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Double Agency and the Irish Big House in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heart of the Day*

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I. Introduction

After the Victorian era, modernists began to see the world in a fractured manner, often overturning long-held assumptions and beliefs. One of the beliefs that can be attributed to the Victorian era was that of identity being coherent and whole. While it is arguable whether Victorians saw the world in this manner (proto-modernists like Conrad already began to expose the problems with coherent identity in his novels), the modernists clearly and openly began to see identity as fluid. Once identity is no longer cohesive, ideas like double agency become avenues and means of finding oneself. What I will term double agency in this essay involves a perceived fracturing of national identity in the twentieth century. Towards the end of the Victorian era, the British Empire was troubled by internal dissent and by limits to any

further expansion. Questions of gender—including questions of masculinity—exacerbated this sense of fractured British individual and national identity. However, it was not until the mid-century when identity became fractured in seemingly irreparable ways. During World War II, the Blitz in London had a profound impact on the lives of British citizens, and individuals and spies became double agents in navigating their own lives amid the destruction of the world around them.

In *The Heat of the Day* (1948), Elizabeth Bowen explores the Blitz and its effect on the individual, and the author uses language that struggles to capture the nature of modern life. The strange style of *The Heat of Day*, noted by critics, almost seems like it cannot express the most mundane events, as if it is demonstrating how the Blitz makes a familiar event unfamiliar.[1] Just as the Blitz turned the familiar city of London into an unfamiliar wasteland in some areas, so too the novel's language takes a familiar event and makes it unfamiliar through a complicated and tortuous syntax. Bowen also employs elements of the Irish Big House novel in *The Heat of the Day* so that the clash of the personal and the political can be further highlighted. The Irish Big House genre typically takes political themes and plays them out in domestic settings, which is exactly what Bowen achieves in *The Heat of the Day*. While the novel does not revolve around a Big House, its inclusion invites us to see how the larger political realities of the Blitz and British-Irish relations play out

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1) See, for instance, Matthew Brown, "Strange Associations: Elizabeth Bowen and the Language of Exclusion," *Irish Studies Review*, 20.1 (2012): 3-24; Heather Bryant Jordan, *How Will the Heart Endure? Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Megan Faragher, "The Form of Modernist Propaganda in Elizabeth Bowen's The Heat of the Day." *Textual Practice*, 27.1 (2013): 49-68; Anna Teekell, "Elizabeth Bowen and Language at War," *New Hibernia Review*, 15.3 (2011): 61-79; and Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Subsequent citations will occur parenthetically in the text.

on an individual scale. The future of the British imperialism is enacted in the way Mount Morris is inherited.

II. *The Heat of the Day* and the Blitz

Bowen's *Heat of the Day* takes place during the Blitz in London, from September 1942 until around the same time in 1944. The novel follows Stella Rodney, an employee for the British government, as she is first confronted by a stranger named Harrison who accuses Stella's lover, Robert Kelway, of being a spy. Harrison implies to Stella that if he gives the word, Robert will be killed, and so he attempts to blackmail Stella into a physical relationship in exchange for Robert's life. Stella, incredulous, asks for time and tries to discover if Harrison is telling the truth, which involves a trip to Robert's childhood home, Holme Dene. She does not learn anything concrete, but at the end of the novel Robert admits to being a spy when Stella asks him about it. Robert changes his behavior after this admission, which tips off Harrison. In an attempt to escape capture, Robert either kills himself by jumping or is killed by falling off the roof of Stella's apartment building. Two other story lines intertwine with this main plot: one involves Roderick, Stella's son, and his inheritance of Mount Morris, a house in Ireland that belonged to Stella's cousin, and the other is Louie Lewis's quest to find stability in an extramarital relationship while her husband Tom is serving in India. These other plots are connected to the love story: after Stella's trip to Mount Morris to settle matters so Roderick can inherit the property, she decides to confront Robert Kelway about his treasonous behavior. Also, Louie is a stranger to Stella except when she meets Stella and Harrison at a bar before Robert's death; Louie opens the novel with her meeting Harrison in Regent Park. She also closes the story with

moving away from London to raise her child.

While the novel takes place during the Blitz, it rarely mentions the bombings or their effects; rather it is always implied, looming in the background and subtly hinted in minor details. Bowen also uses Big House novel elements, by including the Irish Big House Mount Morris, to explore what happens on an international scale after the Blitz. The uncertain relationship between Ireland and Britain results from Ireland's neutrality during World War II, and Roderick inheriting the Big House probes that relationship by representing it on an individual scale. The style of Bowen's language also contributes to how the Blitz affected the individual. The complex syntax makes the most familiar elements unfamiliar. In these ways, *The Heat of the Day* shows how the Blitz alters London life so that double agency becomes the means of coping with the world after World War II.

To understand more fully how the Blitz affects the novel, it is necessary to examine the nature of the Blitz and total war. By looking at the historical Blitz, we will see how that strategy collapsed the personal and the political, forcing individuals to become double agents to cope. The Second World War saw a change in the mechanics of war in relation to battlefields, enemy combatants, and strategies for fighting. Along with other technological developments, air power became instrumental in fighting during World War II, a dramatic shift from its use in the First World War. "In the space of a little over 40 years," John Buckley writes,

> aircraft progressed from the Wrights' first faltering flights in the Kill Devil Hills in 1903 to the mass destruction of Dresden, Tokyo and, most poignantly, Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The air raids of the Second World War, in particular those which to this day evoke bitter feelings of resentment and guilt, were the culmination of a revolution in warfare which saw aircraft do more than any other weapon to bring in the era of

total war. (1)

Buckley notes how the air raids of a war that happened over half a century ago still produce "bitter feelings of resentment and guilt." This captures at once those personal elements that cannot be extricated from political conflict and that remain in a society as long as it remembers the conflict. And this poignancy, resentment, and guilt are brought into relief by the fact that total war—here defined as war without boundaries, where the demarcations of enemy combatants, battlefields, and even objectives are blurred or ambiguous —impinges upon private space. For Buckley, the Second World War brought about a change in the nature of war. He states that "[u]ltimately, war had become so 'total' that the conflict threatened to subsume the political element which had always been the very impetus for war itself" (125). Even the political element cannot be distinguished in a total war situation, so that any type of definition or demarcation is intrinsically and inherently linked with other elements. This inability to extricate political goals, personal involvement, and even battlefield locations is precisely what occurred during the London Blitz. Total war coerces the individual into involvement because now war destroys the city, so the individual must confront the political as the world that surrounds the individual is being destroyed.

The city's destruction fractured individual identity because the literal destruction of the institutions Londoners knew forced individuals to reexamine their identities. As Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint relate in their book *Total War: The Story of World War II*, "Those in the path of the *Blitzkrieg* were left dazed as the Germans swept away the familiar things of daily life from goods and houses to the governments and officials to whom a settled people is wont to turn for guidance or instruction in a crisis" (261). The sweeping away of many portions of London left the city's denizens in a new situation

despite their own familiarity with the city. The institutions and people they used to turn to no longer existed in ways they had known, and even the comfort and familiarity of their homes vanished. The bombings altered the lives of many Londoners dramatically. Many became involved in the war effort in various ways; even Bowen herself worked as an air warden during the Blitz (Austen 3). This physical destruction of the city forced the individual to confront the political; it represented a clash between the two spheres that was unavoidable. It is this clash that Bowen's novel demonstrates, showing that the double agent emerges as a means of coping with the collapse of the personal and the political.

III. The Big House Novel and Elizabeth Bowen

The Blitz was a violent intrusion of a political reality into the domestic sphere, and to grapple with this fact, Bowen employed elements of the Irish Big House novel, which conveys larger political themes by relocating them in an intimate, domestic setting. In *The Heat of the Day*, Mount Morris highlights the tension between the personal and political when it comes to the relationship between Ireland and England. But what is the Big House novel? Vera Kreilkamp in her essay "The Novel of the Big House" defines the genre:

> The term "big house"—an ambivalently derisive expression in Ireland—refers to a country mansion, not always so very big, but typically owned by a Protestant Anglo-Irish family presiding over a substantial agricultural acreage leased out to Catholic tenants who worked the land. As rural centres of political power and wealth in Ireland, most big houses occupied property confiscated from native Catholic families in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (60)

This definition shows why the Big House is an appropriate location to stage the invasion of wartime politics into every aspect of personal life. It is always a site of tension because of its history: the Big House plays upon the conflict between Protestant and Catholic, Anglo-Irish and Irish. While it is a house in which people live and work, it is also a center of "political power," and because the land was often confiscated, there could be resentment between the "native Catholic families" living there and the "Anglo-Irish family presiding." By its very definition, the Big House is already comprised of several oppositions that can fracture the identity of characters. Kreilkamp admits the term is "ambivalently derisive" in Ireland, which captures the tension between the personal and the political. This understanding of the term "Big House" thus provides insight into how the genre functions. Frank Tuohy "defines the Big House novel as dominated by the Big House itself as setting and symbol as well as by a social world full of snobbery and distance, deprivation versus passion for sport (especially hunting), and 'inadequate men and masculine women'" (qtd. in Cahalan 206). Both Kreilkamp's and Tuohy's definitions show that the Irish Big House is a space where contradictions and oppositions appear, where political events play out in a personal setting. *The Heat of the Day* plays out the political repercussions of the Blitz through the inheritance of Mount Morris. That is, Mount Morris acts as a microcosm of Irish neutrality in the Second World War, and Roderick's inheritance of that Big House raises questions about Britain's relationship with Ireland that the novel ultimately does not answer.

Irish writers developed the genre to offer political commentary. Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) is arguably the first Irish Big House novel, and it satirizes the Act of Union of 1800 through the portrayal of Anglo-Irish ownership of the big house (Kreilkamp 61). Since that novel, many other authors, both male and female, have used the genre to point to

larger political issues in what *prima facie* looks like a novel about individuals' lives at home. Indeed, "[w]omen writing from within Ascendancy society and a range of largely middle-class male authors were to transform the subject matter of domestic gentry life into an insistently (if often covertly) political fiction" (Kreilkamp 61). Because the "political fiction" aspect of the genre could be hidden in domestic interactions, the Big House Novel was a popular genre among authors whose voices may not have been very prominent in political or governmental spheres. The Big House novel is also very malleable: the genre changed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to respond to political and personal events as they happened.[2] As Bowen herself was a woman from the Ascendancy, it is fitting that she included Big House Novel elements to show how the characters become double agents. In other words, by including some elements of the genre in her work, Bowen offers political commentary of Britain's relationship with Ireland during the Blitz, and the future of that relationship.

Thus, the Big House novel offers an avenue for Bowen to explore the clash of the personal and the political that highlights the double agency of the characters in the wake of the Blitz. Bowen uses elements of the genre throughout her work, and therefore understanding *The Heat of the Day* in light of the Big House genre can show how characters become double agents when the personal collapses into the political. Critics agree concerning the significance of the genre to Bowen herself. Heather Bryant Jordan, in her discussion of *Bowen's Court*, shows how Bowen uses Big Houses in her novels: "Farraways and the host of other fictional vulgar English houses such as Holme Dene in *The Heat of the Day* serve as transient and unsatisfactory alternatives to the Anglo-Irish Big House, Mt. Morris" (109). For Jordan,

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2) See John Cronin, *The Anglo-Irish Novel* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1980). Subsequent citations will occur parenthetically in the text.

Bowen's fictional work always returns to the Irish Big House, whether the property is in England or Ireland. Hermione Lee, in *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation*, sees Bowen qualified "to form a clear view of the history and the temperament of the Anglo-Irish," which results in a "nostalgia for Big House life" (16 and 17). Lee argues that the return to the Big House is Bowen's "nostalgia for her own youth" and a "nostalgia for a whole class, a whole way of life, which reached its peak in the latter part of the 18th century, found itself in decline thereafter and was by the 1920s an isolated minority cut off from the country it had once dominated" (17). For Bowen, the Big House genre can convey the interaction between political goals and personal ones in a subtle manner.

Combined with the language Bowen chooses, the genre is useful in capturing how the modern individual must become a double agent to cope with the fracturing of modern life the Blitz created. Neil Corcoran examines how Bowen's essay "The Big House" also plays a role in understanding the Big Houses in her fiction, particularly in *The Heat of the Day*:

> Tacitly salving the tragically bruised adverb of the final sentence of *The Last September*, when its big house is razed by the IRA ('Above the steps the door stood open hospitably upon a furnace'), she proposes a new socio-cultural role for the remaining big houses . . . as places where members of both traditions may come harmoniously together. (37)

Thus, Corcoran shows that the destruction of Danielstown in *The Last September* can offer hope: there can be some harmony between the warring factions of Irish society. In the same way that *The Last September* uses the Big House for political commentary, I argue that *The Heat of the Day* uses Mount Morris, despite its lack of prominence in the novel's plot, to show a new relationship between Britain and Ireland that is not always clear. The Big

House Novel offers Bowen the framework to explore the ambiguous national relationships that are just as affected by the Blitz as the individual lives of Londoners. In other words, the genre is fluid enough to reflect whatever new political situation exists for Ireland; thus, Bowen uses the Big House to show exactly how national and individual identity is fractured during the Second World War.

IV. Mount Morris as Anglo-Irish Big House

While Mount Morris does not have as prominent a role in *The Heat of the Day* as Danielstown does in *The Last September*, the Big House in Bowen's spy novel nonetheless captures the clash of the personal and the political during the Blitz by playing out Roderick's inheritance of the property. Mount Morris becomes a focal point, and Roderick's inheritance acts as a microcosm of Britain's relationship with Ireland. The very description of Mount Morris is an indicator of how the personal and the political clash. Roderick inherits the property—surprisingly to Stella—from a cousin, Francis, who passes away prior to the events of the novel. It is a surprise for Stella that Roderick receives the estate because Roderick hardly knew his cousin, so there does not seem to be any reason for him to get the house.[3] If Roderick is understood to represent Britain and Mount Morris symbolizes Ireland, then a new relationship between the two countries is surprising and somewhat historically disconnected. Despite not being the heir to the estate, Stella does

3) Roderick's inheritance could be a reflection of Victorian inheritance laws, which only allowed property and wealth to be transferred to male heirs. The only way for women to keep property and other forms of inheritance was to marry and have the husband become the inheritor. Since Stella is not married in the novel, Roderick would be the closest male heir.

go to look at the property and take care of some business before Roderick takes over. When she visits the house, we get a description of the building and grounds that provides a glimpse of the ambiguous nature of the property:

> There was no bridge for a mile up or down the river from Mount Morris. Down its valley the river swept smoothly towards the house, then was turned aside, lost to view, round the high rocky projection on which the house stood. On the far side, unequal cliffs of limestone dropped their whitish reflections into the water; trees topped and in some places steeply clad the cliffs. The river traced the boundary of the lands: at the Mount Morris side it had a margin of water-meadow into which the demesne woods, dark at their base with laurels, ran down in a series of promontories. This valley cleavage into a distance seemed like an offering to the front windows: in return, the house devoted the whole muted fervour of its being to a long gaze. Elsewhere rising woods or swelling uplands closed Mount Morris in. (180)

The main thrust of the passage is that of splitting. First, a river divides the land, and Mount Morris itself is isolated by not having ready access to a bridge to the other side. The cliffs are unequal and doubled by having their reflections in the water, at least providing the appearance that there are two exact copies of the cliffs. The valley too cleaves into the distance; the entire passage shows stark contrasts and divisions. This description becomes symbolic for Ireland's relationship with Great Britain—Ireland itself is cleaved and separated officially from the United Kingdom, but still part of it. This fact is highlighted with more context: there is no separation between Stella's presence in London and in Ireland. Just before the description quoted above, Stella discusses with Robert her trip to Mount Morris. The discussion occurs at "seven o'clock in the evening, in her flat," which means that "Early tomorrow she must be catching the Irish Mail" to make it to Ireland (179).

However, this trip is never described in the novel; rather, there is an immediate jump from Stella being in her flat to her being in Ireland. The only segue is one of ideas because Robert says, "What a lot of water... has flowed under the bridges since then, or hasn't it? Floods enough have washed most bridges away" (179). If "water under the bridge" indicates that tense times have passed and all is forgiven, then here Robert is attempting, through the touchstone of the Irish Big House, to say that the relationship between Ireland and Britain has eased. However, the text resists this idea, and Mount Morris is proof of this. As a representative of Ireland, the house is split from Britain, and yet, without there being a narrative segue between Stella in Britain and Stella in Ireland, Mount Morris becomes a reflection of Britain. This splitting and connectivity are similar to the fracturing that occurs during the Blitz, where the personal must confront the violent intrusion of the political. Thus, Roderick inheriting Mount Morris acts as an intrusion of war-ridden Britain into neutral Ireland.

The details of how Roderick inherits Mount Morris offer insight into how the relationship between Britain and Ireland could be read at the end of World War II. The transfer of the house to Roderick may be a surprise for Stella, but it also fascinates the young man. For Stella's son, it is not so much owning the estate that interests him, as his own responsibility towards it. Earlier in the novel, when Roderick is staying with his mother in her flat, the two discuss the conditions of his inheritance of Mount Morris, which confuses the young man. Roderick asks for Stella's advice: "Look, this is where I want to know what you think. When he's said about he bequeathes 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?" (95). Stella does not understand Roderick's confusion until he clarifies how

the statement can be interpreted in two different ways, depending on where the stress lies. Roderick wonders exactly what Francis meant in his will: "Did he mean, care in my own way, or, carry on the old tradition in my own way?" (95). The crux of the matter lies in the future of Mount Morris, and the future of the Big House depends on how exactly it is to be inherited. Is Roderick allowed to do what he likes with the property because that is the old tradition, or is he limited by the tradition in his care of the property? Neither Stella nor the novel provides an answer to Roderick's quandary. This problem thus connects this personal element of inheriting property to larger questions about national identity at the start of the post-colonial era. Through Roderick's indecision about what to do with Mount Morris, we can see Britain's difficulty with handling an independent, neutral Ireland during World War II. Language also creates this difficulty: there is a lack of punctuation that could clarify Francis's intentions, and so it becomes difficult for Roderick to interpret the conditions of his ownership of the Irish big house. Mount Morris becomes a focal point for the clash between the personal and the political, where Roderick's identity as controller of the property or follower of tradition clash, and where the future relationship between Ireland and Britain is seen on a microscopic scale. These clashes all essentially fracture any clear sense of national identity, fostering a kind of double agency that echoes the larger plot about spying and treason at the heart of the novel.

The future of Mount Morris, and by extension Ireland's future, hangs in the balance and goes unresolved in the novel, pointing to the ambiguity of Irishness. Just as Roderick does not know what to do with Mount Morris—how to care for it exactly—there is also an uncertain future for the property itself. Since he is a British citizen and controls an Irish property, and therefore is in charge of the Catholic servants Donovan and his family, the novel implies a sense of imperialism because this ownership structure mirrors

Britain's rule over Ireland for over 120 years. Roderick's position, therefore, is stuck between competing and complicated forces, an exemplum of the Anglo-Irish's status: "Bowen was deeply aware of the Anglo Irish sense of being stranded between anti-imperial nationalisms increasingly driven by lower-middle-class, rural, Catholic Irish and a British nation whose drift toward capitalist-democratic modernity the Ascendancy had historically defined itself by opposing" (Pearson 326). Mount Morris literally shows the split nature of Anglo-Irish identity within the novel—a split that models the double agency evident in the love plot: nowhere in *The Heat of the Day* is it ever explicit that Stella or Roderick are Anglo-Irish. It is only because he receives the house that his national identity becomes open to question. Roderick and Stella are *both* Irish and English, the novel seems to imply, and they navigate between these sometimes opposing nationalities by becoming double agents.

The last encounter with Mount Morris in the novel occurs when Stella is about to leave after her visit to take care of business; the news of Montgomery's breakthrough in Africa comes across the wireless radio. Stella contemplates Hannah, Donovan's daughter, whose palindromic name indicates that the future might be exactly the same as the past. Hannah's neutrality gives Stella pause: "Stella, also making for the house, became becalmed in the orbit of Hannah's gaze. She smiled at the girl, but there was nothing—most of all at this moment nothing—to be said. Whenever in the future that Mount Morris mirage of utter victory came back to her, she was to see Hannah standing there in the sunshine, indifferent as a wand" (199). This passage captures the legacy of Mount Morris under Roderick's possession: one of a near perfect ambivalence. Hannah becomes the symbol for Ireland; in the face of victory, there is no feeling, no emotion, and no inclination toward any side. Ireland's neutrality in the Second World War is focalized perfectly in Hannah—even Montgomery's victory is not met with any smiles or positive reactions from

the young girl. Yet, despite this ambiguity of the legacy of Mount Morris, some critics see the possibility of marriage between the Protestant Roderick and the Catholic Hannah: "but the novel is... brushed here by the possibility of a marriage... between the new master of the house and the young Catholic servant" (Corcoran 196). The problem with neutrality, however, is that such a positive view cannot be assumed: just as Ireland does not favor or oppose a British victory during World War II, Hannah cannot be seen to love or hate Roderick. Thus a marriage between the Anglo-Irish and the Catholic is difficult to see. Likewise, Roderick's inhabiting Mount Morris later in the novel gives no indication of the result of Britain's relationship with Ireland after the war. Ireland's neutrality in the Second World War provides no clear insight into the future of the two countries. In other words, Hannah and Ireland's neutrality shows a different type of double agency, one that occurs because no side is being chosen: both marriage and separation are equal to Hannah, just as victory and defeat are equal to Ireland. The future of Britain and its empire is on unstable terms as Stella leaves Mount Morris for Roderick to care in his own way.

By focusing on the Big House elements in *The Heat of the Day*, we see how double agency arises on a political level through how individuals interact with each other. Characters like Roderick and Hannah begin to represent larger ideas, namely Britain and Ireland, respectively. The connections between Roderick, Mount Morris, Stella, and Hannah generate questions about the future of Britain and Ireland—an ambiguous future because of Irish neutrality during the Second World War. Bowen spied on Ireland for Britain during the war to ascertain Irish opinions on neutrality, which shows that Britain was certainly interested in Irish neutrality.[4] The future relationship between Britain

4) See Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Biography* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), pp. 202-04. Subsequent citations will occur parenthetically in the

and Ireland is ambiguous because Ireland did not side with either Britain or Germany during World War II; Bowen offered to gather information for the Ministry of Information because she wanted to do "some good" and she felt it was "important" (qtd. in Glendinning 202). Her primary responsibility with gathering information for Ireland was to figure out Irish attitudes toward the War: "What she was chiefly engaged in was ascertaining Irish attitudes to the war, specifically in the question of the Treaty Ports in the south and west of Ireland, to which Churchill tried to persuade de Valera to allow Britain access" (Glendinning 203). Thus Ireland could have been instrumental in some ways to the British war effort, and Irish neutrality possibly affected the outcome. This British interest in Ireland is also seen in Roderick's inheritance of Mount Morris. This interpretation is highlighted by the elements of the Big House Novel contained in *The Heat of the Day*. The framework of this genre allows Bowen to explore larger political forces at work in the intimate lives of individual characters, and the result is inconclusive—we cannot read Hannah and therefore cannot understand how Britain will interact with Ireland in the wake of the Blitz.

V. Elizabeth Bowen and the Language of *The Heat of the Day*

One element that highlights the double agency that permeates the novel is the language, as if it struggles to express the possibility of an aerial attack on London that could occur at any moment. The threat of the Blitz results in a tortured syntax that obfuscates events, making them uncertain. Many critics, such as Anna Teekell, Neil Corcoran, and Megan Faragher, examine Bowen's language in *The Heat of the Day*, particularly because it differs from Bowen's

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text.

other novels. Teekell, in her article titled "Elizabeth Bowen and Language at War," argues that "[a] better metaphor for neutrality in the novel might be the resolutely negative syntax of Bowen's language itself. One could argue that in declaring neutrality, the Irish Free State—by removing itself from the map of global war—made what Bowen termed 'Eire's first free self-assertion' by mapping itself in a double-negative fashion" (65). As an example of "negative syntax of Bowen's language," Teekell cites a portion of the novel where Stella discovers that her lover Robert is a Nazi spy: "She could not believe they had not, in those two years, drawn on the virtue of what was round them, *the* virtue peculiar to where they were—nor had this been less to be felt when she was without him, was where he was not, had not been ever, might never be: a perpetual possible illumination for her, because of him, of everything to be seen or be heard by joy" (309). Negatives abound in the passage: "not" is used five times, while "nor," "without," and "never" also convey negatives. It becomes difficult to follow all the negatives in this passage to find out exactly what Bowen is trying to express; to Teekell, this paragraph is illustrative of the "willfully tortuous syntax" Bowen employs to highlight the neutrality of Ireland during the Second World War (61). This interpretation also shows how the novel's language is connected to, and an extension of, the genre elements. For Teekell, Ireland was, by remaining neutral, asserting its freedom from the United Kingdom, and all the negative language Bowen uses acts as a resounding "no" to involvement in the war. This negative syntax also makes it difficult to see what exactly is being asserted, so that the language is always grasping to express even the most mundane events. This inability to express simple events enables double agency to creep into the language of the novel: the Blitz fractures modern British life, and the language captures that dissolution through a difficult grammar. The characters in Bowen's text must cope with the resultant collapse of the personal and the political by becoming

double agents.

In *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return*, Corcoran also examines Bowen's language in *The Heat of the Day*, but differs from Teekell in that he pays less attention to its relation to international politics. Faragher also treats the language used in Bowen's novel; she includes the political aspect when she argues that *The Heat of the Day* was propaganda for the war effort.[5)] Ultimately the language in this novel is trying to capture the state of affairs during the Blitz, when the political was violently intruding upon the personal.

From the start, we can see how the novel uses language to explore the clash of the personal and the political. The novel opens in Regent Park in London during a Viennese concert. The scene is peaceful and calm, but there are already hints of trouble in the fading light. Bowen describes the oncoming dusk: "The Sunday had been brilliant, without a stain of cloud. Now, the burning turquoise sky of the afternoon began to gain in transparency as it lost colour: from above the trees round the theatre there stole away not only colour by time" (4). The sunset sets the scene for what happens to the lovers at

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5) See Faragher, "The Form of Modernist Propaganda in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*." Faragher argues that Bowen's letters to Lord Cranbourne that report on the neutrality of Ireland during World War II shaped the writing of the novel. While this thesis appears interesting and highlights Bowen's job as a spy on Ireland for Britain during wartime, it does not quite get at the reason for the tortuous and twisted syntax of the novel. Other critics comment in passing about Bowen's language in *The Heat of the Day* and throughout her work. See, for example, Nicola Darwood, *A World of Lost Innocence: The Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), p. 152 (with particular emphasis on the names of the characters and how they become repetitive and confusing); Jordan, *How Will the Heart Endure? Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War*, p. 164; and Renée C. Hoogland, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing* (New York: New York University Press, 1994). Subsequent citations will occur parenthetically in the text. For Bowen's language in *The Last September*, see Brown, "Strange Associations: Elizabeth Bowen and the Language of Exclusion."

Regent Park as they listen to the concert. To describe these characters, Bowen employs a syntax that does not clarify the characters or what is happening to them on that Sunday evening: "Pairs of lovers, fatigued by their day alone with each other, were glad to enter this element not themselves: when their looks once more met, it was with refreshed love" (4). It is immediately unclear what the element is that the lovers are entering, and how that element is "not themselves." Adding to the confusion produced by this enigmatic "element" that the lovers are entering into is the contradictory nature of "their day alone with each other." While this phrasing does make sense in that each individual pair was separated from everyone else, and therefore "alone with each other," it still indicates two opposing ideas within the same phrase: being with someone generally indicates that an individual is not alone. The passage does not provide any clear notion of what is happening to the lovers that is transforming their fatigue into fresh love. This complicated expression in a minor passage of the novel indicates how the language struggles to grasp the mundane, as if the threat of the Blitz were always interrupting the lives of Londoners. While not directly addressed in the opening, there is still the sense of a threat hanging over the opening in the novel; the people attending the concert in Regent Park are relieved to feel themselves at ease: "For many, chiefly, the concert was the solution of where to be: one felt eased by this place where something was going on. To be sitting packed among other people was better than walking about alone" (5). The fear of solitude, and the gratitude for feeling at ease, subtly suggest a looming threat, and this sense of danger affects the very expression of the novel. The Blitz is this threat, and the language shows this without explicitly mentioning the war. The tortuous syntax of what happens to the lovers in Regent Park is therefore connected with the fear and loneliness that have become a part of the life of the Londoner during the Blitz, when the destruction of the city and its familiar

institutions seems always imminent.

The passage near the end of the novel in which Stella thinks about her relationship with Robert after learning he is a spy also demonstrates the complex, and unnecessarily tortuous, language to describe the simplest of events. The difficulty of the language occurs especially at key moments in the novel, heightening the effect of disassociation. For example, there is almost a metafictional moment within *The Heat of the Day* when Stella explains the very language of the novel to Harrison. When she wants clarification about exactly what he wants from her, he responds: "'It's funny . . . when you begin "you mean," you remind me of a girl I met in the park. I would say, for instance, "How blue the sky is," whereupon she'd say, "You mean, the sky's blue?"' (33).[6] Stella misinterprets Harrison in attempting to rephrase him. That is, "How blue the sky is" means something slightly different from "The sky is blue," with the former sentence pointing to the depth of the color, while the latter is a statement of fact. The words are all the same in both sentences —with the exception of "how"—but the different syntax alters what is being said, so that the phrase "You mean" is emptied of its meaning. After this comment on the nature of language, Stella shows Harrison what he does with language: "I cannot wonder at her; quite ordinary things you say have a way of sounding, somehow, preposterous. But in this case you are saying something preposterous—or trying to. You must be clearer, though, if you're trying to frighten me" (33). Here Stella identifies with Louie, saying that

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6) It seems like Harrison is referring to Louie. While Harrison never says to Louie "How blue the sky is," he does tell her, when he is trying to get her to leave him alone, that "There are funny people about" (18). To this Louie responds, "You mean, you might be funny, for all I know?" (19). This example is not exactly the same as Harrison's, because it makes sense that Louie should interpret Harrison's statement as such. However, it does indicate that Louie's "You mean" may be misinterpreting what Harrison actually means.

Harrison, in his very expressions, cannot make simple, ordinary statements. By commenting on Harrison's language in this way, one can draw a parallel between Harrison's language and the language of the novel.

Like Harrison, the novel sounds preposterous when trying to convey ordinary occurrences (like the sunset) and falters when discussing the preposterous nature of identity. The novel itself is unclear, just as Harrison is. For the characters Louie and Stella, Harrison's ambiguity creates misinterpretation: first Louie rephrases Harrison and changes his meaning, then Stella does. The characters are never sure what Harrison means; they must always question, rephrase, and—maybe unavoidably—misinterpret. The reader of *The Heat of the Day* experiences something similar, because the novel has its own "preposterous" way to describe even the most basic events. The reader too must rephrase, question, and misinterpret Bowen's writing, never becoming sure what is being expressed. Since the language is struggling to express the most mundane things, the novel suggests that the lives of Londoners during World War II are fractured and somehow inaccessible and unfamiliar.

VI. The Blitz in *The Heat of the Day*

The Big House genre stages the clash of the personal and the political, while the strange syntax Bowen uses in the novel points to a difficulty in grasping the mundane. Both genre and language conspire to highlight how total war and the Blitz require new forms and syntax in order to be expressed. Because the personal and the political are collapsing into each other, previous modes of expression are insufficient, and Bowen's uses of genre and language highlight that insufficiency. Yet, while the Blitz seems ever-present in the novel, it is only mentioned once. Rather than direct references, it appears

subtly; Bowen employs details in the writing of her novel that point to the threat of being bombed and to how that fractures modern life. It is because the aerial attacks against London literally destroy the city that the political collapses into the personal, which in turn generates a new kind of double agency. The details that both show and hide the Blitz are always present, and those details point to the fracturing of modern life that forces the individual to become a double agent. The Blitz, by being in the background for most of the novel until the end, changes individual life, forcing the characters in the novel to confront the political.

The black-out curtains that Stella plays with in Chapter Two of the novel is one of the first indications of the looming Blitz and the fracturing of modern life. While Chapter One introduces the complicated style and the difficulty of expressing the modern occurrence, Chapter Two begins the main plot of the novel with Stella waiting for Harrison to show up at her door. As she waits, she is playing with the cord for her curtains:

> Stella Rodney stood at a window of her flat, playing with the blind-cord. She made a loop, through which she looked at the street, or coiled the cord round a finger, then swung the finger, making the acorn tap on the pane. The harsh black-out blind, its roller hidden under the pretty pelmet, was pulled some way down, throwing a nightlike shadow across this end of the ceiling; the blind of the other window was, on the other hand, right up. She did not correct the irregularity, perhaps because the effect of it, *méchant*, slipshod, was in some way part of her mood. (20)

Stella's first appearance in the novel is littered with details that seem unnecessary: the description of her playing with the "blind-cord" is lengthy and does not seem to provide any useful information. The key word in the passage, however, throws these details in relief: the "harsh black-out blind" is

a reminder of the Blitz, black-out curtains and blinds being one of the more unpleasant aspects of the Second World War for the civilians.[7] The blinds are an element of the personal, in this case home décor, that confronts a political reality; if people were careless about light escaping their buildings, they could be aiding the enemy. The black-out blinds above are both hidden and open, and Stella is careless herself with them. She allows one window to be half closed and the other completely open. The "irregularity" of the windows not only characterizes Stella's mood, but it also acts as a reflection of the disjointed nature of modern life: London struggles to be even or symmetrical when there is a constant threat that any building can be destroyed.

Not only do the black-out blinds show how the Blitz can affect Stella's mood, but they also affect the personal relationships she has. Soon after Stella's meeting with Harrison, Roderick comes to visit Stella. He discusses various things with his mother, including his inheritance of Mount Morris and Harrison. When the novel attempts to describe their relationship, the language falters, and the black-out curtains appear again:

> Stella and Roderick were too intimate not each to extend to the other that sense of instinctive loss, and their intimacy made them too honest to play a scene. Their trouble, had it been theirs only, could have been written off as minor... But it was more than that; it was a sign, in them, of an impoverishment of the world. There was *not* much left for either of them to say, and in this room in which they sat nothing spoke, either—a mysterious flutter, like that of a fire burning, which used to emanate from the minutes seemed to be at a stop.... Outside the curtain-masked windows, down there in the street running into streets, the silence was black-out registered by the hearing. (58-59)

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7) See Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 51-52.

The passage does little to clarify exactly what the problem is between Roderick and Stella, but the difficulty extends beyond their individual relationship. The problem of communication, both within the world of the novel and the novel itself, is part of an "impoverishment of the world." This impoverishment arises exactly because of the Blitz, and the signs of it are in the "curtain-masked windows" that provide a view to the black-out silence of the street. An aerial bombing is present here: its threat affects how mother and son interact with each other, just as it affected Stella's mood earlier in the novel.

The Blitz also works its way into Stella's relationship with Harrison. During their long conversation, Stella wonders if Harrison is "quite ordinary in the head" (31). When he asks, "What, though, makes you wonder specially now?" she responds, "I don't know. I suppose, in some way, the war." "Oh, you mean the war? Yes, it's funny about the war—the way everybody's on one side or the other" (31). That Stella can see the war as the reason for insanity is indicative of how the Blitz can affect the individual. The person who must confront the destruction of the city around him can lose his or her sanity if he or she is unable to navigate the personal and the political. The individual must become a double agent in to cope with the effects of the Blitz on London. Harrison's reaction to Stella captures this: the war splits the people individually, with regard to their sanity, and politically, because people must be either an ally or enemy. Harrison's careless rhetoric concerning alliances in the war implies that he may not necessarily be on "one side or the other." He is able to navigate the fractured nature of the world that results from the Blitz. The German bombing of London is always in the background, coloring the characters' interactions. It is only through their ability to be double agents, to move constantly, if uncertainly, between the collapsing spaces of the personal and the political, that they are able to adapt to the

changes of life the Blitz produces.

When the Blitz is finally mentioned in the *The Heat of the Day*, it signals a complete and total collapse of the personal and the political, which Stella and Harrison play out in their reaction to the events. After Robert's death, the novel does not end. There is Stella's portion of an inquest and a section involving Louie's storyline. Then there is a page of exposition about what was happening in the war. The exposition ends with the Blitz: "Reflections were cut short by the renewal of air attacks on London—a five-night February season to be known at the Little Blitz" (348). This is the only mention of the word "Blitz" in the novel: most references in *The Heat of the Day* mention "the war," but rarely anything more specific. The fact that the Blitz only appears during an exposition that is devoid of character development—this section is barely connected to Louie's storyline and her love of reading newspapers—leaves it as something always in the background, even though it also has an effect on the events in the novel. After the exposition, Roderick returns—this time to Mount Morris. At the end of this section, one of the characters refers explicitly to the Blitz. Donovan asks: "Did you hear anything from London?" and Roderick replies, "'No. Why?' 'They're bombing away again. Isn't the mistress in it?' 'Yes. Why?' 'You left her very exposed'" (355). It is an Irishman—and a Catholic—who brings up the Blitz, and he does so in the context of putting blame on his supposedly Protestant, Anglo-Irish employer. Subtly, the blame for the Blitz and the war lies with Roderick, as the Big House genre elements turn Roderick from just an individual to a representative of Britain. Roderick does not accept or reject responsibility for the Blitz, or for leaving his mother "exposed" in London. Rather the section ends, and the novel takes up Stella's and Harrison's relationship. While the bombs are falling, their relationship blossoms, but there is no consummation or resolution, leaving the ending of the novel open.

Stella's and Harrison's double agency ends the Blitz section: in this section, they can cope with the fractured world that has resulted from the violent intrusion of total war on London. But while the Blitz is actually occurring in this last section, the tone of the language remains not consonant with the events being described. Harrison arrives at Stella's new flat as the bombs are falling: "Bombardment reopened upon Harrison doggedly footing it in the direction of Stella's new flat, automatically swerving clear of buildings liable at any time to be struck and fall" (355-56). Despite the danger, the diction reflects a calmness that contradicts the situation. Harrison is not running nor rushing, he is simply "doggedly footing" his way to the apartment. While the buildings surrounding him can be destroyed at any moment, he just maneuvers leisurely around them, as if through an obstacle course. This tone of calmness despite the destruction persists throughout the exchange between Stella and Harrison. While Harrison observes that Stella's new pet cat is frightened: "quite a dirty night. Animals don't care for this sort of thing," Stella rejoins, "Quite like old times.... Before I met you, even," indicating a sense almost of nostalgia that comes along with the bombing (356). Indeed, the cat seems to be the only creature in the section aware of the Blitz as a danger:

> A burst of close-up gunfire shook the building—whereupon she started to pace about, looking under the furniture for the cat. Harrison, silenced by the guns, seemed at the same time to feel exonerated from making any secret of the fact that he was following her with his eyes—even, when her movements took her behind his chair, turning right round to see where she was. She scooped up the cat and stood with it held against her: its fur seemed to shrink and dampen as a stick of bombs fell diagonally across the middle distance. (357-58)

The Blitz is now at the forefront, but its effect on the characters is minimal. The cat is the only thing that has a negative reaction to the violence surrounding it.

The fact that both Stella and Harrison are seemingly normal despite the Blitz indicates that they can survive and cope with the aggressive intrusion of the political into their private lives. They become double agents because they have two opposing identities that are reflected in their reactions to the devastation surrounding them. They both are affected by the destruction, but they move on with their personal issues at the same time. The cat's reaction to the Blitz acts as a foil for Harrison's and Stella's double agency: instead of cowering in fear like the cat, the characters behave as if nothing is happening. The language reflects this by downplaying the trauma that surrounds them.

The Blitz also opens up the possibility of a new relationship between Stella and Harrison. Even though Stella admits that she is going to marry a "cousin of a cousin," their interaction—and their last appearance in *The Heat of the Day*—ends with a possibility that is not resolved: "'I always have left things open.—As a matter of fact, though, I think the raid's over.' 'In that case...' said Harrison, looking at his watch. 'Or would you rather I stayed till the All Clear?'" (363). The Blitz may have ended, but its conclusion is not certain. Stella only thinks so, and Harrison offers to stay until there is certainty—the "All Clear" signal. There is a romantic implication in the offer: Harrison remaining with Stella hints at the possibility of a sexual relationship. Yet Stella does not reply to Harrison's offer, and the novel does not resolve or consummate their relationship. Stella leaves things open both individually, in the personal relationship, and politically, by neither allying herself to nor opposing Harrison (who now becomes the symbol of British loyalty). Like the Blitz, the relationship might end or continue another night.

VII. Conclusion

Bowen shows how the Blitz in London fractures the individual's identity by merging the political with the personal. World War II, and specifically the Blitz, brought war from a designated battlefield into the home as individuals were forced to confront the destructive nature of the political. The philosophy and practice of total war brought about a change in the way the individual saw the world. For Bowen, the literal destruction of London became a metaphorical destruction of the boundaries between the personal and the political. This merging actually caused a fracture of identity for the citizens of London specifically, one that made political allegiances in some cases run counter to personal ones.

Bowen recognizes this split identity and shows how double agency can arise from the clash of the personal and the political, but to fully express how an individual navigates this confrontation, Bowen needed a genre that highlights this split. She thus combined the spy novel with the Anglo-Irish Big House novel to highlight how the personal clashes with the political and how an individual must navigate identity during the Blitz. Bowen chose elements of the Big House novel to show the effect of World War II on London, Ireland, and the individual in general. While not generally categorized as a Big House novel, *The Heat of the Day* employs elements from the genre to highlight how double agency works in World War II London. Roderick's inheritance of Mount Morris points to the future relationship between Britain and Ireland—a relationship that is complicated by Irish neutrality during World War II. At the end, it is implied that Donovan, an Irish Catholic, gives responsibility for the Blitz to the Protestant Anglo-Irish Roderick. The Big House novel elements cohere with those of the spy novel in Bowen's text to show the personal clashes with the political both in Britain's relationship with

Ireland and in British individuals' handling of questions of identity during the Second World War.

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Abstract

Double Agency and the Irish Big House in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heart of the Day*

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This article explores how identity becomes fractured during the Second World War through an in-depth analysis of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948). The article argues that the novel is both a spy novel and an Irish Big House novel; the elements of the Big House novel bring into relief the split identity that occurs to members of the Ascendancy, who have loyalties to both Ireland and England. During the Blitz attacks that occurred in London, Londoners become double agents as they tried to navigate a familiar world that became unfamiliar because of the destruction that surrounded them. This double agency occurs on the level of the individual but transcends that to the national, as England must navigate its relationship with a formerly colonized but now neutral Ireland. Thus, the personal and political becomes interwoven in inextricable ways, and Bowen's novel suggests this is how identity must work for an individual to survive.

■ Key words : Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, the Blitz, Double Agency, Irish Big House Novel
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