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Authors	Coughlan, Patricia
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

5 Women and Desire in the Work of Elizabeth Bowen

PATRICIA COUGHLAN

'She abandoned me. She betrayed me.'
'Had you a sapphic relationship?'
'What?'
'Did you exchange embraces of any kind?'
'No. She always was in a hurry.'

ELIZABETH BOWEN, *Eva Trout*, p. 184

The array of analytic tools available today to anyone thinking about issues of homo / heterosexual definition is remarkably little enriched from that available to, say, Proust. . . . Most moderately to well-educated Western people in this century seem to share a similar understanding of homosexual definition, independent of whether they themselves are gay or straight, homophobic or antihomophobic. . . . That understanding is . . . organized around a radical and irreducible incoherence. . . . Enduringly since at least the turn of the century, there have presided two contradictory *tropes of gender* through which same-sex desire could be understood. On the one hand there was, and there persists, differently coded (in the homophobic folklore and science surrounding those 'sissy boys' and their mannish sisters, but also in the heart and guts of much living gay and lesbian culture), the trope of inversion, *anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa* – 'a woman's soul trapped in a man's body' – and vice versa. . . . One vital impulse of this trope is the preservation of an essential *heterosexuality* within desire itself, through a particular reading of the homosexuality of persons: desire, in this view, by definition subsists in the current that runs between one male self and one

> female self, in whatever sex of bodies these selves may be manifested. . . . The persistence of the inversion trope has been yoked, however, to that of its contradictory counterpart, the trope of gender separatism. . . . Far from its being of the essence of desire to cross boundaries of gender, it is instead the most natural thing in the world that people of the same gender . . . should bond together . . . on the axis of sexual desire. As the substitution of the phrase 'woman-identified' for 'lesbian' suggests, as indeed does the concept of the continuum of male or female homosocial desire, this trope tends to reassimilate to one another identification and desire, where inversion models, by contrast, depend on their distinctness. Gender-separatist models would thus place the woman-loving woman and the man-loving man each at the 'natural' center of their own gender, in contrast to inversion models that locate gay people – whether biologically or culturally – at the threshold between genders.
>
> EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK[1]

I

This essay is a discussion of Elizabeth Bowen's representations of woman-to-woman attachment in her work. I have chosen at the outset to place my appraisal within the context of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's views, as one of the most effective summary accounts of our current state of thinking about same-sex desire. Did Elizabeth Bowen hold one of the two positions outlined (according to the 'two contradictory tropes of gender') by Sedgwick? If so, which? At first glance, it seems to have been the former. Whenever she explicitly represents lesbians, she often adopts the 'inversion' model, using schemas of boyish or mannish appearance in narrative description; and she avails besides of other aspects of the Twenties stereotype of the emotional life of lesbians when she renders them as tempestuous and unstable. Yet one has not quite said everything even when one has, as I shall try to do, examined in more detail some of these explicit representations of alleged female 'inversion'. As I hope to show, the 'lesbian continuum' model is perhaps ultimately more useful as an approach to Bowen: that is, the concept, classically inaugurated by Adrienne Rich in 1980 but already developing during the 1970s, of a continuum of woman-to-woman interaction within which recognition may be given to virtual or symbolic mother-daughter feeling and all other kinds of attachment between women as 'woman-identified' and not different in kind from the lesbian.[2]

Women's mutual bonds, loving or obsessive, do not get much attention in the author's own general descriptions and judgements *qua* narrator in Bowen's fictions, or in her scant meta-commentary (reviews, the available passages from private letters, her published criticism) on these matters. Nevertheless, the fictions engage in a meditation so intense and piercing

on female bonding, including symbolic and literal mother–daughter relations, that the topic cries out to be discussed.[3] Power, mothering, sexuality and the successful or failed constitution of selfhood are bound up together in Bowen's writing with an exceptional and even dismaying intimacy; and tangles between 'desire' and 'identification' of women for and with one another (however much these two terms are clearly separate in Freud's psychology) certainly mark deeply her representations of social and psychological life.

On the other hand, there are still major disputes within lesbian theory about the legitimacy, or usefulness, of such a blurring of desire with identification in reflecting on women's interrelations. Is the 'continuum model' of lesbianism productive and enabling, or does it fatally risk the consigning of women's mutual love to the infantile, the pre-Oedipal and in some sense pre-sexual domain, and therefore blot out the possibility of adult same-sex desire, a focused lesbian erotics?[4] Sedgwick has usefullly insisted on the continuing coexistence of these two main models of same-sex relations, however contradictorily, in our minds. In the light of our increasingly focused understanding of the complexity of women's mutual relations, there is a more and more urgent need to conduct a broad investigation of Bowen's imaginative conceptions of relationships between women in all their various forms.

There are three topics contiguous to this investigation, which would also merit detailed study, and which I shall now briefly mention but not explore in detail. First, Bowen's references to gender itself are evidently relevant. By these I mean her interest in representing some equivocal quality in the usual social signals of 'femininity' or 'masculinity' in a character's self-presentation, counter to their apparent gender appartenance, or a quality of cross-gendering in their emotional life, whether or not this is primarily in the context of sexuality; or in the terms she herself tends to adopt, a 'womanishness' felt in male characters, and a 'boylike' or 'boyish' air in female ones. It would be useful to examine this blurring and occasional swapping over of some of the conventional markers of femininity and masculinity in the social world of the novels, and the relevance of this unsettling volatility of gendering to our thinking about the homoerotic.

The second relevant issue is that of the nature of desire itself, irrespective of gender. In Bowen, desire has a strikingly labile quality, seeming to be imagined as not always safely (or dangerously) vested in persons, but to be conceived as a force or form of energy in itself. It tends to be an aura (or perhaps a miasma), something which floats around a sexually attractive character and is experienced by others of either gender. It affects, for instance, the golden-haired girl Jane in *A World of Love*, whose outstanding beauty is felt by all the adults in the household and draws

all to her, even, in a characteristic piece of uncanny plotting, the dead Guy. Sydney Warren in *The Hotel* is similarly afflicted, becoming, like Jane, a kind of unwitting conductor of emotions. Marda in *The Last September* also attracts others, without or largely without *doing* anything to produce this result, and moreover without self-engagement in the process: she does not flirt, and indeed finds herself affectively detached, to and beyond the point of *ennui* and existential isolation. This is another reason why it is difficult neatly to hive off woman-to-woman attraction, delimit and define it, and discuss it in isolation from the phenomenon of desire as a whole in Bowen's fictions. It is an aspect of Bowen's modernity that she so conceives desire, as what Sedgwick calls 'an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities'.[5] W. J. McCormack's discussion of *The Heat of the Day*, a novel in which the presence of desire in this sense is especially marked, shows how that novel's concern with the volatility and unknowability of personality as a whole is a function of its ideological and historical moment (or perhaps vice versa: history conceived as some kind of rationally apprehensible progress is decomposed by, among other things, the failure of stable selfhoods).[6]

The third and related question which requires attention is: to what extent does Bowen rewrite sex as power? This is Henry James territory, and Bowen has a striking kinship with James both in moral vision and literary form. Are her representations of sexuality itself Jamesian also? What is the role of Irish repression (or, as she says, 'sublimat[ion]' or sexless infantilism) in them? In the Irish Gothic writer J. S. Le Fanu, who influenced both herself and James before her, she names 'another terror-ingredient, moral dread'.[7] She differs from James in the degree to which she links this quality with specifically sexual manipulation; how are those links effected and sustained? And what, if anything, have these links — the conscious use of others' sexual attraction, passion or need for love to produce effects in the world — to do with gendering, especially 'inverted' gendering, so-called? (Commenting later on *The House in Paris*, Bowen herself saw the sickroom of Madame Fisher, that laboratory for practising the witch-like manipulation of others, as a '*bois dormant*', which makes Madame Fisher, widowed in youth, a Sleeping Beauty but loveless and unawakened by another, who has had to be her own Prince Charming — both genders in one, as it were.)[8]

This is a painful question. The manipulators in Bowen's fictions are usually women, and so are most, though not all, of those they work upon; what are we to make of this intense consciousness of female power, albeit darkly used? How may we distinguish it from the stereotype of the Destroying Mother or witch? In Bowen, mothers literal and symbolic may forsake their children, voluntarily or otherwise (see Portia's mother Irene, who dies,

Edward's mother Elfrida, who 'ruins' herself, Leopold's mother Karen, who cannot acknowledge him, and Eva Trout's beloved teacher Iseult Smith, who shies away from a committed care for Eva). They may exact compliance in the social order (Mrs Michaelis from Karen, Aunt Myra from Lois), ruthlessly appropriate the young as puppets in their own drama (as Madame Fisher does with both her own daughter Naomi and Karen her charge), or do as Mrs Kerr does to Sydney Warren: coldly and cruelly engage her affections, then transfer her attention to someone else, purely, it seems, for the Sadeian pleasure of seeing her power in action. For Phyllis Lassner, it is *male* dread of women which looms large, along with constricting social forms, in Bowen's fictions; but though Lassner has by her robust recourse to psychoanalytic perspectives on male–female relations greatly helped to remove Bowen's work from the context of woman's-novel gentility to which it was for too long and quite inappropriately consigned, there remains a great deal more to be said about Bowen's staging of gender and sex, and in particular about her intense interest in inventing manipulative and/or evil mother-figures.[9] Still, to return to the opening question of this paragraph, in Bowen desire is not so totally transformed into, and rewritten as, power as it is in James; therein lies some of the intense interest the matter holds for our purposes. We may imagine power and sex as each a different axis, which sometimes cuts across the other, just as the drive of characters to insist on a fuller subjectivity for themselves, to assert more agency and resist objectification, sometimes also intersects with one or both of the other axes.

These three topics are properly concerned in any investigation of sex and gender in Bowen; but I leave them aside now, in order to concentrate mainly on some of Bowen's explicit representations of woman-to-woman feeling.

II

Discussing the role of same-sex attachment in literary texts is, of course, always a delicate and complex business. It is never more so than when the author of those texts is concerned, as Elizabeth Bowen was, to distance herself from any overt interest in or attraction towards the lesbian. In his introduction to the present volume Éibhear Walshe has already cited one of her disclaimers of such interest, made in the 1930s, and has noted the equal or even greater concern of her biographer, Victoria Glendinning, to register Bowen's alleged rejection of lesbian relationships in her life.[10] We must respect such surfaces, but may also notice where they may mask a nexus of anxiety, a need so to constitute and perform the self as to appear adequately, suitably, feminine (given the desexing nature of the

prevailing lesbian 'invert' stereotype).

À propos of the alleged physical signs which assisted observers to apply this stereotype, many descriptions of Bowen's own appearance by her contemporaries stress her large frame and assertive physical presence. Phyllis Lassner summarizes these: 'She was tall and large-boned, and gave an impression of having masculine qualities in her movements, strong face and forthright opinions.'[11] Bowen's unusual social role, as the sole heir of a landed family, however impecunious it was by then, contributed also: her parents had expected a son, and even chosen the name 'Robert' (the first name, incidentally, Bowen gave to both Stella Rodney's lover and the man surveilling her in *The Heat of the Day*). We would, of course, ourselves be putting the mannish-lesbian stereotype into action if we drew conclusions about Bowen's own choice of sexual modes or acts; all this is more of a comment on the narrowness and regulatory character of prevailing prescriptions for femininity in the period from about 1900 till the very recent past.

A wide range of critics now refer openly to the fact that, whatever about the nature of her marital life with Alan Cameron, Bowen had sexual affairs with men. It is scarcely necessary to point out that this does not preclude attraction to or love of women on her part. As regards Glendinning, her work is intelligent, sensitive and rich in detail, and is indispensable to the study of Bowen. But, writing as she was in the mid-1970s, and no doubt hampered by the then stricter limits on what could be said about sexuality, her biographical style is discreet to what now seems an unnecessary degree. The biography tends to take on the tone of her subject's letters and of the social intercourse of the period so fully as sometimes to muffle its own analytic potential. Thus a careful reading of the passage where Glendinning directly addresses the matter of Bowen's possible sexual self-identification leaves a distinct impression of ambivalence and constraint. On the one hand, Glendinning says:

> Enough lesbian sensibility has been discerned . . . in [Bowen's] manner for some people to have presumed that, however conventional her married life, it was towards women that her true inclinations lay.[12]

and on the other, she asserts that

> For a heterosexual woman, a close friendship with another woman is *precisely that, and no more*. For a lesbian, nearly all relationships with women must be coloured by the possibility of love (my emphasis).[13]

The development of consciousness about bisexuality, contrasexuality and gender as performance would lead us now to query such a crisply announced dichotomy between heterosexual and lesbian, which would

preclude the very possibility of either a bisexual orientation or a gradual, sometimes almost lifelong, arrival at a dominant sexual preference — whether or not such a process culminates in any 'coming out'. All this is admittedly (as Sedgwick very well demonstrates) a minefield; at times in the biography there seems a risk of implicitly accepting the inversion model prevalent in the earlier part of the twentieth century, and as a result of collapsing 'lesbian' into 'masculine'. Thus: '*there was a good deal that was masculine* both in Bowen's physical self and in her mentality' (my emphasis). Glendinning also draws on a certain 'worr[y] about herself as a woman' perceived in her by 'a few of her friends', reading Bowen's 'fondness for cosmetics, her concern for her appearance' as a kind of behaviour she calls 'anxiously feminine'.[14] She further instances Bowen's curt rejection of sexual overtures by particular lesbian friends, implying that this amounts to a dispelling of any likelihood of lesbian orientation in general. It is only fair to say that Glendinning has a consistent policy of delicacy and is, in heterosexual matters also, less ready to call a spade a spade than many of those who have discussed Bowen in the two decades or so since she wrote. She is far from explicit about Bowen's several affairs with men in the 1930s and 1940s, no doubt understandably, given the far larger numbers of Bowen's contemporaries living at the time she was writing. The now much greater freedom about the discussion and the understanding of all these categories — 'masculine', 'feminine', 'lesbian', 'heterosexual' — should help us to acquire more subtle conceptions of the complexity of experience and of the self-performance of gender and sexuality in the real world and, still more, in the highly complex set of social and sexual representations in Bowen's work. The whole matter can hardly fail to be intriguing to anyone thinking about Bowen, but, while I do not propose a total severance, in the formalist manner defined by T. S. Eliot, between 'the [wo]man who suffers and the artist who creates', and still less do I suppose an oppositional relation between the two, the ultimate *raison d'être* of this essay is Bowen's art, which is even more interesting than her life.

At the end of that life there is a discernible shift in her own writing about this subject. The way she discusses the possible lesbian relationship of Somerville and Ross in her 1970 review of Violet Powell's *The Irish Cousins* is illuminating:

> When the cousins met . . . there occurred one of those fusions of personality which in one way or another can make history. Their from then on total attachment incurred no censure, and — still stranger, given the habitual jocularity of their relatives — seems to have drawn down no family mirth. Nor was its nature — as it might be in these days — speculated upon. Absolutely, the upper class, Anglo-Irish were (then)

> non-physical — far from keen participants, even, from what one hears of them, in the joys of marriage. (*MT*, p. 186)

At first glance, this might seem to play down the 'total attachment', especially when she goes on to mention the 'Ladies of Llangollen', citing Somerville and Ross's opinion that they were 'extremely silly', and then again when, in a lightly humorous but significant passage, she insists on the asexuality of Ascendancy culture:

> This couple of gentlewomen from Ireland were encased, armoured, in the invincible heartiness of their extroverted tribe and specialized class. Round and upon them blew prevailing gales of clean fun, anaphrodisiac laughter. Anything 'extreme' was comic: that went for passion, that went for art. Dogs, jokes, were the accepted currency. Their initial literary endeavours, daylong disappearances, together, to the neglect of tennis, side-split brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts. Only when books 'appeared' did menace begin. The two now ceased to be amateurs: things looked serious. The actual crux, or crunch, was *The Real Charlotte*. (*MT*, pp 186-7)

But when one examines these passages carefully, it becomes clear that what Bowen says is, first, not that they were not lesbians, but that if they were, they got by without censure in their milieu; and, second, that they were able to do so because of the formidable repressions of sexuality and the body which characterised that milieu. So, though Bowen certainly, and with entire prudence, avoids a direct judgement or naming of the undeniable mutual love of the cousins as a lesbian one, at the same time she discerns in that attachment a quality of opposition to their given community and its values, a quality which emerges clearly and incontrovertibly in the fruits of that attachment, their writings. In spite of the implicit assertion of a change since their time, when 'the upper class, Anglo-Irish were (then) non-physical', we may see an element of autobiographical reference in what she says about those other daughters of the Big House who grew up in rural Ireland a scant decade or so before she herself was born in 1899. (The tennis party in *The Last September* comes to mind.)

In this passage there is also an implicit equation being made between the realms of freed desire and of art as spaces where social constriction is to be overcome, or at least combated. Passion, art, power, desire are all linked. Usually this 'desire' (figured primarily as sexual and indeed as heterosexual in the plots of most of the novels) is antithetical, even fatal, to the presumptions of the social world which is the habitat of the characters. How antithetical may not Bowen's perhaps corresponding *aesthetic* 'desire' have been to her own social world? By aesthetic desire I mean the narrative force or urge to go beyond, which at the meta-level

of the author drives plots towards their resolutions and, much more, proposes their ideological, their moral, meanings. The cataclysms in both cases are generally muffled by the effect of a devastating irony recalling that of such a radical sceptic as Laclos, which saves the appearances of civility but hollows out their moral being to a shell. In what she has to say about Somerville and Ross she makes no bones about naming their passion and their art in the one breath; she goes on to note how they 'cut the cable' in *The Real Charlotte*, making their own 'a terrain of outrageousness, obliquity, unsavoury tragedy, sexual no less than ambitious passion' (*MT*, p 187). There can be no doubt of Elizabeth Bowen's own taste, under the highly polished surfaces, for the monstrous, the perverse, the necessarily antithetical (an 'antithetical' perhaps in Blake's sense, borrowed subsequently by Yeats).[15]

In all except her late work any specifically lesbian manifestation of that resistance to norms is usually projected as marginal, kept sleekly in check or, sometimes, conceived as predatory; but an imaginative fascination inheres even, perhaps especially, in these instances of predation: what reader of *The Hotel* does not feel the real silken cord of the book drawing tight between Sydney Warren and Mrs Kerr? Mr Milton is a sideshow to it. And the, so to speak, daylight modes of female empowerment, such as Karen's in *The House in Paris*, tend to be upstaged by the dark destructive designs of Madame Fisher and her like (of whom Karen thinks 'she is a woman who sells girls; she is a witch' (*HP*, p. 155)).[16]

III

We have seen how Elizabeth Bowen decisively disclaimed any attraction in her own life towards lesbian sexuality in general, and individual lesbian women in particular. When in her fictions she created explicit representations of adult lesbian characters, she tended, as I have said, to place them in the margins, and with a high degree of irony, distance, and even moral disapprobation — not, to be sure, specifically of their presumed sexual acts, but of a range of characteristics with which she chose to endow them, characteristics sometimes including over-emotionality, sometimes manipulativeness. There are several glancing mentions, often humorous and, I think, all distancing except in *Eva Trout*, of the 'crushes' of adolescent girls. In *The Death of the Heart* Portia's school companion, the 'more than doubtful' Lilian, has had to be taken away from an earlier school 'because of falling in love with the cello mistress, which had made her quite unable to eat' (*DH*, p. 51).[17] And when Mrs Kerr in *The Hotel* mentions Sydney's attachment to her in a tone of carefully calculated

ruefulness, her son Ronald remarks: 'I thought you couldn't tolerate *schärmerei*' (*sic*; *TH*, p. 94).[18] But strong attachments between adolescent girls, or between young adult and older women, receive a more complex treatment, which, as I have suggested above, tends to represent the older woman in question negatively, whether as more or less predatory or as *distraite* and therefore emotionally irresponsible. Much of this, viewed piecemeal, may seem to readers to distinguish itself only slightly from such earlier versions of the quintessentially designing woman — coded, if not stated, lesbian — as Dickens's wicked Miss Wade, who sets out to alienate the affections of Tattycoram in *Little Dorrit*. This impression is, however, I believe, radically misleading.

And in her very late work there is a decisive shift in these patterns: both *The Little Girls* (1964) and *Eva Trout* (1968) concentrate predominantly on female attachment, and both explicitly, if inchoately in the case of *The Little Girls*, explore lesbian desire.[19] There is a poignant awkwardness about both these novels, which critics, I think rightly, put down to that radical distrust of language itself, not to speak of fictional form, which is such a marked and progressive development in Bowen's work even from *The Heat of the Day* (1949) onwards. It is also relevant however, that it was only in her sixties that Bowen, widowed, having finally lost or perhaps rid herself of her Irish family home, and trying to achieve a stable base in south-east England, the scene of the intense years spent *à deux* with her mother from the ages of seven to thirteen, found herself able more or less directly to address questions of women's mutual attraction. This too must lie beneath the tongue-tied, halting utterance not only of the characters but even sometimes of the narrator in these novels. Bowen addresses such attraction, and some of the larger implications about a woman's life as a whole which it has, very much more satisfactorily in *Eva Trout* than in *The Little Girls*. The narrative pace of this novel is less than compelling, and to read it is to have the sense of a flailing immobility recalling the 'festination' — the repetitive embroilment in the same perpetually uncompleted actions — which in life besets people with certain neurological disorders. The only passage in which the '"l"-word' is actually mentioned offers, perhaps not accidentally, a particularly vivid example of this effective mental and psychological arrest:

> '. . . And apart from that, also, I often bore him — nor, I may say, is he the first I've bored. But then, boredom is part of love.'
> 'That I deny!'
> 'Well, of affection.'
> '*That* I doubt.'
> 'Then you've no affections. — Mumbo, are you a Lesbian?'
> 'Anything else, would you like to know? . . .' (*TLG*, p. 197)

It is interesting that being a lesbian is apparently equated by Sheila with a denial of affections: that is, an unnatural state.

Eva Trout also has male homosexual characters, who are treated with a conspicuous hostility, as outstandingly manipulative and calculating artists in scripting the suffering of others.[20] Bowen seems not really to have been interested in giving much more than a thumbnail sketch of these characters, and by no stretch of the imagination could they — Constantine and the trendy cleric Clavering-Haight — be said to be positive, valorising versions of gayness; instead Bowen restates the stereotypical connection between scheming and homosexuality, presenting these characters as either parasitic (Constantine and the clergyman, named out of Trollope) or deluded (Trout senior).

The characterisation of bisexual Eva, however, is, as we shall see later, strikingly different. She is shown as capable of explicit desire for both men and women, and is nevertheless not marginalised, treated as a caricature or morally discredited, all fates which befall the lesbians who are limned in more-or-less thumbnail sketches in Bowen's earlier work.[21] I shall discuss some of these earlier examples, and return later to Eva.

IV

The early and excellent short story of Bowen's, 'The Jungle' (1929), is set in a girls' boarding-school and deals with how the heroine, Rachel, forms an intense and troubling relationship with a younger girl, Elise. The setting is significant: it seems to have been acceptable in the period to show same-sex attachment in this conventional context. This presumably allowed readers to make the equally conventional — and implicitly regulatory — assumption that such attractions are a function of immaturity, that girls grow out of them and into proper adult heterosexual relations, and even that they can be seen as practising the rhetoric and rhythms of an emotional attachment on one another in advance of the real thing, falling in love with a man. The friendship of Eva Trout with Miss Smith, which is being discussed in my first epigraph, took place at school; the coming into her own of Theodora Thirdman in *Friends and Relations* is also effected during her boarding-school time.

The title of 'The Jungle' refers to the tangled small wood that the solitary Rachel has discovered by breaking the school bounds. Without a special friend one term, she meets Elise Lamartine, who is in certain ways markedly different from Rachel (and from the norm in the school community). She has French ancestors (and, the reader sees, a poet's name), and is exceptionally talented at physical pursuits such as gym and lacrosse. She has

'her hair cut short like a boy's', and after the friendship is established she takes the upper hand, ordering Rachel around in spite of her own inferior school status. The character of Elise is thus heavily coded, indeed it is overdetermined according to the gender/sex semiotics of the period, which as Sedgwick points out remain very much with us today: she is not only somewhat French (are we to read amorously advanced and precociously developed, sophisticated, or just 'other'?) but more than evidently tending towards the 'inverted' (over-given to physical prowess, tomboyish in tastes and appearance, masculinely authoritative). Bowen gives Rachel two foreboding dreams near the start of the story which quite directly make the relationship with Elise something uncanny and threatening to normality:

> Rachel had one terrible dream about the Jungle and woke up shivering. It was something to do with a dead body, a girl's arm coming out from under the bushes. . . . A few nights afterwards she was back there again, this time with some shadowy person always a little behind her who turned out to be Elise. When they came to the bush which in the first dream had covered the arm she was trying to tell Elise about it, to make sure it *had* been a dream, then stopped, because she knew she had committed that murder herself. She wanted to run away, but Elise came up beside her and took her arm with a great deal of affection. Rachel woke up in a gush of feeling, one of those obstinate dream-taps that won't be turned off, that swamp one's whole morning, sometimes one's whole day. (*CS*, p. 232)

Later, on their first visit together to the Jungle, Rachel recalls her dream-experiences, a heady mixture of sexual feeling, dismemberment and self-condemnation ('she knew she had committed that murder herself'):

> Here was the place where the dead girl's arm, blue-white, had come out from under the bushes. Here was the place where Elise, in the later dream, had come up and touched her so queerly. (*CS*, p. 235)

It is worth spelling out what is happening here. The arm appears where it should not (in accordance with Freud's classic definition of the uncanny) — and so does Rachel's desire for Elise. The self is lawless, a jungle. Elise takes her arm and thus releases her longing. At the climax of the story, after an estrangement between the two girls, Elise is discovered lying with one arm flung out on the ground, asleep, in the Jungle; it ends with her curling up on Rachel's lap and falling asleep once more: 'The round cropped head like a boy's was resting on Rachel's knees. She felt all constrained and queer; comfort was out of the question' (p. 241). Rachel, though a more senior girl, is as if bewitched by Elise's force of personality and by Elise's very capacity to show indifference to her. The dream has climaxed with an uncontrollable excitement, rendered in a metaphor with

unmistakable sexual suggestiveness: 'a gush of feeling', a tap that cannot be turned off.

This story is beautifully managed. The importance in the school society of peer interaction and conventional distinctions such as parity of age among friends is evident, and the Jungle aptly represents Rachel's unregulated inner, sexual and emotional, self, to which in some trepidation she admits Elise. The motif of Elise's sleepiness humorously suggests the fairytale analogue of the Sleeping Beauty, a favourite motif of Bowen's, which would make Rachel her prince — a suggestion lightly acknowledged by the narrator during the scene: 'Rachel stood looking down — the only beautiful thing about Elise was the cleft in her chin.'

This protagonist, Rachel, appears in an earlier story, 'Charity' (1926), which also concerns a friendship with another girl, but while it deals with relations of power between the two and between the friend named Charity and Rachel's older sister, it only lightly touches on physical contact and parodies rather than actually enacts erotic relations. The girls are twelve. Charity comes to stay with Rachel during the holidays, and while eating a late supper they play romantic roles:

> They lit one candle, and Charity, who could be very funny, sat languishing in the light of it, fluttered her lashes and ate off the tip of her fork. Rachel was a Guardsman, very adoring, and kept offering her champagne and cocktails. . . . Rachel . . . jumped up, flung an arm round Charity's neck and kissed her violently. 'Oh, be *care*ful, Captain de Vere,' squeaked Charity; 'you are dripping champagne from your moustache.' (*CS*, p. 195)

The distinction between the stories is that between a true, disturbing engagement of the self, and the consciously ludic playing of roles conceived as adult, which are themselves guyed in this performance. In 'The Jungle', I would say, there is no doubting the strong lesbian feeling, and I detect no ironic or even distancing impulse in the narration or in the totality of the story. The focalisation through the naïve protagonist, in this case Rachel, is a technique in which Bowen, even in her earliest work, shows a skill connected with the thematic importance of innocence in her vision. In 'The Jungle' the innocence of Rachel may be read as signifying doubly: it is an innocence of the erotic, or an inability to name the experience of sexual desire as such, but it is also an innocence of psychological manipulation (for all her and her schoolmates' counting themselves sophisticates). She encounters the two in one, in her time with — and then, painfully, without — Elise.[22] When Elise aims (as the reader discerns) to produce an effect, the effect of hopeless longing, in Rachel, she has 'the most wonderfully natural way of not seeing one' (p. 239). This is the avatar of Mrs Kerr's artlessness with the hapless Sydney in *The Hotel*

(1927), Bowen's underrated first novel. In 'The Jungle' then, Bowen is already exploring both desperate desire and manipulativeness in the context of emotional attachment between females as played out by romantic and erotic flirtation and invitation.

V

With the one exception of her involuntary gift for rich dreams, the Rachel of 'The Jungle' and 'Charity' does not show conspicuous talent at anything except perhaps the capacity to suffer. Sydney Warren, the heroine of *The Hotel*, is quite different. With her man's name and her unwillingness to suffer fools gladly, her striking, sometimes boyish good looks and her air of having a tempestuous inner life, Sydney stands out in the small, claustrophobic expatriate society of the English wintering on the Italian Riviera. The novel has a curious uncertainty of tone, wavering between social comedy and *Bildungsroman* effects. But it attends to women's interrelations more intensely than most of Bowen's later work. Indeed, Bowen opens and closes the novel with a pair of bit players, Miss Fitzgerald and Miss Pym, whom it is difficult not to read as a distant echo of the Ladies of Llangollen.[23]

At the beginning of the novel we join these two characters in mid-quarrel, or perhaps tantrum. High-souled, religious, given to sketching landscapes, and deeply mutually attached, this pair at first appear to be a fairly sharp satiric parody of intense romantic friendship between women, Edwardian-style. In the pattern of the novel Bowen uses them half as foil and half as analogue for the relations of Sydney and Mrs Kerr. Of course, Bowen's effects are delicate, though rarely precious in the negative sense, and it is always difficult to be sure what is ironic and what is not. Further obstacles to interpretation are the cataclysmic shifts in social life which have taken place since the 1920s, the volatility induced by modernity, of which the character Sydney Warren is herself a living instance, and the arcane quality of English upper-class culture. One may be misreading all kinds of signals; but for all Miss Fitzgerald's and Miss Pym's role as butts of the narrator's humour at the start of this text, I would argue that ultimately they are, as the Bible says, not mocked. Their attachment stays firm, and though they make each other intermittently wretched and entirely lack aesthetic grace, there is about their partnership an authenticity entirely foreign to the bewitching Mrs Kerr. In this they resemble foolish Major Brutt in *The Death of the Heart* (1938), who together with the wronged heroine Portia attracts the epithet 'pure in heart'.

Mrs Kerr is Sydney's older, widowed friend, who has a witch-like power.

The clergyman Milton, briefly Sydney's fiancé, is shown feeling that power in a very Jamesian passage with her. He has been summoned to sit with her, ostensibly to be congratulated on the engagement:

> He reproached himself for a suspicion of being closed in on, and of their oasis of silence, light and solitude having become for him a rather remote and dangerous island. Her personality had a curious way of negativing her surroundings, so that unless one made instant resort to one's senses the background faded for one and one conjured up in one's half-consciousness another that expressed her better, that was half an exhalation from herself. . . . He felt again, through that window behind her, that dark garden distressed by the wind; around her those undisturbed shadows, that never-ebbing, mild light. (*TH*, pp 135-6)

The brittle surface of the social scene is here definitively breached by an effect which can only be called uncanny: Mrs Kerr here more suggests Purcell's Sorceress working to wreck Dido's romance than the poised, graceful woman who has attracted Sydney's admiration, even hero-worship, who has distinguished Sydney by her special friendship — perhaps the phrase is 'made Sydney her pet'. The novel is, it eventually becomes clear, one story inside another: not really in the end the narrative of Sydney's development, her *Bildung* in the usual sense — that is, her arrival at marriage or even vocation or, more vaguely, a state of 'maturity' — the business of the text is rather the unmasking of Mrs Kerr. The book's true climax comes in the highly satisfying scene in the penultimate chapter, chapter 24, where Sydney actually gets to tell her erstwhile tormentor that she has understood the whole intrigue.

There is, of course, no gross proof that Mrs Kerr's designs upon Sydney are specifically lesbian designs, certainly in the mere physical sense; but it is hard to account for Mrs Kerr's power over Sydney in any other way than as an erotic plot-motif.[24] Perhaps for her — as I have suggested earlier — the equivalent of sex is power, which too has its excitements, its arousals and climaxes. Mrs Kerr's physical attraction is nevertheless carefully emphasised. As a young adult her son Ronald, who is made the instrument of his mother's manipulation of Sydney, is still vividly conscious of this bewitching beauty, which, in keeping with the book's Italian setting, is represented in terms of cultural icons (Madonnas, the women in Pre-Raphaelite pictures):

> . . . behind the mask of her face she perceptibly retreated from consciousness, in the attitude of the Beata Beatrix. Looking down at her he went back through his memory, past his admiration for Rossetti, to the day when at six years old he had called his mother 'My Beautiful'. (*TH*, p. 96)

VI

In *The Hotel* Bowen makes Sydney both *ingénue* heroine and sexually ambiguous. In the slightly later *Friends and Relations* she divides these roles, assigning the former primarily to Janet Studdart, and the latter to Theodora Thirdman. Sydney Warren also combines self-will with these other roles and attributes: in *Friends and Relations* the problem of women's appropriate self-determination arises, however differently, in the case of both Janet, the 'feminine' heroine, and in that of Theodora, the — one would almost have said 'butch' — lesbian. (Bowen complicates the issue by also having Theodora desire Janet.) Apart from, or as well as, her lesbian characterisation, Theodora is one of a type in Bowen; to this type belong all those awkward and inconveniently perceptive teenage girls dotted about the novels who, like Pauline in *To the North*, are being 'brought up by a committee of relatives', or, like Theodora herself as she first appears, 'spectacled, large-boned . . . awkwardly anxious to make an impression', and wearing a totally wrong hat ('"What a terrible girl," said Lady Elfrida' (*FR* pp 12-13)).

In Bowen's early and middle work, such characters glower from peripheral niches in the plots, while the protagonists gliding up the central aisle of the story generally have beauty, social poise, parents, the warmth of human regard, or some combination of three of those four which makes them adequate to life.[25] Eva Trout's strengths are sympathetically registered, in the 1968 work, as it seems Theodora's cannot be, at least overtly, in the 1931 one. For all the rapier-sharp and comic perception of Theodora which Bowen is able to give the narrator — 'her personality was still too much for her, like a punt-pole' (*FR*, p. 13) — one cannot say that Theodora is constructed with pity, or even with charity, as Eva is. But Theodora undeniably has agency: she is the author of many of her own most entertaining scripts. After early chagrin at her felt exclusion from the ranks of the acceptably feminine ('she did not seem likely to have a figure at all,' thinks her mother), she strikes back with growing enthusiasm and flair at those within, and learns to vary herself and then to perform that repertoire of selves superbly. She invents a parodic persona, 'Lady Hunter Jervois', and in her 'mature, pleasant voice' telephones members of high society in the guise of this *alter ego*. She does this not to conceal herself, in a self-closeting or socially self-protective way, but goes on the offensive and uses her talents to confound that society which has no room for her. The novel's most hilarious bits attend her. In the role of Don Juan at school, she creates a disruptive stir of attraction from the others and admiration for her simulacrum of masculinity:

> 'How different you are with no spectacles,' said Dona Anna, lingering by the bathroom door.
>
> 'We've never had so much love in a play before,' said Hester, joining them. 'Generally, we just arrange for lovers to go off tenderly. I mean, I do think Theodora's extraordinary . . .'
>
> I suppose I can't imagine feeling self-conscious,' said Theodora, straddling a little. (*FR*, p. 45)

(Theodora's virtuosity is, of course, reckoned transgressive: 'But next week, Miss Byng rather strongly suggested they should dramatize folk-songs. She said she liked their programmes to vary' (*FR*, p. 45).) Her talents consist in the reinvention of selfhood, in creatively breaking ranks: her mother ruefully realises Theodora's spiky difference from her own adolescence, sketched as the correct course followed by the kind of 'dutiful daughter' Adrienne Rich called the male-identified woman — 'herself, she had practised the piano a good deal, said, "Very well, Father," when Father objected: her figure began, she braided her back hair' (p. 29) — while Theodora, significantly, 'improvised but did not practise'. In this character Bowen has represented a figure far more complex than the stereotypical invert: Theodora seems both less and more than the 'normal' woman projected by her society: less feminine, less acquiescent, less pretty, but more intelligent, more steely, more active, and bigger. Viewing the girls' pet guinea-pigs at the progressive school where Theodora is to be sent to 'finish' her, her father says: '"She has a brain," . . . staring into the cages (the brain his son would have had), but unsteady, variable' (p. 29).[26] At a crucial moment in the novel's main plot Theodora's strength shows itself negatively: when she sends the letter which brings about the emotional catastrophe of the main characters. She does this for emotional revenge, because Janet cannot return her regard, or even her attention; this kind of motive she has in common with Eva Trout, but the planned and willed quality of her act, and the pleasure she has in watching the effects of her actions, a motive one would call 'Sadeian' in relation to Mrs Kerr in the preceding novel, differentiate her sharply from Eva, whose actions are only incidentally destructive. Theodora is much funnier, but then a convention seems to be operating in the novel whereby she is understood as a kind of grotesque whom the reader is expected not to take seriously — until, that is, she maliciously brings down the house of cards about the ears of the others, the straight women and their families. Even then, the narrator does not give her the degree of interiority which belongs to the characterisation of the novel's heroine, Janet, unambiguously named as object of Theodora's desire. (Janet tolerates Theodora, classifying her as 'odd'.) Theodora's *sprezzatura* and her flamboyant non-conformity have, however, their echoes in the novel at what one might think the other extreme: the

flamboyant Lady Elfrida, mother of the tormentedly conventional and respectable Edward, who as a young wife has 'ruined' herself by her sexual liaison with the big-game hunter Constantine but remains flagrantly unrepentant.

One especially interesting scene in *Friends and Relations* sets up the domestic life of the now adult Theodora and her flatmate Marise, formerly her school friend. Focalised through Theodora's mother, Mrs Thirdman, this little episode has a Jamesian *ficelle*-type function in terms of the plot, but plays a more important role thematically in the novel's meditation on women's possible lives.[27] The passage is curious in that its dry irony seems rather equivocal: it is not clear whether the bewildered, literalistic mother or the angular, eccentric younger women are the object of implicit censure. Perhaps this is because the ironic narrative voice — which Bowen must have learned very largely from Jane Austen and which announces a correct set of judgements on manners and morals — is predicated upon the existence of a set of incontrovertible social norms which attract the consent of a coherent social world, whereas such a consensus is no longer in being in the twentieth century.

Signalling its occupants' uncompromising modernity, the flat has 'a varnished colour-scheme of almost menacing restraint' in which 'there were scimitar-curves and discs and soaring angles', there are 'gramophone records, proofs and curious drawings', but few comforts as Willa Thirdman would understand them — only 'very low' seating (probably, she thinks, because Marise and Theodora 'stood about so much'); and 'dust from the tea-leaves rose in a light film' when 'the alarming girl' Marise sets about offering hospitality (pp 124-5). Marise is a writer; a little later the manuscript of a novel she has written plays a background role in one of the climactic emotional scenes of this novel. Asked what it is 'about', Janet says: 'Oh . . . women's difficulties, difficulties about women: I don't remember. I didn't think it seemed very good' (p. 137). The lives of these two women are an implicit rejection of everything which has been expected of them; they prefer to be telephoned in advance of any visits, 'in view', says Theodora, 'of everything'. The narrator here adds:

> The two had perfected a system of half-allusion — it is not difficult for women to live together — and rarely had to say anything more direct than 'What are we out of?' or 'You are looking like death today'. (p. 124)

Mrs Thirdman, leaving, feels an obscure disappointment:

> An interesting life, she repeated. Yet twenty-six years ago she had borne Theodora — to what? For this? And an idea remained in her mind that the furniture in the flat was made of ground glass. (p. 126)

A moment characteristically balanced between ironic humour and poignancy follows: 'She wished she had a married daughter in London . . .'

VII

In Bowen's later texts there are important representations of female fellowship, admiration and attention which, while not, like this, explicitly coded as lesbian, leap to the eye of a reader whose consciousness has been at all raised about woman-to-woman relationships. There is Louie's admiration for Stella in *The Heat of the Day*, for example, and her capacity, alone among the novel's characters, for intuiting Stella's depair. The words 'a soul astray' form unbidden in her mind as her perception of Stella. Inarticulate, humble and isolated, Louie is lost in the world and, in herself, seems to lack all capacity to be the author of her own life, but to her it is given to discern Stella's pain and disinterestedly to admire her.

In the part of the story dealing with Stella and Louie, Bowen seems, most obviously, to be using the structure, highly conventional in comedy, opera and novels of manners, of setting up two characters as *alter egos*, or partial versions of one another. Louie becomes, like Stella, the mother of a son. With her husband away at war, she seeks attachments outside marriage and thus steps outside normative feminine behaviour, or 'virtue', as Stella has the reputation of having done (both in the past and again after Robert's mysterious death at what the newspapers call her 'Mayfair' flat (see p. 306)). Like Stella, she becomes oddly embroiled with Harrison, and so on. But it is important to distinguish between this *structural function* of the Louie–Stella parallel and the *emotional content* in their relation as characters. Accompanying the admiration she conceives for Stella, Louie also yearns for her. With renewed awareness she experiences her own permeability to the world, to whatever 'the air was charged with, night and day'. She feels herself to be so much 'receiver, conductor, carrier' that she cannot compose or discern herself as a separate entity; and it is in this context that, recalling Stella's warmth at their one meeting — 'But this is not goodbye, I hope? — she recognises what amounts to her passion for Stella: 'Lying in Chilcombe Street . . . Louie dwelled on Stella with mistrust and addiction, dread and desire' (p. 248). Her beauty, her class, her presumed wealth, certainly play a part in surrounding Stella with an aura of excitement for Louie, but beneath all these is a stratum of real and intense *combined* attraction and concern. This plot element in *The Heat of the Day* is a good example of what is a not infrequent phenomenon in the novels: the presence of a homoerotic motif or incident or feeling in the margins of the main action, slightly out of the direct glance of what

the narrative theorist Todorov calls 'the narrator–reader couple', but there all the same, and perhaps the more suggestive for being oblique. (Naomi Fisher's mute attention to Karen in *The House in Paris* is another striking example.) In this case Louie's undischarged care for Stella, her perhaps rather maternal inexpressible concern for her, is touching.

Making a slight shift of perspective, let us consider Stella, apotheosis of Bowen heroines, in the context of gender, sexuality and empowerment. Stella has the smoothest of polished surfaces: she is beautiful, fashionable, and capable. She is apparently star-like, as her name suggests. But in fact not only is she literally being watched (like the circumscribed court ladies who were so ambiguously celebrated by Renaissance sonneteers as cold, distant guiding stars); she is beset by men who are all more or less inadequately phallic (to use a harsh word). Until well into the novel there is no intimation of female fellowship; Stella is alone, even exaggeratedly or markedly so, and so is Louie, when she distractedly half-tries to pick up Harrison in the opening scene.[28] On the other hand, the novel is full of instances of masculinity, but refracted and, glass-like, half-reflecting one another and split into shards or slivers. Bowen's verbal games with naming and with physical appearance as metaphor in this novel would not have disgraced a Freudian dream-text. Under surveillance by the shadowy Harrison, who literally looks crooked (his eyes are at different heights), Stella has a dead (and failed) husband named *Victor Rodney* and a scrupulously honourable but stiff and emotionally distant son, *Rode*rick Rodney. In addition, she is in love with a wounded, limping man, whose unmanning at Dunkirk has coalesced with his oppression in childhood and his father's brokenness to bring about his secret treachery. This element of the plot, Robert's spying, scarcely or barely supports any attempt to give it motivation in realist terms, but functions strikingly as part of the novel's subtle and highly organised interrogation of masculinities, which is a motive on another level, namely the ideological and psychological. Robert's knee-wound, which, it is explained, is more disabling at some times than at others — he appears most physically wounded, limps worst, when he is *feeling* wounded — strongly recalls the displaced but recognisably phallic thigh- or buttock-wounds of medieval romance.[29] Harrison watches, knows and loves but cannot gain Stella; Robert loves her but has lost himself. Her son Roderick too loves her but is abstracted, not merely by his obsession with his role as owner of his newly inherited Irish estate. 'It had been clear,' says the narrator with startling briskness, 'since Roderick was a child, that friendship with him would have to be one-sided' (*HD*, p. 60).[30] Between them all Stella is a specially intense example of Bowen's consistent representation of heterosexual women as 'other' to their men and isolated among them; a more extreme case still is Emmeline

in the earlier work *To the North*, who is destroyed by her desire for the caddish Markie.

VIII

Between *The Hotel* (1927) and *Friends and Relations* (1931) came *The Last September* (1929). This is almost as equivocal in its adherence to the *Bildungsroman* genre as *The Hotel*. Its setting during the Irish War of Independence and its adoption of 'Big House novel' conventions (then seen as inherited from Edgeworth, Trollope, Thackeray, and Somerville and Ross, now definitively exemplified for many by *The Last September* itself) combine to complicate the story of Lois Farquar's passage to adulthood. Less discussed than these, however, the novel has another aspect which may be experienced as at the very least a variation on Lois's 'voyage out'. At the opening of the novel she is self-consciousness in white muslin, desperate for an escape from the emptiness attending the life-path which she is expected to follow: a 'suitable' engagement, a marriage in due course which will be devoted to stoutly sustaining her class and its way of life, as her Aunt Myra does. Her cousin Laurence has at least Oxford to go back to, and though he shares her ennui, he is not above irritatedly imagining her as 'a very pink bride'. All this functionlessness is, of course, part of the book's stress on the façade, cardboard-like quality of the Anglo-Irish Big Houses in their fragility and quasi-unreality compared to the 'wide, light, lovely unloving country' described as 'the unwilling bosom' on which the great houses were set (*TLS*, p. 66). But besides the historical aspects of the novel, both the narrower and the wider ones — an anatomy of Ascendancy uselessness, but also an intimation of international Twenties malaise in general — it queries the prescribed narratives of femininity as such. This interrogation centres on Marda, the 'Miss Norton' whose demure name is given, tongue-in-cheek, to the middle section, which recounts her visit to Danielstown.

Lois desires to desire. Her romance with Gerald, the English officer, is dreamy but asexual; she cannot quite bring herself really to inhabit it. But when Marda comes, Lois mutely admires her, wants to be with her, longs for her regard. One of Marda's other functions in the book's design is certainly as an older *alter ego*: ten years on from Lois and her friends who are experimenting both in London and in Co. Cork with their first exposure to adult social life, she has been there and done that. With a broken engagement or two behind her, a just-avoided scandal, Marda has had to capitulate to the script laid out for her and is about to marry. But her lack of affect in the whole matter is striking: she is so purely following the rules, and her interior dissent from them is so plain. Exquisitely

poised and fashionable, Marda is a volatile element in the isolated world of Danielstown: not only Lois, but Laurence, and Hugo who is a whole generation older, all fall for her. So she attracts the desire of others, rather like Sydney Warren, but, also like Sydney, cannot herself become attached.

Turning to Lois's state of mind, it seems that Gerald fills a role which she needs to have filled as a kind of experiment, like her adventures in the stereotypical gaiety of youth such as dancing down the avenue to gramophone music. It is quite plain, even comically so, that Gerald's death is mostly a relief to Lois, whereas her attachment to Marda is what we might call emotionally in earnest. Marda in her turn attends to Lois in a way she is desperately in need of and which the likes of Aunt Myra or Francie do not.[31] It is another example, on a larger scale than the one in *The Heat of the Day*, of a woman-to-woman attachment which takes place in the margins of the accepted *social* narrative and which has little or no allotted place in the scheme of things (and, I might add, in most of the published criticism of Bowen to date). Accounts of the book which glide over Marda are, I would argue, defective to the extent that they ignore something Bowen placed, in one sense, at the centre of her design.

We should recall that Marda is about to move to England to make her marriage, a prospect for which Lady Naylor, who has never been able to see the point of the Home Counties, extends sympathy to her; the reader observes the implicit irony whereby Lady Naylor herself is about to be deprived by the forces of history of her own Irish home. The immolation of Danielstown in the book's spectacular final scene is so imaginatively satisfying because in it Bowen effects a virtual destruction not only of the Big House but also of that whole claustrophobic world within which Lois is so stiflingly confined. It is implied that modernity must afford Lois, at least, a purpose in life, even if Marda, for all the restless unchannelled force of her personality, has been obliged to capitulate to appropriately feminine uselessness.

Marda is not one of Bowen's manipulators, but is perhaps a prefiguring of Stella Rodney in *The Death of the Heart*: a woman straying without direction in the upper-class social world which is her milieu but which offers her no meaning. And Marda, like Lois, has conductivity: they are together when, in the rather uncanny ruined mill, they meet the book's second IRA man, who accidentally fires the shot which wounds Marda in the hand. When Marda leaves for the boat train, a ghostly wind blows through her empty bedroom and flutters the pages of the book lent her by the hopeful Laurence, which she has left lying there. In her invention of this disruptive figure, focus of the central part of the book, Bowen seems to distil and concentrate the other characters' search for purpose, and to show the failure of that search. All in all, the Marda narrative in *The Last September*

might seem well suited for that kind of mental rewriting by lesbian-feminist readers described by Bonnie Zimmerman when she suggested

> that lesbian-feminist readers resist 'heterotexts' by privately rewriting and thus appropriating them as lesbian texts. There is a certain point in a plot or character development — the 'what if' moment — when a lesbian reader refuses to assent anymore to the heterosexual imperative and follows her own path.[32]

I have, however, grave doubts about this strategy. There are certainly cases where this specific application of the general 'resisting reader' policy originally defined by Judith Fetterley may prove fruitful, but the complex and subtle design and texture of Bowen's novels surely make them unsuitable objects for such simplifying upbeat readings. Given the paradoxical quality of Bowen's imagination and her multiple ironies, I feel one has one's hands full in attending to what *is* there, the endings that Bowen did actually write, however little purchase they may offer to perfectly understandable Utopian longings. I do not believe this judgement amounts to 'heterosexism' (after all, loving men scarcely gets the female characters of *The Last September* very far either); and my understanding of the novel is that, along with and among the other inheritances of traditional gentry society, the sex/gender system prevailing in it is being searchingly interrogated by Bowen in this as in other texts (and as we have seen it critiqued in her discussion of Somerville and Ross late in her life). Bowen's text characterises the relation of Lois to Marda with delicate impulses of yearning and attraction, but there are no false dawns: the light illuminating the book at the end is that of Danielstown burning down ('the door standing open hospitably upon a furnace').[33]

IX

I have been noting the insistent, if understated, importance of woman-to-woman attachment in Bowen's works from the end of the 1920s onwards, and the various modes of that attachment: the explicitly 'inverted' bond between the 'mannish' Theodora and Marise, the yearning of Louie for Stella, and, one might add, of Naomi in *The House in Paris* for Karen (herself tragically embroiled in her doomed passion for Max). Also insistently present are versions of mother–daughter bonds; what light may these throw on Bowen's representation of women and desire?

In recent decades psychoanalysts have increasingly stressed the fundamental role of the mother–child dyad in constituting identity. Elizabeth

Bowen's own childhood loss of her mother by death is a relevant biographical consideration here – a striking parallel with what happened to Virginia Woolf. Rich's concept of a 'lesbian continuum', with its use of motherhood as paradigm of woman-to-woman relationships, even contentious as that use is, also comes irresistibly to mind: does this to any degree displace in Bowen the 'inversion model' of such attachments?[34] I have mentioned the merging of desire with identification in 'woman-identified' theories of feminine sexuality; at the end of this discussion we shall see a striking expression of lesbian love as identification in *Eva Trout: 'She is all I am . . .'*[35]

Certainly it is true that in Bowen's vision of relations between women a crucially important role is played by mothers literal and symbolic, and while there are both nurturing and destroying mother-figures, the destroying ones predominate imaginatively. Mrs Kerr, Madame Fisher, and Mrs Kelway in *The Heat of the Day* are all good examples of the destroying kind (and so is Mrs Nicholson, another Jamesian manipulator, to the sad little boy in 'Ivy Gripped the Steps'). But there are also important examples of the 'original nurturing love' of mother and daughter, and these examples do make a remarkable use of the trope of love as identification, as distinct from love as desire. These daughters' love is, as is perhaps true of all human loves, never more intensely felt than after its loss. The Bowen novel in which that love and loss are most memorably instanced is *The Death of the Heart*, in which Portia's beloved natural mother Irene (which in Greek means 'peace') dies. She finds herself in – or on – the hands of a cold unloving stepmother, her half-brother's wife Anna. The book luminously recalls the child Portia's and her mother's wanderings through inexpensive Swiss hotels (because of Irene's illicit liaison with Portia's father, they cannot come home, even after his death). In this passage early in the novel, as Portia looks vaguely at her half-brother Thomas with whom she now lives, he feels her abstraction:

> Thomas felt the force of not being seen. . . . What she did see was the *pension* on the crag in Switzerland. . . . Precarious high-upness had been an element in their life up there, which had been the end of their life together. That night they came back from Lucerne on the late steamer, they had looked up, seen the village lights at star-level through the rain, and felt that that was their dear home. They went up, arm-in-arm in the dark, up the steep zigzag, pressing each others' elbows, hearing the night rain sough down through the pines: they were not frightened at all. . . . They would lie down covered with coats, leaving the window open, smelling the wet woodwork, hearing the gutters run. (*DH*, p. 34)

Portia has a deep longing for maternal love and oblivion, which are strikingly merged in the scene where, overcome by the strain of Thomas and Anna's grand but chill house and beset by the manipulative Eddie (another vintage Bowen 'bounder') she falls asleep propped against the chimney-breast at afternoon tea.[36] The housekeeper Matchett's awkward efforts to offer Portia some surrogate motherly affection make a poignant strand in the novel's design. Herself starchy, proper and standoffish where the other servants and her employers are concerned, Matchett is nevertheless driven by her concern for Portia's lostness and a sense of her overwhelming emotional isolation to reach out to her in an awkward maternal moment. frozen at source by bodily repression:

> Matchett, reluctantly softening, inch by inch, unlocked her arms. leaned across the bed again, leaned right down – in the mysterious darkness over the pillow their faces approached, their eyes met but could not see. Something steadily stood between them: they never kissed – so that now there followed a pause at once pressing and null. Matchett . . . released herself and drew a judicial breath. . . . But Portia's hand. with its charge of nervous emotion, still crept on the firm broad back, the strong spine. (*DH*, p. 83)

This isolation is exacerbated by the prescribed repressions of upper-class femininity, not least by its denials of the body. Vigilantly watched over in the classroom by a headmistress whose 'rigid stillness quelled every young body, its nervous itches, its cooped-up pleasures in being itself, its awareness of the young body next door' (p. 55), Portia is ticked off for reading her letter from Eddie under the desk. Acutely aware of being above all an encumbrance to Anna and Thomas and inwardly desperate for someone's loving regard, Portia replays her life with her mother as an experience of complete mutual recognition and merging. Though from the viewpoint of respectability what they had was a 'shady . . . skidding about in an out-of-season nowhere', her memory is of a warm emotional union marked by mutual recognition, truly this lost daughter's 'original love':

> Untaught, they had walked arm-in-arm along city pavements, and at nights had pulled their beds closer together or slept in the same bed – overcoming, as far as might be, the separation of birth. (*DH*, p. 56)

This reminds us of the child Hermione in *Friends and Relations* who wakes with a nightmare and clings to her mother, crying: 'Oh, go on holding me tight, don't go; I wish we were the same person!' (*FR*, p. 110).

X

From these examples of mother–daughter attachment figured very much as identification, I turn to *Eva Trout* (1968). In this novel the highly finished protagonists of Bowen's earlier social worlds are supplanted by the raw, *un*finished Eva, the great gawky girl who is first more or less orphaned — conveyed, in luxury, around the world after her distracted father and his exploitative lover Constantine; then emotionally wronged by her Miss Smith at school, who gave her some attention and held her out a promise of regard, but left her in a kind of psychological inchoateness and isolation:

> She desisted from teaching me. She abandoned my mind. She betrayed my hopes, having led them on. She pretended love, to make me show myself to her — then, thinking she saw all, she turned away. (*ET*, pp 184-5)

Becoming racked by 'long-ago' grief, she adds: 'I had never been. I was *beginning* to be. . . . She sent me back . . . to be nothing. . . . I remain gone. Where am I? I do not know — I was cast out from where I believed I was.' And later, Eva has come to see that Iseult hated her, 'hated the work she had feared to finish' (p. 185). Not at home in language, and unable to settle in any place, monster Eva is the ultimate avatar of all the too-strong but unfocused, 'unfeminine' women of the earlier fictions, of whom Theodora is the fullest exploration; her loves, all but one of which are for other women, are poignant, her fate early and violent death. Inheriting great wealth, she uses it to acquire a son by purchase, a deaf-mute with a prophet's name (Jeremy), an *alter ego* whose moment comes in the novel's intentionally weird climactic scene, just after Eva's own apotheosis when she appears dressed up for the pretend wedding she has planned in the gloom of Victoria Station. Jeremy accidentally (probably) and symmetrically shoots dead his virgin mother.

Eva is awkwardly large physically (and, we feel, psychically) and something of a poor fit as to social gender. A schoolfellow asks, 'Trout, are you a hermaphrodite?' and she replies: 'I don't know.' The possibility is not an entirely negative one: it comes supplied with potential, if odd ('queer'?) glory: 'Joan of Arc's supposed to have been' (p. 51). Looking back, Iseult Smith says to Clavering-Haight: '. . . she belonged to some other category. "Girl" never fitted Eva. Her so-called sex bored and mortified her. She dragged it about after her like a ball and chain' (p. 243). Her capacity for intense, helpless love, as for her mentor Miss Smith, has the effect of revealing the limitations of its objects. She strongly recalls the monster in *Frankenstein*, abandoned by its maker, righteously angry, and at first totally innocent. Eva does eventually come to display the same quality of agency shown earlier by clever Theodora, that other gender misfit; but

where Theodora, as we have seen, employs her powers to discomfit others, and manoeuvres in a more or less Sadeian way to make them her puppets, Eva devotes her attention to making *herself* a life and wrenching free of her minders. In so doing, she has destructive effects, but not out of frivolity or deliberate malice. The book is a kind of study of will at work, in which the social surface is scantily, even perfunctorily, wrought. Bowen's interest in the internal pattern of psychological forces at play against one another and in Eva's eccentric but purposive self-development consumes her attention, making the novel more or less completely careless of Barthes's 'reality-effect'.

As to Eva's loves, her perception, registered with a flash of Bowen's earlier ironic poignancy, was that Iseult Smith was in too much of a hurry to 'exchange embraces of any kind' with her. There is, however, a touching scene in which Eva recites a passage of seventeenth-century poetry on the love of God, which evidently transfers to her own inexpressible love for her teacher:

> But thou art Light, and darkness both together:
> If that bee dark we can not see,
> The sunn is darker than a Tree,
> And thou more dark than either.
>
> Yet Thou art not so dark, since I know this,
> But that my darkness may touch thine
> And hope, that may teach it to shine,
> Since Light my Darkness is.
>
> O lett my Soule, whose keyes I must deliver
> Into the hands of senceless Dreames
> Which know not thee, suck in thy beames
> And wake with thee for ever.

Miss Smith's response (surely a tiny parody of 1950s 'New Criticism') is to talk about 'how pure language can be', with 'not more than two syllables — are there? — in any word' (pp 65-6). But in spite of that, in this instance of Eva's love for Iseult, Bowen gives her protagonist a degree of direct and expressible emotional investment which contrasts with the intentional inarticulateness of Rachel's unawakened sensibility in 'The Jungle' (with its not dissimilar school setting) and which elsewhere in her work is, as we have seen, more usually masked or deflected.

Still more clearly, Eva has also quite unambiguously loved her school room-mate Elsinore (can this, its *Hamlet* allusion a false trail, be a version of the 'Elise' loved by Rachel in the 1927 story?). This attachment is revealed in flashback, after their accidental meeting in America as adults. The adult Elsinore (now 'Elsi-nora') is described as still tiny, a suggestive complement to Eva's size: 'She had hardly grown. Inside the haze of thistledown

hair her waif beauty was as it had been, not child's or woman's.' The accoutrements of her adult femininity seem like mere actress's props: 'The silver fox cape smothering her shoulders, the brilliants studding her ears might have been borrowed from an acting box' (p. 131). The contrast between the adult Eva's and Elsinora's appearance or self-presentation may seem to indicate what Sedgwick calls 'the preservation of an essential heterosexuality within desire itself', with Eva cast as 'man', as it were, to Elsinora's 'woman'; yet the trope of love as identification which is simultaneously present decisively displaces that of sexual difference. In this, the climactic passage, Elsinore, slight, fair-haired and ethereal, has attempted suicide by walking into the lake beside the school:

> *The hand on the blanket, the beseeching answering beating heart. The dark: the unseen distance, the known nearness. Love: the here and the now and the nothing-but. The step on the stairs. Don't take her away, DON'T take her away. She is all I am. We are all there is.* (p. 133; italics in original)

After a period of illlless during which Eva is allowed to be with her and, as we are only later explicitly told, love her, Elsinore's mother, who had earlier simply offloaded her at the school, suddenly turns up and takes her away. The passage above continues, in Eva's interior monologue:

> *Haven't you heard what is going to be? No. Not, but I know what was. A door opening, how is my darling? Right — then TAKE her away, take your dead bird. You wretch, you mother I never had. Elsinore, what happened? Nobody told me, nobody dared. Gone, gone, Nothing can alter that now, it's too late. Go away again.* (p. 133; italics in original)

It is difficult to read these passages in their context and think in quite the same way afterwards about almost any of the other woman-to-woman scenes and plot elements in Bowen.

XI

In conclusion, how may we draw these strands together? I have a number of very simple propositions. First, mother-attachment is a major nexus of feeling in Bowen's work, and it is invariably attended by one or more of the three emotions of love, grief or anger, each very intense. Sometimes that anger is projected onto the mother-figure, making her a 'destroying' or 'terrible' mother. Sometimes, as in the very early story 'Coming Home', it is part of a fantasy of destructive power within the daughter's self.[37] But, *pace* Adrienne Rich's view, in Bowen the mother–daughter bond is not, in my opinion, either felt or represented, nor can it usefully be

conceived, as the source, origin or determinant of lesbian desire. Second, Bowen's fictions also show a sensitive awareness, remarkable for her time, of the shifting, sometimes evanescent, sometimes enduring interpenetration of desire and friendship in women's relationships, and she explores and represents such attachments across a spectrum from negative to positive. Third, her fiction shows a strong imaginative interest in the representation of specifically lesbian feeling and woman-to-woman relationships of desire, whether reciprocal or not. Finally, while in her work as a whole Bowen explores the desire for the other *as* other, whether between women and women or women and men, she attends with equal or greater intensity to desire as love of one's like, one's other self, in other words a desire which culminates in identification: *'the hand on the blanket, the beseeching answering beating heart. The dark: the unseen distance, the known nearness. Love: the here and now and the nothing-but. . . . She is all I am. We are all there is.'*

Abbreviations

CS	*Collected Stories* (1983)
DH	*The Death of the Heart* (1939)
ET	*Eva Trout* (1968)
FR	*Friends and Relations* (1931)
HD	*The Heat of the Day* (1949)
HP	*The House in Paris* (1935)
TH	*The Hotel* (1927)
TLG	*The Little Girls* (1964)
TLS	*The Last September* (1929)

Dates are the dates of first publication; references are to Penguin editions. Quotations from Bowen's critical writings are from *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, selected and introduced by Hermione Lee, London: Virago, 1986, which is abbreviated as *MT*.

Notes and References

1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, London: Penguin, 1994, pp 85, 87-8.

2 Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' in Catherine Stimpson and Ethel Spector Person (eds.), *Women, Sex and Sexuality*, University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 62-91. See Sedgwick, op. cit., esp. pp 36-7 and 84-90, for a wide range of other relevant references to this argument.

3 Examples of the literal relations I am primarily thinking of are those recalled by Portia in *The Death of the Heart*, with her now dead mother, those in *The House in Paris* between Karen Michaelis and her mother, that iron hand in a velvet glove,

and those in the very early story 'Coming Home' (1923), which is a miniature study in the competing selfhoods of mother and daughter (*CS*, pp. 95-100).

4 I have drawn here (and elsewhere in this essay) on the following: Judith Mayne, 'A Parallax View of Lesbian Authorship' in Diana Fuss (ed.), *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, London: Routledge, 1991, pp. 173-85; Biddy Martin, 'Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference(s)' in Anne C. Herrmann and Abigail J. Stewart (eds), *Theorizing Feminism*, Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1994, pp. 316-38; Marilyn R. Farwell, 'Towards a Definition of the Lesbian Literary Imagination' in Susan Wolfe and Julia Penelope (eds), *Sexual Practice and Textual Theory*, Cambridge, Mass. & Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, pp. 66-84. Renee C. Hoagland's book *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing*, New York University Press, 1994 (in a series on Lesbian Life and Literature) has come to my attention just at the completion of this essay. It addresses Bowen in the combined perspectives of psychoanalysis, lesbian feminism, and the post-structuralist critique of traditional subjectivity. Hoagland's analysis of current thinking from these perspectives about the process of identification and its relation to desire is a useful one and bears on my own argument (see esp. p. 343 n. 32).

5 Sedgwick, op. cit., p. 85.

6 McCormack also insists, not incidentally, on the creative estrangement from realistic form which Bowen effects: 'Lucid with detail from the street and on the dressing-table, reliable as to rationing and blackout regulations, it turns away from realism into romance. This is no evasion of reality. It is the romance of irony which releases character from the iron cage of identification with the self. W. J. McCormack, *Dissolute Characters: Irish Literary History through Balzac, Sheridan Le Fanu, Yeats and Bowen*, Manchester University Press, 1993, p. 240.

7 In a well-known passage on Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*, she wrote (as something specifically Irish) of the 'sublimated infantilism' of the Anglo-Irish milieu from which both she and Le Fanu originated, and added: 'In the story, no force from any one of the main characters runs into the channel of sexual feeling' (*MT*, p. 101). The remark about 'moral dread' is in *MT*, p. 112.

8 'The room, felt by the child [Henrietta] as "so full and still", is a case not of mere immobility but of immobilization. In a terrible way, it is a *bois dormant*' ('Pictures and Conversations', *MT*, p. 285). Madame Fisher's daughter Naomi says 'she is all mind and will, but she cannot make a *tisane* without flames running round the spirit stove' (p. 188).

9 See Phyllis Lassner, *Elizabeth Bowen*, London: Macmillan, 1990, esp. pp. 48-72.

10 See Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977, pp. 189-91.

11 Lassner, op. cit., pp. 14, 5.

12 Glendinning, op. cit., p. 189.

13 Ibid., p. 140.

14 Ibid.

15 W. J. McCormack notes Bowen's employment of children and ghosts as conductors of one mode of such monstrosity, the uncanny (*From Burke to Beckett: Ascendancy, Tradition and Betrayal in Literary History*, Cork University Press, 1995, p. 409, drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben).

16 In this connection, R. F. Foster cites Bowen's own warm approval of Portia in *The Death of the Heart* as a deliberate wrecker of the *status quo*, and approved of this destruction. Bowen disliked the tendency of readers and critics to emphasis Portia's victim position (R. F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch*, London: Penguin, 1993, p. 103).

17 'More than doubtful' here is the phrase of Miss Paullie the headmistress, and is meant, I believe, to be read as a comment simultaneously on class and on a behaviour which infringes the close boundaries of feminine 'self-respect', i.e. flirtation (see p. 57).

18 *Schwärmerei* (Bowen, or the typesetter, incorrectly omits the 'w') in its usual twentieth-century sense means a rather irrational or excessive emotional attachment, and has often been used to name the attachments (or, more dismissively, 'crushes') of adolescent girls for each other or for older women, typically teachers or more senior girls, and especially in a boarding-school environment. Its older, more literary context was the special attention paid to the life of the emotions in the period of sensibility and Romanticism, between the late 1700s and the early 1800s. I am grateful to Beate Dreike for her elucidation of this word.

19 McCormack notes that the topic of homosexuality 'only breaks the surface' in these works, but after that is silent on the matter (*From Burke to Beckett*, p. 409).

20 Thus Eva Trout's dead father is presented in brief flashbacks as having been besotted by the silky Constantine, so mesmerized by his attraction as to be endlessly willing to be sponged off and, what is more to the point, to neglect and emotionally abandon the child Eva.

21 As Hermione Lee puts it, 'Though Elizabeth Bowen deals very unsympathetically with homosexuals in *Eva Trout*, there's a clear expression of understanding for lesbian feelings in the last two novels' [i.e. *The Little Girls* and *Eva Trout*] (*Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation*, London: Vision Press, 1981, pp 208-9).

22 'She felt so sick for Elise that she prayed to be hit by a ball on the head every time she went out to Lacrosse' (p. 239).

23 Here, as very often, she plays games with names: for 'Butler' and 'Ponsonby', respectively Hiberno-Norman and quintessentially English-sounding, read 'Fitzgerald' and 'Pym', whose first name is even 'Eleanor' (like Butler's); in 'Pym' we might also hear an 'r' after the 'P'.

24 Diana Swanson's essay 'Subverting Closure: Compulsory Heterosexuality and Compulsory Endings in Middle-Class British Women's Novels' (in Wolfe and Penelope, op. cit., pp. 150-63), in a perceptive brief discussion of *The Hotel*, simply describes Sydney as 'in love with Mrs Kerr'.

25 Portia in *The Death of the Heart*, an exception, lacks at least three of these four, and to that extent prefigures Eva Trout.

26 When her parents return to their London flat after this visit they find that Theodora — like those guinea-pigs — 'has more than ever her caged air' (p. 30). On the 'brain his son would have had', compare the alleged expectation of Bowen's own parents about the gender of their child (see p. 108 above).

27 James applies the term *ficelle* (i.e. 'string') to characters whom he uses as often unwitting carriers of bits of information crucial to the plot: the symbolically named Miss Stringham is an example.

28 Louie's tough sidekick, the ARP warden Connie, who is introduced a bit later,

is one of a gallery of confidantes who are worthy of a whole discussion to themselves: it would include Lois's two friends Olivia and Viola (with their names borrowed from *Twelfth Night*, in which one falls in love with the other, resourcefully cross-dressed), and solemn Portia's slightly 'not-quite-quite' adviser Lilian in *The Death of the Heart*.

29 For an example in Malory see Catherine La Farge, 'The Hand of the Huntress: Repetition in Malory's Morte Darthur' in Isobel Armstrong (ed), *New Feminist Discourses*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 265.

30 For this Stella tends to blame herself: a beautiful passage expresses her sense of having somehow been responsible for cutting him off fatally from the world in his childhood: '. . . when he was a baby she had amused him by opening and shutting a painted fan, and of that *beau monde* of figures, grouped and placed and linked by gestures or garlands, he never had, she suspected, lost interior sight. The fan on its fragile ivory spokes now remained closed: she felt him most happy when they could recreate its illusion in their talk' (*HD*, p. 61).

31 This recalls Marilyn R. Farwell's explanation of her own conception of the word 'lesbian': 'What is called lesbian does not depend on women loving other women genitally but, rather, on the presence and attention of women to other women that is analogous to the act of loving sexually another like oneself. In fact, words like *presence, attention,* and *sight* are used more often to describe this metaphoric lesbian' ('Toward a Definition of the Lesbian Literary Imagination', pp 73-4).

32 See Bonnie Zimmerman, 'Perverse Reading: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature', in Wolfe and Penelope, op. cit., pp 134-49; this quotation is on p. 139.

33 One might also consider Marda as Lois's ego-ideal, in the Freudian vocabulary: one whom Lois can admire and look up to as a perfected version of oneself, a self *in potentia*.

34 See Farwell, op, cit, pp 71-3, for some excellent caveats and useful expressions of justifiable suspicion about the motherhood metaphor.

35 I owe this perception to Piaras Mac Éinrí, to whom I am grateful for this and other insights.

36 A moving scene which, like that of Rachel's dream, cries out for Freudian exegesis, along the lines of the hearth as figure for the absent mother.

37 This is according to a structure, illogical to the rational mind but perfectly coherent to the unconscious, familiar in psychoanalytic explanations of human behaviour – she's not there, so I'll make her disappear – which prompts one to wonder whether all Bowen's evil mother-figures are so constructed as a fantasy-revenge for their having gone. It would, of course, be reductive to read them as that and nothing else, but the thought is nevertheless not irrelevant.