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# The Elizabeth Bowen Review



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## Editorial policy

All essays are subject to double blind peer review, and we welcome submissions on all aspects of Elizabeth Bowen's life and work. Completed essays (6,000 words including bibliography and footnotes) should be submitted by 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021 for Volume 4 (to be published in September 2021). If you would like to discuss a possible submission, please contact the editors (details above).

The views expressed in the Review are those of the contributors, and are not those of the editors.

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## Nicola Darwood & Nick Turner ~ Introduction

On the one hand, it doesn't seem that long since we published Volume Two of the *Elizabeth Bowen Review*; but, on the other, it seems an age ago. We had no idea when we hit the 'publish' button last September that so much would change over the course of the year. We count ourselves very fortunate that we've been part of a group of people who remain fascinated by and engaged with all things Bowen; it's fabulous to be part of the world of scholarship focusing on her life and work. This volume of the *Review* is one of promise, which seems very apt in 2020. All the contributors are at the early stages of their careers, and we anticipate that their voices will be heard for many years to come.

In 'Notes on Writing a Novel' Bowen argues that '[c]haracters should, on the whole, be under rather than over articulate. What they *intend* to say should be more evident, more striking (because of its greater inner importance to the plot) than what they arrive at saying' (*Collected Impressions*: 256). Tung-An Wei's essay 'Elliptical Dialogues and Critique of Genres in *The Death of the Heart*' explores some of these conversations in Bowen's 1938 novel and focuses, in particular, on her employment of elliptical dialogues that can affect the progression of the narrative, creating, as Wei argues, 'unnecessary instability'. Wei explores three specific events, and two of these book-end the novel: the discussion of Portia's diary between Anna and St Quentin, and Matchett's exchange with the taxi driver as she rushes to 'rescue' Portia from the apparent clutches of Major Brutt. The third event is the conversation between Portia and Daphne where they discuss Eddie's behaviour, a conversation in which Portia demonstrates, once more, her inability to interpret verbal and non-verbal cues.

The second essay in this volume, Sofia-Pelendridis-Roberts's 'Visual Resonance in *The Heat of the Day*', turns our attention to the ways in which Bowen employs visual techniques in this novel, published in 1948. Focusing on the ways in which Bowen 'paints' her scenes so effectively, as she takes an image such as a fallen leaf that connects Stella and Louie, Pelendridis-Roberts argues that images such as these 'carry emotional potency' and, when connected, 'relay an emotional movement'. Pelendridis-Roberts effectively highlights Bowen's technique of playing with a reader's expectations of the natural and the mechanical as she comments on the staged, cinematic quality of some of the scenes in the novel.

Connor Larsen's essay 'Reading Adolescents & Adolescent Reading in the *Death of the Heart*' returns our attention to Portia's diary. Discussing the ways in which she reads and then writes her world, and the ways in which Anna reads the diary, Larsen highlights the many occasions when situations and intentions are misread in the novel. A diary is essentially a private conversation, one written by the diarist for the diarist. When someone else reads that diary, whether by nefarious means (Anna) or by coercion (Eddie), the diarist's relationship with that diary changes. As Larsen argues, the novel 'catalogues exactly how *writing*, even of the everyday variety like a diary, produces a powerful narrative that creates unforeseen conflicts each time it is read': as can be seen in *The Death of the Heart*, the consequences for the changing audience of the diary can be disastrous.

The fourth essay in this volume of the *Review* is Geraldine Gent’s “Voices from the Past”: an exploration of haunting and hospitality in ‘The Back Drawing-Room’, the winning entry of the inaugural Elizabeth Bowen Essay Competition. She draws on notions of hauntings in Bowen’s short story ‘The Back Drawing-Room’, first published in 1926 in *Ann Lee’s and Other Stories* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd). Focusing on the idea of ‘non-belonging’, Gent argues that this manifests itself in a fractured narrative where the ‘little man’ who recounts his story is constantly interrupted, a verbal reminder that he is and remains an outsider in the English home.

2019 saw the publication of two books which are reviewed in this Volume: Patricia Laurence’s *Elizabeth Bowen: A Literary Life* (Palgrave Macmillan) and *Elizabeth Bowen: Theory, Thought and Things*, edited by Jessica Gildersleeve and Patricia Juliana Smith (Edinburgh University Press). We have also included Layla Ferrández Melero’s report of the Elizabeth Bowen Symposium in London in February (published initially on the Elizabeth Bowen Society website); it was a thoroughly enjoyable day and one the Bowen Society hopes to repeat as soon as circumstances permit. The final piece in this volume of the *Review* is Nick Turner’s ‘Afterword’, a close reading of the opening scene of *The Death of the Heart*. It feels a little odd for us to extoll the virtues of an essay written by one of the editors, so we’ll leave that for you to discover at the end of the *Review*!

This volume would not have been possible without the support of our Editorial and Advisory Boards, and it certainly would not have been possible without the work of our peer reviewers, whose engagement with the essays at the early stages helps to shape the content of the *Review*. And so we say a huge thank you to everyone who has been involved, not least the essayists with whom it’s been a pleasure to work. It seems quite astonishing that an idea that arose from a dinner in Warsaw in 2016 has blossomed into the *Review* – we hope that the work will continue to grow, and look forward to Volume Four as scholars continue to read, discuss and write about Elizabeth Bowen.

Nick Turner and Nicola Darwood  
September 2020

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## Essay competition 2020

The inaugural 2020 essay competition was officially launched at the Bowen Symposium at Birkbeck, University of London, on Leap Day, that extra day that comes around once every four years.

This year's winner was Geraldine Gent with her essay 'Voices from the past: an exploration of haunting and hospitality in "The Back Drawing-Room"', and we are delighted that her essay appears in this volume of the *Review*. Lydia Sharpe's essay, 'Narrative Techniques in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*', was highly commended.

We hope that this competition will encourage both Geraldine and Lydia to continue with their work on Elizabeth Bowen, and look forward to reading more of their work in the future.

Many congratulations to both essayists!

## Essay competition 2021

The Editors of the *Elizabeth Bowen Review* invite BA and MA students to submit essays which focus on Elizabeth Bowen's life or work for the 2021 Essay Competition. Essays should be no more than 4,000 words in length (excluding reference list) and use the Harvard referencing system. The essay should be submitted by email to [bowen@beds.ac.uk](mailto:bowen@beds.ac.uk) by 11.59pm on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2021.

The submitted essays will be judged by a panel and the winner will have the opportunity to work with the editors so that the essay can be published in either Volume Four or Volume Five of the *Review*. The winning essayist will be announced in Volume Four (to be published in September 2021).

For more information, please contact the Editors, Dr Nick Turner and Dr Nicola Darwood, at [bowen@beds.ac.uk](mailto:bowen@beds.ac.uk)

## ESSAYS

### Tung-An Wei ~ Elliptical Dialogues and Critique of Genres in *The Death of the Heart*

In this essay, I examine the elliptical dialogues in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* (1938), which are often considered to have no function other than highlighting the issues of class and manners. I would define an elliptical dialogue as one in which a significant part of the conversation is obscured for either the reader or any of the characters, a gap which is not filled for them throughout the remainder of the novel. There are a number of instances that must be distinguished from the elliptical dialogues I discuss. For example, the conversations between Anna and St Quentin at the beginning of the novel may be disorienting to a first-time reader, who is thrown into the middle of their conversations about Portia's diary and her behaviour without being properly introduced to the characters and their relationships. Even on a first reading, the reader's feelings of alienation are arguably dissipated as they are given more clues in the pages that follow. This conversation is not sufficiently recalcitrant to be the kind of elliptical dialogue I discuss in this essay. Additionally, Bowen's characteristic ellipses and dashes, which are used to cut short a sentence or make a sudden turn in a conversation, also fall outside the scope of my analysis, since a reader would mostly have little difficulty filling in the missing information. Moreover, the recalcitrance must be of a certain magnitude that it creates not only local difficulty, such as awkward interactions between the characters, but also a long-term impact on the narrative progression.<sup>1</sup> In Portia's dialogues with other characters, especially with Eddie, there are a number of non sequiturs and ellipses, but they may not necessarily have consequences on the progression. That is, they do not slow down or divert the narrative or point to some significant issue, the resolution of which will bring the novel to its ending. As I will discuss, the conversation between Matchett and the taxi driver is a paradigmatic example of an elliptical dialogue, because it poses significant questions about the ending of *The Death of the Heart*.

Elliptical dialogues are prevalent in Bowen's works around and beyond the 1930s, and many of these centre on class issues. As Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle have analysed, class dictates the acts of not-talking or talking but also not saying too much (2013: 72). Characters not only interrupt themselves at difficult moments in *Friends and Relations* (1931), but also self-censor so that sentences are left unfinished. Hermione Lee argues that *The Death of the Heart* is a study of the different strata of the English middle class, and that Portia is a *déclassée* who has no idea of what social behaviour ought to be and whose innocence is not only that of her age, sex, and the emotions, but more particularly a social innocence (1981: 104). Many of Portia's elliptical dialogues represent her exclusion from the middle class

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to James Phelan's notion of progression, which refers to 'the synthesis of both the textual dynamics that govern the movement of narrative from beginning through middle to end and the readerly dynamics' (2007: 3).

because they arise from her ignorance of manners. Additionally, the Waikiki episode in the novel focuses on the life of the lower middle class, the representations of which have attracted divergent commentaries.<sup>2</sup> Among other issues, there is an antagonism between classes in some of the elliptical dialogues from that episode, as I will discuss.

Moreover, elliptical dialogue lends itself to such diverse interpretations as intertextuality, representations of non- and miscommunication, and challenges to the arbitrariness of realist conventions. Bennett and Royle describe the dialogue between Stella, Robert, and Ernestine in Chapter 10 (especially p.207) of *The Heat of the Day* (1948) as ‘kinks’,<sup>3</sup> because no truth or tale is unfolded, while it enfolds a relation to *Hamlet* in ‘this cryptic, undecidably motivated, unanswerable citation from the Ghost’s speech’ (1995: 97-98). Taking her cue from these scholars, Yoriko Kitagawa suggests that in *The Death of the Heart* ‘the lack of “any comment” behind these words is a forerunner of the non-communicative dialogue in the plays of Beckett or Ionesco’, and that ‘the reader consequently takes more note of the dialogue as “verbal interaction” than of Anna and Thomas as “characters”’ (2000: 493-494). Analysing *The Last September* (1929) and *A World of Love* (1955), Siân White suggests that Bowen’s indirection (such as euphemisms, omissions, and abstract dialogues) critiques the artificiality of dialogue, which is generally thought to be communicative and closer to mimesis (2015: 97). Additionally, elliptical dialogues are also considered a manifestation of wartime paranoia (*The Heat of the Day*) and a partial representation of the Anglo-Irish posture (*The Last September*).<sup>4</sup>

This essay focuses on *The Death of the Heart* because its elliptical dialogues pose significant questions for the issue of narrative progression. I will show that these dialogues, while they do not completely subvert the overall narrative, are just porous enough to foreground the lack of motivation in characterisation, the mediation of dialogues, and the artificial role dialogue plays in romance, comedy of manners, and the *Bildungsroman*. I arrive at a similar conclusion to White, but for different

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<sup>2</sup> As a contemporary response to the episode, Victoria Glendinning records that several of Elizabeth Bowen’s friends, notably Edward Sackville-West, ‘did not at all encourage her [Bowen] in her burlesque, social-comedy manner’ (quoted in Coates, 1998: 150). Additionally, critics have arrived at antithetical conclusions about Bowen’s view of the lower middle class. While Nicola Humble praises the novel for its rare sympathetic representations of domestic space and of the leisure devices of the lower middle class (2001: 79-80), John Coates comments that Waikiki in Bowen’s view is a shallow world that ‘has no cultural values, traditions, sense of texture or subtlety of response to life. [...] Deprived of cultivation, and manners in the deepest sense, Daphne, Dickie and their friends seem to lack dimension’ (1998: 152). Moreover, as Julie Stevens notes, it is rather ironic that Daphne should work as a librarian, especially one that earns the respect of her elderly library subscribers because of her disregard for *belles lettres* (2009: 184).

<sup>3</sup> A ‘kink’ is first and foremost conceptualized as a thread. As the author explains, ‘Proliferating in all that links a text with weaving or knitting and in all that binds narrative to notions of unfolding and to the analysis of threads and lines, *The Heat of the Day* is sheer kink’ (1995: 86). In another capacity, ‘The sheer kink of *The Heat of the Day* concerns the experience of reading and the reading of experience. In other words it concerns a ghostly doubling [...] a work of rereading or re-experiencing which can neither help to constitute a more accurate “original” reading nor indeed, by the very necessity of this doubling, even coincide with itself’ (1995: 89).

<sup>4</sup> Many critics have commented on the opaque conversations and the associations with wartime paranoia and propaganda in *The Heat of the Day*. See for example Phyllis Lassner and Megan Faragher. Declan Kiberd, for one, discusses that ‘observant detachment had long been a feature of Anglo-Irish writing, which achieved an almost anthropological status, seeking to view man as if he were a foreign, even non-human, witness of himself’ (1997: 137). See also Robert Foster. Nevertheless, Maud Ellmann warns that Bowen’s formal and stylistic peculiarities cannot be attributed merely to her Anglo-Irishness (2003: 16).

reasons; I argue that while communication between the characters is denied in the elliptical dialogues in the novel, the reader can often fill in the gaps by drawing from the narrator's commentary, the narration, or from previous dialogues. The elliptical dialogues call attention to how certain types of dialogue are set up through romance, comedy of manners, and *Bildungsroman* plots, for example, to reveal the relationship between Eddie and Portia, and to reveal Anna's act of secretly reading Portia's diary. The novel therefore presents a profound aesthetic critique, which exists alongside the realistic treatment of human psychology and the representations of the middle class that have long been praised.

This essay draws on research on dialogues, primarily that of Bronwen Thomas, who warns against a prevalent 'direct discourse fallacy' and points out that dialogue is in fact not a truthful representation of speech, and that, on the contrary, it may be presented selectively, mediated through different stylistic devices, and qualified by, for example, speech tags (2012: 16-30). As Ryan Bishop reminds us, our judgments regarding 'natural' dialogue are determined by literary tradition, not by actual everyday conversation (1991: 58). Additionally, James Phelan's research on the two channels of communication—conversational and authorial disclosure—sheds light on the reader's and the characters' discrepant knowledge during elliptical dialogues. While the former refers to what characters communicate to each other in a scene of dialogue, the latter refers to what authors communicate to their audiences through conversational disclosures (Phelan 2017: 168). From these two notions Phelan further distinguishes a third resource, authorial disclosure across conversations, which refers to what authors communicate to their audiences by means of the links between and among the scenes of dialogue (ibid). Bowen manipulates these three resources so that the reader has more knowledge of the characters than the characters do of themselves or of each other. For example, towards the end of the novel, Matchett is sent by the Quaynes to fetch Portia, who stays with Major Brutt and refuses to come home. Realizing that she has missed the directions Thomas gave to the taxi driver, Matchett asks the driver about the destination in a circuitous way. Since we already know where Matchett is going to fetch Portia, through authorial disclosure across conversations in previous chapters, her ignorance of Portia's location, exhibited in conversational disclosure, is therefore thrown into sharp relief. In all the following three scenes of elliptical dialogue, an irony emerges from this discrepancy between the reader's and the characters' knowledge. Since the reader knows where Matchett is going, what is Bowen's point in setting up such a dialogue, beyond the more straightforward answers of irony, characterisation, or the ethical implications of giving voice to a servant, one of an underrepresented group of people?

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The conversation between Matchett and the taxi driver destabilises not only the characterisation but all the progression leading to the ending. As Matchett has missed Thomas's directions, she asks the driver:

'Here, do you know where you're to go to?'  
'Where he just said, don't I?'  
'Well, so long as you do know. But don't you come asking me. It's not my business. You've got to know your own way.'  
'Ho, come," said the driver, nettled. 'I didn't start this, did I?'

‘None of that, young man. You mind your own business, which is to know what address the gentleman said.’

‘Ho, so that’s what you want to know? Why not ask me out straight?’

‘Oh, *I* don’t want to know. I just wanted to know you did.’

‘Rightie-o, auntie,’ said the driver. ‘Then you chance it. Isn’t life an adventure?’ (412; original emphasis)

There are several mechanisms in this dialogue that contribute to its obscurity and in turn its seeming lack of narrative significance. The referent of the ellipsis remains unknown to the character (Matchett) throughout the progression. More significantly, both characters echo each other’s sentences without producing much information. Deliberately muddling the dialogue, Matchett is defensive because she does not like the fact that the driver sees through her ignorance. As if to maintain some kind of authority over the driver, she repeatedly draws lines between him and herself and admonishes him to mind his own business. But the driver is not naïve; he correctly reads that Matchett wants to make sure that she is going the right way. This partly contributes to the irony of the dialogue and creates considerable instability in Matchett’s personality, a character normally depicted as reliable and informed.<sup>5</sup>

This dialogue appears to create unnecessary instability in the narrative, giving rise to divergent critical positions. For some, what is more important is whether the novel is about the death of Portia’s heart or that of Anna. Lee suggests that Portia is like Henry James’s Maisie in *What Maisie Knew* (1897), a character who acquires diplomacy, loses her illusions about the person she loves, and has an intense relationship with a lower-class female guardian. On the contrary, Victoria Warren argues that the title actually refers to the callousness of Anna’s heart, which is transformed by Portia by the end of the novel.<sup>6</sup> There are still other interpretations: as Nicola Darwood suggests, the ending ‘fails to answer many of the questions posed by the novel and the reader is left to wonder about the future of Portia, Major Brutt, the Quaynes and, indeed, the future of the society in which the Quaynes move’ (2012: 115).

Moreover, the instability generated by the dialogue is not resolved but complicated by Matchett’s monologue:

I don’t know, I’m sure.

Mrs. Thomas certainly never thought to mention, and I never thought to ask. Whatever came over me? All Mr. Thomas said, when he put me in the taxi, was, did I need money outside of what I had. No, Mrs. Thomas didn’t mention, either, taking it Mrs. Thomas would be sure to have said. And there, you see, if I’d just left that door open I’d have heard what he said to the man. But I shut the door. Whatever came over me? No, I never thought to notice what he said to the man. And I wouldn’t ask *him* right out, not after all that sauce. You don’t know what drivers are. Not a nice class.

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<sup>5</sup> I refer to Phelan’s concept of instability, which is defined as ‘an unstable situation within the story: it may be between or among characters; between a character and his or her world; or within a single character’ (2005: 216). There are two kinds of instability. Global instabilities are ‘those that provide the main track of the progression and must be resolved for a narrative to attain completeness’, while local instabilities are ‘those whose resolution does not signal the completeness of the progression’ (2007: 16).

<sup>6</sup> Warren adds that her position is sanctioned by the author herself in a radio interview.

Oh well, it does seem queer. I ought to say to myself, well, things will get overlooked. What with all that hurry and that. The hotel was all she said, the hotel. But one of those might be anywhere. I can't but worry—oh, I am vexed with myself, not thinking to ask like that. How am I to know the place is the right place? He might stop and put me down anywhere, well knowing that not knowing I wouldn't know. I had no call to let on I didn't know. That did make me look wrong ... Not one of the drivers off our stand.

And what do I say if they say, Oh no, Major Brutt's not *here*, or Oh no, we know no one of that name. [...] (413; original emphasis)

A few scholars discuss how the prior focus on Portia's disillusion may or may not be displaced by Matchett's monologue. Kitagawa, for example, claims that Matchett's monologue is problematic for three reasons: it appears very abruptly in a text that has been composed exclusively of narration, dialogue, and Portia's diary; it presents not the heroine's voice but that of a minor character and reveals nothing more than the self-concern of prejudice, scepticism, and fear; and it is largely incompatible with the theme of the inner death of characters (2000: 495). Neil Corcoran, though admitting the weaknesses in the representations of working-class speech in the monologue, emphasises its merits:

it is undoubtedly in part a bow to Molly Bloom's monologue at the end of *Ulysses*; and it seems to me an appropriate and skilful adaptation of the mode as a mechanism of narrative termination. What it appears to propose is that the "big house" (that Irish rather than English locution), in its coldness, disdain, and heartlessness, may be saved from itself, if it is to be saved at all, only by the agency of the class whose labour it exploits. (2004: 120)

In an interpretation of the stylistic significance of the monologue, Chris Hopkins suggests that '[t]he passage is not, however, much like Woolfian stream of consciousness: the thought is not private, nor metaphorical in its procedures, but strictly contiguous. It is surely influenced by Molly Bloom's stream of consciousness in the final book of *Ulysses*, which, as [David] Lodge points out [in *The Modes of Modern Writing*], is highly metonymic' (2006: 39).

The dialogue and the monologue, though offering valuable class representations, seem to be otherwise narratively unnecessary, as both characters and the reader know where Matchett is heading. After all, the novel ends as Matchett pushes the doorknob of the Karachi Hotel. The ending, with the driver's comment on life as an adventure, nevertheless does provide loose parallels with Portia's earlier life of exile. More importantly, the dialogue prompts the monologue, which can be read as a speculation on possible futures and an attempt to reconstruct the situation in which Matchett misses Thomas's directions. The monologue starts with a mixture of self-reproach and exculpation; Matchett blames Anna for being in a rush, defends Thomas for what he says, and defends herself for not asking for more details. The monologue acts to fill in narrative gaps without conclusively reconstructing what has transpired. Further, Matchett reflects upon two contradictory endings: either Portia agrees or refuses to go with her. Her monologue explores several possible scenarios, especially what she would say if she were delivered to the wrong place and what she would say to Portia to persuade her to come home. By foregrounding gaps and hinting at possible directions in which the narrative could develop, both the dialogue

and the monologue significantly contribute to the ambiguity of the ending, in which the teleology of the *Bildungsroman* is subverted.

Another example of elliptical dialogue can be seen in the exchange between St Quentin and Portia when she is returning from school. Out of the blue, St Quentin asks 'How is your diary?' (326). The narrator notes from St Quentin's perspective that 'Portia's face flashed his way; she at once threw him a look like a trapped, horrified bird's' (326). St Quentin attempts to make up for his slip of the tongue with a weak explanation: 'that was just a shot in the dark. I feel certain you should keep a diary. I'm sure you have thoughts about life' (326). A short theoretical discussion on the difference between fiction and diary, pure invention and records of memory follows. The discussion is cut short by St Quentin's incongruous question for Portia: suppose someone reads her diary? (327). It is baffling why St Quentin would make such a blunder a second time. And his pretext that he is talking about 'a hypothetical diary' (328) will not suffice. Not only are St Quentin's remarks wholly unmotivated, so is Portia's sudden realization that Anna has been reading her diary. After hearing a few accusations of how her diary 'set[s] traps' for others and 'ruin[s] [their] free will' (328), Portia breaks from her characteristically terse and reserved way of speaking, replying, 'I see now you knew about my diary. ... *I suppose Anna found it and told you? Did she?*' (329; original emphasis). St Quentin quickly confirms Portia's speculation, explaining that he 'ha[s] no loyalty' (329). One cannot help but wonder: what prompts his defection and weak pretexts? More mysteriously, how does Portia come to this conclusion?

In this example, what eludes the reader are the characters' motivations. Compared with Matchett's dialogue, which is a result of the discrepancy in knowledge between Phelan's three resources (namely, authorial disclosure, conversational disclosure, and authorial disclosure across conversations), the difficulty in reading the dialogue between St Quentin and Portia may lie partly in the fact that we only have cues from conversational disclosures scattered across several scenes. It is possible that Bowen needed someone to reveal to Portia that Anna has been reading her diary; the initial instability established at the beginning of the novel, that is sustained by various other characters (for example, Eddie, who cautions Portia not to write about him in the diary) and by Portia herself (we read two sections of her diary), needs to be resolved. Nevertheless, St Quentin's unmotivated dialogue does not stop here. Bowen foregrounds the obscurity in St Quentin's motivation by having him reflect on 'these *lacunae* in people' (330) and by having him ask Portia, 'you don't *ask* what made me do that—you don't even ask yourself' (330; original emphasis). St Quentin even asks Anna the same question (400). To his disappointment, neither Portia nor Anna is interested in knowing why. Why does Bowen consider it necessary to make him ask Portia and Anna, when the reader can come to this conclusion on their own? What is the point of making the reader paradoxically find St Quentin more resistant (thanks to the combination of three resources) than Portia and Anna (who only have access to conversational disclosure) do? Perhaps St Quentin starts the dialogues out of his egoism and his sudden need of an audience, or perhaps irony is the ultimate answer. I nevertheless suggest that this elliptical dialogue lays bare the importance of motivation in dialogue, and that it further points to the novel's recursive tendency.

In the following dialogue between Daphne and Portia, two mechanisms of elliptical dialogue can be seen, namely a fixation on literal meanings and a persistent return to the earlier parts of the novel. After Eddie and Dickie have been sent to the bar, Portia

and Daphne stay behind in the lounge at Waikiki. Daphne starts an apparently casual conversation about Eddie:

‘[...] Is what’s-his-name, I mean Eddie, a popular boy?’

‘I don’t know who you mean with.’

‘Do girls fall for him much?’

‘I don’t know many girls.’

‘But your sister-in-law likes him, didn’t you say? Not that *she’s* a girl, of course. I must say, that gives one a funny idea of her. I mean to say, he’s so awfully fresh. I suppose that’s the way he always goes on?’

‘What way?’

‘The way he goes on here.’ (264; original emphasis)

As a mechanism of elliptical dialogue, literalisation provides no meaningful new information and pauses the narrative. Portia tends to overly rely on earlier comments from other characters to interpret the present dialogue. Daphne warns Portia that Eddie might be ‘playing her up’, to which Portia responds, ‘Do you mean about him holding your hand? He does that because he feels matey, he says’ (265). Portia’s response to Daphne recalls an earlier conversation with Eddie, in which he casually provides two contradictory explanations for his behaviour, one that he has ‘to get off with people [...] because [he] cannot get on with them’ (257), the other that he ‘felt matey’ (258). Moreover, Eddie suggests to Portia that she ‘just ask[s] old Daphne. It’s simply the way most people have to get on’ (259). Consequently, Portia keeps interpreting Daphne’s various comments about Eddie over the next two pages in light of this earlier conversation.

Determined to get a definitive answer from Daphne, Portia ignores or misinterprets Daphne’s annoyance:

‘[...] I don’t wish to blow my own trumpet, I never have, but one thing I will say is that I’m not a cat, and I’d never put in my oar with a girl friend’s boy friend. But the moment you brought that boy here, I could see in a moment anybody could have him. It’s written all over him. He can’t even pass the salt without using his eyes. Even so, I must say I thought it was a bit funny when—’

‘When he held your hand? Yes, I did just at first. But I thought perhaps you didn’t.’

‘Now Portia, you look here—if you can’t talk like a lady, you just take that puzzle away and finish it somewhere else. [...] I had no idea at all you were so *common*, and nor had Mumsie the least idea [...] This all simply goes to show the way you’re brought up at home, and I am really surprised at them, I must say. [...]

‘I will if you like. But I’m not doing my puzzle.’ (265-266; original emphasis)

In characteristically coarse lower-middle-class speech, Daphne attributes Portia’s impudence to her unsatisfactory upbringing and the class distinction between Portia and herself. Though Portia now lives in a middle-class household, Daphne implies that Portia in fact belongs to a class that is even lower than hers. Nicola Humble reveals the notion of gentility particular to Daphne’s class, explaining that she ‘is quite happy to flirt with Eddie, but it rocks her values to the core to have it talked about. The upper-middle-class characters, in contrast, are much more open about their dalliances, because [they are] less concerned to prove a gentility that they

largely take for granted' (2001: 81). Nevertheless, Portia does not stop here but yet again brings up the conversation between Eddie and herself earlier in the morning, replying that 'I don't know why to behave ... Then Eddie told me this morning that people have to get off when they can't get on' (267). Portia's response is a characteristic non sequitur, repeating the same question about holding hands a third time in fewer than two pages. Though arguably a non sequitur in this dialogue between Portia and Daphne, this is exactly Eddie's explanation to Portia. Portia demands definitive verbal answers, especially when she is told by Eddie to get one. Though the true answer to Portia's question cannot be clearer to the reader, she fails to see through Eddie's pretexts and Daphne's annoyance, owing to her fixation on literal readings. No wonder Daphne is absolutely incensed, saying that 'I should never lower myself. It's not my fault that you've got the mind of a baby—and an awful baby, if you'll excuse my saying so. If you don't know how to behave—' (267). Portia's incongruous comments and insistent disregard of all discouraging cues further suggest that the novel engages with the tradition of the comedy of manners. Indeed, especially with the publication of Lee's 1981 study, Bowen's work has been read as belonging to the tradition of the history of the novel of manners, to which Jane Austen and Henry James also belong.

The non sequitur in this dialogue not only shows how inept Portia is at interpreting cues; it also has several other functions. The non sequiturs, such as the question about holding hands in the above dialogue, are usually formulated in the exact or almost the same wordings as their first appearance in the novel. Operating like quotations that are inserted in the wrong place, these non sequiturs moreover often create a unique rhythm or pattern in the narrative. In this dialogue, the question about holding hands creates an alternative flow of conversation, which is stronger than the initial one in Daphne's casual and loosely connected comments about Eddie.

Portia's repeated question is part of the novel's pervasive use of quotation and paraphrasing of the words of others. Quotation seems to be primarily utilised by Portia and Matchett (e.g. 27; 92-95). Portia frequently quotes Eddie's words and records many terse conversations in her diary. Others are more in the habit of paraphrasing, with purposes ranging from establishing their authority and credibility, to alienating certain characters' relationships, to recounting a story unknown to others, and to simulating possible reactions. Interestingly, the novel is not especially repetitive because rarely are we given multiple versions of the same event, whether from the same or different characters. Nevertheless, in the above examples of elliptical dialogue, there is a tendency to repeat at certain critical moments in the narrative: for example, the resolution of the initial instability in reading Portia's diary (in the St Quentin example), and the instability that emerges in the relationship between Eddie and Portia in the middle of the novel (in the Daphne example).

To further discuss the innovations in Bowen's elliptical dialogues, I draw upon Phelan's three narrative components: the mimetic (characters as possible people and the narrative world as like our own, that is, hypothetically or conceptually possible); the thematic (the ideational function of the characters and the cultural, ideological, philosophical, or ethical issues being addressed by the narrative); and the synthetic (characters and the larger narrative as artificial constructs) (2007: 5-6). Dialogues are conventionally considered as a means to advance plot and develop

characterization (the mimetic).<sup>7</sup> Bowen's elliptical dialogues oscillate between the mimetic and the synthetic, because they combine representations of class (the thematic and the mimetic) and Bowenesque mannerisms (the synthetic). To a certain degree, the elliptical dialogues in *The Death of the Heart* are similar to what Elizabeth Alsop calls the mannerist approach to dialogue, in which the author culls from actual speech while at the same time lyricising these borrowed elements (2019: 30). In Alsop's view, the non-realist dialogues in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *The Waves* (1931) are more poetic in structure since they are detached from individual subjects and manifest intersubjectivity or authorial agency (2019: 3). Since Bowen's elliptical dialogues also contain significant mimetic dimensions in addition to the synthetic, these dialogues are not as extreme as those of Faulkner or Woolf. Additionally, Bowen's dialogues advance plot and develop characters, while the elliptical ones do so in unconventional ways. The elliptical dialogues in this novel utilize literalisation, non sequiturs, and quotations from earlier moments in the novel to further the plot without completely resolving the problems or filling in the gaps. At the same time, since these dialogues also suggest a peculiar rhythm and pattern in the novel, they approximate to but never fully become a poetic structure.

The elliptical dialogues I have examined in this essay highlight a larger problem of Bowen's *oeuvre*, one of periodisation. Bowen was for a long time considered a writer of manners or sensibility, [her] work often judged according to certain protocols of "realist fiction" and consequently 'valued as important, but minor' (Bennett and Royle 1995: xvi). Nevertheless, recently critics have started to re-evaluate Bowen and rethink her relationship to realism, modernism, and postmodernism. Beginning with characterisation, Bennett and Royle argue that undecidability in identity and even dissolution of character are especially prominent in *The Death of the Heart*, since the novel traces how human identity is fractured by a human otherness, such as that of animals and furniture (1995: 66). Kitagawa claims that *The Death of the Heart* anticipates a conception of self which is closer to postmodernism than modernism, the former of which is conceptualised with a focus on surface (2000: 486).<sup>8</sup> Kitagawa anticipates Maud Ellmann in suggesting that Bowen's descriptions of objects in human terms signal a turning away from the modernist psychological realm (2000: 485), but Kitagawa and Ellmann come to antithetical conclusions about the modernist status of Bowen's stylistic oddities. For Ellmann, Bowen is somewhere between classical realism and modernism. She explains that the elaboration with which objects are described, which makes people seem ill-defined, exceeds the exigencies of realism and goes beyond what Roland Barthes calls the 'reality effect' (2003: 7-8). Additionally, Hopkins points out that the characterisations in *To the North* (1932) are drawn from three different modes, writing that "They are not "realist" characters who can be explained clearly, nor Woolf-like characters with complex thought processes of which they are aware, nor Waughesque characters who do not have an "internal" life' (2006: 32). In terms of the issues of narrative time and space, Janice Rossen observes that 'while she [Bowen] writes consciously within a realist tradition, she has also absorbed from the Modernists a tendency to perceive life and the physical world itself in flux' (1992: 103). Bowen's taxonomic difficulties occur on the levels of language and narrative as well; Nels Pearson suggests that in *The Last September* (1929) and *The House in Paris* (1935) 'syntax, word choice, and

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<sup>7</sup> See for example *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory*: 105.

<sup>8</sup> Kitagawa also draws from Nathalie Sarraute's essay, 'From Dostoevski to Kafka', in which she contrasts the postmodern conception of self with the modernist one of depth and psychology.

metaphor almost heavy-handedly imply that time or space are somehow out of joint, anomalous, disjunct; yet, the narrative remains essentially linear or objectively framed' (2015: 63-64). I argue that *The Death of the Heart* is akin to modernism insofar as the epistemological dominant<sup>9</sup> is manifested in the aporias (ellipses, aposiopesis, literalisation, and non sequitur) and in the thematisation of the reader's and the characters' differential extent of knowledge.

Bowen's evasion of taxonomies is in fact characteristic of many fictions produced in the 1930s. According to John Mepham, there was a shift to a focus on the problem of representing talk in social interactions in the fiction of the 1930s and 1940s; the writers at work, he argues, can be labelled modernist while being accessible and working within or close to the popular models of fiction (2007: 59-60). His preferred way of theorising this period is to 'emphasise the ways in which post-1930s' fiction broke not only with nineteenth-century traditions, but also with the conventions developed in the period of avant-garde modernism, for example in the works of Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf' (2007: 59). Because of the shared concerns of class, manners, and domestic interiors, Humble recruits Bowen for the feminine middlebrow novel, 'the "other" of the modernist or avant-garde novel' that comprises genres ranging from the romance to the country-house novel, through domestic and family narratives to detective and children's literature and the adolescent *Bildungsroman* (2001: 24). But one wonders whether the distinction between high- and middlebrow is as clearly defined as Humble claims. After all, she comments that Bowen 'combines caustic gossip about class and domesticity with a stylised, mannered exploration of profoundly separate subjectivities that has much in common with Virginia Woolf's similar project' (2001: 26). The debate continues with Brook Miller, who inverts Humble's terms to argue that Bowen is a highbrow figure concerned with the complexities of the middlebrow, and that she nevertheless resists the middlebrow because she refuses to view the market as 'a site for potential subversion' and because she 'values literature that insists on an impersonal narratorial relation to the passions, rather than indulging popular taste for an attitude of censure or complicity' (2007: 361). The concept of intermodernism might capture Bowen's fiction, since it is all-encompassing in genres and deconstructs binarisms such as, but not limited to, high- and lowbrow. However, Bowen's work does not have some of the crucial characteristics of intermodernism: the political allegiances with communism, socialism, and feminism; the focus on the representation of the working-class; or the commitment to noncanonical, even middlebrow genres and forms of media (Bluemel 2009: 5-7). In short, Bowen's elliptical dialogues, along with other stylistic oddities, remain elusive in whichever literary period we read them. In this respect, Susan Osborn is incisive when she writes that 'Bowen's works' resistances and the unfamiliar and often irregular problems [...] seem less indicative of an irreducible otherness or a conceptual or lexical failure than they do of the persistent uncertainty that readers share about how to approach and represent the competing pressures apparent in Bowen's art' (2009: 6).

In this essay I have examined the various functions of the elliptical dialogues in *The Death of the Heart*. These dialogues are mimetic insofar as they are uttered by people in a world resembling our own, and they can be considered conventional

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<sup>9</sup> Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* defines modernism as epistemologically dominant, that is, preoccupied with epistemological issues.

insofar as they seem to mostly align with the plots of *Bildungsromans* and comedies of manners. In Daphne's and Matchett's dialogues, we see compelling representations of the speech of their respective classes. Portia's *déclassée* identity and her ignorance of manners account for her awkward words in these dialogues, but St Quentin's unmotivated dialogue is better explained by the force of conventions of various popular genres than by class. Moreover, in some instances these dialogues seem to render instability where none is needed, thereby calling our attention to their synthetic functions as plot devices and their being part of the novel's general fabric of quotation and paraphrasis. The elliptical dialogues in *The Death of the Heart* break realist protocols without completely exploding them, while they critique the roles dialogue plays in romance, comedy of manners, and *Bildungsroman* without completely subverting them. By uncovering the innovative narrative functions of the elliptical dialogues, I have tried to show how *The Death of the Heart* stands out from the clamorous conversations of the 1930s.

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## Sofia Pelendridis-Roberts ~ Visual resonance in *The Heat of the Day*

‘Illusions are art, for the feeling person, and it is by art that we live, if we do’  
(Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart*).

Elizabeth Bowen’s engagement with visual culture is palpable in her fiction. Her interest in aspects of cinema, photography and surrealism has been well documented. Discussing Bowen’s writing, Patricia Laurence observes how she ‘deepens a scene like a painter who creates a setting in which to immerse her figures or her eyes reel past a landscape like a film, or takes a still photograph. She becomes an instrument, a kind of screen upon which images are projected’ (2019: 223). The art forms of painting, film and photography are connected here. In addition, Laurence’s statement indicates how Bowen becomes both the shifting medium and the creator of her intermedial visions. Her interpolation of Bowen’s eye into the field of visual and technological consciousness (her eyes ‘reel’, she ‘becomes an instrument’), indicates a deep affinity between Bowen and visual aesthetics, a place in which Bowen can work alchemically as the distance between self and form dissolves. Images are flung onto Bowen’s ‘screens’ or canvases, and are intuited into a pattern in her fiction. The intermediality of Bowen’s work is alluded to in Laurence’s description of Bowen as ‘an instrument, a kind of screen’ (233). However, discussions of Bowen’s artistry are often presented through a particular artistic identity or form, and do not necessarily pay attention to the particularities at play in the textual visualities of her work.

This essay focuses on minute repetitions in Bowen’s 1948 novel *The Heat of the Day*, to show how they constitute their own theorisation of the visual. Bowen’s work is preoccupied with seeing and seeing again, and it is through the interplays of viewing and spectatorship that the issues of belonging in the novel are so vividly animated. Any reliance on the ocular is shaken, a dislocation heightened by what Harriet Chessman describes as ‘the danger inherent in all fiction making’ (1983: 69). Bowen destabilises the viewing and the viewed in such a way that not just character but reader, too, might strive for some semblance of the familiar. It is in the force of highly resonant visual details that I suggest this is found. Close readings of the text will demonstrate the energetic pertinence of the visual as a quality which, though perhaps reminiscent of cinematic discourse, cannot be captured. Visual resonance, I will suggest, is a much more fluid way of thinking about Bowen’s text, because it is more aligned to the force of the image in the text itself. In turn, I will explore how the dynamics of isolation, connection and transference not only *feature* pictorially but are part of the energetic make-up of the image. Just as *The Heat of the Day*’s concern with modes of articulation also reflects the modernist preoccupation with authorial voice, by extending notions of disembodied transmission to the visual, this study speaks not only to tensions *within* but outside and beyond: to ways of seeing reading alongside the developments of cinema.

Set in wartime London, *The Heat of the Day* painfully expresses how war transfigures communication. The novel questions the nature, source, and shape of communication, and it is with this context in mind that a concentration on the visual

as a form of communication becomes particularly interesting. The opening lines of the novel conjure a hauntingly visual scene that resurfaces in various ways throughout the text:

That Sunday, from six o'clock in the evening, it was a Viennese orchestra that played. The season was late for an outdoor concert; already leaves were drifting on to the grass stage - here and there one turned over, crepitating as though in the act of dying, and during the music some more fell. (1948: 7)

It is the leaves in this passage, 'drifting on to the grass stage', 'crepitating as though in the act of dying', that have such a strong imagistic quality. It is the leaves the reader *sees*, an image strengthened by the acoustic register of the scene: 'crepitating' refers to an aural mode of perception, but here it serves to amplify the visual delivery of this sentence. This is an image of premature death and strained movement, of the ocular betraying the familiar, of exaggerated isolation and an unbearably close yet detached observation. The image is part of the acoustic scene that an audience (yet to be introduced) is witnessing. The reader sees what they are seeing before knowing who *they* actually are; that is, unless it is the season itself—curiously personified as 'late for an outdoor concert'—which is the audience, a reading in keeping with the air of ghostly spectatorship so central to the novel. But the gaze always has an object, and it is clear here that it is not only viewing that adopts a spectral quality, but what is being viewed. The image of the leaves reflects a ghostly performance that blurs the boundaries between nature itself and theatricality. The 'set' for this image is the 'grass stage' onto which they fall, suggesting an acute lack of separation between the real and the illusory. This uncertainty is doubled by the allusion to a questionable audience; knowing that this is their scene, whoever *they* are, the reader is made to feel like an intruder.

### **Visual Resonance**

An uninvited, unknowable presence infuses this war-torn text, constructed as it is around the dead's 'anonymous presence', 'pervading everything to be seen or heard or felt with their torn-off senses' (91). This anonymity also surrounds the narrative lives of the characters. Haunted narrative as collective trauma is internalised and treated as a central tension in the plot-within-plot of *The Heat of the Day*. As the leaves which opened the text 'continued to fall' (7), this blurring of temporality so prevalent in the novel shows that the leaves continuously fell and are falling, and will continue to fall. This visual timelessness is attributed to the pervasiveness of the image and its endless degrees of resonance. Resonance, the 'power or quality of evoking or suggesting images, memories, and emotions; an allusion, connotation, or overtone' (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*), is primarily an aural concept. It is the reinforcement of sound 'by reflection or by the synchronous vibration of a surrounding space or a neighbouring object' (*ibid*). This is analogous to Albert Einstein's argument that 'to every event there are as many 'neighbouring' events (realised or at least thinkable) as we care to choose' (1961: 62). In a fusion of the three, visual resonance is an echoing of the image, infused with such energy that it resonates independent of a receiver, while its registration certainly amplifies such resonance. Though it is tempting to label this passage as 'cinematic', images were replayed in the mind long before the birth of cinema and its capacity for infinite reproduction. As Bowen herself notes, "the pictures" date right back in their

command of emotion: they are inherently primitive' ('Why I go to the Cinema', 1938: 219). It is with a sense of finality that a quality of the text is framed as cinematic, which contradicts the very energy of the image as something which resounds visually, emotionally, lyrically even.

Additionally, the force of this image has an impact on the syntactical and linguistic expression in Bowen's sentence. The leaves inhabit both the past (indicated in the past participle delivery of this image: 'continued'), and the present ('fall'). This signifies the questionable ability of an artist to capture an image, as the leaves' place in the text itself is uprooted. It also speaks to the uncertain distinction between *telling*, narrative delivery, and *seeing*. Maud Ellmann observes how Bowen's fictions 'refuse to be contained within a single frame of reference' (2003: 3). It is one thing to label an image cinematic, but quite another to suggest an enactment of cinematic duality within a writer's mode of delivery. To do so here would, I believe, prematurely rob Bowen of her writing, or what she describes as 'verbal painting' (2019: 224). There is a felt resonance in this image of the leaves which, whilst resisting categorisation, seems to attract images of a similar emotional force throughout the novel. So, variously in the novel, in London, '[p]arks suddenly closed because of time-bombs – drifts of leaves in the empty deck chairs' (1948: 91); in Stella's flat, despite that here, 'senses were cut off from hour and season', '[...] something happened – petals detached themselves from a rose [...] to fall, one by one, on to Stella's letters' (56); in Louie's imagination, she returns to the rose garden, where '[g]reat globular roses, today at the height of their second blooming, burned more as the sun descended, dazzling the lake' (17). All these images connect and create a counter-dialogue. The leaves which opened the text, and which continue to infuse it, blend with fellow images. An inter-artistic narrative is formed.

In turn, the way these images are connected lessens the distance between them, despite the energy of their isolation when they are considered individually. The repeated image has the effect of bridging voids between people, space, and place. In these examples, for instance, the shared imagery of leaves blooming and falling draws together Stella and Louie (the two central female characters of the novel) and their different contexts. Through the resonance of the repeated image, a psychic connection is formed between characters (albeit one of collective loneliness). Neil Corcoran describes how the threat of annihilation and deceit in the novel extends to its style, which is 'fraught, intimate, and urgent: its pitch is so high, and its syntactical distortions and dislocations sometimes so arrestingly peculiar, because the pitch of the potential panic is so acute' (2004: 169). Interestingly, Corcoran instinctively adopts a language of frequencies, amplification, and vibration. It is worth noting that all the images mentioned here are pictures of what somebody or something in the novel has *seen*. They are not just stylistic images of setting and effect; rather, they rely on the ocular for their entry into this narrative. In this sense, the hypnotising presence of these images has the effect of controlling time and narrative both for the characters (Stella, Louie, and the anonymous park audience), and for the reader.

### **Thinking in images**

It is significant that the images so far referred to are ones from nature. By drawing on the most cyclical symbol that exists, Bowen reminds us that this is a setting where 'real' becomes a metaphysically charged question amidst the horrors of war; where

nature itself becomes unnatural, untimely, and out of place. The juxtaposition of the natural and the mechanical is a familiar trajectory in the cinema, both thematically and theoretically. Indeed, it is easy to trace these images in cinematic terms: the close-up of the petals, the freeze-frame effect in which leaves or petals seem to last forever yet never to fall, the repetition of associative imagery to conjure *mise-en-scène*, and the unreliable narrator. All these point to the unsolicited allusion to not only one, but a whole host of cameras ready to transfigure our gaze. Yet when nature is employed sensitively in art to embody a particular spirit, it is intuitively moving. It evaporates any sense of artifice, and in turn, the presence of nature is not that of a textual construction but its opposite: the allusion to something that is always already *there*. These images in Bowen's text carry such emotional charge that they seem to have always been present and connected, even outside the novel. Bowen taps into a collective visual resonance, and in doing so electrifies her scenes with the pathos of unnumbered 'souls astray' (Bowen, 1948: 248), who have seen their pain in the image. In themselves, the images carry emotional potency, but connected together they relay an emotional movement, even if the image itself is one of frozen or exaggerated growth. The associated 'feeling of motion' (Eisenstein, 1929: 1949: 50) is a central aspect of Eisenstein's cinematic montage. Perhaps unsurprisingly, shot and montage emerge through highly imagistic language in his writing. Eisenstein depicts the shot as a 'cell', showing that it is through its 'collision' that montage is characterised (37). The dynamism inherent in the image (cell) and connection (collision) of images to form a montage suggests one of innate connectivity: that there is something in the image as a life-force that 'breeds' with the partner images it was always destined to meet.

Despite how the rhythmicality of the natural world provides its own visual language, visual resonance is by no means exclusive to images of nature in *The Heat of the Day*. Resonance, by nature, is expansive, and as such I would propose that any images with a similar frequency invariably connect to one another, just as sound depends on 'synchronous vibration' ('Resonance', *Oxford English Dictionary Online*). Both occur regardless of a witness. In fact, if one considers the old adage that 'like attracts like', this connection could be seen to extend beyond the control of the author. To follow this logic, one may question at what point visual resonance ceases to be visual and becomes simply resonance. Since resonance is something which repeatedly resounds, there is something to be said for the centrality of the image in the consciousness which makes visual resonance particularly evocative. After all, it is the image of the leaves that resounds in the very opening scene, and not, despite its physical largeness and its greater textual reference, the orchestra and the music that open the text. The reader does not, for instance, hear the tones that emerge, or *see* the orchestra. Rather, it is the leaves that emit the richness of visual presence. This brings to mind Bowen's notion that '[o]ne thinks in images and the language found for them is nothing more than a translation' (1953). The close relationship Bowen attributes to cognition and image suggests that consciousness finds its manifestation in the visual. In turn, it follows that the repetition of the visual in particularly resonant ways can affect thought. Both are points of transferral, sites at which something is delivered, and both are simultaneously evident in the aforementioned scenes. As a further example from the novel, Stella's son Roderick noticing the petals 'fall, one by one' (56) (another inflection of the leaves that open the novel) provides a visual register for the shared sensation of immobility, a manifestation of thought through the image. The life of the image is an assurance of existence. The visual resonance of the image, which Stella sees Roderick seeing

before she 'watched also' (56), has the energy, once registered, to affect change. Hence, the strained period of 'imperfect silence' (56) is broken, after the shared assimilation of the image, the visual mobilisation of thought, and Stella is able to find words: 'that reminds me' (56), she continues.

### Seeing and seeing again

What complicates visual resonance is the fact that its (registered) impact depends on the receptivity of the individual. Even if visual resonance goes unnoticed, it does not preclude its existence, nor does it mean that an exchange does not occur. It simply shows that at this particular moment in time, the intensity or awareness of this exchange is less vivid. As John Berger writes, all seeing is 'affected by what we know or what we believe' (1972: 8). This invariably applies to the artist. If, as Bowen suggests, '[o]ne thinks in images', what happens when this thought is theorised within the text? Here I am thinking of two scenes in particular, which serve to interrogate visual resonance through the overt introduction of the camera. This is something which not only threatens to obliterate the visual resonance of the scene, but raises interesting questions about the nature of the cinematic in fiction. The first is when the narrative retraces Stella's first meeting with her partner Robert, 'from whom she only turned away to wave good-bye to the friend who had brought her across the room':

That gesture of goodbye, so perfunctory, was a finalness not to appear till later. It comprehended the room and everybody, everything in it which had up to now counted as her life: it was an unconscious announcement of the departure she was about to take - a first and last wave, across widening water, from a liner. Remembered, her fleeting sketch of a gesture came to look prophetic; for ever she was to see, photographed as though it had been someone else's, her hand up'. (95)

The natural and automatic 'wave good-bye' becomes immobilised with the weight of the emotional force it comes to symbolise, 'a finalness not to appear till later'. Even the narrative voice alerts us to this shift in temporality and reality by moving swiftly from a 'wave good-bye' to 'the gesture of goodbye': already distanced from the motion itself, the wave becomes its own picture as the narrator reframes it into an act. The original image is rapidly layered on top of itself: the initial movement, the memory of this, the re-enactment in the present tense, and the solidification of this movement into an image (it is no longer movement but 'gesture').

The visual resonance of this scene intensifies when the image is recalled from multiple perspectives. The emotional force of image and memory of image (unique to the person remembering) compounds and communicates in a visual resonance where the wave is infinitely evocative. In turn, sense, self, moment, time and place and its desperate laceration, which the wave epitomises, are articulated through the intimacy of the visual. The echoing of this single image creates its own poignant lyric. Whilst bodily motion is extinguished from its source (reinforced through the continuous reference to the wave as 'it'), the pathos of detachment is embodied visually. In this sense, the fact that Stella then refigures the image in photographic terms— 'for ever she was to see, photographed as though it had been someone else's, her hand up' - encapsulates the pervasiveness not only of *this* image but *the* image.

Clearly, as the image is what photography and cinema is able to replay and reconstruct (cinema makes 'a montage disintegration of the event in various planes' (Eisenstein, 1929: 1949: 34), Bowen's allusion to camera work is unsurprising. But its predictability is what is most jarring: not for the emotional dislocation that it is meant to enhance, but for the transparency of its presence. The narrator describes how 'remembered, her fleeting sketch of a gesture came to look prophetic', yet it is unclear who is doing the remembering. Through whose 'look' does the gesture become prophetic? The narrative voice blends with the 'shoals' (91) of the dead, circulating hints that it is not necessarily Stella who is 'seeing' the photograph in this image. In turn, 'photographed as though it had been someone else's', may not actually be referring to the disassociation of her hand but rather the discordance of the image itself, which is 'someone else's' vision. Such a reading deepens what is already a novel of haunted self and haunted sight. In this sense, the photograph is as much imposed on Stella as it is on the reader, who has already prophesied the entry of the camera through the imagistic register of the description.

### **The Cinema**

The second scene I want to look at here is the freeze-frame occurrence of the single reference to the cinema in *The Heat of the Day*, a reference which is highly arresting. It deserves attention because it has, to this point, been anonymous and disguised. First, the context of the scene. Privately fearing each other's obliteration by war, Stella and Robert's meeting is punctured by the following dialogue:

He then broke out 'I'm very glad you are here. I was certain something had happened to you.'  
'Why should it?'  
'Because that would be exactly the sort of thing that would happen to me.'  
(98).

As an important aside that I will return to, the language of this exchange suggests an important connectivity at play. Robert's words 'that would be exactly the sort of thing that would happen to me' are read by Stella as the 'travesty of a glum boy's manner' (98). This, indeed, is how it first appears, until the reader notes the deliberate ambiguity of Robert's 'that'. The 'that' does not only refer to *Stella's* potential eradication, which comes to symbolise Robert's psychological fears of being deserted; it refers to the potential extinction of his own self. In this light, the 'something' he fears would happen to Stella is the 'something' he fears could happen to him. This in fact harbours a much deeper, collective psychic wound. Though subconsciously speaking to a collective fear of obliteration by war, this also raises a questionable distinction between Robert and Stella, a comment on the telepathic ties between lovers. Looking more closely at this dialogue, it is interesting to note that the blurring of boundaries between self and other figures is a textual pattern on the page itself. Robert's 'something had happened to you' is literally mirrored back in 'the sort of thing that would happen to me'. Yet, what had the potential to be a reinforcement of psychic connection between the lovers bypasses them both. Neither Robert nor Stella are granted this deeper awareness because they are a couple who, according to Ellmann, are 'always haunted by an absent third' (2003: 72). The connection between the characters is stolen from them by the narrative voice. Its impact is one of disembodied form.

In Robert articulating a fear that Stella shares, silence and immobilisation ensue: '[s]he stayed with a cigarette - which before he spoke he had been on the point of lighting - held to her lips, looking tentatively at him. He kept his thumb on the lighter' (98). With the 'time stands still' quality of emotional rupture, this image repeatedly splinters into itself. In which image is it that Stella 'stayed with a cigarette'? Is it now, in this scene (a scene that is of course a replay), or in the image of the image remembered, an image that will never progress and will always remain (static)? It is an image which so infuses the present with its dislocation of temporality that it becomes impossible to decipher which is the real, which the image, and which the memory. The reader wonders if Robert was indeed on the brink of lighting the cigarette in 'reality' after all. Nevertheless, in Stella's mind, she, or *they*, still exist pictorially in the what-has-been: the 'demolition of an entire moment' (96). It subsequently becomes unclear whether her 'looking tentatively at him' is a look she is holding *in* this picture, or in the present (at least the narrative memory of this present). It is not a great leap to question whether this actually happened at all, except for the fact that it is an image that the narrator sees. It is a product of the narrative voice that blurs, annihilates, and then fills in the space between past, present and future; between self and other. This is a tribute to Bowen's artful articulation of image. Relaying a force of emotional immobility through the immobilised image facilitates a cognitive fluidity, a mobilisation of thought and feeling which finds expansion through the eternal image. So why must the cinema lay claim to such effect? Indeed, the fact that it becomes an 'effect' in the first place is troubling.

The full passage, in which the reference to the cinema occurs, is as follows:

She stayed with a cigarette - which before he spoke he had been on the point of lighting - held to her lips, looking tentatively at him. He kept his thumb on the lighter. So in the cinema some break-down of projection leaves one shot frozen, absurdly, on the screen. (98).

In exactly the way the entry of the photograph in my close reading of the wave enacts what the reader has already seen for themselves, the same is true here for the cinema. If, as Bowen writes, 'the aesthetic is nothing but a return to images that will allow nothing to take their place' ('Out of a Book', 1946: 53), why let cinema 'own' this image here? A redeeming feature of this use of the camera lies in the prospect that its employment is a deliberate means of commenting on the possibilities and limitations of cinema itself. In 'Why I go the Cinema' Bowen suggests we have 'almost within our grasp, a means to the most direct communication possible between man and man' (1938: 220). In fact, Bowen's recapitulation of this scene in cinematic terms serves as an enactment of this perspective. By paralleling her image with 'some break-down of projection' in order to enhance the emotional impact of this scene, Bowen insinuates that it is in the break-down of cinema that one can find the source of something forcefully resonant. She does not refer to a technique in cinema to heighten the emotional effect of her scene. Rather, she alludes to the eradication of its artifice, its technical modes of production which, failing here, have the greatest power. This is not too dissimilar from Virginia Woolf's argument that it is the 'accidental' in cinema that is the source of a more truthful, vivid, creative expression ('The Cinema', 1926: 2008: 174).

If the greater the fortuity the richer the picture, then it is interesting to note the (potentially) accidental effect created by cinema's entry into fiction. My reading of the line that contains the cinema reference in this novel perhaps goes some way to exploring this. The quotation '[s]o in the cinema some break-down of projection leaves one shot frozen, absurdly, on the screen' (98), is meant to refer to Stella 'with a cigarette [...] held to her lips [...]. He kept his thumb on the lighter' (98). However, quite fortuitously, it is the *leaves* that I see as the 'one shot frozen' in each reading of this line. This returns us to the leaves in the opening paragraph of the novel, to the leaves throughout the novel, and indeed, to every frozen image with which they fuse. There is an intimacy in these connected images that cannot be touched; an aliveness which seems to resonate independently of an observer. It is curious that, whilst cinema characteristically ruptures the linearity of temporality, its entry into fiction in this passage registers a breakdown in the internal life of the sentence. The reader starts to transmit motion into the line: a phantom pause after 'projection', a breakdown in prose which further isolates the leaves as the 'one shot frozen' for montage effect. Whilst 'leaves' is in fact meant to mean lingering, the activation of all the images of the leaves mean it is *they* that linger. In this sense, the reader has already experienced the absurdity Bowen raises before coming into contact with it textually ('absurdly, on the screen'). Subsequently, there is a ridiculousness to this word 'screen': it becomes absurd because of the staged distance. 'Screen' is a barrier textually, something to prevent getting through or past, and something that actually feels quite foreign in this sentence, because the sense of 'cinema' was invoked prior to its arrival. It seems belated because there is something inherent in visual resonance that prophesises cinema. The image is always intuitively psychic.

In contrast, 'screen' reminds us of something mechanical and staged. 'The cinema', writes Kenneth Macpherson, 'has become so much a habit of thought and word and deed as to make it impossible to visualise modern consciousness without it' (1998: 8). The closeness of cinema to modern consciousness is embedded in Macpherson's language, but simultaneously reveals itself to be a dynamic of separation and projection, since to 'visualise' is to extract oneself from reality. Such trickery is what is at stake with Bowen's introduction of 'screen'. Intentionally or not, it alerts us to the threat to our own powers of discovery and imagination. Adopting Bowen's conviction that we 'think in images', the appearance of the screen rudely places us outside this fluid imagistic cognition by immobilising the image into packaged slides. Cinema obliterates itself when it becomes active in this text. Notably, this extract from the novel unconsciously redirects itself to a visually resonant mode of perception, one not borne of cinema, but certainly enhanced by. The textual screen which cinema affects within the novel functions as a barrier to feeling, knowing and reality. Though it was no doubt Bowen's intention when implementing the cinematic to heighten such sensation, to what degree she is theorising the cinema remains less clear. Nonetheless, the cinema screen in this novel inevitably finds its like in fellow images of uncertain detachment and blurred boundaries. It thus blends with the 'wall between the living and the dead' (92), with 'the safety curtain between the here and there' (126), and the fact that 'war made you see any peaceful scene as if it were through glass' (104): all the barriers which normally serve to intercept identification with feeling itself.

## Seeing beyond

This essay has responded to the repetition of key images, both large and small, natural and technological, in *The Heat of the Day*. I have attempted to show how, through reading and rereading these central moments, Bowen's textual visuality carries its own rhythmic energy, one which deserves to be seen and seen again. The visual in Bowen's work does not correspond to categories of art form (singular or multiple). Rather, it functions as a network of thought itself: a place where meaning, matter and art converge. *The Heat of the Day* is a landscape so percolated with stifled feeling, suppressed selves and the simulacra of uncertain realities that the ability to establish a direct pathway to feeling, and a *knowing* in this feeling, becomes a central struggle. This seems to be as much a concern for the characters within the text as it is for Bowen, who must endeavour to locate a mode of articulation proportionate to the force of *what* it carries. Its realisation is further problematised by the dead (who find more of a home in this text than any character) 'pervading everything to be seen or heard or felt with their torn-off senses' (91). Yet, interestingly, it is this discourse of spirit communication that facilitates a 'breaking through' in this text. This can be seen with unparalleled force towards the end of the novel, where the exposure of Robert's fascism disintegrates the parable of love between him and Stella: "Why?" she cried, 'what is the matter - what?' Not letting go of the sofa, she put out her other hand; which he, by immediately catching at and holding by its wrist to his breast, used to establish a sort of circuit for the joke or agony.' (285-6). The 'what' in the 'what is the matter - what?' is exactly that which cannot be *formed* into being, only *felt*. It can be articulated only through bypassing the modes of articulation to such a degree that what is left is pure resonance, and what is felt finds its knowledge in these reverberations. In a devastating proximity of physical contact, the 'circuit' created soothes the pair into an alignment of self and soul so deep as to be untouchable. Such force detonates the 'demolition of the entire moment' (96) in its profound timelessness. With a similar intimacy generated through the visual resonance of this image, the reader knows that nothing could take its place.

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## Connor Larsen ~ Reading Adolescents & Adolescent Reading in *The Death of the Heart*

The central drama in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* concerns a wandering text: a diary that, twice, falls into the wrong hands, causing betrayals in friendships and the breakdown of a family. Sixteen-year-old orphan Portia Quayne, who has spent her life traipsing through off-season hotels in Southern Europe, suddenly finds herself in her half-brother's elegant Regent's Park home, where she is in the position of a visitor to a foreign culture. In the 1930s *beau monde* drawing rooms of the British upper classes, the conversational currency is doublespeak, a mode of communication with which Portia has no familiarity. Always an acute listener and observer in the house, Portia overhears snatches of conversations, hushed and muffled interactions between her guardians, and catches quick glances that characters throw at one another. The novel explores the development of Portia's *reading* practices: she struggles to work out the relationship between what people feel, what they say, and how they say it. Portia's diary, which is embedded in the novel as though printed verbatim, is the written record of an adolescent trying to puzzle out the 'little signs' (312) of the world around her, a world where meaning is buried. When her sister-in-law Anna looks in the diary, she is aghast: she reads Portia's writing as a damning portrait of her, as a criticism of her and Thomas's behaviour as guardians, and as an ethical spur for them to examine the way they live their lives. The diary is also a point of contention when Portia meets Eddie, a mischievous young friend of Anna who charms Portia and pursues her. The novel suggests that Portia's idealistic attachment to him is a product of *misreading*, an error of interpretation. In a tragic act of self-sabotage, Portia agrees not to speak or write about her relationship with him, thus giving up her ability to tell her own story.

It is only through an act of *re-reading* Eddie in the light of another insincere character that she learns to read the signs of his betrayal.

## Reading

The descriptions of Portia in the novel pay close attention to the way that she watches and observes. The narrator tells us that Portia's gaze is 'steady, level, and unassuming [and] missed nothing' (27). In one moment in the novel, we are told that 'Anna had felt those dark eyes [...] steal back again and again to her face' (49). In another moment, Portia slinks through the Regent's Park house, 'softly opening door after door, looking all round rooms with her reflecting dark eyes, glancing at each clock, eyeing each telephone' (229). At times Portia seems as if she is nothing more than a pair of 'dark eyes'. Adolescence is a time of watchfulness, a time to learn to read the signs of the world around one. As Neil Corcoran suggests, Portia's age—sixteen—is 'an ambivalent age and an age of ambivalence, an awkward age' (2004: 106).<sup>1</sup> It is a time of particular intensity, a rich site for a novelist's exploration of how one learns to read social cues, and, crucially, to understand the way that meaning is often communicated through *knowing* winks and nods. As she listens to the witty sardonic commentary in Anna and Thomas's drawing room, Portia, untrained in the social world where she suddenly finds herself, notes the winks and nods at each turn, but cannot make out the meaning behind them. Her social milieu up until this point has been a world away from London high society, as she has spent her life traversing dingy hotels with her mother Irene. The narrator describes their life together in the following:

she and Irene had been skidding about in an out-of-season nowhere of railway stations and rocks, filing off wet third-class decks of lake steamers, choking over the bones of *loups de mer*, giggling into eiderdowns that smelled of the person-before-last. Untaught, they had walked arm-in-arm along city pavements, and at nights had pulled their beds closer together or slept in the same bed.[...] Seldom had they faced up to society - and when they did, Irene did the wrong thing, then cried. (56)

This tender description of their life contrasts sharply with the atmosphere of Anna and Thomas's home at Windsor Terrace, which the narrator describes as 'rigidly ruled' and 'queasy and cold' (170). Despite their relative poverty, the cosy affection between mother and daughter is a far cry from the hushed house in Regent's Park, where 'there was no place where shadows lodged, no point where feeling could thicken' (42). The key word 'untaught' suggests that the values that Portia learned through her mother are not the same values held by 'society'. Later in the novel, Portia is described by the narrator as a kind of *tabula rasa*: she has no 'policy,' 'no point to stick to,' 'nothing to unlearn' (105).<sup>2</sup> It is a way of suggesting that her mother's values have no value in the upper-class home where she finds herself. Maud

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<sup>1</sup> For a different reading of adolescents as 'awkward,' and also queer and obnoxious, see renée c. hoogland, 'Obnoxiousness and Elizabeth Bowen's Queer Adolescents' in *Elizabeth Bowen: Theory, Thought, and Things*.

<sup>2</sup> For explorations of Portia's innocence, see *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Neil Corcoran: 2004) and *A World of Lost Innocence: The Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen* (Nicola Darwood: 2012).

Ellmann describes Portia as ‘unsocialized, a noble savage cast adrift’ (136). Indeed, Portia is presented as hopelessly at sea in Anna and Thomas’s house.

To say that she receives a frosty welcome is almost too generous a description of her arrival in their home. The emotional life at Windsor Terrace is bottled up so deep inside the house’s occupants that Portia wonders if there is any warmth in the home at all. After Irene dies, the couple reluctantly agree to take Portia for a year (until she gets passed on to an aunt), but it amounts to an almost unbearable breach in the routine of their lives. Apart from decorating the room where Portia is to stay, neither Thomas nor Anna can seem to muster a word of understanding or encouragement, as Portia learns to navigate a new space with a new value system. Portia’s mere presence feels to Thomas and Anna an almost unendurable imposition. In an early scene, the narrator describes how even entering Thomas’s study was ‘an act of intimacy’; the narrator tells us that

Anyone other than Anna being near him, anyone other than Anna expecting something gave Thomas a sense of pressure he could hardly endure. He liked best, at this time of the evening, to allow his face to drop into blank lines. Someone there made him feel bound to give some account of himself. (31)

Portia will, indeed, as the novel unfolds, require Anna and Thomas to ‘give an account’ of themselves.<sup>3</sup> Portia arrives at Windsor Terrace as an ethical thorn in their sides, a persistent witness to the way they live.

Hermione Lee is right that the novel is ‘the story of an education’ (1981: 114), and might be read as a contribution to the literary tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. And yet, given the abdication of the possible mentors and teachers who might guide Portia’s way, it is an education that is entirely self-directed.<sup>4</sup> Without any previous learning to support her, what the narrator calls ‘stores of notes to refer to’ (277), each gesture, each phrase, each nod is a new sign that she must register and decipher. With so few clues to go on, Portia analyses the world around her and looks for signs that might help her navigate the treacherous waters. The narrator tells us that

Every look, every movement, every object had a quite political seriousness for her: nothing was not weighed down by significance. In her home life with its puzzles, she saw dissimulation always on guard: she asked herself humbly for what reason people said what they did not mean, and did not say what they meant? (59)

This passage describes Portia’s *reading practice*—her strategy for meaning-making in a world that throws up obstacles and barriers to clarity. Portia harbours suspicions about the disingenuous world of her guardians, a world where no one says what they mean, where language is muffled and spoken in euphemism and code. This

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase echoes the language used by Socrates as he accuses the Athenian jury, saying that it is easier to condemn him to death and so escape his indictment than it is to ‘give an account of [their] lives’. Towards the end of the *Apology*, Socrates warns his Athenian jury ‘Me you have killed because you wanted to escape the accuser, and not give an account of your lives.’ (*The Trial and Death of Socrates: Four Dialogues*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. New York: Dover, 1992)

<sup>4</sup> Many of Bowen’s novels present questions about how, and if, her protagonists grow and develop over the course of the narrative. For an exploration of Lois Farquhar’s non-development in Bowen’s *The Last September*, see Jed Esty’s chapter ‘Virgins of Empire: The Antidevelopmental Plot in Rhys and Bowen’ in *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development*.

skepticism is one hallmark of adolescence, a deep distrust about whether the signs produced and transmitted by society can be taken at face value. Despite her uncertainty, Portia is keenly perceptive about the emotional undercurrents in the household, and learns to mistrust, quite rightly, everything that Anna says.

*The Death of the Heart* joins a long literary history of novels that incorporate diary entries into the text; the novel becomes a composite, thick with different storytelling genres.<sup>5</sup> Portia appears almost as an amateur ethnographer, attempting to read her guardians' culture, one that is guarded, suspicious, and cagey, and noting it all in her diary. A diary can be, of course, an everyday object: Portia's love interest Eddie reminds us that '[d]iaries are things almost all girls keep' (274). Portia's own explanation of her diary is equally mundane, though more pitiful: she tells Eddie that she keeps her diary because '[w]hen I first came to London, I was the only person in the world' (107). Most of the diary's entries combine a record of the day's events—'Today we did Umbrian Art History, Book Keeping, and German Composition' ; 'Today we did English Essay, First Aid, and a Lecture on Racine' (109, 110)—with pointed observations about those around her: '[Anna] looked put out'; 'Eddie says our lies are not our fault' (110, 118). Despite its apparent ordinariness, Portia's writing is her own unique interpretation of life in the Quayne household, her version of the story. Corcoran reminds us that 'Portia's diary, with its combination of vulnerable childishness and brilliant perceptiveness, is, in fact, alive with the virtue of written record' (123). The shift in register from the moralising omniscient narrator to the interiority of Portia's mind is arresting indeed, perhaps as arresting for readers of the novel as it is for Anna herself. As Ellmann notes, the diary is misleadingly simple in what she calls its 'apparent innocence of style' (2003: 129). Portia carefully notes everything that transpires, both the spoken and the unspoken, and she has an uncanny faculty to see through Anna's affectation. In a telling entry, for example, Portia writes:

Tonight Anna and Thomas stayed at home for dinner. She said that whenever there was a fog she always felt it was something that she had done, but she did not seem to mean this seriously. Thomas said he supposed most people felt the same and Anna said she was certain they did not. Then we sat in the drawing-room, and they wished I was not there. (115)

This entry could be used in a master class on rhetoric: first, there is the implied direct quotation from a speaker, who makes a claim (that the fog makes the speaker feel a certain way); second, there is Portia's *reading* of the claim (that the speaker had spoken falsely); lastly, there is a claim that is reported as fact ('they wished I was not there') but is in fact Portia's *reading* of the situation, what Ellmann calls an 'imputation masquerading as a neutral observation' (2003: 129). Even despite Portia's argument that she 'write[s] what has happened' and does not 'invent' (250), a diary is of course a *fiction*, in the sense of something made, something fashioned. When Anna stumbles upon the diary in Portia's room, and betrays her trust by reading it, she is shocked by what she reads there.

The novel opens with a scene where Anna has just read the diary and relates her version of the situation to her novelist friend St Quentin, as they walk on a bitterly

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<sup>5</sup> Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) are texts that incorporate diary entries into their narrative structures, producing startling shifts in narrative perspective and tone.

cold afternoon in Regent's Park. Anna does not see herself reflected in the portrait that Portia has drawn of her, a portrait Anna calls 'completely distorted and distorting' (10). The repetition of the verb is telling: it speaks not just to their different ways of looking at the world, but also to the power of Portia's words to advance a different narrative. She tells St Quentin '[a]s I read it I thought, either this girl or I are mad' (10). The distress that Anna feels about the diary is a response to a desire to control the narrative of one's life. Ellmann writes that the 'novel tells the story of [Portia and Anna's] war of style, in which each tries to take possession of the other's narrative' (2003: 131).<sup>6</sup> Anna's version of the story, one that she narrates at length to St Quentin, is threatened by Portia's version of it. St Quentin, himself a novelist of some renown, wants to hear the details of the diary, and commends Portia on her sense of style. Anna, who wants no part in recommending Portia's version of the story, rejects the comparison to St Quentin's chosen profession; she tells him '[b]ut this was not at all like your beautiful books. In fact it was not like *writing* at all' (10). Anna's narrow definition of what constitutes writing dismisses the genre of diary writing and the legitimacy of the diarist's narrative. Seeking to calm her, St Quentin encourages Anna to think about the conditions under which a diary is written. He tells her: 'And a diary, after all, is written to please oneself - therefore it's bound to be enormously written up. The obligation to write it is all in one's own eye, and look how one is when it's almost always written - upstairs, late, overwrought, alone' (10), which echoes Portia's own description of how loneliness is the backdrop of her writing practice. Nevertheless, despite Anna's insistence that the diary is not like *writing*, the power of Portia's words has a profound effect on Anna's life, and the seemingly harmless reading of the diary changes the course of their relationship, and of the novel. The diary enacts a revenge on its thief: it implants doubts about Anna's very sense of her own world, *distorting* the narrative she tells herself about her life.

Knowing that Portia 'bolt[s] upstairs and write[s] everything down' (11) after each tea and dinner, Anna, who is herself a perceptive observer, feels that she is being relentlessly scrutinised by Portia's watchful eyes. She complains to Thomas 'I cannot stand being watched. She watches us' (37); Lee suggests that 'Portia is posted inside their gates as their most ruthless spy and critic' (1981: 105). Anna certainly interprets Portia's role in this way, and feels hounded by her criticism. At the end of the novel, she tells St Quentin and Thomas:

Her diary's very good - you see, she has got us taped. Could I not go on with a book all about ourselves? I don't say that it has changed the course of my life, but it's given me a rather more disagreeable feeling about being alive - or, at least, about being me. (304)

The passage suggests that Portia has articulated some of Anna and Thomas's defects as guardians, and that she has become wise to their inability to hide their dislike for her presence in their house. The colloquial usage of the word 'taped' is evocative: it suggests that words have the power to fasten one down so as to inspect, and assess, their character. Though he has not read the diary, St Quentin suggests how it functions: he tells them that '[s]he wanders around you and Thomas, detecting what there is not and noting clues in her diary' (309). Portia's words invade Anna's life, changing the way that she sees both her own life and Portia's. The diary exposes

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<sup>6</sup> For a keen reading of the novel as a play of 'narrative war,' see Maud Ellmann's chapter 'Furniture' in *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page*.

Anna to Portia's perspective through an infiltration: she sees herself, perhaps for the first time, not through Portia's eyes, to use the common language of perspective, but nevertheless through a narrative portrayal. Indeed, Portia's diary has breached the walls that Anna has tried so relentlessly to maintain, her interior walls that match the sturdy walls of Windsor Terrace, keeping intimacy at bay. At the end of the novel, St Quentin suggests that Anna's best bet at seeing things from Portia's position is *through* the diary. The diary's narrative, now implanted in Anna's mind, upends their relationship, but the novel suggests that the breach is also a possible means to a mutual understanding between the girl and the woman.

When St Quentin asks Anna how she would feel if she were in Portia's position, Anna says: 'If I were Portia? Contempt for the pack of us, who muddled our own lives then stopped me from living mine. Boredom, oh such boredom, with a sort of secret society about nothing, keeping on making little signs to each other' (312). Anna's imagined understanding of how Portia might see the world is a remarkably astute indictment of the society in which they live: a 'secret society about nothing' (312). It censures, indirectly, the way in which their world keeps itself afloat through little games, codes, and dissimulations. Anna, with the diary's words ringing in her ears, denounces the very operations of the culture in which she is a participant: she admits that the society is unnecessarily covert, as though to cover its own hollow centre, its own emptiness. Thomas responds '[h]ow much is the diary, how much is you?' (312), which is an impossible question for Anna to answer: the diary has breached her thinking, re-wiring her perspective. In this way, the diary has become an ethical spur and a solicitation for them to provide an account of their own lives.. The novel suggests that the reading of a new narrative might indeed *distort* one's perspective, but that this distortion may be a necessary breach of an old routine, creating an opening for a new one.

### **Misreading**

Portia, even with those watchful 'dark eyes', and despite her observational skills, nevertheless fails to notice any warning signs when she falls for Eddie, a clever young friend of Anna. Soon after Portia arrives in London, she is immediately taken up by him, and he charms her with letters that rail against the disingenuousness of the upper-class society around them. Eddie savages his friends and acquaintances in the satirical novel he publishes, and mercilessly mocks Anna behind her back, even though she is responsible for getting him his job at Thomas's advertising firm. Eddie's ridicule for Anna and her set confirms Portia's suspicions that something lurks behind the polished veneers of her guardians and their friends. So Portia, who is always puzzled by the disjuncture between what people say and what they feel, reads Eddie's searing contempt as authenticity, an authenticity she craves. *The Death of the Heart* explores the unevenness of a reading practice: Eddie's clever dissimulation thwarts Portia's interpretive faculties, which leads her to certain misguided conclusions about her relationship with him.

Eddie is a handsome mischief-maker and delights in his own self-proclaimed 'wickedness'. When he takes Portia out to her first tea in London, he performs the role of an alluring villain, a role which requires an easy foil, an innocent little 'darling' who will blush when he speaks (54). Eddie wins Portia's confidence through telling her a different narrative, one in which Anna is 'depraved' and 'loves making a tart of another person' (104). As he vociferously disparages Anna, the narrator tells

us that Portia was ‘hypnotized by this view’ (105); ‘[Portia] was disturbed, and at the same time exhilarated, like a young tree tugged all ways in a vortex of wind’ (105). Portia is exhilarated but also flummoxed by the myriad ways that a person can be seen. By raising concerns about Anna’s insincerity, Eddie manages to redirect suspicion away from his own insincerity. Portia is charmed by the manner in which Eddie tells stories, by his extravagant gesticulations and gestures, by the way he makes faces ‘pulling his features all ways’, by his ‘demonic smile’ (105). The narrator describes how Portia’s ‘meticulous observation’ made ‘her like somebody at a play in a foreign language of which they know not one word - the action has to be followed as one can’ (102). We see Portia struggling to read the signs, struggling to pin down the meaning. Portia’s character in the novel illustrates an act of misreading, an error of interpretation.<sup>7</sup> It might be that love baffles one’s interpretive faculties, as Portia soon finds herself dismissing critiques of Eddie’s motivations by those who are close to her. When the housekeeper Matchett warns Portia (in the first of many warnings) that she would be wrong to trust Eddie, that he is always up to something, and that she does not know what she is doing, Portia returns fire: she tells Matchett ‘I do know when I’m happy. I know that’ (86). As early as the first time Eddie takes her out for tea, she realises that she will be forfeiting her relationships with others in order to cast her lot with Eddie. The narrator tells us

Now she saw with pity, but without reproaching herself, all the sacrificed people - Major Brutt, Lilian, Matchett, even Anna - that she had stepped over to meet Eddie. And she knew that there would be more of this, for sacrifice is not a single act. (106)

Yet just at the moment she falls for Eddie, another crucial event happens that has received scant critical attention: he not only takes her diary from her to read, but he begins placing prohibitions on what she can write about, on the story she can tell.

Readers of the novel may wonder why Eddie, like Anna, wants to read Portia’s diary. In describing how he imagines the diary must function, he tells her that he likes to think of her writing down her thoughts because it shows him that she is constantly thinking; he compares her diary to a watch and imagines that if she stopped writing down her thoughts it would ‘feel as though [his] watch had stopped in the night’ (108). The watch metaphor is suggestive: Eddie finds safety in the comfortable constancy of her daily writing, but only when her diary is a steady production of perfunctory, rather than deep, thoughts. As soon as Eddie takes possession of her diary, he begins to restrict how she can make use of the diary. He forbids her from ever writing about him; he tells her, ‘I hate writing; I hate art - there’s always something else there. I won’t have you choosing words about me. If you ever start that, your diary will become a horrible trap, and I shan’t feel safe with you any more’ (109). Eddie’s reaction might strike readers as excessive: we might wonder how Portia’s diary poses a threat to Eddie’s safety. And yet, *The Death of the Heart* catalogues exactly how *writing*, even of the everyday variety like a diary, produces a powerful narrative that creates unforeseen conflicts each time it is read. For Eddie, Portia’s writing presents a specific set of dangers. Eddie is scared that the diary will become evidence of his mischief in toying with Portia. Writing produces evidence of an event that might otherwise go unrecorded; it makes legible and tangible what

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<sup>7</sup> In her misreading, Portia echoes Henry James’s Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), who, when reflecting on her choice of husband, finds that ‘she had not read him right’ (442).

Eddie would like to keep unmarked and momentary. His concern over Portia's writing echoes one of the narrator's earlier comments about Thomas's father, who wants to keep his affair with Irene a secret. Mr Quayne, the narrator informs us, 'did not like things in writing' (20). Because Eddie knows that writing wanders from the private to the public, he cannot risk the diary falling into the wrong hands and exposing his misdeeds. A paper trail poses a problem for Eddie: by 'choosing words,' Portia's sincere writing would reveal Eddie's insincerity; it would catalogue his tricks and stunts, and potentially pull back the magician's curtain. As we have seen with Anna, Eddie does not want Portia to produce her own version of the story; by forbidding her from writing about him, he maintains control over how the story is told. Eddie believes that, by restricting the possibilities of Portia's writing, the diary can remain a steady, comforting, harmless watch.

Even as we assert the importance of being able to tell one's own version of a story, few critics have given attention to the way that Portia's diary changes after Eddie intervenes in her writing process. The diary, normally a place for private, unfettered reflection, becomes stifled, choked by Eddie's prohibition; it fills up with omissions and elisions where there might otherwise have been writing about Eddie. In an entry for 'Sunday,' for example, Portia merely writes, 'I shall just put "Sunday," Eddie prefers that' (111). Because the reader, who is privy to the reflections of the omniscient narrator, knows that Eddie's actions are not in Portia's best interest, the narrative lacuna created by the gap in the diary produces an opportunity for readers to create all manner of ways in which the encounter between the two might go wrong.<sup>8</sup> Of course, to include Eddie's name at all is already more than suggestive: staying true to Eddie's word would rightly mean withholding his name from the diary entirely, and the partial withholding is perhaps more damning than a full report. Nevertheless, we know from other entries that Portia uses the diary as a place to puzzle out some of life's mysteries, including some of her questions about sex and sexuality: in another entry, she records an immensely awkward encounter when her brother Thomas hesitantly inquires whether Eddie 'is polite' and whether he 'tries it on' (113). When Portia tells Thomas that she does not know what he means, Thomas promptly drops the subject. One of the most poignant moments in the novel occurs when Portia realises that, due to Eddie's injunction against her writing about him, the diary is no longer a safe space for her to work out her feelings. She writes 'I cannot say anything about going away. I cannot say anything even in this diary. Perhaps it is better not to say anything ever' (228). Eddie's constraint on her writing, in addition to hampering her interpretive apparatus and making it harder for her to work out the signs, is a violation of her self-determination, her ability to write her own narrative. Portia insists on the importance of the diary to her understanding of her own identity; she pleads with him: 'But my diary's me. How could I leave you out?' (274). Portia's identification with her diary offers proof that we live by the stories we tell about our lives. The narrator reminds us that our 'illusions are art, for the feeling person, and it is by art that we live, if we do' (91).

However, rather than submitting to Eddie's mandate, Portia, as we have seen above, breaks her promise by writing about him anyway. It is her 'Sunday' entries that most frequently break the silence. On the Sunday following the entry where she cryptically

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<sup>8</sup> Portia certainly echoes another imperilled heroine in English epistolary literature, in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740). For another analysis of the potential danger for Portia, see Neil Corcoran, who draws a line of the child at risk in literature from James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897) through to Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955).

alludes to having spent the day with Eddie, she records some of her ‘particular thoughts’ about Eddie’s characteristics. Her accounts, although childish—‘his father is a builder’; ‘he is quite afraid of the dark’; ‘he does not like being laughed at, so he pretends he wants people to laugh at him’ (116)—are nevertheless the way in which we build up a profile of a person and assess their sincerity or insincerity. The following Sunday, Portia pushes her writing further, recording a day spent in Eddie’s flat, including moments of intimacy when she strokes his head. She writes, reflectively, that ‘I promised I would not write that down. But Sundays make one have to think of the past’ (119). In another novel, it might be easy to dismiss an adolescent’s prose as sentimental, or hopelessly naïve. But, in Bowen’s hands, Portia’s diary instead carries the ethical weight of the novel. Portia asserts her right to her own narrative, a narrative that is an explosive catalyst for change in her household. Portia is not, as Eddie repeatedly insists, a ‘sweet beautiful angel’ for him to toy with (101). She is, rather, a careful witness to the way that others treat her, with her own ethical demands, demands that the diary makes clear. In a 1950 interview, Bowen said that she did not see *The Death of the Heart* as a ‘tragedy of adolescence’. Rather, Bowen said, ‘[t]he one adolescent character in it, the young girl Portia seems to be less tragic than the others. [...] The book is really a tragedy of atrophy [...] and the function of Portia in the story is to be the awake one’ (quoted in Hoogland, 71). Portia is not only now awake to the world around her, but also wakes up to Eddie’s betrayals.

### Re-reading

Throughout the novel, Portia’s inexperience, her ‘unpreparedness’, and her ‘lack of policy’ (105) make it impossible for her to discern what might constitute ‘natural’ behaviour, or what might constitute affected or disingenuous behaviour. She repeatedly states that she cannot tell if people’s actions are ‘natural’, as she has nothing to compare them to: in a tragi-comic moment, when someone furiously demands of her, ‘Have you got *no* ideas?’ Portia responds, in a dazed way, ‘I’ve no idea’ (205). *The Death of the Heart* articulates, twice, that experience is only meaningful when it repeats itself; in fact, as Anna suggests, ‘till it does that, it hardly *is* experience’ (11). The novel proposes that reading requires comparison through triangulation, between the individual, an event, and a repetition of the event, especially a repetition with a twist. Reading only takes Portia so far; it is through *re-reading* that she learns to recognize insincerity. Initially baffled by Eddie’s game of sincere insincerity, Portia learns how to read him by learning to read another character who is just like Eddie, but whose duplicitousness is more visible. The novel’s tripartite structure exemplifies the idea that experience requires repetition: the first part takes place in London at Thomas and Anna’s home in Windsor Terrace; in the second part, Portia spends the spring on the south coast of England with the family of Anna’s old governess; in the third, Portia returns to Windsor Terrace having experienced a different way of life. The structure enables her to return to London armed with the new perspectives gained from her time at the seaside town of Seale: the singular events of her life begin to condense into ‘experience’ through revisiting. After Seale, things start to look a little different for Portia.

In a canny literary move designed to show the reader an exaggerated version of Eddie, the novel offers up Mr Bursely, an army man who Portia meets at a party at the seaside villa ‘Waikiki.’ Mr Bursely, who arrives drunk to the party, approaches Portia while she sits on the sofa, barging into a conversation she is having with a

friend. Introducing himself as part of the 'licentious soldiery' in the region, he promptly asks Portia her age. When she replies that she is sixteen, he responds: 'Gosh -I thought you were about ten. Anyone ever told you you're a sweet little kid?' (168), unintentionally echoing Eddie's patronising language in other moments in the novel. Mr Bursely continues by saying that when he first spied Portia at the party, he 'wanted to cry and tell you about my wicked life' (168). Portia, not knowing how to respond, is promptly pulled away from the misbehaving man by a 'sort of rescue party' who arrive to remove her from the situation (169). Though the scene is brief, Portia does not fail to see that Mr Bursely drooling over her sweetness creates a 'disconcerting echo' of Eddie, a darker double that disturbs her. The narrator explains that

It is frightening to find that the beloved may be unwittingly caricatured by someone who does not know him at all. The devil must have been in Mr Bursely when he asked, and asked with such confidence, if she had not been told she was a sweet little kid. (169)

Portia wonders whether the 'impulse' that drove Mr Bursely to burst out was the same impulse that drove Eddie to write her letters and pursue her (170). A creeping 'dread' haunts her thoughts, a suspicion that she might have misread Eddie's intentions. Is Eddie, perhaps, just like Mr Bursely, leering over her, misbehaving, gushing over her childishness? Suddenly, her initial reading of Eddie appears threatened by seeing a distorted repetition of his words and actions.

This triangulation allows new thoughts to arise, particularly where they concern Eddie: 'something asked her, or forced her to ask herself, whether, last night on the settee, it had not been Eddie that had emerged?' (172). Mr Bursely's emergence as Eddie's darker double begins to create ripples on the smooth pond of Portia's devotion to him, ripples that turn into waves as the novel progresses and Portia's 'experience' piles up. When Eddie comes for a visit to Waikiki, Portia is stunned to discover, one evening at the cinema, that Eddie is secretly clasping the hand of Portia's host, Daphne. When he insists that his actions with Daphne 'mean simply nothing', Portia insists that they do mean something (199). If, formerly, she might have believed him, now, far from Windsor Terrace, armed with her reading of Mr Bursely, the narrator tells us that 'she now saw, or resaw [...] everyone she had known' (171). Portia has some material to compare Eddie to, some actions to weigh against Eddie's actions. Portia's experience of comparing Eddie to another is repeated twice in the novel: in a later scene, Anna compares two sets of letters, and the narrator tells us that she had the 'intention of comparing the falseness of Pidgeon with the falseness of Eddie' (245). Through triangulated re-reading, judgment is possible. When she returns from the seaside, all the characters who surround Portia notice a change in her. In their final confrontation, Eddie tells her that she 'used to be much gentler, much more sweet [but she's] all different, lately, since Seale' (280). In a way, of course, he is right: equipped with a finer interpretive apparatus, and with the 'experiences' accumulated in Seale, she is ready to re-visit her relationship with him, armed with sharpened critical skills. In their final interaction, at Eddie's flat in London, the narrator tells us that Portia 'gave the impression of being someone who, having lost their way in a book or mistaken its whole import, has to go back and start from the beginning' (277). Having misread him once, she needs to begin again, reading each sign and gesture anew.

At the end of the novel, however, Portia ends up running to the other character in the novel who is a chronic mis-reader, Major Brutt. A hapless middle-aged veteran of the First World War, Brutt has spent a memorable evening with Anna and her first lover, Robert Pidgeon, a memory he takes with him wherever he goes. Having spent the next decade working in the colonies, Brutt has returned to England to try his luck. He is, as the narrator tells us, ‘out of touch with London’ (45); as clueless as Portia, he wanders around looking ‘uncertain’ and stands around ‘doubtfully’ (88). The description of Major Brutt’s behaviour produces a ‘disconcerting echo’ of Portia when the narrator tells us that ‘he took it that people meant what they said’ (87). His inability to read social cues exasperates Anna, who believes that he has an almost perverse inability to do what might be expected of him. He mistakes politeness for friendship, accepts invitations to return that were intended as hollow offers, and gives gifts that are out of proportion to the occasion: the ‘cochineal pink’ carnations that he sends to welcome Anna home from her vacation, for example, make her ‘hysterical’ (240). As people who misread cues, and willfully disregard cynicism and doublespeak, Major Brutt and Portia form a natural pair. When Portia, her idealism punctured, throws Eddie overboard, she heads straight to Major Brutt’s hotel, where she proceeds to puncture *his* idealism about his position in the Quayne household. In what Ellmann calls ‘one of the most mortifying moments in English fiction’ (139), Portia proceeds to expose his misreading by describing how he is really perceived by her guardians:

You are the other person Anna laughs at [...] I don’t think you understand: Anna’s always laughing at you. She says you are quite pathetic. She laughed at your carnations being the wrong colour, then gave them to me. [...] They groan at each other when you have gone away. You and I are the same. (288)

It is a brutal assessment of the scornful operations of the Quayne household, with Major Brutt the unfortunate victim of Portia’s searing commentary. Nevertheless, it is also a virtuosic performance of a close-reading practice, and an indication that Portia and Major Brutt may not, in fact, be the same: Portia, unlike Brutt, has finally learned to read the world around her, and to render her verdict on it.

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## Geraldine Gent ~ Voices from the past: an exploration of haunting and hospitality in ‘The Back Drawing-Room’

I have this need to let myself be haunted by voices coming from my elsewhere that resonate through me. I want to have voices. As a result I am at the mercy of their inspiration. They can fail me. I master nothing, I submit to the oracles. This risk is the condition of my creative energy and of my discoveries. (Cixous 2006: 2)

Hélène Cixous, in conversation with Jacques Derrida, talks of being haunted by voices, of how these voices stimulate her creativity and lead to her ideas. She refers to these voices as coming from her elsewhere: the ‘beautiful ancient voices’ of her ancestors (Cixous 2006: 2). She talks of them as a pre-voice, haunting her as they resonate through her. This is reminiscent of Elizabeth Bowen’s biographical account of her predecessors in *Bowen’s Court & Seven Winters*. Here she recounts how the voices of her ancestors have stalked and haunted her family down through the ages. She talks of how, at the end of each generation, lives became ‘submerged’ and were ‘absorbed again’, and how the air had ‘thickened’ as the rooms were ‘permeated’ by their ‘extinct forms’ (*Bowen’s Court & Seven Winters*: 451). These traces of her ancestors stayed with her all her life. Bowen writes about what she knows but does not know why she knows; her knowledge is more intuitive than certain. She refers to these ‘intuitions, which she cannot challenge’ that allow her to create her narrative (*Bowen’s Court & Seven Winters*: 452). Cixous feels at the mercy of her voices, as if she has no control over them. She submits to them. This condition creates a risk as the voices could fail her. She may not catch them. She cannot master them.

I can locate my own writing in a similar vein. My creativity also comes out of voices from my past, voices which have haunted me all my life. Elizabeth Bowen’s ancestral home, Bowen’s Court, was situated very close to my own family home. The voices from Bowen’s past are closely interwoven with my voices. The risk that I face is not that my voices might fail me but that they might become submerged in Bowen’s. She came from an Anglo-Irish, Protestant background; I come from a long line of Irish Catholic farmers. Her family were big landowners. One of her ancestors was a general in Cromwell’s army and was granted land as a reward for his services. The Roches, whose land Cromwell seized (*Bowen’s Court & Seven Winters*: 64), are my

ancestors. Bowen saw the prints that her 'ancestor's eyes' left on the land outside the house (*Bowen's Court & Seven Winters*: 451). It is as if her forefather's eyes were always watching out over the land to ensure their stronghold on it. This is the same land that was taken by force from my ancestors. My Irish cultural heritage is the other side of Bowen's, the other that is silent for the most part in her writing. My voices come from an Irish cultural heritage, which is the other to Bowen's Anglo-Irish background.

In her short story 'The Back Drawing-Room' Bowen writes about a traveller from England coming across a house on a rural road in Ireland. He enters it to find a ghost in the drawing room. It later transpires that the 'ghost' is an apparition of a woman who is still living in Dublin, and that the house there, at Kilbarran, had been burned down a couple of years earlier. The differences between past and present, place and no place, become blurred. The vision that the visitor sees is still alive and living in Dublin, while the house no longer exists. In an interview for *Ghost Dance*, Jacques Derrida points out that ghosts do not just appear: they come back, they return (Derrida, 2007). This presupposes a memory of the past that has never taken the form of the present. In this way the spectre speaks to the living from the dead. Derrida makes it clear that it is not our unconscious that is speaking but that of our ancestors, the ghost of the other (Derrida, 2007).

Bowen anticipates Derrida when she refers to the voice of her ancestors: 'what runs on most through a family living in one place is a continuous, semi-physical dream. Above this dream-level successive lives show their tips, their little conscious formations of will and thought' (*Bowen's Court & Seven Winters*: 451). This 'semi-physical dream', these 'tips' can be passed down through lapses, ellipses and hints, allusions, traces of what has gone before. In this short story, the apparition is still living but the house has gone. Is this apparition a ghost of the future? She is one of the Barrans, the family who lived there, and who are now living in Dublin. It is as if her presence is haunted by her death, her future death, unlike the house, which seems to have returned, like a revenant. Irish Republicans made it very clear that the owners were not welcome; they burned the house down. The ghost of the house appears almost like a threat to those of the Protestant ascendancy class who still remain on Irish land, as if they too will be destroyed, becoming mere images of themselves, ghosts of what they used to be. It terrifies the visitor from England. His cousins think of the Barrans as plants that have been 'pulled up' from their land and that although they might still be living in Dublin or England they have 'nothing to grow in or hold on to' ('The Back Drawing-Room': 227). They have become dispossessed. They are the walking dead.

The title of the story emphasises the place of the drawing room at the back of the house, and at the same time the word 'back' has connotations of being in the 'back' of Ireland, both historically and geographically. It is analogous to the historical significance of the big house in rural Ireland. In her essay of that title, Bowen refers to its role in offering hospitality to local people and to visitors from further afield. She sees this as the future for such establishments. She talks of the 'getting together of people' for conversation, social intercourse, and general gaiety (1986: 29), of the stranger being as welcome as the friend. In the final words, she makes the point that

‘a barrier has two sides’ (1986: 30). In the ‘The Back Drawing-Room’, the house is the ghost. It did not survive the War of Independence. It is as if it only had one side, that of the Protestant ascendancy class. The Irish are absent from the story until the end when we learn that they were responsible for burning the house down a couple of years earlier. If a barrier has two sides, then where did the Irish fit into the culture of the Big House? Their side was absent. Can hospitality be one-sided?

Derrida discusses the word ‘hospitality’ and its Latin origin ‘hospitalitat’: how it ‘carries its own contradiction incorporated into it, a Latin word which allows itself to be parasitised by its opposite, “hostility,” the undesirable guest which it harbours as the self-contradiction in its own body’ (Derrida, 2000a: 3). In this way, hospitality and hostility are inextricably linked, the one containing the other in itself: the visitor becomes the undesirable guest and can at the same time evoke hostility. Derrida also discusses how the condition of hospitality can only apply while the host remains master in his own home and maintains his authority. This limits the ‘gift proffered’ and makes it the ‘condition of the gift and of hospitality.’ (Derrida, 2000a: 4). The Anglo-Irish, who took the land by force, may have been hospitable to their own class, but to the Irish they were hostile. That they were masters in their own home was always in dispute. However much they wanted to be hospitable, as desired by Bowen, they were limited by this condition. The Irish never fully accepted them. In Bowen’s short story, the owners of the house are both host to the visitor from England and neighbouring Protestant families and yet hostile to the local Irish, who burn down their homes. The Anglo-Irish are always on borrowed time, waiting for their stay in Ireland to come to an end. In this case, the irony is that the Barrans have already left: they have fled to Dublin. In a sense they are the ones held hostage, they are the ‘undesirable guests’; they are the ones regarded as the ‘undesirable foreigner, and [...] as an enemy’<sup>1</sup>; they become the host’s host. The owner of the Big House is both hostile and hospitable: the little man risks becoming their hostage.<sup>2</sup> Derrida opens up the relationship between parasitism and hospitality and asks how we can distinguish between a guest and a parasite. ‘The little man’ is almost parasitical in the way Bowen portrays him. He is first introduced as ‘something stirring from beyond the fire’, coming alive from his ‘torpor’, uncrossing his legs and sitting up, almost like an insect crawling out from behind the fireplace (‘The Back Drawing-Room’: 218). As the visitor, he approaches the big house expecting hospitality; instead, he is met with the menacing appearance and deathly demeanour of the ghost. He runs away terrified.

Derrida expounds Levinas’s theory on how troubling receiving the other can be, and that the risk involved is like offering hospitality to a ‘*guest as ghost*’ (1999: 111). ‘There would be no hospitality without the chance of spectrality’ (1999: 112). The phantom ‘is not nothing, it exceeds, and thus deconstructs, all ontological oppositions, being and nothingness, life and death ... and it gives’ (1999: 112). Spectrality, like hospitality, always contains the risk of the other. The ghost deconstructs life and death; it goes beyond them. In this case, the apparition, which appears in the back of the house, is still alive. The visitor, the little man, feels the risk

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, 2000, p. 55, while discussing foreigners in a foreign land.

<sup>2</sup> Ireland became independent in 1921. The story is set approximately 2 years later.

and runs away, terrified. The home, which ought to have been hospitable to the visitor, makes hospitality impossible (1999: 65). The phantom creates the condition of impossibility, and exposes the impossibility of the condition. This is an unwelcoming environment where the hosted cannot accept the hospitality of the host. There is no 'yes' in this encounter.

To this present day, Ireland is divided. Conflicting voices from the past fuel the divide on both sides. In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida discusses divisions within a country and writes of a 'disorder of identity' arising out of these separations and partitions within one place. He questions the nature of his 'Franco-Maghrebian' roots, taking the hyphen as a symbol of the double-sided nature of his sense of identity (1998: 14). Bowen was in a similar situation, being Anglo-Irish; she was born into a country alien to the language and culture to which she belonged. Derrida writes of 'situations of linguistic oppression and colonial expropriation' and refers to 'an unnatural process of politico-phantasmatic constructions' (1998: 23), as if our identity is constructed according to political phantoms: the politics and culture of the coloniser. It is a phantom because it is presented as if it has always been there, as if it is natural, as if it has always belonged but, as Derrida makes explicit in *The Ghost Dance*, ghosts do not just appear: they come back, they return. In actuality, the phantom is a construct, its purpose to make the inhabitants subservient. Consequently the wish to identify with one place in particular is never quite resolved; only the process endures. If born into a society that is separated and divided by two or more cultures, as with Derrida, Cixous, and Bowen, how does one identify with any single culture? Nicholas Royle in *Jacques Derrida* suggests that Derrida's work can be seen as an 'affirmation of non-belonging' (2003: 146). Could the same be said of Bowen's short story, 'The Back Drawing-Room'?

It is raining heavily in Ireland when 'the little man' comes across the phantom. Mrs Henneker refers to Ireland in the following way: 'one lives in a dream there, a dream oppressed and shifting, such as one dreams in a house with trees about it, on a sultry night' ('The Back Drawing-Room': 219). This sense of being in a dream distances Ireland from the English drawing room, within which the tale is told. The dream resonates with oppression and an intangible sense of movement that cannot be grasped: we do not learn that the house has been burned down until the end of the story. The rain darkens the ghostly atmosphere making everything seem inaccessible: 'The only accents on the landscape were the mountains' ('The Back Drawing-Room': 220). There is a sense that the whole landscape and surrounding land is in collusion with the ghost, creating a sense of disorientation and distance. It feels, in a way unbelievable, as if 'the little man' is lost in a strange country. This heightens the sense of separation. 'The little man', who recounts the tale, is referred to as an 'umbrella that an absent-minded caller has brought into the drawing room' ('The Back Drawing-Room': 215). Why would an umbrella be brought into a drawing room? Surely, it would be left in the hall with the coats? This emphasises a sense of intrusiveness on his part, as if he is an unwanted guest. His arrival and departure is never quite clear. He arrives late, brought in by a 'somebody' ('The Back Drawing-Room': 215), and is collected by another 'someone' who 'took him away quietly' ('The Back Drawing-Room': 227). No one quite remembers how he arrived or left. Like his usher, he is nameless. He has a ghost-like quality. He knows 'nothing of atmosphere'

(‘The Back Drawing-Room’: 224), as if he remains isolated, outside the little group in the English drawing room.

Recounting his story to his audience, he tells of how terrified he becomes when the ghost raises her head because he ‘cannot remain outside it’ (‘The Back Drawing-Room’: 225). The little man is an outsider, nothing more than an umbrella in a stand waiting to be picked up again and taken outside when it rains, like an automaton; but he cannot remain outside the story in Ireland. He feels that the ‘end of the world is coming’ and he starts to ‘perspire all over’ (‘The Back Drawing-Room’: 225). He becomes terrified. Whatever it is, is not said, it is beaten back. The phantom just cries and sobs into a cushion. While he is re-telling the story, everyone else in the English drawing room contributes in the form of questions, statements or agreements. It is as if there is not just one narrator but many, as if they embody what Nicholas Royle refers to as ‘a narratorial proliferation’ of voices (2004: 167). The voices blend together seamlessly to create their own narrative, an English narrative of a house in Ireland. The little man cannot speak to the apparition: ‘Whatever it is that this woman at the heart of the text, at the heart of the back drawing-room wants to say, or wants not to say, she manages to ‘beat it back’ (Royle 2004: 167). It is not her story we are hearing: it is a multi-voiced tale from the English drawing room.

‘I couldn’t speak to her again; she - she . . . ‘  
‘Beat it back.’  
‘Beat it back.’ (‘The Back Drawing-Room’: 225)

In these few words, the climax of the story, it is not the little man who says the first ‘Beat it back’ but Mrs Henneker, who interjects her words into the tale. What is being beaten back we never know. The little man merely repeats the words of Mrs Henneker. Derrida refers to the ghost as not being that of our own unconscious but that of someone else’s: the ghost of the other. We never know what these secrets are or to whom they belong. When the ghost beats it back, she hides it forever. A silence pervades.

Derek Hand takes up this point when he discusses the self-reflexiveness of Bowen’s writing, referring to ‘numerous literary references’ scattered throughout her work: for example, ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ is mentioned by other guests in the drawing room. He contends that this can be read as Bowen establishing her own sense of separation or ‘apartness from the gathering’ (2009: 68). I would say that she is also separating herself from a certain class or type of English drawing-room clientele, as is apparent by the ironic, satirical, and sometimes humorous tone with which she pokes fun at the characters and the setting. The ‘inevitability’ of Mrs Henneker ‘taking her place’ to discuss the ‘larger abstractions’, not even hesitating to ‘challenge the mortality of the soul’, suggests a satirical look at an English drawing room (‘The Back Drawing-Room’: 215), as does substituting the little man’s name for an umbrella, conveying a sense of the ridiculousness of the whole encounter.

Could there be a connection between Bowen’s own sense of belonging and that of the little man’s in the sense of how out of place she felt, the narratorial voices of the

others in the room blending with her own voices from the past? The story of the little man frames Bowen's, which in turn is framed by an English drawing room. Mary Breen develops the idea that Bowen's fiction is in part autobiographical, suggesting that in some cases it is difficult for Bowen to separate out what she has read from what actually happened in her life. In the same way, she writes into her stories aspects of her own life, which may or may not have happened. Breen quotes Bowen as saying that when she writes, she re-creates what had already been created for her (Breen 2009: 112). Her ideas had already been implanted, although whether by her own voice or from the voices of others is unclear. Can these ever be separated?

The story ends with the guests enquiring as to 'Whose importation' the little man had been. No one can answer. The ending is left open. The ambiguous nature of the haunting is not resolved and the text ends in a silence. As Shannon Wells-Lassagne discusses, this silence 'calls attention to the politicised subject matter' (2009: 111). Perhaps there is no resolution to the political situation in Ireland. Nicholas Royle in 'Spooking Forms' proffers that Elizabeth Bowen does not offer any single, undivided narrative in the story. He describes 'the little man's narration' as being 'part of, partitioned by, the so-called frame narrative that is itself, already doubled, divided and partitioned' (2004: 166). Reflecting on Ireland's current political situation today, divided, partitioned and portioned, Royle's comment on the frame narrative seems particularly relevant. There is an undecidability attached to the ghost, which cannot be resolved. Hospitality, for which the Irish are famous, both north and south of the border, becomes hostility at the flick of a switch.

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## REVIEWS

### Patricia Laurence, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Literary Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

In the years since Victoria Glendinning wrote her outstanding biography *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer*, much has changed in Bowen scholarship. In 1977, it did not seem inappropriate to begin the Foreword to the book with 'Why a life of Elizabeth Bowen?', a strange-sounding remark 43 years later. But in 1977, Bowen had only been dead four years; on the republication of her landmark work of criticism *Elizabeth Bowen* in 1999, Hermione Lee wrote that Bowen was in 1981 'a marginalised and undervalued figure' (1999: 2). With the only two biographical works being those by Glendinning and a shorter 1986 study by Patricia Craig, the time is ripe for a new biography: Bowen scholarship has blossomed, and she is now viewed as a leading twentieth-century novelist, the themes of trauma, identity, exile, displacement and nation making her now read as a very contemporary writer, while still intriguingly hard to categorise: as Laurence remarks, 'Bowen's fiction is an original amalgam, hewing to no specific aesthetic or place in conventional literary history' (251).

Bowen is a difficult writer who attracts complex arguments and sophisticated theorising. The great asset of this biography, however, is its readability. Laurence writes clearly and accessibly, sharing a great amount of often complex material in a way that easily engages the reader: this is a real plus, especially for those new to Bowen's work. Also admirable is the book's presentation as a blend of biography and criticism: it proceeds chronologically, but is divided into clear sections on key themes in Bowen's writing such as surrealism, love, outsiders and identity. Viewed like this, the range of these themes in itself evokes the idea of collage, which Laurence joins other critics in finding in Bowen's work.

Throughout the book, Laurence is rightly keen to stress that Bowen was far more than a writer of sensibility, love or comedies of manners. Observing how '[h]er movement reflected the age of the refugee' (84), Laurence establishes how Bowen was engaged with the history and politics of her day, whether working on the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment or, more controversially, passing intelligence about Ireland to England during the Second World War. Likewise, although

Laurence gives great attention to Bowen's relationships with men and women (she is particularly good on how younger writers such as May Sarton were devoted to her, one of many ways that this book goes beyond Glendinning's earlier work), she is contemporary in her reading of relationships, arguing that Bowen 'lived and wrote about postmodern sexual fluidity' (161).

Equally interesting, although sometimes taking us away from focus on Bowen, is the author's discussion of other writers, such as Eudora Welty and Sean O'Faolain, and their connections with Bowen, especially fellow intellectuals such as Isaiah Berlin and William Plomer. For Laurence, Bowen sits well in their company, for her philosophy 'veers towards post-modernist perspectives which aimed to collapse borders between the literary and the popular, to strip away the cerebral, to engage with the ironies of a TV generation, and to innovate and inject new language and sensation into the novel' (110-11). There are interesting insights throughout, for example the idea that although much is written about Jamesian connections, Bowen is 'closer in feeling to Dickens' (274), an idea that scholars should pursue, as is the case made for links between the work of Bowen and Iris Murdoch.

The reader gets a great sense of Bowen herself, to the limited extent this can ever be possible, as this book shows, through frequent quotation from Bowen's letters. I was impressed by the book's avoidance of any semblance of hagiography: we are reminded that Bowen was in no way a feminist, at times quite the opposite, even though her work for the Women's Institute in Old Headington shows her belief in 'women's historical connection to the home' (261). Laurence points out that when O'Faolain urged her to write about the real Ireland outside the Big House, she never did; Laurence also gives time and care to the ethics behind Bowen's reports from Ireland in World War Two, something that has been the centre of greater controversy since the previous biographies. She is even-handed with this, neither blaming Bowen nor defending her, but suggesting why it happened and what it tells us about Bowen as a person and a writer.

While there are some errors in the book, the reader comes away with a great sense of Bowen's personality: 'the farouche quality: the untamable, forthright, frank and unconventional under a veneer of propriety' with 'a rage [...] that critics and biographers have failed to register' (143), eternally restless yet always seeking a home, 'modern, modernist and on the move' (85). The complexity of Bowen's life and the diversity of themes in her work make for an ambitious project when they are brought together. Laurence makes great and valid claims for Bowen, for example that she 'helped to diminish the borders of high, middle and low culture along with other interwar authors' (258). Although the knowledge and research at work sometimes strains against a clear focus, the wealth of evidence here mostly bears those arguments out. *Elizabeth Bowen: A Literary Life* is a timely, readable book, which will create added interest in Bowen's life and work.

Nick Turner

*Elizabeth Bowen: Theory, Thought and Things*, edited by Jessica Gildersleeve and Patricia Juliana Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

In 'The Roving Eye', Bowen suggests that 'Concentration on any one writer's work almost always ends by exposing a core of naïvety - a core which, once it has been laid bare, seems either infantile or august.' She continues:

the vital test is the sense of truth in the vision—its clearness, its spontaneity, its authority [...] Nothing is negative; nothing is commonplace. For is it not that the roving eye, in its course, has been tracing for us the linaments of a fresh reality? Something has been beheld for the first time. (*Afterthought*, 193-4)<sup>1</sup>

The essays in this collection demonstrate, however, that concentration on Bowen's fiction does not expose 'a core of naïvety' that is 'infantile', but rather a core that is impressive, 'august' even. As Bowen has become ever more popular, academic studies have highlighted her own 'clearness [...] spontaneity [and ...] authority'. It is perhaps that spontaneity which, as Jessica Gildersleeve and Patricia Juliana Smith state in their introduction to this impressive collection of essays, means that 'Bowen's work has never been simple to categorise' (1). While some may perceive this as an obstacle to reading her work, for others this leads to a lifetime's engagement with her fiction and non-fiction. She can be considered in so many ways: as a writer of the Big House story, a modernist, a postmodernist, or one concerned only with 'drawing-room romance' (2). But as the contributors to the collection show so ably, Bowen's non-fiction writing is self-reflective and engaged with the construction of fiction (both her own and the fiction of others), and should be considered as experimental and innovative. Focusing, as the title suggests, on 'Theory, Thought and Things', the essayists discuss a range of ways in which Bowen can be read, and ways in which Bowen read other writers. The essays are wide-ranging, discussing novels, short stories and Bowen's non-fiction writing, while also offering some illuminating comparisons with other writers.

Aimee Gasston considers the ways in which Bowen wrote about style and her own notions of style in her appearance, the inventiveness of her writing and her understanding of the writing process, particularly in relation to the short story. She takes issue with the notion that Bowen should be considered problematic, arguing rather that her focus on style (both on the page and off) indicates a writer whose 'experimental prose should be seen [...] as part of the intrinsic fabric of everyday life, its mystery and its meaning' (21). Keri Walsh also draws attention to Bowen's innovative style, exploring her short fiction within the newly defined notion of Irish Surrealism, and arguing that, in *The Cat Jumps* (1934), Bowen 'emerges as a deft practitioner of Surrealist style, an authority on the ideas in Breton's manifestos, and a sympathetic as well as a sophisticated critic of the movement' (31). Jessica Gildersleeve focuses on Bowen's critical work, and discusses the pleasure to be found

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was first published in *New York Times* as 'The Search for a Story to Tell' on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1953 and in *Harper's Bazaar* (English edition) in June 1953, and reprinted in *Afterthought* as 'The Roving Eye' (Sellery and Harris, 1981: 165).

in her writing and the pleasure that reading affords her characters. ‘Pleasure for Bowen’, Gildersleeve suggests, ‘is immediate, thoughtless, tinged perhaps by the romance of memory’ (51). While pleasure may well be immediate, many of her characters are less than present; in ‘Obnoxiousness’ renée c hoogland interrogates Bowen’s portrayal of obnoxious adolescents and children and their liminal existence, arguing that they should be seen as ‘aesthetic objects’ (65), which, perhaps because of their liminality, become figures of hope. The liminality of indoor spaces—‘staircases, windows, hallways and corridors’ (96)—is considered in Emma Short’s comparison of the work of Elizabeth Bowen and Katherine Mansfield, in which she argues that the thresholds of these liminal places are ‘frequently the sites of romantic and/or sexual transgression’ (103). In contrast to the discussion of these liminal but concrete places, Damian Tarnopolsky discusses the abstract concepts of absence and presence in Bowen’s fiction: ‘something and nothing’ (119). Laurie Johnson suggests that everyday objects, so important in the construction of her characters’ identities, can take on a greater significance, removing the agency and voice of her protagonists as they unravel before the reader’s eyes.

The formation of identity is of course of significance throughout Bowen’s fiction, and it is a focus of Patricia Juliana Smith’s essay, where she considers the role of female fetishism in *The Little Girls*. In this novel, however, unlike *The Heat of the Day* where, as Johnson highlights, ‘the trappings of their houses remain the only stable aspect of their lives’ (142), as Dinah, Sheila and Clare gain self-knowledge, the fetishized objects of the past (the gun, the sixth toe and a volume of Shelley’s poetry) cease to hold any significance. While these items loosen their hold, notions of habit and habitus, as Ulrike Maude demonstrates, allow ‘for the (re)formation of an identity that has become dissipated’ (84), an identity which can also be affected by ‘disturbances in spatial awareness’ (90-91). In the last essay in this collection, Andrew Bennett considers Bowen’s employment of the telephone as a narrative device. Bennett’s concluding sentence is apt: ‘Bowen’s telephones’, he argues, ‘communicate to us the fact that communication is what her writing produces, calls for and evokes, but also resists, displaces and dissolves, in an eerie or phony modernist prosthesis of presence of verbal exchange’ (193), a resistance which can be found in much of Bowen’s work.

As Gildersleeve and Smith argue, ‘Bowen should be viewed as occupying and interrogating multiple places and roles in literary history’; this collection of essays achieves that premise, providing diverse readings of her work that will add to and develop current scholarship on Bowen’s writing. Indeed, the essayists have illustrated very effectively that, in her fiction, the reader will always find ‘[s]omething [...] beheld for the first time’; it is that ‘something’ which continues to engage Bowen’s readers and which will lead to further discussions of her work.

Nicola Darwood

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## Layla Ferrández Melero ~ Symposium Report<sup>2</sup>

On Saturday February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Elizabeth Bowen Society hosted a symposium at Birkbeck, University of London. The morning discussions began at 10 am after a brief introduction to the event by society founders Nicola Darwood and Nick Turner.

In a stimulating talk titled ‘The Shadowy Third: Love, Letters and Elizabeth Bowen’, Julia Parry discussed Bowen’s first affair with Humphry House, Parry’s grandfather, and considered the triangle formed by the two lovers and Madeline, House’s wife, which was inevitably reminiscent of Maud Ellman’s study on the flow of desire in Bowen’s work and Bowen’s own perception of romance, captured in her war-time novel *The Heat of the Day*: “No, there is no such thing as being alone together.” Parry captivated the attendees with some exhilarating never-seen-before photographs of Bowen at Bowen’s Court and presented her upcoming book about the correspondence between Bowen and House during and after their relationship, always bearing in mind the importance of the presence of Madeline as the shadowy third, an indivisible part of the liaison.

In “‘Outside War’: The Evacuated Spaces in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*’, Farah Nada explored one of the themes which, according to Bowen, was overlooked by the critics of her work: space. ‘Am I not manifestly a writer for whom places loom large?’ Bowen wrote in her biographical notes in *Pictures and Conversations*. With a thorough analysis of the novel, Nada provided interesting insights into the symbolism of the empty/emptied space in a story in which there is no actual evacuation.

Nicola Darwood gifted the audience with a gripping talk about a letter Bowen wrote to P.N. Furbank as a reply to his appraisal of her 1968 novel *Eva Trout*. His review was not entirely negative, but Bowen could not help noticing some imperfections in his writing: he had misquoted the novel several times! Bowen, who took negative reviews with a fortified equanimity, pointed to his lack of attention with her characteristic sharp, intelligent, and eloquent comments in the most elegant and sarcastic manner.

After the coffee break, Nick Turner proceeded to read the first pages of *The Death of the Heart*, which inspired a lively exchange of views on Bowen’s widely-read novel, one which is also recognised as her masterpiece.

Once the morning session had concluded, we headed to Burr & Co on Russell Square. After a relaxing lunch and animated conversation, we started our walk to 2 Clarence Terrace. Our first stop was 10 Gower St, the final home of legendary Bloomsbury hostess Lady Ottoline Morrell. We heard about how she was depicted in novels by many of the writers around her, most famously being the inspiration for Lady Chatterley by D.H. Lawrence. Bowen first met Virginia Woolf in the garden at a one of Lady Ottoline’s previous residences. She was a keen photographer and many of her

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<sup>2</sup> This report originally appeared in ‘The Elizabeth Bowen Society Newsletter’ earlier in 2020.

pictures (including several of Bowen) are in the collection at the National Portrait Gallery.

We then moved on towards 29 Fitzroy Square, one-time home of Virginia Woolf. It also happens that No 29 was the London home of George Bernard Shaw. However, our focus was on Woolf, and we had an interesting discussion about their friendship: in particular, on how Bowen's reminiscences about Woolf are often used to counter the portrayal of the latter as an always tragic, sad, depressed figure, with Bowen remembering her most for her wonderful laugh.

We made our way to Regent's Park in order to visit several locations which inspired and are featured in some of Bowen's most famous writings. The first stop was the Rose Garden, which was the backdrop to romantic walks for Bowen and Charles Ritchie during the early stages of their relationship. We also read a scene from the short story 'Look at All Those Roses', which eloquently described the array of colours and powerful scents in a garden full of roses.

We briefly glanced at the Open Air Theatre, which served as the setting for the opening of *The Heat of the Day*, and passed the bandstand which also famously featured in the novel. As we approached 2 Clarence Terrace, we crossed one of the bridges over the lake which may have provided the locale for the short story 'Tears, Idle Tears'.

Once we arrived at 2 Clarence Terrace, we convened around the blue plaque and had a look at the cover of Victoria Glendinning's biography, which features a photo of Bowen seated inside. In the background of that photo, you could see where we were standing. We read through the beginning of the chapter, which covered Bowen's purchase of the house. and we were all much amused by the idea (as relayed in a letter to Virginia Woolf) that she considered the house to be small.

Photos taken, walk completed, after a long day of fascinating insights, we all began to meander towards our next destinations with new connections made and memories formed. We would once again like to thank everyone who contributed to make the day a success: the organisers from the committee, the speakers, and of course everyone who attended. Thanks to you all.

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## Afterword ~ Nick Turner ~ ‘The centre cannot hold’: Juxtaposition and instability in Chapter One of *The Death of the Heart*

For many scholars, writers and readers *The Death of the Heart* (1938) is Elizabeth Bowen’s best novel. It sold more than any other of her books, and was made into a TV drama in 1985. It is generally listed by commentators as either Bowen’s best novel or as among the very best: Victoria Glendinning observes that it is ‘one of the most memorable and the most characteristic [...] of her novels’, and that it ‘crowned a phase of concentrated fiction writing that had lasted nearly twenty years’ (125). Patricia Craig notes that it is ‘the book that nearly made Elizabeth Bowen a popular, as well as an acclaimed, author (74)’ and wrote how May Sarton ‘left a memorable picture of Alan Cameron, walking up and down the drawing-room at Clarence Terrace with a glass in his hand, reciting the first page of *The Death of the Heart*, and breaking off to shout, “That’s genius!”’ (87). In contrast, Bowen herself did not rate the novel as highly as some of her other work: it may be that there is an apparent smoothness of surface in the text that works against Bowen’s characteristic interest in fracture and instability.

Not surprisingly, Bowen’s novels, as well as being sustained by narrative development dependant on psychology, movement, secrecy and displacement, are also often constructed as a series of set pieces or vividly visual scenes, which are close to being contained short stories: the valley in *The Hotel*, Cecilia and Markie’s evening at the cottage in *To the North*, the beach party in *The Little Girls* and Eva’s visit to her former home at the start of *Eva Trout*. Many of these scenes depict two characters in a tense, complex emotional situation played out against a landscape that hovers between the realistic and the symbolic, or in an interior that is claustrophobic. These scenes parallel the content and mood of short stories such as ‘The Demon Lover’ (entrapment in vehicle in a wartime city), ‘Mysterious Kor’, and ‘A Walk in the Woods’. The value of individual works will always be subjective, but interest in the stories has increased, particularly those set in World War Two. The ability of short stories to generate intensity benefited Bowen’s vision; they allow for a glimpse of something wider and suit her interest in poetic expression. In ‘A Walk in the Woods’, in particular, the two central characters retreat from urban London to woods that are presented as a realistic space, but whose function emphasises their symbolism. Like the forest in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* the woods are a symbolic place, and only for temporary habitation.

The remarkable first chapter of *The Death of the Heart* can be related to these ideas. If Glendinning is right to see the book as a pinnacle of Bowen’s writing, there is an argument for this section being its high point, and Cameron’s claims of genius well merited. I wish, by close reading, to suggest that this chapter takes us to the heart of her work in its setting, tone, language, themes and narrative; it is not only revelatory in terms of Bowen’s craft, but also contains a unity that bridges the gap between novel and short story. It is a chapter that is of enormous narrative significance to the novel as a whole.

Bowen presents a winter scene in Regent's Park, London, focusing on a man and a woman whom we later learn to be Anna Quayne and her friend, the writer St Quentin. Beginning in *media res*, the chapter takes us through the conversation the two characters have about Portia, the sixteen-year-old orphan half-sister of Anna's husband who has come to live with them. Anna reveals that she has read Portia's diary; to explain her discomfort, she tells her friend the story of Portia and how she came to live with them, before the two return to Anna's house in the square surrounding the park as the chapter closes.

Regent's Park was a place Bowen knew intimately from living at 2 Clarence Terrace, the position of which corresponds with that of Anna's house in the novel; the similarity between life and art is close. But, as we have seen previously, the value of the scene is both realistic and symbolic. Here, as in many other moments in Bowen's work, language is employed poetically as well as visually, and we become aware that the scene not only opens a story set in contemporary London, but also employs its setting metaphorically. On second reading the meaning becomes clearer, once we are aware of Bowen's damning of the world she portrays. She has deliberately opened the novel in winter, the frozen natural world of the park clearly commenting on the paralysed urban world of which the Quayne home is a microcosm. This is actually fairly obvious symbolism, part-and-parcel of the mid- and late-nineteenth-century novel: the fog in *Bleak House*, Stonehenge in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Bowen adds complexity, however, implying ambiguity, paradox and liminality, enhancing the sense of a T.S. Eliot-like wasteland, aligning her as much with modernist as with realist aesthetics. Later in the chapter St Quentin is shown to think of 'the lake scene' (12), highlighting the artificiality of the place, a subtle self-consciousness which will appear again at the start of *Eva Trout* when Eva visits the artificial-looking castle where she was born.

It is striking that Bowen does not introduce the couple until the second paragraph: the environment is signalled as being more significant than the personages, something that may mould them; it has conditioned our reaction to them. When Anna and St Quentin do appear, they are placed by Bowen on a bridge to one of the islands, which is also telling: the island may symbolise the isolated separation of each character in the novel, the bridge the transitional space they occupy, connecting two pieces of solid land, poised above water that flows beneath a frozen exterior, rather like life in 2 Windsor Terrace. Anna and St Quentin are at or near a frozen centre of the park, an artificial piece of nature ringed by a road and houses, which they move towards as the chapter progresses. Enclosed by coats, cold and the traffic that circles the park, the characters symbolise liminal outsiders, 'chessmen', pieces in a game, 'sexless and stiff', lacking volition (7). By the end of the second paragraph of the chapter 'their reflections' in the ice beneath them are 'constantly broken up' (7), symbolising fractured identity and the acknowledged inability of a novelist to portray someone clearly. They may be together, but are clearly marked as separated in outlook and understanding.

St Quentin does not in fact appear again till near the end of the novel, thus acting as a kind of framing device. It is significant that he is a writer himself, an urbane outsider who comes to witness events; he may evoke Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*, a novel Bowen intensely admired. If St Quentin is a writer, Anna is a talker, a narrator, someone who needs to vocalise her experience to make sense of it. This is one reason for the large amount of exposition in this chapter, where St Quentin learns the

complicated story of Portia's family. Here, as audience, he operates as an avatar of the implied reader, Anna as the narrator and the implied author Bowen, St Quentin as an outsider who throws 'a homesick glance up at Anna's drawing-room' where firelight is 'making cheerful play' (16). Anna is passionately over-involved; he stands by contrast detached and outside, a listener. The curious relationship between Anna and St. Quentin and their dealings with Portia also remind us that this is a novel about spying.

If there is a slight delay in introducing the two characters, there is a greater one in introducing Portia, who does not appear at all in this chapter. Although this is partly for dramatic effect, it also emphasizes the degree to which she is enclosed and hidden. Portia is trapped, initially, within the narration of Anna; she is someone the reader understands only through her writing, which is both a mask and her very identity, and who is judged by Anna and St. Quentin.

The symbolism continues through the objects that drive the narrative. Anna refers to the diary in the novel's first moment of dialogue as 'the thing' (7), a term which is employed three times, giving ambiguous and even gothic connotations. Anna's narration is in fact structured around objects, clothes and furniture, mirroring her creator's interest in these. Anna tells how she had gone into Portia's room, her tidying a metaphor for narrative coherence; the object that causes problems is Portia's desk. The desk, in effect, is Portia: someone else's property initially, designed to be closed. While Anna intends the locking to allow privacy, the reader may see this as confinement. Portia however has, it seems, 'lost the keys' (9), hinting that this ordering and separation so desired by Anna will not work. Anna finds that 'papers gushed out all around it' (9): Portia, innocence, her writing and individual life cannot be contained by the artifice of civilised London life, a polite and urbane exterior that works against passion, energy and even madness. 'Either this girl or I are mad', says Anna (10); she refers to the diary as 'deeply hysterical' and St Quentin agrees, suggesting that writing is always to 'rave' a little (10). It seems that this energy, this raving, may be communicated to or already suppressed within him, for later he makes 'the bridge shake' (12). As the chapter progresses, St Quentin's short questions and answers disappear, Anna's talk about Portia turning into a monologue, which enhances the sense of the characters' separation.

Everything about the setting, themes and content crystallises in the language, in the twisted word order and striking images. In the first line of the chapter, the ice is 'no more than a brittle film', suggesting the protective cover, a metaphor for urban manners, is unstable; it has cracked and is now 'floating in segments', the pieces of ice standing for the figures in society who, like the ice, only 'tapped together', leaving channels of 'dark water' down which 'swans in slow indignation swam', a striking phrase (7). A swan is commonly seen as an image of power and majesty, with a paddling beneath the surface that undercuts its elegance; if the swans symbolise the urban middle classes that so mystify Portia in their combination of control and energy, the almost oxymoronic 'slow indignation' adds to this; indignation is generally accompanied by some kind of energy, not slowness. Placing 'swam' at the end of the sentence gives a subtle emphasis to movement and also achieves a mirroring effect between 'swans' and 'swam' in word similarity, the mirroring evoking the reflections in the scene itself. The forced word order emphasises the complexity of a scene that cannot be easily rendered by conventional syntax, and the sibilance in the three's's heightens the poetic effect.

Bowen tells us that it is 'between three and four in the afternoon' (7); it is close to dusk, a liminal time, and the sense of uncertainty enhanced by the use of 'between', for the time is not precise. The air is appropriately opaque. The trees round the lake soar 'frigidly' (7), another image that we should consider; these trees may connote the urban middle class, constructed around near antitheses, the energy of 'soar' and the paralysis of 'frigidly', which link with the cracking ice and the water beneath. The image of separation is continued through the 'islands', and the theme of enclosure in the image of the 'Bronze cold of January' that 'bound the sky and the landscape', the plosives emphasizing the power in the personified cold that constricts, and the sky being 'shut to the sun' (7). Sibilance is used again here, the soft sounds contrasting with the plosives. The narratorial comment that '[t]here is something momentous about the height of winter' (7) creates ambiguity in the idea of both summits and depths in the word 'height'; it also suggests a distance from the scene, a view that can be shared by the implied reader.

The fact that all this comment can be made on just 15 lines of prose indicates the dense, poetic nature of Bowen's writing, and this continues in the second paragraph, which concludes the visual introduction to the scene. The park is rather curiously referred to as the 'mainland' (7), giving an impression of sea being present, and of the power, movement and instability this image connotes. Positioned on their footbridge, Anna and St Quentin's pause is 'summerlike' in contrast with the 'intense cold' around them, and they have 'obvious stillness' as opposed to the 'hurry' of everyone else (7). Although they may 'look like lovers', the romantic image enhanced by the flowing alliteration, there is a gap between appearance and reality; the pause is far from 'summerlike', seen through the use of 'riveted' to describe their attention to Anna's words; their clothes are 'bulwarks' (7). The scene is clearly tense, heightened by the juxtaposition of 'Warmth' and 'cold' in the same line (7).

Analysis of the language shows that this is a scene constructed subtly around juxtapositions in language, setting and theme: stillness and movement, heat and cold, natural and urban worlds. The story of Portia's past is a contrast to the narrative present, and the novel of course develops as a Jamesian dramatisation of the struggle between innocence and experience. The tension between these is something Portia must navigate; they are irreconcilable opposites that a good Modernist (or at least partial Modernist) like Bowen will not seek to unite. The construction of the novel and its grounding in oppositions places Bowen in the tradition of the realist novel embracing ambiguity and symbolism: *Wuthering Heights*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the work of Henry James, or even Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. At the end of the chapter, when '[a]n inch of park gate was kept open for them alone' (21) there is a sense of Maria squeezing through the gate in *Mansfield Park*.

Bowen was, of course, an admirer of many nineteenth-century novels, with a particular admiration for *Wuthering Heights*. In *English Novelists* (1942) Bowen writes '*Wuthering Heights* is a book of fire and ice: no book has ever been better named' (33); it is no surprise that she subtly introduces these elements into her contrastingly urban novel, and no surprise that she so admired a novel that worked so much against realism and coherence in its embracing of multiple narratives, gothic, antithetical settings and identities and textual instability. These qualities can be seen to be at work here, in this astonishing opening chapter; disconnection is seen through the juxtapositions and near oxymorons. The tone is also close to the

bleakness in Thomas Hardy's depictions of communication and relationships, for example in his poem 'Neutral Tones', where the couple 'stood by a pond that winter day/And the sun was white, as though chidden of God'.

Bowen's Anna may want to 'only connect', but for all Bowen's characters and her world the 'centre cannot hold'. Portia's diary might be considered something of a comic device, its instability linking with the empty box that is the result of the quest in *The Little Girls* and the unsent letter near the textual centre of *Eva Trout*. But most striking here is a physical emptiness at the heart of the park '[...] the empty cold clay silence of inner Regent's Park [...] beneath a darkening sky' (16). We are reminded of *Heart of Darkness* as well as Hardy's lowering landscapes: the centre is a void.

But within this instability is also coherence, providing the reader with a final overarching antithesis. This coherence is achieved through Anna's role as narrator and her ordering of Portia's experience, and in the artistic shape of this chapter: like many short stories it has a unity of time and place, a focus on one event, and suggests a great deal more than is explicit; it also forms a satisfying aesthetic whole in that we move, with the characters, from near the centre to the edge of the park and are poised at its boundary as the chapter closes. There is a sense of finality in '[c]ars slid lights all round the Outer Circle; lamps blurred the frosty mist' (21); we have left the park to return to the urban world. We have learned a great deal about the family unit in Windsor Terrace, about Portia's past, about instability and fracture, through a symbolic scene grounded in the realist novel, with modernist overtones. The idea of 'genius' and its Romantic overtones may be old-fashioned today; here, it does not feel inappropriate.

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