

Spatial Politics/Poetics, Late Modernism, and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*

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In her 1956 talk “Truth and Fiction” on the BBC Home Service, Elizabeth Bowen (1962, 135) speaks about story time in spatial terms: “The good story is a succession of effective Nows—call them scenes, if you like—and those Nows are linked together by intermediate action. We may move backwards and forwards, but the present moment must grip and hold us, so that while we read it is as important—more important—as the moment in the room where we are in our chair.” In linking moments in time (the reading moment and the story time moment) together in terms of spatial juxtaposition rather than temporal sequencing, Bowen celebrates spatialization as a way of reading and a way of writing.¹ The snapshots of “effective Nows” create story as a montage might, collapsing time by showing simultaneous events in different spaces, like reading the page of a newspaper. In the next moment in the broadcast, Bowen links that aesthetic to high modernism, remarking that the “master of the dramatic Now was Virginia Woolf,” with her use of “extraordinary simultaneousness in which a number of things may be made dramatic by happening close to each other” (135–36). Those “things made dramatic” might be happening closely in the space of the story world or on the space of the textual page. Bowen is not clear on this point, but Joseph Frank’s similar response to the experimental forms of writers from the high modernist 1910s and 1920s suggests the latter. For Frank, spatial form is a structuring element on the page itself.² Moreover, this spatial aesthetic insists on

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1. This conception of moments in terms of space recalls Henri Bergson’s notion of duration.

2. Frank specifically addresses the work of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Djuna Barnes.

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a related spatial interpretative practice: certain writers of modernist literature are “moving in the direction of spatial form,” he says, meaning that “the reader is intended to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence” (Frank 1945, 225). Like the spatial reading practice Bowen and Frank both reference—prompted by aesthetic elements of the modernist works themselves—this article approaches Bowen’s own far less formally experimental novel *The Last September* ([1929] 2000) in a way that derives from her own spatial aesthetic and that unlocks late modernist characteristics of the novel.³

These theorizations about the relationship of space to time correspond with challenges to *linear time* as the principal term in defining narrative⁴ and arise during a late modernist moment. Although some scholars understandably balk at using *modernism* as the standard for measuring stylistic innovation in the twentieth century, I use it here advisedly, because it is the primary point of reference for the continuing scholarly conversation about late modernism, a discourse whose very mobilization of the term *modernism* has worked to nuance the fraught category to which it refers.⁵ Moreover, Frank and Bowen (writing in 1945 and 1956, respectively) themselves both link radical spatial form (which specifically imagines space as the dominant constituent of narrative) with high modernism or the avant-garde (Frank 1977, 231). Meanwhile, in 1937 Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 84–85) introduced the “chronotope,” the name he gives to “the intrinsic connectedness” of space and time that is the defining feature of literature more broadly, where “it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions.” These developments in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s considering how space and time cooperate in the configuration of narrative correspond with a novelistic

3. In his work on Bowen, Shafquat Towheed (2009, 116) also notes this shift toward the spatial in late modernism, briefly sketching the development of that thinking: “The decades leading up to the Second World War saw perhaps the greatest rise in spatial thinking—and theorizing—in the twentieth century.”

4. The definition of narrative primarily in temporal terms—as a series of events, one after another in time, that propel narrative from beginning to end—can be traced back to classical definitions of genre identified by Plato ([380 BCE] 2007) and especially Aristotle ([335 BCE] 1997), the latter of whom deems plot the most important component of poetics. See also Pyrhönen 2007, 110.

5. In the past decade scholars of twentieth-century literature and modernist studies have fiercely debated how to define or whether to even use the term *modernism*. David James and Urmila Seshagiri’s (2014, 88) recent article about metamodernism makes a compelling argument that periodization is valuable for incorporating developments in the definition of what *modernism* means while retaining or reasserting parameters that help keep the category useful: “Without a temporally bounded and formally precise understanding of what modernism does and means in any cultural moment, the ability to make other aesthetic and historical claims about its contemporary reactivation suffers.” See also their specific comments about changes to narrative fiction (92).

trend in the wake of high modernism toward more engagement with historical and political reality. The critic Cheryl Hindrichs (2011, 840), echoing Woolf's famous statement about human character and staking a claim for a chronological beginning of late modernism, writes, "On or about October 1929 . . . the nature of modernist fiction changed." In that same year, 1929, Bowen published *The Last September*, a novel very much about one historical moment with implications for two different but interrelated perspectives: that of the characters in the tumultuous narrative present and that of the reader, who even at the time of publication would already know the outcome of the historical events. The lack of suspense about that outcome underscores the characters' denial and increases the sense of lamentation. By inviting the reader to look back into the past while also focalizing the narrative now, the novel produces both the "simultaneousness" of the gripping present and a sense of continuity, where the knowing 1929 reader can still experience the uncertainty being dramatized. This simultaneity and continuity are presented in a deceptively accessible prose that seems to eschew modernist narrative experiments. I argue, however, that the novel's narrative discourse incorporates subtle but nevertheless experimental elements that execute two related forms of destabilization. The first destabilizes time and linear plot as primary constituents of narrative with the result of privileging space over time in the form of the literary product itself. The second destabilizes the ostensible authority of the "narrator" in representing the internal experience of the focalizer(s).⁶ Bowen incorporates experiments with spatiality and focalization but in a far less radical way, using space and time cooperatively and incorporating variable focalization to propel narrative in service of an engagement with the historico-political moment.

The narrative discourse of the novel proves complex and spatially oriented in a historically significant way, the big house estate a Bakhtinian chronotope in which "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 1981, 84). In the novel's narrative arc the residents of an Irish country house at Danielstown in county Cork—Lois, her half-cousin Laurence,

6. The term *focalizer* (as an alternative to the *narrator* who merely tells and the *point of view* that merely sees) refers to the perspectival filter of narrative information that expresses the opinions, attitudes, experiences, and even voice of the focalized character. See Genette 1980, 161–211; Jahn 2007. See also ongoing developments of *narrator* (Margolin 2013) and *focalization* (Niederhoff 2011) and "Puzzles and Problems for the Theory of Focalization" (Köppe and Klauk 2013) in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*.

and their aunt and uncle Sir Richard and Lady Myra Naylor—spend the late summer of 1921 hosting visitors, playing tennis, and attending dances, all against the backdrop of the Irish War of Independence (1919–21). Reluctant to acknowledge the magnitude of the conflict around them, which is as much about class or economic resentment as about rebellion against the British Empire, they live idyllic lives while British soldiers patrol the towns and roads and Irish rebels hide in the hills, burying weapons throughout the countryside. The novel’s poetics demands to be read in terms of the intersections of space and time not just because it features shared spaces where ownership, boundaries, and divisions are contested, a spatial politics, but also because of Bowen’s tendency to use spatial images and metaphors, a poetics of space, to stage the relationships and tensions in the text.⁷ As this article will show, *The Last September* offers character relations that are embodied in the topographical features of the story world, enacted through movement in space, and even encoded in the spatial language of the grammar itself.

These two central components of Bowen’s spatial poetics—the topographical and the grammatical—reflect developments in narrative theories of space since Bakhtin’s and Frank’s essays,⁸ developments that suggest how space can not only structure narrative on the page (as in the montage form) but also map topography in the story world and convey power dynamics in spatial grammar. Susan Stanford Friedman (2005, 192, 203), for example, who laments that Bakhtin’s chronotope seems to have been forgotten, reads topography to argue that certain spaces—such as buildings or public places—illustrate power differentials and therefore propel narrative: “The narrative’s structural reliance on buildings to move the narrative forward gives a compensatory emphasis to space over time as constitutive of narrative discourse.” To bring Friedman’s approach to bear on Bowen’s *The Last September*—where colonial architectural space is

7. David Herman (2002, 277) explains such connections between spatial language and emotional tenor, arguing that “emotional identification is enabled by perceptual discrimination, while expressions of empathy can in turn generate inferences about who is of primary as opposed to secondary importance.”

8. For a phenomenological approach to the psychological significance of particular spaces in literary documents, see Gaston Bachelard’s (1969) topoanalysis of intimate space, especially in the “house image,” including the house of humans and the houses of things. See also Yi-Fu Tuan’s (1977) meditation on the interrelationship between space and place. My use of space differs from Tuan’s definition, where space connotes freedom and movement, something to be defended and longed for, and is in dialectic relation to place, which connotes security, identity, and the site of felt value. Both Bachelard and Tuan focus on the lived experience of spaces and places, and my approach shares with them an interest in interpreting space as an element related to and as valuable as time. See also Zoran 1984; Moretti 1998.

more than just a setting or a symbol of power disparity but is actually embedded with, inhabited by the markers and memories of that power—would complement the considerable amount of scholarship orienting Bowen's fiction to contexts of Anglo-Irish history, the Irish Gothic genre, and the Big House novel.⁹ Likewise, a sustained reading of spatial grammar in this or other Bowen novels would supplement existing treatments of her style.¹⁰ David Herman, like Friedman, argues for the necessity of considering space as central a component of narrative as time, but Herman focuses less on the topographical and architectural features of a narrative and more on how spatial relations are legible in its very grammar. This kind of approach closely reads, for example, how prepositions direct the focal view, because, as Herman (2002, 269, 283) argues, narrative encodes “emergent spatial relationships among participants, objects, and places” and “directions of movement as viewer-relative.” Such an approach establishes the relationship between objects and characters in terms not just of position and movement but also of implicit attitudinal or political dynamics within the story world. While for Herman such spatialization is revealing for what it tells about the reader's cognitive practices,¹¹ I am more interested in how Bowen's spatialization of narrative discourse signals her interest in the intersections of aesthetics with a historico-political context.

Scholarly efforts to define late modernism have centered on this relationship

9. The term *Big House* usually refers to the principal house of an estate and in an Irish context is a country house (not necessarily big) owned by members of the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy, who took “ownership” of the estates during British colonial settlement of Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Big House novel was popularized as an Irish genre in the late nineteenth century by the writers Edith Somerville and Martin Ross (two female cousins), whose work followed in the tradition of Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and Lady Morgan's (Sidney Owenson) *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806). Twentieth-century writers in the Big House genre include Bowen, Molly Keane, William Trevor, John Banville, and arguably Edna O'Brien. On Bowen, Irish history, Anglo-Irish anxiety, and the Big House novel, see Backus 1999; Ellmann 2003, 176–202; Foster 1993; Kiberd 1995; Kreilkamp 1998, 2006; McCormack 1993, 208–52; Deane 1991. See also Bowen's other treatments of big houses in her novels *The Heat of the Day* (1948) and *A World of Love* (1955) and her nonfiction work on her family estate, *Bowen's Court and Seven Winters* ([1942] 1999). As several critics have noted, *The Last September* features an unusual transference of agency between character and environment (subject and object), a transference that is reflected by a focal shift between Anglo-Irish residents and the surrounding land, houses, and active objects. See Inglesby 2007; Moran 2011; Barnard 2004; Concilio 1999; Ellmann 2003, 40–68. On Irish material culture more broadly, see the recent special issue of *Éire-Ireland*, “Irish Things,” edited by Paige Reynolds (2011).

10. For discussions of space and place in Bowen's wartime fiction, see Pong 2009; Towheed 2009. See notes 15 and 16 for scholarship on her style.

11. Herman (2002, 263) writes, “Narratives can also be thought of as systems of verbal or visual cues prompting their readers to *spatialize* storyworlds into evolving configurations of participants, objects, and places.”

between aesthetics and historically situated politics during certain decades. Late modernism—as a time period, a typology, an attitude, or a set of practices—has received a growing amount of critical attention in the past several years, particularly in the wake of three landmark book-length treatments by Tyrus Miller (1999), Jed Esty (2003), and Marina MacKay (2007).¹² Though subsequent treatments of late modernism differ in terms of exactly which authors, works, or dates qualify,¹³ the field has begun to see a consensus about a working definition. Thomas Davis (2012, 334) asserts, “Late modernism names writers who still believed art was best engaged with its contemporary moment when it contested the forms, definitions, and functions of art.” Late modernist writers tend to be self-conscious of their relation to modernism, its change, and particularly its decline and about their place in a transitional moment when historical circumstances insist that art cannot be concerned merely with aesthetic form. In contrast to the modernist spatial form that Frank describes, which focuses on an aesthetics of the page rather than on historical or political context, for some writers and scholars of late modernism the self-conscious relation to high modernism includes a new, often historically particular relationship to space,¹⁴ as is the case with Bowen’s early

12. Miller’s synthesis of related scholarship from the 1980s and 1990s suggests that late modernism corresponds to the period from 1926 to the 1940s. MacKay and Esty both adopt Miller’s general approach but treat late modernism in terms of the particular historical and national contexts of Britain during World War II and the decline of empire, respectively. See also Fredric Jameson’s (2002, 209) designation in *A Singular Modernity* of late modernists, a midcentury second wave of experimental writers whose work, though tending to be “far more accessible,” is nevertheless depoliticized, devoted to an aesthetic autonomy (164) that MacKay (2009, 1612) calls “reactionary formalism.” MacKay warns against depoliticizing modernism by defining it in terms merely of aesthetics that is separate from particular national or historical circumstances.

13. See Hindrichs 2011; James 2009; Carruth 2009; Reynolds 2009; Davis 2012. Hindrichs (2011, 851) surveys scholarship dealing explicitly with the term *late modernism* (and related terms, such as *intermodernism*) and British literature from the 1930s and 1940s and suggests that the foremost preoccupation of late modernists is the “function of art in society at a period of crisis.” James (2009, 61) examines the “micro novels” of regional British women writers whose late modernism is characterized by an ability to connect localism with formal innovation, reconciling modernist experimentalism with “the legacies of Victorian realism.” Allison Carruth’s approach to late modernism in terms of food texts of World War II most approximates the historicizing work of MacKay (2009). Reynolds defines “Colleen Modernism” in terms of the late late modernism of Irish women writers. Thomas Davis draws on the typology and historicizing impulse from Miller’s, MacKay’s, and Esty’s studies while expanding the chronological period through the 1950s, effectively connecting modernist form to both postmodernism and postcolonialism. He usefully pinpoints two overarching and intersecting issues that characterize late modernist writing: the transformation and persistence of modernism and the function of modernist aesthetics in different historical situations (Davis 2012, 328).

14. Hindrichs (2011, 851) argues, “Late modernist aesthetics, then, recurrently draw readers to reorient themselves in time and space, to consider figure and ground, time and timelessness.” MacKay’s entire 2009 article focuses on shrinking space in London during World War II. See also James (2009, 44), who argues that regional late modernist writers “recalibrated rather than restricted the purpose and poetics of spatial description in interwar writing.”

novel. Thanks to a substantial body of recent scholarship, much of Bowen's fiction is widely accepted as having modernist traits,¹⁵ but until as recently as 2009 little work examined her fiction in relation to late modernism.¹⁶ No one has clearly connected the narrative discourse of *The Last September* to the characteristically late modernist intersection of aesthetics and politics. This reading for spatial politics and poetics in *The Last September* furthers the work of historicizing her narrative discourse in relation to high and late modernist narrative practices. Bowen is more than merely a regional writer or a radical eccentric.¹⁷ David James (2009, 56) argues about Bowen and Rosamund Lehman that both have "an ability to refashion [conventions of Victorian realism] as part of a radical renegotiation of high modernism's legacies throughout the 1930s and 40s." Part of that "radical renegotiation" can be seen in Bowen's use of a subtle, spatially encoded discourse to convey interpersonal tensions and historically significant political anxieties without the explanatory intrusion of an overt narrator or nonfocalizer.

The narrative discourse in *The Last September* navigates between mimetic extremes of realist (ostensible) nonfocalization that often emphasizes the social, physical, external reality¹⁸ and a high modernist "figural style" or "internal focal-

15. Keri Walsh (2007, 128) asserts as recently as 2007 that "even those critics attending to her modernist style and technique figure such experiments as idiosyncrasies. . . . Uncovering Bowen's dialogue with surrealism, on the other hand, allows us to see her 'strangeness' . . . as part of her engagement with avant-garde, continental discourses." For recent scholarship orienting Bowen to modernism, see Davis 2013; Esty 2011; Wurtz 2010; Reynolds 2009; Kreilkamp 2009; Osborn 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Walsh 2007; DiBattista 2007. See also the recent full-length critical works Bennett and Royle 1995; Ellmann 2003; Corcoran 2004 and the collections Walshe 2009; Thurschwell and White 2013.

16. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle (1995, xv) use Bowen as their representative case for their assertions about modern changes to the novel form: "Bowen's novels are what happened after modernism. They embody nothing more and nothing less than the dissolution of the twentieth-century novel." MacKay (2009) includes Bowen's wartime novel *The Heat of the Day* in her study of the contraction of mobility, space, and privacy in novels from the 1940s, and Davis (2013, 47) notes that "Bowen's work surely addresses problems of style, waning imperial power, and total war in ways that complement these arguments [by Miller, Esty, and Mackay] and, to be sure, offers other ways to think about late modernist form and history." James (2009, 52) suggests that Bowen negotiates between the extremes of the avant-garde and realist social engagement, her nonfiction "theoriz[ing] something of a third way for late-modernist writers, amounting to an alternative approach to experimentation." See also the essays in the special issue of *Textual Practice* that "make a case for considering Bowen as a particularly challenging and quirky 'late modernist'" (Thurschwell and White 2013, 1).

17. The parameters come from definitions of late modernism in James 2009 (regional) and Bluemel 2004, Bluemel 2009, and Hindrichs 2011 (radical eccentrics).

18. I say "ostensible nonfocalization" because Mieke Bal has argued convincingly that "even typical 'non-focalized' passages are rarely free of point of view, attitude, restriction of perceptual field, or emotional stance" (Jahn 2007, 101). Non- or zero focalization is a concept distinct from but in conversation with the idea of omniscient narration. For ongoing discussions about omniscience, see Culler 2004; Sternberg 2007.

ization”¹⁹ that focuses more on the presentation of characters’ psychological, interior realities. In navigating between these extremes, Bowen’s variable focalization shifts subtly and sometimes indeterminately from one focalizer to another. Her discourse holds her external focalizer to the standard of a physical constraint in a way that does not rely on readerly suspension of disbelief and effectively reduces the self-consciousness of an overt narrator or nonfocalizer.²⁰ A conception of narrative that relies on nonfocalization (that can move from inside to outside, from interiority to interiority, through time and space without necessarily any orienting principle) calls attention to its own artifice as a device. That artifice demands a suspension of disbelief, where the reader accepts having to rely on an overt narrator (or nonfocalizer) to receive, in exchange, an inclusive version of reality. Modernist fiction writers, by contrast, place greater restrictions on the narrating device, experimenting with constraints that limit the focalizer(s) to that which is physically, spatially, and temporally explicable according to properties of the character in the story world rather than relying on readerly acceptance. In a well-known example from Woolf’s ([1925] 2005, 25–27) *Mrs. Dalloway*, focal shifts between strangers in Regent’s Park—Peter Walsh, the Smiths, Maisie, and Mrs. Dempster—follow lines of sight, as if the focal view is a camera physically handed from one character to another. These constraints increase verisimilitude, especially about interior experience (the “reality” with which some modernist fiction writers were ostensibly preoccupied). Modernist stream of consciousness or free indirect discourse stays linked to an internal focalizer (sometimes one of several focalizers), seeing, thinking, and knowing what the focalizer could plausibly perceive, while the physical view is often consistent with the physically possible movement of the focalizer. In Bowen’s version of this high modernist focalization, the focalizer (whether person or thing) has its own interiority and location in space, and so, even in the case of the external focalizer, the possible movement is dictated by spatial properties (as is the case with what Manfred Jahn [1996; 2007, 99] calls “online perception”).²¹ Thus Bowen’s spatial poetics offers

19. Franz K. Stanzel (1984) develops the terms *figural narrative* and *figural style* to describe the form of the modernist novel of consciousness, while Gérard Genette (1980) develops *internal focalization* to describe the character filter. See also Jahn 2007, 95–98 and the references in note 6.

20. I use the term *external focalization* not in the sense proposed by Genette—an outside view “reporting what would be visible and audible to a virtual camera” (Jahn 2007, 98)—but rather in the sense developed by Bal, which combines and subsumes Genette’s ideas of external and nonfocalization. See Bal 1985, 1991.

21. Jahn contrasts “online” with “offline” perception, where the imaginary “offline” perceptions are not subject to the same kind of real-life constraints (of space and time, for example) as online perceptions. In this passage from *The Last September*, an external focalizer is subject to online perception.

a subtle form of more extreme innovations to convey political significance, using prepositions and object-viewer relations not only to map the space of the story world but also to advance the relationships and tensions between the characters without relying on a nonfocalizer for overt explanation. Bowen's recourse to the spatial—in terms of politics and poetics—enables her to experiment with narrative discourse while still remaining engaged with the contemporary moment, a cause she shares with other late modernists.

The following close readings of topography and grammar reveal that Bowen's narrative is propelled by active spaces charged with history, power discrepancies, and personal tensions in the story world. Bowen's aesthetic is heavy with spatial markers, laying out the orientations of subject and object to each other in a way that diagrams story world space and conveys the emotional or empathic vectors. The expressed structure of *The Last September* exemplifies how paying inordinate attention to events in time when both structuring and reading narrative can conceal important tensions that surface from incorporating the spatial. The novel is divided temporally, the sections titled to mark three events: "The Arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Montmorency," "The Visit of Miss Norton," and "The Departure of Gerald." The visitors Hugo and Francie Montmorency and Marda Norton, also Anglo-Irish, bring memories from the past (Hugo once courted Lois's now-deceased mother Laura, who ran off with a man from the North and bore Lois) and potential complications for the future (everyone, including Laurence, Hugo, and even Lois, seems to be infatuated with the careless Marda). These light, euphemistic section titles and the events they reference obscure an ominous reality, however, that emerges more clearly through the topographical layout embedded in the narrative's aesthetic features. That ominous reality includes the Montmorencys' literal homelessness, Marda's impending commitment to a loveless marriage in England, and the uncertain future of the whole class of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, young and old. Only in the final section of the novel does a specific event—when the English soldier Gerald, who had been courting Lois, is shot by an Irish gunman—finally make clear to the residents not just the certainty of danger but also the residents' proximity and vulnerability to it. All of those portentous facts have everything to do with the politics of the regional war, which, when represented obliquely in the spatial terms of the novel, convey the experience of denial even to readers who know the historical outcome.

The well-known passage in which Lois has a near encounter with a strange man exemplifies how the physical positions of the bodies in relation to the land-

scape and to each other in the chronotope of the estate can reveal much about the personal and political tensions in the novel that is not made explicitly clear by a narrator or nonfocalizer. Bakhtin (1981, 250) theorizes how space and time work together for “representational importance” in the chronotope: “Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. An event can be communicated, it becomes information, one can give precise data on the place and time of its occurrence. But the event does not become a figure. . . . It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events.” While this scene has received critical attention for its political implications²²—that the permeability of the property is emblematic of the literal and figurative position of the Anglo-Irish in the landscape—what merits attention here is the way spatial language furthers those readings. Spending dusk with family and visitors on the porch, Lois takes a walk, remembering an encounter with Gerald at a dance. That memory gives way to current fears brought on by the darkness of the path, presented as primal fears (“her fear of the shrubberies tugged at its chain, fear behind reason, fear before her birth; fear like the earliest germ of her life that had stirred in Laura”), and that description of fear leads into another type of encounter with another type of soldier:

First, she did not hear footsteps, and as she began to notice the displaced darkness thought what she dreaded was coming, was there within her—she was indeed clairvoyant, exposed to horror, going to see a ghost. Then steps smooth on the smooth earth; branches slipping against a trench-coat. The trench-coat rustled across the path ahead to the swing of a steady walker. She stood by the holly immovable, blotted out in the black, and there passed within reach of her hand, with the rise and call of a stride, some resolute profile powerful as a thought. In gratitude for its fleshiness she felt prompted to make some contact: not to be known of seemed like a doom of extinction.

“It’s a fine night,” she would have liked to observe; or, to engage his sympathies: “Up Dublin!” or even—since it was in her uncle’s demesne she was trembling and straining under a holly—boldly—“What do you want?”

It must be because of Ireland he was in such a hurry; down from the mountains, making a short cut through their demesne. Here was something else that she could not conceive of her country emotionally: it was a way of living, abstract of several countrysides, or an oblique, frayed island moored at the north but with an air of being detached and drawn out west from the British coast.

Quite still, without even breath, she let him go past in contemptuous unawareness. His intentness burnt on the dark an almost visible trail; he might

22. See, for instance, Hand 2009, 71; Laird 2009, 199–200; Kreilkamp 1998, 155. Heather Laird summarizes other well-known critics’ responses to Lois’s several interactions with the Irish Republican Army (Foster 1993; Kiberd 1995; Backus 1999).

have been a murderer, he seemed so inspired. The crowd of trees straining up from the passive disputed earth, each sucking up and exhaling the country's essence—swallowed him finally. She thought: "Has he come for the guns?" A man in a trench-coat had gone on without seeing her: that was what it amounted to.

She ran back to tell, in excitement. (Bowen [1929] 2000, 41–43)

In this passage chronology is plotted simply. Lois sees the shadow and fears it to be a ghost; she hears footsteps and the branches on the coat; she sees the coat and its wearer, which pass near her hand; she thinks about speaking but lets him pass; and finally, the man in the trench coat disappears. The full significance of the near encounter is not told overtly by an external narrator, and the focalizer, Lois, inadequately summarizes this newsworthy near encounter: "A man in a trench-coat had gone on without seeing her," concluding, "that was what it amounted to. She ran back to tell, in excitement" (43). Lois's excitement about this meeting signals her naïveté. The man's stealth, from the context of the novel, establishes him as an Irish gunman; as a young Anglo-Irish woman walking at dusk on her family's estate, she could have been in great danger. Because he did not see her, for Lois the near encounter does not qualify as a major event, as is evident by the dismissive "that was what it amounted to," which minimizes its importance. Nevertheless, though the two do not actually meet, the encounter demonstrates the degree to which the estate and its inhabitants are spatially and politically in the heart of the conflict. By revealing the proximity of threat and the property's permeability to trespass, the encounter foreshadows the burning of the house at the end of the novel.

Though the summary reflects Lois's naïveté, it reads as ironic, because the passage is clearly, though inexplicitly, politically charged. The amount of page time the scene gets—more than a full page—indicates its importance for tracing of physical relationships in space, to which the passage insistently calls attention. The man's presence is made known by his spatial disruption of elements perceivable by the senses: vision, sound, touch. The first "event"—Lois's discovery that someone is coming—occurs because of "the displaced darkness," and the man's approach is perceivable by the sounds of his steps on the earth and the rustle of branches against the coat. The impact of his passage through the space registers on the environment and in relation to the standing girl, whose physical position—standing "immovable" by the holly—is also presented in relation to the physical properties of the woods. Lois realizes that he is not a ghost when she recognizes him as a tangible moving object, a "steady walker" who

“passed within reach of her hand” and whose “fleshiness”—detectable because of physical proximity—brings her great relief. The naïveté with which the passage ends—her excitement at telling the others—is set up by the fact that her fears were of the supernatural and not of the real threat that his coat and movements suggest he poses as an armed, violent revolutionary. The political ramifications of that reality and Lois’s naïveté emerge through the reading of the spatial layout of the scene rather than through explicit narration and even as Lois herself fails to understand. This reading of the scene does not tell us anything new about the politics of trespass or the class of people involved. The novel is about what it says it is about, as readers at the time of publication would know: the decline or last September of a people in denial of their political reality. This reading does, however, reveal something new about the narrative discourse of the scene and by extension about Bowen’s late modernist concerns.

The turning point of the passage (when Lois decides not to call out to the man) is the most politically telling, and our understanding of her physical closeness to the man—that she is close enough to observe the expression on his face—comes largely from the spatial layout of the passage. Even the expression itself speaks to the political overtones. The man’s mysterious and ominous identity is created through the metonymic references to him, as he is known by his trench coat and his profile, “powerful as a thought,” and the readings of his attitude, as when he passes “in contemptuous unawareness” and an “intentness” that “burnt on the dark side an almost visible trail.” She knows that he is “down from the mountains, making a short cut” through what she has just called “her uncle’s demesne,” and therefore judges rightly his position in the conflict. Her debate is whether to play the part of proprietress or to “engage his sympathies.” She frames her debate over whether to speak in terms of space, thinking of where each is from, where each is now, and where they are in relation to each other: “a way of living, abstract of several countrysides, or an oblique, frayed island moored at the north but with an air of being detached and drawn out west from the British coast.” In considering the spatial relationship between Britain and Ireland as places and the people and culture associated with them, Lois connects individuals with land and therefore the personal with the political. Like Bakhtin’s (1981, 250) castle chronotope, the embattled estate and islands “are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied.” Lois and the man share space just as the groups they represent share the island.

Nevertheless, she remains somehow detached from the politics of the situation, as when she says plainly, “Here was something else she could not share.” Lois’s personal emotional detachment is matched by her physical demeanor, her behavior in space. In contrast to the man whose steady, smooth, resolute movements take up space and displace other things (linking him to the earth and metaphorically to Ireland), Lois is trembling but immobile, indecisive while silently watching. In contrast to the man, she is not integrated or linked to the earth, not a force in space. He takes action and has impact, while she stands statically inactive. Derek Hand (2009, 71) reads this nonencounter as “evidence of her inability to partake in the world of action.” Vera Kreilkamp (1998, 155) contrasts Lois’s own personal sense of “her own drifting life and inability to love” with “the power of the fuller life” exemplified by the man’s “physicality and purposefulness.” The passage’s focus on the spatial exposes not just Lois’s own emotional detachment—for “she could not conceive of her country emotionally”—but also that of the Anglo-Irish class as a whole, people who are apolitical in their reluctance to face the dangers and detached from or even unconscious of their responsibility for their position. As Kreilkamp observes, “Bowen identifies the decline of her people with the absence of political judgment that proved fatal to all the Anglo-Irish” (148). That detachment surfaces in the passivity of both Lois and the external focalizer: the man’s departure from the scene is less about the event of his leaving than about his absorption by the landscape, “the crowd of trees straining up from the passive disputed earth” that ultimately “swallowed him.” The notion of passivity here has multiple political connotations: it evokes the Anglo-Irish stance on the war, the complicity of the estate and “the disputed earth” in hiding armed rebels, and the helpless anxiety with which the objects (such as straining trees) must passively bear witness to the propulsion toward inevitable destruction.²³

By the end of the passage the summarizing statement that the episode amounted to “a man in a trench-coat had gone on without seeing her” is accurate and yet denies any overt articulation of the political significance of the encounter: that the estate and the assumed social position associated with it are permeable to threat (posed not just by the Irish but also by the conflict between the Brit-

23. For that fated knowledge to be registered and conveyed by conscious though powerless objects is ironic. Its generations-old reification of objects raised this class to this level of importance in the first place and contributed substantially to the very political circumstances the Anglo-Irish cannot face.

ish and the Irish) and that the Anglo-Irish themselves are behaving as if unconscious of that reality. Declan Kiberd (1995, 374) writes of the Anglo-Irish at the time, “Their world, as depicted by Bowen, is one whose members are constantly isolated from the wider society around them by the great walls encircling their demesnes: major events unfold on the other side of those walls, events which the aristocrats within make a point of not noticing.” Lois’s attempts to position herself as an individual (friendly? political? assertive and defensive?) also position her as a representative of her class, identified by a “way of living . . . detached and drawn out west” and therefore not implicated in the current conflict. The novel’s poetics of space uses the position and movement of bodies and objects in the chronotope to convey the social and political tensions subtly.

Bowen’s poetics of space relies not just on the topographical layout of the story world but also on spatial grammar to convey significant tensions and movement between variable focalizers: the discourse moves between internal focalizers—Francie, Laurence, then Lois—and an external focalizer whose perceptions are nevertheless online (that is, subject to temporal and especially spatial properties). In one passage with a particularly complicated spatial layout, Bowen ([1929] 2000, 151–55) uses physical properties to legitimate the movement of the external focalizer to present the simultaneous actions of characters in different but connected places. After the arrival of the absentminded Marda has disrupted the household peace (as Hugo, Laurence, and Lois are all infatuated with her), the residents are in their respective bedrooms and all awake (except for Richard and Myra, whose briefly focalized dreams end the episode and transition to the next day in which, with “a kind of fatedness, a passivity” [155], the characters resume living). Hugo and Francie are on the same floor as Laurence, and Lois is one floor below. The chapter begins in Hugo and Francie’s bedroom, where they share minimal dialogue before the focalizer, Francie, pretends to be asleep. Her discomfort with Hugo, likely brought on by her jealousy of Marda and the reminder of his former lover Laura, is expressed in spatial terms: “Her mind clenched tighter, like a fist, at the isolation of this proximity” (152). The word *this* makes a focalizer-oriented reference by suggesting that the proximity is already familiar to her. It is Hugo’s very physical nearness that ironically exacerbates her sense of loneliness. Her mind flashes back to a time when she was alone and wished to be with him, contrasting “the tenderness of imagined contact” with her current desire to reach across an empty bed to “a wall so patient and smooth to the reaching hand where there was now a sleeper.” The words *reaching* and *now*

are, again, oriented to the spatial and temporal positions of the focalizer. As in the first scene with Lois and the man in the coat, where the spatial language conveys the topographical and attitudinal layout of the scene, here too the topographical relationship between objects and bodies—Francie’s hand, the wall, “a sleeper” (Hugo)—combines with internal focalization (of Francie) to illustrate her emotional distance from Hugo.

The focalization then moves in the next paragraph into Laurence’s room as if delivered or escorted by Hugo, who has risen in response to Francie’s expression of thirst (presumably to get her water). “Laurence could not sleep either,” the text continues. “There must have been something at dinner. . . . He longed for the raiders and strained his ears in the silence—which had, like the darkness, a sticky and stifling texture, like cobwebs, muffling the senses” (152). The word *either* reflects continuity with the scene just left, the external focalizer linking Francie’s and Laurence’s wakefulness. As if to deemphasize the temporal, the focalizer actually presents the slowing of time, “the dragging tick of the watch at [Laurence’s] pillow, slowing down as at the mortal sickness of Time.” Moreover, while Laurence’s longing for raiders seems to be a longing for an event, he is, like Francie, left with a crowded space instead, the silence and darkness both portrayed as having physicality, texture. The space of the room is crowded not just with Laurence’s wakefulness in the narrative present but also simultaneously with long-dead Laura’s past confusion, an extreme version of Bowen’s “effective Nows”: “Her confusion had clotted up in the air of the room and seemed, in that closest darkness under the ceiling, to be still impending” (154). Some of Laurence’s present frustration—his inability to sleep and his intolerance for Lois—stems from his judgments about Laura’s rebellion against the expectations placed on her twenty years ago by her class and the regional culture.²⁴ As an act of defiance (at least according to Laurence as focalizer), she attracted and married a northerner, ultimately producing Lois, after she fled under the watchful eye of the house. The frustration of the room’s two occupants—Laurence now and Laura twenty years prior—remains in the space and objects of the room (“choked in

24. Laurence, Myra Naylor’s nephew, is a cynical, Oxford-educated student of Continental outlook. Lois, Sir Richard’s niece, struggles to find her identity in relation to love, social class, and the scandal of her origins. Her struggle is matched by her companions’ similar efforts to grapple with her origins, i.e., her mother’s impulsive flight and subsequent marriage to a northerner. Lois and Laurence are representatives of an uncertain Anglo-Irish future, and they do not get along well—he thinks her a flighty twit, while she thinks him a snotty prig.

the sweep of the bed curtains” with the pillows “far resistant” [154]). Moreover, the important backstory to the tensions between Laurence and Lois and between Hugo and Francie is presented neither through nonfocalized exposition nor as a flashback in time but rather as a coexistent in shared space, both simultaneous and continuous. In conveying inexplicitly the parallel personal and political tensions—though deceased, Laura is still an active source of anxiety and interpersonal tension that parallels the tensions of the whole class—Bowen’s poetics offers a kind of palimpsest of their emotional narratives shown in the topography of domestic space and movement through it, while their effective *Nows* are juxtaposed on the page of the novel itself.

The next focal shift, indicated by a preposition, follows the sound of a scraping gramophone needle. The preposition moves the focalizer through the floor to where Lois is playing music, continuing the trajectory begun with Francie and then passed to Laurence:

Below, through the floor, a light drawing scrape climbed into stuttering melody; syncopated dance music, ghostly with the wagging of hips and horrid in darkness [*sic*] Lois, child of that unwise marriage, was playing the gramophone. Laurence listened, paralysed with indignation, then reached out and banged a chair on the floor. She attended; the music broke off with a shock, there was a tingling calm as after an amputation. He above, she below, they thought of each other with outrage. (154–55)²⁵

The prepositions *below*, *through*, and *above* (and especially the combined use of those prepositions, i.e., “below, through”) present figure-ground relationships.²⁶ The prepositions themselves reference not just the locations of individuals and objects—and importantly the focalizer—but also their relation to each other, in this case literally, as the rooms map out physically and figuratively the novel’s preoccupation with Lois’s identity because of her age, her uncertain social class, and especially her origins. Thus the politics of above and below refer less to class and more to looking down at Lois as an object of scrutiny. To begin the sentence with the word *below*, for example, is to omit the reference object (i.e., the object to which *below* refers), but the sentence nevertheless retains that referent in its grammatical structure, and context clues reveal the needle scrape to be that which

25. Though some editions show a period between the words *darkness* and *Lois* in this passage, the 2000 Anchor Books edition has no such mark.

26. Herman (2002, 274–75) defines figure-ground relationships: “The semantic structure of spatial expressions can be thought of as a dependency relation between two or more entities: a *located object* (or *figure*) and a *reference object* (or *ground*). . . . At issue are locative adverbs (*forward*, *together*, *sideways*) and prepositions (*beyond*, *with*, *over*), which convey information about the geometric character of located and reference objects.”

is below Francie and Laurence. Similarly, *through* brings with it the implicit reference to those spaces on either side of the floor, which in turn orient the characters to one another though they are in different rooms and on different floors of the house. The figure-ground concept helps establish how and to what end the physical perspective shifts. Thus in this episode we see Anglo-Irish subjects not only related through objects in shared, divided spaces (the hallway, the floor) but also connected through an external focalizer that moves seemingly freely from subject to subject but not without restriction, instead following the explicable properties of the movement of sound as if bound to its waves. The spatial grammar helps define the link between the focalizer and its relationship—in terms of position and movement—to the house.

The word *floor* itself demonstrates the way the spatial properties of an object can shift within the context of the sentence, a shift that corresponds to the focal movement. When first mentioned, *floor* is a topological location, that is, a reference object with unchanging properties. When it next appears, it is a projective location (relying, as Herman [2002, 280] says, on “an orientative framework projected by the viewer”)²⁷ in that its significance lies in its role of physically separating Laurence and Lois and yet it fails to serve as an adequate barrier to the passage of noise between them. Furthermore, the floor exhibits the properties projected by the focal subject (in this case, Laurence) when it serves him as a means of communicating to Lois his outrage (when he bangs the chair on the floor). In the case of the floor, then, we see that its spatial properties not only reveal information about the physical layout of the episode but also shift according to focalizer perspective, a shift that opens the significance of the scene by underscoring the relationship between the characters Lois and Laurence. They are annoyed with each other not only in this moment of conflicting desires but also generally, not least because they share a precarious position of being inheritors of an uncertain future. Thus the elements of the house—the rooms, the floor—mediate between the subjects, demonstrating how the external focalizer is linked to objects in space and the physical properties associated with them—such as the transmission of sound—instead of to a human focalizer. They also reveal the impossibility of emotional mediation between the two people, a fact that conveys

27. Herman (2002, 280) describes these viewer-oriented projective locations as distinct from topological locations, which are characterized by the unchanging geometric properties of an object.

the overarching unconsciousness, indirect communication, and unresolvable conflict of the Anglo-Irish.

In this way the orientation of external focalizer to objects in space helps develop the emotional tenor of the episode without the mediation of an overt nonfocalizer. Consider, for example, the bias projected in the phrase “child of that unwise marriage.” It might seem to reflect Francie’s opinion, especially in light of her recent thoughts about Hugo’s history with Lois’s mother Laura, or perhaps that of Laurence, the superior and disapproving not quite cousin who has just been thinking about the circumstances surrounding Laura’s choice to marry Lois’s father. The line about the unwise marriage, however, follows the phrase “ghostly with the wagging of hips and horrid in darkness,” a description that is too opinionated to be a neutral nonfocalizer and too visual and visceral to be attributable to either Francie or Laurence, both of whom are upstairs and therefore unable to see either hips or darkness. In addition, the syncopated dance music, made “ghostly” and “horrid” with the hips, plays the gramophone rather than the other way around; despite the novelty of technology, the dynamism of the scene resides in the music rather than in the machine. The judgments “unwise,” “ghostly,” and “horrid” belong then to the focalizer subjectivity linked to the animus of sound in the house. Here Bowen bestows consciousness on elements of the house itself. Just as the room Laurence occupies still bears Laura’s confusion in the darkness of the ceiling, so does the focalizer that follows the sound retain Francie’s and Laurence’s judgments of Lois in the room below. The external focalizer, separate from any one character focalizer and in keeping with Bowen’s tendency to imbue objects with subjectivity or intentionality, conveys the vocabulary—and therefore the emotional tenor—of the relationships as it passes from room to room, floor to floor. The spatial seepage, whereby the ghostly focalizer moves through the floor and walls not freely but in a way that is consistent with the travel of sound, fills out the “view” of a single period of time and therefore effectively offers multiple perceivers—variable focalizers—almost simultaneously, like several Nows. None of this is explained overtly. Rather, the tension is offered implicitly, through topography, crowded space (past and present), and the seamless transitions of an external focalizer whose movement is dictated by physical properties in space. The difficult-to-place, moving external focalizer is neither consistently heterodiegetic (outside the story world) nor clearly focalizing any one character or set of characters. Rather, in this scene the focalizer seems to be homodiegetic and yet is traceable only to some diegetic property (one spot or one

vector). Bowen's poetics of space thus uses the positioning of subjects and objects in diegetic space and shifts in focalization to convey interpersonal tensions that have broader, often political significance.

The most recent passage depicts not just Francie, Laurence, and Lois living on top of each other, connected by halls, walls, and floors, to say nothing of a focalizer tracing the movement of sound, but also the long-dead Laura, whose turmoil in the same space precedes and lays the groundwork for (while living on presently with) the emotional tenor of the effective Now. Bowen herself was conscious of sharing her space with multiple generations, remarking in "Bowen's Court" (2008) about her difficulty finding space for her books among the bookshelves already populated by ancestors' collections. To questions such as "How does it feel . . . living with ancestors right on top of you?" or "Don't you ever feel crowded?" Bowen responds that the present occupants of the big house do not replace those of the past: "While I in my turn live, they are not forgotten. But on top of me? No" (145). Rather, she describes what past and present occupants share in terms of movement or collective action: "Between those who were here and me there is a physical link, forged of touch and sight—a matter of handling the same door knobs, mounting the same stairs, looking out at the same scene through the same windows. But most of all they and I are akin in one thing: the business of keeping going" (148–49). Bowen's approach to space here is not about static place or unmoving layers of objects but about the movements of living. Even the estate is more than a place; it is the stimulus for ongoing, multigenerational action, evoking both simultaneity and continuity. In supplementing linear progression with layered historical time and shared, plausible movements in collective space—like moving pictures on a single page—Bowen's spatial aesthetics re-creates the Anglo-Irish experience of inhabiting the big house and also achieves the effective Nows of a good story, a narrative strategy that reconfigures a high modernist internal focalization in terms of a political, historical particularity.

These images—of snapshots on a newspaper page or the link of shared habitual motions, which illustrate actions at different times coexisting in space and continuously moving—might extend to Bowen's relationship to her literary predecessors as well. Just as the external focalizer plausibly moves through text space and the Anglo-Irish past and present keep going, so does narrative discourse continue to develop from early to late modernism. Recalling Bowen's praise of Woolf as the master of the dramatic Now, we might think of Woolf and

Bowen as Nows on the page next to each other. Though they are of slightly different times—Woolf’s life beginning just eighteen years before Bowen’s—and of different critical receptions and narrative Nows, the dynamism of their focalizers suggest that their narrative practices are “made dramatic by happening close to each other.” Woolf, like Bowen’s ancestors, is neither on top of nor replaced by Bowen. Bowen’s spatial poetics holds the narrative device accountable to consistent spatial principles without defaulting to a focalizer that either unquestionably perceives all or exclusively focalizes human consciousness. Instead, Bowen’s in-between presents a variable focalization that is mediated according to physical, spatial properties to convey interpersonal and political tensions. The result is at times indirect, inexplicit, or unclear meaning. That indeterminacy is partly a consequence of Bowen’s interest in the life of a whole landscape, one that includes conscious places and things as much as people, rather than in just the interiority and psychology of the human subject. Bowen’s modification of narrative discourse in this way expresses her commitment to finding an aesthetic practice that not only remains engaged with but also furthers the political by conveying the experience of the historical moment. Though the politics in the novel are hardly revolutionary—the doom of the Anglo-Irish class was certainly a foregone conclusion by 1929, and as a staunch conservative Bowen herself longed to preserve a bygone way of life—the tension between the focalized present and the project of looking back suggests an ambivalent mixture of lamentation, critique, and tentative responsibility. The senses of simultaneity and continuity produced by the negotiation of present with past ironically gesture toward the future. Though by 1929 the particular political events of the novel were over, for some of her class—including Bowen herself—the material implications of decline continued. Her ownership of Bowen’s Court ended not in a blaze but when she sold it in 1959 for financial reasons.²⁸ Thus the aesthetics and politics of the novel engage with and reach beyond the novel’s historical moment to illustrate that the decline of the Anglo-Irish was both a historical fact and an ongoing source of loss and sadness. This kind of historicized aesthetic appears more explicitly in Bowen’s work from the 1940s with the class leveling and redistribution of wealth that occurred in Britain during and after World War II.²⁹ Her earlier, more regional novel, however, is of its own moment: certainly his-

28. See Hepburn 2008, 3, for an account of the relationship between Bowen’s literary productivity and the upkeep of Bowen’s Court.

29. See Wills 2007; Davis 2013.

torical and political—published in the early decades of an independent Ireland where the Anglo-Irish no longer had a place—but also aesthetic, its strategies at the forefront of the broader trend in midcentury aesthetics that we now call late modernism.

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