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978-1-107-00929-5 - Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture

Leo Mellor

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

[A]nd there he was, on the top of the hill, in the thick of the bombardment. A flapping gutter, glassless windows, an iron bedstead in a front garden the size of a tabletop. Half Paradise Piece had been torn up as if by bomb blasts: the children played about the steep slope of rubble; a piece of fire-place showed houses had once been there, and a municipal notice announced new flats on a post stuck in the torn gravel and asphalt facing the little dingy damaged row, all that was left of Paradise Piece.

Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (1938) ¹

In Greene's description of a Brighton slum clearance scheme his central phrase – 'as if' – is doing some stern and strenuous work. The preceding sentence has described a scene that could have been placed in any bombed city of the Spanish Civil War or drawn from the Japanese attacks on China, both conflicts underway when the novel was written, in 1937–8. If his disingenuous use of 'bombardment' as a way of describing a gale prepares expectations, then the template of the bombed metropolis as applicable to Britain is realised, partly as a form of foreboding and partly as an index of the details of destruction. All the items, disjunctions and classic tropes of the bombsite from that wartime literature to come are already present: household objects exposed violently to the world, disordered and incomplete remains, the absent glass as indicative of recent blast. Yet this is a scene of peacetime, the construction of a municipal utopia that will replace the actuality of squalor in the ironic Paradise Row. The real British bombsites, and Greene's response to them, would follow only a few years later.

This book tracks how British culture feared, predicted, engaged with, portrayed and interpreted the bombsites of the Second World War; those spaces of destruction in the midst of British towns and cities caused by enemy attacks. Both the national psyche and the architecture of cities today still bear the marks of the Blitz of 1940/1, the 'little Blitz' of 1943/4 and the V1 rocket and V2 missile attacks. Over 50 per cent of buildings

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

within greater London were damaged, with the totals in some boroughs being far higher.² The book's argument stems from a belief that such material conditions provide the subject of many works, whether overtly or implicitly. It also argues for the significance of the more abstracted value of these spaces (whether theological, metaphorical, allegorical) for the narratives and iconographies of British culture, both then and now.

For while every bombsite could be a useful metaphor and also a unique ruin, en masse they were to become an unavoidable fact on the ground, and a manifestation of how modern warfare literalised the phrase 'Home Front' with violence. As time passed they could be aestheticised into picturesque ruins or politicised through surrealism, observed through the templates of archaeology or natural history or the phantasmagoric – or merely played on by children. To study and write of Britain's bombsites, making claims for them as worthy of detailed attention, is thus to be aware of the shifting paradigms of what history – and literary history and culture – chooses to unearth or to forget about the materiality of cities. Setting this book in its own place are some useful co-ordinates concerning the recent history of various critical approaches. Various distinct strands within contemporary criticism have grown over the past ten years that make such a study timely and necessary. The literature of the Second World War, for so long overshadowed by that from the First World (or Great) War in both popular and academic discourse, has undergone a sustained critical re-evaluation. There is an increasing awareness of pluralities within the term 'war writing' and an acknowledgement that widespread civilian casualties and compositions meant previous soldier-poet paradigms would have to be revised. The poet Stephen Spender, writing in 1943, offered a reason why these zones of destruction might be so culturally resonant. He noted: 'in this war, by "War Pictures" we mean, pre-eminently, paintings of the Blitz. In the last war we would have meant pictures of the Western Front ... The background to this war, corresponding to the Western Front in the last war, is the bombed city'.³ But the bombsites bring war literally home to British terrain, in a way the Flanders trenches never could, and assert the mundane, complex and flammable actuality of the British city.

An understanding of the fate of modernism, and indeed the deeper contours of British postwar culture and its literary validation, has then to acknowledge a material basis to disorder and the possibilities for narratives of reclaiming, rebuilding and remaking. But such an understanding also has to account for the survival of writers – and artists – who chose to venerate the partial and incomplete, the broken or estranged. These men and women had been personally exposed to destruction, since the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

inescapability of the London bombsites – both from sight and from consciousness – was a postwar fact. But, rather more interestingly, they were familiar with broken cityscapes through a reliance on a created literary tradition: those inviting texts already existing that depicted a rewilded metropolis, or one filled with the debris of surrealism. This book will therefore allow the centrality of modernism to wartime culture also to reveal how much of postwar culture relied upon such an inheritance – for definition, even when overtly in reaction or opposition to fragments, debris and the charms of the ruin.

Conceptualising any aesthetic in terms of locale can be useful, since it gives texture to particularity, specificity and the happenstance juxtapositions of geography that could remain obscured. There has recently been the growth of synoptic area studies, and these trace the relationship between literature and the urban experience: with the city as character or at least shaper of a particular consciousness and the possibility of knowledge. These have ranged from the best-selling and popular to the more specialised and theoretically informed.⁴ A topographic way of mapping narrative and form should have to acknowledge the cataclysm that altered the physical space of London more than any event since the Great Fire of 1666.

Against an interest in the city as a metropolis that shapes culture and consciousness there has also been an ever-present interest in the ruin and the fragment, the incomplete or decayed structure that offers an implicit dialogue with the past through its very continued existence. Throughout the latter part of the twentieth century British critics – from Rose Macaulay to Christopher Woodward – have attempted to explore a particularly British belief in the ruin.⁵ For the continuing significance of the ruin in a wider European tradition, as both a point of pondering and a jagged material fact, must include figures as disparate as Freud and Hegel, Spengler and Mary Shelley, Piranesi and Anselm Kiefer. Moreover, recent academic work has used not only the ruin, but also the ‘ruin-gazer’ and the ‘ruin-theorist’, to offer nuanced critiques of twentieth-century modernity; tracking back from the debris of the World Trade Center to consider, as ‘master tropes of traumatic modernity’, how structures incomplete, broken, smashed or decayed could tell far more than they ever could while whole.⁶ A corollary to this is the continuing growth of an apocalyptic aesthetic in popular culture, one where, under the pressures of anthropogenic climate change and demographic angst, the ruined cityscape again becomes the iconography of choice for film-makers and novelists to have their characters traverse.⁷

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

But it is the renewed and complicating study of modernism, with its ability to assign signification to the fragmentation of form and content, that has provided the intellectual motor for the research from which this study has emerged. Several works published over the last five years have attended to the problems in delimiting or understanding how modernism matured – and dissipated – within British culture. Two main aspects to this revisionism have given the precise conditions from which my work emerges. Firstly, questions of the pluralities and the variegated textures of works, inherent when considering aesthetic form and a historical epoch, mean that such telling titles as *Modernisms* have had particular influence.⁸ The amplitude and multifarious nature of the aesthetic in the period, and its subsequent reduction to cliques and canons, especially through a settlement with the growth of English as an academic subject, can be understood rather better from the vantage point of the present day. Secondly, there has been the wider critical interest in marking where – and how – modernism ends.⁹ Many works that have considered this issue have a variety of structures, but all need at least to engage with the question of ‘late modernism’ or the various possible points of epoch shift. The Second World War has remained a persuasive end point, both as part of a preparatory shift to a democratisation of literature and to a national culture ‘becoming minor’.¹⁰

Moreover, any study of literature’s relation to the bombsites has to exist within a framework of war culture and how the study of that culture has changed. In readings of the British Second World War literature, the centrality of the work of Mark Rawlinson and Adam Piette is unarguable;¹¹ of note now would be hints of a formalist turn from those such as Kate McLoughlin.¹² One way of attempting to remove the literature of the Second World War from merely existing within pre-existing ‘war literature’ terms has been the move fully to conceptualise the 1940s as a decade, one that links both the writers and ideological interests of the 1930s and the 1950s. Such an approach can be seen in work such as Marina MacKay’s with the term ‘Mid-Century’,¹³ or – less successfully – the ideological claims made for ‘intermodernism’ as an idiom that could colonise the debateable lands, and genres, of these years.¹⁴ But while current efforts at a reappraisal of British literature from the 1930s to 1950s in terms of influences, continuities and linkages is worthwhile, it can obscure a problem. Such connective continuities undermine the neat delineation of literary eras into numerically tidy decades, or ring-fenced pre-war and postwar epochs; but they also require modernism to exist as a dissipating, ebbing, and – ultimately – reactionary ideology.

Cambridge University Press

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Leo Mellor

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

However, as this book will show, British writing – and culture in general – of the wartime years was dependent in various ways on the aesthetic and intellectual possibilities offered by modernism.¹⁵ There is also one fundamental reason for the centrality of modernism as an active form; for modernism appeared to have been utterly and hauntingly proleptic. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s British writing was filled with ruins and fragments. They appeared in novels, plays and poems as content: with visions of tottering towers and scraps of paper; and also in the *mise en page* shapes of broken poetics and recovered *objet trouvés* phrase shards. But from the outbreak of the Second World War what had been an aesthetic mode began to resemble a template. During that conflict many writers attempted to engage with the devastated cityscapes and the altered lives of a nation at war: but they did so with *avant la lettre* implications of the pre-war culture. This did not just apply to those writers whose own interwar works relied on shards and residues. An awareness of the sense of prophecy coming to pass is acutely expressed in ‘Notes on the Way’, an essay of Greene’s for *Time and Tide* in the autumn of 1940. His comments on bombed London, and the sensations it exposes alongside the burst-open buildings, move into a wider political point:

Violence comes to us more easily – not only by the political sense but by the moral sense. The world we lived in could not have ended any other way. The curious waste lands one sometimes saw from trains – the cratered ground round Wolverhampton under a cindery sky with a few cottages grouped like stones among the rubbish: those acres of abandoned cars round Slough: the dingy fortune-teller’s on the first-floor above the cheap permanent waves in a Brighton back street; they all demanded violence, like the rooms in a dream where one knows that something will presently happen – a door fly open or a window catch give and let the end in.¹⁶

Greene’s ‘waste lands’ are actual here, but for many others who drew on Eliot’s text as template for a response to violence, the linkage was made textually absolute and unambiguous, as for example in Rose Macaulay’s stories set against her own, bomb-blasted ruins. A critique of such recapitulatory approaches, ones that overtly utilised the proleptic effects of modernism, does however need to acknowledge a singular fact on the ground in London: the ruined city was not only material for writers, but also the background and inescapable condition of possibility for late modernism itself.

But why did bombsites offer so much material to so many writers? The obvious discordant pleasures of buildings turned inside out and of the sublime inherent in visions of destruction point to materiality as the key site of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

attraction. Yet many kinds of time itself were also presently exposed – and became resonant for writers. For bombsites contain absolute doubleness. They are inherently both a frozen moment of destruction made permanent; as much as they capture the absolute singular moment, the repeated cliché of the stopped clock exposed, battered by blast but still affixed to a wall in a bombsite: yet they also act as a way of understanding a great swathe of linear time previously hidden or buried, offering history exposed to the air. Such temporal expansiveness is more amorphous than might be initially realised, stretching back through an archaeology usefully uncovered by bombing. The late 1940s were vintage years for being able to perceive London's previously hidden layers.¹⁷ Additionally, the bathos of intimate life was blasted open – an aspect Louis MacNeice captured in 1941 when he saw that 'sometimes, when a house has been cut in half, you get the pleasant effect of a doll's house – a bath in the bathroom and a dresser in the kitchen and wallpaper with roses'.¹⁸ Directly implied alongside these versions of the past comes the postwar afterlife of the bombsites amid a very different city – the future of ruins. But trying to write about the process of destruction, or the split-second action of fire or explosions, was difficult, and it strained the available language. In a war report on the V1 rockets, 'London fights the robots', Ernest Hemingway interviewed some fighter pilots, who attempted tentatively to find a new language, one applicable for the sudden moments of explosive violence that ensued after shooting down these weapons: "It is a sort of air bubble that rises from them", he said. "Bubble" had been quite a venturesome word to use, and he took confidence from it and tried a further word. "It is rather like a huge blossoming of air rising."¹⁹

There will, inevitably, be limits, exclusions and points of unequal focus in this book. It is a study of a particularly British cultural response, and most of my detailed readings concern London – with only very brief comparative excursions. Potential further comparisons and contrasts abound. Firstly, European experiences of the Second World War could be considered – whether in national literatures or debates, for example with regards to the continued politico-ethical maelstrom around Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand (The Fire)* (2002). Then there are the British experiences of the results of 'Bomber' Harris' policies as Germany 'reaped the whirlwind' of the Allied bomber offensive, experiences which were figured in works such as Stephen Spender's *European Witness* (1946). There are distinct parallels between the pleasure taken by various critics in the 'vista' of ruined London and Albert Speer's imagined future teleology for the ruins of 'Germania' (the renamed Berlin) that would obey a '*Theorie vom*

Cambridge University Press

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Leo Mellor

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

Ruinwert. These structures would continue to impress and terrify even after they had fallen into stone (not steel or ferro-concrete) fragments. As Speer wrote in his memoirs: 'Our building must speak to the conscience of future generations of Germans. With this kind of argument Hitler also understood the value of a durable kind of construction.'²⁰

The possibility of an avowed and pertinently theoretical perspective on the writing of this period is obvious, and it has been performed with elan – for example by the psychoanalytic critique of Lyndsey Stonebridge – or with the overtly anti-heroic democratising of Paul Fussell.²¹ But my methodological aims and co-ordinates are simple: the mode is close reading coupled with historical formalism. My desire is to understand how forms might be historically contingent and yet remain open to the complexity of their subject matter. Thus the aspects of uncomfortable plurality in the form of the works, the constructions of difficulty (consciously or not) in matters of representation, and the strange complexity of works that have – subsequently – failed any test of canonicity, are all of inherent interest to my study. The impossibility of totalising coverage means that there are both limits and *lacunae*, and a writer's oeuvre may be understood from representative – or, more interestingly, non-representative – individual works. Moreover, while the main field this book works within is the sphere of the literary, there are also various comparisons and excursions, mainly into visual culture, including sketches, photography and film. At points I also consider music and anthropology. The literary works included range between the canonical and the forgotten, and cover much that could be dismissed as pulp or inconsequential. But for understanding the terrain of the bombsites in the present day, and comprehending how it was understood at the time, they are all vital.

The chapters of the book progress on a roughly chronological path from the First World War, with each taking a central conceit or idea as a way of gaining purchase on the rubble and its interpreters. Chapter 1 will focus on pre-war fears and visions. The years before 1939 in Britain were decades haunted by portents of war. In the shorthand of populist iconography, as well as in many literary works, this was expressed through the image of the bombed city. Poetry and prose that engaged with the wars in Abyssinia, China and Spain returned again and again to observation-as-premonition. Central to my argument will be various complex exculpations and pieces of positioning: from Virginia Woolf, Louis MacNeice and Henry Green. Patrick Hamilton's *Hangover Square* (1941) – set in 1939 – and George Orwell's *Coming up for Air* (1939) rely upon very different devices for making the imaginative leap to see city streets filled with rubble and buildings

blown apart. Yet they all do so, and thereby externalise political dread, fitting the ennui and cognitive dissonance of the characters on to an 'inescapable' future.

Chapter 2 will chart responses to the events that created the city bomb-sites – the air raids and incendiary bombs of the Blitz in 1940/41. It will also bring together much fugitive and disparate work on the effect of fire in literature: it will thus offer a reading of an elemental force, but also bring in the particularities and peculiarities of such a conflagration. A complex dynamic that lurks in many of the works, the concept of a purgative flame as well as the desire to end a corrupted interwar era, is typified in the acknowledgement MacNeice accords to 'Brother Fire' – seeing him as 'O enemy and image of ourselves'. In the short stories of William Sansom, such a desire for destruction mutates into disorientation in the laconic intensity of 'Fireman Flower', 'The Wall' and 'Building Alive'. Likewise, Henry Green served in the wartime Auxiliary Fire Service and his short stories, as well as his novel *Caught* (1943), develop a rather different narrative complicity with this most transformative element. Perhaps the apotheosis of flame enchantment comes in *Four Quartets* and, especially, in 'Little Gidding'. The one-time fire-warden T. S. Eliot gives war-time flames both a role as a transformative and culture-terminating force, but this has to be set against the symbolic unity they can also encode: 'And the fire and the rose are one'.

A bus flung upside-down into a tree; tombs blown open; a cascade of rubble through the surviving doorway of a chapel; the smell of coffee as an entire warehouse of it burned: in Chapter 3 the impact of surrealism will be assessed. For it is unsurprising that both reportage and more considered writing from blitzed London returned repeatedly to versions of Surrealism as an explanatory mode. Yet histories of surrealism in Britain do not dwell on the years of the Second World War, identifying it rather as an epoch of decline. I wish to challenge such a view, arguing that the cityscapes of 1939–45 were zones of unrivalled inspiration, giving rise to works that let us understand Surrealism in Britain in a rather different way: as a source, not a doctrine; as a template, not a movement. Thus in this chapter I will consider what the surrealist fragment meant in the works of some key writers, artists and film-makers. I will also consider how the *idea* of the fragment was changed, not only by the bombed, fragment-filled cityscapes, but also by the lives and consciousnesses fragmented in wartime conditions. Central to this argument will be case studies, including discussion of the films and writings of Humphrey Jennings, the photography of Lee Miller, and the poetry of David Gascoyne. In addition

Introduction

9

I will consider various related aspects, such as the relatively forgotten New Apocalyptic Movement, led by Henry Treece and J. F. Hendry.

In his autobiography the fighter pilot Richard Hillary, scarred and burnt, titles one of his chapters: 'Shall I live for a ghost?'²² The haunted or ghostly cityscapes of the phantasmagoric city of rubble will be addressed in Chapter 4. This will include meditations on who or what might haunt them, whether recent or historical ghosts, not excluding the spirit of the buildings that now lay in heaps of rubble. Elizabeth Bowen's 'Afterword' to her Second World War collection of short stories, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945), expressly understands the phantasmagoric city of ruins as a way of mapping mental states. In 'Mysterious Kôr' (1944), London is evacuated of the living and becomes 'like the moon's capital – shallow, cratered, extinct'. Texts can themselves conjure up ghosts. The recent publication of David Jones' previously lost *Wedding Poems* allows a comparison to *The Anathemata* (1952) and provokes questions about how, for Jones, one war haunts the next. Moreover, life-shattering bombed buildings, ghosts and traces become a form of narrative in Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear* (1943).

A taxonomic exploration of the new London jungle of bombsite greenery will comprise Chapter 5. A few days before VE day, in 1945, the *Times* published a long leader column that began with a list: 'Wildflowers had spread over the bombsites: rose-bay willowherb, coltsfoot, groundsel, Oxford ragwort, Canadian fleabane and Thanet cress'. The combination of specificity, national identity, recuperative pastorality and the endurance of ruined ground are packed into an inventory of flowers. One of the most remarked-on features of the bombsites in London was their new verdancy. This chapter will address the resonances these new wild spaces had for writers, as the centre of cities became cloaked in brambles, buddleia, ivy and – most importantly – rosebay willowherb. With its pink flowers and jagged leaves, this plant had been pressed into literature before, as merely another species growing beside the track in Edward Thomas' poem 'Adlestrop'. But now it became the emblematic flower of the bombsites.

There are, however, salutary limits to engagements with such ruins. In April 1945, in an office in New York, an Americanised W. H. Auden was recruited – for his German-speaking abilities and his familiarity with pre-war Germany – into the morale division of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey. Passing through London in May, bedecked in an American uniform and with his usual hubris – 'My dear, I'm the first major poet to fly the Atlantic'²³ – he then travelled via sea and road to Darmstadt near Frankfurt, where, in his words, 'there was once a town'.²⁴

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

It had been the subject of a mass daylight raid in September 1944, which had transformed the centre into ruins. Faced with an expanse of bombsites that mixed remaining walls with piles of ash and charred timber, Auden saw a landscape so terrible as to be beyond critical or creative response, as he later recalled: ‘We asked them if they minded being bombed. We went in to a city in ruins and asked them if it had been hit. We got no answers that we didn’t expect.’²⁵ He left quickly afterwards and never wrote about it. Yet this blank nullity, when faced with destruction, was unusual – and probably shaped by Auden’s status as ambivalent external observer. For British bombsites, while also places of debris and death – with the ruined city personified as ‘O Mother of wounds; half masonry, half pain’ in Mervyn Peake’s meditation ‘London, 1941’ – were incredibly resonant for the artistic and literary imagination.²⁶ This book attempts to understand and explain why culture was, is, and will continue to be haunted by these zones.