

## BEYOND TRANSITION: ELIZABETH BOWEN'S *SEVEN WINTERS*

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The present essay intends to analyse *Seven Winters – Memories of a Dublin Childhood*, an autobiographical account of Elizabeth Bowen's early winters in Dublin, both as a text *per se* and as a counterpart, or "a minor intertext" (Stewart 334) – as it has long been considered – to her more extended autobiographical work, *Bowen's Court*<sup>1</sup>. *Seven Winters* and *Bowen's Court* came out in the same year and are now published together, thus forming an interesting macrotext in Elizabeth Bowen's autobiographical writing.

An extremely productive writer, author of novels, short stories and occasional prose ranging from articles and reviews to introductions and afterwords, Elizabeth Bowen also tried her hand at writing autobiography. If *Seven Winters* and *Bowen's Court* are her most famous ones, they are not her only autobiographical pieces. In early 1972 she had shown her literary executor, Spencer Curtis Brown, two chapters of an autobiography which was to be entitled *Pictures and Conversations*, a project that was interrupted by her death. Following her will, Curtis Brown published it posthumously in 1975. Hermione Lee collected "Pictures and Conversations" in *The Mulberry Tree – Writings of Elizabeth Bowen* (1986) in a section entitled "Autobiography", and she chose to put before it "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met", an autobiographical sketch Bowen wrote in 1944, shortly after the death of Sarah Barry, Bowen's Court housekeeper, the 'character' of the title. Taura Napier also includes *A Time in Rome* in Bowen's "declared works of autobiography" (Napier 78), while Neil Corcoran defines it as "her only travel book" (Corcoran 19); neither Napier nor Corcoran mention "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met" among Bowen's autobiographical texts.

*Bowen's Court* is a bulky autobiographical volume. It is both her family's history through the Big House the family had identified with, being the account of the history of a building encompassing the history of her family and her class, and her deflected autobiography. According to Taura Napier's definition, this is a characteristic mode of Irish female autobiographers and a "useful theoretical model that has particular resonance for the self-narratives of Irish women [...], a narrative mode in which the protagonist is ever present yet not apparently central, where the author resists being identified as the heroine of her work" (Napier 70). *Bowen's Court* traces the history of her ancestors from the arrival of Colonel Bowen from Wales and her family's later building of the Big House, to Elizabeth Bowen herself, the last descendant. In the "Afterword" the author wrote for the second edition of the book in 1964, she revealed

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1 Quotations from the volume *Bowen's Court and Seven Winters* will be followed by page number in brackets.

to her readers that the house no longer existed: being no more able to maintain it, she sold it to a neighbour, who destroyed it, so that “it never lived to be a ruin” (459).

Although in *Bowen’s Court* she recourses, where she can, to documents and family papers, she admittedly blends history and story, reality and imagination, thus providing a self-conscious intentional mode to her approach to autobiographical writing: “I have made the frame of this family history from hearsay and some certain retrieved facts” (452). As Napier argues, it is “all the more interesting that in recalling her family’s history she also articulates a description of her autobiographical method – ‘the version that most appeals to me’ – that entails moulding history and legend into a more pleasing pattern” (Napier 79). Bowen herself reflected on the art of autobiographical writing in an essay she wrote on the topic in 1951<sup>2</sup>. Here she defined contemporary autobiography as made “[o]ut of impressions” (Bowen, “Autobiography” 204) and as deriving “from query, being tentative rather than positive, no longer didactic, but open-minded [...] mobile, exploratory” (Bowen, “Autobiography” 201), thus giving a frame of personal creativity to the writing of autobiography. This personal creative approach to autobiographical writing goes hand in hand with the reticence that she cultivated as to personal exposure, so that, while allowing that *Seven Winters* “could be called a fragment of autobiography”, in the introduction she wrote for the 1962 American edition of the volume, Elizabeth Bowen made it clear that “it is as much of my life story as I intend to write – that is, to write *directly*” (Foster, “Prints” 154, emphasis added), a statement which recalls what she had already expressed in “Autobiography”: “The author seeks expression [...] but *self-expression* only at one remove” (Bowen, “Autobiography” 200).

While *Bowen’s Court* takes into consideration her ancestors and her family in history, *Seven Winters* focusses on the early period of her own personal history; it is an insight into a child’s experiences, thoughts and imagination, and especially into her relation to a defined area in Dublin. “If *Bowen’s Court* is constructed as a site of history, Dublin is a site of memory” (Stewart 336), and in a way space and time overlap in Bowen’s autobiographical writing. Both *Bowen’s Court* and *Seven Winters* testify to the importance of places in Elizabeth Bowen’s aesthetics: places are even more important than characters in her fiction, they are the original embryos of her writing. According to the seasonal divide of young Elizabeth’s life, *Bowen’s Court* was the place where she spent her summers, while the house in Dublin existed only in winters: “I used to believe that winter lived always in Dublin, while summer lived always in County Cork” (465), therefore space and time intertwine and mingle so that she was unable to understand that she had been born in Dublin: “But how? – my birthdays are always at *Bowen’s Court*” (466).

She spent her first seven years in Ireland. When she was seven, her father had a serious breakdown and Bowen’s mother and Elizabeth were ordered to leave him

2 “Autobiography”, first printed as “Autobiography as an Art” in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, now in *Afterthought – Pieces about Writing*, 199-204.

alone to recover. So they went to England, where they lived in many different places, frequently changing hotels and houses, thus totally reversing a life of fixed and secure habits and its resulting certainties. *Seven Winters* ends on the watershed of her father's illness: "When I was seven years old, Herbert Place was given up: my father's mental illness had to be fought alone; my mother and I were ordered to England" (512).

### Autobiographical writing in wartime

Both *Bowen's Court* and *Seven Winters* were written during the second World War: The former was begun in the early summer of 1939 and finished in 1941, the latter was a sort of spin-off of Bowen's *Court*, and both were published in 1942. Both centered on houses; they were written in London at a time when houses were daily destroyed. Both, characteristically, keep destruction away from their narratives and from their houses. The war years favoured a recourse to memory: the turmoil, instability and danger brought with them the need to reflect on the past, origins, roots, in search of stability and comfort. As Bowen herself wrote in December 1942, "War makes us more conscious, anxiously conscious, of the value of everything that is dear and old" (Bowen, "Christmas" 128). Memory is a bulwark of civilization and of the survival of the self: "To survive, not only physically but spiritually, was essential" (Bowen, "Post-script" 193).

The war, then, "precipitated a vogue for precocious autobiography" (Foster, "The Irishness" 117); it represented, for Elizabeth Bowen as for several other writers, the moment of crisis which usually triggers the exercise of memory and the re-examination of one's own past to which autobiographical writing is related. She "turned to autobiography in search of the continuities of private life that [...] the random effects of war threatened to extinguish or [...] render irrelevant" (Grubgeld 36).

It is not by chance, then, that during the war years Bowen devoted herself mostly to autobiographical writing, to which short stories and a novel, *The Heat of the Day*, started in 1944, are to be added. She lived mainly in London, where she was an air-raid warden and experienced the destruction, loss and fear brought about by the German air-raids on the city. She also travelled to Ireland on an assignment for the British government to report on Irish opinions about the war.

In her short stories of the period, houses, so dear to Bowen and so relevant to the Anglo-Irish class she belonged to, are subject to the threat of war, they are always at risk, or destroyed, or they barely or only partly survive. The daily destruction brought about by the war pervades all her writing of the period,<sup>3</sup> not only her short stories, but

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3 In a letter to Virginia Woolf dated January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1941, Bowen wrote: "When your flat went did that mean all the things in it too? All my life I have said 'Whatever happens there will always be tables and chairs' – and what a mistake" (Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree* 216-17). An observation echoed in Bowen's short story "Sunday Afternoon", first pub-

also articles and prefaces, which makes a striking contrast to the permanence of the houses she recalls both in *Bowen's Court* and in *Seven Winters* – “The search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world” (Bowen, “Postscript” 194)

In the essays and introductions of those years or those immediately following, she often mentions the hallucinatory atmosphere of the war and “the state of lucid abnormality” (Bowen, “Postscript” 191) in which everybody lived. It is the need to cling to saving memories, “[t]he search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world” (Bowen, “Postscript” 194) that makes Elizabeth Bowen “look back from an ‘anaesthetized and bewildered present’ to a lost stability and innocence” (Lee vii), from war-time London to Bowen’s Court and to her Dublin childhood winters in *Seven Winters*.

The drive to the past is the subject of “The Bend Back”, an essay dealing with nostalgia, which Bowen wrote in 1950, where she reflects on the sense of dislocation, acknowledging that it can be projected out not only in space, but also in time. The desire for an elsewhere has turned for many contemporaries into a dislocation in time: “we have shifted our desire for the ideal ‘elsewhere’ from space to time” (Bowen, “Bend” 58), that is, to the past. Once again, space and time seem to overlap.

### **The child and the city of Dublin**

In the same essay she wrote that “one invests one’s identity *in* one’s memory” (Bowen, “Bend” 56, original emphasis). Interestingly, the identity she constructs in her autobiographical writings is never only nor mainly her own individual identity, but rather the identity of her family and of her class. The child of *Seven Winters* is aware of “some unwritten law of our time and class” (499) and shares this collective identity. The urban spaces of *Seven Winters* are perceived as a microcosm constituted by a very small portion of central Dublin, encircled by the Canal, where the Bowens’ home is, at Herbert Place. It is such a small area that, when her dance teacher selects her for “a sort of gala or exhibition at the Rathmines Town Hall” (501) – further south – a “rare cab” has to be summoned, because her mother, like “several other mothers – [does] not know how to find” (501) the place. Her Ascendancy microcosm is also set apart from the “red roads” south of the Canal and their well-to-do-houses. The richness of these mansions, where she was sometimes invited for parties, “with their frosty gardens and steamy conservatories” (502) filled her governesses with awe but was despised by her mother, as the expression of new, competing social forces: “Quite often, one’s cab crossed the canal, for the spreading mansions along the red roads [...] vied with the cliff-like blocks round Merrion Square” (502).

In her childhood topography the Liffey acts as a divide, with the Four Courts “where my father went every day” (477) painted on the canvas of the north side: “It seems likely that we never walked on the quays – certain districts of Dublin being ruled out

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lished in *Life and Letters of To-day*, July 1941: “I must ask you – we heard you had lost everything. But that cannot be true?” (*Bowen's Court* 619).

as 'noisy' – and that we did not venture to cross the Liffey. So the North side remained *terra incognita*" (477). It remained so "till I went one day to a party in Mountjoy Square" (477); the actual visit to the square cancelling her feeling that "Sackville Street had something queer at the end" (477). The "canvas" north of the river is "pierced and entered only by the lordly perspective of Sackville Street", now O'Connell Street, "the widest street in the world" (473). The choice of the word 'canvas' recalls her past desire to become an artist, which may account for the relevance of the visual in her writing.

Although "[a]ll here stood for stability" (493), even not far from St Stephen's Green there were "ruled-out parts of one's own city" (477), unknown areas which held in store more threats than "any swamp or jungle" (477). They had "canyon-like streets that could intimidate me" (477), streets "massed with [...] architectural shadows" (478) which made Dublin "cryptic" (477). The word 'canyon' seems associated to threat in Bowen: she uses the same word in the "Postscript By The Author" (October 1944) to *The Demon Lover* when recalling what living in London during the war was like – "[w]alking in the darkness of the nights of six years (darkness which transformed a capital city into a network of inscrutable canyons) one developed new bare alert senses, with their own savage warnings and notations" (Bowen, "Postscript" 196). Readers are seemingly reassured and told that "My fear was not social – not the rich child's dread of the slum" (478), but, rather, that it was physical, something similar to claustrophobia: "something might shut on me, never to let me out again; something might fall on me, never to let me through" (478). It is, indeed, the fear and repulsion aroused by the impropriety of poverty – "It was a charnel fear, of grave dust and fungus dust. [...] I had heard of poverty-rotted houses that might at any moment crumble over one's head" (478). The safe alternative is to stay on familiar ground: "Only on familiar pavements did sunshine fall" (478).

Aware of their belatedness – even her father's monumental and exhausting work on *Statutory Land Purchase* to which he dedicated sixteen years was outdated just before being printed – the Anglo-Irish live in the past, "[t]he twentieth century governed only in name; the nineteenth was still a powerful dowager" (493), and are obsessed with family history as a means of asserting claims to legitimacy.

Protestant Anglo-Irish decline haunts *Bowen's Court*, and is envisioned in the fate of the house, but the child seems not to perceive it at the time of *Seven Winters*: "[t]he tyrannical grandness of this quarter", that is, the area around Lower Baggot Street and Leeson Street, close to St Stephen's Green, "seemed to exist for itself alone. Perhaps a child smells history without knowing it – I did not *know* I looked at the tomb of fashion" (492) – the reference here being to the end of Grattan's Parliament and the Act of Union. The time of History thus speaks through the space of the present, but the tensions and turmoils of contemporary history are excluded from *Seven Winters*, as they would in some way erode the sense of permanence the author strove to create in the text.

Only slowly, through governesses, does Elizabeth as a child begin “to perceive that Ireland was *not* the norm, the usual thing” (484), but she does not even perceive that hers is a minority community: “It was not until the end of those seven winters that I understood that we Protestants were a minority, and that the unquestioned rules of our being came, in fact, from the closeness of a minority world” (508). Such awareness anticipates the coming of age of Bowen’s consciousness of her past and social class.

### **Timelessness and Permanence**

Although Elizabeth Bowen is, famously, “a great novelist of unhappy childhoods” (Foster, “The Irishness” 122), the childhood portrayed in *Seven Winters* is not unhappy, rather, it shares a quality of magic timelessness whose rendering is one of the major accomplishments of this text: “Stretched across the roof lines of Upper Baggot Street I see a timeless white sky, a solution of sunshine in not imminent cloud – a sky for the favoured” (483). Moreover, the way Bowen introduces the seasonal divide of her whereabouts – “By taking the train from Kingsbridge station to Mallow one passed from one season’s kingdom into the other’s” (465) – has the quality of fairy tales, even if her mother was “reserved in the telling of fairy tales [...] for fear that I might confuse [fairies] with angels” (472). This might be justified by her mother’s constant preoccupations about the health of her child’s mind, the most relevant being about her learning to read: Elizabeth was not allowed to do so until she was seven, as her mother was worried that the effort might tire her brain.

As is typical of Bowen’s writing, also in this memoir not only houses but also objects – “the materiality of the everyday” (Stewart 349) – play a major role: “On the whole, it is things and places rather than people that detach themselves from the stuff of my dream” (470). Houses and household objects, “tables and chairs” (Ellmann 145) are a means through which the past can be recovered because they are bearers of the past: in Bowen’s wartime writing their presence act as a continuity in the face of destruction.

*Seven Winters* is a very static text, in which there is almost “no progress” (Breen 122). The perspective is not one of chronological development, rather, the recollection of repeated habits has “the effect of increasing the feeling of timelessness” (Breen 123) irradiating from this memoir. Its structure contributes to this effect, as, rather than presenting a development, it “contains a number of vignettes that appear comparable to the experiences depicted by Virginia Woolf in ‘A Sketch of the Past’” (Stewart 340). Moreover, as Victoria Stewart argues, “*Seven Winters* is largely built around visual memory, the memory of places and things” (Stewart 346), the visual element being, unmistakably, one of the features of Bowen’s voice and of Bowen’s writing: “I find myself writing now of visual rather than social memories” (470). In “Autobiography”, which keeps resurfacing in this essay as a metadiscourse on her autobiographical production, Bowen claims that the “‘I’ in the narrative [...] provides”

– more than “viewpoint or continuity” – “the visionary element in whose light all things told appear momentous and fresh” (Bowen, “Autobiography” 201), and this remark well applies to *Seven Winters*. Being an essential element of “the texture of existence” (Bowen, “Autobiography” 204), the visual element enables the ‘I’ to become aware of her life.

*Seven Winters* is pervaded by what Bowen herself, in a later essay, defined as “The semi-mystical topography of childhood”, which “seems to be universal” (Bowen, “Bend” 55):

The perspectives of this quarter of Dublin are to any eye, at any time, very long. In those first winters they were endless to me. [...] Everything in this quarter seemed out-size. The width of the streets, the stretch of the squares, the unbroken cliff-like height of the houses made the human idea look to me superhuman. (491)

This feeling of timelessness or, rather, of being out of time and out of space, of a sort of ‘semi-mystical universal topography’, is rendered through a careful use of language both in terms of lexical choice and of grammar. In fact, words are so qualified as to make them above space or time, thus pertaining to infinity, and the use of suffixes, superlatives, and indefinites – “to any eye”, “at any time”, “very long”, “endless”, “everything” – emphasizes this strategy. The emergence and establishment of a sense of absoluteness is achieved through references to space, time or objects: here the author deploys what could be termed as a language of measure – “long”, “out-size”, “width”, “height.” As a consequence of the absolute nature of the child’s thoughts and beliefs, her world is untouched by doubts or questions: “I took this for granted (as being the rule of cities)” (492). When she mentions Phoenix Park, for instance, she claims that it “was the largest park in the world” (473-74), just as Sackville Street was the widest.

Two instances of the absolute and naïve nature of the child’s beliefs reveal what she considered “the paragon status of her native country and city” (Huber 65). The first one is a reflection deriving from Bowen’s “pride of race”, which leads her to consider Dublin as “[t]he model of cities” (474) and Ireland the hypernym of all islands in the world, Britain included, thus inverting “the structural relationship of centre vs. margin” (Huber 65). She writes:

These superlatives pleased me almost too much: my earliest pride of race was attached to them. And my most endemic pride in my own country was, for some years, founded on a mistake: my failing to have a nice ear for vowel sounds, and the Anglo-Irish slurred, hurried way of speaking made me take the words “Ireland” and “island” to be synonymous. Thus, all other countries quite surrounded by water took (it appeared) their generic name from ours. It seemed fine to live in a country that was a prototype. England, for instance, was “an Ireland” (or, a sub-Ireland) – an imitation. Then I learned that England was not even “an Ireland”, having failed to detach herself from the flanks of Scotland and Wales. Vaguely, as a Unionist child, I conceived that our politeness to England must be a form of pity.

In the same sense, I took Dublin to be the model of cities, of which there were imitations scattered over the world. (474)

As Werner Huber, to whom this “collection of essays is dedicated, commented, “[t]his equation based on a case of mistaken etymology presents an interesting reversal of perspective, as much postcolonial as it is ironic” (Huber 65).

Another absolute belief held by the child concerned brass plates: in Merrion Square “each door [...] bore its polished brass plate.” For her, “this brass plate announcing its owner’s name” was “the *sine qua non* of any gentleman’s house. Just as the tombstone says ‘*Here lies*’ the plate on the front door (in my view) said ‘*Here lives*’. Failure to write one’s name on one’s door seemed to me the admission of nonentity” (493-94).

This certainty leads to a recall of Bowen’s first visit to London, which took place at the end of *Seven Winters*:

I remember my first view of London – street after street of triste anonymity. So no one cares who lives in London, I thought. No wonder London is so large; all the nonentities settle here. Dublin has chosen to be smaller than London because she is grander and more exclusive. All the important people live in Dublin, near me. (494)

The absoluteness of the child’s experience and beliefs in *Seven Winters* is strengthened by a sense of permanence which, as Bowen wrote in “Pictures and Conversations”, “is an attribute of recalled places” (Bowen, “Pictures” 287). Only places, even if and even more when they have disappeared, can aspire to permanence, a precious state for somebody whose life was characterized by early uprooting and a constant feeling of in-betweenness.

Dislocation was a topic Bowen utterly mastered and experienced on an everyday basis, due both to her belonging to the Anglo-Irish class and to her own personal history, “most at home in mid-Irish sea” (Foster, “The Irishness” 107), a “resident alien” (Corcoran 19), as Sean O’Faolain defined her, wherever she chose to live. In addition to this, and, crucially, being “a writer for whom places loom large” (Bowen, “Pictures” 282) and are central, “[m]ost of her writing concerns an effort to define a location and establish the illusion of permanence – in a world where she was highly conscious of being the last of a line, in insecure possession of a house” (Foster, “Prints” 2002: 150). Permanence is brought into being by the process of remembering, which is also essential to autobiographical writing.

## Conclusion

She ends, not concludes, *Seven Winters* with her characteristic “withstood emotion” (Bowen, “Pictures” 268):

How should I write “*The End*” to a book which is about the essence of a beginning? [...] The end of our Dublin house, in actual time, places no stop to my memories. Only a few of these have been written here. I halted (not stopped) in the drawing room, for it was here that [...] the second phase of my memories had its start. (512)

Bowen’s choice of the verb “halted” has the function of crystallizing the present, suspending it and extending it to timelessness, thus consigning it to permanence.

The permanence which dominates *Seven Winters* is accurately built in order to exclude contemporary history, life in progress, all the huge changes that subverted the author's life after her seventh winter. Permanence is instrumental in damming the flux of life, and the pain it brought along for her.

In conclusion, permanence – the permanence of recalled places – is sealed by the closing of the house at Herbert Place and the dissolution of the certainties depicted here. Thereafter a period of recurrent moves – from Ireland to England, from house to house – started, reversing her previous regulated life, so that the atmosphere of her lost childhood home (and world) appears suspended, almost out of time, a crystallized present beyond and before transition.

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