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‘The violent destruction of solid things’: Elizabeth Bowen’s wartime short stories.
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Whilst Elizabeth Bowen might have written to William Plomer that she “had such a good war”,[1] she was acutely aware of the horrors experienced by many during the Second World War. She explores some of these horrors in *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*, a collection of short stories written and published individually during the second world war and then republished in the UK in 1945 and in 1946 in America as *Ivy Gripped the Steps and Other Stories*.

In her introduction to the American edition, Bowen highlights some of her emotions during this time:

> In war, this feeling of slight differentiation [experienced during peace time] was suspended: I felt one with, and just like, everyone else. Sometimes I hardly knew where I stopped and everyone else began. The violent destruction of solid things, the explosion of the illusion that prestige, power and permanence attach to bulk and weight, left all of us, equally, heady and disembodied. Walls went down; and we felt, if not knew, each other. We all lived in a state of lucid abnormality.[2]

Commenting that the “stories are not placed in the time-order in which they were first written”,[3] Bowen believed that the collection represented “a rising tide of hallucination”, adding that the “hallucinations in the stories are not a peril; nor are the stories studies of mental peril. The hallucinations are an unconscious, instinctive, saving resort on the part of the characters”.[4] This paper focuses then on three stories which these hallucinations are explored through the manipulation of time – ‘The Inherited Clock’ (where time is literally stopped), ‘The Demon Lover’ and ‘The Happy Autumn Fields’. And I’m going to discuss them in the order that they were published in *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*, rather than in their chronological order, as I believe this lends a better appreciation of Bowen’s editing process.

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[1] Elizabeth Bowen (1999b). *The Mulberry Tree*. H. Lee (ed) London: Vintage, 206.

[2] Elizabeth Bowen (1945c) “The Demon Lover” in Elizabeth Bowen (1950) *Collected Impressions*. London: Longmans, Green and Co, 47-52 (48).

[3] *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* contained the following stories in this order: “In the Square” (originally published September 1941), “Sunday Afternoon” (July 1941), “The Inherited Clock” (January 1944), “The Cheery Soul” (December 1942), “Songs My Father Sang Me” (November 1944), “The Demon Lover” (November 1941), “Careless Talk” (Originally published as “Everything’s Frightfully Interesting” in October 1941), “The Happy Autumn Fields” (November 1944), “Ivy Gripped the Steps” (September 1945), “Pink May” (October 1942), “Green Holly” (December 1944) and “Mysterious Kôr” (January 1944). (Sellery and Harris, 1981, pp.58, 110-111, 138-141). When reference is made to Bowen’s short stories the parenthetical reference will be to *Collected Stories*, referred to as *CS*.

[4] Elizabeth Bowen (1945c) “The Demon Lover” in Elizabeth Bowen (1950) *Collected Impressions*. London: Longmans, Green and Co, 47-52 (49).

These stories demonstrate Bowen's own fascination with temporal discombobulations as she explores the fears of many in London for whom 'the destruction of solid things' leads to a 'rising tide of hallucination'[5] for those struggling to live in a world torn apart by war.

FEARS OF AND DURING WAR

Of course, the psychological fears faced by many in the second world war are not discussed just in this collection of stories; they can also be seen in *The Heat of the Day*, the novel which Bowen started during the war and which she completed and published in 1948. One aspect of this novel is the fragility of the membrane between the living and the dead which is also to be seen in the short stories. In a passage which contains echoes of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the narrator of *The Heat of the Day* explores this membrane in a London where:

> […] not knowing who the dead were you could not know which might be the staircase somebody for the first time was not mounting this morning, or at which street corner the newsvendor missed a face, or which trains and buses in the homegoing rush were this evening lighter by at least one passenger.
>
> These unknown dead reproached those left living not by their own death, which might any night be shared, but by their unknowness, which could not be mended now. […] The wall between the living and the living became less solid as the wall between the living and the dead thinned.[6]

This suggestion of the thinning membrane between the living and the dead is also explored in Bowen's essay 'London 1940'[7] in which she describes Oxford Street on an early September morning. London is waking up after a night of bombing with both 'high explosives' and time bombs which have yet to explode. As people leave their shelters, in underground stations or in basements, they are faced with scenes of destruction, of death, following a 'dirty night'.

Employing the pronoun 'we', Bowen writes of shared emotions, experienced by those who are facing death on a nightly basis:

> We people have come up out of the ground […]: we now see what we heard happen throughout the night […] Standing, as might the risen dead in the doors of tombs, in the mouths of shelters, we have nothing to do but yawn at each other or down the void of streets.[8]

Despite all this, however, those who find themselves alive in the morning share a moment of light relief when one of the time bombs explodes – no one is killed: 'the street puffs itself empty; more glass splinters. Everyone laughs. It is a fine

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[5] Ibid, 49

[6] Elizabeth Bowen (1948:1998). The Heat of the Day. London: Vintage, 90-91.

[7] There is some doubt as to when Bowen wrote this essay. Hermione Lee states it was written in 1950. A manuscript of a longer version of the essay exists at the University of Texas at Austin within the Arthur Ransom Humanities Research Collection, this is dated 24th April 1950 (Sellery and Harris 1981, 222) but Sellery and Harris suggest that the essay, published in *Collected Impressions* and *The Mulberry Tree*, was prepared for the Ministry of Information, an organisation which was dissolved following the war (ibid, 71).

[8] "London, 1940" in *Collected Impressions*, 217-220, 217

morning and we are still alive.'[9] And yet in a city where people face the constant drain of the nightly bombing raids, where civilians are killed, mothers get letters and Londoners are displaced, made homeless, the daily pattern of life is further disturbed by the army in Regents Park detonating 'bombs dug up elsewhere' while a boy on a bicycle whistles 'It's a Happy, Happy Day'.[10]

TIME

Bowen frequently manipulates time in her fiction and this is certainly the case in the three stories I'm discussing in this paper. In 'Notes on Writing a Novel' (first published in *Orion II* in 1945), she states the following:

> For the sake of emphasis, time must be falsified. But the novelist's consciousness of the subjective, arbitrary and emotional nature of the falsification should be evident to the reader. Against this falsification – in fact, increasing the force of its effect by contrast – a clock should be heard always impassively ticking away at the same speed. The passage of time, and its demarcation, should be a factor in plot. The either concentration or even or uneven spacing-out of events along time is important.[11]

Seven years later Bowen reiterated the importance of fictional time in her work in the 'Preface' to an American edition of *The Last September*: 'I am, and am bound to be, a writer closely involved with place and time; for me these are more than elements, they are actors.'[12]

Bowen's manipulation of time can be seen both in her novels and her short stories. For example, in both *The House in Paris* and *The Little Girls*, Bowen utilises ellipses within the narrative to provide the biographical history of the protagonists. And, again in *The Little Girls*, Bowen plays with the speed of the narrative; the novel is full of temporal gaps, lacunae that can lead to considerable doubt as to the meaning of the narrative as Bowen adjusts both the protagonist's understanding of the world in which she lives and the reader's comprehension of the text by deliberately writing physical and chronological spaces into the novel. This is particularly apparent in the final chapter: this is the longest chapter in the novel, running to just over thirty-seven pages, yet it deals with a single day in the lives of Dinah, Sheila and Clare, considerably slowing down the narration.[13]

Although Bowen was writing specifically about her novels in that essay, her fascination with the treatment of time can also be seen in her short stories in *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* as she explores the emotions felt by so many during the war, drawing on the notion further explored in *The Heat of the Day*, of that thinning membrane between the living and the dead or, in the case of 'The Inherited Clock' between the traumatic past and the present.

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[9] Ibid, 218

[10] Ibid, 220

[11] Elizabeth Bowen (1945) 'Notes on Writing a Novel' in Elizabeth Bowen (1950) *Collected Impressions*. London: Longmans, Green and Co, 259-260.

[12] Elizabeth Bowen (1952) "Preface" to *The Last September* in Elizabeth Bowen (1962) *Afterthought: Pieces about Writing*. London: Longmans, Green and Co Ltd, 95-100, 96.

[13] See Nicola Darwood (2009) "Empty Boxes, Empty Spaces: Elizabeth Bowen's *The Little Girls*" in A. McNair and J. Ryder (eds) *Further from the Frontiers: Cross-currents in Irish and Scottish Studies*. Aberdeen: AHRC Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies, pp11-20.

'THE INHERITED CLOCK'
First published in January 1944, this is the third story in the collection. In contrast to the other two stories I'll be discussing this afternoon, where time is considered in a more abstract fashion, in 'The Inherited Clock' time is described as a physical entity, and the memories induced by the violence exhibited by Paul force Clara to acknowledge the ghosts of the past who have been haunting her present.

The short story tells of the inheritance of a skeleton clock (as well as money) from her Cousin Rosanna, a clock which Clara appears to have forgotten over time. The clock, however, represents childhood fears, fears that Clara has supressed in the intervening years.

Visiting Cousin Rosanna just before her death, Clara goes to inspect the clock which she has been told she will inherit. She is struck by the appearance of the clock which appears 'threatening' but even then cannot recall having seen the clock before. Nevertheless, Clara is aware of something supressed:

> [w]ith regard to no other place other than Sandyhill [her cousin's house] could this opening and splitting wider of a crevasse in her memory have alarmed her more. At its deepness, she dared not attempt to guess; its extent, if it ever did stop, must simply wait to be seen.'[14]

It is not until Cousin Rosanna dies and the clock is delivered to Clara's flat that her memories, suppressed for over twenty four years, start to return. Although she has yet to remember exactly why she fears the clock so much, she tries to stop it ticking; she even considers dropping the clock from a window: '[s]uppose gravity failed? Or suppose the tick stayed up here without the clock, or the nothing that had shown through its skeleton form continued to bear its skeleton shadow?'[15]

But it is the re-enactment of Paul's sadism which finally brings back Clara's unwanted memories of past trauma. He places Clara's finger in the mechanism of the skeleton clock for a second time, and this action starts to bring back the memories of an horrific afternoon when she was six years old:

> '*I'll tell you something, Clara. Have you ever SEEN a minute? Have you actually had one wriggling inside your hand? Did you know if you keep your finger inside a clock for a minute, you can pick out that very minute and take it home for your own?'* So it is Paul who stealthily lifts the dome off. It is Paul who selects the finger of Clara's that it is be guided, shrinking, then forced wincing into the works, to be wedged in them, bruised in them, bitten into and eaten up by the cogs. *'No, you have got to keep it there, or you will lose the minute. I am doing the counting – the counting up to sixty.'* But there is to be no sixty. The ticking stops.
>
> We have stopped the clock.[16]

Corcoran argues that 'the story is an almost literal realization of the Freudian return on the repressed, with the clock also acting as an emblem of Clara's

[14] *CS*, 629
[15] CS, 635
[16] *CS*, 639

entrapment in the past.'[17] Before Clara regains her memory of this episode, she walks through the blackout and loses herself, both literally and metaphorically. Having found her way back to her flat she is confronted once again by her lack of memory; however, it would appear that sensations and emotions are beginning to surface; although describing the flat in physical terms, the description of Clara's emotional state is evident for, as her memories appear to be surfacing, 'the wall between herself and the clock was [also] thin[ning]'[18]

This may be a physical description, but it echoes that thinning membrane between the living and the dead which is particularly present in 'The Demon Lover' (initially published in November 1941) and 'The Happy Autumn Fields' (first published in November 1944).

'THE DEMON LOVER'

Drawing possibly on the Scottish border ballad which was in circulation in the seventeenth century,[19] 'The Demon Lover' explores the haunting of a woman by something powerful, cruel and supernatural. Phyllis Lassner suggests that the short story (the sixth in the collection), 'embeds the psychological horrors produced by a Blitzed city',[20] horrors which are returned to in *The Heat of the Day*. Mrs. Drover, on her return to her bombed London home, is haunted by the thoughts of her dead fiancé, and is terrified by the sudden appearance of a letter from him reminding her of their promise to meet 'at the hour arranged'.[21] Letters feature in many of Bowen's short stories and novels, letters to past lovers, letters seeking information, lost and hidden letters and even letters that are never received (for example in *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes*). They can invoke love, but also make connections with the traumatic past.

The melodrama often associated with ghost stories and the gothic is present from the very beginning of this short story, where '[i]n her once familiar street, as in any unused channel, an unfamiliar queerness had silted up'[22], on reaching her house, '[d]ead air came out to meet her as she went in'.[23] Now, as Clara notes the 'splitting wider of a crevasse' in 'The Inherited Clock' so too are there 'cracks in the structure' in the fabric of Mrs Drover's house,[24] cracks that metaphorically connect Kathleen's life in 1919 to the horror faced by Mrs Drover in the second world war, cracks in which the past threatens to destabilise the present.

The memories of the past also suggest a foreshadowing of the horror to come; Kathleen's fiancé is cruel; not only does he press her hand to his chest in such a

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[17] Neil Corcoran (2004) *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 155.

[18] *CS*, 633

[19] See Toni Reed's *Demon Lovers and their Victims in British Fiction* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press: 1998) for a full discussion of the folk tale and its appropriation by a number of writers including Elizabeth Bowen.

[20] Phyllis Lassner (1991) *Elizabeth Bowen: A Study of the Shorter Fiction*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 64.

[21] *CS*, 662

[22] *CS*, 661

[23] ibid

[24] ibid

way that his button cuts into her fingers, he also extracts a promise which has more than a hint of a threat. Standing in the garden in August 1916, Kathleen imagines 'spectral glitters in the place of [her fiancé's] eyes' as he makes a promise that he will be with her once again. While this may sound a romantic ideal, a promise made by many a service man going to fight in a war, the tone of his promise is threatening – 'I shall be with you […] sooner or later. You won't forget that. You need do nothing but wait'.[25] Kathleen later feels this 'unnatural promise drive down between her and the rest of all human kind […] She could not have plighted a more sinister troth.'[26]

Over 25 years later, having been told that her fiancé had died and having met and married Mr Drover, Kathleen has a solid, if not stolid, life, a life that is thrown into disarray by the appearance of the letter. Her London house, once a calm home, has the 'whole air of being a cracked cup from which memory, with its reassuring power, had either evaporated or leaked away'.[27] Trying to rationalise the presence of the letter from her fiancé, she tells herself that all will be well if she can find a taxi before the appointed hour referred to in the letter. However, the final taxi ride becomes, for Mrs. Drover, the culmination of all her fears, and the membrane between life and death, represented by 'the glass panel that divided the driver's head from her own',[28] is seen to be fragile. Once the drawing back of the glass panel shatters this membrane, Mrs. Drover is forced to look at the driver and realise the full horror of her situation. But the horror is not explicit, and the reader is left to imagine what terrors Mrs Drover might be facing as her

> '[t]hrough the aperture driver and passenger, not six inches between them, remained for an eternity eye to eye. Mrs Drover's mouth hung open for some seconds before she could issue her first scream.'[29]

'THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS'

Whilst "The Demon Lover" evokes the psychological atmosphere felt by Bowen and many others during the Blitz, Bowen's short story "The Happy Autumn Fields" (the eighth in the collection) approaches this in a more subtle fashion. Neil Corcoran argues that:

> Where in 'The Demon Lover' someone returns from the past, in 'The Happy Autumn Fields' someone returns to it; but both returns of the dead should also be read, I think, as figuring the actual dead of the Blitz, who nowhere appear literally in these stories. They nowhere appear literally, that is to say, but their presence is, nevertheless, everywhere.[30]

This is a short story which rewards, indeed demands, multiple readings and re-readings. Manipulating time in such a way that the reader is never sure whether the past encroaches on the present, or the present causes chaos in the past, Bowen develops her use of time shifts employed in *The House in Paris* and *The*

[25] *CS*, 663
[26] *CS*, 663-4
[27] *CS*, 664
[28] *CS*, 666
[29] *CS*, 666.
[30] Neil Corcoran (2004) *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 148.

Death of the Heart not just to delay the reader's moment of *anagnôrisis* but, in fact, to deny the reader a complete understanding of the events which take place within the story. Much as Fitzgeorge "wonders, and says he will always wonder, what made the horse shy in those empty fields"[31] so the reader will wonder about the cause of Henrietta and Sarah's deaths, whether it is Henrietta's malevolence, Mary's ghostly presence from the future or the explosion of a bomb in war-torn London, travelling through a slip in time.

Mary appears to be aware of the approach of an horrific tragedy which has impinged upon her life, through her dreams and through the contents of "a musty old leather box"[32] and she is anxious to send Travis, her fiancé, away so that she can return to her dream. Yet there is doubt as to whether it is Mary that Travis is talking to, for it would appear that for a short while Sarah and Mary are one, and whilst there is an amalgamation of their souls and bodies in the present, her desire to return to the field in the past is overriding: she is

> "[f]rantic at being delayed here, while the moment awaited her in the cornfield, she all but afforded a smile at the grotesquerie of being saddled with Mary's body and lover."[33]

The title of the short story is also to be found in the first five lines of Tennyson's poem 'Tears, Idle Tears',[34] lines which might suggest that the past is idyllic:

> Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
> Tears from the depth of some divine despair
> Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
> In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,
> And thinking of the days that are no more. (ll1-5)

But the title of the story is, of course, ironic. The Victorian fields are not the site of happiness and, as the present (or future) encroaches on the past (or present), the lives of the privileged upper class Victorian family are shown to be less than perfect. Tensions are highlighted by the disruptive effect of the future, tensions which include the strict patriarchal society, the suggestion of forbidden sororal love, and the 'something terrible [which] may be going to happen in lives where '[e]verything pulverises to easily because it is rot-dry'.[35] And the reader is implicit in this encroachment; as Eugene and Sarah appear to be recognising their love for each other, the scene is disrupted by the pronoun 'we' – '[w]e surmount the skyline: the family come into our view, we into theirs'[36] – and Mary and Sarah's lives become entwined in Mary's waking moments.

CONCLUSION

Phyllis Lassner argues that '[p]ast and present are not abstract constructs for Bowen; they are the sum of social, political and cultural events, a climate that in

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[31] *CS*, 685
[32] CS, 677
[33] *CS*, 677
[34] This is the title of another short story in her earlier collection, *Look at all the Roses*, published in 1941
[35] *CS*, 682 and 683
[36] *CS*, 675

turn shapes her characters' psychology.'[37] In each of these three stories, Bowen manipulates time to discuss, however implicitly, the psychological horrors faced by many during the second world war. She explores the notion that the present is always informed by the past and that times of intense fear invoke memories of past trauma, of trauma that has been unresolved (such as the uncertainty of the fate of many men in the first world war) or of trauma that has been supressed (such as the psychological trauma resulting from childhood abuse). Through her manipulation of time, above all else Bowen's stories invoke the overriding fear which pervaded Britain during the second world war – the destruction of the familiar, of the fabric of society, indeed, as Bowen stated: '[t]he violent destruction of solid things'.

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