

THE GHOSTS AROUND THE HOUSE. REPRESSED FEARS AND LITERARY IMAGES IN ELIZABETH BOWEN'S DESCRIPTIONS OF PLACE*

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ABSTRACT

The ambiguous presence of supernatural and anthropomorphic elements in Elizabeth Bowen's representations of place reveals her contradictory feelings of both attachment and detachment from Ireland and her personal obsession with the Anglo-Irish past. Bowen's permanent explorations of the Irish landscape and the literary use of natural space denote the importance that the Anglo-Irish writer confers to the agency of the land in the formation of the Anglo-Irish identity and in the anticipation of their decline.

KEY WORDS: Elizabeth Bowen, ecocriticism, place and identity, Anglo-Irish Big House narrative.

RESUMEN

En las descripciones del paisaje que abundan en la narrativa de Elizabeth Bowen, la ambigüedad en el tratamiento de los rasgos sobrenaturales del terreno y el empleo literario de la personificación reflejan una disparidad de sentimientos de arraigo y desarraigo con respecto a Irlanda, así como una obsesión permanente por investigar el pasado de los anglo-irlandeses. El estudio pormenorizado de los rasgos del paisaje irlandés, así como el empleo literario del espacio físico, denotan la importancia que la escritora otorga al lugar en la formación de la identidad y en la configuración del declinar de su grupo social

PALABRAS CLAVE: Elizabeth Bowen, ecocrítica, lugar e identidad, narrativa anglo-irlandesa.

INTRODUCTION

The land outside Bowen's Court windows left prints on my ancestors' eyes that looked out: perhaps their eyes left, also, prints on the scene? If so, those prints were part of the scene to me. (451)

When I first read these final lines from the afterword to *Bowen's Court* (1942), Elizabeth Bowen's (1899-1973) longest autobiographical work, I immediately felt interested and vaguely startled by their sheer originality and boldness of sensibility.

They were written as closing lines after a long paragraph dedicated to describe her Irish family home, its demesne, its nearby forest of hollies and laurels, and the sun-pink mountains that glowed behind the demesne. Inside the stately house, the portraits of her ancestors, the marble mantelpiece with its two supporting pillars and the imposing staircase gave testimony to a succession of finished lives that had gradually become part of every form and contour. Between lines I could read how the author mournfully breathed her ancestors' air, which seemed to have thickened with each generation, and could see the light that had absorbed the souls of dozens of Bowens and now travelled freely into and out of deep mirrors in the empty rooms.

At first sight, the final words of the quotation simply expose the writer's personal bond with the house and land of her ancestors, a feeling that in anthropological and environmental studies is often referred to as place attachment (Altman and Low; Cross). But they also denote a rare complexity of mind which, long before ecocriticism as a specific form of literary analysis started to exist,¹ had attempted to represent the intensity and subtlety of human relationship to place.² It is surely not a matter of chance that the first metaphor used to underline the novelist's recognition of the agency of the land in the formation of human identity is immediately counteracted by a hesitant admission of a reciprocity and mutual influence. Without pretence, escaping any type of dogmatism, the question mark suggests a simple principle: the fluidity of every human relationship with place which points to a complex process of mutual enrichment and understanding. Even more important seems to me the concentration of the closing remark on the personal pronoun, which reflects a mixture of loneliness and ambivalence. An ambivalence supported by the subsequent paragraphs, where the writer fails to clarify whether the existence of that mutual relationship is true for every individual, or only for the Anglo Irish as a social class, or even, possibly, whether it is just an elegiac feeling of a singular Anglo-Irish writer tormenting herself with fantasies and thoroughly intent on perpetuating a commitment to rootedness, at a time when that feeling was no longer valued or understood.

Concentrating on *The Last September* (1929) and *A World of Love* (1955) as representative works of Bowen's fiction, this essay aims to explore the importance of

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¹ Also known as environmental literary criticism, ecocriticism officially appeared as a specific form of literary analysis in the USA in the mid 1990s, with the publication of two seminal books: Lawrence Buell's *Environmental Imagination* (1995) and *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996). For further reference, see the ASLE bibliographies web page, <<http://www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/bibliography>>.

² For further reading on the different aspects of the human relationship to place, see Wallace Stegner, *The Sense of Place* (New York: Random House, 1992), and Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).

place in her writings by showing that the settings are not mere backgrounds for the plots, but crucial points of practically every scene in the so called “Irish novels.” The acuteness of her feelings for place and the literary representation of those feelings will help understand why, without her contribution, the landscapes of county Cork would not have remained such a vivid and eloquent allegory of a long forgotten past and of the Anglo-Irish identity. Initially, my approach will rely on some scholarly assertions concerning the importance of the fictional representations of landscape in the formation of individual, group and national identities (Tuan; Graham and Connolly). The analysis of the work of some specialists in Irish social history will provide support to my personal belief in the ability of fiction not only to describe but to create new social realities, considering that the characters, places and landscapes produced by the writers in their narrative constructions are often more real for the readers than reality itself, so powerful and influential is the role of the artist (Duffy; Graham).

From that initial point, drawing from Eibhear Walshe’s analysis of Bowen’s literary treatment of the Irish landscape and from Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle’s deconstructionist study of some of her literary devices, I plan to demonstrate that, more obviously than in other novels set elsewhere, the disquieting presence of supernatural and anthropomorphic elements in the representations of Irish space reveals her contradictory feelings of attachment and detachment from Ireland, as well as her personal obsession with the Anglo-Irish past. A reading of some passages from the above mentioned fictional works and a brief look at her autobiographical notes collected in *Bowen’s Court* will hopefully demonstrate the existence of deep contrasting feelings undermining the writer’s overt expression of fondness for the Irish land. In contrast to the idyllic view reflected in her autobiography, the unsettling literary use of natural space in her fiction makes the characters that populate *The Last September* and *A World of Love* live in a continuous, semi-physical dream. The places that they inhabit are frequented by ghosts, their homes are frequently haunted. The fictional Big House life, the snobbish, limited society of the lost order is permanently threatened by disquieting presences which hide behind the trees, whose footsteps can be heard taking the shortcuts through the demesnes, crossing the forests and valleys of county Cork. Consciously or subconsciously, the writer cannot but reflect how the violence and social instability of the fictional time (the early 1920s and late 1940s, respectively) materialize in the Irish wilderness to threaten the idea of rootedness and permanence.

The conclusion being that, as William Butler Yeats contributed to create a personal version of the Isle of Innesfree,³ through her fiction Elizabeth Bowen constructed a deliberate, symbolic, inner landscape, impressing herself and her ancestors on its topography. While *Bowen’s Court* should be considered Bowen’s contextualizing autobiographical work, the novels set on Irish soil yield a clear and

³ A curious radio recording of the 1930s, with Yeats reading his own poem, can be heard at <<http://innisfree1916.wordpress.com/2008/08/04/w-b-yeats-recitando-the-lake-isle-of-innisfree>>.

everlasting perception of how and to what extent the natural world is affected by the surrounding disorderly world of early and mid-twentieth century Ireland, making the characters act and react with amazing intensity in a space as sharply visualized as any theatre set. Her works repeatedly recreate a mutual empathy between land and individuals, reflecting the complex and varied world of her time, a world and order that have long been lost to our sight and can never be recovered.

THE ROLE OF PLACE AND CULTURE IN THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY

Admitting that through her fictional characters Bowen succeeds in describing her Anglo-Irish ancestors as agents and recipients of a mutual influence with the Irish land and culture, the novelist clearly anticipates Chinese geographer Yi Fu Tuan's assertion when, more than thirty years later, in chapter 6 of *Topophilia*, he explains that it is practically impossible to establish a clear difference between the influence of cultural and natural aspects in the formation of identity within social groups. Conscious of the multiplicity of meanings embedded in the concept of nature, Tuan adds that by natural aspects he means a variety of topographical and environmental circumstances which affect directly or indirectly the formation of societies. In any case, Tuan emphasizes the impossibility of drawing a clear line between culture and nature when discussing the process of fixation of identity, a perception which seems to be the norm among the specialists in social sciences. When sociologists, geographers, historians and anthropologists have sought to elucidate and illuminate the concepts of identity, place attachment and culture, they have often turned to creative art (Cairns and Richards; Altman and Low; Duffy; Cross). More specifically, when discussing Irish topography, different scholars have repeatedly pointed out that the sense of place derived from the artistic representations of present and past Irish landscapes should be regarded as a fundamental part of territorial identity and of geographical understanding. In this sense, writers are important witnesses to our world, and are capable of articulating various manifestations of place and different notions of locality. In a literal and literary sense, narrative and poetic texts are mirrors to a reality outside, apt to reproduce and communicate meanings which can vary across time and within cultures. For that fundamental reason, writers are frequently seen by critics and readers as interpreters of place, landscape and national identity, their role broadens beyond mere reflection or revelation (Duffy 64-65).

Because of their relevance in the formation of societies, texts have often been monopolized by the ruling classes, used as vehicles for propaganda and for political manipulation. Conversely, they have often shaped the natural milieu for subversion, being especially apt to articulate different politics of resistance. In the introduction to *In Search of Ireland*, Brian Graham observes that landscapes, whether depicted in literature, art, maps or even wall murals, or viewed on the ground, are signifiers of the cultures of those who have made them (4). Accordingly, any place description signifying the cultural and political values of a dominant group can be viewed as symbolic of oppression by those subservient or excluded from those values. In the

Irish particular case, the very complexity and transience of the social divisions have ensured that every dominant or hegemonic national landscape should be viewed as a transitory representation of place. As an example, Graham mentions a good number of 18th-century estates of Ireland, with their characteristic triad of demesne, big house and improved town or village, all of them literary and cultural representations designed by the newly arrived Anglican landowners to place their imprints on an Ireland “only recently won and insecurely held.” Later, however, the same landscapes came to symbolize the British exploitation of Ireland, and were excluded from the narratives of late 19th-century nationalism (4).

Like everywhere else, the ever-present process of social transformations has produced an enormous diversity of narratives imposed on Ireland and its society by successive representations of place. In his analysis, Graham brings to mind the complex differences that can be traced in the symbolic meanings of different representations of place, a diversity which underlines the existence of “many Irelands” or, in other words, the existence of a geographical mosaic that results from the interrelation between numerous conflicting historical, cultural and social groups. Bowen’s works are, undoubtedly, an important part of that mosaic, and contribute to increase the cultural diversity in the literary representations of the Irish geography.

During the past two centuries Ireland has produced some of the most illustrious writers in the English language and, to a very significant extent, the views of Ireland and the concept of Irishness have been shaped by subsequent readings of literary texts written in English by Irish authors (Duffy 65). Among the writers in the English language who over the past two hundred years have contributed to the formation of Irish identity, William Butler Yeats and James Joyce are prominent figures, both of whom saw themselves and their writings as occupying a significant place in Irish life. After these influential figures, contemporary writers like Seamus Heaney and Elizabeth Bowen are, in their own particular ways, cited by Duffy as important articulators of Irish consciousness (66). And rightly so, because Heaney’s eloquent poetry overtly interrogates the role of the poet in the modern world while it raises important issues about his own feelings for Ireland among the political turmoil of mid-twentieth century Ulster. In a similar way, while searching for a new form for the novel, the core of Bowen’s fiction has strived to demonstrate that any writer’s cast of mind derives from a deep sense of belonging to a place, an ancestry, a history and a culture.

CONTRADICTORY FEELINGS OF FONDNESS AND MISTRUST FOR THE LAND

For literary critics, Bowen’s 20th-century Irish novels, with their modernist, elaborate, highly-wrought style, have been considered a modern, sophisticated version of the Big House novel, anticipated in the previous century by Maria Edgeworth and Somerville and Ross. Set entirely in Ireland, *The Last September* and *A World of Love* capture with equal subtlety the ambiguous nature of the concept of identity among Bowen’s ancestors, all of them members of the Anglo-Irish landed class. From

different perspectives and although distant in time, they both bring to the fore the characteristic ambiguity of a social class which, as Duffy points out, “emerged more starkly as the century progressed and cultural and political polarities became more obvious” (72). Perhaps because of the increasing polarities between the Irish and the Anglo Irish, it is precisely in these novels where the presence of supernatural elements linked to the insistent, almost obsessive, representations of place reveals their author’s contradictory feelings for the Irish land and her personal ambiguous position in modern Ireland.

Both novels are well known in literary circles. From the very first pages it becomes obvious that, although they are not autobiographical in a literal sense, the author recreates a time and a way of life that she knows well and is fully aware of. Apart from being set entirely in north Cork, their most prominent feature is that their characters are all members of the Irish landed class, the Ascendancy. Perpetually committed to property, endlessly involved in lawsuits over land, the fictional members of the Protestant Irish gentry are socially and emotionally divided between England and Ireland, spend their time hunting, drinking and fuelling self-destructing conflicts between family members. It is obvious that, since the 18th century their permanent use, or misuse, of power must have gradually increased a feeling of alienation and detachment from the social milieu of 20th-century Ireland.

Surely, in Bowen’s case, her fiction closely mirrored her immediate reality. The alienation that she must have felt from the Irish society of her time surely had a logical effect on the public acceptance of her writings, often considered snobbish and conservative. Generally speaking, the lack of popular recognition had traditionally affected the Anglo-Irish writers, who never shared the Irish national memory and were “as unIrish as they could be” (Hughes 59). Quite understandably, especially during the first quarter of the previous century, Irish nationalism had managed to cast a dark shadow over them and had treated them with suspicion on political and cultural grounds, to such an extent that, in Bowen’s time, they came to be described as “spiritual exiles.” As a result, a self-imposed feeling of alienation, a recurrence to exile and expatriation were generally accepted as the most defining characteristics of Anglo-Irish writings, their pages being often strongly colored by a sense of estrangement from many of the political and social currents of modern Ireland (Hughes 59).

A persistent feeling of emotional distance from her birthplace affected Bowen during her lifetime, even though her family had been settled in country Cork for nearly two hundred years by the time of her birth. Her parents being both members of the Protestant gentry, since her early childhood she spent every summer at Bowen’s Court, one of the big houses of the area. Later, as an adult, Bowen divided her time between England and Cork, and on her death she was buried next to her husband and her father in the churchyard of Farahy (north Cork). During her writing career, the identification with Ireland, with north Cork and with the landscape around Farahy energized her as a writer, particularly at times of distress. But, at the end of her creative life, after the sale of Bowen’s Court in 1959, Bowen inevitably interrupted her visits to Cork and turned her gaze exclusively to England, where she settled and found the settings for her later fictional works, with the only exception of

A World of Love.⁴ Very possibly, the fact that she spent most of her lifetime between two countries appears reflected in her permanent obsession with locality, which stimulated her creative imagination even sooner than characters, plot or action, as she explains in her foreword to a collection of articles published under the general title of *The Mulberry Tree* (1959): “As a reader, it is to the place element that I react most strongly: for me, what gives fiction verisimilitude is its topography” (282).

In “An Anglo-Irish Novelist” Alfred Corn reflects on this trait of Bowen’s fiction and points out that her literature does not share the tendency of some contemporary Anglo-Irish writers who, avoiding upsetting memories, feel inclined to ignore the scenic details and prefer to focus exclusively on the conceptual contents of their works (153). Distancing herself from an eminently conceptual line of thought, “Bowen is all perception... Reading her you realise you have never paid close enough attention to places or people, the mosaic of detail that composes the first, or the voices and gestures that reveal the second” (154). But, as has been pointed out, the treatment of place in her fiction is complex. First, because the writer is unable, or unwilling, to hide unsettling feelings of anxiety and guilt for the Anglo-Irish past, feelings which appear reflected in her narrative in a variety of ways but, more specifically, through her carefully contrived scenic descriptions. Secondly, because in her fiction she can hardly avoid paying heed to the ongoing ideological, cultural and literary representations of the Irish people as uncivilized others, wild, savage and dangerous (McElroy 55), representations that have been heralded by English imperialism since the 18th century and that Bowen carefully avoids in her essays and biographical works. And, even more possibly, because she can never totally overcome the inherited Anglo-Irish ambiguous view of natural space, which presents two contradictory versions: within the perimeter walls of the great estates, it constituted what was civilized and “picturesque”; then that which lurked outside the graduated borders of such reserves was deemed to be uncivilized wilderness (McElroy 56)

THE REBELS HIDE BEHIND THE TREES

This is especially true of *The Last September*, whose descriptions of the Irish woods and groves around Danielstown reveal a much darker version of the idealized vision of the open fields and meadows of Farahy described in *Bowen’s Court*. The same land which is once described as peaceful and calm, where “the sun winked in through the trees and through the south windows” (*Bowen’s* 408) of every big house “unerringly placed near a river or stream” (*Bowen’s* 407); that same piece of land can unexpectedly turn unnatural, secretive (*Last* 206), severe (*Last* 190) and desolate (*Last* 176). The same Irish fields whose light and quietness reflect “peace at its most

⁴ For further reading on the writer’s life and works, see Edwin J. Kenney, *Elizabeth Bowen* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1975), Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (London: Phoenix, 1993), and Patricia Craig, *Elizabeth Bowen* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).



ecstatic" (*Bowen's* 457) can make people feel terrorized, houses can be stifled by the surrounding forests, young men die mysteriously amid murderous woods, and the carefully contrived fantasy of ease in the fields beneath the Ballyhoura Hills unexpectedly disintegrates when it becomes fiction.

Apparently, *The Last September* sets off to describe a perfectly innocuous experience: the last month that Lois Farquar, a nineteen-year-old orphan, spends with her aunt and uncle at Danielstown, one of Cork's big stately houses. However, it soon becomes clear that the story takes place in 1920, during The Irish Troubles, a time of rebels and Blacks and Tans. From the very first pages, the atmospheric descriptions are affected by the unsettling sounds of lorries and reports of battle, and everything in the environment reflects a strong sense of dramatic inevitability. In that atmosphere of looming danger, every personal crisis that the characters experience is closely related to the physical world, and every new turn in the story is deeply anchored in the natural features of the landscape, the mountains, the meadows and rocks, the shallow hollow of land on which Danielstown stands. Even the successive emotional dilemmas in Lois's relationship with the family guests are closely associated in the character's mind with momentary feelings of repulsion for the Irish land, as occurs in the episode of the mill, in mid-novel. In a transforming turning point, when the young protagonist discovers the true nature of the woman she has so much admired, the episode concludes with a curious declaration: "I don't think I'll come down this part of the river again" (178). Very significantly, while it is actually a person who has badly disappointed her, Lois projects her frustration on the river and on its banks, promising herself never to return there again.

A similar moment of truth had presented itself in a brief earlier scene, which had served to provide a prologue of the protagonist's pervading anxiety for the implications of adulthood. When Lois accidentally encounters a solitary Irish patriot walking through her uncle's demesne at dusk, the ghostly, shadowy, unnamed figure instantaneously represents a threat to her and to her family, and the landscape becomes the visible signifier of that anonymous danger. In a curious attempt at stylistic symmetry, the solitary member of the IRA is increasingly portrayed as a menace to Lois, as the natural features of the landscape steadily take the rebel's side and transform themselves in order to hide and protect him: "It must be because of Ireland he was in such a hurry; down from the mountains, making a short cut through their demesne... The crowd of trees, straining up from passive disputed earth, each sucking up and exhaling the country's essence, swallowed him finally (34). But those same trees that stretch to protect the Irish rebel gradually turn dangerous to Lois and, being alone in the darkening forest, she suddenly experiences anxiety for the nearness of the shrubberies, and feels "fear behind reason; fear before her birth; fear like the earliest germ of her life that had stirred in (her mother) Laura" (33). In this crucial part of the protagonist's life, in order to better describe the active subsurface emotional energies that the young woman experiences, Bowen not only invests the natural world with the qualities of dream imagery, but uses multiple literary devices (anthropomorphism, alliteration, metaphors, allusions and similes) to insinuate Lois's entry into the depths of her own personality and a first encounter with her

dangerous subconscious: “A shrubby path was solid with darkness, she pressed down it. Laurels breathed coldly and close: on her bare arms the tips of leaves were timid and dank, like tongues of dead animals” (33). The birds—“high up a bird shrieked and stumbled down through dark, tearing the leaves” (33)—, the bushes and the darkness turn nightmarish to reflect acute physical apprehension, fear and extra awareness: “...she did not hear footsteps coming, and as she began to notice the displaced darkness thought what she dreaded was coming, was there with her—she was indeed clairvoyant, exposed to horror and going to see a ghost” (33).

Later on, in a most eloquent scene, Lois discovers that her love for her fiancé, Gerald, has come to nothing and unconsciously projects the fear and distaste she feels for him on the wild laurels which grow everywhere around Danielstown:

She stood, perplexed, at the edge of the path; he kissed her with frightened violence. The laurels creaked as, in his arms, she bent back into them. His singleness bore, confusing, upon her panic of thoughts... her physical apprehension of him was confused by the slipping cold leaves... I don't like the smell of laurels. Let's come out of here. (237)

In the scene, the inevitable presence of the natural world, the wild bushes and fragrant leaves blend with the dramatic vision of Lois and Gerald running in the forest, a very literary image which seems to have found inspiration in the classical myth of Daphne, the maiden who, unwilling to yield to Apollo, changed into a laurel tree. As in the Greek story, the laurel leaves which envelope Lois become a symbol of her fear of Gerald, which is, in fact, a feeling of dread of her own femininity. Obviously, the Daphne story is a transformational myth and Lois's dislike of laurels is unambiguously a reminder of her fear for womanhood (Blodgett 18).

On a more collective level, *The Last September* is Bowen's elegy for the fall of the Anglo Irish and the loss of a civilization (Walshe 143). Although not expressed in so many words, the main characters are idealized for their courage in the face of imminent extinction at the hands of the emergent Irish revolutionaries. Like the rest of the families of their class, Sir Richard and Lady Naylor of Danielstown carry on living their traditional country life, confronting rebellion and desperately defending their feudal relationship with the native Irish. Choosing to ignore their inevitable end, they persistently refuse to acknowledge that the life in the Big House is threatened by insurrection and they willingly forget that the old modes and traditions they have always known and respected are clearly at risk. Perhaps following the same path, using the same policy of not noticing, the author overtly places the characters' dread of attack and extinction away from the native Irish revolutionaries and onto the north Cork landscape. This displacement becomes particularly evident in the descriptions of the big isolated house glimpsed at a distance by Lois:

To the south, below them, the demesne trees of Danielstown made a dark formal square like a rug on the green country... The house seemed to be pressing down low in apprehension, hiding its face, as though it had her vision of where it was. It seemed to gather its trees close in fright and amazement at the wide, light, lovely unloving country, the unwilling bosom whereon it was set. (66)



The deliberate use of anthropomorphism and oxymoron applied to house and countryside presages the subsequent pathos caused by the final destruction of the building and the traditions it represents. In the young protagonist's eyes, the house and its people are perpetually spied on by unspecified others, by ghostly figures who under the protective dusk of dense trees and bushes represent an impending, inescapable threat.

But it is at the closing moments of the novel when Bowen allows this violence to emerge with shocking force, in the description of the actual burning of the house. Again anthropomorphism, use of pictorial devices and profusion of metaphors applied to the natural elements of the landscape are present to evoke the inevitable feeling of impotence, fear of physical destruction and frustration for the dissolution of a lost order:

For in February, before those leaves had visibly budded, the death—execution, rather—of the three houses, Danielstown, Castle Trent, Mount Isabel, occurred in the same night. A fearful scarlet ate up the hard spring darkness; indeed, it seemed that an extra day, unreckoned, had come into abortive birth that these things might happen. It seemed, looking from east to west at the sky tall with scarlet, that the country itself was burning; while to the north the neck of mountains before Mount Isabel was frightfully outlined. 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. (206)

THE GHOSTS AROUND THE HOUSE

In much the same fashion, although twenty years later the ambushes and burnings seem far removed, *A World of Love* presents a much more pessimistic version of *The Last September*, where new and threatening manifestations of nature affect the characters in a similarly drastic way. In this case, the apparently benign light of early summer that appears profusely described in the first few pages soon becomes devouring, and the house and its inhabitants are forced to survive a dreadful summer heat wave. *A World of Love* is set almost entirely in and around an old Irish country house, in the post 11 World War years, during a period of extremely hot weather. The narrative plot centers on the Danbys, the family who live there: a married couple, their two daughters, Jane and Maud, and their cousin Antonia, the owner of Montefort, currently staying on a visit from London. The story line grows around Jane's discovery of a bundle of love letters written by a mysterious man who had died in the Great War, and who had been Lydia Danby's former fiancé and Antonia's beloved cousin. The text explores the effects of the letters on the inhabitants of Montefort, and examines how far people are determined by haunting experiences of the past. As the letters that form the dramatic central point are completely absent—they are actually never seen by the members of the family, except by Jane—the natural world, which is essential to the development of the story line—is equally cryptic and ghostly.

The first page opens with the newness of dawn, with the unfamiliarity of daybreak:

The sun rose on a landscape still pale with the heat of the day before. There was no haze, but a sort of coppery burnish out of the air lit on flowing fields, rocks, the face of the one house and the cliff of limestone overhanging the river. The river gorge cut deep through the uplands. The light at this hour, so unfamiliar, brought into being a new world—painted, expectant, empty, intense. (9)

In this first description, the anthropomorphism applied to the features of the landscape, and the dreamy qualities of light and air (pale, flowing, face, unfamiliar, expectant) serve to underscore the strangeness of the morning. Allusions to painting (coppery burnish, painted light), to the passiveness of the scene (no haze, expectant, empty) and to the intensity of the moment (deep, intense) underline the absence of people, which, for Bennet and Royle, evokes a landscape inhabited by the dead (112). Such early hints at the passivity of the moment explain why, all through *A World of Love*, the atmospheric conditions and natural features of the Irish countryside combine to create a pervading feeling of non-existence, a permanent drive to dissolution. Page after page, progressively, the heat of the early summer contributes to generate a burning immobility, a torpidity and lassitude which is both ecstatic and phantasmagoric (Bennet 110). In the heat of this atypical Irish summer, it is as if the characters could never wake up, since they keep being “sent on out of one deep dream into another... more near perhaps to the waking hour” (*World* 132). The thermal, oppressive world presented in *A World of Love* reflects and contributes to the heated climate engendered among the characters, who feel that in this ghastly endlessly suffocating weather, in this strange thermo-world, they are all living without living, in a dream. Technically, their lives are dissolving, already verging on non-existence. Jane, the protagonist, is “like a boy-actor who belongs to some other time” (10); she is “all the time somewhere else,” in a “trance” (26). Her mother Lilia responds to the heat searching for refuge in permanent immobility; like a “waxen lady” she lives on, uncertain of whether she is alive or dead. Wanting to hear how she is, another character attempts to voice her own feelings: “So you mean now you’re dead.” To which Lilia retorts, in a “dead voice,” “In this heat how can I know what I am?” (12).

In *A World of Love*, constant images of extrasensory perceptions interfere with the descriptions of the character’s everyday life. The glare of the blinding summer light makes the landscape look like “a picture postcard such as one might receive from Hell” (88). The air that the characters breathe feels sultry, over intensified, so strange that “one can barely breathe it” (18). The pervading heat wave causes melting, evaporation and dissolution of events and identities, places and experiences. Undoubtedly, the scorching heat is the most persistent climatic condition of this text and of its reading (Bennet 107). In the novel, the atmosphere is “spattered” with sun, of “a brightness quite insupportable” (10). The heat becomes “more dreadful day after day” (12). Out of doors, the buildings are “sunstruck” and “the heat stands over the land like a white-hot sword” (20). The landscape shimmers and glares “clamped under a burning glass” (84). The heat is so intense that it almost literally drains the



strength of the inhabitants of Montefort, who “lie sleepless” picturing each other in flames” (12). Drawing on the powerful symbolic association of heat and dissolution, combined with the use of metaphors, alliteration, hyperbole and personification, the narrator frequently pictures the land, house and garden as shimmering, tottering, suspended. As the young protagonist goes out into the back yard:

Grass which had seeded between the cobbles parched and, dying, deadened her steps: a visible silence filled the place—long it was since anyone had been here. Slime had greenly caked in the empty trough, and the unprecedented loneliness of the afternoon looked out, as though eyelets cut in a mask, from the archways of the forsaken dovecot. Not a straw stirred, or was there to stir, in the kennel; and above her something other than clouds was missing from the uninhabited sky. (*World* 43)

And so the whole plot evolves in burning heat, the characters’ torpid lines of thoughts frequently make them feel bloodless, paralyzed, in abeyance. The general dissolution and evaporation of their thoughts caused by the high temperatures anticipates the fragmentation of the Danbys as a family and, in a more general sense, seems to foresee the disappearance of the Anglo Irish as a social group.

CONCLUSION

Without aiming to pose too close parallels between Bowen’s life and works, it seems inevitable to remember that the universe of her fiction is the world she lived in, and that its continuous external conflicts—rumors of war, war itself and the aftermath of war in Ireland and Europe—influenced her writing deeply, along with her divided Anglo-Irish heritage. It seems appropriate to take this into account when trying to understand the obvious tensions and sense of dislocation of her treatment of place, especially in her two Irish novels. The haunting, ghostly, menacing depictions of the landscape in *The Last September*, and the hardships borne by the characters in *A World of Love* are Bowen’s fictional ways of escaping from a devouring inner dread for the decline and eventual disappearance of her social group.

What appears reflected in her narrative is clearly at odds with her rational inclinations, which tend to show love and veneration for the Irish landscape, a conscious voluntary attitude which probably remains at the bottom of every first design of her novels but never quite materializes: “This is a part of Ireland with no lakes, but the sky’s movement of clouds reflects itself everywhere as it might on water, rounding the trees with bloom and giving the grass a sheen” (*Bowen’s* 3). Her conscious, voluntary trust in the permanence and calmness provided by the ownership of the land is overtly thwarted by a subconscious feeling of guilt and a fear of dissolution and death. In the novels previously discussed, the Ascendancy estates provide a stifling environment for the characters. They project their inhabitants’ psychic lag, they are symbols of denial and stasis, of a social group captive to an etiolated past, attitudinized and sensually parochial (Blodgett 27).

Amid the social upheavals that Bowen witnessed during her lifetime—namely, the First World War, the Irish Troubles and the Second World War—, Bowen’s fond-

ness for the land provides the only source of equilibrium in an otherwise unbalanced world: “Yes, there was the picture of peace—in the house, in the country around... And so great and calming was the authority of the light and quiet around Bowen’s Court that it survived war-time” (*Bowen’s* 457). However, below that idyllic surface, there are doubts and tensions, and perhaps that magical image “did not quite correspond with any reality. Or, you might have called the country a magic mirror, reflecting something that could not really exist” (*Bowen’s* 457).

The tension caused by alternating feelings of attachment and detachment from her native land remained a powerful and mythic theme for Bowen throughout her writing career, with the more general themes of exile, expulsion, and the development of complex, mixed identities in a changing world. This essay has attempted to demonstrate that an effective way to explore those mythic themes might be to observe the obsessive treatment of place in her novels, in connection with the formation of individual and group identity. The ecocritical approach as a form of literary analysis is justified by Bowen’s fundamental concern with locality, which in her fictional writings rivals in dramatic force with the main characters. Fields, forests, mountains and rocks, light, water and air, whatever their function in the story, seem to have been especially designed to transfer meaning: permanence or dissolution, life or death. Bowen takes great pains to set her characters in specific, well defined, often oppressive settings where the natural features of the environment are carefully selected to confer true meaning to the plot. What is more, Bowen is clearly determined to use place as the most characteristic trait of the whole narrative context, because, as she once suggested, both the places and the scenes they evoked appeared in her mind before the characters themselves:

On the whole, places more often than faces have sparked off stories. To be honest, the scenes have been with me before the characters—it could have seemed to me, even, once or twice, as though the former had summoned up the latter. I do not feel, necessarily, that this is wrong: a story must come to life in its own order. (*Mulberry* 129)

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