

BERYL PONG. **British Literature and Culture in Second World Wartime: For the Duration.**

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Near the end of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1949), the double-agent Robert Kelway tells his lover Stella Rodney that the only way for her to understand his treachery would be "to re-read [him] backwards". A time and mind-bending formulation typical of Bowen, this contorted phrase carries within it a hint of the damage that will be inflicted on Stella's sense of the past when what was once contingent and ineffable is reconfigured in light of this revelation. *The Heat of the Day* makes much of the common emotional climate that ties Stella and Robert's turbulent affair to the conflict within which it had flourished. And as one whose past and future have been devastated by an unforeseen threat, its heroine's summons to backwards re-reading likewise seems indicative of the 'temporal paradox' of 'wartime' itself: a notion considered at length in Beryl Pong's *British Literature and Culture in Second World Wartime: For the Duration* (p.25).

Acknowledging the dual sense of 'wartime' as the period during which a conflict took place and the intense, dislocated experience of temporality felt in its midst, Pong considers mid-century writers and artists who engaged with this 'muddled interplay between wartime's epochal and phenomenological understandings' (pp.1-2, 8). Taken together, her readings chart the development of 'late modernist chronophobia': a term which denotes how, from the late interwar period onwards, British society was overtaken by a form of existential dread that saw 'memory and futurity, and anxieties about past and future war, dissolve into one another' (p.15). The distorted temporalities and chronophobic character of much mid-century writing therefore induces us to think about its formal innovations in terms of the long shadow cast by modernism; after all, many of those who depicted the discontinuities of Second World Wartime did so by foregrounding a subjective experience of time indebted to Henri Bergson's notion of 'la durée' and the interior time-consciousness explored by the likes of Virginia Woolf (p.8). The distinction

encapsulated in Pong's notion of a specifically '*late modernist* chronophobia', however, is that whilst these earlier literary experiments were often seen as part of a solipsistic retreat from the realities of the world (a criticism voiced famously by both Wyndham Lewis and Georg Lukács), those radical temporalities explored around the mid-century arose from an unblinkered engagement with global geopolitics (pp.10-11).

*British Literature and Culture in Second World Wartime* is divided into three sections. 'Part I: Blitz-Time Capsules' examines the various ways in which memoirs by Henry Green and Arthur Gwynn-Browne, amnesiac novels by Patrick Hamilton, Graham Greene, and Henry Green, and William Sansom's and Elizabeth Bowen's snapshot-like short stories all sought to capture and contain a version of the wartime present that was itself underwritten by a dread of futurity. 'Part II: War Time Zones' brings together a group of writers who found in the differing experiences of wartime between nations a prompt to consider the complexities of national identity. Henry Green's novel *Loving* (1945) and Bowen's wartime short stories are explored in relation to their treatment of Irish neutrality; whilst readings of works by Storm Jameson, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot indicate how others responded to the violence of global warfare by articulating deep conceptions of time that could call to mind a shared past. 'Part III: The Temporality of Ruins' focuses on the ambivalent and highly suggestive nature of ruinscapes. Containing accounts of the aesthetics of pre-emptive ruination evoked by members of the 'Recording Britain' movement and the War Artists' Advisory Committee, as well as the concern about ruin children and ruined childhoods expressed in Rose Macaulay's novel *The World My Wilderness* (1950), Pong turns to the epoch of 'post-war', and reveals how anxieties about this uncharted territory had emerged even from the earliest days of the conflict.

The ambitious scope of this project sees Pong move adeptly between artforms, creating a comprehensive vision of wartime cultural production that encompasses literature, painting, photography, and film. Many of the novels and short stories considered here have been treated extensively in previous accounts of Second World War writing, and there is a fair amount of

overlap with Leo Mellor's *Reading the Ruins* (2011) in particular. That being said, it is a benefit of this book's thematic structure that fresh connections are forged between familiar texts and lesser known examples from the likes of Jameson and Gwynn-Browne. Commendable also is Pong's insistence that those more subtle, idiosyncratic elements of Second World Wartime deserve to be expressed with critical precision equal to their experiential complexity: her mobilization of concepts such as 'transtemporal ruination' and 'proleptic mourning' will be of use to future accounts of late-modernist aesthetics and wartime psychology (pp.193, 199).

This monograph is part of the Oxford Mid-Century Studies Series, and Pong uses her introduction to make a strong case for its contribution to a number of debates about the relationship between the Second World War and this long-overlooked period of intellectual and artistic innovation. *British Literature and Culture in Second World Wartime* aims to establish how the cultural legacy of these 'wartime years' is implicated in those of both the 'modernist and postwar periods' (p.6), to theorize the place held by the Second World War in the developing character of modern wartime (p.6), and to argue for the impact that aerial bombardment had on modernist philosophies of time (p.8). Like the wartime nation at its heart, then, this commendably ambitious book finds itself engaged on multiple fronts; and yet the heavy-handedness with which certain sections of close analysis are reframed so as to satisfy these objectives does lead one to suspect that its resources might have been overstretched slightly – the breathless conclusion to the very brief sub-chapter on 'Rubble Comedies' is a case in point (p.233). This is a shame, because Pong's study is a substantial work of scholarship whose inventive close-readings and evocative historical vignettes serve to illuminate those imaginative resources through which some of the most curious aspects of mid-century psychology were apprehended: insights which are of profound value in their own right.

Organized into parts and subsections by means of several 'tropes', this book is propelled by Pong's keen analytical eye, which both draws out and exploits the 'metaphorical utility' that was identified in wartime commonplaces like the blackout, ruins, and homeless children by those

attempting to comprehend and express these strange temporalities (pp. 214-5). Pong thus seems to have unfinished business with the question of why it is that the eccentricities and discontinuities of Second World Wartime would seem to emerge most clearly when readers consent to think with and about such metaphors. For many of the artists she considers, responding to wartime meant placing at the forefront of their work a sense of dissolving certainties, of semantic and temporal flux, and of warped causal relations: paradoxes of perception that analogic, symbolic, and metaphorical thinking not only seem to embody, but to perpetuate. *British Literature and Culture in Second World Wartime* comes close to exploring the implications of this intriguing connection, about which I would be interested to hear more.

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