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SHAKING THE CRACKED KALEIDOSCOPE:  
CUBISM AND COLLAGE IN THE NOVELS OF ELIZABETH BOWEN

Paper given at International Conference on Elizabeth Bowen, Warsaw, Poland - 5 July 2016

In an autobiographical note written in 1948, Elizabeth Bowen said: ‘Often when I write I am trying to make words do the work of line and colour. I have the painter's sensitivity to light’<sup>1</sup>. I will attempt to demonstrate that she adopted several different techniques of the visual artist, working in a number of different genres. In this paper I will identify and explore some of the Cubism and Collage in four of her ten novels, *Friends and Relations*, *A World of Love*, *Eva Trout* and *To the North*. In a BBC radio programme, talking about her 1949 novel *The Heat of the Day*, she had said:

I wanted ... a smashed up pattern with its fragments investing on one another, drifting and tapping rather like [...] broken ice. [...] I wanted the convulsive shaking of a kaleidoscope, a kaleidoscope also in which the inside reflector was cracked.<sup>2</sup>

To create her smashed up pattern, Bowen develops a technique first noticeable in *Friends and Relations*. When she needs to describe physical or emotional dislocation, she dislocates language itself. As a Cubist painter might break down an image and reassemble it in an abstract manner to enable the image to be viewed from several different perspectives, Bowen fragments her sentences and reassembles them. In doing so she mimics the kaleidoscope which combines many of her *leitmotifs* – mirrors, reflection, refraction, light, and sight itself.

Bowen’s prose certainly suffers from dislocation, but since ‘dislocation’ feels a restricted term to describe her fractured syntax, I have chosen to use ‘dislocation’, a term I borrow from Fritz Senn’s analysis of James Joyce:

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, autobiographical note for Curtis Brown, 15/10/48, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, box 1, folder 5, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> ‘A Conversation between Elizabeth Bowen and Jocelyn Brooke’, *Listening In, Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews by Elizabeth Bowen* ed. Allan Hepburn. Edinburgh U P, 2010, p. 283

It suggests a spatial metaphor for all manner of metamorphoses, switches, transfers, displacements, but also acknowledges the overall significance of speech and writing, and insinuates that the use of language can be less than orthodox.<sup>3</sup>

An example of dislocation comes towards the end of Bowen's 1931 *Friends and Relations*.

The dislocation of travel is felt by Lewis as he reflects on the possibility that Edward and Janet are eloping. I will read the first half of the passage:

Watching a ship draw out you are aboard a moment, seeing with those eyes: eyes that you can no longer perceive. You see the shore recessive, withdrawing itself from you; the familiar town; the docks with yourself standing; figures – but later (where was the crowd?) all gone. The high harbour crane is dwarfed by spires behind; there are buildings very distinct, paste-board houses: you can still count the windows. Indifferently, you perceive some unknown relation, the hill right over the church – lovely, the light church backed by the dark hill: you often went in without looking up. The opera house and the station are brothers, with twin arcades. The steep avenue to the observatory you never mounted – now the whole town is ruled by that grave bubble. The climbing terraces are in order, lending each other grace. You look – as this all retreats – with regret but without desire. The figures in trouble are inconceivable, gone. Your tear perhaps is for some fine house with a portico, unknown, always to be unknown.<sup>4</sup>

This mood of this passage calls to mind two paintings both entitled *The Melancholy of Departure*, by Giorgio De Chirico who, like Bowen, often features travel and dislocation in his work.



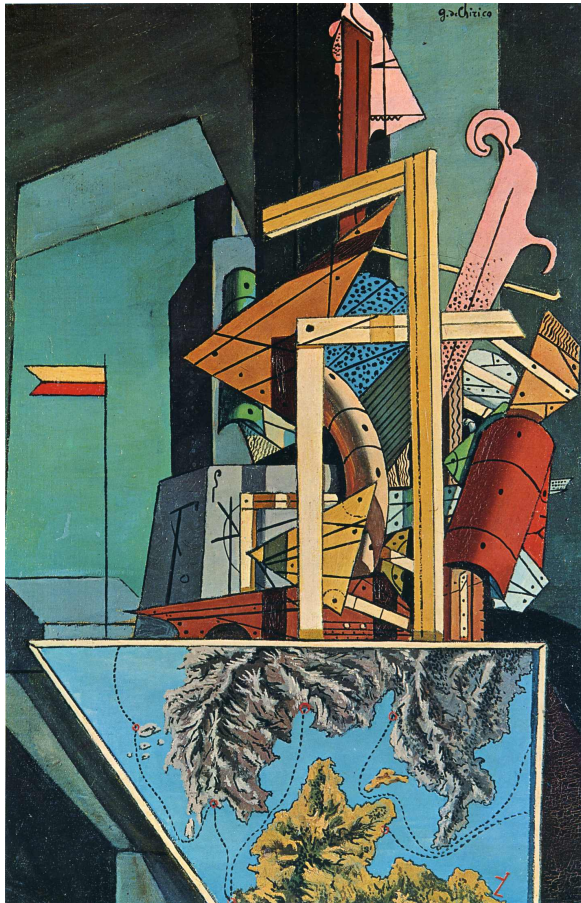
<sup>3</sup> Senn, Fritz, ed. Riquelme, John Paul, *Joyce's Dislocations: Essays on Reading as Translation*. Johns Hopkins U P, 1984, p. 202.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *Friends and Relations* (1931); Penguin, 1986, p. 147.

The earlier more representational one, *Gare Montparnasse*<sup>5</sup> from 1914, is described by

Robert Hughes:

De Chirican perspective was not meant to set the viewer in a secure, measurable space. It was a means of distorting the view and disquieting the eye. Instead of one vanishing point in his architectonic masterpiece [...] there are six, none “correct”. [...] This cloning of viewpoints acts in a way analogous to Cubism. It jams the sense of illusionary depth and delivers the surface to the rule of the flat shape, which was the quintessential modernist strategy.<sup>6</sup>



The second painting, from 1916, mystifies.<sup>7</sup> It is full of jumbled geometric shapes, and the eye immediately lights on the simplest thing: a yellow and red signal or flag which seems to direct us out of the picture. To its right is a square-based polyhedron inscribed with various

<sup>5</sup> Giorgio de Chirico, *Gare Montparnasse*, *The Melancholy of Departure*, early 1914. Museum of Modern Art, 1077.1969

<sup>6</sup> Robert Hughes, ‘Giorgio de Chirico’, *Nothing if not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists*. 1990: Harvill, 2001), pp. 160-164.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio de Chirico, *The Melancholy of Departure (Melanconia della Partenza)*, 1916 (London: Tate Gallery, T02309)

geometric shapes: it is topped with a soaring rectangle, which loses itself behind a black space. Further right, half-cylindrical and flat triangular shapes tumble: they have stippling, lines scored or black holes, as if they are parts of plating for a dismembered engine or ship which could be riveted together again, or sections of caulked decking from a boat. All are parts of vehicles in which departure could take place. At the top, slightly right of centre, appears to be a window with a lighter colour coming through: but any escape through its bars is impossible. In contrast to the many perspectives of the upper part of the picture, the map at its bottom is strikingly two-dimensional, a right-angled trapezoid, or maybe it is a truncated triangle. The map is of imaginary mountainous lands, with three separate journeys traced on it, each cut short by the frame. Or is it a picture of dead leaves? We can be sure of nothing.

Bowen is doing something similar in the passage from *Friends and Relations*. She does not provide a secure, measurable space; there are multiple perspectives: the surroundings are shifting and distorted. The reader is likely to be disturbed: neither his viewpoint nor what he sees is consistent. What is causing this unease?

The polymath artist and author Guy Davenport writes of de Chirico:

There is a pressure of words just under the surface of a de Chirico ... as if a poem had had to abandon the verbal and redefine itself in paint.<sup>8</sup>

I would suggest that we can see a reverse force in Elizabeth Bowen, as if a painting had had to abandon its canvas and redefine itself in words. It helps to understand this vertiginous extract if we analyse it from both the verbal and the physical viewpoints: the dislocation and the dislocation.

Each sentence is composed of fragments, often unrelated, punctuated haphazardly, causing the reader's mind to leap from fragment to fragment. Through her frequent use of the pronoun 'you', Bowen achieves multiple perspectives. The 'you' is not constant.

Sometimes it is in the nominative, sometimes the accusative; sometimes it represents one

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<sup>8</sup> Guy Davenport, 'Civilization and its Opposite in the Nineteen-forties', *Art of the Forties*, ed. Riva Castleman, Museum of Modern Art, 1991, pp. 15-32.

person, sometimes several people that Lewis (or is it the narrator?) is addressing; at others it is used by the narrator as an indefinite pronoun in the sense of 'one'.

This passage is a diptych, two images hinged together. Since they are of the same scene, we might imagine that they would be mirrored, but Bowen presents them from very different perspectives, making it almost impossible to relate them. In the first picture, arguably the more complex of the two, no sooner has she established a viewpoint 'watching the ship', than she turns the viewer 180 degrees so that he sees himself on land through the eyes of someone departing on that ship. Then she returns him to his original position, watching the ship; a third turn, and he is returned to the ship for the remainder of the first paragraph, still seeing himself ashore. Here is the sense of multiple perspective, as in a Cubist painting. Then, through her use of dislocation, Bowen presents the town in fragmented images, spreading upwards from the docks, dominated by the observatory, a building which hints at even more and different perspectives.

Bowen hinges the two images together with the past tense: '- So you looked back...'. In the second half of the diptych, after a momentary glance at the shore from the ship, the viewer is once again ashore, but with his viewpoint altered, foreshortened. All sense of the town spreading up vertically is lost. Three of the buildings visible from the ship are now no longer visible - the opera house, the station, the observatory. In the first half of the diptych the crane is 'dwarfed by spires behind', in the second the 'very high crane [dwarfs] spires behind': in the first 'the light church is backed by the dark hill', in the second 'the church hides the hill'; in the first the terraces arrange themselves in order as they climb the hill, in the second they block out each other. The houses in the terraces are paste-board. This gives them a two-dimensional effect like a pack of cards: one meaning of paste-board is playing cards. The houses are spread out like a hand of cards in the first; they are closed like a pack in the second. Bowen gives no indication of how we should understand 'you' in this second

half. Is she using it as an indefinite pronoun or as a collective pronoun for a group of *alter egos*? Is it a group of people each with their own perspective, or is it one person with multiple perspectives?

Another example of dislocation comes in the 1950 *A World of Love*. Lady Latterly is in her bedroom putting on her make-up. She is *distracte* and her reflection in the triple mirror is already ‘foreshortened’.

... this marvel of marbling and mirror-topping, mirror-building-in and prismatic whatnots being at the moment a battleground of clashing dazzling reflections and refractions. Crystal the chandelier dripped into the sunset; tense little lit lamps under peach shades were easily floated in upon by the gold of evening. – a blinding ray presently splintered over the dressing table.<sup>9</sup>

This paragraph is packed with parts of speech in unconventional order, random punctuation, hyphenated words, short phrases thrown together in apparent *non sequiturs*. Light and mirrors play their part, making the bedroom is a battleground fought over by opposing light-states. The energy emanating from all these conflicting sources of light fractures the mirror, creating multiple viewpoints, as in this portrait of a weeping woman by Picasso.<sup>10</sup>



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<sup>9</sup> Bowen, *A World of Love* (1955; Penguin, 1983), p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> Pablo Picasso, *Weeping Woman (Femme en Pleurs)*, 1937 (London: Tate Gallery, T05010)

One of the original Cubist painters, Picasso was also one of the first artists to employ collage, whose original intention was to jolt people out of their normal expectations by juxtaposition of unrelated objects, by dislocation and by transformation. Bowen also uses collage but hers is slightly different, and more analogous to the work of Salvador Dalí, described here by Semir Zeki, Professor of Neuroaesthetics at University College, London:

[Dalí's] view was ... that one should not only look at the whole picture but also at the details which can reveal an alternative picture.<sup>11</sup>

Bowen also includes details which have no apparent relevance to the narrative, but which reveal an alternative picture, or deepen our understanding of the existing one. She inserts a fragment of prose, in the form of a quotation, a veiled allusion to another text, an author's name, or a single word, sometimes repeating it insistently. By looking behind the text, further details are revealed. I would argue that, along with dislocation, this is an important characteristic of her idiosyncratic style and may most easily be described as literary collage.

Bowen herself says:

All through creative writing there must run a sense of dishonesty and debt. Is there such a thing, any more, as creative writing? The imagination, which may appear to bear such individual fruit, is rooted in a compost of forgotten books.<sup>12</sup>

In *Eva Trout*, her final novel from 1969, are many examples of a compost of forgotten - and well-known - books. Here is just one example:

In Part II, we begin to notice an insistence on 'apricots' in a box which is at one point holding down some letters, with nine mentions, eight of them in twenty-one pages.<sup>13</sup> In her Preface to the Flaubert Omnibus (apparently unpublished)<sup>14</sup>, Bowen describes the basket of apricots sent to Madame Bovary by her lover Rodolphe, containing the letter telling her that

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<sup>11</sup> Semir Zeki 'Les fonts neuronals de l'ambigüitat de Salvador Dalí (Neural Sources of Salvador Dalí's Ambiguity)', *Noves Fronteres de la Ciència, l'Art i el Pensament*, Universitat de Girona and ArtNodes, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Bowen, 'Out of a Book', *Collected Impressions*. Longmans Green & Co., 1950, p. 268.

<sup>13</sup> Bowen, *Eva Trout* (Cape, 1969), p.191 et seq.

<sup>14</sup> Bowen, *Collected Impressions*, p.24.

he will not, after all, elope with her. Bowen has surely placed these apricots as a warning that Eva's plans (as yet unknown to the reader) to 'elope' with Henry will not come about.

Twice Bowen describes the apricots as crystallized, and crystallization brings us another important aspect of Bowen's use of light. In his introduction to *The Bazaar and Other Stories* Allan Hepburn notes:

A long quotation ... from Stendhal's *De l'Amour* [which] appears in *To the North*.<sup>15</sup> The quotation opens the chapter 'Concerning Jealousy' from Stendhal's 1822 treatise. It serves two purposes: firstly to herald jealousy, and secondly to introduce both the form and the idea of the crystal with its many facets. Stendhal's notion of crystallization, central to his thinking on love, was inspired by observing the transformation of a bare bough into a 'galaxy of scintillating diamonds' after it had been left in an abandoned salt-mine.

What I have called crystallization is a mental process which draws from everything that happens new proofs of the perfection of the loved one.<sup>16</sup>

As we will see, Bowen's crystals in *To the North*<sup>17</sup> are not salt, but ice. In *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*,<sup>18</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle aptly entitle their chapter on *To the North*, 'Shivered', a word which combines coldness with fragmentation.

As well as *De l'Amour*, there is another work essential to our understanding of *To the North*. This time, rather than insert a quotation, Bowen collages clues throughout, leading us to *The Snow Queen* by Hans Christian Andersen.<sup>19</sup> This story contains several of Bowen's *leitmotifs*: the mirror, the shattered glass, the creation of something from broken pieces. The boy Kay is stabbed in the eye and the heart by splinters of glass from a distorting mirror. When the mirror was first created by the Evil One, his gnomes flew with it to Heaven to

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<sup>15</sup> Bowen, ed. Allan Hepburn, *The Bazaar and Other Stories*, Edinburgh U P, 2008, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Stendhal, trans. Gilbert and Suzanne Sale, *De l'Amour*. 1822; Penguin, 1984, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> Bowen, *To the North*. 1932; Penguin, 1987. Subsequent references provided parenthetically as *TN*.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*. Macmillan, 1995, pp. 23-41.

<sup>19</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, 'The Snow Queen', *Fairy Stories*, illustrated by Margaret W. Tarrant (Ward, Lock & Co., Limited, u.d.), pp. 261-240.



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. After this happens to Kay, he is kidnapped by the Snow Queen. He tells her he is good at fractions, and at her palace he is given the task of solving a puzzle made from blocks of ice. Meanwhile, Kay's friend Gerda has set off in search of him, wearing her red shoes. When she eventually finds him, the blocks of ice dance delightedly, until they form the solution to the puzzle. Here is Margaret Tarrant's illustration from 1910 of that blissful moment.



No such bliss ends *To the North*. Bowen's 1932 novel opens with Cecilia returning in a lurching train from Italy to England. She is thrown together, literally, with Markie. One might expect a relationship to develop between these two, but the geometry of relationships between Bowen characters is never simple. It is Emmeline, Cecilia's myopic sister-in-law, who falls for Markie, blinded to his bad points by the glitter of love. Bowen takes fragments,

or shivers, from Andersen's work and dislocates them. Thus, rather than Markie, the male protagonist, it is Emmeline who is associated with ice: she drinks iced tea and her 'glacial manner is unfortunate in a girl'. It is Emmeline, not Markie, who has the 'splinter of ice' in her heart, and who has defective eyesight. She is frequently called 'angel' or 'angelic'. Wearing red slippers, 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. (TN106)

Emmeline is no angel, despite her *soubriquet*. And although there is a secondary character called 'Gerda', whom Cecilia describes as 'a bad illustration to Hans Andersen', the red slippers (not shoes) belong not to Gerda, but to Emmeline.

Throughout the novel, the overriding attraction is to the North. North light for Bowen is one of blinding, seductive glitter from shivered ice, whose sharp edges can wound and at worst kill. 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. (TN225)

Emmeline has not been able to solve her puzzle, and for her and Markie, unlike Kay and Gerda, there can be no happy ending. Death is what comes to them as she drives Markie 'To the North'.

Each of the examples we have examined demonstrates one of several ways in which Bowen adopts and adapts the techniques of the visual artist. Her ability to alter perspective by cracking the mirrors in her kaleidoscope, or by moving the reader's viewpoint, combines with the collage of fragments unearthed from her literary compost heap to create her individual and idiosyncratic style.