen’s The Heat of the Day (1949), and theorizing the ‘timing’ of postmodern extended between practice and theory. Thus this paper itself opens a dialogue and sustains the tension between two positions which are themselves constitutive of ‘the postmodern debate,’ which has so far involved less the openness of an exchange, and more the rigidifying divide(s) of differing positions into closed discourses, specialized addresses. This paper situates itself in the ‘excluded middle’ of that debate, performing the ‘spacing’ of postmodern time in the location of Elizabeth Bowen’s The Heat of the Day (1949), and theorizing the ‘timing’ of postmodern proximity in the distance extended between Bowen’s text and the philosophy of Gianni Vattimo.

The former enterprise, which amounts to reading and positing an interpretation of a work of art through the informing ‘lens’ of a theory and methodology, risks either the ‘prosifying’ of what is essentially a poetic (that is, open) phrase in the work of art, or in a different way, the collapsing of boundaries between the aesthetic dimension of art and the critical dimension of theory. Following the philosopher Martin Heidegger, Gianni Vattimo defends the ‘eventful’ or ‘inaugural’ aspect of all art in his essay entitled “Art” from the 1994 volume of essays Beyond Interpretation: the Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy (trans. 1997). He warns his readers, and future practitioners, of the banality of a traditional form of textual criticism and interpretation which, for instance, equates art with politics, forcing statements out of the open-ended, incomplete, unsystematic, and promising phrase of its medium. The provenance of art, according to Vattimo, is a socially constituted practice which sustains an intransigency, that is, an open possibility for inducing change in the world. Stating that, “in short, the truth [of art] cannot be thought by hermeneutics on the model of the statement” (67), Vattimo rejects art’s reification in critical practice. Returning to Heidegger’s emphasis on the ‘poetry of poetry,’ Vattimo argues that “it is relatively uninteresting, and often entirely vacuous, to believe that Heidegger and hermeneutics urge us to try to extract philosophical theses from poetry, literature, and the figurative arts” (71). And yet, this judgment informs us of an interesting paradox within the philosophy of Vattimo, himself. Or else, it is more of a betrayal of his own blindspot. For in two other essays in the same volume, “The Truth of Hermeneutics” and “The Reconstruction of Rationality”, he also urges us to conceive of hermeneutics in a radically ontological way, as the practice of a collocation (what he calls Erörterung, following Heidegger), conceived as the risking of a provisional statement in the face of what has become the contemporary hegemonical orientation of hermeneutics. This hegemonal orientation comprises what we hinted at above as a second risk of this first enterprise in the paper, namely, a dissolution of the theory and practice of hermeneutics into its contemporary practice as deconstruction, which Vattimo criticizes as “an ‘ecumenical’ form so vague and generic” (“Preface” ix) because it does not risk positing a theory or rationale for itself. For Vattimo, this lack of risk involves the further risk of transforming critical practice into an inconsequential ‘irrationalism’ -- which avoids all attempts to risk argument and statement, even in a provisional sense; and which, as such, neglects the extension of boundaries between art and critical practice.

Thus this paper risks interpreting the ‘truth’ of Elizabeth Bowen’s 1949 historical narrative of the Second World War as a provisional ‘statement’ of a hermeneutic ontology, as Vattimo conceives it, positing the text ‘for now’ as a possible adumbration of postmodernity and as a possible predication of Vattimo’s philosophy in literature. In a very controversial text of 1984, Il pensiero debole, Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldorovatti present a series of essays on what they conceive as ‘weak thought.’ In “Postmodernism in Italy”, Monica Jansen explains the sustained problematic of the text as speculations on “the problem of finding, after the fall of strong, classical reason, a new art of ‘oscillation,’ of hovering between past and present without subordinating the one to the other” (389). In many ways, this problem is projected in response to “the one who wants to put an end to the discussion... the great theorist of the postmodern condition, [Jean-François] Lyotard himself” (388). Jansen cites Lyotard’s declaration, in an interview with the Italian thinker Gabriele Invernizzi, that “for him the postmodern is not a period that comes after the modern, nor a simple ‘come-back’ of the past in order to cancel the modern experience” (388-89). Lyotard’s now famous and still polemical text La Condition postmoderne was published in Italy in 1981 and
quickly assimilated. As Jansen states, “Lyotard’s position has clear affinities with epistemological and ontological problems that have a respectable tradition in Italian philosophy” (388). However, Rovatti’s response to Lyotard’s declaration was in the form of a reproach, as he blames his French colleague for not noticing that “there are in Italy also philosophers like Vattimo who try to problematize the ‘postmodern condition’ by focusing on the transformations of the idea of ‘surpassing’ (‘superamento’) typical of modernism” (Jansen 389). Following this problematization, this paper risks a response to the call by Vattimo and Rovatti to theorize a kind of ‘resistance’ writing “against a cynical ‘return to,’ against the loss of a critical dimension” (389), thus corresponding to Vattimo’s theorization of a critique of postmodernism. As Jansen states of Italian postmodern thought,

the question whether the postmodern can constitute a new avant-garde that breaks with the past seems definitely answered with a clear no. Still, it is useful to discuss the question in the field of literature (389).

And as Geert Lernout explains, in “Postmodernism in France”, the French cultural commentators Guy Scarpetta and Antoine Compagnon -- whose interpretation of postmodernism does not radically differ from that of Lyotard -- have nevertheless pointed to

a third way, between a nostalgia for an imaginary authenticity situated in the past on the one hand, and a modernist and progressive search for the ever new on the other hand. The solution is “the way of postmodernism, the way of impurity” (1985: 55). Compagnon agrees with Habermas that there is a French postmodernism that comes very close to a simple irrationalism and he believes that one should distinguish between ‘kitsch-postmodernism’ and a genuinely critical postmodernism. The ‘good’ postmodernism (according to Compagnon who refers to Gianni Vattimo to show that this is not entirely a French affair) has always included a critical moment, a critique of classical philosophy represented by “the Nietzschean doctrine of the eternal return and the ‘surpassing’ of metaphysics in Heidegger” (1990: 174). The result, for both Compagnon and Scarpetta, is a postmodernism that signals the end of the avant-garde, the end of the ideology of rupture, a kind of art that is never temporally defined (355).

Bowen’s The Heat of the Day is chosen as just this kind of ‘impure’ or ‘contaminated’ writing, conducive to extending a dialogue with the thought of Vattimo, thus forming a fluid point of contact between philosophical reflection and literary creation. In “Postmodernity and Literature in Spain”, Enric Bou and Andrés Soria Olmedo posit Vattimo’s thought as itself being most conducive to such a dialogue, as far as literary practice is concerned. Bou and Olmedo state that this conduciveness or extensity “proceeds from certain attitudes related to Vattimo’s pensare debole (weak thought) such as the ripresa contaminatoria del passato (contaminatory recuperation of the past), the stilizzazione di forme e modelli al di fuori di ogni logica di derivazione ideale (stylization of forms and models to those beyond all logic of ideal derivation), and the appraisal of memory as pietas (trans. from Raimondi 1990: 7-8)” (400). As Vattimo would have it, ‘internal’ articulations, or statements of a paradigm, or epistemological truths, must be collocated with a transformative or revolutionary phrase, that is, with hermeneutical truth. Truth as correspondence must correspond with truth as opening, so that in place of “the merely postulated universality of true propositions... there is an actual setting into relation of particular truths with the multiplicity of perspectives constituting the network that supports them and renders them possible” (“The Truth of Hermeneutics” 95). In this paper, then, the effort involves setting the hermeneutic truth of Vattimo’s philosophy into an actual relation with (that is, it is collocated with, or read through) Bowen’s text, which is itself read as an art of oscillation.

Vattimo and Bowen are thus drawn together in an (im)possible statement in order to take the necessary risk of rationalizing the choice and use of their texts in the present context. As Vattimo states in his essay called “The Truth of Hermeneutics”,

once again, it is worth repeating that the hermeneutic conception of truth is not an affirmation of the ‘local’ over the ‘global,’ or any such ‘parochial’ reduction of the experience of the true -- for which statements would hold true only within a delimited horizon, and could never aspire to a wider validity. To open up -- as Heidegger has often done in his etymological reconstructions of the vocabulary of Western metaphysics -- the connections and the stratifications that echo, implicit and often forgotten, in every particular true statement is to awaken the
memory of an indefinite network of relations (such as Wittgenstein's family resemblances, opposed to the abstract universality of essence, genus and species) that constitute the basis of a possible universality, namely, the persuasiveness of that statement; ideally, for everyone (95).

The second enterprise mentioned earlier as part of the risky aspect of this paper, namely, the historicizing of a postmodern theory by reading it through a practice interpreted as being situated at the historical 'beginning' of postmodernity, is suspect as an attempt to fix or reify the postmodern in time and place for reasons which could or would even be called 'political.' But this risk is actually an extension in the opposite direction of the first risk discussed above. To repeat, this paper situates itself in the 'excluded middle' of an extension, would even be called 'political.' But this risk is actually an extension in the opposite direction of the first risk of conceiving postmodernity as a postmodern which transcends time and space — such as in Umberto Eco's discussed above. To repeat, this paper situates itself in the 'excluded middle' of an extension, would even be called 'political.' But this risk is actually an extension in the opposite direction of the first risk of conceiving postmodernity as a postmodern which transcends time and space — such as in Umberto Eco's conception of postmodernism as an ironic 'mannerism,' or in Lyotard's conception of a cyclical postmodernism — this paper takes a second risk. Specifically, there is an argued proposition of the end(s) of modernity in a postmodernity, the beginnings of which are identified with the historical referent of the Second World War. According to Peter Carravetta, in his 1991 book Prefaces to the Diaphora: Rhetorics, Allegory, and the Interpretation of Postmodernity, there is a risk involved in posting the idea of a 'break' between pre-and post-War Two society. Referring to Fredric Jameson's argument of just such a break occurring in sociological and political terms at this time, Carravetta states that he (along with other theorists of postmodernity, such as Linda Hutcheon, Jochen Schulte-Sasse, Terry Eagleton, and even Jürgen Habermas) contributes to the general confusion that surrounds the notion of postmodernity with an analysis of artists and phenomena that are actually closer to being 'neo-avant-garde' rather than 'postmodern.' According to Carravetta, the problem seems to be derived by the self-imposed, unflinching theoretical imperative to hang onto the 'incomplete project' of Modernity" (160).

It is important to note that Carravetta's critical practice itself is closer to that of deconstruction, with its subsumption (or, in extreme practices, consumption) of the second kind of risk we are discussing here under the first kind of risk discussed above. In other words, the 'playing field' extended between these two risks is uneven, and so we find Carravetta stating that 'much better, and more fruitful' than thinking of the project of modernity as incomplete, would be "to develop [Kenneth] Frampton's 'critical regionalism,' the rhizomatic panorama explored by [Arthur] Kroger and [David] Cook, [Michel] Foucault's discourse analyses and genealogies, Lyotard's Differend [event], [Gilles] Deleuze's textual tectonics, and Vattimo’s 'weak thought' alternative to 'strong metaphysics'" (160). First of all, Carravetta misses Vattimo’s emphasis on the absence of a possibility for pure alternatives or for history as tabula rasa. He cannot be grouped in with the other postmodern theorists which Carravetta catalogues (except perhaps Foucault), as this group of thinkers is presumed to have given up the 'incomplete' project of modernity. And it is precisely the issue of overcoming which informs Vattimo notion of 'weak thought' as a problematization of the fantasy of forgetting, of the clean slate, of giving up on the past, and of the abandonment of the incomplete project of modernity. In Vattimo’s thought, there is no modernist overcoming (Überwindung), but only the possibility to recognize, with ironic awareness, that overcoming is itself ironic (Verwindung), and as such, doubled (Verwindung or distortion is also always Andenken or rememoration). But although the position that this paper puts forward certainly does not accord with Carravetta's negative judgment of the theoretical imperative to return to modernity, it nevertheless concurs with his rationale for using the August 1945 detonation of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki as the historical referent for postmodernity.

Along with this event, which Bowen's narrator makes a glancing mention of in The Heat of the Day as being "heard of but never grasped" (308), arrived the threat of ultimate human extinction rather than just individual extinction. In Carravetta's view, then, Heidegger's concept of the anticipatory decision towards death, as the decision which opens up all of the possibilities that constitute existence, needs to be rethought in more world-historical or extended terms. Towards a definition of a rethinking of postmodernity, Carravetta states the following:

If a historical-conceptual 'break' is at all needed to signal the advent of the Post-Modern Epoch — something which, to historiographer and bibliographer alike, is 'methodologically' comparable to the 1348 plague, the 1492 voyage to the New World, the 1609 telescope sightings, the 1789 Revolution - then I would suggest August 1945 (Hiroshima-Nagasaki), which Arthur Koestler had posited since the mid-seventies; the reasoning behind this choice goes something like this: for the very first time it was mankind, or rather men (in the phallocratic society, I can
Thus this paper polarizes its second risk around the event of the Second World War, in terms of its fictional (and negative) 'representation' in Bowen's historical narrative, in order to respond to Vattimo's call to contribute to an opening horizon of postmodern practices -- where and when there still exists the opportunity to appeal to a weak normative horizon or context, on the way to a reconceptualized notion of the postmodern.

In his 1990 essay “Postmodern Criticism : Postmodern Critique”, Vattimo conceives of a future for criticism when and where it will not attempt to forget, leave behind, or overcome its modern 'Wesen' (essence) as critique. Implied is the actual impossibility of criticism ever leaving behind its ‘Other’ as critique. This seeming paradox will be discussed in detail in the forthcoming chapters of Division I of the paper. For now, it is important to note that the text of “Postmodern Criticism : Postmodern Critique” is itself the central stress of the two opposing extensions in this paper. Furthermore, following Vattimo’s recommendations in that essay, this paper activates ‘checks’ on both dimensions of critical practice: so that criticism as critique moderates the practice of criticism, and criticism as (textual and/or deconstructive) criticism moderates the theory of critique. Each dimension of critical practice tempers or moderates the other, so that a model of the paper could be represented as a structure and function of chiasmus, a cross-over of correctives. In this way, each instance or moment of criticism or critique involves both an Andenken (recollection) and a Verwindung (distortion) of the other, resulting in what Vattimo theorizes as ‘weak thought,’ or postmodern criticism as postmodern critique, as well as postmodern critique as postmodern criticism. As such, the thought of the paper remains compromised by the explicit retention of what threatens to negate or oppose it, mediating its own constitutive difference, and thus involving a vulnerability (openness) in its positing of a provisional unity as weak or circumstantial evidence, contaminated testimony, moderate proof. Such a vulnerable unity is thus also a tempering (a Verwindung or distortion) of the traditional Hegelian or rationalist conception of thought as a dialectic (Aufhebung) tending towards the reconciliation of its poles. In this paper, there is a problematizing of the demonstrative discourse of this dialectical thought, such that its strong evidence, ultimate convictions, and totalizing impulses are always interrupted in the oscillation and interference of criticism and critique. The tension of incompatibles results in an occasional spasm or interruption which is accepted as the inevitable betrayal of all discourse.

This problematizing does mean, however, that weak thought is also slow thought, involving hindrance, restraint, attenuation, and moderation. Here we approach yet another significance of Vattimo’s ‘il pensiero debole,’ and another description of the structure and practice of this thesis paper: a thought which proceeds slowly and carefully, rather than in a hasty, imperative, explosive, or dramatic way. In the age of technological instantaneity, the reinscription of critical distance takes time, as it moves away from the hegemony of both modernist and postmodernist spatial(izing) conceptions of instantaneity, thus putting brakes on the vehicle of critical practice in order to reinscribe an ethical-pragmatic dimension of the present, or a ‘now-time.’

Finally, it is important to understand that each time criticism or critique is practiced or theorized, each remains ‘contaminated’ with the dimension of the other -- what Derrida calls the trace, and what Heidegger terms ontological difference -- so that, in effect, and in Vattimo's conception of hermeneutic ontology, they are never separate, pure, exclusive, or discreet practices. But just as they comprise differences constitutive of one another in this way, criticism and critique must also be understood as a constitutive difference in another, different way. They form an inalienable relation, but in that, the one or the other remains alienated within this relation in an extended
oscillation. In the mediation or extension of criticism and critique, Vattimo proposes a future for criticism which will, in this way, think difference as difference, thus reawakening the importance of ontological difference for thought, following Heidegger. The future of criticism is sketched out by Vattimo as follows:

If the question for postmodern criticism was -- as we saw -- how to remain faithful to its modern Wesen once the meta-récits have been dissolved, the answer we are sketching here is that this is possible in so far as the monumental essence of the texts is recognized in both its meanings: the substantiality of the Wirkungsgeschichte (which is nothing but the substantiality of the traces of the past mortals) and the accidental and causal aspect of the monuments as rhetorical exempla. The first sense provides sufficient guidelines in order to avoid the pure arbitrariness of wild criticism [or deconstruction]; the second sense provides the basis for taking a critical distance from an actual existence; not in the name of an essential, metaphysically given, order, but in the name of the 'multiple' possibilities of existence which are given by the 'world-opening' force of the texts and which, in a sense, belie the claims of the actual existence to be the sole 'natural' possibility-reality. On this basis, postmodern criticism can take up the task of criticism and critique in their modern sense, by shaping the connection between the two terms in an original way which has still to be thought (65-66).

This paper attempts to shape the connection between criticism and critique, taking up the task of criticism and critique in a 'reading through' each of Vattimo's theory and Bowen's practice, that is, in an extended 'reach' of texts. Through the critical and ontological bearing of what Carravetta terms the rememoration-distortion dyad, Vattimo develops a postmodern notion of criticism and critique which function(s) as a 'chiasmus' (Greek for 'a placing crosswise' [x]). As such, the dyad criticism-critique is conceived as a temperable constitutive difference for postmodern hermeneutic ontology to think through and practice.

* 

There is yet one more way in which this paper can be described as risky writing, which is really just a way to reconfigure the two risks discussed above. In his introductory essay to the massive 1997 volume entitled International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice, Hans Bertens explains that even to continue the discussion on postmodernism today is risky. For,

although it has not yet been officially pronounced dead -- but, then, who would be in a position to sign such a death certificate -- there would seem to be a general feeling that postmodernism is at least moribund, both as a creative moment that has in the last thirty years manifested itself in virtually all artistic disciplines and as a subject for academic research. The postmodern impulse seems to have run out of steam, the cutting edge of literary-critical interest flexes its muscles -- if I may mix my metaphors -- in more recently established fields of intellectual inquiry such as cultural studies and, more in particular, postcolonial studies, and publishers are getting wary of new manuscripts on the postmodern because the market gives every sign of being saturated (3).

Accordingly, Bertens proffers that these last years of the end of the twentieth century would seem to provide an ideal opportunity

for taking stock of what, after modernism, has been the second great upheaval in the arts of the twentieth century, an opportunity for getting things right, in the correct perspective, for balancing the books, and, not in the least, for cleaning the slate, so that future periodizers of Western art can use the impending turn of the century as a neat break between the afterglow of the postmodern and whatever the twenty-first century will bring (3).
He is being ironic. That such a ‘neat break’ could be is recognized as a fantasy or a delusion of wishful thinking, but either way, also an unwitting repetition of the logic of modernity. Bertens points out the further irony that he should discuss the impossibility of periodization in a text which is to a large extent motivated by such lofty encyclopaedic aspirations -- international in its coverage and six-hundred pages long, it is hardly moderate in scope. For the truth is, as Bertens says, “our intellectual and literary reality does not permit such a definitive inventory” (3) -- but just as it never has. However, it seems that the macropaedic impulse will only be hindered, but not brought to a halt altogether in our times. Ecumenicity and problematization are extended as an erring but nevertheless functioning check-and-balance system in postmodernity, as the future-oriented drive to establish epistemological truths is tempered by the past-invested drive to constantly remind ourselves of our hermeneutic situation, our historicity, our hermeneutic ontology.

Far from having exhausted itself, the postmodern impulse is alive and well, although its current manifestations are admittedly not those of thirty, or even those of twenty or fifteen years ago. Insisting on difference and declaring war on sameness in the name of intellectual, moral, and political freedom, and seeing never-ending process where other world views saw (and see) stability, postmodernism has itself also been protean rather than fixable and has again and again remade itself without, however, losing its most distinctive qualities. And so, even if the postmodernism of the 1960s is no longer with us, the postmodernism of the 1990s surely is (Bertens 3).

And so, if we have reached saturation point in postmodernity, it is only to find that an uncanny realization awaits: at the ‘end’ of the story there remains a continued need to tell the ‘end’ of the story. In his 1991 essay, “The End of (Hi)story”, Vattimo urges us to pay attention to the paradox in which we are captured. As he explains, Lyotard’s now famous, and for the most part convincing story of ‘the dissolution of the metarécits’ is itself a (paradoxical) kind of metarécit.

To point out this paradox does not necessarily involve the rejection of Lyotard’s theses [as Habermas would have it]. On the contrary: only by recognizing the paradox shall we be in the position to dissolve Habermas’s objections by preparing a solution of the problem of legitimation that surely has not been completely dissolved by the dissolution of the metarécits.

In the paradox that we must recognize in Lyotard’s theory of postmodernity, it seems that postmodern thought simply experiences in its own way the same ‘contradiction’ that is visible, for instance, in Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal recurrence (which, as K[arl] Loewith has shown, is to be ‘instaurated’ by a historical decision that is not itself a repetition of the past) or in Heidegger’s view of the relation of postmetaphysical thought to past metaphysics. Unlike these eminent predecessors, Lyotard seems to pay too little attention to the paradox in which he is captured. He does not see (and would probably not admit) that his theory of the confutation of the metarécits is itself a metarécit. He assumes that this confutation is an accomplished fact, an event that is completely behind us. The metarécits of the past metaphysics of history have been dissolved, and do not mean anything more to us. In his paying no attention to the paradox of the (metarécit of the) dissolution of the metarécits, Lyotard reminds me of a page of Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra, where Zarathustra’s animals describe the eternal recurrence in too easy a form -- they sing and dance, chanting, “Everything goes [an anticipation of Feyerabend’s anarchism?], everything comes back, eternally rolls the wheel of being.” Zarathustra blames them for having transformed such a terrible and serious idea into a hurdy-gurdy song. The animals, he says, have forgotten all the pain he had to suffer (described in another discourse, of the same third part of the book, “On the Vision and the Riddle”) in order to become able to think (or to instaurate, or to accept) the idea of the eternal recurrence (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, part 3, “The Convalescent”).

It is exactly in authors such as Nietzsche and Heidegger -- who, of course also belong to the theoretical background of Lyotard’s theory of
postmodernity -- that we have to look for a more productive way of paying attention to the paradox on which postmodern theory is based (136).

This passage describes what has been the main thrust of Vattimo’s philosophy. And in his now well-known book, La fine della modernita (1985), published in English as The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture (1988), Vattimo develops his discourse on this postmodern problematic by returning to the thought of Nietzsche, in particular, and also Heidegger. In fact though, since his doctoral philosophical study with Luigi Pareyson at the University of Turin in the 1950s, on through to his post-doctoral philosophical studies with Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Loewith at the University of Heidelberg in West Germany, and then all throughout his own writings since the 1960s, Vattimo has returned to the thought of Heidegger and Nietzsche most frequently in order to develop his theory of postmodernity.

Introducing Italy to the thought of Carl Jaspers, Pareyson “had been among the very first intellectuals in Italy to discover existentialism in the early 1940s, despite Italy’s cultural isolation under the fascist regime” (Snyder “Introduction” to The End of Modernity viii). And Gadamer and Loewith had both been Heidegger’s students at Marburg in the 1920s. As Vattimo’s translator Ron Snyder states, “it was around this time in the early 1960s that the focus of Vattimo’s research turned to nineteenth- and twentieth- century European philosophy, most notably hermeneutics and ontology, a field in which he has worked exclusively ever since” (viii-ix). Vattimo’s thought has involved a slow extension out of the thought of Heideggerian existentialism towards his own formulation in the 1970s of ‘il pensiero debole,’ best translated as ‘weak thought.’

Vattimo’s theses on the ‘weakness’ of thinking and Being at the end of modernity have provoked considerable controversy in Italy throughout the 1980s, and the publication in late 1983 of a volume of essays entitled Il pensiero debole, which he co-edited with Pier Aldo Rovatti, triggered an acrid public exchange among Italian philosophers and theorists.... In the last few years international interest in the problematic of ‘weak thought’ has increased exponentially... (Snyder ix-x).

Weak thought is the risk of moderation that Vattimo takes at the ‘end’ of (hi)story, and he puts forward a convincing argument for its acceptance in “The End of (Hi)story” as elsewhere. Weakness in thinking, according to Vattimo, involves the explicit acknowledgement of the absence and simultaneous necessity of strong (metaphysical) foundations, modes, or bases for thought. As such, what he proposes for weakness in thinking involves a problematization of demonstrative discourse. At this point, we should turn to recollect and review Vattimo’s argument in the aforementioned essay, as it will be important to keep in mind that this paper, as risky writing, attempts to return and correspond to Vattimo’s notion of weak thought. And yet, we can also keep in mind that this paper takes the further risk, as a distortion of Vattimo’s thought, of historicizing the notion of weakness as being adumbrated in the historical narrative of Elizabeth Bowen.

*  *

Vattimo turns primarily to two intimately related and key concepts in Heidegger’s philosophy in order to “help us go farther into the meditation on postmodernity and its problem of legitimation” (136). These concepts are Andenken and Verwindung. Vattimo states that Heidegger, “in his effort to overcome (überwinden) metaphysics” (136), faced the same problem that Lyotard is confronted with “when he tries to ‘prove’ that we are living in a postmodern condition and that the metarécits have been confuted” (136). But unlike Lyotard, however, Heidegger does not confute the history of metaphysics “as an accomplished event which does not require further consideration, and which has put us in a totally new condition” (136). Rather, as Vattimo explains, Heidegger explicitly recognizes that “metaphysics cannot be left behind us as an error we have got rid of” (136). Heidegger recognizes that there is a radical reason for this, and that is that “metaphysics cannot simply be overcome because to overcome it would mean to perpetuate its methods and structures” (136). If we have overcome metaphysics, then Heidegger sees the irony of our criteria for confutation or rejection as “the basis of a more adequate foundation, substituting a new truth for the old error” (136). Such a thinking merely continues the strong thought of metaphysics. As a confirmation of this thesis, Vattimo points to the difficulty that Lyotard reveals in attempting “to confute metarécits by means of another metarécit” (136).

Vattimo argues that Heidegger did not attempt to conceal this paradox in his philosophy, but rather, in being acutely conscious of it, set out to revise the notion of overcoming. Heidegger eventually came to think that “the only way to step out of metaphysics is not by critical overcoming (or confutation) but by Verwindung” (136).
Vattimo takes up this concept in Heidegger's philosophy, and throughout his many essays and books, he has discussed the meanings and implications of Heidegger's use of this word, as well as the meanings and implications of Verwindung for thought and for existence. In this essay, he explains that Verwindung involves "a complex set of notions that go from 'distortion,' ... to 'healing,' 'convalescence,' 'resignation,' 'acceptance'" (136). And here, as elsewhere, it is the notion of distortion which is foregrounded as the chance for a limited affirmation of future possibilities in, and for postmodernity. But in Heidegger's thought, Vattimo explains that metaphysics can only be verwinden in all these senses: we can step out of it only by accepting it with resignation, as a sort of illness whose traces we still bring in ourselves; but taking it this way will also be a distortion of its original purposes and claims. If we apply the notion of Verwindung to modernity and postmodernity (an application that is justified by the fact that, for Heidegger as well, modernity is just the last result of metaphysics, its 'practical' aspect in the moment of its accomplishment), we shall say that postmodernity is the epoch that has a relation of Verwindung (in all the sense of the word) to modernity (136-7).

And thus, as Vattimo points out, postmodern thought will always retain in itself "the trace of the historicism that characterized modernity" (137). And the fact that Lyotard can only corroborate his argument for the postmodern condition "by bringing in historicist procedures of legitimation" (137) is proof of this paradox.

Verwindung, as a defining concept of relation in thinking is performed in Heidegger's late works, according to Vattimo. Interpreting these works as distortional metaphysics, Vattimo explains that they "carry on the program of the destruction (or deconstruction) that was already announced in Sein und Zeit by the means of the recollection of its turning points, that is, by the means of a retrieval of the whole metaphysical tradition" (137). But this retrieval or recollection, according to Vattimo, is not an intention "to grasp what has remained unthought of in metaphysics, something that has been forgotten and should be remembered, brought back to the presence of representation" (137). Rather, and according to Vattimo's interpretation, in Heidegger's thinking "what remains unthought in metaphysical tradition is the Ereignis character of Being, Being as an event and not as a stable structure like Plato's ontos on" (137). And so, what Heidegger's recollection achieves "is the recovery of this 'eventual' character of Being: metaphysics appears to Heidegger as the 'series' of epochs in which Being has opened itself in the form of different archai, each one claiming to be a stable (metaphysical) structure while it was 'just' an 'epochal' openness, a sort of episteme in Foucault's sense" (137). Following Michel Foucault, Vattimo qualifies this recollection of metaphysics as 'archeological,' that is, as a distortion "because it deprives metaphysics of its authoritarian character, disregarding its claims to being a knowledge of the stable principles of reality" (137).

Once 'the insignificance of the origin has been revealed,' in Nietzschean terms, thought takes a turn which Vattimo explicates, again following Nietzsche, as a return, or following Heidegger, as An-denken. Vattimo understands this notion of return or recollection as "the very essence of postmetaphysical thought" (137), in that it does not reach any ultimate evidence or any stable foundation. Rather, An-denken involves the recognition that Being is an event and thus "cannot be grasped as a presence, as a stable ultimate structure beyond the errors of metaphysics" (137). Our revelation: Being is not. As 'is-ness,' it cannot be (named as a being). Rather, Being "happens' (es gibt Sein = Es, Sein, gibt)" (137). And so Being can only be 'thought' of "in the form of recollection, as something that is always already gone" (137). This string of recognitions brings Heidegger to practice postmetaphysical thought as something that cannot overcome its 'Other' of metaphysics through a new foundation. Rather, "it can only celebrate, in relation to metaphysics, 'feasts of memory,' as Nietzsche says more or less in the same sense as Heidegger" (137). Heidegger theorizes that "Being is not presence but Ereignis, event, and Ge-Schick (the aggregate, Ge, of the sending, Schicken); therefore, thought is not (is no longer) foundation but An-denken, recollection" (137-8). However, An-denken is also a distortion, a practice of Verwindung, as "it deprives the metaphysical archai of their ultimacy, thinking of them within the framework of the eventuality of Being" (138).

Vattimo then aligns Heidegger's emphasis on recollection or rethinking with the postmodern sensibility. Here, Vattimo is thinking of postmodern architecture, art, and literature, with its "tendencies toward a free -- even arbitrary -- revival of the forms of the past [which] is not inspired by the idea of an analogy between our epoch and one or the other epoch of the past" (138), as this analogous relation would imply a justification of the evocation of these forms as adequate examples for the art of today. Rather, this postmodernism involves the evocation and revival of past forms and stylistic traits "outside of any kind of foundational motivation" (138). For, they are understood as "a repertory of rhetoric exempla that are not intended as the basis for a more adequate understanding and expression of the present situation" (138).
Vattimo turns to help us understand how this way of referring to the past (that is, in a verwindend or andenkend way) stands as a possible solution to the problem of legitimation which we face in postmodernity, and as an ‘authentic’ possibility for postmodern thought to think through and beyond metaphysics as the search for ultimate foundation. He explains that ‘recollection is the form in which thought ‘corresponds’ to Being conceived of in terms of event, Geschick, Überlieferung (trans-mission) of historically qualified disclosures” (138). And he states, that it is an attitude of this kind that Nietzsche describes in Human, All-Too-Human as “the attitude of the ‘good tempered man,’ who, having discovered that all metaphysical, moral, and religious ‘values’ are only the result of the sublimation of impulses, interests, and so on, does not simply reject these values but looks at them with an attitude of ‘limited’ respect” (138). Vattimo thinks that this attitude can be described by the Latin term pietas, which in this context “would describe the attitude of devoted attention that we adopt toward the values marked by mortality and finitude” (138). Adopting the Heideggerian point of view, Vattimo argues that “this appeal to the inherited ‘values’ -- works of art, institutions, language, and so on, more or less what Hegel called the objective spirit --” (138) is the only kind of foundation that is at our disposal in the age of the end of metaphysics. For, understood and interpreted “as ‘monuments,’ that is as something that lasts and provides us with ‘valid’ ways of approaching experience, but only within the horizon of mortality and perishability” (138), our recollection and reception of the inherited ‘values’ cannot be another strong metaphysics. Rather, what remains, or the endurance of monuments, “is not to be conceived in terms of an eternal duration, not even in terms of the perfection of the classical work of art in Hegel’s sense (which also involves a certain kind of eternity), but in terms of historical monumentality, which is ultimately related to the notion of trace and of mortality” (138). Furthermore, what remains is conceived by Vattimo, following Heidegger, who himself cites the poet Hölderlin, as opening up poetically: “Was bleibt aber, stiften die Dichter,” says Hölderlin as quoted by Heidegger: what lasts is founded by poets” (138).

Following this, Vattimo proposes that it is not too difficult to understand how this conception of the foundation in terms of recollection “can claim to be a Verwindung of the foundational thought of traditional metaphysics” (138-9). Lyotard makes the mistake of “implicitly but strongly attributing a normative character to the events that have ‘confuted’ metaphysical metarécits,... calling for respect and attention toward what happened, assuming that it shall be considered a decisive indication for theory and thought” (139). And on the ‘other side’ of the postmodern debate, Habermas refuses Lyotard’s conclusions, “but only by appealing on his side to another course of events that, he assumes, contain another, equally cogent indication for theory” (139). Thus, to think through the postmodern debate, Vattimo follows Heidegger in performing what could be understood as a sort of compromise or mediation. In his thinking, “to explicitly substitute recollection and pietas for this still-foundational thought means, in the first place, to deprive this ‘foundation’ of its claims to logical cogency and demonstrative power” (139). As an illustration of this type of thinking, Vattimo refers to Nietzsche’s ironic announcement of the death of God. Vattimo explains that “‘God is dead’ is only the announcement of an event, not the metaphysical description of a structure of being in which God would not possibly ‘exist’” (139).

But a question remains: is the postmetaphysical distortion-recollection way of thinking a ‘solution’ for the problems of legitimation that face postmodern thought? How can one prove this contention? Vattimo argues that, as a concept and as a practice for thinking, Verwindung succeeds “in unmasking the still metaphysical character of postmodernist theories, such as that of Lyotard” (139). And he moves on to explain how Verwindung can “provide us with positive alternatives” (139).

At first, he admits that “it is true that there is no alternative solution” (139) to the metaphysical practice of foundation. But then, as he explains, “this is what is meant by the word Verwindung -- which is, in my opinion, a key word to describe not only philosophy, but also, for example, the political ‘chances’ of postmodern culture” (139). For Verwindung involves the recognition that

the only way we have to argue in favor of postmodernist philosophy is still an appeal to history, as those we have seen in Lyotard and Habermas. Only if we recognize this fact explicitly and make it the theme of our reflection, instead of pretending that it is now completely behind us as a vergangen event; that is, only if we tell explicitly, again and again, the story of the end of history, shall we be able to change, distort, verwinden, its still metaphysical significance. Somebody (K. Rosenkranz, I think, in one of the first works on philosophical anthropology, quoted and discussed by K. Loewith in one of his essays) has observed that the only real way we have to distinguish between sleep and wakefulness is that, when we are awake, we can remember that we have woken up. Nietzsche is right when he says (in Twilight of the Idols) that the true world at the very end became a fable; but fable and simulacra, if they have to be recognized as
possibility of a rational critique of the present" (139).

But conversely, if we recognize, following Vattimo and Heidegger, that “the end of history belongs to the history of Being, we will still have a criterion -- be it paradoxical -- for rational arguing and for historical options” (139). Vattimo admits that this means appealing again “to a cogency of what happened, in the sense that metaphysical historicism (but also Lyotard and Habermas) used to do” (139-40). But in speaking of the history of Being, in reviving this metarécit of the history of Being, we are now doing something different. For, according to Vattimo, “this metarécit is recognized as having the sole meaning of the progressive -- as it were -- dissolution of all the metarécits -- that is, of the dissolution of Being as a stable structure in favor of Being as an event” (140). In recognizing this, Heidegger practiced pietas, An-denken, and Verwindung in his thinking, finally developing “a philosophy in which Being (foundation, structure) disappears, takes leave, is gone -- and nevertheless he still remained interested in ontology, according to the purpose on which Sein und Zeit was based” (140). For Vattimo, this means we must follow suit as,

we can adequately, or authentically, experience the disappearance of Being as an event only within the history of Being; and vice versa. The story of the end of history, in this sense, is both a Verwindung (a distorted continuation) of metaphysics (or historicism) and a theory in which the very meaning of the history of Being is Verwindung, in all the senses of the word....

As with metaphysical historicism, the metarécit of the end of history is also an appeal to correspond to what happened to the history of Being. The distortion, however, consists of the fact that the event that we are to correspond to is a process whose meaning is the dissolution of any cogency, as well as the cogency of the history of Being. What we must correspond to is the dissolution of Being itself (“das Sein als Grund fahren lassen,” says Heidegger in “Time and Being,” a lecture of the sixties) (140).

Vattimo concedes that the normativity this postmodern thought faces, in its attempt to correspond to the dissolution of Being, is a very paradoxical one. However, he still argues that “it claims a specific validity” (140) as weak thought. He explains that “the ‘process’ to which we are to correspond is the ‘epochal,’ self-concealing (or simply nihilistic) essence (Wesen being meant here in the verbal sense Heidegger gives to it) of Being” (140). And thus “the ‘reasons’ why we are to correspond to this destiny of Being are also ‘distorted’ reasons, no longer cogent in the sense that belonged to the metaphysical foundation” (140). Strangely, and perhaps against our own impulses, we are not to apply strong or metaphysical criteria to determine the validity of Vattimo’s argument for weak thought. However, this leaves a further problem, because we notice that he himself has applied such criteria (adequacy, correspondence) in ‘proving’ Lyotard and Habermas (as well as other ‘extreme’ thinkers polarized on this side or that’ of the postmodern debate) to be ‘on the wrong track.’ The only ‘justification’ or explanation that Vattimo can offer for this contradiction or paradox, is that the argument he puts forth is only ever a ‘hypothetical imperative’ that is, in any ‘final’ analysis, dependent on the pietas that he conceives of as an attitude of limited respect. In other words, he is not trying to convince us beyond the shadow of a doubt, because in his thinking, the world we live in is already, and now especially, a twilight world -- there will always be shadows or ‘blinds spots’ in thinking, as the shadows are what allow thought to ‘show’ in a ‘movement’ or ‘propel’ itself along, or at least perceive itself as ‘progressing,’ or even ‘dissolving’ in this way. By putting forth only circumstantial evidence, Vattimo hopes to ground his theory of weak thought in its ontological situation as an inevitably historical phenomena, in the sense of historicity or mortality. The ‘solutions’ we provide to our postmodern condition, according to Vattimo, will only ever be provisional ones, but nevertheless ones which still attempt to appeal to a fading context of the metaphysical foundation. This is also what Vattimo means (as he stated in an earlier text of 1980, The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy After Nietzsche and Heidegger) by ‘rooting domination out of grammar.’

On the subject of conviction, however, it is interesting to note that the American pragmatist Richard Rorty acknowledges, on the jacket leaf of Vattimo’s latest book Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy (1997 [1994]), that Vattimo’s ambitious philosophy has “led me to reconsider a lot of my previous
views about the relations between science, religion and art”. He compliments Vattimo, qualifying him as “a
genuinely original, and very stimulating, philosopher”. So, it seems, philosophy is not dead, yet. Nor originality,
apparently. All of these traditional values can be reconceived and reevaluated within a limited, provisional, or
‘weak normative’ context. For now, Vattimo’s thought remains a convincing process and event, which others can in
their turn appeal to and follow, for now. But then, that is all we have ever had to contend with, in living and in
thinking: the ‘now.’ Certainly the ‘now’ is an extension constituted by a past and a future; but what we know is
always ‘for now.’ This might sound similar to the postmodern criteria put forward by philosophers like Rorty, but
Vattimo in fact differentiates his thought from that of pragmatism.

I am thinking here of some recent positions of Rorty’s -- if thought can no longer
be ‘foundational thought,’ the reasons we can offer in order to persuade others to
accept the thesis of postmodernism (or any other thesis) cannot be based -- as
pragmatists seem to think -- on the need for survival (which would require
agreement, playing the social and language games, etc.); if it were so, the need
for survival would represent another form of true and ultimate (metaphysical)
foundation. Life, to which we can appeal in order to persuade somebody of the
validity of a philosophical thesis, is rather, and is perhaps only, a historically
and culturally qualified and ‘charged’ form of life; we are hardly interested in
pure biological survival, but in surviving within a set of ‘goods,’ cultural and
human values that constitute our sole being. But the appeal to these historical
values is exactly what can be described as pietas (140-41).

This argument against the pragmatist criteria of survival is important in the present context of this paper. For in
recollecting and repeating Vattimo’s thesis of ‘weak thought,’ this paper attempts to provide further criteria for the
acceptance of his theory of postmodernity. Simply speaking, this paper puts forward circumstantial evidence of its
own in the effort to link the theory of ‘weak thought’ to a particular, historical event, namely the Second World
War, or even more particularly, its end in the atomic bomb. For it was this event which negated any residue of
humanism remaining in thought after the First World War. Life was and is grasped, with the moment of that
historical crisis, as what ‘we’ make of it -- but the ‘we’ in question here, presumably a conservative ‘we’ bent on the
survival of the human species, or even on the survival of planet Earth, could no longer be taken for granted.

Vattimo concludes his essay by explaining that his ‘solution’ to the postmodern condition includes a
limited positivism armed with negative criteria. He acknowledges that, on the one hand, there is plenty of
normative content in his theory of ‘weak thought,’ and that this “can provide the basis for satisfying the reasonable
preoccupations of people like Habermas” (141). Thus, it is Vattimo’s hope that “a postmetaphysical ‘logic’ and
‘ethics’ -- not to speak of politics -- can be constructed on the notions of pietas, Andenken, Verwindung” (141).
This is his specific project in works such as The Transparent Society of 1992 (1989) and in his most recent work
Beyond Interpretation, mentioned above. On the other hand, such projects, like this thesis paper, are also
constructed with a default mechanism of negative criteria in the functioning of ‘weak thought’ as Andenken,
Verwindung, and pietas. As he puts it, “to correspond to the verwindend essence of Being and of thought, we have
to engage actively in the de(con)struction of all the metaphysical residues that still are alive in our philosophy,
psychology, ethics, culture in general” (141). Finally, one last acknowledgment and a call to take the risk of ‘weak
thought’ is made:

Maybe the initial, purely negative, normative implications of the (paradoxical)
postmodernist philosophy of history (because it is actually one) are not much,
but they seem to be the only way to open philosophy in a time when
foundational thought has become (fortunately) impossible, and Being as Grund
is (fortunately) gone (141).

* And so, if the ending of modernity and metaphysics is a beginning of a response to this ‘end,’ then,
paradoxically, the beginning is also an ending. This apparent dissolution of ends might lead one to posit, as Lyotard
or Eco have, that postmodernity is not a temporally delimited phenomena, that perhaps modernity has been
postmodernity all along without knowing it, thus questioning the need for definitive terminologies. By insisting,
paradoxically, on a history for postmodernity and a rationale for its term, this paper hopes to temper such apparent
tautology or transcendentalism, along with certain dissolutive tendencies of postmodern thought which would have
nothing to do with the ‘passing fad’ of postmodernism/-ity at all (apparently ‘reality’ has also already become a ‘passing fad’ for some theorists, such as Baudrillard). We might work towards taking the risk of establishing, carefully, as this paper attempts to do, the hint of an argued proposition for postmodernity as ‘beginning’ post-1945. For it is exactly in the ‘atomic age’ that we begin to interpret (see, hear, sense, read) the concatenated propositions of postmodernity (concatenated postmodernisms, such as Nietzsche’s late philosophy, Heidegger’s philosophy, etcetera) with increasing frequency -- like reverberations amassing tone, like labour pains approaching closer and closer together, like frequencies channelling into a wave length, or like a substance reaching saturation point. At this point in time, we begin to strike a tone, and spilling over, we give birth to a realization, voicing the ‘ending’ and the ‘beginning’ at the same time.

There is a reverberation of ends approaching such a ‘twilight’ intensity in post-1945 art, literature, and thought, that now has to be re-thought and revisited as the opportunity to assert a less negatively oriented postmodern philosophical or theoretical program, as a way to begin again. In the twilight of beginning endings we are faced with a choice that can be thought of as an extension. Thought can either continue to think against itself negatively, towards the levelling down of differences into either a rejection of post-possibility (Habermas’ ‘[yes] no’), or an affirmation of endless (post-)possibilities and undifferentiated pluralities (Deleuze’s, Derrida’s, and Baudrillard’s ‘[no] yes yes’), both of which risk the (unwitting or not?) abstraction into a new One, a new logos for thought. Or thought can begin to think for itself, accepting its negative possibilities and the problem of legitimation as its inevitable provenance (a resounding ‘no yes,’ which might be written as a resounding ‘no yest, yes no’), and furthermore historicizing these negative impulses as a possible extension of the pessimism (Kulturpessimismus) stemming from the eve of World War Two. In the very least, it can be argued that this is an ‘existential’ context shared by the ‘acute triangle’ of writers collocated in this paper: Heidegger (1889-1976) — Bowen (1899-1973) — Vattimo (1936-). And if we extend devoted attention (pietas) to these ends, we might just work towards opening the morning (which is not necessarily the mourning) of philosophy and art in postmodernity.
We should be more sensitive to the enlightening as well as obscuring implications of a much-maligned modernity whose promise is still greater than is assumed by those who counsel a leap into the postmodernist dark.

Martin Jay
We have not merely survived, we have continued to be and, which is still more, to be aware of being.

Elizabeth Bowen “Autobiography as an Art” (March 17, 1951)
Just as the fact that the 'real' world does not exist does not obliterate the world, so the impossibility of 'absolute' originality does not abolish originality: On the contrary, it places it within a structure and within history, which is where, after all, it has always belonged.

Alexander Nehamas
DIVISION I

DEFENSIVE POSTURES
The formula of my happiness: a Yes, a No, a straight arrow, a goal.
Friedrich Nietzsche
They do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself.
It is an attunement of opposite tensions like that of the bow and the lyre.
Heraclitus
Part I

The Paper as an Anironic Enclave of Ironic Values
In light of the emphasis so far placed on risk and irony as operative not only in the texts of Bowen and Vattimo, but also in this paper itself, one might feel compelled to point out that it is not so risky, radical, or even ironic to be engaged in a single-author, single-text study, assuming that we take Bowen as our primary text, the object of the study, and Vattimo as the theoretical ancillary text which forms the 'lens' through which the primary text is read. As far as the conventional model or scope of theses based on critical analysis or philosophical speculation go, this 'subject (I/writer of thesis paper) - transitive verb (interpret) - direct object (Bowen's text) - indirect object (through Vattimo's philosophy or theory)' formula would comprise the presumed relationship between the texts under consideration. And even beyond this presumption, the attempt to collocate the texts of Bowen and Vattimo in a sort of flexible 'conversation,' by reading them alongside and through one another, could again be criticized as a concealed form of a single-author, single-text study upon which the theory of Vattimo has been 'mapped,' so to speak. The first thing to point out here, by way of a defense of the avowedly 'risky' and 'ironic' aspect or appeal of this paper, is that such criticisms might involve an oversight of the double (or proliferative or even, sometimes, explosive) operation of irony as it takes place, this time not only in the texts of Bowen and Vattimo, but also in this paper. That is, such a criticism might be unaware of the unrelenting self-awareness or the intentional irony that this paper itself attempts to sustain. There is, in this paper, a double movement of the operation of irony, such that there has been an anironic attempt to found an enclave of values of the risky, the ironic; and insofar as that has been attempted, the paper thus attempts to create provisional anironic enclaves of ironic values, an attempt which is itself clearly ironic and which therefore involves a certain element of risk.

One might do well at this point to confess that this paper also seeks to practice what has been identified, for instance by Hans Bertens, as thematic postmodernism, and by Alan Wilde in his Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Ironic Imagination, as “a narrative form” that “negotiates the oppositional extremes of realism and reflexivity (both their presuppositions and their technical procedures)” (Wilde 192) and that accommodates truth and meaning as long as these are not seen as absolutes (Bertens 11). In “The Debate on Postmodernism”, Bertens sketches the various postmodernisms as they have emerged along with their theorizations since the 1950s. Identifying a ‘postmodernness’ which is established particularly by ‘content’ and ‘attitude,’ or ‘a specific postmodern thematics’ (8), following Alan Wilde, Bertens explains that such a postmodernism “resists the modernist intellectualization of experience and... rejects modernism’s supposed interest in transcendent, timeless meaning in favor of provisional meaning, that is, meaning as a product of social interaction” (8). And it also involves a “deep awareness of historicity” (11), for instance, in the way that Wilde argues that the postmodern text “exhibits a specifically postmodern intellectual attitude, a form of irony that must be sharply distinguished from the irony of the modernists” (11). Such an irony can be distinguished from that of the modernists in that it is ‘suspensive,’ according to Wilde; that is, it attenuates irony as a worldly inevitability. Bertens summarizes Wilde’s position as follows:

Whereas modernist irony offered “in opposition to its vision of disjunctiveness a complementary vision of inclusive order, thereby generating a hope that more often than not outstrips belief,” postmodern ‘suspensive’ irony never includes such a vision. While modernist ironists in the final analysis are ‘anironic,’ “postmodern ironists... acknowledg[e] the inevitability of their situation in the world they describe. Whether or not they are involved with that world, they are of it, their perspective conditioned by a view from within reality itself” (Wilde 1981: 121) (Bertens 11).

Bertens identifies such a suspensive postmodern irony as “an acknowledgement of the historicity of one’s perspective” (11) which, nevertheless, does not inevitably signal resignation. As such, it is important to stress at this point that this paper, following in suit of such suspensive, relentless, or mediated irony, also intends to echo “the possibility of genuine if limited affirmation” (Wilde 123). Such an affirmation that is furthermore undeniable, even if limited, in the texts of both Bowen and Vattimo. By sustaining an ironic position, as in the manner that Wilde identifies in postmodern ‘midfiction,’ or in the manner that Vattimo means by an ‘art of oscillation,’ as mentioned earlier, this paper means to posit thereby an (an)ironic historical referent. That is, (1) a historical referent which posits the recognition that “sub specie aeternitatis everything is provisional” (11) in this world (our ‘postmodern condition’), and thus also an ironic historical referent in itself (a ‘reflexive’ context acknowledging the historicity of one’s perspective); and (2) an anironic historical referent (the attempt to negotiate ‘realism’ or reference within that ‘reflexive’ context) which, following Wilde’s formulation, involves “the attempt, inspired by the negotiations of self and world, to create, tentatively and provisionally, anironic enclaves of values in the face of -- but not in the place
of -- a meaningless universe" (148). Vattimo himself would likely want to call this attempt a 'verwundene' form of recuperation; that is, an ironic recuperation of modernist irony which, in the context of this paper, translates to a verwundene form of demonstrative discourse, operative upon its metaphysical presuppositions and technical procedures.
Chapter 1

Foregrounding Ontology

It is also important to recognize that the postmodern irony which is practiced in and suspended throughout this paper, in addition and related to its foregrounding of the historicity (provisionality) of perspective -- or the positing of an (an)ironic historical referent, as explained above-- also involves the foregrounding of ontological concerns. This move to foreground ontological concerns (the aforementioned 'negative criteria'), while all the same not forgetting epistemological ones (the attempt to make a statement or a limited affirmation), is also a feature of the texts of Bowen, Vattimo, and before him, Heidegger. In his Postmodernist Fiction, Brian McHale locates the foregrounding of ontological concerns and questions as 'the dominant' (a term which he adapts from Jurij Tynjanov and Roman Jakobson) of postmodernist fiction. In the first chapter of that book, "From modernist to postmodernist fiction: change of dominant", McHale uses as his epigraph a quote from Dick Higgins' A Dialectic of Centuries of 1978, where he formulates an opposition between 'cognitive' and 'postcognitive' art through the location of a shift towards the backgrounding of epistemology. The quote is as follows:

The Cognitive Questions (asked by most artists of the 20th century, Platonist or Aristotelian, till around 1958):

'How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?'

The Postcognitive Questions (asked by most artists since then):

'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?'

McHale adds that other typical modernist, or that is, epistemological questions might be:

What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? And so on (9).

Now it might be objected that, although these epistemological or ontological concerns could be understood to comprise philosophical questions of art, that is, asked by fiction which has been identified, classified, and differentiated as 'modernist' or 'postmodernist' -- conversely, the texts of Heidegger, Vattimo, and this thesis paper cannot or should not be identified, classified, or perhaps even considered in the same terms as fiction or art, which is what the categories of McHale, Higgins, and Wilde classify. That is to say, what might be queried is how a thesis paper can claim to put into practice a postmodern thematics or a narrative form that involves the foregrounding of ontological concerns in the same way that we have identified the postmodern 'literary' or fictional text (or work of art) does?

This query conceals a suspicion about what McHale identifies as "the special logical status of the fictional text, its condition of being in-between, amphibious -- neither true or false, suspended between belief and disbelief" (33). Underlying this suspicion is the common assumption that the philosophical text and the text of a thesis paper are (or should be) rather different from the fictional text. This assumption itself involves the injunction that both philosophical texts and theses be subject to semantic constraints extending beyond the confines of their texts proper; or that they should be governed by the logical modality of necessity because they involve propositions about the real world which are meant to be believed and hence 'demonstrated,' in contrast to the fictional text, which is governed by the logical modality of (im)possibility. McHale cites Thomas Pavel's argument "that readers do not evaluate the logical possibility of the propositions they find in literary texts in the light of the actual world -- as logicians would require them to do -- but rather abandon the actual world and adopt (temporarily) the ontological perspective of the literary work" (McHale 33). As McHale explains, "fictional narratives are subject to certain global semantic constraints: all the sentences of a text are governed by the same logical modality, something like its logical key signature" (33).

But there are two important exceptions to consider in the present context of this paper. First, Bowen's The Heat of the Day is categorized by the author herself as a 'historical novel,' a somewhat problematic genre in itself, as McHale also insinuates. For, the historical narrative is undeniably linked to epistemological concerns involved in
the logic of necessity. To explain: the heterocosmic world of the historical novel incorporates propositions about the real world which are intended to be convincingly demonstrated as 'true' or 'real,' and thus these references constitute "enclaves of ontological difference within the otherwise ontologically homogeneous fictional heterocosm" (McHale 28). So one can understand how Bowen's historical novel involves in this way a mediation of the logical modalities of necessity and (im)possibility, epistemology and ontology. For Bowen's novel also posits an (an)ironic historical referent. As explained earlier; it is a classifiably postmodern work in its foregrounding of ontological concerns, but it also involves a negotiation of realism within that reflexive context. Dick Higgins might have classified it as 'postcognitive,' Linda Hutcheon might consider it to be 'historiographic metafiction,' Alan Wilde might want to call it 'postmodern midfiction,' and someone else might be satisfied to categorize it as a 'posthistorical' novel; the point is, if fiction is 'amphibious' or 'interstitial' anyways, as McHale claims, Bowen's text redoubles that 'double' or 'in-between/mediating' quality. For, first of all, there is "a certain kind of overlap or interpenetration between the heterocosm and the real" (McHale 28) in the historical novel, which has a 'double-decker' structure of reference according to the theorist Benjamin Hrushovski. And, indeed, it could even be contended that all fictional texts involve this 'double-decker' structure of reference, or an interpenetration of worlds, in so far as there is realism, in the loosest sense of the term, in all fictional texts -- that is, not only 'internal' fields of reference in "a universe or semantic continuum (loosely, a 'world') constructed in and by the text itself" (McHale 28-9), but also inevitable references 'outside' their 'internal' field to an 'external' field of reference: "the objective world, the body of historical fact or scientific theory, an ideology or philosophy, other texts, and so on" (29). But secondly, and even beyond all of these considerations, Bowen's text involves a problematization of reference (realism, propositions or statements 'about' the 'real' world, language) in the very first place, and so it folds over once again, becoming doubly 'double,' doubly divided, or doubly amphibolous.

And this brings us to the second exception to consider in the present context of this paper. When we talk about making propositions about the real world, and hence, referentiality, the logic of necessity, or demonstrative discourse, it is important to remember that this paper follows Bowen and Vattimo in understanding those propositions as ones made about the 'real' world. Following the postmodern philosophy of Vattimo, who is in turn inspired by Heidegger and others, this paper understands that there is no real world per se, only a real world, a 'real' world, or real worlds -- or, that is to say, only interpretation, only the projection of (im)possible worlds, only what Vattimo calls 'hermeneutic ontology.' The thinking that is "on the way to language" (Gadamer "Heidegger's Later Philosophy" 228), following Heidegger's lead, involves the understanding that language always mediates, always lies in between us and the 'real' world. In the attempt to convince, prove, or demonstrate on epistemological grounds lies the concealment of one's historically situated and thus provisional and mediated (and mediating) perspective, which amounts to the concealing of language. And this concealment of language, interpretation, or rhetoric is precisely one of the things that Vattimo, following Heidegger, and this paper, following Vattimo, intend to expose or, ironically, show/demonstrate. Similarly, in her writing, Bowen incorporates foregrounding strategies, which have since been classified, for instance, by McHale, as part of a repertoire of postmodern poetics which foreground ontological issues of text and world "by exploiting general ontological characteristics shared by all literary texts and fictional worlds" (27). Both linguistically and thematically, and even in a structural sense, Bowen is always calling our attention to the ambiguous 'surface' of the text: the indecideable quality of sounds, words, meanings; the doubled quality of characters (doppelgänger), dialogue, narrative description, and narration of events; and the indecideable quality of the text itself as being both an allegory of reading, language, or Being and not allegory at the same time (or, also: a pastiche of romance, Bildungsroman, detective story, spy thriller, ghost story, parody of Hamlet, the 'Big House' tradition). Her text is both wartime 'resistance' writing and a war novel, both narrative of history and a historical narrative.

So we come to understand that there can never actually be a full concealment of language or interpretation or provisionality -- what might be termed the rhetoric of epistemology. For if this concealment can be exposed, shown, or even thematized from or in an ontological perspective, then it has not concealed what it intended to cover up. This is why there can only be an attempt or a pretense to conceal language in an epistemological perspective--but language will always betray its mediation or its interpretive operation from within and without that perspective. In short then, if foregrounded, or if we pay close attention to the 'movement of a showing,' language will always reveal its ontological and epistemological moments or inscriptions as aspects of one another -- that is, as a constitutive difference, and as differences constitutive of one another.
Chapter 2

Postmodern or Hermeneutic Ontology

So, in the perspective of this paper, modernist epistemological perspectives attempt to conceal mediation in *pretense* to access unmediated knowledge of the real (its anironic proposition, as such); but postmodernist ontological perspectives recognize and even *accept* the inevitable mediated and thus ironic (or one might say, then, *risky*) quality of all ‘knowledge’ and all ‘reality,’ and hence all propositions (interpretations) of knowledge or reality. And in fact, the recognition and acceptance of this irony or risk— for, to recognize, admit, and even explicate one’s proposition as a pretension is ultimately *ironic* and *risky* — is precisely what makes postmodern ontology *ontological*. That is, the *postmodern* quality of Vattimo’s philosophy, Bowen’s novel, and this paper is, not only one which involves the suspension of this irony and risk, but also, and in the ‘tension’ of that mediation, *ontological*. A different way of saying this is that ontological (postmodern) perspectives involve an explicit recognition of the irony of showing (demonstrating) in convincing, in making propositions or statements about the ‘real’ world. As such, they also inevitably involve an explicit and sustained recognition of the rhetorical, aesthetic, or *fictional* quality of their ostensible propositions. A postmodern ontological proposition will, in Vattimo’s perspective, following from Heidegger, reflect upon and even *witness* the movement of its own rhetoric, its own attempt to convince, or one might say, its own epistemology.

As such, it is important to note that we are not defining a rigid difference or binary opposition here, between epistemology and hermeneutics, epistemology and ontology, or statement and phrase. For an epistemology which acknowledges the historicity, that is, the provisionality of its own rhetorically persuasive perspective becomes an ontology; simply by recognizing that it is only one of many possible, impossible, and/or necessary logical perspectives, or even by recognizing itself as part of an ongoing *dialogue*, it must find a way to mediate the logic of necessity with the logic of (im)possibility. We might say that any sustained epistemological perspective must eventually — unless it refuses this recognition, in which case its concerns remain epistemic — come to terms with itself as a fiction trying to persuade us of a (its) truth. Or, simply speaking, it must eventually embrace itself as interpretation, as a *promissory* or future-oriented statement of knowledge.

On the other hand, and if we follow McHale’s working definition of an ontology following Thomas Pavel, it is “‘a theoretical description of a universe’” (27). For McHale,

this definition should lay to rest the objections of those who find the coupling of ‘postmodernist’ with ‘ontology’ in itself *oxymoronic* and *self-contradictory*, on the grounds that postmodernist discourse is precisely the discourse that denies the possibility of ontological grounding. For the operative word in Pavel’s definition, from my point of view, is the indefinite article: an ontology is a description of *a* universe, not of *the* universe; that is, it may describe *any* universe, potentially a *plurality* of universes. In other words, to ‘do’ ontology in this perspective is not necessarily to seek some grounding for *our* universe; it might just as appropriately involve describing *other* universes, including ‘possible’ or even ‘impossible’ universes — not least of all the other universe, or heterocosm, of fiction (27).

But nevertheless, to ‘do’ ontology, as McHale puts it, also invites the recognition that what one is positing is a necessary description of a universe, and as such, a necessary fiction — or really, an (an)ironic attempt to seek grounding for that fiction. And so, a postmodern ontological mediation involves its incorporation of the logic of necessity, its inclusion and admittance of epistemological objectives. In other words, ontology, recognized as a *hermeneutic* endeavour in our postmodern perspective, no longer takes on an agonistic stance with respect to epistemology. Rather it accepts epistemology as a *difference* within itself that must be mediated. Propositions about or descriptions of ‘the real world’ must still be made as if it were *the* real world, which is to say, they must still be made *convincingly*. It seems that we cannot escape from the epistemological injunction of adequate description or proposition. There is a reason why Bowen’s text was so widely praised as the ‘quintessential’ novel of the Second World War in London. Indeed, Ptolemy and Hermes are each made to compromise in the postmodern ontological perspective, what Vattimo calls *hermeneutic* ontology.

And hence, we return to conclude, after this long defense, that Bowen’s text, or postmodern fiction, and the texts of Vattimo, and by implication, Heidegger, together with the text of this thesis paper can indeed be considered
in the same terms, as texts which foreground ontological concerns or which 'do ontology' in the way McHale describes above. We have been defending the position of this thesis paper against a possible query or objection -- namely, that philosophical texts and/or theses are subject to semantic constraints 'outside' the bounds of their texts proper unlike works of fiction, and thus, that these texts could not be discussed together, 'in the same space' or 'at the same time' as practices of hermeneutic ontology. And you will remember that the purpose of this paper was precisely to put into practice a postmodern thematics in the manner that Wilde identifies in postmodern 'midfiction,' thus broaching an area which has traditionally been understood as part of the special logical status of the fictional text, its 'amphibious' quality as already discussed. We have so far made the point that postmodern or hermeneutic ontology -- as practiced by Bowen and theorized by Vattimo, and as practiced and theorized in this paper -- involves a recognition that we are "faced with a world in which there are always only further interpretive choices, rather than absolute values" (Snyder "Translator's Introduction" xxii). Vattimo contends that our postmodern experience of the infinite interpretability of reality "has led to 'the weakening of the cogent force of reality' because it has made 'all that is given [by metaphysics] as real, necessary, peremptory and true' into simply another interpretive possibility among a plethora of such possibilities" (Snyder xxii). And thus the 'special' logical status of the fictional text is no longer exclusive to fiction, but is understood to apply to all utterance, and even all experience.

But it is not only that all formerly 'strong' categories of thought, such as truth, Being, and logic, have been 'weakened' because they have been recognized as a potentially fictional experience, as Snyder explains. For Vattimo makes another point as well, and that is that the fictionalized experience of reality is all we have, and all we have ever had. In this way, hermeneutic ontology represents for Vattimo our only possibility for freedom in postmodernity. And in accepting and practicing this freedom, we posit, in our interpretations of the world, an (an)ironic historical referent, a statement of the world, an epistemology. For, as Vattimo explains in his "Introduction" to The End of Modernity, hermeneutic ontology "is nothing other than the interpretation of our condition or situation, since Being is nothing apart from its 'event,' which occurs when it historicizes itself and when we historicize ourselves" (3). So the point is also that all texts, 'fictional' and 'non-fictional,' and all propositions about or interpretations of the real world are subject to semantic constraints projected as being 'outside' the bounds of their own texts or statements proper. This projective quality means that our statements or texts are sent out into 'the open' as 'openings' themselves of that 'open space-time' itself -- they are sendings sent out to be received. Simply, and minus the Heideggerian terminology, we can understand our statements as interpretive events or historicizations which are posited, communicated, and meant to be accepted and understood as a truth. Following from this, we can also understand that the most essential semantic constraint binding all texts is one proper to language itself: that is, the grammar of appropriation, what is appropriate, approprable, or what is capable of being sent (interpreted, uttered, communicated) and received (interpreted, read/heard/seen, understood) in utterance. This constraint, which is more like a recognition and acceptance of belonging in a tradition of iterancy, is what Heidegger calls Ereignis and what Vattimo calls 'the monumental condition required for utterance,' which we shall take up again in this division.

For now, we may conclude that it is not only the fictional text which has a special, amphibological or even, as Vattimo would say, weak logical status, but also all utterance, which thus implicates the philosophical and theoretical texts under consideration and this thesis paper itself. We might even say that all utterance, hovering as it does in an interstitial or intermittent way, between truth and falsehood, revealing and concealing, has the quality of risk, risking out into the open. And in accepting this risk, along with both the freedoms and the limitations it entails, we offer up our limited affirmation of the postmodern condition.
Chapter 3

Intersections

What we are finally close to realizing here is that this paper itself intends to mediate an overlap or interpenetration of philosophical and fictional concerns, which we have already discussed as primarily ontological ones. But it is important to remember that, again, with ontology in the foreground, and epistemology in the background, we are not describing static oppositions, but rather a relation of shifting dominants something like a figure-ground shift, such that what becomes the ‘figure’ is only so against a ‘ground.’ As McHale states, static oppositions tell us “little or nothing about the mechanisms of historical change” (7), and what he means by this is that it is not enough for a theory of postmodernism (for instance, as the offering up of an [an]ironic historical referent) to merely assert its differences from a theory of modernism. What must be articulated is how historical transformation has taken place within the underlying systematics of differing dominants, from modern to postmodern, epistemological to ontological. And what we discover, through foregrounding ontological concerns, is that historical change is never as ‘clean’ a ‘cut’ as we would like to think it is. A philosophy of history must concede the extensity of change and admit that historical transformation is always a situation of ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or.’

However, it has been a frequent contention in theories of the postmodern, for instance, in David Lodge’s catalogue of postmodernist features in fiction, that “postmodernist writing seeks to avoid having to choose either of the poles of metaphoric (modernist) or metonymic (antimodernist) writing” (McHale 7). But rather than characterize this intermediacy as an avoidance or a refusal to choose, it is more appropriate to think of it as choosing both poles, and instead negotiating an exchange or dialogue between and through them. As such, it is also appropriate to think of intermediacy as an acceptance of the impossibility of refusal or even of choice in the very first place. For, in fact, the metaphoric and metonymic ‘poles’ are always at work in all utterance -- like the dimensions of space and time, we cannot choose one over the other. In situating his theory of postmodern or hermeneutic ontology as an intermediate or ‘amphibian’ way of thinking, Vattimo hopes to account for historical transformation, writing provisionality into the system, and problematizing the postmodern urge to announce the ‘ending’ or refusal of the modern, as if we could choose our own genealogy. For there is in fact no true ending, but rather interpretations or fictions of the ‘end’ of modernity, and thus many (im)possible and necessary endings in an ongoing dialogue with modernity. We have shifted ground in postmodernity, but only against the background of modernity, the dominant epistemological concerns of which we cannot simply leave behind in an amnestic remotion. Modernity is in our blood, undeniably, and so historical transformation cannot involve a clean cut or break. In other words, the logic of necessity cannot cut its ‘losses’ of redundancy, superfluity, excess, or possibility. It must be repeated, but with a difference. We might say, then, that there is no amnesia in postmodernity, only tedious anamnesis, which relates to Vattimo’s sense of hermeneutic ontology or postmodern thought as andenkend thought, or thought which remembers and recollects the tradition of its historical consequentiality, but not uncritically. Postmodern recollecting or rethinking Andenken is also always a Verwendung, an ironic overcoming, remotion, distortion and continuance of modernity.

So if we have undergone historical change, or if we are in fact changing, which is what the announcement of postmodernity (its [an]ironic historical referent) would seem to presume, ironically it must be admitted that historical change in postmodernity is bidirectional and even reversible. In fact, it might even be more adequate to say that the interpretation of postmodern historical change hovers over an informative or constitutive difference -- the difference within its own position, perspective, or referent which it must always mediate. The point that we are now recognizing here is in fact one which McHale makes, but strangely, he restricts himself to describing, not historical change, but only aesthetic change in these terms. Following the likes of Roman Jakobson, McHale is only interested in “the dynamics of the change by which one system emerges from and supplants the other” (11) in terms of fiction or poetry. He does not describe the historical shift from modernity to postmodernity, but only the shift from modernist to postmodernist fiction, and as such, his theory takes for granted or conceals a crucial contention which still needs to be demonstrated or argued convincingly. A philosophy of history, which by Vattimo’s and our postmodern ontological perspective is still necessary to posit (as we ‘do’ ontology), is precisely what seems to be missing from McHale’s otherwise persuasive analysis. That is to say, a description of the logic of literary history is not recognized by McHale as itself being constituted by another description, and that is one of the logic of history. McHale’s whole argument for aesthetic change, as adequate or convincing as it is for the most part and from the perspective of this paper, rests on a pretense which is never explicited. But aside from all of this, we have already identified that we can talk of fiction and (the philosophy of) history in the same terms, and so, if we can take
McHale’s description of the dynamics of systematic aesthetic change as an adequate one to a certain extent, then it is worth discussing and extrapolating it into our ontological (philosophizing and historicizing) perspective.

We had left off above with the mention of hovering, and what this is related to in McHale’s description of the dynamics of aesthetic change, is his citation of Steve Katz’s metaphor for the logic of literary history as one which

brought writers in various cities -- cities in Europe and Latin America as well as in North America -- to a crosswalk; when the stoplights changed, they had one of two options, either to remain on this side and continue to practice a modernist poetics of the epistemological dominant (as many of them have done, of course), or to cross to a postmodernist poetics of the ontological dominant. The streets were different, but the crossing was the same” (McHale 11).

The actual citation, which McHale uses as an epigraph, is as follows: “[I don’t think the ideas were ‘in the air’... rather, all of us found ourselves at the same stoplights in different cities and the same time. When the lights changed, we all crossed the streets’ (Steve Katz, in LeClair and McCaffery [eds], Anything Can Happen [1983])” (3). McHale follows Jakobson and Katz in positing a notion of the logic of literary history and aesthetic change as a shift or a crossing over in the mutual relationship among the diverse components of a given system. But he also states that this shifting dominant does not entail a linear and unidirectional sequence, but is instead “bidirectional and reversible” (11). This is an important admission, and one which McHale does not discuss further other than to say that, in a given text

intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they ‘tip over’ into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions (11).

And he adds that, of course this relates to the philosophical objection that one cannot raise epistemological questions without immediately raising ontological questions, and vice versa. But McHale counters that, “even to formulate such an objection, the philosopher would have to mention one of these sets of questions before the other set -- inevitably, since discourse, even a philosopher’s discourse, is linear and temporal, and one cannot say two things at the same time” (11). Thus McHale thinks that “this is in a nutshell is the function of the dominant: it specifies the order in which different aspects are to be attended to, so that, although it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodernist text about its epistemological implications, it is more urgent to interrogate it about its ontological implications” (11).

There is a problem here, however. It is more than just a question of urgency in the interrogation of a particular text. First of all, McHale talks about three different things, literary critical discourse (the interrogation), the postmodernist text (the object of that interrogation), and philosophical discourse (presumably either the epistemological or the ontological dominancy of the interrogation) without explicating their difference. The fact that he does not explicate this difference relates to the fact that, as stated earlier, he never explicates the difference and thus the relation (the similarity) between a literary history and a philosophy of history in his discussion of the dynamics of historical change, instead keeping the discussion ‘at the level’ of aesthetic change. We have already identified that we can discuss these things in the same terms, or as aspects of a ‘singular’ transformation, movement, or extensity. But that is not to negate the differences which do, nevertheless, exist between the different discourses of: critical practice, or the interrogation of ‘literary’ texts or works of art; critique, or the philosophy of history to which that critical practice refers itself; and the fictional text or work of art. There are different species of discourse here, even though we may focus on the overlap of their dimensions or aspects, that is, on their extensities or ‘family resemblances.’ It is thus important to note the difference between a postmodernist text which, in our and in McHale’s definition, backgrounds epistemology “as the price for foregrounding ontology” (11); a (postmodern) critical practice which “in effect, only specifies which set of questions ought to be asked first of a particular text, and delays the asking of the second set of questions, slowing down the process by which epistemological questions entail ontological questions and vice versa” (11); and a theory of postmodernity as one which posits the bidirectionality and reversibility -- or the hovering, suspended, wavering, or oscillating aspect -- of aesthetic and historical change.
McHale's discussion here evolves out of his consideration of William Faulkner's novel Absalom, Absalom!, a novel which he states involves Faulkner's 'crossing onto the other (postmodern) side of the street,' but which comprises 'an isolated event in his oeuvre, however; he did not stay on the postmodernist side of the street, but quickly returned to the practice of modernism' (11). This judgment should strike one following McHale's discussion up to this point as peculiar, because he does not explicate either: the extent to which this 'crossing' is only one which his own 'literary discourse' finds most urgent to interrogate in Faulkner's text at that particular time; or, that is, the extent to which this 'crossing' might just be only a momentary -- because oscillating -- effect or shift within Faulkner's text or within his oeuvre that has been fixed as unidirectional only in McHale's analysis and interpretation. We might ask, has his reading (interrogation) of Faulkner's text convinced us of a 'crossing' or 'shift' in Faulkner's novel or oeuvre, or has Faulkner really, just suddenly, foregrounded ontology, encouraging or forcing us as readers to therefore privilege ontological questions and concerns in our reading as being more urgent than epistemological ones? We might even begin to wonder, using McHale's criteria of circumstantial dominancy within Faulkner's text or within his oeuvre in McHale's analysis and that has been fixed as unidirectional only; or, that is, the extent to which this 'crossing' might just be only a momentary -- because oscillating -- effect or shift within Faulkner's text or within his oeuvre. We arrive at the problem that Vattimo explains in Beyond Interpretation as a situation familiar to hermeneutics -- "that one who is dominated by prejudices cannot recognize and thematize them as such" (105). But furthermore, if the 'shift' has been made and can be interpreted as such, even if 'momentarily,' within Faulkner's text and/or his oeuvre, we have already been told that it is a bidirectional and reversible shift -- thus we can no longer use linearity in our criteria. Nevertheless, McHale makes the judgment that, because this 'crossing' is an 'isolated event' in his oeuvre, Faulkner is therefore "not very representative of the change that has occurred throughout western literature in the years since the Second World War" (11). That McHale can make this judgment betrays the fact that he has not radicalized his initial contention that by pushing epistemological questions far enough, they broach ontological questions, and vice versa -- that is, his contention about the bidirectionality or reversibility of aesthetic and historical change. The fact that McHale first admits that this sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional, reversible, and thus irresolute, and then goes on to posit the idea of a logic of literary history as a linear, unidirectional, and resolute shift, crossing, or change is contradictory.

The problem is in fact one which McHale specifies himself, but again, does not radicalize: that of time, the inevitable phenomenologically linear and temporal aspect of all discourse and even human existence. If there is a change or shift that has taken or takes place historically, and if we can identify a dominant foregrounding of ontological questions and concerns in postmodern texts, then what must always be remembered and explicated beyond this, is that this shift or change only takes place against a background, which is as much to say in a context of temporality, of past, present, and future. The effect of our interpretation or approach in critical practice, that is, the outcome of our reading, is itself 'charged' with epistemological and/or ontological concerns or dominancy, precisely because we perceive ourselves (whether this is explicated or not remains a different matter) as appealing and corresponding to a historical context with those same concerns or that same paradigm of dominancy. The shift in postmodernity, in terms of aesthetics and in terms of the philosophy of history, is only ever a matter of specifying a different dominant or order (aesthetic-philosophical concern) within a relation (a historically 'charged' context) -- specifically, or at least for now, the relation is between modernism/-ity (epistemological dominant) and postmodernism/-ity (ontological dominant). But postmodern ontological concerns reveal the fiction of dominancy or hierarchy in this relation in the very first place. And so the foregrounding of ontology is also always made at the price of introducing irony into the relation or domination. If this irony is taken up and explicated in postmodern discourse, whether that be of the fictional text, or of literary criticism, or of philosophical-historical critique, then what happens is it ends up intersected by the mutual concerns of a constitutive difference. Surely these concerns are taken up in a certain (linear, temporal, oscillating, or narrative) order, but nevertheless both of them are taken up and a dialogue is initiated between and through them. That is to say, and to continue but distort the metaphor that Katz and McHale use, postmodern discourse ends up hovering over or loitering in an intersection in its mediatory operation, rather than crossing the street completely to one side or the other. And yet another way of saying this, is that postmodern discourse must recognize and articulate itself as being in a historical context. Such a recognition comprises its postmodern acceptance of the inevitable historicity of one's perspective -- what we discussed earlier as thematic postmodernism or a specific postmodern attitude, following Alan Wilde, which this paper attempts to put into practice, or what Heidegger calls, perhaps in a more melodramatic way, 'deciding oneself towards death.'

By his own definition of the inner logic or dynamics of aesthetic-historical change, McHale should recognize that there is no definitive or pure 'crossing of the street,' so to speak. In a strange and contradictory way, McHale ends up using a modernist and epistemological formulation (ending, crossing, change as progress) as a yardstick for measuring which texts are worthwhile discussing as postmodernist fiction. Obviously Faulkner does not meet the criteria, and McHale ends up taking an extreme or strong position with regard to postmodernism(-ity),
stating that “the change in dominant appears in its most dramatic form in writers who in the course of their careers travel the entire trajectory from modernist to postmodernist poetics, making in successive novels different stages of the crossing” (11). In effect, McHale reinstates the modernist fiction of progressive, linear, or teleological history without even recognizing what he has done. He states that “by way of substantiating my claims about the change of dominant, I have chosen to examine some of the more familiar contemporary writers of whom this [progressive crossing] is true: Samuel Beckett, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Carlos Fuentes, Vladimir Nabokov, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon” (11). The irony of McHale’s analysis is thus that he discusses, by his own definition, modernist writers, or writers who, in articulating a definitive ‘crossing of the street,’ essentially still exist and practice their art in a state of ‘denial,’ privileging epistemological concerns over ontological ones.
Chapter 4

Acceptance

Thus Postmodernist Fiction turns out to be a study of modernist fiction, or strangely, and by his own definition, a study of liminal texts and writers who refuse to recognize and accept that there is no true ‘crossing of the street’ or forgetting, leaving behind, or overcoming of history. Of course, it could be questioned whether this ‘refusal’ is actually made by those writers, or whether it is an effect of McHale’s contradictory analysis. But it is nevertheless important to note that McHale specifically differentiates his postmodernism from Alan Wilde’s “account of postmodernist irony” (26) which, as we discussed earlier, is suspensive and involves the acceptance of the inevitable historicity and thus provisionality of one’s perspective. Discussing the work of one of his exemplary postmodern ironists, Donald Barthelme, Wilde indicates that there is a “bracketing of modernist epistemological questions” (McHale 26) in postmodern art, which McHale obviously endorses. But McHale parts company with Wilde “when he specifies Barthelme’s ontological concerns as acceptance of the world, especially if he means this to be a characterization of postmodernist ontological concerns in general” (26). McHale makes the point that “there are other possible forms that these concerns might take” (26), and then follows up with a judgment of Wilde as a minority voice within postmodernism. Indeed, McHale prefers to adopt the more extreme and dominant postmodern ontological view, precisely the refusal to accept the ‘given-ness’ or ‘constructed-ness’ of the world (the other side of the street, modernism, modernity, the history of Being) as a necessary fiction, and instead only accepting it as a fiction. As such, this fiction takes on a plural and arbitrary character, and is only ironic insofar as it is deemed unnecessary, and thus, supposedly lacks any rationale. As McHale states,

despite the aleatory conception of the postmodern. For if all postmodernisms are only or merely fictions, why should we subscribe to or accept any one version over the other? What convinces us to choose among the plural and arbitrary fictions? Vattimo’s answer to these questions would be that, in an important way and in the first place, we do not choose from among a plethora of incommensurable versions of postmodern ontology as if they were merely interchangeable fictions- or rather, we cannot, as long as we remember the inevitable historicity of our situation in the world. Vattimo’s difference from McHale, and indeed the majority voice of postmodern ontology, lies in his attempt to theorize a ground(s) or grounding for his fiction of postmodernism, notwithstanding his avowal and acceptance of the inevitable historicity and provisionality of that theorizing perspective. He insists on a rationale for his fiction (the announcement of the ‘end’ of modernity), or on rationalizing our acceptance of it, through arguing what must inevitably be accepted as a determining condition for all truth following Heidegger: mortality. We must accept the given-ness or constructed-ness of the world as a necessary fiction, or as an ontological condition for human existence, which is precisely what the coining of hermeneutic ontology implies. As Vattimo explains in his “Apology for Nihilism” in The End of Modernity, interpreting Heidegger’s Being and Time, “being-towards-death and the anticipatory decision that it assumes both appear as the one possibility truly able to make possible all the other possibilities that constitute existence” (27).

And hence we must also accept what has been given or ‘handed down’ to us as a necessary fiction, or as a possibility constitutive of human existence, (for instance, modernism, with its primary epistemological concerns), and thus as something we cannot simply refuse or reject. That refusal would be akin to believing that we can refuse death. Vattimo argues, contrary to McHale, that there is convincing criteria for the acceptance of his postmodern ontology, which is ultimately convincing: first of all, when we understand that Vattimo’s ‘fiction’ of postmodernism is an extension and a reworking of the necessary fiction of modernism, thus involving, not only acceptance, but also change; and, secondly, when we recognize and accept the situation of human existence in an attitude of ‘accomplished nihilism,’ as Vattimo calls it (following Nietzsche’s notion of an ‘active’ versus a
‘passive’ nihilism), which means that we accept human existence as being ultimately determined but not paralyzed by mortality. McHale, on the other hand, merely suggests various criteria -- self-consistency, internal coherence, scope, productiveness, and interest -- which might inform one’s ‘choice’ of one of the many possible constructions of postmodernism which are ‘out there’ even if the referent they refer to is not. He ends up by saying, “Naturally I believe that the fiction of postmodernism which I have constructed in this book is a superior construction” (5), and he adds with a shrug ‘why not?’ “Postmodernist? Since we seem to be saddled with the term, whether we like it or not, and since postmodernism is a discursive construct anyway, why not see if we can make the term itself work for us, rather than against us, in constructing its referent?” (5)

4.1 ‘Out there’

There are several important things to take note of here. First, McHale must admit -- although it is such a simple point that he does not elaborate upon his passing admittance of it -- that, although we cannot prove or demonstrate definitively that the referent which constructions of postmodernism refer to exists ‘out there,’ nevertheless the constructions or fictions of postmodernism do exist ‘out there.’ For Vattimo, this is a crucial point. Because it is not as if humans have ever been able to prove or demonstrate definitively that a referent exists out there in the world in correspondence with a discursive construct (what, in epistemological terms would be called correspondence truth). We have only ever been able to convince others of our pretenses or truth-claims. And as such, all we have ever had and all we have ever been able to accept are discursive artifacts which do exist ‘out there’ insofar as they are material, they are uttered, they are understood, and they remain, or at least retain the possibility of enduring. So if all we have is fictions of the world, or ontologies rather than epistemologies, then we must accept this; in fact, we do, undeniably, simply by existing in a context of iterancy which has always already been given to us, or into which we are ‘thrown,’ as Heidegger would say, using his term for human existence, Dasein or ‘thrown-ness.’ In other words, if all we have is fictions of (the) world(s), then what we are also saying and admitting is that this is all we have ever had.

Therefore, the postmodern admission or recognition of the fictitiousness of all truth must not lead us to assume that the postmodern world dissolves in sophistry, or in making specious arguments to convince others that our unnecessary fiction should be accepted instead of others. Because, just as McHale states, ‘naturally’ we would all think that our constructions were superior to others. Rather, our admission here should lead us down the same path taken by thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Vattimo, towards an (an)ironic recognition and acceptance of the necessity of our fictions and constructions of the world, or our truth-claims as such. In fact, the announcement of postmodernity, which has entailed the corollary announcements of the end of modernity and of the fictive quality of truth, must be accepted as a repetition of an earlier controversial announcement and (un)necessary fiction: that is, Nietzsche’s announcement of ‘the death of God.’

We have already discussed this in the opening of this paper, but it is important to reiterate its sense here. For Nietzsche’s announcement involves at once the recognition that God is no longer necessary along with the recognition of why God has been necessary. That is, through Nietzsche’s statement that ‘God is dead,’ we recognize that if we have to announce ‘His’ death, or thus ‘His’ fictitiousness and the end of ‘His’ fiction, then what we are already constructing is another necessary fiction -- both that of ‘Him’ and ‘His’ ‘end.’ Again, the logic of necessity is accompanied with a ‘logic’ of superfluity, excess, or redundancy. As Vattimo says in his essay “The Nihilistic Vocation of Hermeneutics” in Beyond Interpretation: “The hermeneutic complexity of all this consists in the fact that God is not necessary, is revealed as a superfluous lie (a lie precisely because superfluous) by virtue of the transformations wrought in our individual and social existence by our very belief in him” (7). Like the announcement of postmodernity, Nietzsche’s announcement of an ending returns him to a beginning, the beginning of a belief in God; and so he must tell again the (hi)story (fiction) of its ‘ending,’ which amounts to the positing of a philosophical reconstruction of history, a philosophy of history, and thus an (an)ironic historical referent. This recognition, which Vattimo thematizes as the truth of hermeneutics, presented “as the response to a history of Being interpreted as the occurrence of nihilism” (8), is what he understands as constitutive of the original philosophical meaning of hermeneutics -- which, according to him, has now become so pervasive, ecumenical, vague, and generic as to be without consequence, innocuous, or even worthless. According to Vattimo, “the true problem of the hermeneutic koine is that of coming radically to terms with the historicity and finitude of pre-understanding, with Heidegger’s Geworfenheit ['thrown-ness']” (6). It must not persist in pre-judging its own interpretive activity as being unnecessary because it is superfluous, but rather must accept that repetition is the extension of difference just as difference is the extension of repetition.

Thus, again, and secondly, recognizing that fictions are ‘out there’ as discursive artifacts should inform us of a context into which we are necessarily thrown and dispersed -- Heidegger’s Geworfenheit. And so, to recognize postmodern ontology as a fiction should not be to suddenly suffer existential angst or ‘nausea,’ and feelings of
alienation in the world. For if we think about it, what we are saying is that we are not alone in this context. We are always surrounded by, immersed in, and in admittance of (which means receiving, producing, sending) fictions or discursive artifacts -- this is something, not nothing. And so, in contrast to McHale's choice of anguished authors, such as Pynchon or Beckett, who, according to McHale, even relish their supposed alienation in (and thus their rejection or refusal of) a meaninglessness universe, this paper chooses Elizabeth Bowen, an author whose concerns are, such as Pynchon or Beckett, who, according to McHale, even relish their supposed alienation in (and thus their alienation in the world. For if we think about it, what we are saying is that we are not alone in this context. We are there is no meaning or nothing, but rather that we cannot say there is meaning (or even no meaning) 'out there' 'universe,' (our nihilistic recognition which is announced with Nietzsche's 'death of God'), then what we are accepting is that meaning (as well as meaninglessness) is made, we make it in our fictions. That is, it is not that there is no meaning or nothing, but rather that we cannot say there is meaning (or even no meaning) 'out there' outside of our making or our mediation of it. Meaning only exists in the intermediate 'out there' of our fictions; it is never immediate or truly shown, but is only ever what we make of it. And so, in accepting this, we are also admitting that the intermediate, 'out there' meaning of our fictions is something to go on, something substantial, a referent 'out there' and thus not something we have lost. Furthermore, our intermediate meaning always already and necessarily involves acceptance as the basic semantic constraint binding all texts in, as Heidegger would say, the liberating bind of the tradition.

However, without explicating any of these turns, McHale takes a stand against Wilde and claims that acceptance is only one possible attitude in postmodernity. And he states, not wrongly, that “much more typically, critics have characterized postmodernism in terms of its ontological instability or indeterminacy, the loss of a world that could be accepted, 'willy-nilly,' as a given of experience” (26). This view which McHale adopts can thus be characterized as a refusal of the given-ness of human existence (the loss of ‘the other side of the street’), and as such, it is also characteristically and contradictorily modernist rather than postmodernist. Furthermore, positing hermeneutics, or postmodern ontology, as “the wholly metaphysical claim... to be a finally true description of the (permanent) ‘interpretive structure’ of human existence” (Vattimo ibid 6), McHale reduces his theory of postmodernism “to a generic philosophy of culture” (Vattimo 6), or a correspondence truth (an epistemology) which supposedly does not need to be explained, argued, or justified. This is the same problem which we have already discussed as Lyotard’s -- inattention to the paradox in which he is captured. He can at least accept that there are no facts, but only interpretations, and yet McHale nevertheless thinks that that interpretation should just be accepted as a statement of ‘fact.’ He does not radicalize the contradictory character of this claim, which would force him to recognize, as Vattimo says, that hermeneutics is not only a theory of the historicity (horizons) of truth: it is itself a radically historical truth. It cannot think of itself metaphysically as a description of one objective structure of existence amongst others, but only as the response to a sending, to what Heidegger calls Ge-Schick. The reasons for preferring a hermeneutic conception of truth to a metaphysical one lie in the historical legacy of which we venture an interpretation and to which we give a response (6).

But as if we were merely dealing with choices or a matter of taste here, McHale states that “if acceptance and assent such as Wilde finds in Barthelme is one possible ontological attitude within postmodernity, there is also, at the opposite pole, Pynchon’s or, even more acute, Beckett’s anguish in the face of a world that seems without ontological grounding” (26). McHale refuses to admit that acceptance is the more appropriate (because doubly-ironic or correspondingly ironic) attitude to take on in postmodernity. For it is especially when we recognize and admit that we have always already accepted given-ness, simply by being able to posit our meaning or give our interpretation, that we finally understand that we can only ever make a pretense to refuse this acceptance. Acceptance of the given-ness or historicity of existence is an ontological condition or grounding which, so far, we have not lost, and (as long as we can have it within our power to hold threats of ultimate extinction in check), can never lose.

And so, from his postmodern ontological perspective, Vattimo asks, ‘but what if we radicalize (thematize, elaborate upon) acceptance?’ In accepting the given-ness of B/being (‘is-ness’ and what ‘is’) and meaning (our interpretation), we recognize that we also give, we are given-ness, we send and we receive. And to give meaning means to posit it ‘out there’, rather than to always hesitate -- in pretense either to anguish or to ‘play’ in the retention, refusal, or negation of a giving -- on the verge of this giving which we always give anyways. To give or posit meaning means to give up: first of all, the pretense of it being an arbitrary, ‘playful,’ and thus ironically unnecessary choice amongst an infinite variety of interpretations in a ‘world of difference’; the pretense of it being simply a matter of “registering a state of mind that remain[s] as wholly inexplicable to oneself as to others (precisely

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because intractable to argument)" (Vattimo ibid 9); and finally, being in anguish over the risk of its loss, that is, the risk of the loss of ontological grounding 'out there.' As such, to give meaning involves both risk and responsibility. For to recognize hermeneutics as something other than "a comfortable meta-theory of the universality of interpretive phenomena, as a sort of view from nowhere of the perennial conflict, or play, of interpretations" (Vattimo 9), means to accept it as a response to a message or sending from somewhere, which is to say a message which is 'out there.' According to Vattimo, the only alternative to an inconsequential hermeneutics (or theory of postmodernity), which appears "so acceptable, urbane, and harmless only because it lacks philosophical precision" (2) -- as the simple admission (and subsequent pretense of anguished or 'playful' irresponsibility) that there are no facts, but only interpretations -- is a theory of historical consequentiality. As he says, we must accept and think hermeneutic meaning or the philosophy of interpretation "as the final stage in a series of events (theories, vast social and cultural transformations, technologies and scientific 'discoveries'), as the conclusion of a history we feel unable to tell (interpret) except in the terms of nihilism that we find for the first time in Nietzsche" (8).

And thus, to give meaning means to recognize ourselves in a postmodern dialogue, and on both receiving and sending 'ends' of it. Our giving forth in this ongoing dialogue and our acceptance of the necessity of our giving and receiving of meaning constitutes our postmodern ontological grounding. We do not need to suffer anguish over these recognitions, because we no longer understand dialogue purely in terms of the modernist metaphor of war, of being ultimately convincing 'beyond the shadow of a doubt' and overcoming our opponents. Instead we problematize this violent and polemical metaphysics of modernity in an attitude of Verwindung, that is, in an attitude of acceptance with a view to change, involving both the movements of return (recollecting andenkend thought) and remotion (distortional verwundene thought). There are no winners or losers in postmodern dialogue, no strict binary oppositions, and no agon -- only mediatory exchange 'out there' in the extensity of theory and practice.

4.2 'Why not?'

The third thing to notice about McHale's postmodern ontology is that, again, it is still only an ontology of fiction, of 'postmodernist' fiction rather than of postmodernity. This is worth expanding on. He states that, "clearly, a wide range of ontological themes and attitudes is available to postmodernist writers, and it is important to specify which writers display which attitudes" (27). And the fact that he can formulate a seemingly arbitrary and plural range of possible ontological themes and attitudes in postmodernist fiction betrays the fact that, as indicated earlier, McHale has not translated his postmodern ontology into metacritical or even philosophical terms. If he had, he would have to realize that the same range of themes or attitudes is not available to an ontology of postmodernism as hermeneutic ontology, or as a philosophy of history. For the philosophical aspect of an ontology of postmodernism as a hermeneutic ontology always already involves accepting its given-ness. That is, as an (an)ironic historical referent, it is made in the face of what has already been accepted as a 'meaningless' universe, and it is risked notwithstanding the awareness of its own limitations as a provisional offering. As already discussed at length, the specific attitude of acceptance is not an arbitrary one that we choose from among many; rather it is necessary and must be argued, explicated, and thematized as such, as it is always already a constitutive feature of human existence and thus cannot be refused. Specifically, our postmodern ontological attitude of acceptance involves the admission of death or mortality as a limiting condition of human existence, and thus as the potential negation of (our) meaning if not our given-ness. This is why Vattimo identifies this acceptance as the 'nihilistic vocation' of postmodern or hermeneutic ontology. But McHale forecloses philosophical thematics because he states that it can only specify the ontology of postmodernist texts. That is, he glosses over it because it "will only tell us that there is foregrounding" (27) of ontological concerns and questions, but "it will not tell us how this foregrounding has been accomplished, what strategies have been deployed" (27). Thus McHale turns from philosophical thematics to poetics proper and "specifically to theories of literary ontology" (27) in pursuance of the question 'how?'

Again, what has been forgotten here by McHale is an explanation of why there is a foregrounding of ontological concerns in postmodernity, an explanation which comes out and can only come out in a philosophical thematics. As he does not pursue this question, McHale does not translate his ontology of postmodernism into an ontic context. And as long as McHale refuses to recognize that the referent of postmodernism does exist in the given-ness constitutive of human existence -- or, that is, in what Vattimo refers to as ontological difference, following Heidegger -- he can afford flippancy when he says 'why not' to postmodernism: "why not see if we can make the term itself work for us, rather than against us, in constructing its referent?" (5, my emphasis). When McHale talks about constructing the referent of postmodernism here, he is again only constructing an argument about how posterior phenomena and historical change emerge in terms of species of 'literary forms.' McHale does not admit, as Vattimo would argue, that the adoption of an ontology of postmodernism cannot merely be done in an aleatory attitude of 'why not,' as if it were a matter of pure arbitrariness in the adoption of the historical fiction of
postmodernism. We must know why we have been 'saddled with this term,' as McHale puts it; and this means that we must have a rationale for adopting and using it in genealogical terms first. And if we pursue the question of 'why postmodernism?...,' sooner or later we must admit that we do not construct the referent.

This admittance might seem confusing at first, since we have so far been talking about positing referents, constructing fictions, and making meanings, but we must come to terms with our constructions as responses to a sending, as Heidegger and Vattimo say. We do not construct the referent 'ex nihilo' since our postmodern ontology already involves the avowal of 'ex nihilo nihil fit' -- nothing is made from nothing, because language always already mediates, we are thrown in it, and language is not nothing. Language is there. There is language. And so, instead, the referent -- what is 'out there,' 'is-ness,' Being, Ereignis (or what is translated from Heidegger as Appropriation-event), iteren, texts -- constructs us -- beings, interpretation, texts. To remember and admit this is to think ontological difference -- or, as Vattimo says in other contexts, to think difference as difference. In exploring the question 'why?,' we must accept that we have received the term postmodernism from somewhere. McHale insinuates as much when he states that 'we seem to be saddled with the term,' implying that it somehow seems to have been put on us, or that we have somehow been imposed upon, and thus burdened with or obliged to this term, postmodernism. If he can admit that much, then he cannot, except in a contradictory manner, exclaim 'why not?' in an attitude of 'anything goes.' McHale seems almost disgruntled when he implies that we might as well face it, because we are saddled or stuck with the term postmodernism; but he only ever understands this term at face value. He does not explicate his admittance that, as an imposition, we have received postmodernism, and that, furthermore, and as such, ontological difference is in the background, as an answer to the question of 'why postmodernism?'

The reason we understand ourselves as somehow having received the term postmodernism, is that we ourselves are constructed in our own giving forth (of constructions, interpretations, fictions) by a destinal difference which is constitutive of the extensity of human existence -- ontological difference. And the thinking of ontological difference is always provoked by an original question 'why?' in the face of the world and human existence, meaning a question which, in accepting acceptance (or what Heidegger calls pre-understanding), returns to this sending in order to question it, asking 'why given-ness?'. Thinking ontological difference is never incited by a surrendering 'why not?' which, upon surrendering to given-ness, immediately proceeds to conceal or forget the acceptance of given-ness implicit in its surrender.

In terms of the acceptance of given-ness, McHale will only go so far as to admit that the post- of postmodernism emphasizes "the element of logical and historical consequence" (5), but again, he is still only thinking in aesthetic rather than in existential terms. Speaking of "the inevitable historicity of all literary phenomena" (5), when Vattimo would insist on the inevitable historicity of all phenomena, McHale concludes that postmodernism just happens to be a rhetorically persuasive poetics which follows "from modernism" (5) rather than just after modernism. He does not rationalize this claim in its ontological aspect, or in philosophical or historical terms, and thus finds himself in a tautology, still refusing to accept in different terms the historical referentiality of postmodernism as an (an)ironic referent or as a necessary fiction for us, for now. This is why, for McHale, "the presence of the prefix post in literary nomenclature -- or of pre, for that matter -- merely signals the inevitable historicity of all literary phenomena" (5); note, historical consequentiality is only ever merely a matter for McHale, precisely because he is merely interested in literary phenomena as if it were not somehow indicative of or even related to existential phenomena. He states that

"every literary-historical moment is post some other moment, just as it is pre some other moment, though of course we are not in the position to say exactly what it is pre -- what it precedes and prepares the way for -- except retrospectively, while we are always able to say, in principle, what it is post -- what it is the posterity of. Postmodernism is the posterity of modernism -- this is tautological, just as saying that pre-romanticism is the predecessor of romanticism would be tautological (5)."

In an effort to explicate more than just tautology to the relation between modernism and postmodernism, McHale proceeds to construct his argument about "how the posterior phenomenon emerges from its predecessor -- about, in other words, historical consequentiality" (5). But, as already discussed, in pursuit of the question 'how,' McHale forgets the more fundamental question 'why,' and thus, his argument remains tautological because he refuses to explicate the 'aspect' relation between poetics and historical referentiality.

Asking 'why postmodernism?' or 'why posit the post?' does lead to a recognition of historical consequentiality. However, when we think of historical consequentiality, we also recognize why positing is necessary (because it is always already done) in the first place -- and that means positing as the risking and affirmation (acceptance) of an (an)ironic historical referent. To accept that we have always already accepted
positing means to recognize it as necessary, and to recognize our acceptance as a consequence. For there are consequences in the world. Consequently, in postmodernity this leads us to posit our own necessary fiction of consequent postmodern or hermeneutic ontology. In fact, McHale does this when, in constructing his postmodern ontology, he reviews “some of the classical ontological themes in poetics, from the Renaissance through the German romantics to Roman Ingarden and contemporary ‘possible-worlds’ theorists” (27). Still, rather than understanding this as the necessary positing of a philosophy of history, if only in terms of poetics, McHale contends that postmodernist fiction achieves a “modeling of our pluralistic ontological landscape” (39, my emphasis), precisely “by foregrounding the ontological themes and differences, internal and external, described by ontologists of fiction from Sidney through Schlegel to Ingarden, Hrushovski, and the possible-world theorists” (39). So in effect McHale conceals the historical consequentiality at work in his historical reconstruction which he initially claimed is his book’s “primary objective” (6): to “capture... the POST of POSTmodernISM” (5). Again, what is missing is the initial positing of an (an)ironic historical referent for the term POSTmodernITY. 

In fact, though, McHale actually does posit the referent for postmodernity, twice, without ever explicating or elaborating upon it. First of all, he hints as much when he uses the Dick Higgins quote regarding cognitive and postcognitive questions, with its associated chronological or periodizing division of “till around 1958”. Not only does McHale use this as an epigraph, but he also praises Higgins in his “Preface”:

I want in particular to mention the avant-garde poet Dick Higgins, whose essays and manifestoes... I came across only after my own book was already substantially finished. Higgins’s opposition between ‘cognitive’ and ‘post-cognitive’ art is not identical with my own between modernist epistemological poetics and postmodernist ontological poetics, but it’s close enough for jazz (xii).

Secondly, McHale also ventures a historical referent when he mentions, in discussion of Faulkner’s novel Absalom, Absalom!, “the change that has occurred throughout western literature in the years since the Second World War” (11). Again this claim is never explicated, let alone thematized, as a necessary fiction, or as an (an)ironic historical referent, wherein what would have to be admitted is the mediation of epistemological with ontological concerns in the positing of a postmodern ontology. McHale leaves his readers wondering why they should accept that change (the dominant foregrounding of ontological concerns) has taken place, either since around 1958, or after the Second World War.

4.3 Acceptance as amnesty, not amnesia

There is an important sense of acceptance which is tied in with Vattimo’s concepts of Andenken and Verwindung, and which also relates to the sense of the word amnesty. You will remember that, in discussing historical transformation in postmodernity as postmodern dialogue, we recognized that, if we have shifted ground in postmodernity, we have done so only against the background of modernity. And so, in conceiving postmodern ontology as dialogue, what we are contending is that we are still in dialogue with modernity; we cannot deceive ourselves into thinking that we can leave modernity behind in an amnestic remotion. Such a way of thinking, which involves the belief in definitive ends, linear temporality, and progress, is what Vattimo characterizes, following Heidegger, as a typically modern way of thinking as Überwindung or overcoming. And yet, we are distanced from modernity; in fact, the reason we can periodize it as such is that we recognize its dominant epistemological concerns as apart or remote from our dominant ontological ones. What we are in fact saying, then, is that we describe the postmodern world as being in a different space or time or position with respect to, that is, in relation to modernity; in short, we remember or recollect modernity in positing our difference and our historical consequentiality.

Following these recognitions, there is an important shift in words here to take note of: from amnesia (oblivion, forgetting), which we have identified with the epistemological and monological Verwindung of modernity, with its concealing of revealment and its refusal of acceptance, to anamnesis (memory, or the recalling or recollecting of things past), which we have identified with the ontological and dialogical Andenken of postmodernity, with its revealing of concealment and its accepting of acceptance. Acceptance involves, in this way, Vattimo’s sense of hermeneutic ontology or postmodern thought as andenkend thought, or thought which remembers and recollects the tradition of its historical consequentiality, as already stated. But there is still another sense to consider here, and that is in terms of acceptance as forgiveness. To remember and to recollect means also, in a way, to forgive rather than to forget the past; we shift from amnesia to anamnesis to amnesty. For part of Vattimo’s postmodern andenkend thought involves the recognition that, it is not only that we cannot forget the past in terms of what has been posited, but also that we can only grant it amnesty. That is to say, we can only for-give,
which brings us back to notions of human existence as given-ness. Forgive: the word is crucial for postmodern ontology, for it involves the sense of granting remission, in the sense of the Latin remitto, to remit, to send back. And so, in forgiving, we send or give back what have been given and received as 'errors' or interpretations, thereby engaging in a dialogue or correspondence with the messages sent to us from the tradition, where tradition is understood as textual transmission. Here also we recall the sense of bidirectionality and reversibility (dialogue, exchange, alternation, oscillation) which McHale attributes to historical change, although he does not elaborate upon it as: an admittance of the inevitable provisionality or historicity of positing; and thus an admittance of the mediatory, intermediate, hovering, intersected, and even errant quality of historical change.

But acceptance as amnesty or forgiving even involves a further sense which becomes apparent in the word remission as a slackening or a relaxing. In forgiving the errancy of modernist or metaphysical thought, we relax our categories for thinking. As Vattimo explains, discussing the philosophical postmodernism which originates in Nietzsche's work, in an essay from 1983 entitled "Verwindung: Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy", the "idea of thought which dominated the metaphysical tradition of Western culture has always been defined as the search for principles and causes" (10). When we discover, as with Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God, 'the insignificance of the origin,' or the insignificance or 'error' of principles, then the meaning of thinking changes. Specifically, there is a remission, meaning a diminution, abatement, or subsidence, of the strength, force, extremity, violence, and/or melodrama of metaphysical thought. And this remission in thinking -- which so far we have identified as a dialogue, a recollection, a forgiving or amnesty, and a weakening -- is also a historical remission. That is, in arriving at the Nietzschean nihilistic conclusion that truth itself is a value that dissolves, "one truly exits from modern??/' (Vattimo ibid 9, my emphasis). However, the 'exit' from or 'ending' of modernity/metaphysics is still a remission -- that is, not a complete exit or true ending, for the remission is postmodern. And as "postmodernity is only beginning" (Vattimo 10), it is also a fading away or weakening of modernity. Vattimo explains this problematic in discussing Nietzsche's nihilism in the aforementioned essay --

Because the notion of truth no longer holds and carefully laid
'foundations' no longer function as a basis for thought (since there is no basis for believing in a basis, in the notion that thought ought to be 'grounded'), one cannot escape from modernity by means of critical surpassing, which is still completely interior to modernity itself. It becomes clear that one must look for another way. We can call this the birth of postmodernism in philosophy. It is an event, like the death of God first announced in Aphorism 125 of The Gay Science, whose meaning and consequences we have not yet finished measuring (9).

At any rate, our attempt to fathom this postmodern event involves, not only our recognition that truth is an event (and thus, the recognition of the 'insignificance' of the origin as 'only' interpretation), but also our recognition that "in thinking which is no longer metaphysical, Being no longer appears as presence but as an event (Ereignis), the disclosure of an epochal horizon which is historical and cultural (as in Foucault's epistemai), within which Dasein has access to the world and to itself" (Vattimo 13). Thus, what we are getting at here, is that remission is not only philosophical (or critical or aesthetic) in postmodernity, it is also historical, which means existential. What we uncover here, in the shift from amnesia to amnnesia (or hermeneutics as verwindend-andenkend thought) to amnesty, is a "way of considering metaphysical archai no longer as principles but as events, as historical disclosures within the framework of the 'eventual' character of Being" (Vattimo 13). And so, in our postmodern ontological remission of modernity/metaphysics, we recognize that the problem we face is not only one for thinking, but one for living, for destiny -- Geschick.

As Vattimo explains, "one ought not to think that metaphysics is just an error of some philosophers or even of humankind, for this would imply that there is Being out there and somewhere else the human way of viewing it" (13). Our nihilistic discovery is such that, "not only must Being (no longer conceived in terms of the present/object) be viewed as an event more than as a 'structure,' but insofar as Being is not to be thought of as an object, it is additionally something which is anterior to any distinction between subject and object" (ibid 13). And as Being therefore precedes all distinctions between subject and object, "the forgetfulness of Being, the mistaken identification of Being with beings, is not simply man's error, but a destiny of Being itself" (ibid 13). We return to the sense of remission as diminution, abatement, or subsidence here, in the recognition of the weakening of Being -- as it cannot be grasped in presence as an object, we recognize that "Being has the destiny of dissolving, of disappearing, of fading and w[ek]akening" (ibid 13). Thus as Vattimo concludes: "As in Nietzsche, the dissolution of the notion of foundation is not simply something which concerns human thought, but Being itself, because to think that the end of metaphysics concerns only human thought would amount to accepting and perpetuating the
metaphysical distinction between a ‘subjective’ view of things and an ‘objective’ being of the things themselves’ (ibid 13).

In arriving at the recognition of Being itself as acceptance or remission, we also arrive at the corollary recognition of Being, in its amnesty or its forgivingness, as Verwindung. For in our “capacity to consider Being no longer as a structure but as a ‘happening’ of discourses or as Ge-schick (destination)” (Vattimo ibid 14), we can still posit an (an)ironic historical referent and a limited affirmation in postmodernity. For as Vattimo explains, in addition, “post-metaphysical thought appears, on these bases, as an attitude of historical relativism, which is nevertheless tempered and in its turn distorted or gotten over (verwunden) through the awareness that the history of disclosures is not ‘only’ the history of errors, belied on some grounds elsewhere available; rather, it is being itself” (14). There are two emphases here. First of all, post-metaphysical thought, as a distortion of metaphysical thought, is nevertheless not disrespectful of metaphysical thought, for it embraces this thought as a destiny of Being, and thus holds itself in a relation of limited respect to it. Secondly, and following from this, postmetaphysical thought, involving remission or amnesty, and thus not being remiss, involves “pietas or devoted affection, respect” (Vattimo 14). Not only is the postmodern ‘consequence’ of nihilism (relativism) accepted, but following from this, this consequence is also recognized and accepted as being ‘nothing new’ in itself. For something to be ‘nothing new’ means that, in its way of always already having been, it is original, onto-logical. And so, not only is post-metaphysical thought, following Vattimo, not disrespectful of metaphysical thought, it is actually respectful in its devotion to this erring origin. It follows that, as a remission of all that is transmitted, postmodern hermeneutics, involving as it does Andenken and Verwindung in its respectful attitude and practice, must be recognized in a “more radical, ontological sense” (Vattimo 14) as hermeneutic ontology. For, as Vattimo explains,

Being is none other than the trans-mission of historico-destinal disclosures which constitute the possibility of access to the world for humanity in each epoch. The experience of being, as the experience of responding to and receiving, is always An-denken (re-thinking, meditative pondering, loving recollection) and Verwindung (overcoming, getting over, recuperating) (14).

So as an answer to why we should “take seriously and conform to the development of Western thought in which, ultimately, God is dead” (Vattimo 15), we thus have the recognition of Being as transmission, which we can only ever accept in a remission; that is to say, in a respectful attitude of acceptance which is nevertheless adopted as the possibility for change or Verwindung. Finding ourselves situated “at the end of philosophy in the form of metaphysics” (Vattimo 13), we accept, following Heidegger and Nietzsche, that thought “has no other ‘object’ than the errances of metaphysics recalled to memory in an attitude that is neither that of criticism which surpasses nor that of mere acceptance” (ibid 13).

However, and in a more genealogical attitude, we also recognize that Verwindung, experienced as Andenken or as “the sole possible form of post-metaphysical thought” (ibid 16), is not only “a matter for thought: rather it concerns Being as such” (16). This recognition stems from a clear implication which Vattimo explicates in the texts of both Nietzsche and Heidegger; to reiterate, that “nihilism is not only an ‘error’ of the mind but a destiny of Being itself” (ibid 16). What is important to recognize here, then, is that “the history which we recollect has itself the structure of the Verwindung, of recollection and distortion” (ibid 16). Vattimo states that, if this “last implication of [Nietzsche’s] ‘morning philosophy’ and of the verwundend ‘essence’ of thought [according to Heidegger]” (17) seems to be a very abstract generalization, that “it is no longer so if we translate Verwindung into a term which is much more familiar to the historians of Western civilization, the term ‘secularization’” (16). Following the connotations that the word secularization has in the texts of Max Weber, Norbert Elias, and René Girard, Vattimo states that “secularization/Verwindung would describe the course of history not as a linear progression or as decadence, but as a course of events in which emancipation is reached only by means of a radical transformation and distortion of its very contents” (16-17). And thus, we reach a point of recognizing the ‘ironic’ essence of history, wherein “when critical overcoming is ‘distorted’ into the notion of Verwindung, history itself can no longer appear in its linear light” (17). This revealment of the ironic essence of history is thus also a revealment of the ironic essence of Being.

Interpretation and distortion, or dis-location, characterize not only the relation of thought to the messages of the past but also the relation of one ‘epoch’ to the others. Perhaps this was one of the meanings Heidegger had in mind when he spoke of the ‘epochal’ essence of Being (in the essay on Anaximander in his Holzwege): in its event, Being reveals itself only insofar as it also conceals itself, so that one cannot speak in terms of
progressive revelation of Being (nor, of course, in terms of 'regressive' concealing of it) (17).

This last implication of Verwindung, as the sole possible form of post-metaphysical thought, and as the experience of the 'epochal' essence of Being, leads Vattimo to make two provisional conclusions. First, what unfolds is the recognition of “many problems related to the question of the possibility of a ‘philosophy of history’” (ibid 17). This recognition returns us to the contention stated in Chapter 1 of this section: that this paper, as a postmodern mediation of epistemology and ontology, Andenken and Verwindung, attempts to posit an (an)ironic historical referent -- it attempts to articulate and practice the relation between aesthetics (practice, hermeneutics, criticism) and a philosophy of history (theory, epistemology, critique). This attempt thus comprises an acceptance of both the interpretive and distortional thrust of its own positing, a forgiving (amnesty) of its own given-ness and giving-ness, its revealing and concealing of Being, its correspondence with (past) truth(s) and its opening of (future) truth(s), its repetition and its difference. As such, and secondly, Vattimo provisionally concludes that “like the death of God in The Gay Science, the Verwindung too is an ‘event’ whose consequences we have just begun to comprehend” (17).
Chapter 5

Interface: the End(s) of Modernity in The Heat of the Day

We return, in the fifth and final section of this part of Division I, to the initial contention of the risky truth of this paper: namely, the overlap which it intends to investigate as its ‘object’ in the attempt to mediate the interpenetration or relation of philosophical and aesthetic/fictional concerns in Vattimo’s philosophy and Bowen’s ‘war novel’ The Heat of the Day. This overlap can be broadly defined in the texts of Bowen and Vattimo as the foregrounding of ontological concerns and questions, or as postmodern hermeneutic ontology. And alternately, the ‘object’ of this paper can be understood as the interface in which is read the ‘end’ of modernity, as Vattimo announces it, in Bowen’s The Heat of the Day, in both a literal and a figurative way. Such an interface or ‘intertext’ constitutes a postmodernism which is at the same time always an announcement, admittance, and an argued proposition of postmodernity as a literary-historical fiction and discursive artifact which is nevertheless out there as a real-world ‘object.’

However, at the same time, the attempt to negotiate such an intertext comprises a ‘betrayal’ of Vattimo’s statement of the ‘end’ of modernity through its interpreted predication in a fictional text. As already discussed, this reading is a postmodern extension of both theory and practice. And furthermore, through this interpenetration of philosophy and literature, it is argued that postmodernity exists ‘out there’ as an anironic historical referent, if ‘only’ in terms of the eventuality of ‘the trans-mission of historico-destinal disclosures which constitute the possibility of access to the world for humanity in each epoch’ (Vattimo ibid 14). In other words, postmodernity exists, at least in terms of textual traces (Bowen’s, Heidegger’s...) interpreted as the announcement of some real-world historical change or consequence. And thus the historical change or consequence which is announced with the use of the term ‘postmodernity’ belies the fact that it is not ‘chosen’ in a moment of flippancy, as if it were an arbitrary matter, or simply a matter for aesthetic practice (postmodernism). Rather, in having received the term postmodernism from somewhere, what we are saying is that that somewhere can, and indeed, must be posited as a historical event. As already discussed, it is not ‘just’ a matter of having been ‘saddled’ with the term ‘postmodernism,’ for looming in the background of postmodern aesthetic practice is an initial imposition to which we have responded: namely, the philosophical contention of the end or ending of modernity and the birth or beginning of postmodernity, which cannot be forgotten and which must still be argued as a necessary fiction. And in order to convince others of our proposition, and thus of the necessity of our interpretation or risky truth, we must of necessity mediate and extend our argument with a logic of necessity in the positing of an (an)ironic historical referent -- concrete but also fictional.

This paper constructs the referent of postmodernity ‘out there’ during the years of the Second World War and its aftermath. The total warfare of that war, not to mention of this century, can be retrospectively interpreted as the fulfillment of the history of Western metaphysics with its violent logic, and, as such, the ‘end(ing)’ of modernity or metaphysics and the beginning of postmodernity in the Western world. The event of the war had foregrounded the paradox of historical transformation as an extension, and thus the end and the beginning were ‘the return of the same.’ And we find that this interpretation of historical change is articulated by Bowen in her wartime novel The Heat of the Day. The Second World War, with its unnameable atrocities and its threats of ultimate extinction which were both facilitated by modern technology, exceeded the rational logic of modernity/metaphysics which had indeed informed the development of that technology, even to the point of its horrific deployment in the Second World War. The silence in many circles ‘literary’ and otherwise, and for instance, in Britain, both during the war and following the year 1945, to a certain but significant extent reflects the inability of writers and thinkers to contend with what had happened, to historicize it, to rationalize it, to interpret or make ‘sense’ of it. Language could not correspond to the absurd and horrific ‘reality’ of the war; and thus any attempt to represent it was recognized as being excessive, even, in a terrible way, futile and unnecessary. Faced with the possibility of ultimate extinction, anything ‘added to’ such an unthinkable prospect was not only superfluous, but was furthermore a horrible redundancy, the ultimate travesty.

When we say ‘silence’ here, by way of describing the response to the war, we must of course posit the particulars of our argument: (1) that British writers were relatively ‘silent’ about the Second World War; (2) that they were ‘silent’ about the Second World War relative to British writers of the First World War; and (3) that the British writers we are talking about here are, strictly speaking, novelists, rather than historians, political-cultural commentators, or poets, etcetera. Similar interpretations lead Gordon Wright, in his book The Ordeal of Total War: 1939-1945, to state that “wartime novels and poetry [of the Second World War in Great Britain] lacked the sentimental and heroic rhetoric of the literature of 1914-1918; their dominant note, rather, was low-keyed restraint” (258). However, this paper does not support the views of a historian such as Wright who states that: “Neither
public sponsorship nor private inspiration managed to produce any outstanding works of literature, of music, or of art in wartime Britain” (258). Rather, what is contended is that a British writer such as Bowen, in her attempt to come to terms with the events of 1939-1945, adopted an attitude of suspensive or postmodern irony (or what could be interpreted as ‘low-keyed restraint’) in her historical narrative of the Second World War in Britain and Ireland. Wright reluctantly supports the historian A.J.P. Taylor’s suggestion that, “to the British the Second World War was not a profound spiritual experience, and that a prosaic war, accepted by all and fought in a businesslike fashion as a job that must be done, is not likely to produce general intellectual ferment” (Wright 258). Contrary to this proposition, however, this paper argues that, for Bowen at least, and, in her experience, for many others as well, the Second World War did comprise a profound spiritual experience, wherein people were being forced to re-examine all that they had believed, and to seek new explanations. What Bowen articulates in The Heat of the Day is a profound sense of the dislocation experienced by people in wartime London, and if the dominant note is, as Wright contends, one of ‘low-keyed restraint,’ or suspensive (postmodern) irony, this should not be interpreted as a lack of intellectual ferment, a lack of profound spiritual experience, or even a lack of ‘the luxury of introspection.’ Rather, Bowen’s novel is a real indication of the devastating impact of the Second World War on intellectual and cultural life in Britain. And as well, The Heat of the Day can be interpreted as a flickering sign of the emergence of a new, perhaps less impressive, (because emptied of its strong, violent, or dramatic claims to definitive descriptions or absolute values) and thus identifiably postmodern mood and attitude, expressed by a thoughtful and creative writer who perceived herself and her world to be severely altered by the experience of the Second World War. Through the event of the war, Being, as truth itself, was no longer understood as being (only) a structure, but moreover an event -- its only structure was grasped as being the erring one we give it in language.

What we are on the way to practicing here, is the problematizing of demonstrative discourse which we have already discussed as taking place in Bowen’s historical novel, and as well, in Vattimo’s philosophy -- as he follows from the central Heideggerian problematic of the being of validity, or of ‘letting unconcealment show itself.’ What Bowen came to recognize, in her experience of the Second World War, was the problem of grasp. What could not be grasped (seized, held, possessed, owned, mastered, understood) as (a) truth could not properly be ‘shown’ or ‘demonstrated’ as such. And what was happening during or in the total war of the Second World War, its ‘event’ or its ‘truth’ as such, Bowen admitted to be beyond her grasp to demonstrate, at least not without introducing a certain extended sense of irony into the description or narrative. But this admission should not lead us to assume that her historical novel ‘simply’ comprises an intellectual problem; it also represents an emotional and spiritual crisis for the writer. For to even venture speaking for or representing the countless others who had disappeared, even without a trace, seemed to Bowen, as it still seems to us, as atrocious as the ‘rationalization’ which loomed behind their disappearance. In the final chapter of The Heat of the Day -- without venturing a comment on, for instance, the unspeakable horrors of the Jewish Holocaust -- the narrator of Bowen’s novel states that after 1943 expired,

war’s being global meant it ran off the edges of maps; it was uncontrollable. What was being done, for instance, against the Japanese was heard of but never grasped in London. There were too many theatres of war (308).

But speaking of ‘grasp,’ if we can contend that Bowen found the war, or at least certain events in the war, to be beyond her grasp, what we are also contending is that she grasped the war, in this way, in its ‘ungraspability.’ Thus, the ‘total war’ of this century, which was so formative for the lives of people who lived through the first half of this century (including both Bowen and Heidegger), and which was ‘grasped’ by Bowen in its ‘ungraspability,’ can be interpreted as being represented by Bowen in an analogous way to how Heidegger and Vattimo speak of Being. She did not merely despair the dissolution of truth, but rather (re)turned her attention to the ‘event’ of its dissolution, and attempted to forge out what can be interpreted as the sketchy beginnings of a hermeneutic ontology. Like Heidegger returning to the paradox of the ‘end’ of Western metaphysics, Bowen turned back her attention to the unrepresentable ‘end’ of modernity in the war. Indeed, if we follow the philosophy of Vattimo, who in turn takes his cue from Heidegger, we can interpret that the ungraspable total war of this century, and particularly of the Second World War, as a paradox, itself returned thought to the thought of Being as ontological difference. The war became thought as being not merely analogous to, but moreover constituted by Being, being as it must be accepted as part of the destiny of Being. That is, war, as it was experienced by Bowen, in this case, during the Second World War and in London, came to be understood in the same sense that Heidegger (a contemporary of Bowen) reserved for Being as ontological difference, in that, thought on ‘it’ dissolves/ed the subject-object relation. In other words, the war, like Being, resists/ed depiction or objectification, and thus seems/ed to share the destiny of Being, in that it dissolves, disappears, fades, and weakens. The war, too, could not be grasped in presence as an object. It became
exceedingly difficult for Bowen, as with others, to offer up any assertion (epistemological truth-claim) on or about the war. Or at least, it became necessary to introduce irony into any assertion ‘on’ or ‘about’ (the) war, which amounted to a thematicizing of the play of unconcealment and concealment in language and existence.

This experience of the dissolution of truth was especially obvious in the midst of war, which should not seem so strange. As Wright states, a writer’s “thoughts and energies tend to be swallowed up by the harsh demands of the struggle; it absorbs and annihilates most intellectual activities” (254). As Wright states, “only the tentative beginnings of... postwar manifestations belong in a book whose chronological limits are the war years” (259), and Bowen’s wartime writings are ‘proof’ of the fact that the experience and recognition of the dissolution of truth came to her at this early point in time, though in a ‘sketchy’ or ‘shadowy’ way. In the ‘twilight’ worlds of her wartime writings, she articulates this experience of the infinite interpretability of reality and the paradox of reference. Amongst other wartime writings, her collection of short stories The Demon Lover, written between 1941 and 1944 in wartime London, remain sketches for the historical narrative she was later to write.

The novel itself is testimony to the fact that Bowen indeed recognized the experience of the dissolution of truth (or the confrontation with nihilism) as a historical consequence of the war, rather than as simply a representational problem of historical proximity. And furthermore, the novel ‘demonstrates’ and thematizes her post-war acceptance of this dissolution as a permanent feature of the ontological landscape, but one which had only ever been concealed with the security of inherited values. Started in 1944, and ‘germinated’ even before that, Bowen took five years to complete her “present-day historical novel” (Bowen, “Broadsheet”), which was to comprise “the ideal vehicle for [her] memory” (Bowen, “On Writing” 12) of the war, in response to the ubiquitous fear of artists and critics alike that the novel creating “a picture [of the war] which [could] not be effaced by tomorrow’s newspaper” (Calder-Marshall, et al, Manifesto) would not get written. Her description of the war as ‘present-day’ is telling. For indeed, in The Heat of the Day, Bowen attempts to both practice and articulate the ‘now time’ of the war, as it extends itself out into ‘the open’ of ‘the present,’ interrupting or intersecting it, and cutting an ‘archaeological’ line through life and silence. In her novel, war is ironically ‘demonstrated’ as an oppressively proximitous space and time of crisis. Published in 1949, and bringing Bowen her greatest popular success, immediately selling forty-five thousand copies, in its reception the work is considered by many to be “one of the classic novels in English literature about World War II” (Hoogland 118, my emphasis). The work ironically ‘demonstrates’ the wartime and post-war recognition that reflection on the events of 1939-1945 seemed to stultify (adequate) description — indeed, no picture of the war could be offered up to complete its representation. It was an event that could not yet -- even if the attempt still had to be made -- be grasped. Thought would necessarily return to the war in the attempt to interpret it as being both the ending and the beginning of something that was still too huge and too nebulous. And yet, this paradox is also put forward in the novel as something that had been so far concealed in thought, something that had been forgotten, always, and returned to always, at the same time. It’s telling or representation could only ever be both a rememoration and distortion. But in the text, this is posited as the only opportunity for freedom in a fictional world which is an uncanny predecessor to the theoretical world put forth some twenty to thirty years later by Gianni Vattimo, amongst others, as postmodernity.

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The need to temper one’s representations or one’s statements (‘truth’) with the acknowledgment of their interpretive or ‘weak’ status was (if at first a crisis for thinking) at least accepted by Bowen as an ontological condition of human existence. The Heat of the Day is an ironic historical narrative of the experience of the dissolution of truth in the Second World War. As an ironic ‘statement’ of the war, it is an allegory of history’s dissolution in nihilism. Its irony consists in its problematization of demonstrative discourse or epistemological truth, in the same space and at the same time as it attempts to correspond with what was grasped as a historical consequence of the war: Being’s disappearance, fading, or weakening. As such, Bowen’s text broaches many of the postmodern recognitions that we have so far been discussing as part of Vattimo’s central thesis of ‘weak thought,’ as he follows from Heidegger, a contemporary of Bowen.

Reflection on the war which could not be objectively grasped, because it was now recognized as being ‘uncontainable,’ or perhaps even ubiquitous, informs Bowen’s writing of a historical narrative of the Second World War which is, ironically but appropriately, almost devoid of what is usually represented as ‘history’ or ‘war.’ Indeed, much of the early and negative criticism of the work is ironically ‘on the mark’ in pointing to this problematic of ‘lack of action’ in a ‘war novel.’ It would take many years before The Heat of the Day was finally grasped as being an ultimately ironic, subversive, and allegorical work. In the narrator’s contention that total war, particularly as it was experienced in the Second World War, was ungraspable, we can interpret that this meant that, as an experience (of truth), the war was recognized as an impossible saying. It could not be objectified, pinned-down, or pin-pointed, as if it could be attributed to or named as a specific or singular thing or event. Therefore, if it could not unproblematically be designated in this way as something that ‘is’ (i.e. a ‘being’), then the ‘truth’ of total war, as it was experienced by Bowen, must also constitute a fundamental absence, in that it cannot definitively be
said that it 'is' (a present object, that is), at least not in the epistemological or rational sense of metaphysical thought.

It becomes obvious here that, in reflecting on total war, Bowen either reminds us or was herself reminded of the ancient category (question) of Being as ontological difference, or as being itself incomparable to beings (all subjects and objects in the world). As 'is-ness,' Being (truth, war) was grasped as something that could not be described or named objectively as a being or something that 'is.' Indeed, and following the two alternatives which Bowen incorporates in her narrative, it thus becomes more likely that total war, thought in this way as analogous or corresponding to Being, is both an all-pervasive 'given' and is not at all. What was recognized by Bowen, in the experience of the dissolution of truth in wartime, was that Being, as truth itself, is an interpretation, and thus whatever we assert as 'truth' is as equal in its truth (it 'all-pervasiveness' because it is our own) as in its untruth (its 'absence' or 'nothingness' because it is given, it is not only our own). In short, she realized, as Heidegger explicates in his philosophy, the play of unconcealment (Andenken) and concealment (Verwindung) in 'truth,' a thinking which is undoubtedly 'on the way to language,' and a thinking which is, undoubtedly postmodern, in the sense that Vattimo means.

In his aforementioned essay, "Verwindung: Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy," and in discussing Nietzsche's radicalization of modernity's own dissolutive (or verwundene) tendencies in Human, All Too Human, Vattimo explains that Nietzsche "starts out with the purpose of effecting a critique of the higher values of civilization by means of a chemical reduction of these values to their basic components before any sublimation" (9). However, and as Vattimo explains, this plan of 'chemical' analysis, when carried through completely, leads Nietzsche "to the discovery that truth itself is a value that dissolves" (9). Following this, Nietzsche recognized that "belief in the superiority of truth over untruth and error is a belief which, on the one hand, is imposed in particular, determined situations (instability, total warfare, etc.) and, on the other, is governed by the idea that humankind can know things 'in themselves'" (9). This nihilistic ‘truth’ was grasped by Bowen during and after the total warfare of the Second World War, as thematized and ironically 'demonstrated' in her wartime historical novel. Bowen's experience of the dissolution of truth, the 'end' of the Enlightenment project, or the 'end' of modernity, and her embracing of what we now call postmodern truth, happened during and as a consequence of the total warfare of the Second World War.

The contention of this paper is that total war exceeded "the procedural logic and rationality of metaphysics" (Snyder xv), thus forcing a return, even though not explicitly thematized by Bowen in its philosophical sense, to "the question of Being with which Heidegger is constantly concerned, and the philosophy of nihilism" (Snyder xv). In this way, Bowen's novel seems to announce the 'end' of modernity and the 'birth' of postmodernity in much the same way that Vattimo does, returning as he does in his own work to the philosophy of Heidegger, and before him, Nietzsche. In this paper, one can envision Vattimo as a kind of strange or (im)possible translator, moving in between Bowen and the 'ghost' of this text, Heidegger. As contemporaries (Heidegger, born in 1889, died in 1976, and Bowen, born in 1899, died in 1973), they are interpreted as having an uncanny 'correspondence' in their thought and writing.

Specifically, we find that the correspondence between Bowen and Heidegger (that is, its 'translation') occurs in the philosophy of Vattimo -- a philosopher who translates and interprets Heidegger, extending his thought in(to) the postmodern context, and a philosopher whose theories have in turn been translated, interpreted, and extended in(to) the context of this paper. Furthermore, this paper itself works to translate, interpret, and extend Bowen's historical narrative of the Second World War in(to) a postmodern theoretical/philosophical context. The context of this paper is, in this complicated way, a merging point and an extensity, when and where Bowen's novel seems to broach on Vattimo's philosophy, and Vattimo's thought seems to broach on Bowen's novel. Such an interface (an intertextual space and time) could be described, following Vattimo and, in his turn, Nietzsche, as "the Zwischen, the interim between the death of God and the unraveling of human overcoming, as the only possible dimension we can inhabit as mortals" (Carravetta 223). What is coordinated in this thesis paper, then, is an extensive interface of texts -- intractable epistemological searching in Bowen's novel tips over into intractable ontological questioning in Vattimo's philosophy; and unrelenting epistemological concerns in Vattimo's philosophy are translated as ontological concerns in Bowen's fiction. It is important to emphasize, though, that in each case this 'shift' (or relation) is not a pure crossing over, as already discussed with regard to McHale's poetics, but rather a sort of mediation, or ironic 'concealment' of the Other. Both writers end up in the same interstice or intermission, each intersected by and intermittently taking up the mutual concerns of the difference which is constitutive of their hermeneutic ontological position. Neither Bowen nor Vattimo forgets, leaves behind, or annuls the line of questioning with which they have begun; but rather, they 'shift' into a remembrative movement (an Andenken) and a transformation (a Verwindung) of the 'Other.' The 'shift' in each case extends the negotiation of a thinking (a space) and a writing (a time), a theory and a practice, that remains within difference to be thought.

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The objection is often made that the basic concepts of Heidegger's later work cannot be verified. What Heidegger intends, for example, when he speaks of being in the verbal sense of the word, of the event of being, the clearing of being, the revealment of being, and the forgetfulness of being, cannot be fulfilled by an intentional act of our subjectivity. The concepts that dominate Heidegger's later philosophical works are clearly closed to subjective demonstration, just as Hegel's dialectical process is closed to what Hegel called representational thinking.

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Hermeneutics cannot be only a theory of dialogue; as a matter of fact, perhaps it cannot think of itself as a theory of dialogue at all (understood as the true structure of any human experience, which in its universal essence would still have to be described 'metaphysically'). Rather, if it intends to be coherent with its own premises, hermeneutics must articulate itself as dialogue, thus committing itself concretely vis-à-vis the contents of tradition.

Gianni Vattimo “Hermeneutics as Koine” (1988)
In speaking, there always remains the possibility of cancelling the objectifying tendency of language, just as Hegel cancels the logic of understanding, Heidegger the language of metaphysics, the Orientals the diversity of realms of being, and the poet everything given. But to cancel [aufheben] means to take up and use.

Hans-Georg Gadamer
Part II

Gianni Vattimo’s Reading of the Text Monument: The Immortal Possibilities of an Impossible Mortality
Chapter 1

Postmodern Criticism as Postmodern Critique

In Part I of this division, we have been following through the implications extending out of the theory and practice of this paper as the positing of an (an)ironic historical referent, which we identified at the outset of that section as a first defense of the risky and ironic aspect of this paper. Now, in Part II of this division, we turn to a second point to be belaboured in defense of the risky and ironic aspect of this paper, as it evolves out of a return to and consideration of Vattimo’s 1990 essay entitled “Postmodern Criticism: Postmodern Critique”, published in the volume edited by David Wood entitled Writing the Future. In this essay, which forms the linchpin to this whole paper, Vattimo elaborates upon the ‘monumental essence’ of texts in two different senses, both of which he sees as necessary to recognize and mediate towards providing a provisional ‘solution’ to the problem of redefining criticism in postmodernity.

Vattimo states that “texts are monuments at least in two senses” (64), and he relates the difference between these two senses of monumentality to the “ambiguity shared by the Italian, French and German languages concerning the words critica, critique, Kritik: these words, usually, designate both the activity of criticism (literary or art criticism) and, say, the ‘critique of pure reason’ or social critique such as that of the Frankfurt School” (57). So, according to Vattimo, this ambiguity is best translated into English by the use of two different terms, criticism and critique, the latter of which “has a more general and radical sense” (57), and the former of which “is more generally related to the activity of interpretation and evaluation of literary and artistic works” (57). Proposing that when “the connection between criticism and critique is visible in an exemplary form” (57), such as in the work of Walter Benjamin, that it results in a ‘more problematic, rich, and balanced’ form of contemporary criticism, Vattimo then proceeds to shape his argument along a double axis.

I will argue that: (a) the connection between criticism and critique is a characteristic of criticism in modern times, something which marks the critical activity in the form in which we inherit it from our immediate tradition; we could say with Heidegger that this connection is the ‘Wesen’ of criticism, the way criticism ‘west,’ essentiates itself, is -- in our epoch; and (b) that, as Habermas has rightly noted in his The Discourse of Modernity, the end of modernity also brings about the end of critique in the general sense of the word. This poses at least the problem of the redefinition of criticism in the restricted sense of the word, since the connection with critique, which has determined its essence in modernity, seems no longer to subsist (57-8).

Now, there is a certain undeniable sense of risk involved in the redefinition of criticism which Vattimo undertakes, in this essay as elsewhere. This element of risk can be related, not only to the mediation of the two senses of textual monumentality mentioned above, and to be explained later, but also to the project at hand: what could allegedly be seen as a single-author, single-text study, or a traditional aspect of one form of textual monumentality, as discussed in Vattimo’s essay, is also a study which, in its defense against this possible allegation, uses the author and her text merely as an occasion, a second form of textual monumentality that Vattimo also explicates. As such, this paper can also be understood as being shaped along a double axis, negotiating, as already explained, not without awareness of the irony that, in its own practice of redefining criticism, “in which, although in a verwundene form, it can still operate in conjunction with critique” (Vattimo 64). As criticism, this paper could be subsumed under the category of a single-(‘minor’) author study; and as critique, it would also have to be seen as one that simply uses the author as an occasion for the practice of postmodern criticism/critique, for the attempt to contribute to an opening horizon and contextuality of postmodern practices. As such, this paper reads Bowen’s The Heat of the Day alone, but only The Heat of the Day. Bowen’s text as a mortal trace, but as simply a mortal trace; that is to say, it attempts to think postmodern criticism as postmodern critique, following Vattimo.
1.1 The modern essence of criticism and the ‘end of meta-récits’

Vattimo sketches out the proposition that “probably from its very beginnings in Aristotle’s Poetics, but surely in modern times, literary and art criticism has been more or less explicitly connected to ‘critique’ in the more general social or philosophical sense” (57). Discussing “the two major ‘koinai’ -- hegemonial orientations -- of recent European, or western culture” (58), Marxism and structuralism, Vattimo ponders whether or not both of them “‘prove’ that the connection criticism-critique is a typically modern Wesen of criticism, which de-termines (be-stimmt, in the Heideggerian sense) our situation and must be taken into account when we try to figure out what a future criticism could be” (59). He concludes that, at the very least, “the examples of Marxism and structuralism reveal some essential traits of modern criticism in so far as we assume, as I think we should, that the meta-récit, or the philosophy of history, is not one aspect among others of the modern mind, but is the specific form in which this mind conceives of rationality as such” (59). Explicating the themes and theses “widely shared by the theorists of modernity, from Hegel to Weber, A. Cochlen and Koselleck” (59), Vattimo states that “modernity is the epoch which, in a more and more explicit way, assumes that the basic ‘value’ or norm is being modern” (59). As such, he sees that “Enlightenment is, in this sense, the typical essence of modernity, with Hegelianism, Marxism, positivism as ‘declinations’ of the same ‘progressive’ content” (59). Following Karl Loewith and Arnold Gehlen, Vattimo supports the view that “the ultimate ‘ground’ of reality [in modernity] is conceived of as a principle which displays its strength through history” (60). He explains that this principle can be alternately conceived of as the Biblical ‘reason in history’ which “became the common background of western culture only in modern times, from the Renaissance on, through a process of ‘secularization’ which has conceived of ‘progress’ and ‘salvation’ in more and more earthly terms” (60).

Modern teleological time, understood as running toward an end which is that of the definitive but secular ‘salvation of man,’ should also display a historical ‘reason’ which is “in accord with the liberating process of history” (60) itself. But now we are in a situation where, as Vattimo contends, following Lyotard’s (once) polemical contention in his famous 1984 book The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, ideologies and meta-récits, or the emancipatory philosophies of history have dissolved and come to an end, characterizing ‘the end of modernity,’ which is itself seen as “the last result of this process of ‘Sakularisierung des Fortschritts’ as Gehlen has called it” (60). So the problem becomes that, if “the reciprocal implication of criticism and critique is a typically modern phenomenon” (61), “a common datum of our experience” (61), then what happens to critical practice in postmodernity, when it no longer “has to do with the destiny of man in terms of progress, emancipation, etc.” (61)? As Vattimo states, in its modern essence criticism seems to be conceivable only within the framework of a meta-récit, of a philosophy of history. And so criticism in postmodernity “seems to lose its essential character” (61).

1.2 ‘Sola Scriptura,’ modern hermeneutics and the pure listening of wild criticism

Now, Vattimo doubts that, “as Nietzsche said at the beginning of Human All Too Human speaking of the philosophical problem, [that] criticism takes again the form it had ‘two thousand years ago’-- namely in the work of the sophists” (61). He does not see that there is a possibility of a pure return to rhetoric after the dissolution of the meta-récits, which would imply “the possibility of going back to origins, to a moment in which ‘history’ would not yet be an inescapable theme for thought” (61). Instead, Vattimo sketches out a possibility for criticism which has in fact been in practice since the writing of Jacques Derrida has first come into prominence in the late nineteen-sixties. He explains that, more likely, and in a way which corresponds better to our condition of ‘post-histoire’ (as Gehlen calls it), criticism could react to the end of the meta-récit by becoming ‘savage’: criticism in the wilderness -- no matter what meaning G. Hartman attributes to this title of his books -- would then be the motto and the characterization of this situation in which no meta-récit any longer provides us with a basis of legitimation, and also with a source of methodological directions. The savage critic dedicates himself completely to a pure listening to the text as such, in a dialogical attitude which is completely free of any normative horizon provided by a general philosophy of history (61).
Acknowledging that Luther’s ‘sola Scriptura’ is, of course, far from excluding all normative horizons, Vattimo nevertheless hears the echo of the Lutheran motto in this ‘wild criticism.’ Following Wilhelm Dilthey’s essay on the “Origin of Hermeneutics”, Vattimo understands the Lutheran motto to be one “which in many senses inaugurated modern hermeneutics by the refusal of the norms and guidelines provided by the Church tradition” (61). So, despite the fact that the scripture the motto refers to is, of course, the Holy Scripture -- and despite the fact that Protestant exegesis simply replaced the norms of the Church tradition with the normative horizon of humanistic philology -- Vattimo nevertheless maintains that “Luther’s motto exemplifies in an emblematic way not so much the modern hermeneutic condition, but the late or postmodern one” (62). For Vattimo feels that “it is exactly in postmodernity that the liberation of the text as such from any horizon, from all kind of supporting meta-récits, has taken place in its extreme form” (62).

What follows, then, with the decline of the meta-récits, is that the multiple récits, “the plural texts which constitute the content of the world of the media in which we live” (62) are freed, and it is as such that “hermeneutics, in so far as it can be described as the theory of the dialogue with the text apart from any metaphysical framework, is the philosophy of the postmodern condition” (62). Vattimo then points to the work of Heidegger and Dilthey -- the former to whom Derrida has acknowledged his intellectual debt, even if his own work represents a radical departure from Heidegger’s thinking -- pointing out that

Sein, Being, as Heidegger teaches us, is but Ge-Schick and Ueberlieferung, transmission: texts -- especially literary texts, language, works of art... are the most authentic instances of the trans-mission, i.e. of Being. The sole relation we can have to Being is a relation to it as trans-mission, or as text(s)...(62).

There being no more normative framework to which these texts are referred, “neither on the level of content, nor even on the level of methods” (62), there is no more connection between criticism and critique in this postmodern ‘wild criticism.’ Rather, it seems that “the only critique we may expect to be able to practice is criticism, in the most specific sense: listening to the text as such, which is the sole locus of the transmission, i.e. of Being...” (62, my emphasis). Pointing out that such a view has inspired, not only the ‘wild’ literary criticism of a critic such as Geoffrey Hartman, but also philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida, Vattimo maintains that philosophy itself has come to be identified “more or less completely... with ‘literary’ criticism” (62). According to Vattimo, and this is the point at which he himself departs from this postmodern ‘wild criticism,’ these ‘philosophers’ consistently refuse to follow Heidegger when he still speaks of Being, seeming to beg the question that, “if Being is nothing but Ge-Schick, transmission of texts, then why should we not simply go to the (multiple) texts, instead of trying to ‘recollect’ Being as such?”

1.3 ‘Solum scriptura’ and the reconstruction of rationality

Seven years after “Postmodern Criticism: Postmodern Critique” was published in David Wood’s collection of essays called Writing the Future, we find that Vattimo is still elaborating upon his departure from the intellectual hegemony of deconstruction, which itself has become a Koiné dominating postmodern critical practice at the end of the century. In his latest publication of 1997, Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy (1994), Vattimo attempts to ‘rescue’ hermeneutics itself from the “ecumenical form so vague and generic” (ix) that it has seemed to acquire, especially, it seems, through its exemplary ‘philosophical’ practice in Derridean deconstruction. He begins this project by rethinking “the ‘originary’ meaning of hermeneutics” (ix) which he believes is “to be found in its ‘nihilistic vocation’” (ix). This project is in many ways a continuation of his attempt, in his 1980 compilation of essays from the 1970s, called The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy after Nietzsche and Heidegger (trans. 1993), to offer up a critique of Derridean deconstruction or the Derridean ‘philosophy of difference.’ In chapter six of that work, “The Adventure of Difference”, Vattimo states that “ontological difference seems of late to have been following a downward curve, especially in relation to what has been called the philosophy of difference, a particular feature of French philosophical culture since Derrida” (137). But he explains that this is not just attributable to an ‘eclipse’ in its popularity as a concept, but moreover a sign of the fact that “the idea of difference, having run round the whole curve of its possibilities, is declining and fading away into other philosophical standpoints” (137). Incisively, Vattimo states that “Jacques Derrida’s 1968 Paris lecture on différence may at the time have looked like a straight manifesto of the philosophy of difference, but today it looks more like a kind of epitaph or memorial for it” (137). According to Vattimo, at the end of this 1968 lecture, “Derrida distanced himself from Heidegger; if we analyse closely how he did this, we can observe at one and the
same time the reasons for both the decline of difference (and Derridean différence) and the ‘persistence’ of Heideggerian ontological difference” (138).

At this point, it is worth a detour to introduce the argument that Vattimo pursues in the later work, Beyond Interpretation, to a certain extent, as it represents a further development of his criticism of Derridean deconstruction. In several essays in this book, specifically, the first chapter “The Nihilistic Vocation of Hermeneutics” and the two appendices “The Truth of Hermeneutics” and “The Reconstruction of Rationality”, Vattimo sets out to defend hermeneutics from the ‘irrationalist’ or ‘non-argumentative’ aestheticism that has been its contemporary orientation. As such, Vattimo contends that, exactly in refusing to follow Heidegger when he still speaks of Being, a theorist/philosopher such as Derrida “has granted priority in both his philosophical practice and his self-interpretation to the archetype of Mallarmé’s coup de dés over the more argumentative approach that could still be seen in the introductory chapter to Of Grammatology (‘The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing’), where Derrida seemed to justify what we might call the grammatological turn by appealing to a kind of epochal change” (100). Vattimo reads this text as “a kind of hapax legomenon in Derrida’s work; [for] nowhere else has Derrida provided, or even set out to provide, an argued justification of his ‘method’ (with many scare quotes), or of the terms and ideas to which his attention periodically turns” (100-1).

Derridean ‘hermeneutics’ is preoccupied with the ‘trembling’ on the verge of language’s limits; strategic sites of ‘contamination’; the incessant equivocation on the boundary of sound, glyph, phoneme, morpheme, statement; semantic indecision; Mallarméan syntaxing; linguistic decomposition; deferment or ‘différence’. Constantly radicalizing the arbitrary nature of the sign by problematizing of the universal grammars of Saussurian linguistics, Derrida is also paralyzed on this ‘boundary’ of difference. As such, Derridean deconstruction is read by Vattimo as having (pretended to have) forgotten, left behind, or even deliberately confused the ontological origins or background of hermeneutics, for what, “when put into practice -- and this is of course said without the slightest disparagement -- ...increasingly resembles a performance, the effect of which is not easily distinguished from that of an aesthetic experience” (101). It seems that, in its insistence on undermining the stable order of meaning demanded by logocentric texts -- which occurs as a result of the savage critic’s ‘pure listening’ to and dialogue with the text without reference to any normative horizon(s) -- deconstruction has paradoxically insisted on what amounts to a ‘subjectivism’ (or, what has alternately been the accusation aimed at deconstruction, a ‘transcendental solipsism’ or a ‘linguistic relativism’). And yet, the subjectivist stance of deconstruction nevertheless implies “an ascetic reluctance to admit the subjective, to grant that someone is thinking (or reading, or looking)” (Latimer 184).

Still insisting on origins, Vattimo thinks that the paradox of hermeneutic irrationalism being alternately conceived of as aestheticism, reveals that hermeneutics “has betrayed its own originary inspiration” (100). Without denying the distinctive nature, legitimacy, and importance of Derrida’s negative (or aesthetic) development of the Heideggerian legacy, Vattimo himself would prefer to emphasize precisely the risk of aestheticism inherent in such liminal writing practices, which he acknowledges all the same as being “no more than a risk in Derrida” (101). Moreover, Vattimo recognizes that this effect is one which “in Derrida’s view... is probably not regarded as a limitation, but rather as something positively desired” (101). However, the argument against this kind of ‘critical’ practice, is that in its remotion or incessant deferral of its critical opportunities, it becomes what Rorty ironically condemned it as -- ‘private fantasy.’ And private fantasy, as opposed to what Rorty thinks, cannot ‘radically interrupt’ modernity or the tradition of Western metaphysics. Ironically, it remains a repetition of this tradition as it does not problematize the (im)possibility of overcoming. As such, Derrida is a thinker, who like some other postmodern theorists, and like an artist, cannot be followed, only repeated.

Vattimo follows thinkers like Heidegger and Adorno, who in his interpretation, dared to live the ‘adventure of the dialectic’ as un-grounding difference, as a following of thought as ex-tension, repetition but with a difference. Following Vattimo, we understand that in order to critically engage with the tradition of modernity or Western metaphysics -- if indeed we hope to leave its worst aspects behind us, or if we intend not to repeat its systemizing authoritarianism -- we cannot merely announce its ‘end,’ and we cannot just ignore this announcement as a ‘passing fad’ either. Rather, we have to intersect the tradition in order to ‘interrupt’ it, relating to it with a transformed and distorted notion of overcoming as andenkend-verwindernd thought and practice. For, Vattimo also points out that with “Derrida’s preference for the margins -- the frame, the borders, etc. -- another metaphysics lies in ambush: that which looks for the true or perhaps the most authentic, the most worthy of being said and thought, in what lies outside the canon” (101). So what can be read as a betrayal of origins in Derridean deconstruction can also, seemingly, be read as a paradoxical and/or unwitting return to origins. Derrida, like Lyotard, seems to avoid the truly radical thing, which would be to explicate the paradox in which he is captured through a problematization of overcoming. Whether this is Derrida’s double-bind, blindspot, risk, or ‘just/only/merely’ Vattimo’s interpretation seems to be beside the point as far as Vattimo himself is concerned. For Vattimo, “this attitude... can nonetheless be called aestheticist, in a broad sense that encompasses the rhetoric of the bohémien artist, the damned poet and the creative intellectual as excluded from the harmony of the bourgeois order and so on” (101).
But leaving aside the complexities of Vattimo's argument in *Beyond Interpretation* for the time being, not to mention the defense of Derrida against these kinds of accusations, and concentrating again on the essay "Postmodern Criticism: Postmodern Critique", it is important to note that his main emphasis in that essay is precisely his own fidelity to Heidegger's text, that is, to Heidegger's insistence on still speaking of Being. For Vattimo, this fidelity marks both what he sees as the 'originary inspiration' of hermeneutics, and also the critical difference between his ontological hermeneutics and Derridean deconstruction, or even Rortyean pragmatism. Vattimo claims that "if Heidegger were wrong in claiming that what we are trying to recollect is Being and not simply the Meaning of (multiple) texts (Being and not simply beings) -- then, I think, it would be difficult to avoid the consequence of the hermeneutic nihilism of Valéry's motto: *mes vers ont le sens qu'on leur prête*" (63), identifiable with the *anironic* epistemological relativism of modernism. Quite simply, Vattimo's main argument in this essay "is that the experience of philosophical hermeneutics, especially in Heidegger's texts, points toward a more complex 'future' for criticism in the epoch of the end of ideologies and *meta-récits*; this future is not simply identifiable with hermeneutic nihilism, 'wild' criticism" (63). Or, as David Wood summarizes in his Introduction to *Writing the Future*, if the characteristically modern link between criticism and critique has been dissolved, then Vattimo suggests that "we can find resources in Heideggerian hermeneutics" (6) to avoid the formalist and/or nihilist developments of 'wild criticism'.

And thus, to bring us back to the point at which we left off in the previous chapter, Vattimo proposes a complement to Luther's formula *sola Scriptura* -- which as you will remember referred to scripture alone, the multiple texts freed from any normative horizons -- and this is the "slightly different expression: *solum scriptura*" (63). In Vattimo's words, "not only: the scripture alone, the text as such, read and listened to independently from any normative horizon of *meta-récit*; but also: only the scripture, and therefore not any kind of message, only what has the character of the Scripture" (63). It is at this point, with the complement that he proposes to Luther's formula, that Vattimo introduces the idea of the text as a monument, which he later explicates in its two different senses. But here he proposes that (textual) monumentality could be seen as a possible external normative horizon, and thus "should open the way to the reconstruction of a contextuality or rationality which can provide a sort of horizon in which, although in a *verwundene* form, criticism can still operate in conjunction with critique" (63-4).

Basically, whereas Luther's *sola Scriptura* "opposed the clarity of the Holy Scripture to all external normative horizons" (63), Vattimo's *solum scriptura* wants to emphasize "that the transmission in which Being exclusively consists happens only in scripture, in the written word" (63). It is a matter here of constantly collocating, mediating, and attenuating the shifting emphases of 'nothing but' and 'only'; exclusivity and inclusivity; focus and dispersal; critical proximity and critical distance; the immediate and the mediated; communication and possibility; message and message characteristics, criteria, or protocol; missive and mittenze; 'circuit' and 'conduit'; 'current' and 'generating apparatus'; utterance and monumental condition required for utterance; the multiple récits and the multiple meta-récits; reception/interpretation and (thanking/Danken for the) sending/belonging; Verwunderung and *An-denken*, the forgetting of Being (in the objective sense of the genitive) and the memory of Dasein (in the subjective sense of the genitive); tradition (as *Ueberlieferung*) and (tradition as) Being; the work of art, text, or trace *and* the history of its effects or of the interpretations by way of which it has been handed down to us (what Vattimo calls, following Gadamer, the *Wirkungsgeschichte*); (ontological) hermeneutics and epistemology; truth as opening and truth as correspondence; aesthetic experience and methodological rationale; truth and method; difference and identity (but also similarity and difference); event and eventuality; rhetoric (persuasion) and proof (demonstration); performance and argumentation; practice and theory; circumstantial evidence and absolute evidence; criticism and critique....

One can easily see by this list that it can go on and on; indeed, it does. For in consideration of the project at hand, one is reminded of the emphasis discussed earlier-- that is, on the mediation which is attempted between a single-author study, on the one hand, and a single-author study which operates as an occasion for the practice of postmodern criticism as postmodern critique, on the other hand; or on the attempt to negotiate the founding of an *anironic* historical referent within the unfounded and unfounding context of an ironic historical referent; or on the attempt to attenuate a 'realism' within a reflexive context. By discovering itself as 'only' or 'just' interpretation, Vattimo claims that hermeneutics has to account for two other corollary 'discoveries': "hermeneutics... not only has 'discovered' that Being is nothing but *Ge-Schick*, trans-mission; but, exactly by freeing scripture from any dependence on Being conceived of in terms of external, factual, objective reality, has discovered that being as *Ge-Schick* gives itself, or happens, only in that 'monumentalized' utterance which is the written word" (63). This point is reinforced in Vattimo's "Reconstruction of Rationality", where he insists that hermeneutics must come to acknowledge the fact that it belongs to a tradition; in the practice of hermeneutics we cannot simply just go to the text(s), we must also recognize how exactly in being an instantiation of Being, it has been transmitted or sent to us through another (hi)story (another text) of its effects. As Vattimo says in that essay,
...there is no ‘phenomenological’ analysis of experience (the inverted commas cannot be avoided here) that is not conditioned, that is, made possible and qualified, by the fact of belonging to a tradition. Even the [Derridian] coup de dés is described in reference to the historical experience of an artist from the past. Its arbitrariness, consequently, can only reside in the refusal to explain why precisely this term and this specific historical reference are chosen (105).

Following this, Vattimo takes contemporary hermeneutics itself to task, asking, “but is this not a situation familiar to hermeneutics -- that one who is dominated by prejudices cannot recognize them and thematize them as such?” (105). Vattimo wonders if “there is not here something that Gadamer would call a forgetting [oblio] or a remotion of Wirkungsgeschichte” (105). He urges that “in the thesis that a work of art, a text or a trace of the past can only be understood on the basis of the history of its effects, of the interpretations by way of which it has been handed down to us -- there may lie a clue for the reconstruction of an idea of hermeneutic rationality” (105).

So to say that the text is a monument means not only that it “is a texture, a tissue, which brings with itself a specific ‘substantiality’; [but also that] it is transmitted only because it conforms to certain rules (grammar, first of all) and therefore enters the domain of the ‘transmitted’ forms” (Vattimo “Postmodern Criticism: Postmodern Critique” 63). That domain itself constitutes a possible horizon according to Vattimo, who insists that the text is Being “exactly because it is written, or: because it is put into the monumental condition which is required for transmission” (63). Thus, to reemphasize Vattimo’s critical difference from (more like a supplement to) Derrida and ‘wild criticism,’ the substantiality of the text, its written essence, not only has “the ‘negative’ meaning it has in Derrida’s grammatology -- according to which exactly because it is nothing but scripture the text cannot be called Being” (63, my emphasis). In addition, and in a seemingly paradoxical way, Vattimo insists on following Heidegger in still speaking of Being. And thus, what Vattimo’s supplement to the Lutheran motto accomplishes is a mediation: “If the principle sola Scriptura frees the text from its dependence on metaphysical meta-récits, the formula solum scriptura should open the way to the reconstruction of a contextuality which can provide a sort of horizon in which, although in a verwundene form, criticism can still operate in conjunction with critique” (64).
Chapter 2

‘At Least’ Two Senses of Textual Monumentality:
Dialectic, Parallax, Diaphora

At the end of his essay “Postmodern Criticism: Postmodern Critique,” Vattimo develops his statement that texts are monuments “at least in two senses” (64). It soon becomes clear that this statement might also have been written as ‘in at least two senses.’ There are indeed ‘at least’ two senses here, for, as with the extension of ‘mediated alignments’ listed and discussed in the previous section, these two senses are not to be understood as a strict binary opposition. Or, if one must think of them that way, precisely in order to make them ‘thinkable,’ one might start out to conceive of the first term in the pair as running along the ‘vertical’ axis of a double axis system, and the second term as running along the ‘horizontal’ axis of such a system. As such, the interpretation of the text-monument would be understood as comprising the ‘resultant diagonal’ axis, forming a pseudo-dialectic — ‘pseudo,’ because the movement of these operations would almost be conceived of as ‘simultaneous’. That is, they would be ‘simultaneous’ in the sense that they should be thought together and through (inclusive of) one another, rather than as a strict temporally-sequenced dialectic, wherein the second antithetical moment negates the first thetical moment, and the third synthetical moment cancels out and deletes (or forgets) the first two. Thus in the ‘pseudo-dialectic,’ the ‘diagonal’ or ‘synthetical’ axis would form the trace of the text-monument thought/received in its ‘at least two senses,’ and as such, it would also be understood to constitute a kind of thetic ‘fourth moment’ -- more like a ‘simultaneity,’ or even (a) parallactic displacement.

The latter description would be more suitable here, because the notion of simultaneity is not exactly appropriate. What we would want to understand in our conceptualization of the ‘pseudo-dialectic’ is the sense of it incorporating both flexibility and memory in its operations, and the sense of parallactic revision, with its suggestion of alternating, and thus undeniably sequenced (narrative) ‘moves,’ is closer to the dialectical model of hermeneutic rationality that Vattimo seeks to explicate on the model of dialogue, oscillation, or collocation. In fact, and not incidentally, the parenthetical subtitle of Vattimo’s Adventure of Difference: Philosophy After Nietzsche and Heidegger is Parallax Re-Visions of Culture and Society. Furthermore, the sense of parallactic revision is also akin to the notions of hovering, intersection, overlap, and interface which were discussed in the opening part of this division in relation to the texts under consideration, modes of historical transformation, and this thesis paper itself. Of course, we can append to these notions many others, such as the thought of the interstice, the thought of the interim, ‘now-time,’ or even, as we shall see, moderation, intermediacy,... weakness.

But, taking one of these terms, parallax, in contrast to the Hegelian dialectical model conceived as _Aufhebung_, one finds that it captures the sense of a synthetical operation which involves, not the rescissory resolution of a simple oppositional difference, but rather a movement (interpretation) calculated on the basis of its ‘memory’ of the first two (that is, the ‘original’ difference). As such, it could be understood as a ‘simultaneity’ only insofar as it involves the negotiation of (at least) two other movements, which in themselves comprise an (un)founding difference which is never quite synthesized or resolved into an identity. With this description, it is important to note that what we are working towards defining here represents a return, not only to Hegel, perhaps the ‘ghost’ for all thought, as Derrida suggests, but also to another philosopher who self-consciously divulged his (negative) indebtedness to the thought of Hegel, Theodor Adorno. His ‘negative dialectics’ involves a condemnation of Hegelian idealism as a regressive fantasy of ‘organic wholeness,’ and thus it also involves an explicit critique of Hegel’s belief that he had effected the reconciliation of the dialectical poles. As such, Adorno’s negative dialectics aim at constantly undermining and defeating any final synthesis. In his insistence that “dialectical processes never resolve themselves into a final synthesis where problems are completely overcome” (Sim 249), Adorno is thought to prefigure both deconstruction and post-Marxism. But it is perhaps more important to note that he did, nevertheless, ‘live the adventure of the dialectic,’ as Vattimo says. Adorno did take the risk to return to dialectical thought in order to transform, but not overcome, its contents. Vattimo takes his cue from Adorno’s negative dialectics, but in a slightly different way from either post-structuralist or post-Marxist thought. For, in Vattimo’s thinking, although an original difference involves a _decision_ in its negotiation, this decision need not be the rescission of difference -- it is more like an exchange. But at the same time, the importance of some kind of resolution, synthesis, or decision is not the primary ‘stress’ for Vattimo. He plays out the dialectic a bit differently. The injunction to decide is mediated with the undeniable quality of all thought, but it is nevertheless accepted in a _temperance_ of finality, rather than being constantly undermined, defeated, or rejected altogether, as it ostensibly is in many deconstructive practices. Perhaps Adorno’s historical vicinity to the horror of Auschwitz or his ‘witnessing’ of the late capitalist American ‘culture industries’ formed more of a ‘palpable’ foreground in his thought, constantly calling it to resist in difference. Nevertheless, for Vattimo, the foreground, ‘for now’ has a
different tone. Rather than a menacing ‘reality’ in the foreground, there is the menacing ‘simulation’ of the ‘hyperreal’ in postmodernist theories, or the stagnancy of the contemporary koïné of the philosophy of difference (deconstruction). Vattimo's interpretation of the text-monument is thus only ever an attempt to insert a decision, or an (an) ironic historical referent, into a context understood by Vattimo as an ongoing dialogue; as such, ironically, this identity is never decisive, but only ever provisional or even preparatory, in the sense that its positing anticipates revision.

In fact, though, and with reference to the text-monument, it is even more adequate to think of such a 'pseudo' dialectic as being both a 'geometrics,' as we started out to describe above, and an 'energetics,' so that we do not fall prey to the 'fantasy of a geometrical clarity, symmetry and proportion' (3), as Andrew Gibson warns in his book *Towards a postmodern theory of narrative*. Speaking of the narrative text, Gibson urges us to problematize the kind of geometricization that has been present in narratology from the start, wherein "the geometry of the text and its intelligibility become inseparable" (4). Gibson would have us attempt to disturb narratological space as it has been habitually conceived: "a unitary, homogenous space, determined by and organised within a given set of constants" (7). We can heed these warnings against any structural fixation, extending Gibson's challenge to the present context, precisely by thinking of Vattimo's suggested mediations as a kind of 'diaphoristics' in the sense that Peter Carravetta, also a reader of Vattimo, hopes to recover in his book entitled *Prefaces to the Diaphora*.

The word *Diaphora*, which in Ancient Greek stood for the 'quarrel' or 'contest' or, more correctly, the 'specific difference' among species, though in Aristotle is made to coincide with final form, definition, and by implication essence, ...[can be] readapted to double as the umbrella notion for a difference predicated upon *movement, exchange, and figuration*.... Movement and exchange is built right into the word, that is, *dia*: 'in between,' and *phora/pherein*: 'bring across,' 'bear' (xi). The Diaphora then intends to signify a movement akin to a dialogue between and among forms of discourse that, though typically exclusive of one another, are here made to relate and transfer signification from one semantic/hermeneutic position to another (xi).

Gibson himself reads Vattimo's 'weak thought' or 'weak ontology' as being precisely the type of thought which is amenable to the development of a postmodern theory of narrative and a postmodern critical practice in its disturbing of traditional dimensions of thought, narratological and otherwise. However, and as we shall discuss later, Gibson is not directly proposing a 'diaphoristics,' as Carravetta is. He ends up proposing that we follow future-invested and past-divested postmodern thinkers like Baudrillard, Lyotard, or Deleuze. But this proposal, as Vattimo argues, puts a peculiar 'end' to the conversation, perhaps, in some instances, despite its own best intentions. The diaphora is no more an exchange, but strangely, a rigidification back into Aristotelian difference, understood as essence.

One last stress: if we *do* follow through the idea of a postmodern theory as dialogue or as diaphora, following Vattimo and Carravetta, we must also realize that we have to have currency in the exchange. What this paper understands and attempts to practice, then, is a certain 'banking on' or risk of positing a historical referent for postmodernity. These grounds are its peculiar investment; peculiar, because the investment is not short-term. What this paper articulates as a current practice for thought in the exchange is a return to the moment of a particular detonation: the mid-century crisis of the H-bomb. This is telling for thought at the end of the millennium, in terms of where its future investments should be. Simply, then, the currency of this paper involves a return to the economics of excess which seems to describe the current situation of thought in postmodernity. Holding this currency up, extending it, this paper articulates a discovery: it is only paper, or only paper in at least two senses. This is not an entirely frivolous discovery, however; we do not let the paper fly to the wind, but nor do we hoard it. The excess of postmodern thought reveals its scarcity and its poverty in a different sense, and thus also the need to return philosophical and theoretical thought to a particular (practice of) crisis (thinking). It is Vattimo's hope that postmodern thought retains this currency for the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, and all allegories aside, if we can think here, not only in terms of a double-axis-(pseudo/negative)-dialectic or parallactic displacement, but also, 'bisociatively,' in terms of kinetics (kinesis, motion, flow, force, dynamic, change, movement, exchange), we would be able to think through and practice the mediations which Vattimo suggests a postmodern criticism would be mindful of. And thus we can take up the challenge that he proposes for thinking at the end of his essay, to shape the connection between criticism and critique in their modern sense "in an original way which has still to be thought" (66).
Chapter 3

Vattimo's Risk of Intermediate Postmodernism and the Tradition of Extremity

It should be discussed, at this point, how Vattimo himself occupies an interesting and original position in 'the postmodern debate,' in that he offers an 'interstitial' (an 'in-between,' intermittent, oscillating, middling, diaphoric, mediatory, or even parallactic-re-visionary) way of thinking through what has come to be called the Habermas-Lyotard aporia. Hovering amongst the uncompromising (or even avowedly uncompromised) and extreme 'positions' of Jürgen Habermas (a late member of the 'Frankfurt School' of which Adorno was a major representative), neo-Marxists (such as Fredric Jameson or Terry Eagleton), Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida, Vattimo compromises his position. In fact, his position becomes suggestive of the belief that, as Peter Carravetta says, “criticism must accept the risks, indeed the constant betrayal, of its discourse, and look to the unreachable otherness or alterity of the text as the motive force of future history” (Carravetta xiii-xiv). As with Carravetta, for Vattimo intermediacy loses the stigma of 'mediocrity' simply by his accepting of this ‘betrayal’ of moderation, inadequacy, or ‘low’ proficiency (compromised or 'weak' thought). Instead it becomes the ‘adequate’ attitude or risk to take (on) in ‘the postmodern debate,’ as already discussed in great detail in the opening part of this division. In the postmodern context, intermediacy becomes more ‘adequate’ than strong, agonistic, extreme, radical, and uncompromising (ironically modernist) ‘positions’ precisely because the inadequacy or the compromised (provisional) quality of its ‘position’ is post-modern. Against this position, it could be alleged, as it is for instance by neo-Marxist critics, that postmodern criticism is always already complicit in the system that it criticizes. But, to counter this argument: first, it must be remembered that Vattimo differentiates his project from the greater part of postmodern theory, specifically theories which make a serious theoretical and political mistake in 'severing' their concerns and their work from the critiques (the metanarratives) of the modernist tradition; and secondly, Vattimo criticizes the aforementioned anti-postmodernist argument as itself continuing a modernist metanarrative in an uncritical way, specifically the wishful thinking of occupying a position outside the system. We could add: finally, this paper intends to extend the risk of tautology in a linking of Vattimo’s theory with a critical practice which takes as its 'object' the historical referent of the Second World War, understood as being correspondent with the ‘end’ of modernity.

In a correspondence with Stefano Rosso from 1991, referring to ‘weak thought’ in order to clarify his own position as a postmodern thinker, Umberto Eco states that he traces “the origins of this ‘soft thought’ to the failure of certain ‘strong’ modes of thinking to take hold after Aristotle with the late Greek and medieval theories of language” (Hoesterey ed. 245). This interpretation of the historical origins of weak thought is similar to Vattimo’s position, with the exception of the word ‘failure.’ For, as already insinuated, it is not as if strong modes of thinking have actually failed, not in a modern sense and not in a postmodern sense either; and Vattimo certainly does not hold this view.

Rather, in surveying the postmodern scene, Vattimo understands that strong modes of thinking have either retained and even increased their preponderance, in terms of technological-rationalist thought, or they have been neglected altogether, specifically in terms of postmodern hermeneutics -- which, with its often hasty dismissal of tradition, actually and ironically represents an unproblematized continuance of strong thought. In his essay “Postmodernism, Modernity, and the Tradition of Dissent”, Lloyd Spencer remarks that postmodernism in philosophy and cultural theory “has had a distinct French accent” (166), and that for instance, with regard to theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, there has been no sustained attempt to engage seriously with the tradition of Marxism which they developed away from. He states that “it has largely been left to English-speaking writers, such as Jameson and [Douglas] Kellner, to bring the two traditions [postmodernism and Marxism] into critical engagement with one another” (166). However, Spencer points out that one notable exception to this generalization

would seem to be the way in which Lyotard’s French theory has defined itself in opposition to the thinking of the German social theorist, Jürgen Habermas. In The Postmodern Condition [1984 (1979)] Lyotard develops his most-quoted definitions of postmodernism (as a suspicion of metanarratives) as an explicit critique of Habermas’s ambitious intellectual project. Habermas is singled out for this unique distinction because his aims remain unashamedly synthetic and constructive (rather than analytical and deconstructive) (166).
However, Habermas has at least been critically engaging with postmodern theory, formulating responses to postmodernism in social theory as early as 1981, for instance in an essay entitled “Modernity versus Postmodernity”, in which “he drew comparisons between postmodern theory and neo-conservatism” (Spencer 167). Now, Spencer makes the argument that, even in his more sustained and substantial treatment of what he sees as ‘the flaws and dangers of postmodernism,’ presented in his twelve lectures on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (1985), Habermas’ engagement is anything but direct. Spencer states that, although Habermas treats of Foucault and Derrida, as well as the antecedents of postmodern thinking in Nietzsche, Heidegger and the surrealist Georges Bataille, nevertheless “he is more concerned to trace what he sees as a more promising basis for understanding modernity (and postmodernity) through the insights of Hegel and the theorization of late capitalism (and late modernism) by Horkheimer and Adorno” (167). Significantly, and as Spencer also points out, an aporia is fixed between Habermas and Lyotard, who seemingly speak as representatives from across a divide of ‘opposing’ camps, and their positions become transfixed; as neither wishes to avow complicity in the other’s project or concerns, neither accepts the betrayal of moderation or intermediacy, and so, there is no dialogue. The postmodern debate takes on its ‘extreme’ character, the positions within it really just becoming a modernist recoup. And it is at this precise point, this ‘interim’ and ‘interstice,’ that Vattimo situates his response -- publishing The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture in 1985 (trans. 1988) -- and his conception of postmodern hermeneutic ontology or ‘weak thought,’ which he is still developing today. Richard Rorty is another thinker who addresses this impasse. And, as Spencer points out, in a collection of essays devoted to Habermas and Modernity he gives a succinct summary of the way in which both Habermas and Lyotard talk past one another.

Anything that Habermas will count as retaining a ‘theoretical approach’ will be counted by an incredulous Lyotard as a ‘meta-narrative.’ Anything that abandons such an approach will be counted by Habermas as ‘neoconservative,’ because it drops the notions which have been used to justify the various reforms which have marked the history of the Western democracies since the Enlightenment, and which are still being used to criticize the socio-economic institutions of both the Free and the Communist worlds. Abandoning a standpoint which is, if not transcendental, at least ‘universalistic,’ seems to Habermas to betray the social hopes which have been central to liberal politics. So we find French critics of Habermas ready to abandon liberal politics in order to avoid universalistic philosophy, and Habermas trying to hang on to universalistic philosophy, with all its problems in order to support liberal politics (quoted in Spencer 167).

Yes, Vattimo seems to say, agreeing with Habermas, the (rational) project of modernity is incomplete; but he adds that it can only ‘complete’ itself within the context of postmodernity -- that is, within the context of a postmodern (way of) thinking, for instance, a postmodern criticism which will be a Verwindung of criticism in its modern (rational) ‘Wesen.’ Vattimo urges the defenders of the modernist (Enlightenment) project of rationality, such as Habermas, to be attentive to the (differential) effects (concatenated reflections upon, readings, or ‘openings’) of the tradition of Western metaphysics as the destiny of Being. But he also urges postmodern thinkers not to refuse the destined inherency of the modern in the postmodern; for that inherency which we want to reject or overcome (perhaps writing it off as a ‘failure’ or as ‘error’) will come back to haunt us, betraying our debts to a modernist ‘tradition.’ But in fact, that refusal or rescission is itself always (and in light of the above point, obviously) already betrayed, always already indebted to the tradition. And although the issues of acceptance and refusal have already been discussed in some detail, it must be reiterated that refusal, as Ueberwindung or overcoming, is precisely the modernist fantasy of the ‘new,’ the ‘fresh start,’ or even the dream of the Nietzschean Uebermensch. So quite simply and -- with regard to the groundless relativism of much postmodern thought which nevertheless upholds itself as a radical challenge to the tradition of modernity -- contradictorily, refusal or rejection of the strong modes of thought which characterize modernity represents an unwitting return to these strong modes of thought. For it is not as if this return, citation, or indebtedness is ever avoidable; rather, the postmodern neglect or dismissal of the modern is an issue precisely because it marks an unproblematized return to the modern. As Vattimo argues in his introductory chapter to Beyond Interpretation, “The Nihilistic Vocation of Hermeneutics”, philosophy’s acceptance (of the past, of its historic-cultural ‘provenance’) is always insinuated (either explicitly or implicitly) in its discourse which is structured as a response, or as a dialogue. He states that “it is true up to a point that all
philosophies, if not explicitly ‘ontologies of actuality’ (which is, however, probably the case at least for post-Hegelian philosophies, as Habermas has observed), are always responses to contingent questions” (10).

But perhaps it is worth a pause for further discussion on the issue of overcoming or refusal. For the position of those who would claim to overcome, reject, or refuse modernity, its metanarratives, and the Enlightenment rational tradition represents an extreme but nevertheless rhetorically persuasive one in the so-called postmodern debate. But the truth is, according to Vattimo, we cannot simply forget, overcome, or annul the inherency of the tradition or its continuity, and claim a ‘discontinuous’ or radical position within (rupture or break with) tradition. And even if we feigned to do this, ironically it would not be anything ‘new.’ As Rodolphe Gasché states in his book on Jacques Derrida called Inventions of Difference (and here it is worth quoting the whole passage, as it will be useful to keep it mind when we discuss Vattimo’s criticism of Derrida, for his argument against the Derridian ‘philosophy of difference’ is quite complex):

To characterize a thinker’s work as breaking with the entire tradition is a quite traditional mode of thought. Moreover, such a break with tradition and traditionalism is in the best tradition of philosophical thought. The rupture in question is a function of the singularity, uniqueness, and spontaneity of a position that without prejudice or bias -- independent of tradition-bound everyday truth; of the truth of traditions that have grown on a national soil; and, finally, of the truths of a calcified tradition of philosophizing itself -- invents itself in a new beginning. Since Aristotle conceived of the beginning of philosophy in wonder -- the Grundstimmung of philosophical thought, as Heidegger calls it -- philosophy requires that it always be reenacted as if for the first time. A radical break with the tradition and its limits -- an epoche in Cartesian or Husserlian terms -- secures the freshness of the beginning of a thinking that lives up to the initial pathos of the philosophical thaumazein. Such a break with the tradition is constitutive of the genuine tradition of philosophical inquiry. It is not possible to philosophize in a true fashion without desiring to disregard, neglect, ignore, overcome, dismantle, leave behind the whole tradition. This fundamental exigency of an always-new start assures the essential radicality to which philosophy as philosophy must aspire. Thus to describe a thinker’s work as completely breaking with tradition, and as escaping historical and historiographical characterization, is a sure way to situate that thinker in the tradition of genuine philosophical thought, that is, as a repetition of the inaugural first time of philosophical wonder (59).

Now, it is not as if Vattimo holds that Derrida’s work constitutes or even attempts such a ‘break’ or ‘rupture’ with tradition, which is the accusation against which Gasché defends Derrida in this passage. For Vattimo first of all recognizes the impossibility (we can never presume to be without prejudice or bias, but we can only fail or choose not to thematize our prejudice or bias) and even, in a seemingly paradoxical way, the conventionality of such presumption to ‘singularity’ in the same way that Gasché does. Again, Vattimo recognizes, as Gasché himself credits him for, that the idea of a definite end of a historical project, of a reappropriation and recuperation of the Other of Reason at the end of history, is itself modern in nature” (Gasché 112, my emphasis). Therefore, and to repeat: in this sense nothing claiming to be breaking with modernity or deciding the end of modernity (or history, or ideology) could be anything but, and paradoxically so, modern in itself. And it is important to note here that Vattimo does think of Derrida as a postmodern thinker -- this is a significant point to keep in mind while discussing in further detail Vattimo’s criticism of Derrida and deconstruction.

Vattimo has written about the Rortyean experience of truth (or model of historical transformation) which is conceived in the same ‘wondrous’ aesthetic terms as described by Gasché, in its repeating of “the initial pathos of the philosophical thaumazein” (ibid 59); as such, it “becomes a poetic or aesthetic experience” (Beyond Interpretation 99), or “the encounter -- necessarily non-argumentative -- with a new system of metaphor, or a new paradigm, whose comprehension and acceptance have nothing to do with procedures of demonstration, or at most only with persuasive argumentation” (98). And he takes note that, “as is well known, Rorty regards his idea of
hermeneutics as being well represented by Jacques Derrida" (98). That Derrida himself is persuaded by the accuracy of Rorty’s description of his work as “an exemplary way of practising philosophy as hermeneutics, namely as an encounter with and listening for new metaphorical systems” (99), Vattimo doubts. But he nevertheless uses Rorty’s description of deconstruction -- as “a way of practising philosophy [which] offers no justification for its own preferability, [and which] ultimately is itself a ‘poetic’ and creative proposal of a new paradigm, of a new metaphorical language” (99) -- as “a good example of what the critics call the irrationalism of hermeneutics" (99).

What Vattimo mentions here, the accusation of ‘irrationalism’ against hermeneutics (or even more so, against postmodernism, or in other circles, poststructuralism), is precisely the issue which has decided the stand-off or impasse in the aforementioned ‘postmodern debate’, between the defenders of rationality (for instance, represented by the work of Habermas) and the proponents of postmodemism (for instance, represented by the work of Lyotard and Derrida). In her essay “Postmodernism as Discursive Event”, which introduces the volume of 1991 essays Zeitgeist in Babel: the postmodernist controversy, the editor Ingeborg Hoesterey characterizes the above impasse as “the dialogical constellation Habermas-Lyotard-Derrida virulent in critical theory circles” (xii). In fact, the charge of irrationalism made against Derrida’s work and deconstruction, held by Rorty as “the only writing to radically interrupt and transfigure the tradition of metaphysics” (Gasché 8), is also virulent in philosophical circles, as elsewhere. Gasché states that Derrida’s ‘singularity’ has “most often provoked either a violent hostility or a mechanical imitation that obscures” (1) his thought from our sight. As such, the charge of irrationalism against Derrida, and as well, the obscurantist practice of deconstruction in North America, are what Gasché seeks to refute in Inventions of Difference. Nevertheless, and as the title of the book betrays, Gasché defends what he perceives to be Derrida’s singular and radical position within the tradition of Western philosophical thought. In his chapter “Answering for Reason”, Gasché refutes the charge of irrationalism, especially in terms of Habermas’ extension of it against “the left Hegelians on to Martin Heidegger, Theodor W. Adorno, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault” (111). These are thinkers whom Habermas characterizes as postmodern, that is, as participating in the “all-out abrogation of reason and rationality” (Gasché 110), or the ‘farewell’ to modernity and its discourse as a whole. And Gasché therefore refutes Habermas’ polemical dismissal of postmodern thought as a ‘pursuit of an immemorial’ anarchism, which, after Nietzsche, characterizes the Other of reason in essentially two forms -- forgotten Being (Martin Heidegger) and ecstatic sovereignty (Georges Bataille)” (110). And while, on the one hand, Vattimo would concur with Gasché’s refutation of Habermas’ polemical dismissal of postmodern thought; on the other hand, Vattimo would also concur with Habermas’ contention that Derrida — whose deconstructive writing practices Vattimo understands as being largely representative of postmodern hermeneutics as it is practiced today (and particularly in France) -- is “a nicht argumentationsfreudiger Philosoph, that is, a philosopher with little enthusiasm for argumentation” (Gasché 121). As such, Vattimo states that the accusation of irrationalism is not entirely unfounded, especially as this accusation is propagated in its ‘weaker’ form, maintaining “that hermeneutics involves a more or less explicit rejection of argumentation, which is replaced by a kind of creative-poetic, or even purely narrative, way of philosophizing” (Beyond Interpretation 97).

Thus between Habermas and Vattimo, the difference seems almost to be a matter of where each decides to ‘draw the (postmodern) line.’ Habermas draws it somewhere in the vicinity of Kant, only but admittedly seeking “to return to the level of the critique of reason inaugurated by Kant, and ‘the trace of communicative reason’ to be found in the early Hegel” (Gasché 111). And Habermas also moves a different kind of ‘line’ up to his current situation, presumably recommending, in exact reverse of many postmodern thinkers, that we overcome (ignore or reject) the present. But Vattimo, by contrast, does have positive things to say about the criticism to which reason has been subjected from the left Hegelians on until present-day postmodern thinkers. His main complaint, however, is regarding the loss or predominant negligence of any argued rationalization for the hermeneutic koiné of postmodernity. That is, Vattimo challenges the hermeneutics which has become a common idiom of Western culture, wherein “the generalization of the notion of interpretation to the point where it coincides with the very experience of the world” (Beyond Interpretation 4) has come about “at the expense of a dilution of its original philosophical meaning” (ibid 1). Vattimo’s programme in his 1997 book Beyond Interpretation, to explicate and even, ironically, demonstrate the significance of hermeneutics for philosophy, is indicative of the refinement of his own philosophical position since he first began writing in the sixties. What has emerged in his thinking is an increasingly clarified injunction for the hermeneutic koiné of postmodernity to come “radically to terms with the historicity and finitude of pre-understanding, with Heidegger’s Geworfenheit” (ibid 6). Vattimo’s thought, in this way, represents an extension towards collocating critical practices with critique, while all the same, not divesting itself of a ‘check’ on the authoritarian impulses of critique. For if it is not merely to be the metatheory of the play of interpretations, hermeneutics must take a further step: namely, undertaking “a more radical recognition of its own historicity, its own formal character as interpretation, eliminating the final metaphysical equivocality that stands as a threat to it and which is apt to make of it a purely relativistic philosophy of cultural multiplicity” (ibid 9).
Simply speaking, Vattimo argues that postmodern hermeneutics, as it is practiced today in the nineties and in the future, must defend itself: not as a metaphysical discovery of the true objective structure of human existence, but as a kind of history. Thus specifically, "its truth may be wholly summed up in the claim to be the most persuasive philosophical interpretation of that course of events of which it feels itself to be the outcome" (ibid 11). And the course of events to which Vattimo refers here is, of course, the events of modernity, for which postmodern hermeneutics thus assumes responsibility: "both against other competing interpretations and against the historiographical objectivism that mistrusts all such epochal categories while yet taking for granted a naively objectivistic conception of historiography (the events of modernity are so varied and manifold that one cannot speak of them in such general terms) and referring everything to one specialism or another, beginning with its own, which is itself accepted as beyond dispute" (ibid 11) -- an obvious reference to Habermas.

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Some might want to accuse Vattimo of reverting to historicism here -- to which accusation, he responds: "Yes, if one means that the only valid form of argument in favour of the truth of hermeneutics is a certain interpretation of the events of modernity" (ibid 11). But he emphasizes that postmodern hermeneutics does not in this way become a deterministic historicism. That is, while the arguments which hermeneutics can offer to support its own interpretation of modernity must involve an ironic awareness of being 'only' interpretations, this is not because there is any kind of concealed belief that there exists outside of these arguments a true reality that could be read otherwise. Rather, as Vattimo explains, this admission of 'weakness' is done because these arguments "admit to being unable to appeal, in support of their own validity, to any immediate objective evidence whatsoever" (ibid 11). The point is, the argument must still be made, the defense still posited -- we must revert, however ironically, to the strong modes of thinking that characterize modernity. As such, the value of postmodern hermeneutics will lie in its "being able to establish a coherent picture we can share while waiting for others to propose a more plausible alternative" (ibid 11).

For a thinker like Umberto Eco, however, the position that Vattimo argues as a necessity for postmodern hermeneutics would seem to take place as a matter of course. And it is important to differentiate Vattimo’s thought, or at least the position of this paper, from this type of thinking which finds postmodernism/-ity to be so obvious that it is almost not worth talking about -- what amounts to a naturalization of the postmodern. In the previously mentioned “Correspondence on Postmodernism” with Stefano Rosso, Eco states that he believes, in light of the fact that before long Homer himself will be considered ‘postmodern,’ that the anachronistic tendency to apply the term ‘postmodern’ further back in time "is to some extent justified" (Hoesterey ed. 242). He explains that he does not consider the postmodern to be "a chronologically circumscribed tendency but a spiritual category, or better yet a Kunstwollen (a Will-to-Art), perhaps a stylistic device and/or world view" (ibid 242). In fact, Eco believes that every age has its own postmodern, just as every age has its own form of mannerism, and he wonders “if postmodern is not simply the modern name for Manierismus as a metahistorical category” (242-3). In contradistinction to Eco’s beliefs, however, Vattimo does not believe in metahistorical transcendentalist categories. And interestingly, Eco’s views are precisely of the kind that Vattimo seeks to differentiate his theory of postmodernism from. The difference would seem to evolve out of the fact that, in the very first place, Vattimo takes very seriously the crisis of historicism which opens the twentieth-century, as articulated at the end of the nineteenth-century by Nietzsche. Eco, by contrast, thinks that “every age reaches moments of crisis like those described by Nietzsche in the second of the Untimely Considerations, on the harmfulness of the study of history” (243). Eco describes this crisis as “the sense that the past is restricting, smothering, blackmailing us” (243). And although this description is perhaps an accurate one, insofar as it describes a crisis of historicism, it does not adequately describe the crisis of historicism (or as Vattimo might say, the 'end/s' of history) in postmodernity. Eco at least goes further than the postmodern theorist Brian McHale, whose refusal to posit any historical referent (effects-history) for the postmodern we have already discussed. But Eco posits such an effects-history only in transcendentalist terms, refusing to posit a specific history for postmodernism, for postmodernity. He states that the historical avant-garde (but here too I would consider avant-garde as a metahistorical category, in the sense in which Renato Poggioli helps us to understand it) tries to settle its accounts with the past.... The avant-garde destroys the past, it disfigures it. The Demoiselles d’Avignon represents the typical gesture of the avant-garde; then the avant-garde goes even further. Having disfigured the figure, it erases it, finally arriving at the abstract, the informal, the empty canvas, the torn canvas, the burned canvas. The same thing happens in all the arts; in architecture it is the
Eco posits that there then follows from the avant-garde a moment when it can go no further “because it has already produced a metalanguage to talk about its own impossible texts (for example, conceptual art and body art)” (243). And at this point, according to Eco, the ‘postmodern’ is simply a retrenchment and thus “the normal production of the midcult and of popular art that always continues, indifferent to the tensions of experimental modes, serving the needs of its own unchanging market” (243).

Eco’s historiographical objectivism is highly problematic in light of some of the same criticisms already offered up against McHale’s postmodern ontological poetics. It is ironic that Eco should feel compelled to defend his informal history of the postmodern from the charge that it merely describes “a dialectical response to the avant-garde” (243). For he defends his interpretation against this charge without admitting (although ironically betraying) the fact that it is actually a reappropriation, or at least a citation of the Hegelian dialectic of history: “the old Hegelian swerve between the in itself and the for itself that activates the entire phenomenological process and needs of its own unchanging market” (243).

Eco’s transcendentalist history is the borrowing or ‘reinvention’ of a specific historical conception of historiography (a specific philosophy of history), which goes unacknowledged (uncited) insofar as Eco himself refuses to acknowledge this specific inheritance from the Western philosophical tradition. The acknowledgment or citation is not made, however, for that would force Eco to contradict his metahistorical or universalist definition of the postmodern (which, like McHale’s theory is really only a postmodern poetics) by historicizing his particular philosophy of history within yet another (particular, that is, historical) tradition. For Eco, though, there is simply no postmodernity; he seems to have (naively, it would seem) relinquished the need to historicize, or to have at least refused to problematize historiography in the very first place, preferring instead, one would assume, dissolution in the aestheticization of experience. And as with McHale, although we can accept his descriptions of the postmodern at face value, they have no further value within the context of Vattimo’s postmodern hermeneutic ontology. Eco states that “the postmodern response to the modern consists instead of recognizing that the past -- since it may not be destroyed, for its destruction results in silence -- must be revisited ironically, in a way which is not innocent” (243). And although this view seems to correspond with Vattimo’s postmodern response, there remains no rationale for what Eco claims other than a ‘naively objectivistic conception of historiography,’ since he has not bothered to make an argued proposition of or for postmodernity.

Vattimo’s own argument for postmodern hermeneutics, for instance, as articulated in the essays of Beyond Interpretation, constitutes an example of the diaphoric-postmodern way of thinking that we have been talking about so far as a mediation (diaphora) of epistemology and hermeneutic ontology -- that is, not simply hermeneutics, but hermeneutic ontology. As such, this mediation should not be understood as a simple desire to blur the boundaries between distinct discursive zones. Vattimo problematizes the postmodern desire for theorists to practice what they preach, and for artists to preach what they practice. In other words, part of his criticism of Derrida involves precisely the literary pretensions of his theoretical or philosophical discourse. Vattimo himself mediates the injunction for disclosure or demonstration of rational-epistemological thought with the openness of a postmodern hermeneutic-ontological approach. In this way, he makes explicit the rhetoric of ‘the waiting game,’ which in his mind has come to characterize much of postmodern thought. But he does so with a clearly posited and reasonable argument which, nevertheless, does not abrogate the vigilance of the postmodern attitude at the same time that it does not consider itself immune from the seduction of the Hegelian promise and fulfillment of reconciliation as Versöhnung. In his previously mentioned essay, Lloyd Spencer points out Richard J. Bernstein’s reminder of ‘this most fundamental, powerful, and perhaps seductive theme of reconciliation’ in Hegel’s philosophy in his The New Constellation of 1990. Spencer suggests that, while Habermas’ treatment of communication and discourse pacts of the spirit of Versöhnung, and “on this basis seeks to transcend ‘systematically distorted communication’” (168), all the same, and contrary to Habermas’ judgment, the ‘postmodern’ celebration of contingency, fragmentation, fissures, singularity, plurality, and ruptures might not be profoundly anti-Hegelian gestures after all. Postmodern theorists who privilege the above celebrations of difference over unity might consider themselves in defiance of reconciliation, but as Spencer notes,
from Hegel to Habermas (and beyond in many other traditions still active) there persists the hope not only of reconciliation among the living but also reconciliation with the dead. The postmodernist attitude of citing, parodying, pastiching, using and reusing the past is surely a significant symptom of our times. The postmodernist intellectual metropolis is one without a cemetary -- there is no 'dead centre' to its town (168).

What Spencer seems to be saying here, is that, ironically or not for itself, even postmodernism, with its emphasis on negativity or a negative relation to the past, is symptomatic of the Hegelian appeal to dialectical (or synthetical) reconciliation. There is every bit as much a grammar of negativity in Derridian deconstruction as there is a betrayal of difference within the positive grammar of Saussurian linguistics. Negativity and positivity always seem to work together in this way, wherein even postmodern philosophy, as an updated version of scepticism, "more concerned with destabilizing other theories and their pretensions to truth than setting up a positive theory of its own" (Sim 13), accrues a definite program of its own, "if only by default" (Sim 13). Saying 'by default,' though, means 'as a matter of course,' and so what one must admit here is that whereas the negative always colludes with the positive, it is not always true for the reverse. Certainly there are historical 'proofs' (Auschwitz and the H-bomb amongst them) which can be posited to support the argument that so-called 'constructive' theories, metanarratives, ideologies, or technologies are not necessarily commensurable with ethical considerations, and do not always function with a synthetic 'conscience' or with the hindrance of scepticism -- in contrast to Vattimo's 'weak' thought.

And thus, we must maintain a negative 'check' (scepticism, knowing irony) on the standard narrative(s) associated with the Western philosophical (and political) tradition; but this does not mean that we should reject positive or reconstructive theorizing altogether, as many postmodern theorists would argue, Rorty being one of them. Because certainly there are ideological implications to adopting the postmodern line of thought, as it is argued by Lyotard or Rorty, or as it is practiced by Derrida and others. Amongst the critics of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Christopher Norris, and Jürgen Habermas find it to be ideologically suspect: as "unwittingly or otherwise, in collusion with the powers-that-be in helping to maintain the status quo" (Sim 13); as rejecting the positive possibilities that remain for ideological confrontation; as having "the effect of serving the cause of the right, which has a vested interest in seeing apathy about the political process grow" (Sim 13); as being empty and insensitive in its problematization, if not moreover in its denial, of the reality which nevertheless does exist behind simulacra and simulation; as an apparent naivety or resignation with the belief that systems no longer need to be opposed; as an unwitting return to the authoritarian imperatives of culture at the theoretical and political level through its very (naive) belief in the 'subversive' powers of its own deployment of philosophy (as paralogy, as metaphor, as allegory, as 'literature'...) to undermine those imperatives. As Stuart Sim states, in his essay "Postmodernism and Philosophy",

to some extent postmodernism has become its own grand narrative (there is a definite postmodern 'line' to most philosophical issues), and therefore vulnerable to attack in its turn. It is also possible to argue that postmodern philosophers have overstated the decline of grand narratives, and one highly pertinent objection to Lyotard's dismissal of their continuing significance has been that religious fundamentalism (a grand narrative if ever there once was one) has manifestly been on the increase in the closing decades of the twentieth century (14).

It would seem then that any dialogue with, response to, return to, or citation of (a) text(s) -- or perhaps at the most basic level, any communication -- must reconcile itself with the structure and event of its thought as the Hegelian dialectic of reconciliation. This reconciliation or admittance in itself would at least involve turning the tradition of dissent (or scepticism or anti-foundationalism or extremity) back on itself in a doubling and duplicitous move of '(knowing-) knowing irony.' We could thus be "more modest in our modernity, more cautious in our hopes, more sceptical of the promise of the future" (Spencer 169), and we could thus generate a more "sober reflection on where we have come from and where we are going" (Spencer 169), that is, on our extensions into the past, present, and future.

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Nevertheless, and by way of extending the argument in this chapter with regard to the tradition of extremity -- and to return to his argument in “The Reconstruction of Rationality” -- Vattimo argues that the accusation of irrationalism in postmodern hermeneutics “at least identifies a risk that is indeed present in the most well known and talked about of hermeneutic theories” (97). Now, it is important to note that the risk which Vattimo alludes to here is not exactly the same risk that we have been so far talking about, namely, the risk of betrayal (belonging, moderation, intermediacy, reconciliation etcetera) that all discourse must accept and acknowledge. Or, in other words, it is a risk in the opposite direction of the same issue, so to speak. For essentially, there are two risks here, with multiple variations or degrees. One would be to refuse the inherency of the (modernist, rationalist, epistemological) tradition and claim to have broken with tradition; and we have already spoken at length about how this is not really a risk as such, but rather, quite a conventional and in itself paradoxically modernist move. And the other risk, the risk that Vattimo thinks is the more adequate (‘radically moderate’) one for postmodern hermeneutics to take, is that of the acceptance and acknowledgement of the ‘thrownness’ of its project, its historical situation of belonging or inhering in a tradition as such. For as long as we acknowledge our historical situation of belonging in this way, we must recognize the difference (and thus also the identity) between any (im)possible or necessary world(s) we can imagine (conjecture) and the historical reality of our situatedness as always being an intersection of the present as constituted by the past and the future. The acknowledgment of this difference is quite simply the ontological difference to which both Heidegger and Vattimo often refer in their writings: or, “the well-known movement between ‘that which appears in a given horizon,’ says Vattimo, and the horizon itself as ‘an open disclosedness which makes possible the appearance of being within it’ (Adventures of Difference 73)” (Carravetta 222).

We can imagine, explain, postulate, theorize, describe, conjecture, or define a (being in the) world; but we can never be sure that these interpretations are correct: “nothing guarantees that the order of our ideas corresponds to the order of things (in the sense meant by Spinoza: ‘ordo et connexio rerum idem est ac ordo et connexio idearum’)” (Eco in Hoesterey ed. 252). In the absence of absolute criteria or foundations of belief to guide us, knowledge becomes interchangeable with a plurality of knowledges; specifically, and as Lyotard argued in his 1979 book The Postmodern Condition, there is a ‘mercantilization of knowledges’ and “a pluralist competition between knowledges” (Easthope 18, in Sim ed.) in the post-industrial postmodern world. But it is not as if this is anything new. Thus we arrive at and return to the problem of legitimation at the same time -- our ‘space of enunciation’ is split, as the theorist Homi Bhaba puts it. And thus the problem of legitimation cannot be refused. But, we have already discussed the problem of legitimation in our criticism of McHale’s adoption of the term postmodernism as if it were an arbitrary matter or choice -- it suffices to say, “as Lyotard asks, ‘Who decides what knowledge is?’” (Easthope 18). If we follow through the crisis for thinking that this ‘split space’ (Being and time; Time and being) represents, as Vattimo’s friend Umberto Eco explains following from C.S. Peirce, we now realize that the conjectures we project are exposed to ‘fallibilism,’ and thus “true conjecture is always a wager, a dare” (Hoesterey ed. 252).

However, it is with this realization that many of the most notorious postmodern theorists stop. For instance, Derrida and his defenders think that “trying... to ‘demand a reason for reasonableness itself’” (Easthope 26) is -- through a practice which retains only the effect or rhetoric of rationality (invoking reason only insofar as its discourse remains ‘coherent, consistent, and appropriately detailed,’ or can at least be translated as such in an ancillary text) -- an ‘invention’ of difference, or a ‘departure’ from and ‘new’ response to the argument about knowledge. In his essay “Postmodernism and Critical and Cultural Theory”, Antony Easthope follows Christopher Norris’ defense of Derrida, stating that Derrida’s thinking represents a true departure because he proves that “the argument about knowledge does not necessarily have to go up the escalator Lyotard thinks is the only possible way to truth by asking ‘What proof is there that my proof is true?’” (26). But one could question what makes trying to demand a reason for reasonableness itself (Gasché also uses this argument in defense of Derrida, describing his philosophy as an answering for reason) so different from asking what proof there is that my proof is true? Summarizing Norris, Easthope states that

Derrida “regards rationality in its current (technological and other) forms as a highly specific historical formation which cannot be appealed to some kind of ultimate ground.” This said, the whole of Norris’s exposition demonstrates (perhaps even to excess) that Derrida practises rationality in his writing and that his arguments always invoke reason in being coherent, consistent and appropriately detailed. On this showing reason needs no ‘ultimate ground’ in reality to have its inherent effectiveness as rational discourse (26).
In an important way, however, this misses the point. Vattimo has already gotten over (verwunden) the fact that an 'ultimate ground in reality' is always a conjecture. That is, he has truly reconciled himself to the fact that there are no guarantees. And so, for Vattimo, the statement that 'reason needs no ultimate ground in reality to have its inherited effectiveness as rational discourse' goes without saying. But it certainly does not follow that this statement stands as a defense for empty rhetoric or the turning away from the possibilities of guarantees that might remain 'for now.' What Vattimo proposes is that we can move beyond this realization, without angst and without hastiness, with the further realization that our discourse is only effective because it is also (as it has always been) effectible. And for something to be effectible calls to mind its condition of indebtedness to another (past or present) effect, another influence -- in this case, that of the rational discourse of the Western philosophical tradition. The question of ultimate grounds is not an issue here in the sense that we should reject it as an illusion. Because if we accept that there are only ever weak grounds (the openness of tradition or inherited forms) to which we can appeal for our own 'circumstantial evidence' or conjectures, we can accept this as nevertheless being a ground. And thus, in its turn, our wager or dare of conjecture is not simply an exposure to the openness of futurity and fallibilism, for this very openness also betrays all discourse of its past, its tradition, its historical situation or present 'debt,' so to speak. And if we accept and thematize this risk, as a corollary our 'proof' becomes a mediation of epistemology and ontology, grounding and worlding, time and space, the past and the future through an admitted conjecture in the 'now-time.' In short, our 'proof' should become explicitly moderate, 'weak,' or circumstantial evidence. And it is this risk that is the risk of betrayal in all discourse that we have been alluding to so far, and the risk that this paper takes. For, again, the issue is not (or not only) one of recognizing the paradox of legitimation in postmodernity, that ultimate grounds are 'only' an illusion; rather, this paper goes further in arguing, much as the postmodern theorist Paul Virilio does, that our grounds can also be destroyed. As Stuart Sim explains:

In War and Cinema (1984) [Virilio] outlines the complicated connections between the development of military technology and the optical technology that is now -- in cinema, television and video -- a part of everyday life. According to Virilio, the logic of this technology -- and of the form of the state of which it is part -- results from the insight that that which can be seen can also be destroyed. This leads Virilio to posit an 'aesthetics of disappearance,' in which the dominant relation in modernity turns out not to be (as modern philosophy had conceived it) the relation between appearance and reality, but that obtaining between appearance and disappearance (377).

This paper suggests that there is even a further risk to take, even beyond the risks that Vattimo takes. In an extension but distortion of his thought, this paper stretches his historical referent for postmodernity -- of the 'crisis of historicism' at the turn of the century (and in particular, Nietzsche's crisis) -- 'forward' to the middle of the century, to Elizabeth Bowen, and to her historical narrative of the Second World War, The Heat of the Day. It is a risky attempt to extend a dialogue between Bowen (and Heidegger) at mid-century and Vattimo (and this paper) at the end of the century. The ghost of Nietzsche's crisis is foregrounded as an event at the turn of the century, which nevertheless is one we are still trying to grasp through our dialogue.

* But we may want to clarify the notion of the risk (of the betrayal) of belonging even further: for specifically, it is the betrayal of belonging to a tradition of thought which is identifiably modern and rational. But how -- and returning to Vattimo's argument in "The Reconstruction of Rationality" -- if it is indeed 'irrational' does a discourse betray its debts to a rational tradition? To repeat: Vattimo makes the statement that the accusation of irrationalism in postmodern hermeneutics 'at least identifies a risk that is indeed present in the most well known and talked about of hermeneutic theories.' We have stated that the betrayal of belonging constitutes a risk in all discourse. So then how can any discourse be accused of being (or even itself presume to have broken with the rational tradition or in itself be) 'irrational'? And, furthermore, how could Vattimo then support this accusation by saying that it at least identifies a risk that is indeed present in the most well known and talked about of hermeneutic theories? We might ask, what exactly is this risk then? The answer is clear: there is no irrationalism, pure and simple -- at least no irrationalism which would be intelligible, or which could therefore be unproblematically called, named, or designated as such. As Gasché states, "paradoxically, even the most radical singularity must, in order for it to be recognized for what it is, have an addressable identity, guaranteed by a set of universal rules that, by the same token, inscribe its singularity within a communal history, tradition, and problematics" (2). What we are getting at here, in part, is "the intimate link that exists between rationalism and irrationalism" (Gasché 108), or
positivity and negativity, as already discussed (or the play of unconcealment and concealment in language, as Heidegger points out, stating famously that we do not speak language, but rather ‘language speaks us’). So even the most radical singularity, the most seemingly ‘irrational’ discourse, is intelligible as such by means of its links, however minimal, “to a tradition of thinking and its discipline, argumentative structures, performative gestures, identifiable topoi, for instance” (Gaschê 2). Thus, in actuality there is no risk of hermeneutic irrationalism in the first sense which we discussed above. Or, in other words, as Vattimo explains, it is only a risk of aestheticism, which ironically betrays “its own originary inspiration” (99-100), and which paradoxically pushes “it in precisely the opposite direction, that is, in the direction of a defence of rationality” (Vattimo 100). So, for instance, Derrida’s aestheticism is only a risk to itself -- as Vattimo says, ‘only a risk in Derrida’ -- insofar as, in Vattimo’s interpretation, he refuses to recognize, thematize, or even problematize, not only his historical provenance, but also the effect of his own hermeneutic activity.

What exactly constitutes the ‘other’ risk, then, that both Vattimo and Carravetta refer to? This ‘risk’ is precisely the showing (demonstrating in argument, rationalizing) of a belonging (to a tradition, etcetera) in saying, especially when we are claiming not to belong to a particular tradition, or, that is, especially when we are making some claim to a ‘singular’ position apart from the tradition. Gaschê’s purpose, in his Inventions of Difference, is “to elucidate what, being no one’s singular property, at least up to a certain point, might be shared by all of us” (3). Vattimo, by contrast, would rather emphasize that, as long as we wish to remain within the communicative orbit of (philosophical) discourse, no matter how far out we wish to extend the circumference of that orbit, we must nevertheless risk acknowledging or betraying our debts to the tradition of (philosophical) communication in a more than implicit way. That is to say, “hermeneutics can and must rebut this accusation [of irrationalism] by working to develop from its own original presuppositions a notion of rationality all of its own that, without returning to the foundational procedures of traditional metaphysics, does not completely annul the specific characteristics of philosophical discourse, as distinct from, say, poetry and literature” (Vattimo Beyond Interpretation 97-8). The difference between Gaschê and Vattimo thus revolves around their differing emphases, on this side or that, of the idea of risk. For Gaschê, it seems to fall on the side of rationality constituting a risk in discourse, whereas for Vattimo, it falls on the side of irrationality constituting a risk in discourse -- a risk not because it is radical, but rather because it is traditional without acknowledging it. That is, whereas for Gaschê rationality would be a risk to defend against and avoid (he accepts the supposed ‘irrationalism’ of Derrida as an effect of his ‘radical singularity’), for Vattimo it is the only risk to take. Gaschê would rather us make the most of Derrida’s minimal betrayal of belonging to a tradition (his minimal ties to it); and Vattimo, on the other hand, insists on radicalizing the form of argumentation that already exists in, for instance, Derrida’s hermeneutic activity, stating that it nevertheless constitutes an interpretative reconstruction of the history of modern philosophy, “albeit in a deliberately fragmentary and partial way” (107).

This difference not only prompts Gaschê to defend Derrida in the first place, (just as it prompts Vattimo to criticize Derrida) but it also brings him to state that, if we wish to understand “the singularity, the idiosyncrasy, of the ‘position’ in question [Derrida’s, that is], so as to address, and if luck permit, respond to it” (2-3), we must learn to appreciate his minimal contact with, and thus his minimal betrayals of, the (modern) tradition (of rational discourse). But Vattimo would rather ask, at this point, why should we only be able to respond ‘if luck permits’? Can we not, rather, problematize the demonstrative, rational, epistemological, or argumentative discourse of modernity and, at the same time, still pay (betray or demonstrate, that is, through articulating a rationale) our debts to the tradition? Furthermore, would not this respectful or remembrative problematization, our betrayal, constitute even more of a risk than, for instance, Derrida’s discourse? And, at that, somehow a more adequate, responsible, and appropriate risk?

For Vattimo, obviously, the answers to these last two questions would be yes. But we might have a further query: if the risk is that of betrayal, and the betrayal is that of belonging, and if the risk of the betrayal of belonging belongs in all discourse, then we might still be tempted to ask, what is the problem? We are still left with the question: what is the ‘risk’? And, to be ultimately clear, even to the extent of running the different risk of repetitiveness, here is the important point: this risk must be explicated, acknowledged, or ‘cited’ in a way, and thus accepted. Otherwise we pretend not to be compromised by it, when in actuality, we always are. Our pretension, however, amounts to what we have already referred to, following Vattimo’s citation of Gadamer, “a forgetting [oblio] or a remotion of Wirkungsgeschichte” (105) -- that is, of the history of the effects and interpretations by way of which a work of art, text, or trace of the past has been handed down to us. Vattimo argues that this effects-history must be deliberately acknowledged in postmodern hermeneutic discourse, for example, in the choice of a particular text as the ‘object’ of our interpretation, in our interpretation of that particular text, and in the methodology of our interpretive activity itself. The effect of this acknowledgment will then constitute the necessary defense against the accusation of ‘irrationalism,’ and the accusation of deliberate indifference to the ontological difference’s status for thought, both of which have been directed at much postmodern (hermeneutic) thought.

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Another effect, one which Vattimo also looks forward to in his essay "Postmodern Criticism: Postmodern Critique", from the volume of essays entitled Writing the Future, is the possible reconstruction of a rationality (albeit in verwundene form), or "a contextuality which can provide a sort of horizon" (63) for postmodern thought.

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However, and to continue with the above example, Derrida's answer to why he chose a particular work of art, text, or trace of the past, as the 'object' of his interpretation or as the 'model' for his methodology, like McHale, would most likely be 'why not?' And Vattimo would respond to this capriciousness by saying that there is always a reason why, a rationale, which, when articulated, amounts to a positing of the interpreter's inevitable historical situation, his or her situated-ness. In articulating a rationale for our hermeneutic activity, we historicize ourselves, which is inevitably a narrative acknowledgement of historical consequentiality, or 'post-ness' -- that is to say, a recognition of the inevitable consequence of one's situation as coming after or being 'post' some other situation, and thus a recognition of the effectuality of our situation. For, as already stated, our interpretive situation in the world is both effectible and effective. But to recognize this would, in the very first place, require us to posit: the difference between our interpretive activity and the 'object(s)' of our interpretation; and then secondly, the effect of past methodologies on our own; and finally, the effect of these differences and effects on our interpretation itself.

In his problematization of the relation inside/outside, with respect to historical transformation, rationality, aesthetic experience, or texts/textuality, it seems that Derrida wishes to remain 'inside' the text, insisting as he does that there is no 'de hors-texte,' no outside-text as such. As Easthope points out, this claim has become notoriously 'de hors-texte,'urnal issue here can still be interpreted as a sort of angst for ultimate grounds, and in the lack thereof, a capricious turning away from ultimate grounds conceived of as a ridiculous proposition of God. The 'package deal' of texts involves 'doing ontology' in the way that McHale describes it, following Thomas Pavel: positing a description of a universe.

Referring to decision, or an ultimate pronouncement of the theological sort, as if that were the issue, Easthope defends Derrida's aestheticism as a standing implication of the 'reasonable' defense that "it is hard to know what a human world would be like in which there were only texts and the sign had no relation at all to anything beyond it" (26). The unacknowledged issue here can still be interpreted as a sort of angst for ultimate grounds, and in the lack thereof, a capricious turning away from ultimate grounds conceived of as a ridiculous proposition of God. The 'package deal' of texts involves 'doing ontology' in the way that McHale describes it, following Thomas Pavel: positing a description of a universe.

But it seems that, in the way that ontology is done, only artists have traditionally held the 'privilege' of extremity, that is, of pretending to refuse the outside in their art. And we have already discussed at length, in reference to McHale's ontological poetics in his Postmodernist Fiction, how even this aesthetic 'refusal' is only ever 'illusory' in light of the fact that language itself unavoidably sustains contact with the 'outside' world, which is on the most basic level a shared 'reality' or tradition of iterancy. In fact, we could say that the fact that "creative productions are always structured in terms of cultural signs (mathematical, visual, linguistic, and so forth) is proof enough of the essentially social nature of creativity" (Grudin 6). And thus, this 'socially constituted' (aside from the 'historically charged') aspect inevitably involves a logic of necessity or identity in terms of the shared transmission and communicability of cultural-creative productions. Still, only art refuses (or can refuse) to posit a logic of necessity in the way that it 'does' ontology; or perhaps it is more true to say that the minimalization of this logic is art's provenance. In doing ontology, art can practice or perform the limits of cultural signs and communication as a 'shared reality,' thus bringing one face to face with the ineffable or the 'Other' of reason, the possibility of other worlds, and thus the openness of the future; in this way, art is phrasal. But hermeneutic activity, in its critical engagement with texts or works of art, must at least explicate a pretension to posit a logic of necessity, a pretension to being 'outside' in the way that it predicates art's phrasal aspect in the statement of its interpretation. For even if we maintain that it is an impossibility to be 'outside the text,' we are nevertheless articulating a distance (a difference) within the text or within (inter)textuality in our interpretation of or response to the text; and as such, we are undeniably contributing to a context or an 'outside' of sorts. At the very least, this context is the horizon of communication and intelligibility, or what Vattimo calls 'the monumental condition required for utterance,' which
is shared with the text or work of art, but which also and therefore presumes a situation of dialogue or exchange between two differing positions which, in themselves, never 'arrive together.'

And so, it would seem that in refusing to articulate that difference or distance, by not differentiating his discourse from that of the text as a work of art, and/or by making a 'capriccio' out of his methodology(-ies), Derrida communicates his desire to be received and understood at the same time as or as the text or work of art -- presumably then escaping judgment or shirking responsibility, as he posits an incommensurate relation between his discourse and the logic of necessity. Matching phrase with phrase, Derrida points..., where? At himself. But what this position misunderstands, perhaps, is the writer's or artist's desire to be received/constructed from across the distance s/he inaugurates in the text or work of art, in the way that s/he 'does ontology.' That is, what is imparted in the text or work of art is imparted (even if 'irrational') for the interpreter, the reader, the critic; but as such, it is nevertheless impartibly transmitted by the writer/artist. Its 'share' is always a return for/to the writer or artist -- otherwise art would be anonymous, it would not 'matter.' And thus, just as its reception in its reading or interpretation is never impartial in its 'outside' difference, the text or work of art is also never truly partible from the author/artist as its 'inside' origin.

The point is that we can still concur with Derrida's criticisms of the logic of identity between a conjectural 'inside' and 'outside' (an 'old' argument, anyways), agreeing that there is no firm or fixed presence that can guarantee or underwrite the meaning of a conjectural 'inside-' or 'outside-' text, and like Derrida, we can even contradict logic to a certain extent in recognizing that we must use and erase (and reuse) our language at the same time; but this is not to say that we have to avoid assertions about the nature of truth in the attempt to preserve, however ironically, in a distortional way, aspects of the philosophical-critical vocation or the modern tradition of rationality. Or, to put this another way, we can agree with Derrida that, "just as signs refer only to other signs, texts can refer only to other texts, generating an intersecting and indefinitely expandable web called intertextuality" (Sarup 52); but we do not have to understand this situation as a predicament with 'no way out.' Or, rather, we must see beyond this nihilistic predicament to the possibilities for truth.

Vattimo does not merely indicate the postmodern condition as 'the infinite interpretability of reality,' he also sets out to collocate this crisis of perspectivism (or nihilism, or historicism) through risking a provisional predication of that indication -- the risk of a proposition or statement about the nature of truth which is nevertheless tempered through ironic awareness, or an extended reflexivity. Vattimo's point is that we can still do this without proposing an impossibility such as the availability of direct unmediated or objective knowledge of the world, or a correspondence truth between text(s) ('inside') and reality ('outside'). A postmodern hermeneutic ontology does not have to preclude raising questions about truth; rather, Vattimo finds a way to mediate the possibilities which exist beyond the deconstructive aporia described as the fact that there is "no escape outside the logocentric enclosure... since the interpreter must use the concepts and figures of the Western metaphysical tradition" (Sarup 54). The so-called predicament of having to use the resources of the heritage that we bring into question does not have to be so if we recognize that history and tradition as intertextuality (the text's 'arrival' as 'reality' or interpretation) is all we have, and all we have ever had (Ge-Schick). We can still celebrate the critical role of interpretation in this intertext which is 'the world': without having to kill the author/artist/art; without neglecting the dialogical aspect of human existence, language, and knowledge; and without having to minimalize rationality to the point that critical discourse takes on the character of an "ensemble of conceptual performances... entrusted to the sheer artistic flair [genialità] of the deconstructor" (Vattimo Beyond Interpretation 12). That is, we can still problematize the boundary, limit, division, frame, or margin which is installed between, amongst so many other things, text or work of art and interpreter, recognizing with Derrida that "no border is guaranteed, inside or out" (Sarup quoting Derrida 54).

However, this does not mean that we cannot fix or decide upon meaning in the provisional sense of positing an (an)ironic historical referent. We can mediate identity and difference, unity and fragmentation, ontology and the philosophy of language, epistemology and rhetoric, presence and absence. And we can do this without having to follow the path that deconstruction has taken, described by V. Leitch in Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction as: a celebration of "dissemination over truth, explosion and fragmentation over unity and coherence, undecidable spaces over prudent closures, playfulness and hysteria over care and rationality" (Sarup 54).

If we articulate our belonging in tradition through positing our (historical) situation, we are doing (hermeneutic) ontology as discussed in the opening part of this division, mediating our propositions or projections of worlds with the inevitable betrayal of their determined or conditioned quality, or the 'thrown-ness of our project,' as Heidegger says. In another turn of the argument, by refusing to articulate this belonging, Derrida can actually be accused of trying to occupy a position outside the text contrary to his own statement that there is no outside-the-text.
And so, in refusing to posit, he can also be accused of the same violence that many postmodern theorists have, in turn, accused the rational thought of Western metaphysics of practicing and perpetuating; or, he is at least as melodramatic or extreme, taking on a posture that Vattimo encourages us to question. Indeed, it can at least be said that, while claiming that there is no "outside" outside of the text, Derrida nevertheless proceeds to claim an outside space for himself, in his supposed 'invention of difference,' refusing to recognize or admit to the effectual (epistemological, modern, rational) distance that his indifference or disinterest installs, because presumably it would contradict his claim, or at least his practice of 'radical interiority.' Thus the difference that Vattimo's thought makes, in contrast to Derrida's, is that it acknowledges its debt or its belonging to a tradition of rationality not of its own in the development of a notion of rationality of its own. That is to say, it does not presume to be an invention of difference, because in the first place, Vattimo radicalizes the notion that identity begets difference, whether that be conceived in Gadamerian terms as the 'universal promise' extended by/in/through language, or even in 'animalistic' terms, as the extension of humans over the earth, all of whom communicate with one another, even if they often misunderstand one another. Gaschê defends Derrida's postmodern thought against the accusation that it has abandoned the traditional forms and claims that constituted it, and states that, rather, it has displaced them "within operations of thought whose calculated economy obeys a 'rationality' of its own" (128). But again, the issue is not exactly that of abandonment, as stated before, because to abandon tradition is in fact as impossible as is a 'rationality all of its own.' Rather the issue is, as Gaschê himself acknowledges in a contradictory way, that of the deliberate refusal of or indifference to tradition in such a way that, while being fully aware of the ontological difference's status for thought, Derrida is a thinker who is "not only conscious of the consequences of disinterest, but even wills them" (94). In a very confusing way, Gaschê ends up both accusing Derrida of and defending him from the same thing. He states that of the thinkers whose work is actively engaged in such disinterest I name a few: Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, Paul de Man, and, in a certain way to be elucidated hereafter, also Jacques Derrida. In what is to follow, I will concern myself with such an indifference to the ontological difference in two diametrically opposed positions, those of Marion and Derrida, which divide along a line that separates theology from philosophy. I choose to discuss the question of indifference to the fundamental difference in the writings of both thinkers, not only to show that such indifference lends itself to different styles of thought and diametrically opposed intentions, but to demonstrate that a certain indifference to difference, rather than fostering a petrification of metaphysical difference, as is the case with the criticism and practice of difference, opens an entirely new vista on, and field of research about, difference itself (94).

If one is ready, even at this point, to tolerate an indifference to difference, to accept a lack of argumentative appeal to the propositional -- or maybe even to turn and ask, what difference does the thought of Vattimo make? -- then we can return to one point made at the outset of this extended chapter on the tradition of extremity. That point was made as the fact that Vattimo does think Derrida is a postmodern thinker/practitioner. It might seem innocuous, but we can turn to a defense against this made by Gaschê, who states that "Derrida, however, would certainly resist any association with the concept of postmodernism, and for reasons not unlike those which made Heidegger refuse all identification of thinking with passing fads" (121). This is ironic: passing fads. For Derrida, apparently, there is no primordiality but only the arche-trace and its proliferating (re)duplications, its incessant duplicity. But he would not be identified, at least according to Gaschê -- who seems to assume, as with most of Derrida's translators, that he knows him best, so thoroughly in fact, that he can even answer for Derrida's unreasonable refusals, like a parent protecting a child -- with passing fads, or, presumably then, temporal definitions or limitations. A refusal of 'passing fads,' as a way to write off and overcome the dialogue that we encourage by speaking/writing in our 'present' time and space, is an extremely modernist position, and one which deludes itself of its theological implications (as the wishful Word of God, presumably). And thus, Vattimo's criticism of Derrida essentially involves his contention that Derrida has forgotten, and deliberately forgotten, the ontological origin or temporal-spatial extensity of hermeneutics as a human and mortal event.

Thus, even aside from the points Gaschê makes in the earlier and lengthy citation from his text -- regarding the irony of pretension to Ueberwindung (extremity, overcoming metaphysics, radicalism, or the 'break' with tradition) -- what we are approaching here is a picture of a our 'position' in the world in more 'primordial' terms. That is, in so far as it is determined by language, our existence is always relational, and therefore continuous with
and ‘betrayed’ in its always already (pre-)determined way of belonging and relating -- what Heidegger terms Ereignis, or ‘Showing in Saying.’ We cannot simply forget or overcome this inherency of the tradition, and its continuity as such, precisely because we always already speak in a language which is appropriate or, that is, continuous:

“This owning which brings... [all present and absent beings] there, and which moves Saying as Showing in its showing we call [heisse] Appropriation [Ereignis],” Heidegger writes. [Ereignis]... designates, denominates (nennen), and it does so, Heidegger remarks, in a saying in which “we speak our own appropriate (eigenen) already spoken language” (On the Way to Language [trans. P.D. Hertz, 1982), 127-8) (Gasché 5).

Thus considering such primordial contingencies, or our appropriative being, the claim to extremity or singularity is what Allan Megill calls, in his book Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, a kind of “compounded irony” (352). In fact, Megill finds it necessary to articulate his own stance “and something of a rationale for that stance” (xiv) in the face of such ‘extreme’ thinkers as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida, simply because “the radicality of their attack on the ‘normal’ canons of rationality raises problems for the commentator” (xiv). Megill finds himself “acknowledging the force and justice of much of what these writers said” (xiv-xv), but he still finds that “a tension remained between their stance and mine” (xv). The tension that Megill mentions here is the same tension that Vattimo proposes to both extend and loosen between the purportedly extreme positions of ‘the postmodern debate’ and the ostensibly extreme positions of the Western philosophical tradition, bringing the two traditions into a critical exchange or engagement with one another. It is interesting to note that in Megill's discourse, this tonicity has the same effect as in Vattimo’s, namely that of a mediation, an alternation, or of intermediacy. Megill explains that,

briefly, the reader will find a division between exegesis and critique. I frequently move from the exegetical mode to the critical mode and back again. These moves will be very obvious; indeed, they will all but leap out at the reader. Here I only want to make clear that I do not see these criticisms as arbitrary. They do have a rationale (xv).

Megill’s ‘moves’ or ‘leaps,’ as described here, are as a result of negotiating the ‘compounded irony’ of the positions of the ‘extreme’ thinkers under consideration. First of all, despite “the rhetorical situation that these writers willy-nilly have brought into being” (351), they still demand an audience; that is to say, they still demand to be understood. However, and secondly, such an effort at understanding them brings about the realization of the ‘peculiar position’ that they occupy. As Megill states,

there is a radical dissonance in what they do. They are playful (and sometimes sober) ironists, making a dance out of the problems that we confront in the ‘ordinary’ world, transforming these problems into the material of art. The adherents of science and method -- those who follow in the tradition of the Enlightenment -- cultivate a distance between their allegedly objective scientific stance and the passions motivating the world. Despite their opposition to science and method, the prophets of extremity do the same thing, for only out of aesthetic distance does their art become possible. When they ravel and unravel the myriad ironies of discourse, they are as distant from morality and suffering as the supreme rationalist. Zarathustra’s withdrawal to the mountaintop is paradigmatic of the prophecy of extremity in general (352).

In short, it is not only that these extreme thinkers insist that we be their audience, but it is the distance that they inaugurate in their liminal writing practices, their ‘radical extremity’ as such, which forces us to negotiate it in the way that Megill suggests, alternating exegesis with critique. We realize the irony that “the prophets of extremity fall victim to the same distancing that they criticize (above all, in the guise of the subject/object division) in ‘normal’ science” (Megill 352).

In itself then, Vattimo’s thought is a diaphoric reading of the postmodern condition, wanting to understand modernism and postmodernism, not as pure, coherent, discrete, or complete components, but rather as contaminated
(and contaminating), incoherent, blurred, indistinguishable, alternating, and incomplete projects. As such, his thought diaphorically transfers signification from and moves between one position and another, all the time parallactically revising itself, and thus incessantly betraying contradictory and compromised fidelities. But it is not so much the betrayal itself (the inherency and inheritance) of all discourse which is the important point here (as if we could refuse this inherency, we would be unintelligible!). Rather, the point is that the critical acceptance of the ‘risk’ of betrayal must involve an explicit thematization of it in our discourse or thought, towards the reconstruction of a contextuality (a horizon) “in which, although in a verwundene form, criticism can still operate in conjunction with critique” (Vattimo 64).

And with respect to this critical conjuncture, and also the insuperability of the ‘positions’ modern and postmodern themselves, it is important to note that these ‘positions’ are no longer conceivable simply in extreme geometric or linear (temporal) terms, except perhaps in terms of their having ‘taken place’ or their ‘taking place’ within an undeniably chronological tradition. But even chronology does not have to confer a rigidity to tradition, which is conceived by Vattimo as “Heidegger’s view of tradition as it emerges from Being and Time” (64), that is, as Ueberlieferung. This means tradition, not “as it is accepted by a traditionalist, passive, uncritical attitude;... [but as] the Selbstueberliefern of the authentic Dasein, which requires that the past is not accepted as a closed Vergangenes, but as an open Gewesenes, something which is still ‘possible’” (64). As such, the traditional ‘position’ (theory and practice) of modernism/-ity is one which is still open to possibility, still happening within and therefore in dialogue with, and thus even betraying the existence of, its theoretical and practical ‘posteriority,’ postmodernism/-ity.
Chapter 4

Diaphoristics as Interstitial, Interim Space-Time

After having problematized notions of extremity, it is important to further place Vattimo’s thought, in order to define what is ‘moderately radical’ or ‘radically moderate’ about it. In order to do that, one can set it against other purportedly more ‘radical’ positions in postmodern theory. Vattimo is perhaps not so radical as Andrew Gibson states a thinker like Paul Virilio is, for instance, in his conception of narratology as undergoing “a current ‘crisis of “whole” dimensions... in which our habitual notions of surface, of limit and separation, have decayed, and given way to those of interface, commutation, intermittence and interruption’ (Virilio The Lost Dimension [1991], p. 110)” (Gibson 8). However, in Vattimo’s thought, there is an implicit correspondence with Virilio’s idea of the ‘epoch of non-separability’ -- that is, an implicit recognition, in accordance with postmodern theorists like Virilio, that “we are losing ‘the dimensional mechanics spawned by ancient Greek geometry,’ and with them, as [Benoit] Mandelbrot noted, ‘a certain relationship of conformity, such as entity, unity and symmetry’ that came from a distant past” (Gibson quoting Virilio [ibid, p. 104], 9). But Vattimo is not so radical, with his interstitial ‘weak thought,’ to espouse Virilio’s ‘aesthetics of disappearance,’ wherein “ours is a world of dispersed or scattering structures whose amplitude -- contrary to the structuralists -- we can no longer measure” (Gibson [ibid, p. 72], 9). Unlike Virilio, and Andrew Gibson, as far as he concurs with Virilian aesthetics, Vattimo does not wish to ‘close the gap between physics and metaphysics’; he would rather sustain a ‘diaphoristics’ of physics and metaphysics. Gibson writes excitedly that: “whether it is a question of new optics, infography, holography, macrocinematography, telematics, telemetries, informatics, tele-topology, supersonics or quantum mechanics, for Virilio, ‘geometric dimensions’ are increasingly ceding to ‘fractionary dimensions’ and ‘becoming nothing more than momentary surface effects’” (quoting Virilio [ibid, p. 111], 8-9). This seems to echo the negative ‘nothing but’ hermeneutic nihilism of Derridian deconstruction which Vattimo criticizes as being itself a forgetting, refusal, or remotion of the (verwundene) opportunity and possibility to reconstruct a normative horizon, albeit weak -- that is, the reinscription of a geometric, temporal, or narrative dimension after the dissolution of the metanarratives.

Against such attempts “to negotiate the contradiction of periodizing the ‘posthistorical’” (Bennett 264) strictly in terms of a spatial register, as Gibson mostly wants to do, David Bennett, in his essay “Postmodernism and Vision: Ways of Seeing (at) the End of History”, asserts the importance of negotiating both spatial and temporal registers, both “seeing and narrating subjects” (264). As such, he seems to espouse a ‘diaphoric’ or ‘biscissiative’ postmodern criticism in the same sense that Vattimo does. Discussing the texts of several postmodern thinkers, Francis Fukuyama, Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson, Gayatri Spivak, and even (at certain moments) Martin Jay, Bennett suggests that: “diametrically opposed though their premises may appear to be, right-wing and putatively left-wing thought about postmodernity would seem to be converging in a conviction that not only modernity but ‘history’ itself has ‘ended’ -- a corollary of which would seem to be that ‘space’ has displaced ‘time’ as the only intelligible category in which to construe social processes” (261). It is important, in this respect, to note that, when Vattimo speaks of ‘the end of history,’ he speaks of “The End of (Hi)story”, the title of his 1991 essay in Ingeborg Hoesterey’s Zeitgeist in Babel: The Post-Modernist Controversy. His is not an apocalyptic announcement of a definitive or imminent ending, but instead a problematizing of our narratives of ‘ endings’ themselves, our very narrative impulse to want an end (of/in history, narrative, time), and thus an attempt to negotiate seeing and narrating, space and time. Vattimo asserts a spatial interim and a temporal interstitiality in his description/narration of ‘the postmodern condition.’ Like Carravetta, Vattimo acknowledges “the positivity and creativity of the interim space-time between the purely poetic and the absolutely philosophical” (Carravetta xiv). In short, his thought is also a preface to the diaphora in the sense of the title of Carravetta’s book. Meanwhile, Vattimo and Bennett also concur in their realization that “paradoxically, the ‘posteriority’ of postmodernism consists in its being, inter alia, ‘post’-historical” (Bennett 262). And Vattimo acknowledges, in the same way that Bennett does, the consensus that has formed, amongst postmodern theorists ‘right’ and ‘left,’ around the description of the postmodern condition as ‘the end of history.’ However, he argues, as does Bennett, that the only way we have to argue in favor of postmodernist philosophy is still an appeal to history, as those we have seen in Lyotard or Habermas.

Only if we recognize this fact explicitly and make it the theme of our reflection, instead of pretending that it is now completely behind us as a vergangen event; that is, only if we tell explicitly, again and again, the story of the end of history, shall we be able to change, distort, verwunden, its still metaphysical significance” (Vattimo 139).
4.1. Andrew Gibson: trading past times for future spaces

If one is not yet convinced that such an appeal to history (as narrative or as temporal register) is still necessary; or, if one is ecstatically prepared to risk the ideal of making “‘pre-individual and non-personal singularities speak’” (180), which Gibson proposes as an ‘alternative’ following his reading of Deleuze, then a sketch of David Bennett’s argument in his aforementioned essay might prove ‘edifying.’ But before we do this, Gibson’s argument itself, particularly as it is made in his chapter “Narrative and the Event”, should be discussed. For not only is his argument complex, but it also insists upon the pervasive topos of ‘space’ which Bennett sees as constitutive of “both the theoretical discourse of postmodernism and the rhetorical culture of ‘late capitalism’ more generally” (277). As thus, it represents the kind of argument that both Bennett and Vattimo expose and refute, and also, therefore, an important foil to the argument of this paper itself.

Gibson follows Deleuze’s description of time as having two aspects, the first aspect being “measurable and relational” (179), and the second aspect being “measurable, incommensurable” (179), and he equates these two aspects themselves “with the two kinds of repetition in Difference and Repetition” (179) and also with “the two forms of time according to the Stoics, chronos and aion” (179). Interestingly, but not incidentally, here the first aspect can be thought of as the horizontal axis previously mentioned in Chapter 4, and the second aspect as the aforementioned vertical axis, so that we can align chronos with the temporal or narrative register that both Bennett and Vattimo insist upon retaining (what Gibson dismisses as ‘geometrics’), and aion with the spatial or scopic register that Gibson (in his readings of postmodern theorists such as Virilio, Deleuze, Levinas, etc.) restricts himself to (praising ‘energetics,’ amongst other ‘spatial’ metaphors, as an alternative). Gibson states that the difference between aion and chronos can be reduced to “the difference between open and closed conceptions of time” (180), which, as such, has huge significance for Deleuze both politically and aesthetically/philosophically. But, according to Gibson, following Deleuze, “Western thought in general and contemporary culture in particular have been responsible for a powerful over-emphasis on and overvaluation of chronos as opposed to aion” (180). Gibson then makes the connection between chronos and rationality or metaphysics, saying that, “in Heideggerian terms, this [over-emphasis and overvaluation of chronos] is an aspect of the triumph of the technological Gestell as confirmation, re-establishment or accomplishment of metaphysics” (180). And he supports Deleuze’s assertion that “it is in aion rather than in chronos that our freedom and strength reside, in these singularities which are more ourselves than we are, more divine than the gods, as they animate concretely poem and aphorism, permanent revolution and partial action’ (Deleuze The Logic of Sense [1990], p. 72)” (Gibson 180). It is at this point, sounding strangely similar to Eliot’s modernist appeal to the impersonal and his proposal “to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism” (Norton, v.II, 2212), that Gibson begins his condemnation of narrative and narratology ‘so far,’ also proposing to ‘halt’ before the unexamined “metaphysics of form, theme, motif, subject and character that [Nathalie] Sarraute -- for instance -- wished to question” (180), again following his reading of Deleuze and Guattari.

Gibson claims that “without chronos, the very foundations of established narratology are at risk, and with them a psychology, a logic, a theory of the stable subject, and a metaphysics” (181), himself performing, seemingly without awareness of the irony of this performance, his own ‘hypostasization,’ reification, and objectification of narrative and narratology (‘so far’ or as conceived in a certain way); that is, he himself performs the very operations which he condemns as constitutive of the “imprisoning power” (193) of narrative, without somehow seeing this as an inevitable, narrative feature constitutive of discourse, and thus, without thematizing this operation. He is seemingly unaware, or at least he does not make explicit or thematize, the betrayal of his own discourse here, a betrayal which, as you will remember, Caravetta and Vattimo see as inevitable, as constitutive of the ‘real’ risk of discourse. Claiming that there is, however, an eventuality of ‘aionic’ (non)dimensions in certain (postmodern) texts/narratives, Gibson states that “narratology as it has been classically constituted has offered us no possible vocabulary” (184) to account for such aionic ‘rhythms’ of the text. And thus, according to Gibson, a postmodern narratology might try to correspond “to [this] something in narrative itself” (184), that is, to postmodern aesthetics, and more specifically, to the scepticism “current in postmodern aesthetics with regard to the adequacy of narrative to the event” (184). What Gibson is doing here is setting the stage for his opposition of poetry and narrative -- narrative here being equivalent to what Caravetta called earlier the ‘philosophical,’ in his discussion of the diaphora as a reactivated hermeneutic figure of the ancient quarrel between poetry (Hermes) and philosophy (Ptolemy) -- and his subsequent rejection or refusal of narrative and opting for the ‘alternative’ of poetry.

Gibson’s tracing here of this sceptical attitude toward narrative back to Heidegger’s “influential valorisation of lyric and the expense of epic” (184), his privileging of “poetic discourse as a possible mode of the self-expression of Dasein” (184), is ironic in at least two senses. First, it is ironic that Gibson should privilege Heidegger’s identification of poetics and ontology as participating “in a reciprocal disclosure” (184) of Being over...
Heidegger’s emphasis on the destiny (history, tradition, temporal register, narrative) of Being itself, as if poetry could be simply and neatly opposed to ‘telling a story’ as the more “appropriate means to understanding ‘the problem of Being’” (185), or, that is, as an alternative. The problem of Being is also a problem of its destiny, its history, that is, its narrative, and Gibson fails to see this paradox, wanting himself to quickly reject the epistemological, the temporal, and the narrative for a pure, transcendental, alternative realm of the hermeneutical, the spatial, and the poetic. As you will remember, it is exactly this ‘alternative’ and aestheticist refusal that Vattimo criticizes in the hermeneutic nihilism of Derrida. Admitting, in his essay “The End of (Hi)story”, that, “in a sense, it is true that there is no alternative solution” (139), Vattimo proposes the description of philosophy as Verwindung, because that is precisely what is meant by that word: no alternative solution, only alternating (mediated or diaphoric) emphases, only a dissolutive solution. Secondly, is it not also ironic, in the same way that Vattimo points out with Derrida’s citation of Mallarmé in his methodological ‘coup de dés,’ that Gibson himself betrays his ‘conditioned’ proposals precisely by making reference to the condition or fact of belonging, that is, precisely by making a specific historical reference (to Heidegger) whose ‘narrative’ (the rationale behind choosing Heidegger) he refuses to explain or admit?

Over-emphasizing the possibility of ‘writing the event,’ which he himself later admits as being ‘impossible,’ Gibson goes against even his own betrayed rationale and insists on refusing narrative (history, time) altogether for space or virtual reality. After all, he quotes, as if citing evidence for this move, “Lyotard’s now famous scepticism with regard to the ‘grand narratives’ is itself a function of a certain postmodern scepticism about narrative in general” (186). Following his reading of Lyotard, Gibson states that the “teleological, progressive formulations” (189) of narrative intimately “ally it with a modernity committed to mastery” (189), and that poetry, on the other hand, “escapes the increasing hegemony of contemporary rationality, the ever-expanding order of knowledge, clarity and appropriation, of techno-scientific predeterminations” (189). Gibson thus posits poetry as a pure alternative to narrative, opting for the topos of space over that of time, and then, again following Lyotard, proceeds to align a poetics of space with an opening out onto “an uncertain and contingent ‘afterwards’” (189), that is, a future time. Aside from the (ironic) commitment to mastery which is never thematized in Gibson’s discourse itself, one can hardly help noticing the utopic and idealistic belief in pure alternatives, the ironically modernist belief in an Ueberwindung (overcoming, escaping of) metaphysics. Furthermore, he ends up, following Lyotard, ironically reinscribing chronos (an ‘afterwards,’ a future time, narrative) without recognizing what he has done. Gibson supports Lyotard’s supposed location of narrative as the ‘enemy’ which neutralizes “the contingency and freedom proper to the human project” (189), without explicating the fact that contingency is itself a narrative aspect: freedom itself must therefore be, not only contingency to an ‘afterwards,’ but also contingent upon narrative, that is, a (possible) function of narrative. But none of these ironies are made explicit or thematized, and so Gibson concludes that narrative “would seem only to provide models running counter” (189) to a postmodern Deleuzean politics, which seizes “on the indeterminability of the event” (189), and a Levinasian ethics, which gives “priority to immediate responsiveness and constant responsibility” (189). Thinking that he can use the poetic escape-clause of indeterminacy (‘the presentation of the unpresentable’) to avoid totalizing moves and “a familiar metaphysics (of presence, the subject, the unified self and so on)” (193), Gibson fails to recognize the totalizing function of his adherence to the ‘dangerous’ philosophers who think ahead to ‘radical difference from the past, a dazzlingly unimaginable future’ (Rorty Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers [v. 2, 1991], p. 81) (193).

Even as he attempts to make a ‘case for the defence,’ discussing the work of Alain Badiou, Richard Rorty, and Milan Kundera, Gibson still betrays his own discourse and, at the same time, still refuses to thematize this betrayal. He admits that the structure of the Heideggerian opposition between lyric (poetry) and epic (narrative) “can be unsettled or blurred” (189), and thus also that “strictly speaking, there can be no ‘writing the event,’ no encounter with Ereignis by means of a text (Lyotard Économie Libidinale [1974], p. 28)” (195). Gibson is a convoluted and ironically un-reflexive argument, ironic in that reflexivity is precisely what he espouses as a ‘spatial’ or aionic operation. He promotes an opting for the ‘open’ space of the poetic aion (event) in rejection of the ‘closed’ time of the narrative chronos (representation), but then ends in admitting that “in any text, the event is always registered or reported” (195), and that, thus, “there is always a difference and a distance in the writing” (195). Perhaps this irony is a result of Gibson’s reading of Lyotard; but then he also cites Deleuze at this point, supporting his more extreme argument “that the event is never graspable, that it is only ever available to us as ‘has happened’ or ‘is about to happen,’ as tale, novella, representation, sign (Deleuze The Logic of Sense [1990], p. 63)” (195).

Thus it seems strange that, after promoting the topos of space as an exclusive alternative, Gibson should suddenly end up almost on side with Vattimo in recognizing the necessity of mediation. Gibson chooses to call mediation an “ambiguous aspect” (195) of the event in writing, refusing to recognize the ‘ambiguity’ that his own discourse has been complicit in, but he does, nevertheless, use the word ‘mediate.’ He states that
we must therefore think the event in writing as always having an ambiguous aspect, yielding to, enfolded, mediated or muffled by the process of registration. So too with the irruption of the figural into the discursive. Discourse produces, not the event, but its simulacrum. Thus there can be no absolute distinction between lyric and narrative. The modes of the simulacrum will be diverse, and will be narrative as well as lyric. In thinking about discourse, we can only use the term ‘event’ in a ‘deconstructed sense,’ to ‘designate something other which resembles it’ (Derrida Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question, p. 24) (195).

Clearly, Gibson must be seen as simultaneously holding, or at least promoting, two distinct frames of reference without developing the notion of a diaphoristics, or an interstitial, interim space-time, as Carravetta, Vattimo, and Bennett do, that would inform a theory and a practice of the dynamic interaction between these two distinct frames of reference. He claims that in special cases, specifically, Stephen Crane, Proust, Woolf, Joyce, Beckett, Burroughs, Arno Schmidt, “narrative escapes from narrative” (209) and “becomes its own phantom or perversion” (209), embroiled in and not being able to “work free of anti-narrativity” (209). It is fitting that Gibson should choose to understand this operation, not only in an exceptional sense, as if it were not ubiquitous, but also in a negative or oppositional sense, as an ‘escape’ (it is not an escape in the sense of an overcoming or a ‘leaving behind,’ which he also admits, thus contradicting himself) and a ‘perversion’ (he himself can ‘only’ see this inevitable diaphora of narrative and anti-narrative as something ‘perverse’ because he covertly judges it as a contamination of the ‘pure’ aionic space of the poetic).

Gibson arrives at a particularly ironic point here where his whole argument collapses into irrationalism: claiming that this narrative ‘perversion’ or anti-narrativity only happens in special cases, Gibson at the same time insists that it is “a resistance which narrative as a whole can never overcome” (209), leaving his reader entirely baffled at how he could hold such incommensurable views simultaneously without at least thematizing the risk of (this) contradiction, that is, the risk of betrayal which is precisely the risk of all discourse, all narrative, all representation. Gibson states unproblematically that “aion haunts and displaces the residues of chronos” (209) without suggesting that they can or should explicitly, and indeed always do work together as such. It becomes clear that Gibson refuses to identify ‘anti-narrativity’ with aion, space, or the poetic, precisely because the term itself involves an undeniable insight into and admittance of the ‘inter alia’ and intermediacy of aion and chronos themselves. Gibson can at least admit to ‘anti-narrativity’ as being operative in the spatial register of aion, and so he is also undeniably admitting the involvement of narrativity here, if only in a negative sense. And so he chooses to call ‘anti-narrativity’ an ‘escape’ or a ‘perversion’ in the attempt to neutralize its associations, its intermediacy. This is the reason we only ever find narrative and anti-narrativity in the same sentence; the rest is Gibson’s rhetorical wash of mea culpa, evident in his refusal to use the words anti-narrativity and aion in close proximity to one another. Gibson cannot afford to make this association or he risks betraying his discourse, which insists on aion as an immediately available and so far under-emphasized opportunity and alternative for postmodern thought, following his readings of Deleuze, Lyotard, and others.

Gibson makes an absolute identification of narrative as chronos with the Gestell, without even making this identification (or totaling narrative explicit, or at least making explicit the historical reference that it involves -- to Heidegger, that is, which would further involve his having to realize that the Gestell, as Heidegger conceives it, is itself a space-time, and not simply a closed-time or an ending of metaphysics. And he thus supports Lyotard’s contention that narrative as such (as chronos, as Gestell) performs an insistence on a metaphysical postulate whereby “every event in the world is to be explained as the effect’ of a cause or reason, ‘i.e. rationalising the given and neutralising the future’ (Lyotard The Inhuman: Reflections on Time [1991], p. 69)” (209). In short, Gibson would rather that we could forsake metaphysical postulates altogether, and presumably together with the history of those metaphysical postulates, for texts and narratives alone (the ‘sola scriptura’ that Vattimo discusses) -- and, at that, only texts/narratives which constitute “points at which any complete [or ‘Bergsonian’] identification [between narrative and closure, control and the Gestell] becomes impossible” (209). So, in a characteristically contradictory move, Gibson proposes that narrative as chronos cannot overcome its aionic other, in fact presupposing that it can or ‘wants’ to in the first place. And then he ironically insists on thinking of a postmodern theory of narrative in terms of a spatial and not a temporal register. It might be said, then, that he is only thinking time in terms of space, but not also space in terms of time: “Fluent form, nomadic distributions, the hymen, heteroplasty, transversals, multiplicities, the excluded third, the chora, vectors, lines of force and flight: these are just some of the terms I have borrowed or adapted from critical theory in my attempts to hypothesise a new space for narrative theory” (212).
As such, "Lyotard's anxiety" (209) is used to support an overly anxious postmodern theory of narrative. In his attempt to describe a postmodern theory of narrative that will "allow a sense of the figural and its transgressive work to begin to trouble the categories that have been and are still so readily established on the basis of a perception of the discursive order alone" (30), Gibson refuses an explanation of how the figural and the discursive are always at work together in writing, transgressing eachother, moving across one another's terrains/zones diaphorically. For just as the figural is predicated upon the discursive, taking place as it does in a 'metanarrative,' 'metatextual,' or even 'metadiscursive' sense, so the discursive can only 'move' its narrative, argument, or reason through the figural, can only rationalize by means of transference through the metaphorical or figural. Indeed, for a theorist like Vattimo, the recuperation of narrative in the face of postmodern anxiety over and suspicion of (meta)-narrative(s) involves a recognition of the ineradicable and ubiquitous operation of metaphor and the figural (the hermeneutic 'truth' of criticism) in narrative and the discursive (the epistemological 'truth' of critique).

The Derridian recognition that, as Madan Sarup explains it, "meaning shifts around, and metaphor is the name of the process by which it does so" (47), is one which Vattimo acknowledges likewise as the effect of living in 'a world of difference.' He recognizes, like Derrida and like Gibson, that metaphor or the figural is thus "a threat to orderly language and allows for the proliferation of meaning" (Sarup 47), but he also insists upon a reassessment of the discursive as rational discourse, that is, as an order which accepts the risk of figural threats or betrayals, but as such, nevertheless, a rational order. For Vattimo, it is not only a matter of unsettling or disturbing the theories with which we surround ourselves, whether they be theories of narrative or whatever, because this action, even if it could be performed alone, would merely serve to indicate "that our account of the world could be different, but that it cannot tell us how it would be different" (Sarup 55). That is, this action, which is the attempted charade of Derridian deconstruction and also what Gibson is proposing, is merely a pointer and a signpost, and not an attempt to risk the predication of indication. But for Vattimo, to even criticize deconstruction as such is to lapse into a tautology; for to merely indicate or point is an impossibility anyways, that is, at least in philosophical, theoretical, narrative, or critical registers. The space of indication, which is the space of the figural, actually must be grounded in the discursive narrative, in the 'time' of predication in order to be indicated, written, or communicated. So, as such, the arguments 'for' or 'against' deconstruction on these grounds, for instance, seem to miss 'the point.' The point is precisely the recognition of how indication and predication are themselves inevitable operations in all writing, ineradicable functions of language. The criticism of Derridian deconstruction that Vattimo does offer has the sense of an interrogation: 'is it enough,' he seems to ask; that is, is indication enough? Or, as Madan Sarup asks: "Is Derrida playing among the webs of language, 'parodying himself, and then parodying the parody'?' (55).

The same could be asked of Gibson, who would like to think of the playful undecidability of indication as an alternative space beyond a predicative, narrative, temporal register. Vattimo provides an answer to this question in his theory: no, we cannot trade future space for past time(s). Gibson would claim "to have come out 'beyond' all distinctions between truth and falsehood, reason and rhetoric, fact and fiction" (Sarup 56), whereas Vattimo insists that the only 'beyond' will be a necessarily ironic one, not an overcoming but a Verwindung. For Vattimo, we cannot simply choose not to inhabit the 'past' of time (history, narrative...). Or at least we cannot do so and still be ethical -- as if we could simply affect amnesia and inhabit an aestheticist space, displaying infidelity in our thought without a conscience. Vattimo would rather pursue the question of how we can remain faithful, for instance, to the modern Wesen of criticism, and his notions of Andenken, Verwindung, and weak ontology as philosophy "disclose stimulating ways of dealing with and inhabiting the reality of the decline of the West" (Carravetta xiv). Gibson thinks that, since "we are ceasing to inhabit that space" (30) of the discursive or the narrative, "it can no longer be that of our thought" (30), and so he reads any insistence upon the discursive or the narrative (or, in the case of Vattimo's topical essay, 'critique') as "nostalgia for a unitary space" (30). Is it not incredibly ironic, then, that his description of aionic space as an 'alternative' for postmodern narratology is tantamount to a modernist nostalgia for a unitary space?

4.2. David Bennett: the oscillation, interference, and inter-subjectivity of space and time

It is important to have followed through Gibson's argument in such detail, not only so as to provide a foil to the type of argument that both Bennett and Vattimo put forth, but also because his insistence on the adoption of 'space' over 'time' follows the prompting of several rhetoricorically persuasive postmodern theoretical positions, such as that of the 'new philosophy' of Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, and the koine of deconstruction. Bennett's message, in his essay entitled "Postmodernism and Vision: Ways of Seeing (at) the End of History", is that even though the topos of space and spatializing figures of thought have become so pervasive in postmodern theory which wants to claim 'the end of history,' or 'the end of ideology,' or 'the end of spatial conflict,' nevertheless, time or history itself proves such 'obituaries' to be premature. Bennett observes the reputed discrediting of "the so-called 'master narratives' of modernity" (262) in postmodern theory: those emancipatory metanarratives such as "the
humanist metanarrative of enlightenment, of humanity's inevitable progress toward self-knowledge and emancipation through the agencies of reason, science and technology; the Marxist metanarrative of emancipation from exploitation through the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat; the liberal capitalist metanarrative of humanity's emancipation from poverty through the operations of the free market" (262). He acknowledges the revealing of these teleological 'grand narratives' to be "the fallible projections of local rather than global interests, of desires rather than of 'knowledge'" (262). But he also realizes that "with their destabilizing the very grounds of social and cultural periodization have seemed to dissolve" (262), thus making the 'posteriority' of postmodernism a paradoxical 'period,' consisting "in its being, inter alia , 'post'-historical" (262). Thus Bennett's argument follows much the same route as Vattimo's in his "Postmodern Criticism and Critique", first acknowledging what is the reputed 'postmodern condition,' and then proceeding to point out the paradoxical position of critique (periodization) in postmodernity.

And for Bennett, as for Vattimo, "the question of the perspective or subject-position from which an objectifying analysis of postmodernism might be conducted" (264) becomes crucial, either for historiography or for 'reflective' art. Thus Bennett proceeds to reflect upon "certain imaginings of this subject-position in left-wing, Western academic discourse" (264), primarily in the texts of Frederic Jameson and Craig Owens. In doing so, Bennett also focuses "on the oppositions between seeing and narrating subjects, and between spatial and temporal registers, which tend to emerge in attempts to negotiate the contradiction of periodizing the 'posthistorical'" (264).

Specifically, Bennett sets out to dispute the frequent postmodern contention that "the boundary between historiography and fiction has been erased altogether" (262), making history 'depthless,' effacing the past as referent, textualizing time, and "leaving only representations, texts, pseudo-events, images without originals: a spatial, rather than temporal, order of simulacra" (262). Pointing out the same irony that Vattimo's philosophy absorbs, and that Gibson refuses to thematize, Bennett states that "all periodizing theories of postmodernity as a global phenomenon are... by their own definitions modern rather than postmodern, contradictorily posing as reflections on, and thus distanciations from, a totality which they represent as having no 'outside' or 'other,' and hence as incapable of objectification" (263). In this vein, Bennett also paraphrases Brian McHale's argument in his Postmodernist Fiction of 1987, stating that "McHale identifies epistemological relativism as the dominant mode of modernist literature, arguing that it is a short and inevitable step from modernism's epistemological relativism to postmodernism's ontological relativism: in other words, from a modernist fragmentation of the world into a heterogeneity of 'subjective' viewpoints to the postmodernist insistence on a heterogeneity of incommensurable worlds" (265). And thus, "any globalizing theory of postmodernity clearly poses a resistance to ontological relativism, or to what Jameson characterizes as a view of the present 'as sheer heterogeneity, random difference'" (Bennett 265).

Similar to the argument made earlier against Gibson's narratology, Bennett himself argues that even Jameson's self-reflexive effort "to construct postmodernism as a totality" (265), his self-reflexive attempt "to imagine the reconstitution of a centred subject of vision or knowledge in the postmodern period" (265), turns out to be contradictory. Bennett understands this contradiction as a result of the fact that Jameson -- note, much like Gibson -- "projects this recentred subject of postmodern knowledge, and hence of political praxis in the postmodern world, as a viewing rather than a narrating subject, a subject of vision rather than of history" (265-6). Jameson proposes that the postmodern subject is lost in 'postmodern hyperspace,' much in the same way that Gibson excitedly reports Virilio's sense of a current crisis of 'whole' dimensions. According to Jameson, the postmodern subject experiences "the as yet untheorized original space of some new 'world system of multinational or late capitalism'" (Bennett quoting Jameson, 266) as "an abolition of 'distance in general (including 'critical distance' in particular), a loss of coordinates, both physical and conceptual" (267), again similar to Virilio's (Gibson's) description of the experience of postmodern 'space.' Jameson thus proposes a 'cognitive map' for the recentering of this fragmented postmodern subject who is confused in 'postmodern hyperspace.' But in Bennett's argument, Jameson's cartographic aesthetic of 'cognitive mapping' is rather confused itself. Specifically, for Bennett, Jameson's proposals for the symbolic representation of postmodern space are a tactical confusion of cartographic with perspectival logic, wherein he "calls for an 'aesthetic' to resolve postmodern fragmentation into coherence and restore the subject of such art to mastery over conceptual and empirical space" (270-1). As Bennett argues,
pathology of the postmodern subject.) If the monadic subject has indeed, as Jameson maintains, been definitively dispersed, then Jameson is in the paradoxical position of attempting to radicalize non-existent subjects -- "non-subjects" with neither the desire nor the 'need' to be radicalized since they are no longer constituted in or by the dynamics of anxiety and alienation (269).

Against Jameson then, and again similar to Vattimo's argument in "Postmodern Criticism and Critique", Bennett reasserts the possibility of a (critical) distance which can be negotiated without the desire to resolve or master. In Bennett's argument, Jameson's cartographic aesthetic elides "a significant distinction between perspectivalism and cartographic grids" (268), in that Jameson proposes that the cognitive mapping of postmodernity will provide a 'world view' or 'world picture.' For whereas "the implied subject of Cartesian perspectivalism is a centred, panoptical subject, the cartologic grid is a decentred symbolic system with, strictly speaking, no implied subject" (268). As it turns out, Jameson's ideal subject of postmodern vision involves a modernist aspiration to 'clean space,' as Michel de Certeau described it -- placeless space, de-historicized time, and a corollary "universal and impersonal subject, freed from the divisive legacies of regionalism, local culture, tradition, class and so forth" (Bennett 270). At this point, one cannot help noting the similarities between this description of Jameson's postmodern cartographic aesthetic and Gibson's postmodern narratology, as already discussed, the fantasy of a new space for narrative theory which will mirror the pure, aionic space of poetry. Bennett concludes that, ironically, "Jameson's 'aesthetic' reconstruction of the subject implied in Cartesian perspectivalism... [is] figured ultimately as vacating space... in the name of recovering transcendence and cognitive mastery over space" (278), a conclusion similar to the one reached regarding Gibson's essentially modernist nostalgia for a unitary space. Reinscribing (critical) distance will be critical in postmodernity, according to Bennett, but it must be done both by placing space in historical time and by historicizing time in the place of space.

Bennett goes on to argue that Craig Owens, in another attempt to figure an ideal subject of postmodern vision -- in this case, the 'ideologically sound' subject of postmodern theory -- is complicit in a project of scopic mastery, similar to Jameson, and, as I would argue, similar to Gibson as well. In fact, though, the argument is a little different, because Bennett accuses Owens of being seduced by "the liberal-pluralist conception of 'synthetic' heterogeneity" (274), just as the theorist Martin Jay is, in "an inadvertent moment... [of his] Foucauldian historical commentary on 'ways of seeing'" (274). According to Bennett, Jay inadvertently projects a generalized 'we' which revels in the plurality and possibilities of different 'scopic regimes.' And thus he also projects "a homogeneous, universal subject of vision/knowledge" (274) along with "the modality of this subject as liberated" (274), invoking the utopian figure of democratic 'free play,' which, according to Bennett, "conceives of differences as non-conflictual, non-contradictory -- rather, as complementary or synthetic" (274). Bennett accuses Owens of the same oversight, stating that few periodizing theorists of postmodernity have found it easy to resist, at certain moments in their discourse, the essentially modern, liberal-pluralist conception of difference, which welcomes heterogeneity as a potential multiplicity of viewpoints carrying the utopian promise of a more comprehensive vision, a new cognitive plenitude -- as if the multiple, incommensurable visions of gender-specific, class-specific, race-, region-, and age-specific subjects could somehow be fused into a single, veridical sight, giving miraculous re-birth to the transcendental subject of Cartesian rationalism. With its phantasm of a fully emancipated subject (released from the 'limitations' of ethnicity, region, gender, age, sexual preference, etc.), this idealist conception of difference merely rehashes one of the master narratives of modernity, that of Enlightenment (274).

Owens "repeats Jameson's and other periodizing theorists' attempts to figure postmodernism/-ity as a totality" (Bennett 275), and Bennett thus insists upon (critical) distance as difference, or upon the need to still "think difference as opposition" (275), which would involve the refusal of a synthetic liberal-pluralism. Bennett argues in favour of "those non-universal subjects... for whom historical narratives, rather than epistemological circles, are still urgent requisites" (275).

At this point, it is worth stopping for a moment to consider what Bennett means by insisting upon still thinking difference as opposition. Presumably such an insistence would seem to run counter to some aspects of Vattimo's weak thought, for instance: his idea of Verwindung as a way of inhabiting/mediating the site of
difference itself; or his belief that the dissolutionary destiny of Being is such that demonstrative discourse (wherein differences are necessarily, even if ironically, conceived of as synthetic) is both necessary and impossible at the same time; or his concept of oppositional difference as Erörterung, or an “unfounding [sfondata]’ collocation’ that has indeed many of the traits of aesthetic experience, but as it is given at the end of metaphysics and as a moment of its ‘overcoming’ in the form of a Verwindung” (“The Truth of Hermeneutics” 89). However, this would be a misunderstanding of what Bennett means by thinking difference as opposition. Bennett identifies epistemological circles with Jay’s imaginary totality --“still male-dominated, predominantly white, middle-class, Western, liberal academy” (275) -- and with Owens’ “anti-representational aesthetic” (275), because he argues that these scopic regimes do not admit the possibility for difference. Furthermore, he thinks that “the subject of a deconstructive aesthetic” (276), as a subject in process which is projected by Owens as “the ideal viewer of and in postmodernity” (276), is engaged “in a practice of rigorously sceptical self-scrutiny... [such that this] subject no sooner identifies the mastering impulses, desires and interests which inform its vision than it attempts to evacuate them” (276). As such, it cannot think difference as opposition because it cannot announce its own difference, its own truth (as history, as narrative, as temporal register, etcetera). And thus the deconstructive aesthetic as espoused by Owens involves an unwitting return to the dominant scopic regime of modernity, Cartesian perspectivalism.

The introspective, self-effacing, ostensibly self-emptying subject which Owens projects as the ideal viewer of and in postmodernity is in a sense a blind, rather than a seeing subject, relentlessly mistrustful of its own impulses to mastery, its own potentially objectifying vision. The telos of this self-deconstructing subject (intent on voiding its vision of differential interests and desires, in short, of ‘identity’) is ultimately indistinguishable from the disincorporated, dehistoricized subjectivity of Cartesian rationalism (Bennett 276).

Involved in “the logic of the spatializing metaphors which invariably emerge in attempts to think postmodernity as a totality, and thus the subject of its knowledge or vision as posthistorical” (276), is thus a displacement of “historical questions with irresolvable epistemological issues, which in some ‘real,’ historical sense are characteristically academic” (276). In this respect, thinking postmodernity as a totality also involves fantasies of the transcendence of difference (as opposition -- for instance, as self and other). And thus Bennett asserts that the challenge of thinking difference as opposition will necessarily involve the corollary challenge of a deconstructive cultural politics to maintain the “constant oscillation between ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ self and other” (277, my emphasis). And so we arrive at what is the crux of Bennett’s argument in his essay, his insistence upon difference as opposition, and his understanding of opposition in this sense, not as a rigid binary opposition, but instead as an extended oscillation, coordination, mediation, collocation, discussion -- in short, ‘diaphoricities.’

It could be argued that at certain points in Bennett’s argument, the insistence on history, time, and narrative is almost as exclusive as Gibson’s opposite insistence on the event, space, and poetry. For he insists that even the oscillation which he sees as necessary is one “whose medium is time rather than space and whose representation is narrative or historical rather than epistemological” (277, my emphasis). It is almost as if, in Bennett’s mind, a strong emphasis in one direction would supposedly compensate for the currently strong emphasis in the other direction, that is, on “the topos of ‘space’ [which] has become pervasive in both the theoretical discourse of postmodernism and the rhetorical culture of ‘late capitalism’ more generally” (277). For, according to Bennett, ‘posthistorical culture’ likes to think that it “has reputedly witnessed an implosion of the ‘distantiating,’ temporal ‘perspectives’ on the present which historiography once promised” (277), and thus spatializing figures of thought have begun to disseminate or circulate, yielding “a t(op)ology in which ‘space’ has increasingly assumed (in a relatively short ‘space’ of time) the status of a dead metaphor” (278). And in a time such as now where time itself seems ‘disappearing’ or becoming more and more obsolete, “an era in which the transmission of the information which is power/money takes, literally, no perceptible time at all” (278), space has taken over. In arguments such as Gibson’s, Jameson’s, and Owen’s, for instance, “space” has become the preferred dimension in which to figure autonomy and identity in the postmodern era” (278). And thus, “to be engaged in ‘creating a space’ (for others, for the self), whether in the realm of discourse, of politics, or of institutions, has become the incontrovertible sign of engaged liberalism, or postmodern pluralism” (278). In fact, argues Bennett, “to have ‘a space/place of one’s own’ has become the very ‘ground’ or condition of identity and autonomy” (278). Bennett thus sees both Jameson and Owens as only temporarily reviving “an expiring metaphor by projecting ideal subjects of postmodern vision” (278), and so Owens’ ‘ideologically sound’ subject of postmodern vision is also “figured ultimately as vacating space” (278), this time “in the name of an ethics of self-effacement, a ‘decolonization’ of space, which it ‘frees for occupation by (hitherto ‘marginalized’) others” (278).
Needless to say, then, neither Jameson’s or Owens’ arguments satisfy the demand for oscillation which Bennett sets out as a challenge for postmodern theory. For, according to Bennett, both Jameson’s and Owens’ ways of seeing (at) the end of history can themselves be “seen” as projections of epistemologies or ontologies of non-interference” (278-9). Thus we understand that Bennett’s argument does, after all, echo that of Vattimo’s or Carravetta’s, for the challenge is to project a ‘posthistorical’ way of seeing (subject of vision) which is less than ideal simply because it oscillates, it interferes, it is opposed, and it is differentiating). That is to say, the inevitable betrayal of this subject’s way of seeing, its discourse, is also admitted by Bennett’s argument. It is clear from Bennett’s argument that he holds no naive belief in unproblematic representation; to represent (totalize, periodize, and ultimately ‘see’) will be ultimately problematic, but also, and therefore, dynamic. As in Carravetta’s and Vattimo’s attempts to understand the diaphora (Erörterung/Verwindung) as an exchange, mediation, or movement between time and space, epistemology and hermeneutics (or ontology), etcetera, Bennett insists upon the dynamics of oscillation and interference in postmodern, posthistorical representations. As such, Bennett’s strong emphasis on history, time, and narrative actually ends up in the orbit of Vattimo’s suggestion of weak thought as being the only possible way of thinking, seeing, or representing in postmodernity. Bennett himself suggests that the ‘space’ of deconstruction, as a dominant orientation in postmodern thought, “may be too radioactive, too radiated by the forces of deconstruction, to be the ground of any identity or subjectivity” (279). And thus, for Bennett, as for Vattimo, there will be no more ‘strong’ or ‘cogent’ form of grounding or stabilizing any form of identity, whether that be perceived as a subjective identity, a political identity or, even more radically, the identity of any correspondence (truth). For Bennett, as for Vattimo, the ‘times’ of postmodern historiography and the ‘spaces’ in dispute in the cultural politics of postmodern vision will “remain, ineluctably, inter-subjective” (279), mediated, interstitial, intermittent, ‘inter alia.’ And as time and history are also inter-subjective events/sites of contestation -- that is, as they are not merely objective facts -- we cannot expect them to offer promises for subjectivity or identity founded on strong notions any more than we can with space. Just as Vattimo emphasizes the need to tell the story of the end of (hi)story, Bennett emphasizes that ways of seeing (at) the end of history must also be ways of speaking, telling, and narrating the end of history. But as such, they will be no less problematic than ways of seeing.
Notes

1. The mention of this difference in itself can lead one to recall a whole string of associations, for instance, following Roman Jakobson's famous essays "The metathorific and metonymic poles" and "The Twofold Character of Language": metaphor (aion/vertical axis) and metonymy (chronos/horizontal axis); similarity (between things not normally contiguous in space/time) and contiguity (in space/time); or, that is, difference (which Deleuze sees as one kind of repetition) and repetition (as a form of continuity); but also (metaphoric, symbolic) identity and (contiguous) difference; selection, substitution, association and combination, contexture, collocation (according to the rules of 'language'); paradigmatic relations and syntagmatic relations; allegory and reading; Romanticism and realism (as a sort of Enlightenment 'Reason' or rationalism); Sigmund Freud's condensation and displacement; synchrony and diachrony; the figural and the discursive; naming and syntax; Ferdinand Saussure's selection as connecting terms 'in absentia' (absence) and his combination as connecting terms 'in presentia' (presence); virtual and real; code and message; Charles S. Peirce's concept of the operation of similarity as providing the linguistic sign with a reference to the code in serving to interpret it and of the operation of contiguity as providing the linguistic sign with a reference to the context in serving to interpret it; and thus, in each of these ways, the sign is understood in its relation to another set of linguistic signs through alignment, and the sign is also understood in its relation to another set of linguistic signs through alternation; explicative replacement and determining connection; internal modes of relation of a message's constituents with the code and external modes of relation of a message's constituents with the message. Finally, other strings of associations could be thought of along Deleuzian 'lines,' such as: harmony and melody; improvisation (difference) and imitation (repetition); creation and derivation; chaos and parody.... The list goes on, resonating through 'split space' of all language and all thinking -- what Heidegger chooses to call, for this reason, the ontological difference.
Criticism should be a risky, duplicitous, and uncanny experience.

Peter Carravetta
At least one central aspect of what makes an interpretation better will be whether it understands not only its object and subject matter, but also itself. Interpretations that are methodologically more self-aware are therefore better if they bring to light unnoticed features not only of the object of interpretation, but also of the conditions and procedures of interpretation. A good interpretation, on Heidegger's model, will show something about the possibilities of interpretation as such. An interpretation presupposes a self-understanding [Sichverstehen], and bringing crucial features of this implicit self-understanding to light will make the interpretation insightful (in Heidegger's special sense of sight, which is not simply the perception of present-at-hand objects, but the disclosure of the total background or context.

David Couzens Hoy "Heidegger and the hermeneutic turn" (1993)
Criticism... will accept and function with one sound and philosophically consistent prejudice: methods exist, they are historically determined pathways of knowledge-gathering and legitimation, and must be employed even if -- or perhaps explicitly because -- they have to be proven unilateral, insufficient, at times 'wrong' and subservient to theory (or ideology).

Peter Carravetta “About the Ancient Diaphora: Sketch of a Post-Modern Theory of Interpretation as Diaphoristics” (1991)
After such a long detour, it should be quite obvious that the diaphora, mediation, or conversation (Erörterung) which this paper intends to coordinate has a “double exigency” (Carravetta 172): it intends to ‘listen’ (see, articulate a ‘space’) and to ‘say’ (narrate, articulate a ‘time’ or historicize). As such, it represents a critical exchange in the manner that Carravetta outlines in his chapter entitled “About the Ancient Diaphora: Sketch of a Post-Modern Theory of Interpretation as Diaphoristics”, where he attempts to “predicate viable practices within the as-yet-unbounded horizon of the Postmodern” (170). It is in this essay that Carravetta sketches a possible future for criticism in much the same manner that Vattimo does in his essay “Postmodern Criticism: Postmodern Critique”, explaining how “a double (forked?) criticism” (173) can be conceived and practiced as “Post-Modern Dialogue” (175). As several of his points indirectly elaborate upon those made by Vattimo in his essay, we shall return to Carravetta (significantly, something of a Vattimo ‘acolyte’ himself) after having finally discussed the crux of Vattimo’s argument: his reading of the text-monument as both a substantial and an insubstantial mortal trace, and as such, the trace of both an immortal possibility and an impossible mortality. Finally, Division I ends by returning to a consideration of Heidegger’s analysis of the circle of understanding and the controversy that it has aroused.

Let us recall -- according to Vattimo, the text is a monument “at least in two senses” (64). As a mortal trace, it is both substantial and insubstantial, and as such, it involves both the proximate activity of exegesis, or what we have so far called criticism, and the distillation of critique. We are drawn to the text-monument as Being or substance, as the pure trace of another mortality which appeals to us as Dasein (thrownness, or being-in-the-world). And we are also drawn to think of the text monument in this way as we adopt a position of authenticity in our own life, which is made possible for us simply by deciding ourselves towards our own mortality. But we also happen upon the text-monument as an insubstantial accident, its coincidence in the Wirkungsgeschichte being ‘just’ or ‘simply’ another possibility open to us, another way of “experiencing in imagination other lives, other possibilities of existence” (65). So the text-monument is actively selected, as implied in Vattimo’s explanation of Heidegger’s other word for tradition -- Ueberlieferung, or “the Selbstuemerliefern of the authentic Dasein, which requires that the past is not accepted as a closed Vergangenes, but as an open Gewesenes, something which is still ‘possible’” (64). But the text-monument “is also something relatively isolated, which we choose as an object for our consideration, or cult, or study, in an arbitrary way” (65), as just another possibility.

As an immortal possibility, then, the text is a monument “in the sense that [it comes] to us through a story of interpretation, the story which Gadamer calls Wirkungsgeschichte, which possesses a specific substantiality” (64). Just as a monument is a landmark constituting “an order, a ‘system’ of reciprocal references, a tissue, in the etymological sense of the word ‘text’” (64), so a text is a monument with such substantial aspects. And thus, as an immortal possibility, appealing to us and affecting us as a mortal trace “found in the substantiality of the tradition” (64) -- understood as Ueberlieferung -- the effects of the text monument have no closure. As Vattimo states, “Being, substance, to which criticism can refer in order to remain faithful to its dimension of critique is ‘contextuality’; as far as it is written, the scripture is never alone, it has the reality and cogency of the monumental ensemble within which it is given and accessible to us” (64). Thus “tradition substitutes for the ontological horizon which, in modern criticism, was provided by progressive philosophies of history” (64). But as an immortal possibility within tradition, the text-monument (always still ‘possible’) does not “have the value of an established reality; rather, it is ‘just’ the act of another mortal being, towards which we are in a position of dialogue and discussion” (64). And, understood as such, the ontological horizon which is constituted by a tradition of text-monuments is not another strong metaphysics. For, because “what is transmitted to us from the past appears also as the pure trace of other mortalities” (64), it does not therefore represent “a necessary and monolithic order, a non-objectionable truth, as all ‘traditionalisms’ have believed” (64-5). It is in this way that Vattimo believes “monuments of the past carry in them what we could call a weak normative power, on the basis of which... postmodern criticism still can have a meaning on the level of ‘critique’” (65). He states that to call the text a monument, therefore, in strictly Heideggerian terms means to recognize that it has the character of a trace of mortal beings which appeals to us as mortal beings too. Tradition is nothing more than trans-mission, Ge-Schick, sending of messages and traces; and Being is nothing, in its turn, but tradition, transmission-sending. This, I believe, is the reason why in a page of Der Satz vom Grund, Heidegger can speak of the “liberating bind of the tradition” into which we have to leap in order to be free. The normative horizon provided by tradition conceived of in these terms is only apparently narrower and more rigid than the philosophies of history which dominated modern criticism (65).
It is at this point that Vattimo recalls us to a second sense of monumentality, insinuated here in the
description of text-monuments as providing a weak normative horizon, but also "visible, for instance, in the notion
of 'monumental historiography' developed by Nietzsche in the second Untimely Meditation" (65). The text-
monument as the trace of an act of another mortal being is also something of an impossibility, and at that, an
impossible mortality. So although the text-monument does belong "to the tissue of monumentality, to the system
of landmarks which constitutes the normative horizon of our culture" (65), we can also take on an attitude towards this
(substantial) history which betrays something of the insubstantiality of mortal traces, their impossibility as such. In
this vein, Vattimo states that "Petrarch was not interested in the Greats of the past because he hoped to find in their
writings and acts an 'explanation' of his present condition, as the critical history of modern times has generally
believed; he was rather looking to the past in search of 'edification,' of what we could call 'rhetorical exempla'''
(65). In more recent history, Vattimo states that, "at the end of the modern development of the historical
consciousness, Wilhelm Dilthey, in his conception of art and history as ways of experiencing in imagination other
lives, other possibilities of existence, seems to rediscover the same sense of monumentality" (65). Thus, in this
second sense of (textual) monumentality, we are drawn to the text-monument in an engagement which literally
edifies -- raises up, erects, constructs -- the knowledge of another mortality aside from our own which exists to convinces us of its possibility as a 'message,' and thus also of the possibility of our 'dialogue' with it. But it is only a(other) text-monument, and simply or just a(other) mortal trace, and so therefore not any kind of message, only
what has the character of messages, sending, trans-mission, Ge-Schick, text(s). Our dialogue with the text-
monument has thus also been that of convincing ourselves of the a/effectiveness of textual trans-mission or of its
'message,' which can also be understood as the sending of an impossible mortality.

As such, after having uncovered an immortal possibility, in the first sense of textual monumentality, we
also stumble upon the 'cover up' (overlap) of an impossible mortality, both ours and that of the trace itself. And
thus, in our encounter with the text-monument, it undergoes a parallactic revision or displacement. Incidentally, we
might be reminded here of Brian McHale's identification of the bidirectional and reversible 'shift' from the
epistemological relativism of modernism (immortal possibilities) to the ontological relativism of postmodernism
(impossible mortalities). But, as already discussed in some detail, it is not simply a matter of shifting from one
position to the other. McHale's theory of postmodernism/-ity is underdeveloped. For, postmodern
criticism/critique must negotiate both the "modernist fragmentation of the world into a heterogeneity of 'subjective
viewpoints (McHale 265) and the "postmodernist insistence on a heterogeneity of incommensurable worlds"
(McHale 265). Vattimo concludes his essay by returning to the question which began it, and stating a condition:

If the question for postmodern criticism was... how to remain faithful to its modern
Wesen once the meta-récits have been dissolved, the answer we are sketching here is that
this is possible in so far as the monumental essence of the texts is recognized in both its
meanings: the substantiality of the Wirkungsgeschichte (which is nothing but the
substantiality of the traces of the past mortals) and the accidental and causal aspect of the
monuments as rhetorical exempla. The first sense provides sufficient guidelines in order
to avoid the pure arbitrariness of wild criticism; the second sense provides the basis for
taking a critical distance from an actual existence; not in the name of an essential,
metaphysically given, order, but in the name of the 'multiple' possibilities of existence
which are given by the 'world-opening' force of the texts and which, in a sense, belie the
claims of the actual existence to be the sole 'natural' possibility-reality (65-6).

It should be stated at this point that all of this explanation and translation (interpretation) of Vattimo’s
philosophy, and various other theoretical texts, is itself: first, an attempt to negotiate an exchange between
(sometimes opposing) points of view in the so-called postmodernist debate; and second, a 'spasm' or 'contortion'
tension) within the paper proper whereby various defensive postures are held. You will recall that we initially
departed along this path by way of two points that were to be belaboured in defense of the risky or ironic aspect of
this paper itself, and that the second point evolved out of a consideration of Vattimo’s topical essay. By this time,
"the aims, the cause(s), the 'target' and the means must stand out loud and clear" (Carravetta 170). Risks have been
articulated, chances have been taken, and now it is time to be even more risky -- duplicitous, in fact. We have so far
engaged in a close scrutiny (listening, criticism) of the message of Vattimo’s philosophy, along with that of other
texts. We have been uncovering a substantiality within these texts; we have been explaining and translating within their space, in close proximity to them. Now it is time to begin covering up that substantiality, to stand back from the text of Vattimo and reinstate critical distance. In short, we must begin to practice postmodern criticism as postmodern critique.

But how can this be realized? In his essay “About the Ancient Diaphora”, Carravetta explains that interpretation,

in going beyond the purely operative stage as metacriticism,... will question the work of art[~text] by listening to its Being, opening up to its ushering forth, ready to produce (others would have it: to reproduce) in poetic/philosophical language -- for that text, for that critic, and for that spatio-temporal framing -- a discourse about the originary messages spoken by the work of art[~text] (174).

And when confronted with “the voice of truth” (174), as it is ‘spoken’ in the message(s) of the text, criticism “will ask its bearer, the critic, to make a choice: either stand by and experience in silence, or advance and speak out” (175). Carravetta expands this dichotomy not only to develop his conception of ‘Post-Modern Dialogue’ as a ‘double (forked?) criticism,’ but also in order to recall “the three meanings of the word hermeneuin, which are: to express, to explain, and to translate” (175). Carravetta states that, in the first case, where or when the critic ‘stands by and experiences the text in silence,’ s/he will attend to the last two meanings, explaining and translating. Note that these critical activities would seem to correspond with Vattimo’s conception of ‘sola Scriptura’ and the pure listening of ‘wild criticism.’ For, this is the kind of interpretation which stems from the realization of the first sense of textual monumentality, where “the savage critic dedicates himself completely to a pure listening to the text... in a dialogical attitude which is completely free of any normative horizon provided by a general philosophy of history” (61). Of course, it is more complex than this, as ‘wild’ critics or ‘deconstructionists’ often describe their activity as being ex-pressive -- as presenting the unpresentable, saying the unsayable, or exposing the disturbing silence which is repressed within the text itself. Nevertheless, from Vattimo’s point of view, deconstructive practice remains a form of explanation and translation. For, as long as it refuses to extend the dialogical attitude that it engages with the text to the normative horizon which in part constitutes that text, and also back into its own activity, deconstruction remains secure within the explanation and translation of the text.

There is another possibility, however, corresponding very closely with Vattimo’s conception of ‘solum scriptura’ and his proposal for the reconstruction of rationality (postmodern critique). And this other possibility stems from a second sense of textual monumentality, as previously explained. As Carravetta states,

if, however, the critic decides to concentrate on hermeneutics as expression, and decides to advance and speak out (in the first person, as it were), he may forego the notion of criticism altogether, for there is no evaluation whatsoever to be actualized; rather, he will inscribe (as opposed to circumscribe) his response in the strange language of the Gods, where hermeneuin has the sense of expressing something other, something unwieldy, unexpected, unpredictable, but nevertheless voiced (voiceable), real, an announcement, a communion: like Hermes, for whom saying, interpreting, and being are one and the same thing (175).

And it is in this second case, where and when criticism takes on an expressive role, that Carravetta thinks “interpretation must realize itself as pure dialogue, a dialogue which now can be conceived as non-Platonic and post-Socratic: Post-Modern Dialogue” (175). With respect to this formulation, it must be pointed out again that, so far, this paper has mainly been involved in the first ‘activity,’ explaining and translating the message(s) of Vattimo’s philosophy, along with other texts. However, this is not to insinuate that there has been a choice in the matter, that criticism can somehow choose whether to be explanatory/translatorive or expressive, ‘wild’ or ‘rational.’

Rather, what we are trying to arrive at here, by way of explaining and translating the thought of Carravetta, Vattimo, and also Heidegger, is a recognition regarding the provenance of language itself. As Carravetta himself explains: “ontologically, the capacity both to reveal and obscure are two aspects of language (langage, linguaggio) which are equiprimordial and essential to truth” (170-1). Thus the medium of language itself determines criticism as a duplicitous experience,

because it is in the nature of language, history, and being, to be double: language as logos is speech which can be both authentic and inauthentic, as Heidegger explains in paragraph 44 of Being and Time.
The *logos* is that way of being in which Dasein can *either* uncover or cover up. This *double possibility* is what is distinctive in the Being-true of the *logos*: the *logos* is that way of comporting oneself which can *also* cover things *up*. Further on, still deconstructing Aristotle, Heidegger goes on to say that: The most primordial ‘truth’ is the ‘locus’ of assertion; it is the ontological condition for the possibility that assertions can be either true or false — that they may uncover or cover things up (Carravetta 170).

Carravetta thinks that “in its coming into concrete (textual) being” (171), criticism will articulate “this ‘double bind’” (171) and will thus be “both phenomenological and hermeneutic” (171). Its ‘duplicity’ consists in its being both “an awareness of a modulating, reductive consciousness” (171) — what we have so far identified as postmodern criticism—and “a linguistic, ontological, and historical immersion in the circle of understanding”(171) -- or, that is, postmodern critique. And therefore, “this duplicity is not necessarily something to be censored *a priori...*, [but] rather, it is the necessary condition that governs the very act of interpretation, or the ontological and epistemological starting point above and beyond the subsequent ideological and moral constraints that must be resolved” (171). The ‘archaeological’ activity of criticism will uncover a substantiality and the ‘edifying’ activity of critique will cover it up. Postmodern criticism/critique will both listen and say. Or, as Carravetta states,

> even the least pretentious criticism must be aware of the fact that, at the very moment it undertakes to explain a given text (be it ancient or contemporary), its very own language is bound to the violence of withdrawing the sedimentations of *Dasein* in order to bring them into the ‘clear-ing,’ into full view; but it may also, at the same time, constric the generally polymorphous text (and, at a superstructural, suprasyncategorematic level, the forms of discourse) into quaint, repeatable locutions, the indifference of ‘They’ — or idle talk (171).

It must be stated now, in a duplicitous way, and in seeming contradiction to the defensive postures so far held, that those defenses are as necessary as they are *unnecessary* in the present context. For perhaps the central paradox of Vattimo’s weak thought (as with Carravetta’s notion of ‘Post-Modern Dialogue’) is that “it does not purport to be convincing: it does not mean to sway interlocutors against their will” (175). As with Bennett’s emphasis on interference, oscillation, and difference as opposition, contradiction can be left to stand if it is explicitly thematized as such, that is, as the necessary betrayal of all discourse. It is thus towards a practice of Vattimo’s ‘weak thought’ (as the attempt to think difference *as* difference) that this paper follows his suggestion to ‘root domination out of grammar.’ This was Vattimo’s proposal for weak thought in his 1993 publication *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy After Nietzsche and Heidegger* (*Parallax Re-Visions of Culture and Society* *Le avventure della differenza*) [Milan: Garzanti, 1980]). And it is important to point out that, for Vattimo, rooting domination out of grammar does not mean levelling or flattening out difference (covering up the betrayal) in an epistemology or ontology of non-interference, as was Bennett’s accusation of Jay and Owens. Rather, in letting difference stand exposed, we do not purport to be ultimately convincing, we do not pretend to tell ‘the end of the story,’ nor do we insist on being first (originary) or right.

By contaminating our testimony in this way, we not only contribute to the problematizing of demonstrative discourse, but we also, in effect, ‘remember’ or ‘recollect’ difference. And thus we recall Being, practicing a type of thinking which Vattimo calls, following Heidegger, *An-denken*. In his essay “The Adventure of Difference” from the above mentioned book, Vattimo points out that this recollection is not, however, one “that makes present something which was but is no longer present, it is not an ‘ephemeral presencing of the past’” (148). Vattimo explains that “we cannot recall Being in the sense of making it present once more, since it has never been present” (148); and thus, “recalling it has more to do with taking one’s leave of it (verabschieden)” (148). What he means is that in recalling difference, we recall also the event of Being as it is given in “a historically constituted horizon, thrown and finite” (149), and thus what we ‘really’ recall here is “the non-coincidence between the horizon of presence and Being as present being” (149), a non-coincidence which, not coincidentally, “is at the basis of the relation Heidegger marks out between Being and time” (149). In short then, we recall and think the ontological difference. And to think difference as difference (‘weak thought,’ *An-denken*) will also therefore involve the remembering (against the forgetting of metaphysics) of “the making-present that governs and makes possible every determinate presence” (149), including one’s own thought (presence). What we are involved in doing here, then, is putting distance (time) between ourselves and texts. Understanding tradition as *Ueberlieferung*, we deploy a
temporality in the space of our ‘making-present,’ our truth, and our interpretation. Another way of saying this is that we speak in the space of our listening, thus announcing our own impossible mortality through the silence of an immortal possibility.

The uncovering of difference here, the necessary betrayal of discourse, also contributes to the problematization of endings in Vattimo’s philosophy. For this paper does not attempt “to define a closed system or field” (Carravetta 175), but rather “aims at an open-ended principle or process” (175), which as such, does not attempt to convince beyond a shadow of a doubt, even though it still purports to be convincing. If there can only be difference because even the arche (the ‘origin’) is a repetition (a difference), then we are left with endings alone, and only endings, responses alone and only responses. Thus there is no end because there is only ending, and in this way, the ending is always beginning in an ending, the interpretation is always a response. As Carravetta states,

> the question of the beginning is important because, as will become more evident further on, dialogue in the postmodern age is always beginning over and over without wanting to reach an origin -- it has abandoned such lofty ideals! For the idea is now to recover, recollect, starting over again and again in determinate temporality (177).

If this paper attempted to convince absolutely (which is what a thesis paper purportedly or ostensibly sets out to do), then it would require a circumscribed end. Rather, by passing from the explanatory and translative aspect of interpretation to its expressive aspect -- in the location of Heideggerian and Vattimian thought as an insightful context to the text of Elizabeth Bowen -- this paper intends to inscribe difference in the beginning of an interpretation of Vattimo, and before him Heidegger and Bowen.

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As such, and as postmodern criticism/critique, this paper intends to accommodate “central features of both the reconstructive and the deconstructive enterprises” (188) which, according to David Couzens Hoy, Heidegger’s original account of the hermeneutic circle negotiates. In his essay “Heidegger and the hermeneutic turn”, Hoy discusses the specific controversy which has been the outcome of the hermeneutic turn in the late twentieth-century. Speaking of “a general movement that can be called the ‘hermeneutic turn’” (170), Hoy explains that this turn has taken various forms, including poststructuralist cultural studies, deconstructive literary studies, interpretive anthropology and social science, and critical legal studies. Of course, the specific turns taken in each of these fields are reactions to older ways of practicing each discipline. But in each case the emphasis on interpretation is used as an antidote, usually to objectivistic conceptions of the discipline’s methods. However, none of these particular turns would have been imaginable without a dramatic change earlier in this century, the change brought about in philosophy by Martin Heidegger in 1927 in *Being and Time*. Heidegger’s hermeneutic turn is taken most explicitly in Sections 31 and 32 of that book, where Heidegger makes interpretive understanding the central mode of human existence (or Dasein) (170).

In the last section of this essay, subtitled ‘After Heidegger,’ Hoy moves on to discuss “two thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century whose work would not have been possible without these sections of *Being and Time*” (188), Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida. He explains how the Heideggerian account has been ‘split’ between these two thinkers into reconstructive and deconstructive emphases.

Gadamerian hermeneutics appear to deconstructionists to harbor the hidden assumption that the text has an internal unity of meaning, and that meaning is a single thing that interpretation must aim at reconstructing. The deconstructionists see this faith in the unity and coherence of the text as a vestige of metaphysical faith, which they aim to deconstruct. In contrast to the hermeneutic move to recover and reconstruct the meaning of the text, deconstruction is the operation of questioning this faith in the meaning of the text by finding in the rhetoric and style of the language of the text moments where the assumption of the unity of meaning fails (188).

It is interesting to note, then, that these two emphases indicate that ‘fork in the road’ which Vattimo himself negotiates, by conceiving of a theory and practice which would moderate both aspects of interpretation.
Hoy moves on to discuss the problems which are raised by these two different ways of developing Heidegger's analysis of the circle of understanding. In his own analysis, there is the problem of deciding interpretation as either reconstruction or deconstruction; there is the question of the interpreter's metabelief in approximating the ideal of the one right interpretation (or monism versus pluralism); and then finally, there are methodological and political issues which evolve out of each of these two problems.

The debate about deconstruction is too complex to be summarized here, and I will therefore limit myself to the issue of what follows directly from Sections 31 and 32 of Being and Time for this controversy. The issue has two sides, a methodological one and a political one. The methodological one turns on the question of whether Heidegger's insistence on the circle of understanding does not simply imprison us in our own outlook, blocking us from recognizing the otherness or alterity of the text. The political issues arises from Heidegger's further insistence that the fore-structure of understanding forms our interpretations *in advance*. Thus, interpreters inherit from their tradition much of the background of their readings. From the deconstructive point of view the hermeneutic position that accepts Heidegger's analysis is too traditionalist and thus politically suspect because it seems unable to challenge the cultural and political status quo.

The countercharges against deconstruction are easy to imagine. Methodologically, deconstruction will appear to be fantasizing an escape from the circle of understanding by its dalliance with an impossible 'outside' where meaning is undecidable and thus hopelessly multiple and fractured. Politically, its critique will seem pointless, since the fantasy of a complete break with tradition can lead nowhere. Deconstruction will seem to be neglecting Heidegger's insistence that we find ourselves already thrown into a social situation, which has specific concrete possibilities but also real limitations. Deconstruction's own faith that any construction can be deconstructed will lead to an undirected resistance that will be ineffectual because of its inability to generate a positive construction of its own (188-89).

Nevertheless, Hoy argues that "these charges and countercharges may obscure the reach of Heidegger's original account of the hermeneutic circle" (189), as that account "did not envision the specific controversy that I have sketched" (189). In Hoy's view then, as with Vattimo's, Heidegger's account is more expansive, and actually accommodates both of these important aspects of interpretation, reconstruction and deconstruction. Calling this accommodation a 'reconciliation,' Hoy begins by first of all clarifying the issue of monism versus pluralism. Defending Heidegger and Gadamer against the deconstructive worry about the hermeneutic recovery of meaning, Hoy claims that much can even be said *for* the monistic ideal of the one final, right interpretation. Nevertheless, he reiterates that

in the exposition that I have given of Heidegger's account I have deliberately stressed the elements in it that I find pointing toward an antimonistic pluralism. Heidegger's account of 'meaning' in his technical sense may seem monistic because it posits a whole, a totality of involvements, a single context in which interpretation may take place. My insistence on the holistic nature of meaning in this special sense suggests, however, that the context is always revisable, and that revision will come from within the context of belief itself. This holism implies, therefore, that while the task of understanding strives to be coherent and unified, it must always recognize that there are elements in it that have not been worked through explicitly and that may be inconsistent with other central commitments. So the context can always turn out to include inadequate elements. The drive of understanding toward a single coherent position is thus compatible with its allowance for the inevitability of hidden error and bias, and the recognition that no interpretation is final (189-90).

Hoy explains that there are at least two other aspects of Heidegger's account that support this metaposition of pluralism, including "his revision of the ordinary conception of truth and his description of the fore-structure of projective understanding" (190). And he concludes that, first of all, and with regard to true statements within interpretation, if there are conflicts, the criteria used by the individual interpreters to decide their truth "are themselves interpretable and do not obviously support the monistic belief in a single exclusive interpretation" (190). And secondly, Hoy thinks that Heidegger's account of understanding as projection "suggests that explicit
interpretations always arise from implicit needs” (190). Thus with interpretation generating new needs, and new needs stimulating further interpretation, there comes the eventual recognition that “the circle of understanding is never closed” (190). But, as Hoy says, this recognition “need not raise the specter of epistemological relativism” (190). For, as Hoy explains, “the nihilistic conclusion that our present interpretations are mostly false does not follow from the pluralistic thought that they will be altered by future generations, for whom the context and the background conditions will have changed” (190).

Hoy recognizes that his pluralistic interpretation of Heidegger may indeed be a radicalization of the theory of Dasein in Being and Time, but he explains that expansion and modification are a function of textual reception. Thus he ends his essay by suggesting that Heidegger’s account of understanding can and should be expanded and modified following both of the ways represented by Gadamer’s and Derrida’s interpretations of the Heideggerian text.

One way it can be modified is to take the hermeneutic turn more radically than Heidegger did in 1927, allowing language a more central role by modeling the account of understanding more explicitly on reading, as Gadamer did in 1960. Another way would be to recognize more explicitly and strategically how understanding can directly challenge meaning and how much more conscious the rhetorical play of language can become. The latter way was the achievement of Derrida and the deconstructive movement from the late sixties to the present (190).

These extensions, which Hoy says are prefigured in and ‘allowed’ by Being and Time itself, point to the fact that we need to redefine tradition, as Vattimo himself often urges in his writings. Hoy explains that whatever Heidegger’s personal politics were, the text of Being and Time allows for the deconstructive suspicion of simply recovering the tradition. Heidegger insists that the tradition may need to be criticized, and he reminds us that the ‘tradition’ is not simply the ‘past.’ The past is finished, and there would be no point in criticizing it since the criticism could have no effect on the past. What we (and poststructuralists like Derrida and Michel Foucault) may need to criticize is the present, or more specifically, the present’s interpretation of how it has come to be what it is, which is what ‘tradition’ is. The criticism of the ‘traditional’ in the present need not be presented as a complete break with tradition, but more reasonably as a break with a prevalent but mistaken understanding of the tradition’s possibilities. So an effective criticism will see places where the present has misconstrued the possibilities inherited from the tradition, and it will also draw our attention to concrete possibilities in the tradition that have currently been lost from sight (191).

Continuing on in his defense of the Heideggerian account of the circle of understanding, Hoy ends by saying that Heidegger’s “Interpretierung of Dasein brings out a double-sided possibility of interpretation” (193) wherein it will always attempt to “disclose something about both Dasein and the world” (193). And, as interpretation is “the way that both meaningful human existence and a significant world become what they are” (193), we can come to understand Heidegger’s model of projective understanding as therefore recognizing “both reconstruction and deconstruction as necessary moments of interpretation” (192). Following Hoy’s suggestions, then, which are remarkably similar to Vattimo’s, we come to understand that the circle of understanding itself should not be purely reconstructive, if by that is meant either that the interpreter reads only what is already familiar back into the text or that in the effort to find a unity of meaning the interpreter should overlook tensions and contradictions that are also at play. But the circle should also not be purely deconstructive, since there must first be an assumed meaning that is deconstructed, and the discovery of tension and contradiction is itself a projection of an understanding of what is really going on in the text (192).

Our postmodern dialogue now passes from the ‘circumscription’ of Vattimo’s philosophy by explaining and translating it, and by setting it within the context of ‘the postmodern debate’ and, as well, the wider context of the Western philosophical tradition, to the ‘inscription’ of his philosophy through its expression. Specifically, this
expression involves the risky operation of interpreting ‘echoes’ (Vattimian, Heideggerian, Nietzschean...) in Elizabeth Bowen’s Second World War novel The Heat of the Day. Within this postmodern dialogue, these echoes represent the ‘something unexpected or unwieldy’ that Carravetta insists is the necessary ‘betrayal’ of all discourse. Through an act of linkage, or what Vattimo terms Erörterung following Heidegger, this paper attempts to locate an intertextuality, a string of debts or reverberations, and an interim space-time which is interpreted as occurring between the texts under consideration. Traversing the interface or overlap of this paper, its proper subject and object, what we find is that there are ‘family resemblances’ between the postmodern philosophy of Gianni Vattimo (itself involving inevitable ‘family resemblances’ with other, preceding and contemporary philosophy), and the writing of Elizabeth Bowen.

Thus, linking these texts in ‘dialogue’ with one another reawakens awareness of the (con)text which holds them together as such, just as it also reawakens awareness of our own belonging in the tradition, again understood as Überlieferung -- an open (not closed) tradition still happening. Effectively then, in its ‘practice’ this paper attempts to be edifying as well as being systematic to a certain extent. And at the risk of violating Vattimo’s statement that “it is relatively uninteresting, and often entirely vacuous, to believe that Heidegger and hermeneutics urge us to try to extract philosophical theses from poetry, literature, and the figurative arts” ("Art" Beyond Interpretation 71), this paper attempts to contradict Vattimo, distorting his thought, precisely by putting into practice another of his notions -- that of the Erörterung (dialogue, discourse, discussion, collocation) of hermeneutic truth. By drawing Vattimo, Heidegger, and Bowen together in an acute triangle of family resemblances, this paper performs a collocation, that is, it posits an (im)possible statement, which awakens “the memory of an indefinite network of relations” (Vattimo “The Truth of Hermeneutics” in BI 95).

For indeed, to ignore possible relations existing amongst these texts, would be an avoidance of hermeneutic truth as “an actual setting into relation of particular truths with the multiplicity of perspectives constituting the network that supports them and renders them possible” (Vattimo ibid 95). This paper attempts to exceed any “parochial” reduction of the experience of the true” (Vattimo ibid 95), with regard to truth in Vattimo, Heidegger, and Bowen, by opening the horizon of interpretation in each case to a wider validity. The translation of truth between (‘from’) Heidegger, (‘to’) Vattimo, (‘to’) Bowen, and (‘to’) Heidegger again, explodes delimited disciplinary horizons in the location of an (uncannily) familiar expression of the ‘end’ of modernity in the same attitude of ironic awareness that we now call postmodern. The expression thus marks the opening up of “the connections and the stratifications that echo, implicit and often forgotten, in every particular true statement” (Vattimo ibid 95), and also awakens “the memory of an indefinite network of relations” (such as Wittgenstein’s family resemblances, as opposed to the abstract universality of essence, genus and species) that constitute the basis of a possible universality, namely, the persuasiveness of that statement; ideally, for everyone” (Vattimo ibid 95). In this way, the (rein-)stating of Vattimo’s theory through Bowen’s practice will represent what Carravetta calls the ‘uncanny (unheimlich)’ aspect of criticism in postmodernity -- “an authentic revelation of yet another possibility of Being-in-the-World” (Carravetta 174).
Anyone who writes essays must work to reduce the labyrinth. He must impoverish the wealth of the real in order to permit definitions, even provisional ones. He must make an effort to reduce the ambiguity. When you want ambiguity to run free, you write poetry or fiction. When theoreticians behave like writers of fiction, I do not like it (even though I might admire what they write as if it were a novel). Our brain is divided into two parts: we can use one or the other, but we always need to know which half we are using. Anything else is a Wagnerian dream of merging the arts, philosophy, religion, everything into a single discourse. I am just an average guy, all those schemes are beyond me.

Umberto Eco
The subject matter of aesthetics... is defined negatively as its undefinability. That is why art needs philosophy to interpret it. Philosophy says what art cannot say, although it is art alone which is able to say it: by not saying it.

Theodor Adorno Aesthetic Theory (1970)
If I were asked to name the most important date in the history and prehistory of the human race, I would answer without hesitation, 6 August 1945. The reason is simple. From the dawn of consciousness until 6 August 1945, man had to live with the prospect of his death as an individual; since the day when the first atomic bomb outshone the sun over Hiroshima, mankind as a whole has had to live with the prospect of its extinction as a species.

Arthur Koestler
The salutary value of the exterior, the comfortable sanity of the concrete came to be realised only when the approach of the Second World War forced one to envisage wholesale destruction.

Elizabeth Bowen “English Fiction at Mid-Century” (September 21, 1953)
Traditions are confronted in their totality only in times of war.
Alexander Nehamas
DIVISION II

TESTIMONY AND BETRAYAL
War in the air, war of attrition, tank war, war of propaganda, war of defence in depth, war of movement, people’s war, total war, indivisible war, war infinite, war incomprehensible, war of essence without accidents, or attributes, metaphysical war, war in time—space, war eternal.

Evelyn Waugh
A novel which survives, which withstands and outlives time, does do something more than merely survive. It does not stand still. It accumulates round itself the understanding of all these persons who bring to it something of their own. It acquires associations, it becomes a form of experience in itself, so that two people who meet can often make friends, find an approach to each other, because of this one great common experience they have had. And, like all experiences, it is added to by the power of different kinds of people, in different times, to feel and to comment and to explain.

Elizabeth Bowen “Truth and Fiction” (1956)
Part I

From Circumscription to Inscription: Bowen’s Twilight World
Chapter 1

The 'Forties: 'Closing Time in the Gardens of the West...'

The Wirkungsgeschichte or effects-history of Bowen’s war novel The Heat of the Day begins with a discussion of light, specifically twilight. The idea of light, the effect of light, and its symbolic resonance were a strong source of fascination for Bowen, and it is no coincidence that many readers of her war novel have found her descriptions of the war years to be highly atmospheric in terms of lighting. Indeed, the novel opens with a description of an outdoor concert in Regent’s Park, the first Sunday of September 1942, where a Viennese orchestra is in intermission, but preparing for the next number in their programme -- suitably late in the season when the light is particularly dramatic, and suitably late in the day, so that “this hollow which was the source of music was found to be also the source of dusk” (7). The people who have slowly drifted around the edge of the hollow, following the description of an outdoor concert in Regent's Park, the first Sunday of September 1942, where a Viennese orchestra is the strong source of fascination for Bowen, and it is no coincidence that many readers of her war novel have found her descriptions of the war years to be highly atmospheric in terms of lighting. Indeed, the novel opens with a description of an outdoor concert in Regent’s Park, the first Sunday of September 1942, where a Viennese orchestra is in intermission, but preparing for the next number in their programme -- suitably late in the season when the light is particularly dramatic, and suitably late in the day, so that “this hollow which was the source of music was found to be also the source of dusk” (7). The people who have slowly drifted around the edge of the hollow, following the muffled and disturbing hints of music, have “the sensation that they were missing something” (7), but upon pausing find that “all they had left behind was in sunshine” (7). The description seems highly nuanced, and our suspicions are confirmed when an explicit association is drawn by the narrator between war and the absence of light. The Second World War had made Londoners “idolize day and summer; [but] night and autumn were enemies” (7). The description is suggestive of a dying or fading world, or more properly world-view, “not completely in shadow -- here and there blades of sunset crossed it, firing branches through which they travelled” (7) -- but ‘dissolving’ like cigarette smoke, ‘quivering’ like the gnats, or turning over like the ‘crepitating’ leaves of autumn, “as though in the act of dying” (7). The end, according to Bowen, was a slow dying ember.

The light was so low, so theatrical, and so yellow that it was evident it would soon be gone. The incoming tide was evening. Glass-clear darkness, in which each leaf was defined, already formed in the thicket behind the orchestra and was the other element of the stage (7).

The description is theatrical, even filmic, and it is interesting that as a kind of ‘fade-out’ it is placed at the very beginning of the text, as we enter into Elizabeth Bowen’s twilight world. That is, the beginning is both a fade-in, as it introduces us to the world of the text with descriptions of increasing intensity, and a fade-out, in the way that it describes a world which is fading away, dissolving, or disappearing. This ‘doubled’ (ironic and allegorical) effect continues throughout the novel, which gives an overwhelming impression of a twilight world where the light is always failing, hazy, and ambiguous, and a twilight zone, where things (‘reality,’ characters, descriptions, utterances, events) can be ‘both/and’ rather than just ‘either/or.’ That is, these things can be both themselves and not themselves at the same time; there is very little which is ‘glass-clear’ in the darkness of Bowen’s text. As readers, we are thus made aware of the fact that we are dealing with the (reality) of war here, only ostensibly a reality, or as Heidegger might write it reality or war. In her biography of Bowen, Hermione Lee describes the ironic ‘reality’ of Bowen’s twilight world as “the surreal theatre of war-time London” (164, my emphasis).

The ambiguity of the novel’s opening fade-in/fade-out is also interesting in that, along with the ambiguous reference to ‘the stage’ (the last two words of the opening description before one turns the page), it is suggestive of other media which were certainly by the late nineteen-forties already competing with narrative representation in the form of the novel as forms of art: not only the radio, but the television, motion pictures, and recordings. As a frequent guest speaker on the BBC, Bowen was herself well aware of the protocol for radio fade-in/fade-out, as technical demarcations for beginnings and ends. But one wonders if there is also something else at work in this highly nuanced historical narrative of London during the Second World War --perhaps not only an allegory for the ‘end’ of modernity or history and the ‘beginning’ of postmodernity, as this thesis proposes, but also an allegory for the ‘death’ of art, or at least the ‘death’ of the novel as an art form.

But beyond these allegories of ‘ends,’ through the problematization of ending(s) which is carried out from the novel’s beginning to its end, Bowen suggests the old riddle ‘every ending is a beginning.’ She was not too serious in her eschatology. Rather, for her the idea of history, and even death itself (the ultimate ‘the end’), could be moderated with a frivolousness that, as Victoria Glendinning explains in her biography of Bowen, “is play at its most evolved,... self-irony” (214), and “is under no circumstances to be confused with triviality” (214). Certainly, if the message of the 1940s was, as Bowen’s friend Cyril Connolly wrote in the final number of his journal Horizon in 1949, “‘Nothing dreadful is ever done with, no bad thing gets any better; you can’t be too serious’” (Glendinning 214), Bowen tempered this pessimism with an attitude of frivolity. Connolly had ended his 1949 piece with a sentence that includes “those elegiac, unforgettable, and characteristically overcharged words, ‘it is closing time in the gardens of the West...’” (214). And 1949 was also the year that Bowen’s historical narrative was published.
But, as Glendinning states, she was courageous and adaptable. For Bowen, “the post-war period turned out to be another opening time” (214), and she wanted to communicate this possibility for limited affirmation in this curious twilight time.
Chapter 2

Crepuscular Writing

Following the theme of (twilight), we return to an essay written by Bowen in 1928 entitled “Modern Lighting”, where she writes about the idea and effects of light, our sensitivity to light, and the translation of chiaroscuro, primarily a visual effect of the play of light and darkness, or the presence and absence of light, into writing. She suggests that we aestheticize experience with lighting in the same way that a writer controls the lighting effects or atmosphere of her fiction with description. For, although we cannot control our ‘tone of living’ in terms of what is naturally conditioned (the sun and the moon, the alternation of day and night, the geographical specificity of light, or the changing light of the seasons), the weather or environmental lighting sensitizes one to the transformative and playful power of light, even its ‘sinister energy.’ What is important to note in this essay is Bowen’s realization of the power of lighting, not only as an aesthetic effect, but as an ontological condition. What she explicates, again in an allegorical way (a favourited mode of Bowen), is the ‘modern’ or contemporary, or moreover the human tendency to aestheticize experience and fictionalize ‘reality.’ For Bowen, the transformative power of our ‘fictions’ of lighting, that is to say, our interpretations, has an ontological basis in and for living. If this sounds overstatement, we can at least interpret that Bowen’s essay posits the fact that ‘lighting’ is something that ‘we moderns’ (can) do, in order to make our world more habitable, or in order to understand the world.

Describing the ‘tone of living’ in the British Isles, Bowen states that

all day -- speaking for these islands -- our tone of living is conditioned for us: rainlight, sunlight, penetrating fogginess, or a metallic sunlessness that lets nothing through. Windows admit these facts, mirrors record them; we modify them the little that we may. But past twilight, we can create circumstance.

In typically poetic language, what Bowen articulates here is the idea that during times when there is an absence of light, or for that matter, in the space of absence or negativity, one creates or can create ‘light’ -- in other words, one interprets ‘past twilight.’ Rather than an articulation of ex nihilo creation, however, what Bowen advocates is an aesthetic model for existence. She says, “Living is less that affair of function that we were forced to suspect, more an affair of esthetics.”

Coming in, going out, sitting still, looking -- all our little tentative touches upon the actual gain in deliberation. We can arrange our lighting. We work like sculptors upon these blocks of pregnant darkness rooms have become. We can control shadow, place, check, and tone light. The response from a light-switch, the bringing in of a candle is acute, personal as a perception.

While admitting that her observations of course spring “from yet another of those literary recognitions,” Bowen all the same insists that what “we have uncovered for exploitation” here is much more profound than that. She is not only talking about the literary effects achievable through descriptions of lighting in writing, but moreover about the uncovering of “that most profound, implicit sensitiveness of our childhood -- to the idea of light.”

Bowen suggests that, to the child’s mind, light appears more “as a sinister energy” than “the universal mild exposure of a day.”

There was the lamp-lighter mystery, the tabu on matches, that response -- with dread -- to poetry: “Lead Kindly Light”, “The Dong with the Luminous nose”; that excitement, before the most homely approach, of light coming up through bannisters on a staircase wall, the L of a door widening.

One might wonder why Bowen would immediately associate light(ing) with a ‘sinister’ energy, if it also has such positive and transformative powers in life and for living. But note that it is the idea of light as lighting, rather than light itself, which is realized as such. The child understands it as ‘sinister’ because of the warnings and admonitions associated with fire, and in the imagination of the child, light retains a frightening proximity to destruction and also
to its opposite, darkness. Its presence seems to forebode or threaten its absence, and as the child begins to make these connections, a further realization comes: the idea of light has a sinister energy, sinister because this ‘atomical’ yoking together of positive and negative energy means that it is unstable, unpredictable.

The other emphasis, on the idea of light (or lighting) as an energy in itself, is also interesting. We can interpret that, for Bowen, art has its own peculiar energy; there is movement or kinesis in our creations. Bowen immediately proceeds to compare painting and writing in discussing the sinister energy of lighting in writing.

Bowen goes on to interpret ‘crepuscule,’ or the lighting effects of twilight and dusk, with their glimmering ambiguity, in passages quoted from Conrad, Stevenson, Poe, Proust, and Brontë, emphasizing the strong effect of chiaroscuro or half-lights on the reader. Then turning to describe the state of literature in 1928, which she judges as being in a kind of transitional state, Bowen hints that writers now “need an intense guardedness, a flair for the first breath of decline or exhaustion equal only to the modiste’s.”

According to Bowen, the effects of chiaroscuro, or the sinister energy of ‘lighting,’ in the writing of Flaubert, Conrad, Stevenson, Poe, Proust, and Brontë, may have been near-blunders. Certainly, they were not the result of a painstaking formalism which is at once “the tool and the enemy” of the writer in 1928. Interestingly, in what seems to be an early response to modernism perceived as formalism, Bowen foreshadows the practice of postmodern literature, suggesting that writing seems to be moving towards ‘humble craftsmanship,’ where “the appeal will be chiefly to the ear [and] responses will become elementary.” But although this would seem to describe a unified and simplified writing based on the Latin dictum ‘ars est celare artem’ (‘art is to conceal art’), or ‘hard writing makes easy reading,’ in fact something like the opposite is true. In his introductory reader Literary Theory, Terry Eagleton remarks that “people sometimes call writing ‘fine’ precisely because it doesn’t draw undue attention to itself: they admire its laconic plainness or low-keyed sobriety” (6). For example, realist or naturalistic writing is often treated as if it were “not linguistically self-conscious or self-exhibiting in any striking way” (Eagleton 6) -- that is, it is not read as poetry. However, that is not the type of writing or reading that Bowen is suggesting here. For according to Bowen, this new writing will still be the outcome of extremely hard work for most writers, but it will in no way be ‘easy reading.’ Rather, as crepuscular writing, its foreground of hearing is shot through with ambiguity, split, exposing the ‘deus ex machina’ (‘god out of the machine’) for what it is, exposing itself, exposing the sinister energy of its lighting (its rhetoric). And thus, crepuscular writing opens up the ‘elementary’ understanding of writing, language, words, or signs in the deconstructive or postmodern sense as ‘half not there, and half not that.’ With the appeal being primarily to the ear, this writing will comprise a problematication of demonstrative discourse with its primary appeal to the eye in ‘showing,’ thus ironically revealing the dialogical aspect of writing or language, its openness to a wide range of interpretation by individuals. However, again it is important to emphasize that Bowen was not advocating a return to modernist formalism or aestheticism. She later hints in the Foreword to her Collected Impressions of 1950 that she would rather see writers avoid the “embarrassing consciousness of the literary medium” (vi) typical of modernist experimentation.

And against the melodrama of realist modes, gone will be the pregnant pause in literature where the writer stops to say ‘And picture....’ In other words, Bowen’s postmodern response to modernism in literature does not involve the recommendation of a pure return to realism. She does not welcome the writing where “firelight will, once more, signalize only the momentous return of the traveller out of the dark and rain.” Rather, she values the ‘sinister energy’ of lighting/writing, that is to say, its double, allegorical, or suggestive potential in foregrounding the play of unconcealment and concealment (chiaroscuro) in language. Furthermore, and as shall be discussed in more detail in the last section of this Division, Bowen creates her own literary worlds in the space of half-lights, ambiguities, undecideables, chiaroscuro, and twilight. As crepuscular writing, her art in The Heat of the Day inaugurates a twilight world, where the only possibility left for thought is grasped as a kind of thinking of ends, or a ‘twilight thought’ -- what Vattimo terms ‘weak thought,’ il pensiero debole.

However, Bowen suggests that, still in 1928, one stages one’s life very carefully. Living is an aesthetic experience expressed and enriched through the interpretations that we offer up of the world, the ‘lighting’ that we give it past twilight. Bowen leaves us with her idea of light as an allegory for the play of interpretations (the
‘sinister energy’) which constitutes ‘reality’ or existence, and which can be exposed in a writing which remains open to the possibilities of its own kinetic energy. Finally, turning to criticize the idea of light conceived in totalizing technological terms, Bowen expresses a dislike for ‘bright bulbs,’ for the incandescence which still blares unchecked and the electricity which frowns boldly “only in the remoter English provinces, [and] in Irish cities where we are naive with dignity.” Similarly, “in the villa drawing-rooms of North Oxford light comes down steep, distending intellectual eyeballs, outraging a sense kept delicate for the faint relief of façades and silver outlines on the Cherwell trees.” What Bowen suggests at the end of her 1928 essay “Modern Lighting”, is that lighting (interpretation, writing, thought, art) will continue to exert its playful effects or sinister energy in the world, even when it is expressed with such ‘bright bulbs’: “Powerful minds interlock, and meanwhile light drifts and trickles down on the moiré wallpaper.” Past twilight there is only twilight.
Chapter 3

DaVincian Ambiguities: a Craggy Dangerous Miniature World

Bowen’s correspondence with Virginia Woolf from 1935 until Woolf’s death in 1941 affords an interesting and brief glimpse into her thoughts during this period, particularly on the devastation of war, leading up to the time she sets for the beginning of her historical narrative The Heat of the Day, 1942. Throughout this period, Bowen’s understanding of the war as a profoundly devastating experience for many is communicated through a thin guise of bravado which nevertheless could be (as it has been) misread as triviality on her part. In a letter to Woolf dated July 1st, 1940 from Clarence Terrace in Regent’s Park, she announces that she will do espionage work for the Ministry of Information which will require her to be in Ireland, much to her dismay. Bowen took it as a point against her pride to be away from London during the air raids, saying “If there’s to be an invasion of Ireland, I hope it may be while I’m there -- which I don’t mean frivolously -- but if anything happens to England while I’m in Ireland I shall wish I’d never left, even for this short time” (Mulberry Tree 216). She nevertheless used the occasion to collect information, not only for the M.I., but for her prospective historical narrative of the war, which she conceived at this time. She states that although she feels low at going away, because “it will all mean endless talk” (216), all the same “sorting out talk into shape might be interesting” (216).

Six months later, in a letter dated January 5th, 1941, Bowen writes to Woolf from Bowen’s Court, her childhood home in Ireland. Her fears have been confirmed: she is stuck in Ireland, forced to inquire through letters about the raids in England, or about certain streets or neighbourhoods which have been burnt to the ground all in her absence. She asks about Woolf’s loss of her London flat, and it brings to mind her own completely vulnerable home in London. She writes, “All my life I have said, ‘Whatever happens there will always be tables and chairs’ -- and what a mistake. Clarence Terrace is now perfectly empty” (217). What’s worse, she and her husband Alan Cameron become immobilized in Ireland due to the petrol shortage, and Bowen finds herself contemplating history and technology: “We are immobilised, at least immobilised until we get new ideas about time. No motor car ever lived here until ten years ago, so it really is artificial to fuss” (217).

She discusses her work for the M.I., stating that in Dublin she gets “engaged in deep rather futile talks; it is hard to remember the drift afterwards, though I remember the words” (218). Language is explicitly double during times of war, forcing Bowen to reflect on this inherent ‘smoke-screen’ quality of words, which she nevertheless thinks “is a trick of the Irish mind [as] they are very religious” (218). Describing the ‘climate of treason,’ Bowen tells Woolf that it is nevertheless the political people she sees mostly, partaking of their “craggy dangerous miniature world” (218). Although she is under a confidentiality oath, Bowen writes “I can’t write any more about that but would like to talk very much” (218). It seems that this retention of information, and all of Bowen’s bundled up energy in Ireland, resulted in an explosive motive force, which must have provided at least a good part of the momentum in carrying forth her idea for a war novel. Little did she know that she would not be able to talk to Woolf about her work or her time in Ireland when she returned to England, for Woolf would take her own life two months after this letter was written. Remarking on a card sent to her by Woolf, with a picture of a church covered in snow in her hometown of Rodmell, Bowen is brought to contemplate her homesickness and her frustrations. She writes, “I feel a sort of despair about my own generation -- the people the same age as the century, I mean -- we don’t really suffer much but we get all sealed up” (218). This soft pessimism and generational angst is translated directly into The Heat of the Day through the character Stella Rodney, who is described by the narrator as follows:

Younger by a year or two than the century, she had grown up just after the First World War with the generation which, as a generation, was to come to be made to feel it had muffed the catch. The times, she had in her youth been told on all sides, were without precedent -- but then, so was her own experience: she had not lived before (25).

Despite the pessimism, however, Bowen still remained vigilant during these fascinating years, and she had a keen eye for the absurdities of her work for the M.I., and a great skill for describing this ‘twilight world.’ In a letter written to Woolf from Clarence Terrace, a letter which Woolf did not live to see, Bowen compromises her confidentiality for the sake of passing on an entertaining story that brings to mind a passage out of an earlier ‘spy novel,’ Joseph Conrad’s The Secret Agent.

Today, this morning, I went and talked to Lord Cranbourne at the Dominions Office about Ireland. I say talked, because he listened with
sympathetic and charming Cecil politeness. I knew he had seen the reports I'd been sending in, and there were things I wanted to say that I couldn't write. So I had asked David to put me in touch with him.

Getting into the Dominions Office was such a business: I had had no exact idea where it was, so took a taxi, which didn't know either and aroused far more suspicion than if I had come on my feet. We were challenged by bayonets, and I said each time in a more quavering but more aggressive voice that I had an appointment. Then inside there were forms to fill in, then the long passages that though very hot still manage to smell of stone. There were outer courts of rooms of gentlemen-secretaries and files, then his room, which was nice and long, with boarded-up windows, a stretch of Turkey carpet, a roaring fire. Unfortunately it was just as I had imagined (the scene, I mean) there were almost no surprises. The last time I was in London I went to the War Office, also on an Irish errand, and there, because it was eleven o'clock, they were all drinking glasses of milk, which was something that I had not imagined (220).

Throughout her life, Bowen had much to be pessimistic about, if only in terms of her experience of living through and actively participating in both World Wars. However, she always felt that she and others had a duty to look for the positive, because this was the only hope. Woolf's 'surrender' in the form of suicide devastated Bowen, and she wrote to express her condolences to Leonard Woolf from Ireland on April 8th, 1941, stating flatly but not without her poetic touch that, as far as she was concerned,

a great deal of the meaning seems to have gone out of the world. She illuminated everything, and one referred the most trivial things to her in one's thoughts. To have been allowed to know her and love her is a great thing (221).
Chapter 4

Sketches for the Novel: 1940-1945

In an essay entitled "London, 1940", Bowen contemplates both the absurdities and the irrational horror of war during the air raids. Published in 1950 in her Collected Impressions, the piece survives as a wartime sketch for The Heat of the Day along with two others, "Dover: 1st June 1944" and "Folkestone: July 1945". As she indicates in her Foreword to the collection, "each of them carries the colour of its year; each reflects, involuntarily, what was in that year a contemporary mood of thought or phase of feeling" (vi). Read together, Bowen suggests that they "combine into something which is one of the many imponderable by-products of history" (vi).

"London, 1940" communicates something of the initial shock of the air raids for Londoners, and yet also their odd attitude of what could almost be described as complacency, which Bowen attributes to the habit of resistance that many had by this time built up, such that they could even laugh at the absurdity of their situation. In his book The Ordeal of Total War, 1939-1945, Gordon Wright describes this general climate of the beginning of the war as one of courageous resistance.

The war struck Europe at a time of low resistance to infection by intellectual doubt and despair. For two generations, the dominant values and beliefs of the post-Enlightenment era had been under attack; old certainties had been dissolving without being replaced by positive new values and convictions. The interwar years had been most strongly marked by this mood of cultural despair -- a mood from which fascist movements (especially in Germany) had profited greatly. True, the decade of the 1930s had brought some signs of a resurgent humanism, an attempt to reassert Enlightenment values against the anti-rationalists and the cultural pessimists. Many European intellectuals, writers, and artists turned back toward social and political commitment in these years of economic breakdown and rising barbarism. And the outbreak of war seemed for a moment to strengthen this resurgence, for a war against Hitler could be seen as a crusade for humane values against the new savagery (259).

Nevertheless, uprooted and homeless, the inhabitants of London either move away or move underground, forming "a city of villages -- almost of village communes" (Mulberry Tree 23-4). Many people are even turned out of their own 'villages' from time to time, "on account of time-bombs: exiled" (24), foreigners in their own city. In fact, at the time of writing the sketch, Bowen admits that the Marylebone Village or "Regent's Park where I live is still...closed: officially, that is to say, we are not here" (24). Hence she ends up in the Oxford Street village, "only once more to be dislodged from there" (24).

Wandering about the city of villages, Bowen notes "the smell of charred dust [which] hangs on what should be crystal pure air" (21), and the 'innocence' of the clear morning sky over the whole length of Oxford Street, which "west to east, is empty, [and] looks polished like a ballroom, glitter[ing] with smashed glass" (21). The last of brown smoke and fumes dissipate at a corner "where the burst gas main flaming floors high made a scene like a hell in the night" (22). The heat of the previous night can still be felt, but "the silence is now the enormous thing -- it appears to amaze the street" (22). As sections and blocks have been roped off, people feel the surreality of wartime: "Roped away from the rest of London we seem to be on an island -- when shall we be taken off?" (22). An old man mumbles that he has outlived his generation, and resilient Polish refugees "who having lost everything all over again sit down whenever and wherever they can" (22), reminding Londoners that even their experience is not the worst wartime predicament.

The descriptions are poignant, rendered in an impressionistic way, as an artist views the scene before herself and attempts to sketch a broad outline. And although much of the material in this text has been reworked, thickened, and absorbed into the larger canvas of the novel, some passages stand out as interesting in their own right, as Bowen’s initial attempt to give a raw account of the ‘feeling,’ (or as she calls it in “Folkestone: July, 1945”, the ‘time colour’) of wartime London.

Standing, as might the risen dead in the doors of tombs, in the mouths of shelters, we have nothing to do but yawn at each other or down the void of
streets, meanwhile rubbing the smoke-smart deeper into our eyes with our dirty fists... It has been a dirty night. The side has been ripped off one near block -- the open gash is nothing but dusty, colourless. (As bodies shed blood, buildings shed mousey dust.) Up there the sun strikes a mirror over a mantelpiece; shreds of a carpet sag out over the void. An A.R.P. man, like a chamois, already runs up the debris; we stare. The charred taint thickens everyone’s lips and tongues (22).

The absurdity of the present time and space, the mundane, or the familiar in total ruins forces the realization of war as the archaeology of ‘silence,’ exposing what normally remains concealed (unwritten, unsaid, silent) in the text(s) of history. Historicity, or ‘belongingness,’ in the sense in which these terms have been discussed in Division I, is foregrounded in a time of war. People begin to grasp the meaning of authenticity (deciding oneself-towards-death), in the sense that Vattimo means following Heidegger, as an acceptance and reminder of the possibilities which are constitutive of careful living and responsible thinking. In an odd way, then, it could be understood that the effect of war recovers a certain ethical conception of the now, not unlike what the cultural critic Walter Benjamin -- who died the same year Bowen’s essay was written -- called “the Jetztzeit (‘now-time’), which is obliterated by thinking of history in terms of a progressive linear continuum” (Sim 199). Describing this conception of time, Stuart Sim states that,

for Benjamin, the task of the historian or the critic is to see the historical moment not ‘as it really was’ (the project of historicism) but blasted out of the continuum of history, in its full potential as a moment of crisis or danger. In this he anticipates the postmodern concern with rethinking temporality and historicity (199).

Bowen could also be said to anticipate postmodern concerns, as she writes genealogically of what remains for thought when people are placed face to face with the threat of their extinction. According to Bowen, the Second World War represented a profound crisis for the British, amongst others, and not simply a sober realization that historical change in a time of war could almost be taken for granted. For Bowen, crisis-thinking, as a result of the war, involved the foregrounding of ontological concerns. Amongst “these fuming utter glissades of ruin” (23), the Londoners could laugh at the absurdity of a time-bomb puffing a street empty and sprinkling it with glass splinters in the clear autumn morning, but only because they felt guarded by “the theatrical sense of safety” (23) that attends the daytime. But when each night renews the threat of death, the sirens and black-outs mark a date that the Londoners keep with fear --

We can do much for each other, but not all. Between bomb and bomb we are all together again: we all guess, more or less, what has been happening to all the others.... Fear is not cumulative: each night it starts from scratch (23).

What had been accepted without question as the normal (ontological) background of life, not only people, places, and things, but also ideas, beliefs, foundations for thought -- all of these things are ruthlessly exposed during this time in their total fragility as ‘only human, all-too-human.’ Bowen finds that the fine line separating people and their ‘saving illusions’ disappears as quickly as the fumes still coming from the shell of a shop. The Londoners enter a twilight world when and where illusion and reality coexist. Looking at the site of her empty home, Clarence Terrace in Regent’s Park, where just inside the gates “an unexploded bomb makes a boil in the tarmac road” (24), Bowen confronts the world of difference and possibility which has been exposed during this time.

Around three sides of the Park, the Regency terraces look like scenery in an empty theatre: in the silence under the shut façades a week’s drift of leaves flitters up and down. At nights, at my end of my terrace, I feel as though I were sleeping in one corner of a deserted palace. I had always placed this Park among the most civilized scenes on earth; the Nash pillars look as brittle as sugar -- actually, which is wonderful, they have not cracked; though several of the terraces are gutted -- blown-in shutters swing loose, ceilings lie on floors and a premature decay-smell comes from the rooms. A pediment has fallen on to a lawn. Illicitly, leading the
existence of ghosts, we overlook the locked park (24).

An uncanny glimpse of Louie in her nascency -- one of the characters who we are introduced to at the beginning of The Heat of the Day, having herself just spent the day in Regent's Park -- drifts through this sketch in the 'character' of Elizabeth Bowen (the narrator) herself. She watches "dahlias blaze out their colour" (25) before the night approaches, when again "the throb gathers over the roof" (23). But even the day carries its threats:

Now and then everything rips across; a detonation rattles remaining windows.... We have no feeling to spare (25).

Thought runs on an economy of scarcity and returns to the basics of philosophical contemplation.

* *

This thought carries over into “Dover: 1st June, 1944”, a piece written for the Ministry of Information, in which Bowen reflects upon the concatenated effects of over six hundred years of British history through the particular silence she “met in Dover, on the first day of this June, 1944” (Collected Impressions 221). Practicing ‘now-time,’ Bowen historicizes the remaining people and places of Dover, itself the only remaining one of the Cinque Ports established six hundred years ago by Royal Charter. Reflecting on the ‘proud destiny’ of empire, Bowen darkens this history by hinting at the peculiar alliance between imperialism and (total or global) war. In fact, though, she belittles the idea of empire, stating that “the Cinque Ports gave England her first Navy -- bold little cockleshells of ships, manned by the men of Sussex and men of Kent” (221). By this time, there has been time for, as the historian Wright calls it, “the luxury of introspection” (259), and as with the inhabitants of the occupied Continent, the British were now “forced to re-examine all that they had believed, and to seek new explanations” (Wright 259). Any complacent acceptance of the war as a resistance campaign had now, too, been exposed as yet another ‘saving illusion.’ As Wright states, “Hitler’s triumphant course from 1939 to 1941 came as a profound shock to many thoughtful Europeans, for it seemed to suggest that the enemies of the Enlightenment tradition, the spokesmen for the mood of cultural despair, had been right all along” (259). Three years later, Bowen, as a thoughtful Anglo-Irish writer, had come to the same realization regarding this pessimistic suggestion. But she did not follow suit in taking the easy way out, which was an acceptance of “the Nazi Weltanschauung as the spirit of the new age” (Wright 259). Rather, she incorporated a quiet critique of this Kulturpessimismus, not only in the “Dover” sketch, but, more strongly, through the character of Robert Kelway in The Heat of the Day, who becomes an intellectual convert to the Nazi world view, and is exposed as a misleading fascist sympathizer in the novel.

In Romney, the most high-and-dry of the port of Dover, Bowen confronts the silence of a ghost town. She writes that

silences can be as different as sounds. The silence I met in Dover, on [1st June 1944], was charged, momentous, big with expectancy. Yes, the past was here: an unbroken past of fortifications and watchers dating back to the Romans. But the past seemed, with caught breath, to await the future. For four years, since France fell, Dover has watched, waited. Through the late summer of 1940, cut off from the rest of England by invisible barriers, she faced, across twenty-one miles of water, an enemy nothing had so far halted (221).

War soon became global, though, and the focus turned away from Dover. Though as France is “bodily visible on clear days” (223) from the port, it is also never long “out of Dover’s psychological view” (223) in war or in peace. And in 1944, Bowen noticed that “Dover people speak of the coastline facing them as ‘the German coast’” (223). The proximity to total crisis meant that “not only roaring skies but trembling earth has given Dover her part in the French ordeal” (223). Meanwhile, and strangely, the climate of treason makes Dover full of secrets, and invisible barriers keep London “as ignorant of what goes on in Dover as might be Berlin” (224).

War’s surreality again strikes Bowen as she views invasion barges floating in the ocean below one of Romney’s two Observation Posts, the ‘Drop Redoubt.’ Like painted ships, “they had a strange light air, almost of unreality” (222). Bowen finds the need to check if they are real, and she views them through field glasses, still finding that their camouflage made them difficult to see.

Grouped by themselves on the dazzling water, they were near nothing by
which one could rate their size.... Their look of lightness was not delusive -- they are made, I learn, of canvas stretched over fine steel. My imagination found them as hard to focus as did my eyes. Much stranger than the first Cinque Port Navy were these ships for the future, ready to dip and right themselves under tons of weight. Painted canvas, waiting to carry history (222).

Bowen’s world remains a twilight world of the ‘both/and’ in her descriptions of Dover in 1944. Noticing that “this June opens upon a whole south of England vibrating with the final movements of soldiers” (224), Bowen is not surprised to encounter a convoy passing through Dover High Street. Describing the assault troops in a defamiliarizing way, Bowen compares them to otherworldly or mythological figures, as they pass through the town. “Balancing, riding, sprawling, swinging their legs over the backs of trucks” (224), “grinning, turning those light eyes this way and that, they returned the townspeople’s glances as impersonally as Martians” (224). Bowen remarks with irony that the troops “embark as secretly as though they were undertaking a crime” (224). She is left to contemplate how the ‘craggy dangerous miniature world’ of Dover will awake to D-Day, “where she has woken many mornings before ~ in the caves honeycombing the seafront, in the tunnels bored into the hills” (224). With a last glimpse of the wartime twilight world of Dover, Bowen recounts her most vivid impression of the port on 1st July of 1944 with a description of the bizarre caves of Dover.

Along the humid chalk walls of tunnels, electric-lit, strange to the stranger’s eye, run double-decker sleeping berths in their hundreds. The entrances to these dormitories inside hills look like mouseholes. I see those small black apertures at the foot of a white cliff pink-tufted with valerian. Better I liked those caves -- once, smugglers’ hide-outs; later, burgesses’ cellars. Very dark, chilly after the outdoor heat, the cave I entered still smelled of wine -- for a moment I fancied I heard vats dripping; then someone said: ‘The alarm clocks...’ In the dark, on ledges above the rolled-up bedding -- patchwork quilts, paisley eiderdowns, knitted blankets -- clocks tick all day until their owners’ return (225).

Still, the absurdity of war does not escape notice.

*  

At the end of the war, in July of 1945, Bowen visits another seaport, Folkestone, and finds it to be a jumble of incommensurable worlds, but for the most part still the same ghost town that it was in 1940, with the fall of France. She writes a piece for the journal Contact, entitled in that publication “The First Spring of Peace”, or “Folkestone: July, 1945”. It is late summer, 1945, the town’s clock on the plateau has stopped.

The shops are blind behind rusty shutters; a church has been obliterated; the Pleasure Garden Theatre, taken over by N.A.A.F.I., stands in a lorry-flattened waste, and its satellite racquet courts and roller skating rink are now Army stores and canteens. In private and public gardens has perished, for five summers, uncut hay. A pillar box, functionless, has been boarded up. Ivy mats and clings to the steps of more than one private house, sending suckers over the sealed door (227).

As the remnant of what used to be “the expensive visitor and residential quarter” (226) of the town, the buildings of this self-contained plateau now, “after five years, compose a sort of Pompeii” (Collected Impressions 227). Time seemingly stands still all throughout the town, or at least the ‘now-time’ still retains the mark of its interruption at the beginning of the war, but everywhere signs of decay, internal and external, have set in. Describing this seaport which “was closed to the outside world” (226) for half a decade, Bowen exaggerates, stating that “through this film of ghostliness shows the time-colour of, say, 1908” (227). Bowen chooses for her sketch of a place and time at the end of the Second World War a transition or ‘twilight’ town, with a ‘short past and problematical future,’ and again, as with most of her writing, the description itself becomes ‘crepuscular,’ doubled or allegorical. As an allegory for the ‘end’ of the war, plateau Folkestone is in the throes of yet another transition stage, where/when ‘all-out military occupation is at an end, but soldiers are still about -- the place is a transit camp, for which hotels, many houses and
the theatre remain requisitioned" (228). In the midst of all of this, “de-requisitioned buildings stand stripped and bleached, as though after the passage of white ants” (228). But here and there, nevertheless, returning residents are settling in again, looking about themselves in a hesitant and unsettled way. The twilight world still clings to the present time and space, but what’s more, machines are gearing up everywhere to deconstruct the signs of war.

Torturing the silence, there is to be heard from under a line of chestnuts the action of a pneumatic drill; a man is at work loosening the 1940 spiked concrete roadblocks. A crane is to follow, extracting these like teeth. This marks the opening of another campaign — for visitors (228).

Elsewhere one notices the devastating effects of the war, for instance in the Leas, where vast “thickets of wire have been cleared, leaving cracked asphalt and parched bald soil” (228). The question which lurks in minds everywhere is, “Can the illusion be coaxed back?” (228). According to Bowen, some of the townspeople seem hopeful, but at the same time fearful, as they sit “staring at the military remains” (228). The town represents the “inch-by-inch fight back to normal” (229) which was certainly a global phenomenon in 1945. The vast machinery of ‘normality’ coughs and sputters as it grinds back into its functioning in the ‘real,’ post-war world which is never again to be simply the real world.

Bowen certainly hints that, while the illusion can be coaxed back, nevertheless it will never again be an innocent one. The enormous debt which has accumulated over the many years of maintaining the illusion has now fully been grasped, by Bowen and by many others. In other words, the Western tradition of metaphysics and modernity has been confronted in its totality by anyone who has lived through the experience of the Second World War, opening up the last possibility for freedom in the form of an ironic awareness. The high-and-dry and self-contained plateau of modernity has been abandoned along with the oppressive overhang or downward sneer of the Leas plateau, a “watering place expansion, with a definite bid for the high class” (226). And now “life has run downhill into the town proper” (229), reluctantly in some parts, but nevertheless returning to the ‘old town’ which in fact “took the greater part of the bombing” (229). And interestingly, the return to the old port-side quarter of Folkestone looks Continental; it runs to blue-and-white-wash, arcades, caryatids and strident painted lettering. The summer’s mine-warnings plaster ruins: be careful what you fall over, be careful what you pick up (229).

Here the markets are enjoying a boom once again, and life in the old town is everywhere showing signs of picking up momentum. “Veteran salts, sitting along the parapet, watch the scene which, war in, war out, has probably not changed much” (229). According to the observer, “Folkestone’s magnetic centre has, decidedly, shifted: it is now down here — one might say, back down here” (230). This is a statement, which like the rest of her descriptions which follow, is especially resonant. By now used to the code language of the war, Bowen becomes a master of allegory. For, read allegorically, the end of the “Folkestone” sketch tells the story, Bowen’s interpretation, of the course of twentieth-century (philosophical, aesthetic, political, economic) history, with geographical areas or social precincts of the town representing what we can now term the post-war postmodern ‘landscape.’

Early-Victorian terraces, round the bend from the harbour, under and backing into the heights, lost caste when the plateau came into being. Facing them, we are back to the first focus, the original pleasure-town and watering-place idea. Opposite them lies the fun fair; its ruins hold the illusion the Leas have failed to regain. An empty circular floor, battleground of the Dodgems, has cracked and heaved up. Lorries stink and back between pleasure booths; on the beach a crane rattles, scooping graves for the wire. Prams going down to the sea bump cross the rails for the shingle trucks. The dry cement bed of the swimming pool shows cracks; its metal and bottle-glass screen sags in. A hit steel and concrete pavilion looks like a crashed plane. Beatifically, however, the holiday people are circulating among the fun fair ruins. ‘I always did like Folkestone,’ one woman said. They sit, smoking, round the rim of the Dodgems, in groups imitating the sensation of a crowd. Bunches of sat-in deck-chairs tilt on the shelving shingle; flocks of cycling boys do stunts on the hard strip. Apart from the winkle table and too-small harbour café, I
see no place for anyone to have tea. A shimmer of contentment, however, goes up from this end of the hot beach.

This is the last idyll of war, not the first of peace. It is essential for Folkestone to get going. War damage cannot account for everything; for years before this war she had been feeling the draught. From the point of view of to-day, she has disadvantages -- difficulties of access to the sea, the extrusion of modern-type holiday building to miles inland. Pleasure-beach life is forced into unideal proximity with the harbour by the narrowing, as one goes west, of the strip between the Leas’ base and the sea -- over which the Leas’ overhang is itself oppressive. Socially, the whole plateau set-up is out of date; there is frigid urbanity, a best-clothes compulsion. The sunbather and beachwear devotee has no outlet. The age level of visitors to the plateau had, pre-war, been shifting up; the steadies were Midland rich middle-aged middle class -- their sons and daughters wanted something more plage-y: shorts, espadrilles, the drink after the swim. For the child of 1945 Folkestone bristles with barbed wire (230).

In this allegorical passage written at the end of the war, Bowen problematizes the idea of endings or beginnings and exposes the difficult post-war legacy for thinking and living. Historical transformation is thought of in the postmodern sense, as bidirectional and even reversible. What lurks as the near memory of the irrational horror of total war leaves an indelible trace everywhere and in everyone.

This allegorical sketch also forms a trace within the text of *The Heat of the Day*, particularly in Chapter 16, the chapter which marks Robert’s end, in his “fall or leap from the roof” (291), and the beginning of the end of the war itself, with “Montgomery’s Order of the Day to the Eighth Army -- ‘We have completely smashed the German and Italian armies’” (291). Throughout England, every steeple on every church “was to break silence” (291), but when at last it came, the bells’ sound was not as strange or momentous as had been expected: after everything these were still the bells of the former time, climbing, striving, searching round in the air in vain for some still not to be found new note. All that stood out in cities were unreverberating lacunae where there were churches gone (291).

Poignantly, even before the bells come to a climax, people begin to turn “away from the illusion, either because it had already begun to fade or because they knew it must. There was a movement indoors again: doors and windows shut” (291). Stella meets with her son Roderick to tell him of Robert’s death, and they walk across yet another of Bowen’s symbolic landscapes, indebted to the “Folkestone” sketch, amongst others. Together they contemplate what is to become the immense ‘construction site’ of postmodernity -- an uncanny repetition of the earlier described wasteland with cracked and heaving pavement.

The path obliquely ran across exhausted grassland offered for building: the offer remained open; the board was down -- that there was to be building here you could never doubt. This that met the eye was the merest ghostly lingering of a landscape, gone by now if it had not been for the war. The recalcitrant swell of earth which had cracked the path would present not more than a moment’s difficulty to the sinkers of foundations, however shallow. Meanwhile, the path led, ahead of the walkers, in the direction of a thin line of poplars, beyond which, one seemed to remember, was a foot-bridged brook. For some reason, because she thought of the path as running, she envisaged all else as standing still; so it was with surprise that, from half-way across the bridge she saw motion, more fateful for being slow, in the disks of scum and the shreds of froth on the clayey water below her. Pausing to rest her hands on the rail, she wondered what the hazards of navigation would be for a paper boat, was passed through by an impulse to fold, launch one, recollected that there was now nothing for which the boat’s fortune could be an augury (291).
The cracked pavement, as in the “Folkestone” sketch, represents the fragility and unending transformation of our saving illusions, and perhaps even a certain conception of the ‘dialectic’ of history. The novel suggests that the world will once again reassemble the ‘shored-up fragments’ of its ruined foundations. And it will do so in a return to, rather than a denial of, modernism, but its return will not be a simple repetition. Bowen suggests that each person is to take her or his share in this process of return; it cannot be a matter of building only one ‘new’ foundation that must be shared by all. Rather, and pluralistically, Bowen suggests in the novel that we can build up a world of incommensurable foundations, conflicting world-views, and competing ideologies without compromising the possibility of being able to share a foundation built on care for the Other. However, such hopes turned out to be a bit premature. For, as Wright states, in 1945 the hope of any saving illusion was to be “clouded by the signs of political and ideological conflict among the victors, and by the awareness of many... intellectuals that war -- particularly a war like that of 1939-1945 -- is not likely to condition men’s minds and spirits for the practice of the humane values” (262). Quoting from the still obscure French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Wright suggests that perhaps that same ironic awareness underlay his musings as he viewed the scene from his enforced exile in distant China:

At the root of the greatest disturbance on which the nations have embarked today, I distinguish the signs of change in the human age. Like it or not, the age of the ‘lukewarm pluralisms’ finally has passed. Either, then, a single people will succeed in destroying or absorbing the others or else the peoples will join in a common soul in order to become more human. Unless I deceive myself, that is the dilemma set by the present crisis. In the collision of events, may the passion to unite be lighted in us and become more ardent each day as it faces the passion to destroy...(M. Picón-Salas, The Ignoble Savages [New York, 1965], pp. 166-67)

(262).

The world of conflicting ideologies -- or as the postmodern theorist Lyotard might say, the world of conflicting ‘phrase regimes’ -- now must finally be accepted and thought as a world of difference. The knowing and suffering children of the next generation, like those of the “Folkestone” sketch, and like Roderick, are to carry on living through to the end of the millenium and beyond with an ironic awareness. That is, if they are to avoid the same strong modes of thought which characterize modernism/-ity, and which informed the war as a totality of destruction and overcoming, they must only ever return to the thought of modernism/-ity ironically. First of all, however, they must come to terms with their ‘middle-ness,’ their suspension in the middle of nothing, or the nihilism of history which is history. And the most promising illusion for a generation which is both ‘neither this nor that’ and ‘both this and that’ will be one which links together its ‘twilight’ sense of the war and existence, with its memories of war’s ‘barbed wire.’ If destruction is an inevitable impulse, then, as Chardin suggests, unity and fragmentation must finally be thought together and through one another, each grasped as the Other of the Other: truly thinking difference.
Chapter 5

Spot-lighting the Twilight World

In a 1949 "Preface" to the reprint of her first volume of short stories Encounters (1923), Bowen hints that she has always had a profound sense of her belonging in the ‘now-time.’ What she remembers about her first writings is “the newness of the sensation of writing anything” (Afterthought 82), and “that first uncanny complicity with one’s physical surroundings, the objects, sounds, colours and lights-and-shades comprehensively known as ‘the writing-table’” (82). And although she suggests that this feeling of complicity has perhaps worn off or grown less acute through familiarity over the years, she nevertheless remembers how ‘hyper-significant’ for herself were her physical surroundings, as the “sensuous witnesses to my crossing the margin of a hallucinatory world” (83). This was not quite yet a twilight world of writing, however. Bowen criticizes a certain lack of irony in this early writing, connected with a ‘mal élevée’ attitude towards the human race. In her mind this attitude can only be excused as a youthful succumbing to the intellectual fashion and psychological climate of “the now famous ‘twenties, asceptic and disabused, [which] had already set in, though without a name” (86). By 1928, however, Bowen was already sketching the aesthetics of the ‘crepuscule,’ with its constitutive ironic awareness or doubled quality.

Finding herself pressed up against the present in the twilight world of the Second World War, Bowen describes her 1945 volume of wartime stories as “disjected snapshots -- snapshots taken from close up, too close up, in the middle of the mêlée of a battle” (Collected Impressions 52). Described by Bowen as ‘resistance writing,’ these stories can also be read as postmodern attempts “to rescue a notion of a localized present in the face of the generalized instantaneity of technology” (Sim 378). Fifty years later, the postmodern cultural commentator Paul Virilio urges us to do the same, following Benjamin’s “mystical invocation of Jetztzeit or ‘now-time’” (Sim 378). The technological immobility of postmodernity was adumbrated during this time of total war, and especially between the spring of 1941 and the late autumn of 1944, when Bowen wrote her collection of stories.

In her “Preface” to the 1945 edition of The Demon Lover, Bowen mentions that she has been writing a novel at the same time as these stories, and “did not want to imperil its continuity” (47). As her intense impressions of the now-time began to accumulate, however, she found that they exerted a tremendous pressure on her imagination. “Each time I sat down to write a story I opened a door; and the pressure against the other side of that door must, I found, have been very great, for things -- ideas, images, emotions -- came through with force and rapidity, sometimes violence (47). As she wrote, the stories developed their own momentum which, although she had to control, she found she “could not question” (47). And despite both aesthetic and intellectual difficulties she confesses to having had in writing some of them, she insists that they were flying particles of something enormous and inchoate that had been going on. They were sparks from experience -- an experience not necessarily my own (47).

In admitting to the ‘transitivity’ of the work, Bowen also acknowledges her historicity or her belonging-ness to the present moment as a crisis. She admits to having lived this time “with every pore open” (47). And she expresses in this piece that she wants her work-in-progress, a plan for a historical narrative “which deals with this same time, to be comprehensive” (47). We understand her meaning of ‘comprehensive’ when she states that, as a novel requires form, “for the form’s sake, one is always having to make relentless exclusions” (47).

The stories, which Bowen harshly criticizes for ‘lacking invention,’ nevertheless function as sketches for The Heat of the Day, in that, like the novel, they are allegorical, crepuscular. In them she was practicing the ‘comprehensive exclusivity’ of the novel form, as she conceived it. As they are all “wartime, none of them war, stories” (48), they involve a figure-ground shift in the same way that the novel does, although the later work is more ‘hard-boiled,’ more contoured. As reflexive responses to the now-time, Bowen describes the stories as being 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 imperviousness I have, I find, not written (48).
Still speaking here in terms of ‘blindness,’ a perspective she may have formulated back in 1939 after reading a novel which fascinated her, called The Blaze of Noon. Bowen gives us insight here into her practice of problematizing demonstrative discourse. What is ‘seen’ is no longer evident, no longer evidence; as the risk of conjecture, representation is grasped as an act of blindness. This feeling of being ‘blind’ during wartime also led to the destabilizing of identity, which Bowen calls ‘the uncertain’ I’.

Sometimes I hardly knew where I stopped and everyone else began. The violent destruction of solid things, the explosion of the illusion that prestige, power and permanence attach to bulk and weight, left all of us, equally, heady and disembodied. Walls went down; and we felt, if not knew, each other. We all lived in a state of lucid abnormality.

Dissolving into a world of fictionalized reality, the uncertain I lived in what Bowen describes as a ‘hallucinatory’ state, and she finds that her stories trace this “rising tide of hallucination” (49). The twilight world of fiction, which had once been neatly demarcated from the ‘real’ world by a margin of implacable but ‘sensuous’ witnesses (tables and chairs), had now become implacably sensuous in itself. And the ontological background of what had once been ‘reality’ was now foregrounded in its total fragility, or its total weakness, as a hermeneutic ‘reality.’

But at the same time, this condition -- which, twenty years later, has been described by some theorists and philosophers as ‘the postmodern condition’ -- is grasped as the only freedom left for humans.

The halluciinations in the stories are not a peril; nor are the stories studies of mental peril. The hallucinations are an unconscious, instinctive, saving resort on the part of the characters: life, mechanized by the controls of wartime, and emotionally torn and impoverished by changes, had to complete itself in some other way. It is a fact that in Britain, and especially in London, in wartime many people had strange deep intense dreams. ‘Whatever else I forget about the war,’ a friend said to me, ‘I hope I may never forget my own dreams, or some of the other dreams I have been told. We have never dreamed like this before; and I suppose we shall never dream like this again’ (49).

Bowen emphasizes that the dreams by night and the fantasies by day, with which “formerly matter-of-fact people consoled themselves” (49), were the only compensation for the ungraspable absurdity and horror of the twilight zone that had become ‘reality.’ She states that “apart from them, I do not think that the dessication, by war, of our day-to-day lives can be enough stressed” (49). Anything that had formerly been taken for granted or understood as ‘self-evident’ was no longer so, and

the outside world news was stupefying: headlines and broadcasts came down and down on us in hammer-like chops, with great impact but oddly little reverberation. The simple way to put it was: ‘One cannot take things in.’ What was happening was out of all proportion to our faculties for knowing, thinking and checking up (49).

Though the British knew and felt that, compared to those on the Continent, in Britain they could not be said to suffer, still the utter absurdity of their lives meant that war, being global, exceeded rationalization. If, physically, they survived the war, the British still suffered a spiritual, emotional, and intellectual crisis. With their world pulled out from underneath them, they were forced to rethink all they had once ‘known’ to be ‘true.’

Foreign faces about the London streets had personal pain and impersonal history sealed up behind the eyes. All this pressure drove egotism underground, or made it whiten like grass under a stone. And self-expression in small ways stopped -- the small ways had been so very small that we had not realized how much they amounted to. Planning pleasures, choosing and buying things, wondering and wandering, dressing yourself up, and so on. All that stopped. 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. Any remaining choices and pleasures shot into new proportion and new value: people paid big money for little bunches of flowers (49-50).

And thus writing, and all wartime writing, as far as Bowen is concerned, became resistance writing. She states that, although in no way do “we who were in Britain compare ourselves with the French” (50), nevertheless “personal life here put up its own resistance to the annihilation that was threatening it -- war” (50). And if one could not or did not write, one read voraciously.

Everyone here, as is known, read more: and what was sought in books -- old books, new books -- was the communicative touch of personal life. To survive, not only physically but spiritually, was essential. People whose homes had been blown up went to infinite lengths to assemble bits of themselves -- broken ornaments, odd shoes, torn scraps of the curtains that had hung in a room -- from the wreckage. In the same way, they assembled and checked themselves from stories and poems, from their memories, from one another’s talk. Outwardly, we accepted that at this time individual destiny had to count for nothing; inwardly, individual destiny became an obsession in every heart. You cannot depersonalize persons. Every writer during this time was aware of the passionate attachment of men and women to every object or image or place or love or fragment of memory with which his or her destiny seemed to be identified, and by which the destiny seemed to be assured (50).

Total war was grasped as a total crisis, not only physically, not only intellectually, but also emotionally and spiritually. And Bowen articulates that, what is left for human living, thinking, and being amidst such a crisis, is interpretation: all we have in the twilight world of difference is our own and each other’s interpretations. War foregrounded this remaining ‘reality’ as the only possibility left upon which to revalue, reinstate, or re-found the world. Bowen states that these interpretations, “small worlds-within-worlds of hallucination” (50), represented a “search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world” (50). The ‘saving hallucination’ and ‘dear saving illusory world’ becomes recognized and accepted, embraced even, as an ontological and a fictional landmark, both a substantial and an insubstantial monumentality.

And filling “the vacuum for the uncertain ‘I’” (51) comes resistance-fantasies which “are in themselves frightening” (50), thus “counteract[ing] fear by fear, stress by stress” (50). The stories are frightening because, in them, as in the ‘outside’ world they are meant to represent, ghosts become more certain than the uncertain “I,” hence exposing identity as a fiction and problematizing the boundaries of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the text. As a suspended void in the middle, in the ‘interstice’ and ‘interim,’ floating uncertainly towards an uncertain future, the individual being came to recognize the importance of the past (as its own fiction and as others’ fictions) as a possibility for ground and for grounded-ness in the text of its world. According to Bowen, “the past... discharges its load of feeling into the anæsthetized and bewildered present” (51), and this text of the past remains as the only horizon to which individual identity can refer itself -- a fictional horizon. “It is the ‘I’ that is sought -- and retrieved, at the cost of no little pain” (51) -- no little pain for the ‘ghosts’ of the past are more ‘real’ than the uncertain “I.”' And yet, finally, this is accepted, for the only certainty will be that which we project in our fictions of the world, our hermeneutic ontologies. Interestingly, in this “Preface” and elsewhere, Bowen often speaks of the characters of her stories and of The Heat of the Day as taking control over her, gathering a momentum and life of their own in her twilight world.

It seems strange, then, that Bowen apologizes for the figural or twilight quality of her wartime fiction, that is, for the fact that they “do not contain more ‘straight’ pictures of the British wartime scene” (51). But the apology is elusive, for she immediately proceeds to make excuses for her crepuscular writings, stating that as “impulsive movements of fantasy [they] are by-products of the non-impulsive major routine of war” (51). Against the technological immobility of the postmodern twilight world, Bowen had projected her “between-time stories -- mostly reactions from, or intermissions between, major events” (51). And interestingly, even though she took another three years to work on it, The Heat of the Day is written with the same ‘crepuscularity’ as the wartime short stories, also a ‘between-time’ narrative, similarly exposing “a levelled-down time, when a bomb on your house was as inexpedient, but not more abnormal, than a cold in your head” (51). As with the stories, in The Heat of the Day, “the backgrounds, and sometimes the circumstances, are only present by inference” (51), involving a figure-ground shift which foregrounds “the intensely subjective mood into which most of the characters have been cast” (51). The
"element of chanciness and savageness about everything" (51) had exposed the possibility of the world as a conjecture, and "the claustrophobia of not being able to move about freely and without having to give an account of yourself" (51) opened the chance to practice an "I" saving hermeneutic ontology. "These are ways in which some of us did go on -- after all, we had to go on some way" (51).

At the end of her "Preface", Bowen speculates on her suspicions of the 'form' of the post-war world, whose comprehensive exclusions were recognized as being beyond her or anyone's control. In this twilight world lurked an unseen or silent potential:

In wartime, even in Britain, much has been germinating. What, I do not know -- who does, yet, know? -- but I felt the germination; and feel it, here and there, in these stories now that I read them through. These are received impressions of happening things; impressions that stored themselves up and acquired force without being analysed or considered. These, as wartime stories, are at least contemporary -- twenty, forty, sixty years hence they may be found interesting as documents, even if they are found negligible as art. This discontinuous writing, nominally 'inventive,' is the only diary I have kept. Transformed into images in the stories, there may be important psychological facts: if so, I did not realize their importance. Walking in the darkness of the nights of six years (darkness which transformed a capital city into a network of inscrutable canyons) one developed new bare alert senses, with their own savage warnings and notations. And by day one was always making one's own new maps of a landscape always convulsed by some new change (52).

Certainly, Bowen is being modest in her estimation of her own wartime writing, for in this writing, her stories and her historical narrative of the Second World War, The Heat of the Day, lurks the same unseen and silent potential which has now been theorized as 'postmodern.' As historicizing works, Bowen's war writing broaches postmodernity, remaining as works of pure extension, a futural reaching out and openness to both new and old directions for thought, (im)possible photographs of the figure-ground reversal which is historical transformation.

Through it all, one probably picked up more than can be answered for. I cannot answer for much that is in these stories, except to say that I know they are all true -- true to the general life that was in me at the time. Taken singly, they are disjected snapshots -- snapshots taken from close up, too close up, in the middle of the mêlée of a battle. You cannot render, you can only embrace -- if it means embracing to suffocation point -- something vast that is happening right on top of you. Painters have painted, and photographers who were artists have photographed, the tottering lacelike architecture of ruins, dark mass-movements of people, and the untimely brilliance of flaming skies. I cannot paint or photograph like this -- I have isolated; I have made for the particular, spot-lighting faces or cutting out gestures that are not even the faces or gestures of great sufferers. This is how I am, how I feel, whether in war or peace time; and only as I am and feel can I write. As I said at the start, though I criticize these stories now, afterwards, intellectually, I cannot criticize their content. They are the particular. But through the particular, in wartime, I felt the high-voltage current of the general pass (52).
Chapter 6

Muffled Poetry: Bombs in the Echo-track of Sensation

During the 1940s, Bowen set out, in a review of Woolf's posthumous 1941 novel, *Between the Acts* -- and in several other pieces, "Notes on Writing a Novel" (1945), "Out of a Book" (1946), and "She" (1947), amongst others -- to develop her aesthetic speculations into more of a prescription for writing. And in 1948, when she had finished her historical narrative *The Heat of the Day*, she produced, along with Graham Greene and V.S. Pritchett, a piece called "Why Do I Write? An Exchange of Views". As the experience of total war, with all of its attendant crises of ontological insecurity, recedes further into the "background," we see that her perception of this twilight world from time to time begins to be reified into more conservative and unplayfully traditional prescriptions for writing. An element of impatience with the inevitable twilight of experience occasionally sets in, and the respect formerly held for the world of difference which was revealed in the midst of war is tempered with a desire to conceive of a 'new' structure to contain this (world of) difference.

In 1941, Bowen reads Woolf's 'war novel' as an 'organically unified' text which effects a new 'reconciliation.' This is a judgment. She feels that *Between the Acts* lacks the playful experimentation and risky quality of Woolf's other texts, and that it sacrifices the productive elements of "awkward but vital discord, friction, collision between the outer and inner" (63), which according to Bowen "are not only not stressed [in this novel], but hardly present at all" (63). This judgment of the novel as being 'static' and 'organic' seems harsh to postmodern ears, as the text can be read differently. But in fact, Bowen admits to a much different reading of the text when she describes it as being, nevertheless, open-ended and lacking in finality. She states that, "when the book ends it is, as at the end of [Woolf's] other books, as though a lamp had been switched off at its base, but the current is still waiting along the flex" (64). It seems paradoxical that Bowen should be saying two different things about the text at the same time, judging it for its organic reconciliation or closedness as she praises it for its openness. But perhaps this is just a factor of Bowen's own preference for openness, or her hesitation to judge the work of a good friend. Certainly, Bowen's rejection of the idea of textual hermeticism or textual completion is insinuated in her statement that Woolf's work "is incapable of being completed" (64). Moreover, she says that "one envisages or desires completion only upon a level upon which [Woolf] neither wrote nor lived" (64). Ending her review with a quote from one of Woolf's most experimental texts, *The Waves*, it is apparent that in 1941 she did not quite know what to make of *Between the Acts*. "'Walking on the embankment, I prayed that I might thunder for ever on the verge of the world where there is no vegetation, but here and there a marble pillar. I threw my bunch on to the spreading wave'" (64). The quotation reads like a manifesto for the negative dialectics which are still at work in Woolf's final text, although Bowen does not quite realize it. For the current of textual play, energy, or kinesis is indeed embraced in *Between the Acts*, where Woolf seems to embrace utterance as the powerful dispersion of meanings in a world of difference. If there is a lack of incommensurability detected, nevertheless, to postmodern ears Woolf's text reads more as an inside-outside problematic, where indistinguishability and undecideability lurk, and less as a thinning of "the thickets of mystery between person and person" (63), as Bowen would have it. As already said, a realization of the intertextuality of being is one that Bowen herself begins to incorporate into her wartime and postwar writings, where she continues to practice her preference, expressed here, for 'speculation' in uncertainty over 'a perceiving certainty.'

The war brought the realization of a 'thinning down of the thickets of mystery between person and person' to be anything but a 'miracle of containment,' as she reads Woolf's novel to be. Nevertheless, in this review, Bowen expresses a preference for the risk associated with "anguish, desire, [and]surprise [which] have reached rim-level" (63), and have even spilled over the rim, so to speak, thinking that Woolf's text does not take this risk. Perhaps this is justified, as Woolf's suicide might seem to cancel out the irony with which the portrait of the embittered artist Miss La Trobe is drawn. La Trobe's modernist nostalgia for perfection and unity, and her detestation of the perishability of art as it is released out into the world, given over for judgment, might have seemed to Bowen not so much an ironic portrait as a caricature of Woolf's greatest fears in a world of ontological instability. In her letter to Leonard Woolf of 1941, after having just learned of Woolf's suicide, she says "I had begun to imagine what I learned from you to be true -- that she had feared her illness was coming back" (Mulberry Tree 221). Any embracing of the risk which is constitutive of all art, or even all experience, which is *seemingly* done in the novel, might seem to ring false given Woolf's own refusal to take the risk of continuing to live, or even given her expressed dissatisfaction with the work before she died. As it stands, the novel is interpreted by Bowen as an attempt to communicate that "the fate of imperfection is present, in the attempt to render, in the attempt to eternalise even for one moment, in the attempt to speak" (64). Bowen summarizes the 'failure' of Miss La Trobe's production:
The limitation, the downward pull on the power is agonising to the poor village highbrow -- to the others it was a foregone conclusion, known. Clouds and cows, however, the village idiot, light on a distant spire and unpredictable fancies among the onlookers perfect moments that perish for Miss La Trobe. Her designed silence falls flat, but the cows save it. Her crux, 'the Present,' the trick with the running mirrors throwing back at the audience their own faces, succeeds, but shatters the planned whole. After this break with illusion the vicar rises to speak, but does not know what to say (64).

Seemingly, one could understand from this that the work of art or any kind of synthesis is predicated upon the basis of risk and possible failure. Bowen states a very postmodern understanding, one that Jacques Derrida is fond of reiterating, that no communication could be possible without this risk.

* * *

In 1945 Bowen produced an exceptionally dry piece entitled “Notes on Writing a Novel” which contains sections on Plot, Characters, Scene, Dialogue, Angle, Advance, and Relevance. The text under each subtitled section is written sketchily, almost as if in the margins of a book, and she makes no attempt to be systematic. In the last section on relevance, Bowen states that the question of relevance “is the headache of novel-writing” (46). She expresses a preference for the “well-constructed detective story” (Mulberry Tree 46), in terms of there being less technical difficulties with regard to this question. She states that

The model for relevance is the well-constructed detective story: nothing is ‘in’ that does not tell. But the detective story is, or would appear to be, simplified by having fact as its kernel. The detective story makes towards concrete truth; the novel makes towards abstract truth.

With the detective story, the question of ‘relevant to what?’ can be answered by the intelligence. With the novel, the same question must constantly, and in every context, be referred to the intuition. The intelligence, in a subsequent check over, may detect, but cannot itself put right, blunders, lapses or false starts on the part of the intuition (46).

It seems that some of Bowen’s preferences of four years before, expressed in the review of Woolf’s novel, are being contradicted in this piece, written while she was working on The Heat of the Day. For, by the end of the piece, Bowen comes to assert a unity of relevance (plot, character, scene, and dialogue) which is not at all unlike the ‘organic reconciliation’ that she had earlier detected and judged in Woolf’s work. She calls for a strength in writing which should not “be weakened by anything irrelevant to itself” (47), which is to say, anything which could be ‘disruptive to the plot.’ Her recoup, stated entirely without her earlier ironic awareness of the necessity of disruption and thus of the irony of dialectical reconciliation itself, is confusing.

Irrelevance, in any part, is a cloud and a drag on, a weakener of, the novel. It dilutes meaning. Relevances crystallises meaning.

The novelist’s -- any writer’s -- object is, to whittle down his meaning to the exactest and finest possible point. What, of course, is fatal is when he does not know what he does mean: he has no point to sharpen.

Much irrelevance is introduced into novels by the writer’s vague hope that at least some of this may turn out to be relevant, after all. A good deal of what might be called provisional writing goes to the first drafts of first chapters of most novels. At a point in the novel’s progress, relevance becomes clearer. The provisional chapters are then recast.

The most striking fault in work by young or beginning novelists, submitted for criticism, is irrelevance -- due either to infatuation or indecision. To direct such an author’s attention to the imperative of relevance is certainly the most useful -- and possibly the only -- help
What sounds like an emerging emphasis, or more properly re-emphasis, on a logic of necessity as a corrective, possibly, for the logic of impossibility which was constitutive of the wartime twilight world, is here perhaps overstated in order to, in turn, emphasize the need for a reconstruction of rationality as against the ‘irrationalist surrender’ of Continental post-war nihilism. Certainly, The Heat of the Day, as an ironic whole, spotlights the question of relevance. For instance, in the novel the question of relevance is brought to bear upon the corollary question, ‘relevant to what?’ As a ‘historical narrative,’ its material evolves out of ‘mixed motives’; the reader is often left to wonder, is it a historical narrative, a detective story, a romance, a Bildungsroman, a continuation of Bowen’s ‘Big House’ tradition of writing, a ghost story, a spy thriller, a parodic revision of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, a comedy? As all of these things, and yet none of them alone, Bowen’s novel, which she announced as a historical narrative of the Second World War in London, makes her ‘will-to-system’ in “Notes on Writing a Novel” seem worthy of the Nietzschean judgment as indicating ‘a lack of integrity.’ But they are not simply irrelevant in themselves, as they point to an emerging injunction in post-war thought to maintain a respect for and even to return to past structures.

A year later, in a piece entitled “Out of a Book”, Bowen returns to her childhood, with reminiscences of “reading deeply, ravenously, unthinkingly, sensuously, as a child” (Mulberry Tree 48). She also returns to some of her earlier realizations arrived at in the wartime twilight world, regarding “the overlapping and haunting of life by fiction” (48). As a voracious child reader, Bowen remembers that she had a “virgin susceptibility to what [was] written” (49). She also remember that, ever since she was encouraged to develop “a bookish attitude towards books” (49) in school, she was thrown out of the ‘Eden’ twilight world where fiction and reality were synonymous. She states that “for evermore [her] brain [was] to stand posted between [her] self and the story” (49). However, by the end of the piece Bowen explains that she finally got over her dejection, still remembering her Edenic unity with the text, where and when there was no inside-or-outside-the-text, but nevertheless moving on to another realization. She explains this progress as a result of her realizing that the relation between reality and fiction was much more complex. The peculiar conjunction of “any real-life scene” (52) come across in a fictional text imparts a realization of the “transmuted existence” (52) of the ‘real’ in the ‘unreal’: “it has not only given body to fiction, it has partaken of fiction’s body” (52). For Bowen, such a real life scene, incorporated into the fictional text, “sucked into the ambiance of the story” (52), is never to be looked at in the same way.

[It] cannot again be walked past indifferently; it exerts a pull and sets up a tremor; and it is to indent the memory for life. It is at these points, indeed, that what I have called synthetic experience has its sources. Into that experience come relationships, involving valid emotion, between the child reader and book characters; a residuum of the book will be in all other emotions that are to follow” (52).

The realization is that the ‘intercourse’ between reality and fiction produces (1) reality (1) -- fiction remains as a trace in ‘reality.’ Conversely, Bowen explains that “there are real-life places -- towns, seaports, suburbs of London -- unknown to the child, though heard of, which become ‘real’ through being also in books” (52). She explains that, for the child who is a voracious reader, characters of the real-life places incorporated in fiction are understood as having been or being real.

For instance, after David Copperfield I could not hear either Dover or Yarmouth mentioned, in the most ordinary context, without excitement: I had a line on them. Towns that were in books, and the routes between them travelled by characters, stood out in relief on the map of England. Not a Londoner, I was continuously filling in and starring my map of the environs -- at Richmond lived Sir Percy, the Scarlet Pimpernel, and his wife Marguerite, who fainting into a bed of heliotrope in her riverside garden; at Highgate, the Steerforths and Rosa Dartle; at Blackheath and Lewisham, the E. Nesbit children. When I came to read ‘Kipps’, I was made dizzy by the discovery that I had, for years, been living in two places, Hythe and Folkestone, that were in a book. Historic
places one was taken to see meant no more and no less to me than this; history was fiction -- it took me a long time to be able to see that it gained anything further from being 'true' (52-3, my emphasis).

Bowen concludes this essay with the conjecture that, following her realizations as a reader, “most creative writers must in their day have been reading children” (53). Furthermore, she speculates that “all through creative writing there must run a sense of dishonesty and of debt” (53). This statement brings to mind Vattimo’s formulation of thought as involving both Verwindung (dishonesty) and Andenken (debt), and indeed functioning through the dynamic interaction of these two elements, discussed earlier as the recognition of the text as a monument in its two senses, insubstantial and substantial, and so on. During wartime, Bowen realized the dishonesty at work in ‘actuality,’ and the distortional power of illusion; her postwar realization, as articulated in this essay, involves an acknowledgment of the string of debts at work in maintaining the illusion of a ‘horizon of actuality.’ This recognition has an uncanny reverberation in the thought of, not only Heidegger and others, but also postmodern philosophers such as Gianni Vattimo. In the last passage of this essay, Bowen expresses a realization, which in philosophical or Heideggerian terms, we can call that of ‘the ontological difference’; or in Nietzschean terms, that of ‘the eternal return (of the same)’; and which in postmodern terms, we can call that of ‘the infinite interpretability of reality’ (Vattimo); or of ‘the trace’ or ‘the supplement’ or ‘differance’ (Derrida); or of ‘intertextuality’ (Kristeva), etcetera. She gives up the search for origins, in a surrender to intertextual reality, accepting in a distortional way that we can only ever repeat/respond... with a difference, tempering our acceptance with the projected potential for variation.

Is there any such thing, any more, as creative writing? The imagination, which may appear to bear such individual fruit, is rooted in a compost of forgotten books. The apparent choices of art are nothing but addictions, pre-dispositions: where did these come from, how were they formed? The aesthetic is nothing but a return to images that will allow nothing to take their place; the aesthetic is nothing but an attempt to disguise and glorify the enforced return. All susceptibility belongs to the age of magic, the Eden where fact and fiction were the same; the imaginative writer was the imaginative child, who relied for life upon being lied to -- and how, now, is he to separate lies from his consciousness of life? If he be a novelist, all his psychology is merely a new parade of the old mythology. We have relied on our childhoods, on the sensations of childhood, because we mistake vividness for purity; actually, the story was there first -- one is forced to see that it was the story that apparelled everything in celestial light. It could lead to madness to look back and back for the true primary impression or sensation; those we did ever experience we have forgotten -- we only remember that to which something was added. Almost no experience, however much simplified by the distance of time, is to be vouched for as being wholly my own -- did I live through that, or was I told that it happened, or did I read it? When I write, I am re-creating what was created for me. The gladness of vision, in writing, is my own gladness, but not at my own vision. I may see, for instance, a road running uphill, a skyline, a figure coming slowly over the hill -- the approach of the figure is momentous, accompanied by fear or rapture or fear of rapture or a rapture of fear. But who and how is this? Am I sure this is not a figure out of a book? (53)

The insignificance of the origin is revealed as a superfluous lie, and an uncanny family resemblance is revealed between philosophers such as Nietzsche or Heidegger, Elizabeth Bowen the reader/writer, and the postmodern philosopher Gianni Vattimo. The figure approaching over the horizon is, as one might by now guess, figural -- in one interpretation, possibly a figure for the future of postmodernity which Bowen broaches in this essay of 1946, and again in The Heat of the Day.

*
In a BBC Broadcast of 28 February, 1947, we find Bowen emphasizing much of the same realizations articulated one year earlier in "Out of a Book". Again she reminisces her childhood, a time when her "ideas of growing up were ambiguous, and sought to have no relation with reality" (Mulberry Tree 246). With humour, she recounts her discouraging experience with education, meaning in school, where her "own romantic approaches to any subject [were] being rebuffed in favour of quibbling truths" (246). She states, as we already know from the earlier essay, that she had developed "a sort of grudge against actuality" (246). As a child, Bowen found that "history, for instance, had looked promising; but [she] soon found it inferior to the historical novel" (246). She explains how she had sustained, at about this time, a reverse in the matter of my fine essay on the Civil War. I had written:

"Now the Roundheads hated the Cavaliers because the Cavaliers were better-looking than they were...."

"Oh," they said, returning the essay, "oh, but you can't say that!"

"Why -- who says I can't say what?"

"You can't say that because it is not the case. Nothing, alas," they said, with a maddening kindly smile, "is quite so simple."

It was 'alas', indeed. Constitutionalism: its first breath blew cold.

I wanted the primary motive and the primary colour. So I resigned from history and turned to geography; if there were not a better time there might be a better place? But with geography, also, something shrivelled and shrank: there was no undiscovered country, they told me, now. What a prospect: what an absence of prospect, rather! I was chiefly depressed at that time, I think, by what seemed the sheer uniformity of the human lot, by its feebleness, arising from some deficiency...(247).

Again, she remembers her earlier adolescent pessimism which, by the end of this piece, is understood by her as having been transformed in the process of maturing, tempered by a more positive embracing of the possibilities for thinking and writing in the twilight world. Again she drops many hints to the reader regarding the 'crepuscular' or metaphorical quality of the writing: "She" is an allegory of reading. She gives us hints of her allegorical impulses, even as a child:

It was at the height of this, my first winter of discontent, that I came on the novel She, by Rider Haggard. Everything, from the first glance, made this a book of promise, even its author's name. Rider Haggard... was this some kind of Erl-king or demon horseman -- staring, awful, visionary and pale? Counterbalancing this, where I was concerned -- for I had not a totally gothic taste -- was the book's cover: a solid, homely and edible pink-brown, suggesting cocoa or milk chocolate. (And, indeed, in time the narrator's style, with its blend of the jocular and the blood-curdling, was to have on me the effect of well-sugared cocoa laced with some raw and subtle intoxicant.) It was impossible not to keep looking ahead at the wash illustrations by Greiffenhagen: a lion and crocodile locked in a death-grip... a savage dance in the dark, lit by human torches... a veiled white form proceeding down endless caves... an extinct, deserted city under the moon...(247).

Through the crepuscule of She, Bowen remembers that she saw the fictional city "Kôr before [she] saw London" (249), referring to the hallucinated city within one of her most famous wartime short stories. She tells us that she "read She, dreamed She, lived She for a year and a half" (250). This was to be outgrown, however. Once again, Bowen articulates what became a more mature realization of "the power of the pen. The inventive pen" (250). She passed from being a reader, listening to the text in close proximity, living for what she wanted to believe was a substantiality, to being a writer, seeing the effect that language had in altering her perceptions of 'reality,' and thus seeing the necessity of moderating her belief in the text with the recognition that it is also ('only' or 'just') an insubstantial monument. She ends by telling us that since the time she read, dreamed, and lived She in that close and intense space,
until almost yesterday, I have not opened the chocolate-pink book again. There are -- there can but be -- startling divergations between what I remember and what is written. At the same time, surprisingly little of what was written has evaporated. All the way there is an echo-track of sensation -- just as I find my own childish grubby thumbprints on the pages.

This book 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. Writing -- that creaking, pedantic, obtrusive, arch, prudish, opaque overworded writing... what it could do! That was the revelation; that was the power in the cave (250).

With age, with distance, and with the passing of time, the ‘echo-track of sensation’ edifies the intensifications of texts. Thus later on in life, they can also be grasped as forming a horizon of ‘rhetorical exempla,’ or a context of ‘weak normative power.’ And in Vattimo’s words, they are “conceived no longer -- as the metaphysical philosophies of history used to -- as stages in a rationally necessary development, but simply as traces of mortal beings, as ‘possibilities’ still open, at least in a certain sense” (Vattimo “Postmodern Criticism and Critique” 65).

In 1948, V.S. Pritchett, Graham Greene, and Elizabeth Bowen conceived of an idea for an informal ‘symposium,’ which was to be an exchange of views through the unsystematic and unhurried “careless intimacy of letter writing” (Pritchett 10). The topic, as indicated by the title of the published exchange, “Why Do I Write?”, also meant to address the public paranoia concerning ‘free speech’ following the war. As Pritchett remarks, throughout the exchange “one principle slips out and remains out, intransigent: the assertion of our liberty” (10). In the Preface to the exchange of views, Pritchett himself addresses the fear of freedom of expression and the fear of anarchy which typify the post-war period, not only in Soviet Russia and in other countries of Europe (certainly in Italy, where at the time, Vattimo’s mentor Luigi Pareyson was introducing Heideggerian philosophy to Italy, even amidst fears of irrationalism and fascist totalitarianism), but also in England. Such fears obviously impacted writers all around the world at this time. And, on the other hand, a domesticated socialism in England and the commercialization of writing in America are also perceived by Pritchett as threats to the ‘freedom’ of the writer.

The imaginative writer has always had an admired but precarious position in every country; but now he suspects that he is facing a danger far greater than the usual morbid perils of his profession. He has seen the totalitarian censorships of Europe. He sees in Soviet Russia the attempt to raise writing to one of the most highly paid and exalted positions in the State, at the deadly price of State-direction and State-censorship. He sees in America a literature which has been commercialised to an extent never before known. And in Britain, where his freedom is not shouldered out in these ways, he finds he is annulled in effect by the inflation and the shortage of paper. What chiefly disturbs him is that socialism, the managerial revolution, planning -- or whatever the current political specific is called -- holds out the hand of rescue: but if he grasps it, he is likely to be pulled into the unventilated corridors of official culture. Are all the advantages of the enlightenment to be thrown away? Is it true that a return to the medieval darkness is preferable to the chaos and barbarism that are said to be the alternatives? Has he anyway a choice? (6-7)

Beleaguered and pestered by questions regarding what writers should or should not be doing in the present time of ‘crisis,’ Pritchett, Greene, and Bowen all answer, unequivocally, ‘none of your business.’ The insistence is on a sense of privacy necessarily guarded, especially at a premium now, and basic to human freedom; whether that person is an artist or not, all three writers are implacably convinced that human privacy must be respected at all costs.

All three writers also seriously address the ‘cliché,’ as Pritchett terms it, that the post-war period “is a time of crisis,... an age of revolution, transition, despair” (7). And they all express both the interest and the need to temper the modernist notion of the artist as ‘avant garde’ with the sobering fact that s/he is as much a part of ‘mass society’ (or as much a part of the perceived ‘mass’ which is ‘society’) as anyone else. Still, they maintain that art
should not become political. All three writers defend the ‘phrasal’ aspect of art in its ability to offer the promise of change, while all the same avoiding pulpits, platforms, and planning. In the minds of Pritchett, Greene, and Bowen, art must maintain its distance from actuality.

There are no people — as the actions of the present Soviet government have shown — of whom governments are more afraid than writers; on the other hand, their tactical position is feeble. The writer is — as Miss Elizabeth Bowen says in a letter towards the end of this book — a Resistance man, a guerilla and his only strength is that he can keep on fighting and running away, his weakness that he may betray under political or commercial torture. It is fatal for him to believe that he can have or ought to have the serried power of other organised workers in the industries or professions, and that he can compete with other figures in public life on their own terms. The one thing he can do is to say what he is in his own fashion, and to refuse to be forced into false attitudes by official questions. To any party secretary or Public Relations Officer who asks him, What is your relation with Society? he must answer like the wise men of the Gallup Poll: ‘Don’t Know.’ He does know, but the answer cannot be put on a triplicated document (Pritchett 9).

In a later letter, Bowen herself wonders why the temptation has become so strong for artists to put their names to petitions, or to write letters to newspapers “on matters they do not know much about and have no reason to know anything about” (26). Stating firmly that all of her own discoveries about life “have been capricious and inadvertent” (26), Bowen insists that she “should hesitate to lay down the law about anything” (26). Throughout her correspondence, she expresses the need to keep theories of actuality and artistic practice informed of one another in writing, but nevertheless separate. Nor does she attempt to define the relation between theory (society) and practice (artist/writer/'individual') any more than to say that her writing is her relation to society.

Perhaps one emotional reason why one may write is the need to work off, out of the system, the sense of being solitary and farouche. Solitary and farouche people don’t have relationships: they are quite unrelatable. If you and I were capable of being altogether house-trained and made jolly, we should be nicer people, but not writers. If I feel irked and uneasy when asked about the nature of my (as a writer) relation to society, this is because I am being asked about the nature of something that does not, as far as I know, exist. My writing, I am prepared to think, may be a substitute for something I have been born without — a so-called normal relation to society. My books are my relation to society. Why should people come and ask me what the nature of this relation is? It seems to me that it is the other people, the readers, who should know (23).

But in relation to ‘the other people’ mentioned here, Bowen expresses serious doubts, asking “to what disordered values and fallacious hopes on the part of the public” (26) does the temptation to force artists into taking political stances or theorizing their own practices owe itself?

In defending the format of their symposium, Pritchett explains that beyond the desire expressed by all three writers to avoid “the easy finality of an essay or the open yawns of the hurried article” (10), they “wanted an enquiry which would not exhaust the subject; the value of it for ourselves would be self-discovery not decision” (10). Being, all three of them, busy writers, they thought that “a correspondence that dragged on -- and this one did -- would not be a burden and might gain from its dilatoriness” (10).

Imaginative writers and critics are continually pestered to utter their views on all sorts of subjects, to turn aside from their work; and they build up a resistance and a resentment which is visible in the views when they are at last pushed into uttering them formally. We hoped that we would not resent writing letters to one another. Above all we wanted to avoid the sterility of debate, the banalities of taking sides: what we wanted to produce was conversation (10).

In this conversation, Bowen insists, nevertheless, that such ‘resistance’ is necessary for the writer, who occupies a dialogical position vis-à-vis her readers, writing for the ‘Other.’ She asks,

At the same time, you don’t think it possible that things these days may be almost too propitious? And that to let this propitiousness invade us mayn’t make for a lowering of
internal pressure? We must have something to push against. Oh well, one need not worry: we always shall have. I expect the effects of the present pro-art indoctrination are very much more limited that I’m inclined to feel. A healthy animal indifference to art probably is endemic in human nature, in your crowds in the Lichfield marketplace. If anyone on that wet day had been told they were shouldering up on a writer, they’d probably have thought: ‘Lucky to have an indoor job.’ It’s this virgin indifference on the part of the mass of people, this unspoken individual mystery in each one of them, that they don’t propose to trade in, that’s lovable and infatuating, that makes you and me write novels and stories. One writes for the ideal reader, but not about him. At least, I don’t, and you don’t. One writes, in so many cases, about the man or woman who would throw a crooked glance at your or my page of prose and groan: ‘What is this about?’

Bowen also recognizes, following Pritchett, that this dialogical relationship is really a monologue, wherein the writer at first perceives herself to be different from ‘the masses,’ and splits off from the people who surround her, discovering the necessity of talking to herself and not them. In this way, Bowen acknowledges that writing involves a certain naivety, and as Pritchett states, “one of the strange pleasures of the solitary monologue is the discovery that one has said aloud to oneself what other people are saying silently” (18).

Nevertheless, as Bowen adds, this monologue, when released into the hands of society, becomes a dialogue. Bowen moves on to explain a certain sense of textual monumentality, in the same way that Vattimo does, insisting that the work is ‘never alone’ in its ‘monologue.’ She says,

But, of course, your monologue isn’t simply a thought-stream; you touch a starter; you set in motion something that never stops (that will never stop so long as a single copy of the story or novel you have written exists) by your ‘invention’ of people who feel, speak, act. You make a society each time you write a story. In fact, you are in closer relation to the characters in the story than you will ever be to anyone in real life. It is this ideal relationship of intimacy and power which is to fascinate those who read. Fascinate, and delude. They expect this capacity for relationship to be extended outside the written page, to them. To, as they put it, society as a whole (23-4).

Bowen concludes, then, that it is an interpretive ‘directive’ and a ‘shape’ that writers provide in response to some societal, epistemological desire for meaning. She explains that

shape is possibly the important thing. Obsessed by shape in art, you and I may forget the importance of shape in life.... But I shouldn’t wonder if it were the shape, essentially, that the reader, the mass, the public goes to the story for. The idea of the possibility of shape is not only magnetic, it’s salutary. Shapelessness, lack of meaning, and being without direction is most people’s nightmare, once they begin to think -- and more and more people are beginning to think, clearly.... Isn’t the average thinker simply trying to trace out some pattern around himself? Or, to come on, detect, uncover a master-pattern in which he has his place? To the individual, the possibility that his life should be unmeaning, a series in the main rather hurting fortuities, and that his death should be insignificant, is unbearable. Temporarily, for the reader (or listener of music, or looker at pictures) art puts up a buttress against that -- or, still more important, makes a counter-assertion. The very arbitrariness of art brings an odd peace. You and I, by writing a story, impose shape -- on fictitious life, it’s true, but on life that is real-seeming enough to be familiar and recognisable. Every action or word on the part of any one of the characters in the story has meaning (because it’s essential for you and me that it should have meaning), and the whole trend of the story suggests direction -- it may or may not be a tragic one. Even stories which end in the air, which are comments on or pointers to futility, imply that men and women are too big or good for the futility in which they are involved. Even to objectify futility is something (24-5).

Thus, defining a hermeneutic ontology of her own, in the effort to explain why it is that writers write and readers read, Bowen identifies narrative as a kind of epistemological groping after truth. But this need to objectify something, even nothingness, as Bowen says, goes beyond societal needs or epistemological desires -- she suggests
that, rather, the search for meaning in the face of a meaningless world is constitutive of a human condition. This desire may be pronounced or foregrounded now, in the post-war years, but it is nevertheless an ontological condition; that is, it is not peculiar to the ‘individual’ or the ‘writer,’ two categories which Bowen seeks to problematize.

The difference between a mass and a society is, I suppose, shape. Yes, you, I see, say: “When I say ‘society,’ I mean more than people; I mean people bound together by an end, who are making a future.” Shape, relation, direction... I can’t explore this further; I wish you would. I’m only on the edge of a hazy idea that the artist, in these days, is being sought, focused on — he may feel, sometimes, beleagured -- because he seems to be a conferer of shape, an interpreter of direction? If society, at this moment, in this age, did exist -- as something conscious, authoritative, explicit and realised -- I imagine that the artist would be in a more neglected, but for himself healthier, position. At the moment, he’s not simply being asked whether he is, feels himself to be, or should be, in relation with society; he’s being asked, implicitly, to create a society to be in relation with. Or -- in so far as society is a sensation as well as a form -- to set up in people a sense of society. He seems, from his books, to know the secret: he ought to know how (25).

In turn, Bowen concludes that it is because of this epistemological and ontological desire for shape, direction, and meaning, that a corollary demand for journalism or theory about artistic practice is growing stronger and stronger in the post-war ‘atomic age.’

Bowen writes the ‘end’ to the exchange of letters, and in her final letter, she discusses her conviction that difference(s) will persist even amidst the technologically and commercially ordered totality which is becoming the post-war world more and more every day. And, interestingly, she seems to identify literary theory with the quest for totality.

I do think conflict essential -- conflict in the self (a never quite dislodgable something to push against), and an if anything hyper-acute sense of every kind of conflict, every phase of any kind of conflict, in society. I am only not afraid of a conflictless Better World because I am absolutely convinced there will never be one. I am convinced, too, that the more outwardly regulated, planned, organised and equitable the world becomes, the stronger will be the unholy (possibly) domination of the artist -- no, I mean of art (56).

Bowen is obviously insecure about the possibility that the artist will be absorbed into the mediocre, mindless masses, along with ‘the rest of the world,’ but curiously she also articulates her recognition that this hegemony of the masses is an impossibility, at best an institutional narrative. She deeply understands and feels the need for difference, in thought and in existence, but she is not afraid of its disappearance as such. According to Bowen, art will be different, as it always has been. On the edge of defining a negative dialectic, Bowen suggests that art resists actuality at the same time that it seeks reconciliation with actuality. This ‘split-personality’ of the artist, and this difference which inheres in the work of art itself, informs Bowen’s belief that art and life are intimately relative to one another (their substantial relation), but also implacably separate from one another (their insubstantial relation). The writer writes both for and against the reader (the ‘Other’), whom she perceives herself to be at once uncannily similar to and irremediably different from. Obviously then, according to Bowen, the difference between art and actuality should not be collapsed because it can never be collapsed. According to Bowen, the political and/or theoretical quest to approximate actuality will never comprise an ‘artistic’ moment, or have aesthetic value as such. Politics, theory and art will persist in dialogical relation with one another; but as such, the relation will remain ‘indefinable,’ as Bowen says, emerging “from what we have all three said, as a thing of great possibilities and various flaws” (58). Settling on this compromise, Bowen’s concludes the symposium by saying that, as much as she dislikes trying “to give the impression that we have come to an end” (58), nevertheless

I think we have each asserted a sort of recalcitrance, shown a red light: at the same time, I don’t think any of us feel ourselves to be unrelatable to something. We envisage, we are not passive, and we are not contributing to anarchy: that may be the most to be claimed for us (58).
In an article of 1949 entitled “Miss Bowen on Miss Bowen”, we find out several more interesting things about her and her writing. In it she presents an abridgment of a biographical account written for the publisher of The Heat of the Day, Alfred A. Knopf, together with some of her answers to a questionnaire sent to her by the Literary Guild just before the publication (19 February 1949) of her historical narrative of the Second World War in London. As usual, her answers to questions about her writing are typically elusive and allegorical.

She comments on the painstaking and ‘revisionary’ quality of her own writing process, saying that she is a great rewriter, for “each page represents from two to ten discarded drafts” (33), and that she is also a slow worker, as “part of each day’s work goes to revising work done the day before” (33). However, Bowen states that the writing of The Heat of the Day went more or less as projected, and that, as usual she found that the writing acquired a ‘force’ of its own, the novel thus seeming to ‘shape itself’ in the process. Asked which of her works she considers the best, she answers that,

artistically, I have been most nearly completely satisfied by some of my longer short stories, such as “Summer Night”, “The Disinherited”, “The Happy Autumn Fields”. Of my previous novels, The House in Paris gives me most pleasure. Though I think perhaps the human content of The Death of the Heart is more important, I consider The Heat of the Day my best novel so far (33).

As to what comment about her work she liked most, Bowen states that her favourite description of her work was by someone who described her as a ‘muffled poet,’ saying that she “transposed poetry (or rather, what might have been poetry) into terms of the short story or novel” (33). This is interesting as an aural description of Bowen’s writing to balance out the visual metaphor of twilight which has been referred to throughout this Chapter. In addition, this sense of being a ‘muffled poet’ recalls the negative dialectic that we have been sketching out so far in this paper, between hermeneutics and epistemology, space and time, lyric and narrative, etcetera.

Bowen goes on to express a typically postmodern distrust of or incredulity towards the ‘metanarrative’ of periodization. When asked who her favourite modern writers are -- she answers in a typically elusive way, “I am never sure how far back the word ‘modern’ goes” (33). And finally, and just as elusively, saying “I like scrap work” (33), Bowen implies that (her) writing involves pastiche, significantly a frequent practice in postmodern texts. Bowen brings to mind Vattimo’s notion of postmodern writing or thought structured and occurring as andenkend thought or as ‘memory,’ explicitly citational and intertextual -- that is, involving the idea that language can be transformed, translated, or transferred, but never transcended.
Chapter 7

Extension -- from The Blaze of Noon to The Heat of the Day and Beyond

Bowen’s ‘nihilistic’ world views, formed as a result of the experience of total war, to a certain extent involve a revision of earlier views. In a 1939 "Preface" to a pre-war novel entitled The Blaze of Noon, Bowen states that this text, “coming now, ...may be a little in advance of its time -- it is more like a novel one might imagine being written ten, or even twenty, years hence” (Collected Impressions 55). With uncanny foresight, Bowen broaches her conclusions in the “Folkestone” sketch of 1945 regarding the ‘Continental’ yearnings of the post-war generation in this 1939 piece. She states that the ‘futuristic’ novel The Blaze of Noon may itself augur a time when “we may all be more European” (55). She was later to temper her hopes for what is essentially another post-war generation in this 1939 piece. She states that the ‘futuristic’ novel The Blaze of Noon may itself augur a revolution in English writing, stating that: “If personal experience is to survive and have any value, and continue to be communicated by art, it must be cleared of the twilight of vague romanticized feeling and of the received idea” (55). She expresses a yearning for the fresh start and clean slate. However, she also immediately qualifies this injunction to overcome the ‘twilight,’ stating that she does not believe that “there will be any revolution -- at least, any effective revolution -- in English writing: the change in manner and purpose will come on us gradually” (55).

As a text which she considered to be, nevertheless, “an early sign of the change” (55) going on in English writing, it is interesting to note that, ten years later, its effect on Bowen forms a trace in her own war novel of remarkably similar title. She describes the novel as being “the extraordinary extension (extraordinary because this has never been done before) of experience of which the sheer matter is ordinary -- a visit, the impact of new surroundings, penetration into a new group of people, one realized and unrealized love affair” (53). Not only her description of the risky ordinariness -- or seeming lack of what was traditionally valued in a novel as ‘plot’ or ‘action’ -- which is sustained in the novel, but moreover this idea of extension itself is also operative in The Heat of the Day.

Indeed, Bowen was often considered to be the master of ‘the long durée.’ But beyond this, her narrative is in many ways a playing out of the extension of a historical interim (time) and interstice (space) which are both held together and transformed in an act of linkage which can also be conceived of as a negative dialectic. The stalemate of war, its ever-and-omni-present and oppressive ‘present,’ the foregrounded temporal quality of present and future uncertainty -- this experience spotlighted the fiction of advance or progress, not only conceived in terms of ‘plot’ or ‘action’ in the novel, but also in terms of time, experience, or existence itself. Stated theoretically, the ex-ten-sion of the historical time-space of the novel becomes an allegory for the transformation of history, experience, and thought as a bidirectional and reversible rememoration-distortion dyad -- as in Vattimo’s conception of Verwundung and Andenken, following Heidegger. Bowen highlighted this problematic in The Heat of the Day in what is itself a distorsional return to (or a parallactic revision of) her speculations on a novel of ten years earlier, The Blaze of Noon, which Bowen reads as ‘an extraordinary extension of experience.’

But perhaps more interestingly, for the context of this paper itself, we can refer our discussion of the problematic of historical transformation, as it is ironically demonstrated in The Heat of the Day, to a memory it awakens of Heidegger’s conception of the ‘epochal’ character of Being. This ‘epochal’ character can be otherwise referred to as the ontological difference, or what we referred to above as a rememoration-distortion dyad, following Vattimo. In other words, what we return to and look forward to in the reading of Bowen’s text is a listening for the string of reverberations that link it to the (con)text Heidegger-Vattimo. If we listen carefully, we can pick up, in ‘the foreground of hearing,’ an echo of Heidegger’s conception of the play of concealment and unconcealment in language -- what he understood and articulated as the (dis)playing (out), in all language and thought, of the true/false toggle. In his 1969 book On Time and Being, and in a ‘silent’ demonstration (reading) when/where we follow the movement of showing, Heidegger ‘points’ to an ontological condition grounding language in the locus of assertion, which itself can be either true or false. Bowen’s novel echoes this ironic demonstration/reading of language through its entire and incessant playing out and positing of itself through this ‘toggle’ or ‘switchpoint.’ And this correspondence with Heidegger in Bowen adumbrates an extension of this thought and practice, encouraging the reader to locate a playful correspondence or dialogue of texts between Bowen and the philosophy of postmodernity as Gianni Vattimo conceives it, himself returning to Nietzsche and Heidegger to locate and posit the ‘birth’ of postmodernity.
The Heat of the Day takes on the quality of extension as risk, direction, and conjecture. Its ‘present’ narrative opens out onto its past debts and its future possibilities, spilling into or overlapping a string of concatenated associations. And it is these associations which the postmodern philosopher Vattimo urges us to recognize as the instructive intertextual effects-history of all texts: not only language as the locus of assertion, that is, but tradition itself as Ueberlieferung, an open possibility which is still happening. False : true; difference : identity; space : time; proximity : distance; unconcealment : concealment; substantial : insubstantial; figura : litera; the Lichtung or the opening of truth : idle chat, prattle, edification; blindness : insight; conjecture : evidence; hermeneutics : epistemology; criticism : critique; expression : explanation; translation; uncovering : covering; destruction : construction; persuasion : demonstration; interpretation : ontology; rhetoric : the philosophy of language; risk : debt; absence : presence; emergence : hiddenness; projection : thrownness; part : whole; event : structure; deconstruction : reconstruction; fragmentation : unity; antithesis : (syn)thesis; particularity : totality; truth as opening : truth as correspondence; authenticity : inauthenticity; Andenken : Verwindung.... These paired concepts, taken from various theoretical and philosophical discourses, when thought together (that is, against and through one another) trace a thinking of difference which is always still happening, indeed always already happening, in writing, language, thought. Heidegger names this thinking the thought of ontological difference which, in thinking against and through its Other, attempts to think Being as a being. His philosophy itself is instructive of the problematic that thought cannot place Being (or Appropriation, as Heidegger calls it) in front of us. Thought must ‘think against,’ so to speak, but this will not bring it any closer to ‘seeing’ Being in the being of its ‘saying.’ And in ‘thinking through’ being, Being fades away, disappears, retreats, and is covered over or concealed. It is a part of the ambiguous event and complex structure of thought as a negative dialectic that history (of Being) will always be destiny (of Being). That is, history appears to us simultaneously as a sending or giving, which thought receives in an ‘andenkend’ way, and as a holding back (an ‘epoche’) which we can never fully ‘see’ and never fully ‘tell’ the story of, and which thought distorts in a ‘verwundend’ way. However, and as Heidegger instructs, the epochal character of history also means that discernibility (identity, the wishful thinking of history as litera, truth as correspondence) of the gift, that is of Being with regard to the grounding of beings, is favoured (over difference, history as figura, truth as opening). But, nevertheless, this favoured ‘discernibility’ of Being is always rendered indiscernible in a covering over of language. In other words, the ostensible ‘unconcealment’ of Being is actually always its concealment in iteration. And herein lies the incessant play of unconcealment and concealment in language and thought, which we have previously referred to many times in this paper.

Undiscernibility is Being’s holding back (epoche) in the concealment of its unconcealment. In the first division of this paper, we discussed Derrida’s work as a kind of resignation in/to the iteration of utterance, settling on the incessant play (concealments and deviousness) of language/writing/thinking. And we discussed Gasché and Rorty’s understanding of Derrida’s work as ‘an invention of difference,’ or a radical interruption of and break with tradition, obeying a rationality ‘all of its own.’ It is interesting to note, then, that in his 1969 text On Time and Being, translated into English one year before Bowen died in 1973, Heidegger concludes from the unconcealment-concealment problematic that there can be no break with tradition, no end(ing) or overcoming or refusal of tradition, because “what is historical in the history of Being” (8) is its (temporal) presencing. And this presence, this favoured discernibility of Being understood as a being, is “determined by what is sent forth in destining” (9). That is to say, it is always already appropriate (Ereignis), always already conditioned, a/e effected, thrown (Dasein), and indeed limited to a certain extent by the sending or giving of tradition. But here is where we return to state the difference between the thought of Derrida and Vattimo, as they each follow from Heidegger in different ways. The extent of this limitation need not be judged as an oppressive restriction or a denial of agency, change, or possibility. For, as Heidegger urges, one can leap into the ‘liberating bind’ of the tradition which is understood as open, not closed -- that is, as still happening. The extent of our limitation is simply a factor of something undeniable: human mortality, our historical situatedness, and the perishability of utterance. And it is this certain extent, this risk of human experience itself, that is foregrounded in Bowen’s text, just as it is foregrounded and theorized in this paper itself, and in the philosophy of Vattimo; as such, it involves the thinking of difference as difference. And if Bowen’s ‘extent’ stops just short of theory, Vattimo’s ‘extent’ stops just short of practice: the text of this paper thus stands between two reaches.

This ‘certain extent’ is also what Vattimo calls the ‘monumental condition required for utterance,’ again following Heidegger. And you will remember that, in his essay “Postmodern Criticism : Postmodern Critique”, Vattimo also conceived of this limiting extent as the notion and corrective ‘solum scriptura,’ which should provide a context for and horizon within which a projected ‘reconstruction of hermeneutic rationality’ could take place. The discernibility of texts, including the text of our historical transformation (the text of historical narrative) remains as the distortion of Being into a being, which can be given and offered up as ‘evidence’ in language -- named, indicated, pointed out, seen, demonstrated, displayed. Bowen’s historical narrative problematizes its evidence (of history, of the war) at the same time that it takes the opportunity to thematize an acceptance of and recovery from
its own distortional powers. Bowen’s text is thus both an example and an allegory of postmodern freedom as acceptance of the limited license which is constitutive of human existence — accepted as such, this freedom becomes the chance to reassert an ethical dimension of the rational. What is articulated and put into practice is a post-war recognition of the limited possibilities for affirmation — close to what Nietzsche termed active or accomplished nihilism — in postmodernity. The text distorts its own determinacy (‘everything has already been said’; ‘history is fiction’) in a ‘temperance’ which involves the corollary recognition that this horizon, its effects-history, is still opening, still possible, still happening (‘everything can be revised’; ‘fiction is history’). Finally, this operation of difference between discernibility (beings) and what is capable of being discerned (Being), can be interpreted in the text as a revelation of the locomotive of Being (history) and time, its ‘advance’ as such, as a sequence of epochs in the destiny of Being. The text has both a logic of necessity and a logic of (im)possibility. In this sense, the (hi)story that it tells and revises cannot be understood strictly as accidental, arbitrary, or entirely ‘irrational’; nor can it be grasped solely as destinal, necessary, or entirely ‘rational.’ Rather, it must be grasped as being both of these things, and in this way, a twilight text.

Bowen’s (an)ironic historical narrative ‘of’ the Second World War demonstrates that “what is appropriate shows itself in the belonging together of the epochs” (Heidegger 9) of Being. As ‘an extension of experience’ itself, the novel constrains constrainingness just enough to afford a ‘glimpse’ of the contemporaneous thought of Heidegger (and before him Nietzsche and many others), and as well, the later thought of Vattimo’s postmodern philosophy of difference. Bowen’s project(ion) The Heat of the Day is ‘shown’ to be thrown; it is an exemplary practice of remembering her historicity as she historicized herself. Thus, we can say that Bowen’s project in her fiction was to set about thinking difference as difference, and in this way, also positing this thought as a sort of ‘ontological doctrine,’ which nevertheless can and must still be mediated with the desire to ‘move on,’ to overcome history, and to advance into futurity. In The Heat of the Day, Bowen articulates the necessity of living beyond the ‘face-to-face’ blinding proximity of ideological and technological immobility. And related to this, Bowen also articulates the necessity of living beyond the anticipatory decision towards extinction, which during the Second World War was grasped as an extension of the individual anticipatory decision towards death or human mortality. Extinction was understood by Bowen in an extended way as a possible (because ‘historical’), but not necessarily necessary ‘destiny’ for the entire human race.

Her ‘recipe’ for existence thus broaches Heidegger’s postmodern notion of a negative dialectic of history and Being — the negative aspect of this dialectic itself being more of a tonic of the Heideggerian text through Vattimo’s distortional emphasis on Verwindung as ironic overcoming. It is important to emphasize that Vattimo’s extension of Heidegger in this way also involves a return to the ‘critical thinking’ more typical of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse), the ‘negative dialectics’ of which (formulated by Adorno in 1966) involve “restoring the critical tension to Hegelian thinking” (Sim 323). Heidegger calls this negative dialectic ‘nearness of nearness,’ ‘nearhood,’ or Nahheit. In the Heideggerian text, Nahheit is itself explained as a return to das Selbst (the Same) of Kant’s text and a future-thinking conception of a ‘fourth dimension.’ It describes a pseudo-dialectic which brings its components “near to one another by distancing them” (15), therefore having the character of deferral or withholding that in turn ‘restores’ the negativity or critical tension to the dialectic. Bowen’s problematization of demonstrative discourse in her wartime historical narrative involves a practice of this temporal-spatial withholding Nahheit linguistically, aesthetically, thematically, and structurally (that is, allegorically). In the textual extension of experience, the narrative of history is exaggerated or spotlighted as both récit and freedom. An ethics of ex-tension is posited, slowing down and constraining the event and structure of the text (its [hi]story), at the same time that an ironic awareness informs and mediates the mobile element of text and (hi)story.

In his Postmodern Thought, Stuart Sim extends the history of this postmodern mediation, stating that its conception can be traced in the ‘dichotomy’ (‘fuzzy set’) which Aristotle formulated in the fourth century B.C. in his ‘law of the excluded middle,’ which states that “a thing cannot be both x and not-x at the same time” (252). And he locates the influence of this conception in Hegel’s formulation of the dialectic of history. Both of these concepts have been revised in the thought of thinkers as many and varied as: Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Isaiah Berlin, Jürgen Habermas, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Paul Virilio, and Gianni Vattimo. This is not to mention the countless other thinkers who ex-tend the thought of this dichotomy in the effects-history or tradition of Western thought and practice. What emerges, however, in the act of linking the thought and practice of particular texts, such as Vattimo’s and Bowen’s, is a realization that the ‘law’ of the excluded middle constitutes the core problematic of postmodernity, in the sense that it is only in postmodernity that this ‘law’ is even thought of as a problematic. As Sim says, describing Lyotard’s thought on this dichotomy, our modern programmes are refuted, yet there are no successors. Postmodernity is therefore a period without a programme, working over the accumulated debits
against one modernity while experimenting with its roots to invent another. It is in this sense that postmodernity comes not at the end, but at the beginning of modernity (309).

One gives up to and one gives up on modernity in an act which is at once “both a strict and logical continuation of modernist thought and its thoroughgoing revision or reversal” (Sim 319). To use Bowen’s favourite word for describing post-war thinking, in our ‘disabusing’ postmodernism, we come to terms with the realization that the ending and the beginning are the same. Our thought and our existence can (only ever) be the ex-tension of the tension of this interface: twilight. ‘But past twilight, we can create circumstance.’

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Predictably, these realizations involve a return to language. The linguistic horizon is recognized as being this ex-tension of experience in both the texts of Vattimo and Bowen. Of course, with Bowen’s text, there is more self-conscious foregrounding of the linguistic horizon in practice, which makes it a ‘literary’ text, whereas with Vattimo’s texts, this reflexivity is tempered or mediated as more of a background feature of his theoretical practice, giving him the license to call his activity ‘philosophy.’ Between them, the texts of Bowen and Vattimo extend the relational structure of difference in terms of the theory and practice of theory and practice, philosophy and literature. But the important thing to note here, is that the difference is still sustained, in both texts, and between both texts. There is no unity, no levelling down of theory and practice in either writer’s writing. And in this respect, the writing of Bowen and Vattimo also maintains a difference from the majority of the writing of postmodern theorists and practitioners today -- those who would like to call themselves ‘writers,’ ‘authors,’ or ‘artists,’ ‘critics,’ or ‘philosophers,’ while at the same time implying in their theory or demonstrating in their practice the ‘death’ of the writer, author, artist, critic, and philosopher; or those who would rather not have to take responsibility at all for any categorical distinction or description of their activity, any qualification of their writing whatsoever. In both the texts of Bowen and Vattimo, the return to language can be understood as a kind of ‘back to the basics’ thinking-practice as the only possible program for postmodernity -- we might say, we are called back to language in Bowen’s The Heat of the Day only to posit a basic in the thought of Vattimo. That basic is language posited as the ‘monumental condition required for utterance,’ as a site conducive to providing a ‘grammar of the glimpse’ into the play of unconcealment and concealment in language and experience; that is, language as a hermeneutic ontology.

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The return to language in Bowen’s text, or her ex-tension of the linguistic horizon in an aesthetic practice, has certainly always been commented on by different readers of the text throughout its effects-history and since its initial reception. And predictably, this extension has not always been grasped as a return to basics, or as having an ontological thrust. The effects-history of the novel shows that, although there have been hints of the philosophical ‘nature’ or possibilities of the writing, mostly it has been written off as an obscuring or frustrating element of the text. It is with an ironic awareness that we return to the reception of the text in its effects-history, underscoring what were once criticisms of the writing as ‘blinding glimpses of the obvious’ -- the text’s hermeneutic-ontological dimension.

Some readers have taken an opposite approach, however, and highlighted the difficulty of the writing as an aspect of its epistemological concerns. Here the text is received as an ironic detective story which involves the groping after or extension of epistemological or cognitive questions which are never finally resolved. And here, in these readings of The Heat of the Day as ‘cognitive’ art foregrounding epistemological questions and concerns, the text is often read as an aesthetics and thematics of epistemological extension: the foregrounding of the linguistic horizon in the writing is read as an aesthetic theory directed towards an end in structure. In other words, the novel is read as the story of ‘this or that’ in a concealment of the relentless play of its language: genre, plot, characters, scene, dialogue, and perspective are suddenly located in the text, and freeze-framed as structural entities. Some of these structural readings are absorbed into the context of larger epistemological enterprises, such as histories of English fiction or of the English novel as a genre; or histories of the war novel or war writing as a genre; or histories of the historical narrative as a genre. The reception proceeds from reviews of the text, to expanded analysis and interpretation in journal or book articles on the text, to book-length biographical endeavours (journal articles appear first on the fiction of Bowen, and then eventually whole studies of her fiction emerge), to full-fledged biographies. In the present context, this extension of the text in its effects-history is its projective meaning -- in other words, the Wirkungsgeschichte is a repetition and enactment of the Nahheit dialectic (or negative dialectic of textuality and experience) that we have been discussing so far. For beyond these structuralist readings, epistemological questions
are eventually understood as broaching ontological questions, and the text is received in poststructuralist or postmodernist terms as both an aesthetics and thematics of extension, as well as an ethics and practice of extension.

In a later reading of the novel, in her biography of Bowen, Hermione Lee remarks that the novel not only is "highly strained" (164), but also "about strain" (165). Lee would seem to be ‘on the path’ that we have delineated above in terms of recognizing the extension, risk, or ‘strain’ of the text as both a practice in the writing and a theory of ostensible structural elements. But as with some earlier reviews of the text and some mentions it receives in generic studies, Lee boils the text down to an ‘unusually evasive surface’ which sustains a sometimes painful ‘proliferation of detail’ at every turn. The subversive ‘spasm’ within the writing is written off as an annoyance. But, at the same time, a thematics of strain is affirmed as an appropriate reinforcement of the structure of the story, read as an adequate description of wartime London during the Second World War, and as a foregrounding of epistemological concerns. But the connection between spasm and structure, or aesthetics and thematics, is not yet received or grasped as a foregrounding of ontological concerns. Instead, Lee finds that the novel becomes “uncomfortable, especially in its syntactical mannerisms” (165), and feels that Bowen’s idiosyncratic manner begins “to look like affectation” (165). Expressing frustration with an apparent lack of transparency or concision detected in Bowen’s writing, Lee states that in The Heat of the Day Bowen over-uses “double negatives, inversions, the breaking-up of natural sentence order, passive constructions...” (165). The ‘linguistic horizon’ of the text is not yet received as a ‘grammar of the glimpse’ into the play of unconcealment and concealment in language.

From the time of Lee’s biography in 1981, it will take fourteen years before The Heat of the Day is received in a poststructuralist-postmodern context, with the publishing of Andrew Bennett’s and Nicholas Royle’s book-length study in 1995, called Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives. Bowen’s problematization of demonstrative discourse (discernibility) is recognized in this study as an articulation of hermeneutic-ontological concerns. The language is grasped for its subversive potential. However, using a deconstructive approach, Bennett and Royle nevertheless proceed to dissolve the linguistic horizon of the text in the ‘nameless and unmapped space’ of language games, which are played out in their own text in order to ‘sheer’ Bowen’s vocabulary “from the mimetic function and its supposed relation to her sensibility” (Ann Wordsworth “Foreword” vii). Ironically maintaining a modernist belief in overcoming, Bennett and Royle think that this ‘sheering’ of structure frees the text in its eventfulness, allowing it “to make transitions that surpass the activity of the plot” (vii). In other words, taken to this extent, deconstructive practice intends to read the text as an allegory of difference without obeying the traditional critical injunction to limit analysis to the ‘familiar’ and ‘apotropaic’ traditions of past structures, which they judge and reject outright as holding “both critic and reader in a benign literary history which assimilates the new to its own patterns” (vii). Their example of such assimilation is in fact Hermione Lee’s estimation of Elizabeth Bowen as being “what happened after Bloomsbury... the link that connects Virginia Woolf with Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark” (vii).

As it turns out, this reading involves a hasty and prejudged rescission of tradition, itself received in a parochial, reductive, and ‘traditional’ sense, as being benign in its ‘malignancy.’ Rather than radicalizing an acceptance of tradition as an elastic dialectic or ex-tension of difference, open with possibilities, Bennett and Royle, as with most deconstructive critics, ironically but not self-consciously, submit to the fantasy of overcoming, refusing the dimension of critique in critical practice, and levelling down the difference between criticism and creative writing. Vattimo would repeat the same criticism of this practice, as he does of Derrida’s ‘philosophy of difference’ -- it is dangerously uncritical, but in that, only ‘dangerous’ for or to itself. Following the thinking of Marcuse and others, Vattimo would blame Bennett and Royle for flattening out the tension between art/literature and radical praxis. In Marcuse’s conception, the aesthetic dimension involves a ‘distance from actuality,’ or an ontology, which needs to be defended if art/literature is still to retain its promise of change, its ex-tension of experience. In a strange way, Bennett and Royle end up reducing Bowen’s text to an actuality; in their reading, the text is in full possession of a futurity which has finally been freed from the past in an overcoming of history and tradition. They assume as a presence, that does not need to be questioned or defended, the reality of a “world of experience... no longer separable from a linguistic drift... [with] nothing pinning activity to any constitutive authority” (vii). Apparently we are meant to believe and accept without question that, in the world of différence, nothing is binding and everything is free. In this critical practice, there is no currency or exchange; the implication is that we must accept their interpretation of the present as an established reality. Is this naivety, fantasy, or capriciousness? In a repetition of the modernist, fascist, elitist, or aestheticist disregard of the complex relation between art and actuality, these critics convince themselves that they have settled their superiority complex with art and literature, and in turn they become happy but inferior artists themselves.

The reading which waits beyond this 1995 text, which is the last book-length text to be published on Bowen’s fiction, is the reception of her work in a postmodern hermeneutic-ontological context. Following Vattimo’s conception of weak thought, this would involve a criticism which risks the possibility of sustaining a relation with its determining ‘Other,’ critique, in order to work towards an extension of postmodern criticism as
postmodern critique, and vice versa. This paper prepares this context as one which maintains a respect for the effects-history of the text, not as a limiting banality, but as an extension that cannot be refused, that must be, as it nevertheless always is, accepted. In radicalizing our acceptance of an informative tradition, we also have the opportunity to assert our freedom of difference, in our critical engagement with and interpretation of the text. For beyond the twilight, beyond the horizon of the text's effects-history, we glimpse tradition, time, existence, and text as open possibilities. As Vattimo explains, "the past is not accepted as a closed Vergangenes, but as an open Gewesenes, something which is still 'possible,'... which, therefore, doesn't have the value of an established reality, but is 'just' the act of another mortal being, towards which we are in a position of dialogue and discussion" ("Postmodern Criticism : Postmodern Critique" 64).

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For indeed, Bowen’s novel is an extended problematization of demonstrative discourse, or of the injunction to prove or convince with apodictic certainty -- what we have earlier referred to as a foregrounding of the play of unconcealment and concealment in language. In The Heat of the Day, the narrator explains that "war at present worked as a thinning of the membrane between the this and the that, it was a becoming apparent" (195). But at the same time, along with the violence of this unconcealment, this revelation, was another -- the tendency of language to cover up and conceal this 'becoming apparent,' its tendency to be inadequate for the present, for presence. Through the proliferation of detail, Bowen works to build up a surface tension in the language of the text, which holds together and yet stretches this language, resulting in a sort of attenuated ‘spasm,’ what Lee and others have often judged harshly as an obscuring mannerism or affectation. One reads these commentaries with an ironic excitement. Their blindness becomes our insight. For instance, we can agree with Lee and others that the language ‘obscurers’ or ‘covers up’ a perceived substantiality. But we also recognize this as the very playful tonicity of the text which, as a quality of the writing and as a theme (blackmail, waiting, suspense), works as an allegory of reading and history itself. The very ‘corporeality’ of Bowen’s language goes into a tonic spasm, where words work as toggles or switch-points offering the individual reader the opportunity to put her own ‘tonic’ (accent, stress, interpretation) on the text.

In her 1939 review of The Blaze of Noon, a book which she thought was an early sign of change, Bowen ponders its problematizing of the primacy of perception. She explains that it is “a story told in the first person by a man in whom one sense is suppressed: the ‘I’ is a blind man” (Collected Impressions 53). Similar to her own incorporation of a negative dialectic of blindness and insight in The Heat of the Day, this earlier novel is read by Bowen as being not only about blindness, but also the practice or enactment of blindness itself, thematically and aesthetically. She explains that “this is not primarily a book about blindness: Louis’s blindness is an accessory, to create the conditions in which a man can speak of direct love” (54-55). And she goes on to explain, in her reading of the novel, that blindness is posited by the author Dunkel as a condition for insight, for the discernible. In Dunkel’s work, the blind narrator Louis is able to objectify and generalize everything around himself, as he is not perturbed by the difference (the insight) of the visible world, or the ‘ineluctable modality of the visible.’

Toying with the possibility of ultimate knowledge of one’s world, or the epistemological fantasy of totality, Bowen’s reading itself reads as a glimpse into her pre-war aspirations. And even if she was misdirected here, thinking that the twilight could be overcome in a bizarre return to the condition of blindness, she rightly predicts that such a blind epistemological grasp of the world would be unsettling for the English. Her prediction was soon to be confirmed in the blinding experience of total war. In this experience, insight was returned most completely to its provenance in blindness, and thought recalled its simple origins in the darkness of a twilight world.

Here, the experience is perfectly generalized. The blind narrator imposes blindness: the unseensness of Sophie is therefore absolute. Every sentiment, every phantasy, every romantic particularization that, in love, goes with the act of seeing is, accordingly, stripped away. Since [D.H.] Lawrence there has been little writing in English on the subject of Love, as apart from the surround of the love affair. And this is writing very unlike Lawrence’s -- much less emotional, much more ascetically sensual, or sensually ascetic, more disabused. This disabusedness, and the absence of conflict, make this un-English writing: Dunkel posits, in love, a whole set of laws and conditions which may be very repugnant to the English mind. Most of all, he may offend, or frighten, by the very suppression of the romantic-particular, the personal motive, the hunt for unique experience that is supposed, with the English, to excuse, or to elevate love to 'a higher plane.'

In a country where the romantic-particular rules, the personal coldness and
calmness of these lovers may be found more shocking than their erotic simplicity.

As a novel The Blaze of Noon is remarkably integrated. The articulate, fluctuating Sophie, and Amity, unhearing in her shell of unseeing silence, balance each other. The unseen scene is felt. The dialogue, not able (since it comes to us through Louis) to be illustrated by expression or gesture, has the spare, even sharpness of something purely heard (55).

As a reading preceding the writing of The Heat of the Day, Bowen's review of The Blaze of Noon is interesting to revisit. Uncannily, we read in this review what Bowen was to attempt to work out in her wartime novel, after the experience of the Second World War. In her work, what she terms the 'foreground of hearing' in the blinding proximity to war, is mediated in an interface with the 'romantic-particular' of a highly visualized 'background of seeing.' Concealment and unconcealment, indiscernability and discernability, proximity and distance, space and time -- the contact between these things is in fact foregrounded in the novel, itself a negative dialectic of blindness and insight, tempering the absolutism of phonocentricism with what could be called, hesitantly, the pluralism of photodifferentiation.
Chapter 8

Mid-century, Mid-life: the Link in Art’s Continuity as an Art of Oscillation

Just before mid-century, in a 1946 article for John Lehmann’s journal *New Writing and Daylight* entitled “The Future of Fiction”, L.P. Hartley recollects the experimentation of modernists such as Lawrence, Joyce, and Woolf, and concludes that, while they were all innovators, that their contributions “did not so much enlarge the scope of fiction as cultivate intensively certain areas of it” (86), such as in “manner and method and point of view” (86). He states that “all three writers carried their theory and practice to a point beyond which it was impossible to go, leaving no room for imitators” (87). Furthermore, he argues that “most people would agree that Joyce and Lawrence went too far, reaching a dead end and incurring a nemesis of a reductio ad absurdim” (87). However, Hartley feels that for Woolf, as evidenced by her final posthumous work *Between the Acts*, “the road was still open, though to what destination it was leading must remain her secret” (87). Despite reservations that one might have regarding the crediting of Bowen with carrying on the legacy of Woolf, so as to draw a straight line leading from Bloomsbury to Bowen, one might concede that her writing in *The Heat of the Day* does fulfill this transmission -- at least in terms of it being an ‘open’ text with a mysterious ‘destination,’ just as Hartley describes Woolf’s *Between the Acts*.

Speaking of the future of fiction from the standpoint in time of 1946, Hartley cannot help pointing out the many “ways open to the novelist of escaping from actuality” (88). Speaking of symbolism and mysticism as examples of these ‘escape routes,’ he proceeds to point out the powerful “influence of Kafka on the fiction of today” (86), especially in writers who explore “mental states that, a short time ago, would have been considered prohibitively neurotic or morbid” (87). According to Hartley, “if our daily life becomes too dull or too disagreeable or too organized for the public to want to read about it, fiction, like painting, may become less representational and take refuge in symbolism and mysticism” (86). Following this, Hartley makes the interesting observation that “judged in the light of two world wars, Edgar Allen Poe’s vision of the complete human consciousness may well seem nearer to the truth than Jane Austen’s” (87).

In other contemporary fiction, Hartley sees the impulse to escape from the present or from actuality to be evidenced in its “drawing away from the world, rather than mixing with it” (88) through allegory. As he states, “to imitate the surface of life, as Trollope did, without trying to interpret it, no longer satisfies serious modern novelists” (86). However, Hartley also recognizes “that fiction written in or after very troublous times... tends to be allegorical; actuality has become distasteful, as it may have been to Shakespeare when he wrote *The Tempest*” (88). Thus, in 1946, Hartley predicts “an era of symbolical novels... that look at reality from an angle that is not the ordinary man’s” (88). Hartley explains that, at any rate, even if they are not all Christians, Westerners have at least been brought up in the Christian tradition, and thus they “pine for what is not [and] find life morally and aesthetically unsatisfying” (88). And so, according to Hartley, in this context every action cannot bear its face value, as it did for Homer, whose *Iliad*, “written about times as dangerous and uncomfortable as those we have been living through” (88), is also written in a pagan context where the only secondary purpose of action “is to illustrate character, not to prefigure a universal truth, still less to suggest an ironical interpretation of life” (88).

Hartley goes on to discuss other ways of escaping from actuality open to the novelist, citing the historical novel as a form where serious fiction concerns itself with “past happenings” (88), and the detective story and its affiliations as forms for a public which “is more than half in love with death..., the mere fact of death” (88). Hartley dismisses comedy as an escape route for fiction, which he feels “needs a background of peace and even prosperity, before its convention can be accepted” (89). Accordingly, he sees that the only contemporaneous comedy “we have now is bitter and dangerous, like a seemingly playful animal that suddenly bites your hand” (89). And Hartley cannot see “how satire can flourish in a world that has so caricatured itself, so paraded and proclaimed all its most ignoble features, that there is nothing left to satirize” (89). In addition, Hartley feels that romance is also not an adequate exit for the contemporary or future world of fiction, for it is “too mild a medicine for a war-sick world” (89), an “indulgence for the healthy-minded, a gentle intoxicant, like wine” (89).

And finally, according to Hartley, even characterization is not a form of escapism in the contemporary novel. Hartley points to a flattening or levelling force in fiction, which pulls down the good rather than exalting the bad, reducing character to sameness, and exposing “mediocrity in whose presence we need not feel ashamed of our own littleness” (89). As such, Hartley points out that “the war has hardly produced a single figure at whose name the imagination kindles, nor has war-time fiction” (89). It is in this same vein of thought that Philip Toynbee states, in his “Experiment and the Future of the Novel”, that...
what can and must be said about the times is that we are all associated with one another as never before and that every individual, liking this or loathing it, is bound to the community by stronger bonds than ever before. The hydrogen bomb is simply the most powerful and alarming symbol of this new association (65).

Following this critique of modern subjectivity, Hartley describes the current feeling as

I resent these qualities in which you excel me; I even resent those qualities in which you differ from me. I want you to be like me, so that if there is anything odd about me it shan’t be noticed” (89).

Proximate mediocrity, or ‘community’ as Toynbee calls it, is thus read as a symptom of the paranoia so prevalent in the ‘climate of treason’ of the Second World War. Thus Hartley states that, in this vigilant context, there is no room for escapism with heroes or villains in novels. This thought is reinforced by Hartley’s observation that “we have grown more and more distrustful of the hero-villain antithesis; we feel that the terms are meaningless, abstractions that have no counterpart in reality” (89). He concludes that the consequent dissolution in mediocrity is not an inherent objection to the Victorians, but rather to “their eminence; we needs must love the middling when we see it, because then we feel safe, safe from the challenge of the remarkable or the distinguished” (89-90).

It seems interesting then, in reviewing Hartley’s assessments of contemporary fiction and predictions for future fiction, that he should conclude his essay in grouping Bowen with writers such as Fielding or Trollope, who “found the material around them sufficient [and] did not have to create a new world out of unsatisfied emotional longings” (90). Of course, Hartley’s assessment predates Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day* by three years; but it is interesting, nevertheless, that he should see Bowen as a writer who does “accept the challenge of actuality” (90). For indeed, although this is a very fair and interesting assessment of her, it would take *The Heat of the Day* to show Hartley that Bowen’s accepting of this challenge involves a problematizing of representation. For, *The Heat of the Day* is a work involved in the double-move of paradox -- it involves escapism and pragmatism at once; it is invested in a plethora of ‘escape routes’ (symbolic novel, allegory, historical novel, detective story, comedy, satire, romance, and hero-villain antithesis) which are simultaneously shown to be ‘dead ends’ and ‘solutions,’ or (dis)solutions. Obviously a ‘revolving-doors’ novel such as this was beyond Hartley’s imagination in 1946. However, he was an astute reader. For, in speaking of the war-time short stories of Bowen, Hartley interprets that “the life she portrays is as full of rents and fissures as a bombed-out building, and smells of decay, but she portrays it unflinchingly, and with only a sidelong glance at some ‘mysterious Kôr’ created by the spirit [of the age] in the image of its dreams” (90). It is precisely this ‘sidelong glance,’ or this oblique quality of Bowen’s writing, especially as it appears in *The Heat of the Day*, which becomes a part of its ‘postmodern aspect. For, looking backward, straight-on, and forward, all at the same time, the work involves an explosive fusion of temporal-spatial perspectives. Indeed, Hartley alludes to this explosive quality of Bowen’s writing by summing up the novelist’s predicament at this time with a diagnosis which he judges as being possibly “as true of the future as it is now and as it was in 1941” (90-91). Hartley ends his piece by quoting Sir Osbert Sitwell, who says that:

“The chief difficulty under which the creative artist, more especially the novelist, labours, is this: that the violent agitation from end to end, and from top to bottom, of the background against which his figures are placed, renders the movements of these figures meaningless and unimportant. As well try to concentrate upon a game of chess in an earthquake!” (90).

* Hartley’s assessments of Bowen’s writing and the future of fiction in 1946 look interesting in light of Bowen’s own speculations on the state of English fiction at mid-century -- its tradition-bound tendencies and its future possibilities. For, it is precisely at mid-century, when Bowen was in ‘mid-life,’ that she began to put forward theories for the link in art’s continuity as being an art of oscillation. Her theory of an art of oscillation follows in suit of her wartime work *The Heat of the Day*, and it can be read obliquely as her attempt to explain and justify what she was trying to accomplish in that important novel. And interestingly, looking at four different pieces she wrote in the early nineteen-fifties, one finds that Bowen’s theory bears a striking resemblance to one put forward by Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti in their 1984 collaboration *Il pensiero debole*. For, it is in this text that Vattimo and Rovatti theorize ‘weak thought’ as involving ‘the problem of finding, after the fall of strong, classical
reason, a new art of ‘oscillation,’ of hovering between past and present without subordinating the one to the other” (Jansen 389).

On May 27th, 1950, Bowen wrote a piece for the Saturday Review of Literature entitled “Once Upon a Yesterday”, alternately published with the title “The Bend Back”. In it, Bowen addresses the contemporary ‘illness’ of nostalgia, asking

What is the matter with us... that we cannot acclimatize ourselves to our own time? Does our century fail us or we it? (9)

She observes that, in a time when all illusions have run the course of their day, or in other words, in a twilight world that has just barely survived the threat of extinction introduced with the Second World War, people invest in the illusion of the past. In Bowen’s estimation: either “one invests one’s identity in one’s memory” (10), reassuring oneself that “to relive any moment acutely is to be made certain that one not only was but is” (10); or one clings to the “fictitious memory” (10), otherwise known as the “historic past” (10), and falls in love, not with the past, “but the idea of the past” (10), another illusion. As evidence of this contemporary ailment, Bowen cites the burgeoning of fiction, “in almost every country, every language, of books about childhood written for grownups” (9), and the popularity of biography and books set in the distant past. She asks,

Are we to take it that our own time has been, from the point of view of its human inhabitant, irreparably injured -- that it shows some flaw, loss or vital deficiency? What fails in the air of the present day that we cannot breathe it or, at any rate, breathe it with any joy? (9)

Bowen sees this contemporary malaise as an extension of “the attitude of the critical exile, the psychologically displaced person” (9). And she identifies this attitude with the mask worn by the artist after the First World War, and as such, also a symptom of the death of all illusion -- “Can it in our generation be our fate to see the grace [of God] give out, the illusion die?” (9). Furthermore, Bowen attributes the contemporary sickness of nostalgia to a rejection of the high modernist “cerebrally brilliant, but skin-deep, ultimately bodiless... literature of sensation” (9), where “bright lights glared round the vacuum left by a disillusionment” (9). Bowen sees that “in order to live we must love life in one or another form” (9), and thus the contemporary obsession for nostalgia is understood by her as a “compromise in this matter of loving life by loving it at one remove -- in the past” (9).

Bowen takes as occasion the year 1950 -- “a year in which to reflect: our century has run just half its course” (9). And it has just narrowly survived the Second World War with “its excoriations, grinding impersonality, obliteration of so many tracks and landmarks” (9). Thus the contemporary subject, according to Bowen, cries out “to be fed, steadied, reassured, focused, taught” (9). And negative philosophies will not suffice:

Destructive mockingness has become hateful: has not enough been destroyed? The demand is that writers should reinstate the idea of life as livable, lovable (9).

Bowen’s assessment of the situation is that, at present, this demand can only “be met by a recourse to life in the past” (9). According to Bowen, the contemporary human in 1950 could not yet move beyond the fetishism of “the dear attachment to the familiar, blent with a sturdy attitude to the unknown” (9). But Bowen would have her contemporaries know that the fetish of the past was, and still is, and for that matter more dangerously so, an illusion. She can understand, and has even herself often practiced, the writing which is magnetized to the subject of the past. But she will also have us ‘face the music’ of the present. She will have us know that, allegorically-speaking, in painting the perspective of the “landscape just after sunrise, a tract in which every feature not only stands up gleaming but casts a shadow which is unique, distinct” (9), we are contributing to a dangerous illusion.

And in fact, Bowen insinuates that this is exactly the same illusion which is responsible for the contemporary malaise -- that very “flaw, loss or vital deficiency” (9) which the seeds of history carried within themselves. Bowen would have us look at the present age without turning away, recognizing it as “an age when change works swiftly, when each change spells so much obliteration, and when differentiation between person and person becomes less” (10). Even though “that day-before-yesterday shines for us as the last and the best of the old order” (10), Bowen suggests to her contemporaries that they must take responsibility for the more recent memory of the war, living as they are in the shadow of recent atrocities such as the Holocaust. And as such, Bowen states that “we must not shy at the fact that we derive the past from fiction rather than history and that art out of the very necessity to compose a picture cannot but eliminate -- and so falsify” (10). What is incomprehensible for the human mind is not only injustice and bloodshed, “but the dismay, the apathy, the brutalizing humiliations of people for
whom there was no break" (10). How is art to deal with these atrocities? Well, according to Bowen, it does not -- rather:

As things are, the past is veiled from us by illusion -- our own illusion. It is that we seek. It is not the past but the idea of the past that we are in love with (10).

So, according to Bowen, history is not a category of objective knowledge to be opposed to fiction or literature. Rather, as she sees it, history, whether it calls itself “raw history” (10) or historical fiction, relies on the rhetoric of presentation. It needs “to be ‘presented’ -- which is to say, attractively shown” (10). Either the reader of ‘history’ needs illusion, or when it is set under the auspices of objective truths, “it has only chronicled the survivors” (10). Tracing this impulse as a symptom of “the high-water mark... [of] ...romanticism” (36), Bowen then turns to deconstruct the whole notion of a contemporary crisis of nostalgia that she has so far proposed. She locates “an unbroken nostalgic vein” (36) through all literature, all writing, asking “at what time has the imaginative, sentient human being ever been satisfied by his immediate world?” (36) Bowen sees the desire for “the unexplored, the distant, the little known” (36) as a romantic deferral of the present in a spatial sense, a desire which is now particularly realized in a temporal sense.

Now the whole earth is mapped out in routes and railways, enmeshed by press and radio: there are no ‘other lands,’ only other countries -- of which we know too much. Geographically, there are no more far horizons. Accordingly, we have shifted our desire for the ideal ‘elsewhere’ from space to time (36).

Thus, Bowen wonders if, “in itself the desire is not new” (36), it is only perhaps that the desire is now “so widespread, so conscious, so pronounced, so articulate that we begin to ask ourselves if it be a malady” (36).

Using what seems to be a diluted Marxist theory, Bowen then proceeds to critique the contemporary capitalist consumer-mentality, and the corollary aesthetics of the new, and aesthetics of proximity. She can at least understand, but not justify, ‘the bend back’ as a desire which has been “aggravated to malady point by our distaste for and uneasiness in the present -- the sheer, bald uniformity of our surroundings, their soulless newness” (36). It seems that an oppressive sameness and reiterative quality has ‘taken hold’ of the contemporary situation, and in this sense, Bowen can understand, but just not excuse, the contemporary recoil from the present. Describing the contemporary situation in 1950, one notes the startling similarity to descriptions of the ‘present’ in the 1970s and even now, which are often used to describe the postmodern situation of the human subject or the artist vis-à-vis actuality:

Where is the eye to linger; where is fancy to dwell? No associations, no memories have had time to gather around soaring blocks, the raw new suburbs. And will they ever do so? Where shall they find a foothold? Nothing rustles, nothing casts a fluttering shadow: there is something frightening about the very unhauntedness of ‘functional’ modern rooms. Atmosphere has been conditioned out of the air. Nor even among all this ton-weight oppressiveness of brick and concrete do we feel secure: all this could become nothing in a split second. Nor, piled and crowded upon one another in our living and moving, do we feel in contact; personal isolation has increased (37).

Finally, Bowen decides that the resources of illusion, nostalgia, deceit, fictitiousness, and interpretation are in themselves recognizable as ‘essentially’ human tendencies. In her mind, we have come to question this human operation, activity, and capacity, and we have come to question its ubiquity, only because we “have extended the boundaries of self-consciousness” (37) and become more aware of our own frustrations. Using a pseudo-Marxist ‘class-consciousness’ model of historical transformation, Bowen then suggests that it is “our own awareness rather than the dissatisfactions [that] has increased” (37). And since “more and more of us are cast in the mold of those to whom no present time ever has been ideal” (37), Bowen sees that we must then recognize interpretation as our human responsibility, and our particular human power on earth. She states that, “out of existence, mankind has continued to forge something” (37), and therefore we must continue the art of interpretation in contemporary times, recognizing its ontological necessity ,as it is in itself an activity constitutive of perception. Sounding like Heidegger, Bowen holds that “our time, being part of all time, holds within it something essential which needs perceiving” (37). Following Bowen’s theory thus far, we can speculate that she understand this ‘something essential’ as the paradoxical human ‘reality’ of perception as a hermeneutic ontology. As usual, however, and in accordance with her own dislike of doctrine, Bowen leaves this speculation as a question, open to interpretation.

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A year later, on March 17th of 1951, Bowen wrote another piece for the Saturday Review of Literature entitled “Autobiography as an Art”. In this essay, Bowen broaches the radical (postmodern) recognition that fiction, and indeed, all writing and all thought, retains an autobiographical thrust, just as autobiography retains a fictional aspect. She starts out by addressing the marked contemporary interest in autobiography, and attributes this attraction to the increased ‘literariness’ of autobiography, thus suggesting a grafting, cross-fertilization, or blurring of generic boundaries to a certain extent. But she also insists on preserving a separate category of ‘literature’ or ‘fiction’ as distinguished from ‘autobiography.’ For instance, Bowen exposes the narratological rhetoric of the autobiographical work -- such as the rhetoric of omniscience and impartiality, ‘shape,’ beginning and end, ‘eventfulness,’ or “boldly left gaps and admitted lacunae” (10). And she also states that autobiographical works are “side lights on history” (9), implying both a historiographical thrust to the individual life story, and a narrative aspect of historiography. But at the same time, she insists on a difference between private document and literature, truth and fiction, history and the ‘self-told life story,’ history and fiction, disciplined concentration and licensed ease, professional and amateur. What emerges, then, is the recognition that autobiography stands somehow in between fiction and history as a more flexible and transient kind of writing. At least, in Bowen’s observation, this has become the contemporary aspect of autobiographical writing:

One might say that whereas autobiography used to be based on statement, now it derives from query, being tentative rather than positive, no longer didactic but open-minded. It is mobile, exploratory (9-10).

She attributes this new quality of autobiographical writing to “the fact that today it is less often written in old age; it is, rather, the work of early or late maturity” (10). And she states that the “mood which engenders autobiography” (10) is a sort of ubiquitous one in that it is invested in existence, being. In Bowen’s view, the feeling at mid-century is that “we have not merely survived, we have continued to be and, which is still more, to be aware of being” (10).

Although she never invests her theories with terminologies, Bowen comes close to expressing the hermeneutic conception of ontology, which involves the idea that life itself, existence, is a story. She states that “gradually one’s years in the world add up into something which takes on size and shape and in which meaning may at least be sought for” (10). As such, the life of a single human being, in her or his own perspective, takes on the qualities of a fiction; and meanwhile, outside of this life-story stands, “like a mask or frame” (10), what has been ‘externally’ or ‘historically’ done by this human being “at work, in society, at home” (10). But again, Bowen explains that there is play between the ‘outer’ and the ‘inner.’ And “to study the contrast, the interplay between the inner and outer ‘I’ may be fascinating -- how much so only oneself can know” (10). Bowen is beyond advocating solipsistic or existential philosophies here. Rather, she thinks that “autobiography is above all narrative” (10), forcing a syllogistic train of thought in the readers mind, wherein if autobiography is narrative, and human life is lived autobiographically, then it must follow that human life or existence is also narrative to a certain extent. The proposition here is not that nothing but the self exists, and therefore that the self is the only object of real knowledge, but rather that nothing but narrative (interpretation, writing) exists. And thus, knowledge or truth will therefore always have a narrative, fictional, or mediated enframement.

It is with interest that the ‘postmodern’ reader comes across Bowen’s mid-century observations of the advantage of autobiography “being written in middle life -- neither youth’s trend towards introspection nor old age’s urge to post-mortem is to be feared” (10). For, what Bowen is actually applauding here, in the contemporary ‘middle-aged-ness’ or ‘middledom’ of autobiographical writing, is the deconstruction of the rhetoric of oppositional entities, such as fiction and truth, inner and outer, subjective and objective, young and old, beginning and end. ‘Middle life’ might then be a way of being, seeing, thinking, knowing, a way marked by oscillation between past and present, present and future, self and other -- and thus, a way marked, moreover, by mobility, transience, transitivity, mediation, experiment, risk. Living life through the middle would be a way of admitting that, as Bowen states, “I am a part of all that I have seen” (10), that the texture of existence itself is spun out of the middle, is always mediated. If we are all potential biographers, as Bowen suggests at the end of this essay, then we are also all potential (life) writers. By the end of this essay, writing loses part of its privileged and hermetically-sealed status as the distinct and professional discipline of ‘literature,’ and the latter designation is dispersed out into the open, as a ubiquitous activity in human life.

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In a third piece for the Saturday Review of Literature of June 20th, 1953, entitled “The Sponge of the Present”, Bowen suggests that the apparent transitional, learning, apprentice, or ‘crisis’ stage of English writing at mid-century is more than just a ‘stage.’ She states that the radical realization for writers has been that

the task of expression appears a vast one -- the old simplicities of the world are gone; the artist is hard-pressed by what is happening round him. Our century, as it takes its frantic course, seems barely inhabitable by humans: we have to learn to live while we learn to write. And to write, we must draw on every resource; to express, we need a widened vocabulary -- not only as to words, as to ideas (44).

It is not a matter of simply exchanging modernist vocabularies or modernist conceptions, for something ‘new,’ something different. It is a matter, instead, of thinking differently, of changing the way we think about language, writing, art, existence. In 1953, one finds that Bowen is entirely comfortable with the idea that the post-war cultural crisis and ‘apprentice stage’ in English fiction “cannot but be a long one” (44), which “some of us... will not outlive” (44).

For Bowen, to ‘merely’ continue and ‘merely’ serve as a link, where that means continuing and linking to nothing but uncertainty, is what it means, not only to survive, but to write. And, as such, writing is understood in the Heideggerian sense as a monument, or as a risk out into the open, a ‘shot in the dark,’ a venture into uncertainty with no guarantees. The very riskiness of writing forces the writer to grapple more immediately with how and why writing is done, and also, with the presuppositions behind its designation as ‘literature’ or as ‘fiction.’ Writers like Bowen, who came to these conclusions after the Second World War, start to question traditional distinctions and metaphysical oppositions through their writing in a way that has come to be called ‘postmodern.’ Bowen grasps the interplay and oscillation between ‘binary oppositions’ such as: outer and inner, the future and the past, innovation and tradition, the strange and the familiar, the fictional and the non-fictional, fiction and truth, the immediate and the mediate, poetry and prose, the other and the self, and even the writer and the reader.

The recognition that, as Bowen states, imagination is by its nature susceptible and affectable, opens up the work of art to debt structures and risks implicated in all language, all writing, and existence itself. For Bowen, the issues of the origin of a work of art, originality versus imitation, and influence boils down to the recognition that “words are the general property; they link with our experience” (11). Thus the writer’s medium -- language, words -- is recognized by Bowen in a very Heideggerian way as indebtedness itself. She states that “influence, in one sense if not another, is inevitable” (11). The complex origins of any work of art are always already implicated in a system of exchange, and so, “the question as to whether [influence] should or should not be avoided therefore falls to the ground” (11). Here again, the idea of ‘apprenticeship’ emerges, and in answer to the questions of whether or not “the writers of our day are too much subject to influence, from whatever source... [lacking] the resilience, the independent hardiness of their predecessors” (43), Bowen suggests that perhaps this is the ‘new’ quality of writing at mid-century -- or, rather, the quality of writing which has so far been concealed, refused, denied, or confused -- namely, an ‘apprenticeship’ or ‘transitional quality. Bowen begins to understand the only possibility for writing as being an art of oscillation, which moves but hovers between the ‘masters’ of the past, “affective novelists such as Henry James, Faulkner, and Mauriac” (11), and ‘x-factor’ of future writing and reading. In the meantime, the writer will keep herself in a state of permanent apprenticeship to the past and the future, in an attitude of susceptibility which Bowen understands, anyways, as an inevitable state wherein the writer keeps herself open “to styles and energies in already-existing art” (11).

To Bowen, the trace of influence, whether that be of an aesthetic, literary, environmental, or experiential kind, will always be present in writing. And according to Bowen, inevitably, it is the style of a writer in which influence or inflection “is most easily recognised” (11). No doubt defending herself against the often accusatory or derogatory tone of comparisons between her own writing and that of Henry James, Bowen points out the irony in making a writer accountable, or even reproaching her, for stylistic ‘inflection.’ For, as she questions, are not “style, vision, and outlook... interknit?” (11) Presumably then, to write with no style would be to write with no vision or outlook, and how can that be possible? Here, Bowen broaches the radical postmodern realization of what Vattimo calls, himself following Heidegger, a hermeneutic ontology. She states, quoting Flaubert, that style is just “a manner of seeing” (11). And she explains that, “as we all know, a strongly-directed film or a striking collection of pictures by one artist can so invade the receptive eye that, coming out of the cinema or the gallery, one continues for hours after to see life in terms of So-and-So’s film or So-and-So’s painting” (11). For Vattimo, hermeneutic ontology involves the recognition that we live in a world of conflicting interpretations. And thus, as a ‘philosophy of difference,’ it involves an acceptance of the infinite interpretability of reality, the incessant play of interpretations which constitutes existence. Bowen is on the verge of such a recognition herself in defining an art of oscillation between past and present influences. For Bowen, the writer is a sponge, absorbing and accumulating debts, because
his or her place is only ever that of “a link in art’s continuity” (11). ‘Originality,’ then, for Bowen, means to “become influence” (11) yourself. And to absorb debts or influences means to transmit them in a “necessary artistic heredity” (11).

Bowen also suggests in this essay that the notion of memory, as it specifically applies to the influence of environment on a writer, also carries the trace of interpretation. There is no pure function of memory according to Bowen. It is not a ‘bank’ which stores images corresponding to some outside reality. The operation of retrieval is contaminated with retrospective interpretation and anecdotal colouring. Thus, the ‘outside’ (environment, history, etcetera...) infiltrates the ‘inside’ (memory) through a subjective, selective process. And as time passes, memory “tends to become more and more subjective” (43) or narrative in quality. As an influence, environment is always going to be, to a degree, selected, because, “as we now know, there is an element of choice, however apparently involuntary, in memory” (43). Once more, Bowen seems to be on the verge of the ‘postmodern’ philosophy of difference when she states that

The writer is influenced by what he retains; and still more, perhaps, by the very fact that he has retained it -- and the picture, by continuous dwelling upon, may be so much intensified as to become changed. Thus, though to an extent the environment creates the writer, he also plays a part in creating it -- his art, by demanding this kind of sustenance, has reached back past the bounds of actual memory into a phantasmagoric hinterland quite its own (43).

Stated in these terms, Bowen introduces an important, and at the time still controversial, idea -- that the boundaries between ‘outside’ (environment, reality) and ‘inside’ (memory, writing or interpretation) are always blurred. And thus, in her thinking, “the writer carries about in him an inner environment which is constant” (43). This ‘inner environment’ is no more and no less than interpretation itself, which takes place and oscillates between the traditional Western metaphysical distinctions of: outside/inside, mind/body, presence/absence, present/past, present/future, positive/negative, life/death, west/east, male/female, high/low, true/false, truth/fiction, right/left, time/space.

Perhaps most importantly, Bowen makes the same point regarding experience as an influence in writing, pointing out the irony of the “tendency to think that the direct transcription of experience (into novel or poem) and the action of experience are synonymous” (43). Bowen seems to alternate, as she does in other places in this essay, between outright statement and careful qualification, almost as if she realized the radical nature of what she was suggesting and its profound implications. And thus, she tempers the subversive power of her statements with the continual reminder of the ‘present’ actuality. She states, first of all, that “true action of experience on the creative powers is erratic, indirect and slow” (43). And then, she follows this statement by explaining that “the experience which really influences art does not consist in drama or incidents; it is a sort of emotional accumulation, or, in fact, seemingly influenced by Freudian theories of the unconscious mind -- merely work to ‘pad’ the more radical statements which follow. For Bowen states, secondly, that “in so far as writers do make use of their individual experience as persons, they almost invariably transform it” (43). And furthermore, the crux, that “experience is the reaction to what happens, not the happening itself -- and in that sense experience is, like environment, to a degree selected” (43). She qualifies this statement by stating, more moderately, that “the meaning which is extracted from occurences varies, and varies in its importance, according to the writer’s choice as to feeling: he allows some things to ‘take’ with him more than others” (43). Variation -- or as a postmodern writer might call it, play -- is the inevitable effect of the recognition of a ‘world of difference,’ an effect which was indeed always at play in the world, but which was only ever concealed under the strong categories of Western metaphysical thought. As Bowen records, in the 1950s, writers began to recognize the subtle play between influence and originality, tradition and innovation, reality and perception. As she states, the common post-war complaints are that “influence... seems harder now to throw off than once it was” (44), and furthermore that “we have too many disciples, too few masters” (44). To these complaints, Bowen offers no solace, no solution, but rather a suggestion for the rethinking of the oscillating aspect of language, art, and experience.

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Finally, in an essay for the New Republic on September 21st of 1953, entitled “English Fiction at Mid-Century”, Bowen is asked to assess the current state of writing in England. Interestingly, she uses the “display analogy” (15) of an art exhibition, stating that “it is not that there is nothing to show” (15), but rather that “its overall significance and expressiveness” (15) is in doubt. As to the question of what English fiction at mid-century
shows, Bowen states that “the novel, onward from 1914, has in different ways reflected the sense of flux” (15). Constitute of this “cracking and splintering of the social mould during and after the first World War” (15), has been “a shift, as to the subject, from outer to inner -- from man as public being, in public play, to man as a seat of isolated and in the main suffering private sensibility” (15). And following this shift, according to Bowen, “for the greater part of the inter-war years, subjectivity hazed over the English novel; there was disposition to follow the stream of consciousness ‘from caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea’” (15). The “intellectually respectable English novel... concentrated... [and] insisted upon the victim-hero... in the jungle which by overgrowing the ruins of a fixed society succeeded to what that used to be” (15). Bowen states that “there was almost a convention of disillusionment” (15).

But for Bowen, the English inter-war novel “did not finally diagnose the modern uneasiness -- dislocation” (15). Indeed, “the salutary value of the exterior, the comfortable sanity of the concrete came to be realised only when the approach of the Second World War forced one to envisage wholesale destruction” (15). The modernist project, with its hermetic concentration on the ‘inner’ at the expense of the ‘outer,’ was exploded with the approach of the Second World War when “the obliteration of man’s surroundings, streets and houses, tables and chairs sent up, for him, their psychological worth” (15). As Bowen states, “up to now, consciousness had been a sheltered product: its interest as consciousness diminished now that, at any moment, the physical shelter could be gone” (15). According to Bowen, the threat of immediate destruction meant that writers were thrown into a state of crisis, or in the very least, a ‘transitional’ phase where art, as it was known, including the art of fiction, would have to be rethought. But furthermore, and in terms of problematizing the whole idea of crisis, Bowen suggests that it was later recognized that it was not so much that writers had been thrown into a state of crisis, but rather that they were instead suddenly and painfully aware of, as Heidegger would say, their own ‘thrown-ness’ and ‘dis-location’ in the midst of a crisis. In this sense, all art and all thought was now beginning to be recognized by Bowen as the product of such a ‘transitional’ or ‘oscillating’ experience between the ‘outer’ and the ‘inner,’ the ‘past’ and the ‘present.’ Interestingly, dislocation is also the word that Vattimo uses, following Heidegger, to describe the epochal character of Being -- in terms of it being thrown in between being a progressive revelation and a regressive concealment.

Such an echo encourages us to interpret that Bowen was on the verge of formulating an art of oscillation (or dislocation) as a result of her experience of the Second World War. Certainly, she at least practiced such an art in her present-day historical novel.
While not a political writer in the familiar sense of the word, she created novels, short stories, essays, and autobiographical works in a war-torn world that saw successively the Great War, the guerilla war known as the Troubles in Ireland (1919-21), the Irish Civil War (1922-23), and finally the Second World War. Bowen’s participation in these battles -- as a resident of a Big House occupied during 'the Troubled Times,' as a nurse [for shell-shocked patients] in Dublin in the First World War, and as both an air raid warden and an employee of the Ministry of Information in London during the Second World War -- sharpened her consciousness of and involvement in present-day events. These military and political conflicts came to signify her intensely personal vision of loss and betrayal.

Heather Bryant Jordan  
How Will the Heart Endure:  
Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War  (1992)
But they were not alone, nor had they been from the start, from the start of love. Their time sat in the third place at their table. They were the creatures of history, whose coming together was of a nature possible in no other day -- the day was inherent in the nature.... The relation of people to one another is subject to the relation of each to time, to what is happening. If this has not been always felt -- and as to that who is to know? -- it has begun to be felt, irrevocably. On from now, every moment, with more and more of what had been 'now' behind it, would be going on adding itself to the larger story.

Elizabeth Bowen  *The Heat of the Day* (1949)
Part II

1949-1999: Extenuating the Twilight
Chapter 1

The 1949 Reviews

So far, in the second division of this paper, we have been working towards establishing the ‘substantiality’ of Bowen herself, as an author, through interpreting various works of hers, extending roughly from 1928 to the late 1950s. These works consist of letters, reviews, interviews, prefaces, broadcasts, critical-cultural commentaries, and semi-autobiographical/historical writings. As such, they can be understood to comprise a sort of ‘frame’ around the ‘main’ text under consideration, The Heat of the Day. We have been producing (our translation and explanation) for her text, respected as a ‘mortal trace’ and ‘monument’ in the first sense which Vattimo discusses in the integral essay “Postmodern Criticism : Postmodern Critique”.

Now it is time to repeat our earlier pattern of twisting away from or distorting a substantiality, as we did in the first division, when the proposal was made to read the text of Vattimian theory through the text of Bowen’s practice. This time, we distort the mortal trace and message we had set out to explain and translate (interpret) in Bowen’s own critical, theoretical, non-fictional, and autobiographical/historical writings. We turn now to read her text The Heat of the Day through the (hi)story of its effects, its ‘Wirkungsgeschichte,’ or the story of interpretation by way of which it has been handed down to us. Taking a distance from the ‘text’ of Bowen ‘proper,’ we repeat the extension which was inaugurated by her wartime text, read as a ‘twilight world’ of ex-tension, irony, and risk in the final section of this paper entitled “Intermission : Extension”. For indeed, reading the text through the ‘insubstantial terms’ of its effects-history reveals the further extension which is its reception: truly, an extenuation of the twilight which Bowen created as circumstance in The Heat of the Day.

Many readers, in the 1949 reviews, were quick to grasp Bowen’s creation of a twilight world in The Heat of the Day. But, while all of these initial reviewers discuss the work as a departure, transition, or breakthrough for Bowen, only a few applaud the risk she was taking with her writing. Seven reviews were released in the month and a half surrounding the novel’s publication, from February 19th, 1949 until April 1st, 1949. Interestingly, these reviews themselves seem to adumbrate the readings which follow, in the form of: journal or book articles on the novel; journal or book articles on Bowen’s fiction; books on Bowen’s fiction; journal and book articles, or books on: English fiction; the English novel; war writing; historical fiction; or feminist and/or deconstructive approaches to Bowen, The Heat of the Day, or war writing. It is possible to interpret at least five recurring concerns in the reviewers’ readings of The Heat of the Day which could be categorized as concerns about: the complex structure of the text, as ‘multi-layered’ or as allegorical; Bowen’s difficult and evasive style of writing; the problematic (because plural) genre(s) of the text; its equally problematic topic or subject (including concerns about the story and/or characters); and finally, the risk that Bowen took in writing this text, or its ironic and ‘extreme’ aspects. These five concerns can in turn be interpreted, in a corollary ‘extended’ way, as being continued and expanded upon throughout the fifty years of readings which follow the reviews. It is even possible to interpret luke-warm and negative judgments of the novel as resulting from readings which concentrate exclusively on structural, stylistic, generic, and topical considerations, at the expense of ignoring the ironic or risky quality of the text and writing. And, on the other hand, more fruitful critical readings of the text result when any of the four, more traditional concerns are mediated with a sense of the work as risky writing, or as such, a risk for Bowen to have taken. This is not always true, of course, as some readings announce the work’s ‘risk’ and, at the same time, denounce the work for the same reason. And some readings which concentrate solely on the structure, style, genre, and/or topic (subject) of the text are, in themselves, risky readings. However, in the attempt to, in turn, interpret the story of interpretation which follows The Heat of the Day -- what Eco might call ‘an attempt to reduce the labyrinth’ -- one can say that the Wirkungsgeschichte of the work reveals and tells of a stalling of post-cognitive, ontological, or ‘postmodernist’ concerns for initial cognitive, epistemological, or ‘modernist’ ones. And as already stated, and interestingly, the text itself can be read to follow a similar extension (what might otherwise have been read as ‘course’ or ‘direction’ or ‘route’). It is read in this paper as ‘arriving’ in the extended interface of mutually constituted concerns, ontological and epistemological alike, an interface which is also constitutive of Vattimian theory.

In his review for the New Yorker, of 19 February, 1949, entitled “The Importance of Being Human”, Gill Brendan discusses the anticipation which surrounds the release of the novel, due to be published the Monday following his review. He states that it is an anticipation which “she, in the course of writing [the novel], must have wondered whether to cherish or dread” (78). By this time, Bowen was esteemed as “one of the most distinguished
citizens in the British commonwealth of letters" (78). But Brendan right away determines the fact that, knowing it as a selection of the Literary Guild, people will claim to be ‘let down’ by Bowen’s wartime novel. To justify this prediction, Brendan discusses the fact that The Heat of the Day is not only “not quite in character” (78) for Bowen, but is also “not a tranquil book but a troubled one” (78). According to Brendan, the book is a departure for Bowen, and one not readily forgiveable by an ‘impatient and withering’ public desperately needing reassurance.

Instead of repeating what everyone is comfortably confident she can do to perfection, she has taken a big, if unsteady, step forward. She has not changed, save to grow, but as an artist she is risking more than she ever risked before. She has transferred her reconnoissance from the carefully composed Regency blockfronts and scarcely less carefully composed upper-middle-class proprieties of a London between the wars (the slowly widening, all but imperceptible cracks in the façades were Miss Bowen’s particular subject) to the façadeless rubble, physical and social, of the London of 1942; and the illumination that poured without a shadow into every corner of “The Death of the Heart” has here become the beam of a flashlight which, though brilliant, trembles and occasionally threatens to go out (78).

Risk, ambiguity, half-lights, the fragility of a world once thought solid, the tenuousness of existence, and the importance of being (human) -- interestingly, Brendan discusses all of these more radical interpretations of Bowen’s concerns as contributing to the success of her novel. He states that, while the novel “teeters constantly on the brink of melodrama” (78), it never falls. For, “no writer living practices a sterner discipline than Miss Bowen, and if she consents, here and there, to a touch of mystification, so did her master, Henry James” (78).

It is not the first comparison that has been made to James, nor will it be the last; what is more interesting, though, is Brendan’s discussion of Bowen’s writing as the product of a perfectionism that also afflicted James. Not surprisingly perhaps, both writers stuttered their speech, always seeming to be on the search for the perfect (or the many possible) word(s) to express any one thing, and the drive for a certain rarity or flawlessness in the writing made both writers’ writings ‘hard writing,’ and not always ‘easy reading.’ Brendan alludes more than once to the efforts gone into creating her ‘masterpiece,’ The Heat of the Day, also citing her ‘Introduction’ to her wartime publication of short stories as further evidence of the risk she was taking in attempting to convey “that sense of lucid abnormality” (79) that the war brought out in life. Quoting from one of the metatextual passages in the novel, Brendan notes the risk in such writing, and even suggests, by way of the quotation, that Bowen’s writing is poetic.

“Both felt the greatness inherent in being human and in their being mother and son. His homecoming should have been one more chapter added to an august book, a book on a subject greater than themselves: nothing failed, to make it so but their vision. It may still have been such a chapter in the vision of God. Where they were concerned, the ban, the check, the caution as to all spending and most of all the expenditure of feeling restricted them. Wariness had driven away poetry: from hesitating to feel came the moment when you no longer could.” In The Heat of the Day, Miss Bowen has fortunately not been wary, and her vision is wider and deeper than it has ever been before (79).

Overall, Brendan’s review of the novel is positive, and he suggests that Bowen is taking her writing in a bold ‘new direction,’ certainly not leaving behind her former style or concerns, but rather honing these for a new purpose, structure, and subject. Even if it is scant on detail, Brendan’s review manages to communicate something of the radical and experimental quality of Bowen’s text, in its structure, style, genre, and topic; and, at the same time, he applauds Bowen’s courageousness in taking such a step.

* On the same day, Glenway Wescott reviewed the novel in the Saturday Review of Literature. Her review is also positive, but she manages to describe in more detail the quality of Bowen’s writing that Brendan labelled as Jamesian ‘mystification.’ In particular, Wescott brilliantly conveys the sense of mystery in the structure of the narrative, immediately noting the curious ‘absence’ of war in the wartime novel. Using Bowen’s words, Wescott states that “the war’s relation to the novel is like a painting of ‘one of the Dutch interiors where, although there are central figures, the character of the whole picture comes as much from the background as from the figures themselves’” (9). Noting that Bowen had always wanted to be an artist, Wescott suggests that her artistic
beginnings as a painter and a poet are highly influential on her art as a writer of novels and short stories. When she describes the characters in the novel, Wescott describes the novel as if it were a painting, or something spatial as well as narrative.

In the foreground, [there is] a wonderful pair of female clowns, Louie and Connie -- the one young and so to speak subnormal, the other oldish and mannish -- pathetic and problematical as is all our clowning nowadays, in the century of the common humanity. And in the middle distance, in several scenes of brilliant and chilling comedy, two detestable women: exactly the kind of mother and daughter who would have a traitor son, a traitor brother. And in the background, an old lady who is Hamlet-like, sane and pretending to be insane or possibly vice versa; and some supernumeraries not to be forgotten (9).

Wescott describes the writing as having a palpable surface, on which Bowen works "quickly and quietly..., as with her fingertips" (9), so that "nothing of the mystery of character is lost in the presentation, nothing is revealed prematurely" (9). Her characters are like Dutch portraiture, such that

in very few pages the reader is enabled to say that, yes, he knows these people, they are of consequence to him; but almost to the last chapter he is obliged to admit that, no, he does not understand them, not yet. Neither do these people understand one another, not until they have lived through all the circumstances of the book (9).

And Westcott also suggests that the experience of reading the text mirrors the experience of the characters described by it, in that

our experience of the narration as a whole as we read it, our position relative to the narrated persons, is much the same as the relationship they have with one another: a gradual intimacy more and more intensely troubled, more and more fraught with emotion and with opinion. The suspense is in this as well as the plot. It is like watching a daybreak, a daybreak lasting months and months for them, six or seven hours for us. Page by page the strangeness of everyone and everything progressively lightens, but there is always some left. Miss Bowen never rationalizes too much. She does not indulge in optimism; yet on the other hand she seems not at all subject to any of the defeatist philosophies in fashion now, existentialism and reactionary neo-Catholicism and so on. Her thought is no more cut and dry than her style (9).

It is a short review, but almost strangely insightful, seeing as it actually arrives before the actual publishing of the novel on the Monday following these February 19th reviews. Describing the structure of the work as a figure/ground reversal, the sense of 'twilight' which is extended throughout the novel, just affording a glimpse of pure daylight at the end, and commenting upon the philosophical bent of Bowen's writing, itself a curious mixture of rationality and existentialism -- Wescott's radical insights are not expanded upon until Barbara Bellow Watson publishes her brilliant essay "Variations on an Enigma: Elizabeth Bowen's War Novel" in 1981. Wescott applauds the open-endedness of the novel, not taking this realization any further other than to state that

even at the very end of the book, in the unmasking and the melodrama, she keeps and respects the essential element of the obscurity she has led us through -- the soul, the subconscious, the unconscious (never does she give it these names) -- as in the plainest daylight in reality something of the dead of night is ever present in places, a little here and a little there, shadows! (10).

Wescott does not use the word 'chiaroscuro' to describe the novel or Bowen's writing, but certainly, what is being touched upon here is the sense of 'crepuscule' in the writing, the deliberate foregrounding of the unconcealment/concealment toggle or interface in truth and in language which Bowen was fond of playing upon and within. In all of her writing, there remains the clear sense of a philosophical preoccupation with the mystery of life, 'reality,' and Being. And although these are themselves clearly ontological concerns, Wescott also suggests that Bowen tempered these with epistemological ones.
The next day, Alice S. Morris published a review of The Heat of the Day for the New York Times Book Review. Her review was placed in tandem with George Orwell's review of Evelyn Waugh's wartime book Scott-King's Modern Europe. As a visual corollary to both texts, there lies at center a detail of a drawing by Henry Moore called "The Uprooted". Coiling roots wrap the entire body of a seated person, almost as if mummified, and he or she seems to be either blindfolded or strangulated by these roots, except that the subject sits alert with its hands placed neatly in its lap, perhaps looking into some strange distance that is closed off from the viewer. The drawing gives a sense of panic and restraint, and yet also quiet solemnity and acquiescence. Placed on the lap of the subject are four roots, cut off from one another, and not seemingly attached to the subject itself. It is ominous, suggestive of torture, genocide, and execution, and indicative of the post-war atmosphere of disorientation or dislocation in Britain, as elsewhere. Split between a yearning for freedom from the horrors of the past, and a sense gained from historical reflection that there is no freedom as such, the modern subject seems ‘stuck,’ immobile, in crisis. The editor remarks upon such curious ‘coincidence’ of feeling in post-war Britain, as between Bowen, Waugh, and Moore, stating that

by coincidence, the same week brings new work by two of Britain’s foremost novelists. By coincidence, too, they are dealing -- though in highly disparate ways -- with essentially the same theme, the dislocation of the individual in our time. Mr. Waugh’s handling of the theme is that of the social satirist, Miss Bowen’s that of the highly sensitive observer. Both, nonetheless, are highly serious.

Morris’ review is entitled “Miss Bowen Illumines the Landscape of War”, and in it Morris concentrates mainly on the radical quality of the writing as war writing. She reads the text primarily through an investigation of what she interprets as its topic -- “the effect of enormous social dislocation on individuals” during wartime. And although the writing itself is understood as a further development of the ‘muted and evocative’ wartime short stories, Morris thinks that the novel is a peculiar blend of the exciting and sinister with the serious sense of crisis experienced by Londoners during the war. She makes apt comparisons between the novel’s atmosphere and Graham Greene’s ‘entertainments,’ such as The Ministry of Fear or the Confidential Agent, and as well Alfred Hitchcock’s early films. Morris finds this entertaining atmosphere to be only one aspect of the work: “an unfinished gesture, a discordant word, a familiar face sighted in an unlikely place” -- all this makes for exciting and sinister entertainment, as in most spy novels, detective novels, or thrillers. But, the ‘pulpier’ aspects of the work are still instrumental according to Morris.

As might be expected from Miss Bowen, this wire of tension is the dramatic means to something else. In this instance, to the idea that people, on their own, know practically nothing about themselves or about each other; that patterns (traditions, customs, habits, familiar rooms, remembered arrangements of furniture) are the important and even crucial touchstones. When the patterns are abandoned or dissolved under the weight of war, Miss Bowen says, cry havoc! The individual, robbed of custom, achieves perspective and identity in some way -- attaching himself in desperation or apathy to the makeshift, the deceptive, the ideological. All but one of Miss Bowen’s characters are displaced persons in this sense.

Grasping the senses of tension, nuance, shadiness, twilight, and the philosophical crisis of dislocation which are communicated in the text, Morris’ reading turns out, at least initially, to be a fruitful one, communicating the spatial as well as narrative aspects of the work as a figure/ground reversal.

Concentrating on three ‘main’ characters in the novel, Morris compares Stella, Robert, and Harrison, in their different ways of ‘coping’ with the crisis of dislocation. She finds the sociological critique in the novel to be ‘obvious,’ discussing Stella Rodney as a divorced and disenchanted woman who has “come loose from the worn-out moorings of the respectable landed-gentry” (1). For Morris, Stella is semi-autobiographical, an ‘obvious’ fictional corollary to Bowen herself, as the last of a dying tradition of the Ascendancy class of Anglo-Irish aristocrats. In wartime, this world dissolves completely, existing in the fictional pseudo-fictional realm of Stella’s imagination, Ireland and Mount Morris. As this background disappears, and is replaced by war, Stella’s world shrinks down to the ‘foreground’ of another individual -- Robert.
In the ‘tideless, hypnotic, futureless day-to-day’ of wartime London and in the anonymity of a furnished flat, she focuses on her lover, Robert. He becomes for her ‘a habitat.’ Meaning and pattern have contracted to a ‘hermetic world’ (1).

Actually, though, there are several ‘individual’ foregrounds, for Stella also experiences her ‘hermetic world’ in the foreground of Roderick, her son, and her frequent, unwanted visitor, Harrison. And the foregrounds shift from place to place: one of the two different apartments she occupies in London during the war; a dingy underground restaurant in London; a funeral in the “old-world nucleus of a new dormitory town” (Bowen 66); a trip to Mount Morris in neutral Ireland; train compartments during different railway journeys; Robert’s childhood home of Holme Dene, just outside of London; the inquest hearing; a park facing a wasteland posed for development. As well, the foregrounds obviously shift from character to character, as the narrator follows either Stella, Roderick, Robert, or Louie. Harrison is the only ‘foreground-less’ character in the novel, and Morris picks up on this.

But first, she discusses the character Robert Kelway as being, in contradistinction to Stella, “the product of rigid middle-class disciplines and of a dominating mother” (1), and violently broken away from this background “in a revulsion touched off by the retreat at Dunkirk” (1). As she explains, Robert has broken violently from all his patterns..., he has rejected allegiance to the accepted concepts of country, freedom, democracy, as well as his family. He has ‘come out at the far side of all that.’ With what? A pattern so rigid it cannot be broken. ‘Freedom,’ he scoffs, defending to Stella his defection to Nazi ideology. ‘Freedom to be what? -- the muddled, mediocre, damned.... Do you suppose there’s a single man of mind who doesn’t realize he only begins where his freedom ends?’ (1).

Quoting from one of the most important passages in the novel, in chapter fifteen, when Stella finally confronts the ‘truth’ of Robert, Morris reads Bowen as engaging in philosophical and political critique through her portrait of Robert Kelway.

She then turns to discuss Harrison as the “third figure of Miss Bowen’s precarious triangle, the secret agent, the man without a background, without a pattern, who finds in wartime his proper and even propitious atmosphere” (1, 25). Again, and following the theme of dislocation which informs her review, Morris understands Harrison as yet one more ‘floating’ individual, grasping desperately onto anything that smacks of tradition. However, Harrison’s understanding of tradition is debased, and he seems to be, as Morris explains, as much attracted to the person as any sense of ‘routine’ or ‘pattern’ that she seems to display in her day to day life. Even answering the ring of a telephone seems ‘traditional’ enough for Harrison, who finds the identification he longs for has become accessible in the person and surround of Stella. As Morris explains, “throughout the novel, Harrison tries by blackmail, persistence and a kind of dogged love to move in on Stella -- as much for her ‘luxury’ flat (the sense of place) and the tatters of tradition that cling to her, as for Stella herself” (25). Though Morris does not elaborate upon it, the suggestion is, following her discussion of Stella, Robert, and Harrison, that in a world without (back)ground, one either forges or clings to a ‘figure’ -- whether that be in the form of a person, a tradition, an ideology, or perhaps even in the form of speech, as Louie seems to do. Morris also does not pick up on the sense of ontological responsibility which is communicated quite strongly through these characters, in terms of the interpretations, choices, and actions they make in the face of a ‘meaningless universe.’

As she tends to ‘miss out’ on these, perhaps deeper, or more involved and risky aspects of the work, it should not come as a surprise that Morris’ judgment of it is negative. Yet it is still surprising, after following her interesting analysis of the work, to find her calling it a failure. Morris thinks that it is only so because Bowen has gone ‘too far,’ she has risked too much in a direction Morris finds frustrating to follow.

If The Heat of the Day falls short of being the remarkable novel it had every reason to be, the failure is not one of plot, nor of theme, nor of Miss Bowen’s power to evoke, suggest and explore down oblique and little-frequented avenues the mysterious centers of human conduct. The fault is that she carries these bents and talents, which give her work its unique glow, too far (25).

Being a reader who requires ‘balance’ in the writing, Morris finds the novel to be unbalanced, and judges this accordingly as a fault in the writing proceeding from Bowen’s “emphasis on all that is latent and intangible, [and] her suppression of obvious and tangible events” (25). For the purposes of this paper, however, Morris’ argument nevertheless retains some interest, as she claims that “one aspect of reality is lost in discovering another” (25). Certainly, this is Bowen’s ‘point’ -- reality had become ‘reality,’ at least it had been revealed as being, and as
always having been a hermeneutic ‘reality’ during the Second World War. It is interesting that Morris stubbornly refuses to believe that things following the war could ever be simple and clear-cut ‘once again,’ or indeed, that they ever were that way. Displaying her roots in a traditionalism that some might call pure naivity, one cannot take her judgment of the work very seriously.

Indeed, missing ‘the point’ altogether, Morris states that Bowen’s “intensely subjective scrutiny of her characters, fixed on every nuance down to the least shadow of a thought or of a doubt, leaves hidden the everyday image and makes the people diffuse and elusive” (25). Interestingly, Morris finds that “Harrison, who is presented only through outward show, is the exception and therefore the most arresting and realized figure” (25) in the novel. It seems obvious, in the present reception of the text, that the only reason this concision and clarity is possible regarding Harrison, or for that matter, regarding anyone or anything in the world, is because Bowen offers us only the reductive and objective portrait of Harrison as seen through the eyes of others. But indeed, this is also the reason why Harrison seems un-'realistic' or unconvincing as a character. The narrator herself admits as much, foregrounding the ironic understanding that there is no such thing as a narrative vantage-point from which to see or understand the inner workings of all things great and small. It is a subtle critique of the ‘binocularity’ of the traditional, epistemological narrative perspective. Bowen shows that, especially as concerns other people, the subjective aspect of beings will always complicate our yearning for objective clarity concerning them. For, as Wescott explains, even in her intensely subjective portraits of Stella, Roderick, Robert, or Louie, Bowen still retains a sense of mystery and obscurity. Shadows remain, drawn into the portraits of different characters, the descriptions of different places or times, and the narration of different events. Bowen always undermines our epistemological drive for full revelation or full realization, forcing the reader to understand that we can only offer up a limited interpretation of the world and its inhabitants. Read in this way, Bowen is now received and interpreted as a postmodern writer. Thus Harrison remains a character ‘impossible,’ arresting and seemingly fully realized only because of his impossibility, his pure objective existence in the work. And yet, if one reads a little more closely, even Harrison remains mysterious, diffuse, and elusive.

Morris turns to the actual language of the text to prove her point, again insisting that Bowen has gone ‘too far.’ She states, “Miss Bowen’s flexible and fastidious prose is also sometimes carried to a fine, far point where it stifles what it is trying to set free, steps elaborately over clichés and inverts and traps in Jamesian commas what might be said straight out: ‘She was not, therefore, then, in effect, again to see Robert until she had thought”’ (25). The wording is indeed laughable, until one remembers that Bowen did stutter her speech, and a realization of a different kind comes, concerning the way Bowen in fact thinks. Her stuttering, which followed the crisis of her parents’ separation and then her mother’s death soon afterwards, seems to reveal an aspect of crisis thinking itself. For its dwelling upon and compulsive return to actuality can be read as a kind of ‘stuttering,’ an insistent and persistent effort to cope with ‘the real’ in the attempt to understand it. Morris condescends only so far as to admit that “when Miss Bowen is really writing rather than molding her prose, her discernments, focusings and descriptions construct themselves into compact and wonderfully substantial wholes” (25). Morris cites the band concert in the park and Stella’s visit to the house in Ireland as episodes which, “aside from their functions in the novel, stand out as serene examples of the literary art” (25). Statements such as these leave one wondering where Morris was during the war. She quotes a passage from the text which describes the 1940 blitz in London, but seems not to understand or appreciate the crisis that it does communicate. Indeed, the effect of the night behind and the night to come meeting across every noon “in an arch of strain” (Bowen 91) added tension to every move, every sound, every perception, and every thought, producing occasional ‘spasms’ of complication, wherein nothing could ever again seem simple, clear, present, or immediate, sometimes not even the ‘crisis’ or war itself. However, Morris does not realize the profound quality of Bowen’s creation, and she simply judges it as a frustrating or ‘hard’ read.

The experience of reading The Heat of the Day might be compared to crossing a distinguished and faintly ominous landscape in which, to one’s annoyance and bafflement, entangling overgrowth and delaying boulders of subtlety crop up to block the way. But when the prospect is clear, it is brilliant enough. Order returns to the trees and to the roots beneath; every hollow and hump of the ground has its sharp contour; and one seems to see in all directions to the horizon -- and a little beyond it (25).

So strangely, what is meant to be read as justification for calling the novel a failure, is instead read, at least in the context of this paper, as a perfect description of its’ success as postmodern writing. The novel itself foregrounds and pursues epistemological concerns and questions, of the type that Morris finds objectionable, until they shift into ontological concerns and questions, or further hindrance for clear and easy reading and thinking. Without realizing it, then, Morris ironically tells us a lot more about Bowen’s wartime novel than she can admit herself.
Another negative review follows on the heels of Morris' in the form of Diana Trilling's "Fiction in Review" for the Nation of 26 February, 1949. And yet, like Morris' review, Trilling's remains of interest, in that the 'evidence' she offers for her reading of Bowen's text can also be cited to support its reading in the present context. Slotting Bowen in with the 'writers of sensibility,' as many of her readers unfortunately do (without bothering to explain what they mean by 'sensibility'), Trilling states that she is only to be distinguished from the category "in that she addresses her intention outward, to a world of the very bluntest moral truth, rather than inward, to an only private universe" (254). Nevertheless, Trilling thinks that Bowen is too 'fine-tempered' and does not have a manner "robust enough to support the major claims which are often made for her" (254). According to Trilling, even Bowen's "least perception [is] too charged with import" (254), and thus it is only her "passion of moral purpose in relation to the objective world which always finally rescues her from preciousness" (254). Trilling judges The Heat of the Day as a 'commanding' work, but like Morris, she finds it too difficult to read.

Her excessive concern with the subtlest interplays of the human personality makes it very difficult to come at the moral motive of her story.... The preoccupation with nuances of human response virtually belies all recognizable human conduct and quite obscures the sense of the book, simply as narrative. A reviewer 'interprets' Miss Bowen's story only at the conscious risk of being wholly on the wrong track (254).

Trilling proceeds, nevertheless, to 'risk' her own reading of the work "as a political allegory of the war period in which it is set" (254). She explains that, in her reading, "each of its characters... stand for a class or group or tendency in contemporary English society" (254). She admits that her 'symbolical' reading "over-intellectualizes Miss Bowen's novel" (254), and yet, she states, "without some such key to its intention, it is surely impossible to make a coherent pattern of its incongruously gathered characters and unresolved situations" (254). She runs through a reading which concentrates solely on each of the 'main' characters, Stella, Robert, Harrison, Roderick, and then Louie:

Stella, Miss Bowen's heroine, a beautiful and gracious woman of middle years who learns that her lover is selling his country, represents, as I see it, the ever-betrayable educated, idealistic middle classes. Robert, the veteran of Dunkirk who betrays England to the enemy because he believes that only the annihilation of the old ways of life can bring any true freedom and order, I take to stand for that small, dangerous section of the disaffected intellectual class which finds its new values only in the violent destruction of the old. Harrison, the counter-spy who offers to spare Robert in return for Stella's love, represents, I think, the classless robot-spirit of modern man, the almost inhuman being who, while functioning with mechanical perfection, knows himself to be less than alive because bred without love and without any traditional ties. Roderick, Stella's son by an early disastrous marriage, inheritor of an ancestral place in Ireland, represents Miss Bowen's charming, and, I believe, accurate picture of modern youth, with its will to live dutifully and correctly, and to strengthen the links which bind the best of the past to the future. Then there is the girl Louie, who stands for the warm, eager, unconnected lower orders. Desperate for virtue and for the emotions of being possessed, Louie moves wherever a superior power seduces her (254).

This reading would apparently 'work' for Trilling, if it were not for the confusions, complications, and obscurities in the novel which make such a reading difficult to hold. Thus, according to Trilling, the work "fails to make its clear point" (254). Trilling reluctantly admits that this 'failure,' however, "does not rob it of an ingenious and compelling narrative substance" (254). Presumably, then, it is just too irritating or time-consuming to give the work the attention it demands from its readers. Trilling states that "one reads it with urgent curiosity through to an end of great frustration" (254).

Trilling proceeds to compare Bowen's work with Lionel Trilling's The Middle of the Journey and Humphrey Slater's The Conspirator, two "recent novels in which a leading character is dedicated to an ideal outside his own country" (254). Trilling finds that, in her refusal of "the Communist gambit" (254) for the 'enemy cause' of Nazism, Bowen's "choice is evasive or timid or perhaps merely insular, and diminishes the stature of the story" (254). She even suggests that 'with striking ease,' Robert "could be rewritten into a Soviet instead of a Nazi agent" (254). Where she finds Bowen's insight to be "as pertinent to the one form of totalitarianism as to the other" (254),
Trilling finds Robert's background of Holme Dene to be extremely convincing breeding grounds for treason. She judges that, "indeed, though all too brief, her statement of the genesis of Robert's political turpitude, her recreation of the spying, emasculating, martyring atmosphere of his childhood, is not only the high point of Miss Bowen's novel but as brilliant as anything that has been written on the subject of treason" (254).

Trilling turns, finally, to criticize Bowen's 'not-too-subtle bias' against the English proletariat in the form of Louie Lewis. Perhaps she deems herself to be in the 'same class' as Bowen, however, for she states that "the picture is no doubt biased -- but biased with such love as produces its own lasting truth" (256). Overall, Trilling finds the portrait of Louie to be "only less brilliant and even more courageous" (254) than the portrait of Robert and the Kelways, a convincing picture of "the susceptible inarticulate heart and the vacant intellect burdened with its own emptiness" (254). Without contemplating what it might mean to have the character of Louie in both the opening and closing 'scenes' of the novel, Trilling offers the following analysis:

Louie has come to London from the seaside, where her parents were killed in a bombing. Perhaps the loneliest soul in all modern fiction, she waits out the war and the never-to-be-realized return of her husband in an alternation between apathetic sexual surrender and mystic identification with the 'we female civilians' of the newspapers. There is a chance encounter with Stella; for Louie, Stella is all of superiority and goodness -- until the newspapers carry the story of her unsanctified liaison with Robert, whereupon Louie feels that her own efforts to virtue have been betrayed (256).

Trilling could have added at this point, that Louie does, nevertheless carry herself beyond this 'crisis of betrayal' -- in itself mirroring the other more serious 'crisis of betrayal' which Stella experiences -- just as Stella does, but in a different way. The important thing is, like Stella, Louie does not give up, and thus, she is as much a 'heroine' of the novel as Stella might be.

Trilling's main complaint, much like Morris' then, is that the novel complicates things rather than clarifying them. This 'risky' quality of Bowen's writing is not interpreted as a playful, fruitful, or interesting aspect of the work. Like Morris, Trilling also focuses her criticism on the characters of the novel, paying no attention to the fact that the 'risky' quality of the writing enhances rather than distracts from our reading of people, places, things, and events. Trilling, like Morris, 'misses the point' in that she acknowledges Bowen's gift as a writer, but at the same time wishes she would just proceed to 'the point' -- the point is, however, that getting to the point is the whole point! Bowen foregrounds the process of structure in its becoming. And thus, it is the event as well as the substance of the writing which continue to retain interest for postmodern readers of the text. In her writing, Bowen teaches us to follow the movement of a showing in our reading, much in the same way that Heidegger urges in his writing. This 'showing' involves a careful and patient thinking of event and structure, Being and time, as being inextricably related to one another. Such contemplations prove to be beyond Trilling, however, and she ends with the following judgment of Bowen's writing:

When a writer has this much gift of penetration and affection, when she has as many true and useful things to say about life as Miss Bowen always has, surely she does not need to indulge her literary 'giftedness' as Miss Bowen does; she can afford, as most writers of sensibility cannot, to move straight to the heart of the matter instead of mounting delicate effect upon effect. It is not fair to accuse Miss Bowen of preferring light to heat; there is plenty of fire in her spirit. It is her style which dampens it -- the relentless play of manner and mannerism to which her moral intention must constantly yield (256).

In the 'final analysis' then, what Trilling seems to resent is the difficulty of keeping two or multiple foci in view instead of only one, thus having to constantly mediate and attenuate purpose with play, objective distantiation with subjective intensification, time with space, epistemological concerns and questions with ontological concerns and questions.

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The reviews which follow the publishing of the novel, two on March 5th, 1949, and one on April 1st, 1949, are more carefully thought out, detailed analyses, and they hold definite interest in serving as further indication of the direction of analysis to follow, from the 1950s through to the 1990s, in the effects-history of Bowen's wartime novel. In his March review for the Time and Tide, L.P. Hartley lavishes praise for The Heat of the Day as an
‘unusual triangle drama’ which is “about a crisis within a crisis” (229). Like Wescott, Hartley uses the metaphor of a painter to describe Bowen’s writing, explaining that she counterpoints “masses of light and dark, for the sake of broad effects” (229). Hartley discusses the novel’s ‘main’ characters and events, as well as its ‘subsidiary’ groups and situations, noting that

the actual texture of the story is extremely close -- closer, perhaps, than in any of her other novels. And though the pattern of the story is plain enough the pattern of the thought is extremely complex and expressed in a style so pregnant, many-faceted, elliptical and colloquial, that it is not always easy to follow. All the physical senses and the senses of the mind seem to record their impressions simultaneously, giving an orchestral effect of extraordinary richness, such as no other writer that I know of has even attempted (229).

Hartley enjoys the relief which is provided from the more serious aspects of the novel -- such as the “grim problem of how Stella and Robert (and Harrison) will extricate themselves from their predicament” (229) -- with the alternating episodes of satirical or light comedy of the Kelways, Louie and Connie, or the mentally ill inmates of Wistaria Lodge. Like some other readers, however, he finds that the chief difficulty in the novel surrounds the issue of being convinced of Robert’s treachery. Hartley brings up the valid point that

it needs a special state of mind to be a traitor; and perhaps Miss Bowen never quite explains how Robert bridged the gulf between passive and active disloyalty. He is a theorist. ‘Betrayal’ has no meaning for him -- it is a word that belongs to a dead currency. ‘Freedom, freedom to be what? The muddled, mediocre, damned.’ ‘Who could want to be free when he could be strong?’ Country means nothing to him, he tells Stella: ‘You have been my country.’ Robert is chiefly seen as a fanatic and a man in love, two things which, though not dehumanizing, are depersonalizing, and Robert’s immediate impact is that of a force rather than a human being. One knows him very well by sight, but not so well to talk to. The shadowy, equivocal Harrison, haunter of doorsteps and street corners, has more substance than Robert, and partly because he lives for himself instead of for his ideas (and ‘himself includes Stella) he is a little pathetic (229).

Nevertheless, Hartley finds that the difficulty of conviction concerning Robert might after all be an intended effect, and he states that “it is from these three, [Stella, Robert, and Harrison] that the story gets its motive power; when they are present it vibrates like a violin string with an almost unbearable tautness” (229). In the more ‘relaxed’ episodes which are interspersed throughout the novel, Hartley finds that Bowen lavishes them with “treasures of observation” (229). And, finally, serving to link these ‘two groups’ together, Roderick also serves as “Stella’s link with unbedevilled human nature” (229). Passing over Louie, or even Stella herself, Hartley reads Roderick as the center and symbol of hope in the work, stating that “if he is spared he will carry on the Mount Morris tradition and add something to it” (229). Hartley turns the rest of his analysis to the ‘message’ of the novel, stating that it “is a sad book -- perhaps all the sadder because it does not wear the airs of a tragedy” (230). But, he finds that “it is not, ultimately, depressing, first because Stella’s spirit can give all that is required of it, and also because the story is a triumphant example of Miss Bowen’s art -- an art which, because it is so highly wrought, so multitudinously aware, so instinctive and yet so closely controlled by her mind, has an exhilarating, life-giving effect whatever her subject” (230). Certainly, however, the work “gives a bleak picture of the war years, whether one looks at the landscape or the figures” (229). For, as Hartley explains,

to Miss Bowen appearances (by which I mean objects or perception) are as stimulating and emotion-rousing as her human material; she gets out of the look, taste, feel, smell of a thing more than one knew was there. She does not only observe an object, she creates it, endowing it with a power of response almost implying sentience. What she seeks is not beauty (though how often she finds it!) but a thing’s essential quality (229).

The war certainly provided a challenge for Bowen in this sense, for in the midst of crisis, nothing in the world seemed capable of resonance, shape, or meaning. The world seemed dead to the dialogical imagination, for as Hartley explains,
crisis impoverishes life, a prolonged crisis deadens it. *The Heat of the Day* is a novel about a crisis within a crisis, much of it in London; and the squalor of bomb-blasted London has entered like iron into Miss Bowen's soul, creating a distaste that her admiration for the courage of its inhabitants cannot quite allay. Crisis is a great leveller, reducing everyone to its lowest common denominator, a dreary, uniform measure of things lacking (229-30).

In the novel, Bowen shows how "the newspapers tried to make what was left seem enviable and distinguished" (230), but the illusion could only be coaxed back for someone as naive as Louie. Otherwise,

one notices the negatives. They abound in the book; they are like milestones leading into a land of privation, where *panache* is unknown and even a death that ends a crisis must be hushed up and hurried out of remembrance -- even, perhaps, out of Stella's (230).

As Hartley states, "this mediocrity, this lack of stature in much of her human material haunts Miss Bowen" (230). Thus he reads her as refraining from "exploiting the melodrama inherent in her subject" (230), and finds that she in fact "muffles the resonance of its drama" (230) by having it "enacted, for the most part, on the spiritual plane -- the highest levels where love and danger meet" (230). Overall, however, Hartley's interpretation is that, although the novel offers up a gloomy thought on life -- as Roderick reflects, 'I suppose art is the only thing that can go on mattering once it has stopped hurting' -- yet in the midst of it "there is an exaltation that no one who reads this book will miss" (230).

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Turning now to the second review on this same day, March the 5th of 1949, one regrets to find out that what is one of the best of the 1949 reviews remains anonymous. In an article-length review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, an anonymous reviewer offers an interesting reading of the novel entitled "The Climate of Treason". Surveying Bowen's writing up until 1949, the reviewer states that it "shows few traces either of improvement or deterioration, but a steady, sustained record of repeated accomplishment" (152). According to the reviewer, "the strong impression made by *The Death of the Heart* has been given time to deepen and expand while for a decade it has remained without a successor, and reprints of her earlier books now add weight to this writer's claim, long apparent to the discriminating and widely acknowledged, to an exalted position among the imaginative novelists of her generation" (152). Then along comes the novel *The Heat of the Day* in 1949, much anticipated in the long stretch following Bowen's earlier success, throwing "new light on her talent and add[ing] a dimension to her potential range" (152). The reviewer judges that, although the novel is "not her most satisfactory, it is her most 'difficult' and her most ambitious" (152), furthermore noting that

her admirers may be both disappointed and reassured to find that Miss Bowen has not been content merely to repeat herself; *The Heat of the Day* seems to mark a point of transition in the development of her art, and its uncertainties imply further, perhaps more successful, attempts to resolve them (152).

The main 'fault' of the text, according to the reviewer, is Bowen's 'faltering' before "the daunting theme of active treason [which] replaces in the foreground of the novel that of the individual's passive, uneasy response to his time" (152). However, the reviewer actually applauds the novel as a further exploration of 'war-climate' beyond that of her wartime short stories. And, (s)he states that "so long as it remains so, it is on par with, and consistent with, the best of Miss Bowen's earlier work" (152). As such, her 'faltering' is read more as an effect of exploring new territory, and according to the reviewer, rather than being a 'negative' quality, it "hints at future surprises" (152).

The reviewer moves on to describe Bowen's 'skilfully recaptured' atmosphere of wartime London, noting that it seems almost tangible --

This climate of feeling is a major ingredient in the scheme of the novel, as its effect on human behaviour is perhaps the major theme. One by one figures materialize, detach themselves as it were from the pervading desolation of the emptying city, where movement is restricted and mechanical but emotional response is unnaturally quickened. These characters live in a physical and spiritual void, the vacuum of their time, and the
reaction of one to another is unpredictable and intense. In a world of impermanence they listlessly seek the deceptive permanence promised by love (152).

And then turning to discuss the ‘main’ character, Stella, the reviewer reads her as “yet another version of that key figure in the modern psychological novel: the attractive widow of forty who is conducting a love affair with a man rather younger than herself” (152). The reviewer notes that Stella is first introduced to us, “in an attitude of waiting, an attitude she is to resume at various points throughout the book” (152). This adds tension and suspense to “the heightened sensibilities and sense of isolation that are common to all love affairs but can be emphasized to a point both feverish and sinister in war-time” (152). And according to the reviewer, the strength of the book lies precisely in Bowen’s interpretation of war through love; in an important passage she fixes her lovers firmly in history:

Could these two have loved each other at a better time? At no other would they have been themselves; what had carried their world to its hour was in their bloodstream. The more imperative the love the deeper its draft on beings, till it has taken up all that ever went to their making, and according to what it draws on its nature is.... War at present worked as a thinning of the membrane between the this and the that, it was a becoming apparent -- but then what else is love?

It is their lack of background, or rather, the unreality of what background they have, of which both Stella and Robert are conscious in each other -- the mystery thrown by war over their pasts and the uncertainty veiling their futures, which draw them dangerously close while they remain strangers. Miss Bowen remarks with that semi-epigrammatic precision both jaunty and dignified that is distinctive of her style, ‘To have turned away from everything to one face is to find oneself face to face with everything.’ Stella turns away from family and friends to Robert, and finds herself face to face with more than she had bargained for (152).

It is at this point that the reviewer reads “the emergence of the plot” (152) in tandem with a “certain ambiguity of intention [which] threatens to blur the outlines of the book -- although this blurred effect may well be intentional” (152). The reviewer, as with other early readers of the novel, remarks upon the ‘crudity’ and ‘melodrama’ of the plot itself, stating, however, that there is “no rule by which a writer whose gift is for the refinement and elaboration of subtleties should not treat with success situations more obviously suited to the thriller” (152). Furthermore, “once she has established the melodramatic centre to her delicate design Miss Bowen is able to illuminate it by a series of approaches characteristically oblique” (152). But it is in the exposition of this central situation, which the reviewer admits as being “not an improbable one in its context, that she fails to convince, and its essential crudity withstands her discreetly allusive technique (152). The reviewer then proceeds to discuss the the unwinding of the plot in the novel, up to the point of its eventual ‘disappearance.’ The fact that interest is still sustained in the work during its long ‘anti-climax,’ and after the disappearance of a ‘melodramatic plot,’ proves to the reviewer that Bowen’s characters are independent “of the story that has brought them together” (152).

Discussing other characters and scenes of interest in the work, the reviewer predicts that the astute scenes depicting “the visits to Robert’s family in a home county... will probably be the most popular episodes in the book, as they are the most consistently amusing” (152). For,

an edge of satire not elsewhere apparent is added to Miss Bowen’s writing as she explores the inglenooks of Holme Dene and the smug economies of the home front. Mrs. Kelway, the formidably dainty matriarch; her doggy daughter Ernestine, boisterous in W.V.S. uniform; and the ghost of the late Mr. Kelway, still hovering round the pretentious house that had stifled the life out of him while he dreamed of escaping to another exactly the same -- these provide copy for some very funny pages, written with a pursuit of accuracy that saves them from parody (152).

Still though, the reviewer finds that the English middle-class Kelway family is perhaps “too easy a target” (152) for Bowen, and (s)he questions Bowen’s considerations of class distinctions, “a subject often shirked or bungled by contemporary writers” (152). As (s)he states,

Stella’s connexion with the landed gentry is established, with confident caution, in a
As with other readers who find the issue of treason in the novel troubling, the reviewer ends by accusing Bowen of being too bold.

But the problem seems to proceed from the fact that these readers require strict standards of ‘realism’ in order to find anything ‘fictional’ to be ‘credible.’ One might question, amongst other things, their easy identification of Bowen’s own beliefs with social satire occurring in fictional writing that can be interpreted as a critique of English bourgeois values. Furthermore, one might question the supposed seriousness of treason as a subject for treatment, the definition or meaning of treason, and whether or not Robert actually commits (active) treason, and so on. Nevertheless, in the reviewer’s reading, Bowen refuses to confront the subject of treason squarely, and (s)he finds her “refusal to do this makes the chapter in which Robert explains his actions and expounds his views the least satisfactory in the book” (152). (S)he elaborates:

As an objective character, he does not exist; as a traitor, he does not begin to convince; only as Stella’s lover does he enjoy a shadowy, subjective life. That he should be a shadowy figure conforms with the trance-like nature of Stella’s love for him and with the demands of the plot, which rests on the fact of his being an unknown quantity; but the vagueness surrounding his personality weakens the impact and obscures the meaning of a novel to which he should be the key. If only we knew more about him, if only we fully understood him, what a magnificent book this would be (152).

Obviously, and as with other early readers of the novel, it is the reviewer’s own refusal to radicalize her or his reading of the vagueness which does indeed surround most characters, scenes, and events in the work, which informs their bias against it.

For indeed, another reading of ‘the treason plot’ involves the ‘real’ possibility that it does not even ‘exist,’ and is perhaps nothing but the product of Stella’s imagination, ‘heated fantasy’ or ‘saving hallucination.’ Such radical possibilities are in fact not even considered until the 1995 publication of Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle’s book, Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives. That Bowen should be problematizing the traditional structural, stylistic, generic, and topical features of narrative seems to be beyond most of these initial readers of the work -- perhaps comprising a thought so risky that it cannot yet be articulated in any ‘bold’ or ‘outright’ way, but only in a metaphorical way. The recurring painting analogies, and references to foreground and background, figure and ground, portraits and allusions, contours and atmosphere, all in the attempt to describe Bowen’s writing and the text itself, would seem to imply that an understanding and reception of the text’s radical (spatial as well as narrative) quality lay just over the horizon. But one wonders how, if a reviewer can at least admit that Robert and Harrison both do not seem to exist as characters, (s)he can then turn to apply the logic of necessity to judge their possibility and the credibility of their background and their ‘actions’ within the ‘story.’

In fact, and beyond this consideration, it now seems odd that readers should be applying such strict criteria of verity to a fictional work, albeit a ‘historical narrative’ or a ‘war novel.’ It seems to postmodern readers that the truth claims inherent in the very idea of history (historiography, historical narrative, the war novel) are precisely what Bowen is problematizing in her text. At the very least, it seems that if one can recognize, following the narrator’s metatextual suggestion, that Harrison (and/or Robert) is “by the rules of fiction, with which life to be credible must comply,... a character ‘impossible’” (Bowen 140), that one should also recognize that conventional aspects of the novel are indeed being questioned, if not dissolved, by Bowen.

Nevertheless, this second to last review of 1949 ends on a ‘positive’ note, praising the construction of the novel as being directly in tune with and “adjusted to its mood and theme; people cross and recross each other’s paths by coincidence, time is relative to emotion, there are long periods of inaction, and when action does come it is arbitrary and unexpected” (152). The reviewer praises Bowen’s accomplishment of interpretation in the midst of wartime London, stating that she “triumphantly gives shape to shapelessness, catches the untidiness of life and, with no tying up of loose ends, gives it form and meaning; the meaning would go were the ends not left hanging” (152). With further praise for the open-ended quality of the work, the reviewer states that
her novels and stories have all been models of construction; this book has nothing to
touch the opening expository chapter of The Death of the Heart, the mingling of past
with present in The House in Paris, the balance held between the two pairs of lovers in
To the North or the imperceptible approach to the tragic climax of The Last September;
but were the jerks and lapses with which the story unfolds ironed out it would lose its
peculiar vitality (152).

Turning to discuss Bowen’s further development “of her simple and expressive style” (152) in The Heat of the Day,
the reviewer concedes that some may accuse Bowen of ‘over-development.’ Nevertheless, (s)he defends Bowen
from this charge:

There are passages here which remain obscure after a second reading. A habit, casual by
design, of repeating the same word several times in one sentence is more noticeable now
than before; this deliberate clumsiness leads on occasion to ambiguity. ‘So far, nothing
had happened to anyone she knew, or even to anyone she knew knew --’; surely to make
sense, this should read ‘to anyone anyone she knew knew’? One is ever grateful,
however, that Miss Bowen never forgets for a moment that she is
writing; her tricks of
style give virility to her sensitive prose, and the beauties hidden by many of her
obscurities, once fathomed, amply reward the effort (152).

“The Climate of Treason” ends with praise for Bowen’s experimental courageousness in choosing a
‘public’ or ‘historical’ subject such as war, not often broached in her previous writing. In a partial revision of the
erlier judgment, the reviewer states that “there are indications that, had she intended to, Miss Bowen could have
made a success of Robert and written a novel about treason” (152). (S)he interprets that, the fact that Bowen “has
chosen to skirt round this subject, suggests no more than that she does not now feel ready to treat it” (152). Reading
the novel as a ‘transitional’ work, the review ends by alluding to an important idea which has also been continued
throughout this paper -- extension.

As an imaginative interpretation of the effect of war on the manners, morals and
emotions of those not directly engaged in the fighting, this new novel, so profound and
comprehensive within its self-imposed limitations, adds another achievement to Miss
Bowen’s already remarkable list: only as an analysis of the heart and mind of the traitor
and the cause and effect of treason is it superficial. Since it promises, however, an
extension of her range, its successors will be awaited yet more eagerly than it has been
itself (152).

In the final review of 1949, dating from April 1st, Anne Fremantle reviews the novel for The
Commonweal. Comparing Bowen’s writing to cooking, Fremantle states that she has, as
everyone will agree, a wonderfully light hand for the pastry. Her prose is like
millefeuilles, paper-thin flake upon flake, adding up to a gossamer-wafered perfection,
solid and satisfying in every succulent detail (618).

This description is more than just playful, however, as Fremantle picks up on the dyadic aspect of Bowen’s writing
in the novel: ‘paper-thinness’ as well as ‘solidity,’ transparency and obliquity, light and dark, lightness and weight,
unconcealment and concealment, twilight. Bowen’s writing mediates this tension of incompatibles, attenuating a
sense of ‘chiaroscuro’ (light and dark) throughout the novel. But there is tension in a different way as well.
Fremantle discusses the dramatic tension in the work, and in describing Stella’s dilemma, she explains that
the world had censured Stella, and she had not defended herself by defaming the dead.
Now that she loved Robert, in an entire hermetic intimacy, Harrison was asking her to
believe the living self-defamed. The tension of the first scene is terrific: nothing else in
the book quite comes up to it, combining as it does, the moral, the macabre, and the
deserts of vast eternity (619).
Fremantle also offers up an interesting reading of the character Harrison, stating that he is "a sort of stylized private detective, of whose humanity, despite a reassuringly lower middle-class wish to have a place of his own, it is difficult to be convinced" (619). What is of interest here, amongst other things, is Fremantle’s description of Harrison as ‘stylized.’ He is an exaggerated character, or a character ‘impossible,’ as the narrator explains -- standing out as being obviously ‘fictional’ in the ostensibly ‘non-fictional’ or pseudo ‘fictional’ world of the historical narrative or war novel. However, this ‘stylized’ quality actually works to describe, not only most of the other characters, but also the work itself as a whole. Descriptions of people, places, and things, narrated events, and even the structure, genre(s), and topic(s), all stand out as highly stylized or exaggerated features of the text’s ontological landscape. Even the narrated thought of different characters is ‘stylized’ in this way, seeming to support the further interpretation that, in Bowen’s twilight world, the last possibility for thinking and living is grasped in the form of a ‘direction,’ ‘style,’ or the ‘freeplay of interpretations.’

A breakdown in the world has foregrounded the processes usually backgrounded and suppressed by (ontological) structures, revealing the insignificance of ‘the origin’ as such, and yet also exposing, at the same time, the hermeneutic quality of ontology and all structures of thought. Thus with truth grasped as interpretation, much of the structure has ‘disappeared’ from life, thinking, and writing, because in a crucial way, it is recognized as never having been structurally ‘present’ in the first place. Structure has lost its structure, but that does not mean that it cannot be, slowly and carefully, ‘stylized’ or coaxed back into ‘existence’ in a different way than it ever has ‘been.’ Meanwhile, and secondly, the possibility for conviction, for being convinced that the narrative Bowen creates, with its associated aspects, is a possible story at all, is thrust into the foreground of the novel. Fremantle broaches, in this early reading of the text, the radical possibilities extending out of a ‘character ‘impossible’’ such as Harrison. For indeed, to be made aware of the rhetoric of conviction is to be made aware of the fictive quality of truth, history, time, and perhaps even b/Being. Fremantle’s pinpointing of Harrison is especially interesting, for he is indeed the ‘turncoat’ of the text who opens up other possibilities for its interpretation.

Finally, Fremantle reads Bowen’s use of light in the work as a form of ‘heliotropism,’ a somehow ‘natural’ instinct in the writing, just as “certain plant-lice [are] forced to direct their movements towards the source of light” (619), or just as “the force of gravity determines the movement of a falling star or tumbling apple” (619). But, while one can perhaps agree that Bowen “uses light, not form, or shape, or soul or substance, as her frame of reference” (619), it is more difficult to agree with Fremantle that Bowen’s “will is in the light alone” (619), or that “light is the hero of The Heat of the Day” (619). For, what Fremantle overlooks, is the playful and paradoxical quality of Bowen’s referential frame of lighting. As a light of textual disturbance, which forces its own referential frame into ambiguity rather than establishing it unproblematically, Bowen’s lighting forces the reader to question the possibility of any such frame of reference whatsoever, textual or otherwise. Whether flickering, fading, low, theatrical, chemical, yellow, white, or quiet, this light works to perturb the ‘frame of reference,’ problematizing the idea that there can even be some outside, reliable, clear, and present reality which can be referred to with ease. And yet, this light is framing -- and as such, it is metaphorically and even materially indicative of our mysterious earthly en-framedness, or as Heidegger might say describing human ex-istence, our ‘thrown-ness’ (Dasein); Rorty, our ‘contingency’; others, our ‘situated-ness.’ In our perceptual acts of perceiving, reading, interpreting, and naming the world around us, we frame it. But in so doing, the percept, or what we frame (refer to), is at some point recognized as being always already framed in its own way, open or accessible to us through another opening always prior to that access. Bowen’s subtle language of lighting, in The Heat of the Day, teases out the recognition that knowledge (of ‘reality,’ of the past, of the war, of another being, or of an event, be it ‘treasonous’ or ‘wrongful’ or whatever) is never unmediated -- that is to say, it is mediated and never immediate. The shady Harrison is the incessant ‘middle’ of the text in this way, bringing with him, wherever he goes, the mediate sense of twilight. And it is mostly through him that Stella accesses ‘knowledge,’ however shady and equivocal, of the war, of Robert, and, strangely, of herself.
Chapter 2

The ‘Forties — Curious Admixtures and More Mixed Reviews

A heated academic argument passed between H.A. Mason of England and Dr. Betsky of America in the spring 1949 numbers of Scrutiny concerning the differences and similarities between the American and English cultural ‘scenes,’ and respectively, between writers of each country. Defending his position against Betsky, who had apparently accused Mason of complacency concerning writers of his own country, Mason writes an article in response entitled “Measure for Measure: Or Anglo-American Exchanges”. In this article, one is surprised to find that Mason, first of all, claims Bowen as a thorough example of what is internationally considered to be the best of English contemporary writing, without even a thought to her own sense of having a fractured identity as an Anglo-Irish writer. And secondly, one is surprised to find that he just as easily dismisses her against these ‘foreign estimations’ as merely ‘fashionable,’ popular but totally uninteresting from his ‘intellectual’ standpoint, and thus not worth considering as representative of the English ‘scene.’ In fact, Mason admits having experienced highbrow embarrassment and humiliation when, in conversation with ‘cultivated foreigners,’ he understands that they have taken, say, Stephen Spender, Rosamund Lehmann, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Elizabeth Bowen, or Graham Greene to be either ‘the best England has to offer,’ or ‘representative of the best the English can manage in the ‘philosophical novelist’s’ line” (3). However, referring to ‘fashions,’ ‘trends,’ ‘lines,’ and ‘literary wares,’ we begin to understand exactly where Mason himself is coming from. Pursuing an odd post-war fantasy of measure-for-measure “‘civilization-wide unity’” (2), apparently formulated as “graftings and cross-fertilizations” (8) between English writing and “the America one senses over the horizon” (8), one cannot take very seriously Mason’s harsh publishing-house assessments of different English writers and the English ‘scene’.

Nevertheless, Mason’s article points to an intellectual debate that was going on within England itself, in particular concerning ‘the death of the novel’ in the post-war period. Actually, this ‘debate’ had been going on for a long time; 1949 marked the end of the decade since the beginning of the war, and critics, academics, and writers alike were inspired, usually by an expressed sense of panic, to interpret, chronicle, justify, and/or periodize what had been accomplished in ‘English literature’ in that space of time. Mason’s insecurities about how English writing was being received and perceived at that time, in the ‘international scene,’ reflect the more insulated concerns within England. But moreover, all of these debates and attempts to periodize and defend English writing as a (national) ‘literature’ resonate throughout an even longer tradition of concerns within the English departments of Universities.

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Continuing on in the ‘great Leavisite tradition,’ English critics, academics, and writers had been working since the end of the First World War to fashion English into a serious discipline of study within the University. In his 1983 book, Literary Theory: An Introduction, Terry Eagleton traces the complex twentieth-century institutional rise of English as a subject for study and an academic discipline within the University. Back in the ‘birthplace’ of the new subject at Cambridge, F.R. Leavis, Queenie Dorothy Roth, I.A. Richards, William Empson, and L.C. Knights are discussed as the champions of English stemming from an alternative social class to that which had led Britain into the First World War.

F.R. Leavis was the son of a musical instruments dealer, Q.D. Roth the daughter of a draper and hosier, I.A. Richards the son of a works manager in Chesire. English was to be fashioned not by the patrician dilettantes who occupied the early Chairs of Literature at the ancient universities, but by the offspring of the provincial petty bourgeoisie. They were members of a social class entering the traditional Universities for the first time, able to identify and challenge the social assumptions which informed its literary judgments in a way that the devotees of Sir Arthur Quiller Couch were not. None of them had suffered the crippling disadvantages of a purely literary education of the Quiller Couch kind: F.R. Leavis had migrated to English from history, his pupil Q.D. Roth [later Q.D. Leavis] drew in her work on psychology and cultural anthropology. I.A. Richards had been trained in mental and moral sciences (31).
But furthermore, as Eagleton explains, “these men and women blasted apart the assumptions of the pre-war upper-class generation” (31). With the arrival of the Leavisites on the ‘scene,’ a revolution had occurred within the University.

No subsequent movement within English studies has come near to recapturing the courage and radicalism of their stand. In the early 1920s it was desperately unclear why English was worth studying at all; by the early 1930s it had become a question of why it was worth wasting your time on anything else. English was not only a subject worth studying, but the supremely civilizing pursuit, the spiritual essence of the social formation. Far from constituting some amateur or impressionistic enterprise, English was an arena in which the most fundamental questions of human existence -- what it meant to be a person, to engage in significant relationship with others, to live from the vital centre of the most essential values -- were thrown into vivid relief and made the object of the most intensive scrutiny (31).

Indeed, scrutiny of the philosophical (sociological and anthropological) kind was part of the curious admixture comprising English studies in the University.

Suitably, Scrutiny was the critical journal launched by the Leavises in 1932. And although Scrutiny “was the ideology of an uprooted, defensive intelligentsia who reinvented in literature what they could not locate in reality” (Eagleton 47), from Eagleton’s Marxist standpoint “it has yet to be surpassed in its tenacious devotion to the moral centrality of English studies, their crucial relevance to the quality of social life as a whole” (31). Eagleton explains his position by placing the late twentieth-century hegemonical orientation in English departments -- otherwise known as ‘literary theory,’ and often preferentially known as ‘critical theory,’ ‘cultural studies,’ or just ‘theory’ -- in contact with its ‘roots’ in the Leavisian revolution.

Whatever the ‘failure’ or ‘success’ of Scrutiny, however one might argue the toss between the anti-Leavisian prejudice of the literary establishment and the waspishness of the Scrutiny movement itself, the fact remains that English students in England today are ‘Leavisites’ whether they know it or not, irremediably altered by that historic intervention. There is no need to be a card-carrying Leavisite today than there is to be a card-carrying Copernican: that current has entered the bloodstream of English studies in England as Copernicus reshaped our astronomical beliefs, has become a form of spontaneous critical wisdom as deep-seated as our conviction that the earth moves round the sun. That the ‘Leavis debate’ is effectively dead is perhaps the major sign of Scrutiny’s victory (31).

Without reviewing the further complexities of Eagleton’s history of the rise of English and literary theory in the University, it suffices to say that a tradition of ‘literary investigation’ can be traced back from current theoretical pursuits back to I.A. Richards and the New Criticism, and from there to F.R. Leavis, who is thought by Eagleton to be “the true inheritor of Matthew Arnold” (34). Beyond this, one could continue following the thread back to Sir Walter Raleigh, Edmund Spenser, and countless others. And one could still follow the thread in a parallel journey back through other national traditions, such as the strong philosophical tradition in Germany -- back through Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Friedrich Nietzsche, A.W. Schlegel, Johann Fichte, Friedrich Schiller, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and beyond. One can even find aesthetic concerns in various guises extending as far back as Plato and Aristotle. At the risk of generalizing, one could say that the tradition is as ‘long’ as the history of aesthetic contemplation, as ‘wide’ as the variance of writers and thinkers all over the world, and as ‘deep’ as such ancient questions as ‘what is beautiful?’, ‘what is art?’, ‘what is Literature?’, and ‘why read Literature?’

Certainly, at least the understanding of the ‘bourgeois’ nascency of English in the University is not exclusively the retrospective historical formulation of Eagleton. On April 17th of 1949, the writer V.S. Pritchett published an article entitled “Prospects for the English Novel” in the New York Times Book Review. In this article, Pritchett returns to the debate over ‘the death of the English novel,’ and defends English writing from such a charge, explaining that the year 1949 has brought the end of “the ten years’ cramp” (1) experienced since the beginning of the Second World War. Reading English writing as the product of either ‘highbrows’ or ‘lowbrows,’ Pritchett states that the former “have at least kept up their standards or have remained silent” (1), while the latter “have really
"deteriorated." In the ‘void’ looming between such extremes, Pritchett reads the emergence of a ‘middlebrow’ English mentality taking over the ‘English scene.’

He says “now the author is obviously rattled by anxiety, has lost sparkle, and is lost in petty dullness.” And furthermore, Pritchett finds none of this to be surprising, especially if we reckon from the Spanish Civil War, we have had fourteen years of war and social revolution to contend with and neither war nor revolution is propitious for literature or criticism. It is rash and unkind to say that the novel is dead, but we might apply the words of Stephen Leacock’s description of the behavior of the typical Englishman who is spoken to by a stranger in a railway carriage: like him, the novel ‘has entered into a state resembling death.’

The novel is still a middle-class product, and the war and the revolution have given the middle classes a knock from which they have not recovered. It is indeed tempting to argue that the novel which has been the dominant historical expression of private enterprise, private capitalism and the interest in individual relationships, is becoming outmoded in a planned, socialized and mass society. (It has ceased to be a serious form of writing in Soviet Russia)

We have heard these concerns before in Bowen’s own ‘literary investigations’ -- various essays, articles, and reviews. Indeed, Bowen and Pritchett were friends, and thus it comes as no surprise to readers that she incorporates such concerns in her wartime historical narrative The Heat of the Day. Beyond this, both Pritchett and Bowen were proving themselves to be true Leavisites, “bound up with deeper judgments about the nature of history and society as a whole” (Eagleton 33). In Bowen’s novel, one can easily read a ‘scrutinizing’ influence in her attempt ‘to make the ordinary person (or man, as Pritchett puts it) intellectually acceptable’. Critics have come out with various interpretations of Bowen’s class biases, but one can at least interpret her emphasis on the individual’s psychological, moral, emotional, and even physical survival, not only of the war, but moreover within ‘mass society’ as an unconscious inheritance of Leavisian principles. As Eagleton explains,

Scrutiny was not just a journal, but the focus of a moral and cultural crusade: its adherents would go out to the schools and universities to do battles there, nurturing through the study of literature the kind of rich, complex, mature, discriminating, morally serious responses (all key Scrutiny terms) which would equip individuals to survive in a mechanized society of trashy romances, alienated labour, banal advertisements and vulgarizing mass media (33).

However, in the reading that this paper offers, Bowen twists these ‘highbrow’ concerns in order to be more critical of the very idea of individual identity and, at the same time, more accepting of one’s complicity within ‘the mass.’ Like Leavis, Bowen does not entertain any radical fantasies of trying to change ‘mass society’; in both cases, it is “less a matter of seeking to transform the mechanized society which gave birth to this withered culture than of seeking to withstand it” (33). As a Marxist himself, Eagleton criticizes this attitude as acquiescence, stating that “in this sense, Scrutiny had thrown in the towel from the start” (33). But in the case of Bowen, it can be argued that she is more consistently ambiguous about the “effects of ‘mass civilization’” (34) — if they are judged as ‘insidious,’ that is to a large extent due to the fact that we are all responsible for them. Rather than shirking ‘mass culture,’ Bowen was directly engaged with it in theory and in practice. And in the first place, one doubts that she regarded her own acceptance of the contemporary world as a mutually exclusive arrangement, or in other words, as excluding the possibility for critical thinking and writing, and for the creation of works of art which might inspire change, however moderate that might be judged by others. Moreover, she was entirely open to the constructive possibilities which remained for thinking and writing within the age of technological immobility.

The Heat of the Day was the work which, according to Pritchett, broke “the silence which dates from before the war” (1). But in his opinion, Graham Greene, Rex Warner, George Orwell, and Evelyn Waugh are still variously afflicted; and we might add to this list names which seem to me equally eminent: Frank O’Connor and Sean O’Faolain. Even the prolific Joyce Cary, author of The Horse’s Mouth, richest comic novel of the last ten years, appears to be lagging; and how long is it since Rosamund Lehmann’s The Ballad and the Source?
Pritchett makes reference to Bowen’s stalling of her wartime novel, explaining that it is not uncommon anymore to hear experienced novelists, such as herself, saying that they have got stuck in a novel they cannot finish, or that they have begun again and cannot move beyond.

One critic has even refused to allow that Elizabeth Bowen’s book is a novel at all, but a collection of brilliant short stories. If this is so, I do not consider it to be a fault but a very interesting and original merit and perhaps, in itself, a criticism of the contemporary novel; but one can see how the ten years’ cramp tends to a desperate willing of episodes on to paper to get the book done at all costs (1).

Certainly, this is an interesting reading of the work, and yet another counter argument can be made that, if it is structured somehow like a series of short stories, end on end, nonetheless there is nothing desperate about The Heat of the Day. Rather, its construction seems to be a meticulous overpainting upon the already existent, sketchy ‘raw material’ of short stories which Bowen wrote as either ‘desperate’ or ‘spontaneous’ responses to what was happening all around herself throughout the war.

Nevertheless, Pritchett continues on in the Leavisian strain, explaining that the incidence of the ten years’ cramp, of course, depended on how the individual novelists were situated when the war caught them. The older were cheated of their maturity, the younger were denied a start. What is really shocking about the short list at the beginning of this article is that there are so few young names creeping up for membership; and that the gulf between the intelligent novels and the popular pulp has become wider than it has ever been (1).

Such thoughts lead Pritchett to turn (‘morbidly,’ as he says) to the history of “the novel’s beginning in the eighteenth century, when it displaced the drama” (1). If displacement is indeed the mechanism of historical and/or aesthetic change, then Pritchett wonders “what new form... is threatening to take the place of the novel in the new life we are so successfully moving into in England?” (1) Pritchett admits his ambivalence, but thinks “the fact that the English method of revolution is unquestionably successful, has in itself been damaging to the creative mind” (1). One wonders what ‘revolution’ he may be referring to, until, reading along a little further, we see a reference to “the new mass society” (1). Pritchett feels that “energies that might have gone into literature have been diverted into the enormous gymnastic exercises of social adaptation” (1). Pritchett is pessimistic, and he responds to the optimist, who might say ‘well, why not make a go of it?’, that “one has only to look at the life of the very young novelist to see how he is prevented from the start” (1). For, according to Pritchett,

The days when a young man of talent could eke out a living on a little free-lance journalism, or a part-time job, while he trained himself as a novelist, have gone. He cannot afford that life any longer. His generation is working full time in the B.B.C. and never learns to write. The state, the large organizations of collective society, with the aid of the appalling tax-collector and the cost of living, are destroying English literature; and the wily and resourceful mind of the creative artist has not yet found a way of adapting itself to the new life nor learned to cadge a way of independent living off the new society (1).

By way of explaining such a situation, Pritchett claims that “the revolution you work for is never the revolution you get” (1). For “in the Thirties we expected political novels, socially conscious novels, earnest novels and novels enriched by a vivid sense of ordinary life” (1). And, according to Pritchett, George Orwell and Rex Warner were the only two political novelists responding to such ideals. He finds he has to “omit Koestler, who has merely camped in England, who does not understand us and whom, anyway, we ought not to claim -- though he likes to lay claim to us” (1). And what is more, Pritchett notes that the best works of Orwell and Warner “are allegories or fantasies” (1). He explains that what we really hoped for in the Thirties was another Balzac, novels like Zola’s Germinal, Dickens’ Hard Times and (more temperately) George Eliot’s Middlemarch. We did not get novels of this kind.

Still, a very important beginning was made which the war diverted into duller channels. I refer to documentary literature, to the kind of thing that was published in
New Writing. It was an attempt to write down the everyday facts in the life of the new England that had never been in print before: to document the factory worker, the railway man, the sailor, the miner, and so on; and especially there was the impulse to put down common speech. The war ruined documentary writing by justifying it, by expanding the opportunities. We have been flooded with simple naturalistic accounts of the life of the aircraftsman, the motor torpedo boat commander, the prisoner of war, the man in the army of occupation, in every country all over the world. The common man has come to the top with a vengeance and he is bored with the other common men (1).

According to Pritchett, then, the war ruined a lot of things, and could be held single-handedly responsible for 'the death of the novel.' He feels that the documentary movement, despite its accomplishments, "is dying of ridicule, banality and disappointment" (1), and that meanwhile, the best writers are turning to the past with evident nostalgia. Nevertheless, he defends contemporary English novelists such as Bowen "from the old granny point of view of the Marxist critics" (21). Pritchett explains that these critics' "Queen Victoria-like propensity for not being amused is still occasionally audible (especially when they get a new dose of English literary criticism from the Moscow medicine chest)" (21). And as Pritchett understands it, all the writers he has so far mentioned would be judged by the Marxist critics as being "decadent and [having] retreated into private life and the wickedness of formalism" (21). Contrary to the Russian novelists -- such as Alexander Fadayev, who bragged to Pritchett that "Russian writers had had no difficulty of adaptation during or after the war [as] they were so well integrated" (21) -- English novelists on the whole felt alienated in the 'new mass society.'

The fact is that the English novelists are aware that revolution has provided them primarily with esthetic and intellectual problems and not with anxieties of the social conscience. Obviously the pressure of life upon us has destroyed the conventions into which literary portraiture used to fall (21).

However, Pritchett finds that the literary responses to this situation result in a curious admixture or 'compromise,' which is nevertheless indicative of an exciting and different direction for English writing.

All the stock characters have to be thrown away or re-examined and my impression is that the typical approach to character has now become anthropological. The English novelist anthropologizes the imagination, collects its native rites. In our pragmatic English way we have refused Marxism; we have refused Freud; we have not been seriously caught by the Kafka fever; but we have invented a mixture of our own, and it is so peculiar to ourselves that I rather suspect our novels are far less popular or understood outside England than they used to be (21).

Turning to examples, Pritchett discusses the novels of Henry Green, with their odd gerundial titles, Living, Loving, Concluding, or others such as Blindness or Back. Writers like Green, Compton-Burnett, and Bowen, according to Pritchett, have "added to the documentary a sense of the mysteriousness of life" (21), writing of common people "without using a single left-wing cliché and indeed without a shadow of Leftist belief" (21). He finds that Bowen's pictures of the lower classes in The Death of the Heart and The Heat of the Day show an interesting and anthropological "power of acute generalization" (21). And moreover, these novelists find a 'poetic' value in being human; their characters "begin to have souls" (21). According to Pritchett, the questions which novelists such as Bowen now pursue are philosophical in orientation: "What peculiar private rites, what mysterious everyday, half-gods do people attend?" (21). In other words, the novelist pursues the existential: how does the modern human "survive as a ponderable life in the horrors, the dullness, the machine life of today?" (21) And in the quest to make this average 'mass' human intellectually acceptable, "it is as if Henry James and the documentary writers had arrived at some sort of compromise" (21). What this translates to, according to Pritchett, is the slow fading away of "the old kind of picaresque novel, or the novel of exciting episode and plot" (21). Instead, this "has been quietened down and has been turned into itself" (21). And interestingly, Pritchett defines the effect as a metafictional or metatextual one, wherein "thrillers are now used for the purpose of criticism" (21). Certainly, Pritchett's views can be expanded to a more detailed reading of The Heat of the Day. We can read Bowen as returning to the picaresque novel of episode and plot, and with her curious admixture of genres (spy, thriller, detective, romance, etcetera), using this structure allegorically to speculate on the existential state of human beings, not only in the age of 'mass society,' but in the 'atomic age.'
It is at this point that Pritchett mentions Leavis, and criticizes what he understands as his error "of supposing that the extroverted novels of adventure, entertainment, sociability and strong plot -- Fielding, Dickens, Hardy, for example, but particularly the novels of the eighteenth century -- were outgrown because they lacked a moral dimension and were unconcerned with the spiritual growth of their characters (21). Pritchett finds that, rather, the novels of the 'genial tradition' were bound by a worldview which "dominated the time intellectually and to which everyone assented" (22). According to Pritchett, these writers thought "they knew exactly what a man was" (22) because they had not yet experienced a crisis on par with the Second World War. Thus the only reason Pritchett finds the 'middle-brow novel' -- or "the novel of the film' which tries so hard to keep up this tradition" (22) -- to be a failure, is that there is no longer any "general view of the world' to sustain it" (22). On the whole then, Pritchett agrees with Leavis' assessment that "the morally significant novel is now the only one that is tolerable" (22), but he finds Leavis to be 'too narrow a doctrinaire' in applying his standards to contemporary writers. He ends by saying that

if we have stood still for the last fourteen years since the Spanish Civil War I think we have not been idle. We have been most diligently and searchingly revising the ordinary material of the novel. From this documentary soil I prophesy that we shall shortly grow the great eccentric and romantic blooms which are in our tradition; and, eventually, what has been balking for years, the great subject. For it is to our tradition that we are crabwise returning (22).

In the present context, it seems that 'the great subject' would be exactly what Pritchett suggests, perhaps without daring to name it -- compromise, or the human ability to be flexible in adaptation to change, historical or otherwise, simultaneously accepting and critical of the horrors of the past, the present 'reality,' and the unknown and still possible future.

During the remainder of 1949, Bowen's novel receives a series of mixed reviews. In his "Hell on Earth: Six Versions", a review of Bowen's novel along with five other wartime works, Vernon Young appreciates the "generous ambiguity [which] is... a purposeful part of her meaning" (317) in The Heat of the Day, and also defends Bowen against the resistance she has come up against "in anti-elliptical quarters" (318). Young finds Bowen's wartime novel to be a fictional "rendezvous with death, or its penultimate condition" (311). Recognizing Stella's dilemma as being only the 'circumstantial subject' of the text, he states that Bowen's writing "has an interesting indirection which is yet not too indirect for focusing on the immediacy of conversations enriched by the accurate idioms of class or on the properties of [her] most protected devotion: the reflection of persons in their things, the intimate appointments of a street, a house, a room, the objects in a room" (318). Young feels that Bowen's indirection must be judged in its context of contributing in a philosophical way to "the gesture of relatedness made by the inanimate" (318). He explains that, from his perspective,

in Miss Bowen's city of death, life is guarded in whatever of life remains. Her feeling for this suspension between existence and oblivion is quite... keen....

For those of us who did not dwell in the toppling cities of Helltime Europe, the community of the quick and dead must remain more impalpable than real. That this was a nucleating experience for the European literary mind we need have no doubt if we had read only its results in the work of... Elizabeth Bowen (318).

David Daiches' gives a more lukewarm review of Bowen's fiction. However, he finds The Heat of the Day to be her most complicated, striking, and ambitious work so far, but as such, almost impossible to describe -- "the meaning in Miss Bowen's novels sometimes almost disappears under its own weight" (313). Calling Bowen a 'muffled poet,' Daiches asserts that "the actual writing has become so charged, so loaded with meaning in every phrase, in every pause, that we feel that this is about as far as prose can go in this direction" (312). Both Daiches and Elizabeth Hardwick, in her article on Bowen's fiction, find Robert Kelway to be an incredible character, although Hardwick's criticism is sharper. Whereas Daiches remains unconvinced, Hardwick reads Robert as the main character of the novel, and at that, painfully unconvincing. She states that "Robert Kelway seems both unfamiliar with and embarrassed by Nazi ideology; he is 'English,' as thoroughly discomfited by an extreme position as the author herself" (1117). Hardwick herself finds it "impossible... to exaggerate the stubborn inadequacy of [Robert's] motivation for treason" (1117-18). Writing Bowen off as "a conservative of nostalgic
temperament” (1115), split between the “romantic feminist” (1114) and “the well-bred woman of sensibility, moderately elegant, sensitive to differences in class, moralistic about taste, courtesy and fidelity” (1114), Hardwick communicates her impatience with the novel as

a curiously sentimental and confused reflection on a deplorable family with a stunted sense of the emotional value of property; and that this is the true theme is elaborately and tediously acknowledged by the subplot, which has to do with an estate in Ireland inherited by Stella Rodney’s son. As a political novel, or a commentary on the English middle class, or a character novel, except for the engaging treatment of Stella Rodney, it is too impalpable to be held in the mind (1118).

Finally, in his 1949 book Inclinations, Edward Sackville-West includes an essay entitled “Ladies whose bright Pens...” on Bowen and Ivy Compton-Burnett. He starts out defending women writers against their male counterparts as being more flexible and more sharp at the same time, and being more careful to keep within a human or actual scope. He praises Bowen for facing her times head-on and exhaustively, thoroughly exploring her subject within the scope of “the individual trembling on the verge of irreconcilable ties” (79). He finds her wartime novel to be her largest and most ‘far-reaching’ work, and he claims that in it, she “achieves by subtlety what a male novelist, treating a similar subject, would have tried to achieve by power” (95-6). Sackville-West’s reading is on the whole positive and interesting, in that he also grasps the allegorical aspect of the work. In his reading, The Heat of the Day invokes Bowen’s unceasing “concern with the opposition between poetry and that which is foreign or hostile to it” (97-8). Her writing, according to Sackville-West, “has the exaltation and gravity of music, its boldness and freedom” (100). And even though he finds her method to be traditional -- and “in this, as in other features of her technique, she is the reverse of an experimental writer” (101) -- he feels that, like Charlotte Brontë, Bowen derives an originality “from poetic vision and a completely sane grasp of the human mystery” (101).
Chapter 3

The Cultural Crisis of the ‘Fifties

In the nineteen-fifties, Bowen is increasingly swept up into the many extended post-war considerations of English fiction, which had started to appear as early as 1946, with Henry Reed’s book The Novel Since 1939, L.P. Hartley’s 1946 article for John Lehmann’s New Writing and Daylight journal entitled “The Future of Fiction”, and then again in 1948 with V.S. Pritchett’s article for the Partisan Review entitled “The Future of English Fiction”. After 1949, we find mentions of Bowen and/or her wartime works, including The Heat of the Day, in eleven different considerations of English fiction at mid-century, the majority of them being books. Furthermore, most of these readings are concentrated around assessing the current ‘state’ of writing in the face of what the critic perceives to be the concurrent cultural crisis of the times.

In his English Literature of the Twentieth Century of 1951, A.S. Collins compares Bowen to Woolf, and finds The Heat of the Day to be “a psychological study at once detailed and reticent, suggestive rather than analytical” (260). He states that, “in a way typical of all her work, [Bowen] shows us people acting under the pressure of the current time, ‘creatures of history’ and creatures of the day” (261). Summing up, he finds that “where Virginia Woolf found it necessary to revolutionise the writing of the novel, Elizabeth Bowen showed how it was possible to employ similar talents in the revivifying of a traditional novel” (261).

A year later, in his Rehearsals of Discomposure: Alienation and Reconciliation in Modern Literature, Nathan A. Scott, Jr. gives an interesting reading of the work of Franz Kafka, Ignazio Silone, D.H. Lawrence, and T.S. Eliot, along with many other writers, including Bowen. Scott compares Bowen to Kafka, and discusses the latter as a curious and enigmatic writer “whose genius so teasingly eludes the critical alembic, whose grammar is so far beyond the circumference of ‘modern’ thought, and whose experience seems yet so consonant with the contemporary” (12). And he explains that, as such, the intensity and the animus that have characterized discussion about Kafka in recent years can be understood as frustration with “metaphysical overtones of a kind that appear in perhaps only a handful of novels written in this century and that are of a type particularly offensive to the secular imagination” (12). According to Scott, the initial difficulty that readers have in encountering Kafka is that he “is, first and last, preoccupied with that dimension of our world’s meaning which cannot be fully comprehended in terms of purely empirical categories and to which we can establish a meaningful relation only by transcending the conventional immediacies of social and biological existence” (12-13). Departing from the vehicle of reportage which “both critic and plain reader have come to expect their novels to be” (13), Scott explains that Kafka thus “irritates his readers into dogmatic invective and abuse” (13).

And in Scott’s view, the reason for this departure is that, rather than merely present a segment of human life, Kafka urges “us through a process of discovery -- of ourselves and of a relation in which we stand to forces which run ‘counter to the familiar systole and disastole of the human heart and its history’” (13). But furthermore, Scott finds that Kafka leaves poetic gaps in his writing, and it is at this point that he draws a comparison between Bowen and others and Kafka.

Baudelaire once remarked, by way of explaining his conception of poetry: ‘In the written word, there is always a gap completely by the imagination of the hearer.’ And, of course, it is through our completion of this gap that literature, in its own magical way, enlarges our awareness of the world’s dimensions. But because of the defection, already mentioned, which has characterized the general history of the modern novel, this function has been chiefly performed by poetry -- and by those novels whose texture has been more akin to poetry than to prose. And I think that it would be fair to say that where the novelist has been aware of this dilemma his work has assumed a problematic aspect, in the sense that it has been the happy or unhappy result of an effort aimed at a fusion of Naturalism (which has been, on the whole, the tradition of the modern novel) and Symbolism (which has been chiefly a characteristic tendency of modern poetry). Indeed, it is in terms of this ambivalence of attitude that we must understand the work of Joyce and Proust and Kafka -- and among living writers, of Djuna Barnes and Elizabeth Bowen, of Henry Green and William Samson, of Graham Greene and Robert Penn Warren (13-14).
In what is an adept early assessment of modern writing, English and European, it is interesting to find Scott grouping Bowen in with Kafka, Joyce, Proust, and Woolf, as a writer of a type of "novel which renders the rhythms of an interior life beneath the control of intelligence" (70).

In 1953, G.S. Fraser published *The Modern Writer and His World: Continuity and Innovation in Twentieth-Century English Literature*, a collection of essays which includes a review of *The Heat of the Day* along with several other references to Bowen in different essays. In one piece, Fraser briefly discusses Bowen’s peculiar status as an Anglo-Irish writer, noting with interest that the two men who brought life back to English Comedy in the 1890s were both Irish; so before them, were Congreve, Farquhar, Goldsmith, and Sheridan, and so have been a number of novelists who have handled comic dialogue and situation in the novel with special vitality, Maria Edgeworth, Charles Lever, Sheridan Lefanu, Somerville and Ross, Elizabeth Bowen. These writers, it should be noted, were all members of the Protestant minority in southern Ireland, tending to think of themselves as a kind of aristocracy, morally bound to display in their speech and manners a certain gaiety and style. Apart from these special attitudes of a minority group, the Irish people in general have a feeling for speech as a social art, a raciness, wit, and fluency, and a taste for rhetoric which are much less typical of the English" (193).

In another interesting essay on “Critics from Cambridge”, discussing the criticism of F.R. Leavis, William Empson, I.A. Richards, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, John Speirs, L.H. Myers, T.F. Powys, Adrian Bell and many others, Scott discusses *Scrutiny* in its heyday as representing “an influential but isolated point of view: ‘modernist’ in relation to the older academicism (it was Leavis and his friends who forced university teachers of English to treat Eliot and Lawrence seriously); but conservative in relation to many other manifestations of ‘modernism’ (such as Joyce, for instance)” (395). Scott discusses this contradiction in reference to the fact that the *Scrutiny* crew could not withstand a certain confrontation with nihilism that many novelists and poets had undertaken since the 1930s: “If *The Waste Land* seemed to express almost complete despair, yet its pessimism was not as slackly and complacently negative as that of Joyce” (394). The work of “dangerously smart or fashionable writers like the Sitwells or Mrs Woolf or Aldous Huxley, or of the poets of the 1930s onwards from Auden to Dylan Thomas” (394) was not welcomed by the scrutinizing Cambridge critics.

Whether by concentrating on politics, like Auden in much of his early work, or by remaining content with a confused romantic subjectivism, like Thomas, the poets of the 1930s -- and even more the popular novelists of the 1930s, like Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene and Elizabeth Bowen, apparently involved deeply in urban worlds, smart or comic or sinister -- must have seemed to the *Scrutiny* critics to be ignoring, as Lawrence and Eliot and Pound have not, the profounder theme of cultural disintegration and the need for getting back to the deep sources of life (394).

It is interesting to note, then, that if one is indeed going against the Leavisite tradition in admiring the work of Bowen, certainly the effects-history of her text *The Heat of the Day* shows a gradual return to the ontological concerns and questions which are themselves foregrounded within the text, and which can be compared to the Leavisian criteria for ‘profounder themes.’

In 1954, Walter Allen published a short critical history entitled *The English Novel*. In it he views Bowen as a writer who should be considered in terms of her attempts to revive the form of the novel after the shattering of its structure by Joyce and Lawrence. Allen understands that this problematic for modern writers of the novel can be solved through mediating the discoveries of Joyce and Lawrence with the realization that, “if the novel is to fulfil its purpose as the agent, in Trilling’s phrase, of the moral imagination, stucture is as necessary as it ever was” (329). He explains that no one has yet succeeded in solving the problem on a large scale, but it is because they have solved it, or partly solved it, within the limits they have set themselves that we can consider Graham Greene, Joyce Cary, Elizabeth Bowen, Henry Green, Anthony Powell, L.P. Hartley, James Hanley, and P.H. Newby as among the most significant English novelists at present writing (329).
Allen also considers Bowen to be a writer who mediates the demands of prose and poetry, and in this way, he compares her to the late Victorian novelist George Meredith.

"Wit and poetry exist side by side, and each irradiates the other. It is this combination that gives Meredith his special place in the novel. In the history of the novel, however, it is the poetry that is important. A mind come suddenly to obscure consciousness of itself, trembling on the verge of half-apprehended self-discovery, can be shown directly only through poetry. Meredith is the first master of this kind of poetry in the English novel, and in this respect he stands behind Henry James, with what Stephen Spender has called his 'described poetry,' D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and later novelists like Elizabeth Bowen (232)."

It is in this sense that Allen finds Bowen has fulfilled her statement of the novelist’s mission as that of delivering 'the non-poetic statement of a poetic truth.'

In his 1956 book, *Forces in Modern British Literature: 1885-1956*, William York Tindall groups Bowen in with 'stream-of-consciousness' thinkers and writers extending out of the work of: Laurence Sterne, the Romantic poets, Proust, Turgenev, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, André Gide, Édouard Dujardin, William James, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, Joseph Conrad, George Moore, Dorothy Richardson, Surrealist artists like André Breton, Joyce, Woolf, Ford Madox Ford, and Katherine Mansfield, not to mention others. Tindall omits commentary on *The Heat of the Day*, concentrating rather on several pre-war novels and on "the elliptical, inconclusive form of [her wartime short] stories [which,] though reflecting Mansfield and Chekhov, no doubt, are an additional commentary on the times" (208). Defending "the subjective stream-of-consciousness novel" against classicists (such as Herbert Read, Wyndham Lewis, I.A. Richards, Yeats, C.P. Snow, William Empson, F.R. Leavis, and in France, Julien Benda), Tindall describes "the followers of Bergson" as being misunderstood and dismissed as those "who were menacing Western culture by their indecent abandonment to time, disintegration, and flow" (209). Finally, Tindall notes that it was not moral earnestness of the Leavisian kind which "at last discouraged the subjective novelists" (211), but rather "economic, political, and spiritual problems, increasingly pressing, [which] were beyond the capacity of the interior monologue" (211). No doubt, this explanation accounts for the fact that *The Heat of the Day* is not read as being in the 'stream-of-consciousness' tradition. As Tindall states,

"when more sensitive men of our turbulent times prospected rivers of the interior, they preferred descent to deeper pools, which symbols alone could fathom and irrational conduct illustrate. For such descents the familiar reaches of the stream of consciousness were far too shallow (211)."

Elsewhere, Tindall compares Bowen to Henry Green and L.P. Hartley; in his reading, all three novelists occupy "the place of highest distinction among surviving symbolists" (292).

In a 1956 collection of essays edited by John Lehmann, entitled *The Craft of Letters in England: A Symposium*, Philip Toynbee distinguishes Bowen's work from that of Kafka's in his essay "Experiment and the Future of the Novel". He states that, although she "has presented us with a new sensibility and a new form of feminine intelligence" (62), she "is not what we mean by an experimental novelist as that Kafka is precisely one of the things that we do mean by it" (62). In the same symposium, however, Francis Wyndham presents an essay entitled "Twenty-five Years of the Novel!", wherein he claims that Bowen, amongst other writers, has "set a dauntingly high standard for the young writer of today" (47). Commenting on her two post-war novels, *The Heat of the Day* and *A World of Love*, Wyndham feels that these works "show mainly technical developments, though of impressive and sophisticated virtuosity" (50). But moreover, "of those novelists at the height of their powers when war was declared only Mr. Green in *Caught* and Miss Bowen in *The Heat of the Day* made serious attempts to approach the subject of war, both taking oblique roads towards it" (51). Finally, Wyndham finds Bowen's writing, especially of dialogue, to be "as tentative as Henry James" (55), and so subtle that he finds it demands "an alertness, even a faculty of intuition [in the reader] that is unnecessary for appreciation of (for example) a book by Graham Greene, where the narrative has the speed and clarity of a film and the complexity lies in the situations described" (55). According to Wyndham,

"such sophisticated writers are sometimes accused of placing more importance on method than content, of being 'writer's writers'; and certainly a degree of virtuosity can be reached where the subject is in danger of appearing trivial in contrast to its treatment. Yet how dull and pedestrian the worthy, talented and impersonal novel can seem beside..."
the work of the virtuosos! (56)

Jack Lindsay's 1956 book *After the 'Thirties: the Novel in Britain, and Its Future* had begun “as an effort to tackle the postwar crisis in literature and to put forward some positive suggestions” (7). In his chapter “What the Problem Is”, he states that the ‘fact’ that the world is “in the midst of a cultural crisis” (11) in 1956 does not need to be proved. Originally, he set out to write a long section prefacing the book which would prove that fact. But in collecting testimonies, he found “that everyone agreed about the crisis” (11). As he explains,

there were no dissentient voices. The only difference lay in the explanation of causes and the interpretation of the event. I felt myself relieved from the necessity of having to prove the existence of the phenomena that I wanted to discuss (11).

However, Lindsay finds that the idea of crisis is nevertheless elusive. It is not just that it is an age of transition, for “every age has been transitional, with social and economic forms in process of breakdown and reformation” (11). Rather, he finds “that the transitional quality of today is different from that of previous ages” (12). And, as Lindsay explains, it is

in this aspect of difference we must presume that the core of the crisis is to be found. The implication is that the changes are more deepgoing than previously and that there is little or nothing in common between the old order in dissolution and the new order ‘which has not yet taken definite shape’. In former transitions the elements of similarity between the old and the new cushioned the shocks of change; but now there seems to be no comfortable continuity (12).

Quoting the artist Henry Moore’s observations on ‘the current cultural crisis,’ Lindsay concurs that

when a transition is as sharp as all that, we are surely approaching a revolutionary period. Yet the position does not seem to Moore to make a revolutionary demand; for he sees its essence in confusion and indeterminateness. In his view, the artist is at a loss because he cannot attach himself effectively to a world ‘in dissolution,’ yet the future has no definite shape and he is unable to help in making it more definite (12).

Lindsay concurs with this view because he believes that the crisis at mid-century involves a weakening of all previous categories of thought, such that “the whole political arena has been reduced to the level of a dull and meaningless debating club, [and] the rest of our society is also flattened down to an uninspiring round of shadow-combats and philistine complacencies” (13). This “last and dullest of all revolutions” (14) results in the same moral according to Lindsay, “whether the ‘new order’ seems mistily indeterminate or deadly dull and levelling” (14) -- as he puts it, “conflict has faded out of life” (14). Wide social and economic changes have occurred and the changes have brought about cultural confusion or paralysis. Lindsay looks out into his world and finds that “politics consist of two parties politely disagreeing to agree: both courting the new ruling class, the Common Man, who is sitting pretty, smug and philistine” (14). With the loss of effectiveness and significance, Lindsay finds that he cannot blame writers “for turning to small personal themes -- above all to themes of childhood, of middle-class living before the war -- or to abstract experimentation with words” (14). As he sees it, “the only ‘enemy’ appears as somebody outside the deadly round of accepted values -- a ‘spy’ or an ‘enemy-agent’ of some sort” (14).

In his chapter “The Lesson of the 1930’s”, Lindsay analyzes a statement made by Bowen in *The Spectator*, January, 1941, to the effect that “the movement of the 1930’s had been... the Romantic Movement of our century” (34). As he paraphrases, Bowen had found that

its characteristics had been youth and masculinity, with a strong political purpose; also it was European in outlook and it was ‘towered over by an idea, its idea, of the U.S.S.R.’ The Spanish war had been its rallying-point and its symbol. Yet, after all, its best products had been, not realistic reportage, but Kafka-type fantasies. Though owning a genuine integrity, the writers lacked irony and the power to generalise or synthesise. Middle-class youths, they turned to what seemed a power outside themselves, outside their own lost world -- the proletariat. But it was an idealised proletariat. In England or abroad, they were always closed in their own intellectual world, their own circle of personal emotions; and so in the end they were as ‘claustrophobic as any middle-class
As Lindsay puts it, what had emerged then in the nineteen-thirties, was a lack of faith in art, and "a failure to grasp its necessary part in guiding men through dangerous places and in organising the spiritual forces which already belong to the next phase of history" (40). He finds that "into the heart of the effort to define a new active relation of art and life the old passive or contemplative attitude intrudes" (40). And thus, 'realistic reportage' and 'fantastic allegory' are not fully merged, but rather remain split.

It remains curious, then, that Lindsay should turn to blame Bowen, along with others, for "a simple decline in energy, in any sort of conviction" (102) in the post-war years. He more or less sides with Anthony Quinton's view, in a radio talk of July, 1954, entitled A Refusal to Look, that Bowen, Nigel Balchin, and Graham Greene, for instance, had been entirely ineffective in facing the times and in adequately portraying the contemporary moral and social 'middle-class reality.' Regarding this 'reality' as a 'sickness of conscience,' Quinton had blamed writers of hardly touching this aspect of contemporary life. He had said that, at any rate, "there is more to it than there is to the melodramas of treason and adultery with which we have been regaled by some of our most highly regarded novelists" (102). Interestingly, both Quinton and Lindsay display a refusal to look, themselves, at least as far as Bowen is concerned. For, certainly, her post-war wartime ('present-day historical') novel The Heat of the Day represents an attempt to extend a confrontation with the 'now-time' of wartime, and as well, with all of its attendant crises which extended on into the post-war years.

Bowen receives three more readings in books published on English fiction in the 1950s. In his 1956 book The Vanishing Hero: studies of novelists of the twenties, Sean O'Faolain manages to write off: Huxley and Waugh as writers under the motto 'I do not think, therefore I am'; Graham Greene as a writer under the motto 'I suffer, therefore I am'; William Faulkner as a writer with 'more genius than talent'; Ernest Hemingway as one of those 'men without memories'; Elizabeth Bowen as a writer under the motto 'Romance does not pay'; and Virginia Woolf and James Joyce as 'Narcissa and Lucifer.' Feeling that the 'twenties were "a watershed or divide in the history of the contemporary novel" (13), O'Faolain interprets that the one constant in all the writers before himself is "the virtual disappearance from fiction of that focal character of the classical novel, the conceptual Hero" (14). In this book, and in what is by now a common category to fix Bowen's writing, she is mostly examined as "a romantic up against the despotism of reality" (187) -- O'Faolain says, "as so many other Irish writers are" (187). Only, finding her 'master' to be Flaubert, O'Faolain assesses Bowen as a writer who has "described the dilemma of our times honestly, beautifully and at times movingly" (190).

John McCormick, in his 1957 book Catastrophe and Imagination: An Interpretation of the Recent English and American Novel, at first seems to dismiss Bowen as a 'novelist of manners.' According to McCormick, "a case could be made for a falling off in English literary energy not because it has ignored manners, but because it has relied too heavily upon them" (93). He states that one is tempted to say that without idea the novel of manners tends to a feminine preoccupation with technique, the proliferation of detail that is fascinating in itself but ultimately distracting, as in the later novels of Elizabeth Bowen, or Hartley's The Boat. Henry James has often served the English novelist badly (93).

Later, however, McCormick contradicts himself and defends Bowen against the ubiquitous charge that English writers display a "falling-off in literary energy" (97). Quoting Bowen's statement in Why Do I Write?, regarding the connection between literature and society, that her books 'are her relation to society,' McCormick states that in fact the falling-off in literary energy of which critics often complain is their own, "not that of living, breathing writers" (97). He states that "even in their own terms, the mourners of the death of the novel have by turns ignored, twisted, and denied the facts of contemporary literature" (97).

Later on, McCormick defines a matriarchy leading away from the Gothic novel of the late eighteenth century to Jane Austen, Trollope, George Eliot, Henry James, Elizabeth Bowen, and Rosamund Lehmann. And, in a different chapter yet, McCormick places Bowen within a new tradition of contemporary writers who successfully mediate their own native tradition, with the international masters of the nineteenth century, and the great experimental period between 1910 and 1925. He states that, "whether we look to Ivy Compton-Burnett, Rex Warner, Elizabeth Bowen, Anthony West, P.H. Newby, Gerald Hanley, Henry Green, or Rosamund Lehmann we discover a common mastery of what were once experimental techniques, an admirable cultivation of the meanings and implications of those techniques, and a common degree of stylization which relates their feeling for reality directly back to their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century forbears (166). McCormick also repeats his earlier linking of Bowen with Henry James, noting that his main impact in England has been upon style, while his influence in
America has been first thematic and only secondly stylistic. Finally, in what is overall a very contradictory analysis, McCormick then turns to criticize Bowen's war novel *The Heat of the Day* as being the least satisfactory war novel produced by an English novelist, as "she seems unable to strike a balance between intensity and the implied scope of her ambitious theme" (229). He ends his assessment of Bowen by stating that her writing, along with L.P. Hartley's, is limited by "the tradition of manners and social realism" (292). What remains of interest in these accusations is that, still, no attempt is made to clearly define or explain what is meant by a 'tradition of manners,' a 'novelist of manners,' 'sensibility,' or a 'novelist of sensibility.' Clearly then, these are 'write-off terms attached, however cloudily, to unarticulated assumptions about class structure within English society, and used when a critic does not know, or care to know, what else to make of Bowen's writing.

Finally, in his article for the *Partisan Review* of 1959, entitled "Realism and the Contemporary Novel," Raymond Williams examines Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* as representing a breakdown of realism in the novel. But instead of being a first-person narrative lavished with "so much technical brilliance," which Williams finds to be "ordinarily the mechanism of rationalizing this breakdown" (209), *The Heat of the Day* still formally resembles the realist kind of novel. He states that, in Bowen's novel: "the persons exist primarily as elements in the central character's emotional landscape, and are never seen or valued in any other terms, though there is no first-person narrative, and there is even some careful descriptive realism, to make the special pleading less stark (209). As such, Williams reads the novel as somehow standing in between the complete breakdown of realism in what he calls 'the personal novel' -- where 'the majority of persons' end up being denied, or end up falling away into 'graded levels of caricature' -- and its (re)construction in the social novel.

Aligning the personal novel with 'the crisis of our society,' Williams states that a new realism will have to work towards "the practical learning of extending relationships" (211), such that the social and the personal are integrated. Feeling that the critical point in 1959 is precisely the "separation of the individual and society into absolutes" (211), Williams feels that a new realism could show, in detail, "that vital interpenetration, idea into feeling, person into community, change into settlement, which we need, as growing points, in our own divided time" (211). A new realism, as Williams sees it, must be both traditional and innovative in these ways. It is with interest, then, that we find Williams reading Bowen's work as being precisely an extension of relations, in the sense that it comprises a form of realism wherein society is seen in fundamentally personal terms, and persons, through relationships, in fundamentally social terms. The integration is controlling, yet of course it is not to be achieved by an act of will. If it comes at all, it is a creative discovery, and can perhaps only be recorded within the structure and substance of the realist novel.

Yet, since it is discovery, and not recovery, since nostalgia and imitation are not only irrelevant, but hindering, any new realism will be different from the tradition, and will comprehend the discoveries in personal realism which are the main twentieth-century achievement. The point can be put theoretically, in relation to modern discoveries in perception and communication. The old, naive realism is in any case dead, for it depended on a theory of natural seeing which is now impossible. When we thought we had only to open our eyes to see a common world, we could suppose that realism was a simple recording process, from which any deviation was voluntary. We know now that we literally create the world we see, and that this human creation -- a discovery of how we can live in the material world we inhabit -- is necessarily dynamic and active; the old static realism of the passive observer is merely a hardened convention. When it was first discovered that man lives through his perceptual world, which is a human interpretation of the material world outside him, this was thought to be a basis for the rejection of realism; only a personal vision was possible. But art is more than perception; it is a particular kind of active response, and a part of all human communication. Reality, in our terms, is that which human beings make common, by work or language (211-12).

In Williams' terms then, Bowen's novel is an achievement of realism as it "is a continual achievement of balance" (213), a masterpiece in tension "in the necessarily difficult struggle to establish reality" (212) in the face of the apparent absence of balance, both in the contemporary world at large, and in the forms of the contemporary novel.

In her 1950 study of Bowen's fiction, "The Uncertain 'I'", Lotus Snow draws a similarity between Virginia Woolf and Bowen in their creation of characters who are either experiencing an identity crisis or "searching for a
the search for a sense of personal identity... characterized the British people during World War II. Six years of destruction made negligible outward concern with individual destiny. The sense of national destiny, evidenced in the stringent circumstances in which life was lived, in broadcasts and headlines too outsize to be assimilated, anaesthetized consciousness against the personal.... Galvanized by the threat of annihilation, the sense of personal identity summoned its own resistance: people resorted to illusions, ghosts, the past, to recover themselves (299).

Snow finds that the ‘uncertain I’ is explored most successfully in her wartime short stories and in her last two novels, The Death of the Heart and The Heat of the Day. And yet, she gives the latter text only cursory attention, simply summarizing the story, and then calling attention to the serious flaw of “the failure to establish motives for Robert Kelway’s treachery” (309). She states that “because Robert is more important to the plot than Stella, his shadowiness constitutes a heavy tax upon the imagination of the reader” (309). Snow reads the characters in the work as easily aligning themselves according to their corruption by (Robert), compromise with (Stella), or innocence within (Roderick, Louie) “the world of the post-Wasteland generation” (309). Whereas Robert is quite literally a ‘write off,’ for Stella there is still hope; but “Roderick and Louie are the innocent in heart, the hope of the future” (309). Hinting at the dialectical quality of this arrangement, Snow finds that Bowen “has fully merged the subjective world, paramount in her novels until The Death of the Heart, with the history of her century” (309).

In Elizabeth Bowen, a book published for the British Council and the National Book League of 1952, Jocelyn Brooke offers up the first book-length, extended analysis of Bowen’s fiction. He classifies her as a ‘novelist of sensibility,’ and he explains the term ‘sensibility’ as “a kind of medium through which the world can be apprehended more clearly and significantly, just as the features of a landscape will stand out more sharply when seen in a particular kind of light” (5). He speaks of Bowen’s interest in context, describing her as a writer primarily interested in ‘atmosphere’ — another vague term which he explains as being an interest springing “from a vision of a ‘landscape with figures’ rather than from a direct concern with the figures themselves” (6). Describing Bowen as a novelist with “the visual as opposed to the auditory approach to novel-writing” (6), Brooke finds the effect of her writing to be filmic, in that only at a much later stage do “the characters and their actions emerge, as it were, from the middle-distance into the foreground” (6). She is a writer of ‘silhouettes,’ groups of people “perceived in relation to their surroundings” (12). He also expands on this visual susceptibility in Bowen’s writing as: a pictorial quality; her ‘French Impressionistic,’ intense feeling for light; her preoccupation with the visible world; her similarity to Woolf in this way; her acute awareness of ‘outside things’; her abnormally acute apprehension of the visible world; her interest in the superficies of life; her sense of light and atmospheric effects; and her technique of ‘thickening’ her stylistic effects, elaborately and carefully building-up details in descriptive passages; and finally, her tendency “to see things on a number of planes simultaneously, so that one is sometimes reminded of those modern pictures in which several aspects of the same object are presented in different perspectives on a single canvas” (19). Also of interest to Brooke is Bowen’s preoccupation with the relationship between the individual and his or her environment. In his reading, her writing displays a fascination with the ‘surface’ of life, “not so much for its own sake, as for the dangerous sense which it gives of existing upon a thin crust beneath which lurks the bottomless abyss” (9). But finally, what is important to Brooke is her interest “in the behaviour of her characters as it is affected by this ‘cracking’ or ‘heaving’ of the ground upon which they so perilously exist” (9).

Brooke reads The Heat of the Day as Bowen’s most important, complex, and ambitious work, but does not personally judge it as her best as it “is so atypical” (24). Brooke finds that the melodramatic ‘love-story’ elements à la Graham Greene or Nigel Balchin clash with the more serious ‘war-novel’ elements. Furthermore, he finds that the whole situation of the novel’s story is “curiously improbable,” and “almost as obscure as that of a story by Kafka: the characters seem to be caught up in a chain of circumstances whose origin can only -- like the charges against ‘K’ in The Trial -- be guessed at” (25). But he feels that, as this effect is ‘no doubt intentional,’ that Bowen does nevertheless “produce an effect of terror merely by her significant omissions: Harrison, for instance, dim and unrealized though he is, inspires horror by his very vagueness; one feels, behind the characterless façade, the menace of sheer emptiness” (25). Furthermore, Brooke finds that “in many passages one has the impression that the characters are inhabiting a kind of limbo, their words and actions have the deadness of a film in which the soundtrack has suddenly broken down” (25). Overall, the effect of her wartime novel on Brooke is one of ‘disjection,’

of being composed of a number of broken fragments, like a jigsaw puzzle in which the
pieces are arbitrarily fitted together, so that the final picture is distorted. Miss Bowen has, as it happens, admitted that this -- or something like it -- was her intention when writing the book; the distorted, fragmentary effect is deliberate, a bold attempt to supply an aesthetic equivalent to the actual breaking-up of urban life under the stress of war. (In this respect, The Heat of the Day might be compared with The Waste Land, in which Mr. Eliot attempted something of the same kind in poetic terms: ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’) (25-6).

Interestingly, Brooke also comments on Bowen’s augmentation of her stylistic resources, not only within a single descriptive passage or a single work, but also over the course of her own body of writing. He interprets that “her prose has become, with each new book, more elaborate, as though the pressure of her material demanded a more complex and comprehensive form for its perfect expression” (26). Feeling that she has continued to develop in the direction of an even greater complexity, Brooke finds that her wartime work The Heat of the Day “is written in an extremely highly-wrought style, in which the influence of Henry James, already noticeable in the earlier books, is even more apparent” (26). He explains that

the prose has an extraordinary tautness and intensity, the syntax seems often to be stretched, like elastic, to near breaking-point; and here, again, one recognizes Miss Bowen’s deliberate intention to fashion a style which shall correspond with the overstrained, strung-up condition of men and women in war-time London. At times, indeed, this tautness gives the effect of some neurotic impediment, a kind of stammer; and occasionally it may lead to actual obscurity (26).

Extending these considerations to an analysis of dialogue in The Heat of the Day, Brooke finds that her convoluted style has broken through the tradition of realism in which she has so far worked, such that the characters’ speak in a stylized manner. Her deliberate distortion of ordinary speech is, in Brooke’s reading, a means of heightening the effect of overall distortion, absurdity, and ‘unreality.’ In this respect, Brooke reads Harrison as being “like some mysterious ‘official’ in a Kafka novel, he is not so much a character as a disquieting Presence, the vehicle for some deadly and half-apprehended menace” (27).

Summing up, Brooke finds The Heat of the Day to be, if not the most successful of Bowen’s novels, at least her most innovative work, formally and stylistically. He looks forward to her next production, but comments that “personally, I do not think that she can go much further in this particular direction” (27). He feels that Bowen has extended her range as far as possible in this work because it “is, in any case, a war-novel, and the technical experiments which it embodies are directed to a particular end” (27). Still, he wonders what Bowen’s approach and response, as a novelist, will be to “the squalid, standardized and unhopeful world in which we are now living” (28). The reading continues to be an interesting one, more or less -- that is, up until the last page, where Brooke proceeds to sum up Bowen’s achievement as an artist. Ridiculously, he states that one must not “forget, in summing up her achievement, a fact which, up till now, I have purposely not emphasized -- the fact, I mean, that she is a woman” (29). He praises her for, in his interpretation, taking into account “both the limitations and the specific advantages of her femininity” (30). In Brooke’s opinion, Bowen is unlike other contemporary women novelists, in that she does not ‘too boldly’ assume “that, in matters of art, their sex ceases to be important” (30). These other artists, according to Brooke, have fallen into error and “ignored the limitations which (whether they like it or not) are implied by the mere fact of being female” (30). So, in Brooke’s incredibly chauvenistic estimation, Bowen is admirable for her ‘self-imposed confinement,’ though in The Heat of the Day, he detects “a certain impatience with this self-imposed restriction” (30). But, as Bowen does not ‘overstep her bounds’ so much as to offend, Brooke accepts her. In his assessment, she is in no way a ‘great novelist’ of ‘size and weight’ like Tolstoy and Proust, but a creator of “a small and perfect universe which, though wholly her own, can be compared not unfavorably with the world of Pride and Prejudice” (30).

In an interesting piece for Vogue magazine entitled “Chronicler of the Heart”, Lord David Cecil offers his opinion of ‘Miss Elizabeth Bowen,’ in all her ‘feminine capacity for charm,’ as well as in her more ‘serious’ aspects as a ‘professional woman and writer.’ The portrait, like Brooke’s, is entirely condescending, but Cecil manages to communicate at least three interesting points. The first is regarding the effect of war on her life. Her youth was cut across by the shadow of war, “first of the 1914 war and then, more importantly, of the civil war in Ireland” (119). Even in Ireland, as an only child of an ancient family of Anglo-Irish country gentry, Bowen’s “balls and tennis parties took place against a sinister background of conspiracy, and secret associations, and country houses burnt to the ground” (119). The Second World War truncated life again, but
Miss Bowen rose to it as she rises to most situations: went through the bombing of London as an Air Raid Warden, and did some literary work for the government. From this experience also came one of her finest novels, *The Heat of the Day*. Since 1945 she has been less occupied with fiction and more with criticism, and has also, rather unexpectedly, blossomed forth in a public capacity; lectured on literature both in America and England, and served on a Government commission about capital punishment (119).

Secondly, Cecil points out the fact that Bowen, unlike many writers, has not reacted against her background. Stating that “her spirit is still coloured by its standards and traditions” (119), because “she realizes that convention is as necessary to the art of living as to any other art” (119), we realize that Cecil is not alert to Bowen’s deviousness as a writer. And yet, he is quick to point out that, “in her, we see the old world confronting the rigours of the new in the spirit of a cavalier” (119). And what is more, he recognizes the power of her ability to live fully in ‘the present moment’ or the ‘now-time.’

All the same she is not a decorative survival from the past. This is where her creative side comes in, her adventurousness, her receptivity. Elegance for her must be combined with vitality. Her taste is immediately attracted by what is vigorous, and up-to-date, and quick moving, and gleaming with newness; by films, and streamlined motors, and neon lights, and racy slang phrases, and modish clothes. It is its energy and zest that makes her like America so much. Conversely, she is irritated by the defeated nostalgia for the past which colours much modern English writing (119).

Finally, what Cecil manages to convey is the sense of Bowen’s appreciation for human life as “an incurably mysterious and risky affair, brimful of interest and fascination but with infinite potentialities for disaster and suffering lying in wait for man behind every corner” (119). She is both adventurous and ethical, combining in her own writing a vigilant art of oscillation between the past and the future, but in a way that is ‘not overly experimental.’ Cecil readily admits his dislike of professional women, and communicates his appreciation of Bowen’s recognition of her ‘feminine limitations.’ Such chauvenistic remarks, however, should not dissuade one from extending the understanding of them to that of a certain postmodern value in recognizing *one’s human limitations*. Cecil’s remark, that “in her the woman and the author, the modern and the traditional are fused so that each reinforces the other” (119), is an interesting description of the mediatory quality Bowen has as a postmodern writer. According to him, Bowen is living “proof that people are wrong who say that civilization, and urbanity, and stylishness can not be achieved any longer because of the atom bomb and the social conscience and so on” (119).

In a 1955 piece for the *English Journal*, Bruce Harkness analyzes Bowen’s fiction up until that point in time, and discusses her Jamesian style, aspects of her writing which, in his mind, are truncated with World War II, and finally the ‘failure’ of *The Heat of the Day*. According to Harkness, the resemblance with James is two-pronged, in terms of her style and in terms of thematics. He states that her “many qualifications of thought and sudden turns of rhythm” (500) are Jamesian, as well as her repeated portrayal of the theme of betrayal in personal relationships. In an article which is largely dismissive, one should not be surprised to find Harkness reducing Bowen to “three typical aspects” (500). He finds that, first of all, although she is very interested in technique, “she is a traditional, non-experimental writer” (500). Secondly, Harkness thinks that, “though her exploration of the theme of betrayal is ever-deepening, she is a less philosophical or heavily thematic novelist than most first-rate novelists of the modern period” (500). And a third typifying aspect of Bowen’s writing, according to Harkness, aside from “her expert presentation of character and her fine manipulation of plot” (500), is the “overwhelming sense of place” (500) that she gives in her writing. In Harkness’ opinion, Bowen breaks away from all three of these patterns with the coming of the war and with *The Heat of the Day*, which he judges to be a complete failure. In her attempt to experiment with her range, extending “the central conflict of her work into public life” (505), Harkness finds that “its central situation makes impossible demands on our sympathies” (505). He finds both Robert and Harrison to be imperfectly realized, and “cannot accommodate the conception of Harrison, the government agent, as a man who would use his position to extort the favours of Stella, the traitor’s lover” (505).

Bowen’s fiction is given one last treatment in the nineteen-fifties, in Barbara Seward’s 1956 article “Elizabeth Bowen’s World of Impoverished Love”. In this article, Seward discusses Bowen as a writer who “explores a persistent theme -- the tragic dangers of romantic excesses in the twentieth century” (31). Furthermore, Seward argues that tragic dangers of this excess are exposed by Bowen as resulting in two World Wars and at least two civil wars. In her six pre-World War II novels, her wartime short stories and wartime novel *The Heat of the Day*, and still in her 1955 book *A World of Love*, where she turns back to deal with the effects of the First World
War, Bowen consistently explores the relation between twentieth-century idealism and twentieth-century totalitarianism. Seward is the first to offer such a rich reading of Bowen, and not until Heather Bryant Jordan’s 1992 book How Will the Heart Endure: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War, do we find a reader using the topic of war obliquely linked to the topic of philosophical reflection, to interpret Bowen’s fiction.

Seward also argues that Bowen has a claim on serious critical attention, but that up until 1956, she has not been given this kind of reading.

Curiously, to date she has been given little such attention, although she is generally recognized as one of our foremost writers. More curiously, what attention she has received has tended to ignore the full significance of her work by overstressing her compassion for the innocent idealist trapped in the modern world. Certainly Miss Bowen is enormously sympathetic to the idealist who is desolated by a callous society; nevertheless she is equally aware that the callous society is itself made up of desolated idealists. And, more fundamentally, she perceives that the root of the trouble is in the ideals themselves, that society is in its present negative condition because too many individuals have for too long been pursuing unfulfillable romantic desires at the expense of immediate, living realities. Appalled by the tragic inability of our world to meet the demands of the innocent romantic, Miss Bowen has throughout her career been still more appalled by the romantic’s inability to meet the crying demands of the world (30).

Seward offers another reason for the lack of critical attention that Bowen has received -- in her opinion, Bowen is too often written off as a snob. And she proceeds to give an interesting reading of Bowen’s fiction, defending her from this accusation. She argues that, on the contrary,

Miss Bowen’s upper class people remain suspended between two worlds, hopelessly engaged in making the worst of both.

These characters, even the vicious, are treated with compassion. Like everyone else in the novels, they remain as much victims as victimizers because they are weak, unaware, or blighted by their environment. But the point is inescapable: upper-class England in the twentieth century is a sterile and decadent phenomenon, frantically fleeing the demands of the present in the futile pursuit of the past.... Bowen is terribly aware of the dangers and weaknesses of her own class. Far from being suffused with romantic nostalgia for the golden age of the aristocracy, she is attacking that very nostalgia as a force that is blighting a whole social group (34).

Noting that Bowen’s critical attitude does not stop short of her own class, Seward feels that her critique of the upper class is, if less evident, at least as harsh as her critique of the middle class.

As she explains, Bowen does not view the middle class in ‘rosier light,’ for if the upper class is understood by Bowen as hiding in the past, the middle class is understood as grasping for the future. Both, however, are missing ‘the point,’ which for Bowen is always the grasping of the present moment or the ‘now-time’ in its full, oscillating, and potential relation to both the past and the future.

Whereas the upper class has lost the old values of home and social position, the middle class has never possessed them. To Miss Bowen these things are important. Having a home that is really one’s own, in which one’s ancestors have lived, gives one a sense of belonging, of being a link in an unbroken chain. Having some sort of social status, being accepted as part of a definite group, gives one a sense of security and of individual worth. Lacking these stabilizing conditions, the middle class as Miss Bowen presents them are ‘tangles of mean motives’ (The House in Paris), a rootless, restless lot. Unsure of themselves and afraid of others, they remain in constant competition for prizes they do not really want and strive incessantly for power they do not know how to use (34).

A serious Marxist theorist might judge Seward’s reading, and most likely Bowen’s fiction as well, as naive. However, it is at least significant to note that Bowen comes to much of the same conclusions as Vattimo. For, face to face with a meaningless world, people -- regardless of whether they are upper, middle, or lower class, and regardless of whether they even want to admit to being classed in this way -- need to feel that they belong in a present joined to an ever possible past. But they also need to feel that they can be effective in a present linked to an
ever possible future. In Vattimo’s theory, andenkend thinking attempts to remember its ‘sending,’ its roots, or in other words, its tradition of coming from somewhere and belonging to a tradition of thought, but in a way that is always open rather than closed. And this is where verwindend thinking comes in, as it remembers the possibilities which still lay within any tradition. And it is precisely this dose of critical-but-hopeful perspective that Bowen advocates as necessary for living in today’s world.

This can still be said in a different way. For, as Seward reads it in Bowen’s pre-war fiction, the problem is that people need to have some kind of direction in their life, “in which to channel their energies” (34). Thus Bowen’s critique of the middle class is that they have an ‘outsized will,’ which as she explains in her family history Bowen’s Court, in itself is not necessarily an evil, but rather a phenomenon. As Bowen explains, in pseudo-Nietzschean terms “It must have its outsize outlet, its big task. If the right scope is not offered it, it must seize the wrong” (Seward quoting Bowen 34). Seward reads that Bowen’s novels show that too often middle class people are not offered the right scope, for they have been born to no definite status, have no real homes or connections to cultivate, no preordained niche in the social scheme. Thrown back on their own resources to rise or fall by their own worth, they are driven to prove themselves somehow, too often at each other’s expense. Society, failing to provide men’s egos with sufficient positive outlets, has left the ambitious to prey on each other in an animalistic void. Energetic individualism, with its worship of the striving will, is a middle class aspect of romanticism that has worn dangerously thin (34).

Sounding like a mixture of a Hobbesian view of human nature and a critique of bourgeois liberalism, Seward concludes that, for Bowen, “the public predicament is then at the heart of the personal disaster” (34).

And, according to Seward, Bowen offers no remedy for this human dilemma until The Heat of the Day. Coming upon a world in which the upper class has atrophied and the middle is tearing itself apart, innocence has small chance for survival. Since man is a social animal, he must either accept his impossible world or be annihilated by it.... Either way he is defeated and in turn perpetuates defeat. For the thing is of course a vicious circle: the society that breaks the individual is made up of broken individuals... (34-5).

In this way, Seward reads Bowen’s novels about so-called ‘private’ or ‘personal’ disasters in a different way than they have ever been read up until this point. According to Seward, these micro-tragedies expand “beyond the individual to become the tragedy of an era and a misdirected way of life” (35). And what is more, “the disease must get worse before it gets better; man must come to some sort of awareness of his predicament before he can set about to resolve it” (35). Thus, in Seward’s interpretation,

Miss Bowen shows in these [six pre-war] novels that twentieth-century society between world wars was still pursuing nineteenth-century dreams of personal glory, traditional sanctity, or superhuman love, without sufficient awareness that the dreams had turned to nightmare. She shows that the dreams had turned to nightmare not only because they were out of date but because they were egotistical, asocial or anti-social, and unrealizable in the actual world. Using each other without charity or scruple to fulfill unfulfillable personal fantasies, men were blindly destroying all social cohesion and rushing their world towards inevitable disaster (35).

Enter: World War Two.

Seward reads the same forces that were at work in the earlier novels being “carried to frightening conclusions” (35) in The Heat of the Day. In this work, Seward thinks that Bowen presents more graphically even than before “the inseparable relationship between the diseased romanticism of individuals and the havoc of the world at large” (35). As she explains,

Where love was previously doomed because it was innocent and based on illusion, it is here doomed because the sky has fallen and there is no longer any shelter even for mature, well-founded love. Where the individual was previously doomed because he was unable to adapt himself to his society, he is here doomed because there is virtually no society left to adapt to. But the tragedy that has expanded to annihilating proportions
is shown to have sprung from the same bewildered roots. ‘Fantasy is toxic,’ writes Miss Bowen in Bowen’s Court: “the private cruelty and the world war both have their start in the heated brain” (35).

As such, Seward reads the character Robert Kelway as symbolic of middle-class emphasis on ‘untrammeled individualism for its own sake.’ Furthermore,

his treason is a tragic commentary on a society that has run the risk of losing its invaluable freedom by failing to give its members anything else. For the free also need constructive outlets for their energies, need to feel that their lives derive enduring value through contributing to an order greater than themselves (35).

And beyond Robert, who “carries to ruinous ends the misguided quest for self-realization we have seen driving earlier middle-class characters” (35), Seward reads that Stella reveals the total collapse of ‘the upper class orientation.’ In Seward’s reading, Stella

has given up the last of her houses and now lives homeless in rented flats, and she has been outcast from her social group by the scandal of modern divorce. A ‘soul astray’ in her class and her world, she has become acutely aware of the aristocracy’s disintegration. Time, gaining in the earlier novels on a class that clung to the past, has by the second world war won its devastating victory (35-6).

Thus, Seward reads that, as total war has taken over the world, so has time’s devastation, which embraces more than a single class, but rather a whole era.

Limiting her reading in terms of the destruction of love, Seward also finds a difference in the degree of destruction — it is final, “and there is no possible future for Stella and Robert’s love or for that of the generation whose tragedy they enact” (36). But not all hope is lost. Seward interprets that,

though the older generation is shattered, there is a chance that the young may rebuild the world. Stella’s son Roderick, who has the realism to adapt Mount Morris to modern times, may revive in the post-war world the enduring values of home. Louie, whose natural son is born in despite [sic] of social constrictions, may revive the values of parenthood and the undeflected heart. The hope of the future lies with these two and with the generation they represent. Here for the first time in her fiction Miss Bowen has offered a possible remedy for society’s long disease, perhaps because in its greatest crisis the patient more fiercely than ever needs help (36).

In what is an interesting reading of Bowen’s fiction, then, Seward points in the direction that this paper takes, in terms of reading Bowen’s wartime novel as communicating a sense of twentieth-century crisis thought broaching theoretical speculation in a ‘return to basics.’
Chapter 4

The Last Forty Years — from Apologies to Ontologies

The reception of Bowen’s work in the nineteen-sixties begins with an apology. In his 1961 book on her fiction, entitled Elizabeth Bowen: An Introduction to Her Novels, William Heath explains that “to talk about the novel as rather static and spatial, as I have done here, is merely to recognize that no other convenient critical language exists” (20). By the end of the decade, however, not only different critical approaches to literature, but moreover different theories of literature would begin to emerge institutionally, and would soon proliferate rampanty within the University. Reading the effects-history of Bowen’s The Heat of the Day from the nineteen-sixties through to the nineteen-nineties reflects this proliferous history of literary critical theory. After 1961, a shift can be detected in the criticism of the work, such that, as discussed earlier, similar to a movement which can be detected in Bowen’s text itself, epistemological concerns are increasingly backgrounded in the foregrounding of ontological concerns. Moving beyond the more traditional ‘structuralist’ criticism from 1949-1960 —for instance, to paraphrase the text, relate its perceived form to its interpreted content, judge its representation in terms of simple mimetic criteria, and focus on the epistemological (modernist or cognitive) questions which it prompts — post-1960 criticism takes on an increasingly ontological character, as critics work to define their own ontologies (or theories) of fiction. And thus, it can be said that the work begins to be received in different contexts — such as in the different ontological contexts of post-structuralism, semiotics, feminism, psychoanalysis, narratology, deconstruction. In many cases, however, these contexts overlap, with each other and/or with more traditional ‘structuralist’ concerns which they critique. And structuralist enterprises themselves persist, for instance: in Edwin J. Kenney, Jr.’s biographically-constrained 1975 book Elizabeth Bowen; in Harriet Blodgett’s book of the same year, entitled Patterns of Reality: Elizabeth Bowen’s Novels, wherein she offers up a Jungian reading of ‘certain traditional Christian assumptions about life’s meaning’ in Bowen’s work; and in Bloom’s establishing of a patriarchal structure of descendants in 1987, with Walter Pater as the ‘sublime’ father to Henry James and James Joyce, and with Virginia Woolf and Bowen as ‘counterparts’ to these ‘sublime ancestors.’

Nevertheless, in 1961, Heath manages to provide, as G.S. Fraser says, reviewing Heath’s book, ‘solid attention’ to the texts of Bowen, as well as an interesting analysis of her accomplishments as a writer. Discussing the Platonic assumptions behind Bowen’s statement that ‘the aesthetic is nothing but an attempt to disguise and glorify the enforced return,’ Heath describes Bowen’s relation to experience as being both romantic and traditional, but moreover synthetic. As a reader of the world, she remains a “divided soul” (4), standing posted between the world of fiction and the world of actuality. Appropriately then, a writer of such split-subjectivity produces narratives which require the reader to make adjustments, not as concerns the events being told, but rather “with the manner of the teller” (10). According to Heath, in Bowen’s texts, there is a complex relation between the reader and the work, such that there is a ‘broken frame,’ or “what Robert M. Adams has called the effect of trompe-l’oeil” (10). Furthermore, Heath finds that the broken frame has become increasingly prominent in the work of intelligent and serious novelists of the mid-twentieth century. What Northrop Frye says of contemporary poets is equally true of contemporary novelists: they are ‘deeply concerned with the problems and techniques of the age of sensibility.’ In various modes, they seek to reconcile ‘literature as process’ with ‘literature as product.’ The story the reader of such novels listens to is, in Frye’s terms, both product and process, its teller both experienced man and self-conscious artist (10).

Accordingly, such a novelist produces a work that is complex in its language and its form. And in Heath’s reading, such a creation is the response produced by “the enclosed air threatening the romantic consciousness” (11).

Thus following, but also expanding, the theme of the frustrated romantic will coming up against an unrelentingly harsh world, Heath states that “the problem of the romantic will is to arrive at a synthesis between the circumstance of external fact and the projection of an ideal world where feeling can be realized” (11). And according to Heath, “the process by which the romantic will arrives at a synthesis would be twofold” (11). After the death of the heart, the once innocent individual learns “to make distinctions between good and evil according to an individual standard that is reconciled to the objective world of fact” (11). In other words, the individual person recognizes her/himself as existing in a world of difference. And, as Heath explains, recognizing this and learning “to make such distinctions, finally, is the power of language and literature” (11). And thus
synthesis is fiction, and the individual's definition of himself, like the narrator's literary position, is the 'artificial' pattern of language he uses to compose and define his world. The alternative to such integration is destruction, the other form of the death of the heart. When a synthesis is impossible and the subjective vision finally bears no relation to the world outside it, madness or death, real or symbolic, are its consequences. Quiet perfidy and frank vulgarity are facts that the individual's art can transcend only if it acknowledges them, without submitting (11-12).

And it is in treating "the failure of reconciliation of the tree to the tomb" (12) that Heath finds Bowen to be most poignant. Discussing her equation of a perversion of the romantic will with twentieth-century violence, Heath finds Bowen's "indictments of society, especially middle-class banality, [to] become most salient" (12). He interprets the subject of The Heat of the Day to be the near-ultimate frustration of the romantic will, and thus also the critique of the romantic will to power. As he explains, in that novel,

war is the disastrous situation in which there is no public language to control fantasy. To say that the second world war was the failure of art sounds absurd as a proposition, but The Heat of the Day makes such a proposition convincing. The contemporaneousness and relevance of Miss Bowen's fiction cannot be stated more directly than that (12).

In Heath's reading, Bowen's wartime novel communicates her belief that "the illimitable romantic will in conflict with external circumstance is a paradox that only metaphor, which is art, can resolve" (12). That artistic resolution is pattern, shape, direction -- interpretation. And thus, for Bowen, as Heath explains, form is valuable as "a means of survival" (14), both for Bowen's protagonists and for herself. As such, Heath reads an ethics emerging in Bowen's definition of the work of art as the artist's relation to her world; he finds this definition to be similar to Lawrence's statement that "morality in the novel is the trembling instability of the balance" (13) of interrelatedness. And he states that, furthermore, "though it has not always been her achievement to preserve this fluid, trembling balance, Elizabeth Bowen joins James and Lawrence in their plea for simultaneous concern and detachment, for honesty and openness in the powerful application of ideas to life" (13).

Part of what accommodates such a reading of Bowen is Heath's full awareness of her irony, something which is relatively new in the effects-history of Bowen's work. Comparing Bowen and James, Heath explains that there are pertinent differences between their "convictions about the attitude the narrator may take toward his audience (she repeatedly allows the explicit recognition of the novel as illusion)" (18). Such a metatextual turn in the writing differentiates Bowen's art from James' in their similar expression of the preservation of both illusion and order. Thus Heath aligns Bowen with E.M. Forster in terms of their irony or 'double vision.' According to Heath, her art is both Aristotelian and Platonic, traditional and romantic, reasoned and idealistic, structured and metaphoric, perfectly timed and ambiguously spaced -- and thus, at the same time, amphibolous. And as such, Heath follows Bowen's suggestion that "narrative bridges are 'slimy tracts' disrupting unity and art" (20).

Interestingly, Heath interprets that "only some such conflict can account for the odd discrepancy between the manner of The Heat of the Day and that of A World of Love only six years later" (20). For, in his reading,

the intellectual and cultural awarenesses expressed by The Heat of the Day made necessary the abstraction of A World of Love. Her knowledge of her own time and the possibilities for her fiction in it are expressed by that change. Like Stella Rodney's final silence, it is articulate, not oblivious. For the honest and intelligent nonrebel, it is rebellion's alternative (158).

He reads the former novel as a work with "a radical irony of vision" (152), wherein a careful reading of almost any single page, even out of context, "would seem to make inescapably obvious the self-consciousness of her fiction and its creator's awareness of what she had read and what she was doing" (152). And paradoxically, then,

Miss Bowen's role must be that of the novelist who possesses absolute confidence in her craft at the same time that she distrusts its reality. Her own synonyms for art and tradition, it must be remembered, are 'dishonesty' and 'debt' (153). Moving towards "a novel born of an abstract metaphysical concept and narrated from a position of remote detachment" (157) -- Heath's reading of A World of Love -- he finds that Bowen is already employing a form of
ironic removal in *The Heat of the Day*, such that the work takes on a risky, allegorical aspect. Assessing these later risks in her career as a writer, Heath sums up:

> What is at stake in her fiction one must call, for lack of less pompous terms, a sense of reality: in any world, the intelligent, imaginative person cannot make things of people and survive with integrity, cannot crudely substitute art for life and live with sanity. Yet one must in some way (her novels consider many) make art of life in order to live, for to deny the risk of imagination, inherent in its ability to expose the sensibility, is to abandon one’s self to imagination’s revenge as chaos and fantasy. This moral proposition her art repeatedly sets; but because these terms, like those of a parable, are extensive, her fiction is rarely repetitious...

> What a reader can say of Miss Bowen’s achievement in the art of the novel can only be said of the greatest: that she has kept going a worthwhile continuity without submitting to nostalgia; that she has attempted honestly to assign importance to the elements of the world she and her readers share, without resorting to clichés of material or attitude; that she has given to her age and to her culture an image of art within which life can go on with relative fullness and sanity. Because she accepts and comprehends the work of those who have preceded her, thus giving her own art a role in a tradition, and because she has adapted what has gone before to a contemporary world, Elizabeth Bowen’s novels, at their best, have the quality she herself has called (in a different sense) the most difficult to achieve: relevance. It is as great a demand as can be made of a writer that his art be relevant to the work of the past, that his technique be relevant to his theme, that his theme be relevant to the reader and his world (159).

Bowen’s wartime work receives only three more negative reviews in its effects-history extending throughout the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies; and at that, these reviews are only partially negative, moreover ambivalent. In his 1968 book entitled *The Lunatic Giant in the Drawing Room: The British and American Novel Since 1930*, James Hall argues that “Miss Bowen is one of the few radical explorers in the recent novel” (17), arguing that “the part of her work that looks conservative really shows her recognition of change” (17). Judging her as ‘a born consolidator’ who wants “no less than a smooth mixture of all the best ingredients available” (18), he reads in her writing a poetic tension resulting from her attempt to balance positions previously kept separate — such as those between a writer like Proust, Mann, Woolf, or Joyce, and a writer like Hemingway, Huxley, or Fitzgerald. Nevertheless, Hall’s reading of *The Heat of the Day*, strangely, is quite negative. Writing the novel off quite quickly, he states that

> in *The Heat of the Day* she arrives at that disaster for the imaginative writer — she solves her problem. The novel is a plain box with a note inside, ‘I have left home.’...

> Unfortunately, *The Heat of the Day* comes out an inadequately controlled fantasy deficient in felt life. A good deal of honor always goes to the writer who will not repeat his obsolete conflict and tries to get down some sparer truth of the present. Not every novelist moved by time and war, however, has auctioned so much as Miss Bowen (51).

And in 1972, in the *Reader’s Guide to the Contemporary English Novel*, Frederick R. Karl gives Bowen’s wartime novel a similarly ambivalent reading. He states that when Bowen “experiments in *The Heat of the Day*, she does little more than what Virginia Woolf had tried in *Mrs. Dalloway* fifteen years earlier” (11). But nevertheless, he finds that the novel is important for Bowen as “a departure; as a ‘war novel,’ it attempts to cover a large space, to take in, whereas before Miss Bowen tended to exclude as much as possible so that her characters would stand out in bolder relief” (126). Furthermore, although he judges the novel as a partial failure, “because her hero was unbelievable” (279), he finds that “the disjointed nature of the novel’s structure and language successfully conveyed the incoherent quality of the period” (279).

Finally, in his 1976 article “A Sense of Place: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of the Heart”, Walter Sullivan discusses and judges *The Heat of the Day* in a way opposite to Hall, interpreting that in it Bowen grappled with new fictional problems which “she did not fully solve” (148). Sullivan explains that, from his perspective, Bowen was least ‘fitted for’ the kind of material in this wartime work, such as “discussions of ideologies, questions of political right and wrong,... global conflict, competing moral philosophies” (148). Furthermore, in what sounds
like his own admission of nostalgia, he reads the novel as a pessimistic commentary on the fate of this century. In Sullivan’s reading, Bowen is missing from the work:

This world, however accurately it is depicted is not Elizabeth Bowen’s world; and the society, the organization of western culture which supported and informed her best efforts, was not, in her lifetime, to be found again. The symbolic destruction which she had devised for the ending of The Last September was repeated by the Nazi bombers which destroyed the houses at Regent’s Park. With them, in the playing out of our recent history, went all the certainties that undergirded Elizabeth Bowen’s work. Established conventions ceased to be. Moral absolutes decayed. Without a society to support them or a transcendent authority to which to appeal, the passage of dialogue, the gesture in the drawingroom ceased to signify more than themselves. Words remained simply words spoken; the surreptitious hand upon the thigh came to mean no more than the flicking of ash from a cigarette (149).

Indeed, language becomes a prominent focus for analysis in the nineteen-sixties and following. And, in fact, in 1972, Karl also offers an extended commentary on the language of the text, noting that the dialogue itself has become tightened, austere, oblique; rarely has the Jamesian influence seemed stronger. The warped syntax, the taut, packed prose, the indirection of phrasing, the stylizing of word and scene -- all these indicate how the language has changed to meet the change in vision. Disintegration is the key to The Heat of the Day, and both the winding form and the tense use of language twist and jar the material from a smooth, regular narrative. The conversation is jagged in its irregularity; people speak with a minimum of articles and connectives, as though wartime will now allow wasting a single word and relationships are to be smashed almost as soon as they begin (128).

Similarly, in his earlier article “Elizabeth Bowen and the Artificial Novel” (April 1963), Geoffrey Wagner focuses particularly on Bowen’s ‘irregular’ use of language. He reads Bowen’s works as somehow mediating ‘the poetic novel’ with an ethical environs or ‘moral climate.’ And in his reading, Bowen tends more towards the formalism of the poetic novel, with its ‘higher density of symbolization’ (155), than towards the pragmatism of the social novel. As such, he finds that Bowen encounters a “difficulty with applying the poetic novel to the surface of the external world [in] that it rapidly appropriates more detail than can at first be dealt with by the method” (156). He analyzes her adverb positioning as “the most artificial of her mannerisms” (162); her pastiche-like and Jamesian sentence inversion and convolution of the so-called ‘periodic’ sentence as being subconscious methods of forcing close attention; her use of “the grammatical opposite of the periodic sentence, the ‘loose’ sentence, in which the statement (subject and complement) is at once completed, and then accretions poured in” (162), as approximating the rhythms of contemporary speech; and finally, her “enforced double negative, which sometimes make nonsense of her sense” (162), as her most compulsive trick. In Wagner’s estimation, overall these ‘artificial’ or ‘poetic’ tendencies either read as “the sort of example of ‘style’ in decay one meets in a popular novel like By Love Possessed” (163), or as a parody of the difficult contemporary tenet that ‘style is vision.’ Finally, however, he decides that Bowen is perhaps parodying herself, just as “towards the end of his life Thomas Mann felt that his own style had so cohered that only in parody and even in self-parody... could he find stylistic authenticity” (163).

In his 1964 book, Tradition and Dream: the English and American Novel from the Twenties to Our Time, Walter Allen also focuses on the text’s ‘weakness’ as its strength. He finds that the most distinctive quality of Bowen’s writing occurs in The Heat of the Day, as “what, in Henry James, Stephen Spender has called ‘described poetry’” (194). He finds many passages of the text to be ‘lyrics in reverse’ -- “with extreme brilliance, by analysis and amplification and the matching of ambiguities, [these passages] tease out the meaning of what is essentially a poetic idea” (194). As he explains,

it is a method which demands great powers of intuition into subtleties of feeling and the utmost precision in the use of language; and since its material is such as cannot ordinarily be expressed in prose, it demands, too, an expression which is bound to use many of the devices of poetry. Almost inevitably, it leads Miss Bowen from time to time into a distortion of normal sentence-structure and word-order suggestive of a prose Hopkins.
Indeed, if the process were carried much further the result would be a disintegration of language, as seems to me to occur in her next novel *A World of Love* (1955) (195).

Finally, in 1964, Anthony Burgess concentrates on the surfaces of Bowen’s writing, finding that she has “a phenomenal semantic range when it comes to dealing with texture, colour and nuance of speech” (254). Locating James as ‘her true progenitor,’ Burgess analyzes her “endlessly qualified sentences with their spinsterish scruples” (254), the involutions and “the torturings of natural syntax to avoid the cliche, the enthroning of the cliche where the cliche is not even enlightening” (254), as a Jamesian substitute for poetry. Not quite sure how to read ‘so much technical brilliance,’ Burgess finds that “there are times when, seduced by the miraculously caught cadences of feminine speech, one wakes to the shock of thinking it all a contrivance -- a device for moving spheres (if one may use the old metaphysical imagery) which in themselves have no intelligence” (254). Nevertheless, he finds that in *The Heat of the Day*, Bowen has created

a world of intense and highly credible detail which conjures one’s own sensuous and emotional memories, though so heightened that it feels like a re-living (remember Louie, who ‘had, with regard to time, an infant lack of stereoscopic vision; she saw then and now on the same plane; they were the same’); a world of people who are never quite real and often unmemorable. A miracle makes the parallels meet: while the weaving of atmosphere and the accumulation of detail proceed, the illusion of solid existence holds. But, behind the whirl of phenomena, there doesn’t seem to be much of a thing-in-itself (254).

Analyses of the language of the *The Heat of the Day* lead inevitably, in the late nineteen-sixties and onward, to feminist readings of the text. In her brilliant 1983 article entitled “Women and Language in the Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen”, Harriet S. Chessman focuses on the much neglected character Cousin Nettie and her relation to Roderick in the novel. Using the theory of the French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray and others, Chessman interprets that “women, in Bowen’s vision, are inherently outsiders to discourse, unless they turn traitor and defect to the other side” (70). She explains that “it is Stella... who, according to her inarticulate alter ego Louie, can ‘sp[ek] beautifully’..., yet who discovers the bonds of silence between women in the drawing room of Mount Morris” (71). And according to Chessman, both Cousin Nettie and Louie Lewis represent figures outside language who “hint at possibilities for language and for story that remain unfulfilled” (78). In other words,

the power to represent and define rests with other characters, including both male characters and the female characters, including both male characters and the female characters who stand as alter egos to their female counterparts outside. Such representation involves betrayal. As those with language become storytellers, they participate in the ‘overpowering’ of inarticulate or silent objects which all authorship -- at least in part -- involves (78).

Finally, Chessman argues that, while she offers hints of a collapse of barriers, Bowen nevertheless manages to maintain this problematic ‘doubleness’ of perspective (inside/outside language) involving the intimate relationship between language and betrayal.

But her own ambivalence toward such collapse prevents her from allowing it narrative representation, and the possibility for such representation, in any case, remains questionable. She leaves us always, however, with the desire to imagine a language and a narrative form, however utopian, that would overcome the treacherous distance she herself represents between author and object, and between those women who possess language and those who do not (84).

In 1994, in a book published for ‘The Cutting Edge: Lesbian Life and Literature’ series entitled *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing*, Renée C. Hoogland engages a wide variety of critical theories -- semiotics, psychoanalysis, narratology, deconstruction -- in order to present a radical re-reading of Bowen’s work from a lesbian feminist perspective. In fact, though, the ‘lesbianism’ of Bowen’s heroines had been noted and analyzed in a feminist reading of her work as early as 1956, in E.D. Pendry’s *The New Feminism of English Fiction: A Study in Contemporary Women-Novelist*. Pendry had focused, in her reading of *The Heat of the Day*, on Bowen’s use of
tension as that "balance struck between character and action" (135), product and process. Similarly, Hoogland focuses on the tension that is maintained between the reconstructive and deconstructive aspects of the text. In her chapter on The Heat of the Day, entitled "Histories of Narrative Desire", Hoogland focuses on the destabilization of both subject matter and style in this wartime work. But, throughout the text, Hoogland also reads an emphasis on "trying to recover the 'prepossession with living' rather than extend the 'vacuum' left by predecessors" (115), and thus Bowen’s turning to engage actively with the (recent) past. And, she reads that, in Bowen, this is not so much a 'compromise' as it is "an ontological necessity, for it is only thus that the 'life-illusion' can be sustained" (115). Further to this ontological necessity, she also reads a moral necessity in Bowen’s wartime work, wherein "the emphasis on the ambivalence of subjectivity also foregrounds the individual's moral responsibility, or more precisely, her/his answerability in/to the world" (153). Finally, Hoogland offers up a reading of Bowen's work which, interestingly, broaches the postmodern theory of Vattimo, with his concept of postmodern weak thought as Andenken (memory) and Verwindung (distortion). Looking to her non-fictional writing and also to her wartime 'present-day historical novel,' Hoogland finds that Bowen’s theories and her art communicate ideas which are very close to those of postmodern theory and the theory of historian Hayden White.

Shifting her focus to the historic as distinct from the personal past, Bowen contends that [being] can only be known by being 'recreated in terms of art.' Such a claim almost literally articulates one of the basic tenets of postmodern thought: that both history and reality are accessible only through their textual inscriptions.

As new historicist Hayden White points out, historical 'facts' are constituted rather than given. What historians choose to say (describe and interpret) about the world is not only determined by their socioeconomic contexts but also by discursive codes. To historicize is to naturalize or familiarize perceptions into patterns of coherence. Since the impulse to mythologize is inherent in language, in discourse, it is 'by figuration that the historian constitutes the subject of the discourse. Writing history is thus not simply reduction (through selection) but is in fact a distortion of the phenomena it is presumed to describe. Writers of fiction and historians alike produce ideologically determined representations of some sort of 'reality' (115).

In her 1970 book, The Changing Face: Disintegration of Personality in the Twentieth-Century British Novel, 1900-1950, Vida E. Markovic reads a similar tension between character and action, product and process, reconstruction and deconstruction, and/or memory and distortion in her chapter on Stella Rodney. For Markovic, Stella is a symbol of 'the fateful course of this fatalistic century,’ and thus also a sign of what she terms the ‘disintegration of personality’ in the twentieth-century. Yet, according to Markovic, it is also Stella, who, at the price of her private emotional life, tried to keep the chain of human continuity from breaking. Her repudiation of her generation’s indifference in her denial of her love once he is found out to be a traitor represents her personal contribution to the moral stability so essential for those who are to succeed. Her son may therefore be able to inherit Mount Morris and maintain its actual and its symbolic value; what she has done may help to prevent the flame of individual being from being extinguished (151).

Starting in 1978, feminist readings of Bowen expand with the consideration of her work as ‘war writing.’ In Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig's Women and Children First: the Fiction of Two World Wars, Bowen’s wartime novel is read as evidence to dispute P.H. Newby’s claim, in his book The Novel 1945-50, that 'no good novel has appeared since 1945 to paint the horrors of war.' They explain --

'Horrors' is a strong word; in this context it suggests battle-field slaughter and mutilation and terror, and emotions that are inimical to dispassionate presentation. Nevertheless, the war produced good novels of the home front and the horrors of blitz and bereavement and evacuation. The most important writers of the 1940s -- among others Elizabeth Bowen, Evelyn Waugh and Henry Green -- found their subject matter in the day-to-day experience of wartime behaviour. Unlike the situation of 1914-1918, the mood of the time was transcribed directly in imaginative, seriously intended fiction (194).
Similarly, in her 1987 book *The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of the Novel*, Rosalind Miles examines the significant fact that, as a ‘war novel,’ *The Heat of the Day* involves a figure/ground reversal. In her reading, the text “deals in fact with the lives and actions of a group of people who did not go to the war, but stayed at home: it is the impact of war, not its action nor external structure, that provides the focus of the novel and the real story” (89). And finally, in their massive 1994 volume entitled *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar read *The Heat of the Day* through the lens of war writing. But theirs is a more thoroughly pessimistic reading of the work; they focus on the relationship between Stella and her lover Robert Kelway, read as the Nazi who “illustrates Bowen’s thesis that the attraction to fascism is inextricably related to what she calls a ‘fiction of dominance’” (225). And furthermore, in their reading Bowen registers an intense sense of devastation, for [her] characters masochistically embrace a constellation of oppressive forces about which they feel helpless. Because, as Keith Douglas explained in “Vergissmeinnicht”, during the war “the lover and the killer are mingled/who had one body and one heart,” some female characters end up fatally in love with the killer. Like Elizabeth Bowen’s Stella in *The Heat of the Day*, they may decide that ‘from the point of view of nothing more than the heart any action was enemy action now’ (142) (251-52).

In 1992, Heather Bryant Jordan combined an extended feminist reading of Bowen’s works in a book which focuses on the context she felt to be most illuminating for Bowen -- that of war. Noting that Bowen was been born on the eve of the century of ‘total war,’ Jordan interprets war in the background of all of her works, like a ‘landscape.’ She remarks upon the fact that so few book-length studies of Bowen exist, and understands this to be a result of the fact that “the meaning of her work is difficult to grasp, to catalog, or even to comprehend; she saw to that” (xvi). Explaining that Bowen is both restless and contradictory, Jordan thinks that, therefore, “her very reversals make for her continuing importance to any study of the literature of Anglo-Ireland, modernism, women, and, most important, war” (xvi-xvii). Using war as the peculiar focus of her study in *How Will the Heart Endure: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War*, Jordan is concerned to investigate “the intersection of the poetics of loss with the politics of war” (xvii) in Bowen’s works. In her chapter on *The Heat of the Day*, entitled “Fictional Silences”, Jordan observes that historical event and private moment are often shown to be coincident -- for instance, “Montgomery’s victory in Egypt, the Battle of El Alamein, and D Day coincide with the important private moments of the novel” (153). As such, Bowen works to define the relation between historical context and private association, the larger world and psychological intricacies, the individual’s awareness of the outside world and the individual’s self-absorption. But, in *The Heat of the Day* these relations are shown to be complex; they bear a contrapuntal tension which is disturbed by both the positive and the negative possibilities of language and silence. Broaching the ontological recall prompted by Bowen’s use of language, Jordan notes that Bowen’s use of the passive voice in the scene describing the Allied landing in North Africa the day following Robert’s fall or leap from the roof “typifies its obfuscating presence throughout the novel” (164). She explains that, in her interpretation, it was through such linguistic inversions [that] Bowen re-created for her readers the torpor and convolutions of the war years when words strained to represent the significant connection between historical events and individual dramas. Daniel George, who read the novel for Cape, reported that the contorted language, the odd vocabulary, and the double negatives gave him trouble but he admired her efforts, saying that she had worked ‘miracles’ by expressing ‘what’s been ‘inexpressible’.

Continually, Bowen’s words recreated the tension between truth and belief that challenged her characters. She ‘put language to what for [her] was a totally new use,’ investigating the ‘actual pattern’ of the cracked ‘surface’ of civilization so evident in wartime (“On Writing”, 11). The design she represented in *The Heat of the Day* was a ‘smashed-up’ one ‘with its fragments invecting on one another.’ The language of the novel is alive with what is not said, what is inherently inexpressible in the human experience of war. The plot turns on omissions: first Robert’s silence, followed by Harrison’s, then Stella’s. Paul Fussell associates this quality with the poets of the Second World War whose ‘silence ranging from the embarrassed to the sullen’ runs throughout their verse. The most important moral decisions taken in *The Heat of the Day* hinge upon the choice between silence and speech. The crux of the plot follows from the silence that ensues when words have been betrayed and have thereby lost their ability to
signify (164-65).

Nevertheless, in Jordan’s reading, despite the obfuscating and threatening silence of the text, Bowen had “realized her desire to write a ‘present-day historical novel’ as she turned with ‘relief’ to the larger world in ‘revulsion against psychological intricacies for their own sake’” (153). And thus, _The Heat of the Day_ is affirmed as ‘the ideal vehicle for her memory.’ And, according to Jordan, “despite the expanse of the Second World War and its extinction of so much that mattered to Bowen, the paradox of her postwar novel about wartime lies in the hopeful moments she managed to interlace with its tragedies” (168). Jordan reads that, “in memorializing the psychological struggles of this conflict through art, Bowen remained somewhat optimistic” (168). Bowen’s ‘inescapable proximity’ to the overlapping wars of this century “altered the way she described or imagined the smallest, most intimate details of characters and setting, even in peacetime” (x). And “the wars she endured became, then, not only abstractions but also emblems of what she detected to be wrong with the world and the century she inhabited” (x). However, through art Bowen managed to communicate the limited possibilities for affirmation which lay beyond what had been a lifelong preoccupation in her writing -- “to trace what she perceived had gone wrong with her generation, which had ‘come to be made to feel it had muffed the catch’” (x). For, beyond such feelings of incompleteness lay the possibilities in art to provide ‘completeness,’ or its illusion, if only in a provisional, fleeting way. Somehow, then, the secret lay in preserving the extended interpenetration of art and life.

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From nineteen-sixty and following, Bowen is drawn into different considerations of war writing, or writing of the Second World War period, but only Jordan in 1992 extends the category to apply to all of Bowen’s writing. In fact, though, in many pieces on war writing, such as the 1941 manifesto “Why Not War Writers?”, signed by Arthur Calder-Marshall, Cyril Connolly, Bonamy Dobrée, Tom Harrison, Arthur Koestler, Alun Lewis, George Orwell, and Stephen Spender, Bowen is entirely neglected. Writers such as those just listed considered war writing to be limited to that which was produced by writers “most actively engaged in this war” (238). In her wartime novel, Bowen in fact problematizes the journalistic or documentary, propaganda-oriented definition of the war writer set out by Calder-Marshall et al in their manifesto. She might have agreed with their feeling that “the rôle of writers to-day, when every free nation and every free man and woman is threatened by the Nazi war-machine, is a matter of supreme importance” (236). And she had definitely responded to the ubiquitous fear expressed in the manifesto that there would be no novel of the Second World War which “will create a picture which will not be effaced by to-morrow’s newspaper” (236). But, she was also definitely opposed to the idea that writers should become journalists, or the idea that this was even possible in the first place. Bowen repulsed the Soviet-inspired idea of the political writer, or the writer with a platform, who, as Calder-Marshall et al propose, “should be used to interpret the war world so that cultural unity is re-established and war effort emotionally co-ordinated” (238). Thus, it should come as no surprise that Bowen receives no mention in many pieces written on war writing, such as Tom Harrisson’s long article “War Books”, Granville Hicks’ article “Literature in this Global War”, or Francis Wolle's “Novels of Two World Wars”.

Only in 1960, with John Lehmann’s book _I Am My Brother_, does Bowen begin to receive some recognition as a war writer. Lehmann, who had also worked for the Ministry of Information, but as a correspondent with Russia, relates how his old pre-war acquaintance Timofei Rokotov, editor of _Internationalnaya Literatura_ in Moscow, had demanded regular information in telegrams about the wartime activities of English writers. Lehmann was sending articles on a regular basis to Rokotov, but was apparently shocked to find out that “the Russians appeared to know practically nothing about the literary scene in England” (148). He explains that early on I was abruptly bidden to send DETAILED CHARACTERIZATIONS WORK OF MANY WRITERS MENTIONED UNFAMILIAR TO US HENRY GREEN NORMAN CAMERON LAURIE LEE WALTER ALLEN EVELYN WAUGH ELIZABETH BOWEN WILLIAM PLOMER. Coping with this kind of request began to sap my morale; and at the same time, by a curious process of empathy, something of the high fervour of Soviet propaganda began to creep into my style and made me wonder whether I had actually written the articles that were sent off under my name (148).

Later on, Lehmann explains that Bowen, amongst other British writers, had been received rather negatively in Russia, with “the charge of ‘aestheticism’ or ‘formalism,’ which rouses the peculiar rage of the Soviet pundit of today” (247). As he explains, the British authors had a record in Soviet Russia which could hardly be worse:
T.S. Eliot, with his *Four Quartets*, is hopelessly lost before his case opens; and is followed into ignominy by Walter de la Mare (for his poems in *Orion*), Dylan Thomas (most emphatically, for his recent poems in *Horizon*), George Barker, Stephen Spender and Terence Tiller for their love poems ('erotic in the worst sense' as *Komsomolskaya Pravda* furiously complained about some verses by the unfortunate Joseph Utkin), and a whole cohort of the young. Prose writers are in no secure position. Elizabeth Bowen, in particular, beware! Subtle descriptions of atmosphere in the Irish countryside are no substitute for a healthy pugnacious note against the foe....(247).

The complaints go on, along with Lehmann's mocking tone, and we conclude that, at least in his estimation, the writers mentioned should not be written off so quickly. After all, the Soviet idea of war writing, according to Lehmann's old friend Nikolai Tikhonov, from the magazine *Bolshevik*, involved a formula for the description of 'the splended people around' and the depiction of "'the heroes of our time in full stature'" (248).

In his 1978 book, *The Thirties and After*, Stephen Spender had in fact offered something of an excuse for the seeming insularity of British writers during the Second World War. Borrowing an analogy which actually comes from Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, Spender states that, "looking back now, it seems to me that in England the war period was a little island of civilization in our lives" (91). Mentioning Bowen amongst his memories of the war years, Spender explains that

> a little island of civilization surrounded by burning churches -- that was how the arts seemed in England during the war. And looking back they retain their strange aura which was also that of the last flicker of the England which began with the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and which ended with the war and the diminution of England to our Welfare State (91).

But Bowen is still absent in Spender's consideration of the writing of the war years and following. A year later, John Mellors published an article entitled "Dreams in War: Second Thoughts on Elizabeth Bowen", indicating an attempt to rescue her 'war writing' from oblivion. Claiming that she "wrote her best stories during the 1939-45 War" (68), Mellors explains that nevertheless, "none of them are conventional war-stories, but in most of them the effects of war are present, the material effects of bombs on buildings and also the effects on people's behaviour of their feelings of fear, frustration, hope, boredom and despair" (68). He is referring to Bowen's wartime short stories, which he deems to be far more successful than *The Heat of the Day*, still misunderstood as "broken-backed..., preposterous" (65). From her wartime novel, it is only the brilliantly evoked 'atmosphere of wartime London' that Mellors remembers.

But not until 1984, with Holger Klein's *The Second World War in Fiction*, do we arrive at a more thoroughly considered definition of war writing, if not yet a consideration of Bowen's war writing. But Klein in fact credits Bowen with her "distinction between a 'wartime' and a 'war novel'" (10), explaining that by 'war' novels, one means 'combat' novels, and that everything else can be subsumed under the category of 'wartime' writing. And further to this, Klein adds the distinction that 'wartime' designates "fiction set in the war as environment, 'war' designating fiction in which the war is a major subject" (10). Nevertheless, Klein does not analyze how these categories of ostensibility are problematized in Bowen's wartime novel. Two years later, in his book *The British Novel since the Thirties*, Randall Stevenson cites Bowen's novel *The Heat of the Day* as evidence against Rosamund Lehmann's conclusion in 1946 "that there had been 'no great war novel'" (119). Explaining that many writers and thinkers felt that there had been no successful rendering of the direct experience of the war, no successful description of "its actual violent action" (119), Stevenson captures the British fear that their war writing could bear no comparison "with the achievements of American fiction in communicating something of the nature of wartime military action" (119). And yet, he argues that

> the apparent absence of what might be called a 'great war novel' in the British context may simply be a consequence of seeking it in the wrong place. In concluding, for example, that 'comparatively few good novels came out of that real, historical, war... the Hitler war failed to stimulate novelists,' Anthony Burgess explicitly, and rather improvidently, discounts the 'civilian novel,' giving *The Heat of the Day* as his example.

In fact, an excellent clue to a better understanding of the real 'stimulus' of the war is provided in this novel when Elizabeth Bowen remarks of Robert and Stella that:

> ... they were not alone... their time sat in the third place at their table. They were the creatures of history... of a nature possible in no other day -- the day was inherent in the
nature (pp. 194-95).

Just as civilians were as inevitably ‘caught’ as soldiers in the experience of total war, novels not directly concerned with actual military actions are as much the ‘creatures of history’ as those which try to present them. For contemporary novelists, the common factor of ‘their time’ accounts for the communality of imagination identified throughout this chapter. Its repeated expression in the same set of themes in their novels is evidence of the extent to which ‘the day was inherent in the nature’ of literature as well as contemporary life. The strength and particularity with which its presence affected novels of the period makes almost all of them ‘war novels’ in one way or another, as Walter Allen suggests:

No rigid distinction between war novels and others is possible... Since war was the inescapable experience of everyone, civilians as much as soldiers, we find the war present throughout the fiction of the forties and the decades that follow, not necessarily shown directly but there as the ineluctable shadow under which characters and events have their being.

Burgess goes on himself in The Novel Now (p. 50) to acknowledge that ‘All British novels with a 1939-45 setting were, in one sense or another, novels about the war,’ but this specification of ‘a 1939-45 setting’ is still too restrictive. The ‘ineluctable shadow’ Allen mentions falls upon the ‘characters and events’ of many novels written around the time of the war but set quite outwith its actual duration (119-20).

Quite obviously, Stevenson extends a debate about war writing of the Second World War that had been going on since at least 1941, and which still extends on into the present day. The issue, quite clearly, involves what exactly constitutes war writing? -- and beyond that, what is war in the age of total war?; what is historical about war?; what is history?; what is fiction?; and what is representation?... While generic boundaries were being disputed in the polemics of literary critical circles, a more subterfuge question of explosive potential ticked away like a time bomb in the background of these debates. This question is of a philosophical kind, and readers like Stevenson can be seen to brush its surface ever so carefully, though not directly confronting its implications, not to mention, its provenance in a text like Bowen’s The Heat of the Day. That question is, quite simply, the question of Being. Stevenson gives Bowen’s present-day historical novel its by now standard reading of her attempt to make explicit the connection between private and historical experience, individual life and the broader disturbances of contemporary history. But, like so many other readers who precede and follow him, he does not dare to confront the more subversive, or for that matter more ‘basic’ implications of her hermeneutic ontology, inherent in the explicit connection Bowen establishes in her work between private and historical experience. He notes “the betraying effect of the past on the present” (85) in the novel, but does not expand on the situation of blackmail as an allegory of history, let alone an allegory of Being.

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Apologies only merge with ontologies when the criticism of Bowen’s work itself is assessed -- in other words, only when writers/readers contributing to the effects-history of her work become conscious of the substantiality of her reception. Such retrospection occurs as early as 1965, when George Greene remarks, in his article “Elizabeth Bowen: Imagination as Therapy”, that “for a writer whose compass has been so confidently measured, sizeable doubts about the quality of her fiction still persist” (42). Greene identifies three kinds of criticism which have emerged so far in the reception of Bowen’s work, pointing to Jocelyn Brooke, William Heath, and Frederick Karl as representatives. There is Brooke’s type of underhand ‘compliment,’ in his expressed belief “that her shrewd insight as well as her elegant language depend on the fact that ‘she has from the first... taken into account both the limitations and specific advantages of her femininity’” (42). And then there are other admirers, who like Heath, seek “to demonstrate a bolder scope, [and] testify to the wider appeal of her stranded wayfarers” (42). And finally, a third group, increasingly vocal, might echo a remark by Mr. Somerset Maugham when, in one of his stories, he characterized the fiction of a rival. ‘It was so delicate that it was a little difficult to know exactly what happened.’ Recently, for example, Mr. Frederick Karl censured Miss Bowen’s ‘limitation of range, the fluttery concern with a miniature world, the exclusion of much that makes life exciting and significant...’ (42).
In 1965, this is a fair enough assessment of the effects-history of Bowen’s work. For aside from the chauvenistic dismissal and diminution of her work, there exists a vector of potential in the reception of her work stemming from the 1949 reviews which grasped the text’s subversive potential on through to Heath’s 1961 book on her fiction. What is common to the ‘Heathian’ variety of readings is the effort to extend the implications of what Bowen was setting out to accomplish in The Heat of the Day, and as well, in the larger body of her fiction, through a recognition of both the risky and the traditional aspects of her writing.

Greene indicates that he would rather follow a reader such as Heath, and seek to demonstrate a bolder scope of implications for The Heat of the Day, but he is stumped by what he deems to be a “certain heaviness of execution” (48). The stretch between that “flow, massive, vaguely inimical, [which] Virginia Woolf referred to as ‘life itself going on’” (48) and close attention to that “specialized world... in the clutch of total war” (48) leaves Greene stranded in his reading. However, he finds that The Heat of the Day “yields wider questions, among them which path fiction should take” (42). As he explains,

Elizabeth Bowen has never sought the immunity we grant to an artist who remains withdrawn, uncompetitive. She accepts the risks as well as the solace of aligning herself with a tradition. In this context, unquestionably, her chief mentor has been Mr. Henry James (42).

The comparison is apt to provoke a yawn at this point, but Greene actually extends this frequent attempt ‘to identify the bond between these two craftsmen’. Citing James’ 1901 essay “The Future of the Novel”, in which “he endorsed intellectual depth and also, predictably, experimental freedom” (43), Greene notes James’ particular emphasis on the need for mystery.

James asked that more attention be given to the element of the unseen which figures so largely in human lives, and which confers on his best work a vigor which far transcends genteel eavesdropping. James saw a lack of reverberation as the common disability of fiction produced by his rivals, the Naturalists. ‘It is not a trifle,’ he concluded, ‘... that “mystery” should, to so many of the sharper eyes, have disappeared from the craft, and a facile flatness be, in place of it, in acclaimed possession’ (43).

Comparing Bowen with Flaubert, Greene contends that Bowen has followed the Jamesian injunction ‘to preserve the mystery,’ and like Flaubert, has “explored the possibility of order, some measure of salvation, behind the mask of the visible” (43). However, Greene is not yet prepared to submit to the fact that such things indicate the foregrounding of ontological concerns and questions in Bowen’s work. He merely indicates that how Bowen has “enlarged on her original premise in this area is a feat worthy of inspection” (43).

Three years later, in an excellent article entitled “‘Fall or Leap’: Bowen’s The Heat of the Day”, Angela G. Dorenkamp undertakes such a feat. Noting that, unfortunately, the work of Bowen “has received scant critical attention, most consisting of reviews, too general to be incisive” (13), Dorenkamp continues Greene’s criticism of the effects-history of Bowen’s work. She explains that

the seeming reluctance to consider her work in depth makes the inclusion of her name in lists of ‘foremost British novelists’ seem gratuitous. Surely such general acclaim is not usually accorded work about which there is so little to say. The situation is difficult to account for but is surely due in some part to the indiscriminate use of labels, as when Elizabeth Bowen was early described as a ‘novelist of sensibility’ and as a ‘novelist of place.’ The connotations these tags evoke are perhaps not in tune with modern tastes: the very premeditated quality of her art within traditional contexts causes impatience. These labels are, moreover, too amorphous to account for the effects of the strange evocative prose which Elizabeth Bowen controls (13).

Indeed, it is the language of the text once again, as with other feminist readings, which is understood to open up onto the ontological concerns and questions prompted by the text. Dorenkamp explains that, if the style of The Heat of the Day can be understood as elegant in a literary sense, nevertheless, “its communication of sensibility is hesitant, tortured, and ambivalent, appropriate for a fiction dealing with mysteries which are only apparently solved” (13). Furthermore, Dorenkamp explains that the obvious elements of Bowen’s style, such as “the distortion of syntax, the use of ellipsis and inversion, which have led Walter Allen to call her a ‘prose Hopkins,’ have long been recognized” (13). But, in Dorenkamp’s reading, what has not been recognized, more importantly, is that
the tension of the syntax is matched by the tension of the imagery and of the language itself; and that these elements coalesce in the fiction with such decorum that separation is difficult. The ‘vagueness’ Miss Bowen has been accused of in *The Heat of the Day* is decorous in a world where human relationships are uncertain and ill-defined. This ambivalence is recounted in a language which is suggestive rather than declarative, qualified rather than bright (13-14).

Dorenkamp proceeds to discuss the ambivalent aspects of the novel, such as its ambiguous events which occur “in a world only half-lit” (14), the permutation with “crepuscular images” (15), and the use of specular devices throughout. She notes that, “the mirror, long a symbol of ambivalence, presents a world of illusion, a visual aspect of half-realization” (15). Furthermore, she interprets that “the ubiquitous mirror, functioning as a kind of Platonic removal from reality, is even temporal” (15). As such, it gives “the illusion of the past, the present and the future” (15). Similarly, “photographs are illusory” (15) — deceptions, imitation moments, lies. And, in Dorenkamp’s reading, hallucination is also ubiquitous in the novel, lending every description a mobile, fleeting, and impermanent quality. This world “is surely, if not the death of the heart, the death of this particular world” (16). Deceptions, betrayal, conspiracy, blackmail, complications, misunderstandings -- all, according to Dorenkamp, “reflect the impoverishment of language” (17). Equivocal images, impossible communication, the dominance of language, inexpressible events, oxymoronic observations, paradoxes, and uncertainties -- in Dorenkamp’s reading, these “are actually attempts to describe more accurately the real in the unreal” (17). For Dorenkamp, then, the effect of all of these things “underscores the uncertainty of experience” (17), and overall, Bowen’s courting of a *discordia concors* in the work is an extension of the ambivalence of ‘reality.’

This ‘either-or’ quality of the language is in concert with Harrison’s threat and Robert’s final escape. Ambivalence reigns and truth is unattainable.

Even when truth seems visible, it is often qualified. For instance, *The Heat of the Day* exists not only in half-light, but in various half-tones.... This qualification of quantity or quality is extended into actual statements of qualification (‘He qualified this, however, by uncertainly, broodingly, looking at Stella’s face’) which contribute to the impression that everything is tentative....

These ambiguities are supported by direct references to the uncertainty of the world... (19).

Reading that “ultimately, all these tensions are caught up in the concept of time” (19), Dorenkamp brings out Bowen’s existential focus for the first time in the effects-history of her work. Broaching the Heideggerian concept of *Nahheit* -- as Heidegger explains, an early word used by Kant to describe the dialectic of time as ‘nearing nearness’ or ‘nearhood’ -- Dorenkamp reads Bowen’s work as the textual extension of that dimension of time which “brings future, past and present near to one another by distancing them” (Heidegger “On Time and Being” 15). According to Dorenkamp, this dimension of time, as an extended present, comprises Bowen’s perception of time during *wartime*. She does not suggest, as this paper does, that Bowen’s point was also to reveal this dimension of time as it operates concealed in ‘everyday life.’ Nevertheless, experiencing a crucial element of the text in her reading, Dorenkamp explains that

Elizabeth Bowen has said that ‘Time, not passion, spins any plot that there is,’ and in *The Heat of the Day* time, in an almost cinematographic way, stands still: ‘She stayed with a cigarette -- which before he spoke he had been on the point of lighting -- held to her lips, looking tentatively at him. He kept his thumb on his lighter. So in the cinema some breakdown of the projection leaves one shot frozen, absurdly, on to the screen’ (106). These frozen moments are the present of war (19).

It is at least important, in Dorenkamp’s reading, to note her identification of the relation between ex-tension, time, and B/being in *The Heat of the Day*. And, she also suggests that the ex-tension of the wartime present in the text is the experience of the present in its moment of becoming.

Sometimes the moment is drawn out, as at Robert and Stella’s first meeting when a descending bomb obliterates their simultaneous comments and becomes ‘the demolition of an entire moment’ (104). Although Stella’s room lacks an ‘apprehension of time’ (59), the event of war intensifies the present: Stella and Robert find themselves
conscious of a submerged decision to go on as they were, for that ‘time being’ which war had made the very being of time’ (109). In The Heat of the Day, place absorbs the implications of movement, of tradition and rootlessness, while time, the arrested moment, becomes place. In a postscript to The Demon Lover, Elizabeth Bowen says that war is a territory rather than a time (19).

In accordance with this view, which Dorenkamp finds to be informative of the text as a whole, she observes that “constant and almost determined references to time, clocks, wrist watches, moments, etc., serve, in an ironic way, to emphasize the present and to dramatize the tension of an ‘Everlasting Now’” (19). Then returning to a familiar reading, but giving it a ‘temporal’ twist, Dorenkamp interprets that Roderick and Louie either exist beyond or are able to move through this twilight zone of an extended present -- Roderick offering the possibility of change to past traditions, and Louie offering the possibility of a future for posterity. Dorenkamp deems that, in Elizabeth Bowen’s aesthetic context, the Second World War was the failure of art. But she notes that “Roderick says that ‘art is the only thing that can go on mattering’ (337)” (20); and in her reading, the swans which appear in the final pages of the novel, “like Yeats’s, are the triumph of art, of imagination, of immortality, the future of unambiguous alliances and unqualified loyalties” (20). Nevertheless, Dorenkamp offers her own qualification to such a reading, explaining that Elizabeth Bowen, however, is not so romantic as to promise this unequivocally: when Louie hopes that her child ‘might see, and perhaps remember,’ the qualifications still govern. But the dissociation of sensibility which is so insidious in The Heat of the Day has a shrewd challenger in Louie, installed by the sea, itself an ambivalent symbol. After all, she was always interested in being: ‘she did not look at things in the light of their getting or failing to get her somewhere; her object was to feel that she, Louie was...’ (12). Perhaps hers, and Roderick’s, is the lone accommodation with the ambiguities of existence (21).

Dorenkamp’s reading of The Heat of the Day is the most thoughtful reading that the text would receive before Bowen’s death five years later, on February 22nd of 1973. After this point, biographies emerge, along with readings of the text which attempt to confine the meaning of the text to Bowen’s experience of wartime London. In these readings, the text is read as ‘semi-autobiographical,’ the fictional communication of her wartime affair with the Canadian diplomat Charles Ritchie, to whom the book is dedicated. In her obituary for the Sunday Times of London, Cyril Connolly deems that “she was the intellectual peer of her friends Virginia Woolf and Edith Sitwell, a poet content to work her imagination into the texture of prose” (12). And in 1978, Victoria Glenndinning brings out her biography of Bowen, and judges that it is still “too soon to assess precisely her place among twentieth-century novelists” (xv). In her view, “at this close remove, her position is a little obscured by the established reputations of writers who preceded her and by the impact of contemporary writing” (xv). Nevertheless, in her estimation, is is safe to say that Bowen -- active in writing for half a century -- is what happened after Bloomsbury; she is the link that connects Virginia Woolf with Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark. She changed with the century in approach and technique without losing her original inimitable voice (xv).

In 1981, Hermione Lee brings out her similarly reductive, critical study of Bowen’s work entitled An Estimation. And, if neither biography adds significantly to the reading of The Heat of the Day, they at least both serve to stimulate renewed interest in Bowen’s writing.

As an example of such interest, in 1979, Barbara Brothers published an article on the text entitled “Pattern and Void: Bowen’s Irish Landscapes and The Heat of the Day”. Her reading combines an effort to relate the meaning of the text to Bowen’s own background as an Anglo-Irish writer with an extended consideration of the text in ‘the big-house’ tradition. Brothers interprets that this ‘genre’ was, for Bowen the embodiment of an authority or tradition outside the self which provided the self a refuge and which also acted as a curb upon the intense power of the ego. Like Yeats and Eliot, Bowen wished to preserve the spirit of the individual, as opposed to that of mass man; at the same time she instinctively rejected the abusiveness of the will unleashed...
upon the world with no control outside itself. The big-house tradition set in the Irish
landscape was her image for the answer to twentieth-century man's predicament. We
may reject her answer as glossing the abuses of the human spirit in that tradition. But
Bowen was suggesting not so much that we return to it, as that we take from it a model of
what is needed to provide a pattern for man to withstand the void (138).

Another example of renewed interest in Bowen's work comes with Harold Bloom's 1987 book for the Modern
Critical Views Series, a collection of essays by different critics over the years, considered by Bloom to be “the best
criticism that is available upon the writings of Elizabeth Bowen” (vii). And finally, in 1989, Allen E. Austin brings
out a revised version of his critical study of Bowen’s works, inspired by an expressed desire to contribute to the
“steady critical conversation prompted by the creations of this urbane stylist and thoughtful and witty observer of
life in her time” (“Preface”). In a chapter entitled “The Power of the Past”, Austin groups together Bowen’s later
works, The Heat of the Day (1949), A World of Love (1955), The Little Girls (1964), and Eva Trout (1969), as
novels which “disclose her readiness to set herself new and challenging problems” (48). In his reading,

these books emphasize that the quality of an individual’s life is significantly influenced
by his attitude to his accrued memories and experiences. Characters in each of the stories
are shown in the midst of life as acting upon distorted and delimiting recollections, and
they are forced by circumstances to confront this fact. Thus they are afforded an
opportunity for reassessment and readjustment toward a more vital existence (49).

In particular, The Heat of the Day is read as Bowen’s most ambitious, daring, vulnerable, allegorical, and
ambiguous novel, in that in it, the war, “while vividly real, an undeniable actuality, moves imagistically beyond
actual history” (50). Other than such an interesting point, however, Austin’s reading of the text is standard, bound
to the traditional critical elements of character, plot, story, and theme. He ends his analysis of it by emphasizing
what he feels are its ‘evident weaknesses.’ He states that

no other novel gave the author more trouble than this one. We may intuit why this was
so while acknowledging its justification (55).

Appropriate to such a reading, Austin judges that “the chief glories, of course, are the vivid descriptions of London
under the blitz” (55).

* * *

Finally, the destination of the Wirkungsgeschichte of The Heat of the Day ends up, strangely, returning to
what can now be understood as the source of Bowen’s ontological focus in 1949. In three readings which can
themselves be read as extensions of and returns to the text, Barbara Bellow Watson in 1981, Phyllis Lassner in
1990, and Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle in 1995, each in their own way work to emphasize the philosophical
works, entitled “Variations on an Enigma: Elizabeth Bowen’s War Novel” -- is without a doubt closest to the
source of Bowen’s ontology, although she judges this mainly as a despairing one. We shall return to review this
reading shortly. Meanwhile, in two different texts, her 1990 book Elizabeth Bowen, on the novels, and her 1991
book Elizabeth Bowen: A Study of the Short Fiction, Lassner takes the feminist reception of Bowen further than
ever. Significantly, the book on Bowen’s novels is published for the Macmillan ‘Women Writers’ series. This
series is designed to help with what the general editors, Eva Figes and Adele King, understand as the necessary
reassessment of women’s writing, held to be “long neglected by a male critical establishment both in academic
circles and beyond” (viii). In their view, such an establishment has brought about either the unfair neglect or the
marginalization of women writers like Bowen, such that “their true influence and importance has been ignored”
(viii). As they explain,

other women writers have been accepted by male critics and academics, but on terms
which seem, to many women readers of this generation, to be false or simplistic. In the
past the internal conflicts involved in being a woman in a male-dominated society have
been largely ignored by readers of both sexes, and this has affected our reading of
women’s work. The time has come for a serious reassessment of women’s writing in the
light of what we understand today (viii).
Reading *The Heat of the Day* as Bowen's most difficult novel, Lassner finds reason (but not justification) for its neglect due to “its unabashed challenges to literary and moral tradition” (22). In her reading, Bowen questions “the notion of difference itself, especially in readers’ expectations of how male and female character embody different spheres of responsibility” (127). For her, Stella is the ‘difference’ in the text which exposes both “the instability of conventional moral dualities” (126) and the frantic patriarchal reliance on ‘a rhetoric of absolutes’ to make sense of war, action, spying, plots, plotting. Furthermore, in Lassner’s reading, “Bowen’s personal, cultural and literary legacies inform her portrayals of characters caught between ties to inherited traditions and their desire to upset them” (146). Through a feminist reading, Lassner locates the ‘tug and pull’ of the past and the future on the present moment of historical transformation which is foregrounded in Bowen’s text, or what we have otherwise discussed in this paper as *Andenken* (memory) and *Verwindung* (distortion). And finally, Lassner defends Bowen’s use of language, often criticized as idiosyncratic, as serving “to unsettle the reader’s reliance on conventional moral dualities” (161). In her reading, Bowen’s double negatives, unfinished sentences and arch use of abstractions are her post-modern response to moral complacency. Her syntax expresses doubt, not acquiescence, either to the moral or literary tradition in which she lives and works. Her language expresses acute ambivalence or the inability of conventional language to express the emotional paralysis which results from such ambivalence (162).

As such, representing a struggle for autonomy in self-expression, Lassner reads Bowen’s characters, and especially her female characters, as struggling within patriarchal language, culture, and tradition. In her reading, Bowen understands “women’s inexpressiveness [as] a function of how their will is paralysed by social and literary traditions” (163).

As for the last text in the effects-history of Bowen’s work, Bennett and Royle’s collaborative effort, in their book entitled *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives*, is undoubtedly the furthest stretch in this entire effects-history. As already discussed, this is a deconstructive reading of Bowen’s works, one in which an ontology of fiction (a theory of writing) has taken over entirely any hint of apology, such that it becomes a practice rather than a theory and a practice. As Ann Wordsworth states, in Bennett and Royle’s view, “the world of experience is no longer separable from a linguistic drift; nothing pins activity to any constitutive authority” (vii). As such,

the nameless space which Bennett and Royle’s study invokes is unmapped and we, whether resentfully or with relief, find ourselves denied the positioning of the canon and the accommodation of character and plot to the suavities of paraphrase. These are such stable critical practices that to write without their architecture requires a different address, a mobility which must take the reader out of the known context and into a space which is more truly that of the novels themselves. The words of the sub-title *Still Lives* enact this movement by an indeterminate pressure of adjective and adverb, noun and verb, which break down the resistance of the phrase as a single defining term. Under this pressure Bowen’s vocabulary is sheered from the mimetic function and its supposed relation to her sensibility and freed to make transitions that surpass the activities of plot. ‘Writing is eventful’ (vii).

That this is precisely the kind of ontology this paper has so far criticized, especially in the first division of this paper, hardly needs to be emphasized. Nevertheless, a review of Wordsworth’s manifesto of deconstructive reading is instructive in light of this paper’s criticism of such a reading of texts, traditions, and experience. She explains, enlarging on the implications of Bennett and Royle’s deconstructive practice:

The Cogito and the House of Fiction alike are transgressed. Mirages of selfhood, the re-enactments of the dead on the unwitting bodies of the living, the tensions of heat and stillness and erotic expectation are all loosened from their explanatory contexts and given a figurative energy, unreified and unconstrained. Bowen’s language, only seemingly representational, becomes the generator of what moves through the novels, across and beyond the traditional space of literature.

The course and process of this language are not easy to trace and it is through theoretical work that Bennett and Royle find a mode adequate to the eventful writing of the novels. Their readings are performative, not critically prejudged, not tautological like

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paraphrase. Theory, therefore, is not used, as is so often the case, like a talisman to give power and a safe passage to a critical work through the authority of cited names -- Derrida, Freud, Nicolas Abraham, Maria Torok.

(A talisman, nevertheless, for this foreword: to cite Derrida's 'single definition of deconstruction, one as brief, elliptical and economical as a password': 'plus d'une langue -- both more than a language and no more of a language.' This too is intimation and warning to artist, critic and reader alike.)

This volume, so old-fashioned in its apparent scope -- a single-author study of a 'minor' figure whose work is most often read as a charming but dated embodiment of traditional literary and social values -- follows instead processes of dissolution, 'of loosening, fading away, breaking up, unsolving.' The precarious beauty and comedy of the novels is dispersed through a writing of life / death which the critical work in its turn mobilizes through the uncanny exchanges of language. Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel sets a precedent for more readings and rereadings of other novelists enfolded in traditional criticism whose future has not yet been opened (vii-viii).

There is much to wonder about in such a statement of critical practice, but perhaps foremost is the Derridian definition of deconstruction as being 'both more than a language and no more of a language.' By now the reader of this paper should be familiar with Vattimo's differing emphases, which in this context, would be something like 'both more than a language (i.e. a substantiality) and only a language (i.e. an insubstantiality).'

However, probably the sharpest criticism that one could offer against such a critical practice is the apparently entirely arbitrary choice of Bowen for study. At least, the excuse that Wordsworth offers is not even an interesting one; for, if Bowen is really as arbitrary a choice for 'study' as they make her out to be, and if deconstruction is no more a language just as it is more than a language, then why do they need Bowen? Why not just write their own poetry? Otherwise, the phrasal quality of (her) art has been entirely reduced to statement -- the statement, ironically, of the end of difference. This is no 'precedent for more readings and rereadings of other novelists enfolded in traditional criticism.' Rather, this practice indicates a violent disregard for the novelist and her art in its practitioners' dreams of overcoming. Further review of their confused and gratuitous reading of The Heat of the Day, in their chapter entitled "Sheer Kink", is unnecessary.

Finally, in "Variations on an Enigma: Elizabeth Bowen's War Novel", Watson's reading of The Heat of the Day is, as already stated, without a doubt closest to the source of Bowen's hermeneutic ontology, tempering its own ontology of fiction with the one that Bowen communicates, both in the novel and in her non-fictional writings. In this essay, Watson combines a feminist reading of the text with its reception as war writing and as a philosophical novel. However, she reads Bowen's ontology as being more despairing than hopeful. She explains that, in her view, "this philosophical novel is... Pirandellian in the thoroughness of its skepticism" (82). In her reading, Watson will only admit that "the bleakness of the view, the refusal to hope for some firm ground underfoot, is incomplete" (82-83). For, as she explains,

the case should not be put more positively than that, yet an English, an Anglo-Irish stubbornness in it resists the final surrender to the evasiveness of truth, and ends instead with the clearly implied possibility of a hope, or at least of a plodding commonsensical commitment to muddle on with until the missing theoretical structure can be supplied. Provisional yet not improvised, old platitude and fresh response to genocidal war, the hope lies in preservation and generation, specifically in the child nurtured with natural feeling, not cramped in a cage of orthodoxies or ideologies. Heroism without weapons, the heroism of a mother giving birth, of a child laboring to grow up, is sketched without sentimentality or bombast in the frame surrounding the main plot (83).

Following the note of skepticism that she detects in the novel, Watson also reads that "the literary forbearer of this novel is Hamlet" (82). If the comparison is not new, the extended analysis is. Watson provides a full and detailed analysis of Bowen's parodic rewriting of Hamlet in The Heat of the Day, commenting that

all the puzzles and hauntings of that tragedy are still possible, but heroism is not. Qualities less grandiose will come to seem heroic enough in the bombscape of desolated possibilities. Nevertheless, echoes of Hamlet throughout will evoke both parallels and poignant differences (82).
Watson’s reading in fact focuses on Bowen’s skepticism in *The Heat of the Day* as a “total response to totalitarian war” (81). She reads that, furthermore, Bowen “traces the disruption of the moral and intellectual fabric of life back thread by thread to its sources in the normal and the traditional” (81-82). As such, Watson explains that the novel combines both traditional and experimental concerns in a risky way—and not only in terms of the story, but also in terms of style.

To convey an experience harrowing and bizarre but immeasurably distant from that of occupied Europe and *l’univers concentrationnaire*, Bowen has devised a form capable of enclosing grotesque aberration within an ordinary realistic narrative. In fact, what may be most remarkable about this rather understated novel is its ability to express by largely traditional means some of the bleakest realities conceivable. In this novel, the fictional experiment takes place inside the artifact, not on the surface (82).

Like other readers before her, Watson also notes the curious ‘absence’ of war (or action) in the novel, and she explains this ‘absence’ using Bowen’s oft-quoted statement that she ‘sees war more as a territory than as a page of history.’ In Watson’s reading,

this territory is the setting of her first postwar novel, *The Heat of the Day*, a war novel without the blood, brutality, boredom, and obsessive physicality of other war novels. Bowen’s territory of war is a place of blind darkness except for apocalyptic moments of blinding light, a place in which language keeps closing up, like yesterday’s code, against communication, a place in which windows give no view, mirrors do not reflect truly, and pictures are not worth any more than words, since they too falsify. In this territory, sanity and madness interpenetrate, opponents and opposites are twinned. All questions take on an epistemological edge, small ones as well as large. If war is perceived in a new way, that is only partly because the author is a woman and a highly individual observer. The reason is also that the nature of war itself has changed (81).

Along with the change of total war came, as Watson puts it, “the single heavy line drawn across history by the Holocaust and World War II” (81). In Watson’s reading, such a crisis requires, “if not the response of silence predicted by some critics, at the very least a new kind of war novel” (81). Bowen’s text is thus read as “a civilian combatant’s war novel full of the claustrophobic sensations accompanying the two major innovations of total war, the massacre of civilian populations in air raids and the intensification of spying in an intricate pattern of subversion (81).

As a philosophical novel, Watson reads that “in the main plot the ethical and epistemological questions are pinned to the page with as spare a device as any detective story” (83). And yet, she also interprets a problematizing shift in this structure, such that in this text, Bowen’s concentration on the moral mysteries of life is at its most intense. She explains that the innocents of her earlier novels are always in quest of knowledge and faced with obstacles in that quest, but here a deeper doubt arises. *Not only knowledge but the ground of knowledge is in doubt.* In retrospect, as it happens, similar questions can be read in the earlier work, but now the cold queries of epistemology hurl themselves directly on the stuff of the novel: character, plot, everything down to the least detail of furnishing, phrases, and allusions. The war that is the setting and, in a deeper sense, the subject of the novel will have taken from its survivors abilities they can never regain. There is a change in the nature of uncertainty, not just the degree. Therefore the texture of existence and its rendering in the novel must be permeated by doubtfulness, ambiguity, mistake, falsity. A conviction is established, however, by the end of the novel, that *the unreliability of knowledge and of people has been revealed rather than created by war, that the difficulties of knowing are inherent in the nature of human personality, in the social context, and finally in the nature of reality itself* (82, my emphases).

Thus, with Watson’s reading, the radical nature of Bowen’s hermeneutic ontology in *The Heat of the Day* has finally been expressed in terms that are easily translatable into the Heideggerian hermeneutic ontology of *Dasein*, or the human existential situation of ‘thrownness.’

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She provides a thoroughly detailed reading of the text, with its structure of ‘one main plot and two subplots,’ its *Hamlet* echoes, its characters, including Cousin Nettie, and its ‘three arrays of symbolic imagery’ which are “netted in the fabric of ambiguities and deceptions” (96) of treason and detection, and its ‘subsidiary motif’ of time. But overall, she finds that, in its own details, Bowen’s novel “has been so finely woven that only small patches can be picked apart for analysis” (100). Even so, she finds that “the effect is produced by the whole tapestry of the novel” (100). In what seems almost like a return to some of the 1949 reviews, Watson uses painterly language to describe the novel:

The broad outlines that emerge from all the intricacy of detail show darkness and light mingled and not without meaning. In its unflinching treatment of the dire losses in certainty of our century, losses for which the Victorian crisis of faith now seems a mere rehearsal (if not a premonition), Elizabeth Bowen’s war novel shows a vision closer to those of Kafka, Pirandello, Camus, and Beckett than to that of Jane Austen, the comparison of choice for critics of her work (100).

Along with those readers who find such comparisons surprising, Watson concurs with the view that “the essential difference between Bowen’s response and those of her contemporaries on the Continent may be implicit in the anonymous baby or the young soldier who may live to father children in an ancient house” (100). But, she holds to her reading, explaining that

the meaning of these and other ritual elements remains, like so much else in the book, an enigma, but that is very different from a denial of meaning. Bowen herself was among the first to give expression to the idea of a literature of silence coming out of World War II, although distanced in the words of a character in one of her wartime short stories:

‘Henry is probably right,’ said Ronald Cuffe, ‘in considering that this -- this outrage is *not* important. There is no place for it in human experience; it apparently cannot make a place of its own. It will have no literature.’

Yet even the unspeakable has had a literature and is beginning to have a body of literary criticism as well. This is as it should be, an effort not just to memorialize, but to seek meaning of some sort in experiences that themselves baffle all response.

Bowen’s variations on the enigma she proposes are derived from a generation and a culture that belong still to the old order, although she is too honest a writer to treat as unfallen the Europe that produced the monster. Her style and values derive from that prewar world, but she has used the novel form for heuristic purposes, treating it always as a vehicle for both intelligence and intellect. Perhaps only a writer so civilized can offer such a faithful *critique* of her own civilization (100-101, my emphasis).

And, perhaps only a writer *poised* so vigilantly on the brink of that fleeting contact between the past and the future in the present could offer such an announcement of postmodernity.
Man in outline against the panes, his communication with the order of the stars became not human: she, turning where she lay, apprehensively not raising herself on the pillows, stared also, not in subjection, but in a sort of dread of subjection, at the mathematical spaces between the burning bright points.

Elizabeth Bowen *The Heat of the Day* (1949)
Approaching, being not yet present, at the same time gives and brings about what is no longer present, the past, and conversely what has been offers future to itself. The reciprocal relation of both at the same time gives and brings about the present. We say 'at the same time,' and thus ascribe a time character to the mutual giving to one another of future, past and present, that is, to their own unity.

Martin Heidegger  *On Time and Being* (1969)
...She and Robert found themselves conscious of a submerged decision to go on as they were, for that 'time being' which war had made the very being of time. War time, with its makeshifts, shelvings, deferrings, could not have been kinder to romantic love.

Elizabeth Bowen  *The Heat of the Day*  (1949)
Intermission: Extension

In a 1991 piece for Revista de Estudios Hispanicos, “Gianni Vattimo: Philosopher of Postmodernity: Responde a Gianni Vattimo The End of Modernity”, Paul Julian Smith explains that Vattimo is best known for his coinage of ‘weak thought,’ which “describes a predicament and a discourse in which the ‘strong’ certainties of ontology and hermeneutics have been dissolved, in which being and truth have lost both foundation and ultimate value” (109). Elizabeth Bowen’s wartime novel The Heat of the Day describes just such a predicament and in itself comprises just such a discourse. It is a novel of weak thought, being both about it and also self-consciously constituted by it. One finds, then, that Bowen starts out from the same premise as Vattimo, which Smith explains as being

that Man (as transcendental subject) has been displaced, citing Nietzsche’s cryptic note “Man rolls from the centre to X” (The End of Modernity 19). A strong sense of Being has been reduced to exchange value: all terms are now convertible into each other (21). For Nietzsche, “the world has become a fable” (24), but overcoming ‘alienation,’ for the reification of the fable is ubiquitous (26): “In the world of generalized exchange value, all is given... in a more evident and exaggerated fashion, as narration or récit” (27). For Vattimo this state is not negative but positive, enabling “the reappropriation of the meaning of history by those who actually make it” (28). Such a reappropriation must also however be a ‘dissolution,’ cannot simply fall back into the renewed fantasy of a progressive history. This fictionalized reality of mass media and technology raises the possibility at least of new freedoms (29) (109-10).

Bowen’s novel strikes the reader as the description of a ‘world of generalized exchange value,’ a fading context wherein ‘all is given... in a more evident and exaggerated fashion, as narration or récit.’ As her ‘present-day historical novel,’ The Heat of the Day presents an odd confluence with the Heideggerian notion, later cited by Vattimo, that “one can recover from metaphysics by making its traits more extreme” (“Optimistic Nihilism” 43). The near incredible or simply trashy story of spies and counter-spies, romance, blackmail, and treachery, put forward as ‘the ideal vehicle’ for Bowen’s memory of the war, is a conspicuous narrative which continually flaunts its amphibolous status as a historical narrative. In the novel, the historical actuality of the war years in London is at once palpably imitable and deceptively inimitable, but either way, it is flaunted by Bowen as only ever being accessible through interpretation.

Like Vattimo, however, Bowen’s recognition of the infinite interpretability of reality informs an optimistic nihilism, wherein the individual human being is presented with the opportunity to reappropriate the meaning of history for her/him-self. Rather than an announcement of ‘the end of history,’ Bowen’s novel reads as an emphasis on the human need to historicize, or the individual human’s need to tell the story of her connections within the temporal extension of past, present, and future. As David Lowenthal states, in The Past is a Foreign Country, we treasure these connections with the wider past. Gratified that our memories are our own, we also seek to link our personal past with collective memory and public history. People vividly recall their own thoughts and actions at moments of public crisis because they jump at the chance to connect themselves with a meaningful cosmos. A high proportion of those old enough to recall Lincoln’s and Kennedy’s assassinations many years later also vividly remembered their own circumstances at the time: where they were, who told them, what they were doing, how they reacted, what they did next. But these recollections are often as erroneous as they are vivid. Indeed, the gross inaccuracies emphasize the point: people are so eager to be a part of ‘history’ that they falsely ‘remember’ their responses to, or even having been present at, some momentous event (197).

This desperate need to feel oneself belonging to a ‘meaningful’ context is expressed in the novel through all of the characters, but in particular, through Stella, Roderick, Harrison, and Louie.

Nevertheless, Bowen’s positive distortion of nihilism, articulated through her own response and through her characters’ responses to the crisis of the war, should not be read as a nostalgic return to humanism. For, like Vattimo, Bowen realized the dangerously tenacious hold of humanism on the imagination. As Smith explains,
Certainly, The Heat of the Day is a novel lacking in any peremptory tone. Rather, the very appearance of foundation (or 'truth') is foregrounded as being interpretive (imaginary), even if it is also recognized as an ontological necessity. As a narrative of process, conviction is backgrounded, and the art of persuasion, the activity of interpretation, and the ubiquity of rhetoric are foregrounded in the 'establishment' of a historical foundation. It is an intermission between the 'now-time' and the future, awaiting the arrival of 'truth' its readers will give, and it is an extension of the past into the present, stretching the sending of traditional 'truths'.

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In terms of Bowen’s response to the crisis of total war, we can begin to understand the figure-ground shift The Heat of the Day performs when we reflect upon the propagandistic urgency of impositions of 'truth' (or rhetoric) over 'error' or 'untruth' during wartime. Truth in the Second World War, meaning truth as it was so far known (epistemological -- logical, rational), was recognized by Bowen as being in crisis. Granted, as the historian Wright states, “the war struck Europe at a time of low resistance to infection by intellectual doubt and despair” (259). For two generations already, “the dominant values and beliefs of the post-Enlightenment era had been under attack” (Wright 259), and “old certainties had been dissolving without being replaced by positive new values and convictions” (259). However, the logical/rational rhetoric of modernity and metaphysics was now being foregrounded or exposed with its exaggeration in propaganda (fascist and nationalist alike); its obtrusion on the mood of cultural despair hanging over from the interwar years would still have been perceived as a further crisis in/of/for truth. Indeed, the political propaganda of the war period must have seemed obvious to thoughtful people as nothing but a flagrant exaggeration (Vattimo or Heidegger would say 'fulfillment' or 'destiny') of the violent logic of Western metaphysics which had so far been the truth of Being: that is, the imposition of 'truth' over 'untruth.' The obviousness of half-truths, distortions, and biased information, disguised or imposed upon people as 'truth' or absolute evidence, revealed by exaggeration the rhetoric at work in all purportedly convincing assertions of truth, all 'absolute' evidence.

Bowen’s recognition and experience of the dissolution of truth is thus also what we can understand, in interpreting her historical fiction, as ‘a first flashing up of Ereignis,' as Heidegger would say. That is, we can contend that The Heat of the Day is circumstantial evidence (circumstantial as it is ‘found’ in the overlap which this paper mediates) of a near-full and proximitous revealment of (the destiny of) Being during the Second World War. Heidegger called this revealment the ‘propriative event,’ which is always an event which forces thinking on the way to language as ‘own-ness’ or ‘propriation,’ or as that which is always already appropriate or always already our own (eigen) -- that is, what is also in this way grasped and graspable as an imposition which we must own up to. In Bowen’s historical novel, there is a return to the thinking that is on the way to language in the sense that its rhetorical (‘grasping,’ detecting, imposing, owning, appropriating, or epistemological) operation -- or, as Heidegger would say, the movement of its showing (convincing) -- is foregrounded. And it is in the foregrounding of the epistemological grasp of language, or in the playing of ‘language games,’ as Vattimo and Heidegger say, following the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, that one faces and articulates, in an intelligent and appropriate way, the subject-object split which is an effect of the thinking of Being as Being -- or, that is, the thinking of difference as difference -- which cannot be grasped.

Extrapolating from Heidegger’s essay of 1959 “The Way To Language”, what Bowen articulates in The Heat of the Day is that the monological aspect of language (its grasping ‘lie’ of absolute evidence) must be owned up to as an owning of people or things. As with Heidegger, Bowen owns up in her writing to the fact that the saying
of language "becomes telling only when it lets a being come into its own" (Krell 395). It is only when we have recognized ourselves as being ontologically in a situation of dialogue with respect to both language and the world that we can properly articulate what David Farrell Krell explains, following Heidegger, as "das Eigene, whatever is a thing's 'own,'" that is, whatever shows itself when language lets a being advance under its own power, or lets it withdraw into concealment and abide on its own" (396). Accordingly, 'the' war (amongst so many other 'truths' in the novel, such as the truth of Robert's death, Harrison's claims, or Stella's experience) is not demonstrated or 'revealed' in Bowen's historical narrative of the Second World War in London.

Secondly, and following from this -- in her novel, Bowen thematizes the dissolution of truth into exchange value, which was experienced during and as a consequence of the total warfare of the Second World War, by exposing "the idea that humankind can know things 'in themselves'" (Vattimo ibid 9) as a lie, error, or itself an interpretation. In The Heat of the Day, Bowen shows the truth of war itself to be ironically unknowable or ungraspable in any objective sense, owning up to it as 'only' a rhetorically persuasive announcement, or, simply speaking, a word. As Harrison implies to Stella in the novel, there is no difference between war and 'life in general.' He says, "'War, if you come to think of it, hasn't started anything that wasn't there already'" (33). War in this view is perhaps simply an exaggeration of something that was already 'there.' This is an important recognition, for it is one which is also confluent with Heidegger's overlapping of technological with philosophical questions in his contention, for instance in "The Question Concerning Technology" of 1949-53, that the essence of technology is nothing technological. For Heidegger, as Krell puts it, "the essence of technology is ultimately a way of revealing the totality of beings" (309), and it is a way of revealing that "is pervasive and fundamental in our time, so much so that we cannot 'opt for' technology or 'opt out' of it" (309). Thus total war, as in Harrison's view, being simply a pronouncement of what was already there, and thus also the most flagrant manifestation of technology (technological thought and practice) at that time, must also be accepted as "the most historically advanced form of Western metaphysics... because it represents the most extreme degree of rationalization thus far to be produced by Western thought" (Snyder xv).

First of all, with regard to this admission, Krell explains Heidegger's thesis that the advent of technology -- and it is this historic, essential unfolding or provenance that Heidegger means by 'essence' -- is something destined or sent our way long before the eighteenth century. One of Heidegger's most daring theses is that the essence of technology is prior to, and by no means a consequence of, the Scientific Revolution (309). But secondly, our admission also means that technology, as it was manifested and utilized during the total warfare of the Second World War, revealed/s the contention that things can be ultimately knowable in themselves to be inseparable from the violence of metaphysical thought as "an ordering of, or setting-upon, both nature and man, a defiant challenging of beings that aims at total and exclusive mastery" (Krell 309). That is, technology, or metaphysical/modernist thought, thus comes to be recognized by Heidegger and also by Bowen as a supreme danger in that...

...this one way of revealing beings may overwhelm man and beings and all other possible ways of revealing.... The technological framework is inherently expansionist and can reveal only by reduction. Its attempt to enclose all beings in a particular claim -- utter availability and sheer manipulability -- Heidegger calls Ge-stell, 'enframing.'

As the essence of technology, enframing would be absolute. It would reduce man and beings to a sort of 'standing reserve' or stockpile in service to, and on call for, technological purposes (Krell 309).

Total war can thus be interpreted as the fulfillment of Western metaphysics in its technological aspect, in the Heideggerian sense of the essence of technology as an ultimate rhetoric or epistemology of 'knowability,' 'graspiability,' ownership, mastery, or appropriation. But, as already mentioned, total warfare is itself articulated as an absence in Bowen's wartime novel, which involves a figure-ground shift. And thus we arrive at a third area of overlap between Bowen's text and Heidegger's philosophy -- namely, the mystery of technology in its inability to enframe (grasp, own, demonstrate) itself. As Krell explains, enframing cannot overpower or even reveal its own historic, essential unfolding, nor indeed the advent, endurance, and departure of beings. Behind all the confident and even arrogant manipulations of the technological will to power something remains mysterious.
about technology that only a thoughtful recollection can appreciate -- though indeed it cannot explain (and so enframe) what is transpiring all over the globe (309).

Itself being a thoughtful recollection of total warfare and twentieth-century technological thought and practice, Bowen’s work of art reveals the mystery of technology as total warfare by: first of all, preserving the play of unconcealment and concealment in truth; and secondly, “by bringing us face to face with the concealment itself... [which is effected by] the mode of understanding dominated by technology and metaphysics” (Guignon 21).

And this first way of revealing, as Krell explains, “this mysterious coming to presence and withdrawal into absence that includes technology and that technology would but cannot entirely master relates the essence of technology to what Heidegger speaks of in his treatise on the essence of truth: the presencing of beings in unconcealment” (309). In fact, though, and as Krell explains, Heidegger’s thought as a whole circles about the double theme of presence/absence and unconcealment/concealment, or, that is the meaning of Being and the propriative event (Ereignis) of disclosure. Sein and aletheia remain the key words, Sein meaning coming to presence, and aletheia the disclosedness or unconcealment implied in such presence. Of course this double theme has its reverse side. Coming to presence suggests an absence before and after itself, so that withdrawal and departure must always be thought together with Sein as presencing; disclosedness or unconcealment suggests a surrounding obscurity, Lethean concealment, so that darkness and oblivion must be thought together with aletheia. The propriative event is always simultaneously expropriative (Enteignis) (32).

Heidegger in turn relates this revealing to the kind of revealing of beings that occurs in the language of art and thought, especially in poetry. For Heidegger, “all artwork and all thinking... reveal beings and let them come to radiant appearance, but only by cultivating and safeguarding their provenance, allowing all things the darkness they require and their proper growing time” (Krell 142). Vattimo in his turn calls this kind of revealing, embraced as the postmodern truth of Being, wherein truth is finally accepted as a fictional (interpretive, rhetorical, aesthetic) experience — exactly what is articulated in Bowen’s The Heat of the Day. Thus we can also posit that the interface, overlap, or intertext that this paper reveals as its ‘object’ is the weakening of Being as articulated in the texts of Heidegger, Bowen, and Vattimo.

A second way of revealing the mystery of technology as total warfare becomes apparent in Bowen’s war novel in her foregrounding of the concealment or oblivion of Being which, as mentioned, is a result of the mode of understanding dominated by technological and metaphysical (modernist) thought and practice. To clarify, though, the mystery referred to here and above is simply Bowen’s articulation of an impasse reached in logical or rational thought with the experience of the Second World War. This impasse or aporia is mysterious considering the characteristic “stance toward things in the modern age [which] is that of ‘machination’ (Machenschaft), which interprets all entities as representable (Vor-stellbar) and capable of being brought forth in production” (Guignon 20). Technology, especially as it was utilized and realized in the total warfare of the Second World War, can be understood as the domination of ordering, which as Guignon explains following Heidegger, “takes the form of ‘enframing’ or ‘configuring’ (Ge-stell), which reduces all entities, including humans, to the homogenized level of resources on hand to be ordered and used with maximum efficiency” (20). And this “fascination with ordering for its own sake colors all our ways of understanding things” (Guignon 20), so that eventually there is no longer anything which is impossible or inaccessible. Everything is within grasp, that is, everything except Being, which, as connectedness, or the play of unconcealment and concealment in truth, is mysteriously concealed in the technological Ge-stell. As Guignon explains, quoting from Heidegger’s Contributions to Philosophy of 1936-8 and his posthumous The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays of 1977:

“Inmediate graspability and usefulness and serviceability... self-evidently constitute what is in being and what is not” ([CP] 30). Entities “are presupposed as what can be arranged, produced, and fixed (idea)” (493). The understanding of entities as whatever is at our disposal reinforces the self-certainty of the “greatness of the subject” in modern subjectivism (441). We experience reality as a ‘world-picture’ set before (vor-gestellt) us, and ourselves as subjects who can challenge and control whatever there is. The result of this abandonment of Being is that “entities appear as objects merely on hand, as if Being were not [als ob Seyn nicht wese]” (115). Being -- that which imparts focus, coherence, belonging-ness, and a richness of possibilities to things -- is blotted out of view. This withdrawal of Being is evident in the objectifying procedure of modern
natural science that conceals the “essential fullness [Wesensfülle] of nature” (OCT 174),
that is, the rich possibilities for cohering and belonging together harbored within things.
When entities are treated as interchangeable bits cut off from any proper place or ‘region’
to which they belong, they are ‘un-beings,’ devoid of the kind of connectedness to
contexts of meaning that could let them become manifest in their Being (20-21).

However, there is an interesting result to this aggravated (or as Guignon calls it, ‘second-order’) concealment of
Being which is effected by technological thought and practice: distress.

Why distress? Technological thought and practice entrap us in “the illusion of thinking that nothing is
hidden and that everything is totally out front” (Guignon 19). The moment this illusion fails us -- which for Bowen,
and her fictional characters Stella, Roderick, and Louie, occurred/-s during the Second World War in London -- we
are suddenly distressed with the awareness that our epistemological (technological) grasp is actually a concealment
of something mysterious: namely, forgotten Being, or that is, the play of unconcealment and concealment in truth.

As Guignon explains,

concealment inevitably accompanies every emerging-into-presence in this sense: just as
the items in a room can become visible only if the lighting that illuminates them itself
remains invisible, so things can become manifest only if this manifesting itself ‘stays
away’ or ‘withdraws.’ This first-order concealment is unavoidable and innocuous. But it
becomes aggravated by a second-order concealment that occurs when the original
concealment itself is concealed. That is, insofar as humans are oblivious to the fact that
every disclosedness involves concealment, they fall into the illusion of thinking that
nothing is hidden and that everything is totally out front (19).

The second-order concealment effected by technological (epistemological or modernist) thought and practice is
such that it ‘bleaches out’ the original play of unconcealment and concealment, or the contextual significance
(chiaroscuro) of what shows up in the world. This second-order concealment is aggravating because, as a particular
form of presenting, it has come to be accepted as “the ultimate truth about things” (Guignon 19). That is, in
technological thought and practice, ‘what shows up at a particular time presents itself as the last word about reality,
as the ‘only game in town,’ with the result that the current epoch’s interpretation of reality comes to be taken as self-
evident and beyond discussion” (Guignon 19). However, as stated, the second-order concealment of technology,
which paradoxes as an ultimate revealing with its ‘bright lights’ that bleach out the connectedness of all entities in the
world, mysteriously remains concealed from itself and in itself. And as it will not be grasped of itself in itself, it
thus reminds one of an original concealment. And this ‘reminder’ then marks the reinstatement of connectedness
in the world: that is, coherence, belonging, chiaroscuro, the play of unconcealment (light) and concealment (shadow)
in truth, ‘weakness.’

We are on the verge of describing what takes place in Bowen’s The Heat of the Day -- a figure-ground
‘shift.’ For the moment of technology’s ‘failure,’ as described above, marks a movement which we have already
discussed as one between and through epistemology and ontology, modernism and postmodernism: in brief, we are
reminded of and we shift to foreground the ancient question of Being at the very moment that technological thought
and practice exceeds the procedural logic and rationality of metaphysics, (which is another way of saying the very
moment that technology exceeds its own grasp). This excess of/in technology occurred during the ‘breakdown’ of
the Second World War, interpreted as the inauguration of the ‘atomic age.’ However, to further explicate this
breakdown, it would be helpful to return to a metaphor developed by Heidegger. Using the metaphor of the
‘equipmental context’ or ‘dwelling’ of the workshop, Heidegger explains that a breakdown disrupts what previously
remained “unobtrusive and unnoticed” (Guignon 12), that is “the ready-to-hand [which] must ‘withdraw’ into its
usability... in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically” (Being and Time 99)” (12). That is, what we would
normally ‘see through,’ in order to ‘zero in’ on what we are out to accomplish, is now suddenly obtrusive, or visible
and foregrounded -- in this case, the techno-epistemological thought and practice of modernity. But we are also,
and in this way, suddenly aware of being-in-the-world (what Heidegger calls Dasein) as a connected,
interdependent, interpretive, and/or as Heidegger says ‘unitary’ phenomenon. And this awareness opens up further
with the recognition that “there is no ultimate ground or foundation for the holistic web of meaning that makes up
being-in-the-world,... [and thus] the meaning of Being (i.e., the basis of all intelligibility) is an ‘absence of ground’
or ‘abyss’ (Abgrund) (Being and Time 194)” (Guignon 12). Thus, with the breakdown and the shift in the way
things show up for us (what is articulated in Bowen’s war novel), we suddenly return to the question of Being and
the philosophy of nihilism. Guignon continues Heidegger’s metaphor, explaining that

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when something goes wrong in the workshop, however, there is a ‘changeover’ in the way things show up for us. If the handle breaks off the pot or the spatula is missing, the whole project grinds to a standstill and we are put in the position of just looking around to see what to do next. It is when things are temporarily unready-to-hand that we can catch a glimpse of the web of functional relations in which they played a part. Thus, a breakdown makes it possible to catch sight of the worldhood of the world. If the breakdown persists, however, items can begin to obtrude in their unusability, and we can look at things as brute present-at-hand objects to be investigated from a theoretical perspective. As we adopt a stance in which things are explicitly noticed, we can be led to believe that what have been there ‘all along’ are value-free, meaningless objects whose usefulness was merely a product of our own subjective interests and needs. Heidegger’s point, however, is that this conception of reality as consisting of essentially contextless objects can arise only derivatively from a more ‘primordial’ way of being absorbed in a meaningful life-world. Such contextless objects are by-products of the ‘disworlding’ of the world, and so cannot be thought of as the basic components from which the world is built up (Guignon 12-13, my emphasis).

Thus in Bowen’s novel, the ‘excess’ or ‘failure’ of the technology of total war is explored thematically as a breakdown which precisely affords a glimpse of ‘the worldhood of the world.’ This breakdown persists for some characters only to the extent that it opens up onto the question of Being in the Heideggerian sense (Stella, Roderick, and, arguably, Louie), while for other characters, (Robert, Harrison) the broken down world remains without context, without meaning, ‘dis-worlded.’ Bowen thematizes this breakdown differently, for instance, through the failure of the narrator’s grasp of the war, through Harrison’s failure to feel, through the failure of Robert’s totalitarian ideology, and even through the many plays on light, for instance, as initially evoked in the title of the book. Ironically there is no ‘heat of the day’ in the novel, no bright lights or long stretches of ‘bleaching out,’ but rather an extended crepuscule, two years of twilight ending with a glimpse of daylight by the sea. The novel commences ‘en medias res’ several characters’ epistemological ‘grasping’ for answers (Robert, Stella, Harrison, Roderick, Louie, etcetera). This ‘grasping’ movement works as that blinding technological ‘light’ of the novel which inevitably fails, and has indeed already ‘broken down’ by the start of the novel, thus restoring a ‘twilight’ or ‘chromatic’ character to the world and knowledge, which also describes the in-between, shifting, and even shifty writing of the novel. But, much has already been said already about the tonicity of Bowen’s language, its elastic surface tension which results in frequent spasms or contortions, much like a stutter. As such, the language ‘stammers’ in between moments of unconcealment and concealment.

However, technology, or loosely speaking ‘(the) war,’ is concealed in itself in the novel; that is, it is backgrounded as a marginal event, forgotten, or remote. Bowen thus performs upon technology a technological concealment. And in this way, war becomes analogous to Being, and we experience the same distress with its concealment in the novel. But we are distressed only until we become aware of the concealment at work in truth, or its ‘epistemology’ (really just an unacknowledged ‘worlding’ or ontology) as such, in the looking for and positing of answers. Bowen foregrounds this epistemological grasping in order to stage a figure-ground shift in the return to ontological questions, which suitably and ironically return in the dark, in the absence of any blinding technological light of ‘the heat of the day.’ Examples of such blindness and insight are abundant-- one thinks of the scene of Stella and Harrison’s argument in her black-out darkened apartment; Stella’s self-discovery in the drawing room of Mount Morris; Roderick’s self-discovery while wandering around in the darkness of the night outside Mount Morris; and Stella and Robert’s final meeting and argument, again in her black-out darkened apartment. Using Guignon’s analogy that ‘just as the items in a room can become visible only if the lighting that illuminates them itself remains invisible...,’ we can posit that the invisible ‘light’ in this sense is what is familiar to us, what in techno-epistemological terms we assume ‘is’ and therefore to which we are ‘blind.’ This ‘background’ of what has been assumed to be the ‘mundane’ or the ‘ordinary’ (the invisible light which has been ‘forgotten’ and reduced to dead metaphors of knowledge) is suddenly and paradoxically foregrounded in Bowen’s novel through its very absence, making the whole world seem to obtrude (like so many meaningless items in a room) or stand out strangely in the mysterious ‘light’ of the novel. There is a figure-ground shift: suddenly the invisible light (what Heidegger refers to as the ‘clearing’ or Lichtung, ‘emerging-into-presence,’ interpretation, becoming, truth-making, and the possibilities for connections, answers, and coherence...) becomes visible or foregrounded through its very invisibility (ungraspability). And thus we suddenly also pay attention to epistemological answers shifting into ontological questions. That is, as Guignon explains, quoting from Heidegger’s Introduction to Metaphysics of 1959, instead of pursuing “the ‘guiding question’ concerning the beingness of entities (What are entities?)” (21), we suddenly ask “the ‘basic question’ (Grundfrage) that asks ‘about being in respect to its ground’ (32) -- What is the
truth of Being? What is Being itself?... How come truth?” (21). In short we experience an other beginning which this paper posits as that of postmodernity, for

only by coming to experience fully the distress of this abandonment of Being can we begin to move beyond the mode of understanding dominated by technology and metaphysics. Heidegger speaks of a ‘new’ or an ‘other’ beginning that stands as a possibility before us if we can hear the ‘echo’ (Anklang) of Being. This ‘other beginning’ will bring about a transformed relationship of humans and Being. By bringing us face to face with the concealment itself, the transition to a new beginning will lead us to experience exactly what was forgotten in metaphysics: the truth of Being. In Heidegger’s words, ‘The first beginning experiences and posits the truth of entities without asking about truth as such.... The other beginning experiences the truth of Being and asks about the Being of truth in order to thereby ground the essencing of Being’ (Introduction to Metaphysics 179) (Guignon 21).

However, we should again clarify that, in theorizing a ground for postmodernity here, this paper (or Heidegger, or Vattimo, or Bowen) does not privilege ontology over epistemology in a rigid binary opposition. Nor is there a reassertion of a new hierarchy of primordial Being over technological disjunction in a move that has often and wrongly been alleged, in the interpretation of Heidegger, as a rejection of technicist rationalism. Rather, ontological concerns and questions are reawakened in the technological-rational context of the ‘atomic age.’

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As already discussed, Bowen’s wartime historical narrative involves a problematization of demonstrative discourse, such that it can be read as a performance of the Heideggerian temporal-spatial withholding Nahheit dialectic -- aesthetically and structurally, or that is, in terms of the actual writing itself, and in terms of the narrative as allegory. As a textual extension of the experience of the Second World War in London, its narrative of history is exaggerated or spotlighted as both récit and freedom, Andenken and Verwindung, repetition and difference. Through the extended oscillation of this amphibolic relation, an ethics of extension emerges, such that the constraint upon the event and structure of the text (its [hi]story) is grasped, ironically, as the informative and mediating mobile element of the text and of (hi)story itself. Asked about writing action in fiction, Bowen stated to women students in a lecture entitled “The Experience of Writing” that, as a writer, it is more important to concern oneself “with the link between the sensibility and the act”’ (Lassner 163). As such, emphasizing the link slows down the ‘movement’ of narrative and history itself, and thus also involves the foregrounding of weakness as that ‘twilight’ quality of experience and thought. However, what makes history slow down and obtrude into our space as (hi)story or narrative is also what quickens its temporal relation to actuality as history or event. Either way, with the opening up of human awareness onto the experienced relation between time and B-being, space becomes temporal and time becomes spatial.

The character Stella is both riveted and relieved by this recognition. And as a Hamlet- type, she lives through careful deliberation, prevarication, and restraint, teaching her son that these are ethical responses that can be lived as the last possibility for postmodern freedom.

Meanwhile, she posted to him the copy of Cousin Francis’s will; he should have time to digest this before they met.

Had he done so? The afternoon appointed found them face to face with each other across a teashop table: Roderick, with a frown, unfolded the document, which had been a good deal thumbed. His eyes ran down the typescript till they stopped at a line -- ‘Look, this is where I want to know what you think. When he’s said about how he bequeaths Mount Morris, the lands, the etcetera, etcetera, and so on, to his cousin Roderick Vernon Rodney, me, he goes on, ‘In the hope that he may care in his own way to carry on the old tradition.’ -- Why must lawyers always take out commas?’

‘Because what they write is meant to be clear without them.’

‘Well, in this case it isn’t. Which did Cousin Francis mean?’

‘Which what, darling?’

‘Did he mean, care in my own way, or, carry on the old tradition in my own way?’

Uncomprehending, Stella returned her eyes to the cropped top of Roderick’s
downbent head. ‘In the end, I suppose,’ she hazarded, ‘it would come to the same thing?’

‘I’m not asking what it would come to; I want to know what he meant.’

‘I know. But the first thing is that you’ll really have to decide.’

‘What should I decide? He’s decided. It’s become mine.’

‘We must think what you’re going to do.’

‘But I want to know which he meant. Does he mean, that I’m free to care in any way I like, so long as it’s the tradition I carry on; or, that so long as I care in the same way he did, I’m free to mean by ‘tradition’ anything I like?’

‘There was another cousin of yours, Roderick, a Colonel Pole, at the funeral, who said —’

‘Yes, Mother, yes; but never mind Colonel Pole. What we must make out is, what Cousin Francis meant. That might make all the difference to what I do.’

‘One must not be too much influenced by a dead person! After all, one can only live how one can; one generally finds there is only one way one can live — and that often must mean disappointing the dead. They had no idea how it would be for us. If they still had to live, who knows that they might not have disappointed themselves?’ (87-88).

Stella herself finds that the one way she can live is to leave undisturbed the “ancient history” (83) which has been attributed to her by her late husband Victor’s family, as a femme fatale. As readers, we find out that she was in fact a victim, left by her husband, after his return from the 1914 war, for a middle-aged nurse. Shortly after divorcing her, Victor died under the care of this woman, but his family had automatically interpreted the failure of their marriage as being due to a young wife’s infidelity, and she is judged by the Poles as being a femme fatale. Stella does not bother to contradict this narrative, as she prefers to be living irony, amused by Colonel Pole’s and by Harrison’s attempts to figure out her ‘mystery.’ Roderick proves to be the better ‘reader’ of his mother, however, and he digs up evidence from the ‘insane’ Cousin Nettie to refute this ‘ancient history’ surrounding his parents. As Harrison does too, Roderick eventually confronts her with ‘the truth’ of this story, only to find Stella insisting that it has been easier to live the fiction of a femme fatale.

Similarly, “with regard to Robert the silence from behind the scenes never broke: what was most to be noted about his death was its expediency — the country was spared a demoralizing story; everything now could be, and was, hushed up” (301). Stella spares Roderick ‘the story of Robert,’ not in any small part due to the fact that it still remains mysterious to her. Indeed, it remains mysterious even up until ‘the end,’ when Stella reunites with Harrison to ask him what had happened “that day whose start in darkness covered Robert’s fall or leap from the roof” (291). Even during the inquest, Stella plays the role of the femme fatale to its ruthless ‘end,’ preferring silence over resistance, or perhaps preferring silence as resistance.

His death remained, officially, what the coroner found it — misadventure, outcome of a crazy midnight escapade on a roof; to which identification, in the popular mind, of any part of London W I with ‘Mayfair’ gave colour, odour, scandalous likeness. From Stella, as the woman friend in the luxury flat, were extracted the cogent parts of the inquest evidence. Having replied to questions as to the position of the ladder, the skylight, etc., she answered others....

She left the coroner’s court with one kind of reputation, that of being a good witness (301-2, 305).

The implication, of course, is that she also left the inquest with another kind of reputation left intact, that of being a woman of ‘loose morals,’ or a femme fatale. And due to the reader’s ‘knowledge’ otherwise, there is wonderful irony in Louie’s shock of finding out ‘the truth’ about Stella.

For Louie, subsidence came about through her now knowing Stella not to be virtuous. Virtue became less possible now it was shown impossible by Stella, less to be desired because Stella had not desired it enough....

There was nobody to admire; there was no alternative. No unextinguished watch-light remained, after all, burning in any window, however far away. In hopes of what, then, was one led on, led on? How long, looking back on it, it had lasted -- that dogged, timid, unfaithfully-followed hope! (305-6, 307).
But the reader is forced to confront a more generalized ‘weakness’ in the text, such that the irony concerning ‘the truth’ can be extended out from the character Stella to include most other characters and events in the text. In Bowen’s metatextual words, there is “a subsidence of the under soil”, such that “without the surface having been visibly broken, gradients alter, uprights cant a little out of the straight” (301). In *The Heat of the Day*, we confront the world of ‘the excluded middle,’ where people, places, things, even the writing itself and the structure of the text are blurred in a twilight world of the ‘both/and.’ Syntactically or grammatically, there is blurring of the subject-object division and of the nominal-verbal division. Categorically, Bowen blurs the differences between literary genres. Eidetically, the descriptive images and metaphors of the text become interchangeable, mobile, and metatextual, as they are loosened from their deictic function, seeming to ‘float’ across the surface of the text. Structurally, Bowen foregrounds the ‘middleness’ of the text (the absence of archai or telos) as it begins ‘en medias res’ and ends ‘in mid air.’ And thematically, the narrative is one of a war with no perceived boundaries, borders, beginning, or end. Not only does the story of a middle-aged woman take place in the middle years of the war, 1942-44, but the war itself has come to be understood by the narrator as ‘spilling off the edges of maps,’ uncontrollable and ubiquitous, a ‘war of dry cerebration.’ As such, the war is both backgrounded and foregrounded in the text -- it cannot be located or identified. War becomes blurred as an allegory for Being, and further blurred, as both Being and war themselves are perceived as being anterior to the subject-object division, and thus incapable of being grasped in representational terms.

Identity, too, is blurred, as characters are shown to be ‘both/and.’ Robert is both ‘good’ and ‘evil.’ As such, he is both friend and enemy, lover and traitor. And his death is blurred as being both suicidal and accidental. Similarly, Harrison is blurry, ‘strabismal.’ With his crooked glance, his “lag or inequality of vision” (12) gives Louie the “feeling of being looked at twice -- being viewed and then checked over again in the same moment” (12). Like Robert, Harrison is both ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ friend and enemy. But, in fact, Harrison has a negative relation to all characters and events in the text, and even to the narrative itself, as the narrator admits he is a ‘character impossible’ -- that is, presumably, both a character and not a character at the same time. He is an informing ‘absence’ of the text, Robert’s *dopplegänger*. When Stella at last confronts Robert with ‘the truth,’ she finds that “it seemed to her it was Robert who had been the Harrison” (275). And, during the last eerie meeting between Harrison and Stella, in a room which seems like “a dark-lined kernel of silence under the flare-pale resounding sky” (319), Harrison collapses into his ‘double,’ Robert, as Stella finds out that they have the same first name. Stella confronts Harrison, as if he were a ghost, haunting her, and in an odd way, the ghost of Robert. She says,

‘You were the last of him. -- No, not that: I am the last of him. You then? Were you then, somehow, love’s necessary missing part? You brought that into us, if you killed him. But now, you and I are no longer two of three. From between us some pin has been drawn out: we’re apart. We’re not where we were -- look, not even any more in the same room. The pattern’s been swept away, so where’s the meaning? Think!’ (320).

Furthermore, both Louie and Stella are problematized as being both ‘fallen women’ and ‘heroines,’ ‘femmes fatales’ and ‘victims.’ And the characters themselves are curiously ‘double,’ both being single women with dead husbands and treacherous lovers, their lives magnetized around and their paths crossing through the ‘absent center’ Harrison. At the end of the narrative, Louie has a son who, like Stella’s son, indicates some direction and hope for the future. And, finally, Roderick stands in the middle of all of these characters with his “historic future” (50) and “his growing capacity for attachment” (50), the arbiter of both the past and the future in the ‘now-time.’

With Roderick, the text’s weakness takes on a more positive and potential aspect. The other characters of the text, Stella and Robert, Louie and Harrison, Cousin Nettie and Cousin Francis, and even the ghost of his father Victor, are ranged around him variously as predominantly nostalgic or utopic characters. Interestingly, the female characters are shown to shy away from the present in nostalgic retreat, in increasing intensity from Stella to Louie to Cousin Nettie -- to the point that Nettie is shown to escape from the present, living in the past of her imagination (Mount Morris as it once was) in a timeless nothingness.

He had been looking past her, out of the window. A distance of fields, woods and diluted November sky did indeed stretch without any other feature: sky and earth at last exhaustedly met -- there was no impact, no mystery, no horizon, simply a nothing more. This was a window at the back of a house at the edge of a town; Roderick recollected that Cousin Nettie had not for years now looked out of any other. And years ago she must have ceased to look out of this, for today she sat with her back to it with finality. What she liked must be this extreme end of the room, light on her work or the unassailing sensation of having nothing but nothing behind her back (206).
And on the contrary, the male characters, with increasing intensity from Cousin Francis to Harrison to Robert, are shown to have futuristic drives with little or no connection to the present. Cousin Francis has a fetish for technology, Harrison devises plans without thinking or caring about their possible consequences, and Robert lives for "the next thing" (267), the "specious, unthinkable, grotesque... beginning of a day" (274) in Nazi terms. Arguably, Stella and Louie break through the 'blackmail' of the past as they overcome nostalgia and face the present. But the male characters are all too far gone. It remains for Roderick to care in his own way to carry on the old tradition into an unknown future which awaits beyond the bounds of the text, mediating the human tendencies for nostalgia and utopia, historic retreat and futuristic abandon in the 'now-time.' As such, Roderick is the 'eye of the storm' in the text, the tranquil center through which the narrator expresses the possibility for limited affirmation in the future -- and, along with Louie Lewis and her newborn son, Bowen's symbol for hope.

‘-- However,’ concluded Roderick, folding the will and putting it back in the envelope, 'let’s leave that at that. I’ve really made up my mind.’

‘Colonel Pole seemed to think you really ought to think twice.’

'I have.'

‘Colonel Pole felt you ought not to tie yourself up.’

‘Fred takes exactly the opposite view.’

‘You may not be able to go there for some time -- it’s in Eire, you’re British, besides being in the Army.’

'I can’t help that: Mount Morris won’t run away.’

‘But meanwhile the roof may fall in, or the trees blow down.’

'I don’t suppose so,' the tranquil Roderick said (88-89).

However, Roderick is a link in another sense, too, which ironically serves to foreground the text’s 'weakness' in a more radical way. For, it is through the character Roderick that we come to realize that both Robert and Harrison could be one remove beyond ‘the fiction proper,’ the ‘saving hallucinations’ of his mother. The narrator hints at Harrison’s cagey, amphibolous status as a ‘character impossible,’ and indeed, the scene of their first meeting is set up in a way that the reader might question its ‘reality’:

Over the photographs hung a mirror -- into which, on hearing Harrison’s footsteps actually upon the stairs, she looked; not at herself but with the idea of studying, at just one more remove from reality, the door of this room opening behind her, as it must (24).

Her first meeting with Robert, too, is described in a way that encourages the reader, as well as the character Stella, herself, to question (his) ‘reality.’ Here, it is worth quoting the entire passage in order to once again experience its effect:

It was a characteristic of that life in the moment and for the moment’s sake that one knew people well without knowing much about them: vacuum as to future was offset by vacuum as to past; life-stories were shed as so much superfluous weight -- this for different reasons suited both her and him. (Information, that he had before the war lived, worked abroad, in a branch of his father’s or a friend of his father’s business accumulated gradually, later on.) At first glance they saw in each other’s faces a flash of promise, a background of mystery. While his eyes, in which mirror-refracted lighting intensified a curious blue, followed the one white lock slowly back from her forehead, she found herself not so much beginning to study as in the middle of studying this person -- communicative, excitable -- from whom she only turned away to wave good-bye to the friend who had brought her across the room.

That gesture of good-bye, so perfunctory, was a finalness not to appear till later. It comprehended the room and everybody, everything in it which had up to now counted as her life: it was an unconscious announcement of the departure she was about to take -- a first and last wave, across the widening water, from a liner. Remembered, her fleeting sketch of a gesture came to look prophetic; for ever she was to see, photographed as though it had been some else’s, her hand up. The bracelet slipping down and sleeve falling back, against a dissolving background of lights and faces, were vestiges, and the last, of her solidity. She returned to Robert -- both having caught a breath, they fixed their eyes expectantly on each other’s lips. Both waited, both spoke at once, unheard.
Overhead, an enemy plane had been dragging, drumming slowly round in the pool of night, drawing up bursts of gunfire -- nosing, pausing, turning, fascinated by the point for its intent. The barrage banged, coughed, retched; in here the lights in the mirrors rocked. Now down a shaft of anticipating silence the bomb swung whistling. With the shock of detonation, still to be heard, four walls of in here yawped in then bellied out; bottles danced on glass; a distortion ran through the view. The detonation dulled off into the cataracting roar of a split building: direct hit, somewhere else.

It was the detonation of an entire moment: he and she stood at attention till the glissade stopped. What they had both been saying, or been on the point of saying, neither of them ever now were to know. Most first words have the nature of being trifling; their from having been lost began to have the significance of a lost clue. What they next said, what they said instead, they forgot: there are questions which if not asked at the start are not asked later; so those they never did ask.... The extraordinary battle in the sky transfixed them; they might have stayed for ever on the eve of being in love.

This had lasted up to the October morning when Stella woke to the apprehension of loss, to what seemed the meaning glare of a day. Some submerged dream had accomplished work in the night; some experience, under the cloak of sleep, had had its conclusion in that supernatural nearness to her of Robert's face. Those were a series of nights in which one slept, if at all, with an abandonment in itself exhausting; but no kind of sleep accounted for the distance she felt between herself and yesterday -- and, indeed, between herself and today. Nothing she saw or touched gave token of even its own reality: her wrist watch seemed to belie time; she fancied it had lost hours during the night, that this might be midday, the afternoon -- her first act, as she hurried into the street, was to look about in vain for a public clock. So arrested seemed the movement of everything as she went to work that she asked herself whether the war itself might not have somehow stopped -- she had spoken to nobody, since she woke, but the old mum gardener. Nothing was impossible -- even so, she was late. She halted a taxi and stepped in.

Ten minutes after she sat down at her table, Robert rang up: they agreed to lunch together. The restaurant at which they met most often was this morning, he was sorry to tell her, closed -- the street roped off: some nonsense about a time-bomb. They would have to try how they liked it somewhere else. To the place he suggested she, it happened, had never been: its name from being familiar in so many of friends' many stories, had come to seem to be over the borderline of fiction -- so much so that, making her way thither, she felt herself to be going to a rendezvous inside the pages of a book. And was, indeed, Robert himself fictitious? She looked back, on her way to the restaurant, at their short, unweighty past. The commissionaire set her spinning inside the revolving door; Robert, inside the foyer, started forward to meet her. She was struck by his limp -- a limp so pronounced today that, till he spoke, he seemed like some other man (95-97).

It is thus quite likely to interpret from this passage that Stella slips through the glissade into a fantasy world complete with Robert and his double, Harrison. As the narrator states, such a hallucination "had lasted up to the October morning when Stella woke to the apprehension of loss, to what seemed the meaning glare of a day" (ibid). Beyond this point, 'nothing Stella saw or touched gave a token of its own reality,' everything seemed arrested, as in a dream, and 'nothing was impossible' -- apparently not even the possibility that she had gone 'over the border line of fiction' in her hallucinations, attending 'a rendezvous inside the pages of a book,' or the possibility, then, that Robert himself was 'fictitious.'

Indeed, though, war's unreality leaves nothing untouched in the narrative, such that all people, places, and events take on a 'twilight' quality. But, in particular, it is through the more fully 'realized' and thus 'believable' character Roderick, that we come to realize the 'twilight' possibility that Harrison and/or Robert might be figments of Stella's imagination. As a woman who seemed "to reflect, the greater part of the time, in the dusk of her second thoughts" (25), the reader is early on made aware of her active and fertile imagination. It is interesting, then, that only ashes from cigarettes, stub-heaped in a little Chinese ash tray, which could well have been smoked by Stella herself, and a man's mottled silk dressing-gown with an anonymous note in its pocket, apparently Robert's, remain as clues to the existence of Harrison and Robert for Roderick. As a pseudo-detective figure in the novel, Roderick collects clues about his mother and the men in her life, as he attempts to understand her '(hi)story.' In fact, though,
the whole structure and experience of the narrative is extended through one character's reading of or spying on another in this way: Louie reads Harrison and Stella, Harrison reads Robert and Stella, Stella reads Robert and Harrison, and Roderick reads Stella, and so on. But interestingly, there is hardly "proof" of the existence of Harrison or Robert -- their very "unreality" (or we might say, their exaggerated fictional quality) as counter-spy and traitor, blackmailer and lover, might stand as proof of their extra-fictional existence in the mind of a fictional character.

There is some mention that Harrison had been at Mount Morris, but the name of the mystery man is never confirmed. Harrison shows up at Cousin Francis' funeral, on account of some papers that Francis still had of his, and Stella at first mistakes him for one of the 'lunatics' brought along by Mrs Tringsby -- again, though, the story is recounted through the narrational perspective of Stella. And as for Robert, there are many hints throughout the novel which might encourage the reader to interpret that he is an extra-fictional existence in the mind of Stella. Her first move in 'spying' on Robert in order to uncover his 'truth' is to go with him to visit his family at Holme Dene. But, there is much about the description of this visit which suggests that the reader has stepped into an extra-fictional 'twilight' zone. Viewing the entrance to the house, the narrator observes that "in these years the idea of war made you see any peaceful scene as it were through glass" (104). And, "the first intimation one had of approaching Holme Dene was a notice saying CAUTION: CONCEALED DRIVE" (105). Much is made about "the ambiguities of her tie with Robert" (114) in the scene where she meets the Kelways for tea. In the strange, "chemically yellowing light intensifying the boundary of trees" (114), Stella finds that "reflections, cast across the lawn into the lounge, gave the glossy thinness of celluloid to indoor shadow" (114). It seems as if Stella could almost be inside a movie:

Stella pressed her thumb against the edge of the table to assure herself this was a moment *she* was living through -- as in the moment before a faint she seemed to be looking at everything down a darkening telescope. Having brought the scene back again into focus by staring at window-reflections in the glaze of a teapot, she dared look again at Robert, seated across the table, opposite her, between his nephew and niece. Late afternoon striking into the blue of his eyes made him look like a young man in Technicolor (114).

In this chapter of the book, the reader is afforded an opportunity to confront the possibility of Robert's 'non-existence.' Beyond the 'touring scenery' of his mother's house, the props arranged about in his boyhood bedroom give the impression of a stage set. Noting the 'empty' feeling of this room, Robert responds to Stella by saying that

'It could not feel emptier than it is. Each time I come back again into it I'm hit in the face by the feeling that I don't exist -- that I not only am not but never have been. So much so that it's extraordinary coming in here with you' (117).

Confronting Robert about his old photographs, pinned to the wall of his room, Robert calls them 'imitation moments,' a 'criminal record' nailed to the wall to drive him mad. He says, "Can you think of a better way of sending a person mad than nailing that pack of his own lies all round the room where he has to sleep?" (118) And beyond such 'hints,' one might point to the final scene of their confrontation, which could almost be an infernal nightmare of Stella's, taking place in "red half-dark" (267) and then total darkness.

The room, absolutely unseeable at last, might now have been any room of any size. Nothing but their two silences merging filled it, and she did not know to what part of silence he had withdrawn (267).

One might also note the monological quality of their conversation, and further to this, the monological quality of the conversation between Stella and Harrison as well. Finally, it is only Louie Lewis who stands to confirm the 'reality' of Robert and Harrison. She is the link which joins a world 'outside' to the world 'inside' Stella's perspective. But, through her, the inside/outside dichotomy seems to break down. Being another woman prone to fantasy, Louie reads the newspaper account of Stella's inquest hearing, and two other extensive pieces on her story, and wonders, for a moment, "whether it might not be Harrison who had fallen, under another name" (305). The possibility dawns on the reader that Harrison could very well be primarily Louie's 'saving hallucination,' a figment of her imagination joined fantasticaly to Stella's own fantasy --

The ill-fated behaviour, as emerging from the accounts here, seemed to her in its rabid suspiciousness, its unloving ruthlessness and its queerness, to have been that of Harrison

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exactly — so much so that Louie toured every sensation that, in her, surrounded
Harrison’s being dead (305).

Later on, Connie comes across the sheets of newspaper with “the Officer’s Midnight Prank headlines scattered over
the floor” (307). But we are told by the narrator that, “however, nothing connected Louie’s refined new friend of
the other evening with the dubious heroine of this tragedy — no name had then been spoken: now no name could
be” (307). At the extreme end of possibilities, then, the possibility is presented that perhaps even Stella is extra-
fictional, a figment of Louie’s imagination, reduced to a figure in a tabloid story. Surely in this text, as the narrator
says, ‘nothing is impossible.’

The ‘weakness’ of the text, with all of the negative and positive possibilities it opens up for reading, can
itself be read as Bowen’s announcement of the birth of postmodernity, that era in which “people began turning away
from the illusion either because it had already begun to fade or because they knew it must” (291). The ‘illusion’
referred to is ‘truth’ which, since its slow fading away, results in Stella’s apprehension of the world as being reduced to “unreverberating lacunae” (291). And yet, Stella manages to survive the “sunless toneless reverberation”
(292) of this ‘turning world,’ and even the complete smashing of foundations, with most of her vision and hopes for
continuity intact. She even risks the sinking of her own foundation through the belief, expressed to her son
Roderick, that one must go on, ‘telling the story.’ Stella says to Roderick, “if anything, I should rather like to tell
you the story now that I am beginning to understand it” (297). In silence, Stella and Roderick walk together over a
symbolic landmark of hope, a bridge; listening for the first signs of a new beginning, they hear a “Sunday afternoon
wireless coming across the wasteland from a bungalow” (298). The now-time hangs, trembling, extended in the
balance between the fading context of Stella’s world of titanic destiny and technological disaster, and the awakening
horizon of Roderick’s world of fragile destiny and technological possibility. Through her recognition that “the rest
was not yet ready to be silence” (298), Stella makes the first move toward action through communication. In the
very least, she tempers her Hamlet-mode with the ‘action’ inherent in the realization that:

‘Of course there is something to be said. There must be. There’s something to be said’
(299).

But either heuristically or helplessly, Stella turns to Roderick for the statement of this ‘something.’ And,
revealing inherited Hamlet-traits of his own, Roderick becomes anxious, and then, profoundly, he proceeds to link
the ideas of human mortality, truth, and the monumentality of art. He tells his mother that,

‘The only hope would have been my having happened to say some inspired thing, but
now there hasn’t been that I shall be no good for about another fifty years -- because all I
can do now is try and work this out, which could easily take my lifetime; and by that
time you’d be dead. I couldn’t bear to think of you waiting on and on for something,
something that in a flash would give what Robert did and what happened enormous
meaning like there is in a play of Shakespeare’s -- but, must you? If there’s something
that is to be said, won’t it say itself? Or mayn’t you come to imagine it has been said,
even without your knowing what exactly it was? ... Or are you telling me, then asking
me, because I am young, and so ought to last on later into time? You want me to be
posterity? But then, Robert’s dying of what he did will not always be there, won’t last
like a book or picture: by the time one is able to understand it it will be gone, it just
won’t be there to be judged. Because, I suppose art is the only thing that can go on
mattering once it has stopped hurting?’ (300).

Later on, when reunited with the haunting Harrison, it is obvious that Stella has taken these sage words of her son to
heart. Speaking of the dead, she says that,

‘More one goes on hearing what they said, piecing and repiecing it together to try and
make out something they had not time to say -- possibly even had not had time to know.
There still must be something that matters that one has forgotten, forgotten because at the
time one did not realize how much it did matter. Yet most of all there is something one
has got to forget -- that is, if it is to be possible to live. The more wars there are, I
suppose, the more we shall learn how to be survivors’ (317).
Together, uncannily, the words of Bowen’s characters Stella and Roderick reverberate through the postmodern philosophy of Gianni Vattimo, as the artistic predication of his conception of hermeneutic ontology as *Verwindung*--*Andenken* thought. Thought distorts but thought remembers, and in this double-movement of vision and memory, thought cor-responds to actuality in becoming weak.

Finally, we are left with Louie Lewis, near the end of the war, feeling herself “beckoned into that gaze of abstention and futurity” (325), memory and vision, which her husband Tom’s photograph inspires. Significantly, Louie only begins to face this photograph, gazing into it, when her husband is dead. Again, human mortality and truth are linked along with vision and memory..., and even more strongly perhaps, re-birth, continuity, hope for the future. For, not only do we learn that Louie is pregnant, but the world, poised on the brink of postmodernity, is also ‘pregnant’ with expectation -- “expectation came to its height and stood: everybody waited” (325), newspapers’ front pages “were themselves being pervaded by pregnant secrecy” (325). And finally, “it had happened -- under a curdled windy improbably June night” (328). “It,” referring to both the beginning of Louie’s labour pains and the beginning of the end of the war, we are told that

the whole of the story narrowed down to Louie, still with *her* hour ahead, heavily going to her window. Voices were in the street below; multiplied, one voice from dozens of radios came lancing across and across itself out of dozens of windows standing open. Louie leaned out and shouted: ‘What -- is that true?’ It was (328).

And thus, finally, the dawn of the ‘post-war’ era opens, looming near, surrounding, but as of yet, incomprehensible as the atomic age of postmodernity.

The unexpected-expected day, with its elsewhereness, ran its broadcast-echoing course. You could not take back what had been done. The lucid outgoing vision, the vigil for the fighters, lasted ten days more, till the Secret Weapon started: then, it was shameful how fear wrenched thoughts home -- droning *things*, mindlessly making for you, thick and fast, day and night, tore the calico of London, raising obscene dust out of the sullen bottom mind (328).

And then finally, Louie’s son is born, and his “intention to survive put itself across her and taught her sense” (329). Becoming an ‘orderly’ mother, Louie returns to the sea, which glittered there “as though nothing had happened” (329). Looking at the empty site of what was once her childhood home, Louie finds that “the thin air which had taken the house’s place was, now that she stood and breathed it in, after all full of today and sunshine” (329). And she finds that the ridges left by the foundations of bombed-out homes are “feathered and stirred with grass in light and shadow” (329). Still another day brings “a white quiet light” (329), and just before sunset, Louie looks out ahead where “there was distance as far as the eye could see -- a thoughtless extension of her now complete life” (329). Suddenly, the voice of the narrator shifts to ‘direct reportage,’ and with these words, the reader is brought palpably into the now-time of postmodernity. We are told that

a minute or two ago our homecoming bombers, invisibly high up, had droned over: the baby had not stirred.... But now there began another sound -- she turned and looked up into the air behind her. She gathered Tom quickly out of the pram and held him up, hoping he too might see, and perhaps remember. Three swans were flying a straight flight. They passed overhead, disappearing in the direction of the west (330).

Lancing the technological world of postmodernity with the traditional symbolic flight of swans, and conversely, crossing this traditional symbol with the violence of technology, Bowen ends her historical narrative of the Second World War in the intersection of two equally vital and equally destructive forces in human history and human thought-- *both* vision and memory, *Verwindung* and *Andenken*, technology and tradition.

* 

At one last remove, having read Vattimo’s philosophy of postmodernity following Heidegger through the thematics of ‘weakness’ in Bowen’s text, one can now turn to read Vattimo’s theory through a more structurally-oriented correspondence with Bowen’s practice. As a reader of Vattimo’s *The End of Modernity* explains, and as should be obvious by now, his “definition of postmodernity is precisely that of a culture which does not seek to overcome and abandon the past, but rather to repeat and re-collect it” (Smith 111). Postmodernity thus ‘arrives’ or
"happens" when one recognizes our contradictory relationship with past tradition as *Verwindung*. The reader Paul Julian Smith explains that

this term denotes a taking leave of the past which is not an overcoming of it. As Vattimo says of metaphysics and its myth of the self-conscious subject, "we yield to it, we heal ourselves from it, we are resigned to it as something that is destined to us" (52). Abandonment, convalescence, resignation, and fatality: such is the relation of postmodern culture to the classic texts and the popular culture which it both rejects and reproduces. A final meaning of *Verwindung* is 'torsion' or twisting: the postmodern manipulates that tradition which it cannot overcome (because the category of overcoming or transcendence is part of that 'strong' modernity from which it seeks to take leave) (112).

The significance of postmodernity, then, in Vattimian terms, is that it has a rationale. Positing the notion of *Verwindung* as a possible law of history, Vattimo thinks that

the techniques of postmodern culture are not random, but can be read as responses to "the death or decline of art..." (51-64). For Vattimo our time is one of "a general aestheticization of existence" which means that "art no longer exists as a specific phenomenon" (52). Art has thus been forced to "call into question its own status... as ironization of literary genres, as rewriting, as a poetics of citation, or as... duplication" (54). This is not a question of sterile self-reference but rather a necessary and considered response to the death of (high) art and the explosion of aesthetics into everyday life (112).

Certainly, Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* can be read as involving precisely such a necessary and considered response to the death of (high) art and the explosion of aesthetics into everyday life. Interestingly, an extended correspondence can be drawn out in this regard between Vattimo's theory and Bowen's practice.

First of all, thematically, three of Bowen's main characters can be read as representing different 'moments' in the dialectic of historical transformation thought as: yielding or acceptance (Stella); distortion or overcoming (Robert); and the responsibility of response, understood as involving both acceptance and overcoming (Roderick). But secondly, Roderick's adoption of the responsibility of response as the only ontological doctrine -- recollecting and exceeding both Stella's resignation to tradition, her fatality, and her silence, and Robert's manipulation of tradition, his rejection of the world, and his silence -- allegorically opens up the text to other cultural possibilities and alternatives, and other interpretations. For instance, through Roderick, the text itself can be read allegorically as Bowen's articulation and practice of the responsibility of response in the face of the death of art. According to Vattimo, the artist "can adopt three positions when faced with this challenge, positions which correspond to three models of art: as Utopia, kitsch, or silence" (112). Interestingly, correspondences can be located between these models, each representing a moment in a dialectic of *artistic response to* historical transformation, and Bowen's text itself. As Smith explains,

the utopian will strive to return to a lost time in which the aesthetic was clearly distinguished from the everyday; the lover of kitsch will celebrate the collapse of this distinction; and the proponent of silence will retreat into an increasingly pleasureless art which refuses to communicate with the consumer, and thus guarantees its own authenticity (56).

As it turns out, Bowen combines features of all three of these models in *The Heat of the Day*. As a utopian, Bowen continues her Big House tradition in the novel; and as a lover of kitsch, she collapses many literary genres into one novel, including the detective novel, spy thriller, Hamlet-parody, *Bildungsroman*, historical narrative, ghost story, satire, comedy, and romance; and as a proponent of silence, and primarily through the unresolved (or for some, no doubt 'unsatisfactory') story of Stella, Bowen refuses to communicate with the contemporary reader-consumer, and the story takes on an allegorical aspect.

As Smith explains, though, for Vattimo these elements are not mutually exclusive. For indeed, Vattimo makes the paradoxical claim that "the key element in the persistent life of art... is... this interplay of the various
aspects of its own death” (Vattimo 58). Indeed, as a utopian, clinging to the metaphysics of the strong subject, Bowen actually offers a critique of nostalgia through the demythologization of revolutionary ideals. Robert’s dream of the Überwindung of history, and his radical interpretation of nihilism, are exposed as the ultimate expressions of the utopic response. Nazi ideology, negative theology, and revolutionary ideals are Robert’s muddled and utopic response to historical transformation. Bowen’s characterization thus corresponds with Vattimo’s critique of revolutionary ideals. In his essay “Optimistic Nihilism”, Vattimo states that “revolution promised to overcome modernity by eliminating authority and the state, but resulted instead in a totalitarianism that belied faith in the refoundation of history and society on an authentic human basis” (41). Similarly, in terms of the text’s ‘kitchiness,’ Bowen is not a purist. She actually offers up a brilliant critique of the aestheticization of experience and popular skepticism through her two ‘clowns,’ Louie and Connie. In no way does she completely surrender to the technological vision of the world as a collapsing of distinctions. Indeed, as Angus Calder has pointed out in his 1991 book The Myth of the Blitz, Bowen’s comedic portrayal of Louie’s and Connie’s readings of the newspapers in ‘the people’s war’ is “interesting in its anticipation of Louis Althusser’s thoughts about ideology, and amusing in its satire of the propagandist efforts of the wartime press” (257). And finally, through the silence of the text, allegory contaminates the dialectic of its response to historical transformation as moments which are endlessly different from one another, and thus endlessly postponed. The text never reaches its destination in any one moment, any one model. The silence of the text spaces the interplay of these various aspects of its own death, promoting contamination and weakness in its structure. Quite simply then, the text is a negative dialectic, a postmodern work of art in the Vattimian sense, understood as “a Verwindung of the real composed of ‘ironical-iconical relations that at once duplicate and break down the images and words produced by mass culture’ (58)” (Smith 112). The Heat of the Day thus predicates Vattimo’s philosophy of postmodernity, understood as a thinking which “cannot transcend or overcome the forces which leave their trace in its body, but must convalesce from them as from an illness, and attempt to twist them to its own design” (Smith 112).

And, in these ways Bowen’s text also reflects upon its own mortality, and is thus ‘conscious’ of its own monumentality. As Smith explains,

aesthetics is thus inseparable from temporality. For Vattimo the experience of art is not transcendental but historical (55). For Heidegger, the work of art which alludes to its own mortality is a monument (72). The monument is not primarily an icon of the subject’s self-reference (73). Its purpose is rather “to bear the traces and the memory of someone across time, but for others” (73). The monument is similar to a funerary mask: “not the artistic casting of a full life, but rather a formula which is already constituted in such a way as to transmit itself, and is therefore already marked by its destiny of radical alienation,... by mortality” (73). As is shown by the patina on the surface of an old painting, the passing of time is positive for the work of art: “the critical fortune of a given work of art, which is constituted by a chain of changing interpretations, is linked to the succession of generations and thus to dying as well” (74).

And linked with the postmodern text’s allusion to its own mortality -- or that is, linked with its monumentality -- is the interplay of two aspects of its ironical-iconical relations, namely formula and mask, repetition and difference. And as Smith explains, these aspects of the text’s mortality are intimately allied with the understanding of history as the transmission of linguistic messages, and thus the understanding of language as our binding horizon.

As formula, the postmodern text presents us with “linguistic expression which has been worn out and emptied of content” (75). As mask, it suggests that the simple distinction between essence and appearance is no longer valid, that there is no essential identity beneath accidental surfaces, and that subjects are unable to take on the responsibility of the first person without some external mediation (Il soggetto e la maschera 17). If this is the case (if, as Nietzsche suggests, the whole phenomenal world has become a mask) then the role of the writer or critic is not to attempt the impossible move ‘beyond’ appearance to truth, but to substitute a new (historicized) appearance for that which presents itself as unique and eternal (40). The postmodern text can achieve, in Vattimo’s paradoxical formulation, “an unmasking of unmasking” (71), based on the recognition that human existence is not simple presence, but a being-outside or ex-sistere (Introduzione a Heidegger 21). And this existence menaced by mortality is not grounded on a knowledge of truth, but bounded by the horizon of language. This is because history is
the transmission of linguistic messages in which Being occurs (Al di là del soggetto 7) (113, my emphasis).

With the recognition that we are the text of language, then, the model of the postmodern text’s relation to tradition can be understood as Andenken or memory. For, if language is the ‘place’ in which history occurs, then “truth can no longer be judged by the correspondence of propositions to a (preexisting) reality” (Smith 113). Rather, it “must be internal to the systems of which everyday life is composed (Essere, storia e linguaggio 190, 192)” (Smith 113, my emphasis).

One meaning of this is that, “as language is the horizon of human possibility, any discourse on language is also a discourse from or of language (‘dal o del linguaggio’ 191)” (Smith 114). Thus, as the reader Smith explains, it might seem that “any possibility of positivist rigour (of appeal to a metaphysical space ‘outside’ language) is thus refuted by the insistence of the hermeneutic circle” (114). But, for Vattimo, “this circularity is not transcendental, but historical” (Smith 114). In other words, in contradistinction to Gadamer’s notion of collective consciousness, for Vattimo, “the insistence that human existence is ‘being always already familiar with a totality of meaning, that is with a context of references’ need not lead to an impasse” (114). For, here we can return to the Heideggerian notion of existence as the awareness of mortality, and the Vattimian understanding, following this, that “death is ‘the factor which allows all other possibilities to manifest themselves as possibilities’ (116)” (Smith 114). Such an understanding is, as Smith explains, following Vattimo, “at once the foundation and the ungrounding of human life” (114). Existence, mortality, possibility, language, and memory -- all are bound together in endless interplay. And thus, “the awareness that all things are transitory means that personal authenticity is displaced by an understanding of identity as event, and social life can be seen as a ‘round dance’ (Ring) in which ‘each thing appears as itself... only in so far as it dissolves into a circular reference to all other things’ (117)” (Smith 114).

What emerges, then, is the model of the postmodern text’s relation to tradition, and even to actuality, as memory or Andenken. As Smith explains, like Verwindung, the term combines a number of different meanings. But the most important one involves the understanding that “the retracing of the linguistic messages of the past is no preparatory or subsidiary work (119) but the only kind of thought possible under postmodernity” (Smith 114, my emphasis). We can read such an understanding of the postmodern text through Bowen’s The Heat of the Day in three primary ways: through the loss of transcendence; through the ubiquity or proximity of the linguistic horizon; and through Bowen’s postmodern (limited) respect (pietas) for the past. In her present-day historical narrative, Bowen demonstrates the postmodern loss of transcendence through the overwhelming realization -- expressed in the narration through narrated text and in the ‘story’ through characterization -- that the determining context of existence is finitude, as in Heidegger’s understanding of existence as Dasein, thrown-ness, Geworfenheit. There is no overcoming here, only the shifting emphases of the proximate. In the text, life and death are touching, forcing the awareness of mortality onto the existential horizon. And, what looms near is understood to be the linguistic horizon. Again, such an understanding is communicated by Bowen in the narration through narrated text and in the story through dialogue. And finally, it is through the language games of the text, that Bowen also forces the recognition of the necessity for a certain respect for the past, as for actuality. As with Vattimo’s understanding of this postmodern respect for the past as pietas, Bowen’s text brings the reader to an understanding of it through the realization of human limitation. Roderick’s response to the will as a linguistic message from the past brings together, thematically, the realized interplay of existence, mortality, possibility, language, and memory. It is through Roderick, then, that we come to the realization, as Vattimo expresses in The End of Modernity, that the death of God... has dissolved any other point of reference, any other basis of certainty except for the cultural heritage. When the origin has revealed its insignificance... then we become open to the meaning and richness of proximity; or... we become capable of playing those language games which constitute our existence upon the sole basis of our belonging to a particular historical tradition, which we have to respect in the same way in which we feel respect for monuments, tombs, traces of past life or even family memories (177).
It was a matter of continuing -- but what, what? As to that, there ought to be access to the mindless knowledge locked up in rocks, in the stayers-on.

Elizabeth Bowen  *The Heat of the Day* (1949)
Past twilight, we can create circumstance.

Elizabeth Bowen “Modern Lighting” (October 27, 1928)
It would have been easy to recline, to become suffused by indifference, to be thankful that all was over -- but it was not, yet; the rest was not yet ready to be silence.

Elizabeth Bowen  *The Heat of the Day* (1949)
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