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Exorcising Trauma: Uncanny Modernity and the Anglo-Irish War in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929)

Edwina Keown

- 1 In this essay I shall examine *The Last September* as a hybrid novel syncretising an Anglo-Irish gothic tradition with modernism. As we shall see, by using innovative and aesthetically shocking narrative techniques Bowen textually embodies the conflict between the Anglo-Irish and Catholic Ireland, with their bloody history, when confronting the social pressure of World War I, nationalism, new technologies and sexual politics. It re-examines the novel's infamous finale, the burning of the big house Danielstown, in the context of modernism and the uncanny to explore Bowen's ambiguous exorcism of the trauma of Irish colonial history and memory. By locating *The Last September* within gothic and modernist studies, this essay develops the on-going critical debate that "[w]ith a personal caste history of loss, Bowen's roles as an Irish Ascendancy novelist and as an ideologically conservative modernist attuned to a wider European cultural dispossession converge in her fiction¹."
- 2 *The Last September* is celebrated as the Anglo-Irish "big house" novel that anatomises the War of Independence (1919-1921). It is a benchmark modernist and gothic text for the twentieth century because of Bowen's experimental treatment of two themes – revolutionary class politics and female sexuality – that have been central to gothic since its full emergence in the eighteenth century as a "writing of excess" that "shadows the despairing ecstasies of Romantic idealism and individualism and the uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence²". Bowen continues the innovative and political Gothic of the Anglo-Irish writers Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla" (1874) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). In *The Last September* she experiments with gothic and modernist techniques: using gothic to create the narrative disruptions; the alienation; the clash between different versions of history; and the focus on gender and alternative sexuality that are all

associated with modernism. With its isolated and decaying ancestral home; its ruined mill and ghosts; its lower-class Catholic “natives” versus landed, hybrid Anglo-Irish “settlers/colonialists”; its entrapped female and male characters; its ambiguous “visitors” – dispossessed Anglo-Irish and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) gunmen; and its exploration of terrifying modernity in the guise of the motorcar and the “New Woman”, *The Last September* ensures that in the “twentieth century, in diverse and ambiguous ways, Gothic figures have continued to shadow the progress of modernity with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values³.”

Doublings: Elizabeth Bowen’s Anglo-Irish gothic-modernist legacy

- 3 In many respects, it could be said that Irish history gave birth to the gothic literary tradition in the English language. Critics agree that gothic emerged as a response to the Anglo-Irish politician Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and his writing on the terror of the French Revolution with its destruction of property and reversal of enlightenment values⁴. Jarlath Killeen originates gothic earlier, in the terror arising from the 1641 Irish rising and massacre of Protestant English colonialists, and the subsequent bloody Cromwellian settlement of Ireland in the 1640s and 50s with the colonial confrontation between the Protestant English “settlers” who took land from the defeated “native” Catholic Irish⁵. Tit for tat, both sides besieged fortified castles and towns and butchered the inhabitants, but Protestant English and Anglo-Irish writers remembered the terror as irrational acts of Catholic violence against Protestant order and reason – resulting in an Irish “proto-Gothic”. The settlers’ guilt of usurpation and their fear of retaliation by dispossessed Irish Catholics formed the psychic landscape of Ireland and the Irish literary imagination. This guilt and fear was built into the foundations of Anglo-Irish big houses and formed the underside of the ruling social order in the eighteenth century, “the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy” that moulded itself on Enlightenment values. This gothic fear of the natives shaped Irish history and literature into the twentieth century.
- 4 Since the English novelist Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), gothic conventions of: ancestral homes; entrapped females; threatening landscapes and climate; class-based political unrest; sexually ambiguous and threatening men and women signify clashes between different social orders and generations. In the English tradition gothic represented the concerns of the emerging English middle class and gentry in opposition to feudal aristocrats and a growing urban working class. In Ireland, gothic was more overtly political, and it typically represented the concerns of the Anglo-Irish who governed Ireland until the 1801 Act of Union between Ireland and England destroyed their power⁷.
- 5 The Anglo-Irish Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1801) is a hybrid realist-gothic black comedy charting the demise of the Protestant landlords, the Rackrents, and the rise of the Catholic Irish middle-class who ultimately triumph. Charles Maturin’s classic *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) is set in a decaying Anglo-Irish big house that is over-run by malevolent Catholic servants and haunted by the restless ghost of an earlier owner, Melmoth, who has made a Faustian pact with the devil. Both novels feature degeneracy, bad blood and incarcerated females. Increasingly, as the nineteenth century progressed,

Anglo-Irish writers couched their political decline in feminised language and tropes of incarcerated women and gender-bending villainous ancestors, as fears of class revolution were equated with and confused with female sexuality and emancipation.

- 6 Sheridan's "Carmilla" and Stoker's *Dracula* represent terror, specifically in relation to the late nineteenth-century Land War in Ireland, and generally in relation to social and scientific developments in Ireland, Britain and Europe which were raising questions surrounding class and the constructions of the feminine and masculine, and thereby undermining the conservative bourgeois rational order. Le Fanu portrays the relationship between Carmilla and her victim as a mutual and intense female crush, transgressing Victorian sexual and social taboos. Dracula lusts after men as much as women. Both texts introduce travel and transport as a new gothic realm. Speedier means of travel and communication – carriages, letters, steamships, trains, telegrams – enable Carmilla and Dracula to infiltrate English homes and transform men and women. As Sinead Mooney writes, Bowen herself in her memoir *Bowen's Court* (1942) "traces the migration of Gothic horror from a threatening world to the interior of the mind, from the castles of Maturin and Radcliffe to psychoanalytic theories of the self"⁸.
- 7 With the Irish Literary Revival and James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), realism, celticism and Irish mythology overtook Anglo-Irish gothic as Irish writers and society focused on the rise of Irish Nationalism, equated with Catholicism, and the struggle for independence from the British: a struggle in which the Anglo-Irish and their big houses would become the main causalities. Following independence in 1921 the Irish novel in general oscillated between realism and modernism, except for the supernatural, big house black comedies of Bowen and her fellow Anglo-Irish writer Molly Keane – who wrote big house gothic and uncanny novels into the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1970s Ian Cochrane, E. L. Kennedy, John Banville, Patrick McCabe and Jennifer Johnston began using big houses and gothic devices in their fiction, showing that Bowen is an important link between Anglo-Irish gothic, modernism and Irish writers today. New Bowen scholarship from Ireland, Britain and America position Bowen as an Ascendancy modernist with gothic undertones "who was more attuned than most to the unspoken and, for some, unspeakable sexual desires that challenge what Adrienne Rich has termed 'compulsory heterosexuality'"⁹. Margot Backus argues in *The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice, and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order* (1999) that Bowen's metaphors, characters and descriptions conjoin revolutionary forces that seek to tear away the façade of Anglo-Irish society with illicit sexual desires that threaten marriage¹⁰. Heather Ingman argues that *The Last September* with its archetypal big house, its insular family (seemingly cut-off from the real world around them), and complex portrayal of women, politics and desire is central to critical re-examinations of the Irish national tale post-independence¹¹. She reads Bowen in the context of Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves* and *Nations without Nationalism*, in particular Kristeva's "psychoanalytic insight to politics, drawing on Freud's notion of the Uncanny, that is, the uncanny sensations we experience in relation to certain objects or people stemming from the unconscious projection of our desires and anxieties onto the world around us"¹². Ingman is interested in why Bowen links the themes of a nation attempting to establish itself with a young girl, the Anglo-Irish Lois, trying to find her place in the world. I would add that Bowen is re-working gothic conventions within the cultural context of the Anglo-Irish war. Lois's sense of uncanny strangeness or doubling helps her to connect, across her caste and gender divide, with the nationalists. In Ingman's words Lois's "awareness of her alterity within, that she is other to herself,

prepares her to relate, as Kristeva has argued awareness of alterity always does, to the other as other¹³". Two recent critical essay collections give full credence to Bowen's big house modernism, her ghosts stories and sense of the supernatural, and her avant-garde experimental style and treatment of class, triangular relationships and same-sex desire¹⁴.

- 8 Heather Laird's essay "Bowen in Contemporary Irish Literary and Cultural Criticism", argues that Bowen's status as an Anglo-Irish woman in a settler colony, and "the divided loyalties that this engendered" dampened her radical potential¹⁵. Despite Bowen's literary flirtation with transgressive sexuality and revolutionary IRA characters and in-between states, which attest to extreme physical and psychological restrictions, same sex desire is often rejected in favour of marriage. Laird acknowledges the splitting and doublings of Bowen in literary and cultural criticism the "Anglo-Irish Bowen", the "modernist Bowen", the "postmodernist Bowen", the "bisexual Bowen" and the "Irish Protestant Gothic". However she sees this fragmented state of Bowen criticism as a positive. It confirms Bowen's own interest in the themes of fragmentation and alterity in response to twentieth-century social change. In Bowen's own words the "dissonance, the doublings and twistings of mankind¹⁶". Laird closes her own appraisal with a reference to *The Last September* and its burning finale. But she reads this exorcism not as artistic liberation but rather a fondness for "surfaces themselves and those who sought to maintain them¹⁷." As we shall see Bowen's treatment of historical trauma and twentieth-century sexuality is ambiguous and open. She cuts to the heart of modern concerns about identity, repression and the role of art in exorcising personal and cultural trauma. To give Bowen the last word in this section tracking her literary and critical legacy to date, "[t]he novelist's subject is not society, not the individual as a social unit, but the individual as he is, behind the social mask. As such, his peculiarities are infinite¹⁸."

The trauma of Irish history and *The Last September*

- 9 Elizabeth Bowen's own peculiarities were infinite. She was a descendant of a Cromwellian settler. The first Bowen in Ireland fought for Oliver Cromwell; and in payment Cromwell awarded the Bowens land in Cork that had belonged to a defeated Catholic-Irish gentleman¹⁹. In the 1770s, a third generation Bowen built a big house, "Bowen's Court", to establish the Bowen's landlordship over the local Catholic Irish. Despite the fact that three hundred years had passed, Bowen acutely felt that the memories of the 1640s were still alive in Ireland and were being fought out in the War of Independence (1919-1921). Bowen believed that Bowen's Court was built on a fundamental injustice – an unlawful act of dispossession against the Catholic-Irish – and that the day of reckoning for the Anglo-Irish community had now arrived in 1919²⁰. Because of her father's illness, which was partially triggered by the rise of Irish nationalism, Bowen was educated in England from the age of seven. Due to the War of Independence, the twenty-year-old Bowen was sent away to Italy and then went on to a literary life in London and Oxford. It was there, ten years after the War of Independence that Bowen wrote *The Last September*.
- 10 The novel is riven with a nostalgic sense of a lost time that still haunted Bowen in 1929. *The Last September* is set in Cork between September 1920 and February 1921, during the most ferocious stage of the War of Independence and the burning of the big houses. "Danielstown" is home to the Anglo-Irish Sir Richard and Lady Myra Naylor and a series of displaced family members and friends: the orphaned nineteen-year-old Lois Farquar who is Sir Richard Naylor's niece; the Oxford undergraduate Laurence who is Lady

Naylor's nephew; the eternal house-visitors Hugo and Francie Montmorency who have sold their big house and own only a motorcar; and the twenty-nine-year old Marda Norton who is engaged to an Englishman. The action happens in one week, but the use of gothic and modernist narrative devices disrupt the linear realist present and impose instead a cyclical-historical-mythological time that is associated with Irish Catholicism and the rebel tradition. Echoing traditional Anglo-Irish gothic, Bowen uses the trope of the Anglo-Irish big house to represent Irish politics and settler/native class relations from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, and register the end of the Anglo-Irish community and culture in Ireland. Danielstown is threatened by the Irish countryside, which remembers Irish history and camouflages the republican gunmen. The gunmen close in on the house, turn it into a battleground and finally burn the big house – marking it as a contested space for revolution and the birthing of post-imperial independent Ireland.

- 11 However, Bowen explores more than Irish revolutionary politics in her novel. Sheridan Le Fanu was an important literary influence, but so too was Virginia Woolf. Bowen was equally concerned with Irish history and the position of women in modern life. She explores the cultural fall out from the post-world-war-I revolutionary sexual politics – thereby making *The Last September* a novel which resonates beyond Ireland to explore broader literary and social revolution of modernism and modernity sweeping Ireland, Britain, Europe and America. Bowen represents Danielstown and the Irish landscape as two female presences confronting each other: from this trope of the big house as a beleaguered female Bowen develops her second gothic theme. She interrogates bourgeois anxieties surrounding female sexuality and mobility. While some critics argue that Danielstown is the central character in the novel, others argue that Lois is the central character and that the novel explores career opportunities for young women, against the backdrop of the War²¹. I would suggest that the novel does not have a central character. Instead the plot hinges on Bowen's gothic treatment of a series of relationships or pairings/doublings – the already mentioned relationship between Danielstown and the surrounding native territory (representing the colonial aspect of Irish history); the special relationship between Lois and Danielstown; and the homoerotic relationship between Lois and Marda.
- 12 The novel opens with the arrival of the Montmorencys in their motorcar and the first paragraph synthesises gothic themes from the eighteenth century with revolutionary politics and twentieth-century modernity. The motorcar contains a new breed of landless Anglo-Irish aristocrats who have lost their ancestral home and thereby their place in the world:

About six o'clock the sound of a motor, collected out of the wide country and narrowed under the trees of the avenue, brought the household out in excitement on to the steps. Up among the beeches, a thin iron gate twanged; the car slid out from a net of shadow, down the slope to the house. Behind the flashing windscreen Mr and Mrs Montmorency produced – arms waving and a wild escape to the wind of her mauve motor-veil – an agitation of greeting. They were long-promised visitors. They exclaimed, Sir Richard and Lady Naylor exclaimed and signalled: no one spoke yet. It was a moment of happiness, of perfection²².
- 13 From this moment of brief happiness *The Last September* pursues a steady decline to the furnace on the last page. The gothic undertones: "wide country" and narrow, shadowy avenues closing in on the house, the "thin iron gate" which seems vulnerable to trespassers, the agitation of greeting, the references to the motorcar and Bowen's

preference for the past-tense warn the sensitive reader that this fragile picture of perfection is about to be destroyed by political change. Bowen is one of the first writers to give modern vehicles a gothic and sinister cast and connect them with the irrational terror of colonial and class based clashes. In doing this she introduces contemporary anxieties about technological developments arising in the aftermath of World War I. Throughout the novel the motorcar brings a sequence of unwelcome “guests” to Danielstown, culminating in the arrival of IRA guerillas who burn the big house. In Bowen’s stories such as “Summer’s Night”, “Joining Charles”, “The Disinherited” as well as in several of her novels, journeys, be they by bus, train, or car, mark the point at which the boundaries between the sanity and madness, the everyday and the uncanny begin to collapse.

- 14 Sir Richard and Lady Naylor and Danielstown unwillingly find themselves caught up in the “unofficial” stage of the War of Independence, when battle-lines between the flying columns of the Irish Republican Army and the British mercenaries, the Black and Tans, were reaching a violent pitch of reprisals and counter reprisals. The IRA encroached upon and wrested back land and estates belonging to the Anglo-Irish, using them to store arms and for short cuts when ambushing the Black and Tans or the British Army. Sir Richard’s niece Lois asks Hugo Montmorency at dinner “If you are interested, would you care to come and dig for guns in the plantation?” (LS 25) Immediately, Sir Richard silences Lois, denies the guns exist and refers to the IRA euphemistically as tourists. “You’ll have the place full of soldiers, trampling the young trees. There’s been enough damage in that plantation with the people coming to sightsee: all Michael’s friends.” (LS 25) Caught between the IRA and the British Army, the Anglo-Irish cannot afford to take sides. Both the IRA and the Black and Tans burnt the homes of anyone seen to help the enemy²³. Throughout the novel, the family and their guests hear the “furtive” sound of lorries and motorcars patrolling the estate boundaries and the surrounding countryside. These modern technologies are not only an unnatural affront to the “natural” social order in Ireland of Anglo-Irish gentry and Catholic farmers and peasants, but they are modern harbingers of Irish revolutionary politics which have been around since the 1640s and flared up in the 1798 failed United Irishmen Rising. Ingman links nationalist memories of 1798 and 1916 with Lois’s memory of her dead mother Laura chaffing against the social restraints that now suffocate Lois²⁴.
- 15 Bowen gives her big house a female persona and establishes a special psychic connection between the house and a female guest, the mother-less Lois, that verges on a mother-daughter pairing. While Bowen gives Danielstown a benign background presence reaching out to the orphaned Lois, the house had a darker, more smothering presence for Laura (Sir Richard’s sister) who died when Lois was ten years old. Neil Corcoran argues that Laura signifies the darker side of political and social decline, specifically female entrapment in the big house and family duty: “Sister of the master of the big house, and southern wife of a failed northern marriage, she is the Anglo-Irish ghost *par excellence*” and she represents the “entrapment and failure of the class” but also the burden of trying to hold onto the Anglo-Irish dream²⁵. Laura haunts Danielstown and the characters – her promise and her frustration and sense of futility. Laura, like Lois, is presented as trying to escape yet ironically she now only exists as a ghostly memory in the house with her name scratched angrily on the bedroom wall and her trunks mouldering in the attic. Lois equates the house with her mother and she yearns for yet wants to escape both of them.

- 16 It is the desire to escape Anglo-Irish domesticity and denial of reality that spurs Lois to walk in the grounds of Danielstown late in the evening, following the dinner scene. As Lois steps outside the house she steps into the darkness of Irish colonial history, represented by the trees and shrubs of Danielstown. “[D]ank” leaves “like the tongues of dead animals” assault her bare skin, pressing in upon her (LS 33). Like the heroines in eighteenth-century gothic-romances Lois is terrified and breathes in death and decay. The narrative identifies Lois’s terror as a specific Anglo-Irish one, a “fear before birth”, which is transmitted from parents to children. The terror outside, originally associated in gothic with Catholicism, is now identified as the horror within the Anglo-Irish themselves. The narrative alludes to colonial history and the Anglo-Irish usurpation of Catholic homes: the nightmare side of their big house enlightenment dream (LS 33). In the same passage an injured bird that “shrieked and stumbled down through dark, tearing the leaves”, mirrors Lois’s terrified stumble through Danielstown and adds to Bowen’s construction of the uncanny.
- 17 The scene recalls *Hamlet*: the world is out of joint and nature bears witness to unlawful acts of murder “Silence healed, but kept a scar of horror.” (LS 33) “Murder will out” because history is never past in Ireland, but gothic-style haunts and disturbs the present. Into this scene of mounting terror Bowen introduces the IRA gunman for the first time. Horror-struck Lois watches the bushes move “the displaced darkness” and believes she is “indeed clairvoyant” and is “going to see a ghost” (LS 33). The ghost turns out to be the IRA gunman, a “trench-coat” with “a resolute profile”, who is making a short cut through Danielstown. Bowen’s irony defuses the terror and is aimed at the Anglo-Irish who refused the reality that they were in the middle of a battleground and viewed as the enemy. IRA gunmen were referred to as “trench-coats” because of their guerrilla attire, but Bowen’s abstract description also turns the gunman into an emblem of Irish nationalism and a fanatical terrorist. In a narrative reversal Lois feels that the gunman turns her into a ghost as he walks past “in contemptuous unawareness. His intentions burnt on the dark an almost invisible trail; he might have been a murderer he seemed so inspired.” (LS 33)
- 18 Indeed, the IRA kill a number of British soldiers including Lois’s fiancé Gerald Lesworth, before burning Danielstown. Bowen represents the duality in Irish nationalism: the gunman may be a fanatic but he is also the end result of Irish colonial history and the Enlightenment – the rights of the individual, Republicanism and Socialism; he is the hero or executioner who will redress Ireland’s wrongs. Echoing the Irish Literary Revival’s imagery of Irish mythological heroes such as Cúchulainn returning from the past to liberate Ireland, Bowen creates the sense that the disputed land has given birth to and possesses the IRA gunman. “The crowd of trees, straining up from passive disputed earth, each sucking up and exhaling the country’s essence – swallowed him finally.” (LS 34) Bowen gives the land a vampiric cast and her imagery recalls the trope of “Cathleen ni Houlihan” – the hag-like mythological Irish queen whose beauty and youth is restored by the self-sacrifice of her young men.

Uncannily transgressive sexuality

- 19 In keeping with gothic convention, Bowen portrays Danielstown as the light of civilisation in opposition to the irrational darkness of Irish history and nationalism. However, Lois’s brush with reality has given her a new adult perspective on her family.

She perceives their vulnerability: stones and mortar have been feminised into “flowers in a paperweight”, depicted as a useless object in a lady’s boudoir rather than the masculine seat of colonial landlords. A number of uncanny paradoxes “lovely unlovely” and “unwilling bosom” signify Ireland is an unnatural mother willing to evict the Anglo-Irish and Lois, adding to Lois’s contradictory anxiety that on the one-hand she is motherless and placeless but on the other hand she needs to break away from the ancestral home and memories of her mother to become her own woman (LS 66). The narrative translates Lois’s anxieties about her family and herself into a sexual attraction for the twenty-nine-year-old Marda Norton. The attraction is played as a gothic subtext and Bowen suggests that lesbian desire is as much a threat to the traditional Anglo-Irish way of life as the IRA.

- 20 The minute Marda enters Danielstown her androgynous figure, her fashionable clothes and detachment disrupts and reorders the domestic space. Having arrived late she has the household in chaos, attempting to track down a suitcase that she has carelessly left on a train and is not too worried about. Marda has a vague idea that the local telephone, run by the lady in the grocery-shop-cum-post-office will be as efficient as the London telephone exchange. She exudes modernity and here seems to have successfully rid herself of Anglo-Irish baggage and history “She escaped the feminine pear-shape [...- They remained sitting behind her with a vague sensation of having been abandoned.” (LS 79) She seems to Lois a woman without a past and with a bright future, with a London fiancé who is a stockbroker. Marda is set in contrast to the wet climate in Cork and the shabby interior of Danielstown. Bowen covertly frames their relationship with gothic tropes that present Marda as Lois’s seducer and rescuer. First Lois is intrigued then aroused by Marda’s belongings: reading *Tatler* then trying on Marda’s fur coat “finding a coat she could not live without” (LS 76). Using erotic language Bowen simulates a sexual climax as Lois “fading, dying into the rich heaviness” repeats the thought “*escape*” as a wistful desire and then an italicised satisfied achievement (LS 76). There is a vampiric inflection to Lois trying on Marda’s coat, with echoes of Le Fanu’s “*Carmilla*”, as Lois almost tastes Marda through her belongings, and there are echoes of Stoker’s Jonathan Harker who lets the three vampire women seduce him in Dracula’s castle.
- 21 The attraction between Lois and Marda is coded. Up until this point in the novel Lois has not found a role model or a fitting object of desire, an “other”, to help her create her own identity. Her mother, Danielstown and the men in her life are all inadequate. Simply trying on the fur coat transforms Lois from an adolescent into a sexualised woman, as if the coat has deflowered her or more tantalisingly its owner, Marda, has. “And she paced around the hall with new movements: a dark, rare, rather wistful woman, elusive with jasmine. ‘No?’ she said on an upward note: the voice startled her, experience was behind it.” (LS 76-77) Possessed by Marda’s coat Lois paces the hall like an exotic animal caged within Danielstown but with a new awareness of who she is and can be, that brings a realisation that she can escape the house “and the blurred panes, the steaming trees, the lonely cave of the hall no longer had her consciousness in a clamp. *How* she could live she felt. She would not need anyone.” (LS 70) Here we have a Freudian and Kristevan irruption of the uncanny and desire as Marda is introduced as a familiar and unfamiliar invading presence both for Lois and for the house (Marda has visited Danielstown many times since she was a child and each time something bad or strange has happened to her)
- 26 .
- 22 In the course of the novel Marda becomes for Lois in a Kristevan sense “the familiar potentially tainted with strangeness and referred (beyond its imaginative origin to an

improper past)” – Marda and her portable luggage, English fiancé and cosmopolitan glamour represents an alternative life-style to the big house. Derek Hand argues that Lois tries on Marda’s coat in order to “lose herself in someone else’s life” because “her existence, and that of the Anglo-Irish society she is representative of, is a ghostly one²⁷”. I would add to this that Lois’s sense of lack could be read positively as an openness to crossing boundaries and trying out different identities and relationships in order to discover her own. Bowen’s ambiguous syntax raises questions about identity and sexuality and nationality through encounters with strangers that help us understand our own inner strangeness.

- 23 If, as Kristeva argues, “uncanny strangeness” is a mechanism for releasing repressed sexuality and anxieties of castration within individuals, then Marda makes Lois face up to her personal and cultural sense of castration and isolation trapped within the Anglo-Irish community. Lois’s personal fear is *textually* mirrored in Danielstown’s horrified and unsettled reaction to Marda, symbolising the settler community’s own cultural castration anxieties in relation to their colonial relationship with Ireland. As noted, Ingman uses Kristeva’s theory of the “other” as “my (‘own and proper’) unconscious” to read Lois as “a secret rebel against the constraints placed on her by life in the Big House where, like the nationalist rebels, she lacks power’ and reveals in Bowen’s work questions of “gender and nationality are never simple²⁸”. Marda invades Lois and alters her perspective on her family traditions and her future. Bowen transforms Danielstown and Ireland into a backward cave in contrast to modern London life and ideas about women, but she also uses gothic to encode “anti-social” lesbian desire.
- 24 Later in the novel Lois is aroused by watching Marda paint her nails in a heaven of female toiletries and dresses associated with foreign travel and sophistication – “And the pink smell of nail-varnish, dresses trickling over a chair, flash of swinging shoe-buckle, cloud of powder over the glass, the very room with its level stare on the tree-tops, took on awareness, smiled with secrecy, had the polish and depth of experience. The very birds on the frieze flew round in cognizant agitation.” (LS 79) Lois strokes Marda’s dresses from Vienna – a coded substitute for Marda. The guest room has been turned into an exotic boudoir as Marda and her belongings have taken possession of the house transforming it, affecting the walls and looking glass whose “secrecy” makes them complicit in the homoerotic energy that Marda exudes. Only the birds on the frieze uncannily come to life and voice a danger to the patriarchal foundations of the house. Lois despairs “I do not interest her” and hopes “the carpet would burn with the house in a scarlet night to make one flaming call upon Marda’s memory” as Bowen conflates imagery of outlawed sexual relations with revolutionary politics (LS 98). As Marda tells Lois there “seems a kind of fatality” in her relationship with the house (LS 77).

Exorcising Trauma: The spectral mill and burning Danielstown

- 25 Marda’s fatal relationship with Danielstown and Bowen’s conflation of sexual relations, revolutionary politics and irruption of the uncanny comes to a climacteric in the mill scene. It is here that the triangular desire between Hugo, Marda and Lois is fully played out when Marda is accidentally shot in the hand by the IRA gunman. In what can only be called an ironic play with signification and clash between Anglo-Irish and modernist cultural politics, Bowen saturates her narrative with gothic techniques and Freudian

symbolism. The mill is described as “staring, light-eyed, ghoulishly [...] Those dead mills – the country was full of them, never quite stripped and whitened to skeletons’ decency: like corpses at their most horrible [...] high façade of decay [...] Incredible in its loneliness, roofless, beams criss-crossing dank interior daylight [...] took on all of the past to which it had given nothing” (LS 122-23). Both Neil Corcoran and Julian Moynihan argue the mill scene is political and moral gothic that reveals a “romantic ruin” is produced by “unimpressive economic reality”, a repressed spectral “other” and dark double to Danielstown²⁹. But it is also a prophetic mirror for Danielstown’s ruined state by the novel’s end. This gothic and Freudian exuberance destabilises the text, showing the return of the historical repressed in the gunman who warns Lois and Marda “you had better keep in the house while y’have it” (LS 125). As Botting and Kiberd argue, gothic “excess” and “horror” is the site of sexual transgression and the mill becomes the locus of sexual ambivalence between Marda, Lois and Hugo. Sulking, Hugo remains outside the mill trying to cope with Marda’s uncanny impact “on his most intimate sense of himself” and sees her ghost in his wife Francie (LS 126). Hearing the gunshot Hugo rushes inside and overreacts, revealing his emotional chaos and desire for Marda. “He was set on transgressing the decencies. ‘Don’t you realize you might have been –’ Marda laughed, coming out through the door of the mill beside him. He looked at her lips – no higher – angrily – burningly. Lois looked quickly away.” (LS 127) The agitated Hugo uncannily thinks he sees “blood round the lips” (LS 126). Again Marda becomes the locus of vampiric and illicit desire that threatens the social fabric based on marriages and homes³⁰. The couple have met too late. For Hugo is married to the older Francie who cannot have children now, and Marda is engaged to the Englishman Leslie Lawe. She and any children they have will become English, as Leslie’s name spells it out. The correlation between disruptive sexuality and Danielstown’s doom is relayed to the reader through Bowen’s broken syntax, rising narrative tension and allusion to burning. The overlooked Lois takes up Hugo’s forgotten box of matches, reminding the reader of earlier textual allusions linking Lois with Danielstown burning, in particular Lois’s desire to set the house alight in a bid to grab Marda’s attention.

- 26 From this moment on the fate of the house is inevitable as the narrative speeds up and violence and death erupt and close in on the house. The British soldiers become like the Anglo-Irish besieged, redundant and then obsolete. Gerard kisses Lois, but only increases her sense of lack, before he is collected in an armoured car. The British barrack’s ball ends in a drunken jazz frenzy with the gramophone crashing and the record smashing as Bowen’s jagged syntax and imagery of burning and water signals the end: “his hands a cup of fire. There were two bright specks in his eyes. – Then the match whirled off and died on the dark [...] his face blinking in and out of the dark, faintly red with the pulse of his cigarette [...] the roar of merriment, solid and swerving evenly as a waterfall past the door, splintered off in crash. Silence came, with a hard impact.” (LS 154-55) The dance resembles Armageddon or hell – there are references to the Trenches. The English soldier Daventry is described as an ironic Satan, a few days later he tells Lois that Gerald has been killed by the IRA, and the D.I.’s Anglo-Irish niece is a sexualised “hell-cat” (LS 156). Balloons are popped and electricity pulses, as another Anglo-Irish woman asks if the noise is like a bombardment. Outdoors there is a contrasting “sinister energy” as the “country bore in it strong menace” and a British sentry “inhumanly paced like a pendulum” (LS 155). Bowen’s twisted syntax, condensed symbolism, dehumanized abstraction into time, and references to World War I affirm her modernist preoccupation

with narrating a new world order. Here, the sentry marks the time of the end of British rule and the Anglo-Irish and the hour of the coming of the IRA.

- 27 The ending of the house when it comes is quick and militarily efficient, covering just one final paragraph. As Ellmann notes, “it replays the first paragraph but in reverse as if a film had been rewound” as Bowen’s gothic-modernist ending adapts cinematic techniques producing an effect of aesthetic shock and a photographic “living image of a dead thing” through replicating the double movement of technological/spectral media³¹. Like an uncanny double negative of the opening, IRA motorcars drive away from the burning Danielstown in the middle of the night, “the executioners bland from accomplished duty.” (LS 206) Bowen’s prophetic, apocalyptic imagery comes to a head with a “fearful scarlet” throwing the light back from the three burning big houses so that “the country itself was burning”. Her description here is similar to her imaginative recreation in *Bowen’s Court* of the Irish landscape following the Cromwellian wars³². As mentioned we have the final eruption of cyclical-historical-mythological time associated with the Irish Catholicism and the rebel tradition, and Anglo-Irish gothic based on the Protestant settlers’ fear of the return of the repressed Catholics – a psychological fear that is displaced onto the landscape: “roads in unnatural dusk ran dark with movement, secretive or terrified; not a tree, brushed pale by wind from the flames, not a cabin pressed in despair to the bosom of night, not a gate too starkly visible but had its place in the design of order and panic.” (LS 206) Bowen’s uncanny oxymoron “abortive birth” recalls Yeats’s poem about the War of Independence “The Second Coming”:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed [...]
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born³³?

- 28 Yeats reads Ireland and the Troubles as a metaphor for post-war twentieth-century modernity and revolutions. Ten years later, when writing *The Last September*, Bowen sets her finale as judgement day for the Anglo-Irish. The final trauma of “colonial power” is demolished in “the first wave of a silence that was to be ultimate flowed back, confident, to the steps”. The final two lines become an epitaph to the Ascendancy with Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, standing outside silently staring at their burning home as if it was a funeral pyre. As critics comment, despite the dramatic finale, the novel is open ended and the future tenuous and rootless. We do not know the fate of the Naylor, or the Montmorencys and Marda who are last scene driving off in motorcars. Lois is reported in art school in London or Paris.

NOTES

1. Vera Kreilcamp, “Bowen: Ascendancy Modernist” in Eibhear Walshe (ed.), *Elizabeth Bowen*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2009, p. 15.

2. Fred Botting, *Gothic*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 1.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. Siobhain Kilfeather, "The Gothic Novel" in John Wilson Foster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, Cambridge, CUP, 2006, p. 78.
5. Jarlath Killeen, *Gothic Ireland: Horror and the Anglo-Irish Imagination in the Long Eighteenth Century*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2005, p. 30.
6. *Ibid.*
7. John Wilson Foster, Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, p. 9.
8. Sinead Mooney, "Bowen and the Modern Ghost", in *Walshe, op.cit.*, p. 84.
9. Heather Laird, "Bowen in Contemporary Irish Literary and Cultural Criticism", in *Walshe, op. cit.*, p. 204.
10. Heather Laird, *op.cit.*, p. 203.
11. Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2007, p. 30.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Eibhear Walshe (ed.), *Elizabeth Bowen* (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2009) is a collection of new critical essays by leading Irish and British academics. Susan Osborne (ed.), *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives* (Cork, CUP, 2009) encompasses American, Australian and European scholarship, but there is some cross-over with the Irish Academic Press publication.
15. Heather Laird, *op.cit.*, p. 204.
16. Elizabeth Bowen, "Disloyalties" (1950) in *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Hermione Lee (1986), London, Vintage, 1999, p. 60.
17. Heather Laird, *op.cit.*, p. 204.
18. Elizabeth Bowen, "Disloyalties", p. 60.
19. Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court and Seven Winters* (1942 & 1943), London, Vintage, 1999, p. 57.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 451.
21. Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation*, Vision Press, Barnes & Noble, 1981, p. 20.
22. Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (1929) London, Vintage, 1999, p. 7. Further references to this edition are abbreviated as LS.
23. R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972*, London, Penguin, 1989, p. 449.
24. Heather Ingman, *op.cit.*, p. 34.
25. Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return*, Oxford, OUP, 2004, p. 50.
26. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919) in Julie Rivkin & Michael Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., p. 154-168; and Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 182-88.
27. Derek Hand, "Bowen and the Unfinished Business of Living" in *Walshe, op.cit.*, p. 71.
28. H. Ingman, *op.cit.*, p. 37.
29. N. Corcoran, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
30. For further critical readings on the relationship between vampires, sexuality and the Anglo-Irish see Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page*, Edinburgh,

EUP, 2003, p. 65; and Julian Moynihan, *Anglo-Irish: The Literary Imagination in a Hyphenated Culture*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 84.

31. Fred Botting, *Limits of Horror*, Manchester, MUP, 2008, p. 87.

32. Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court and Seven Winters*, *op. cit.*, p. 74-75.

33. W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming" in Daniel Albright (ed.), *The Poems* (1990), London, Everyman, 1998, p. 235.

ABSTRACTS

This paper gives a sustained examination for the first time of *The Last September* as a hybrid novel synthesising an Anglo-Irish Gothic tradition with modernism. It is a benchmark gothic text for the twentieth century because of Bowen's experimental treatment of two themes – revolutionary class politics and female sexuality – that have been central to gothic since its full emergence in the eighteenth century as a "writing of excess" that "shadows the despairing ecstasies of Romantic idealism and individualism and the uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence", as Fred Botting writes. By locating *The Last September* within gothic and modernist studies, this essay enhances and redresses gaps in new critical perspectives on Bowen.

Cet article examine d'un point de vue inédit *The Last September*, roman hybride synthétisant la tradition gothique anglo-irlandaise et le modernisme. Ce roman est central dans la littérature gothique au vingtième siècle, dans la mesure où Bowen s'y livre à une exploration de deux domaines – la politique révolutionnaire concernant les classes sociales et la sexualité féminine. Ces problématiques sont en effet au cœur du gothique depuis la naissance du genre au dix-huitième siècle en tant qu'« écriture de l'excès » qui, selon Fred Botting, « reflète les extases désespérées de l'idéalisme romantique et de l'individualisme, et les étranges ambivalences du réalisme de l'ère victorienne et de la décadence ». En situant *The Last September* au cœur des études gothiques et modernistes, cet article identifie et vient combler les lacunes des perspectives critiques récentes.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Bowen Elizabeth, littérature gothique, sexualité, femmes et féminité, femmes - représentations littéraires, littérature – modernisme, trauma

Keywords: Bowen Elizabeth, sexuality, gothic literature, women and femininity, women - literary representations, trauma, literature – modernism

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