



Elena Cotta Ramusino,
Elizabeth Bowen's Other Writing.
A Study of Her Non-Fictional Prose

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by Elena Ogliari

Although she was at the peak of her popularity in the late thirties, Elizabeth Bowen could boast critical and popular acclaim also a decade later, when she was regarded as a rival to Virginia Woolf, and in the 1950s, when Jocelyn Brooke classed the Anglo-Irish author in the same league as Henry James, E.M. Forster and Graham Greene in the first scholarly appraisal of her oeuvre (1952: 10). Notwithstanding such a good reputation, the prolific author of nine novels and dozens of short stories did not escape posthumous oblivion, which has lasted until quite recently. In part, her work has been neglected by academic criticism because of its resistance to categorization (Ellmann 2003: 17), insofar as in her fiction, for example, modernist experimentalism borders on classic realism, and highbrow literature collides with popular literary forms, including the detective story, the sensation novel and the Gothic novel. At the same time, concurring to the critical silence on Bowen's work were the eccentricities peculiar to both her fictional and non-fictional



pieces, like her disordering of English syntax that results in a disorientating effect, opacity of style, excessive elaboration, elliptical dialogue, and representational irregularities.

The tide of neglecting was turned only in 1981 with the publication of *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation*, Hermione Lee's foundational work, which would contribute to restoring Bowen to the status of "one of the greatest writers of fiction in this language and in this century" (Lee 1999: Introduction). And in the wake of Lee's effort, in the last two decades, admirers of Bowen's writing have strived to retrieve her fiction from oblivion, by centring their analyses on those aspects of her work that had been previously deprecated: Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (1995), Maud Ellmann's *Elizabeth Bowen. The Shadow Across the Page* (2003), and Neil Corcoran's *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (2004) all explore the oddness of Bowen's fictional writing as well as its linguistic and substantive difficultness.

Besides fiction, however, Bowen indefatigably wrote essays, prefaces, introductions, reviews, articles for the popular magazines *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, and radio broadcasts, of which some are now collected in anthologies modelled after Hermione Lee's *The Mulberry Tree* (1986).¹ For the Bowen scholar, the collections of her non-fictional works are of immeasurable value, because they reveal the wide range of her cultural and literary interests, while asserting her role as a public intellectual engaged with both the traditional and the new media of her time. Though, the very same collections aimed to open new paths in Bowen criticism that are still much uncharted. This gap in criticism is the reason why Elena Cotta Ramusino's study of Bowen's non-fictional prose, *Elizabeth Bowen's Other Writing* (2018), makes a significant contribution to the current scholarship on the Anglo-Irish writer, while attesting to her enduring relevance. Another fact worthy of praise is that Cotta Ramusino draws the reader's attention also to the under-examined *The Shelbourne Hotel* (1951) and *A Time in Rome* (1960), the analyses of which are completed by a thorough investigation of Bowen's autobiographical writing – namely *Bowen's Court* (1942), *Seven Winters* (1964) and *Pictures and Conversations* (1975) – and an overview of a selection of theoretical pieces on national identity and the craft of writing.

The juxtaposition of texts of such a multifarious nature enables Cotta Ramusino to detect a range of crucial tensions and elements recurrent in Bowen's both fictional and non-fictional prose, singularly examined in a long succession of sub-chapters. Indeed, the division of the book in numerous sub-sections turns out to be productive in drawing attention to specific recurrent aspects of Bowen's prose like her fascination with Big Houses, objects and places; the dichotomy of absence versus presence; the sense of nothingness ranging from the ruins of the Irish landscape to the self-destruction of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy; the constant feeling of dislocation felt by the author.

¹ It will suffice here to mention *People, Places, Things – Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, (Bowen E. and Hepburn 2008) and *Elizabeth Bowen Remembered: The Farahy Addresses* (Walshe 1998).



With regard to the first aspect, Chapter 1 focuses on Bowen's major autobiographical works including *Bowen's Court*, the history of the author's family and the family Big House from the Cromwellian settlement until 1914: the ups and downs of the mansion reflect the vicissitudes of the Ascendancy. Attention is paid to the peculiar circumstances of composition, marked by wartime urgency, and to the fact that the text conveys an admiration for the Big House, which dominates the book as much as it dominates its inhabitants, only partially balanced by Bowen's acknowledgement that Big Houses drained their owners' resources. Cotta Ramusino justly reports that, although Bowen's court survived the fires of the Troubles of 1920, the author's mind was always haunted by the spectre of its destruction. Her fear that the house might be destroyed would eventually inspire the composition of the novel *The Last September* (1929), in which the fictive Big House Danielstown is destroyed by fire (35-40). Perhaps, in the sub-chapter devoted to Big Houses (31-33), Cotta Ramusino should also have mentioned that the Big House Novel has a long tradition in Irish Literature, to which *The Last September* belongs and which identifies in Edith Somerville the immediate predecessor of Bowen, just to give more background information to the non-Bowen reader. Yet, I admit that this lacuna is only a minor drawback for a book generally characterised by the presence of extensive insightful notes as well as by clarity and cohesiveness.

Moreover, Cotta Ramusino has the merit of reminding the reader that, albeit a place of comfort, Big Houses forced their owners into a life in isolation: "Each of this family homes [...] is an island," Bowen acknowledges in her family history (quoted in Cotta Ramusino 2018: 40). In this isolation, generation after generation, the Bowens and other Anglo-Irish families evolved into a "race of hybrids", neither fully native nor outsiders, with an inherent sense of dislocation that made them "really only at home in mid-crossing between Holyhead and Dun Laoghaire" (*ibid.*).

The present volume makes it clear that Bowen felt an acute sense of dislocation throughout her whole life, an aspect that is well documented in her non-fictional writings. In *Seven Winters*, Bowen's memoir of her life until the age of seven, the author pinpoints the origins of her attachment to places – especially houses – and things in the young lesson in dislocation she had as a child, when, after moving back and forth from Bowen's Court to Dublin, she was forcefully sent to England after her father's nervous breakdown (*ibid.*: 43-50). The sense of dislocation kept surfacing when visiting Rome, which proved to be too a disorientating city for the twentieth-century writer. In *A Time in Rome*, the volume analysed in Chapter 3, Bowen lingers on the curious ease of disorientation, the sense of being lost she felt in the Eternal City during her several visits in the 1950s. Cotta Ramusino investigates this ease in the light of Donatella Abbate Bodin's study on the relationship of Irish visitors to Rome (2015), suggesting that Bowen attempted to elude the city's connections to both Christianity and Imperialism: a move that left her with no point of reference.

The importance of place in Bowen's prose and the recurrent concern with the Anglo-Irish heritage are also corroborated by the analysis, in Chapter 2, of *The Shelbourne Hotel*, another text revolving around a building: this time, a landmark of Dublin. Then,



apparently with a too abrupt transition, Cotta Ramusino moves on to focus on a selection of writings, ranging from the WWII reports on Eire to the prefaces, in order to discuss Bowen's views on the Irish country, identity and the craft of writing. In fact, these sub-chapters should be interpreted as further evidence of the author's deepest preoccupations that inform the whole of her prose – namely, the Anglo-Irish identity, the permanence of the past, and the act of writing. At the same time, by virtue of its non-exhaustiveness, the overview of the final pages re-asserts the need for further analysis of Bowen's non-fictional prose. Hopefully, Cotta Ramusino's *Elizabeth Bowen's Other Writing* will spark new criticism on the subject to redress the lacuna.

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