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Conference paper

**Elizabeth Bowen: I do write, I think, from the eye. Verbal painting  
in Elizabeth Bowen's Friends and Relations**

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### ‘I DO WRITE, I THINK, FROM THE EYE’:

#### VERBAL PAINTING IN ELIZABETH BOWEN’S *FRIENDS AND RELATIONS*

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In a 1955 conversation with the novelist and critic Walter Allen, the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen said ‘I do write, I think, from the eye’.<sup>1</sup> She had learnt to use that eye when as a child she attended painting classes held in Dublin by Elizabeth Yeats: a fellow pupil was Mainie Jellett who would go on to become one of Ireland’s most notable and influential modernist painters.<sup>2,3</sup> As is well-documented, Bowen’s own original intention was to become a visual artist, an idea quickly abandoned because she felt she was not talented enough. But the lessons Bowen learnt at that early age must have remained with her, for she uses her innate skills as a visual artist and draughtsman in her writing, adapting the techniques of various genres to form the basis of an individual aesthetic. She describes this as ‘verbal painting’ in an autobiographical note from 1948.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I will discuss Bowen’s verbal painting in her third novel, *Friends and Relations* (1931). Bowen has an acute sense of place and in her first two novels, *The Hotel* (1927) and *The Last September* (1929), she will often pause the action while she paints a scene: a landscape or an interior in an Impressionist or Post-Impressionist style. As Maud Ellmann notes: ‘*The Hotel* is punctuated by tableaux, in which the scene of action is suddenly immobilised into a picture’ (Ellmann 79).

*Friends and Relations* marks a turning point in Bowen’s verbal painting. Her landscapes begin to include the built environment and her style becomes more akin to

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Hepburn, editor. ‘We Write Novels: An Interview with Walter Allen’. *The Weight of a World of Feeling: Reviews and Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*. Northwestern UP, 2017, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Yeats (1868-1940), the sister of W.B. Yeats, trained and worked as an art teacher in London before returning to Dublin in 1900. Her *Elementary Brushwork Studies* was published in London in 1900.

<sup>3</sup> The abstract artist and figure painter Mainie Jellett (1897-1944) was born in Dublin. She studied drawing and fine art painting at the National College of Art in Dublin and under Walter Sickert at the Westminster Art School in London. Starting out as a follower of Impressionism she began – as a result of her association with the Parisian abstract painter and teacher Albert Gleizes – to develop a greater interest in modern abstract art like Cubism. Along with Evie Hone and Mary Swanzy, Jellett was one of the earliest abstract painters in the history of Irish art.

<sup>4</sup> Autobiographical note for Curtis Brown, 15/10/48, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, box 1, folder 5, p. 2.

modernist genres such as the Surrealists and the Futurists. This novel is often disregarded by critics: as Bennett and Royle remark in a recent paper, ‘critics [. . .] tend to rush past the novel on their way to Bowen’s other, better-known, ostensibly more substantial, more glamorous, novelistic, more immediately effective, and sometimes even melodramatic books of the period – novels in which *something*, at least, happens.’<sup>5</sup>

Virginia Woolf evidently recognised that Bowen was attempting something new – but felt she was not succeeding – when she wrote to her: ‘I feel you’re like someone trying to throw a lasso with a knotted rope.’ (Glendinning 82) Later critics were slightly less dismissive. Twenty years after it was published Jocelyn Brooke noted: ‘[*Friends and Relations*] does not, I think, represent the highwater-mark of her achievement,’ but he went on to acknowledge that ‘in it she seems to develop a new confidence. [. . .] [It] has the charm of an early work combined with a newly acquired professional assurance.’ (Brooke 14-15)

Within its superficially mundane narrative *Friends and Relations* contains some of Bowen’s most complex verbal paintings. The new assurance described by Brooke becomes evident in the opening pages, where Bowen boldly sets out her stall by displaying an animated surreal sequence of a wedding reception:

The sun descended, the wet garden was staged in light; guests ventured out on duck-boards to see the tulips. The sun, still descending, came in at the side of the marquee, painting the company. Laughter became expressed in glittering teeth, congeniality in a flashing eyeglass. A white kid glove rolled back from a wrist, the half-ruined cake went golden; the faces flame-coloured. (13)

This is a still life painting, but an active one, demonstrating the effects of light. Light from the sun at first creates a theatre of the garden where tulips are the protagonists. It explores the scene in the marquee like a follow-spot light, and Bowen focuses on the details it picks up: teeth, an eyeglass. The glove rolls back, it seems of its own accord, from a detached wrist, while the cake and the faces actively turn, rather than are turned, golden and flame-coloured in response to light.

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Bennett & Nicholas Royle (2013) ‘A reassessment of Elizabeth Bowen's *Friends and Relations*: the quiet catastrophe’, *Textual Practice*, 27:1, 69-87, DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2013.752219 p.71



Dalí, Salvador. *Nature Morte Vivante*, 1956.  
Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida.

The effect is similar to that in Dalí's much more detailed *Nature Morte Vivante* (whose English title is 'Still Life-Fast Moving') where objects are evidently active and where light comes a succession from different sources: behind the clouds in the top left of the picture, behind the viewer to cast shadows of the knife and glass, and from above to cast a shadow from the moving apple onto the dish.

In Bowen's image, the action of light is a major factor, but there are two images towards the end of *Friends and Relations* where light plays a less important role than line and viewpoint. In this extremely complicated essay in perspective, Lewis is contemplating the fact that Edward and Janet appear to have eloped.<sup>6</sup> (I have given you a sheet with the complete text, which I hope may help.)

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>6</sup> An earlier discussion of these paragraphs was made in my dissertation 'The Writer at the Easel: Verbal Painting in the Novels of Elizabeth Bowen' for the Advanced Diploma of the Institute of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge, 2014.

— So you looked back with those aboard, for a moment only. So they depart; traitors to you, with you, in the senses. The ship, those eyes, are for you ashore now inconceivable, gone. Under the very high crane a winch creaks, clocks strike from the dwarfed spires behind. The church hides the hill, terrace blocks out terrace. The crowd that you are breaks up, looks out no longer, recognises futility. You all stand apart but still return to the town two and three abreast in a kind of familiarity. There is some awkward gesture, a word or two between strangers, a handkerchief put away. But now, you all part; the ship is forgotten. So you relinquish the travellers, the ship vanishes. That last exchange, that identity of a moment, has taken everything; you have lost even regret. The close town receives you in its confusion. (147)

This passage is a diptych, two related images, on the theme of departure. Several modernist artists have painted on this theme, notably the metaphysical painter Giorgio De Chirico in 1914 and 1916, but the work which comes closest to Bowen's diptych is *Stati d'Animi (States of Mind)*, a triptych from 1911 by the Italian Futurist Umberto Boccioni, and I will briefly discuss his three images before discussing Bowen's diptych. [I should note here that Keri Walsh has recently drawn on this triptych to illustrate Bowen's use of Futurism in *To the North* and *The House in Paris*.<sup>7</sup>]

The Futurists aimed at including a fourth dimension in their work – the sense of movement. To suggest this, Boccioni uses what he terms force-lines. Christina Poggi explains: 'The invention of force-lines as a means of conveying a sense of the inner dynamism or rhythm of objects can be [seen as an] attempt [. . .] to interpret ascending, descending, and horizontal lines as universal symbols of human emotions.'<sup>8</sup> In the catalogue for the 1912 exhibition of works by the Italian Futurist Painters at London's Sackville Gallery, Boccioni describes the first painting in his triptych 'The Farewells'. 'In the midst of the confusion of departure, the mingled concrete and abstract sensations are translated into *force-lines* . . . mark the undulating lines made up of the combination of figures and objects. The prominent elements, such as the number of the engine, its profile showing in the upper part of the picture, its wind-cutting fore-part in the centre, symbolic of parting, indicate the features of the scene that remain indelibly impressed upon the mind.' In the second painting, 'Those who Go' 'Their state of mind is represented by oblique lines on the left. The colour indicates the sensation of loneliness, anguish and dazed confusion, which is further illustrated by the faces carried away by the smoke and the violence of speed. One may also distinguish

<sup>7</sup> Keri Walsh, 'Elizabeth Bowen and the Futurist Imagination', *Journal of Modern Literature*, Volume 41, Number 1, Fall 2017, pp. 19-39.

<sup>8</sup> Christina Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage*, Yale UP, 1992, pp.171-2.

mangled telegraph posts and fragments of the landscape through which the train has passed.’ By contrast, in the third, ‘Those Who Stay’, ‘The perpendicular lines indicate their depressed condition and their infinite sadness dragging everything down towards the earth. The mathematically spiritualised silhouettes render the distressing melancholy of the soul of those that are left behind.’<sup>9</sup>



States of Mind: The Farewells, 1911



States of Mind: Those Who Stay, 1911



States of Mind: Those Who Go, 1911

Boccioni *States of Mind* triptych, 1911 Museum of Modern Art, New York.

I would suggest that Bowen is aiming at a similar effect in her diptych, which seems to divide into ‘Those who Go’ and ‘Those who Remain’. Both images are remarkable for the number of force-lines which Bowen is able to create by her use of ‘you’ in several different modes: as singular, plural, indefinite, possessive and reflexive pronoun: altogether there are 21 pronouns in a total of 316 words.

In her essay ‘Notes on Writing a Novel’, Bowen asks, ‘where is the camera-eye to be located?’: in these paragraphs she has allocated it to ‘you’.<sup>10</sup> In these two pictures, using the

<sup>9</sup> ‘The Exhibitors to the Public,’ Catalogue of the ‘Exhibition of Works by the Italian Futurist Painters’, Sackville Gallery, London, March 1912, p.21.

<sup>10</sup> Bowen, ‘Notes on Writing a Novel’, *Collected Impressions*, London, Longmans, 1950, p.257.

present tense, she swivels the perspective of 'you' between ship and shore, creating multiple force-lines in a way similar to Boccioni.

Her 'Those who Go' picture starts with the force-line from the camera eye on the shore looking towards the ship; then it immediately reverses and is now on the ship looking to the land. Next the line of vision becomes two-way; the camera eye is in two places at once. It not only sees through the eyes on the ship, but at the same time has a view point from the shore, from which it is no longer able to perceive those eyes on the ship. Then, from the ship, it scans the town, creating force-lines between itself and various structures. At this point the camera eye on the ship is a fixed point: it is the town which is moving, retreating and diminishing. And because the presumed elopers ('the figures in trouble') are no longer visible *from* the camera eye on the ship – they are 'inconceivable, gone' – they must be presumed to have been at one time on shore, but to have disappeared, to have dissipated.

Then comes the join, with its use of the past tense which has the effect of separating the two images: 'So you looked back with those on board, for a moment only'. I would emphasise that Bowen's use of the past tense here is very important: in the French translation the translator has used the present tense, and the effect of two separate images is lost – they simply run together.

So we move on to Bowen's second picture of the diptych, 'Those who Remain.' The text returns to the present tense, and the camera eye returns to the shore. The narrator confirms that the first part of the episode has closed: the figures in trouble are now deemed to have been traitors, but they have departed and are no longer either in the scene or in the mind. The force-lines have changed completely. The camera eye is now located at ground level in the docks, and buildings which were visible before are no longer seen. Whereas the church spires previously dwarfed the crane, now the crane dwarfs the spires; the church which was backed by the dark hill now obliterates it; the terraced houses which gracefully climbed up the hillsides now block each other out, almost like a deck of cards closing up. The opera house, railway station and observatory have disappeared. The town is then seen from a completely different perspective, and the multiple 'you' penetrates it, breaking into its component parts, its individual 'yous', who dissipate into the 'close town' at the end of the second half of the diptych.

And if, at this stage, Bowen's narrative style seems to move from Post-Impressionism into Futurism, we also see her anticipating the Cubism of her later work. Bennett and Royle note the way a section of this passage suggests a fragmented self, with the phrase 'The crowd that you are breaks up.'

How many are we? [. . .] The preceding and contrary indication of the ‘you’ as singular [. . .] leaves *Friends and Relations* leaving us with the alarm of a truly uncanny departure, that is to say with a fragmenting figure of the self as nothing but a crowd. (34)

I would argue that Bennett and Royle’s fragmenting figure of the self is in fact a Cubist figure, such as Picasso’s portrait of Daniel Kahnweiler in which the subject is broken into scores, if not hundreds, of fragments. Thus within her Futurist painting of the town, Bowen is able to blend a Cubist portrait.



Pablo Picasso, *Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler*, 1910. Art Institute of Chicago.

Bowen will continue to use Futurism and Cubism in her work, and will go on to draw on an eclectic variety of other genres including Surrealism, collage and the found object, often blending their attributes, forming an aesthetic which is peculiar to her. The constant factor is her use of her eye: she sees first, either physically or in her imagination, and then writes what she sees, reproducing pattern and rationalising perspective, movement and the effect of light.

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