Jane Austen, Elizabeth Bowen, and the Novel

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THIS ESSAY EXAMINES the engagement of the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen with the works of Jane Austen. Through a reading of Bowen's extensive critical writing on Austen as well as of her second novel, *The Last September* (1929), the essay demonstrates how Bowen's engagement with Austen shaped her own writing and conception of the novel, particularly with regard to the use of dialogue and the depiction of Englishness. The essay also briefly considers the ways in which this process is exemplary of broader developments in the period.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw an unprecedented rise in popular and critical interest in Jane Austen's works, which resulted in her canonisation as a major English literary classic. Early twentieth-century writers in particular came to consider Austen's novels as paradigmatic of the novel form itself and a source of inspiration when thinking about the future of the genre.[1] One of the most prolific writers on Austen in the first half of the twentieth century was the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen, whose writings exemplify this contemporary interest in Austen, while her own fiction was shaped by her engagement with Austen in various ways. Some studies of Bowen's novels have noted her interest in Austen and its reflection in her works in passing, often slotting Bowen into literary genealogies in which

[1] See also Brian Southam's observation, about the decades (1870–1940) that constitute the focus of the second volume of his *Critical Heritage* of Austen, that '[i]t was during this period … that Jane Austen became recognised as one of the supreme artists of the novel. The serious discussion of her work became an arena for examining central issues in fiction – realism, narrative, the treatment of character, humour, irony and so on; and within these discussions are some remarkable anticipations of modern criticism' (B. C. Southam, 'Preface', in id. (ed.), *Jane Austen. The Critical Heritage*, vol. ii: *1870–1940* (London 1987) pp. ix–x: ix).

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Austen features prominently.[2] Nevertheless, there has been no comprehensive critical investigation of the relationship between the two writers. This essay will take some initial steps towards examining that relationship, through a reading of Bowen's critical writing on Austen as well as of her second novel, *The Last September* (1929), which shows most clearly how her engagement with Austen helped Bowen develop her own early literary style (as well as think through a few key thematic concerns) in ways that she herself came to conceptualise only much later.

To theorise this connection, I follow Elizabeth Scott-Baumann in using the word 'engagement' to refer to interactions that are closer to a more generous 'conversation' (albeit, in this case, with a dead writer) than most traditional theories of literary influence have allowed for, and a more personal interaction than theories of intertextuality would accommodate.[3] To say that Bowen 'engaged' with Austen is to describe a process of attentive reading, careful selection, affinity, and distancing. It is a process that was guided not only by Bowen's literary preferences but also her need to address what she perceived as shortcomings in her own writing and the fiction of her time. In that sense, 'engagement' also takes on its obsolete sense of 'an inducement': engaging with Jane Austen as an *encouragement* to new ways of writing.[4]

Like many of her contemporaries, Bowen regarded Austen as the apogee of the English novel, 'a point nearer perfection than it has reached since',[5] a master of the techniques of novel-writing, from plot to characterisation to dialogue.[6] Bowen came to these works late – in a piece on 'What Jane Austen Means To Me' she confessed that she had not read Austen until the age of 22: a deliberate omission as part of a 'resistance … against propaganda in her favour'.[7] The first novel she did pick up was *Pride and Prejudice*, while staying at an Italian hotel by Lake Como.[8] If Bowen's memory is correct, this

[2] For example, see Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh 2003) p. 42; Lauren Elkin, 'Across the Other Channel: Elizabeth Bowen and Modernist Mediation', in Claire Davison et al. (eds.), *Cross-Channel Modernisms* (Edinburgh 2020) pp. 199–214: 199; and Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives*, foreword by Ann Wordsworth (New York 1995) p. xv.

[3] Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, *Forms of Engagement: Women, Poetry and Culture, 1640–1680* (Oxford 2013) p. 17.

[4] 'engagement' (n.), *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9828548191> (accessed March 2024).

[5] Elizabeth Bowen, 'Jane Austen', in Derek Verschoyle (ed.), *The English Novelists* (London 1936) pp. 99–110: 99.

[6] Ibid., p. 109, and Elizabeth Bowen, *English Novelists* (London 1942) p. 26.

[7] Elizabeth Bowen, 'What Jane Austen Means To Me', *Everybody's Weekly*, 10 May 1954; repr. in *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh 2008) pp. 225–30: 225.

[8] Ibid., p. 226.

would have been six years before the publication of her debut novel, *The Hotel* (1927), which is set on the Italian riviera and which at one point references *Pride and Prejudice*: one of its characters compares another character, an elderly lady who is the patroness of a living, to Lady Catherine de Bourgh – which prompts her interlocutor, the vicar Milton, to think of himself as Mr Collins's equivalent and wonder 'who should be his Charlotte'.[9] Such explicit references to Austen remain rare in Bowen's novels, however.[10]

While Bowen first encountered Austen shortly after the First World War, most of her essays, speeches, and broadcasts about Austen and her works date from about 1940 onwards. It was only Bowen's growing success as a writer that increasingly secured invitations to contribute to anthologies, newspaper columns, and radio broadcasts. The piece cited above on 'What Jane Austen Means To Me', for instance, was composed by Bowen in 1954 as part of a series in *Everybody's Weekly* for which writers were invited to talk about their favourite authors from the past. Its narrowly autobiographical angle is understandably absent from the few pieces she wrote in the 1930s and early 1940s.

Bowen's public engagement with Austen was not limited to critical and autobiographical writing; she also took a role in Austen's popular reassessment. She was an active early member of the Austen Society (founded 1940), between 1949 and 1961 served on the society's committee, and in 1950 addressed its Annual Grand Meeting (unfortunately, her speech appears to have been lost).[11] In 1948, she served as one of the judges of the *Sanditon* competition for which entrants submitted endings to the unfinished manuscript of Austen's last novel.[12] When she appeared on *Desert Island Discs* in 1957, *Emma* served as her book of choice.[13]

[9] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Hotel* (1927), Vintage Classics (London 2003) p. 74.

[10] One other should be mentioned here: in *The Death of the Heart*, published in 1938, one of the characters, Anna, refers to her governess, whose name is Miss Yardes, as 'Miss Taylor' – the name of Emma Woodhouse's governess in Austen's *Emma*. On the basis of parallels in the 'governess situation' and between the characters of both novels, Victoria Warren argues that Bowen is 're-writing the plot of *Emma*' in *The Death of the Heart* ('"Experience means nothing till it repeats itself": Elizabeth Bowen's "The Death of the Heart" and Jane Austen's "Emma"', *Modern Language Studies*, 29/1 (1999) pp. 131-54). Without a consideration of the wider context of Bowen's engagement with Austen, however, the reach of such a reading remains limited.

[11] *Collected Reports of the Jane Austen Society 1949–1965*, introd. Elizabeth Jenkins (Alton, Hants. 1996) p. x.

[12] Allan Hepburn, 'Introduction', in *Listening In: Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews by Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh 2010) pp. 1–23: 18–19. While the judges' commentary on the submissions survives, Hepburn notes that 'it is a collaborative, and very brief, document, that bears no trace of Bowen's flair' (p. 19).

[13] Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 16.

In March 1942, the BBC aired Bowen's experimental radio play, *New Judgement: Elizabeth Bowen on Jane Austen*, in which a narrator tells the story of Austen's life, only to be interrupted constantly by Austen's sister Cassandra, her niece Fanny, and eventually even by Austen herself.[14] The play provides insight into Bowen's view of Austen as a literary-historical figure at the time. It starts with the narrator introducing Austen's biography, only for Cassandra Austen to immediately intrude on the narrative:

> NARRATOR: … The Rev. Mr Austen, Jane's father, a happily-married clergyman of good family, saw at Steventon his eight children grow up. Jane herself was to live here till she was twenty-six. She had, apart from her six brothers, one sister – Cassandra –
> CASSANDRA (*In eager affirmation*): – Yes –
> NARRATOR (*Startled*): Miss Cassandra? – I did not know you were here!
> CASSANDRA: She would desire me to be present.
> NARRATOR (*A little rattled*): Of course – naturally – I do see – yes. (*Picking up again in a more even tone*) Cassandra, her senior by two years.[15]

Initially, the narrator attempts to continue to follow the script and engage with the voices from the past – Austen's niece, Fanny, soon joins Cassandra – as little as possible; when the voice of Jane Austen herself makes itself heard, however, the narrator is more and more forced into the background:

> CASSANDRA: … Fanny, she was, I believe, better known to you than to any human being besides myself.
> FANNY: Know her? She taught me to know myself. I laid bare to her every shade of my feeling. – 'Am I in love *this* time, tell me, *am* I in love?' She always knew – 'Fanny', she said …
> JANE'S VOICE (*Picking up*): – YOU ARE NOT IN LOVE.
> NARRATOR (*Puzzled*): Miss Cassandra – was that you speaking?
> CASSANDRA: No.
> JANE'S VOICE: You are not in love, Fanny.
> FANNY (*Rapturously*): Aunt Jane!
> JANE'S VOICE: Fanny … You are the delight of my life. You are inimitable, irresistible. Such letters as you have lately sent! Such a description of your queer little heart! Such a lovely display – of what imagination does![16]

[14] *New Judgement: Elizabeth Bowen on Jane Austen*, in *Listening In*, ed. Hepburn, pp. 39–55.
[15] Ibid., p. 39.
[16] Ibid., p. 41.

While the conceit of the narrator being progressively overwhelmed by the voices of Austen, her relatives (a good part of whose contributions is lifted from the letters), and fictional characters (despite its relative brevity, the play includes dramatised scenes from *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* as well as a discussion of Austen's death by herself, Fanny, and Cassandra) only carries so far, the radio play is reflective of Bowen's engagement with Austen's style: the narrator's conventional, somewhat heavy-handed exposition soon gives way to unruly, spirited conversation, a chorus of voices that drives the dramatic progress. This is the style in which Bowen herself also strove to write. Among the qualities she admired most in Austen's novels was their narrative economy, which Bowen interpreted as part of a literary-historical teleology interrupted by the Victorians and picked up again only by modern novelists, as she proposed in 1948:

> [T]hat her Victorian successors did not choose to learn more from her is to be regretted. Only now, perhaps, are we returning to the idea that bulk of words, in a novel, is not a virtue – *her* novels do, it is true, attain to a certain length, but that is because much happens, not because much is said.[17]

This view of Austen as a direct precursor of modern styles recurs throughout Bowen's writings. The idea of sparseness she furthermore connects with Austen's morality, which in her view consists of the 'art … to make little things largely felt'.[18] In this regard, too, Bowen could find a model in Austen, describing her own goal as a writer as trying to 'use fewer words and make the words do more'.[19] Austen's use of comparatively few words, her 'qualities of condensation' and 'impulse to clip and prune', as Mary August Ward put it, had been noted by an increasing number of critics since the late nineteenth century.[20] The anti-Victorian streak in Bowen's argument, meanwhile, is not unique to her writings but can be found in the comments of several modernist writers and critics who felt that Austen could provide a superior model to the early twentieth-century writer.[21]

[17] Elizabeth Bowen, 'Introduction', in Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London 1948); repr. in *People, Places, Things*, ed. Hepburn, pp. 217–24: 223. Elizabeth Bowen, 'We Write Novels: An Interview with Walter Allen', in *The Weight of a World of Feeling: Reviews and Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Evanston, Ill. 2017), pp. 24–9: 28.

[18] Bowen, 'What Austen Means to Me', pp. 229–30.

[19] Bowen, 'We Write Novels', p. 28.

[20] [Mary Augusta Ward], 'Style and Miss Austen', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 51 (1885) pp. 84–91; repr. in Southam (ed.), *The Critical Heritage*, ii. 180–7: 185.

[21] Most prominently, Virginia Woolf, in her *Phases of Fiction*, had exemplarily compared the supposedly heavy-handed style of Charles Dickens to the 'tighte[r] …

Besides Austen's narrative economy, the two aspects of her writing that fascinated Bowen most, and the engagement with which had the most discernible impact on her own fiction, were the use of dialogue for the purposes of characterisation and plot development, and the depiction of Englishness. Especially in her wartime writings, Bowen is closely concerned with Austen's characteristics as an 'English' writer, specifically. Her slim volume of popular literary history, *English Novelists* (1942), through its introduction is placed firmly within a wartime patriotic programme of extolling an 'English heritage' that formed the basis of the ostensible heroism of the nation in the present day.[22] For Bowen, it was only 'natural to want our writers beside us as we face this new phase of human experience'.[23] The tradition in which she places Austen is one in which 'the English have continued to show and to see themselves – islanders, haughty, puzzled, at once saved and graced by a comicality to which they are not blind'.[24] As Heather Bryant Jordan has noted, Bowen's preoccupation with her own Anglo-Irishness dominated much of her wartime writing.[25] In some ways, her attachment to England was nevertheless bolstered by the Second World War; in a letter to William Plomer, she later explained that she had 'adored' the country under Churchill's leadership, but afterwards became more and more 'unstuck' from it.[26] While quintessentially English, Austen in Bowen's view is unlike other English writers: 'She could not have been other than English – yet she stands a little apart from other writers we have in an artistry that no sentiment blurred, no theory narrowed and no rancour or prejudice side-tracked.'[27] Most 'English novelists', in Bowen's view, 'wear their nationality as a shackle rather than as a decoration of honour' – and Austen was the exception to that.[28] Bowen's own position, by contrast, always remained that of an onlooker partially on the outside of that Englishness:

structure' and 'knife'-like style of Austen: 'Phases of Fiction, Part Two', *The Bookman* (May 1929) pp. 269–79: 271–2.

[22] Bowen, *English Novelists*, p. 7.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., p. 8.

[25] Heather Bryant Jordan, *How Will the Heart Endure: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War* (Ann Arbor, Mich. 1992) p. 113.

[26] Letter to William Plomer, 24 Sept. 1945 (Durham University Archives and Special Collections, Plomer MSS 19/2).

[27] Bowen, *English Novelists*, p. 26. This observation is similar to Virginia Woolf's well-known assertion: '[h]ere was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching': *A Room of One's Own* (1929; New York 1957) p. 71.

[28] Bowen, 'Jane Austen', pp. 99–100.

> As an Irishwoman, I never take England quite for granted: the country and its inhabitants for me continue to have the fascination of slight strangeness. Even if I could be anything like such a good writer as Jane Austen, I could never get stimulus, as she did, from a small, fixed world and an ultra-familiar scene.[29]

Nowhere are this 'slight strangeness' – and the difference to Austen's unashamed Englishness – more evident than in the depiction of Anglo-Irish relations in Bowen's second novel, *The Last September*. Set in County Cork during the Troubles of 1920, it centres around the inhabitants of an Irish 'Big House' called Danielstown: Sir Richard and Lady Naylor; their orphaned niece, 19-year-old Lois Farquar; and their nephew Laurence.[30] There are a few obvious parallels with Austen's world: Bowen's novel conforms to Austen's famous dictum about the '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village' being the ideal subject;[31] it depicts landed families with considerable property, and whatever servants exist in this setting are largely invisible. More particularly, the heroine of the novel is a young woman, well connected and looking to get married. While Lois's status as the impecunious but observant niece dependent on the aunt and uncle who take her in might remind one of *Mansfield Park*, the presence of junior British army officers provides opportunities for flirtation and matchmaking just as the militia does in *Pride and Prejudice*.[32] In Bowen's novel as well as in Austen's, an overbearing and controlling aunt does what she can to prevent the marriage of the heroine from taking place. Class barriers are a core theme, especially in relation to the marriage plot, while hypocrisy and pretension are targets of gentle satire throughout. The differences, meanwhile, are most obvious in terms of plot. Bowen depicts the effects of sweeping social and political change on her characters; the way in which *The Last September* presents readers with the falling-apart of a quasi-Austenian setting under

[29] Elizabeth Bowen, 'Note for *The Broadsheet* on *The Heat of the Day*', in *Weight of a World of Feeling*, ed. Hepburn, pp. 12–13: 13. Austen noted essentially the opposite problem: in a letter to her fiction-writing niece, Anna Austen Lefroy, she recommended that Anna not write about an Ireland she did not know: '[W]e think you had better not leave England. Let the Portmans go to Ireland, but as you know nothing of the Manners there, you had better not go with them. You will be in danger of giving false representations.' Letter to Anna Austen, 10–18 Aug. 1814, in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd edn. (Oxford 1995) pp. 267–70: 269.

[30] The novel is often read in conjunction with Bowen's history of her ancestral home in County Cork, *Bowen's Court* (1942). See e.g. Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation* (London 1981), and Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen*.

[31] Jane Austen, letter to Anna Austen, 9–18 Sept. 1814: *Letters*, ed. Le Faye, pp. 274–6: 275.

[32] A parallel noted in Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, pp. 17–18.

modern conditions is one of the aspects that locate the novel so firmly in its time. It is one of only two Bowen novels to be set in Ireland – a setting that necessarily complicates any comparison with Austen's works.

The Last September is marked by an atmosphere of drained energy and obsolescence. The Naylors, like Bowen herself, belong to that 'race inside a race', the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy.[33] The novel portrays a family out of touch with the land around it, devoid of any social function extending beyond its own upper-class circles. Outside the borders of the demesne – the Irish equivalent of the English country house's park – the Irish War of Independence rages. The Naylors remain uneasily poised between the factions, feeling rooted in an Irishness increasingly at odds with the political condition of the country but socially and culturally connected to England. Rarely is this more visible than in their relationship to the armed forces in the country and the English officers stationed nearby. While Austen's Bennet family in *Pride and Prejudice* can look upon the militia as rooted in their native soil, the British soldiers in *The Last September* reflect back onto the Naylors their condition as semi-aliens in the country they inhabit.[34] The officers provide a source of entertainment and flirtation – dances, games of tennis, visits for tea – to the Naylors and their social circle, but the latter withhold from the soldiers any information on rebel activities that they happen to obtain.

Like the Napoleonic Wars in Austen's novels, the Irish War of Independence takes place almost entirely off-stage; to the Naylors, it seems but a distant irritation. Laurence sarcastically proposes that it 'would be the greatest pity if we were to become a republic and all these lovely troops were taken away'.[35] His uncle Richard seems to regard the war primarily as an intrusion upon the peace and quiet of a settled country lifestyle: the soldiers crowd the country 'with nothing to do but dance and poke old women out of their beds to look for guns' (*LS*, p. 25). The beginning of autumn signals to him the beginning of a quieter season, to which the war had better adhere: 'There should be less of this ambushing and skirmishing and hey-fidaddling now that the days are drawing in' (*LS*, p. 185).

[33] Bowen, 'We Write Novels', p. 25.

[34] Austen, it should be noted, was by no means unaware of the role of the military in quelling civil unrest, even at home in England. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Darcy purchases a commission for Mr Wickham that allows the latter to swap the militia for the army; however, Wickham is then deployed not abroad but to England's industrial north; see Christopher Kent, '"Real Solemn History" and Social History', in David Monaghan (ed.), *Jane Austen in a Social Context* (Totowa 1981) pp. 86–104: 100.

[35] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (Harmondsworth 1982) p. 26; henceforth *LS*.

In his rhetorical gestures, Sir Richard resembles the classic befuddled, benign but out-of-touch landowner whom we also find in Austen; his reference to 'this ambushing and skirmishing and hey-fidaddling' has a similar rhythm to Austen's Sir John Middleton's benevolent ridicule of 'all this tumbling about and spraining of ancles' among the young people.[36] Sir Richard's comically misdirected irritation stands in stark contrast to the very real violence that takes place beyond the realm of the Naylors' direct experience. Lois somewhat frivolously deplores the latter state of affairs: 'How is it', she asks, reflecting on her emotional distance from an attack on a Royal Irish Constabulary barracks, 'that in this country that ought to be full of such violent realness, there seems nothing for me but clothes and what people say?' (*LS*, p. 49).

Maud Ellmann aptly characterises Danielstown as a 'muffled world'.[37] Its subdued lifestyle goes hand in hand with a noticeable lack of movement. Whatever mobility features is provided by visitors to the house. Bowen, however, seems to have strongly associated the sociability of the Big House with Austen's world, where so much of the social exchange relies on visits. In an unpublished letter to L. P. Hartley in 1957, she describes such an exchange with the circle of her friend Edward Sackville-West ('Eddy'), who had recently bought Cooleville House at Clogheen:

> I'm delighted to hear from Eddy that you are coming to him in September: this is definite, isn't it? A Jane-Austen-like to and fro goes on between Cooleville and Bowen's Court, so I shall greedily rely on seeing you a great deal, and I think we could all have a very pleasant time.[38]

While Bowen casts herself in the role of sociable Austenian landowner, the lives of the protagonists of *The Last September* tend towards the condition of immobility.[39] Bowen did believe that the Anglo-Irish upper-class lifestyle involved an above-average predilection for outdoor activities.[40] But the Naylors prefer to stay within the boundaries of the demesne, and even there, the frayed net separating the tennis court from the shrubbery becomes a symbol of the decay not only of the house and demesne, but of a

[36] Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Edward Copeland (Cambridge 2006) p. 54.
[37] Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 64.
[38] Elizabeth Bowen, letter to L. P. Hartley, 14 Aug. 1957 (University of Manchester Library Special Collections, LPH/2/1/2/49).
[39] Bennett and Royle, *Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*, p. 14.
[40] Elizabeth Bowen, 'Ireland Makes Irish', repr. in *People, Places, Things*, ed. Hepburn, pp. 155–61: 155.

whole lifestyle.[41] In stark contrast to the by now almost proverbial 'improvement of the estate' that is the goal of any worthy Austenian landowner, the Naylors represent a class that has long lost any ameliorative instinct.[42]

If *The Last September* has a core plot, it is the love story between Lois Farquar and the young English subaltern, Gerald Lesworth.[43] What keeps the two estranged from each other from the very beginning is a fundamental incompatibility. Gerald's conception of love is matter-of-fact and superficial: 'He did not conceive of love as a nervous interchange but as something absolute, out of the scope of thought, beyond himself, matter for a confident outward rather than anxious inward looking' (*LS*, p. 41). Of Lois, we learn that she is looking for something more, but her own ideas of love and marriage are equally naive: 'One of the things Lois chiefly wanted to know about marriage was – how long it took one, sleeping with the same person every night, to outlive the temptation to talk well into the morning?' (*LS*, p. 12). In a novel in which speech regularly replaces action, such a train of thought is hardly surprising; but it also points to Lois's particular fascination with talk. Her relationship with Gerald at all points is characterised by a failure to communicate effectively.

Jane Austen's characters, too, often become romantically entangled out of boredom or simply because no other suitable young people are available – the way that, in *Persuasion*, Frederick Wentworth and Anne Elliot originally fall in love because 'he had nothing to do, and she had hardly any body to love'.[44] In *Sense and Sensibility*, Edward Ferrars develops a romantic attachment to Lucy Steele not merely out of 'ignorance of the world', but also simply for 'want of employment'.[45] In each of these cases, that initial connection proves unsound. Lois and Gerald, however, seem stuck at that stage, unable to move on to a deeper attachment.

The whole love affair, then, is doomed from the start. Prejudice there certainly is, if not pride. Lois never stops feeling that Gerald's image of her is rooted in 'illusions', that he does not understand her real self (*LS*, p. 45).

[41] See also Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 58.

[42] See Alastair Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore, Md. 1994). The erosion of the moral core of Danielstown can be compared to that of Austen's Mansfield Park with its reliance on the slave labour that supports Sir Thomas Bertram's Antiguan plantation, as noted most prominently by Edward Said: 'Jane Austen and Empire', in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York 1993) pp. 80–97.

[43] The autobiographical background of this episode is noted by Maud Ellmann in 'Shadowing Elizabeth Bowen', *New England Review*, 24/1 (2003) pp. 144–69: 165.

[44] Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. Janet Todd and Antje Blank (Cambridge 2006) p. 28.

[45] Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, p. 410.

Their attraction to each other often seems tepid. The growing inevitability of a permanent romantic commitment between the two highlights how little sense of direction the inhabitants of Danielstown have. It is a short step from Lois's thought 'I must marry Gerald' to the more passive realisation that it 'was inevitable that she should marry Gerald' (*LS*, pp. 98, 166).

In the end, it is not Gerald's or Lois's insight into their mutual incompatibility through which their marriage is averted, but Lady Naylor's injunction against it. A noted suburbophobe, the revelation that Gerald hails from Surrey leaves her horrified: 'part of it is opposite the Thames Embankment. Practically nobody who lives in Surrey ever seems to have been heard of' (*LS*, p. 58). The key scene in Lady Naylor's intervention, meanwhile, is so strongly reminiscent of its counterpart in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as to suggest a direct echo. Towards the end of that novel, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, having heard rumours about an impending engagement between her nephew Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, contrives to see Elizabeth alone to attempt to talk her out of pursuing that connection. Similarly, near the end of *The Last September*, Lady Naylor arranges to speak to Gerald Lesworth privately to dissuade him from pursuing her niece. The parallels between these two scenes, which fulfil similar functions and are almost identical in terms of their length and placement within the plot, are as remarkable and characteristic of the two novels as are the differences between them. Both scenes feature a controlling aunt aiming to dissuade an ostensibly unworthy suitor from marrying a nephew or niece. The styles and effects of these materteral interventions are highly divergent, however.

Lady Catherine's approach is a direct one. She arrives in the morning, unconventionally early – the reader of *The Last September* is reminded of Lady Naylor's pronouncement on the unfortunate habit of the English to be 'socially visible before midday' (*LS*, p. 193) – and makes no pretence about her intentions: 'You can be at no loss, Miss Bennet, to understand the reason of my journey hither.'[46] Lady Naylor, who has invited Gerald for an afternoon 'chat' at the drawing-room of an acquaintance in town, prefers a more oblique conversational tactic which, to some extent, is due to her preference for 'Irish' over 'English' habits. While Elizabeth Bennet enters into conversation with Lady Catherine with a healthy awareness of their mutual dislike, Gerald, upon arrival for the meeting with 'this now divinely probable aunt of his' (*LS*, p. 177), cannot anticipate the turn which the conversation is about to take. Lady Naylor paves the way for her dismissal of his attachment to Lois by enquiring about Gerald's family

[46] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Pat Rogers (Cambridge 2006) p. 391. Henceforth *P&P*.

background (*LS*, pp. 178–9). There is a rare moment of honesty regarding class difference: while Lady Catherine de Bourgh condemns without embarrassment the 'upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune' (*P&P*, pp. 394–5), Lady Naylor, with her Irish sensibilities, feels some compunction at bringing up the issue:

> She had now to tilt straight at indecency. There was this question of money – a subject which the English made free with, as free with as what was below their diaphragms, but from which her whole modesty shrank. 'You may think me dreadful,' she said, 'but there are things in life one must face. After all, I am Lois's aunt … ' (*LS*, p. 180)

This awareness of the 'indecency' of the point, fleeting though it may be on Lady Naylor's part, nevertheless highlights the advantages of Bowen's decision to allow the reader insight into the minds of both parties. One might momentarily feel a degree of sympathy with Lady Naylor, sympathy that Austen's counterpart in *Pride and Prejudice* never elicits. Moreover, unlike Mr Darcy's aunt, who famously meets with strong resistance from her interlocutor, Lady Naylor encounters so little push-back from confused, overwhelmed Gerald that she can stop the engagement without ever really having to assert herself:

> 'Then I understand you don't like this: you're going to stop it?'
> 'Now, my dear Mr Lesworth, do think: would I ever "stop" anything?'
> '– You're going to stop it because I'm too young and too poor and not "county" enough – or whatever I ought to be.'
> 'You have entirely misunderstood me,' cried Lady Naylor, hurt. (*LS*, p. 181)

Compared to the scene in *Pride and Prejudice*, the roles of intellectual inferior and superior are inverted here. Hypocrisy is something that Lady Catherine and Lady Naylor have in common, though to varying degrees – when Lady Catherine reminds us that her 'character has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness' (*P&P*, p. 391), her self-assessment is not entirely without justification, whereas Lady Naylor's exclamation, 'would I ever "stop" anything?' is most likely the result of self-delusion rather than cruelty. It is the response to hypocrisy, however, that sets the conversations apart. Gerald emerges from this confrontation 'without rancour' and parts ways with Lady Naylor quite amicably (*LS*, p. 181), whereas his counterpart in *Pride and Prejudice*, who has been more obviously ill used by her forthright interlocutor, is left feeling resentful (*P&P*, p. 396). In contrast to Gerald, Elizabeth Bennet invariably finds ways to deflate her verbal

attacker's insincerities subtly but decidedly, as, for instance, in her reaction to Lady Catherine's opening:

> 'A report of a most alarming nature reached me two days ago. I was told that not only your sister was on the point of being most advantageously married, but that *you*, that Miss Elizabeth Bennet, would, in all likelihood, be soon afterwards united to my nephew, my own nephew, Mr Darcy. Though I *know* it must be a scandalous falsehood, though I would not injure him so much as to suppose the truth of it possible, I instantly resolved on setting off for this place, that I might make my sentiments known to you.'
> 'If you believed it impossible to be true,' said Elizabeth, colouring with astonishment and disdain, 'I wonder you took the trouble of coming so far. What could your ladyship propose by it?'
> 'At once to insist upon having such a report universally contradicted.'
> 'Your coming to Longbourn, to see me and my family,' said Elizabeth, coolly, 'will be rather a confirmation of it; if, indeed, such a report is in existence.' (*P&P*, pp. 391–2)

In this – wittier and more combative – exchange, the reader also recognises that the stakes are higher: Elizabeth Bennet is defending her individual autonomy as well as her family honour. Gerald Lesworth, by comparison, does not put up much of a fight because he lacks belief in what he fights for. Of the characters on the other side of the class divide, Lady Catherine, despite her contrary claims, obviously *does* believe that her nephew may have fallen prey to this ambitious low-born, whereas Lady Naylor never fully believes in the possibility of Lois's serious attachment to Gerald. There is an added narrative irony that results from the exchange in *Pride and Prejudice* – as Elizabeth hints at the end of the passage quoted above, Lady Catherine's visit may serve to confirm the very rumours of an attachment that Lady Catherine is seeking to dispel; and, as Darcy later points out, it was his aunt's reaction to that visit that emboldened him to address himself to Elizabeth again, thus ensuring the opposite outcome (*P&P*, p. 423). Lady Catherine, who assures Elizabeth that 'I will carry my point' (*P&P*, p. 397), fails to do so; her Anglo-Irish counterpart, who purports not to *have* a point, carries it all the more decidedly.

With the conversation between Lady Naylor and Gerald Lesworth, Bowen is rewriting a scene from *Pride and Prejudice* and using it to highlight some of the core concerns in her portrayal of the twilight days of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. In terms of their place and function within each novel's plot as well as their structure, the passages are very similar. Many of

the differences derive from what we might call the ideological significance of these verbal skirmishes. What Lady Catherine and Elizabeth Bennet discuss has serious implications: nothing less than the future socioeconomic status, reputation, and society connections of their respective families, which in turn are depicted as belonging to a thriving and meaningful larger social system.[47] Lady Naylor, on the other hand, may rehearse the same elitist and classist gestures as her Regency forebear, but they appear as empty husks of once meaningful categories of the social order. Consequently, marriage – as a union of individuals as well as families – appears devalued in *The Last September*.

Gerald Lesworth is killed by rebels while out on patrol, offstage, where most of the violence in *The Last September* takes place. The Naylors' reactions provide some illustration of Bowen's attempts to make 'little things largely felt'. The true emotional impact on the characters, and its potential to reveal facets of their moral setup, emerges in moments of great subtlety. Lady Naylor finds herself torn between genuine compassion and habitual haughtiness. Having written a letter of condolence to Gerald's mother, she, as an Anglo-Irish woman, regards it as a bit tactless that the mother in her reply should describe Gerald's death – brought about as it was by the English forces' fight against Irish rebels – as 'heroic' (*LS*, p. 205). Lois's reaction, meanwhile, is remarkable not least from a formal perspective. After the family has been informed of Gerald's death, Laurence comes upon Lois in the grounds of the house:

> His look became almost personal, as though he had recognized her. He said: 'I think I should. I expect – I don't know – one probably gets past things.'
> 'But look here, there are things that one can't –' (She meant: 'He loved me, he believed in the British Empire.') 'At least, I don't want to.'
> 'Perhaps you are right,' he said, studying, with an effort of sight and of comprehension, some unfamiliar landscape. (*LS*, p. 203)

The conversation between Lady Naylor and Gerald has already shown how Bowen's experiments with dialogue – particularly in highly emotional moments – are characterised by interruptions and ellipses. In the scene above, we find another feature of Bowen's dialogue, one that is key to her effort to write 'modern' speech: the unspoken within the spoken. Presented here in parentheses, we are shown the thought that underlies Lois's

[47] On the larger significance of Austen's marriages, see e.g. Patrick Parrinder, *Nation and Novel* (Oxford 2006) pp. 188–95.

searching, inarticulate utterance that '"there are things that one can't –" (She meant: "He loved me, he believed in the British Empire.").' The result is a parallelism deployed to significant effect; however, this marked only a first step in the direction Bowen wished to take. Dialogue, in her eyes, was among the most complex components of fictional writing, and one which the moderns were beginning to reshape in fruitful ways. In a 1953 essay on 'The Technique of the Novel', she positions Austen as a model in this regard, once again contrasting her with the Victorians:[48]

> The Victorian novelists used dialogue … rather sadly, they were on the retreat from the high peak of excellence in which, in immediately pre-Victorian days, it was used by Jane Austen. And there is, in our time … I would say ever since the close of World War I … a very great revival in, interest in, and sense of importance of, the dialogue.[49]

While thus acknowledging the achievements of Austen in the technique of fictional dialogue, Bowen feels conscious of living in an age of rapid innovation in the representation of speech in literature. As with her discussion of Austen's stylistic concision, her estimation of Austen's dialogue (compared to that allegedly used by Victorian writers) is similar to other modernist writers' assessments – in the *Phases of Fiction* already quoted, Woolf had also praised Austen's use of dialogue for the purposes of plot advancement in her comparison with Dickens.[50]

More than any other feature of writing, Bowen believed, dialogue required a great deal of art to 'appear realistic without being so'. Its functions included characterisation, the exposition of relationships between characters, and the advancement of the plot.[51] Bowen thinks that dialogue is really a form of action: 'Short of a small range of physical acts – a fight, murder, love-making – dialogue is the most vigorous and visible interaction of which characters in a novel are capable. Speech is what the characters *do to each other*.'[52] This, of course, is with reference to the kind of novel that usually excludes most of those 'physical acts' but instead 'claims our attention through its resemblance to life' – in other words, realist fiction.[53]

[48] For an overview of Bowen's essays on writing (which briefly mentions Austen as well), see Allan Hepburn, 'The Heroic Today: Elizabeth Bowen and the Technique of the Novel', *Irish University Review*, 51/1 (2021) pp. 57–71.

[49] Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Technique of the Novel', in *Weight of a World of Feeling*, ed. Hepburn, pp. 14–24: 18.

[50] Woolf, 'Phases of Fiction, Part Two', p. 271.

[51] Elizabeth Bowen, 'Notes on Writing a Novel' (1945), in *Collected Impressions* (London 1950) pp. 249–63: 255.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Bowen, 'The Technique of the Novel', p. 19.

It also chimes with both the notice that contemporaries of Bowen's took of the way in which Austen's characters were conditioned intersubjectively, as (for instance) noted by Sylvia Townsend Warner in 1951, and with more recent research into the role of 'social cognition' in Austen's works.[54]

Bowen's mention of 'vigorous and visible' interaction in dialogue should not suggest that, in her writing, the affective and effective functions of dialogue cannot be subtle. Of the characters we encounter in *The Last September*, Lois Farquar is presented as the most sensitive to speech. More than other characters, she is aware of the relationship between speech and silence. The latter frequently is the state out of which Lois observes and listens to more verbal characters. But it can also have another effect on her, when, for example, she is confronted by Laurence's inattention:

> Laurence was comfortable to talk to because of his indifference to every shade of her personality. With him, she felt committed by speech itself to a display of such unfathomable silliness that she might just as well come out – and did – with assertions surprising even to herself. When he yawned, took a book up, said he was hungry or simply went away, she was not discountenanced. It was those tender, those receptive listeners to whom one felt afterwards sold and committed. (*LS*, p. 11)

Here, the lack of dialogue-as-action seems to compel the impulse to act via speech – offering both licence and a provocation. The recurring mention of commitment is characteristic of Lois, who, throughout the novel, in her social relations is both seeking commitment and visibly afraid of it.

As far as the form of dialogue was concerned, Bowen highlighted the modern impulse towards giving it a 'spontaneous and impulsive appearance', the very quality that required great artistic effort to achieve the appearance of artlessness mentioned above.[55] The interruptions, repetitions, and ellipses in the dialogue of *The Last September* can be assumed to be expressions of Bowen's effort to achieve that kind of effect.[56] Her attempts in that novel to innovate within the form of dialogue do not end there, however. Perhaps the most ambitious function of dialogue, in Bowen's

[54] Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Jane Austen* (1951; London 1964) p. 8; cf. Alan Palmer, 'The Novel and Social Cognition', in Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the English Novel* (Cambridge 2012) pp. 421–36: 425.

[55] Bowen, 'The Technique of the Novel', p. 20.

[56] The alternative view is Neil Corcoran's, who has argued that the elisions and ellipses in Bowen's style are the result of an encounter with the 'facts of a history whose most violent effects defy the capacity of her own fiction': *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford 2004) p. 46; see also pp. 39–60.

view, was to incorporate that which remained unspoken and thus invisible on the surface of characters' speech. She believed that at an earlier point in the history of literature – presumably she is once again thinking of the Victorians – novelists used to achieve this 'through a rather lengthy analysis or by what might be called inward description', a technique that the modern writer and reader alike have come to regard as potentially long-winded and lacking in dynamism.[57] In its stead, Bowen suggested, the modern novelist aimed to expand the range of dialogue beyond its traditional locutionary functions, in order to 'show what is betrayed by the speaker, show what may be present in his mind, or in his unconscious … if we can, we … suggest the pressure, somewhere within the speaker, of an unconscious force'.[58] This appears to present both a potential challenge to realism and an opportunity for its enhancement, as Bowen believed that 'we care most now to deal realistically with dialogue in the sense of not making persons more articulate than they would be in real life, and yet allowing something – what is behind their speech – to come through'.[59] This ability of dialogue to communicate the unsaid was something which Bowen's contemporaries increasingly analysed in the works of Austen – the most influential example being Mary Lascelles, who in 1939 had examined the way in which linguistic idiosyncrasies made each of Austen's characters' speech recognisably their own, but also made 'the talk of her people communicate to us more than they are aware of themselves'.[60] The narrator of Bowen's radio play on Austen, whose views in this regard we can safely take to reflect Bowen's, points to the combative potential of such talk, finding that Austen 'detected the ruling passion behind the easy remark. In her novels, her polished young men and women confront one another with laughing hostility – one feels, in her little dialogues of flirtation, the rivalry of two vigorous egotisms'.[61] Bowen's later observation, quoted above, that 'Speech is what the characters *do to each other*', can be read as echoing such observations.

While Bowen's conception of modern fictional dialogue was inspired at least partially by Austen, it did, of course, involve a number of departures from that model. The most significant one concerns the way of creating this very representation of the unsaid in the said. Perhaps most noticeable

[57] Bowen, 'The Technique of the Novel', p. 19.

[58] Ibid. The unconscious played a significant role in the efforts of writers in the period to develop new ways to represent human interiority; for a recent discussion, see Thalia Trigoni, *The Intelligent Unconscious in Modernist Literature and Science* (New York 2020).

[59] Bowen, 'The Technique of the Novel', p. 20.

[60] Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (Oxford 1939) p. 195. The role of the unconscious and unspoken in Austen's works has recently attracted more systematic attention, e.g. in John Wiltshire, *The Hidden Jane Austen* (Cambridge 2014).

[61] Bowen, *New Judgement*, p. 46.

on the page, one of the solutions which Bowen adopts to meet the modern challenge represents something of an intermediary step on the path towards the ideal she describes: the parenthetical insertions of thought and affect, as seen in the above-quoted interchange between Lois and Laurence after Gerald's death. We find them usually in passages of dialogue involving Lois, expressing not only her reactions to what is said but also, occasionally, almost meta-conversational reflections on the limits of speech. In the following scene, which takes place after the departure of Marda Norton from Danielstown, Lois meets Hugo Montmorency (whose behaviour towards Marda has left her rather taken aback) in the shrubbery:

> 'Apparently,' she said … 'Marda arrived quite safely.'
> 'It should be a surprise to us all,' said Hugo, sarcastic, 'that she has not fallen out of the train. … '
> 'And she says Kent is dull.'
> 'I cannot believe *she* finds it so,'
> 'She is frightfully philosophic. Perhaps she was dull here.' (She thought: 'Even now, shall we never be natural?') (*LS*, p. 165)

The lack of 'naturalness' (recalling, not least, Bowen's notion of artlessness in dialogue) noted here refers primarily to the phatic nature of the conversation, impacted as it is by the gendered and sexual barriers and tensions that exist between Lois and Hugo. As far as 'what is behind their speech' is concerned, however, the parenthesis may also suggest to the reader that what Lois's statement about the dullness of Danielstown is aiming to 'do' is provoke a stronger reaction from her stolid interlocutor. Earlier in this essay, the conversation between Lois and Gerald on the subject of Lois's subdued emotional reaction to the attack on the RIC barracks has been discussed, to the point where Gerald says:

> 'You know I could listen all day to you talking.'
> She thought: 'As though you could make me talk all day!' (*LS*, p. 49)

The passage continues with Lois's realisation that she has to 'cover the thought' by saying something else and preferably changing the topic. While still presented in the form of relatively straightforward narration inserted in a passage of dialogue, such moments clearly point to Bowen's desire to make the thoughts behind the spoken words visible within dialogue.

If we regard formal naturalism and the representation of the unconscious as Bowen's main areas of experimentation in dialogue in *The Last September*, we can find numerous passages that contain both. At the subalterns' dance

evening, Lois finds herself speaking with Gerald's fellow officer, the mentally distressed Daventry:

> 'Look here, seriously, about Lesworth –'
> 'Oh?' she inquired, suddenly cold inside.
> 'About our young friend –' He pulled up his chair close; she had a feeling like gates shutting. 'Tell me this –'
> But the roar of merriment … splintered off in a crash. Silence came, with hard impact. 'Thank God, *they've upset the gramophone*!' Daventry smacked his knee, remotely, as though rehearsing the gesture. His look decomposed in laughter. 'Done in,' he said, drawing life from the thought. … 'Really,' she thought, 'you laugh like Satan!' (*LS*, p. 157)

The menacing effect of Daventry's efforts to draw Lois into conversation is heightened by the recurring interruptions of his speech. Lois's association ('you laugh like Satan!'), presented here not in parenthetical brackets but as simple direct thought, is unusual enough in Bowen's style to appear very forceful in this instance: the thought seems on the verge of breaking out into speech, but only just remains contained. In her 'Notes on Writing a Novel', Bowen proposed that what characters '*intend* to say should be more evident, more striking (because of its greater inner importance to the plot) than what they arrive at *saying*'.[62] *The Last September* shows us Bowen experimenting with how to create this kind of speech.

Throughout her life, Bowen kept returning to Austen's novels, but as her oeuvre developed, her engagement with Austen became a less significant shaping factor. On the thematic level, Austen would remain a point of reference throughout Bowen's writing career, and some of the stylistic lessons she acknowledged – Austen's economy of style, and her use of dramatic and psychologically revealing dialogue – clearly stayed with her, but her fiction developed in other directions. Her first two novels, *The Hotel* and *The Last September*, had settings displaced from the life-world of most of their readers – an Italian tourist heterotopia and a historical novel of sorts. The 1930s proved Bowen's most productive decade as a novelist; after the war, she increasingly focused on writing short fiction and non-fiction. Much of her writing came to include macabre, occasionally supernatural elements that are a far cry from the generic conventions examined in this essay. For Bowen's early works, however, her intense engagement with Austen provided inspiration both on the thematic and formal levels. In the context of her wide-ranging literary interests, Bowen's frequent dismissal of the

[62] Bowen, 'Notes on Writing a Novel', p. 256.

Victorian novelists has sometimes puzzled critics.[63] I believe it can be explained partially by what has been studied in this essay: her deliberate reaching back – across the Victorians – to an Austenian tradition that provided her with inspiration for the development of a narrative style that went beyond the tradition which shaped her early fiction. *The Last September* emerges as a transitional text.

Bowen generally avoided admitting to being 'influenced' by any writer, particularly English ones – and especially so at times when she chose to emphasise her Irish allegiances for political reasons. Yet there was one writer for whom she continually made an exception. Even when, in a 1942 interview published in Seán Ó Faoláin's Irish literary magazine *The Bell*, Bowen categorically stated that she had 'never been influenced by any English writer' because those 'simply don't influence one', she added, conscientiously: 'with the possible exception of Jane Austen'.[64]

[63] See e.g. William Heath, *Elizabeth Bowen* (Madison, Wis. 1961) p. 19.
[64] Quoted in Bryant Jordan, *How Will the Heart Endure*, p. 113.

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