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‘We get all sealed up’: An Essay in Five Deaths

Patricia Coughlan

Life works to dispossess the dead, to dislodge and oust them. Their places fill themselves up; later people come in; all the room is wanted. Feeling alters its course, is drawn elsewhere or seeks renewal from other sources. When of love there is not enough to go round, inevitably it is the dead who must go without…[1]

On 5 January 1941 Elizabeth Bowen wrote to Virginia Woolf that she felt ‘a sort of despair about my own generation – the people the same age as the century, I mean – we don’t really suffer much but we get all sealed up’. Alone and fretful at Bowen’s Court in freezing weather after her husband had returned to London, she was finding it hard even to write letters or make plans:

> The house now is very cold and empty, and very beautiful in a glassy sort of way… There are some very early lambs, which at night get through the wires and cry on the lawn under my windows. I am doing the last chapter of the Bowen’s Court book: I don’t want you to see it till it is done, because the last chapter seems to, or ought to re-write retrospectively all the rest of the book. It is also rather painful and rather difficult, because some of the people in it are still alive.[2]

Bowen had begun *Bowen’s Court* in the early summer of 1939, before war broke out, and in the event did not complete it until December 1941. As she worked to create a narrative from her Cromwellian-settler family’s several centuries of records, documents, histories, and oral memories, the cataclysms of World War II went on. She had directly experienced the German Blitz on London, begun with systematic nightly bombing throughout September and October 1940; battles continued in several other theatres of the war. Despite Irish neutrality, Dublin

had seen two German raids days before, on 2 and 3 January, and Belfast would be bombed in April.

From this letter, I take two structuring ideas. One is Bowen's sense of being emotionally closed or frozen, 'all sealed up'. The other is her realization, in this iron war midwinter, that the final chapter of her Bowen history would radically turn away from the tenor and trajectory of what had gone before. These two are inextricably, though not explicitly, associated: my essay seeks out these connections. In the case of *Bowen's Court*, she was finding that she must stage a break in the coherence of those precedents, even one amounting to repudiation. Surrounded by the modern, industrialized, uncountable mass deaths of so many thousands everywhere, she chose to conclude her history of one family by showing the removal, with due ceremony, of a single human body from dwelling-place to grave. As we shall see, the climax of the book is this final 'transit' of the last landlord, her father Henry Bowen, in 1930. Still an Anglo-Irish gentleman, Henry was by then no longer the possessor of estates. By the early 1920s the Free State had finished the business of dismantling the landlord system and the gentry were far along their 'political, economic, and social trajectory from Ascendancy to oblivion', in Eugenio Biagini's words.[3] Some proprietors retained a home farm as part of the settlement, but the Bowens did not. In 1928 when Henry retired in failing health to Bowen's Court 'the farm was out of our hands, which was just as well'.[4] The lambs crying on the lawn in 1941 must have belonged to a new owner.

Bowen's letter blamed her state of emotional suppression on the tumultuous century. No doubt the 'sealing up' she describes does indeed come of witnessing decades of revolution and conflict local and global, as she implies to Woolf by mentioning 'my generation: the people the same age as the century'. But familiarity with Bowen's life and work up to this, her forty-second year, indicates that her sense of being 'all sealed up' has complex causes. I shall argue that it entails the effects not only of those disturbances, losses,

and griefs – public and private – punctuating the previous four decades, but also, and crucially, of that personal formation in her class and period which systematically suppressed the outward expression of emotion.

In his work on *The Navigation of Feeling*, the anthropologist and historian of emotion, William Reddy, argues that 'different social orders either facilitate or constrain emotional life'.[5] The Anglo-Irish social order in which Elizabeth Bowen was schooled, which was of a piece with the British one, definitely falls on the side of constraint, producing what E.M. Forster called 'undeveloped hearts'.[6] In her first novel, *The Hotel* (1927), Colonel Duperrier remarks that the *ingénue* (and somewhat androgynous) protagonist Sydney Warren is 'curiously dammed up'[7]. This state of being is a product of upper-class upbringing: the quelling of overt feeling, the practice and policy of 'not noticing', are the marks of a privileged elite, bred as a ruling class for the colonies and at home, in the period from the 1860s up to the mid-twentieth century. Describing the eighteenth-century Ascendancy which occurred in the age of sensibility, Bowen observes drily that 'to enjoy prosperity one had to exclude feeling, or keep it within the prescribed bounds'.[8] Yet from the late 1920s onwards Bowen's fiction critiques and questions the exclusion of feeling with growing power. In the letter to Woolf, herself nothing if not a discerning analyst of stifled emotion, Bowen's reflexive perception of being 'all sealed up' speaks eloquently to the emotional education, the 'unburying' or 'unsealing', carried out in her fiction. As she says in her 1955 novel *A World of Love*, from which I borrow my epigraph: 'feeling alters its course, is drawn elsewhere or seeks renewal from other sources'.

Some of the best recent and contemporary Bowen criticism has shown the centrality of tropes of burial and unburial, and pervasive, often blocked, mourning, to her work.[9] These discussions form a background and partial context for this essay about different deaths, different forms of mourning. The fine thanato-critic David Sherman argues in his compelling

In a Strange Room: Modernism's Corpses and Mortal Obligation, for a 'neither-nor logic of the corpse's liminality'.[10] Extending this insight beyond the immediate and quasi-uncanny presence of the dead body, such a 'logic' is frequently at work in Bowen's imagination: anomalously present as psycho-phantoms and yet absent as people, the dead are neither remembered nor yet forgotten.

In the rest of this essay I pursue the connections between the two principal ideas pinpointed in the letter to Woolf, by way of focusing on five individual deaths and their sequels, effects, and meanings. The first is the 1912 death of Bowen's mother Florence, when Elizabeth was thirteen. The second concerns wartime bereavement and mourning in Bowen's 1941 short story 'Tears, Idle Tears'. The third is not directly about the Bowens and is not fiction: we know about it from a biographical narrative which has much in common with *Bowen's Court*. The prominent dramatist and novelist Molly Keane (b.1904), who much later wrote the mordant Anglo-Irish classic novel *Good Behaviour* (1981), was a close friend of Elizabeth's and had similar class and cultural origins. Molly's young husband Bobby died suddenly in 1945: I focus on the experiences in bereavement of Molly and her six-year-old daughter Sally, principally as related in Sally's 2017 biography of her mother. The fourth and fifth deaths are both recounted in *Bowen's Court.* One is the death in 1868 of Elizabeth's great-grandmother, Eliza, as described to Elizabeth by her aunt Sarah, who was present at the deathbed. The fifth is Elizabeth's own account of the death and removal to his grave of her father Henry in 1930. She was chief mourner.

1: Elizabeth and Florence

Bowen famously experienced two shattering disruptions of her childhood. When she was seven, her father had a major breakdown and prolonged psychiatric illness, occasioning his incarceration for a time. Despite this crisis, her mother, Florence, 'showed me no signs of what she was going through, and I asked no questions'.[11] It was after this that Elizabeth

developed her stammer. Florence felt constrained to leave Ireland with her daughter, going to live in various houses in Kent. She had support there from several nearby relatives, and she and Elizabeth lived in warm mutual attachment: 'she gave me – most important of all as a start in life – the radiant, confident feeling of being loved'.[12] Henry recovered gradually; by 1911 he had resumed work and the family was reunited. But a further blow fell: in 1912 when Elizabeth was thirteen, Florence died of cancer. The aunts looking after Elizabeth thought it best to keep her away from her mother's death and funeral. Nor did they encourage the open expression of grief. Indeed, according to principles of decorous restraint prevailing in her aunts', now to be her, quasi-suburban milieu in Edwardian England, overt mourning was quelled.[13]

In a general process of change from flamboyant displays in the Victorian period, in England mourning had become contained and private, as social rituals were diminishing.[14] In Bowen's 1970s unfinished memoir, she says only: 'I was staying next door', and offers a startling and well-known aporia: 'I could not remember [Florence], think of her, speak of her or suffer to hear her spoken of'. Strikingly, she uses a memory of the Blitz to characterize the felt dread of those final weeks spent with both parents in 1912: these were 'the sorts of evenings… associated with the thrummings of a bomber, circling, coming brutally nearer each time'.[15]

Bowen does not culpabilize her Aunt Laura – designated as surrogate parent – for keeping her from Florence's death and burial. Indeed she describes Laura sympathetically as 'no less in a state of shock'.[16] But there is no mistaking Elizabeth's keen sense of exclusion and emotional censorship in this unadorned account given sixty years later. Her school performance plummeted: at this distance she observes that 'my stupidity may have been due to denied sorrow'.[17] Her fiction several times revisits the experiences of troubled or indignant child characters denied momentous knowledge of their own circumstances – most flagrantly

Leopold in *The House in Paris* (1935) who tells Henrietta that 'nobody knows I'm born' – or deterred from mourning, like Portia in *The Death of the Heart* (1938).[18]

There is a remarkable, and remarkably early, refraction of Elizabeth's experience is the classic story 'Coming Home' (1923), written a bare ten years after Florence's death. The twelve-year-old protagonist, Rosalind, whose father has recently died, finds her mother, as she thinks, gone from the house. She struggles for rational control of her feelings but fails, shuttling frantically through terror of abandonment, rage, and guilt, haunted by a 'spectral shimmer of light in the white panelling' and the scent of primroses recalling the wreath on 'the raw new earth of that grave'.[19] 'Coming Home' goes some way towards confronting in narration the most painful of Bowen's experiences, the disappearance of her mother.

In 1952 when Bowen found her husband dead, she wrote to her friend Isaiah Berlin that she 'had never known what it was like to mourn before'.[20] A desperately sad remark, this nevertheless says that now she does know. It indicates the personal wholeness of having consciously known and suffered emotional trauma: perhaps of being no longer 'all sealed up'? Despite loss and its socially enjoined concealment in early adolescence, in narrating love and grief she constituted a mourner's subjectivity well suited to 'the century', with its crowding in of all the dead.[21]

2: 'Tears, Idle Tears': loss transferred

The second death takes place, so to speak, off stage: before the start of this 1941 story. Written in the first or second year of WWII, it directly concerns the inability to mourn, a topic history had once again made urgent. As elsewhere, Bowen uses the generic resources of the short story to stage sensational motifs and uncanny effects. In this instance she combines two of her recurrent concerns, namely the oppressive demand for composure, even impassivity, made of children in some social milieus, and the deforming legacies with which

parents may burden their children. Gothic licence allows her to use an uncanny plot-device revealing – in a magical sense – the origin of the child protagonist's neurotic symptom.

Seven-year-old Frederick regularly bursts into inconsolable tears without an identifiable cause, irritating and puzzling his stylish, poised young-widowed mother, whose social circle admires her 'pluck'. Walking with her in Regent's Park, he suffers one of these weeping episodes. A flashback reveals his mother's initial inability, five years earlier, to show sorrow at the sudden death of her husband, an R.A.F. pilot. She can 'give full birth to her grief' only when she kneels by the two-year-old infant's cot where, at first, he lies sleeping.[22] Later, however, a visiting friend, together with the child's nurse, finds *her* asleep and Frederick, 'under his mother's arm, still as an image', wide awake and totally silent. This silence, as if mother and baby had somehow exchanged affects, gives the two women 'the horrors', so that '[y]ou would think he knew'. Having thus been delivered of her grief, however, his mother seems indeed to effect the elimination of it from her own being. Subsequently (or, creepily, by consequence), she recovers her 'gallant' composure, much admired by men, while her child experiences a helpless recurring 'incontinence' of weeping, rendering him 'abject': a 'cold, black pit' opens inside him, and through 'streaming eyes' he sees 'everything quake'.[23] She has handed him over the task of grieving *on her behalf.*

In the context of Bowen's fiction, Frederick's mother is a version of Anna Quayne in *The Death of the Heart* (1938), another elegant, closed-in – or 'sealed-up' – character. Bowen grants Anna, however, a more complex and compassionate characterization, showing that it is her own unacknowledged pain that renders Anna incapable of loving her orphaned step-niece Portia.[24] 'Tears…', as we have seen, instead stages a quasi-Gothic 'horror'-transaction making the infant Frederick scapegoat of the mourning prohibition. His mother is beautiful in her 'silver fox, white gloves and dark-blue toque put on exactly right'.[25] But in keeping with the story's Gothic underside, she is harsh and witchy: a representation verging on misogyny.

Yet ‘Tears, Idle Tears’ cannot be summed up as a moral, akin to a Grimm, tale of maternal cruelty. Rather, Bowen’s unflinching story of a small boy left to cry alone in Regent’s Park is far-reaching in both social-historical and psychological insight. As Thomas Dixon’s history, *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (2015) shows, the normative practice of stifling tears – ‘not blubbing’, in prep- and public-school parlance – nourished from the mid-Victorian period onwards in British culture and enforced particularly on boys and men, was at its high point during and soon after World War II. Bowen was overtly resistant to psychoanalysis, but her narration of Frederick’s helpless crying is also strikingly compatible with fundamental psychoanalytic insights about the inaccessibility to ordinary consciousness of the inner self and its irreducibility to rational knowledge and control, especially when enduring a devastating loss such as intimate bereavement. Furthermore, her story notably anticipates Abraham and Török’s account, only developed during the 1960s and ’70s, of the intergenerational transmission of trauma, appearing in cryptic non-verbal behaviour, in this case Frederick’s tears.[26] Bowen shows the boy’s weeping as springing from his mother’s psychic conflict, and not his own.[27] His tears are a ‘phantom’ formed in his unconscious, produced by direct empathy with *her* repressed psychic matter, namely her inability to admit her loss as such, and recognize her own grief.

3: Molly and Sally: a ‘delay in mourning’

We have just seen that Bowen’s 1941 story ‘Tears, Idle Tears’ shows a newly-widowed mother who cannot find expression for her own grief, and her child’s consequent and mysterious disturbance. In this episode I turn to the startling echoes of Bowen’s fictional plot in the real experiences in 1946 of Bowen’s friends the Anglo-Irish Keane family who lived in West Waterford. My discussion draws on *Molly Keane: A Life*, Sally (Keane) Phipps’ loving but painful 2017 biography of her mother.[28] It offers a perceptive discussion,

amounting to keen critique, of the landed-gentry culture in which Molly Keane had been formed before WWI, throwing light too on Bowen family history in *Bowen's Court.*

In 'Tears, Idle Tears', Frederick's deep inner trouble is treated as a character defect requiring to be overcome. His mother's approach is firmly of the 'stiff upper lip' kind we have earlier seen, shown in Dixon's study to have been at its highest point in the mid-twentieth century. By contrast, Sally's psychological trouble after her father's death leads to a startling cultural, and implicitly ideological, encounter. On the one hand stood Anglo-Irish gentry culture and values in the 1940s. On the other was a new vision of personal development which would come to revolutionize child formation. This became embodied, for Sally in particular, by D.W. Winnicott, pioneer in the field.

In November 1945 Elizabeth Bowen paid a visit to her friends the Keanes in Co. Waterford. Molly was happily married to Bobby Keane, son of a long-established landed family, when their first child Sally was born in 1940. Writing to Charles Ritchie in November 1945 about this stay with the Keanes, Bowen spoke with great affection about Sally: 'the most heavenly child', with 'dark red hair and very dark eyes… She made a set at me and I lost my heart to her'.[29]

Molly Keane's family of origin, the Skrines, were part-English and part-Co. Antrim. Unionists and colonials, her parents were ranchers in Canada before settling in Co Waterford. Sally gives a dismaying account of repressive Skrine child-raising, which inculcated an 'extreme code of behaviour' where feelings were 'corralled' to poetry and 'the cry of the hounds or the last post being sounded over a dead soldier's grave', but not acknowledged within the self, and if judged 'ignoble', they were 'punished or repressed'.[30] In Molly's and earlier generations, parents' distance from children and the non-cultivation of intimacy or introspection were class norms among both English and Anglo-Irish. Boys were dispatched to

'prep' boarding schools, sometimes at seven or eight; younger children lived in the nursery and saw their parents only on visiting the drawing-room before dinner.[31]

When in 1946 Bobby died without warning, Sally recalled his loss as like 'an underground river for us both': underground because it could not be made visible. Sally 'didn't mention him because I didn't want to make Molly cry'.[32] Fifty years on, Molly recalled that after Sally heard the news, 'this tiny six-year-old composed herself and said: "We must stop crying now, Mummy. We have to go in and face the servants."'[33] Sally saw her heartbroken mother as 'shattered by the impropriety' of her own outbursts of grief: according to her ethos, 'tears are such rotten behaviour'.[34] Trained from her own early childhood in suppressing emotion, Molly – in Sally's memory – found sustaining maternal intimacy difficult. 'She could lift her dahlias from the cold earth, gather up Sue and her puppies, but it was harder for her to get her hands on her baby'.[35] No doubt the damaging effects of Molly's own upbringing combined with the blasé fashion of upper-class interwar life to discourage her from picking up and hugging her children: in the Keanes' milieu 'motherhood was not meant to disrupt one's previous life in the slightest'.[36]

After some months, Sally began to have irrational terrors, and she was brought to see the prominent London child psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott. His views ran clean counter to previously prevailing norms: he approached even very young babies as already persons in the making, and he placed parental and especially maternal closeness and attention at the very heart of childrearing. One of his most influential concepts was the 'holding environment', namely a mother's ability to keep an infant calm and comforted by her near and attentive presence. He followed up on this consultation with the following letter to Molly (undated):

> Dear Mrs Keane,
>
> If Sally tends to be getting nearer to a more profound mourning for her father that should be looked upon as healthy rather than unhealthy. One could say

> that she is suffering from a delay in mourning for her father, and this may be associated to some extent with your own great difficulty with this thing that has happened to yourself. You are coping with it in your own way, and perhaps Sally's way will be different from yours.[37]

Humane, subtle, and tactful about Molly's feelings, this nevertheless reads as if written from another world than that of the hunting-field, being brave in front of the servants, and indeed the 'campaign of not noticing' Elizabeth Bowen had practised at seven when her father's mental breakdown became evident: 'that winter of 1905–6 my mother hoped I would notice nothing, and I did not notice much', although 'my father's excitability became extreme'.[38]

4: 'Natural, intimate, mystical': Eliza's deathbed

My remaining two death scenes come from *Bowen's Court* itself: one an actual deathbed, the other the removal of the remains of Bowen's father, Henry, to the nearby graveyard. Bowen makes this scene the climax of her book. *Bowen's Court* is a longer single work than any of her others, and as criticism has now acknowledged, is much more than an exercise in (Anglo-)Irish historiography, though it is that, and as such is able and often compelling. Intimately bound up with key scenes in her fiction – *The Last September, The Heat of the Day, A World of Love,* 'The Happy Autumn Fields' – it is a work of the creative imagination, infused with a strong narrativity and fictiveness. She frankly acknowledges that she has had to imagine such and such a dialogue or state of mind, in one of the three centuries whose passage it traces, and frequently achieves eloquence and poignancy in doing so. It is also a significant piece of life-writing.[39] When, at that darkest, most frozen wartime moment, she writes to Woolf that 'the last chapter seems to, or ought to re-write retrospectively all the rest of the book', she is communicating an epiphany – tantalizingly without specific examples or explanation – about how, albeit in her 'sealed-up' state of feeling, she has come to think differently about the Bowens' past and present. The phrasing is remarkable: 'the last chapter'

is the subject of the sentence, so that the book ‘seems’ to be writing her rather than the reverse.

A subdued but strong current of gender difference runs through *Bowen’s Court*.[40] Bowen attends to what she can discern of the lives of women whose ages are not even given in lists of progeny, drawn up within a social order both patrilineal and patriarchal. In particular she provides glimpses of the bonds between women through generations. One woman emerges with particular clarity: Eliza Wade Galwey Bowen, great-grandmother of Elizabeth. The district remembered her for having given all her energies and resources to feeding Famine victims; those she could not save were buried in a pit in the nearby churchyard, where Bowens before and after were also laid. She lived on to be warmly loved by her grandchildren, and her death scene in 1868 is one of the finest moments of affirmation in Bowen’s work. It implicitly celebrates the large-family Victorian community of her ancestors who filled the house with life, sharply contrasting with its near-emptiness five decades on. Florence Bowen tried to give Elizabeth a sense of company by inviting their Anglo-Irish neighbours to tea, and Elizabeth remembered that in the small church they all ‘sang loud confident Protestant hymns’.[41] But the failure of Protestant nuptiality and natality in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, anticipated by Bowen’s own single-child status, is signally shown by the fact that none of her four Bowen aunts married.[42]

It was the eldest of these, Sarah, who bore witness to Elizabeth about her grandmother’s death. The three eldest children, aged four upwards, are awakened in the night and taken to say goodbye to Eliza: ‘The scene, which they always remembered, seemed to the three of them natural, intimate, mystical – though, if their grandmother spoke, they remembered nothing she said’.[43] In her own seventies Sarah could still tap with her toe the spot where her grandmother’s bed had stood in the bedroom made for her within the library, despite this room being later removed. In startling contrast with Bowen’s own experience of

exclusion from and denial of death, the children were brought in to take part in the frank acknowledgement of Eliza's passing, sharing goodbyes and final embraces. In a period still confidently religious, death was not surrounded by fear, nor any flicker of the uncanny, nor a desolating aporia. The scene is focused on familial love with a woman at its centre: the succession it maintains is not one of property but of loving attachment. Retained in memory, not a document, it records an act of looking into the face of mortality and gathering it into relationship. Like Henry's removal, the scene implicitly counters the brutal facts of history, from the Famine through colonial wrongs to the myriad unnamed deaths in wars. To Elizabeth it may also have served to make manifest the hidden death of Florence, and to acknowledge and salve that never-shown wound.

5: 'No false or inhuman hush': Henry's removal

I turn finally to the last death, which is that of Henry Bowen, Elizabeth's father, but first to his life as eldest son and heir of Bowen's Court. The nature of that life underlies the meaning of Bowen's funeral episode. Henry was tall, gangling, physically awkward. A bookish, reflective boy, he shared a close affection with his mother. He did not relish hunting or any other of his father Robert's energetic pursuits, including his drive towards estate improvement and his unforgiving conduct towards tenants. In 1881 when Henry was nineteen, a terrible fate befell the family, irreparably scarring him. On his way back from a tour of Europe, he contracted smallpox in London. When he reached Co. Cork he was already ill. Robert immediately left, taking everyone in the house except Elizabeth, Henry's mother, who nursed him back to health. She caught the infection and died. The shadow of blame for her death, however unwarranted, never left him.

The eldest of nine children, Henry was an unwilling heir. He wished to be a solicitor and researcher in law, but an entail on the Bowen estate precluded any of his siblings from inheriting. On reaching adulthood he would not yield to his overbearing father's attempt to

coerce him into the landlord role: he felt ‘a profound revulsion against whatever Robert had been’, and saw ‘the estate structure, Robert’s life-work, mortared together by Robert’s egotism’.[44] Intransigent and vindictive, Robert punished his son by deliberately leaving him an income radically insufficient to keep up the estate and dividing his wealth between the other children. Always given to fits of rage, Robert became increasingly unhinged before his death in 1888. Even had the landlord system not been in the process of terminal decline, he thus ensured the impossibility of Bowen prosperity after himself, even starting to fell the fine woods on the land until Henry legally restrained him. After inheriting and while landlordism was being dismantled by successive legal measures, Henry made his living as a solicitor, practising his profession in Dublin and in effect maintaining Bowen’s Court as a summer residence. It is worth noting that his daughter reproduced this pattern, albeit in London and in the different profession of writer.

Florence Colley was one of a large, cheerful family of landowning background settled near Dublin. Once he had met and then married her, Henry throve. But after Elizabeth’s birth, nine years into the marriage, Florence almost fatally miscarried a second pregnancy. In 1971, near the end of her own life, Elizabeth explained Henry’s despair: ‘in 1904 he had failed to give birth to dead Robert, his father, in the birth of Robert, his son, and he had almost killed his wife trying’.[45] Subsequently he endured his own intermittent mental illness and Florence’s death. Though contentedly remarried in 1918, he suffered recurrent anxieties and guilt until his death in 1930. At the end of Elizabeth’s book his funeral implicitly effects a healing redress of his life’s sorrows and troubles. This, particularly as seen in light of the unsparing account of Robert’s intemperate character and behaviour, both as father and as the last landlord, is surely part of the change of direction Bowen saw in January 1941 that she must bring about in her book.

The final paragraph of *Bowen's Court* begins as Henry's coffin stands ready in the hall for his last removal from his house. Moving out onto the steps, Elizabeth sees that

> [a] great sea of people, so many hundreds… that it looked like a dream, from all over the country, from the most remote mountainy places, stood on the gravel and on the lower avenue, their eyes fixed on the house. When I gave the sign and the coffin went down the steps, the sea moved, at first in silence, ahead of, around, behind us.[46]

Many relays of bearers from among this multitude carry the coffin smoothly to the small Farahy church beside the house gates, so that to the watching daughter's – and novelist's – eye it seems to move 'like a boat', in 'perpetual transits' made with complete smoothness. The crowd repeatedly parts to let her and her husband 'keep our places' near her father, then surrounds them again in 'friendly closeness'. So numerous that they 'sweep over the grass alongside the avenue' and press 'almost to the verge of the woods', after their initial respectful silence they soon begin sociably talking 'because in Ireland death makes no false or inhuman hush'.[47]

This remarkable scene with its account of a ritual of communal mourning stands out among Bowen's works, resembling no other passage. The 'sign' Elizabeth is required to give, at the moment of readiness, is a formal gesture that makes her a kind of celebrant, in whom is vested the setting in motion and unfolding in time of the day's whole performance. The funeral description is beautiful: calm, paced, dignified, expressing communion in a shared ceremony whose rubrics are already known to all participants. The size of the crowd is a powerful indicator of the importance of the moment in the district and even beyond, in the North Cork region. She conveys this by indicating the extent of the lawns and avenues they occupy, as they wait for the 'transit' of Henry's removal from his house to his grave.

The scene might be interpreted in different ways. For herself the writer performs an assuagement of the harsh, violent Bowens of the past, in the context of her own internally conflicted, deep attachment to this place: a symbolic rapprochement of intimate enemies. This handing over of her father, the last male Bowen, into the hands and onto the shoulders of the Irish community according to immemorial funeral custom, in this final passage of the book, is meant to enact a dignified yielding of settler identity and of the power embodied in it. Henry is *carried over*, via the 'transits' she names, not only from house to grave, but also, by delicate implication, to final unity with the imaginary Other(s) of Irish Catholic culture.

One might argue, however, that this implicit unification rests on a wish-fulfilling fantasy. Without explicit statement but nevertheless powerfully, it invokes an Irish chieftain surrounded by his people, as in pre-plantation Ireland. Yet widespread expropriation by the settler-landlord class to which the Bowens belonged had long sundered those social and familial ties formerly linking landowners and dependants within an ancient and intricate system. By contrast these settler landlords' connections with tenants were economic, contractual, and impaired by differences in language, religion, ethnicity, and culture.[48] So viewed, one might call this funeral scene one more instance of appropriation, in this case of the deeply-established symbolism of Irish funeral customs.

Yet Bowen is consciously using this transaction also as a farewell to her family's landlord role, whose termination she fully acknowledges. This *is* a shared leave-taking, respectfully conducted between her and the mourners. These mourners will certainly have included others of the Bowens' own caste. But the size of the gathering indicates that this last departure of Henry from the house and his placing in the churchyard earth is significantly conducted, not merely accompanied, by former Bowen tenants, descendants of tenants, and local people of other 'stations'. Indeed, the narration says so, in the phrase about 'friends who were Catholics'.[49] This is part of a remark not drawing attention to itself, but which is

important in the context of Catholic-Protestant relations in the Free State: ‘when we came to the churchyard, the service was read there, so that the friends who were Catholics should not be left waiting outside the doors – an inhospitality that would have been Henry’s first.’[50] At this period Catholics were still forbidden by the Vatican to enter a Protestant church during a service. A notable example of Catholic bigotry, the ban is deftly deployed here in praise of Henry’s imputed hospitality, an important seigneurial value, and also in tune with Elizabeth’s showing a positive disposition towards the Catholic majority. It is a clear repudiation, in solidarity with her father, of her grandfather’s intemperate attitudes and acts, and that of other ancestors who were ‘conquering Protestants… before they were Christians’.[51] Probably, too, the final page of *The Last September* is recalled, where at the burning of Danielstown, ‘the door stood hospitably open upon a furnace’.[52]

David Sherman observes that if there is a politics of mortuary practices or deathways, it comes to us filtered through ancient ethical intuitions.[53] Such ethical intuitions are evident in Irish funeral customs. Irish death practices are often said, even now, to belong not to atomized modernity, but to a cyclical vision of life which intimates renewal following loss and reintegrates the dead both with the earth and the surrounding community.[54] In this way we may read Henry’s removal, leading to his burial, as an unburdening of grief at the finality of death. In her final scene, Bowen both unfolds and herself takes part in a ritual whose grace, shown as natural, works to assuage class, colonial, and intergenerational guilt. Paradoxically, bringing Henry to his grave seems a kind of unsealing. This relinquishing to Irish ritual is a gesture of wished-for reintegration of all the Bowens, embodied in Henry, and therefore proleptically of Elizabeth herself, into the Farahy earth which also, as we have seen, holds the nameless Famine dead. By Bowen’s own account to Virginia Woolf, at the end of *Bowen’s Court* she is, at least in the virtual realm of narrative art and in the expression of mourning, undoing everything it has stood for.

[1] Elizabeth Bowen, *A World of Love* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p.44.

[2] 'Bowen's Court January 5th [1941]'. *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth* Bowen, ed. by Hermione Lee (London: Virago, 1986) p.216, 218.

[3] See 'The Protestant Minority in Southern Ireland', *Historical Journal* 55.4 (2012), 1161-84 (p. 1171). Terence Dooley, *The Decline of the Big House in Ireland* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2001), gives a reliable general account; Andy Bielenberg, 'Exodus: The Emigration of Southern Irish Protestants during the Irish War of Independence and the Civil War', *Past & Present*, 218 (2013), p.199-233, especially p.204, 206, 214, and 230, contextualizes the gentry experience within the decline of the wider Protestant community in the south of Ireland, throwing light on the growing isolation of the remaining gentry.

[4] Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court and Seven Winters* (London: Virago, 1984), p.444.

[5] *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), back cover copy.

[6] E. M. Forster, 'Notes on the English Character' (1920), in *Abinger Harvest* (London: Edward Arnold, 1936), p.5.

[7] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Hotel* (London: Penguin, 1987), p.13.

[8] *Bowen's Court*, p.248.

[9] See Anne M. Wyatt-Brown, 'The Liberation of Mourning in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Little* Girls and *Eva Trout*', in *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity*, ed. Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), pp.164-86, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1995, and Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).

[10] For the 'neither-nor logic of the corpse's liminality', see David Sherman, *In a Strange Room: Modernism's Corpses and Mortal Obligation* (Oxford, OUP, 2014), p.133.

[11] Elizabeth Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), p.11.

[12] *Bowen's Court*, p.407.

[13] Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p.27-8; Patricia Coughlan, 'Chapter 11: Elizabeth Bowen', *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature*, ed. by Heather Ingman and Clíona Ó Gallchoir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p.207-8. 'Thus began' Bowen wrote six decades later, 'a career of withstood emotion' (*Pictures and Conversations*, p.9**)**.

[14] On this shift in death culture, see Geoffrey Gorer's ground-breaking *Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (London: Cresset Press, 1965), which influenced Philippe Ariès's more often-cited *Western Attitudes toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. by Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1974).

[15] *Pictures and Conversations*, pp.48-9.

[16] *Pictures and Conversations*, p.48.

[17] *Pictures and Conversations*, p.52.

[18] Bowen, *The House in Paris* (Vintage, 2002) p.54

[19] Elizabeth Bowen, *Collected Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.96.

[20] 8 October 1952, quoted by Deirdre Toomey, 'Bowen, Elizabeth Dorothea Cole (1899-1973)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). https://doi-org.ucc.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30839. Accessed 15 December 2020.

[21] See Patricia Coughlan, 'Chapter 11: Elizabeth Bowen', in *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature*, ed. Heather Ingman and Clíona Ó Gallchoir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp.207-8.

[22] Elizabeth Bowen, *Collected Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.484.

[23] *Collected Stories*, p.481-2.

[24] Charles Ritchie, Bowen's lover from 1941 on, recognized her own 'sealing up' when he said Anna was 'E[lizabeth] as a hostile outer person might see her' (*Love's Civil War: Elizabeth Bowen and Charles Ritchie*, ed. Victoria Glendinning with Judith Robertson (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009), p.26).

[25] *Collected Stories*, p. 481.

[26] Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2000) p.286.

[27] Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török, *The Shell and the Kernel*, ed. and trans. by Nicholas Rand (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994) p.166.

[28] Sally Keane Phipps, *Molly Keane: A Life*. London: Virago, 2017.

[29] Victoria Glendinning, ed. *Love's Civil War* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2008), p.73. Sally warmly returned Bowen's admiration and affection (Phipps, p.110-111).

[30] Phipps, p.31.

[31] Two leading British psychoanalysts themselves experienced this upper-class separation from parents. Bowen's near coeval Wilfred Bion, sent from India to England, wrote of the cruelty embedded in the school system, while John Bowlby (b.1907), remarked of his own experience that 'I wouldn't send a dog away to

boarding school at age seven'. Joseph Schwartz, *Cassandra's Daughter: A History of Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p.225.

[32] Phipps, p.185.

[33] Molly Keane, interviewed by Clare Boylan, 'I do miss talking with a chum', *Irish Times*, 23 April 1996. https://www.irishtimes.com/news/i-do-miss-talking-with-a-chum-1.42192.

[34] Phipps, p.187.

[35] Phipps, p.103.

[36] Phipps, p.102.

[37] Phipps, p.186.

[38] *Bowen's Court*, p.409, 416.

[39] See Elizabeth Grubgeld, 'Cultural Autobiography and the Female Subject: the Genre of Patrilineal History and the Writing of Elizabeth Bowen', *Genre* 27 (1994), p.204-226.

[40] As well noted by Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p.23-4, and by Grubgeld.

[41] *Bowen's Court*, p.408.

[42] On this 'demographic catastrophe', see Ian D'Alton and Ida Milne, ed. *Protestant* and *Irish: The Minority's Search for Place in Independent Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019), p.9, 31. See also the sources in n.4 above.

[43] *Bowen's Court*, p.342-3.

[44] *Bowen's Court*, p. 376.

[45] Interview with Edwin Kenney, in *Elizabeth Bowen* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1975), p.25. The child designated in advance as 'Robert, his son' turned out to be Elizabeth.

[46] *Bowen's Court*, p.446-7.

[47] *Bowen's Court*, p.447.

[48] See Lindsay Proudfoot, 'Landlords', *Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.297.

[49] *Bowen's Court*, p.447.

[50] *Bowen's Court*, p.447.

[51] *Bowen's Court*, p.247.

[52] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (London: Vintage, 1998), p.206.

[53] Sherman, p.4.

[54] See Lawrence Taylor, '*Bás in Éirinn:* Cultural Constructions of Death in Ireland', *Anthropological Quarterly,* 62.4 (1989), p.175-187.