Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

2 | 2010

Voicing Conflict : Women and 20th Century Warfare

“Careless Talk”: Word Shortage in Elizabeth Bowen’s Wartime Writing

Céline Magot

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1189>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.1189

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Céline Magot, “Careless Talk”: Word Shortage in Elizabeth Bowen’s Wartime Writing”, *Miranda* [Online], 2 | 2010, Online since 03 July 2010, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1189> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.1189>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.

Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

"Careless Talk": Word Shortage in Elizabeth Bowen's Wartime Writing

Céline Magot

- 1 In the preface to her collection of wartime short stories *The Demon Lover* (1945),¹ Elizabeth Bowen inquires into the experience of war and its transcription into words:

Literature of the Resistance is now steadily coming in from France. I wonder whether in a sense all wartime writing is not resistance writing? In no way dare we who were in Britain compare ourselves with the French. But personal life here put up its own resistance to the annihilation that was threatening it—war. [...] To survive, not only physically but spiritually, was essential. People whose homes had been blown up went to infinite lengths to assemble bits of themselves [...] from the wreckage. In the same way, they assembled and checked themselves from stories and poems, from their memories, from one another's talk. (Bowen 1950, 50)

2

- 3 The short story "Careless Talk" was first published as "Everything's Frightfully Interesting", in an October 1941 issue of *The New Yorker*. It stages four characters having lunch in a London restaurant during the Second World War: Joanna, who has come from Somerset, is meeting Mary; later they are joined by two men, Eric and Ponsonby. In a review of Bowen's *Collected Stories*, William Trevor referred to "the wartime chatter of 'Careless Talk'" (Trevor 168). Indeed, the story mainly renders the characters' words woven into a long stream of dialogue,² which starts with Mary's grateful exclamation at the gift Joanna has just presented her with: a parcel containing three eggs that she brought from the countryside. This non-narrated and nonverbal exchange becomes a powerful symbolical element in the story, as well as a figurative representation of the characters and of the narration. Beyond the frivolous social talk, the story may in fact deal with the threat of annihilation—not necessarily a form of annihilation induced by the obvious life-threatening context of war, but by more subtle and insidious factors. Existential anguish is expressed through the constant tension between abundance and lack—concerning not only the food supply in a context of shortage, but more interestingly the abundance of words resulting in a lack of meaning and loss of substance.

- 4 The dialogue opens *in medias res* with Mary's demonstrative expression of thankfulness: "How good, how kind, *how* thoughtful!" (667). The ternary rhythm created by the anaphoric repetition of "how" enhances the exclamation and gives magnitude to the adjectives in a pompous manner. With a mirror effect, the conclusion of the story also endows the small parcel with a strong significance: Mary then admits that she has been thinking about the precious parcel throughout the whole meal lest it should be stolen. Food is thus given extreme emphasis. Although restaurants were outside the rationing plan in wartime Britain, food shortage is evoked, albeit indirectly. It has become a commodity whose quantity is expressed in terms of economic value: "[Mary] raised her shilling-size portion of butter from its large bed of ice and spread it tenderly over her piece of toast" (668). Food has become so dear and highly priced that the character's perception is tinged with sensuality ("bed", "tenderly"), ironically suggestive of a literal "bodily appetite".
- 5 Although the text suggests food is omnipresent in the character's mind, it is paradoxically nearly absent from the narration: the actions of ordering, serving and eating food are almost entirely occulted from the text through temporal ellipses. Food is merely evoked as the characters are about to start eating it,³ or as they have just missed it: "Ponsonby did not arrive till just after the potted shrimps" (668). Although food abounds in this restaurant scene, the process of taking in anything substantial is recurrently omitted. The same paradox arises with the evocation of the rationing of cigarettes: lack is expressed through the very denial of it. The characters report how many cigarettes they were supplied with: "I just got twenty out of my hairdresser" or "I got my hundred this morning" (668). The story expresses abundance as a way to suggest absence (or a possible threat of absence), by concentrating on mouths—mouths that eat, drink or smoke; but in this story, mouths are mostly shown in the act of speaking and we will see that language is endowed with the same paradoxical quality.
- 6 The characters' conversation is conducted in a heedless manner as suggested by the title, which is a truncated quotation from a war slogan that was duplicated on the posters of several propaganda campaigns at the time, telling people to avoid exchanging war-related information in public places: "Careless talk costs lives".⁴ Following the posters' injunction, the characters are so cautious not to say anything related to warfare that they hardly say anything at all. Despite the incessant flow of speech, no real information is given and the conversation thrives on vague words or expressions having no referent in the conversation: "*things* keep on happening" (668), "It's *like this* all the time" (670), "He had quite a line of his own on *various things*. Oh well, it was *nothing particular...*" (670) or "One daren't think about *that*" (669).⁵ On the semantic level, the same dichotomy operates: words such as "everything", "everywhere" or "everyone" abound in the text. The repeated expression of totality—can be put in contrast with words suggesting an unspecified quality or absence—"somehow" (668), "sometimes some" (668), or "nothing" (670).⁶ Similarly, the hyperbolic opening of the story ("How good, how kind, *how* thoughtful!") is immediately deflated and undermined by the double entendre of the next sentence which suggests a lack of words: "*I can't tell* you what a difference [the eggs] will make" (667, emphasis mine). Communication is impeded, as is also suggested by Mary's remark to Eric later during the meal: "the waiter's *trying to tell* you there's no more of that wine" (669, emphasis mine).

- 7 In this incessant, empty conversation, if the characters venture to ask for actual information, the question is immediately followed by a cautious withdrawal:

'Now, what is your news?' [Mary] said. 'Not that I'm asking anything, of course.'
'I don't think anything's happened to me,' said Eric, 'or that anything else has happened that you wouldn't know about. When I say happened I mean *happened*, of course. [...]' (669)

- 8 The cryptic dialogue revolves around the repetition of the same words ("anything" and "of course"), words suggesting vagueness and fake certainty. In the same process, the verb "happened" becomes devoid of meaning because of its repetition. Words lose their substance so that language is impoverished and dialogue becomes a denial of exchange. Information is also withheld because of the numerous interruptions—an elliptical syntax made typographically visible with the abundance of dots and dashes. The character's name, Mary Dash, therefore turns out to be ironical: although she is one of the main speakers, her identity signals interruption and elusiveness, as if her very name were incomplete or as if she were threatened with dissolution.
- 9 The temporal ellipsis concealing the food ordered and eaten during the meal is therefore mirrored by the ellipses in the conversation, so that nothing substantial seems to be exchanged between the characters—except for the three eggs. Language thus seems to have become an empty shell represented in the text by the figure of the egg—a symbol of the sealed world of secrecy, a metaphor of elliptical expression. It may also stand for a microcosm encapsulating the "war territory" and the particular "war climate" Bowen evokes in her preface to *The Demon Lover*. The atmosphere in the restaurant is evocative of this war climate and of the international quality of the conflict: "[...] mirrors reflected heads in smoke and electric light and the glitter of buttons on uniforms. Every European tongue struck its own note" (667). Staged in a cosmopolitan post-Babel world,⁷ the short story addresses the problem of the relationship between language and power. The restaurant hums with voices, but they speak different languages; similarly, the eggs do not stand for silence—which would be too obvious a form of linguistic oppression—but for empty, hollow speech, reminiscent of the "systems of exclusion" defined by Michel Foucault when he examines the ways in which society controls people's discourses (*L'ordre du discours*). The systems of exclusion range from prohibition or taboo to mere limitation of the production of discourse, especially when it comes to particularly sensitive areas like politics. Foucault has revealed the tension that lies at the core of our social conception of language, between "logophilia" and "logophobia"—which could be compared to the dichotomy upon which Bowen's story is constructed: abundance vs. absence or threat of annihilation. Foucault explains that we seem to respect and rely on language when in fact we tend to mistrust it in a sort of anxiety of affluence:

Quelle civilisation, en apparence, a été, plus que la nôtre, respectueuse du discours? Où l'a-t-on mieux et plus honoré? Où l'a-t-on, semble-t-il, plus radicalement libéré de ses contraintes et universalisé? Or, il me semble que sous cette apparente logophilie, se cache une sorte de crainte. Tout se passe comme si des interdits, des barrages, des seuils et des limites avaient été disposés de manière que soit maîtrisée, au moins en grande partie, la grande prolifération du discours, de manière que sa richesse soit allégée de sa part la plus dangereuse et que son désordre soit organisé selon des figures qui esquivent le plus incontrôlable; [...]. Il y a sans doute dans notre société, [...] une profonde logophobie, une sorte de crainte sourde [...] contre cette masse de choses dites, contre le surgissement de tous ces énoncés [...]. (Foucault 51-2)

- 10 Towards the beginning of "Careless Talk", Mary tells Joanna: "there's so much to say" (26), thus promising an unrestrained, informative conversation—in a word, suggesting a form of logophilia; yet the tension between the abundance of words and the suspiciousness in which language is held, which leads to a lack of actual exchange of information, has been shown.
- 11 Phyllis Lassner suggests that in "Careless Talk", the characters' incapacity to communicate hides an inner tension, a genuine need to make sense of what they say:

In 'Careless Talk' two men and two women at a fashionable restaurant try to understand the war by exchanging names of people they assume one another knows. What the conversation reveals, however, is the 'hope it didn't matter my having told you that,' conflicting with the anxiety that it does matter, both politically and personally. (Lassner 39)
- 12 Yet the characters' attitude appears as resignation and even active sabotage of language, since they silence themselves or each other. I would argue instead that only one of them, Joanna, the one who provides the eggs, may be a representative of that inner battle for meaning.
- 13 By bringing three eggs, Joanna unwittingly offers burlesque mirrors to her three London acquaintances. The eggs are associated with fragile heads, smooth faces evocative of the restrained conversation and trivial secrecy that characterises them. Looking for a place to store the eggs safely, Mary gives them to the waiter and begs him to leave them in the cloakroom. She hopes "they'll be quieter with the hats" (667). The adjective "quiet"—meaning both "undisturbed", as suggested by the context, and "silent"—is reminiscent of the official injunction the characters abide by. The semantic double entendre takes a comical turn with the evocation of eggs with hats on, a personification that is later taken on again when Eric is described with "shell-rimmed glasses" (668). But Mary's remark may also be a reference to another Ministry of Information campaign launched in 1940 whose slogan was "Keep it under your hat". Interestingly enough, heads were absent from those posters showing only a hat above the slogan that was vertically laid out as if to replace the missing face and body.⁸
- 14 It thus appears that the dialogical short story is permeated with propaganda slogans, as if the authoritative voice of political power interfered with both narration and dialogue, with the narrator's and the characters' voices. The message turning politics into a taboo subject constructs a system of exclusion that has been ingested by the characters and is forced upon the one who does not abide by it. Joanna breaches the linguistic prohibition twice and is duly repressed: when she spontaneously asks about one of their common acquaintances, "What is he doing?" (669), Eric replies that he is not allowed to answer. Even if the man's activities may indeed be secret, Eric obviously chooses to understand the question as a restrictively political one, making it fit within the range of the system of exclusion. Similarly, her first question addressed to Eric ("How do you think the war is going?") is judged as careless talk by Mary who immediately banishes it: "Oh, we mustn't ask him things' said Mary quickly. 'He's doing most frightfully secret work.'" (668) Joanna acts as a touchstone in the story: her attitude is set in contrast with the other characters and underlines their constant restraint.
- 15 Yet, the characters' relationships and functions cannot be reduced to a mere opposition between the careless Joanna and the three careful speakers. Indeed, one real conversation occurs in the course of the meal, but it is limited to a brief aside exchange

between the two men, inaccessible to the reader since the story focalises on the women's point of view. Again Mary expresses her distrust of language:

'But we won't talk about [evacuees], will we?' Mary said quickly. 'Any more than you would like to hear about bombs. I think one great rule is never to bore each other. Eric, what's that you are saying to Ponsonby?'

Eric and Ponsonby had seized the occasion to exchange a few rapid remarks. They stopped immediately. 'It was quite boring,' Ponsonby explained. (669)

- 16 By qualifying their confidential conversation with the very word Mary has just used ("bore"), Ponsonby forces her to refer to and to comply with the rule she has just formulated: "one great rule is never to bore each other". He imposes the enforcement of the "system of exclusion" on her: war and politics should be left undiscussed—except between men. That unspecified nuance in the way linguistic prohibition applies reveals the gendered dimension of the intimate relationship between language and power. Bowen's story shows a balanced tableful of characters: the two women and two men form a system of gender relationships in which suspicion and tension are perceptible. The seal of secret set on the two men's private conversation is a sign of their suspicion towards women; but the episode is mirrored by the manifestation of women's tendency to be wary of men in Mary's seemingly insignificant remark, as she and Joanna are waiting for the two men to arrive: "And I'm glad the others will be late. The only men one likes now are always late." (667) The use of the expression "the others" underlines the underlying antagonism towards a group set apart because it is considered as essentially different.

- 17 By staging gender conflict in a social event, Bowen sheds light on another "theatre of war" which, according to Susan Gubar, is specific to the Second World War. Gubar has examined the role of propaganda in "the expansion of the 'theater' of war from the battlefield to the homefront", notably the effect of "[p]osters enjoining silence as a protection against spies [that] implied that women's talk would kill fighting men" (Gubar 230, 240). Yet, even if many posters clearly singled women out for being dangerously talkative, the "Careless talk costs lives" series explicitly targeted men as well, by depicting male characters or male hats. Bowen's gendered theatre of war therefore seems to imply that even if the propaganda message calling for silence addresses and stages both men and women, the outcome is asymmetric: in keeping with social gender inequality, men hold the control of language and meaning. Therefore, they retain the possession of power and ensure the permanence of gender inequality in spite of women's access to new roles in society, as described by Margaret and Patrice Higonnet:

In this social dance, the woman appears to have taken a step forward as the partners change place—but in fact, he is still leading her. War alters the vocabulary of feminine dependence (as it moves women from the "home" to the "homefront"), and it may even improve the lives of some working women. In the long run, however, the dynamic of gender subordination remains as it was. After the war, the lines of gender can therefore be redrawn to conform to the prewar map of relations between men's and women's roles. (Higonnet 35)

- 18 Bowen's story shows the safe perpetuation of codified gender relationships through a linguistic perspective even as society is in turmoil. In her memoirs about her school years during the First World War, Bowen evokes the gendered dimension of war when she writes about "the intolerable obligation of being fought for, and [the impossibility for girls to] fall short in character without recollecting that men were dying for [them]" (Lee 16). In the light of this remark, Mary's antagonistic statement, "The only men one

likes now are always late" (667) may evoke the prenominal use of "late", meaning dead, in a reference to the glorification of the dead soldier and the moral pressure put on women.⁹

- 19 When Eric finally comes and sits with the two women, non-verbal communication—in particular glances—reveals the widening gap that separates women from men:

Eric was now at the War Office, and Joanna, who had not seen him in uniform before, looked at him naïvely twice. He reminded her of one of the pictures arrived at in that paper game when, by drawing on folded-over paper, you add to one kind of body an intriguingly wrong kind of head. He met her second look kindly through his shell-rimmed glasses. (668)

- 20 Far from being naïve, Joanna sees through appearances. To her, Eric loses substance.¹⁰ He has literally become a flat character and turns into a cardboard figure in that unnamed game called exquisite corpse, as if the figure of the dead soldier was already showing through.¹¹ This episode also discloses one of the reasons for the gender backlash: the uniform is responsible for making the male character lose his uniqueness and individuality. He becomes interchangeable, which creates a form of alienation: a body with the wrong head, a head covered with shell, a body with an egg for a head in a paper game—that is literature. The war taints his perception, as is suggested by the screen of his shell-rimmed spectacles, evocative of weapons ("shell"), through which he projects his glance onto the world. The literary game is also that of quotation, as Sassoon's figure looms over Eric with the evocation of the bitter address to women "You make us shells" ("Glory of Women", Sassoon 79). The soldier's paternalistically "kind" look assigns Joanna to "the other side", as if he was trying to define her as the "Other" in an attempt to recover his full-fledged identity.

- 21 But the story shows that the gender assignment is also self-inflicted, especially by Mary Dash. In keeping with the recurring tension between abundance and lack, she is the character who speaks most and yet, at the end of the meal, she reveals she has been completely absent from the conversation as she exclaims: "all the time we've been talking I've been thinking up a new omelette I want to make" (670). While men are able to exchange meaningful words, to control the power of language, women can only exchange eggs, which of course stand for food—as made obvious by Mary's confession—but may also symbolise the female function of reproduction. Mary's words thus cast women back into traditional roles, connected to the mother figure. In a parodic reference to the book of Genesis, she revives the cliché of woman as a sexual temptress: "I tell you one thing that is worrying me: that waiter I gave Joanna's lovely eggs to hasn't been near this table again. Do you think I put temptation right in his way?" (670) As the symbolical power of language is taken away from them, women undergo a form of alienation and a threat of annihilation: unable to speak for their new wartime selves, they fall back into old myths and old categories in an attempt to resist and to exist, thus contributing to the reproduction of the gender system.

- 22 To "assemble bits of themselves", Bowen's characters rely on the safety of traditional gendered identities, even though these can backfire and trap them into the same threat of annihilation: female characters cling to old myths and clichés while male characters are lost in a glorious uniformity. That is what Bowen refers to in her preface when she writes about "the conventional pattern one does not easily break, and is loath to break because it is 'I'-saving" (Lee 98).

- 23 Bowen's story places the node of identity on an oral axis, where food and language intersect to combine the primary physical qualities with the more elaborate social ones. Mouths take in and babble out, but the deceptive abundance betrays a latent absence. In a parodic process of transubstantiation, food and bodies correspond so that eggs reveal smooth identities or clichés.¹² The story shows how tying up tongues leads to swallowing identities that cannot exist when denied expression. Deprived of substantial words, characters lose their substance in turn.
- 24 This story may be a form of resistance writing as claimed by Bowen—first because it exposes, although obliquely, propaganda and the self-censorship it leads to; it also shows characters trying to resist in the etymological sense of the term—that is to say, trying to stand firm, to exist by defining themselves in opposition to an adverse force, struggling for the preservation of their "I". But the change of title from "Everything's Frightfully Interesting" to "Careless Talk" may play a role in the resistance process. The original title encapsulated the inherent tension of the story between the expression of totality, the abundance of words and the logophobic reality. On a practical level, Bowen probably opted for the new title when the story was reprinted to make the reference to the slogan explicit even after the end of the war, in order to clarify the political meaning of the story. Yet, the new title also increases the writer's subversive power since it shifts from referring to one of the characters' empty words to quoting the voice of the Ministry of Information, in an attempt to re-appropriate it and transform its message. By quoting ironically the authoritative political voice, Bowen increases the power of the authorial voice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bowen, Elizabeth. "Careless Talk". *Collected Stories*. 1980. London: Vintage, 1999. 667-670. (Reprint of "Everything's Frightfully Interesting." *New Yorker*, 11 October 1941).

---. *Collected Impressions*. London: Longmans, 1950.

Foucault, Michel. *L'Ordre du discours*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971.

Gubar, Susan. "'This Is My Rifle, This Is My Gun': World War II and the Blitz on Women." In *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. Eds. Randolph Higonnet, Margaret, et al. New Haven: Yale U.P., 1987. 227-59.

Higonnet, Margaret R., and Patrice L.-R. Higonnet. "The Double Helix." In *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. Eds. Margaret Randolph Higonnet, et al. New Haven: Yale U.P., 1987. 31-47.

Lassner, Phyllis. *Elizabeth Bowen: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1991.

Lee, Hermione (ed.). *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*. 1986. London: Vintage, 1999.

Plain, Gill. *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 1996.

Sassoon, Siegfried. *Collected Poems 1908-1956*. London: Faber and Faber, 1964.

Schneider, Karen. *Loving Arms: British Women Writing the Second World War*. Lexington: U.P. of Kentucky, 1997.

Smith, Harold L. (ed.). *Britain in the Second World War: A Social History*. Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1996.

Trevor, William. "Between Hollyhead and Dun Laoghaire", review of *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*. *Times Literary Supplement*. (6 Feb. 1981): 131. In Phyllis Lassner. *Elizabeth Bowen: A Study of her Short Fiction*, New York: Twayne, 1991, 168.

NOTES

1. "Careless Talk" was published in *The Demon Lover*. The page references in this article refer to its subsequent publication in Elizabeth Bowen's *Collected Stories*.
2. A major part of the text—more than three quarters of it—is devoted to the characters' conversation rendered in direct speech.
3. "[Eric] looked at the grouse on his plate, then took up his knife and fork" (669).
4. The most famous examples of "Careless Talk" posters belong to the Fougasse series, a campaign that was launched in February 1940. They are available on the Imperial War Museum website (<http://www.iwmcollections.org.uk>), ref. IWM PST 0142 or M PST 3750. Several of them depict a literal representation of the expression "Walls have ears" by showing Goebbels or Goering sitting on the bus or on the train and overhearing private conversations. Others depict Hitler's face appearing in paintings, above phone boxes, on wallpapers, etc., as in a "What's wrong with this picture?" game. Similar campaigns led by other cartoonists can be seen on the website of the National Archives, including a poster (by an unknown artist) showing Hitler's portrait with an oversize ear and the slogan: "Mr. Hitler wants to know! / He wants to know the unit's name / Where it's going, whence it came / Ships, guns and shells all make him curious / But silence makes him simply Fuehrrious" (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/theartofwar/prop/home_front/INF3_0235.htm). In what may look like an attempt to achieve comic relief, the posters' tone is mostly light or even childish.
5. Emphases are mine.
6. In the same way, expressions like "twenty things at one time", "all the time" (670), "very full" (669), or "a perfect whirl of ideas" (670) can be opposed to the vagueness suggested by the occurrence of "things", "whatever" (668), "somebody", "various things" (670), "something" (667), "anything" (668-9) or "someone" (669-70).
7. The myth of the Tower of Babel was of course extremely relevant in blitzed London.
8. Those posters also belong to the "Careless talk" series, but instead of staging hidden enemy political leaders, they show male or female hats. An example can be seen on the IWM website (<http://www.iwmcollections.org.uk>, reference IWM PST 3377). A slightly different version of posters also read "The more information you keep under your hat—the safer he'll be under his!" showing both a hat and a helmet (see: http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/theartofwar/prop/home_front/INF3_0235.htm).
9. Antagonism worked both ways of course: Siegfried Sassoon's "Glory of Women" (1917) expresses that gender hostility in a context of war: "You love us when we're heroes, home on leave, / Or wounded in a mentionable place. / You worship decorations; you believe / That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace" (Sassoon 79). He adopts a mother's point of view in "The Hero", in which a woman feels proud as she hears of her son's death on the battlefield: "[...] her

weak eyes / Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy, / Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy" (Sassoon 29).

10. The dissolution of bodies is suggested from the opening description of the restaurant: "The waiters had to melt to get past the backs of the chairs." (667).

11. I am grateful to Penny Summerfield and Suzanne Hobson for drawing my attention to the meaningful name of the literary game.

12. The connection between eggs, religion—the egg being a symbol for Easter—and politics may evoke Swift's war between "Big-Endians" and "Little-Endians" in *Gulliver's Travels*.

ABSTRACTS

Elizabeth Bowen's short story "Careless Talk" (1941) stages four characters, two women and two men having lunch in a restaurant. The text is mainly composed of their incessant, light conversation. Yet, despite the obvious abundance of food and words, absence and lack are suggested both through narration and dialogue. The social gathering thus becomes an image of the theatre of war revealing the fear of the characters confronted with the threat of annihilation and destruction.

But beyond the overwhelming presence of the war, another conflict arises, opposing men to women. The story lies in taboos, double meanings, polyphony and intersemiotic echoes betraying an attempt to preserve normalised relationships, including the most stereotypical gendered identities which can be self-inflicted, precisely because the characters' sense of their position in society is upset.

La nouvelle d'Elizabeth Bowen "Careless Talk" (1941) met en scène un repas au restaurant réunissant quatre personnages, deux hommes et deux femmes, à travers leur conversation légère mais incessante. Malgré l'apparente abondance de nourriture et de mots, la narration comme le dialogue révèlent l'absence, le vide latent. Le rituel social devient ainsi un théâtre de guerre où affleurent l'angoisse de la disparition et la menace qui pèse sur l'existence de chacun.

Mais au-delà du conflit en cours, une seconde ligne de front se fait jour, opposant identités féminines et masculines. Le texte multiplie les silences imposés, les doubles sens, les échos polyphoniques et intersémiotiques qui renvoient toujours aux identités sexuées, à la perpétuation volontaire ou subie des relations normées de genre alors même que (et précisément parce que) la société subit des bouleversements profonds et se trouve menacée.

INDEX

Keywords: war, short story, language, dialogue, gender, women, food, war posters

Mots-clés: guerre, nouvelle, langue, parole, dialogue, genre, femmes, nourriture, affiches de guerre

AUTHORS

CÉLINE MAGOT

Maître de Conférences

Université de Toulouse 2 - Le Mirail

celine.magot@univ-tlse2.fr