# Dispossession in *The Death of the Heart*

Kirsten Daly

Elizabeth Bowen depicts modernity itself as a form of dispossession. '[A] writer for whom place looms large', she reveals this aspect of her authorial character most powerfully in settings which function as synchronic indicators of historical time.[2] As Hermione Lee states, after *The Last September* (1929) Bowen's novels focus on 'places for the dispossessed': '[b]oarding houses, rented cottages, shut-up homes, empty villas, obscure shops one can never find again, parks at dusk, and, later, bombed houses', all of which are 'at the heart of what is odd or ominous about the Bowen terrain'.[3]

The primary settings in *The Death of the Heart* are houses intended to be used on a temporary basis. The oldest and most established location is 2 Windsor Terrace (echoing Bowen's London address, 3 Clarence Terrace), a town house on the edge of Regent's Park. Built in the 1820s as an occasional residence for members of the beau monde when they visited town for the season, it recalls the settled life of the landed classes. Now the home of an ultra-modern couple, Anna, an interior designer, and Thomas, a partner in an advertising agency, Windsor Terrace contains 'lovely furniture' from the country house that Thomas grew up in but no longer owns (p. 81).[4] As many critics have noted, the furniture represents the past; it also bespeaks the dispossession of the landed classes. Described by Matchett as 'Valuables', it was probably made for the house and may never have been moved before (p. 81). Certainly, it seems to resent the transition: Matchett states that 'when I got here and saw all Mrs Quayne's stuff where Mrs Thomas had put it – if I'd been a silly I should have said it gave me quite a look' (p. 81). Under Anna's solicitous regime, the furniture is certainly taken take care of, but it represents a set of forlorn museum pieces that evokes lost time. Unconnected to country house life, Windsor Terrace is fundamentally 'hollow inside', an airy vivacious house, all mirrors and polish' with 'no point where shadows lodged, no point where feeling could thicken', language that Bowen would use to describe what she saw as the emotionally vital life of her childhood home Bowen's Court (p. 42). As a result, the house remains in essence an hotel: receiving few visitors and guarding their privacy, the Quaynes ensure that '[t]he rooms were set for strangers' intimacy, or else for exhausted solitary retreat' (p. 42). Waikiki, a holiday home in Seale on Sea, a resort 'on the Kentish coast' based on Hythe where Bowen lived with her mother for some years, represents an extreme form of modernity (p. 132). Built on 'a strip of reclaimed beach' and '[c]onstructed largely of

glass and blistered white paint', it offers little security or privacy to its inhabitants: Anna's old governess, Mrs Heccomb, and her step children (p. 133). Since the house is made 'for summer letting', every year in July and August, the family decamps inland to stay with relatives or friends (p. 155). Waikiki is filled with possessions that reflect a transient and ephemeral way of life, including a 'a scarlet portable gramophone, a tray with a painting outfit, a half-painted lamp shade, a mountain of magazines' (p 134). A spare room containing photographs of such tropics as Dr Heccomb had visited', together with 'a stretcher bed, a square of mirror, and a bamboo table' indicate a colonial provenance (p. 198). Brutally unhomely, it is more disturbing than Windsor Terrace for the bell at Waikiki 'hung out of its socket on a long twisted umbilical wire', a ghastly image of an incomplete birth (p. 133). It is also not quite English. Indeed, boasting 'balconies, a sun porch and Venetian shutters', it reflects an American habit of naming and designing the new world in the image of the old (p. 126). Seale is itself is a kind of internal colony that points to the growing influence of American culture over English life. With its many 'blank' and 'lonely' 'terraces' and 'lodging houses where no-one lives', is a town made up of people who in different ways are all visitors, its culture of ice rinks, cafes, cinemas and dance halls, creating a rudimentary society analogous to the clubbable culture found in America as well as to that of the outposts of empire (pp. 132-3).

Late in the novel, Bowen's Karachi Hotel recalls Joseph Conrad's description of modernity as an age 'in which we are camped like bewildered travellers at a garish unrestful hotel'.[5] By way of contrast to the Italian hotel in Bowen's first novel, in which the guests take day trips to the Roman villa that symbolises Italy's imperial past, the hotel in *The Death of the Heart* is disreputably immediate. Made up 'of two Kensington houses, of great height, of a style at once portentious and brittle, knocked into one', the hotel is the product of faulty design and botched conversion; one of the doors 'has been glazed and sealed up', while its name is indicated 'in tarnished gilt capitals' above the portico (p. 285). If 'knocked' and 'tarnished' point towards seedy liaisons, the hotel's name 'Karachi', coupled with references to the 'partition' of the rooms and the 'violent convulsions' that result when 'drawers only pull out of chests', evokes British India, soon to be divided along religious lines (just as Ireland had recently been divided). Formerly belonging to the middle classes that came to power in India in the nineteenth century, such residences are, in the narrator's eyes, tainted from the start:

> If these houses give little by becoming hotels, they lose little; even when they were homes, no intimate life can have flowered inside these walls or become endeared to them. They were the homes of a class doomed from the start, without natural privilege, without grace […]. Dyspepsia, uneasy wishes, ostentation, and chilblains can, only, have governed the lives of families here (p. 285).

This portrait of an ambitious and prosaic class dedicated to camping out in the empire, retiring to houses that could not be homes in various states of discomfort, is implicitly contrasted with Bowen's forgiving (though not uncritical) view of her ancestors who settled in Ireland and, she claims, sought to bring civilised values to the country. Built by an earlier generation, the Karachi Hotel has become a place of last resort for casualties of empire such as Major Brutt, a war veteran who, having managed a rubber plantation in Malay, has now returned to London to seek work. Living in a tiny attic room with a 'dolls' house window', possessing only the 'objects which had travelled with him' – 'his own rubbed ebony hairbrushes, his stud-box, his nail-scissors' – he is likely to have found in the hotel his last secure abode (pp. 291, 293).

Portia, the only character to traverse all the different locations in the novel, represents a specifically Irish modernity: she has never had a secure home.[6] The product of an affair between a married man and a 'scrap of a widow […] just back from China', she spends her early years on the French Riviera in flight from her shady past, in 'the back rooms in hotels, or dark flats in villas with no view' (pp. 17, 21). After her father dies, she and her mother repair to 'a high-up village' in the Swiss Alps, where they share 'a back room facing into the pinewoods' with 'a balcony' (pp. 34, 33). A lyrical passage describes how they made their hotel room their 'dear home', decorating it with '[p]ostcards they liked, and Irene's and Portia's sketches' (p. 34). Unlike the terrifying mother-daughter relationship depicted in *The House in Paris* )1935), which causes daughter Naomi to feel 'still so possessed' by the house 'that nothing was real that happened outside that', Portia's relationship with her mother is that of a benign possession.[7] As Portia remembers it, they lived uniquely for one another, retiring to their room in the afternoons to enjoy a Proustian world of the senses: 'They would lie down covered with coats, leaving the window open, smelling the wet woodwork, hearing the gutters run. Turn abouts, they would read aloud to each other the Tauchnitz novels they had bought in Lucerne' and eat 'in alternate mouthfuls, block chocolate and brioches' (p. 34). This delicately romantic tone of the novel (though offset by various kinds of worldly

counterpoint) was no doubt one of the reasons for its popularity; however, as Victoria Glendinning points out, it was the novel that Bowen 'liked least'.[8] She might be said to have treated *The Death of the Heart* as a burden of which she sought to be dispossessed, dismissing it in a BBC radio interview as 'an inflated short story'.[9] Building on earlier works that feature orphaned or semi-orphaned children sent to stay with relatives or even 'a friend's friend', *The Death of the Heart* focuses on Portia's stay with her half-brother Thomas after her mother dies.[10] Exploiting St Quentin's distinction between living and 'only staying', which he suggests, is a state of not living, the novel explores the undoing of Portia's tender feelings in a place that 'ought to be dear […] after endless hotels', but which does not belong to her and in which she has no right to be (pp. 21, 41). An early glimpse of her in the drawing room at Windsor Terrace presents a disconcerting image of a character who does not fully exist in this solid bourgeois setting: 'Her dark dress almost blotted her out against a dark lacquer screen' (p. 26). She is formally still in mourning, and Portia's dress announces her grief: we discover that she is prone to disappear into reveries centred on other times and places. On one occasion, when Thomas is in his study, he addresses her, but 'she only looked through him', possessed by the homely 'pension on the crag', a vision of her lost home that keeps suffering at bay (p. 34). Her mother's illness is acknowledged only in the context of a tender tie ('Irene moaning and clutching Portia's hand'), and the description of her death reiterates their closeness: 'She died at six in the evening, which had always been their happiest hour' (p. 35). At school, where her thoughts 'would go soaring up through the glass dome', having 'no place in which to house the most interesting fact', Portia's reverie prompts a striking contrast between her present and previous life:

> The gilt-scrolled paper, the dome, the bishop's chair, the girls' smooth heads must have been fixed here always, where they safely belonged – while she and Irene, shady, had been skidding about in an out-of-season nowhere of railway stations and rocks, filing off wet third-class decks of lake steamers, choking over the bones of loups de mer, giggling into eiderdowns that smelled of the person-before-last […}. Seldom had they faced up to society – when they did, Irene did the wrong thing, then cried (p. 56).

Portia's exaggerated sense of the permanence of the room and the surreal description of the girls' heads as if they were objects or part of the furniture offers an estranged and estranging view of the settled life that she has come to realise is normal for others. Her own reality as

she conveys it here is one of always settling but never being settled, of existing in a dizzily disorientating placeless 'nowhere', which is neither safe nor secure.

As Portia explains, living in hotels has given her a strangely de-realised experience of other people: 'If you always live in hotels, you get used to people coming and going. They look as though they'd be always there […] and then they've gone forever' (p. 48). For Portia, other people seem both more and less real in that serial impermanence which prefigures the fate of her mother, and leaves her struggling to adapt to a more settled life. At the cinema with Thomas and Anna, while she enjoys watching the film, afterwards, when the Quaynes meet Brutt, she detaches herself from the social situation, reflecting that 'this was one of those polished encounters she and Irene spied on when they had peeped into a Palace Hotel' (p. 44). As this episode suggests, Portia is capable of observing others with an intense scrutiny that may have gone unremarked in the hotels in which she and Irene enjoyed watching other people and making up stories about them. In Windsor Terrace, however, it is out of place. Her 'enwrapping look' when she sees Anna react to the name of her former lover, makes Anna feel 'mummified'; that is, dead like Irene but preserved by Portia's intrusive sympathy (p. 49). Portia is not fully aware of her impact on others, which serves to isolate her further: 'Portia had learnt one dare never look for long. She had those eyes that seem to be welcome nowhere […] their homeless intentness makes them appear fanatical' (p. 49). As a result, in London, she is most at home 'in the streets - unguarded smiles from strangers, the permitted frown of someone walking alone, lovers' looks, as though they had solved something, and the unsolitary air with which the old or he wretched seemed to carry sorrow made her feel that people at least knew each other, if they did not yet know her, if she did not yet know them (p. 59).

Ironically, when Portia is sent to Seale, the familiar experience of uprooting makes it possible for her to recover her settled life at Windsor Terrace as part of a known past and therefore as a home, confirming Bowen's view that '[p]ermanence is an attribute of recalled places'.[11] Feeling 'stupefied by this entirely new world', Portia recalls with affection the 'things that at least her senses had loved – her bed, with the lamp turned on on winter mornings, the rug in Thomas' study, the chest carved with angels out there on the landing, the waxen oilcloth down there in Matchett's room' (pp. 139, 133). Remarking on her 'solicitude for things', the narrator reflects on the necessity ritual of home-making in a strange place:

> In unfamiliar places, [Portia and Irene] unconsciously looked for familiarity. It is not our exalted feelings, it is our sentiments that build the necessary home. The need to attach themselves makes wandering people strike roots in a day: whenever we unconsciously feel, we live. (pp. 139-40).

Yoking together the idea of a primitive 'need' to be attached, the romantic notion of a 'wandering people' and the concept of 'strik[ing] roots in a day', the final sentence departs from the discussion of Portia and Irene to embrace a general and then personal register, which seems to render picturesque Bowen's childhood days with her mother, but also the arrival in Ireland of her Cromwellian ancestor, Colonel Bowen, for the idea of striking roots has a harsh, militaristic tone (she uses the phrase elsewhere to describe Anglo-Irish domination).[12] The removal to Seale gives Portia the opportunity to cultivate feelings of attachment to Anna, whose absence makes it possible for the teenager to recognise her as a substitute mother. Recovering Anna's past in the form of an old portrait and awakening from a frightening dream reviving powerful sensory memories of her mother's death ('the terrible end, the rushing-in, the roaring and gurgling') Portia begins to feel guilty that she had lived at Windsor Terrace 'with an opposed heart' and to worry that Anna has 'gone' and 'may never come back' (p. 141). Seale also deepens Portia's ties to the disreputable Eddie who is invited over and stays in the colonial spare room. '[S]o much at the heart of things, Eddie, based on the Welsh writer Goronwy Rees, is from a different kind of internal colony – Wales – and is described walking 'up Cader Idris' with the Monkshoods (pp. 190, 63). Physical proximity to Eddie makes him another replacement for Irene:

> Portia was learning to live without Irene, not because she denied or had forgotten that once unfailing closeness between mother and child, but because she no longer felt her mother's cheek on her own (that Eddie's finger-tip, tracing the crease of a smile, had more idly but far more lately touched), or smelled the sachet-smell from Irene's dresses, or woke in those hired north rooms where they used to wake. (p. 148)

While this sounds lyrical and Proustian, the narrator offers a more caustic view of the two characters as innocents in search of a mother. Even though she is so young, Portia is a mother figure for Eddie, who 'sat filling his eyes with Portia, as though it were good to be home again', seeing the world as a vast 'bosom' to 'lean his head on' (pp. 105, 107). Portia, too, sees Eddie as a 'maternal' refuge from the cares of society, 'whirl[ing] her free of a hundred

puzzling humiliations, of her hundred failures to take the ordinary cue' (p. 105). Both are resisting a necessary dispossession and both have an unborn quality.

A further irony concerning Portia's time in Seale is that this seaside town recalls an earlier home in the south of France; far from constituting 'an entirely new world', her stay therefore represents a return to a familiar form of untethered modernity. At some level, she recognises this, for when she first sees 'sea, town and plain', she feels 'elated' and thinks 'I shall be happy' (p. 131). Indeed, she is, for with Mrs Heccomb, she is in the care of a benign but hapless widow like her mother, whom Portia feels 'would have been happy with Mrs Heccomb, and would have entered into her hopes and fears' (p. 13). Although there are misunderstandings and difficulties, Portia adjusts to the way of life at Waikiki, camping out with the Heccombs in their 'lounge' where they 'ate as well as lived' and joining in the parties, outings and excursions that are part of the Heccombs' clubbable lives (p. 145). However, Seale is also dangerously provisional and cannot protect her when Eddie betrays her, holding Daphne's hand at the cinema. Confronting Eddie in an empty boarding house, the most primitive and desolate of all the temporary dwellings in the novel, Portia's troublingly excessive response (she tells Eddie 'I would rather be dead than a disappointment to you', p. 200), emphasises the dangers of dispossession as a state which cannot contain extreme emotion:

> The front top bedrooms here were like convent cells, with outside shutters hooked back. Their walls were mouldy blue like a dead sky, and looking at the criss-cross cracks in the ceiling one thought of holiday people waking up. A stale charred smell came from the grates – Waikiki seemed miles away. These rooms, many flights up, were a dead end: the emptiness, the feeling of dissolution came upstairs behind one, blocking the way down. (p. 196).

The palpable feeling of horror at the dilapidated nature of this shelter with its ugly décor and frighteningly open aspect, combined with the references to 'convent cells' and 'stale charred smell […] from the grates' draws on 'memories' of Bowen's Cromwellian ancestor 'camping in charred or desolate ruins' as well as on notions of the bare and austere nature of Catholic life.[13] The feeling of having nowhere to retreat to, which the use of 'one' suggests is not just Portia's, possibly evokes the experience of Colonel Bowen but conceivably also that of Garret Cushin, the man he dispossessed. Portia appears to be trapped in the past as it comes

to meet her. For Yoriko Kitagawa, 'she is almost invaded by the place here', investing the location with supernatural agency.[14] The implication that Portia has never had a place makes the very idea of home unimaginable and raises the question of her role within a history of which she seems to have no knowledge, anticipating Bowen's wartime stories in which lost histories return unaccountably to take possession of the present in a range of abandoned and bombed-out houses.

The final crisis takes place in Eddie's flat, another site of dispossession, full of 'large stark objects, tables and cupboards, that one does not possess' (p. 277). Eddie ends the relationship because, he says, 'you still expect me to be as sweet to you as your mother' (p. 281). Descending the staircase, Portia holds onto 'things' in her mind that 'she had not seen coming up – the scrolls, like tips of waves, on the staircase wallpaper, the characters of scratches on the olive dado, the chaotic outlook from a landing window' (p. 284). In focussing so intently on these physical details, Portia is holding onto her internal landscape and a seedy lover, possessing them in her mind. One of the central statements in *The Death of the Heart* concerns the importance of objects as emotional anchors:

> After inside upheavals, it is important to fix on imperturbable things … These things are what we mean when we speak of civilization: they remind us how exceedingly seldom the unseemly or unforeseeable rears its head. In this sense, the destruction of buildings and furniture is more palpably dreadful to the spirit than the destruction of human life. (p. 207)

Initially reassuring, the contrast between 'inside upheavals' and 'imperturbable *things*' is, in turn, undone by 'the destruction of buildings and furniture', a possible reference to the burning of Danielstown at the end of *The Last September*, Bowen's 'most potent image of dispossession'.[15] Although we may choose to fix on things rather than on people, we may well end up losing both. Like Lois in *The Last September*, Portia has lost a place through which she could have located and defined herself; a place where, as Matchett explains, girls 'supped upstairs with their governess, making toast, telling stories, telling each other's fortunes with apple peel' (p. 42). So, when Portia holds onto the things in the stairway she is trying not only to orientate herself after 'inside upheavals' but she is also, in a sense, holding onto the remains of a shattered past. Written after the upheavals of the second world war, Bowen's next novel, *The Heat of the Day* (1949), sees the heroine Stella return to the

family's Irish country house, Mount Morris; it is the force of her imaginary possession cultivated over many years, rather than the actual entering into possession, that guides her response to the place. The details of what she perceives, from the 'the declivities in the treads of the staircase' to 'the smells of plaster, pelts, wax, smoke, weathered woodwork, oiled locks and outdoor trees', we read, 'preceded themselves in her as she followed Mary. Knowledge of all this must have been carried in her throughout the years which in these minutes fell away (p. 166).

Other moments in *The Death of the Heart* suggest that Portia's life is shadowed by history in more pervasive ways, raising further questions about her identity. The description of her settling in to Windsor Terrace, for example, is freighted by suggestions that although she seems unaware of an ancestral past, she may be tainted by it. Initially the writing attends sympathetically to Portia's feelings for her surroundings, registering the sound and tactile quality of the door which 'brushed heavily over the mat and clicked shut' and the change in temperature as '[t]he breath of raw air that had come in with Portia perished in the steady warmth of the hall' (p. 22). Drawn to the warmth, she 'went to the radiator', 'tugging off her gloves' and 'heard an unloving echo', in a house 'without any life upstairs', 'a house to which nobody had returned yet' (p. 22). While this sounds troubling, she feels '[r]eassured' and warms her hands, not because she is oblivious to the absence of love or life, but because she is alone and safely in possession (p. 22). It is a furtive moment because she is a guest making herself at home in the absence of the hosts within an environment charged with conflict over living space. Her response to the news that Anna will shortly be back is hostile and aggressive: 'O-oh […] That's no good, then. Do you think she'll ever be out?' (p. 24). Matchett informs her that Anna has complained about the collection of bears which she has arranged on the mantelpiece in her room as if they were 'having tea' (p. 28). 'All hand-carved […] by the Swiss peasants', they are portable possessions expressing attachment to her lost home. But as examples of that variety of Heimkunst or folk art which Bowen recognised as a feature of Irish and German nationalism, they also stridently announce their opposition to Anna's sophisticated style (p. 28). [16] When Portia protests 'what was she doing in my room? Matchett points out 'It's her house, like it or not'. Portia counters that 'she always says it's my room', adding: 'I suppose I ought to have known. Birds know if you have been at their eggs: they desert' (p. 25). Portia's uncompromising sense of place which relates most obviously to the emotional drama of grief, is unwittingly cruel for Anna, who has been dispossessed of two pregnancies and has given Portia the room that 'could have been the

nursery' (p. 39-40). Portia's desire to oust her hostess also has odd, uncomfortable suggestions of the rise of fascism: Anna states that 'she marches about this house like the Race itself' and Portia's name, that of the heroine of *The Merchant of Venice*, hints at the 'pseudo-legal' dispossession of German Jews in the 1930s (p. 246)).[17]

When Portia fantasises about deserting with Eddie to colonial Africa, a popular destination for the Anglo Irish after the First World War, Bowen draws attention to the displacement of domestic tensions and the potential for history to repeat itself.[18] Portia's dream bears comparison with the actual travels of Rachel Vinrace in Woolf's novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). However, unlike Rachel's journey from home in London to an English colony in South America - a removal from stability to uncertainty and, ultimately, death – Portia's imaginary voyage out is from insecurity to a fantasised stability, suggesting that she is drawn to empire precisely because she is not securely located in her home country. Gesturing to what Woolf called 'the dark places of psychology', Portia's illicit vision further offers a provocative slant on Freud's idea of feminine sexuality as 'a dark continent for psychology', consciously drawing on a Conradian view of empire as a place for the dispossessed:[19]

> Safe for the minute, sealed down under her eyelids, Portia lay and saw herself with Eddie. She saw a continent in the late sunset, in rolls and ridges of shadow like the sea. Light that was dark yellow lay on trees, and penetrated their dark hearts. Like a struck glass, the continent rang with silence. The country, with its slow tense dusk-drowned ripple, rose to their feet where they sat: she and Eddie sat in the door of a hut. She felt the hut, with its content of dark, behind them. The unearthly level light streamed in their faces; she saw it touch his cheekbones, the tips of his eyelashes, while he turned her way his eyeballs blind with gold. She saw his hands hanging down between his knees, and her hands hanging down peacefully beside him as they sat together on the step of the hut. She felt the touch of calmness and similarity: he and she were one without any touch but this. What was in the hut behind she did not know: this light was eternal; they would be here for ever (pp. 85-6).

Evoking the setting and atmosphere of *Heart of Darkness*, Portia imagines a home for herself and Eddie against the backdrop of 'a continent in the late sunset'. They are pioneers, sitting 'in the door of a hut', creating a new life together, but like Conrad, Bowen draws attention to

the coalescence of romantic fantasy with greed and exploitation. '[E]yeballs blind with gold' recalls Conrad's anti-hero, Kurtz, who succumbs to a lust for ivory. This would make Portia Kurtz's fiancée, 'the Intended', a minor figure in the novel, appearing at the end to bear out Marlowe's notorious judgment that women 'live in a world of their own', 'out of touch with truth' by maintaining her belief in Kurtz's goodness.[20] Hero-worshipping Eddie, Portia confirms his grandiose sense of self, and, seeing the gold through his eyes, she is by no means comfortably distanced from greed and plunder. The affair plays out in a seemingly empty territory: 'rang with silence' suggests she thinks they were alone apart from 'the country' that 'rose to their feet', presumably the land but possibly people, who may be welcoming or assertive. The insistence that she 'did not know' what was inside the hut hints at dark deeds committed by, or more probably against, Africans, who continued to be subject to dispossession by European settlers even in the inter war years. Does she *choose* not to know? Portia's vision of permanence - 'this light was eternal; they would be here forever' - coalesces with an outdated view of empire. It also recalls pronouncements made in Europe during the 1930s, notably Hitler's anticipation of a 'thousand year Reich', which built on resentment that Germany had been dispossessed of its colonies after Versailles and was already informing the pursuit of Lebensraum, or living space, within Europe. Support for Hitler's views among some Anglo-Irish settlers in Africa, notably John Carberry, 'a Nazi sympathiser out of pure anti-English sentiment', is perhaps another context for Portia's words – and another indication of the danger of dispossession.[21]

As the novel draws to a close, our growing apprehension that Portia may be the bearer of a sinister legacy is confirmed when she returns to her unsettled origins, and pays a visit to the Karachi Hotel. Announcing to the bewildered Major Brutt, 'I've got nowhere to go', and threatening to cry, she insists on going to his room (p. 287). The account of the ascent ('Up up. This house seemed to have no top', p. 291) echoes the scene at the boarding house in which she felt she 'had climbed to the very top of a tree pursued by something that could follow' (p. 196). By this time, however, she has no fear, for she is the aggressor. [P]ossessing his room', Portia, who has a small legacy from her parents, offers marriage and 'a home; we would not have to live in an hotel' (p. 295). She then stages a 'move-in', the title of Bowen's last work about a group of squatters who take over a country house: 'she made small arrangements for comfort – peeled off his eiderdown, kicked her shoes off, lay down with her head on the pillow and pulled the eiderdown snugly up to her chin' (p. 296). Recreating the homes she made in hotels with her mother, these actions carry pathos but they are also

sinister. In an extraordinary metaphor, she is imaged as a foetal settler or settling foetus: 'By this series of acts she seemed at once to shelter, to plant here, and to obliterate herself – most of all that last' (p. 296). Embedded in Brutt's room, she makes a home for herself by returning to the security of pre-natal life, but she is also re-enacting a generative moment in modern Irish history: plantation, imagined as a conflict not between hosts and guest but between different kinds of guests. When she instructs Brutt to deliver an ultimatum to the Quaynes to 'do the right thing' (which is probably impossible), he becomes complicit in a course of action that will alienate them; Portia's dramatic arrival has already placed him in a compromised position with the hotel authorities. As he leaves his room, Portia remaining in possession, the narrator hints at a wider tragedy that is yet to unfold in which Portia has played her part: 'she turned over and put her hand under her cheek [...] she was like one of those children in an Elizabethan play who are led on, led off, hardly speak, and are known to be bound for some tragic fate which will be told in a line (pp. 297-8). As this suggests, Portia's role in the drama is a minor one. Bereft of his reputation and his friendship with the Quaynes, Brutt is going to his doom, an 'upright telephone coffin', and does not return to his room (p. 298).

As Neil Corcoran argues, the tragedy of *The Death of the Heart* is that of Major Brutt, for whom the hotel is his last abode. '[T]he man from back somewhere', he is described as 'a 1914-18 model', with no place in the modern world' (pp. 45, 90). Characterized in the same terms as Portia's father, another veteran of the First World War, as 'idealistic', Major Brutt's fatal flaw is his tender heart, which leads him to describe Portia as a 'sweet little kid' (pp. 103, 246, 265). Entering the novel through a chance encounter with Anna, whom he met once long ago during an evening out with Robert Pidgeon, Anna's lover, and Brutt's 'friend', he has attached inordinate significance to this brief meeting, the memory of which has become 'the dear possession of someone with few possessions, carried from place to place' (p. 91). If this makes him pathetic, it is a pathos that the narrator carefully humanizes:

> But a man must live. Not for nothing do we invest so much of ourselves in other people's lives – or even in momentary pictures of people we do not know. It cuts both ways: the happy group inside the lighted window, the figure in the long grass in the orchard seen from the train stay and support us in our dark hours. Illusions are art, for the feeling person, and it is by art that we live, if we do. It is the emotion to which we remain faithful, after all: we are taught to recover it in some other place (p. 91).

In this powerful aside, Bowen defends the importance of illusions, which, she suggests, are essential to nothing less than psychic survival. A propos of which, when the Quaynes invite Brutt in for drinks, and he begins to 'attach himself to that warm room', and to the vision of the Quaynes as a happy, even 'holy' family, we see that his reveries are a matter of life and death, his last chance to feel connected and to believe in something (pp. 88, 92). So, when Portia arrives at his shabby hotel, laying waste to his feelings and destroying his credit with the Quaynes, this is tragic and arouses our pity when we hear of his understated response: 'he felt, simply, things had changed for the worse. His home had come down; he must no longer envisage Windsor Terrace or go there again' (p. 298). The narrator, identifying with Brutt, states that 'One's sentiments – call them that – one's fidelities are so instinctive that one hardly knows they exist: only when they are betrayed or, worse still, when one betrays them does one realise their power. That betrayal is the end of an inner life without which the everyday becomes threatening or meaningless' (p. 298). If this seems poetic, it is informed by a hard-headed belief in the dangers of disillusionment, for, struck by 'what a fiction was common sense', 'how specious wisdom was', it is clear that Major Brutt has lost trust in liberal values (pp. 293, 298). From such a standpoint, it would not require a huge step for him to become one of Eliot's 'hollow men', 'lost/ Violent souls', ripe for political exploitation.[22] When Eddie states that 'Brutt is a brute', although this is not the case, the point is that he could become one (p. 97). If Brutt is a relic from a lost past, he is also a reminder of a constituency from which Hitler would draw much support. Often likened to a dog, Brutt's loyalty and dependency are highlighted, but in the circumstances, this makes him capable of following anyone who will feed him and his 'necessary' dreams (p.92). Referring to the transfer of his affections from Pidgeon and Anna to the Quaynes, the narrator notes 'a ruthlessness in his sentiments' which implies that perhaps he will be seduced by Portia's offer (p. 92).

Like many of Bowen's works, *The Death of the Heart* ends on a note of suspense. When Matchett arrives at the Karachi Hotel to fetch Portia, '[w]e are left', as Bennet and Royle remark, 'with the unfinished movement of being sent towards a strange place and not arriving', 'a sense of movement which is not properly thinkable'.[23] For Bennet and Royle, the open ending reflects a postmodern indeterminacy. Its lack of closure might also be attributed to the novel's uncertainty about history as an unfolding process that Bowen and many of her contemporaries had long anticipated was leading towards war. The decision to send Matchett

to the hotel is defined in military terms as a '*coup*' and Portia has already been accused by Brutt of war-mongering (pp. 313, 293). While Matchett's internal monologue in the taxi is reassuringly prosaic, she has been caught off guard and is not confident that she will be able to persuade Portia to 'come back with Matchett and be a good girl' (p. 317). Further doubts are provoked when we consider that, in the interim, Portia and Brutt could have formed a shady alliance; when the taxi driver questions whether Matchett will 'be coming back out of here', we wonder if she will be safe; even if she could be co-opted by them (p. 317). The closing sentence remains equivocal as to whether, in this febrile environment, traditional order can prevail. Having arrived at the hotel, Matchett pushes on the door knob 'with an air of authority' (p. 318). Whether her air (and it may only be an air) will be enough to restore the status quo is in historical terms not knowable at this stage, but images of the hotel as a place of 'echoes', 'ghostly', 'pallid and bare' with 'uncertain' piano-playing suggest that the fabric of civilisation has worn thin. The anticipation of 'summer, intensifying everything with its heat and glare' adds an ominous touch and the idea that in 'gardens outside London roses would burn on, with all else gone in the dusk' points to a Yeatsian conflagration (p. 318).[24] Looking back to the burning house in *The Last September*, the incendiary roses also look forward to Bowen's novel, *The Heat of the Day* (1949) in which feverish imagery serves to align fanaticism with the physical destruction of houses and furniture in the Second World War.

University of Gloucestershire

Notes

[2] Elizabeth Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations: Chapters of an Autobiography* (1975), p. 34.

[3] Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, rev. edn. (1999), p. 73.

[4] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart* (1998), p. 81. Further references are to this edition and given in the text.

[5] Joseph Conrad, *Victory* (1915), cited in Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: the Enforced Return* (Oxford, 2004), p. 104.

[6] I draw on Nels Pearson's argument that Bowen's characters are 'negotiating belonging in the context of never having belonged. These characters do 'not possess an orientation that precedes their disorientation. They live in the "now" of disruption and historical crises, but they have not "lived before", in the sense of not having experienced a mode of belonging that was, at some point in the past, stable enough to be negated, buried or "botched" by the sudden and seismic turmoil of modernity'. *Irish Cosmopolitanism: Location and Dislocation in James Joyce, Elizabeth Bowen and Samuel Beckett* (Gainsville, Florida, 2015), p. 71.

[7] Elizabeth Bowen, *The House in Paris* (1998), p. 186.

[8] Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (1993), p. 125.

[9] Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 125.

[10] Bowen, *The House in Paris*, p. 17.

[11] Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, p. 44.

[12] Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, p. 14. Bowen refers to 'the Anglo-Irish – with their manner of instantly striking root into the interstices of any society in which they happened to find themselves, and in their own way proceeding to rule the roost'.

[13] Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Big House', in *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Hermione Lee (1999), 25-30 (p. 27).

[14] Yoriko Kitagawa, 'Anticipating the Postmodern Self: Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*', *English Studies*, 5 (2000), 484-96 (p. 491).

[15] Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 74.

[16] *Elizabeth Bowen: Notes on Eire, Espionage Reports to Winston Churchill, 1940-2*, 2nd edn (Cork, 2008), p. 18.

[17] Martin Dean, *Robbing the Jews: the Confiscation of Jewish Property in the Holocaust, 1933-1945* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 2.

[18] Mark Bence Jones, *Twilight of the Ascendancy* (1987), pp. 236, 242.

[19] Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *Virginia Woolf: the Common Reader*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, 2 vols (2003), I, 146-55 (p. 152) and Sigmund Freud, 'The Question of Lay Analysis (1926), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (1953-74), XX (1959) 179-251 (p. 212).

[20] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Oxford, 2002), p. 113.

[21] James Fox, *White Mischief* (1998), p. 67.

[22] T. S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men', in *T. S. Eliot: the Complete Plays and Poems* (1969), p. 83.

[23] Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*: *Still Lives* (New York, 1994), pp. 65, 80.

[24] It recalls, for example, the 'roses of crimson fire' in Yeats' poem 'He Bids his Beloved Be at Peace' from the early collection, *The Wind Among the Reeds* 4th edn (1903), 24-5 (p. 24). Other Yeatsian echoes are identified by John Coates, 'In Praise of Civility: Conservative Values in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*, *Renascence*, 37 (1985), 248-65 (pp. 249-51, 256).