

The Second World War in Contemporary Women's Fiction: Revisiting the Home Front

Abstract: In three recent novels centring on British women's experience of the Second World War – Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch* (2006), Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life* (2013), and Alison MacLeod's *Unexploded* (2013) – the exploration of women's contribution to the war effort is tempered by an acknowledgement of the temporary and limited nature of the opportunities the war offered. The disruption of narrative linearity and the incorporation, within narratives of the past, of considerations of the future often tinged with anxiety or disappointment, are the principal means by which these authors attempt to show both the gains and the losses that were the lot of British women during the Second World War.

It might seem counter-intuitive to suggest that a war could provide positive opportunities for citizens of the nations involved; in Britain, however, both the First and Second World Wars are seen to have been drivers of social change, especially for women. During the 1939-1945 conflict in particular, the concept of the "Home Front" meant that non-combatants were invited, even compelled, to see themselves as taking an active part in the war effort, and women were mobilised to a greater extent than ever before. The chance to move away from home and undertake new kinds of work was evidently welcomed by many women, but as historians including Penny Summerfield have noted, the extent of the positive impact of the war and war work on women's lives was varied, uneven and often only temporary (260). Women were still required to undertake domestic duties alongside employment outside the home, to work a "double day" (Rose 112), and, as Denise Riley has shown, wartime efforts to enable women with children to work were not continued into the peace (72).

The idea that the war offered opportunities to women that were then withdrawn in peacetime has filtered through into popular culture. It is key, for instance, to the ITV drama series *The Bletchley Circle* (2012-ongoing), in which a group of women who were employed in top secret intelligence work during the war reunite and use the skills they gained in wartime to solve crimes.

The series frames this as a reaction to the fact that, in the peace, they have been consigned either to much more mundane occupations or to joyless domesticity. The example of *The Bletchley Circle* also illustrates how stories that could not have been told during the conflict because of the exigencies of official secrecy can be incorporated belatedly into cultural narratives of the war. The work done at Bletchley was kept a closely guarded secret until the mid-1970s, but the breaking of the German Enigma code and the intelligence breakthroughs that came as a consequence are now well-known enough to be signified by the metonymy “Bletchley” in the title of this popular drama. In this instance, an aspect of women’s war work that was absent from the historical record for many years is recovered and celebrated, but, as in the novels that will be examined in this article, any such celebration is tempered by knowledge of the re-imposition of limitations that then ensued.

Underlying the ideological mixed messages that women received during the war and in its wake about the value of their contribution is a further issue, one explored by Gill Plain in her consideration of wartime writing by Elizabeth Bowen and Virginia Woolf. Plain sees these women writers as “engaged in a reconceptualization of time as a strategy for surviving war,” arguing, with reference to Julia Kristeva, that women are alienated from the “patriarchal time of war” (342). Woolf’s pre-war essay *Three Guineas* (1938) traces a direct line between patriarchal social structures and war, and these structures are also shown at work in Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941). Women, and, as Plain points out, other members of “a loosely knit society of outsiders” (347), should, in Woolf’s analysis, have no part in war because it expresses patriarchal imperatives at their utmost. The idea that women could have something to gain from the social upheavals of war is thus placed in a different light. Women who engage in war work and enjoy the freedoms it brings may simply have been duped into supporting patriarchy, even if they feel they are contributing to an ideologically justifiable set of war aims and making personal gains in the process.

The issues Plain highlights in Woolf’s and Bowen’s work pertain to contemporary understandings and depictions of women’s war experience. Discussing Sarah Waters’s *The Night*

Watch (2006), and the difficulties its protagonists have in thinking about the future during the war, Kaye Mitchell argues that, rather than evidencing patriarchal time, “war is sufficiently disruptive of normative temporalities [...] that queer temporalities prevail in wartime” (86). Notably, Mitchell extends the concept of the queer to include not only homosexual characters but also others who have “non-normative ways of being” (86), including, for example, *The Night Watch*’s Viv, a single woman who is having an affair with a married man. There is an echo here of the “loosely knit society of outsiders” that Plain identifies in Woolf’s work. But in Mitchell’s analysis, Waters’s novel presents wartime as a time of relative freedom and self-expression for those who, in peacetime, feel socially excluded.. Woolf’s outsiders, in contrast, are alienated from both society at large and the war itself. A further issue for contemporary authors, however, is that while the ideological means by which the British public were persuaded into staying committed to the war effort are now even more transparent than they were during the war itself, so are the reasons why the war was being fought in the first place. A key question to be addressed here concerns how contemporary authors balance the depiction of the ambivalence with which women were treated during the war with an acknowledgement of the importance, for their protagonists, of being involved in the war effort.

One of the answers to this question lies in authors’ use of particular structural devices. For Waters’s protagonists, and most markedly for Kay, who, as an ambulance driver in London takes the most active war role, alienation comes at the war’s end, but Waters begins her novel at this point, in 1947, with the central section of the narrative being set in 1944 and the final part in 1941. This means that the account of Kay’s purposeful wartime activity is read in the light of the knowledge of her later disappointment. As well as Waters’s novel, I also consider here two other recent works, Kate Atkinson’s *Life after Life* and Alison MacLeod’s *Unexploded*, both published in 2013. The maintenance of a balance between the historically situated consciousness of the protagonists, and the knowledge, often shared by the reader, of what will come after, is achieved by each of these authors through formal means. Thinking about the temporal organisation of narrative, and including consideration of the aftermath of the war, is an important way in which

contemporary women writers have attempted to represent the exigencies of women's wartime experiences.

Where Waters reverses chronology, Atkinson has her protagonist, Ursula, repeatedly live through particular historically and personally important moments. Most notably, Ursula experiences several versions of the Second World War Blitz, which Atkinson refers to as the "dark beating heart" ("Author Note" 617) of the narrative, with a different outcome each time. The action of MacLeod's novel unfolds in the English south-coast town of Brighton over the course of a year, beginning at the height of the so-called "Invasion Scare" in May 1940, in the wake of the retreat of the British army from France. MacLeod uses various narrative techniques, including delayed flashbacks and switches in perspective, to slow down the progress of the action, evoking the anxiety of her protagonist, Evelyn. In each of these examples, the processes of the individual protagonists' thoughts and memories are intertwined with the unwinding of historical events, but the authors considered here also situate their novels, either implicitly or explicitly, in relation to literary history. Evelyn, for example attends a talk by Virginia Woolf during the course of MacLeod's novel. Like references to familiar historical events, allusions to the literary past mean that these novels are situated in relation to, and have an intertextual relationship with, earlier forms of representation. Such references also act as a way of acknowledging what is to come, in literary and historical terms, beyond the temporal boundaries of the narrative. I argue, further, that the disruption of narrative linearity and the incorporation (within narratives of the past) of considerations of the future often tinged with anxiety or disappointment, are the principal way in which these authors attempt to show both the gains and the losses that were the lot of women during the Second World War. The conclusions that these novels reach, however, can sometimes prove less unsettling than their complex narrative trajectories might lead us to expect.

The Past

In her influential study of women's historical fiction, Diana Wallace argues that inscribing women into historical narratives as central rather than peripheral figures is a means by which

women authors can “critique the present through their treatment of the past” (*Women’s* 2) thereby compensating for current feelings of disempowerment. More pessimistically, it might seem that disempowerment remains: the “double day” or “second shift” is still a recognisable concept . Female authors, understandably, show a concern to bring to light and celebrate the achievements of women during wartime, but the novels under discussion have different ways of tracing, within largely self-enclosed historical timeframes, a trajectory from achievement to disappointment. Formal experiment, often involving the disruption of chronology, defamiliarizes recognisable cultural narratives of the war (such as the idea that Britons “pulled together” on the Home Front) but also facilitates the exploration of stories that might otherwise seem an uncomfortable fit with those narratives. Noting the prevalence of novels dealing with the Second World War in recent years, Wallace suggests that this is “related to the fact that we have passed [the] key ‘sixty years since’ point when the past is far enough distant to be ‘history’” (“Difficulties” 211). In fact, this statement can be nuanced: the Second World War is on a hinge-point between history and memory, as Waters’s account of checking her facts about the war with women who were there attests (“Romance” 5). This could also explain why writers including those considered here are concerned not only with creating an historically plausible account of the war but with exploring, within their narratives, how their protagonists remember, think they will remember, or indeed fail to remember, what happens to them in the war.

These authors draw attention to the intersection of the historical and the memorial partly through explicit or implicit allusions to literary history, and these act as a further means of bridging the gap between the past of the text and the present of the reader. Waters is one of a number of authors who have engaged with the Victorian period via the interstices of its literary history. Neo-Victorian novels often echo the narrative structures of Victorian fiction but give voice to subjects who were silenced or marginalised at that time. Waters’s *Fingersmith* (2001), for instance, is structurally akin to sensation fiction, the incident-packed crime genre that came to the fore in the 1860s, but Waters places lower-class characters in a central position and her first-person narrator is a woman. The relationship between recent novels about the Second World War

and 1940s fiction is different: if there is a canon of Second World War writing, it is a slowly emerging one which does not have the same cultural centrality as the Victorian novels with which Waters and others have engaged. Nevertheless, the ways in which Atkinson, MacLeod, and Waters situate their works, either obliquely or directly, in relation to a specifically literary history warrant examination.

Considering *The Night Watch*, Natasha Alden has carefully mapped Waters's engagement with a submerged canon of lesbian intertexts (178-200), and Paulina Palmer has noted the particular significance of the fact that Julia, one of the central protagonists, writes detective novels. This kind of writing, Palmer argues, is apt for "lesbian recasting" given its focus on "secrets, aliases and transgressive acts" (83). The delayed revelations characteristic of detective fiction plots are also discernible in occluded form in another novel that Waters has cited as an influence on the structure of *The Night Watch*: Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* ("Romance" 5). Published in 1951, Greene's novel traces a love affair back to its wartime origins, with the aftermath of the dropping of a bomb having a profound psychological, rather than physical, impact, on the adulterous couple. Sarah, who is married, makes a pact with God that if her lover Maurice has survived the air-raid, she will end their affair. He does survive, and she goes through with her promise, although Maurice only discovers this, the reason for their rupture, very belatedly. In Waters's novel, the aftermath of an air-raid is the starting point rather than the end of the affair between Kay and Helen, although the reader already knows that this relationship will not last.

Greene's novel can be situated as part of the turning away from modernism that many postwar critics saw as characterising British fiction of the 1950s and 1960s (Ferrebe 40-1); *The Night Watch*, despite its unusual structure, is itself rooted in a realist idiom. MacLeod and Atkinson have contrasting engagements with modernism, one explicit, the other more oblique. In *Unexploded*, Evelyn not only reads Woolf's novel *The Years* (1937) but also goes to hear the author speak at the Workers' Educational Association in Brighton. This is the talk that was published as "The Leaning Tower" (1940), and, in an early section Woolf, considering the

difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors, points to their contrasting perceptions of war:

Wars were then remote; wars were carried on by soldiers and sailors, not by private people. [...] Today we hear the gunfire in the Channel. We turn on the wireless; we hear an airman telling us how this very afternoon he shot down a raider [...]. Scott never saw the sailors drowning at Trafalgar; Jane Austen never heard the cannon roar at Waterloo. Neither of them heard Napoleon's voice as we hear Hitler's voice as we sit at home of an evening. (Woolf, quoted in Macleod 118)

Woolf points here both to the physical proximity of the war, very real to Evelyn, living as she does in a coastal town, but also to the media, specifically the wireless, that further bridge the gap, bringing the voice of Hitler into the private home. The boundaries between public and private are eroded by war; the individual's private life is not only invaded by the voice of a threatening dictator but is also managed and policed by regulations – concerning the blackout, rationing and so forth – that are justified as contributions to the “war effort.”

Over the course of the lecture, Evelyn drifts off into reflections on her own troubled family life. Her trust in her husband Geoffrey, a bank manager, has been eroded by the news that, in the event of an invasion, he must take the bank's deposits to safety in land, leaving Evelyn and their son Philip behind. Geoffrey has buried money in their garden for Evelyn to use in the event of an emergency and she has also discovered, unbeknownst to him, that together with the cash, he has left her suicide pills. In modernist fashion, Evelyn's subjective thoughts take precedence, in this section, over her external situation:

Who *was* Geoffrey? Lately she'd felt herself almost gag on the question. [...] Only now did she understand [...] the potential of a marriage to spoil a life. After twelve years he had finally outgrown his old need for her. The war seemed to have inspired in him a certain recklessness, a new and unexpected talent for the unpredictable, a dark sort of autonomy. [...] On good days, she muddled through [...]. On bad days [...] she could think only of those two bright green pills that lay buried in the garden. (120, 122)

Her personal problems, largely a product of the conditions of wartime, prevent her from engaging with a talk that is at least partly concerned with looking beyond the war towards how literature might reconfigure itself in the peace. But, like Woolf in her talk, Evelyn also considers the impact of the war on how individuals might conceive of themselves and their place in society. While Evelyn here ponders the “dark sort of autonomy” that Geoffrey has recently begun to show, over the course of the novel she herself gains a greater degree of autonomy. Evelyn’s thoughts of suicide prefigure Woolf’s own death, news of which deeply affects Evelyn later in the novel (299-302), but Evelyn chooses to exercise her autonomy not by taking her own life but by distancing herself further from her husband.

The Woolf whom Evelyn hears speak is not the Woolf of stereotype, concerned only with the contents of her own consciousness, but a politically engaged and class-conscious figure, who concludes her talk by asserting “Literature is no one’s private ground; literature is common ground” (123). Although Evelyn reflects later that the characters in Woolf’s *The Years* seem more real to her than her own family (132), she begins to free herself from the domestic by using literature as a pretext when she goes to read to the patients in the hospital wing at the internment camp that Geoffrey oversees. Literature does not provide her with a means of escaping from real-world exigencies, however, as Evelyn’s entry into the camp involves her in a confrontation with the darker aspects of the Home Front, as I show below. MacLeod nods stylistically towards modernism in, for example, her use of free indirect discourse and her evocation of the subjective experience of the passage of time, but she is also concerned to emphasise that interiority is always politicised, never more so than in wartime.

Atkinson’s engagement with her literary forebears is less direct, but nevertheless telling. At its widest chronological extent, *Life after Life* covers the period from 1910 to 1967, and the author suggests that she repeatedly revisited 1910, Ursula’s birth year, with the “ghost of [E. M.] Forster always at [her] back” (“Author Note” 617). In one iteration, Ursula’s aunt Izzy is sent to Germany to give birth to her illegitimate child (82), an event which echoes Helen Schlegel’s self-exile in Forster’s *Howards End* (1910). But 1910 is also the year when, according to Woolf, “human

character changed” (“Character” 421). The narrative of *Life after Life* returns repeatedly to 1910 because, over the course of the novel, Ursula dies only to be reborn, with events unfolding slightly differently in each case, and, gradually, she learns from her previous experiences and is able to make life choices that result in better outcomes.

An example of this centres on “a wooden French knitting doll” (82) called Queen Solange. In one version of events, Ursula dies falling off a roof after she tries to rescue Queen Solange, who has been thrown out of the window by her brother (84). In another version, Ursula’s sister Pamela rescues the doll from the roof using an “old lacrosse net tied to a walking cane” (92). Finally, towards the end of the novel, when Ursula seems most in control of what will happen, she hides Queen Solange under her pillow to save her (and herself) from harm (567). French knitting involves hooking wool over a circular arrangement of small pins set into the top of a tube (in this case, the pins are the points on Queen Solange’s crown, and the tube is decorated so that she looks appropriately regal). The “knitting” produced in this way is itself a narrow tube, with, as the narrator notes, limited uses, typically being “coiled into mats” (82). It is striking, however, that Ursula practises this particular kind of handicraft: French knitting may look linear, but it is in fact spiral, with no predetermined end point. In this regard, it can be read as a playful echo of the brown stocking that Mrs Ramsay knits in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1924), Mrs Ramsay’s “criss-cross of steel needles” (37) indicating that this too is being knitted in spiral form. Both examples can be taken not just as descriptions of typical female domestic activities but as images that configure ways of conceptualising time and which, by extension, point to the structural particularities of the novels within which they are embedded.

When Mrs Ramsay pauses to measure the stocking against her son James’s leg, her thoughts go far beyond the present moment both spatially and temporally; Queen Solange’s various fates entwine with Ursula’s own and the French knitting is itself a material image for the structure of the novel. Dr Kellet, who first suggests that Ursula might be experiencing reincarnation, tells her that some “ancient religions [...] adhered to an idea of circularity – the snake with its tail in its mouth, and so on” (192). In fact, a spiral seems a more apt image for how Ursula’s individual

progress, curving in different directions, maps onto the linear forward-movement of history. In this way, the novel appears to suggest that rather than being subject to historical forces, Ursula might be able to intervene to change not just her own fate or the fates of those dear to her, but the course of history, an idea enacted at a structural level. This is Atkinson's particular solution to the problem that also underpins MacLeod's and Waters's novels: how to create protagonists who have agency within the relative constraints of an historical narrative. Alluding to literary history, then, is a reminder that literature, even realist literature, provides a space for exploring possibilities and might-have-beens as well as what was.

Present and Future

Considering the "problem of what to do with the future in the historical novel" (297), Fredric Jameson points out that this problem, on the face of it an unlikely one, arises from the fact that "no historicity can function properly without a dimension of futurity, however imaginary" (297). Where the novel is concerned, "it is we [readers] ourselves who normally stand in for the place of the future, as we peer into the various pasts offered by novels claiming to be historical" (297). The degree of our existing knowledge, Jameson argues, will dictate the extent to which "our irritation" is aroused by "anachronism" (297). Historical inaccuracy at the level of detail might only be discernible to a relatively specialised reader, but where novels about the Second World War are concerned, the reader is unlikely *not* to know at least that the Allies emerged victorious. If an author wishes to diverge radically from known outcomes of this type, then, arguably, their work ceases to be an historical novel and becomes something else, a counterfactual history or dystopia, forms that can powerfully question hegemonic historical narratives. Indeed, there is a whole subgenre devoted to imagining alternative outcomes to the Second World War, and, as Gavriel Rosenfeld has shown, in its contemporary manifestations, this subgenre often vacillates between asserting "self-affirmation" and articulating "self-critique" (70) in relation to British postwar national identity. Of the novelists considered here, Atkinson comes closest to challenging the convention that the historical novel should remain within the boundaries of known history, an

aspect of her novel to which I will return. What constitutes “known history” is itself constantly shifting, as the gradual emergence of the history of Bletchley Park shows, but these novelists nevertheless have to tackle the potential problem of their narratives being overdetermined by their historical framework. The challenge here is to recreate the uncertainties of the past; having historically rooted protagonists consider possible futures is one way that this challenge can be confronted.

In wartime thinking about the future is always difficult, but MacLeod’s novel is set at a particularly anxious historical moment, and Evelyn’s anxiety is compounded by a sense of helplessness, an awareness of her lack of agency. To a greater extent than either Atkinson’s or Waters’s novel, *Unexploded* explores the “experiences of *waiting*, surviving, persisting” (Mitchell 89, emphasis in original) that were characteristic of the Home Front but, as Mitchell notes in her discussion of *The Night Watch*, are at odds with “narrative demands for tension, dramatic reversal and action” (89). This is emphasised in MacLeod’s novel by the use of switches in perspective between the main protagonists, which often result in events being narrated twice, from different points of view, often at some narrative distance: the reader thinks that the account of a particular evening has been completed, only to be returned to it and required to re-view it later. This not only happens with events within the diegetic timeframe of the novel, which moves from May 1940 to June 1941: Geoffrey and Evelyn’s initial meeting at a dance in Brighton some years previously, when they each go outside to get some air, is also retold. Their encounter is first described from her perspective (30-5) and then from his (88-91). Geoffrey recalls that shortly before getting into conversation with Evelyn he becomes involved in an altercation: ‘A bit of name calling. He couldn’t remember. [...] He’d had too much to drink. He probably threw the first punch.’ (90) Evelyn discovers this only belatedly from mutual friends and is shocked to find out that the man Geoffrey has attacked is Jewish: “To think our life together began [...] to think it only began because you couldn’t stop yourself from *baiting* a man.” (99). From Evelyn’s perspective, the whole of their marriage becomes retrospectively tainted by this anti-Semitic act. Geoffrey’s attitudes, unpalatable enough in themselves, take on an even more serious aspect in the

context of his wartime work overseeing an internment camp which has Jewish refugees among its inmates, work in which Evelyn too becomes personally invested. Evelyn's sudden glimpse of a completely different perspective on events that are a part of her personal history, the destabilising of her narrative of the past, links into the novel's evocation of a period when the future seems to depend on events completely beyond any individual's control.

Indeed, the slowing down of a forward-moving narrative through the retelling of certain incidents is an apt technique for conveying anxiety. As Lyndsey Stonebridge has shown in her analysis of the wartime writing of Henry Green, anxiety, or what Green called "dreading forward" (quoted in Stonebridge 52), was characteristic of the so-called "phoney war," when the nature of the threat posed by bombing could not yet be grasped (Stonebridge 49). As Green implies, anxiety is a fear for the future, but it strands the subject in a perpetual present of "what ifs?" For Evelyn, these "what ifs" are all too well-defined, and stem not only from personal fears but also from political realities:

Everyone said it was unimaginable, but she could imagine it: flint-eyed soldiers lining the London Road; officers, impeccable in their dress uniforms, in the boxes at the Theatre Royal [...]. In time, Philip would bring home a fresh history textbook, and she would forbid herself to say anything as she turned its crisp, deceitful pages. [...] Would she, Geoffrey and Philip be able to *be* one thing and behave as another? (20-21)

Notably, Evelyn imagines the Nazis re-writing history; she implicitly aligns herself with what she conceives as a truer, less "deceitful" version. The paragraph from which this extract is taken is a dystopia in miniature, and acts as a reassurance for the reader that this scenario will not be drawn more fully within the pages of *Unexploded* itself. Later, Evelyn's son Philip and his friend Orson play a game in which they too imagine what life will be like following an invasion, and their version of the future is a much less portentous one, consisting as it does of a picnic with the Fuhrer: " 'We stuff ourselves on cooked ham and pretzels. "Save room!" he orders, and out comes the Black Forest cake'" (126). But this vision too has a dark undertow, not only because Orson has been influenced by the anti-Semitic sentiments of his brother Hal, now in the army but

formerly a member of Oswald Mosley's Black Shirts. For the children, it seems obvious that one can adapt to the demands of a new regime, as they, after all, are used to doing what they are told.

MacLeod's acknowledgement of pre-war and wartime British anti-Semitism is given added point by her use of the German-Jewish refugee Otto, one of the internees from Geoffrey's camp, as a focalising narrator. Through Otto, MacLeod gives the reader access to aspects of the war in Germany that only became widely known about in the postwar years in Britain. Otto is the means by which a narrative strand concerning medical experiments, in this case specifically on children, in pre-war German concentration camps is introduced into the novel. In Robert Holton's term, Otto is a "jarring witness" (Holton 48), telling a story not often heard in either wartime or indeed postwar British narratives. That he brings this story with him to Britain and embodies it, suggests not only the turning of a blind eye by Britain in the prewar period, but a critique of postwar accounts that excluded such witnesses. Otto has been condemned in Germany as a degenerate ("entartete") artist and is forced to make pictorial records of gruesome medical experiments at Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Evelyn's self-appointed role as purveyor of culture to the internees in Brighton – she takes Woolf's *The Waves* to read to them - results in her encountering Otto, but he is reticent about what has happened to him. Going through his belongings, she finds his passport: "Its front page was stamped with the word 'Entartete'. Meaning?" (202). Later, when they become lovers, she sees his scars: "Beneath his clothes, his body was older than he was. [...] [S]he saw [...] the hidden landscape of his back; the scar tissue, red and livid; [...] the iron stamp of hobnails" (320). Otto's papers and his body, together with some of his paintings and drawings that Evelyn also sees, tell a fragmented story but she, like the reader, knows that what she glimpses is a narrative of fear and persecution, and that Otto has by no means escaped its grip.

Where MacLeod brings an escapee from Nazism to Britain to share his story, and limits its protagonists' imaginings of the future to anxious daydreams and children's games, Atkinson transplants her protagonist to 1930s Germany and, rather than imagining an alternative future for Britain, creates an alternative future for Ursula. Although the novel repeatedly returns in its opening pages to Ursula's birth, the first depiction of 1910 is preceded by a brief sequence set in

1930, when Ursula goes into a Munich cafe and pulls a gun on Hitler. Given the jump back in time from 1930 to 1910 that the novel then executes, the 1930 sequence might initially be read as the opening of a frame narrative. However, this inaugural section ends with the sentence: “Darkness fell” (24), and, as the novel proceeds, the reader learns to interpret this phrase as indicating Ursula’s demise and signalling an imminent return back to her birth in 1910. Given that many historical moments are revisited over the course of the novel, producing different outcomes, the reader might expect that this tantalising and foregrounded intervention on Ursula’s part might also be revisited, as, eventually, it is.

There are at least seven versions of the Second World War in the novel. The attempt on Hitler’s life is not reworked until the sixth of these, when, having seen Ursula fail three times to survive the Blitz in London, the reader is returned not to 1939 or 1940 but to 1926, when Ursula decides that instead of going to secretarial college she will study languages. This decision eventually takes her, for the first time, to Germany. Moving Ursula to a different room in her lodging house seems not to be enough to save her from death in the bombing; she has to be removed from London, and this requires different choices on her part much earlier in her life. In the fourth of the novel’s versions of the 1930s and 1940s, Ursula is in Germany in 1933, staying with a family who take her to Nazi rallies and introduce her to the man she will marry, Jürgen: “He clicked his heels and kissed her hand, she was reminded of Prince Charming in *Cinderella*” (404). By 1939, however, when they are married and have a daughter, Frieda, the fairy tale has darkened: “When she was a child [...] she had read fairy tales of wronged princesses who saved themselves from lustful fathers and jealous stepmothers by [disguising] themselves. [...] What on earth was she doing here [...] and when could she leave?” (407). Atkinson does not trace Ursula’s incremental shifts in attitude from enchantment to despair in detail. Notably, during the early years of her stay in Germany the only sense of perspective that Ursula gets on her situation comes in letters from her sister Pamela in England. When Ursula suggests that the League of German Maidens is like the Girl Guides, Pamela astutely notes that it is “[n]ot quite” (391) like the Girl Guides, and later, that the factories in the east where people are sent to work are “not really

factories” (427, emphasis in original). Her sister, viewing events in Germany from Britain, has more insight into what is happening there than does Ursula. This narrative tactic both emphasises the seductiveness of Nazi ideology, so that Ursula seems naive but not complicit, and reinforces the British position on the high moral ground. Pamela’s comments also chime with the reader’s understanding of what Ursula is living through; they seem to come from a different time as well as a different place, and, because of this, seem less credible as a means of providing historical perspective than, for example, Otto’s presence in *Unexploded*.

Atkinson elides Ursula’s wartime experience in Germany, and this section ends bleakly with her taking her own and her daughter’s life in the ruins of postwar Berlin. This elision is one reason why the fate of Jews and others who suffered persecution under the Nazis is dealt with only indirectly in *Life after Life*. The assassination attempt on Hitler is not constructed as a means of averting the Holocaust. Instead, Ursula’s decision to try to assassinate Hitler is ultimately framed in relation to the death of her brother Teddy, a bomber pilot. In a version of the war prior to her experience in Berlin, Ursula has a conversation with her lover Ralph in which they contemplate historical change: “ ‘If just one small thing had changed in the past [...]. If Hitler had died at birth [...] surely things would be different?’ ” (328). Ralph asks her if she could really kill a baby in cold blood: “If I thought it would save Teddy, Ursula thought” (328). At this point, Teddy has not been killed; Ursula first has to relive the war and avert her own death. Only then, having assured her own survival, does it become necessary to arrange his. The conversation with Ralph touches on a not unfamiliar trope from dystopian fiction – what would the consequences have been if Hitler had not survived?– and the answer to this question depends on the individual’s understanding of history. It seems logical to believe that the death of Hitler would make more world historical difference than the death of Teddy, although a structuralist (or functionalist) view of history would see the causes of the Holocaust as lying beyond the agency of a single individual (Bessel). The question of who can and cannot make a difference, and indeed how much power the individual ever has to shape their own future, or indeed history, is clearly central

to this novel. Ursula's intention is not to change history so much as to relocate herself to a more propitious position within it.

Where Otto, in *Unexploded*, comes to stand for Evelyn as an emblem of the lack of compassion towards European Jews in pre-war and wartime Britain, then, Ursula's actions are ultimately personal in motivation. There is only a passing sense, in Atkinson's novel, of the wider consequences that might have ensued from Hitler's early death. In 1967, in the version of her life in which she lives the longest, Ursula has a conversation with her nephew Nigel, a history lecturer, about how different the world would have been if Hitler had died:

'If Hitler had been killed, before he became Chancellor, it would have stopped all this conflict between the Arabs and the Israelis, wouldn't it? [...] I do understand why the Jews wanted to create an independent state [...] but, on the other hand, I can also understand why the Arab states are so aggrieved. But if Hitler had been unable to implement the Holocaust---

'Because he was dead?'

'Yes, because he was dead. Then support for a Jewish homeland would have been weak at best...' (553)

Even here, averting the Holocaust, which Ursula believes would have been a consequence of Hitler's death, is constructed not so much as a good in itself but as a means of averting, in turn, the Arab-Israeli conflict current at the time of her conversation with Nigel. At Ursula's next rebirth following her conversation with Nigel, she has the strongest sense of purpose yet, and we finally revisit Munich in November 1930, although the ending of this account echoes the ending of the version with which the novel opens, with darkness falling (598). If Ursula does manage to change history this time, the cost is her own death, and, given that she is the novel's focalizer, the consequences of her actions are inaccessible to the reader. For Atkinson to maintain a foothold in the historical rather than entering the realms of fantasy, the price of Ursula's historical agency is her demise.

Notably, however, Atkinson chooses not to end the novel with Ursula's death; the internal logic of the narrative means that the cycle must begin again and we return to another version

of May 1945 in which Teddy has survived and Ursula for once seems hopeful: “she stayed where she was, worried suddenly that if she moved it would all disappear. [...] But then she thought, no, this was real, this was true” (608). Darkness does not fall this time. Ursula has managed to refashion history in such a way as to produce what is, for her, the best outcome, and the novel therefore ends with a version of Ursula’s life in which she has personal happiness, rather than one in which she has changed the course of history by killing Hitler. Ursula’s happiness in a relatively recognisable version of history is perhaps more satisfying, as a means of providing closure to the narrative than her death in a scenario that points to an alternate world would be. The novel wants to assert that its central protagonist has power, but this is constrained by the broader historical narrative of which she is part: we never know whether her attempt on Hitler’s life is successful.

Ursula’s repeated deaths are mitigated for the reader by the knowledge that another rebirth will surely follow, the structure of repetition with incremental change having been established by this point in the novel. In *The Night Watch*, we know from the outset that the protagonists will survive the war, and this serves to lessen our anxiety as the narrative moves back in time, deeper into the war itself. We also know that, though they will survive with no physical damage, they are all, in different ways, psychically damaged by what has happened. Waters’s choice of narrative structure does not rely, like Atkinson’s, on the reader suspending disbelief, but on suspense, as a narrative device, operating in a different way. The focus is not on whether the protagonists will survive, but how. Progressing from effect to cause through retrospection and the uncovering of clues is a characteristic of classic detective fiction, and, as I have noted, Waters perhaps nods to this in making Julia the author of detective novels. In detective fiction, past events are embedded into the forward-moving narrative of the investigation, so that the action progresses forwards and backwards simultaneously; in narratological terms, the *fabula* and *sjuzet* are “put [...] side by side” (Todorov 160). The reversing of chronology found in *The Night Watch* is less familiar; in his discussion of this device, Slavoj Žižek cites two plays, J. B. Priestley’s *Time and the Conways* (1937) and Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal* (1978), in which events unfold out of chronological sequence, but neither of these retains the backwards movement for the whole of its action. Žižek

points out that moving from effect to cause ought to appear fatalistic to the reader or viewer, closing down narrative possibilities, but he suggests that the impact can actually be quite different. In conventional forward-moving narration, he argues:

the experience of a linear ‘organic’ flow of events is an illusion (albeit a necessary one) that masks the fact that it is the ending that *retroactively* confers the consistency of an organic whole on the preceding events. What is masked is the radical contingency of the enchainment of narration, the fact that, at every point, things might have turned out differently. (69)

Thus the identification of the murderer, characteristic of the denouement of works of classic detective fiction, “confers [...] consistency” on the preceding narrative by relegating some incidents to the status of red herring or contingency. The identification might seem natural or even obvious, but an alternative suspect could equally plausibly have been produced by shifting the focus to a different set of clues.

For Žižek, then, reversing the chronology of the narrative is a means of revealing this contingency: “Such reversals in the order of narration might be expected to provoke an effect of total fatalism: everything is decided in advance, while the protagonists, like puppets, unwittingly play out their roles in an already written script” (70). In fact, he continues, “it is precisely the reversal of the temporal order that makes us experience in an almost palpable way the utter contingency of narrative sequence, i.e., the fact that, at every turning point, things might have taken another direction” (70). The reversed narrative sequence is therefore an apt choice for the depiction of wartime, when chance meetings in a disordered social milieu and brushes with death characterise everyday life. Thus we continue reading *The Night Watch* in order to discover, for example, what the link is between Viv and Kay, signalled in the first part of the novel by Viv returning Kay’s ring; and, by the end of the novel, the impact of Kay’s first meeting with Helen, when she helps rescue her from the rubble, is given both emotional force and a melancholic edge by what we know will happen later. The reversed chronology of this novel therefore has a similar purpose to both Macleod’s weaving together of reflections on the past with progress into an uncertain future, and Atkinson’s repeated restarting of her heroine’s life, in that it emphasises the

uncertainties and anxieties of living through war. However, *The Night Watch*'s temporal reversal feels less-overdetermined than *Life after Life*'s incremental reshaping of Ursula's story. Perhaps paradoxically, Waters's inversion of narrative sequence is a powerful means of incorporating the future into a narrative about the past. The war itself provides the background of "utter contingency", reminding us that, as a detective novel, guilt and responsibility could have been distributed quite differently.

The emergence of Helen, "fresh and unmarked" from the "chaos" (470) of a bombed building could be read as implying that something positive could be a side-effect of even so destructive an event as bombing. It is striking in this context that Helen and Kay's relationship, forged in the destructiveness of war, does not survive into the peace, and Viv's affair with Reggie, which begins in similarly inauspicious circumstances on a crowded wartime train, is shown, by 1947, to be troubled. Waters has written about the relative freedom that wartime offered for illicit relationships (Waters "Romance"), but she also seems to be aware of the danger of constructing the war as a carnivalesque time of sexual freedom. Viv's traumatic abortion in 1944, and the beginning of Helen's affair with Julia in the same section of the novel could be read as acknowledgements of the darker side of wartime relationships, though for the reader these events also belatedly prefigure the postwar status quo. The extent to which the wartime freedoms experienced by Waters's characters are historically overdetermined is therefore implicit rather than explicit in *The Night Watch*.

In this regard, it is notable that the war work undertaken by the protagonists in *The Night Watch* and *Life after Life* is centred on the domestic – rescuing people from bombed houses, or in Helen's case helping them to negotiate the regulations around compensation for personal losses. The political aspect of Helen's war work is alluded to when, having described to a woman who has been bombed out of her home the "rather lengthy process" involved in assessing the damage, and seeing that the woman is deeply traumatised, she fakes the forms to move her up the queue (263). Waters seems to allude here to the interpretation of the war, and specifically the Home Front, put forward in the late 1960s by Angus Calder, which sees regulations introduced during

the war as a precursor of the increased bureaucratization and surveillance of private life in the postwar years (Calder 18); Viv's fear that her telephone call to Reggie might be listened-in on points in a similar direction (Waters, *Night Watch* 351; Stewart 158). Notably, Helen goes on to reflect: "In the first blitz, she'd tried to help everyone; she'd given money to people, sometimes, from her own purse. But the war made you careless. You started off, she thought sadly, imagining you'd be a kind of heroine. You ended up thinking only of yourself" (263). These comments also place Kay's actions in a different light as this seems to be the trajectory that she follows. In 1947, she is presented as a war victim herself, traumatised by what she has seen and only belatedly recognising the damage that has been done to her: "I can't get over it. [...] I've got lost in my rubble. [...] I can't seem to find my way across it. I don't think I *want* to cross it, that's the thing" (101-2). Her emotional paralysis in the postwar period is a product of the contrast between the purposefulness of her war work and her lack of a role in the peace, but this itself masks for Kay what the reader might recognise, that her wartime fulfilment, being a "kind of heroine," is a direct result of other people suffering.

Conclusion

These novels, then, present different ways of rethinking women's experience of the Second World War. They foreground the roles that women played in the war effort on the Home Front and emphasise the particular challenges of continuing to go about everyday life and form relationships under the threat of invasion or bombing. As well as presenting specifically gendered perspectives on familiar historical events, through their different approaches to temporal and structural organisation of narrative, these authors also raise the question of how far women were able to maintain autonomy while contributing to the war effort. Ursula, the protagonist who seems on the surface to have most freedom, in that she is able to restart her life and gradually learn from her mistakes, is in fact completely constrained by historical forces which place a limit on her actions, so far as they are accessible to the reader at least. The ending of *The Night Watch* is melancholic because we as readers know what the protagonists cannot: that innocence and hope will be

irretrievably damaged by the war. This is a lesson that Evelyn also learns in MacLeod's novel: Geoffrey finds Otto work with a bomb disposal team, a supposedly charitable act that results in Otto's death. In answer, then, to the question, can wartime be women's time, these authors seem to answer: yes - but not for long.

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