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Death and the Nonhuman in Elizabeth Bowen's Fiction

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The Renaissance and the Enlightenment, revolutions in 'Western' thought, asserted the superiority of humanist, rationalist modes of engaging with and understanding the phenomenal world over traditional technologies of knowledge. Beginning in the early modern era, emerging models of scientific inquiry seemed to demonstrate the independence of the human mind from its physical environment, in contrast to older, 'primitive' systems of organising phenomena and relationships between them that understood every element of the environment, including the animate, the numinous and the inanimate, as parts of an enmeshed whole. One of the promises held out by Enlightenment thought, then, was the possibility of transcending the body, associated with the mortal limitations of our animal materiality, 'the living link between an artificially idealized humanity and "nature"'.¹ The artistic *avant-garde* of the early twentieth century reacted against Enlightenment imperatives to progress and civilization in its preoccupation with 'primitive' forms, from the aesthetic to the spiritual, and challenged prevailing Cartesian divisions between human and nonhuman animals, between people and things. As Bill Brown observes, 'modernism, when struggling to integrate the animate and the inanimate, humans and things, always knew that we have never been modern',² a potentially destabilising knowledge, promising both existential terror and artistic inspiration. The 'spectre' of the nonhuman, according to Carrie Rohman, 'profoundly threatens the sovereignty of the Western subject of consciousness in modernist literature'. Surrealist and other 'modernist texts variously retrench, unsettle and even invert a humanist relation to this nonhuman other'.³

Modernist Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen was, like modernism itself, both implicated in and sceptical of the imperialist project that brought non-Western art to the attention of European artists. A recent biography suggests that the groundwork was laid for Bowen's mature interest in surrealism by her childhood consumption of a local version of the native 'primitive', Irish fairy and folklore in which the landscape is inhabited by spirits, and animals act as emissaries of the gods, a nonmodern body of narrative wielding significant influence on 'her own inspiriting of objects in her writing'.⁴ What Elizabeth C. Inglesby identifies as Bowen's 'animist sensibilities' have been noted by a number of critics,⁵ including Maud Ellmann, who describes the author as 'aware of the primal impulses battering at the bastions of modernity' and who observes of her fiction that 'every object has a psyche; in fact, her objects even have neuroses'.⁶ Stones can indeed be mad in Bowen. The 'psychic instability' that emerges from the exchange of qualities between the animate and inanimate in Bowen's fiction, a kind of 'defamiliarization' that withholds 'a fundamental support of mimesis',⁷ situates her work firmly within the modernist canon.

Bowen's consistent blurring of distinctions between subject and object, the human and the nonhuman, has implications for human subjectivity in her fiction. Bowen shares with new materialists an interest in destabilizing conventional notions of subjectivity, in challenging the idea of independent entities, in order to understand ourselves and everything around us, seen and unseen, as phenomena in an ongoing process of 'becoming' through relationships and interactions with other phenomena. The work of feminist new materialists and critical posthumanists, including Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett, Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, provide insights into the significance of the 'queer' attractions that Dana Luciano and Mel Chen call 'transmaterial affections', when they occur in Bowen's fiction, and her preoccupation with the trope of haunting.⁸ The varieties of haunting in Bowen suggest that the material human body, not just consciousness, memory or emotion, can be haunted, specifically by itself, by its own otherness. Such readings make clear the sexist and heterosexist implications of dominant constructions of the 'nonhuman' other, when the 'human' is predicated on white, straight, able-bodied masculinity. For Bowen's

characters, the 'sheer otherness' of embodiment, according to Ellmann, renders love and death equivalent in their demands, a kind of impersonality of drive and attraction that moves beyond heterosexist, reproductive imperatives.⁹ Bowen's representation of death exceeds what Rosi Braidotti has criticized as 'the metaphysics of finitude', with its 'overemphasis on mortality and perishability', an emphasis that necessarily invests significantly in logics of lineage and reproduction.¹⁰ Textual moments that reveal the body as object and as abject create liminal spaces and times of possibility, open identity to its multiplicity, release it from individualized, anthropocentric significance. If a continuity is assumed between the human and the nonhuman, between subjects and objects, then the meaning attached to death is transformed, an ironic fulfilment of humanist belief in the endurance of 'life' beyond the material limitations of embodiment. 'Death is overrated', Braidotti argues, 'The ultimate subtraction is after all only another phase in a generative process'.¹¹ In Bowen's fiction, things and objects, the nonhuman and the human, regularly transgress the supposedly 'organic' temporality that determines the difference between 'life' and 'non-life' and generate radical, exhilarating possibilities not only for our relationship to death, but also for our understanding of Irish modernism, often limited by a masculinist, anthropocentric emphasis on the 'human'. Positioning the political within a more inclusive frame would allow for a productive critical re-evaluation of Irish modernist praxis.¹²

Bowen's experiences of the world wars, especially her time in London during the Blitz of the Second World War, feature prominently in critical discussions of her treatment of death. Dozens of her short stories and the 1949 novel, *The Heat of the Day*, are set during the Second World War, a time described by the narrator of that novel as when 'the wall between the living and dead thinned'.¹³ However, Bowen's intimacy with death predates her wartime experiences. Even before the trauma of losing her adored mother when Bowen was only thirteen, she was profoundly influenced by the haunted, backwards-looking culture of *fin-de-siècle* Anglo-Ireland, where the past pressed urgently on the present, as it does for the characters of her 1929 novel, *The Last September*, whose ancestors' lives seem more vivid than their own. *The Last September* takes place in

Danielstown, a house based on Bowen's own ancestral home, Bowen's Court, the inspiration for her book by the same name about the history of the place and the generations who had lived there since the eighteenth century. Her description demonstrates a long-established, indeed, inherited familiarity with the porous membrane between the living and the dead:

What runs on most through a family living in one place is a continuous, semi-physical dream. [...] With the end of each generation, the lives that submerged here were absorbed again. With each death, the air of the place had thickened; it had been added to. The dead do not need to visit Bowen's Court rooms – as I said, we had no ghosts in that house – because they already permeated them.¹⁴

Much of Bowen's fiction is categorized as gothic, though the dead in her work are so integrated into the everyday, as they are in Bowen's Court, they rarely frighten however much they fascinate and disturb. In *The Heat of the Day*, largely set in London, it is the intimate, Irish departed who wield the most lasting power. Recently dead victims of war are barely distinguishable from the traumatized Londoners among whom they wander: 'Uncounted, they continued to move in shoals through the city day, pervading everything to be seen or felt with their torn-off senses, drawing on this tomorrow they had expected – for death cannot be so sudden as all that'.¹⁵ In the meantime, Mount Morris, a family home in Ireland, distant and shielded from the war and from modernity, as if in 'another time rather than another country',¹⁶ offers a potentially restorative postwar future for Roderick, the son of Stella, the novel's protagonist. Roderick can only imagine that future as realizable as an act of honouring 'the genuine dead' of his father's family.¹⁷

Just as Lois in *The Last September* feels dominated by her late mother Laura, whose memory is more present to those around her than is Lois herself, so Bowen describes her own family heritage as being ruled by an invisible continuity. As many critics have noted, Bowen is preoccupied with the unseen, the mysterious. According to Thomas Laqueur, 'the presence of the dead enchants

our purportedly unenchanted world', providing modern secular society with a more 'democratic' form of enchantment, 'a protean magic that we believe despite ourselves'.¹⁸ Brown ascribes a similar quality to objects, which manifest 'a sensuous presence or [...] a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols and totems'.¹⁹ In Bowen's fiction, the numinous quality of the enchanting dead is shared with things and objects, as in *To the North* (1932), where escaping to a country cottage restores to everyday objects 'their full circle of charm and mystery'.²⁰ Much of the time these charming objects are occupying an 'unseen world', described by Inglesby as 'another plane of existence' where things, objects and landscapes 'possess an esoteric form of dignity and energy'. They are inhabitants of 'another dimension of reality not dependent on humanity to lend it significance'.²¹ The independence of the nonhuman is a central tenet of new materialism, along with an acknowledgement of human dependence. As Jane Bennett has noted, 'there was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity'.²² The vitality of the nonhuman in Bowen's fiction, especially putatively 'inanimate' or inorganic objects, has often been discussed in connection with her surrealism of form. Her 'unnerving syntax', as Ellmann characterizes it, which 'constantly ambushes our ontological security', is an element of her idiosyncratic prose in which 'everything conspires to efface the human subject'.²³ Elenud Summers-Bremner similarly understands Bowen's 'disconcerting syntax' as a response to the 'repetitious encounter with an object that refuses to yield its meaning'. According to Summers-Bremner, 'the unnerving life force shown by *things*', is a humbling 'process that returns us to our object status'.²⁴ In this way, Bowen suggests that the human partakes of the kind of 'non-human, yet affirmative life force', that Braidotti would come to call 'zoe', a 'type of vitality, unconcerned by clear-cut distinctions between living and dying'.²⁵

The effects of this transference between human characters and the buildings, landscapes and objects that surround them range from a deadening of affect to the discovery of reserves of receptivity and sympathy. In the final scene of *To the North*, Emmeline becomes fused with the terrible, exhilarating speed and mass of the car she is driving with the intention of killing herself

and her passenger, Markie. She has become 'lost to her own identity, a confining husk'.²⁶ Deaf to Markie's cries of alarm, 'She looked into his eyes without consciousness, as though at the windows of an empty house. [...] Little more than his memory ruled her still animate body, so peacefully empty as not even to be haunted'.²⁷ Houses can be especially unsettling in their human qualities, haunting without necessarily being haunted. In the 1946 story, 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps', a house is undergoing a 'process of strangulation' by ivy 'that must be feeding on something inside the house'. Because of the house's apparent self-satisfaction, the narrator suggests that it was 'perhaps just, or not unfitting that it should have been singled out for this gothic fate'.²⁸ *The Last September's* Danielstown stares coldly, 'piles itself up' over its inhabitants and generally projects a sense of menace, until the narrative reveals the house to be a vulnerable, doomed structure, destined to be burned down by the rebels fighting for Irish Independence in a war the house's inhabitants have refused to acknowledge. In *The House in Paris* (1935), a young girl, Henrietta, in transit between homes, spends a day in the singularly unwelcoming, eponymous house: 'it was antagonistic, as though it had been invented to put her out. She felt the house was acting, nothing seemed to be natural; objects did not wait to be seen but came crowding in on her, each with what amounted to its aggressive cry'.²⁹ Despite this unpromising introduction, Henrietta will achieve a healing connection to another child, also waiting in the house, the deeply damaged, abandoned Leopold, a connection that will be enabled by the 'thing-ness' of both children. A latent openness to this kind of transference is suggested from the novel's first few pages by Henrietta's untroubled acceptance of her plush toy monkey's oscillation between subject and object.

As happens in many of Bowen texts, in this novel the othering effect of identifying as nonhuman is a movement at once inward and outward, what Barad calls 'the surprise, the interruption of the stranger (within) re-turning unannounced'.³⁰ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle discuss the ethical dimension of this kind of 'asocial otherness', the paradoxical foundation of love, 'an otherness which precedes, haunts, solicits the very possibility of self-identity and individuality, memory and the present, the social and the human'.³¹ Henrietta has felt little

sympathy for stiff, awkward Leopold, whom she considers both ‘supernatural’ and ‘an unconscious little tree’,³² until the end of the novel, when he breaks down with a sorrowing despair that voids Henrietta’s subjectivity, making her ‘no more than the walls or table’. This erasure ‘disembodied her, so she fearlessly crossed the parquet to stand beside him’ and lovingly embraced the grieving child, joining him in his tree-ness:

Finally, she leant her body against his, pressing her ribs to his elbow so that his sobs began to go through her too. [...] After a moment like this, his elbow undoubled itself against her and his left arm went round her with unfeeling tightness, as though he were gripping the bole of a tree. [...] Reposing between two friends, the mantelpiece and her body.³³

It is Henrietta’s body, as comforting as a mantelpiece, the ‘unhuman’ materiality that renders her ‘no more than’ any other object in the room. Henrietta’s body provides a conduit, via its suddenly undeniable otherness, an estrangement from herself, for the social and human connection Bennett and Royle describe.

In stepping outside of her ‘self’, Henrietta is ‘summon[ed] to sheer exteriority’, like other Bowen characters, of whom Ellmann observes, that ‘are called to love as they are called to death, and the call comes not from the heart but from sheer “otherness”’.³⁴ In *The House in Paris*, strange houses can bring to uncomfortable awareness the ultimate self-estrangement, one’s own mortality, ‘what life is. To come in is as alarming as to be born conscious, dead: you see the world without yourself’.³⁵ The essence of life, that is, the nearness of violence and death, first becomes vivid in *The Last September*, not in the threatened Big House, Danielstown, where the reality of conflict is kept at a distance, but in an unoccupied structure, an abandoned mill. Its description inverts the usual formula of anthropomorphism, not by investing an ‘inanimate’ object with the qualities of the living, but by figuring it as a corpse, the abjected subject: ‘The mill stared at them all, light-eyed,

ghoulish. [...] These dead mills — the country was full of them, never quite stripped and whitened to a skeleton's decency: like corpses at their most horrible'.³⁶ The mill evokes human 'futility and sadness', taking on 'all of a past to which it had given nothing'.³⁷ The mill's decay situates it in two historic timelines, the deep past, and, in its portency, the contemporary epoch-defining events of revolutionary war. Lois and the slightly older, unconventional Marda, whom Lois intensely admires, venture into the rickety structure and surprise a sleeping rebel who has retreated to the unhospitable shelter. Startled, his gun goes off, accidentally inflicting a minor injury on Marda's hand. This shocking encounter with the messiness and meaninglessness of individual death strengthens Marda's desire to flee the stultifying paralysis of Danielstown. Death in Bowen often forces a confrontation beyond the conventional apprehension of personal mortality to question the vitality of what we think of as our own 'lives'. Patrick Moran identifies Bowen's 'fear that extreme social propriety and class expectations could transform individuals into lifeless, puppetlike figures'.³⁸ Life seems suspended in Danielstown, trembling on the lip of an unsustainable illusion of harmony and order. The house is haunted by its own redundancy, reflected in the corpse of the mill. Another young person of the novel, Laurence, entertains visions of the house in flames, its future past. He also imagines 'a small resurrection day' for lost objects,³⁹ an alternative eschatology, a secular version of the biblical judgement day at the end of human time, in which, rather than the body and the soul being reunited, the human/nonhuman assemblage is comically heightened, yet also recognized and sanctified.

R.F. Foster considers Bowen's 'sense of history' as not only crucial to understanding her work but as constitutive of 'nearly all her best fiction'.⁴⁰ Foster's own sense of history, however, is narrower than Bowen's. The nonhuman object and the dehumanizing power of death that transforms subject to object are implicated in the specific historic sense crucial to Bowen's praxis, as both phenomena point to a timeline beyond that of a single individual. Confronting loss of self and identity through death enables ethical insights into the constitutive patterns and connections amongst all phenomena, insights that decentre the human subject, including the conventional

androcentric understanding of space and time. In her discussion of the character of Stella in *The Heat of the Day*, Renée Hoogland argues that the ‘operations of time and narrative history on the individual subject’s sense of reality’ force Stella ‘to reconsider her experience of self as well as the moral order in relation to which she has thus far defined this self’, a reassessment brought about by the war, one of ‘the forces of destabilization in the material “timespace” in which the story unfolds’.⁴¹ A similarly destabilized ‘timespace’ operates for Lois in *The Last September*, when she entertains the ‘thought that fifty years hence she might well, if she wished, be sitting here on the steps [...] having penetrated thirty years deeper ahead into Time than [her older relations] could, gave her a feeling of mysteriousness and destination’.⁴² In a discussion of Sheridan Le Fanu, Bowen indicates a source for her handling of time other than the asynchronicities typical of modernist praxis when she argues that the ‘time lag’ of Ireland’s amodern temporality ‘separates Ireland from England more effectually than any sea’.⁴³

Specific places in Bowen often act as nodes of recognition of what Barad calls the ‘spacetime-mattering’ through which the ‘material entanglements’ of phenomena are ‘enfolded and threaded’.⁴⁴ For Lois, it is the liminal step at the front door of Danielstown; for Geraldine, one of Bowen’s orphaned, lonely children, in ‘The Little Girl’s Room’ (1934), that space is her bedroom in her step-grandmother’s house:

She was alone in her room, that [...] seemed to be enclosed by more than material walls, by volutions of delicacy and sweet living shadows [...]. If stone sustained it, the very stone was kind. Here was the secret form of her little-girlhood, tenderly animate by the spirit. Here, round the smiling gold clock, time was captive, and only fluttered with little moth-wings; here, coming in, you distilled the whole sweetness of youth from a happy consciousness of mortality: the narrow bed was innocent as an early grave. By falling asleep here, the little girl gave herself back to the centuries, [...] like a little girl in an epitaph.⁴⁵

In another of Bowen's perversions of the scene of anthropomorphism, stone and shadow infuse Geraldine with their animating spirit. Time does not move in a teleological arrow, but flutters stochastically, looking forward to Geraldine's death at the same time as it reaches back through the centuries. In Barad's words, time is 'out of joint; it is diffracted, broken apart in different directions, non-contemporaneous with itself. Each moment is an infinite multiplicity. 'Now' is not an infinitesimal slice, but an infinitely rich condensed node in a changing field diffracted across spacetime'.⁴⁶ Life and death are 'enfolded' and reconfigured in this room where youth is savoured in imagining its extinction. This example of the way things in Bowen – here the room itself, walls, shadows, stones, clock, bed – suggest 'alternate durations or planes of existence beyond the human present', as Laci Mattison has argued about the treatment of time by Bowen and her contemporaries (including Virginia Woolf and Henri Bergson): 'Such a vision of time is a particularly nonhuman one in the sense that [...] we do not store memories: rather, time contains us.'⁴⁷

Geraldine is a comically secret rebel, ostensibly well-behaved but seething with resentment, constantly examined by her step-grandmother for signs of genius, signs she fails to manifest. It is suggested, however, that her hidden genius may reside in her imagination. In her room she stages bloody nightly battles with 'The Enemies', or 'Imaginary Furious People', that is, the tutors, trainers and instructresses engaged to draw out her artistic and intellectual abilities. Geraldine's considerable powers to conjure detailed and convincing appearances and performances from these spectres both contrast with and rely on her insecure sense of self: she 'seemed to exist with difficulty. Every time her reflection flitted out of the looking glass the whole of Geraldine seemed to be mislaid'.⁴⁸ Geraldine's creative abilities are linked to what Summers-Bremner refers to as an 'event of non-coinciding with ourselves' in Bowen's fiction, a disorienting but productive occasion of 'felt frustration [that] eventually reveals itself as the only thing, if there is anything, that it might be possible to share with others. [...] And it is on this non-coincidence with ourselves, as well, that

our historical belonging is also seen to rest'.⁴⁹ The unexpected consolation and comfort Geraldine seems to take from seeing herself 'like a little girl in an epitaph', an anonymous figure in an indifferent future, appears also to enable her creative abilities. Mattison considers Bowen's 'sense of time beyond human mechanization' as necessary to connecting 'with durations other than our own, both human and nonhuman', which allows us 'not only to "transcend ourselves" but to become otherwise'.⁵⁰ After a typical 'nightly session of the red passions', Geraldine 'glanced around the room as though it had been another child's nursery', the ghost of herself. Having successfully 'transcended' that other child, she is ready to sigh 'acquiescence into her frilly pillow'.⁵¹

Geraldine abdicates her 'self' in the act of animating the bogeys of her young life, to act as puppet master to hated authority figures whom she defeats nightly. Moran's analysis of toys in Bowen's fiction quotes an unfinished essay of the author's in which she likens 'characters to marionettes' and compares 'writing to economies of play'.⁵² Geraldine's paradoxical occupation of the positions of both puppet and puppet master comments obliquely on illusions of mastery, authority, and hierarchy, those structures new materialism also critiques. Moran argues that for Bowen, 'the modern novelist is like the child in that he or she is always playing with collapsing distinctions – or hermeneutical ambiguities – which recall our first encounters with the phenomenal world'.⁵³ Bennet and Royle also discuss the recurring figures of toys and puppets, those most evocative of 'inanimate' objects, in Bowen's work, which render 'the body not only as a fiction of death, but also – even before that in a fictional body'.⁵⁴ The body is always a simulacrum of the body, they argue, shaped and activated by others' thoughts, including the thoughts of the dead, as noted above in the cases of Lois in *The Last September* and Roderick in *The Heat of the Day*, themselves constructs granted eternal, ever-renewing 'life' by Bowen herself. Death is a life force, not simply in the negative sense of contrast or even an 'organic' process of regeneration, but through a more dynamic interplay of indeterminacies, including the reconfigured temporalities that lend Bowen's texts their hallucinatory atmosphere, what Susan Osborn calls her 'bizarre images' that are 'fashioned for something other than a reality effect'.⁵⁵ Bowen shares with her contemporary

surrealists a ‘conscious effort to achieve greater intimacy with things and to exert a different determination for them’, in the words of Brown, in order to register ‘their refusal to occupy the world as it was’.⁵⁶ The collapse of distinctions between reality and the construction of imaginary worlds, whether through child’s play or the work of the mature artist, is not a nullification. As Donna Haraway argues, “‘reality’ is not compromised by the pervasiveness of narrative; one gives up nothing but the illusion of epistemological transcendence by attending closely to stories’; stories, according to Haraway, inhabit us as much as we inhabit them, and ‘such inhabiting is finally what constitutes the “we” amongst whom communication is possible’.⁵⁷ These are ‘the regions where the lively subject becomes the undead thing’,⁵⁸ the liminal space where it is possible to rethink our received ideas of identity and difference.

Patricia Laurence characterizes Bowen’s aesthetic as one in which ‘life or death is heightened by art’.⁵⁹ Osborn makes a parallel observation, but reverses the hierarchical trajectory implicit in Laurence’s reference to art’s ability to exalt its subject. Indeed, Osborn argues for a ‘degrading’ dynamic in Bowen’s resistance to ‘presenting the mundane as real, [...] creating instead unions that are grotesque, anomalous, and excrescent’. In her rejection of a frictionless aesthetic of similarity and wholeness, ‘the deformed images destabilize the ontological status of “copy” by at times eliminating or compromising the known world and its differentiations’.⁶⁰ The world can only be known to the observing human consciousness in fragmented, partial encounters, like Janet in *Friends and Relations* (1931), who compares her younger self to a growing plant that ‘pushes things, even paving stones out of the way, and grows past them’. What she comes to realize she didn’t see, however, is that stones, quite apart from human observation or comprehension, ‘had a life of their own and made growth too’.⁶¹ In that early novel, hedges are ‘eager’ for attention, and unlike some ‘human’ characters, a room can be ‘mortally disconcerted’: ‘A room does not easily re-compose itself, laugh, remark some inconsequence, remember a tune’.⁶² Portia, another of Bowen’s abandoned children, in *The Death of the Heart* (1938), is also sensitive to the feelings of the objects: ‘nothing seems inanimate, nothing not sentient: darkening chimneys, viaducts, villas, glass-and-

steel factories, chain stores seem to strike as deep as natural rock, seem not only to exist but to dream'. Portia is one of the 'very young people', who 'are tuned to the earth',⁶³ and her relation to things 'begins to become love'.⁶⁴

In one of Bowen's last novels, *A World of Love* (1955), objects act as the catalyst for love when an emotional connection to a dead man, experienced through the act of reading, propels a young woman into future possibilities of passion. Jane finds a cache of letters written years earlier by Guy, someone she has never heard anyone speak of. The letters have no clear addressee, and Guy becomes as real a loving presence to Jane as any living person she encounters. Bennett and Royle coined the phrase 'thermo-writing' to describe the heat generated by Guy's letters,⁶⁵ which ignite and illuminate several planes of relation between characters in the text, some of whom knew Guy before he was killed in the war, so that he undergoes a kind of resurrection. The 'liveliness' of this transformative relationship challenges logics of temporality and presence. Jacques Derrida says of text in general that it is 'a dead thing that resuscitates each time a breath of living reading, each time the breath of the other, each time an intentionality intends it and makes it live again by animating it'.⁶⁶ Reading and writing are acts of refusing to accept death as final, commitments to the nonhuman, acts of love generated by what Haraway calls the 'irreducible trickster quality that resists categories and projects of all kinds', a quality shared by people and things: 'Yearning is fed from the gaps in categories and the quirky loveliness of signs'.⁶⁷

Bowen is a novelist of yearning, of quirkiness, of gaps and unsettling, boundary-dissolving figurative language, such as a doorway that 'yearn[s] up the path like an eye-socket', or a piece of paper that creeps 'on the floor like a living handkerchief'.⁶⁸ Her fiction represents 'a world where things and people, like the living and the dead, are constantly encroaching on each other's territory',⁶⁹ an echo of new materialism's relational ontology and epistemology in which 'all bodies, not merely human bodies, come to matter through the world's performativity – its iterative interactivity'.⁷⁰ A version of the transcendence sought by classic European art and philosophy is suggested in the fiction, but it is a movement of dispersion and dissolution, downward and inward

as well as outward, extending beyond our bounded 'selves'. Braidotti addresses the desire for transcendence when she argues that death is the inhuman inside us: 'Making friends with the impersonal necessity of death is an ethical way of installing oneself in life as a transient, slightly wounded visitor. [...] The proximity to death suspends life, not into transcendence, but rather into the radical immanence of "just a life", here and now, for as long as we can take.'⁷¹ For Bowen, to write is to be haunted, just as to live is 'to address the past (and future), to speak with ghosts', as Barad insists is our duty to those who came before us and who will follow:

[It] is not to entertain or reconstruct some narrative of the way it was, but to respond, to be responsible, to take responsibility for that which we inherit (from the past and the future), for the entangled relationalities of inheritance that 'we' are, to acknowledge and be responsive to the noncontemporaneity of the present, to put oneself at risk, to risk oneself (which is never one or self), to open oneself up to indeterminacy in moving towards what is to-come.⁷²

'What is to-come' is always death, a past and future prospect of indeterminacy to be encountered with receptivity and courage.

In 'The Pink Biscuit' (1928), Sibela is asked to run to the shops, something the little girl has never done before. She enjoys being on her own, peeping 'at life this way and that, down all the queer perspectives'.⁷³ Entranced, she is tempted into naughtiness by the glamour of the shops and the heady responsibility. Glittering, vibrant, urgent things seem to present themselves as 'triumphant', and 'there was something of triumph too in the repose of that whole side of a split pig, reclined voluptuously on a bank of moss', a pig later referred to as 'swooning'.⁷⁴ 'The fancy biscuits, occupying a table like an altar, vomited opulently out onto plates from a cornucopia'.⁷⁵ Death (achieved by violence, as the butchers' 'whirring great steel knives' imply), sex, disgust, excess, desire, humour and religion mingle promiscuously in this scene of original sin when Sibela

responds to the call of a pink biscuit that detaches itself from its fellows to 'quiver to stillness at the very edge of the table'.⁷⁶ Visions of skulls and a 'pit of darkness', torment Sibela as she contemplates the end of her 'spiritual life', having 'perplexed' God by slipping that irresistible biscuit into her pocket.⁷⁷ Demonstrating an aching sensitivity to the liveliness of biscuits, oranges, ginger and pig carcasses, Sibela has begun to learn that living is inseparable from sin, death, darkness and risk-taking, an embrace of 'all the queer perspectives'. Bowen's own 'queer perspectives' continue to elude stable critical taxonomies. While her once-denied place in Irish modernism has been secured, new materialist analysis of the work undermines received critical narratives of Irish modernism itself, long reliant on anthropocentric historiography. An old blessing in Irish wishes its beneficiary that very good thing, death in Ireland. Accounts of Irish modernism may also benefit by finding meaning beyond 'life' as defined by the limits of the human.

Notes

- ¹ Ariel Salleh and Meira Hanson, 'On Production and Reproduction: Identity and Nonidentity in Ecofeminist Theory', *Organization and Environment* 12, no. 2 (1999): 213.
- ² Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 12.
- ³ Carrie Rohman *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 12.
- ⁴ Patricia Laurence, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 32.
- ⁵ Elizabeth C. Inglesby, "'Expressive Objects": Elizabeth Bowen's Narrative Materializes', *Modern Fiction Studies* 53, no. 2 (2007): 307.
- ⁶ Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow across the Page* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 5, 6.
- ⁷ Renée C. Hoogland, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing* (New York University Press, 1994), 56.
- ⁸ Dana Luciano and Mel Chen, 'Has the Queer Ever Been Human?', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 3 (2015): 186.
- ⁹ Ellmann, 190.
- ¹⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 333.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² An example of such a reading is provided by Liam Young, "'Do You Dance, Minnaloushe?'" Yeats's Animal Questions', in *Animals in Irish Literature and Culture*, ed. Borbála Faragó and Kathryn Kirkpatrick (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 149–64.
- ¹³ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949), 87.
- ¹⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court* (Cork: Collins Press, 1988), 451.
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- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 14, 27.
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- ²⁰ Elizabeth Bowen, *To the North* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 199.
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- ²² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Economy of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 31.
- ²³ Ellmann, 7, 67.
- ²⁴ Elenud Summers-Bremner, 'Dead Letters and Living Things: Historical Ethics in *The House in Paris* and *Death of the Heart*', in *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. Susan Osborn (Cork University Press, 2009), 64.
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- ³⁰ Karen Barad, 'Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart', *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014): 178.
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- ³³ Ibid., 218–9, 220.
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- ³⁵ Bowen, *The House in Paris*, 78.
- ³⁶ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 178.

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⁵³ Ibid.

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