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Conference paper

**Elizabeth Bowen: Shaking the cracked kaleidoscope. Futurism
and collage in Elizabeth Bowen's To the North**

Hirst, D.

DIANA HIRST

**SHAKING THE CRACKED KALIEDOSCOPE:
FUTURISM AND COLLAGE IN ELIZABETH BOWEN'S *TO THE NORTH***

Paper given at 'Elizabeth Bowen : A Re-Evaluation',

University of Bedfordshire, 6 May 2017

In a conversation between Elizabeth Bowen and Jocelyn Brooke, recorded for the BBC in 1950, Brooke describes reservations he has about her recently published novel *The Heat of the Day*, and how he feels that it doesn't really hang together.¹ Bowen explains what she had been attempting:

I wanted to show people in extremity, working on one another's characters and fates all the more violently because they worked by chance. I wanted the convulsive shaking of a kaleidoscope, a kaleidoscope also in which the inside reflector was cracked.²

In this paper I will argue that Bowen is attempting something similar nearly twenty years earlier in her fourth novel *To the North*.³ In their conversation, Brooke and Bowen also discuss how important the quality of light is in both their work, and how Bowen had originally wanted to be a painter. Several critics, as well as Brooke, identify a visual quality in her writing, and Bowen herself affirms this several occasions. Thus I will also argue that it is possible to identify some techniques of the visual artist in her work in this 1932 novel.

Building up to the Second World War, the thirties was a decade of unease, and unease pervades the novel. Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, the visual art genres or movements that are most relevant to *To the North* are those that are fragmented: Cubism, particularly Futurism, and their opposite: making something from fragments (collage, a jigsaw puzzle or a mosaic).

¹ 'A Conversation between Elizabeth Bowen and Jocelyn Brooke', *Listening In: Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews by Elizabeth Bowen*, Ed. with an introduction by Allan Hepburn, Edinburgh UP, 2010, p.282.

² 'A Conversation between Elizabeth Bowen and Jocelyn Brooke', *Listening In: Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews by Elizabeth Bowen*, Ed. with an introduction by Allan Hepburn, Edinburgh UP, 2010, p.283.

³ Elizabeth Bowen, *To the North*, 1932. Penguin, 1987. References given parenthetically.

The first Manifesto of the Italian Futurists was published by Marinetti in February 1909 in Milan. These are some of the clauses:

We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.

Up to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap.

We affirm that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed.⁴

To the North is full of the embracing of danger, violent movement, speed and their almost inevitable result, fragmentation. The novel opens and ends violently. The slogan for Emmeline's travel agency is 'Move Dangerously'. [TN 23] Not for nothing does Cecilia begin her train journey in Milan, the birthplace of Futurism. And it is an extraordinarily violent journey – the train begins by clanking, it lurches, flings itself sideways, it flees, it shrieks, dashes light on rocks, lashes its passengers. [TN 5-7] At one point Bowen moves to the present tense to make movement more violent: 'the train at this point rocks with particular fury'. [TN 6] Bowen envisages a journey similar to that in a painting described by a leading art critic of the day, Frank Rutter. According to Rutter, "The Journey from Milan to Paris" by the Futurist artist Gino Severini is a "jumbling together . . . of fragments of Milan Cathedral and Notre-Dame".⁵ I've been unable to trace that painting, but there's another by Severini: *Souvenirs de Voyage* which features the Victor Emmanuel building in Rome and Sacré Coeur in Paris and has that 'jumble' which Rutter refers to.⁶

⁴ F.T. Marinetti, *Manifesto of Futurism*, 1909, trans. R.W. Flint, London, Thames and Hudson, 1973, p.?????

⁵ Luke Alder, Museum Administrator at the Estorick Collection emails: 'Having checked both our copies of Rutter's *Evolution of Modern Art* and the Severini catalogue raisonné, I was unable to locate an image that fits the description. I have also consulted our Assistant Curator, who has an extensive knowledge of Futurism, and he suspects that *Memories of a Voyage* may well be the painting described, perhaps with the buildings identified incorrectly by Rutter.' DATE

⁶ Gino Severini, *Souvenirs de Voyage*, 1911. Private Collection



Gino Severini, *Souvenirs de Voyage*, 1911

Much of the violence in *To the North* is caused by clashing opposites. Markie and Emmeline make an unlikely couple to say the least. Markie, the male protagonist, is frequently, often unaccountably, angry and acts or speaks violently: sometimes he treats Emmeline roughly. With his heavy shoulders and thick neck, he is like a rugby forward. He is associated with earth and dark colours. Emmeline has short-sight, which is not only physical but moral and emotional. She is much more ethereal, associated with the colours silver, white, yellow and green: she is moon-like. She is also associated with cold – she has a ‘glacial manner’ [TN 16] - and with ice – she drinks ‘iced tea’ [TN 21].

There was a further Futurist Manifesto, the Manifesto of Aeropainting, published in September 1929. The first clause said:

The shifting perspectives of flight constitute an absolutely new reality which has nothing in common with reality as traditionally constituted by a terrestrial perspective.⁷

In other words, one sees things from a different perspective from the air to that from the earth, as in this painting by Gerardo Dottori, one of the signatories to that Manifesto.⁸

⁷ Giacomo Balla et al., *Manifesto of Aeropainting*, 1929

⁸ Gerardo Dottori, ‘Aeropittura’ Provenance unknown



Gerardo Dottori, 'Aeropittura

Perspective is something which recurs in Bowen's writing. When they fly to Paris, Bowen writes: 'For Markie the earth was good enough, he could ask no better; he observed, however, from Emmeline's face of delight that something had happened: . . . earth slipped from their wheels that, spinning, rushed up the air.' [TN 135]

This difference in perspective between Emmeline and Markie is becoming evident, something Bowen continues to emphasise while Markie and Emmeline are in Paris. Another violent journey takes place on the way to the restaurant. This is the first time Emmeline has doubts about the relationship: 'Her new soaring confidence faltered, she dropped nearer the earth'. [TN 148] In other words she is beginning to lose her individuality, being taken over by Markie. But shortly afterwards, as they swerve, she laughs, blinks at the crash of light and remarks 'oh well, if one's killed one's killed.' [TN 149] When they visit Sacré Coeur later that night, the discord between them is clear: it has been Emmeline's idea to come here rather than visit the 'indoor intimate Paris' preferred by Markie. [TN 149] This is her territory. The building is 'her' colour – white – and Bowen's adjectives about the scene are cold. The moonlight is 'glacial, sinister, Doréesque', the breath of Paris is 'chilled', one is 'served cold up to the moon'. [TN 149, 150]

Gustave Doré, *The Creation of Light* (1866)

Since he died the year before the foundation stone was laid, it would not have been possible for Gustave Doré to have produced a print of Sacré Coeur, but this illustration shows us the light effect that Bowen is describing.⁹ Although Emmeline says she is happy, as she looks at Markie uncertainly in the moonlight, her short sight means that she can't see what he is doing or thinking and she becomes disorientated. She is losing her perspective both physically and emotionally.

We turn now to collage, which originated from the French term *papiers collés* (or *découpage*), used to describe techniques of pasting paper cut-outs onto various surfaces.¹⁰ Light and fragmentation are at the heart of one of the two major pieces of collage. In the Wiltshire cottage, Markie 'takes down a yellow volume', opens it at random and reads aloud a long passage in French. This he dismisses as '- Rot'. [TN 203] The passage opens the chapter 'Concerning Jealousy' from Stendhal's 1822 *De l'Amour*.¹¹ Bowen leaves the reader to delve if they wish into her reasons for collaging it, and if they do so, they will discover not

⁹ Gustave Doré, *The Creation of Light* (1866)

¹⁰ <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/collage> Accessed 8 May 2017

¹¹ Stendhal, trans. Gilbert and Suzanne Sale, *De l'Amour* 1822. Penguin, 1984, pp. 111-115

only that the piece collaged heralds the jealousy which Emmeline will begin to feel about Markie's relationship with Daisy, but that in an earlier chapter Stendhal introduces his notion of crystallization, central to his ideas on love.

Whenever all is not well between you and your beloved, you crystallize out an *imaginary solution*. Only through imagination can you be sure that your beloved is perfect in any given way.¹²

This was inspired by a visit to an abandoned salt-works near Salzburg where he was fascinated to observe the transformation of a bare bough into a 'galaxy of scintillating diamonds' after it had been left there for a period.

At the salt mines of Salzburg, they throw a leafless wintry bough into one of the abandoned workings. Two or three months later they haul it out covered with a shining deposit of crystals. The smallest twig . . . is studded with a galaxy of scintillating diamonds. . . .¹³

What Stendhal is saying, I think, is that when one is in love the glitter of love is such that one is blinded to the imperfections of the loved one.



Emmeline is less sure about Markie after they return from Paris, but remains outwardly calm, though Bowen writes that her 'gentleness masked every shade of will from contrariness to

¹² Stendhal, p.51

¹³ Stendhal, p.45

fanaticism. There is one kind of sublime officiousness, anger's or love's, that is overruling: pure anger crystallizes its object.' [TN 192] Even on the final car ride she is calm and gentle until she gives way to her 'furious driving'. [TN 243]

There is another work essential to our understanding of *To the North* which is collaged in a different way. This time, rather than 'stick on' a whole section of text, Bowen collages snippets throughout the novel, taken from *The Snow Queen* by Hans Christian Andersen.¹⁴ This story contains several of Bowen's *leitmotifs*: the mirror, the shattered glass, the creation of something from broken pieces. In Andersen's tale, when the Evil One's mirror was first created, his gnomes flew with it to Heaven to make fun of the angels, but lost hold of it. It plunged to earth, smashing into pieces. Each tiny piece has the same power as the original, so that if it gets into a person's eye, their moral vision is distorted, and if a splinter gets into a man's heart, the heart immediately becomes a lump of ice.

The little girl Gerda's friend Kay is stabbed in the heart and in the eye by splinters of glass from the enchanted mirror. The splinter in Kay's heart turns to ice, and as a result Kay's nature changes and he distances himself from Gerda. He is abducted by the Snow Queen, who takes him to her palace where he is given the task of forming the word 'Eternity' from sharp, flat blocks of ice: if he can do this, he will be his own master. Wearing red shoes, Gerda sets out to find him, and when she eventually does, it is her hot tears that melt the ice, releasing the mirror splinters in his eyes and heart, and causing the sharp, flat blocks of ice to dance with joy and lie down in exactly the letters the Snow Queen had asked for: they form the solution to the puzzle.

¹⁴ Hans Christian Andersen, 'The Snow Queen', *Fairy Stories*, illustrated by Margaret W. Tarrant (London and Melbourne: Ward, Lock & Co., Limited, u.d.), pp. 261-340



From *Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales*, illus. Margaret Tarrant, early 1900s

However, Bowen does not always collage straightforwardly: she distorts. She takes fragments from Andersen's work and dislocates them. Thus, rather than the male protagonist, Markie, as we've seen, it is Emmeline who is associated with ice. It is Emmeline, not Markie, who has the 'splinter of ice' in her heart, and who has defective eyesight. [TN 47] Gerda in the novel, whom Cecilia describes as 'a bad illustration to Hans Andersen', is just that: her shoes tend to be green, not red. [TN 95, TN 53] It is Emmeline who wears red slippers as she vacillates over giving a letter to Markie, in this passage full of images of coldness drawn from the Andersen story:

Emmeline's heart smote her. ... - this idea of pleasure as isolated, arctic, regarding its own heart only, became desolating to Emmeline as a garden whose flowers were ice. Those north lights colouring the cold flowers became her enemies; her heart warming or weakening she felt at war with herself inside this cold zone of solitude. She desired lowness and fallibility, longing to break the mirror and touch the earth. [TN 106]

When Emmeline discovers that Markie has deceived her, Bowen writes:

Broken up like a puzzle, the glittering summer lay scattered over her mind, cut into shapes of pain that had no other character. [TN 225]

Emmeline has not been able to fit the pieces of her puzzle back together, and for her and Markie, unlike Kay and Gerda, there can be no happy ending.

The final car journey is another journey full of violence. It begins with the ‘cold pole’s first magnetism [beginning] to tighten on them’ and Bowen’s prose is full of cold and ice as Emmeline drives Markie TO THE NORTH [TN 238]. She has become a distorted Snow Queen as she gathers speed. The paragraph beginning ‘An immense idea of departure’ has the energy and violence of the Futurist Manifesto.

An immense idea of departure – expresses getting steam up and crashing from termini, liners clearing the docks, the shadows of planes rising, caravans winding out into the first dip of the desert – possessed her spirit, now launched like a long arrow. . . . Like earth shrinking and sinking, irrelevant, under the rising wings of a plane, love with its unseen plan . . . dropped to a depth below Emmeline, who now looked down unmoved at the shadowy map of her pain. [TN 244]

We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot; . . . we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervor of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; . . . adventurous steamers that sniff the horizon; deep-chested locomotives whose wheels paw the tracks like the hooves of enormous steel horses bridled by tubing; and the sleek flight of planes whose propellers chatter in the wind like banners and seem to cheer like an enthusiastic crowd.¹⁵

Then comes the inevitable crash. Back in London Julian has drawn the curtains over the strip of cold night that disturbed Cecilia. She goes into the chilly hall, and stands under the light with its hanging crystals as she waits – fruitlessly - for Emmeline to return. [TN 245-6] Cold and fragmentation have triumphed. In *To the North* Bowen has succeeded in creating the effect she will seek to create nearly twenty years later in *The Heat of the Day*.

¹⁵ F.T. Marinetti, Manifesto of Futurism, 1909, trans. R.W. Flint, London, Thames and Hudson, 1973