6 The Heat of the Day

Eleven years elapsed between the publication of *The Death of the Heart* and *The Heat of the Day*. Although Bowen had written the first five chapters of *The Heat of the Day* by mid-1944, she felt that the strain of ‘that V-1 summer’ would affect the quality of the novel (*VG* 187). Instead of continuing, she decided to finish a volume of short stories, *The Demon Lover*. As Glendinning reports, Bowen could not finish her seventh novel until the war was over because only then could she say: ‘I suddenly feel I know a lot more than I did. I have got the hang of what I meant’ (*VG* 187). Writing this novel challenged her in new and complex ways. She wrote to Charles Ritchie to whom it is dedicated, that its structure and tone made it ‘The most difficult of all’:

> Sometimes I think this novel may be a point-blank failure but I shall still be glad to have tried. I would not in the least mind if this were my last shot, if I never wrote anything else again.
>
> It presents every possible problem in the world. ... much of what is still to be written must be point-blank melodrama. (*VG* 187–188)

Although *The Heat of the Day* sold more copies than any of Bowen’s other novels, critics have always agreed that it is also her most difficult.¹ The novel certainly demonstrates that Bowen was taking artistic risks. The aggressive imagery in her letter shows a desire to stretch beyond her earlier efforts, risking ‘failure’ with ‘a last shot’.

*The Heat of the Day* deals with themes that compelled Bowen’s earlier work, but its war-time setting occasions
a new impetus and perspective to her methods and concerns. The war not only provides an appropriate setting and subject for themes of betrayal, self-discovery, and dispossession, but is viewed from the perspective of adults. Unlike her previous novels, the characters do not struggle against determining pasts and lack of self-expression. If their speech is difficult, it does not reflect lack of access to a language of self-discovery, but rather the self-knowledge which produces a language expressing defensive entropy. These people are fully responsible for their own plots. Whatever personal betrayals or losses they face they participate in, but with reverberations far beyond individual family histories. Individual betrayal in this novel parallels treason, where a nation is betrayed by one of its soldiers. The story of Stella Rodney, her lover the spy, Robert Kelway, and the counterspy, Harrison, creates a web of personal and political betrayal. In this time of historic crisis, these people betray themselves by acquiescing to their own sense of fatality. Collectively, they suggest the possibility that the society they perpetuate but cannot revitalise may collapse from internal and external danger. As a result, the myth of the ancestral home, which was demystified in earlier works, now burns more widely: as the mother-nation – England.

War not only uproots men and women in this novel, it reveals their basic rootlessness. Although Bowen portrays the profound sense of loss and dislocation in wartime, she also depicts those who have given up the hope of stability and purpose. Once optimistic about the ability of middle-class England to reconcile traditional family values with the discontents of modern life, by 1942 Bowen saw only ‘the explosion of the illusion that prestige, power, and permanence attaches to bulk and weight’. Of the relationship between history and personal experience, she said: ‘outwardly we accepted that at this time individual destiny had to count for nothing;