

METAFICTION IN ELIZABETH BOWEN'S THE LAST SEPTEMBER: SELF-
WRITING, PERFORMATIVITY, AND STORY-TELLING

by

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Metafiction in *The Last September*: Self-Writing, Performativity, and Storytelling

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Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*, set during the Irish War of Independence, draws insistent attention to the elaborate fiction of normalcy on which the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy has come to depend through its highly self-conscious meta-text. The novel's fictionality, and the fictionality of the lives of its characters, emerges as a result of the characters' sense that language can be used to defer and shape reality. The palpable sense of performance that pervades the novel, in addition to its insistence of the formative role of text, stories, and conversations in shaping character, prefigures the Ascendancy's end long before the war has intruded on the demesne. The novel's metatext is used to illustrate that the narratives of nation and gender that have been used to support the English empire are no longer viable. The Ascendancy's tendency to define itself solely through its solipsistic past dooms its members to define themselves through social and sexual roles composed of outmoded narratives, and the complete lack of potential that characterizes their fate is evidence of their inability to create alternative narratives.

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Introduction

But the hold of the country *was* that, [Marda] considered; it could be thought of in terms of oneself, so interpreted. Or seemed so—“Like Shakespeare,” she added more vaguely, “or isn’t it?...¹

This passage from Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September* contains three themes central to the novel; in its examination of the role of language and textuality in *The Last September*, this paper will take its cues from Marda Norton. Firstly, Marda draws attention to the mutually constitutive relationship between self and country; throughout the novel, Ireland is thought almost exclusively of in terms of its bearing on, similarities to, and differences from, the novel’s characters. Moreover, as Marda attempts to explain, the inclination to think of the country “in terms of oneself” resembles the tendency to read Shakespeare “in terms of oneself”; in much the same way that the country is compelling precisely because of its ability to be understood autobiographically, literature is often approached autobiographically. Although this relationship between life and literature is articulated less explicitly than the one between country and self, Marda clues the reader in to a key component of the book: the ways in which individual lives tend to mirror, and depend on, literature and text for the formation and development of their narratives. Text, in the form of letters, novels, and poetry, plays a formative role in the lives of the novel’s characters. Finally, Marda’s inability to adequately finish her statement, which ends, not as an affirmation but as a question, reflects the extent to which conversations are of very limited use in the novel, which thematizes the impossibility of meaningful or honest communication through language. The novel, beset with

¹ *TLS* 117

unfinished, abortive, and indefinite conversations, problematizes the very potential of defining either oneself or one's reality through language or narrative.

In *The Last September*, as in many of Bowen's ensuing war novels, narratives of the personal and the political are so colluded as to be indistinguishable from one other. That the novel is set within the demesne of an Anglo-Irish country house during the Irish War of Independence creates a problem of representation; the novel's protagonists are the war's antagonists, and as the war does not violently intrude on the demesne until the destruction of Danielstown, it can only be represented obliquely. As the war hovers on the periphery of both Danielstown and the novel, the domestic space functions as a lens through which the social significance of the war can be understood. The world of the Anglo-Irish landholders, in their last September, represents what *has been*; what the novel does not, and cannot, do is represent what *will be*. The novel's couples are childless, and its adolescent generation lacks any sense of direction. The novel's staggering lack of potential underscores the historical reality of decolonization; the social paradigms that enabled empire, in particular the maintenance of traditional gender roles, are suddenly no longer viable. The past is extremely present, and formative, at Danielstown.

In her essay "Technologies of Female Adolescence", renée c. hoogland argues, I believe erroneously, that the "violence of the Troubles is so muffled [by *The Last September*]...that we may safely assume different issues to be central."² Yet Hoogland does not ask *why* the Troubles are so relentlessly deferred, symbolized, and peripheral. By moving the war to periphery of the narrative, Bowen is able to epitomize the

² hoogland, renée c. "Technologies of Female Adolescence." Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation In Writing. New York: New York University Press, 1994. 40.

experience of the Ascendancy, alienated from the “lovely unloving” country on which they have been planted, and unable to assimilate their lives’ narratives to a political climate that will divest them of their history (92). Bowen illustrates that the War of Independence represents not only the political severing of colonial Ireland from imperial England, but a historical transition that will necessitate the rewriting of narratives of the nation and the self. *The Last September* is set in an interregnum; it takes place between viable models of nationhood and thus is, in some ways, outside of time. As a novel set on the hyphen between Anglo and Irish, it exists not only between two nationalities, but between Empire and postcolonialization, between world wars, between insidious past and unknowable future.³

By refusing to differentiate in her treatment of the personal and the historical, Bowen seems to keep the war on the periphery of the narrative; her point, however, is that war and the domestic are essentially inextricable. In none of Bowen’s war fiction is human behavior in wartime either simple or motivated solely by patriotism, which emerges largely as a fiction dependent on anachronistic, naive concepts. Bowen’s war novels are staged in a time away from time, in which personal concerns, however mired in war, take its place in the narrative. Bowen is interested in how people behave in times of cataclysmic change. What does emerge out of war is the fragmented, nebulous self, composed of stories and elaborate performances.

A critical tension has tended to converge around Elizabeth Bowen’s politics: Seamus Deane and Hermione Lee, among others, have argued that *The Last September* is essentially an elegy for the Ascendancy, while Vera Kreilkamp and Andrew Bennett have

³ The notion of the space between Anglo and Irish comes from: Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of Modern Ireland*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

argued that the novel relishes the Ascendancy's doom, and revels particularly in the necessary rewriting of women's lives in the face of decolonization. Though *The Last September* has also often been read as a coming of age, this paper will argue that the younger generation, and Lois in particular, undergoes no transformation and makes no decisions.⁴ Their fidelity to the fictions that underwrite their lives divests them of the ability to understand, much less participate in, the political reality surrounding the demesne.

This paper will assess the role of the past in *The Last September*, and the ways in which the telling of stories of self, gender and the nation works to maintain an illusory world even in the face of its destruction. Further, it will examine the ways in which the novel prefigures the Ascendancy's end even within the demesne, and condemns, not only the Ascendancy's solipsism, but its maintenance of traditional gender roles, which are performed by the younger generation to no personal satisfaction. Lois Farquar, the novel's adolescent protagonist, is an orphan, and thus lacks "a place within the traditional family triangle...[because of this, she] is particularly dependent on the wider context of sociocultural relations in which she is to position herself."⁵ Until she meets Marda Naylor, a woman in her late twenties about to be married, at Danielstown, Lois is characterized by her zealous desire to fall in love, either with Hugo Montmorency, an old friend of the Naylor's with whom her mother had once been in love, or with Gerald Lesworth, a romantic and patriotic, if simple-minded, English subaltern. Ultimately, Lois is denied satisfaction in any of these relationships, and the lack of other options available

⁴ For more on *The Last September* as coming-of-age, see: Austin, Allan. "The Sleeping Beauties." *Elizabeth Bowen: Revised Edition*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1989. 13-29.

⁵ hoogland, renée c. "Technologies of Female Adolescence." *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation In Writing*. New York: New York University Press, 1994. 59.

to her outside of falling in love, themselves scarce and unsatisfying, leave her, at the novel's end, to a nebulous fate.

Jed Esty's essay on *The Last September*, "Virgins of Empire", underscores the importance, in the novel, of the "programmatically cancella[tion of] generic protocols associated with two nineteenth-century novel forms, the gothic romance and the bildungsroman".⁶ While Esty argues that the inversion of Lois' bildungsroman—her frozen adolescence, her ambiguous fate, her lack of self-knowledge—is meant to mirror the doomed, sterile fate of the Ascendancy, this paper will read further into the ways in which both inversions of women's conventional narrative fates and those women's relationships to text—letters and books in particular—underscore the formative role of fiction and text in the narratives of women's lives. *The Last September* marks the end of the British Empire through an acknowledgment of the insufficiency of its traditional methods and conventions of story telling. As Andrea Zemgulys has demonstrated, "[The] British...literary canon...oriented colonial subjects toward mother England."⁷ As we shall see, Lois' desire to fall in love is motivated by what she understands her role in life to be; this understanding is often prompted by, and inscribed through, text.

The relationship between conventional gender roles and text is underscored by the role texts play in the novel; within the demesne, texts are deeply sexed—women write love letters; men important tomes—lives, memoirs, novels. The telos of the British Empire, represented by the political reality and material geography of the settler class, the normative heterosexual colonization of women's bodies by men and those women's

⁶ Esty, Jed. "Virgins of Empire: The Last September and the Antidevelopment Plot." *Modern Fiction Studies* 53.2 (2007). 257.

⁷ Andrea Zemgulys. *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 34.

subsequent production of children, and the ideology of the nation and the body politic, undergo a political fragmentation in the early 20th century that Bowen represents through an exploration the domestic and the personal.

To illustrate the ways in which the Ascendancy's reality is dependent upon outmoded narratives of self, nation, and gender, and to signal the future uselessness of those narratives, the novel draws insistent attention to its own fictionality, the trope with which this paper will concern itself. This is accomplished through Bowen's insistent focus on the "nature of [her] own medium...language itself"⁸; highly self-conscious language, staged conversations, uncanny foreshadowing, performance, and attention to the importance of stories in the creation of character. By blurring the boundary between art and life—the undisturbed universe of the Ascendancy is maintained, in its last September, by the older generation of Ascendancy's elaborate fidelity to the arts of performance and speech—and between past and future, Bowen deliberately suspends the illusion necessary to fiction. Hermione Lee has rightly observed that *The Last September* is characterized primarily by "the trance-like quality of a spectacle", and yet the motivation for, and political resonances of, the novel's inherent performativity has yet to be truly probed.⁹ I will argue that by drawing attention to the novel's fictionality, Bowen illustrates that it is the English empire's reliance on stagnant narratives of, particularly, the female self, that is responsible for its ultimate sterility and subsequent collapse, and that it is the detached geographic and temporal space of Danielstown that allows for Bowen to demonstrate this.

⁸Michael Bell. "The Metaphysics of Modernism." *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Ed. Michael Levenson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 16.

⁹Hermione Lee. *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation*. Essex: Mansell Bookbinders Limited, 1981. 15.

In his recent book Culture in Camouflage, Patrick Deer explores the tendency for Bowen's novels to address war only indirectly:

In Bowen's wartime writing, no one seems in possession of the big picture; the war has taken on its own impersonal and irresistible momentum behind the borders of home, and the strange, alienated beauty of wartime left behind inside the island fortress...A self-absorbed older generation struggles...with its demons, or distracts itself *ad absurdum*, while the young explore the wasteland, embracing their metamorphosis into escapist solipsism.¹⁰

Bowen's wartime fiction presents a blitzed or bombarded personal space that, though it registers the war, seems to exist outside of it. *The Last September's* protagonists, thus, are cut off from the War of Independence in two deeply different ways. The older generation refuses the war, while the younger embraces a romanticized version of it, and relishes its destructive potentiality without actively seeking or creating another model for life after the decolonization. As Deer demonstrates, it is a wasteland and an escape that are sought for and inhabited, rather than a solution. It is the active deferral of reality that allows for this last September, and it is Danielstown that makes such a deferral a possibility. This paper, like the novel, will primarily confine itself to the demesne, where which it will explore, firstly, the ways in which language, and conversations in particular, are used to create—to shape or defer—reality. It will seek to highlight the formative relationship of the past to the present at Danielstown, and the ways in which that peculiar temporality is directly responsible for the characters' senses of self. Finally, I will examine gender in the novel and the ways in which Bowen's characters are bound to define themselves through sexual roles composed of outmoded narratives.



¹⁰ Deer, Patrick. Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 172.

Chapter 1

Contested Space: The Performance of Self at Danielstown

As a space temporarily protected from, and outside of, the war, Danielstown relies on the telling of stories, both about the past and the present, for the preservation of its tranquil reality. As the place in which the reality of war is refused, Danielstown creates a sort of frame for the novel; it is a space that allows the performance of an unviable reality, of whose impending end the reader is made very much aware. Thus, Danielstown, and the elaborate narratives of imperial normalcy it requires, forces the reader “adjust [her] perceptive apparatus to the pane and the transparency that is the work of art.”¹¹ Bowen presents Danielstown as the stage on which the characters’ last September is played out; she draws her readers’ attention to the theatricality of life within the demesne through a focus on the characters’ habitual performances—the inherent lack of privacy that characterizes Danielstown, its inhabitants staged, abortive conversations, and the conception of both the self and reality as things that can be assumed, performed, and spoken into being. Declan Kiberd has observed that almost every one of *The Last September*’s characters is condemned “to play out every part except his or her own, to become martyrs to performance.”¹² It is Danielstown, and its antiquated but inescapable narratives, that necessitate this martyrdom. Danielstown is so steeped in, and characterized by, the past lives of its inhabitants that it is less a space in which to live a life than to repeat lives already lived. As I have illustrated, it is a particularly dangerous space for women, and for Lois Farquar, whose sexuality is less than definite, in particular, on which more later.

¹¹ Patricia Waugh. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. New York: Methuen & Co, Ltd, 1984. 28.

¹² Deer, Patrick. *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 169.

In the novel's first chapter, Danielstown is characterized as a place that, particularly for women, preserves the past. Waiting for the Montmorencys to arrive, "[Lois] wishe[s] she could freeze the moment and keep it always" (3-4). Lois' desire for a fixed present signals the still-life quality of novel, which is set in a self-conscious past tense that is linked particularly to an outmoded understanding of gender. "In those days, girls wore crisp white skirts and transparent blouses clotted with white flowers; ribbons threaded through with a view to appearance, appeared over the shoulders" (3). Early on, then, before the novel's action has begun, Bowen establishes femininity as performative: it is indebted to a period costume that highlights virginity, softness, and fertility. "Those days" implies that this time has past, and that some new model has taken its place. Thus, we can assume that the narrative will concern itself with what has changed, and why, between "those days" and these.

In much the same way that femininity is performed, cued by the donning of a costume, the self emerges as nothing more than the consequence of an elaborate awareness of the presence of spectators. The novel's first chapter underscores the extremely public nature of the house. The ante-room, where Lois meets Laurence to discuss the Montmorencys, is not "the ideal place to talk. Four rooms open off it, and at any moment a door might be opened, or blow open, sending a draught down one's neck. People pass through it continually, so that one ke[eps] having to look up and smile" (6-7). Danielstown, more stage than home, demands an active performance of self; it is characterized by its intrinsic lack of privacy; one is constantly on display or in danger of being interrupted. The necessity of "having to look up and smile" reflects the domestic politics of a Big House, governed by adherence to custom and its sense of itself as a

social, rather than a private, space. As a result, the characters are always in the position of having to speak to each other without being free to express their true thoughts, which further lends to private life the quality of performance. Weirdly, Danielstown's inhabitants are always in the wrong part of the house, whose hugeness, preserved past, and lack of privacy necessitate a great deal of shouting, searching, and even hiding. Though the characters are doomed to performance, they are deeply clumsy actors, unable to convince even themselves of the veracity of their assumed roles.

At the end of their conversation, Laurence convinces Lois that the Montmorencys have been outside one of the doors, listening to her assessment of them, a threat she takes seriously, as she's been overheard discussing people before at Danielstown, and will, later in the novel, overhear herself being discussed through opened doors. Inasmuch as Danielstown contains any boundaries—after Marda's departure, when Lois actively seeks privacy, she must hide in a closet—the breaking of those boundaries is a constant threat.

Thus, the self tends to emerge only in relation to other people. The novel thematizes the fact that people understand each other, and themselves, through the stories that are told about them, and that the power of language to fix character is one to take seriously. The threat of an unknown audience (as real for the older generation as for the younger), underscores the necessity not only of performance but also of concealment, and the difference between the public and private selves. Ironically, Lois has no private self to conceal, on which more later.

For Elizabeth Bowen, “[p]rivate consciousness is inseparable from the context of its social being”¹³; to represent the domestic is to represent the social changes wrought by

¹³ Grubgeld, Elizabeth. Anglo-Irish Autobiography: Class, Gender, and the Forms of Narrative. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004. 36.

war. Nonetheless, the fact that the war is obliquely played out on the domestic stage lends to the novel a sense of unreality, and contributes to the metatextuality of the narrative.

The characters in the novel are aware of being watched: by each other, by the objects in the house, by the past—all of which contribute to an uncanny sense that they are aware of the reader. The novel's self-awareness, of both the performance of self and its link to textuality, destabilizes a conventional mimesis, and in so doing upsets the conventional relationship between novel and reader, the latter of whom becomes increasingly aware of the voyeuristic aspects of her function, on which more later.

Danielstown, as the stage on which Bowen sets her scene, is an inhospitable home, a seemingly permanent physical vestige of the British Empire and its occupation of Ireland, in which the younger generation exists uneasily, entertaining traitorous fantasies of its destruction. The novel “is fraught with a sense of suspense and danger...and an exquisite tension is set up between the rational modern world and a sense of long-forgotten forces acting within it”, and it is Danielstown that stages this tension between temporalities.¹⁴ The house is inextricably tied to its past, both colonial and personal, and its inhabitants are utterly defined by the past it preserves, though the younger generation rebels against its oppression. The house is divorced from Ireland, and 1920, by its spatial and temporal geographies. It is neither English nor Irish but something extremely *other*; it is characterized by its relationship to an imperial past. The house's active preservation of the past aligns Danielstown and its inhabitants in a space outside of time, signaling the inherent unreality of the house and the fiction of the Ascendancy.

¹⁴Susan Osborn. “‘How to measure this unaccountable darkness between the trees’: the strange relation of style and meaning in *The Last September*.” ed. Susan Osborn. Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives. Cork: Cork University Press, 2009. 35.

In her memoir about her own Irish country house, Bowen's Court, Bowen writes: "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".¹⁵ The inexpugnable persistence of Laura Naylor and the other dead inhabitants of Danielstown destroys the individual significance of its current inhabitants while inviting a necessary contrast between a static past and an uncertain future. In addition, it elides the realities of its past and present inhabitants, further lending to the novel a sense of both past-tense and still-life that disturbs a conventional mimesis. The novel insists that Danielstown is a place *of the past*, not of the present or future.

Although Danielstown's inhospitability is only ever registered subconsciously by its inhabitants, they are nonetheless transformed by their relationship to Danielstown's past. Forced to perform normalcy for each other as they defer and deny the war in conversation, the inhabitants of Danielstown are also subject to perform normalcy for the past, smug in its preserved perpetuity, which threatens the characters at every turn. This tension between the past and present is manifest throughout the novel. On the first night of the Montmorency's visit, the Naylor's dining room is characterized by an eerie antagonism between the present and the past, preserved through the portraits on the walls:

In the dining-room, the little party sat down under the crowd of portraits. Under that constant interchange from the high-up faces staring across... Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, their nephew, niece and old friends had a thin, over-bright look, seemed in the air of the room unconvincingly painted, startled, transitory... the six, in spite of an emphasis in speech and gesture they unconsciously heightened, dwindled personally. While above, the immutable figures, shedding into the rush of dusk smiles, frowns, every vestige of personality, kept only an attitude—an out-moded modishness, a quirk of a flare hand slipped under a ruffle or spread

¹⁵ Kelsall, Malcolm. "The Duchess Too Is Dead: Bowen and Gregory." Literary Representations of the Irish Country House: Civilization and Savagery Under the Union. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

over the cleft of a bosom—cancelled time, negated personality and made of the lower cheerfulness, dining and talking, and faintest exterior friction. (27-8).

The confrontation between the animate dead and the weirdly inanimate living diminishes not Danielstown's past inhabitants but its present ones, who emerge seeming "thin, overbright...transitory" Eerily, in a wild inversion of expected reality, it is the real people, rather than the portraits, who become "painted". Their interface with the past negates their own present, and it is the portraits, not the living people, who contain 'every vestige of personality'. This passage, set early in the novel, establishes an antagonistic relationship between past and present that is ultimately characterized by an unsettling nihilism that effaces the narrative present and consigns it, prematurely, to the past. The characters emerge as fictional and fleeting, and less sure, or strong, in their present than the long-dead past inhabitants of the house. The scene draws the reader's attention to the ephemeral nature not only of life but of the past on which Danielstown's reality is based.

The Last September drastically destabilizes not only mimetic narrative but the narratives of the world it represents. Art and life become so colluded as to be indistinguishable, a theme that the novel will continue to pursue through the younger generation's understanding of self. Patricia Waugh, in her book-length study on metafiction, demonstrates that the ties between narrative and reality are deeply formative: "For metafictional writers the fundamental assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's 'reality'...Questioning...the authority of consciousness, of the mind, metafiction establishes the categorization of the world through the arbitrary system of language."¹⁶ *The Last September*'s characters exist in a liminal space between reality and imagination that thematizes the way in which the

¹⁶ Patricia Waugh. Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction. London: Methuen & Co, Ltd, 1984. 24.

construction of a personal narrative is almost indivisible from the construction of a fiction. The novel insists on the intersections between life and fiction to illustrate the ways in which story telling, one of the novel's key preoccupations, is deeply constitutive of reality. While Naylor's either refuse to acknowledge, or misunderstand, the threat posed by the Troubles, the novel obliquely prefigures their fall by cueing the reader to recognize that they are already a thing of the past, a fiction in a book, entirely composed of stories, existing only through performance.

As Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle argue in their recent book-length study of Elizabeth Bowen's place in modernist fiction, "the very notion of character (that is, people, real or fictional) is fundamentally transformed in Bowen's writing: her novels derange the very grounds of 'character', what it is to 'be' a person, to 'have' an identity, to be real or fictional".¹⁷ As the characters perform for themselves, each other, and even for the house in which they are ensconced and whose doom they prefigure, the fourth wall, or the space of suspended disbelief between reader and text, disappears. The reader becomes not only aware of, but complicit in, the spectacle. She, like the characters in the novel, cannot see past the undisturbed, disturbing demesne of Danielstown. She too must either grasp at, or ignore, the hints and manifestations of the war. Thus, by collapsing a clear distinction between the personal and the political, Bowen epitomizes the reality of the Ascendancy. This uncanny relationship between reality and fiction destabilizes a conventional mimesis, and in so doing draws attention to the means by which a fiction is upheld.

¹⁷ Bennett, Andrew, and Nicholas Royle. Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives. Great Britain: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

As a geographical space with intrinsic characteristics, the house is particularly interesting because, in its active preservation of the past, it is not only insistently anthropomorphized but displays an uncanny tendency to objectify its human inhabitants. The anthropomorphized house represents the blurring of the lines between personal and political, a boundary whose porousness is often thematized Bowen's fiction. Susan Osborn illustrates that it is Bowen's tendency toward anthropomorphization that creates the fundamental epistemological disconnect between reader and text that characterizes

The Last September:

By showing what is not, by sundering the expected relationship between the sign and the signified and deforming the form that contains the subject... Bowen's excrescent imagery suggests the uncertainty of representation and its limitations, while at the same time, by replacing the descriptive apparatus of the classical model of the theory of categories and undermining its philosophical underpinnings, Bowen's representation suggests the possibility of different theories of meaning, truth, reason, knowledge and understanding than those encoded in conventional mimetic representation.¹⁸

Thus, though the possibility of alternative narratives is gestured at only obliquely, the uncanny images and unstable boundaries within the novel cue the reader to seek hidden or alternative understandings of the "reality" they are being shown.

The novel is one of broken boundaries: even as the public permeates the personal, so too does the individual consciousness—the inner lives of the characters, their fantasies—permeate through to the physical world, and the past deeply shape the present. Not only Lois, but all of the inhabitants of Danielstown, are affected by its past.

Throughout the house, inanimate objects have "independent existence[s] of [their] own"¹⁹

¹⁸ Susan Osborn. "How to measure this unaccountable darkness between the trees': the strange relation of style and meaning in *The Last September*." ed. Susan Osborn. *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2009. 58.

¹⁹ Inglesby, Elizabeth C. "Expressive Objects: Elizabeth Bowen's Narrative Materializes." *Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 53, No. 2, 2007. 306.

Bootacks are “virile”; candles are “virginal”; the house “gazes” and “watches”.²⁰

Elizabeth Inglesby attributes to Bowen’s tendency toward anthropomorphization to an awareness of the “fullness of consciousness and the environment in which it is forms and lives, a creature among other creatures, all occupying potential perspectives, all speaking ‘Unknown’ languages”.²¹ Thus, both consciousness and individuality are utterly subjective constructs, deeply affected by the environments in which they are produced, and people emerge as no less or more important than the objects by which they are surrounded. The novel’s tendency to objectify individuals signals the characters’ extreme staticness: Laurence has a cigarette case “left over from an uncle”; a young child describes himself as “using up the end of my sisters’ governess”.²² The novel’s characters become, not only as foreign, inert and disposable as the objects they ‘possess’, but exchange places with those objects throughout the novel. Again, the Anglo-Irish emerge as set-pieces rather than people, a device that allows the novel to insistently accentuate its own fictionality. The characters become, not people, but outmoded generic commonplaces that have no place in a changing, postcolonial narrative.

In her essay on two of Bowen’s later novels, “Dead Letters and Living Things”, Eluned Summers-Bremner argues that “if undead meaning can travel across generations by means of objects...then history, far from becoming legible as fiction from a distant point of vantage, becomes obstinately and obscurely pressing from within the present moment”.²³ Personal history and the stories that constitute that history are thematized in

²⁰ *TLS* 10, 4, 125.

²¹ Inglesby, Elizabeth C. “Expressive Objects: Elizabeth Bowen’s Narrative Materializes.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 53, No. 2, 2007. 306.

²² *TLS* 55, 56.

²³ Summers-Bremner, Eluned. “Dead Letters and Living Things: Historical Ethics in *The House in Paris* and *The Death of the Heart*. Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives. Ed. Susan Osborne. Cork: Cork University Press, 2009.

Bowen's novels in order to demonstrate the inherent slipperiness of the narratives of personal history. Laura Naylor, Lois' long-dead mother, is a troubling figure; though she is an absent mother, her presence is extremely palpable throughout the novel. Bowen's insistence on Lois' behavioral similarities to her mother underscores the precipitous closeness of the past. Often Lois is shown doing the same things her mother once did: in the middle of the novel, lonely, and angry at Hugo, Lois hides in a closet, where, "[o]n the whitewash, [Lois'] mother, to whom also the box-room had been familiar, had written L.N., L.N., and left an insulting drawing of somebody, probably Hugo. She had scrawled with passion, she had never been able to draw" (192). Lois, who attempts to fall in love with Hugo because her mother had loved him once, and who, like her mother, cannot draw, is utterly, and eerily, indivisible from Laura, whose presence in the closet is not only implicitly, but physically, conspicuous. Precisely because Lois is affected by her mother's indefinite sexual past, and her death, which seems, implicitly, to result from her marriage, she is unable to imagine a future of her own. This passage, which collapses any distinction between the two characters, highlights the tendency of the Anglo-Irish's personal history to repeat itself. As renée c. hoogland demonstrates, "Lois is vaguely aware that Laura's sexuality...is precisely what turned her into an outcast."²⁴ Laura's warning, that sexuality is dangerous and marriage fatal, haunts her ambivalent daughter throughout the novel.

Not only the personal but the imperial past preserved by the house poses a threat to Lois, whose privacy and individuality are threatened by the physical and temporal geographies of Danielstown as a relic of empire. The house is often characterized, not

²⁴ hoogland, renée c. "Technologies of Female Adolescence." Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation In Writing. New York: New York University Press, 1994. 47.

only as foreign, but as adversarial: “a smell of camphor and animals drawn from skins on the floor in the glare of morning still [hangs] like dust on the evening chill. Going through to her room at nights Lois often trip[s] with her toe in the jaws of a tiger” (7). The house, and its imperial past in particular, poses a substantial threat to Lois. Further, its insistent preservation of its past inhabitants’ histories—Laura Naylor, most notably—undermines the lives of its current inhabitants. The temporality of Danielstown is not a temporality of the present but of the already acted. The house serves as a stage on which worn and outmoded narratives continue to be played. Normalcy and growth are performed on Danielstown’s stage without success, and with a growing disquiet.



Chapter 2

“A Haze of Rumor”:²⁵ Abortive Conversations, Retold Stories

The role of language, and conversations in particular, in *The Last September* implies that speech, which can be used to maintain a normative reality, also has a deeply destructive potentiality. Essentially, *The Last September* contains three narratives: that of the older generation of Ascendancy, who refuse to acknowledge their historical position, that of the younger, who romanticize their historical position, and, that of the War of Independence, which intrudes upon the demesne with increasing regularity. While Bowen’s older generation of Anglo-Irish embodies and attempts to maintain the illusion of safety through their use of language, the younger generation and the language associated with its desires usher in and predict the change that will end their way of life. The barren, anachronistic older generation of Anglo-Irish Ascendancy invests in a fictional, illusory storyline to defer the inexorable collapse of their way of life in the face of post-War decolonization and the end of the British Empire, of which they are very much a vestige, however divided and confused their loyalties. The language of their assumptions is sustained by a belief in the fixed, unchanging nature of the British Empire and the Ascendancy in which no concessions to the possibility of change are made.

The Naylor’s generation uses language to protect themselves from the war: rather than talking about it, they talk rather frantically around it, associating, in their dialogue, social niceties and serious historical upheaval, easily, almost artlessly, euphemizing the war. When the Montmorencys arrive at Danielstown, the Naylor’s ask them obliquely whether they’ve seen the war outside the demesne:

²⁵ *TLS* 200

“Danielstown’s looking lovely, lovely. One sees more from the upper avenue—didn’t you clear some trees?”

“The wind had three of the ashes—You came quite safe? No trouble? Nobody at the crossroads? Nobody stopped you?”

“And are you sure now about tea?” continued Lady Naylor. (4)

In this, the novel’s first conversation, it becomes clear that the older generation intends to keep the Troubles at bay by euphemizing or ignoring them. Beneath their language of denial, however, can be apprehended a deep fear; Sir Richard repeats his question—his fear of apprehension by the enemy—four times without ever articulating his concern about the IRA, or, for that matter, the Black and Tans. The Ascendancy’s divided loyalties mean that, ultimately, they are without an identity. They war cannot exist for them because it will mean the irrevocable destruction of the understandings of nationality on which their identities are based.

The older generation employs an obdurate silence as its sole defense against the war. While Sir Richard tends to infantilize or make light of the war—he often reveals a deep ambivalence about the Royal Army and its battle tactics—Lady Naylor simply refuses to discuss it: “From all the talk, you might think almost anything was going to happen, but we never listen. I have made it a rule not to talk, either” (31). The formative link between conversation and reality is thus underscored, both in its creation and its deferral.

When the war is permitted as a topic of conversation within the demesne, it demonstrates its ability to highlight the personal desires of the people by whom it is discussed; again, it is thought of “in terms of oneself”. At no point is it ever thought of, or discussed, realistically. The war is peripheral to personal social and sexual concerns, and even the people participating in it (the subalterns, most notably), seem not to have

processed its realities. This becomes most clear in a conversation between Laurence and Gerald in which the political is blended nonchalantly into the social:

“How is your jazz band?”
 “Very little practicing; not much time, you see.”
 “Do tell me: did you kill anybody?”
 “How much?” said Gerald, startled.
 “Anybody last night?”
 “Oh, good Lord, no!”
 “Isn’t that why you go out?”
 ...Gerald was horrified. His duty, so bright and abstract, had suddenly come under the shadowy claw of the personal.” (135)

This conversation represents the collision of two alternative reckonings of reality:

Gerald’s romantic, deeply unrealistic view of war, and Laurence’s, whose imagination brings him strangely closer to the reality of war than Gerald’s first-hand experience with it, but who is unnervingly blasé about death. Laurence’s narrative of nihilism performs both a revolutionary and a normative function: he relishes the prospect of change for the excitement it will bring to his story while simultaneously failing to understand that it could possibly end, or deeply transform, his story.

Later in the lunch, Gerald is asked to speak for the English forces and “repeat[s]...what he had read in the *Morning Post*” (135). His utter distress at the prospect of violence in a war, and his dependence on the newspaper for information, serve to highlight the divorce of these characters from the world around them, and makes the reader’s relationship to the war, information about which can only be delivered by the characters, mirror the characters’: it is ambivalent and deeply removed. Gerald’s need to peruse the newspaper for information suggests the extent to which he is dependent on conventional texts of authority, and is as deeply detached from reality as any of Danielstown’s inhabitants. Gerald is both the direct product of confidence in the stories

told by British propagandists and the vessel of this propaganda. He is Bowen's most innocent, idealistic figure, who most believes in conventional story lines, and that he is ultimately a casualty of the war represents the failure of those storylines in the face of such extreme social change.

The Ascendancy's younger generation is not interested in the "product of storytelling"—they sacrifice one another, and themselves, to fantasies of conflagrations and shootings too casually to be serious about death—but in the "process of storytelling" in which the validity of individual identities become dependent on their resemblance to romantic narratives.²⁶ There is a marvelous moment of eerie foreshadowing and self-conscious reflexivity in which a roomful of young Anglo-Irish girls and subalterns at a tea party listen to a song called "The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God":

There's a brrroken-hearted woman tends the grave of Mad Carew/And the Yellow God sits smiling up above. Lois blushed and let Livvy squeeze her hand. They both wondered, 'How would I feel under the Circumstances? The subalterns round all looked dogged, clasping their knees, and thought of what one would do for a woman (104).

Here, it is the Ascendancy's young women who cast themselves in a narrative role that is both an unrealistic idealization and an eerily, though as yet unmanifested, prefiguring of the future, in which Gerald will actually die, and Lois will *have* to feel something. The younger generation is arguably as ignorant of war as the older generation, and merely refuses its reality in different ways—through romanticizing, rather than ignoring, the war. In both cases language is integral to the disguising of reality.

The younger generation, however sheltered, is oddly prophetic, indulging in morbid, apocalyptic fantasy as a means to define and amuse themselves. Thus, although

²⁶ Hutcheon, Linda. Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox. London: Methuen & Co, Ltd. 1984. 3.

they are intellectually and physically disconnected from reality, language makes them harbingers of the future. Laurence and Lois revel in imagined interactions with the war designed solely to dispel their ennui. In a conversation with Mr. Montmorency at a tennis party, Laurence is accused of being dissatisfied because he is unhappy at Danielstown. While Mr. Montmorency is proud of having “ask[ed for] nothing better” than Danielstown, either at his age nor “now”, Laurence is deeply ambivalent, and often openly antagonistic, to the house. Their conversation reveals the deep rift between the generations; while the Montmorencys and the Naylor are attached to the house, both for reasons of practicality and nostalgia, Laurence assumes that his identity will only be actualized after Danielstown, which bores and constrains him, has been destroyed. However, like Lois, he seeks no alternative future narrative; Laurence, who “[does] not consider that he [has] anything to do with the [human] race” personifies a *fin-de-siècle* philosophy of indulgence and nihilism that makes him, though more politically radical, no less outmoded than Hugo. He offers no solutions to the problem of historical change; his interest in destruction as entertainment, in fact, is profoundly dangerous: “I should like something else to happen, some crude intrusion of the actual. I feel all gassy inside from yawning. I should like to be here when this house burns” (58). Far from sympathizing with the Irish cause, Laurence is an unblushing opportunist whose characterization, if he is at all representative of the future of either England or Ireland, is troubling. Nonetheless, the novel does suggest that Laurence has something to lose from the conclusion of the War, and that he knows it.

During a conversation with an English soldier who is considering “going to East Africa”, Lois and Laurence pretend to imagine the necessity for, and possibility of, a successful defense against the Irish:

“Smith,” said Laurence, “you ought to stay and defend us.” And Smith had to promise he would not leave the Army and go to East Africa till they were all settled.

But to Laurence and Lois this all had already a ring of the past. They both had a sense of detention, of a prologue being played out too lengthily, with unnecessary stresses, a wasteful attention to detail. Apart, but not quite unaware of each other, queerly linked by antagonism, they both sat eating tea with dissatisfaction, resentful at giving so much of themselves to what was to be forgotten. (170)

The impossibility of a satisfactory conclusion to the war is underscored here: even the language of “all settled” implies an impossible oversimplification, and misunderstanding, of the political relevance, and resonance, of the Troubles. For the younger generation, the War emerges here not as a means to an identity but as culprit, responsible for stealing the adolescents’ identities and wasting their youth. The “prologue being played out” is, they are highly aware, the necessary upholding of normalcy in the face of the destruction of their class. Although Lois and Laurence understand that their way of life is ending, and although they want it to, it is unclear how they will constitute their identities or what shape their lives will take once their class has been obliterated.

Though both Lois and Laurence imagine that their comings of age are contingent on the fall of the Ascendancy, neither are at Danielstown when it burns, and it is left to the reader to imagine how the hoped-for event will change them. Even as they seek change and a sense of having-become (Lois in particular does not enjoy the liminality of becoming), they both fear, and revolt at the possibility of, change. For Lois, more than for Laurence, the lack of alternative narratives is damning. Though Laurence’s identity is

constituted by the time he has spent abroad, at Oxford, Lois is constituted almost solely by her identity as a potentially romantic figure within the demesne.

In Bowen's short story "Sunday Afternoon", which takes place during World War II, a member of the younger generation, who has been "modernized" by war, is "framed, by some sort of anticipation, for the new catastrophic *outward* order of life—of brutality, of being without spirit."²⁷ Lois and Laurence tend toward brutality in their imaginings of the future: each often imagines other of the novel's characters dead. This tendency toward nihilism, or at least brutality, implies that the novel's younger generation senses doom, not only for their elders, but for themselves. Their lack of seriousness and direction is distressing; the fact that they often, accidentally, correctly predict the future, is deeply disturbing.

In his recent essay on *The Last September*, Neil Corcoran has explored the nature of writing in Bowen's novels through the presence, in her novels, of letters, novels, memory, and what Corcoran calls "a return to the already written."²⁸ The novel constantly signals, through the imaginations of its characters, through its exploration of the ways in which personal destinies, though "already written", could have been written differently, and, by playing out the imagined consequences of those unmade decisions, underscores the radical potentiality of language to utterly reconstruct reality, a potentiality that functions very differently, though to no more productive end, for the younger generation than for the older.

Lois, who is often the vehicle of uncanny foreshadowing, prefigures Gerald's death: although she declares that "nothing could make [Gerald] into a tragedy", it is he

²⁷ Bowen, Elizabeth. *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*. London: J. Cape, 1952. 21.

²⁸ Corcoran, Neil. "Discovery of a Lack: The Last September." *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004. 41.

who becomes the novel's tragedy, and more than once she imagines him dead, a romantic fantasy that becomes a violent, and unavoidable reality that precipitates the burning of Danielstown (91). It is only these visions that allow Lois to see Gerald more clearly and to imagine truly loving him, indicating that she can only appreciate the fictional romantic ideal he represents.

Stories are told many times over in *The Last September* not only in the imaginations of the characters, but through letters, inner monologues, memories, and conversations. In a strange way, the characters exist only through the consciousnesses of other characters, a relationship that mirrors the one of reader to text. "Visitors took form gradually in [Sir Richard's] household, coming out of a haze of rumour" (200). In fact, none of the characters ever "take [a] form" antithetical to the stories told about them. The characters simply do not change; the fact that they remain composed of the stories told about them signals both that they *are* fictional and that the community in which they exist is primarily constitutive.

Hugo Montmorency and Marda Norton, liminal figures of the older generation, are initially entirely defined by the stories told about them: Hugo "did not go to Canada;" it is "a pity he never did go to Canada", Marda "came over to Danielstown to a children's party...and cut her knee and there was a good deal of fuss and bloodiness" (57, 300, 107). The similarity of their positions (both are characters in stories told about them) does not make them aware of their narratives' inadequacy; they nonetheless judge each other by the stories they have heard.

"Were you here when I bled so much at that children's party?"
 "Not actually, but I have always heard of it. Didn't you lose a ring?" (116).

And yet, in a strange way, the stories told about them *are* representative: Marda is an

unconventional and destructive force; Hugo has been so sufficiently described as to render him almost *already familiar*: “[Marda] had heard of [Hugo], and of it, in all parts of the country. Her acquiescence in finding him so exactly as he had been described was tempered by incredulity, almost shock” (115). The repeated stories are so entirely representative of character that the person they come to constitute is rendered almost superfluous. The relentless telling of stories suggests that the novel’s characters have become the words that have been spoken about them, underscoring Bowen’s characters’ tendency to “uncannily *become* words and sentences”.²⁹

Lois understands that identities are composed of stories, and she is aware of the performative nature of her youth in much the same way Laurence is aware of the gaze of history; both understand that they are under surveillance. This insistent positing, and presence, of an audience draws attention to the fact of the reader, for whom the characters are implicitly performing throughout the novel. Lois in particular is aware of herself as a character, a story told not only to the reader but to the people with whom she is most intimate. Though, for all the novel’s characters, it is performance that constitutes the self, it is femininity, rather than masculinity, that is figured as an unsatisfying role that must, nonetheless, be performed. Laurence and Gerald, however dependent on their respective narratives, seamlessly and unproblematically occupy their identities. It is Lois and Marda who must take on identities that do not correspond to their desires.

Early in the novel, Francie Montmorency asks Lois whether she is “having a wonderful time” now that she is “grown up.” Throughout the novel, being “grown up” is only ever understood as a symbolic state dependent on the correct performance of

²⁹ Bennett, Andrew, and Nicholas Royle. Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives. Great Britain: St. Martin’s Press, 1995. xvii

particular sexual and social roles, and Lois remains unsatisfied, and unchanged, by her successful performance of those roles. “She tried not to look conscious. Having a wonderful time, she knew, meant being attractive to a number of young men...She was not certain, either, how much she enjoyed herself. ‘Well, yes, I do,’ she said finally” (23). Lois pretends to enjoy her life because she is unable to access any alternative experiences of youth or femininity. Her coming of age an illusion Lois feels compelled to maintain. It is most often through conversation that she commits to a version of herself that she knows to be disingenuous. Because she is conscribed to performance, Lois cannot *become* anyone.

She could not hope to explain that her youth seemed to her also rather theatrical and that she was only young in that way because grown-up people expected it. She had never refused a role...[T]o explain this...would, she felt, be disloyal to herself, to Gerald, to an illusion both were called upon to maintain. (40)

Lois’ sense of responsibility to this illusion, and her determination to deliberately misremember her past, call into question the nature of truth, and of the authenticity of identity and memory, in the novel. Lois’ performance has exactly the effect she intends: their dance on the avenue becomes an anecdote, is discussed and vaguely disapproved of by members of the older generation (in this case, by Hugo Montmorency and Marda Norton):

“There is a young man—Harold—Gerald. They dance on the avenue.”
 “Like rabbits?”
 “They have a gramophone.”
 “Is he supposed to love her?”
 “My wife thinks so.” (119)

Gerald could be any young man; their dance becomes synecdochial for their entire generation. “They dance” implies that the story-tellers imagine the dancing to be habitual, and the conversation makes clear that they are often a subject of discussion; speculation

about their relationship is generated by their self-conscious, and strangely empty and illusory, performance, which is nonetheless convincing. Their identities are entirely defined, at least for Hugo, by this single disingenuous act. The older generation imagines, but cannot understand, the younger, and vice versa, and yet each generation continues to employ outmoded stories to understand themselves and each other.



Chapter 3

“The Bored and the Virgins”: Lois and the Anti-Bildungsroman

Lois is an extremely nebulous personality precisely because she is composed of competing (yet ultimately nihilistic and old-fashioned) narratives of femininity. After she has agreed to marry Gerald, she is described as “lamblike under the force of suggestion”, which underscores her dangerous meekness and malleability (236). As an intersection point for competing narratives, Lois is extremely impressionable, and deeply desirous of a solidified identity. Marda declares that she has “never met any woman so determined to love well, so anxious to love soon, so certain of her ability”, and yet, regarding the desire, or need, to marry in order to become self-actualized, the two are not so different; Marda herself is trapped by the need to marry, and quickly, in order to secure her social and economic futures (118). What is disturbing about Marda’s assessment of Lois is that Marda is amused by Lois’ belief that she will find both happiness and identity through marriage, a course Marda cannot help but pursue, though she understands its value much more clearly than does Lois.

Lois, whose dubious coming of age is contingent on her eventual distance from the conventional narrative of marriage she simultaneously luxuriates in and rebels against, is a veritable blank slate on which various narratives are projected. She spends the majority of the novel performing adulthood, femininity, modernity, and contentment. It is Marda Naylor who represents the possibility of change, and yet Marda, too, is ultimately a disappointment. For better or worse, Marda is Lois’ most significant role model. Happening across Marda’s fur coat, strewn in the hallway, Lois tries it on:

Her arms slipped silkily through; her hands appeared, almost tiny, out of the huge cuffs. “Oh, the *escape!*” she thought, pressing her chin down, fading, dying into the rich heaviness. “Oh, the *escape* in other people’s clothes!” And she paced round the hall with new movements: a dark, rare, rather wistful woman, elusive with jasmine. “No?” she said on an upward note: the voice startled her, experience was behind it. (109)

Lois effaces her own identity in the performance of womanhood. The coat itself enables a convincing performance; inside of it, Lois moves and speaks differently. The dangerous assumption that femininity is solely dependent on superficial trappings is part and parcel with Lois’ other understandings of her impending womanhood.

In one of the novel’s most metatextual moments, Lois wishes bitterly that she could be “a character in a historical novel”, and indeed she is (108). Lois’ simultaneous ignorance and awareness of her own textuality demonstrates her dangerous tendency to accidentally, or negatively, speak the truth. The novel, in which everything of substance is either left unsaid or expressed obliquely, insists on its destructive potentiality through, and to the detriment of, its characters, who are so unaware of themselves as to be the unknowing vessels through which the future is announced. Further, Lois’ underscored textuality cues the reader to understand her less as a person or character than as a generic trope, which is, essentially, how Lois perceives herself. She intends to fall in love because that is what young girls do; she pretends to be happy because she wants, eventually, to misremember her own youth. Lois recognizes her potential for becoming a story, and as such does her best to conform to the confines of her genre.

Lois is always highly aware of what women are supposed to be doing, and of what people think of the narratives of women’s lives. Outside of an army camp dance, alone in the rain with Gerald, Lois evidences, not only her preoccupation with her female predecessors, but, more importantly, the link she perceives between love and death: ““At

one time,’ said Lois wrapping her wild skirts around her, ‘a girl would have died of this’”: through this moment, Bowen both implicates Lois in conventional narrative and allows her a way out: although a girl *would once* have been a casualty to such a romance, to such a moment, but things have changed and are changing, and of the two adolescents, it is in fact not Lois who will die. As the scene continues Lois persists in looking to romantic literary conventions for answers they do not provide: “[Lois] could not remember, though she had read so many books, who spoke first after a kiss had been, not exchanged but—administered. The two reactions, outrage, capitulation, had not been her own” (222-3). Lois and romance fall short of each other: Lois does not feel what she ought to; the books offer Lois nothing useful.

Throughout the novel, Lois deflects Gerald’s proclamations of love by much the same means as the older generation deflects verbal confirmations of war—appealing to rationality, changing the subject—as though love, to Lois, is as disturbing an impending force as war is to the older generation:

“I love—”

“Oh but look here—”

“But I love—”

What are you doing in the drawing-room?” (126).

The couple’s first conversation about love, like most of the rest of the novel’s conversations, ends unresolved. It is characterized by Gerald’s awareness of Lois’ fictionality; warned by Lois that she may be “in love with a married man”, Gerald accuses her of performing, of being “neurotic, I mean, like a novel. I mean: do be natural, Lois” (126). Whether Gerald recognizes that Hugo Montmorency is the married man with whom Lois has been trying to fall in love, he knows that she is not, indeed, in any such position, and suggests that Lois is indebted to the behavior of women in novels as a

model for her own behavior. Nonetheless, his request that she “be natural” is impossible for her to fulfill, as her decision to love him is purely based on her perceived need to get married in order to become grown up. Lois’ reaction to Gerald’s kiss reveals her deep ambivalence: she reflects that being kissed is “just an impact, with inside blankness” (127). Only Marda Norton awakens in Lois any kind of physical response, on which more later. Lois admits that she is invested in love particularly because it is so much on the minds of other people: “But surely love wouldn’t get so much talked about if there were not something in it? I mean, even soap, you know, however much they advertise...I mean” (140). This comical likening of love to soap, its ultimate point—that soap is useful, and that love must also be—almost incoherent, further reveals the ways in which Lois is indebted to advertisement (understood as normative behavior and word of mouth) for her conceptions of love.

Assumedly because of her determination to fall properly in love, Lois, like most of the novel’s other women, Marda in particular, does not expect much happiness from life; “She could not hope to assure [Hugo] she was not enjoying anything he had missed, that she was now unconvinced and anxious but intended to be quite certain, by the time she was his age, that she had once been happy” (40). Performance is not undertaken only for the benefit of others, but for the benefit of oneself. The ultimate goal seems to be both misunderstanding and misremembering reality; the construction and maintenance of a convincing narrative is not the goal only of the present, but of the future.

For Lois, it is a conventional romantic relationship that offers the promise of selfhood. All the adult women she knows are defined through their marriages, and her female friends define themselves through the men with whom they are involved; the

dearth of alternative narratives available to women leaves Lois without other models of becoming adult. Nonetheless, these old-fashioned female narratives are subliminally dangerous; after marrying, Lois' mother dies, and neither the Naylor's nor the Montmorency's marriage has produced children. Marriage, in *The Last September*, is a condition of sterility, passionlessness, and sickness. Not only from Laura's history, but from the realities of the Naylor's and the Montmorencys, we can assume that marriage is unsatisfying, and that procreation is a fatal decision.

Lois finds marriage appealing solely because it is "a passport at any frontier"; it is a state that promises, not only an identity, but a transition from adolescence to adulthood. (193) When Lady Naylor makes it clear that she will not allow Lois to marry Gerald, Lois protests, "But shall I never do anything?" (247) Yet not even this dangerous conflation of the concepts of marriage and selfhood allows Lois to stifle her true feelings about marrying Gerald. Although she sees it as a means toward adulthood, and can see no other path as a viable means of escaping her adolescence, ultimately, Lois is ambivalent, at best, toward marriage, and is often disgusted by it. "Love, she had learnt to assume, was the mainspring of woman's grievances. Illnesses arose from it, the having of children, the illnesses children had; servants also, since the regular practice of love involved a home; by money it was confined, propped, and moulded" (83). Lois sees normative sexuality not only as dangerous but as a sickness and a means to death. Lois rarely ever considers procreation. At one point, early in the novel, while contemplating a bed, she imagines it being difficult to resist the temptation to "talk well into the morning. There would be nothing illicit about nocturnal talking."³⁰ Sex does not so much as enter into her understandings of a marriage-bed, much less a marriage.

³⁰ *TLS* 10.

Though Lois does not want to be married, and indeed, finds marriage repulsive and fearful, she cannot seem to help herself from being drawn, and ultimately agreeing, to it. When she considers the fact that she has promised herself to Gerald at the army camp dance, “a pain so sharp that it seemed to her like her own forbade recantation. It was inevitable that she should marry Gerald” (245). Because women marry, Lois feels she must marry; because she can think of no other logical thing to do, she believes that cannot help but marry Gerald. Further, she feels she “must marry Gerald” only in moments of crisis, when she seeks the safety of one narrative in the face of the failure of another: once, unconsciously predicting the fate of Danielstown while sitting on the floor in Marda’s bedroom, she looks forward to the moment when “the carpet would burn with the house in a scarlet night” and thinks, immediately, that she “must marry Gerald” (141).

This reaction—that she “must marry Gerald—is elicited again in the novel’s mill scene, the first time the war poses a direct threat to any of the novel’s characters. In a dramatically dilapidated mill outside of the borders of the demesne, Lois and Marda meet a man who is presumably a member of Sinn Fein, who points a pistol at them, and shoots at Marda, grazing the skin on her hand. The women’s brush with the danger implicit in the war creates, in both of them, an awareness of their performances of self. Standing in front of the Sinn Feiner, Lois and Marda “could not but feel framed, rather conscious, as though confronting a camera.” The women, who attempt to explain that they are from one of the surrounding country houses, and mean no harm, cannot so much as tell the truth convincingly: “evidently they had the appearance of liars” (182). That the women cannot credibly perform even their true identities leads one to question both whether they can or should adequately perform the assumed roles of wives and whether their identities as

Anglo-Irish women have become obsolete in this political climate. That marriage is so constantly associated with disaster represents its complicity in conventions and presages its ultimate rejection.

Presumably because she is most often misrepresented by language, Lois often refuses definition in the form of language, which suggests her awareness of its power. Most of the words used by the novel's characters to describe Lois are either inadequate oversimplifications or are violently deferred: more than once, the narrative refuses to allow a word to define her, as when a gramophone is overturned at the army camp dance at the moment when Lois would have to define her relationship to Gerald. A soldier asks Lois about Gerald:

“About our young friend—” He pulled his chair close; she had a feeling like gates shuddering. “Tell me this—”
But the roar of merriment, solid and swerving steadily as a waterfall past the door, splintered off in a crash. Silence came, with a hard impact. “Thank God, *they’ve upset the gramophone!*” (230)

The narrative stages a violent refusal of the definition of Lois' inner or romantic life. Lois herself evidences an anxious awareness of the power of language to fix character. When Lady Naylor, in Lois' hearing, attempts to explain just what Lois is, “[she] is so very—”, Lois “lift[s] her water jug and bang[s] it down in the basin: she kick[s] the slop-pail and pushe[s] the washstand about...it was victory (83). Lois, panicked, physically refuses the word, whose potential to “stop, seal, finish [her]” is something against which she must do battle. The fixed identity the word represents is dehumanizing: “Was she now to be clapped down under an adjective, to crawl round life-long inside some quality like a fly in a tumbler?”

Further, Lois' rejection of definition is one of the few moments of violence, of terse language, in the text; it echoes, in its tautness and explicitness, what is practically the novel's sole example of explicitly violent language: "Five days ago, and R.I.C. barracks at Ballyrum had been attacked and burnt out after a long defense. Two of the defenders were burnt inside it, the others shot coming out. The wires were cut, the roads blocked" (64). In both moments Bowen uncharacteristically employs simple, direct verbs, short sentences, and few adjectives. Lois not only recognizes the power of language in constituting a fixed and unchangeable identity, she is, rather than being its wielder, passively its victim. Even her last word to Gerald—Goodbye?— is a question that begs an answer, although it is an answer in itself. Even as she ends their relationship, she rebels against the finality of language by phrasing a statement as a question.

Marriage would make Lois into a form of capital, and would inscribe her in a system of exchange, rather than one of love. Figured this way, Lois' escape from a marriage with Gerald is a positive form of growth, and yet it is not accomplished by any decision or action of Lois'; Lady Naylor prevents it almost solely due to her adherence to outmoded conceptions of class. For Lady Naylor, Gerald is unsavory precisely because his people may be "in *trade*...*he* of course if charming, but he seems to have no relations. One cannot trace him. His mother, he says, lives in Surrey, and of course you do know, don't you, what Surrey *is*" (80). Thus, though Lois is released from the threat of being colonized by an English soldier, it is an archaic classism, not a revolution in the narratives of women's lives, which keeps her from marrying Gerald.

However, despite her antiquated notions of class, Lady Naylor is a complex character, who often seems to vehemently disapprove of Lois' desire to get married

precisely because she wants more for Lois than marriage. She declares, perhaps with the tendency toward apocryphal stories that characterizes the novel's older generation, that, at Lois' age, she concerned herself with more important things than marriage: "When I was your age I never thought of marriage at all. I didn't intend to marry. I remember, when I was nineteen, I was reading Schiller." When Lois protests that "[she] read[s]", Lady Naylor dismisses her: "girls nowadays do nothing but lend each other...biological books. I was intensely interested in art" (246). For Lady Naylor, the books a young woman reads are extremely formative; her textual autobiography suggests both intellectualism and bohemianism. Lady Naylor sets up a fascinating dichotomy between love and art, which the novel will ultimately undermine; after all, Lois gets many of her most romantic ideas from art and poetry. Further, Lady Naylor, despite her adolescent love of Schiller and Shelley, was unable to avoid marriage. Lady Naylor insists that "all young people ought to be rebels; she herself had certainly been a rebel...She herself had had a deep sense of poetry; she remembered going to sleep with Shelley under her pillow. She used to walk alone in the mountains and hated coming into meals" (173). This claim is undermined by her extremely conventional married life, which may have been the cause of the end of her poetic existence. Whether she misremembers her past, or honestly wants a better life for Lois, her decision to send Lois to art school illustrates her misunderstanding of her niece, for whom art school, for which she is unsuited, is no more viable a narrative than marriage. While Lady Naylor is given the ultimate power to decide the course of Lois' life, Lois' attempts to seek definition through alternative understandings of self, particularly through text, suggest that she is aware of the desirability of alternative narratives.

Chapter 4

“You’d make me do anything”³¹: Sexual Discursion and Gendered Texts

In his recent book, John Douglas Peters argues that nascent metafictional authors “work generic theory directly into the discourse of their fiction to produce ongoing ‘underarguments’ concerning the novel as a literary genre. These underarguments are performed through women’s narrations that are simultaneously and explicitly set off against discursive representations of existing patriarchal conventions of narrative.”³² *The Last September*’s underargument concerns the potential of Marda Norton to become Lois’ lover. Through Lois and Marda’s relationship, the novel offers an alternative understanding of a romantic relationship; Marda represents a non-threatening, alternative coupling. Unlike Gerald, Marda has neither the desire nor the ability to colonize Lois’ body.

Contemporary critics have tended to read lesbian undercurrents into Lois and Marda’s relationship, and while it is clear that Lois is deeply emotionally invested in, and physically moved by, Marda, it is unclear whether Lois is interested in Marda because she seeks to embody the erotic, adult femininity that Marda exudes, or because Marda offers the promise of a non-normative sexual relationship.³³ Certainly, non-normative

³¹ *TLS* 180

³² Peters, John Douglas. *Feminist Metafiction and the Evolution of the British Novel*. Florida: The University Press of Florida, 2002. 2.

³³ For more on *The Last September*’s lesbian undercurrents, see:

Corcoran, Neil. “Discovery of a Lack: The Last September.” *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004. 39-60.

Coughlan, Patricia. “‘Not like a person at all’: Bowen, the 1920s and ‘The Dancing-Mistress.’” Ed. Eibhear Walshe *Elizabeth Bowen*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009. 40-64

hoogland, renée c. “Technologies of Female Adolescence.” *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation In Writing*. New York: New York University Press, 1994. 24-71.

sexuality simmers beneath the novel's surface; it is the relationships between women in the novel that are ultimately constitutive. Lois is interested in heterosexual sex in an oblique way: as discussed above, she considers marriage beds as sites of conversation rather than sex, and is physically unmoved by Gerald's administration of a kiss, whereas she responds to Marda's body in an extremely physical way. Standing before the mill in which she is shot at, Marda "put[s] an arm around [Lois'] waist, and in an ecstasy at this compulsion Lois enter[s] the mill. Fear heighten[s] her gratification; she welcome[s] its inrush... 'Hate it?' said Marda. 'You'd make me do anything.' [said Lois]" (180). The fact that Marda's arm around her waist moves Lois to ecstasy underscores the difference between Gerald, whose conventional courtship of her consists of the "adminstra[tion]" of kisses, and Marda, to whom Lois reacts with pleasure, a satisfying sort of fear, and pliancy (222-3). Though Lois and Marda's relationship is only implicitly sexual, it is more formative and important to Lois than her relationship with Gerald.

Lois conceives of Marda as a rival to Gerald; after Marda has left, Lois seeks privacy in the garden, where she reflects that she had gone there "with Marda—never with Gerald—they had sat on the green seat, pressed blisters out of the paint and spat out their plum stones into the box of the border opposite. Entered today, the usual breath of the garden was cold to her face" (242). Lois' relationship to Marda, which is characterized by the ordinary camaraderie of a heterosexual female relationship, is also more deeply affective than any other of Lois' relationships. The two women occupy a space of sorority that is characterized by its intense privacy. That Lois compares Marda to Gerald suggests that she too sees them, and the alternative narratives they represent, as

antagonistic to one another.

Marda represents both a conventional and an unconventional narrative, as Leslie Lawe's wife or Lois' lover, respectively. Nonetheless, Marda embraces the system that marginalizes her. Marda, who is Lois' template for adult femininity, is herself locked into a stifling performance of femininity. There is a sort of pathetic nihilism to Marda's understanding of love. She encourages Lois to be "interested in what happens to you for its own sake; don't expect to be touched or changed—or to be in anything that you do. One just watches" (144). For Marda, marriage is a means to security, and, in keeping with the novel's disdain for marriage, has no relationship to passion or love. Marda's interest in Leslie is purely business-like; she admits that she "need[s] Leslie" (146). Through Marda's marriage, as through all of the novel's marriages, the possibility of a consummated, or consuming, passion is destroyed. Marda will marry him because she must marry; she is twenty-nine and still has "not brought anything off"; she is in the frightening position of being on the verge of becoming unmarriageable (107). Leslie, her future husband, is not a lover so much as a means to an end. For Lois, Leslie is a threat, one she seeks actively to efface: "[W]hat would happen now if you lost your engagement ring?" asked Lois with enjoyment." To such a naïve question, the reader expects that Marda will declare that the ring does not matter. Instead, Marda admits "I daren't wear it" (146). Marda's relationship to Leslie is constituted by symbols and obligations. She must, in her relationship with her fiancé, exercise caution. This extremely performative aspect of heterosexual love becomes particularly clear as she writes Leslie a letter.

Watching Marda write a letter to Leslie, Lois notices that Marda's "shoulders and

the stoop of her head [take] on an appearance of obligation. Lois [thinks] how anxious to marry Marda must really be, how anxious not to frighten Leslie away from her, and how all her distantness and her quick, rejecting air must be a false effect” (145). Marda must write herself into the contract represented by marriage and normative sexuality. The letter she writes to Leslie represents a sort of contract, a sealing-up of self and determination to seal her fate safely through text. Further, it is not just Marda whose fate the letter attempts to seal.

In the letter, Marda tells Leslie that Gerald “wants to marry” Lois, explaining to Lois that “it furnishes you rather. And I can’t think what else to say” (145). In Marda’s letter to her fiancé, a performance of the obligation of insipid heterosexual coupling, Lois’ identity is reduced to her romantic life, and it is not how she feels about Gerald that is worth reporting, but how Gerald feels about her. The fact that Marda cannot think of anything else to say suggests not only the impossibility of honest communication between she and her future husband but the fact that, in their relationship, things will be reduced to concessions to convention. Here, Marda’s communication with her fiancé, and thus Marda herself, function a direct threats to Lois’ independence. As renée hoogland has made clear, “Marda’s defeat in the face of the overpowering strength of dominant gender ideologies is undeniably a disappointment to Lois”, and yet it is more than a disappointment; it bodes badly for Lois herself.³⁴

Throughout the novel, Lois attempts to cultivate a private self through text that is necessarily synonymous with a romantic self. Her concern that the maid, “who [takes] an interest, would be likely to see [her letters to various subalterns] when she [comes] up

³⁴ hoogland, renée c. “Technologies of Female Adolescence.” Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation In Writing. New York: New York University Press, 1994.

with the hot water” illustrates the extent to which Lois attempts to fall in love through inscribing a private self into love letters, and the ways by which her desire to have a private life is sated through letters (11). Whereas men perform individualizing textual functions, women in *The Last September* are shown writing love letters and very little else. For Lois, being grown up means “writing notes instead of letters”, suggesting the extremely formative interrelationship between maturity and the appropriate text (140). Lois’ sole creative outlet is drawing, and Marda declares her “cleverer than [she] can draw” (141).

Lois’ sketchbook reveals the dangerous pervasiveness of conventional romantic narratives, and the extent to which Lois’ inner life is composed of romantic fantasies; the book contains scenes from Robert Browning, the *Morte d’Arthur*, and Omar Khayyam. Her sketchbook is both a repository and a breeding-ground for hackneyed romantic fantasies. It is clearly not the source of her identity—indeed, it contains a conspicuous misrepresentation, a miscasting, of herself as a passionate, emotionally invested woman and an unconscious acknowledgment of the inadequacy of romance as a delineator of identity. In an attempt to define herself through the written word, Lois copies a poem into her book that represents her profound misunderstanding of herself:

I am a painter Who cannot paint;
 In my life, a devil rather than saint;
In my brain, as poor a creature too:
 No end to all that I cannot do!
 But one thing at least I can—
 Love a man or hate a man,
 Supremely—
 Lois Honoria Farquar: *Her Book* (139)

Although she is arguably honest about her inability to paint (she ‘cannot’), the quotation from Browning represents the ways in which language is used to create only a fictional,

romanticized fantasy that does not correspond to reality. The only stories told in *The Last September* are ones that have been told before. Like Browning's Pippa (the inscription is taken from the dramatic melodrama *Pippa Passes*), Lois bears witness to mortality and danger without losing her innocence. She does not love (or hate) supremely. When active, she is characterized as particularly childish (she swings her legs and pouts), and, besides asking questions, most of the other things she does are passive: "she [stands] holding her elbows, not quite thinking" (273). The choice to attend art school, like the choice not to marry Gerald, is made for her by Lady Naylor, who, although antagonistically overbearing, urges, or forces, Lois to defy the conventional narrative set out for her by marriage; what's at stake here is whether art school represents a sort of conventional narrative in itself.

Lois actively attempts to define herself through the love-letters she writes, but the state of her writing table suggests a deep ambivalence about the project to which she devotes so much time.

Lois, dressed for dinner, was tidying her writing-table; two stamped letters, her handiwork, leaned on the clock. She shook out her pink suede blotter and started to sort its contents, but had to re-read everything. Gerald, who had written about a tournament, concluded: "You have the loveliest soft eyes." She was perplexed, thought: "But what can I do?" and snapped the letter with others under a rubber band. Then she pulled out a drawer called "general" and swept the rest into it. She had a wastepaper basket, but only for envelopes. (22)

Lois' writing table is a site of disorder and confusion. Though the letters she receives perplex her, she is unable to throw them out or to revisit them without rereading them. Lois feels powerless to act upon Gerald's letter in any meaningful way; while she writes to him, continuing their correspondence and, presumably, his courtship of her, she is not moved by any feeling for him. Thus, her handiwork is a fictive extension of a passive

personality. Gerald's correspondence, like that of the other two subalterns she writes to, is filed under "general"; his courtship is so bewildering to her that she cannot categorize it. His letter is virtually indistinguishable from the others. Thus, the place where Lois composes her romantic identity, an identity she understands as inextricably tied to her coming of age, is a chaotic site of counterfeit identity. Gerald's letters to Lois suggest that he is complicit in the project of the colonization of female bodies by the empire: Lois is "all [his], and "what [he] is doing this morning [the duties of an English soldier in Ireland] seems so important...because [he] is doing it [for her]" (238). As he inscribes his love for her, he simultaneously inscribes his possession of her.

Lois' relationship to her friend and correspondent Viola, an upper class and sophisticated schoolmate, who "flashe[s] off her men in a phrase, with a sweep of her red quill pen" (67), illustrates the ways in which Lois understands her identity to be constituted through language and the written word. Lois uses her letters to Viola to project and crystallize potential identities. Viola's responses have a resonance entirely out of proportion to their physical (even their social) significance because they represent acceptance of Lois chosen identity-through-narrative. They are private and preoccupying because they are written from a position of authority in a world Lois hopes to enter, and represent the possibility of tangible definition. There is a tactile, sensual significance to their correspondence: "Lois slip[s] Viola's letter into her pocket and button[s] the flap over it...thumb[s] Viola's envelope," and "touch[es] her letter" (94-6). The prospect of having to write Viola motivates Lois to look at Gerald "as though for the first time" in order to compose him and consequently have him made real to her. Even as Lois interacts with Gerald, she makes a narrative of him: he is reduced to being the fact of a suitor; the

future of their relationship will depend not on Lois' own feelings, but Viola's reaction to Lois' writing of him.

As she stood looking at Gerald by the privet hedge...with a quick response to his beauty...she saw him as though he were dead, as though she had lost him, with the pang of an evocation. While she could hold him thus—before he receded or came too closely forward—she wanted to run indoors and write Viola. Viola would be certain to tell her she loved him, and by that declaration, to be expressed with vigour, Lois was too certain to be affected. She was afraid at the thought of it. (71)

Lois' inability to experience Gerald as anything other than a lack is a key to the novel's peculiar meta-narrative in which reality is literally made through language: not only would Viola's letter of approval fix Lois to an identity she has written largely for the sake of fulfilling an epistolary obligation, Lois' letter (and thus her love) is made eerily possible only by a foreshadowing of Gerald's death.

Gerald is not the only man, or identity, whom Lois filters through Viola's lens. She tries to make her fantasy about Hugo more real by writing "to Viola that she feared she might be falling in love with a married man. But when she looked at Mr. Montmorency next morning at breakfast...the idea seemed shocking. She regretted having sent her letter to post in such a hurry" (85): Lois understands she is defined, at least in part, by the words she commits to paper. Lois is "relieved" to find that Viola, in her response, "only refer[s] to Mr. Montmorency indirectly," ordering her not to "talk of [her]self to that elderly man" (97). Viola's disapproval of Hugo either allows or forces Lois to give up her fantasy of falling in love with him, and, significantly, Viola's letter, and Lois' reaction to it, close the novel's first section.

Lois lets Lady Naylor write her narrative for her in the end of a story she spends casting about for people to define her, to write her narrative for her, particularly Viola

and Gerald. It is worth noting that the decision to send Lois to art school is responsible for her absence from Danielstown when it burns, and that, to the end, Lady Naylor treats Lois, not like an adult, but like a child: “[Lois] seemed so offended at being thought incompetent and [Laurence] was so worried at the idea of looking after her luggage, so we went them over separately; he crossed Wednesday, she Friday” (301). Though Lois may be allowed to believe that she has attained some sovereignty, she is nonetheless still part of an elaborate plan orchestrated for her best interests. Further, Lois *knows* that she is a terrible artist, as she admits in a letter to Marda:

We all talk about my future (by common consent I am about nine now, very distracting and sunny; they like to have me about.) It is to be a school of art, certainly—why did you never tell them I couldn’t draw?—but we can’t decide where. London, in view of my age, is supposed to be too large...In Cork I might pick up an accent, and Paris they will not hear of—my wretched virtue. (258)

Only in her letter to Marda is Lois able to express herself honestly: she knows she cannot paint and that art school represents her continued infantilization. Nonetheless, she does nothing to counter her profound lack of agency created by the Naylor’s decisions. She places the responsibility for honesty on Marda, rather than on herself: “Why did you never tell them I couldn’t draw?” suggests that Lois, although she understands her limitations, is not in a position to communicate them to her family, and had hoped, perhaps, that Marda would do it for her, thus allowing Marda, rather than Lady Naylor, to shape her life’s future narrative.

The letter that Marda sends to Lois, like Viola’s letter, has an extremely private nature that is tied to Lois’ body: “And what else did Marda say, Francie had wanted to know. But Lois, who seemed to have swallowed the letter, postmark and all, could not remember” (257-8). Lois’ desire to keep the letter private further suggests a conflation

between Marda's body and her body of text. Nonetheless, the letters through which Lois seeks definition and physical satisfaction are ultimately fruitless. Further, the letters continue to be important as pawns in the game of heteronormative courtship: "[Marda] had written to Lois, sending Hugo [a] message. It had pleased both the girls to underline his exclusion" (257). Marda's letter, though it creates a private space of feminine dialogue, is nonetheless used to communicate a message to Hugo, with whom both the women have been, either in fantasy or reality, romantically implicated.

Ultimately, Lois cannot use the written word to encapsulate her experience; for Lois, as for Marda, letters largely tend to function either as a means to either misunderstanding herself or seeking advice on being or becoming married. While Lois inscribes her romantic hopes into letters and her sketchbook, and Marda contracts herself to Leslie through letters, the novel's men are free to pursue intellectual or self-actualizing identities in print.

When Laurence casually mentions that he "[thinks] he might write a novel," Lois suggests he ask Sir Richard for foolscap, because "he has some paper left over from when he was going to write his memoirs" (163). The lives of men are understood to be the proper subjects of text. Though Lois wants to be "a character in a historical novel" (108), she cannot conceive of writing one. She is the written, rather than the writer; passive rather than active.

While Lois imagines marriage as the sole means to exert control over her life, her cousin Laurence is able to imagine using text to express himself; he most often seeks revenge through composition, either writing, or simply fantasizing alternative narratives for his family. Angry about his aunt's assessment of his generation, Laurence thinks "he

must write that novel, for here lay a gold mine (then Spain and those first editions, a Picasso and curtains for his rooms). He would vindicate modern young people for his aunt and her generation” (174). Laurence, educated at Oxford, has venues open to him, and can use print to effect change and to define, not only himself, but his peers. Laurence, *The Last September*'s sole aspiring novelist, is its most fruitful source of metafiction. It is Laurence who underscores what Neil Corcoran has called “accidental and contingent nature of all plotting” in Bowen’s explorations of the past and present, and who most explicitly recognizes and gestures to the gaze of the reader.³⁵

In many ways, Laurence is as invested in romanticizing the war as are the novel’s young girls. He imagines his involvement in the war as a sort of means to an exciting identity: “He longed for the raiders...he meant to offer them bread and apples and leisurely conversation—and jam and whisky, but in relating the incident he would only mention the bread and apples” (153). Laurence, deeply invested in fabrications, imagines having to retell (to modify, to rewrite) this traitorous collaboration even as he imagines it. Laurence, like Lois, like the Naylor, is not solely character: he is also author; he rewrites lives.

Far enough back, in a kind of unborn freedom, he even remade marriages. Laura Naylor gave Hugo, scoffingly, bridal tenderness; they had four sons and hurried out to coarsen in Canada. Here, in this that had been her room, Laura had laid on her wedding morning, watching a spider run up to the canopy of the bed, while Hugo made ready, five miles off, to be driven over to take her hand at the altar by poor John Trent, and the four young sons in excitement jiggled among the cherubim. And it was Richard who married Francie, who came to him all in a bloom at his first request and made a kind of a bassinette of a life for him, dim with lace. Aunt Myra enjoyed a vigorous celibacy, while Laurence, to be acclaimed a second Weiniger, blew out his brains at—say—Avila, in a fit of

³⁵ Neil Corcoran. “Writing: The Enforced Return.” *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004. 6, 42.

temporary discouragement without having heard of Danielstown. Lois, naturally, was not born at all. (153-4)

By rewriting the (seemingly highly arbitrary) romantic relationships of the novel's characters, their existences, and their positions in history, Laurence calls narrative authority into question. Particularly telling is the fact that Laurence cannot write destinies for the younger generation: their lives are either ended early or not begun at all, reifying the lack of narrative clarity available to them. By essentially killing them off in his rewriting of their lives, Laurence prefigures their absence at the novel's end, at which their destinies remain highly nebulous. Thus does Bowen's "[w]riting... lay bare its condition of artifice...thereby explor[ing] the problematic relationship between life and fiction."³⁶

Watching a tea party from a window, Laurence, imagining the war, seems to gesture to the reader of the historical novel, at one point becoming weirdly aware of a gaze whose presence, and only whose presence, makes the novel's characters real:

A sense of exposure, of being offered without resistance to some ironic uncuriosity, made Laurence look up at the mountain over the roof of the house. In some gaze—of a man's up there hiding, watching among the clefts and ridges—they seemed held, included, and to have their only being. The sense of a watcher, reserve of energy and intention, abashed Laurence...But the unavoidable and containing stare impinged to the point of a transformation upon the social figures with orderly, knitted shadows. (173)

In Laurence's understanding of the war, it is only through the gaze of an imagined (though nonetheless presumably present) member of the Irish Republican Army that the Naylor's and their houseguests have any being. They are constituted, in Laurence's imagination, solely through the gaze of the enemy, who is, with his "reserve of energy and intention", more powerful than the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy he threatens. In

³⁶ Currie, Mark. "Introduction." Ed. Mark Currie. *Metafiction*. New York: Longman Group Limited, 1995. 1-18. Yet this quote is from 42!!

imagining the enemy, Laurence imagines the Ascendancy's destruction. It is important to note, for the purposes of this study in metafiction, that the gaze, through which the characters "have their only being", could be figured as the gaze of the reader: is unavoidable; it compromises the order of the novel's universe; it "impinge[s] to the point of a transformation." In this case, it is Laurence, the novel's most nihilistic figure, who comes closest to looking directly out through the novel's pages at his audience. At any rate, it is Laurence's ability to imagine the enemy that allows him to imagine his class' downfall, which becomes a reality through Gerald's death, which has been gestured at throughout the novel.

Gerald's death is related to the reader through a series of conversations about and reactions to it, which, in drawing attention to the role of story telling in the novel. The news is not directly imparted to the reader until roughly 1600 words after the "shocking news reache[s] Clonmore" (292). That Gerald's death does not begin a new chapter, and that [t]he world [does] not stand still," suggests the utter inevitability of the war's becoming consequential and tragic. The passage of the news through the text is the last use of euphemism by the English and the Anglo-Irish, who attempt to understand it while simultaneously refusing it:

"Percy, where did he—how was he—?"
 "Through the head."
 "Then it didn't—?"
 "Oh, no. Probably instantaneous."
 "Oh, don't! Oh, Percy, how can you!" (293)

Although the older generation verbally refuses Gerald's death—"Oh, *no*—"; 'Oh no—' [Lady Naylor] said quickly, as though to prevent something" (297)—their denial is of course unable to change the fact of it. Gerald's death underscores the conflicting

tendencies of the two generations: while the older refuses to utter the unspeakable, the younger has, throughout the novel, eerily manifested a fascination with Gerald's head, through which he is shot. Early in the novel, on his way to the Naylor's for lunch, Gerald "put[s] up a hand and touch[es] the back of his head, but with assurance: it [is] perfectly smooth and round"; later, he "[has] recourse again to the back of his head, so gratifyingly polished" (45, 132). At the army camp dance, Lois, who, as discussed above, pictures Gerald dead throughout the novel, declares that she "like[s] the back of [his] head" (225). The uncanny suggestion of Gerald's death within the body of the novel contributes, like Danielstown's antagonism, to the reader's awareness that the Ascendancy's end has been activated long before the novel's beginning. Gerald's 'departure' is incontrovertible proof that the war will have both life-altering and life-ending consequences, and of the end of the Ascendancy, and for that reason it ushers in the end the novel.

The burning of Danielstown, at which neither Lois nor Laurence are present, suggesting that the tragedy of the Ascendancy's end is not theirs, is couched in prose that defers the reality of the situation. The burning house is not described, nor does it directly enter the novel: the sky, the roads, the countryside, its gate, the cars and "executioners" leaving the demesne are described in flames, but Bowen does not show the reader a house on fire.

The roads in unnatural dusk ran dark with movement, secretive or terrified; not a tree, brushed pale by wind from the flames, not a cabin pressed in despair to the bosom of the night, not a gate too starkly visible but had its place in the design of order and panic. At Danielstown, half way up the avenue under the beeches, the thin iron gate twanged (missed its latch, remained swinging aghast) as the last unlit car slid out with the executioners bland from accomplished duty. The sound of the last car widened, gave itself to the open and empty country and was demolished. Then the first wave of a silence that was to be ultimate flowed back confidently to the steps. The door stood open hospitably upon a furnace (303).

The end of the novel is as much a performance of a kind of denial as the rest of the narrative. For all intents and purposes the house remains intact—even in its execution it has an open door and a furnace. Bowen continues to shield her reader, to some extent, from the impending historical change represented by the burning of Danielstown. Indeed, the destruction of the house, and of the Ascendancy, when finally achieved, is in some ways less explicit than the sunset, early in the novel, that foreshadows it: "Behind the trees, pressing in from the open and empty country like an invasion, the orange bright sky crept and smouldered" (25-6).

It is Lady Naylor and Sir Richard, rather than the reader, who "[see] too distinctly," and it is integral that as they see, for the first time, the fact of historical change, they do "not [say] anything" (303). The power of language to defer reality has been utterly evacuated: the two do not speak because they cannot. Language, at the novel's end, fails to adequately represent the burning of Danielstown because, although the Naylor's see too clearly, they can no longer use language to order and make sense of reality. The end of the Ascendancy, which was, at its end, a solely product of narrative, is conspicuously characterized by 'silence.' The Ascendancy's lack of narrative potential is underscored by its characters' seemingly hopeless fates. Though we know that the house is destroyed, we do not know what will become of its inhabitants. The English empire, necessarily tied to a past of normative sexuality and the colonizing of women's bodies, leaves a narrative vacuum in its wake.

Lois is decidedly not at Danielstown when it burns: she disappears after her last conversation with Laurence, which condemns the characters to their respective destinies still unable to finish their sentences, or speak them in full: " 'You're going somewhere,

aren't you?' 'Nowhere particular. Not if you—' 'No, I don't specially. Though if it has to be anyone, you'" (300). The cousins, who leave Danielstown before it burns not yet fully matured, are representations of a generation that lacks a solidified narrative. Ultimately Lois is not allowed to be a character in either a romance or a historical novel—the narrative of her life represents something else entirely, something that perhaps cannot yet be encapsulated or defined. The novel's insistence on the importance of language and text in the formation of reality suggests the ways in which an understanding of the personal and the political is deeply dependent on existing narratives. The novel's metatext cues its readers to probe the ways in which the self is understood and inscribed through text, and the social resonances of that inscription for past, present, and future.

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