

**Bombs in the sky, ruins in the city: aspects of urban bombardment
in *The End of the Affair* and *Spies***

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Abstract

Aspects of the London Blitz are represented in the novels *The End of the Affair* (Graham Greene 1951) and *Spies* (Michael Frayn 2002), and these representations involve a reflection on the effects on urban culture and city lives of the translation of the destructive action of war to the metropolitan sphere. To the purpose of elucidating the extent of this reflection, this article offers a comparative analysis of the depiction of human lives in an urban environment under threat of instantaneous ruin in both novels. The analysis is guided by the specificities of urban ruin originated by bombing as useful indicators to relevant textual items, and focuses on the divine associations of air bombing, the articulation between built and open or “natural” spaces in the urban framework, social difference encoded in the city landscape, the significance of bomb sites and urban routine affected by the war. The conclusions attempt to show how, conversely, the literary representation of bombing attacks on the city illuminates the actual experience or city life and urban culture.

Keywords: *bombing; London; The End of the Affair; Spies; ruin; Blitz; war.*

Cultural constructs based on the notion of ruination, and on attendant notions such as those of the remnant and the vestigial, find representation throughout the history of English literature. These constructs are tied in with the English territory; and the city of London, in particular, proves a fruitful site for representations of the ruinous. This seems apposite, given the vestigial survival of very ancient strata in present-day London (Ackroyd 2003: 6-36, 759-760). Yet, London proves fruitful in this connection in a much more modern sense, having

been the object of sustained bombardment during World War II. The Blitz effected a translation of the destructive action of war to the metropolitan sphere, and in so doing revealed its specific effects on urban culture and the human lives involved in it. The novels *The End of the Affair* (Greene 1951) and *Spies* (Frayn 2002) reflect these effects. Both are first-person narratives concerning an illicit love affair carried out in London against the backdrop of the bombing attacks on the city. On the grounds of their similar subject matter, their depiction of human lives in an urban environment under threat of instantaneous ruin may be compared, under the assumption that a look into the specificities of the kind of ruin occasioned by events such as the London Blitz may reveal a depth of meaning in aspects of the literary representation of this phenomenon, and, conversely, that these representations illuminate aspects of urban life affected by this phenomenon. The ensuing comparative analysis will focus on the divine associations of air bombing, the articulation between built and open or “natural” spaces in the urban framework, social difference encoded in the city landscape, the significance of bomb sites and urban life affected by the war as relevant aspects of the bombardment of London illuminated by the two novels.

1. Blast from the London sky

The notion of a fall is etymologically inscribed in the word ruin.¹ When the ruin is caused by bombardment, the inherent fall is underlined by the downward trajectory of the bombs along a vertical axis. A visual retracing of their trajectory back to its point of issue ends in the sky, signaled thus as the origin of ruin. The sky, traditionally associated to the divine in symbolic terms, is appropriated by man in a gesture of arrogance; the effect of almighty power provided by air

¹ From the Latin *ruina*, -ae: headlong fall, downward plunge, in the second meaning provided by the *OLD*; from the Latin verb *ruo*: to rush headlong, rush uncontrollably forwards or down, and to rush or descend (upon) in hostile or aggressive fashion, in its third and fifth meanings provided by the *OLD* respectively.

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warfare contributed to the brutal singularity of World War II. Paul Tibbets, the pilot who flew the Enola Gay and released the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, recalls the sense of superhuman detachment experienced by a bomber pilot in the following terms:

In the buildings and on the streets there were people, of course, but from six miles up they were invisible. To the men who fly the bombers, targets are inanimate, consisting of buildings, bridges, docks, factories, railroad yards. The tragic consequences for humanity are erased from one's thoughts in wartime because war itself is a human tragedy. (Tibbets 1978: 223)

Likewise, it may be surmised that people on the ground lose sight of the men behind the bombing action (other than as a general entity: "the Germans", in this case), and the unexpected quality, the enormous violence, the instantaneous destruction, the relative randomness of the hits and the evident helplessness of the victims – both human and material – may liken the attacks to the attitude of an omnipotent and vengeful divine being.

That there was a symbolic dimension to the bombardment of London during World War II is clear. While "(...) the Nazis knew the propaganda value of destroying iconic buildings and institutions" (Clapson 2019: 44), and therefore aimed at hitting locations such as Buckingham Palace and the Parliament, the attempt backfired for them in the case of St Paul's Cathedral, which remained standing and mostly undamaged after a particularly brutal raid in the area in December 1940, a circumstance that was interpreted symbolically as an example linking urban resistance with divine intervention: "The bomb map depicting the extensive damage around St. Paul's cathedral suggests something of a miracle of survival." (Clapson 2019: 48)

As one of Greene's "Catholic novels", the religious dimension is central to *The End of the Affair*. It tells the story of a love triangle involving the characters of civil servant Henry Miles, his wife, Sarah,

and Maurice Bendrix, a novelist. Alternatively, the love triangle may be understood as the one formed by Sarah Miles, Maurice Bendrix and God, for whom Sarah tries to leave Bendrix, even when she will not leave him for the sake of her husband.² Sarah's attempt is triggered by the effects of a V1 bomb damaging the house where Bendrix lodges: as a woman haunted by vague religious feelings and a desire to have faith, the evidence of Bendrix's death prompts her to ask for a miracle that will buy her belief, as well as to offer a sacrifice as payment: "Do this and I'll believe. (...) I'll do anything if you'll make him alive. (...) I'll give him up forever (...)." (Greene 1962: 93). Thus, the novel effectively taps into the transcendental associations of bombardment. For Bendrix and Sarah, the ruin of their relationship comes from above, both literally and metaphorically.

Spies also tells the story of a love affair carried out in London during World War II, but from the perspective of a young boy, Stephen Wheatley, who finds himself involuntarily involved in its proceedings. While the religious aspect is not as relevant to the plot as in *The End of the Affair*, the sky over the London suburb which provides the geographical setting is picked on more than once along the novel, and it is because of his association with it that the character of Uncle Peter (the man in the affair) derives his superior status in the neighborhood: although others in Stephen's street have relatives involved in the war, "(...) no one had an absent relative who could compare with Uncle Peter. He was a bomber pilot, and he'd flown on special missions over Germany (...)." (Frayn 2012: 24) Allusions to the sky in the novel come with a reflection on its transcendental nature as "the one feature of every landscape and townscape that endures from generation to generation and century to century," a feature on which "Once the war was written across (...) in a tangled scribble of heroic vapor trails." (Frayn 2012: 10) Air warfare is superscribed on the sky, a human intervention in the area

² Neither will she leave her husband for Bendrix, for that matter; since she stays with Henry, to whom she is not united by erotic love but by the holy sacrament of matrimony, her allegiance may be said to remain on the side of God.

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of the transcendental. But man's hubris is his literal downfall in *Spies*, as a severe psychic crisis causes Peter's dishonorable defection and reduces him to barely living in very reduced circumstances with the help of his wife's sister, the woman involved with him in the affair. A comment by the narrator underlines the vertical axis of the bombing, pointing out the terror that, this time, pervades both of its extremes:

(...) I think of the uncontrollable terror seizing him, ten thousand feet up there in the dark emptiness, and five hundred miles from here. And I think of the terror that must have seized my aunt and her children, too, as the unbreathable gases from the burning house filled their dark cellar ten thousand feet below him, or someone like him. (Frayn 2012: 234)

In this case, the blast from the sky backfires and turns Peter into a fallen angel, an outcast, a pariah who no longer belongs to either the upper or the lower spheres that he once, aboard his plane, helped bridge.

2. City wilderness

During the war, the sky proved the least protected – because least protectible – city front; horizontally, London's military or material defenses were not tried like those of Paris, for instance. But its sheer extension and density constituted a time-honoured defense system against the forces of nature, a demonstration of "(...) the modern quest for mastery over nature on which dense cities rely." (Ellin 1999: 15) Yet at the same time, although the city as an entity has often been defined as the opposite of the countryside, it retains a strong bond with the soil on which it 'grows' and with surrounding nature (Chueca Goitia 1978: 32-35).

The End of the Affair bases its narrative on the actual city of London, pointing out streets and landmarks such as Piccadilly or Rules, the famous restaurant in the area of Covent Garden. One specific urban space, however, is central to the narrative, and that is the Common on the perimeter of which both the Miles's home and Bendrix's lodgings

are situated.³ As the area between Henry's handsome home and Bendrix's lodgings, that Sarah must cross and re-cross in her coming and going from husband to lover and viceversa, the Common acquires extra meaning: it is a piece of common land, open to all and shared by many, like Sarah herself is shared by Henry and Bendrix (and pretty much sexually open in general, due to her unsatisfactory sex life with her husband). There is even a church in the Common limits, since Bendrix recalls:

(...) vigils along the edge of the Common, watching their house from a distance, by the pond or under the portico of the eighteenth-century church, on the off-chance that the door would open and Sarah come down those unblasted and well-scoured steps. (Greene 1962: 19)

If it serves Bendrix's spying purpose, the church presumably sits somewhere between his lodging's and the Miles's home, an appropriate situation for a building symbolizing the divine presence that will interfere with the human affair.

The Common itself, as a piece of unencumbered land amid buildings or a vacant space in the urban framework, retains an element of the primitive in the midst of the civilized. Sarah literally catches her death of cold after getting wet walking there, during the same night when Bendrix himself, surprisingly, crosses Henry in a state of deep upset under the rain in the self-same Common, where "The black leafless trees gave no protection: they stood around like broken water-pipes (...)" (Greene 1962: 8); the comparison evokes warlike destruction, giving the natural landscape the brutal quality of a bomb site. On

³ Biographical evidence suggests an identity between this fictional Common and the real Clapham Common in London, on the North Side of which Greene lived in the 1930s. The site <https://www.thisisclapham.co.uk/visit/public-art-map/end-of-the-affair-graham-greene/> (accessed on 10 June 2020) may be visited for further details.

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another occasion, Bendrix encounters sleet on his way through the Common at night:

(...) the edged drops seemed to slash their way in through the buttonholes of one's raincoat: they obscured the lamps on the Common, so that it was impossible to run. (...) I wished I had brought my war-time torch with me (...). (Greene 1962: 124)

The Common is further associated with wartime devastation as Bendrix feels concern for Sarah's safety when "I thought of her walking about on the Common in the black-out – it wasn't a very safe place in those days (...)." (Greene 1962: 58) Reinforced through these links with the war, the Common, in the midst of the city, turns into a no-man's-land, a wilderness where men and women wander unprotected and exposed to the elements, like King Lear in the storm, faced with the essential plight of humanity: love and despair, while God remains untouched by such concerns, through the building in the Common representing His presence: "The eighteenth-century church stood like a toy in an island of grass – the toy could be left outside in the dark, in the dry unbreakable weather." (Greene 1962: 26)

While *The End of the Affair* presents this element of wilderness as well-entrenched in the city territory, *Spies* illustrates another aspect of a city's conflictive relationship with nature in the shape of the rural. As Nan Ellin (1999) has pointed out, "The distinctions between the city, suburbs, and countryside were rendered obsolete with advanced industrial capitalism" (271), and it is in the context of this encroachment of city on country and country on city, and the resulting erasure of "The old hard-and-fast distinction between urban and rural" (Schlesinger 1970: 36) that *Spies* is set. Stephen Wheatley's world centers in the Close, the street ending in a cul-de-sac where his home is found, situated in an area which is the product of London's growth pushed by the middle

classes' desire for the best of both the urban and the rural worlds.⁴ The mature Stephen reflects upon the fact that "(...) this sudden new colony hadn't appeared out of empty desert," (Frayn 2012: 86) and points out how this urban settlement developed by pushing out and away the smallholdings of agricultural labourers who had supplied the city with vegetables, and by rationalizing into a net of straight and proper streets what was before a tangle of irregular lanes. As he revisits the Close after an interval of fifty years, he sees that urbanization has gone on relentlessly, and there is a satirical tone to his description of how

The familiar world has reached out and sealed the underworld away beneath the well-drained and well-lit surfaces. Light has joined up with light, and the haunted darkness between them has been abolished. (Frayn 2012: 88)

But when he was a child during World War II, the "underworld" still existed on the surface, not far from where he lived at all. In fact, you only had to turn right at the corner of the Close and go through a narrow tunnel in the railway embankment to find how

(...) the old world resumed after the brief interruption of our familiar streets and houses, as indifferent to them as if they'd never been. We called it the Lanes, though there was only one of them and so narrow that it almost disappeared in summer into

⁴ Cf. "The whole district had been assembled like a Potemkin village, just in time for his family to move here and for Stephen to discover it as his changeless and ancient birthright. It was an outgrowth of the railway (...). A few rough potholed roads had been hopefully laid out around the little wooden country station; various small jobbing builders in nearby villages had bought plots and sketched out their crude private fantasies of rural life in raw brickwork and timber. A few young couples had got off the train at the weekends and looked around... paid deposits... had three-piece suites delivered and planted privet seedlings... needed writing paper and curtain tape... found shopkeepers opening up in the new parade who could supply them." (Frayn 2012: 85-87)

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the gross greenery of the hedgerows on either side and the shadows of ancient crooked trees. I see the Cottages, the sly tumbledown hovels lurking behind the undergrowth in a debris of rusty oil drums and broken prams. I hear the barking of the misshapen dogs that rushed out at us as we passed, and I feel the sullen gaze of the raggedy children who watched us from behind their wicket gates. I smell the sour catty stink of the elders around the collapsed and abandoned farm where you could sometimes glimpse an old tramp holed up, heating a blackened billycan over a little fire of sticks. Beyond the abandoned farm was a desolate no-man's-land half marked out as builder's lots, where colonization approaching from the next settlement along had been halted for the Duration. (Frayn 2012: 88)

The imagery of ruin⁵ combines with elements of the abject⁶ to reflect a sense of rejection and menace experienced by young Stephen, but pertaining to the city in general as well⁷; while the allusion to a “no-

⁵ The great number of terms making up the semantic field of ruin and degradation in this quotation deserves specification: “crooked”, “tumbledown hovels”, “debris”, “rusty”, “broken”, “misshapen”, “raggedy”, “collapsed”, “abandoned”, “blackened”.

⁶ Notice, in this connection, the “gross” greenery, the “sly”, “lurking” quality of the hovels, the “sour catty stink” and the presence of an old tramp.

⁷ Julia Kristeva (1982) has defined the abject as a perceived threat to the boundaries of the self, and described it both in connection with disgust and with criminality (2-4). In this last respect, it may be pointed out that in young Stephen's time there was talk of a sexual deviant, a Peeping Tom or the alleged tramp himself lurking in the Close, while mature Stephen imagines a present-day child living in the Close and reviewing all the forms of menace in his suburban environment, from the petty to the gruesome: “(...) all the stories of the thieves who stole the ornamental birdbath from the next-door neighbor's garden, of the sick ghosts who haunt the edges of the familiar world with outstretched hands, of the peddlers he's been warned against who offer all the

man's-land" redefines the war as one fought between town and country. Peter's post-crisis existence is confined to this kind of limbo; the remainder of his ruined life is carried out in the Barns (the name given to the area beyond the Lanes and the Cottages, with its animal connotations), in utter dispossession, not far from where the object of his affections lives in the perfect suburban home.

3. Socially coded urban spaces

The automatic generation of urban ruin by bombardment affects city areas differently, according to the social class and economic status of the population. Gregory Clapson points out how "One of the many tragedies of war from the air is that poorest people suffer the most (...)" (2019: 41), and how the bombings serve to bring out the enormous difference that geographical proximity in the city tends to underplay:

The first area of London to come under sustained attack was the East End, a historic mostly working-class district of the capital city, only a few miles from the wealthy and powerful West End yet many miles from it, figuratively, in social and economic conditions. (Clapson 2019: 41)

In *The End of the Affair*, only the small area covered by the Common serves to mark the physical distance between the characters, but a much wider breach lies underneath. If Bendrix picks up on the aforementioned "unblasted and well-scoured steps" of the Miles's home, it is because, as an urban item, the Common is also socially coded in the novel: Bendrix lives in "the wrong – the south – side of the Common", amid "the relics of other people's furniture" (Greene 1962: 7), while Henry Miles's side – the north –, where as a civil servant he has his comfortable and well-tended home as well as his lawfully wedded wife, is presumably the "right" one. It seems almost socially

terrible pleasures that must be refused, of the torturers of children, of the wandering random murderers..." (Frayn 2012: 137-138)

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determined that the V1 bomb affecting the main characters' lives so decisively should fall on the side of Bendrix's lodgings, while the other side of the common goes presumably unharmed, since the Miles's home is not affected by the bombing. The difference in social rank seems connected to the war through the men's occupations: Henry Miles is busily occupied by the war in his capacity as a civil servant (taking care of the distribution of gas masks and state of the shelters), while Bendrix, incapacitated by a limp for war action and unencumbered by other affections than Sarah's, remains unconcerned and even happy with the war that facilitates their affair. The 'divine' aspect of air warfare may manifest itself as a punishment of the solipsistic lover. The novel's ending brings together the significance of the divine, the Common and the ruined steps, as Bendrix is forced to believe in a God that he hates and he faces life in peace time, without Sarah:

I called down to Henry, 'I'm ready,' and we walked side by side over the Common towards the Pontefract Arms; the lights were out, and lovers met where the roads intersected, and on the other side of the grass was the house with the ruined steps where He gave me back this hopeless crippled life. (Greene 1962: 187)

Likewise, a strict social hierarchy rules over the population of the Close in *Spies*, and the Heywards are right at the top of it. Young Stephen is painfully aware of the gap between him and his best friend Keith Heyward, an unmentioned fact that pervades their friendship: "We are socially color-coded for ease of reference. (...) everything about him was yellow and black; everything about me was plainly green and black." (Frayn 2012: 16)⁸ This superiority is manifest in the impeccable state and order of the Hayward household, obsessively maintained by Keith's

⁸ Green and black are the colors of Keith's academically prestigious and exclusive school, "the right local preparatory school" (Frayn 2012: 16), while yellow and black are those of Stephen's unpretentious and run-of-the-mill one, "the wrong school" (Frayn, 2012: 16). It may be well to note the same use of "wrong" in this case as in Bendrix's description of his side of the Common.

father, and that Stephen, as one of the very few people in the street allowed actual access to the house, has been able to perceive at first hand. The urban solidity of this representation of social status offers a shocking contrast to the opposite extreme provided by the Barns, with its infernal overtones, where Mrs Heyward visits Peter clandestinely:

I think of Keith's mother, coming out of the world of silver ornaments and silver chimes and descending the great ladder of the world, rung by rung, until she finds herself where I'm standing, in the smell of the elders and the excrement – and then going on, farther down, into the underworld. (Frayn 2012: 198)

Mr. Hayward's social superiority is also linked to his performance in war times, though in a more physical capacity than as a civil servant: he was in the front in the Great War and is part of the Home Guard during World War II. His obsession with home orderliness and pulchritude smacks of the military and is executed in that spirit, so that the domestic environment becomes oppressive and threatening. A breach in order (the absence of a thermos flask from its rightful place in the picnic basket stored in the garage) allows him to detect his wife's secret doings and prompts an exercise in domestic violence that is carefully kept under a façade of urban amiability:

Keith's mother walks back up the road. Mrs McAfee is coming in the opposite direction. She smiles at Keith's mother. 'Your Ena Harkness is a real credit to the street!' she says. Keith's mother smiles back at her. 'Ted does work awfully hard at the garden,' she says. She walks up the garden path, as calm and unhurried as ever. And as formally dressed, with another silk cravat, crimson this time instead of blue, high around her throat. (208)

The cravat, Stephen knows, hides the place where Mr Heyward pressed his war bayonet against his wife's windpipe. The reversed effect of bombing that caused Peter's fall confines him to the socially inferior

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area, faraway yet so close. The need to help her destitute lover forces Mrs Hayward to go the unthinkable distance between her socially and economically (seemingly) perfect home and the Barns, and the ensuing disorder does not go unnoticed or unpunished. Thus, the bombing has, indirectly, brought out the urban difference within proximity.

4. Bomb sites

As opposed to the ruin that is the product of erosion and gradual deterioration through the passing of time, the city ruin as a product of bombardment is instantaneous: the functioning building one instant becomes a ruin the next. The two different agents of destruction pointed at by these different types of ruin – time and man – are ultimately unified in the entity of History:

Ancient European cities, bastions of civilisations, are now 'cracked and reformed' in a historically instantaneous moment delivered by modern technology. (Clapson 2019: 21)

The location that becomes the actual site of a bombing in *The End of the Affair* is the house where Bendrix has his lodgings; the one, unlike the Miles's home, with "the steps that had been blasted in 1944 and never repaired" (Greene 1962: 8) as a perpetual reminder of the difference in outcome for Bendrix's affair through human/divine intervention. But much more than the steps was blasted in the bombing episode, and none of that has been allowed to remain unrepaired. The urban logic of renewal has operated on the microcosm of the house as on the macrocosm of the city, and a degree of erasure and oblivion has translated itself onto the personal plane, in Bendrix's appraisal:

I came up the broken steps into the hall. Nothing but the stained glass was the same as that night in 1944. (...) The stairs and banisters creaked with newness all the way upstairs. She had never walked up them. Even the repairs to the house were part

of the process of forgetting. It needs a God outside time to remember when everything changes. (Greene 1962: 141-142)

However, one element included in this quotation, and picked up in other pages of the novel, has resisted the bombing: "(...) the stained glass, tough and ugly and Victorian, stood up to the shock as our grandfathers themselves would have done." (Greene 1962: 8) There is an element of almost personal resistance to the stained glass survival, which is assimilated to the past – regarded as stronger than the present generally – through the grandfather analogy. In this way, the house where Bendrix lodges contains the possibilities of urban response to bombing, translates them to the personal sphere of Bendrix's and Sarah's affair, and thus illustrates their impact on human lives and the attitudes and feelings accompanying them: resistance, acceptance, oblivion. This is in accordance with the complex attitudes behind the city's response to the bombings:

If one natural reaction after the war lay in the desire to create a "new world" (...), then another was to reconstruct the old world as if nothing particular had happened. (Ackroyd 2003: 736)

City bombing also nullifies the notion of private property: in the Blitz, the insides of a home "(...) were sometimes stripped bare and left hanging in the air of a ruin as if the private lives of Londoners had suddenly become private property." (Ackroyd 2003: 726) Until it is reclaimed by the forces of reconstruction, a ruined building is materially open to anyone, and may acquire new temporary "owners". The notion of the private is then challenged: a destroyed wall no longer effectively separates the inside from the outside, the public from the private. Yet, at the same time, the urban ruin may be rich in irregular and informal enclosures where the dispossessed can hide or protect themselves, producing a more primitive, less civilized idea of the private than the one posited by the regular walls of a house or a flat. These alternative spaces appeal to those who have a reason, a need or a tendency to

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eschew the socially regulating effect of conventional housing and privacy: children, teenagers, adults involved in clandestine activities.

In *Spies*, a bomb has struck home as well as in *The End of the Affair*: what once used to be Miss Durrant's house lies in ruins next to young Stephen's in the Close, and mature Stephen describes the site as "(...) our Arcadia, our Atlantis, our Garden of Eden, the unclaimed territory left after Miss Durrant's house was gutted by a stray German incendiary bomb." (Frayn 2012: 30) Great enjoyment is derived by the children from Miss Durrant's misery, as the bombing has opened up her space to their occupation, the regular rules pertaining to private property having been suspended for the Duration like so much else. And "Garden of Eden" is right, because

the tall green hedge at the front, which Miss Durrant had kept so rectilinear and behind which she had maintained her privacy so carefully, had lost its shape and grown into a straggling underwood that closed the entrance to this secret kingdom completely and lost it to the world. (Frayn 2012: 30)

Rampant vegetation helps the children redefine privacy in their own terms.⁹ However, Stephen and Keith cannot ultimately prevent the space from being equally open to others who find the secret way in. Barbara Berrill, a girl neighbour, categorically rejects their attempt at re-establishing private property over their hideaway: "It's Miss Durrant's garden, and she's dead. Anyone can come in here." (Frayn 2012: 97) The bombing has made this urban space available to all, and young Stephen finds evidence that suggests another presence in the hideaway, even more disturbing than Barbara's: that of the alleged Peeping Tom haunting the street at night, who may be none other than Peter, coming to watch on Mrs Heyward and his own wife, Mrs Hayward's sister, and baby daughter, who also live in the Close.

⁹ The hedge is in fact a privet hedge, and "privet" is how the unproficient speller Keith Heyward writes "private".

There are echoes of the material fragmentation caused by the bombing in the scraps of Miss Durrant's life salvaged by the boys from the debris and used in their hiding place: a dented black tin trunk, a pencil, a carving knife. A similar effect of assorted elements devoid of cohesion, of a unifying meaning destroyed with the life that provided it, seems to affect the provisions left under the stairs of Stephen's own house,

(...) the random collection of packets and tins that my mother left there as emergency rations, (...) in case the house was hit and we were trapped under the debris like Miss Durrant. (Frayn 2012: 193)

When the actual, live-in house is thought of as a potential bomb site, the fragmentary affects even the attempt at survival involved in the provisions, which make no sense together: pilchards, condensed milk, cheese biscuits, dried egg. The effect transfers from the material to the bodily as Peter's body, already deteriorated through ill health and exposure in the Barns, is destroyed by a passing train in an attempt to cross over the railway embankment; the train carries the shattered remains of war aircraft.¹⁰ The iterated representation of brokenness metaphorises the ultimate sense of meaninglessness behind war destruction, as the unrelated pieces of what once was a whole cease to make sense. Mature Stephen's narrative is nothing other than an attempt to restore unity and meaning to the fragmentation that pervades his own memory of the events:

What I remember, when I examine my memory carefully, isn't a narrative at all. It's a collection of vivid particulars. Certain words spoken, certain objects glimpsed. Certain gestures and

¹⁰ Stephen catches a glimpse of the train's lead and describes it as "the duck-egg blue underside of a shattered aircraft wing with its red, white and blue roundel, sticking up from a jagged tangle of scrap metal, a camouflage-painted tailplane with its red, white and blue flash." (220)

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expressions. Certain moods, certain weathers, certain times of day and states of light. Certain individual moments that seem to mean so much but that mean in fact so little until the hidden links between them have been found. (Frayn 2012: 31)

Another body's ruin, also caused by bombing, albeit indirectly, occupies the final chapters of *The End of the Affair*. As Sarah encounters premature death, her body becomes free property like Miss Durrant's place, and Richard Smythe, another man who loved Sarah, feels entitled to take a scrap of her hair, prompting Bendrix's reflection on fragmentation:

'Oh, she doesn't belong to anybody now,' he said, and suddenly I saw her for what she was – a piece of refuse waiting to be cleared away: if you needed a bit of hair you could take it, or trim her nails if nail trimmings had value to you. Like a saint's her bones could be divided up – if anybody required them. She was going to be burnt soon, so why shouldn't everybody have what he wanted first? What a fool I had been during three years to imagine that in any way I had possessed her. We are possessed by nobody, not even by ourselves. (Greene 1962: 141)

Her cremation restores her from the city in which she wandered restlessly to escape the pain of leaving Bendrix to the celestial plane ("(...) it was her smoke that was blowing over the suburban gardens." (154)), reversing the trajectory traced in *Spies* by the bomber who fell from the sky.

It may also be noted that "Architecture embodies memories, and familiar buildings shape and reinforce how people feel about their built environment," (Clapson 2019: 70) and that, as a consequence of the Blitz,

Beyond the bereavement of those who had lost loved ones, and the pain and suffering endured by injured people living in these beautiful cities, many survivors grieved for the buildings they had known and loved, and the streets they had grown up in. (...)

So the legacy of destruction went deep: loss was felt immediately and brought about feelings akin to grief for something that could not be brought back. (Clapson 2019: 70– 71)

A sense of bereavement is conveyed by Bendrix when he revisits Eastbourne Terrace, the scene of some of his first lovemaking with Sarah, in the light of their extinguished affair:

Half of it [the terrace] was gone – the half where the hotels used to stand had been blasted to bits, and the place where we made love that night was a patch of air. (Greene 1962: 44)

In grieving over his affective loss, Bendrix in a sense grieves also over the city's material loss, and both are in fact inextricably linked because "The very process of remembering grows out of spatial metaphors of connection and topography." (Hebberts 2005: 581)

5. Urban life affected by the war

A ruin standing in a city is an urban ruin, in that it is surrounded by the daily practices that define the urban territory. It accrues meaning through those practices, if only by standing there as a permanent testimony to devastation; its presence signifies how urban routines are affected by a war. And just like a ruin may be temporarily appropriated, as expressed previously in this article, urban routines disrupted by war may be so, too. The example of Coventry Cathedral may serve at this juncture: as a result of Nazi bombing,

The city's beautiful mediaeval cathedral lay in ruins, and remains so today, an iconic reminder of the sacrilegious destruction of places of worship during air raids. (Clapson 2019: 52)

The simultaneous appropriation of the ruin through the restoration of religious urban routine is proved by the fact that "(...) the boldly designed new Coventry Cathedral was inaugurated in 1962, and is

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situated alongside the ruins of the older place of worship." (Clapson 2019: 127)

In *The End of the Affair*, Bendrix and Sarah's affair is closely entwined with urban routine,¹¹ and especially with that routine as affected by the war in such a way that it facilitates rather than hinders their purposes. With his own person excused from service due to a limp, Henry Miles working late in Home Security and his landlady relocated in the basement, Bendrix's access to Sarah is quite direct, and so he claims that "War had helped us in a good many ways, and that was how I had almost come to regard war as a rather disreputable and unreliable accomplice in my affair." (Greene 1962: 56) In fact, the development of the whole affair coincides mostly with the time span of World War II while reversing the negative significance of the conflict, from the time Bendrix meets Sarah in 1939 ("I noticed Sarah, I think, because she was happy: in those years the sense of happiness had been a long while dying under the coming storm." (Greene 1962: 25)) to the bomb that prompts the breakup after the first V1 attack on London in June 1944.¹² The instantaneous obliteration involved in bombing attacks actually seems a welcome outcome to Bendrix, who links it to the "little death" of orgasm and sees it as an end to the anxiety and jealousy occasioned by his possessive love of Sarah:

We had only just lain down on the bed when the raid started. It made no difference. Death never mattered at those times – in the early days I even used to pray for it: the shattering annihilation that would prevent for ever the getting up, the putting on of clothes, the watching her torch trail across to the opposite side of the Common like the tail-light of a slow car driving away. I

¹¹ Cf. Bendrix's description of Sarah's activities: "Sometimes she would come in between two queues, and we would make love between the greengrocer's and the butcher's." (Greene 1962: 34)

¹² The attack was prompted by the successful Allied landings in France, an event that may be seen as marking the beginning of the final stage in World War II.

have wondered sometimes whether eternity might not after all exist as the endless prolongation of the moment of death, and that was the moment I would have chosen, that I would still choose if she were alive, the moment of absolute trust and absolute pleasure, the moment when it was impossible to quarrel because it was impossible to think. (67-68)¹³

Sarah breaks up the affair immediately after this bombing, metaphorically wreaking the same kind of instantaneous havoc in both their lives, without revealing to her lover the promise behind her sudden decision. He is riddled with jealousy and hatred at the thought of having been replaced by another lover, and further V1 attacks provide the sole possible solace to Bendrix's waking mind: "Only the robots were a distraction during the day: for a few seconds between the silence and the crash my mind would be clear of Sarah." (Greene 1962: 72-73)). She, meanwhile, joins Henry on a work tour in the hope of leaving the pain of separation behind, but longs for the city that, under the spell of war, could provide the desired non-existence:

I'm in a train going into the country (...): this is the desert, and there's nobody, nothing, for miles and miles around. If I were in London, I might be killed quickly (...). (Greene 1962: 91)

¹³ Bendrix actually achieves some seconds of blissful annihilation while still under the rubble caused by the explosion: "My mind for a few moments was clear of everything except a sense of tiredness as though I had been on a long journey. I had no memory at all of Sarah and I was completely free from anxiety, jealousy, insecurity, hate: my mind was a blank sheet on which somebody had just been on the point of writing a message of happiness. I felt sure that when my memory came back, the writing would continue and that I should be happy.

But when memory did return it was not in that way. I realized first that I was lying on my back (...). After that, of course, I remembered Sarah and Henry and the dread of love ending." (Greene 1962: 69-70)

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Back in London, urban life under war conditions still provides momentary relief for her, through consumer culture, leisure activities and a sense of loss of individuality in the crowd:

Lunched at Peter Jones and bought new lamp for Henry's study. A prim lunch surrounded by other women. Not a man anywhere. It was like being part of a regiment. Almost a sense of peace. Afterwards went to a news cinema in Piccadilly and saw ruins in Normandy and the arrival of an American politician. (Greene 1962: 101)

A paroxysm of inversion is reached when, more than a year later, with the war over and a renewal of the relationship between them in the offing, Sarah becomes seriously ill and dies; Bendrix experiences an irrational desire to laugh at the whole absurd situation where urban life during the war proved happier and more profitable than peacetime, and his desire devolves on the city and its bombing as the perfect summarizing image: "The tears ran down my cheeks as I laughed. Once in the blitz I saw a man laughing outside his house where his wife and child were buried." (140)

In *Spies*, the war has essentially two effects on suburban routine: suspension and redefinition. On the one hand, regular activities have been suspended like the Heywards's car on wooden chocks, its wheels removed and

(...) hung neatly on the wall, alongside a picnic hamper, tennis rackets in wooden presses, deflated air beds and rubber rings – all the apparatus of a forgotten life of leisure that had been suspended, like so many things, for the Duration, that great overarching condition shaping all their lives in so many different ways. (Frayn 2012: 21)

On the other hand, urban elements have been redefined in the light of the war conflict: the neighbours live "(...) in dread of policemen and

telegraph boys, as everyone did then who had someone in the family away fighting" (Frayn 2012: 32), and the trains passing by carry

(...) shrouded tanks and guns and lines of fighters perched with folded wings like queues of resting crickets from which a trained observer might be able to deduce a great deal of valuable strategic intelligence. (Frayn 2012: 91)

In fact, the logic of war has been superscribed on the whole neighbourhood as part of the War effort, a fact that young Stephen naturalizes until his suspicion that Mrs Hayward is a German spy makes him realize that she, or any other acting as the aforementioned keen observer, might read that superscription well enough to write reports:

Reports on what? Whatever she goes to spy on when she makes all those trips to the shops. The local anti-aircraft defenses, probably – the air raid wardens' post on the corner of the lane to Paradise and the static water tank behind the library. The secret munitions factory on the main road. (Frayn 2012: 39)

Mrs. Heyward is not a German spy, but she is providing Peter, a war deserter and her lover, with supplies. Like Sarah's popping at her own lover's place between the greengrocer's and the butcher's, Mrs. Heyward's female urban routine, affected by the war, also allows for a cover of occupations not altogether lawful. Barbara Berrill apprehends young Stephen of the surprising fact that publicly married women whose husbands are away because of the war may have secret boyfriends, the required urban blackout serving as a metaphor for a general cover-up of the hidden and illicit.¹⁴ Thus, in its turn, the erotic

¹⁴ The nightly blackout serves in this novel a similar purpose to the actual vast blackout that affected the city of London during the initial months of the

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actually superscribes itself on the thanatic, as war's imposition on the urban territory is appropriated by lovers. Bendrix provides a case in point as he describes the prostitutes in the city centre:

It was dark and quiet by this time in the streets, though up in the moonless sky moved the blobs and beams of the searchlights. You couldn't see faces where the women stood in doorways and at the entrances of the unused shelters. They had to signal with their torches like glowworms. All the way up Sackville Street the little lights went on and off. (Greene 1962: 56)

Certainly, London's palimpsest quality has not ceased with the war; time itself rewrites the urban territory indefatigably. Mature Stephen finds the Close essentially the same, yet completely changed:

The houses have become tidy and tedious, their disparate architectural styles somehow homogenized by new porches and lamps and add-on timbering. (Frayn 2012: 10)

A process of homogenization through superimposition seems to have taken place, eradicating the uniqueness of the houses on the street that were once "fourteen separate kingdoms" but have since "coalesced into a kind of landscaped municipal car park." (Frayn 2012: 10) But as Stephen finds out, the Close of his childhood was not the first layer of the urban sediment on which his whole life has developed:

(...) I discovered that my first two years had been spent in a quiet, garden-lined street that seemed to be a dreamlike echo of the Close in which I later grew up, which is no doubt why the Close itself always seemed to be a dreamlike echo in its turn. (Frayn 2012: 229)

attacks: while for many "the predominant sensation was one of alarm and insufficiency" (and Stephen may be equated with these), others "took advantage of the darkness for their own purposes" (Ackroyd 2003: 725).

London is not only the London of today over the London of yesteryear, but it is also London over the unnamed city in Germany where Stephen/Stefan was born; the urban fabric transcends time and space, to prove an intimate feature of the character.

Conclusions

In their different ways (one as a plot-driving device and in specifically Catholic terms, the other through the metaphorical appropriation by man of the city sky and in not necessarily religious terms), both *The End of the Affair* and *Spies* inscribe the air attacks on the city in the realm of the transcendental and underline the symbolic meaning acquired by war destruction when transferred to the urban sphere. This aspect combines with the depiction of the urban space in its connection with open, natural or rural spaces (whereas inserted right in the city's structure or next to it in close menacing proximity) to show the urban territory under bombing as a godforsaken territory, essentially exposed and defenseless, in which humanity finds itself paradoxically returning to the primitive state that it attempted to leave behind through the development of cities and the ensuing sophisticated urban culture. From this point of view, bombardment detracts from the virtues of city life, which, implicitly, under regular circumstances provides protection and even a sort of divine or transcendental sanction.

On the other hand, the representation of urban bombing in both novels also links this phenomenon with other forms of violence (social, domestic) operating regularly in the same territory, so that the exposure occasioned by bombing indirectly reveals them and may even serve as a sort of denunciation. Likewise, the redefinition of routines and of notions such as that of the private/public implied by war on the city, and their active appropriation and exploitation by the citizens, reveals the subtle coercion at play in regular urban dynamics and provides a means to subvert it, if only temporarily. From this point of view, bombardment reveals the flaws of city life that tend to be naturalized or denied beneath its surface.

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Finally, the descriptive focus on material fragmentation required by the depiction of the bombing destruction is counterbalanced by the narrative significance of the fragments (their accretion of new meaning through association with the personal, their renewed use or, in the last resort, the mere attempt to make sense of them), suggesting that the narrative impulse applied to the experience of urban bombing turns narrative into a powerful tool for spiritual, if not physical, reconstruction after such traumatic events as the London Blitz.

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