
Elizabeth Bowen, Modernism, and the Spectre of Anglo-Ireland

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Abstract. The recent scholarly focus on Elizabeth Bowen's modernism tends to reinforce a false dichotomy between Bowen as an Ascendancy Big House novelist and Bowen as a literary modernist. In keeping with Jameson's argument that the colonial experience is at the root of Western modernism, I propose that her representations of Anglo-Irish Big House culture, in *The Last September* in particular, are in fact focal points for understanding Bowen as a modernist, and I argue that the Gothic, with its unavoidable political and colonial resonances, is fundamental to Bowen's Irish modernism.

Key-Words. Bowen, modernism, Gothic, Big House, *The Last September*

Resumen. La crítica académica reciente en torno al Modernismo de Elizabeth Bowen tiende a reforzar la falsa dicotomía entre Bowen como novelista de la élite dirigente de la "Big House" y Bowen como modernista literaria. Suscribiendo el argumento de Jameson de que la experiencia colonial está en la base del Modernismo occidental, propongo que la representación de la cultura anglo-irlandesa de la Big House que nos ofrece la autora, particularmente en *The Last September*, es en realidad un aspecto clave para comprender a Bowen como modernista, a la vez que sostengo que el elemento gótico es fundamental en el Modernismo irlandés de Bowen.

Palabras claves. Bowen, modernismo, lo gótico, Big House, *The Last September*.

Literary modernism has been stereotyped as essentially apolitical, turning inward to focus on the psychological construction of the subject and elevating an aesthetic ideology that venerates Art as a self-enclosed, unitary end. Critical discussions of Irish modernist texts have played a large part in overturning this stereotype, with scholars rightly recognizing that the formal innovations of Irish modernism cannot be divorced from the social upheavals of its early twentieth century context. A primary interest in Irish Studies has often been to analyze writers who engage with issues of Irish politics, and their relation to nationalism in particular. Thus, while the focus on exposing the political and national elements in Irish modernist writers such as Joyce,

Yeats, or Elizabeth Bowen inherently challenges the notion of modernism as apolitical, it also distances them from the wider realm of transnational modernism. The interest in identifying a literature as belonging to an international category ("modernist") runs counter to the impulses of a field that claims a specifically national status for its literature. The tension that this creates is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the case of Elizabeth Bowen.

Early criticism of Bowen described her as a writer of ghost stories and "middlebrow" women's novels (Miller 2007: 354). With the rise of Irish Studies in the early 1990s, Bowen's work was examined through a lens largely influenced by the need to define and

categorize a canon. As a result, scholars identified Bowen as an Anglo-Irish Big House novelist, focusing on her novel *The Last September* and her memoir *Bowen's Court*.¹ Aligned with this identification, she is frequently placed in the tradition of the Anglo-Irish Gothic, following Le Fanu in particular. In the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, W.J. McCormack describes Bowen as a Gothic writer whose Protestant identity rendered her ambivalently Irish and stresses her “Big House inheritance” and “her reading of Le Fanu and James” (McCormack 1991: 853).

More recently, there has been an increasing critical focus on her work as modernist. This perspective gravitates to her short fiction and her writing around the time of the Second World War in making its claim for Bowen as a modernist writer. Sinéad Mooney sees Bowen's absence in “standard accounts of modernist literature” as stemming from Bowen's “insistent self-identification with her Anglo-Irish ‘race’” (Mooney 2007: 246). Brook Miller argues for her work as “a hybrid of modernist detachment and Victorian thematics”, while Keri Walsh tracks Bowen's engagement with Surrealism through her short fiction and claims a space for her “in the context of a modernist avant-garde” (Miller 2007: 363; Walsh 2007: 127).

However, this recent awareness of Bowen as modernist tends to reinforce a false dichotomy between Bowen as an Ascendancy Big House novelist and Bowen as a literary modernist. In keeping with Fredric Jameson's argument that the colonial experience is at the root of Western modernism, I want to suggest that Bowen's representations of Anglo-Irish Big House culture are in fact focal points for

understanding Bowen as a modernist (Jameson 1990: 64). Her deployment of Gothic tropes like the ghost and the haunted house not only places her in an Irish Gothic tradition but also indicates her modernism. To take one particular example, *The Last September*, though most often read in an Ascendancy context, carefully links the modern with the Gothic, thereby collapsing the dichotomy and more broadly indicating the nexus of associations between Irish modernism and its colonial context. Through a preoccupation with internal and external ghosts, Bowen's modernism is centrally tied to her reinvention of Gothic conventions.

In *The Last September*, Bowen takes as a central theme the ruin of the country manor. The decaying Big House touches upon primary concerns of the Ascendancy, as the crumbling of the house parallels in many ways the crumbling of the Anglo-Irish as an aristocratic class. In a sense, the Anglo-Irish perceived themselves to be under siege from the increasingly vocal Irish Catholic majority, and as targets of insurgent violence, the houses symbolized the perilous position of the Anglo-Irish. At the same time, the Act of Union reduced the influence of the Ascendancy, and as it concentrated power in Britain, the Anglo-Irish slipped into irrelevancy. Unsurprisingly, the destabilizing of Irish Protestant identity found a natural outlet in Gothic modes of expression. The Big House became the main site where these issues concentrated, an uneasy repository of the past, neither crypt nor monument, where what has died can never really pass and what lives cannot escape the grasp of the dead. Little wonder, then, that the Anglo-Irish Gothic revolves around a family house or seat as the center of its Gothic machinations. In the theme of the Big House, Bowen finds the potential to reevaluate the Anglo-Irish in relation to the unsettling experiences of modernity.

From the very beginning of the novel there is something foreboding about the house, around which images of death and decay crystallize. When the Montmorencys arrive at Danielstown, “the vast facade of the house stared coldly over its mounting lawns” (Bowen 1998: 7). Shortly thereafter, Lois sits in the upstairs ante-room, where she feels a sense of surveillance as she observes how the

1. For instance, in Seamus Deane's *Celtic Revivals*, the only mention of *The Last September* comes in a discussion of Yeats and Anglo-Ireland (1987. Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest U.P. 31-32). In *Writing Ireland*, David Cairns and Shaun Richards mention *The Last September* in the context of the Big House tradition (1988. Manchester: Manchester U.P. 121). These books, which laid the foundation for postcolonial analyses of Irish writing, each devote less than one sentence to Bowen. Declan Kiberd gives an entire chapter to Bowen in his *Inventing Ireland*, but examines her within the same frame as a chronicler of Anglo-Irish sensibility in *The Last September and Bowen's Court* (1995. London, Jonathan Cape).

high windows were curtainless; tasseled fringes frayed the light at the top. The white sills, the shutters folded back in their frames were blistered ... Exhausted by sunshine, the backs of the crimson chairs were a thin light orange; a smell of camphor and animals drawn from skins on the floor by the glare of morning still hung like dust on the evening chill (9-10).

The “blistered” shutters show the sense of decay in this passage, and the “curtainless” windows with their ragged tassels that “fray” the light passing through give even the sun the appearance of being worn-down, over-used and nearing the end. The chairs are “Exhausted”, the room smells of camphor (an anesthetic and a substance used in embalming), and the primary decorations in the room are the skins of dead animals (10). These skins represent the gloried past by virtue of their existence as trophies of past expeditions while at the same they add to the sense of “vague depression”, claustrophobia, and impending death which permeates the room. Significantly, like the camphor chairs, they also refer to the *imperial* past, trophies from the colonial wilderness which bring to mind in particular the history of the Anglo-Irish in India. These skins “hung like dust”, dead, depleted, and like the house itself, decomposing and lifeless, both political symbol and monument to a bygone resplendence.

Further, this colonial context signals one place where, in Jamesonian terms, Bowen’s Gothic descriptions feed her modernism. Jameson identifies the legacy of imperialism as creating a “spatial disjunction” between Third World colony and First World metropolis (1990: 51). In other words, imperialism produces a blankness at the center that cannot be imagined by a national literature, for nothing “can ever be enough to include this radical otherness of colonial life, colonial suffering, and exploitation” (51). As a result, “daily life and existential experience in the metropolis ... can no longer be grasped immanently; it no longer has its meaning” (51). If modernism is the form of art that recognizes this loss of meaning, then Bowen’s ironic pairing of the colonial legacy of the ante-room with the last days of the Anglo-Irish is a modernist moment in the text. The spatial disjunction that Jameson sees is felt as an emptiness, a lack inscribed at the core of the text. What is modernist about the novel is its recognition of this blank space and its

attribution of the resultant loss of meaning and fragmentation not simply to life in the modern world, as the stereotype of an apolitical modernism would have it, but rather to an explicitly colonial discourse that locates its characters as simultaneously colonizer and colonized.

Crucially, Bowen uses the Gothic to do this. In an image that foreshadows the cataclysmic burning at the end of the novel, Bowen describes nightfall over Danielstown:

The sky shone, whiter than glass, fainting down to the fretted leaf-line, but was being steadily drained by the dark below, to which the grey of the lawns, like smoke, as steadily mounted. The house was highest of all, with toppling immanence (30).

The crumbling house is a familiar Gothic image, most recognizably in Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” (which she references explicitly later in the novel). Bowen’s use of the imagery suggests not only an allusion to Poe, but that decay and ruin are inherent in the very notion of the Anglo-Irish Big House itself. Both the exterior and the interior of the house convey a sense of menace, claustrophobia, and an atmosphere of death and decomposition appropriate to the Gothic.

The Gothic also works on the level of character. Neil Corcoran argues that “beneath the surface realism of Lois’ relationship with Gerald and Daventry in *The Last September* there is the shadow of a Gothic plot in which Daventry is Gerald’s doppelgänger other” (2001: 331). In the uncomfortable scene at the dance when Lois goes off with Daventry, who is drunk on whiskey, she feels herself the object of his desire, just as she is the object of Gerald’s affection. Strikingly, Bowen uses the Gothic as the medium for this feeling: “between bursts of laughter she had felt him look at her lips, at her arms, at her dress, like a ghost, with nostalgia and cold curiosity” (1998: 158). The reading of Gerald and Daventry as Gothic doubles is bolstered here not only by their parallel treatment of Lois, but by the reference to Daventry as a ghost, whose desire is nostalgic rather than immediate.

For Bowen, ghosts serve as an important point of conjunction between her modernism and the Big House tradition. Existing between the borders of life and death, the ghost is an actual spatial disjunction; literally the presence of absence. The radical otherness that adheres

to the colonial experience in Jameson's account is akin to the experience of the ghost: just as it is impossible to fully grasp the extent of colonial suffering, one cannot know what lies beyond death. Bowen represents the unknowable void at the center of life by making the figure of the ghost, a blank space, central to her novel. The ghost is the most prevalent Gothic image in the novel, for it continually reemerges –“ghostly” is one of the most common adjectives in the book– and various characters throughout the course of the narrative are described as ghosts. If Daventry is Gerald's doppelgänger, then it makes sense for some air of ghostliness to adhere to Gerald as well. Indeed, during the dance, just before Lois encounters the drunk Daventry, she dances with Gerald. “‘You do dance divinely.’ ‘What?’ he said, like the ghost of Daventry. Someone stopped the gramophone, they looked at each other, shocked” (151). The connection between Daventry, the veteran who “had been shell-shocked [and]... was now beginning to hate Ireland, lyrically, explicitly; down to the very feel of the air and smell of the water” and Gerald is one of shared ghostliness (144).

Immediately after her encounter with the IRA man, whom Lois first mistakes for a ghost, she notices the house is “excluded, sad, irrelevant”, and realizes that life in the house consists of “Chairs standing round dejectedly; upstairs, the confidently waiting beds; mirrors vacant and staring; books read and forgotten, contributing no more to life; dinner-table certain of its regular compulsion” (34). Routine and meaningless patterns of action, of waking and sleeping, dinnertimes and forgotten books, are all that the house has to offer for Lois and she realizes that “it was impossible to speak of this” (34). Her return to the Big House renders her incapable of speech; amidst the trappings of anesthetizing routine she knows she cannot make the others understand.

In a sense, the Big House in *The Last September* is a crypt, its inhabitants entombed within it even as they still live. Indeed, Bowen considers the Anglo-Irish to be living ghosts, neither fully capable of living or dying (Ellmann 2003: 15). Danielstown, when Gerald beholds it, is a “cold shell...streaked with rain and hollow-looking from an interior darkness” (Bowen 1998: 87). The inhabitants of Danielstown are so trapped in their daily routines and unwilling to acknowledge the turmoil around them in any meaningful way

that they are hardly even alive. In this way, the theme of ghostliness in the novel comes together with the Gothic identifications of the Big House.

In Bowen's modern Gothic, the house reverses the dynamic between character and object, so that the house itself and all it contains is personified and made vital as the characters themselves become living ghosts, committed to manners and etiquette above all, trapped in their routines and unable even to speak of the conflict which signals their coming doom. The description of the ante-room, with its exhausted chairs and sunburnt windows, “as though the house had spent a day in the tropics”, is one place where Bowen combines the disintegration of the Anglo-Irish with the personification of the house (9-10). Decay permeates the characters' habits as well, particularly in regards to the patterns of their day-to-day lives. The exhausted chairs and windows that look in on Lois as she enters the room are but one example of this. A more whimsical take on this is the idea that the house has taken a vacation in the tropics and has as a result become sunburnt (9-10).

The house is very much a living character in the novel, and like its inhabitants, remains voiceless about the surrounding conflict. Hugo and Francie notice “something unremembered about the face of the house, some intensification of the silence surrounding it” (15) and in death, the house remains “hospitable”, as “a silence that was to be ultimate flowed back, confident, to the steps” (206). Lois is robbed of speech when she enters the house after seeing the IRA man, and the catalog of household objects that are personified as Lois enters the house drive this home (34). “Dejected” chairs and confident beds somehow manage to muster more enthusiasm than Lois, who, like the “vacant and staring” mirror is reduced to silence in the face of the everyday possessions in the house.

Throughout the novel, household objects take on the energy that the characters do not have, but the ending scene best demonstrates the ways in which Bowen portrays the house as reducing its residents to a spectral existence. Bowen carefully notes that the burning of the Big Houses in County Cork is an “execution”, suggesting that the Big House is alive and thus capable of being executed (206). The Big House drains vitality from its inhabitants, becoming alive itself in the process. With this

in mind, the burning of the house is in a way the burning of the Anglo-Irish family themselves, and thus is indeed an execution. As the house burns, the “thin iron gate twanged (missed its latch, remained swinging aghast)” (206). The Naylor’s themselves do not speak, nor do they look at each other; they simply watch the house burn. Silent to the end, it remains for the house itself to express the horror of its situation. Richard and Myra are not given any emotion here, but the gate is “aghast.” Even then, it is not clear from the language whether the gate is “aghast” because of the burning house, or because it missed its latch and thus does not conform to the expected order. The fact that the gate is not closed leads to its description as “aghast”, as though the house’s mouth hung open in horror, while at the same time the emotion of the gate itself betrays the extent to which the Naylor’s are incapable of responding to the situation. Their personalities have been utterly drained, replaced by the house which, in lieu of their reactions, must respond to its own destruction.

Bowen’s Gothic describes the Big House and the objects that inhabit it as producing the ghostliness that she identifies as the condition of the Anglo-Irish in 1920. In this way, the isolation and deracination of the characters indicates both a modernist perspective and a colonial purpose. That critics read *The Last September* as a novel of manners or a chronicle of Anglo-Irish sensibility I believe indicates this exchange between the Big House and the Anglo-Irish family wherein the house saps vitality from its inhabitants and replaces it with politeness and etiquette. The Gothic also operates in a wider sense through the continuance of the past into the present, which is, after all, one definition of a ghost. Like a ruin, Danielstown stands as a visible marker of the conflict between past and present, both part of and apart from the surrounding landscape. Bowen identifies the house as draining life from the present, but also recognizes that the past which the house represents and the social codes of propriety and restraint, held over from the height of the Ascendancy, allow for this transformation of the living into ghostly likenesses of themselves.

The fraught relationship between past and present is also a major concern of modernist writing. Given the traditional understanding of literary modernism as interested in the search

present is also a major concern of modernist writing. Given the traditional understanding of literary modernism as interested in the search for meaning in the modern world, and the questioning of the human subject in the face of fragmentation, upheaval, and great change, the comparisons to the Gothic are readily apparent. Although the Gothic, with its atavistic tendencies, is often viewed as antithetical to a mode of writing that insists on its radical newness, the Gothic’s origin in moments of crisis and its emphasis on the fragmentary and the liminal make it essential to understanding the ways in which Irish modernism navigates its colonial and cosmopolitan contexts. For Bowen, the Gothic is more than a received tradition that binds her to the conventions of genre. Rather, she uses the Gothic as a set of tropes and images that carry a range of historical associations as she depicts the siphoning of personality from the Anglo-Irish into their houses and possessions.

Danielstown reduces its inhabitants to silence, pushing them into a ghostly state of existence even as the class that they represent is fading away. The impact of this is most strongly registered in the character of Lois, whose “self-development within the ‘colonial’ context of the Irish Troubles” is aborted long before the IRA destroys the house (Concilio 1999: 283). The familiar reading of the novel as “an exploration of the individual’s search for meaning and order at a time of cultural fracture” emphasizes the interior aspects of the novel that ally it to more conventional interpretations of modernism (Coates 1990: 206). Significantly, this search for meaning proceeds amidst a “colonial” conflict – a type of coming-of-age story for both Lois and her country – and this is the cultural context that Bowen’s Gothic directly addresses. This is also at the core of the modernist crisis as John Coates identifies it: “the abrupt break in the pattern of history, the loss of confidence in the autonomous personality, the discontinuity of the self and the uncertainty of its contact with the outside world, the failure of social contact and communication” (1990: 213). Put another way, modernism, like the Gothic, deals with the breakdown of character and the attempt to arrive at a new subjectivity.

Indeed, psychoanalytic critics observe the Gothic as working directly with the interior self, noting that “Compulsive, repetitive,

superficially meaningless behaviour somehow addresses a deeper ‘wound’, a rift in the psyche” (Miles 1993: 2).² Bowen’s characters, with their conformity to routine in the face of their crumbling society, certainly fit this psychological paradigm, and “her distinctive insight into the processes of dissolution, reformation, and further dissolution which contribute to the seemingly solid notion of character” place her in an Anglo-Irish Gothic tradition (McCormack 1993: 210). However, the presence of the “colonial” context in *The Last September* demonstrates the coalescence of the modern and the Gothic modes of writing as it pulls the reader out of the aesthetic realm into the specific historical reality of the last days of the Ascendancy. The outside world ineluctably breaks in upon the ostensibly hermetic world of the self.

Alongside this joining of Gothic tropes and strategies with modernist concerns over character, Bowen’s novel asks the question, “what does it mean to be modern?” and considers several possible answers before arriving at the very Gothic resolution that to be modern is to be ghostly. When Lois first appears to greet the Montmorencys, she “stood at the top of the steps looking cool and fresh; she knew how fresh she must look” (Bowen 1998: 7). Shortly thereafter, however, their houseguests identify her not as “fresh” but “modern”: “‘I had no idea how to talk to him. I suppose *you’d* never find that difficult. I expect now, Lois, you’re very modern.’ ‘Oh, well, not really,’ said Lois, pleased” (21). “Modern” in its first incarnation seems to be equated with intellect, with the capability of speaking with a student at Oxford on his own level, about potentially subversive political opinions. It also has to do with gender roles, as only a modern woman could do this; for Francie Montmorency, who embodies Victorian ideas of womanhood, this is out of the question. It is ironic that this theme is first introduced in the context of conversation, considering the relative inability to speak at all that the characters exhibit throughout the

novel. Lois as representative of youth and newness sharply contrasts with the aged and aging characters who surround her (even Gerald, her love interest, does not have long to live).

Although Lois is the first “modern” character, she is not the singular example of the modern in the text. The adjective “modern” is perhaps most assiduously applied to Marda Norton, another female character who is older than Lois but who is considered young and reckless by the household. Almost immediately upon her arrival, “she seemed to them very modern” (78). Marda’s brashness, her assertive femininity (for she seems very attractive to the younger members of the house, Laurence and Hugo, and even Lois forms a strong attachment that borders on the romantic) and her disconnection from the Big House society to which she is related all serve to remove her from the comfortable frames of reference of the Anglo-Irish. Being “modern”, distances her from the Big House culture of the Naylor, which belongs to a bygone era.

When she is preparing to leave, Francie offers her some eau-de-Cologne, but worries that as Marda is “modern”, she will not like it (135). When Myra converses with Mrs Carey, who lives in a neighboring Big House, Mt. Isabel, she notes that “Mrs Carey, also, did not understand modern young people” (119-20). “Modern” is here directed towards a break from the past, and an inability to relate past and present sufficiently. The eau-de-Cologne appeals to Victorian sensibilities of comfort, and is something of a luxury. This is not an ideal gift for Marda, who is independent-minded and who seems to defy the expectations placed on her by Anglo-Irish culture, although she accepts it graciously. Likewise, Mrs Carey, representative of the aging Big House culture, cannot relate to “modern young people.” The label “modern”, applied by representatives of the past order to emblems of the present, embodies a disconnection between past and present.

This notion of a break between past and present, however, is complicated by its simultaneous depiction in Gothic form. Throughout the novel, these characters labeled “modern” are also described as ghosts. Upon their arrival, Hugo and Francie note Lois’ resemblance to her dead mother, Hugo’s former lover: “she’s the image of Laura” (8).

2. In arguing that the Gothic represents the disintegration of the subject, Robert Miles actually uses a metaphor that joins the Gothic with the modern and the Anglo-Irish: “the self finding itself dispossessed in its own house, in a condition of rupture, disjunction, fragmentation” (1993: 3).

At the tea party, Betty Vermont, an English officer's wife who views the war as a delightful holiday with the opportunity to encounter rustic individuals and picturesque locales, says "Things do run in families, don't they? Now I am sure you've all got ghosts" (46). While this is a comic statement from a comic character, the notion that the Big House is haunted is again a Gothic device that can be read on several levels. Advancing this notion, Corcoran argues that the ghost that haunts Danielstown is none other than Lois' mother, "the Anglo-Irish ghost *par excellence*" (2001: 324). Hugo's failed romance with Laura hangs over him throughout his time at Danielstown, even as he attempts to recreate it with Marda, and Lois' resemblance to her mother is commented upon throughout. However, when Francie recognizes Lois as "the image of Laura", in a way she establishes Lois as her mother's ghost. Lois's personality is reduced to the ghost of a dead relation, an image that cannot speak but which attempts at the outset to develop a romantic relationship with Hugo (in the form of Lois' crush), much as Laura once did. Lois may be "very modern", but this modernity contains within it a significant trace of the past.

We can thus read Lois as both the ghost of her mother and as a modern character striving to understand herself, but Marda's situation is even more intricate. The consistent identification of Marda with ghostliness challenges the break from the past implicit in the term "modern." During the tea party at Mount Isabel, Marda fades into the background of the house and her facade is stripped away:

She leaned back from the bar of the sun, into the shade of the curtains. Shadow gave transparency to her colours; its brown clarity hardened her face revealingly so that she was exposed a moment, in her anxiety, without the deference of manner. Her green linen dress went ghostly against the cretonne's rather jarring florescence (Bowen 1998: 118).

Bowen links Marda with her clothes throughout; when she first arrives, she has lost her suitcase, when Laurence thinks about the way she seems to him, he thinks of her clothes as "over-assured", and her last meaningful scene in the novel centers around packing her clothes in preparation for leaving (130). Her "ghostly" dress indicates a certain ghostliness for Marda herself. Further, Hugo wonders

whether she had a ghost everywhere (126), and in his affection for her, he associates her with Laura: "Her face and figure, at which he dared not look, compelled his imagination with ghostly sharpness" (138). This observation comes just after Marda is described as "modern." (135). "Modern" cannot refer to a condition in which one is cut off from the past when "modern" is so consistently figured as ghostly. Rather, what leads Lois and Marda to their ghostliness is the past's refusal to die away and allow them to develop into something different from the roles that the restrictive and patriarchal society of the Anglo-Irish Big House has established for them. As a result, they are fated to be ghosts.

In *The Last September*, to be "modern" is not simply a case of being new, of being divorced from the past. Rather, through linking the characters of Lois and Marda to both the "modern" and the ghostly, Bowen offers an elaborate view of the Anglo-Irish at the end of their Ascendancy. When Lois and Marda are referred to as "modern", Bowen draws attention to their incorporeality, and reinforces the ghostliness of the Anglo-Irish as a whole, consumed by their Big Houses and unable to speak or deal with the violence around them. At the same time, the growing certainty of Irish independence means their future is doomed to look back at past glories; Lois and Marda's belong to the last generation of the Ascendancy. To be "modern" is to be a ghost.

The most Gothic scene in the novel, the encounter at the ruined mill, brings the connections between Bowen's modernism and the Gothic to its climax. Here the question of the future of the Anglo-Irish is asked most explicitly, and the mill serves as the site where Bowen joins concerns about being modern and Anglo-Irish with the wider political struggle that serves as the backdrop for the story. As with the Big House, Bowen initially personifies the mill: "The mill startled them all, staring, light-eyed, ghoulishly, round a bend in the valley" (122). Both the mill and Danielstown are capable of staring, but it is the mill that is tagged as "ghoulis", a Gothic description that indicates the danger that lies within. Allied with its Gothic qualities, the mill is an expressly political space, a ruin whose dilapidation betrays wider issues facing Ireland.

Those dead mills – the country was full of them, never quite stripped and whitened to skeletons’ decency: like corpses at their most horrible. ‘Another,’ Hugo declared, ‘of our national grievances. English law strangled the –’ But Lois insisted on hurrying: she and Marda were now well ahead (123).

Hugo identifies with the Irish here against the English, an identification that he is not allowed to make; in the face of the mill, the others abandon him and reduce him once again to silence. The Big House may produce the inability to speak that the Anglo-Irish suffer from in this novel, but the markers of political struggle and sites of nationalist resistance offer no cure.

Like the Big House, the mill represents decline, and stands as a physical sign of the past’s hold on the present. Hugo identifies the decline as the deterioration of Irish economy under the Act of Union, but the decay present is more visceral and linked to the Gothic:

the dead mill now entered the democracy of ghostliness, equalled broken palaces in futility and sadness; was transfigured by some response of the spirit, showing not the decline of its meanness, simply decline; took on all of the past to which it had given nothing (124).³

The notion of a “democracy of ghostliness” fits the devitalizing situation that these characters are experiencing in their relation to the Big House and foreshadows the eventual destruction of Danielstown, but the sense of the mill as taking on a past to which it does not contribute points to its crucial role in considering the position of the Anglo-Irish. “This ruined mill is, as it were, the terrible secret of Anglo-Irish history remaining architecturally articulate on the land” (Corcoran 2001: 326). In a sense, the mill symbolizes the economic and political domination of the Ascendancy. The “terrible secret”, then, concerns both the physical results of their supremacy as well as the slow death of the Anglo-Irish from their complicity in that domination, their inability to fit in either Irish or English society as a whole: their ghostliness.

3. Bowen explicitly aligns the mill with Poe’s *House of Usher*: “Cracks ran down [the walls]; she expected, now with detachment, to see them widen, to see the walls peel back from a cleft–like the *House of Usher’s*” (1998: 124).

The scene at the mill is also a crucial moment for Bowen’s modernism, for in its ruined state, neither wholly present nor absent, the mill dramatizes the radical incompleteness that Jameson specifies as the imperial legacy that confronts literary modernism (1990: 58). In arguing that imperialism creates modernism, Jameson interrogates the spaces where the colonial center and its margins coalesce and diverge, finding in Ireland and Irish modernism a First World space with a Third World substructure (60). In the mill’s simultaneous alignment with and indictment of the Big House, it moves between a British-aligned First World status and a nationalist-aligned Third World position, fully occupying neither. The mill is a liminal space, a physical embodiment of the spatial disjunction seen as the primary symptom of imperialism’s influence on the modern. Again, the Gothic is essential in joining Bowen’s modernism with the political reading of the Anglo-Irish.

Indeed, Margot Backus calls attention to the presence of “a virtuosic modernist” rewriting of Burke’s sublime, a fundamental concept for the early development of the Gothic as a genre (Backus 1999: 189). Bowen removes the sublime from its natural origins and focuses not on the grandeur or power of nature but on the terror and power present in the corroded, seditious, and potentially violent space of the mill, evoking a familiar modernist dialectic between fascination with and revulsion to industry. In literal terms this ruin depicts not the fall of the Ascendancy, but the decline of the middle class. It is not a mansion but an industrial site and regardless of who may have benefitted from that industry, the ruin itself is ignoble, a fact reinforced by the status of the mill as a shelter for the IRA. The mill, from this perspective, belongs not to the Big House but to the political effects of Big House culture.

Beyond its dark and claustrophobic interior, the Gothic quality of the mill in the presence of the gunman within and the threat that he poses to Lois and Marda. Hugo remains outside through this encounter (the contact with a proscribed political sphere seems restricted to those who are “modern.”) Formally encoding blankness onto the narrative, the text does not relate the actual shooting; rather, Lois and Marda discover the gunman, who warns them about the coming destruction of Danielstown:

“‘It is time,’ he said, ‘that yourselves gave up walking. If you have nothing better to do, you had better keep in the house while you have it’” (Bowen 1998: 125). Bowen then shifts immediately to Hugo outside, smoking and longing for Marda. When he hears a gunshot, he runs to the front of the mill, but does not enter, waiting instead for Lois and Marda to emerge (126). Marda has been injured when the bullet struck the doorjamb she was holding onto, and she emerges sucking the blood from her wound: “Marda put up a hand to her mouth—in an incredible half-glimpse, he thought he saw blood round the lips” (126). In this image, the Anglo-Irish become both vampire and victim, representative of the past and avatar of the modern, sinned against and sinning. Marda does not respond to Hugo’s questions, concentrating instead on sucking the blood from her wound.

The vampire image here functions on multiple levels. If the Anglo-Irish bear some responsibility for the ghostliness of the mill, feeding, as it were, off of the middle classes, then in sucking her own blood Marda shows the Anglo-Irish to be feeding upon themselves as well. Just as the inheritance of the Ascendancy has suppressed the Catholic population, the Big House reduces its inhabitants to ghosts. An indiscriminate vampire, the culture of the Big House drains all alike, creating both literal and metaphorical blood-suckers who are at once predators and prey. The vampire trope brings First and Third worlds together, blurring the distinctions between them. Thus, Marda-as-vampire

demonstrates the inability to speak of or even represent the moment of violence within the mill that foreshadows the final “execution”, the desire for the unmentionable future while being locked into the deadening culture of the Big House, and joins these concerns about the past and future in the archetypal Gothic image of the vampire.

Critical consideration of Bowen as a modernist writer has most frequently focused on her short fiction and her later novels, while *The Last September* is familiar as an example of Anglo-Irish Big House writing, from a Gothic tradition. However, Bowen’s work resists categorization, at least in part because of the ways in which she makes use of these older conventions that arise out of Ireland’s colonial history. Gothic descriptions of space and Gothic figures of ghosts and revenants are an essential part of her short fiction, alongside more experimental modernist techniques, a fact recognized by critics otherwise interested in establishing Bowen as a modernist (Walsh 2007: 129). Yet the presence of Bowen’s modernist tendencies in her earlier Ascendancy writing indicates that her use of the Gothic is not incidental to her more overtly modernist texts, but rather is a key component of her modernism. The difficulties of classification in Bowen’s writing point to the spatial disjunction that Jameson identifies in the gap between imperial center and colonial periphery and suggests that Ireland’s colonial context informs her modernism precisely through the literary forms that she inherits and reworks.

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