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Diversion and Disfigurement: Reading Dan Billany (Deceased)

> Your uncle says … most beautiful country, beautiful climate … envies your opportunity […] see all those beautiful cathedrals and Roman ruins … beautiful … Regard it as a Heaven-sent opportunity rather than a … Your uncle has joined the ▬ ▬ ▬. Last week we went to ▬ and saw ▬. But Italy will soon ▬. Keep your pecker up and think of the ▬▬.
>
> Your loving Aunt,
>
> "_____."
>
> *David*. Well, I see nothing to laugh at.
> *Dan*. I was not laughing.[1]

I—Exegesis

Billany Critically Imaged

In this essay I discuss the disfigured and rupturing internal structures of two posthumous novels by the British writer Dan Billany (Hull, 1913 – Italy, 1943?):[2] *The Cage* (1949), co-authorship of which is ascribed to David Dowie, and *The Trap* (1950). Written while Billany was interned in a POW camp in Italy during the Second World War (1942-1943), though never completed, the two works were edited together (1946-1949) from a parcel of different drafts and personal papers and then published as novels (1949, 1950), years after their author had disappeared, presumed to have died. Granted a minor entry into the body of work labelled "mid-century social realism," as seen in Kristin Bluemel's 2009 study of

[1] Dan Billany and David Dowie, *The Cage* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), 2.

[2] Though there is scant published critical discussion around Dan Billany and his texts, there are exhaustive biographical resources accessible, both at http://www.danbillany.com and in the in-depth portrait drawn in Valerie A. Reeves and Valerie Showan, *Dan Billany: Hull's Lost Hero* (Hull: Kingston Press, 1999). Here, therefore, I focus on text and artefact, engaging with Billany's two major works in an effort to establish new avenues of textual approach.

"intermodernism," [3] Billany's novels have nevertheless been regarded as incomplete, dysfunctional, and therefore, according to Tristram Hooley, "unsuccessful."[4] Perceived as artistic failures, they have been treated not as novels but as "sociological documents," deployed in the same way as information drawn from the "Mass Observation surveys." [5] *The Cage* and *The Trap* are most commonly met as extracted raw data, a resource for historians seeking eye-witness accounts of a single battle that occurred in the environs of Gazala, North-Eastern Libya, in 1942.[6] Reference to, and transfigurations of, the battle do appear briefly in both books; Gazala was where Billany was first captured. And, indeed, in both novels the prison camp is employed as framing narrative. *The Cage* might be genred a sort of bunkhouse comedy set within the Italian prison camps, while *The Trap* might be genred a pining romance between the POW protagonist, Lt. Michael Carr, and his lover back home, Elizabeth Pascoe, as told through recollections of life before imprisonment in Italy. However, to directly equate the fictive world of these texts with the factual world in which that battle was fought and Billany was imprisoned, would appear a fundamentally flawed critical endeavour.[7] As will be seen below, that is an approach which *The Cage* and *The Trap* themselves problematise.

The recasting of these novels as documents can only be to some degree justified if the Gazala episode within them is isolated and removed from its structural contexts. Such a practice would not be extended to more established texts in which correspondences in content, form, and historicity might be found: François Le Lionnais's *La Peinture à Dora* (1946), Stefan Themerson's *Bayamus* (1949),

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[3] Though not accounted for critically within the reconceptualization of social realism as British "intermodernism," Billany is included in the supporting cast of ninety-two names listed in Kristen Bluemel, *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 209.

[4] Tristram Hooley, "Visions of a New Jerusalem: Predictive Fiction in the Second World War," PhD dissertation (University of Leicester, 2002), 26.

[5] Hooley, 25.

[6] Neal Dando, *From Tobruk to Tunis: The Impact of Terrain on British Operations and Doctrine in North Africa, 1940-43* (Solihull: Helion and Company, 2016), 113.

[7] See Adam Piette's use of *The Trap* in "War Poetry in Britain," in Marina MacKay, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 13-25.

Rayner Heppenstall's *The Connecting Door* (1962), or, slightly further afield, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). In these works narration of the Second World War and of fictive story fluidly interact, combine, and mutually unlock potential meaning. Though these texts directly represent the war, they are regarded as central examples of new experimentations with literary form that developed in the post-war era, proofs of the ways in which the novel formally mutated to contain and communicate that historically unprecedented experience. That is, in the first instance these works are received as *literary*, as structurally aestheticised *novels* (or, in the case of *La Peinture à Dora*, as "*récit*"). Though they would certainly be classed as failures by the yard stick of mid-twentieth-century British social realism, they have not undergone such thorough structural dismemberment as Billany's posthumous texts.

Whether *The Cage* and *The Trap* are classified as minor social realism or raw data, a process of critical relegation and subsequent dismissal has acted to arbitrarily deaestheticise them as works of art. As Stephen Cloutier writes, in the only extended study of Billany to date,

> unlike other writers of the period […] serious discussion of Billany's work is almost nonexistent. Those critics who do write on Billany place him within the larger context of the Second World War. Any discussion of Billany has, therefore, become subordinate to the larger subject.[8]

As a consequence of this critical treatment, the texts' history as published novels, and so the form in which readers still encounter them today, has been summarily dismissed.

Billany and Cultural Writing of the Second World War

Recent years have produced a series of fundamental critical reassessments of British literature of the Second World War, and of POW writing in particular. To some degree, this moment of reappraisal sets the stage for what I carry out here, but Billany's near-total absence from these "recovered" histories is suggestive of the current limitations of that cultural-critical shift in perspective. In *Modernism,*

[8] Stephen Cloutier, "Militancy, Commitment, and Marxist Ideology in the Fiction of Dan Billany," PhD dissertation (University of Leicester, 1999), 3.

War, and Violence (2017) Marina MacKay suggests that it is in the works of the lingering figures of an "interwar"-era "Modernism," of Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and others, that war's violence and literary aesthetics "dovetail."[9] In the earlier study *Modernism and World War II* (2007), MacKay argues that, as a consequence of the war, "these cosmopolitan and European-minded intellectuals saw for the first time that their transnational interests could be imperial privilege."[10] This implies that the experiential violence of war has informed, formed, or malformed the aesthetic modes of modernist texts, and that this process is accumulative. The works of Lewis, Eliot, and others are moulded by lessons learned in the progression from the First World War, through an unstable interbellum culminating in the Spanish Civil War, to the Second World War. World-events marked the lived lives of these writers and affected the appearance and functions of their literary productions.

That Billany is absent from MacKay's reassessments both complements and counters these assertions.[11] Billany was not a "cosmopolitan elite interwar modernist"; he belonged to a later, then nascent, generation and context—that of Themerson and Heppenstall, among others. But Billany also actively writes in opposition to what he regards as that interwar "Park Lane" clique, "from Galsworthy to Auden" and the "Futuristic" other:[12]

> The pluto-plebeians, hypnotized by the violence of their own Oedipus complex […] they're all twisted twigs from the old tree, they all belong between Piccadilly and Park Lane. (Billany, 28-9)

For Billany these earlier writers are all equally disengaged from the real world, and therefore their literary works either fail in terms of artistic representation or

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[9] Marina MacKay, *Modernism, War, and Violence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 2.

[10] Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

[11] Billany does appear in Piette's essay on war poetry in MacKay's edited collection, *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*. However, the short quotation from Billany's novel *The Trap* is not engaged critically, but used as passing documentary illustration of the effects of desert warfare.

[12] Dan Billany, *The Trap* (London: Faber and Faber, 1950), 29. Subsequent references to this work are made parenthetically.

function as aesthetically disingenuous bourgeois "propaganda" (Billany, 30). They are not the aesthetic products of the experience of the tumults of the first half of the twentieth century, but part and parcel of the cultural fallacies that caused them. This indicates that with Billany's novels, as perhaps with the other war novels and post-war novels noted above, the reader is confronted by new and different writerly contexts and aesthetic processes, for which the critical codings of "Modernism" do not easily account. While MacKay claims that the Second World War brought "Modernism" to an end, for Billany the experiential revelations of that war necessarily brought to an end *all* established, "bourgeois" British literary culture. Indeed, for Billany the war meant an end to the damaging, deterministic schemas of progress found in the mythic structural conceptions of "our cant civilisation" (Billany, 366).

In a further, and compelling, mode of recent reassessment, Clare Makepeace argues that all production of the POWs in the camps is cultural artefact. Analysing not only "the personal narratives POWs composed in captivity," but also their "drawings," "logbooks," and other "paraphernalia," Makepeace suggests that everything produced during internment is testimonial object of a cultural experience that has been erased by dominant masculinist, "victorious" narratives of the Second World War.[13] As Billany would say, Makepeace's study "begins as it means to go on," with the untold micro-history of her grandfather, Andrew Makepeace. The paraphernalia-esque appearance of much within Billany's *The Cage* and *The Trap*, and the novels' relentlessly critical, often diaristic, tone does invite this approach. But this is nevertheless to neglect their specificity as *literary* artefacts, and instead to position them in a deaestheticised dead-end, treated as raw data akin to the surveys produced by Mass Observation. Unlike the POWs whose works Makepeace examines, Billany was a semi-established and semi-popular writer of detective fiction prior to his incarceration, publishing the best-selling *The Opera House Murders* with Faber and Faber in 1940. And despite the critical farming of them for eyewitness data, both *The Cage* and *The Trap* were actively written *as novels*, to be bought and read as literary artefacts. As Billany and Dowie put it in *The Cage*, in a round-up of main characters and their characteristics:

[13] Clare Makepeace, *Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in Europe in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 3, 8.

David
Dan } The Authors—their characteristics may be left to you, dear reader, and to *The Times Literary Supplement*.[14]

Rather than Makepeace's work, then, this essay builds on the only recent study to engage critically with Billany's novels as having literary value, Mark Rawlinson's *British Writing of the Second World War* (2000). Combining MacKay's and Makepeace's general approaches, Rawlinson writes that Billany's "exclusion from hostilities […] is of crucial significance to the form and meanings of the novel[s] he wrote in Italian Prisoner of War camps between late 1942 and early 1944 [sic, late 1943]."[15] Rawlinson's book is focused on the abstractions of that war, by which its violence is rendered "play," redirected into a performative game to be won or lost. He writes that Billany's novels present reflections on that socio-cultural illusory "play of shadow" (Billany, 12), whereby "a critique of civil society is voiced from the marginal space of prisons."[16] And yet the radical formal aesthetics and confrontational content by which that critique is carried out go largely undiscussed. Rawlinson continues the general critical orthodoxy of actively omitting any reference to the author's and the protagonists' outspoken "proletarian" class identity, even though it underlies both books. Nor does Rawlinson account for these figures' homosexuality, though it is repeatedly depicted in *The Trap* and becomes the central narrative pillar for the entire third and final section of *The Cage*.[17] With no account given of the aesthetic tropes of Billany's posthumous texts, nor the centrality of class identity and sexuality to their confessional content, Billany could indeed be easily misconstrued as a

[14] Billany and Dowie, *The Cage*, 13.

[15] Mark Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 161. Rawlinson's inaccuracies indicate the general critical disengagement with these texts, suggesting a sense of readerly dismissal. In *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire and Modern British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Patrick Deer refers, as is common, to Billany's *The Trap* in a brief one-sentence illustrative aside relating the observations of "Billany's protagonist" (201). In Billany's text, that "protagonist" is given not only a name, but also a rank, Lieutenant (359), and his own serial number, 477573 (360).

[16] Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War*, 163.

[17] The only critical reference to these scenes is Alan Munton's *English Fiction of the Second World War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), which, as Cloutier argues, attempts to dismiss these texts' depictions of homosexuality as abstracted modellings of dialectical materialism applied to the realm of personal relationships (Munton, 55; Cloutier, 167).

"minor," "bourgeois" social-realist writer, in keeping with the reception encouraged by his pre-war writing.

This situation complicates established critical accounts of twentieth-century British literature itself, as explained by Isabel Waidner in their introduction to *Liberating the Canon* (2018): "historically, socio-political marginalisation and avant-garde aesthetics have not come together in UK literature, counterintuitively divorcing outsider experience and formal innovation."[18] This separation has been compounded by exclusory critical processes, that continue to remove from British literary history those texts or elements of texts that do unite that outsider experience and innovation. Stripped of their more radical tenets by criticism, both *The Cage* and *The Trap* appear to toe the line affirmed by *The Opera House Murders*. However, this apparent failure to represent working-class identity and gay experience, and to engage in formal innovation, is not borne out by the material artefacts of mid-twentieth-century British literature. It is imposed by the selectivity by which literary history has been and continues to be conceived. In his engagement with *The Cage* and *The Trap*, Rawlinson perpetuates a wider critical orthodoxy that has seen Billany "minored"—largely undiscussed and unread.

Current critical exegesis does not and cannot, therefore, adequately account for either the material textuality or the aesthetic potentials of Billany's novels. The interaction of these three twenty-first-century critical reassessments of British literary production during the Second World War reveals a space, an absence where Billany and his texts, and the radical writing of the Second World War which they represent, are distinctly missing. If Billany's historical moment is often said to have ended innovation in British literature, his posthumous novels offer the critic evidence for the continuation of literary innovation in formerly unrecognised modes. Here, then, I indicate a new avenue for the critical reassessment of the literature of the Second World War and that literature's post-war publication and consumption. This is one facet of the wider re-reading of twentieth-century British literature currently taking place in critical discourse. In

[18] Isabel Waidner, *Liberating the Canon: An Anthology of Innovative Literature* (Manchester: Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2018), 7.

this context, I make the case that Billany and his texts inaugurate new post-war potentialities in novelistic content and form.

II—Text

Confrontations

The textual structures of *The Cage* and *The Trap* have compounded the novels' critical misassignment. As indicated by Billany's attacks on the "Park Lane" clique, the two works are drawn into conflicts directly rooted in fundamental interactions between in-book textual form and the cultural construct of the novel itself. Here, literary artefact and the cultural codes by which that artefact are received are found in atypical relation. Both *The Cage* and *The Trap* harbour a profound destabilisation of the indexical referents of the novel genre, and this raises questions regarding the genre's basic norms: what a novel looks like, what it is, and what it does.[19] Structurally, both texts alternate between myriad registers of writing that in the first instance appear irreconcilable. The primary story, providing narrative continuity, incessantly disassembles and reassembles into other modes of writing, other stories, and the internal fragments of other "novels," thereby generating narrative divergence.[20] Further, as referenced above, the novels are punctuated by apparently "truthful" and "authentic" authorial intrusions, and this both works as connective tissue for the continual re-folding of the fictive

[19] That is to say, *The Cage* and *The Trap* destabilise the genre as it was conceived in the limiting and reductive "social realist" literary milieu in which the two novels appeared. Their status as novels would be much clearer in reference to the first texts taken to establish the genre in English, as for example Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), his *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), or, in particular, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759), in each of which similar slippages in layers of reality and/or fluid formal variation are present.

[20] *The Cage* consists of three sections, each headed by the name of the prison camp in which that section takes place and each with a very different, though in itself extremely variable, general form: Capua (ten "acts," with numbered "scenes"), Rezzanello (a section which, the reader is told, is directly transposed from Dowie's diaries, interspersed with vignettes penned by Billany), and Fontanellato (a series of sub-sections headed by the name of a character, each of which takes the form of sort of docu-drama talking-heads interview). *The Trap* is also divided into three sections, although these sections transition between and synthesise multiple modes of writing: tirade, rant, reflection on the state of society and literature, the story of Michael Carr and Elizabeth Pascoe (which is set as primary story), and fictionalised biography of Billany's own family history in Hull.

world and, by the very process of *ad hoc* textual re-assemblage, lays bare the artificiality of story or stories.

At a glance, therefore, it would be easy to classify these books as fundamentally, structurally flawed and to ascribe this to bad writing or to poor posthumous editing. The novels indeed appear to be amalgams of ill-synchronised scraps, personal documents, and unfinished segments, and this might seem to demonstrate the malfunctions of an "unsuccessful" novel. However, in the texts themselves Billany lays out these structures as integral to their successful operation. In the opening pages of *The Trap*, for example, he describes the aims of such unorthodox textuality:

> I don't want to leave you out as a spectator of my picaresque adventures, and yet I don't want to take you with me on an odyssey in the manner of Stevenson: I'm sorry to be so incoherent, but if you think, you'll see that neither way gives complete truth: there's something missing in both, perhaps it's the undertone of all my reflections, reactions, associations. Once that play of shadow is thrown in, the story will stand forth, as if you'd put on stereoscopic glasses, in its living truth. (Billany, 11-12)

A good illustration of this experimental formal mechanism appears in the second section of *The Cage*, which begins with a note explaining that the section deals "principally with emotional and psychological reassessments," and that it has been generated from

> a diary kept by David at Rezzanello. The material of the diary is highly personal and intimate. We feel it is necessary to the prison story, however, and have determined to use it. For this resolution in itself we do not expect either applause or censure. It is our decision, that's all.[21]

As the note continues, that diary is said to be supplemented by interjections given "in plain narrative, descriptive or dramatic form […] to be regarded as word-illustrations" that "are inserted into the diary-narrative […] to amplify and

[21] Billany and Dowie, *The Cage*, 87.

clarify." [22] For *The Trap* these formal interjections are more extreme and sensorially erratic, including the visual representation of the name "Kitty" as it was carved into the head of a baby's cot (Billany, 40), a baby who died shortly afterwards of diphtheria. Following the diaristic account of the British defeat at Gazala, and protagonist Lt. Michael Carr's capture and transportation to Italy (mimicking Lt. Dan Billany's own capture and transportation), the final two pages of *The Trap* give the representation of a notice "hung over the barbed wire of our prison": "EXTRACT FROM THE DUTIES OF THE SENTRIES AT THE BARBED WIRE" (Billany, 379). The active shift back and forth through artefact, letter, diary, treatise, novelistic prose of varied register, and authorial intrusion concerning varied topics inherent to both texts functions as a kind of epistolary *in extremis*. The implication is that this sense of fragmentation and instability was coded into text at its very inception. This perceived dysfunction is not primarily the product of a process of posthumously editing incomplete artefacts, but a cogent, writerly, aesthetic project of formal destabilisation.

Novel/Counter-Novel

This formal destabilisation is designed aesthetically to work on or, perhaps, work over a cultural object. As his remark about Stevenson suggests, Billany begins *The Trap* by establishing a frenetic intertextuality: "I don't want the running commentary of Hemingway" (Billany, 11), "it's the immediacy of William Saroyan that must be in with the story. But not quite the same personality" (Billany, 12). The implication of such gestures is that his novels are nodes of critical interaction with the cultural surtext of the novel-at-large. As Billany writes, "the great trouble, dear reader, is that all the genres have been tried" (Billany, 89), and thus to write a novel is inescapably to re-script the *monolithic* novel, to transcribe its monolithic and, for the self-professed proletarian Billany, "bourgeois" truth. [23] Meaning in the novel, therefore, appears always anachronistically *other* to the book-object itself; meaning is pre-coded, inescapably culturally reified and reifying. In this sense, Billany appears to pre-empt Roland Barthes and his figuratively "dead" authors: "eternal copyists, both

[22] Billany and Dowie, *The Cage*, 87.

[23] As Billany writes in an interjection, "I'd be ashamed to the very depths of my soul if I could write about my class without heat […] I am Working Class. I was born of workers amongst workers, and therefore I am a native of their country" (Billany, 29).

sublime and comical and whose profound absurdity precisely designates the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture forever anterior, never original."[24] The novel as bourgeois tradition is a constraint not only on the novel as an art form, but on language itself, and thus on artistic attempts at mediating experience of the real world through language. By the very act of writing, Billany is tied up within this constraint: a veiled horizon he attempts to poke holes in, though will never be able to cross. Even his attempts at truthful authorial intrusion upon falsified story are "inauthentic," are "realistic" rather than "real": "even a digression like this, I know it, probably owes more to Sterne or Thackeray than to my own determination" (Billany, 89). The scripting process is thus carried out in a state of crisis, in which the codes of literature impose upon, limit, and warp the writer's potential to write at all:

> One has to give the history of an emotion: but not in any fashionable way. It's a question of what one wants to do and there I fail, in a sense. I can't say in words what my object is, but that is not to say I don't know. I know precisely, in a sense that I reject the wrong impressions when I record the past: but I don't know what makes them wrong. A sense of falseness—*that's* not it.
>
> Begin as you mean to go on. (Billany, 11)

In beginning with this intertextual crisis, Billany lays out a wider critical posture in which *The Cage* and *The Trap* demand to be read. He argues that other novels, in their "slickness and meretricious lures," push a "literary falsity" that leads the reader to an artificial perception of the "Real World" (Billany, 12). In the name of story, such texts do not act as conduits for the critical observation of the real world, but as the gnoseological, storifying tools of the socio-cultural illusion of a seamless whole. Such texts do not access reality, so to speak, but condition the delusions by which reality may be avoided. Readers can perform their function at leisure, as any horror and confusion a narrative might draw them into is strictly orchestrated and will always be reconciled in the final act, at which point the status quo is returned. The horror and confusion therefore remain in-book, and do not leak out of it, so "keep your pecker up" because *it always works out in the end*. As

[24] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1968), in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142-8, 146.

a bourgeois cultural mechanism, other novels propagate and normalise a false image of the world by imposing a fictive narrative stability that occludes the unstable truths of reality. For Billany, such novels form "a vulgar tower of insincerities, an unreal world […] an ivory tower which I shall help to pull down, I hope" (Billany, 30). This sentiment is further demonstrated when, in *The Trap*, the only book to survive the aerial bombing of a family home is Ezra Pound's *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), which was, at the time, almost blasphemous in its attack on "Western Civilisation." For Billany, that "civilisation" had been built upon principles of hierarchical social supremacy and cultural exclusion, such that "one class gets the sugar and the other class gets the shit" (Billany, 345).

Following this tack Billany states that he intends to de-script the cultural doxa of the novel and, in doing so, evoke "raw" truth by diverting story with (dis)associative aside and by diverting (dis)associative aside with story. *The Cage* and *The Trap* are peppered by authorial declarations of perceived social injustices, by dressing-downs of "bourgeois" readers and of the "bourgeois" popular writers whom they are assumed to read, and by admonishments of the constructed images which the home-front reader is said to take for stable reality. The effect is similar to that which Walter Benjamin finds in Bertolt Brecht's use of "songs" interjecting into "story." As Benjamin argues, such "interrupting of the action […] always works against creating an illusion."[25] This is the purpose of Billany's "stereoscopic glasses." The aim of his formal interruptions is to undo the static, stable, and false image given by the novel-at-large:

> What I want to convey is just truth: reality. Not the *effect* which results from truth, encountered by surprise on a gravestone, or on the wall of a public lavatory: but the simple bulk reality of events. (Billany, 11)

Finally, this project relies integrally on readerly participation with the text, on a *you*—"dear reader" (Billany, 89)—interacting with the novel's shifting textual planes. As such, Billany's project of destabilisation is not to be achieved through

[25] Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht,* trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 2003), 99.

the passive voyeurism of an unfolding story. Just as with stereoscopic glasses, it is not a mechanical or automated process, but relies on active enaction by user.

Textual Structure and Readerly Referent

The structure of Billany's text posits that both storied text-world and the authorial "I" which intrudes upon that world—or, as Billany pluralises it, the "fluid I, I, I" (Billany, 336)—are both contingent, fictive entities. At the point of consumption, the author is a past, or *passed*, cipher: the author is "dead," and in the case of Billany's posthumous novels quite literally so. The storied book-object upon which the author claims to impose, despite its engrossing characteristics, is also a past, "dead" entity, since both the context of its writing and the experiential world it represents, the frontlines of a total war, are inactive, phenomenally inaccessible. This is addressed obliquely in *The Cage*:

> the picture we mean to draw now is one which we should lose for ever if we delayed […] *We* are not even *certain* that we shall ever go back to England. At this moment there is not a whisper of release, and the war seems well able to go on for ever.[26]

Interminably locked on the other side of war's end, the experientiality these texts script appears adjacent to but inaccessible from our own, after the war's end and the return of "peace." Billany therefore actively writes to project the violence of that moment beyond its close and historical compartmentalisation. Billany and his text-projections are both equally enveloped within this historical discontinuity, or historical death. The result is a phenomenal break with a fundamental given of narrative fiction, whereby it is assumed that any narrative organ must survive the processes it narrates in order to be able to narrate them. Billany's authorial intrusions and storied world exist upon the same phantasmatic plane of narrative mechanism, where they "live" only insofar as they are summoned by the reader into an uncanny after-life. It is only the reader, after all, who can be termed at the moment of transmission an active or "living" participant.

And so the "truth" here indicated is not the hermeneutic result of the end of the story predicated on an authorial prerogative over the text. It is not a text-meaning

[26] Billany and Dowie, *The Cage*, 2.

to which the reader is guided, an affirming moral or lesson that is delivered with the close of book. It is "truth" as constant textual *affect*, "truth" as something generated by ergodic encounter with the procedurally rendered text-world. I use the term "ergodic" as it is defined by Espen Aarseth:

> the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of "reading" do not account for. This phenomenon I call *ergodic*, using a term appropriated from physics that derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning "work" and "path." In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text.[27]

In the process of engaging with Billany's texts, then, we enter a space of dilemma or predicament. Through our interaction with formal "incoherency," we must actively make choices, associations, and connections. The texts of these novels run neither in sequence nor in parallel, as those of other post-war British experimental novels do; in terms of story, authorial incursions do not self-reflexively support narrative linearity. Instead, the texts are combined in a fluid space that is progressively both more confused and more confusing. And so Billany would appear to place the onus of responsibility upon the reader as active participant, so that the text-space becomes the stage for a process of confrontation and questioning. The textual prison camp which the reader here enters is a heterogeneous space removed, a margin in which social norms and cultural codes are reflected through a prism of violence and degradation.

In this, *The Cage* and *The Trap* offer a critique of the bourgeois novel-at-large and of the falseness which it propagates in our perception of the world. The conduit of "truth: reality" is achieved, not as recorded "eye-witness account" ("on the wall of a public lavatory"), but by aesthetic affectivity beyond the text, by the transportive potentialities of fiction: "our goal in writing this is to bring you into the strange world of the prison camp, naturally a small fee is payable."[28] But the prison camp "into" which the novel brings the reader is not the actual camp in

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[27] Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 1.

[28] Billany and Dowie, *The Cage*, 2.

which Billany was a prisoner; it is a textual camp, a refraction of and supplement to that real-world camp. If readers are to traverse this text-world, "truthfully" to experience a textual prison camp so alien to the everyday norms of the home-front, they must participate in the ergodic piecing together of the confused-confusing text, and they are constantly cajoled into doing so. Addressed in the second person ("you"), readers are themselves allotted an active presence in text, sometimes entreated as "dear reader"; sometimes berated as an adversarial figure, "the hypothetical future reader at home in England";[29] and sometimes both entreated and berated:

> And don't (for Pete's sake) clap your hand down on the pages at this point and say "how I hate novels where the author says 'dear reader'!" Aren't you my dear reader—God knows you've cost me dear in headaches, cigarettes, qualms of conscience and night thoughts; and haven't I the right and the privilege of speaking to you directly, if I want to, as directly as if I were writing you a letter? Certainly I've written things for you here which I'd hesitate to put in most, even intimate letters. (Billany, 89)

For both the intrusive authorial voice and the reader there is no way out. The violent and degraded space from which that voice is projected, and to which the readerly processing of text is drawn, is indeed generated via the aesthetic processes of a textual *trap* or *cage*, to follow the direction of the books' titles.

This combination of extreme ergodic form and radically confessional content indicates that the readerly metabolization of the "incoherent" text is intended to generate an aesthetic *experience* of "the metabolism of existence" (Billany, 15). Billany's novels draw the reader into the fictive representation of an environment where this violent metabolising of the human, occluded in normal circumstances, was rendered observable. This critical, formal-experiential reflex is, as Rawlinson indicates, inherent to these "prison narratives." And this textual function produces an effect which, according to Wolfgang Iser, is specific to the genre of the novel: "to involve the reader in the world of the novel and so help him to understand it—

[29] Billany and Dowie, *The Cage*, 2.

and ultimately his own world—more clearly."[30] If the formal predicament of *The Cage* and *The Trap* is their irreconcilable fragmentation, then the purpose of this form is to produce an experience in the reader of the irreconcilable fragmentation external to text: the brokenness of real-world experience, below the artifice of the seamless aesthetic "whole." The novels thus aim to build a space where readers might access the tools with which to counter the deluge of "bourgeois" literary "propaganda" (Billany, 30). As Rawlinson puts it, readerly engagement with "the 'prison walls and wire' will unhinge the prison of the self."[31] In sum, the genre of the novel—its history, structures, and strictures—becomes a synecdoche for human living.

Desolation, Desolation, Desolation

Though Alan Munton describes this formal process as creating a sense of "pleasurable confusion,"[32] this would appear somewhat dismissive of the critical position that Billany goes to great lengths to occupy. In *The Trap*, Billany writes: "Desolation, Desolation, Desolation [...] all we learned was that we would die" (Billany, 128). In his 2013 lecture "The Natures of War," Derek Gregory spoke of how the world of *The Trap* draws the reader into an essential "deadness"—that a reader entering these texts becomes lost in Billany's labyrinthine "baroque geometry" of minefields, barbed wire, and fragile flashes of "home life."[33] This leaves the reader with a sense that, like novels, "men are perishable goods" (Billany, 367). As indicated by Rawlinson, the boundaries between apparently fictive worlds and the apparently real world are blurred. Layers of "truthhood" do not easily separate into distinct entities. The seemingly separate planes of reality coalesce and form incomplete truth-structurings that cannot be relied on as "the truth." The integration of the novels' internal elements relies on their very *dis*integratory nature: as aesthetic wholes, *The Cage* and *The Trap* function as

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[30] Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1972), trans. David Henry Wilson (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), 42.

[31] Rawlinson, 190.

[32] Munton, 55.

[33] Derek Gregory, "The Natures of War" (2013), The Neil Smith Lecture, University of St. Andrews, 31, 39: https://geographicalimaginations.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/-gregory-the-natures-of-war-final-may-2015.pdf, accessed on 23 November 2019.

irreconcilable juxtapositions of incompletes. By this reading, both novels demonstrate a coherent, cogent project: a criticism of the primacy of the genre of the novel as a cultural mediator of social reality. Billany's novels attack the normative processes of bourgeois British society that the novel-at-large both feeds into and out of.

The two works thus position themselves as formative or heuristic entities; they aim to act as catalysts, serving to pull the wool from over readers' eyes:

> Is it possible for a man to see what is before his eyes? Does he always see what is behind them? This is not obscurantism: I can put certain disconnected lines on paper, and you will see them as letters of the alphabet: your eye will fill in the gaps. But the material your eye puts in—isn't there. You are reading—in a metaphysical sense—between the lines. (Billany, 13)

Billany's writerly project drives towards this sense of "metaphysical" textual access to prohibited experiential truth. Both *The Cage* and *The Trap* therefore demonstrate a fundamental kinship with the outspoken and formally unorthodox "experimental novel" which would develop in Britain in the post-war era, and which social-realist writers and traditionalist critics would also accuse of being "not literature."[34] As Billany states bluntly, "my realism extends as far as the moral certainty that there is no God, and no life after death" (Billany, 30-31). Rather than being instances of minor social realism or qualitative raw data to be excerpted for illustrative aside in historical study, *The Cage* and *The Trap* might be deemed "successful" art-objects when read alongside texts like Themerson's *Bayamus* and Heppenstall's *The Connecting Door*. It would be easy to read Billany's novels, as Paul Skrebels prescribes, as exercises in "the new novel's style"[35] that Heppenstall himself is said to have "inaugurated" in 1939 with *Blaze*

[34] "The resistance was great, in France but especially in England, where traditionalist critics and realistic novelists organised strong campaigns, which they no doubt feel they have won." Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 311.

[35] Paul Skrebels, "The Socialist and the Detective Story: The Case of Dan Billany's *The Opera House Murders*," paper delivered at the University of Worcester, 2006.

of Noon.[36] Such texts do appear to instil a sense of "Man as a unit in the cosmographic scheme" (Billany, 31). Beyond the romantic novelisation of human life given by bourgeois culture, Billany's novels tie the human object to the real world, itself violently chaotic and confused. Counter to critical orthodoxy, this directs us towards a text-centric, perhaps indeed "existential" ergodic grounding for reading the novels.

III—Counter-Text

Contemporary Conflicts in Textual Reframing

Re-reading *The Cage* and *The Trap* is both warranted and fairly straightforward. Both novels have been mislabelled by criticism; they are victims of the dominant anti-innovation tendencies in British literature following the Second World War.[37] They make up part of a corpus of literary innovation in the period that we are only now beginning to exhume. To reinclude such works in "literature" is to bring into clearer view not only their formal innovations, but also their critique of mid-twentieth-century British literature and the wider society, characterised by war, social hierarchy, and cultural othering, of which it was participatory producer and product. And perhaps most pressingly, these texts critique the violent oppression of gay men and women in Britain, a societal norm within living memory.

Though critical accounts have largely ignored it, *The Cage* and *The Trap* openly discuss Billany's previously secret homosexuality.[38] They attempt to write to that "truth," at a time when being gay was regarded as "immoral" and "indecent," legislated as a criminal offence, and punished by prison and chemical castration.

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[36] Hélène Cixous, "Langage et regard dans le roman expérimental: Grand-Bretagne," *Le Monde*, 18 May 1967, 16.

[37] In 1965, Cyril Connolly described 1938 as the year Britain "balanced" its "literary budget" and definitively removed experimental forms of writing from its literature. Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 82.

[38] It seems the only published source to engage with this element in Billany's writing at length is a 2004 article that digitally resurfaced in July 2019: Paul Skrebels, "'Between the Real and the Really Made Up': Mimetic Strategies in Dan Billany's Wartime Novel *The Trap*," *The Space Between: Literature and Culture, 1914-1945* 2.2 (2004): 55-73: https://www.monmouth.edu/department-of-english/documents/between-the-real-and-the-really-made-up-mimetic-strategies-in-dan-billanys-wartime-novel-the-trap.pdf/, accessed on 27 November 2019.

In the military, being discovered to be gay meant execution. In leading the reader to confront these "truths," Billany is aware he will be resisted:

> Damn the public, damn the publisher, this book will only have done its job for me if I can find myself in it, and write down in ink the essential that I live for.[39]

For Billany, the stakes of committing to such textual project were high: "it was a sort of love which, in the world as we know it, could not be made public. One might rather commit suicide; some have done."[40] Billany's novels are thus literary artefacts of reflexive societal critique, an interlocking class-sexuality critique of the violently enforced societal normativity of British bourgeois culture. In *The Trap*, Billany writes:

> By the blood of those I loved who have died, by the years of my own life which have been taken from me, I swear I shall never again from humility acquiesce in the martyrdom of man, never again believe in the cunning sophistications of the world, its vulgar ignorant self-certainty, its cant and its sly admissions. I have seen the wise old world at its work: Folly and Falseness like two foul doctors poisoning their patient. The Worldly Wisdom which engendered the war was just this: Self-Interest, deliberate blindness, gay ignorance that climbs to fortune treading on its neighbour's face: and all the quackery and political-economic mumbo-jumbo which is necessary to mask and justify these things. From now on till I die I shall not cease to smash my fist into the vacant, grinning face of our cant civilisation, never cease from crying "UNCLEAN!", never cease from pointing to the blood and bones of murdered men. (Billany, 365-6)

The violent, overwhelming pressures of British social life force the novels into formal fragmentation. Billany's fiction establishes a textual loop of aesthetic-social interaction, rather than malfunctioning as novelistic failure. Though they

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[39] Valerie A. Reeves and Valerie Showan, *Dan Billany: Hull's Lost Hero* (Hull: Kingston Press, 1999), 149.

[40] Reeves and Showan, *Dan Billany*, 84.

may be "dysfunctional" in terms of the novel as a genre at the time, these texts harbour a generative, "successful" aesthetic functionality.

However, to take such a "new novel" reading as given is itself problematic. Though these novels do attempt to be impossibly *new*, in life Billany was by no means known as a "new novelist." In 1940 he had achieved some popular acclaim as a writer of detective fiction with *The Opera House Murders*,[41] which stuck closely to the genre's formulas, clichés, and delimitation of text-world from real world. In his posthumous novels, Billany himself denounces detective fiction and its writers at length as a sort of degree zero of literature's falsifying processes. In a vignette in *The Cage* entitled "VISITORS: A BEDTIME STORY: A RHAPSODY: ANYTHING," a parade of famous characters from "popular fiction" enters the scene, from Sherlock Holmes, through Horatio Hornblower, to Fu-Manchu. Their larger-than-life personas clash, resulting in "two ornaments of popular fiction"—Simon "The Saint" Templar and Lord Peter Wimsey—shooting each other dead.[42] As Skrebels writes, the point of this vignette "as a miniature *Götterdämmerung* of the pantheon of recent detective heroes is clear: the scene literally clears the decks of the last remnants of Golden Age characters and attitudes that so repel Billany."[43] Billany actively, consciously turns on his earlier work, positioning it in opposition to his later work. This extreme shift was not uncommon in British experimental writing at the time; Billany's contemporaries Anna Kavan and Christine Brooke-Rose both began by writing novels comparable to *The Opera House Murders* and later disavowed them, generating work much closer in concern and appearance to *The Cage* and *The Trap*. And yet the disjuncture between *The Opera House Murders* and the raw manuscripts received from Italy after Billany's disappearance, which were in time edited to become *The Cage* and *The Trap*, led to considerable contention over these texts' internal structures.

With Billany no longer around to finish the novels himself, the indeterminacy of their formal project and "confessional" content raised the question of what in the manuscripts should be included and excluded, and by what judgement process.

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[41] Dan Billany, *The Opera House Murders* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940).

[42] Billany and Dowie, *The Cage*, 62.

[43] Skrebels, "The Socialist and the Detective Story."

This was partly a question of authorial intent. Having written the novels under duress, would Billany, had he survived, have transformed them into straightforward stories akin to *The Opera House Murders*? Would *The Cage* have become a bunkhouse comedy, *The Trap* a heteronormative wartime romance? Or should the manuscripts as received be regarded as aesthetically "complete," so that their "stereoscopic" form disrupts and questions the "false narratives" of such straightforward story-telling?

Contexts of Initial Composition

The versions of *The Cage* and *The Trap* published in 1949 and 1950, respectively, are the products of a negotiation between these two methodological positions. The author's father, Harry Billany—a sort of Max Brod figure in this process—actively lobbied for more or less total fidelity to manuscript, while to varying degrees the two different publishers resisted this. The difference in approach is manifest in the materiality of the texts themselves. Having been met with a flurry of letters from Billany's father, Mark Longman, then director of Longmans, Green, and Co., settled for mitigating the more extreme structural incoherency of *The Cage*, requesting small edits and the removal of Billany's illustrations, which the father conceded. However, Faber and Faber, publisher of *The Opera House Murders*, took a stricter line in publishing *The Trap*. Billany's old editor T. S. Eliot had rejected *The Cage* for being "unevenly written,"[44] and this posture determined the eventual shape of *The Trap*, which Eliot later accepted. The first half of *The Trap* is continuous with *The Cage*, featuring intrusions, multiple stories, and shifting plateaus and modes. However, Billany's father died during the editorial process, and as a consequence the second half of *The Trap* is a highly polished, straightforward narrative of heteronormative romance in wartime. The asides and vitriol have evaporated; the "stereoscopic" form is absent. Because Billany "did not have a chance to edit and revise the final product," Cloutier writes, Faber and Faber had "the final decision on what is printed," and in exercising this prerogative they "included passages that, clearly, have been crossed out in the manuscript."[45] At the same time, Faber and Faber removed and amended passages that had not been so crossed out. Indeed, though Harry Billany resisted them, both Faber and Faber and Longmans, Green, and Co. intervened to remove the two novels'

[44] Reeves and Showan, 159.

[45] Cloutier, 33.

"incoherency" and "inconsistency" and to bring them into line with Billany's pre-war writing.

This history of composition and publication presents a dilemma. Did Billany's experience of the war "break" his writing, requiring it to be editorially "fixed," or did that experience alter his perspective on the nature of writing, so that the texts he then wrote are "complete" in their "brokenness"? In the latter case, the effect of Billany's experience on his literary artefacts is itself of "worth" or "literary value." Billany pre-empts this second reading in *The Trap*: "Oh yes, yes, yes! I know I'm holding up the story, and I don't care a damn. I've wanted to say this for years. Rancorous? By God I'm Rancorous" (Billany, 29). Directions like this, present in both his posthumous novels, suggest that Billany's earlier writing participates in cultural "falsification." More specifically, such directions mean that Billany's "coming out" as gay and as a proletarian writer is part and parcel of how the forms and contents of these texts should be received. In contrast, the publishers' editorial interventions divert the integrity of the text. The internal space of the composed text was formed by the active opposition of Billany and his Brod on the one hand, and the publishers on the other. This adversarial interaction in the formation of *The Cage* and *The Trap* problematises the "new novel" reading of both texts.

IV—Historic Textual Presentation as Aesthetic Whole

Paratexts and Editorial Intrusions

The Cage and *The Trap* each commence, not with a conventional contextual or biographical note, but with a note specifically informing the reader that their author is dead and about the supposed nature of his death. In *The Cage*, Billany is presented as a tragic missing son and the first pages become a sort of funereal space, with large photographs of Billany and Dowie smiling, *in happier times*. In *The Trap*, Billany is a war hero who had died in mortal combat with a British defector working for the Germans to recapture escapees from the camps. The author's death is thus made a central frame for the texts. The books are monumentalised, becoming literary cenotaphs for a society of tragic missing sons who hopefully died heroically (rather than, as Billany himself contends, for nothing). Both books are entered as one might enter an elaborate crypt, a space designed and built in reverence of a figure after that figure's death. Despite the

alienation of author from text by posthumous editorial processes, in its first pages *The Trap* announces that "**THIS STORY HAS NEVER BEEN REVISED**." (Billany, no page). This statement pre-empts the interpretation of the disintegration that follows, not as a dysfunctional sequence of separate parts that access a sense of "truth" through the failure of stable codes, but as a coherent whole that is empirically "true," as proved by its disintegratory dysfunction. The novels' "authenticity" is redirected from aesthetic affectivity to the faux empirical ("on the wall of a public lavatory"), a generic norm which Billany states he wishes to critique. Furthermore, the section of *The Trap* which includes Billany's most explicit directions for reading is provided by the publishers with a footnote: "The passage between square brackets was crossed out in the original" (Billany, 15). In a sense, the section is structurally dismissed from interaction with the rest of the novel.

The death notes that augur this reading are themselves fictive, for it is not known what happened to Billany and his death appears to have been narrated in whatever way was assumed would sell books best. By these paratexts, the novels' "incoherency" or "uneven" form and their confessional content are framed as "authentic war writing." At the time, war diaries, normally produced upon their writers' return to Britain, were a sure-fire best-seller. As such, the social realism of *The Cage* and *The Trap* appears retconned into them by editorial intrusion and direction. Billany's name on the spine would already have positioned the texts in the genre of the British "bourgeois" novel of the 1930s and 1940s, but the destabilising experience of reading them harbours the potential to subvert the readerly "horizon of expectations" in this respect.[46] Therefore, the posthumously added paratexts act as apologia for dissonance between readerly expectation and the text itself. Though they stumble as traditional novels, this stumbling reveals a diaristic "authenticity," rather than the falsity of the novel as a genre and a tradition.

If Billany's novels were disfigured in their composition by war, imprisonment, and death during their composition, their paratexts act as a sort of reconstructive surgery, occluding the "stereoscopic" effects of the texts' aesthetic of

[46] Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic Reception* (1970), trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), 24.

confrontation. Counter to Billany's project, the reader is led to understand the novels as the candid diaries of a dead and, at the time, mildly famous author. The texts are thus framed as a privileged and authentic conduit to, not a participatory textual space, but the last days of detective-fiction writer Dan Billany. The Billany of 1943 is overwritten, subsumed by the Billany of 1940. This reversal was confirmed and concretised by the 1964 Panther edition of *The Cage*, whose cover advertises the novel as "perhaps the most extraordinary personal document of the war."[47]

This treatment of Billany's novels subverts the I-you interaction central to them both; the radical intimacy between writer and reader they encourage is posthumously repurposed. To a degree, paratext successfully displaces the reader's responsibility for making these text-worlds "living," despite the fact that the texts enjoin precisely this of their readers. The shifting hierarchy of discourse dissolves, and the polyphony of voices that first defines these texts disassembles into monologism. Everyone and everything becomes a narrative mask for the theological author-god, Billany. The "author" is assigned a kind of sublime status, by which the body of text becomes the body-politic of Billany himself—the only body to be returned to England. The texts become novelistic dirges: sacred-profane artefacts for the "author" to inhabit, not the reader. And their "brokenness" becomes a direct reflex of Billany's own "broken" state of mind. This produces a paradoxical textual relation, in which the reader is constantly directed through the artificiality of fiction towards the "real" Billany, while the texts themselves reflect back critically upon the illusions that falsify the reader's reality.

Thus, in reading *The Cage* and *The Trap*, the reader traverses two impossibly completed incomplete works, directed by signposts given by multiple presences within the author function. The completion of the novels as monuments and the establishment of their author as monumental limit their experiential potential. The sense of chaotic "desolation" to which Billany attempts to draw the reader is diverted, and a false reconciliation is imposed: the young soldier died a hero's death. Therefore, these texts present opposing conceptions of "truth," agitating one against the other, that complicate the notion of objective textual "meaning."

[47] H. E. Bates, quoted on the cover of Dan Billany and David Dowie, *The Cage* (London: Panther, 1964).

In such texts, as Brooke-Rose puts it, "the multiplicity of interpretive systems make it impossible to envisage a whole form of which the fragments would be parts."[48] The ergodic process of readerly interaction with the text then becomes *the* procedure for generating meaning, and that procedure becomes the text's truth potential. The editorial efforts to suppress this subversion actually amplify this "incoherence." The overwriting of the paratexts and other editorial intrusions leads the reader beyond aesthetic indeterminacy to a sense of formal failure; the novels themselves constantly undermine their own apparent textual projects. As a consequence, the novels have been perceived as "minor" entries in the annals of a traditionalist mode of mid-twentieth-century British literature, to be read, if at all, as source material for historical studies of the Second World War.

Embracing the Artefact as Historico-Aesthetic Referent

Though the radical incompleteness and incoherency of *The Cage* and *The Trap* in their final forms are difficult fully to attribute to Billany, the core of these forms is demonstrably intentional. Within the novels themselves, Billany explains that they are to function as "stereoscopic" mechanisms, that they are to be prismatic, fragmented, and formally *dis*integratory. In terms of Barthes's *S/Z* (1970), "denotation" here proves moveable ground and textual "connotation" becomes "integrally plural" and "multivalent."[49] The reader must constantly attempt to distinguish, and re-distinguish, a narrative platform from a plurality of traditionally stable elements that together make up "the novel." The editorial attempts to complete these incomplete texts undermined this technique but also pushed the novels' forms further into contingency. As the aesthetic "totality" of these texts is their failure to coagulate into a "totality" in reading, they become what Barthes calls "the broken text"; they generate a "stereographic space of writing."[50] Barthes's stereographic space is similar to Billany's "stereoscopic" aims, and describes a "readerly writing" where "text will ceaselessly be broken," thus denying "not the quality of the text" but its "naturalness."[51] However, any intended "truth" this might generate here is subsumed by the way these texts are

[48] Brooke-Rose, 367.

[49] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (1970), trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 6-7.

[50] Barthes, *S/Z*, 15.

[51] Barthes, *S/Z*, 15.

formally "interrupted." Billany's posthumous novels reach the reader already "manhandled," as Barthes puts it, by previous readers, typists, and editors who have integrally altered the body of the text, though none of these actors has wholly "readerly re-written" the artefact. Thus the text consumed by the public reader is received via an unknowable number of unknowable mediations that displace the text's own originating project. The functional "truth-problematic" towards which Billany's novels push is obscured; a question with no answer is given artificial reconciliation.

For MacKay, then, the Second World War brought British Modernism to an end. Yet it is from that very same context which, in *The Cage* and *The Trap*, we find Billany developing new modes by which the innovative treatment of the novel might continue. In this sense, if Heppenstall's *Blaze of Noon* inaugurated the "new novel," Billany's posthumous works establish further possibilities of innovation and experimentation in the British novel, possibilities which would be fully realised in the decades following.