DISLOCATED MODERNITIES:
THE PARADOX OF THE PLANTATION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY IRISH AND
AMERICAN FICTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Notre Dame
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by
Jill Wharton

Barry McCrea, Director
Graduate Program in English
Notre Dame, Indiana
July 2017
© Copyright 2017

Jill Wharton
Decades of literary criticism assessing twentieth-century plantation literature would no doubt see this treatment of Irish and American big houses under the aegis of modernist experimentation as a rank contradiction in terms. The authors considered in this project have long been represented across conceptual forms as conservative, regionally-distinctive agrarian elites, deemed “backward” by the asymmetrically-developing states of the interwar era. *Dislocated Modernities* assembles a transatlantic archive concerning the anachronistic plantation complex to pursue two primary and interlocking aims: first, to dissect the critical feminization of big house literature, and then to foreground comparison of these traditions to unlock questions of disciplinary periodization and of postlapsarian modernism.
Elizabeth Bowen, Eudora Welty, and Molly Keane have seldom been considered as writers invested in transforming planter fiction from within and on their own terms; each author struggled with vitriolic reviews and discouragement from publication when her handling of big house culture did not accord with rhetoric defining a masculinist literary renaissance. In part, this study begins with the early 1930s to recapture the volatility of Irish and American critical reception around plantation fiction. The novels and short stories I discuss have been understood to extend what Joe Cleary describes as an inherently romanticized, conservative ideology perpetuating a “rueful emphasis on the grace of a lost civilization.” This project resists the truism that plantation fiction wields social power only through narrating its own demise. Instead, I analyze the ways such texts afford a nexus wherein the mostly-unexamined nationalisms of Anglo-Irish and Southern writers are mapped onto their stories about modernity and belonging from the vantage of modernism’s ostensible end.
To my mother and grandmothers, in loving memory
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................... iv

Introduction: From a ‘Backwards’ Place: The Critical Constructions of Plantation
Modernism...................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: “Built of Anxious History”: The Plantation and Sensual Design in Bowen
and Faulkner.................................................................................................................. 29

Chapter Two: “Keeping Your Kinfolks and Your Tragedies Straight”: Eudora Welty’s
Plantation Ethnography............................................................................................... 67

Chapter Three: “Another Strange Ridge of Character”: Class and Convergence in the
Big House ...................................................................................................................... 99

Chapter Four: “They Had Come to Fire the House”: Criminal Contingencies in the
Novels of William Trevor............................................................................................ 133

Bibliography.................................................................................................................. 154
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To thank my committee for guiding this dissertation generously and well is my deepest pleasure, yet that act covers not half the debt of gratitude I owe to each of them for shaping my intellectual life these past five years and more. For their exemplary kindness, scholarly rigor, and steadfast friendship, I thank Barry McCrea, Declan Kiberd, Maria DiBattista, and Kate Marshall for gifts of time well spent.

At the University of Notre Dame, I have been supported by the Keough-Naughton Institute through consecutive summers of research and wish to thank Christopher Fox and Beth Bland for their invaluable assistance all along the way. I have benefitted from a constellation of exceptionally-talented friends, and want Whitney Stewart, Finola Prendergast, Michael Rauschenbach, and Aleksandra Hernandez to know their conversation, commiseration, and freely-shared bottles of wine propelled this project to completion.

To my husband, Dan Murphy, a companion in life and of the mind, it is impossible to say where my thoughts end and yours begin. Where and however we go: ‘we make a dwelling in the evening air, / in which being there together is enough.’
INTRODUCTION
FROM A ‘BACKWARDS’ PLACE: THE CRITICAL CONSTRUCTIONS
OF PLANTATION MODERNISM

In the widely-circulated editorial “Last Battles,” published in the New Yorker in June 2015, Jelani Cobb outlined the historical resonances of the contemporary Civil Rights movement in America. In the essay, Cobb surveyed the lingering malady of Southern Exceptionalism, a protean ideology dating from the early 19th century, grounded in the conviction that the southern states have, broadly conceived, a culture distinct from, and in many ways irreconcilable to, American nationalist narratives of economic development and political progress. The region’s resoundingly belated, and yet controversial, removal of Confederate military monuments and civic iconography offer the reader a case in point, capturing a concept central to ‘memory studies.’ In the words of Raphael Samuel, in such uses of history “[memory] is an active, shaping force. […] The past is seen not as a prelude to the present but as an alternative to it, 'another country,' and 'heritage' is typically defined as relics under threat.”\(^1\) The landscape of the South’s ostensibly divergent historical consciousness has likewise conduced, until very recently, to the tacitly bellicose act of flying the Confederacy’s battle flag over South Carolina’s capitol building, and has long been furthered by the lucrative marketing of a

\(^1\) Raphael Samuel, Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture (London: Verso, 1994), x; 221.
romantic, sanitized image of remaining plantations to an almost exclusively white leisure class.  

That such oppressive testaments to Southern ‘heritage’ have been rendered quotidian in the cultural mainstream indicates the need for critics to anatomize the conceptual after-life of a dissident intra-national minority. Meditating on the deployment of southern self-definition against federal prerogatives on race relations and southern resistance to a more globalized rhetoric of American inclusivity, Cobb surmised that “in some future footnote or parenthetical aside, it may be observed that although General Lee surrendered in 1865, the Confederacy’s final retreat did not occur until a century and a half later...its best-fortified positions have always been its cultural ones.”

---

2 As Michael P. Bibler asserted in a recent manifesto included in the PMLA’s Southern Studies review: “Southern exceptionalism is a thing, but that doesn’t mean you have to believe in it. [...] Slavery, segregation, racism, sexism, homophobia, social and political conservatism, religious extremism, capitalist exploitation—these are all national problems, not limited to the South. Yet to hear most Americans talk about these issues, you might think otherwise.” “Introduction: Smash the Mason-Dixon! Or, Manifesting the Southern United States” in PMLA 131.1 (Jan. 2016), pp. 153-156, p.154.

3 http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/06/the-confederacys-final-retreat. Cobb’s essay excavates the civic praxis of what he calls the “translucent lie about the bloodiest conflict in American history and the moral questions at its center.” He comments broadly on the year’s unfolding policing crisis, where gross elements of structural racism fed repeated instances of deadly force against African-American communities; he evokes the mass shootings at the Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, SC earlier that same month, and finally comments on the extent to which notions of Southern Exceptionalism have continued to obscure critiques of racism in American politics: “The South is exceptional not primarily because of its literature or its food or its politics but because, as historians have pointed out, it is the only region of the United States that has lived for the majority of its history with the experience of military defeat... It not only fought tenaciously for the right to own human beings; it did so unsuccessfully. Neither of these facts can be easily accepted, but only one of them can be easily denied. So [detaching] slavery [from] the conception of the war has continued into the present.”

It should be noted that as of this writing, the “South Carolina Heritage Act” (2000) has been invoked to defend the continued display of the Confederate flag on the grounds of the state capitol (though not “atop the dome of the state house”); the Act further mandates a two-thirds majority vote in both houses of the General Assembly before any local or state monument can be “changed, removed, or renamed.” Despite the massacre at the AME church in the city in 2015, SC House Speaker Jay Lucas declared in the
Twenty years earlier, in the first book-length survey of the Anglo-Irish literary contribution, Julian Moynahan asserted that “the Anglo-Irish are gone but continue to haunt the imagination like a lost colony. One sees this in the persistence and popularity of ‘Big House’ fiction, at a time when most surviving structures of the type have been converted into asylums and nursing homes, conference centers and guest houses, vacation homes for media stars.” Moynahan’s wry formulation, set alongside Cobb’s assessment of ‘cultural fortifications’ of the neo-Confederate variety, alerts us to two factors conditioning the relevance of past minoritarian social dominance. First, the two nations have experienced comparable, though obviously not correlating, histories of colonial settlement resulting in a white agrarian elite, a class toppled, in the last instance, by civil war. Second, the markers that ‘haunt the imagination’ of the Irish nationalist narrative are preserved far more obliquely than American relics of Confederate irredentism. The traumatic history of race-based slavery was not the source of the big houses’ economic viability, and so the origins and legacy of Anglo-Irish hegemony could, to some extent, be rewritten or allowed to fall silent in the post-revolutionary years of the Irish state. As Elizabeth Bowen, the last inheritor of her family’s Cromwellian plantation in Co. Cork, noted in 1940: “these [big] houses have made no natural growth from the soil—the idea

following session that exceptions or changes to the Heritage Act would not be considered by the legislature

that begot them was a purely social one. […] There was a true bigness, a sort of impersonality, in the manner in which the houses were conceived.”

Bowen’s essay, in large part a meditation on the isolation of the gentry, their august dedication to maintaining “tradition,” and the “loneliness” that such big houses radiated as “effect,” diverts, of course, our attention from the ‘native’ Irish servant classes who, for generations, had little choice in the nature of their attachment to such estates. Her implicit focus on the assumed historical interest of the Ascendancy’s mores, whether tinctured with elegy or the styptic haughtiness of self-scrutiny, largely excluded consideration of the servant classes who made such orderly living possible. Bowen’s orientation toward preserving the history of her own class was to prove in many ways representative of big house authorship through the midcentury. Perhaps as a consequence, Irish big house estates and their satellite architecture have a formally-acknowledged, if often muted or even disingenuously-styled, role to play in the post-revolutionary state.

It follows that while Confederate eulogizers have, for their various reasons, adopted an anti-federalist, or at least ‘small government,’ stance toward ritualized

---


6 Although Moynahan’s caveat “most surviving structures” alludes to the shadowing ruins of many estates destroyed either by arson during the Twenties or lost to concerted neglect or, like Bowen’s Court and Coole Park, demolition in the decades that followed. Following Walter Benjamin, one could argue these fragments offer their own affective avocation of militarism and class struggle; the aesthetic of time-worn ruins dominates much of Bowen’s thinking on the fate of the plantation homes, as I discuss in the first chapter. In Big House fiction more generally, the destruction of the estate is very often presented in an allegorical register. (Benjamin asserted in his study of German Baroque traurspiel: “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.”) Walter Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama (London: 1977), p. 178.
display, the memorialization of Anglo-Irish dominance has for decades assumed capitalist marketing practices. The Anglo-Irish Heritage Trusts were, until the collapse of Ireland’s economic boom in the early 21st century, often backed by ‘parity of esteem’ political directives, and state-sponsored museumification. Thus the big houses have, as Moynahan acknowledges, to some extent been absorbed by Ireland’s tourism initiatives and normalized for academic study through bureaucratic and heritage-industry counterparts.

The distinctions evident in the commemoration of intra-national political afterlives are, of course, reflective of the Southern plantocracy’s and the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy’s discreet historical origins, a tensive backdrop I address throughout the body of this work. Even so, each nation’s now-impugned power structure has been iconically and psychically encoded in ways that suggest the deep time and lingering, often displaced, cultural formations of reactionary elites whose class privilege manifested.

---

7 Not the least of these is that pro-Southern historiography has long styled the “War between the States”—or, more remotely “The War of Northern Aggression”—as a conflict driven by the defense of States’ Rights doctrine (cf Cobb’s ‘translucent lie’ above). On the question of the Southern Heritage industry, there is a compelling body of cultural criticism investigating the ‘nationalization’ of Southern culture construed, in part, as a tactic of reconciliation between regions after WWI, which I speak to below. Popular accounts in this field are: Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (1998); David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (LSU Press, 2002); Alice Fahs, ed. *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (UNC Press, 2004); and Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (2013).

8 A fascinating exception should be noted in Strokestown Park House, Co. Roscommon, which has been preserved for over thirty years almost exclusively through private investment and has been curated with the contrapuntal aim of capturing the descent of the gentry in the lineage of the Mahon-Pakenham family. The last direct heir was forced by age and bankruptcy to sell the considerably-dilapidated manor house and grounds to a local businessman in 1979; her ancestors had been in power in Roscommon since receiving land grants from Cromwell. Even this unusually gritty materialist view of the waning Ascendancy—the estate also houses the Irish National Famine Museum—may be in danger of state-sponsored gentrification, given that the Irish Heritage Trust entered into partnership with Strokestown Park House in 2015.
in a conspicuously outdated neo-Feudal idealism. More pointedly, the central way in which the ‘heritage’ of both the abstraction of the ‘Old South’ and the Anglo-Irish big house has been indexed and recalibrated in the twentieth century is through the generic assemblages of plantation literature.

Recognizing plantation literature as a vital undercurrent of modernism helps us better understand the distinctions between the novel and the short story’s ambivalent relationship to timeliness and modern political subjectivity. The topography of the plantation itself may be interrogated as a formal anachronism that dramatizes the subjection of minority cultures to modernism’s heterogeneous global temporalities. The residual plantation in these literatures bespeaks, I argue, the contradictions Tyrus Miller diagnoses in *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the Wars* (1999). The plantation affords the reader a nexus wherein the mostly-unexamined nationalisms of Anglo-Irish and Southern writers are mapped onto their stories about modernity and belonging from the vantage of modernism’s ostensible end. Writing in what Miller calls the “no-man’s land between the camps of modernism and postmodernism,” authors of plantation fiction show us a desiccated economic and cultural complex that resurfaces in the twentieth century, and evolves across it. Such texts force our awareness that modernity ‘happens,’ in the Marxian sense, differently depending on one’s subject position, and that modernist literariness cannot be confined to pedagogically-efficient periodization, when its primary fictional materials—in the contrary forms of plantation economics—both pre and post-date the arc we’ve typically ascribed to modernist literary production.
Kathryn Stelmach Artuso has described the reciprocal nature of Southern and Irish literary influence in *Transatlantic Renaissances: Literature of Ireland and the American South*. There she claims that: “in their quest for new literary forms that would undermine local-color fiction and oppose the oppressive outside influences of the North or of England, both southern and Irish writers made massive contributions to modernism…with many southern writers claiming a direct artistic descent from the Irish example” (xiv). Artuso is interested in an earlier moment of cross-cultural filiation and as such her argument takes as given central rubrics of modernist literariness. She cites, for example, Faulkner’s borrowings from Joyce and, more broadly, “the advent of mythical realism as the preferred narrative mode for decolonization and postcolonial literature,” yet the framework she elaborates allows us to track both the self-conscious intellectualism and ambivalence of Southern and Anglo-Irish pastoralism after WWI, with its specific referents in the landed gentry. The intimacy of these writers’ ‘backgrounds’—meaning their critical biographical attachment to pseudo-aristocratic social forms, including the waning gentility of the estates they inhabited—has long been viewed as inextricable from their art. What has not been much considered is the extent to which Anglo-Irish writers and authors in the U.S. South responded, formally and thematically, to a shared predicament of intercultural extinction.

While several contemporary critics broached such a transatlantic affinity, the politically-reactionary contexts in which they often operated have stinted our disciplinary appetite for that archive. Robert Penn Warren, for example, was quite voluble on the subject of what he called “the Nashville poets”—meaning first the Fugitives at
Vanderbilt, and then select Southern Agrarians’—literary and philosophical debts to Yeats’ version of an Anglo-Irish pastoral. (About which, Louis MacNeice wryly noted: “In paying homage to the Big House, Yeats was accepting the values of his father with a snob idyllicism he and his followers chose to refer to as Ireland’s mediaeval [past]. The love of tradition merged into support of reaction. Coole Park strengthened Yeats’s faith in the gentleman; there is no spiritual narcotic like a balance sheet.”)⁹

Influenced definitively by the Irish Revivalists’ sumptuous uses of nationalist mythology, at the ‘Fugitives’ Reunion’ Warren remarked that “he and his friends ‘used to talk about Yeats and Ireland vis-à-vis England as having a sort of parallel to the writer in the South, in a retarded and depressed society facing a big, booming, dominating society.’”¹⁰ Warren’s broad-brushed intellectual history becomes all the more suggestive when read against Oscar Wilde’s 1882 musings on the colonized condition prevailing between the countries. Following his lecture tour of the Southern states, Wilde stated in the New Orleans Daily Picayune:

The case of the South in the civil war was to my mind much like that of Ireland today. It was a struggle for autonomy, self-government for a people, who must have freedom and autonomy before they are capable of their greatest result in the cause of progress. That is my feeling about the Southern people as it is about my own people, the Irish.¹¹

---


As Wolfgang Schivelbusch has noted, there are distinctive types of “defeat empathy,” and Wilde, Warren, and Yeats’s perspectives, differing in the particulars, share in oscillation between the “disinterested observations of third parties” and the “interested reflection of the vanquished themselves.”\(^\text{12}\)

One need not embrace Wilde’s abstruse attachment to the romanticized ‘Celtic South’ thesis any more than Yeats’ or Warren’s political commitments to a supposedly-dispossessed Burkean minority to pursue the significant correlation of these literary traditions as an illuminating counter-narrative of later modernism. In fact the politically-unfashionable status of Ascendancy authors in Irish popular culture for several decades following the Second World War owes much to critics’ ahistorical indulgence of the Yeatsian romance with the big house.\(^\text{13}\) This is surprising given that the novels I’m discussing bear few illusions about the plantation as a vital center of literary or intellectual activity; their collective philosophy of hereditary privilege falling more in line with Louis MacNeice, who claimed in that 1941 biography that the big houses “maintained no culture worth speaking of—nothing but an obsolete bravado, an insidious bonhomie and a way with horses.”\(^\text{14}\) In other words, the modernism of plantation fiction


\(*\text{\textsuperscript{13}}\) “Great works constructed there in nature’s spite/ For scholars and for poets after us, / Thoughts long knitted into a single thought, / A dance-like glory that those walls begot. […] Here, traveller, scholar, poet, take your stand/ When all those rooms and passages are gone,/ When nettles wave upon a shapeless mound/ And saplings root among the broken stone,/ And dedicate—eyes bent upon the ground,/ Back turned upon the brightness of the sun/ And all the sensuality of the shade-->/ A moment’s memory to that laureled head.” —“Coole Park, 1929” (and its counterpart: “Coole Park and Thoor Ballylee, 1931”).

\(*\text{\textsuperscript{14}}\) MacNeice, p. 104-105.
is oppositional in style and period, contouring the way, to paraphrase Declan Kiberd, a “social form radically outlives the death of its contents.”

Taken as a transatlantic archive, Irish and American representations of the failed plantation complex demonstrate a thoroughly ambivalent chronicle of a social order that, already parastatic in the fin-de-siècle, had vanished as an ostensible source of culture by the end of the First World War. The historical context for this shift involved, on one hand, the late-nineteenth century dismantling of the Anglo-Irish landlord system through such legislation as the Wyndham Act, by which landlords were induced (in relatively few cases compelled) to sell farmland to their tenants. As F.S.L. Lyons noted: “between 1903 and 1920, nearly nine million acres had changed hands, and two million more were in the process of being sold.”15 By the end of the nineteen-tens, social relations were fraught with potential danger to the lives, as well as property, of the Anglo-Irish from Irish republicans, a form of intimate hostility legible across the works of Bowen, Molly Keane, and William Trevor.16

In the southern United States, an imposed shift in land-owning was likewise inaugurated in the last decades of the nineteenth century, in part the fruit of war debts and the controversial share-cropping system mandated during military Reconstruction—a


16 H.D. Gribbon’s overview: “…the landed gentry had seemed in the 1860s to be in an unassailable position, yet land legislation first regulated their relationship with their tenants, then drastically reduced their rental income, and ultimately eliminated them as rentiers, as their estates were exchanged for capital (over one-half by 1914, around two-thirds by 1921); [the Anglo-Irish] were steadily relieved of the responsibility and embarrassment, not to say danger, of landowning in Ireland.” “Economic and Social History,” in: A New History of Ireland, Vol. VI, p. 331-332.
federal policy intended to fracture the former planters’ monopoly both of real property
and symbolic prestige. In the years before WWII, the South still represented, in the words
of Franklin Roosevelt, “the nation’s number one economic problem,” where agricultural
employment, until the late 1930s, exceeded national averages by seventy-three percent.17
Poverty was to be a widespread and enduring feature of regional life, contributing
mightily to reactionary white nostalgia for the big house and its façade of localist
paternalism. While the southern plantocracy was shown the historical door a few decades
before the Ascendancy’s socially and financially ‘embarrassed’ position became obvious,
southern plantation novels, when read against interwar texts by Anglo-Irish writers,
indicate a shared sense that modernity arrived belatedly and with highly-mixed results for
societies as yet little affected by urban development or industrialization.18

Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September* and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and
the Fury* (both 1929), demonstrate the operations of social longing on narratorial
consciousness, offering a retrospective first person point of view calibrated to immerse
the reader in the protagonists’ premonition of a lost future. Bowen’s protagonist, Lois
Farquar, the author asserted in the novel’s 1952 preface, “derives from, but is not, myself

17 Edward A. Hatfield, “World War II in Georgia,” in *New Georgia Encyclopedia.*
http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/world-war-ii-georgia (December 1, 2006;
revised November 18, 2015).

18 Robert Penn Warren, in his preface to an ‘anthology of the best short stories of the mid 1930s’,
put it this way: “In the days before the World War, after the bitter confusions of Reconstruction, the issues
seemed, on the whole, simple. […] The collisions of interests and patterns of living and principles are
constant now. It is a time of dramatic choices and of re-definitions. The South has been engaged in a
process of self-scrutiny and self-definition. Its history has been re-written within the last twenty years and
the sociologists and economists have devotedly applied their methods of analysis to the nature and structure
of Southern life. […] There is little harmony among the voices raised to describe this life, or to prescribe
for it. And all the choices have not yet been made.” Warren, *A Southern Harvest: Short Stories by Southern
at nineteen…’ Bowen characterizes the novel as having “a deep, clouded, spontaneous source. It brims up with and is rendered to a degree poetic by experience” (vi, xi).

Bowen’s language of antimonies in these opening pages prepares the reader for the novel’s enterprise in reshaping the menacing years of the Anglo-Irish war, alerting us to a work of fiction conditioned, particularly in the closing pages, by Bowen’s desire to recapture the echoing “imperious hauntedness of a period not understood in its own time” (ix). The author’s ominous tone here is contextualized by the preface falling nearly equidistant from the 1942 completion of her sprawling family history Bowen’s Court, and the 1961 sale and demolition of that ancestral big house.

Faulkner’s novels likewise share an obsession with the disintegrating plantation’s lived effects on narrative memory. In The Sound and the Fury, Quentin Compson’s section (“June Second, 1910”) famously instates a doubled perspective in that it is, first, set in the center of the novel, radiating across all the other narratives that take place after his suicide. Second, Quentin’s discourse opens with a recollection of the disintegrating Compson estate obtruding on the diegetic time of his tormented undergraduate tenure at Harvard, an enterprise financed by the partition of the family farm.

The big house at Danielstown in The Last September, along with the Compson plantation in The Sound and the Fury, and also Sutpen’s Hundred in Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! (1936) figure, in their various modes, as stand-ins for the failure of vertically-integrated, white agrarian patriarchy. Enjoining once more Faulkner’s meditation in Requiem for a Nun, his fiction staged his certainty that “the past was never dead. It’s not even past.” After the devastation of the First World War, the texts of Anglo-Irish writers
and authors in the American South exemplified an impulse to foreground their respective ancestral significance as a form of historical reckoning, indeed, I argue, the heuristic that runs through this project—analyzing the terrain of the big house and its constructed effects—acts as a modernist epistemology.

My first chapter discusses at length the ways Faulkner and Bowen offer us, from the 1920s and spanning well into the 1950s, a glimpse into what, following Amy Clukey, I call plantation modernism. In the following chapters, I extend the genealogy to elaborate how Molly Keane, Eudora Welty, and William Trevor each refined the imaginative topography of the dissipated agrarian subcultures they inhabited, regenerating the fraught and disabused perspectives of the big houses’ feminized and racialized others. Each writer deployed the stratum of the big house and its century of representational and material detritus, lambasting, and even at times lamenting, the myriad deformations and failures of cavalier or Ascendancy mythography. They did so, at least initially, under pressures of considerable critical denigration. Faulkner, though not exempt from castigation for reviving the figural plantation and its mores, was subject to fewer professional obstructions on this front. His war-time credentials and brief expatriation in Paris helped establish Faulkner as a promising interlocutor for Southern literary critics seeking a male figurehead.  

---

19 Faulkner was, reliably, taken to account by Wyndham Lewis, who in Men without Art (1934)—condemned the works of ‘internal, fluid, time writers’ among whom he numbered Joyce, Woolf, Stein, and Faulkner (he called Faulkner the inventor of a “slipshod and redundant artistic machine.”) What Lewis encapsulates for us is the Lukácsian charge that an aesthetic preference for extreme subjectivity leaves modernism’s emancipatory political potential, deployed through regional or peripheral literariness, a moot point. (See: Lukacs, “Realism in the Balance,” in Aesthetics and Politics, ed. Ronald Taylor, trans. Rodney
The female authors I discuss, however, struggled with vitriolic reviews and discouragement from publication when their respective handling of big house cultures did not accord with rhetoric useful to an elite, literary renaissance. In part this study begins with the early 1930s to recapture the volatility of Irish and American critical reception around plantation fiction, understood in many quarters as either extending an insidious end-of-empire tradition, or as an embarrassingly reactionary phase of letters, rankling emergent critics intent on ‘reinvigorating’ a decadent fictional corpus. A 1931 review in the mass-market *Irish Book Lover*, a middle-class nationalist journal based in Dublin, indicates the lines along which Molly Keane’s *Mad Puppetstown* was scornfully dismissed before a domestic reading public, and the review is worth quoting nearly in full:

> The big house in Ireland has gone the way of the ‘last sad squires’ of England. It had never for us an interest, nor could it awaken sympathy despite its part in our life. To the phlegmatic English temperament it presented a charming reaction to its own—stone-walls, double-banks, wildness of limb and hoof, and the harum-scarum common Irishry happy in its task of making idiomatic somersaults of English speech while they docked horse-tails, stopped earths and polished snaffles. For us then perhaps the tale lacks interest, or a momentum of excitement. And the author I think would have it so, since her handling of a situation arising out of the ‘troubled times’ is the only piece of comedy which *Mad Puppetstown* unconsciously provides us with. We would suggest that when Irish novelists refuse to restrict their perspective to suit English eyes the novel will tend to fulfil its purpose of rousing our interest and putting spurs to the flank of our imagination.\(^{20}\)

---


---

Livingstone (London: Verso, 1980), 28-59. His subsidiary claim being that modernist literature willfully avoids the novel’s responsibility to depict social totality.
Absent here is any suggestion of attentive reading. Instead, the reviewer’s familiarity with the supposedly-fixed and moribund genre of big house fiction licenses his open condescension toward ‘yet another’ instance of Anglo-Irish literary opportunism crafted to ‘suit English eyes.’ Trimble goes on to attribute an article of bad faith to Keane’s artistic intentions to caricature the Irish (“[T]he author, I think, would have it so”) before implying that the big house novel is, as a category, insufficiently dramatic, neither driven by plot or attaining the status of coherent novelistic art (“the tale” relegates her fiction to a collection of stereotypes, “the harum-scarum common Irishry”), leaving us to imagine a text reliant on the modest talents of portraiture to fill out its pages.

Reception of *Mad Puppetstown*, then and since, has been impoverished by a lack of attention to the competing narratological forces at work in this darkly-comic novel that registers the erotics of rural and manorial life touched by what the narrator calls “the little bitter forgotten war in Ireland.” Many of Molly Keane’s novels and plays written before her late-in-life success were derided in similar tones; only in the last fifteen years have scholars shown an interest in the manifold ambivalence toward genre that marks much of her fiction, a preoccupation I pursue at length in chapter three.

Nor was Keane alone in drawing such caricatural dismissal. Eudora Welty did not publish a text treating the plantation directly until her novel *Delta Wedding* appeared in 1945. While the novel’s sense of history derives pressingly from the final stages of World War II (and specifically from Welty’s immersion in the New York City publishing scene during that time), *Delta Wedding* is set in the strikingly-distant summer of 1923. The fluctuating pasts of the Civil War and WWI ghost the collectively-protagonistic Fairchild
family and gloss the sociopolitical dimensions of the waning plantation culture of the Mississippi Delta. The novel enjoyed relative popular success, even as it was savaged academically, and in tones that exemplify the persistent New Critical conditioning of Southern literary value as above the supposed fray of middlebrow, feminine sentimentalizing, or exotic sensationalism. John Crowe Ransom, typically a champion of Welty’s fiction, evinced mixed feelings about the novel in the *Kenyon Review*:

> It is needless to remark that this is a woman's book—I don't think the same inference was prompted by the short stories—and a modern one. [...] The plot has to do only with a wedding in the family, and the preparations and brief aftermath last but a week. I feel sure that the pattern of Southern life as Miss Welty has it is doomed. The Delta establishment will be disestablished, and at a time not far off. Like any artist, Miss Welty must be given to pondering her literary strategy in the light of the climate of public discussion. Where will she find the material of her further novels?

If Ransom found the work worryingly Janus-faced about the planters’ South, Diane Trilling was among the more censorious commentators, attacking *Delta Wedding* in the pages of the *Nation* as a retreat to “narcissistic Southern fantasy.” She explicitly chided Welty for abandoning the “realist... lower-middle-class milieu” of her earlier fiction to take the post-bellum plantation as a fulcrum for her art. Trilling demoted Welty from “the trenchant and objective commentator we hoped she would be,” and ‘outed’ the author as

21 These tropes were deployed throughout the 1950s by Louis D. Rubin, Cleanth Brooks, and Richard M. Weaver, among others, to praise the transcendent ‘moral and spiritual purpose’ of Southern writing—specifically helpful for elevating an unsexed Flannery O’Connor to the literary heights of William Faulkner, a comparison often levied to the detriment of prurient social realists such as Erskine Caldwell. In his review for the first edition of *Critique* (Jan.1, 1958), Louis D. Rubin wrote, recalling Trilling’s decade-earlier jab at Welty: “Miss O’Connor has never been known to deal in magnolia blossoms. The language is precise, bounded, direct, oddly masculine.”

“just another if more ingenious dreamer on the Southern past.” Trilling was far from alone in employing language that betrayed the self-serious anxieties of critics eager to defend Southern literary value from feminizing caricature. This critical mode proved difficult to dismantle; not until 2008 did a book-length study of *Delta Wedding* appear, and then as a collection of essays in part extending or modifying post-structuralist scholarship on Welty’s feminist aesthetics and the significance of place.

For decades, writers of plantation modernism went unrecognized for their experiments in revamping the genre, a literary tradition backed by the pressures of lived experience. As Vera Kreilkamp observed in *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House*: “By imposing the circumstantial realism of the novel form onto the neo-feudal myths that helped sustain Anglo-Irish gentry life, Big House novelists create the special irony of the literary tradition.” Yet, twenty years later, Joe Cleary continued an influential line of interpretation, dating at least to Daniel Corkery in the 1930s, when he asserted that big house novels perpetuate a conservative form with “a rueful emphasis on the grace of a lost civilization tending to soften memories, sometimes to the point of willed amnesia, of the violent monopoly of power that sustained the Ascendancy world.” To place the ostensibly regressive literature of the Southern plantation and the Irish Big House at the methodological forefront helps elucidate a transatlantic archive of critically-feminized

---

23 Diana Trilling review in *Nation* (1946), p. 578.


25 Kreilkamp, p. 23.

literature, a lineage that illuminates the contradictions of modernist attachment to disguised biography and to the provincial aesthetic specificity of the plantation, particularly in its epistemological connotations as a seemingly extra-territorial political and literary space.

So while the 1940s—indeed the WWII years generally—have posed lingering descriptive and analytical problems for critics of literary modernism, I contend that focusing on the particularities of Anglo-American plantation literature allows us to isolate the aesthetic and historical vectors of our critical discomfort. If Virginia Woolf got considerable press from the declaration that modernism turned the corner in or around December 1910, we recognize that the account of ‘when,’ (or ‘if’), and certainly of ‘how’ it all came to an end remains largely unsettled. Taking up the larger disciplinary quandary this diffuse periodization bespeaks: how do we reposition ostensibly-reactionary modernist subgenres after the heyday of historicism? We may enrich our critique of the Eurocentric economics and thematic preoccupations (of narratorial subjectivity, or of cosmopolitanism, for example) within an Anglophone modernist archive by considering both novels and short stories ‘about’ the plantation complex as instantiations in the conceptual history of forms. Such fiction, and the subsequent discursive archive it inspired, fascinated with the plantation after the First World War, re-emerged—it should be noted—at an acutely bizarre, because anachronistic, point in modernism’s narrative, and continued strong through the mid-century. 27

---

27 As Cheryl Hindrichs has observed: “while ‘early modernism’ is a well-established term (even if critics disagree on its precise parameters), [the concept of] ‘late modernism’ only entered the critical discourse in the last two decades.” Cheryl Hindrichs, “Late Modernism, 1928–1945: Criticism and
For the first generation of authors I consider here, Faulkner (b. 1897) and Bowen (b. 1899), the theoretical armature of the ‘Lost Generation’ may be a useful starting point for assaying their post-WWI deployment of the plantation or big house as both a source and effect of societal fracture.\(^\text{28}\) For each, of course, the narrative of what Malcolm Cowley called the “rich fund of common emotions” inspired by their generational experience of the Great War is complicated by differences of gender, class, and nationality. Even so, both Faulkner and Bowen viewed WWI and its fallout (which in Ireland meant both the Anglo-Irish and Civil Wars) as refracting the specific passing of an outmoded power structure—for Bowen, the one of which she was a member—and while witnessing a belated rupture of volatile political arrangements to their respective homelands.

It is no coincidence that some thirty years before his formative account of the Lost Generation, Cowley’s editorship of *The Portable Faulkner* (1946) was widely credited with salvaging Faulkner from critical obscurity. In the mid-Forties, Faulkner’s last several novels had suffered disappointing sales, and his earlier work was out of print. What convinced Cowley that Faulkner deserved cultural attention, as he notes in his

---

Theory” in *Literature Compass* Vol. 8, No. 11 (November: 2011), pp. 840–855. Granting for a moment the Eurocentric orientation this discussion assumes, we often figure the question, not least for pedagogical purposes, in the following ways: did the style or movement we call ‘modernism’ emerge with Baudelaire, as Benjamin would claim; with the New Woman novels’ turn to private consciousness, as Angelique Richardson argues; did it spring fully-formed as the Savage God Yeats saw in Alfred Jarry? and so on. See: Angelique Richardson, and Chris Willis, eds. *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin-de Siècle Feminisms* (Palgrave: 2002).

\(^{28}\) c.f. Cowley’s *A Second Flowering: Works and Days of the Lost Generation* (1973); Cowley describes the bond of Anglophone writers who reached their “late teens or early twenties in 1917” as defined by “More than anything else…the First World War [which] made them a generation, by changing their world and by giving them shares, as it were, in a rich fund of common emotions.” (3).
introduction, is the way that Faulkner’s language conveys simultaneously a “strong sense of regional particularity” within an aesthetic alienation from that home region. By distilling the “sources familiar to a small-town Mississippi boy,” Faulkner, in Cowley’s estimation, transformed what was presumably a memory of locale into a fictional form resembling a “lump of history.” Yoknapatawpha is thus taken as prototype for subcultural aesthetic innovation, at once imminently place-specific and transmuted into a “permanent state of consciousness.” Bowen and Welty jettisoned the stream-of-consciousness avant-gardism that fascinated Faulkner, preferring short-form genres to the novel (to the continued chagrin of their agents, critics, and publishers.) I consider how they perpetuated nationalized story-telling traditions to varying formal ends. Reviewing Bowen’s ‘Collected Stories’ for the Times Literary Supplement in 1981, William Trevor suggested her indebtedness to Ireland’s distinctive attachment to oral convention: “Story-telling of one kind or another was still very much alive when Chekhov decided to turn the form inside out. Elizabeth Bowen, who belonged in so many ways to the past, was one of the first practitioners within the new, modern movement.”

Ranging over a problematic of gendered violence, narrative perspectivalism, and imperiled futurity in Bowen and Faulkner’s selected works, I discuss the ways in which

30 Ibid., viii.
31 Ibid., xxix.
32 Artuso elaborates a comparative study of Bowen and Welty’s “hyphenated identities” in Transatlantic Renaissances, pp. 72-76.
they perform strategic recalibrations of the pastoral, in the theoretical vein of William Empson, to elude the traditions of corrosive sentimentality that attended the tradition of plantation or Big House literature they collectively reimagined. Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, “A Rose for Emily” (1930), and *Absalom, Absalom!*, alongside Bowen’s *The Last September*, “Her Table Spread” (1941), and her family history *Bowen’s Court* (1942), indicate the extent to which both authors recurred to the site of the plantation as both historically-riven metonym and a technology for articulating the self-destruction of the social classes to which they, belatedly, belonged. Extrapolating from their texts, as I turn to *Delta Wedding* in chapter two, I theorize common preoccupations of plantation literature between the World Wars: namely, a cast of characters that can be described with only modest overstatement this way: an Anglo-Irish or Southern overbred—and so, inferentially, inbred—landed class that cannot effectively oppose the naturalist violence that surrounds them in the form of the native servants or former slaves once in their command.

Faulkner and Bowen’s fictions fetishize the stifling bifurcations of such social arrangements, and fixate on the impossibilities of cultural regeneration; thus does Bowen’s failed patriarch Hugo Montmorency meditate in the midst of *The Last September* on the outcomes of the Anglo-Irish War: “‘Don’t ask me’ [and he] sighed sharply as though beneath the pressure of omniscience. ‘A few hundred more deaths, I
suppose, on our side—which is no side—rather scared, rather isolated, not expressing anything except tenacity to something that isn’t there—that never was there.”

If plot development proves intractable for the male characters in Bowen’s fiction, her heroines often endure by manipulating the levers of plot toward recursive awareness, if not outright pastiche. Sean O’Faolain’s early analysis in *The Short Story* makes the point that Valeria Cuffe, the protagonist of “Her Table Spread” in “one form or another…turns up in all Miss Bowen’s novels.” O’Faolain’s observation alerts us to the extent to which Bowen’s heroines are subtended by the conflicting signs of the times, often immobilized by their hyphenated identities and evacuated class privilege. In “Her Table Spread,” Valeria “at twenty-five, of statuesque development, [though] still detained in childhood,” imagines she is simultaneously a fairy-tale princess and British officer’s wife, to the mortification of her guests, and ultimately the desertion of her dwindling prospects for marriage. As I discuss below, the female protagonists of these novels and short stories are well-aware of inhabiting a genre manqué, where a realm of fantasy is all that insulates the inhabitants of the manor from the rather desperate state encroaching from without. As Bowen wrote in her 1940 essay for *The Bell*, “big houses that had begun in glory were soon only maintained by struggle and sacrifice. Sons were recalled from college, or never went there; daughters, undowered, stayed unwed; love-marriages had to

---

34 Hugo is an absurdly disappointing love interest for Lois. Having pined after Lois’s now-deceased mother, he reappears at Danielstown in middle age with his “wonderfully unselfish” and partially invalided wife Francie, who meditates on their life as going “forward uncertainly, without the compulsion of tragedy…a net of small complications. There was the drag of his indecision, the fine snapping now and then of her minor relinquishments. Her health, his temperament, their varying poverty—they were delayed, deflected” (15). Marda thinks of the Montmorencys, rather more incisively: “No wonder Francie looked like a windflower—her husband had this unfortunate ability to be young at any time. His unordered moods gave him the churlishness of a schoolboy; his silliness embarrassed her” (177).
be interdicted because money was needed to prop up the roof. [Ascendancy] children grew up *farouches*, haughty, quite ignorant of the outside world. […] It must be seen that a barrier has two sides.”  

Plantation literature, burgeoning from sociologically distinctive but ultimately comparable national traditions, entered an acutely baroque phase in the Edwardian era. Julian Moynahan asserts that in the “first half of the twentieth century,” the Anglo-Irish literary imprimatur “comes into its own just as the privileges and power of this community begin to be curtailed and what had been called an Ascendancy heads down toward an inevitable demise…In the move toward ending, Elizabeth Bowen [contributed] much to what I call the Anglo-Irish postmortem” (xi). As W.J. McCormack observes more generally in his 1992 essay “Setting and Ideology: With Reference to the Fiction of Maria Edgeworth,” the term, we should say ‘short hand,’ of the ‘big house’ entered into “wide cultural use only in the late nineteenth century”—the point at which the Ascendancy entered inarguable socio-political decline. McCormack sees the resurgence of big house literature as an elegiac index of unfinished business—namely the fallout of the Home Rule crisis and the founding of the Free State. The point I pursue is that the fictional transfiguration of the American plantation and its attendant dramatis personae occurred nearly simultaneously, under the sign of Lost Cause narratives. Furthermore, such a central repurposing of the image of the Southern landowning white proved immensely useful as a tool of national reconciliation in the decades following the Civil War and military Reconstruction.

---

35 Bowen, “The Big House” *op. cit.*, 74, 77.
In the South, the crystallization of plantation mythography, in bestselling fiction as elsewhere, was formed in the conflict between insular—and largely, though not exclusively, regional—literary production and the escalating federal prerogative to ‘modernize’ the South under the auspices of the Progressive (or ‘New South’) movement after 1900.\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Absalom, Absalom!} and \textit{Gone with the Wind} were both published in 1936, and the latter’s blockbuster success in theaters three years later was indicative of nothing if not a thoroughly-nationalized romance around the ‘Old South.’\textsuperscript{37} In the Irish tradition, as Derek Hand has recently noted, in both the fin-de-siècle and as an initial response to Irish independence, the big house similarly functions as an explanatory literary code “emerging from within the class who had been dispossessed of political power and

\textsuperscript{36} The cultivation of Lost Cause ideology was a highly-complicated affair, popularized across many cultural fronts through Neo-Confederate propaganda dating from the 1870s on, and proved extremely useful as a set of strategies promoting reconciliation of the regions in the early century (e.g. Bruce Catton’s \textit{Reflections on the Civil War}, 1981 and Karen L. Cox, \textit{Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture}, 2003). The principle tenets of ‘Old South’ doctrine included a heroic and reverential view of Confederate military valor; idealizing white southern womanhood; sentimentalizing images of slavery—largely via stereotypes of the docile, happy-go-lucky (and evolutionarily distinct) African-American servant; and the promotion of states’ rights and secession as the socio-political ‘cause’ of the Civil War. The Lost Cause corpus included many plantation novels and works of historiography in which female authors, including Mary Anne Cruse, Rebecca Harding Davis, Ellen Glasgow—and looking forward to Depression-era America—Margaret Mitchell, loomed large. See also: Sharon Talley, \textit{Southern Women Novelists and the Civil War: Trauma and Collective Memory in the American Literary Tradition since 1861} (2014).

\textsuperscript{37} John Crowe Ransom, in the aforementioned review of \textit{Delta Wedding}, aired his long-standing chagrin at this sensationalizing reversion to Lost Cause depictions of the ante bellum South, praising Welty for resisting such marketing incentives with her novel (whatever its other flaws): “Nor are the Welty characters turned out as handsomely as those in [Jane] Austen. I am glad that Miss Welty did not want them aristocratic and picturesque, as if to perpetuate some tradition of Southern novelists, or as if to produce a commodity in characters fit to sell to a movie firm.” \textit{Kenyon Review}, op. cit., 504. For a literary-critical account of America’s internal capitalist appropriation of a romanticized 20\textsuperscript{th} century Southern identity, see: Leigh Anne Duck, \textit{The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism} (University of Georgia Press, 2006).
Prodding any assumption that plantation literature wields power almost exclusively through narratives of its own societal demise, I argue instead that Irish and Southern depictions of the big house afford critics peripheries hiding in plain sight. Such texts require a critical response extending beyond the affective or symptomatic register to account for collective transatlantic capitalist dilemmas.

As Amy Clukey observes in “Plantation Modernism”: “Many modernists [it bears remarking] either came from or aspired to the planter class”; given that the interwar period saw “an explosion of fiction that registers socioeconomic changes associated with plantation production,” it remains all the more conspicuous that literature on the plantation or big house has not been subjected to intense critical scrutiny as a corpus embodying the acceleration of British decolonization and the concomitant rise of U.S. neo-imperialism during these years. For critics interested in the future of a strategic formalism (pace Caroline Levine and Rita Felski), plantation literature is particularly promising for such diagnostic interrogation, in that it evidences the anxieties and shaping influences of a marginalized political subjectivity. The Irish Big House and the Southern

---


39 Looking at Southern novels in the 1930s only: Caroline Gordon’s *Penhally* (1931)—the story of four generations of Kentucky patriarchs overwhelmed by a Yeatsian vortex of rootless individualism—Stark Young’s *So Red the Rose* (1934), Bontemps’ *Black Thunder* (1936), Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (also 1936), Katherine Anne Porter’s *Old Mortality* (1937—a reference to Sir Walter Scott’s novel of the same name?), Allen Tate’s *The Fathers* (1938), Faulkner’s *The Unvanquished* (1938), and Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939). Consider this output in relation to Daniel Corkery’s acerbic comment in 1931 that Big House novels were part of a ‘colonial literature’ of ‘spiritual exiles’ written in order to explain Ireland to English audiences (quoted in: Kiberd, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, pp. 7-9).

planted have long functioned as literary symbols set intimately against historical paratexts, yet for all the attention assigned to the big house as a schematic designed for historical thinking, it is striking that critics seldom consider plantation literature as offering any viable or invested image of alternative futurity. I consider how such novels, short stories, and, often, essayistic prose, dramatize that the genre’s determinative heuristic is one highlighting contingencies of social formation.

As Derek Hand notes: “for a class that increasingly imagines itself in aloof aristocratic terms, the novel’s vulgarity and its access to the privacies of the inner world of the consciousness signal a loss of power rather than its realization.” This observation is borne out, with varying degrees of identitarian self-scrutiny when William Faulkner and Eudora Welty feel compelled to ‘tell about the South,’ refracting their categorical and ancestral roles in the waning white power structure through reworked forms of plantation fiction, producing a corpus that embodies the alliance of radical form with the logics of cultural conservatism. Again to quote Amy Clukey: “By adopting the perspective of a ‘backwards’ place, plantation modernism revises history from the perspective of the periphery…Bursting through [nineteenth century] stereotypes and creating highly idiosyncratic narrative perspectives, modernist plantation fiction renders the plantation unknowable.”

For critics approaching a so-called ‘coterie literature’ from the political left, it should be recalled e.g. Yeats and the Pollexfens, that the Protestant ascendancy, by

---


42 Clukey, op cit., 17.
the early twentieth century, lingered as a bourgeois, rather than truly aristocratic, social formation. 43

While critics including Susan Stanford Friedman, Jed Esty, Kevin Dettmar, Robert Genter, Cheryl Hindrichs, Tyrus Miller, and Marina MacKay have militated in recent years for a more capacious understanding of mid-century modernist aesthetics and influence (a model or approach we might refer to loosely as ‘multiple modernisms’), and would define their common cause, at the very least, as an attention to modernism’s continued expressive devastation of social realism beyond the outbreak of the Second World War, we mostly continue to theorize plantation literature and late modernism in the terms of an endgame. 44 Reappraising new critical enthusiasm for the autonomous,

43 As Roy Foster concludes in “Protestant Magic: W.B. Yeats and the Spell of Irish History”: “By 1931, social spaces between the various levels of the Irish Ascendancy mattered less (there were so few of them left.) And Yeats had elevated himself to their upper reaches by a sort of moral effort and historical sleight of hand.” Foster then quotes George Moore’s quip dated more than 20 years earlier, when Yeats took the opportunity to “thunder like Ben Tillett against the middle classes…and we looked around asking each other with our eyes where on earth our Willie Yeats had picked up the strange idea that none but titled and carriage-folk can appreciate pictures. And we asked ourselves why Willie Yeats should feel himself called upon to denounce his own class, millers and shipowners on one side, and on the other a portrait-painter of distinction.” in George Moore, Hail and Farewell: Vale (1914), quoted in Allison, Yeats’s Political Identities (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 85.

44 Robert Genter refers to this as a “declension narrative”—within which scholars predominantly condition their arguments in terms of historical upheaval and correlating creative response. In the late Sixties, Irving Howe’s influential “The Culture of Modernism” sounded the death-knell of any “coherent or self-assured avant-garde in the West,” while suggesting that modernism, while conceivably deathless, had fallen on “exhausted days” and entered “the late stages, [where] there occurs an emptying-out of the self, a revulsion from the wearisomeness of both individuality and psychological gain.” (His avatar is, of course, Beckett.) Similarly, Clement Greenberg, by 1979, felt sufficient confidence to state, rather more simply, that Modernism had ended, at least for literary intents and purposes, in the 1930s. What came after was “Late” in the sense Said suggests—a postlapsarian style. Even though periodization predicated on markers of aesthetic specificity—for instance the contested coherence of the afore-invoked ‘High Modernism’—has seen its scholarly stock plummet in the last few years, it remains the case that our discipline exudes a formalist orientation toward Modernism pre-1939 that we view as largely untenable in the ‘transitional’ war years that follow. Put another way: as the explanatory power of ‘Modernism’ as a formal assemblage grows long in the tooth, the literary critical rebuff more often than not is to man the barricades of an
historically-inoculated work of art—however necessarily caricatural this convention has become—I argue that the subgenre of plantation modernism provides us with a wide and supple range of critical responses to such problems of disciplinary periodization. We can then turn to the respective fictions of the authors in question to gauge how fascination with their subjection to the fault-lines of social power challenges our understanding of modernist temporality. Following Adorno’s observation in _Aesthetic Theory_ that “real denunciation is probably only a capacity of form, which is overlooked by a social aesthetic that believes in themes,” I see in the self-critiquing capacities of plantation modernism a story very much worth telling.

amplified Historicism in the 1940s and after, a means by which—as Stephen Greenblatt (self) diagnosed back in 1997—we reinvigorate our analytical protocol by “making the literary and the nonliterary seem to be each other’s thick description.”

The discourse on Southern literary valuation, promulgated by the Fugitive circle at Vanderbilt after WWI, was in large part predicated on 20th century southern writers ‘reclaiming’ the plantation and its idealized culture from the Lost Cause canon popularized in the late 19th century by Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon, among many others. The noisome tractability of this tradition is indicated by the fact that Dixon’s novel, _The Clansman_ (1905) served as primary text for _The Birth of a Nation_ (1915). In _The Clansman_, as is common to many Lost Cause novels, the stage is the ruined plantation, a site of post-bellum desolation and loss, whose grandeur, now overgrown and destroyed by the mercantile north, is retailed, in dialect, by a former slave. In a correlation to the Big House tradition, said narrator—often a native Catholic of the servant class—reminisces fondly about the heroism, kindness, and hallowed lineage of his past owners and laments the lost ritualism of life under their authority. Even such an aphoristic treatment makes obvious the unironic parallels with the narrating servant ‘Honest’ Thady in the _locus classicus_ of Big House literature, _Castle Rackrent_ (1800). In Edgeworth’s text, the narrator Thady’s mimicry of the simple-minded hereditary servant is structurally imploded, not least in the fact that Thady cultivates the novel’s young mock-hero Condy to inherit the rack-rented property—and ultimately serve his own son’s financial ends—by filling the young master’s head with destructive pseudo-aristocratic nonsense from childhood.

“BUILT OF ANXIOUS HISTORY”: THE PLANTATION AND SENSUAL DESIGN IN BOWEN AND FAULKNER

“I don’t know who to tell,’ she said distractedly. ‘They have all disappeared; they always are disappearing. You’d think this was the emptiest house in Ireland—we have no family life…I’ve got nothing to say and I’m sick of always having to keep on saying it.’”

-The Last September (1929)

“Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?”

-Absalom, Absalom! (1936)

“How does the novelist, faced by the magnitude of war, begin to imagine anything stranger or more comprehensive than history?”

What does it mean for a narrative to shuttle obsessively between saying and listening, insisting on acts that transport the reader between an urgent, particularized present, and an irrepressible, collectively-endured past? Why do fictions about the big house so often deploy such structures of contrast, inventorying the passing of time as the contemporary contestation of memory? In the twentieth century, particularly in the years of state modernization following the First World War, mythology surrounding plantations and big houses has served widely-divergent cultural narratives and political

_____________________________

47 Elizabeth Bowen, Bowen’s Court (The Collins Press: Cork, 1998 [1942]), p. 457. “That illusion—peace at its most ecstatic—I held to, to sustain me throughout the war. I suppose that everyone, fighting or just enduring, carried within him one private image, one peaceful scene. Mine was Bowen’s Court. War made me that image out of a house built of anxious history.”

imperatives. After all, just as Faulkner’s Jason Compson ruminated on the painful specificities of Southern history necessary to produce Yoknapatawpha Co.’s ghostly belles, the indomitable Scarlett O’Hara intoned to Margaret Mitchell’s many readers that “tomorrow is another day.”

In its affirmation of idealized Anglo-Southern womanhood Gone with the Wind (1936) elaborated a hugely-popular narrative of post-Depression regional reconciliation, wherein Scarlett’s determined reclamation of the family’s Irish-American plantation symbolized the resilience of the dispossessed throughout the United States. Mitchell’s

---

49 By describing the U.S. and Ireland as engaging in ‘modernization’ projects in the post-War period—years inclusive of the War of Independence and Civil War—I am referring to a shared emphasis on infrastructural development through the creation of semi-state bodies aimed at regionalized economic stimulus. The Free State supported the Ardnacrusha hydroelectric dam from 1925, the establishment of the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) in 1927, and the International Credit Corporation in 1933, among other major modernizing initiatives. See: H. D. Gribbon, ‘Economic and social history, 1850-1921’, in W.E. Vaughan, A New History of Ireland: VI Ireland under the Union, II 1870-1921 (Oxford: 1996), pp 346-347. In the U.S., the ‘war boom’ effected the South haphazardly, as discussed later, but many regulatory agencies and job-creation schemes came into effect for the first time during and just after America joined the war effort. As Hugh Rockoff notes concerning state consolidation efforts in the ‘Teens and Twenties: “The management of the war economy by a phalanx of Federal agencies persuaded many Americans that the government could play an important positive role in the economy. This lesson remained dormant during the 1920s, but came to life when the United States faced the Great Depression.” The logic would be applied with gusto to ameliorate the economic backwardness of the South under FDR. Hugh Rockoff, Drastic Measures: A History of Wage and Price Controls in the United States. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 241.

50 Literally “Anglo-Southern” in that Vivien Leigh, born in Darjeeling, British India, to a Scottish father and Irish mother, was a highly-controversial choice for one of the most coveted roles in Hollywood. A place where the New Jersey-born Thomas Mitchell could portray an immigrant from County Meath turned antebellum big house grandee, who has perfectly internalized both the cavalier costuming of the Anglo-Irish landlord alongside a rural, Catholic, and Famine-driven idealization of property ownership: “It will come to you, this love of the land, there’s no gettin’ away from it if you’re Irish” cries Gerald O’Hara: “land is the only thing in the world worth workin’ for, worth fightin’ for, worth dyin’ for, because it’s the only thing that lasts.” Mitchell’s novel is even more explicit re: the colonial implications of O’Hara’s attachments: “With the deep hunger of an Irishman who had been a tenant on the lands his people once owned and hunted, he wanted to see his own acres stretching green before his eyes. With a ruthless singleness of purpose, he desired his own house, his own plantation, his own horses, his own slaves.” His plantation, Tara, is then named for the prehistoric seat of the high kings of Ireland. Gerald O’Hara becomes
text offers an intriguing mass-cultural bridge between national literary traditions usually thought of as discrete: the southern plantation romance and its off-stage antecedent, the Anglo-Irish big house.\textsuperscript{51} The text suggests (by way of abstract, sanitized versions of Irish complicity in racism at home and in the diaspora), that dynastic inheritance, social elitism, and the politics of cultural conservatism that attended planter culture—usually thought peculiarly national—could be better understood as thoroughly transnational and historically constitutive.\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Gone with the Wind} represents, then, the most easily-recognizable narrative in the inter-war period to assemble such historical linkages and simultaneously both ‘more Southern’ and ‘more Irish’ than any member of the landed class shaped within a single national context could dare to be. There is a strong sense in which \textit{GWTW}’s narrative arc is shaped by Scarlett’s prodigal realization of Gerald’s prophecy—there are no sons in the family (tellingly, we see three tiny tombstones in the family plot naming the sons who each died in infancy, all named Gerald O’Hara, Jr.) Scarlett is by far the most aggressive and self-actualized of the children and her father’s obvious favorite. (She shares with her parents the tragedy of having children die very early). Scarlett’s inheritance plot is normalized from the opening shot, in which she physically dominates the steps of the big house surrounded by beaux, and reiterated in the closing scene, a landscape with Scarlett framed in the medium distance from a hill-top while the sun sets behind Tara, signaling the close of an old order and the dawn of another day.

\textsuperscript{51} The connection between Mitchell’s novel and “constructions of Irish-Southern culture” from a transnational model of plantation economics appears in Amy Clukey, “Plantation Modernity: \textit{Gone with the Wind} and Irish-Southern Culture” in \textit{American Literature} Vol. 85, No. 3 (September, 2013), pp. 505-530. Clukey’s discussion ranges from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century and includes a historical survey of trading practices between the British Empire, the southern U.S. colonies, and the West Indies. For the purposes of this chapter, Clukey suggestively outlines how: \textit{“Gone with the Wind} allows us to see that the Southern plantation is part of a contiguous transnational phenomenon that is capacious enough to support a variety of cultural narratives. Mitchell imagines the admission of the Irish to the upper echelons of imperial hierarchies predicated on African and African American slavery within New World contexts, even though these same hierarchies within Old World contexts catalyzed Irish emigration in the first place” (524).

\textsuperscript{52} As Jennifer Greeson has argued in her recent study of the hemispheric Southern literary landscape: “What remains constant across U.S. history is the conceptual structure provided to us by our South: it is an internal other for the nation, an intrinsic part of the national body that nonetheless is differentiated and held apart from the whole. […] The case of our South provides a textbook example of what studies of the politics of culture, over the past three decades, have taught us to expect: that what is materially peripheral to the modern nation often becomes symbolically central to it.\textquotedblright; See: Jennifer Rae Greeson, \textit{Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature} (Harvard U.P.: 2010), p. 1-2.
gesture toward a renewed predicament affecting identity construction for Southern and Anglo-Irish writers.

Stranded between actively-disputed discourses regarding their national belonging and appropriate participation with the sanctioned body politic after WWI, William Faulkner and Elizabeth Bowen wrote within traditions closely associated with the pathology of plantocratic inheritance. They were the first authors to recuperate the genres of big house and plantation literature from coterie fiction, lineages considered marginal within the national literatures out of which each arose. Bowen and Faulkner recast the subcultural materials of big house traditions in innovative representations of character consciousness and interiority. Their fiction militates against national imperatives toward consensus in the interwar era, sharing aesthetic trajectories that, shaped in part by lingering anxieties over violently-maintained labor histories, cut against any archaeological disposition towards the immediate past.53

Bowen and Faulkner spoke as moderates to Anglo-Irish and white Southern posterity in their political writings, while their best-known novels and selected short stories anatomize the political antecedents and societal reverberations of plantation

---

53 Obviously the Anglo-Irish landlord class was in no meaningful sense a homogeneous economic grouping (being as variable in scaled affluence as the Southern planter classes, though the former obviously experienced a protracted period of decline.) For the purposes of comparative sociology broached in this chapter: there were over 4,000 big houses in the current Republic of Ireland in 1860; these estates were defined as the residence of a landlord who owned more than 500 acres, and who rented part of the land to tenant farmers. A discussion of the dissolution of landlord control via legislative acts and paramilitary arson is compared to the disestablishment and disappearance of U.S. plantation architectures below. The final breaking up of (in most cases, seriously diminished) Irish estates was formalized in the Free State Land Acts from 1923. See: Terence Dooley, *The Decline of the Big House in Ireland* (Dublin, Wolfhound Press: 2001), esp. pp. 10-16.
economics, infusing protagonists with militant awareness of inscribed colonial histories. By reading these authors in a common archive, we can see the traditions of plantation and big house literature as contiguous, and examine the critical armature within which each writer reshaped tropologies of these genres for a changed social order.

The discursive ‘nonfiction’ considered here includes the idiosyncratic family history *Bowen’s Court* (1942), “Ireland Makes Irish” a 1946 article published by *Vogue*, along with Bowen’s audacious (and, until very recently, unpublished) essay entitled “Ireland 1950.” These I read against Faulkner’s essay “Mississippi” (1954), and “On Fear: Deep South in Labor” which appeared in *Harper’s* (1956). The striking connections evident in Bowen and Faulkner’s cultivated journalistic roles form a base from which to assess the formal elements such critical-biographical positions engendered in their fiction, including *The Last September* and *Absalom, Absalom!* The chapter concludes with a discussion of ironized plantation modernism in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” (1930) and Bowen’s “Her Table Spread” (1941).

*The Last September* and *Absalom, Absalom!* feature narrators, as well as protagonists, who evince a utopian desire for a vantage outside the narrative from which to survey, and, often, press a lasting interpretive seal on events. When Lois Farquar is told of her rejected suitor, Gerald Lesworth’s, murder by Anti-Treaty dissidents, she “went into the house and up to the top to find what was waiting. Life, seen whole for a

---

54 I am referencing the version collected in Eibhear Walshe (2011), though Hepburn published the same essay under the title “Ireland Today” in *Listening In* (2010). Hepburn states that while “internal evidence suggests the piece was written around 1952/3, the essay might well be a television documentary written in 1960” (355-356). Neither a broadcast nor a typescript of that documentary is now available to clarify the date of composition.
moment, was one act of apprehension, the apprehension of death” (297, emphasis added). After Lois rather ambiguously exits the novel to undertake not art school, as anticipated, but “Tours, for her French”, an event curiously reported rather than dramatized in the plot, the reader is relegated on the final page to an omniscient (implied authorial) consciousness that retails the burning of Danielstown and neighboring estates. This “execution of the houses” is inflected with the chilling, alien observation that “it seemed that an extra day, unreckoned, had come to abortive birth that these things might happen.” As Lois hides away in the ‘box-room’—a fantastic room of plot convenience in the big house at Danielstown long ago favored by her deceased mother—she thinks, in a manner Bowen surely invites us to read as meta-textual: “Her problem was, not only how to get out unseen, but why, to what purpose?” (192, emphasis in text).

In self-dramatizing a structural reliance on speech acts, critical listening, and the shifting of narrative voice, as this chapter’s epigraphs indicate, Bowen and Faulkner suggest strategies of intra-textual deposition in which the reader becomes aware of the protagonist as a cypher whose burdens of historical pressure they must to some degree adjudge and also share.55 Quentin Compson is the product of a damaged representational field which he cannot reliably judge nor share. As with Lois Farquar, who “look[s] and

55 This is, I assume, a significant component of the logic behind Faulkner’s haunting resurrection of Quentin, whose suicide stands as an aporia, semi-represented but organizing all auxiliary narration in The Sound and the Fury (1929), on which more below. The literary-philosophical framework here owes much to Philip Weinstein, who notes in Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction (Cornell University Press: 2005): that Faulkner’s deployment of time and space “attends to blind spots in the realist achievement” since “the reverberating collapse of the Old South instructs Faulkner that the progress model does not obtain. He centers his fiction on moments of collapse, redepolying time in order to keep it from serving as a medium that accommodates coming to know.” Weinstein’s aesthetic account I largely accept, although his is an avowed ‘metahistorical mapping’ of the novel, which eschews historically-embedded interpretation in favor of concept-modeling with an eye toward canon formation (4).
strain[s] after feeling” to no one’s edification—least of all her own—throughout *The Last September*, Quentin’s inability to make sense of his own story correlates directly to a traumatic inheritance of settler colonialist culture (*TLS*, 192). Quentin’s ability to pose as a protagonist is undercut decisively before the narrative is properly begun:

His very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterward, from the fever which had cured the disease (7).

As Richard Godden puts it in *Fictions of Labor*: “[Quentin] learns that the degree to which his family history depends upon sexually and racially mistaken images…is the degree to which he has no useable past.”

In these novels the reader is placed in an analytical position uncomfortably close to that of the protagonist. As they are revealed to be thwarted products of a plantocratic past, so do we as readers become distressed by the insuperable frustrations attending Lois’ and Quentin’s attempts to structure intellectual development via conventional narrative strategies (including heterosexual romance and the escapist trajectory of higher education.) Our protagonists are impelled to seek proxy readers, as well as hermetic spaces, through which to conduct the critical thinking required of their own historical emplotment. In each conclusion, the futility of literary recounting takes the place of resolution.

---

“A Rose for Emily” and Bowen’s “Her Table Spread” establish the reader at a further remove, employing limited third-person narrators who appear bemused by the perversity of interrogating female subjectivity under lingering societal constraint. The short stories present the economically-moribund estate as a metonym of deep time, distinguished by a darkly-comic inflection not sustained in the novels. As Mr. Rossiter, great-uncle of Bowen’s heroine Valeria Cuffe, remarks to her reluctant suitor: “It’s a pity you don’t want a wife. She’s got a nice income [and] a nice character; she’s a girl you could shape” (317). As discussed at the chapter’s conclusion, in these heroines and their conflicted attachments to property, Bowen and Faulkner register the forces of conquest, exploitation, and the rationalization of oppression, while pushing the symbolic big house toward pastiche with secluded mansions and ungovernable heroines sensationally out of step with a modernizing age.

Both Bowen and Faulkner biographically performed aristocracy as planter-modernists (Bowen more ‘legitimately’ than Faulkner, perhaps, though the proximity of an elegant past became increasingly irrelevant in their shared state of long-term financial precarity. For each author, refined public style—as a complement to their literary output—quickly became the more useful form of cultural capital.)\(^{57}\) Because the Anglo-Irish and Southern aristocracies were far more “invented” than actual, each required that claims to refinement be reaffirmed and preserved through self-aestheticization, long after such ritualism denoted any real lease of social control. While each writer exerted remarkable effort in their personal and artistic commitments to keep up the appearance of

---

gentle breeding, as the realities of straitened circumstances bore in, the heroines of their short-form fiction in particular inhabit subversive inscriptions of such privilege. Emily Grierson and Valeria Cuffe demonstrate the extent to which a woman’s ‘femininity’ is in fact continually produced by her class status. As Susan Lanser argues, the comically-Gothic heroine, a version of the dandy, perhaps, embodies the “sometimes conflicting and sometimes converging needs of Gentry hegemony and feminist agency” (180).\textsuperscript{58}

Following a brief overview of developments contributing to the demise of big house cultures in the decades before WWII, I double down on the fantastical element in Bowen and Faulkner’s treatments of the plantation past. An initial historicist approach is warranted by two considerations: first, Bowen and Faulkner demonstrate a shared commitment to searching for forms in which to represent ‘time’ as it is actually experienced outside of the affordances of capitalist-dictated (linear) narration. Faulkner’s novels are permeated by the iconography of Confederate memory, with the plantation posed as the quintessential symbol of an ‘Old South’ lived in the present tense. “A Rose for Emily” and \textit{Absalom, Absalom!} are works inspired by, and in part modeled on, Faulkner’s acquisition of the antebellum plantation, Rowan Oak. It makes sense to see his decades-long familial habitation of this atavistic estate as, in no small part, a militant gesture against the prescriptive saturation of memorials attesting to an ‘official’ axiology of Southern culture. The repeated and spectacular destruction of the plantation in his

fiction complements the rewriting of Rowan Oak’s meaning that his own reclamation and alteration of that estate ultimately entailed.59

In *Absalom, Absalom!* the search for a usable regional tradition requires a technique of willed anachronism, a condition which presumes diffuse cultural knowledge of a population already thought to experience history differently. *The Last September* and “Her Table Spread” deploy the motifs of fairy tale to undermine any potentially comfortable distance from diegetic time. Anglo-Ireland and the white, landed South were presumed, by the late 1920s, to be comprised of psychologized ‘types,’ mired between fragments of an archaic past and a barely-emergent modernity. When Bowen and Faulkner are read alongside touchstones of Irish and U.S. policy regarding landed estates in this era, we begin to see their fiction elucidating the core traumas of outmoded planter classes through a lens of shared failure—failure both of owning land and of controlling its labor.

An overview of what we might call ‘landlord politics’ further enriches analysis of the search for a protagonist’s psychologized ‘origins’ in these spectacular failures of the bildungsroman. A startling lack of development is often presented in and through images of the big house and plots of inheritance—forms in which Faulkner and Bowen represent history as recessive, recursive, and contoured by disavowal of female agency. The problematic of gendered compulsion, shaped by a minoritarian history that conditions all

59 This is of a piece with the ‘mapping Yoknapatawpha’ enterprise as an urgent (no less comedic), rebuttal of the pathologization of the already-mythic southern past. ‘As if,’ Faulkner seems to say, the fractured and fraudulent operations of the Confederate States of America could have given expression to, or legally codified, in the manner of an accepted nation-state, the imperial notion of a normative, fated correlation between history and geography.
acts of telling and listening, manifests across their respective canons in the acute falsity of domestic relations: women, turned into ladies, become ghosts, who have to keep on saying what cannot—or will not—be heard.

Their protagonists deconstruct the politicized denigration of nineteenth century plantation literature, masculinist critiques of which associated ideologically-regressive ‘melodrama,’ implied to be of merely regional or atomized Protestant concern, with female authors and a feminized readership. Bowen and Faulkner tacitly reject facile equations of big house and plantation literary value predicated on ‘sentimental’ character pathology or biographically-deluded reading publics. Each of the texts discussed in this chapter fashions a protagonist who resists any hermeneutic of self-development: as Lois remarks at one of many points of stasis in *The Last September*, this one reflecting the failure of the novel’s marriage plot: “So that was being kissed: just an impact, with inside blankness. She was lonely and saw there was no future” (127). Many of the protagonists

---

60 Which is to say that big house and ‘Lost Cause’ novels (and a good deal of the Southern ‘social problem’ novels that succeeded them in the 1930s) were denied discursive integration into national traditions while also being tarred with the brush of contrived eccentricity by Southern Agrarians and Irish reformers of varying political stripes (including the editorial staff of *The Bell*) who generally considered any nostalgic vision of an aristocratic national past as a pernicious ideological ruse rather than a literary canon available for contemporary deployment. Shades of political difference were more pronounced among those who sought to limit national appraisal or circulation of Anglo-Irish literature after the Revolutionary period, but suffice to note here that the Irish-Ireland movement contained many in the fold. As Anthony Cronin observes: “It was part of *The Bell’s* implicit assumptions that the Ireland its readers lived in had not been described and that too much of Irish life had been seen through the haze of nostalgia for an invented past or idealism about a projected future. In the first editorial Sean O’Faolain wrote: ‘This is your magazine. Only the people can create an image of themselves.’” in: Kelly Matthews, *The Bell Magazine and the Representation of Irish Identity: Opening Windows* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), ix. In “A Southern Mode of the Imagination” (1959), Allen Tate reiterated the Agrarians’ sexist critique of Lost Cause authorship, arguing that the ‘flowering of modern literature’ in the South was accomplished by “a shift in the mind from melodramatic rhetoric to the dialectic of tragedy.” Female (or effete) class-coded authors lack the ‘historical sense’ to translate artistic materials into a metaphysical conception of man.
under analysis might in fact be classified as figures of prosopopoeia, to whom the author
ascribes an evacuated, absent, or (in the case of Quentin Compson or Emily Grierson in
“A Rose for Emily”) even deceased voice whose personification becomes an act
contingent on readerly reconstruction.\footnote{More generally, in having Jason Compson invoke the ghostly Miss Rosa as Quentin’s narrative
fount (and social obligation), Faulkner invites the reader to query the parameters of overtly-fabled female
protagonicity as creations of white patriarchy. Miss Rosa is an oracle whose voice conditions Quentin for
his self-abnegating role as a vessel of story. Quentin’s capacity to recall, and in voicing, give shape to
Rosa’s narration, ensures that his role in the novel parallels that of the spectral Thomas Sutpen: [Rosa’s
speech] would not cease, it would just vanish. [leaving] the Quentin Compson who was still too young to
deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the
deep South the same as she was—the two separate Quentins now talking to one another in the long silence
of notpeople in notlanguage, like this (4-5).}

Shadowed by social belatedness and a prevailing disaffiliation between narration
and the communication of knowledge, these protagonists dramatize the representation of
Anglo-Irish and cavalier Southern failure as itself a style. The ruminations of Lois
Farquar and the last Compson patriarchs of Yoknapatawpha County index nothing less
than the unfinished business of Anglo-American colonialism. \textit{The Last September} and
\textit{Absalom, Absalom!} stage the tensions inherent in what Barbara Ladd has called
architecture’s “melancholy of modernity” at the level of form and of content.\footnote{From Anse Bundren in \textit{As I Lay Dying} to Jason Compson, Jr. (\textit{The Sound and the Fury}), or
Thomas Sutpen in \textit{Absalom, Absalom!} Faulkner produces various grotesque iterations of the American
Romantic who view property ownership as an expression of “holding one’s own”—i.e. as the manifestation
of both masculine and divine social order. Or, as Ladd puts it, that “particular strain of U.S. popular thought
on moral, religious, and political virtue, in which virtue is a matter of self-sovereignty, of control over self
and property” (20). Ladd further conceptualizes “monumental history” as a category of persistent interest in
Faulkner’s novels, one often depicted by pathological arrest (as in Benjy’s totemic circling of the
Confederate soldier in \textit{TS&TF}, or perhaps Rosa Coldfield’s lifelong determination to destroy Sutpen’s
Hundred):“If the completion of the act of mourning is a matter of grasping and adjusting to loss on the most
intimate level, the conflation of monument and memorial may say more about the melancholy of modernity
than we have realized.” Barbara Ladd, \textit{Resisting History: Gender, Modernity, and Authorship in William
Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Eudora Welty} (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2007), p. 90.} Terms of
societal modernization and intimately-attendant alienation from tradition subend both narrative planes, in evidence from their respective opening paragraphs.63

The ancestral estates at the centers of these works become arenas in which, in the language of The Last September: “The unbelievable future became fixed as the past under the flutter and settling down of a flock of comments,” which to Lois, turning “in imagination back to the [big] house and steps” seemed, “in unconscious readiness, already uttered” (243). Saturated with the oppressions of race slavery and civil war, the plantation in Faulkner’s fiction, riddled with nothing less than “bullets in the dining room table” harbors “a very condensation of time which was the gauge of its own violence” (A, 63

63 Faulkner: “From a little after two oclock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that—a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler, and which (as the sun shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them” (1).

Bowen: “About six o’clock the sound of a motor, collected out of the wide country and narrowed under the trees of the avenue, brought the household out in excitement on to the steps. Up among the beeches, a thin iron gate twanged; the car slid out of a net of shadows down the slope to the house. Behind the flashing windscreen Mr. and Mrs. Montmorency produced—arms waving and a wild escape to the wind of her mauve motor veil—an agitation of greeting. They were long-promised visitors. They exclaimed, Sir Richard and Lady Naylor exclaimed and signalled: no one spoke yet. It was a moment of happiness, of perfection. In those days, girls wore crisp white skirts and transparent blouses clotted with white flowers; ribbons threaded through with a view to appearance, appeared over the shoulders” (1).

Each text pivots from a pressingly-announced hour of opening action (“from a little after two oclock”; or Bowen’s “About six o’clock”) toward an indistinct and decidedly manufactured rendering of the subjects inhabiting the scene: Bowen’s “brought the household out in excitement…the car slid out of a net of shadows…Mr. and Mrs. Montmorency produced…an agitation of greeting”: with Faulkner’s: the “long still hot weary dead September afternoon” which Miss Coldfield’s presence momentarily disrupts, before the language reverts to the distant and anonymous presences intruding on the novel’s founding moment: “because her father had called it that…fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed…” “In those days…” etc., All of which accumulating detail takes precedence over the discrete appearance of Quentin (or at least his reported thought), as it does in Bowen’s establishing description of the protagonist we will soon know as Lois (in her prescribed crisp white costume). The titles (Mr. and Mrs. Montmorency, Sir Richard and Lady Naylor; Miss Coldfield) establish first the requisite aloofness of the women, whose Christian names are withheld, and then the generational divide between, in a sense, those who have authored the cultural narratives and the generation who must now inhabit and decode them—a tension parodied perhaps in Lois’s several scenes of ‘conversation’ with her aunt; Lady Naylor is incapable of asking any question to which she has not already posited the desired response. (Emphasis added.)
A! 201, 289). From the microcosmic sterility of evacuated ‘family life’ in the big house at Danielstown, to the South’s passive, suppositiously-legible societal ‘we,’ a traumatic repetition of the loss of interregional colonial mores subtends Bowen’s and Faulkner’s treatments of manorial life after civil war. Each novel interrogates the plantation redux, self-consciously reproducing the relationship between race, ethnicity, gendered violence, and cultural disavowal that nineteenth-century big house and plantation fiction portrays as essential to an enlightened social contract.

Their protagonists’ sense of dislocation, in which ‘home’ and ‘tradition’ can never operate as stable constructions, dramatize that aestheticized memory is often spurred by the threat of impending social extinction. Thematizing the relentless ineffability of the past in its claims to “fix” the future, Bowen and Faulkner scrutinize the fictional armature of memory as any putative means of dissolving history’s psychology. Each relies on a dramatized pedagogical distance from character formation; the result is an aesthetics that contravenes one of the key preoccupations we associate with High Modernism: ‘interiority’ and the rendering of subjectivity as a privatized metaphysics is always secondary in their texts to interrogation of the social world. If ‘History,’ is, as Edouard Glissant asserts “a highly-functional fantasy of the West,” then in their depictions of the big house and its conceptual structures, Bowen and Faulkner defy what Glissant glosses as history’s ‘functionality’—a closed precondition of experience ripe for the Modernist author to ransack and to shed. 64

---

“Tombstones of a Departed Ascendancy”: Benevolence and Reform in a World at War

“Each of these family houses, with its stables and farm and gardens deep in trees at the end of long avenues, is an island—and, like an island, a world [...] Each of these houses, with its intense, centripetal life, is isolated by something very much more lasting than the physical fact of space: the isolation is innate; it is an affair of origin.” – Bowen’s Court

“If any cosmopolitanism worthy of the name must have an anchor in materialist (and especially colonial) history, how long or short must the anchor-line be? Too long, and historical trauma becomes the bedrock of aesthetic valuation; too short, and the past sins of colonialism may be forgotten for the price of a new market.”

The First World War altered emotional-familial and socioeconomic realities on Irish and Southern landed preserves dramatically. This overview establishes the primary perspectives apparent in public debate over the need to transform—or in many cases, efface—plantations and Ascendancy estates and the pre-War forms of life associated with their ownership. From the late 1920s, both the U.S. and Ireland contained significant populations of rural inhabitants attached—whether as entailed owners, or through

---

65 The phrase is Sean Moylan’s, uttered as Fianna Fail Minister for Lands in 1944. His speech before Dail Eireann demonstrated thorough hostility toward even the concept of big house restoration projects conducted under private or public auspices: “in general, the majority of these Big Houses that I know, and I am very familiar with them, are not structurally sound, have no artistic value and no historic interest. From my unregenerate point of view, I choose to regard them as tombstones of a departed aristocracy and the sooner they go down the better. They are no use.”

asymmetrical, underpaid wage labor—to once-profitable landed estates; we can perhaps
glimpse a proleptic moment of both mid-century European decolonization and the
American Civil Rights movement in the radically-shifting status of formerly-bonded
workers who entered into wage labor primarily through state initiatives during this
period. Comparatively anomalous conditions of rural poverty complemented the
alienating effects of selective and belated urban industrialism in Ireland and the South, on
a timeline suggestive to scholars of postcolonial theory.67 With migration shifts in each
country’s population toward urban centers, and the increasingly-transparent participation
of national governments in subsidizing agrarian development, it is little wonder that
aristocratic manors and literary theorizations of the shifting values of property inform

67 In Ireland, emigration, along with an overall population shift toward Dublin, produced socio-
economic asymmetry comparable to the Southern experience of few urban centers coupled with
interregional migration. Ireland witnessed an extreme case of population stagnation in Europe after WWI:
between 1910 and 1960, the total population of the country stalled at just under three million, even as
England, in absolute numbers, climbed from approximately 32 to nearly 50 million during the same period.
See: Timothy W. Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish: Households, Migration, and the Rural Economy in
Ireland, 1850-1914* (Princeton University Press, 1997). Guinnane’s first chapter surveys these long-term
effects on the Irish economy through the 1970s. Prior to the urban boom partially accomplished in the U.S.
by manufacturing for WWII, rural hardship hit the south generally, and the deep ‘cotton’ south particularly,
harder and lingered far longer than anywhere else in the country. Andrew Hoberek’s *The Twilight of the
Middle Class: Post-WWII American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (Princeton University Press, 2005)
includes an illuminating chapter on the ‘non-economic study of Southern difference’ in which he argues
that a revived interest in Southern Exceptionalism (c.f. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 1941, Owsley’s *Plain
Folk of the Old South*, 1949, and especially C. Van Woodward’s *The Burden of Southern History*, 1960,
different in emphasis though they are) helped explain the sociological sources of the southern literary
predilection for “individualist strongholds” (foremost, language and religiosity), by which to first resist
national culture. Ultimately Hoberek reads the prescriptive classification of the southern ‘grotesque’—his
focus is on Flannery O’Connor in the mid-Fifties and after—as a strategy by which writers might move
toward “transcending history” (104). Hoberek is keenly alert to the regressive implications of Woodward’s
sprawling narrative—published close on the heels of the sudden mid-century affluence of Atlanta,
Birmingham, and Houston; Woodward poses the South’s “long and quite un-American experience with
poverty,” as a “distinctive heritage” that left southerners outside “the hedonistic ethic of the American
Standard of Living.” Burden then harnesses this somewhat existential commentary to a normalization of
Lost Cause nostalgia and thus the reinforcement of certain facets of southern separatism—a thoroughly
national, continuing preoccupation.
much of what we now consider the ‘spatial turn’ of modernism in these decades bookended by global depression and a Second World War.

In the former ‘cotton south,’ as Daniel Johnson has observed, estate farming practices shifted permanently, when “for the “first time since Emancipation, war-generated industrial jobs outside the region presented generous alternatives to farm work—between 1910 and 1920, fully 10.4 percent (almost 200,000) of the black populations of Alabama and Mississippi left the region.” In these same years, former planters transitioned to state-subsidized merchant-landlords, as white sharecroppers came to significantly outnumber African-American ‘croppers’ for the first time since the Civil War. In broad terms then, the 1920s and 30s were decades of acute economic convulsion on increasingly-fragmented Southern estates, as planters dramatically shifted modes of agricultural production. Aided by New Deal subsidies, and pressured by workers’ increasing mobility, “capital-intensive” mechanized farming brought plantation agriculture “slowly, more or less into conformity with the rest of the nation.”

---

68 Daniel M. Johnson and Rex R Campbell, *Black Migration in America: A Social Demographic History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1981), pp. 72-76. For a survey of long term working-class mobility and regional exodus, see: Donald B. Dodd, *Historical Statistics of the South, 1790-1970* (University of Alabama Press, 1973). This account is supported by the Beardsian historian Gavin Wright, who argues that the antebellum planter class had been less "landlords" than "laborlords" in 1860, given that "the value of farmlands and buildings accounted for less than one-third" of agricultural wealth in Southern states while "the value of slaves" constituted sixty per cent of that wealth (18-19). Thus, in Wright’s assessment, Emancipation constituted an "economic revolution," effecting a "massive devaluation of planter assets, leaving only their land, whose value plummeted after the war" (20). See: Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986). There are some parallels here with the ‘cash-poor’ Ascendancy after the Wyndham Act (1903), which offered financial incentives to landlords for the partial-sale of their estates in the aftermath of the Land Wars.

69 There is as yet no definitive account of the state-by-state praxis of sharecropping, which existed in some isolated areas until mid-century. Still, in more prosperous and accessible regions of the South, the
hundred plantation homes that had survived in the generation following the Civil War were abandoned, demolished, or, in a significant minority of cases, salvaged and restored under private (or, more commonly, state) ownership.\(^{70}\)

In the wake of the War of Independence and a geographically-ragged civil war that wound down only in 1923, the estates of the Ascendancy likewise ceased at last to function as stable preserves of political or social elitism. While ‘country houses’ would not be included in any definition of ‘Irish Heritage’ as set out in the National Monuments Act of 1930, state-level disregard of the architectural or historical interest of these estates might well be written off as *ad hoc* collateral damage. As Terence Dooley has noted, the “most obvious manifestation of resentment” was the burning of at least “three hundred Big Houses from 1920 to 1923 in the territory of the present Republic of Ireland.”\(^{71}\) In

\(^{70}\) For a reactionary account of this transition, see: Marc Matrana, *Lost Plantations of the South* (University Press of Mississippi: 2009), especially the introduction, xi-xvi. Matrana claims that during the “height of antebellum agricultural production [1820s-1850] there were an estimated fifty thousand plantations in the slaveholding states of the South…these estates ranged from moderately-sized farms with as few as 20 or so slaves to massive properties that sprawled across tens of thousands of acres. Today only a fraction of these remain and most are significantly altered from their antebellum state” (xvi).

\(^{71}\) Terence Dooley, *The Decline of the Big House in Ireland* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2001), pp. 172-207. Dooley reproduces this rather amorphously-documentated statistic from the Troubles. The earliest authoritative statement I’ve encountered undergirding the ‘200 or more collective instances of arson’ claim appears in: Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1979* (London: Fontana, 1981). Brown states that “between 6 December 1921 and 22 March 1923 […] 192 Big Houses were burned by incendiaries as reported in the *Morning Post* of 9 April 1923. Although these attacks on the houses of the former ascendancy can be understood as part of a political and military strategy (many of the houses were burned by Republicans who considered probably rightly that their occupants were supporters of the Treaty party), to Anglo-Ireland itself this must have seemed a veritable *Jacquerie* and a painful demonstration of their isolated vulnerability in an Ireland which no longer appeared to accept them. The emotional state of
Lost Mansions: Essays on the Destruction of the Country House, James Raven records “over 300 Irish country houses lost during the twentieth century”; this number does not, he notes, include the “destruction of lesser manors or of town houses of the wealthy and the aristocracy. The destruction of great houses accelerated after the First World War, but the 1950s and 1960s were also decades of particular loss.”

Regardless of whether reportorial accounts are strictly accurate to circumstance, the public memorialization of overwhelming destruction by arson indicates (particularly in a nation the size of Ireland), why foundational criticism on big house novels foregrounds gothic tropes refracting the wages of cultural and military defeat for the Gentry. After struggling for nearly two decades to maintain the financial solvency of her family’s Cromwellian-era estate, Bowen, writing in 1950, described entailed ownership of Anglo-Irish estates as “something between a raison d’etre and a predicament,” an aphorism that captures the schizophrenic complex of prestige, passivity, and outworn noblesse enveloping a class widely perceived to have outlived its use.

Anglo-Ireland in the period was registered in a number of novels that appeared in the 1920s and early 1930s that employed the Big House as a metaphor which might allow the author to explore the socially disintegrated world of the Protestant ascendency” (86). Brown’s cited evidence is slightly amplified, and the subsequent critical line pursuing the ‘Big House as metaphor’ extended in: Vera Kreilkamp, The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House, Elizabeth Grubgeld’s Anglo-Irish Autobiography, and Robert Tobin’s Minority Voice, among other accounts. Elizabeth Bowen’s The House in Paris (1935) attempts to modulate this entrenched perception of partisan outrage, as her protagonist, Karen, on a tangential visit to family in Cork, comments on the relative recuperation of displaced landlords after the establishment of the Republic: “With the compensation for [the burnt-out estate] Montebello they had bought a small house at Rushbrook, overlooking the harbor of Queenstown, now called Cobh. But Rushbrook is full of Protestant gentry, living down misfortunes they once had. None of them, as a matter of fact, had done too badly, or they would not be here, for most of the big villas are miniature ‘places’ that need some keeping up. The nineteenth-century calm hanging over the colony makes the rest of Ireland a frantic or lonely dream” (74-75).

---


From the early 1940s, Bowen’s writing aggressively theorizes the international resonances of country house mores, even as Faulkner upends complacent parochial conceptions of Southern planter culture from a diametrical perspective.74 Southern Ascendancy authors would pursue the vectors of settler colonialism beyond their national boundaries throughout the twentieth century, claiming common cause with other imperial and regionally-isolated minorities. In the midst of WWII, Bowen established herself as the most prolific and persistent intellectual voice defending, contextualizing, and positing potentialities for the remaining Gentry. Many of the civic ideals Bowen sought to salvage from the political (and, finally, military) subjection of her class may indeed sound diffuse, if not in some instances specious, to contemporary scholars of decolonization. Still, the elective affinities she claimed between international plantation societies and the Anglo-Irish have, with varying degrees of rigor, long been viewed as the cornerstone of the “Protestant intellectual tradition” in Ireland.75 Her conviction that the big house and

74 As noted below, Bowen anticipates some late Twentieth Protestant defenses re: the international variations of Anglo-Irish “self-sufficiency” within “feudal country house” cultures in historical contexts as disparate as those found in “Poland, or pre-Revolutionary Russia,” and even “in the way of life that they stand for—the Deep South of the United States” (Elizabeth Bowen, “Ireland Makes Irish” [1946], in Eibhear Walshe, op cit. pp. 126-131, p. 127.)

75 See my Introduction, n. 43. Also, Chapter 3, re: the ICA and Hubert Butler. The Literary Revival, and what we might identify as the ‘Ascendancy structure of feeling’ that Yeats and Augusta Gregory were primarily responsible for injecting in its political formation has (along with decades of sectarian violence committed in the name of Protestant dissidence in the North) made extended analysis of the Anglo-Irish intellectual tradition a contentious enterprise. As Hubert Butler was to remark in “Portrait of a Minority” (1954): “We Protestants of the Irish Republic are no longer very interesting to anyone but ourselves. A generation ago we were regarded dramatically as imperialistic blood-suckers, or by our admirers, as the last champions of civilization in an abandoned island...Our brothers north of the border are still discussed in such colorful terms” (Butler, Escape from the Anthill, p. 114). What I’m referencing here as Bowen’s concern touches on, although it is more pragmatic than, the alternative history Yeats
the ways of life it dictated could model sociable, bipartisan political conduct, while also organizing Ireland’s “small-town and country life” for economic self-sufficiency, subtends Bowen’s essays on varying aspects of national life for over twenty years.76

Faulkner’s discursive prose pointedly debunks one of the recurring concerns of the Yoknapatawpha novels—dismantling neo-Confederate claims to any such European cavalier tradition as native heritage.77 Put in broad terms, while Bowen’s arguments propounded in his Senate address in 1925. There he cast his conception of Irishness within an arch-Anglo Ascendancy lineage encompassing “Burke, Swift, Emmett, Grattan, and Parnell,” asserting: “We are one of the great stocks of Europe…We have created the most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence.” See: W.B. Yeats, The Senate Speeches, ed. William Butler Pearce (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1960) p. 20. The Canadian historian Desmond Bowen (no known relation to EB) describes this habitus in rather more theological terms as: “an instinctual aversion toward civic disorder, an embrace of private judgement, a loyalty to tradition, and a capacity for synthesis and assimilation.” See: Desmond Bowen, History and the Shaping of Irish Protestantism (Peter Lang: 1995), p. 328. As with Bibler’s line on “Southern Exceptionalism”—although Ascendancy culture is certainly a thing, it doesn’t mean you have to believe in it.

76 Hubert Butler, above-noted historian and cousin to the Bowen family, elaborates Bowen’s positions on the agrarian co-operative movement—of particular interest to land rich and cash poor Protestants—as an antidote to what Bowen describes as “the dangerous side of the de Valera Government’s pro-industrial policy—the recent shift of the population from the country into the cities. The [Irish] race is group-minded: urbanism is always against the grain” (Bowen, “Ireland 1950,” p. 178). Butler, having lived through Ireland’s entry into the EEC as well as the worst of the Troubles, becomes increasingly reactionary, as in the essay “Divided Loyalties,” written from Kilkenny in 1984. Here he decries the “new and more suffocating ascendancy, that of international commerce,” lamenting that “many of those ruined houses would have been strongholds of resistance to it, and the Anglo-Irish, with their easy-going pragmatic Christianity, would certainly have tempered the religious and political passions of our northern countrymen” (102).

77 Consonant with Agrarian insistence on both Southern metaphorical exceptionalism and on the region’s contribution to American fiction after WW1, is Ransom’s argument in “The South—Old or New” (1927)—an early version of the “Reconstructed but Unregenerate” essay that opens I’ll Take My Stand—that manorial Southern republicanism had been built on “European principles” that ran counter to the rapacious pioneer spirit generally associated with the settlement of the United States. Ransom quoted in: Paul K. Conkin, The Southern Agrarians (University of Tennessee Press, 1988), p. 48. Faulkner, beginning with Sartoris/Flags in the Dust (1929) set about demythologizing the aristocratic planter patriarch, the model for which, in this first Yoknapatawpha novel, was Faulkner’s great-grandfather, William Clark Falkner, one-time colonel in the Confederate Army. Thomas Sutpen constitutes another such ravaging of cavalier hokum, as the illiterate hillbilly who wrests his fortune and its approximated trappings out of an opportune over-seer position slaving in the West Indies.
embrace historical constellations of hereditary privilege and the prerogatives of estate society, Faulkner’s contemporary political writing brushes the American experience of plantation against the romanticized Agrarian grain. The figure of Colonel Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* embodies the ruthless frontiersman who defies all such legendary dimensions of Southern chivalry, honor-bound communal ethics, and the duty of gracious living. Rather, Sutpen radiates crude arrogance and intolerant acquisitiveness, qualities that Faulkner later attributes to the “improvident Spaniards, Frenchmen, and Anglo-Saxons—brawling, turbulent, uxorious” who cleared the way for the “younger sons of Virginia and Carolina” to pose as the Deep South’s autocratic planters in the first place.  

Sutpen is fashioned from biographical fragments Faulkner collected on the nineteenth-century planter Robert Sheegog, who designed and financed the Greek Revival mansion that Faulkner would later purchase and inhabit as his family home. No less intriguing is the consideration that Sutpen’s character, drawn from a class to which Faulkner felt (and sometimes claimed) tendentious ties, later became a prototype in W.J.

---


79 Faulkner purchased this remarkable dwelling in April, 1930 for 6,000 dollars, bought from the owners on a deed of trust. The Sheegog plantation was completed in the early 1840s by Robert Sheegog from Tennessee, by way of Co. Down. At the time of his death in 1860, Sheegog owned over six thousand acres of land and nearly 90 slaves. By the time Faulkner purchased the property, it had been reduced to 29 acres just outside of Oxford, Mississippi. (Interestingly, Greek Revival residential architecture was so ubiquitous in the mid-19th century it became known as the “National Style,” and is undoubtedly one of America’s most distinctive forms of domestic architecture.) See: John Lawrence and Dan Hise, *Faulkner’s Rowan Oak* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), pp. 8-13. Faulkner named the estate after reading Frazer’s lengthy account of the talismanic function of these mythical trees as “protective countercharms” in chapter 68 of *The Golden Bough* —which may signal Faulkner’s desire to instate intellectual distance from, and thus elude “bewitchment” to, Lost Cause-ifying myths of the kind he would have demolish Quentin Compson. The plantation has, since the early 1970s, been maintained by the University of Mississippi as a tourism and heritage site: http://www.rowanoak.com/
Cash’s immensely-popular historical treatise *The Mind of the South* (1941).\(^{80}\) Rosa Coldfield explicitly reveals Sutpen as the archetypical cavalier, damning the deficient humanity of the Southern male aristocrats as the tragic flaw that brought about the rightful defeat of the culture they enforced:

> Oh he was brave. I have never gainsaid that. But that our cause, our very life and future hopes and past pride, should have been thrown into the balance with men like that to buttress it—men with valor and strength but without pity or honor. Is it any wonder that Heaven saw fit to let us lose? (*Absalom, Absalom!*, 13).\(^{81}\)

Diverging from Bowen in this important particular, Faulkner suggests across forms that the processes of class formation and attendant dominance, even or especially in incompletely-capitalist economies, should be understood as both historically structured and continuously overdetermined. In other words: Faulkner represents his thinking about plantation economics as an indirect process of expropriation, which in Bowen’s non-

---

\(^{80}\) Interested in Southern self-fashioning as a factor in the asymmetrical economic modernization of the region, Cash debunks the revivalist saw of a native ‘cavalier’ society to argue that, in the passing of a single antebellum generation, precisely the most ruthlessly self-interested frontiersmen (radiating outward in search of opportunity from the second-tier aristocrats along the Tidewater) emerged as the deep Southern planter class. Rosa Coldfield wryly disavows her own martyred theory of Southern oppression—and thus the putative rationale for rehearsing Lost Cause mythology—suggesting to Quentin that he, “like so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen too…enter the literary profession” and then sell the story to finance his future wife’s desire for “new gown or a new chair for the house,” by placing her story “in the magazines” (5).

\(^{81}\) Emphasizing that Sutpen is to be taken as a target of sociological criticism, the ‘Chronology’ appended to *Absalom, Absalom!* in several instances outlandishly contradicts the dates and facts of his suppositious biography, while the ‘thumbnail’ sketches Faulkner offers of the principle characters revel in the arbitrariness of the genre, oscillating between terse vital statistics and mischievous judgement, in no way proportionate to any character’s essential function in the novel. The entry for ‘Wash Jones’ (who in an act of vengeance, ignominiously murders Sutpen) effectively subjugates all reference to Wash’s own being to that of the egomaniacal Colonel (as though Sutpen, and not the omniscient implied author, had proleptically crafted the portrait): “Wash Jones: Date and location of birth unknown. Squatter, residing in an abandoned fishing camp belonging to Thomas Sutpen, hanger-on of Sutpen, handyman about Sutpen’s place while Sutpen was away between ’61-’65. Died, Sutpen’s Hundred, 1869” (308).
fiction appears as a mostly-visible identity site. Jason Compson’s mythologizing formulation—the imperatives of the War “making our ladies into ghosts”—figures the catastrophe of Civil War as the logical culmination of genteel masculine social programming (a ‘culmination’ in that “Years before we made our women into ladies.”) Rosa Coldfield, a dutiful collector of “thousands of odes to Southern soldiers” for decades following the War, asserts that Quentin is destined for exile “since Northern people have already seen to it that there is little left in the South for a young man” (65, 5).

In fact, Faulkner indicates that the static economic and social contexts against which Quentin is impelled to fail at self-definition are distinctly homegrown, referring, with limited omniscience, to the Civil War as “the fever which had cured the disease” (7).

While Bowen seeks to reanimate certain social formations associated with the Ascendancy class to guide political prerogatives in the Free State, Faulkner, born into the generation that followed Civil War, considers himself impelled by the consequences of “living in a land wrecked and ruined”; a region, furthermore, given national expression in the rhetorical formulae of racists and reactionaries. His writing is accordingly directed by an awareness of identity formation as less visible and theoretically more transient than Anglo-Irish circumstances allowed. (And it is worth recalling, when confronted with

---


83 In “On Fear: Deep South in Labor” (1956), Faulkner, writing in defense of gradual desegregation for Southern school systems, displays many of the paradoxes that make moving between his ‘non-fiction’ and the Yoknapatawpha novels so suggestive. (The essay begins as a defense of the white moderate position on *Brown v. Board*, which he describes as caught between Northern ‘radicals’ and Southern reactionaries, before plunging into an anticommunist diatribe.) Faulkner refers to the South as
Bowen’s desire to occupy a more fully historicized class position, that appraisals of literary merit based, in the last instance, on an author’s constituted biography—and the text as a correlative reflection or representation of the writer’s ‘own experience’—damage the reputations of female authors far more substantively than their male counterparts.)

Bowen’s Court is a central text establishing how the author maps a retrospective aesthetics of the family plantation onto a narrative of societal eclipse for the Ascendancy class. In this text, Bowen critiques the historical slippage of her own subculture within a

enduring “the evil times following the Civil War when our land was a defeated and occupied country” (while giving a relatively uncritical account of secession as the valid prerogatives of States’ Rights doctrine) to the no doubt surprising ends of revealing the racist fears of white southerners to be rooted in disavowed economic fear—asserting “the white man knows and dares not admit to himself [that system] is based on an obsolescence—the artificial inequality of man—and so is itself already obsolete and hence doomed.” Faulkner then undermines Agrarian and Dixiecratic (“reactionary”) ideology, particularly as it was used after WWII to militate for Southern Exceptionalism: “Now the Constitution guarantees the Negro equal right to equality, and the states’ rights which the Mississippi voices are talking about do not exist anymore. We—Mississippi—sold our states’ rights back to the Federal Government when we accepted the first cotton price-support subsidy twenty years ago. Our economy is not agricultural any longer. Our economy is the Federal Government…We farm now in Washington corridors and Congressional committee rooms” (in: Essays, Speeches & Public Letters, pp. 92-106, p. 98.)

84 In an essay for The Saturday Review (1929), for example, L.P. Hartley argues that Bowen, through lack of expertise, frustrates a reader’s need to comprehend the entirety of a character’s identity: “[Bowen’s characters] lack purpose, or the majority do: one cannot see their drift, one cannot tell what they want. They have gestures and self-manifestations, tricks and traits of character, but in the absence of a continuous, dominating, recognizable intention, these intimations of identity are like the moss that will not stay on the rolling stone…one should close a novel with the sense that something has been demonstrated, and I do not think one feels it here” (184-185). Hartley, in common with many early reviewers, cast Bowen’s formal and thematic restraint as tricksy, revealing a lack of mature authorial skill. Under such critical auspices, the novel’s failure to “demonstrate” became evidence of Bowen’s youth and inexperience, rather than her intentional aesthetic exploration of a cultural moment. Similarly, Bowen’s representation of Lois’s queer subjectivity (she “would have loved to love [Gerald],” and momentarily convinces herself she feels a romantic infatuation with the lamentable Hugo, but experiences true affection only for Marda), results in a complex negotiation of desire and identity formation through the very forces of escape, violence, and restraint that early reviews saw mainly as a failure of execution (TLS, 71; L.P. Hartley, “New Fiction” in: The Saturday Review (Feb 9, 1929), pp. 184-85. [ProQuest, British Periodicals Online].

53
modernizing state. As in her essay “The Big House” (published in The Bell two years before), Bowen assumes an inclusive idiom and a sweeping purview to the ends of first asserting the Ascendancy’s continued relevance in the Irish Free State, while sketching a more passive (and politically palatable) future in which her caste might “justify their existences in changed conditions.”\textsuperscript{85} (As we shall see, in “Ireland 1950” Bowen neutralizes the perception of a waning “Descendency” by claiming that the culture of well-to-do Protestantism remained “stable and compact” with its “religious and class irritants” simply removed by “British withdrawal.”\textsuperscript{86} It is during the war years that she appears most interested in elucidating pragmatic social challenges to Anglo-Irish posterity.)

Reflecting on the passed interwar decade, Bowen casts an alternately nostalgic-conservative and responsively wry gaze on the material and symbolic resonances of the demesne as it contoured circumstances of Irish national development. Each chapter is titled after a Bowen patriarch (and not to the ends of clarity—as a staggering majority are named either Henry or John), while nearly four hundred years of colonial history are seen

\textsuperscript{85} Elizabeth Bowen, “The Big House” in The Bell (Vol. 1, No. 1: October, 1940), p. 71-77. In this article, the author sketches some of the major themes of Bowen’s Court, which she began in early summer of 1939 (completing two chapters before the outbreak of WWII). These sections including this meditative conclusion of “The Big House,” which Bowen extended in the introduction of the following work: “It is, I think, to the credit of big house people that they concealed their struggles with such nonchalance and for so long continued to throw about what did not really amount to much weight. It is to their credit that, with the grass almost up to their doors and hardly a sixpence to turn over, they continued to be resented by the rest of Ireland as the heartless rich. Now this myth has broken down: I think everyone knows that life is not all jam in the big house. [Still] life…is saturated with character: the indefinite ghosts of the past, the dead who lived here and pursued this same routine of life in these walls add something, a sort of order, a reason for living, to every minute and hour. This is the order, the form of life, the tradition to which big house people still sacrifice much” p.74-75.

as consonant with the arrival and establishment of the Bowen family and those Ascendancy families who shared its social orbit. As Thomas McCarthy observes in his Preface: “Irish history is a room that becomes animated when Elizabeth makes her stylish entrance…. the gentry and Southern Irish Anglicans in general, were born for remembrance”(x, xi).

Bowen’s Court appears, in some lights, as the dialectical history of a class; it is also a repository of the last century’s family diaries and letters, and an erstwhile rumination on the influence of landscape and climate on ‘national temperament’ and custom. Often the author seeks to insulate the Ascendancy from contemporary nationalist critique by suggesting the self-perpetuating, and exilic nature of hereditary privilege (even or especially when such affluence has gone to seed). As she formulates this proposition in the introduction: “A Bowen, in the first place, made Bowen’s Court. Since then, with a rather alarming sureness, Bowen’s Court has made all the succeeding Bowens” (32). Throughout, Bowen interprets political and social complexities as though addressing the reader of an historical novel:

My family, although notably ‘unhistoric,’ had their part in a drama outside themselves. Their assertions, their compliances, their refusals as men and women went, year by year, generation by generation, to give history direction. Each of the family, in their different manners […] were more than time’s products; they were its agents. (452)

Bowen deploys an autobiographical mode under the aegis of patrilineal history and further suggests that the annals of her class constitute a microcosm of the history of an
imperial culture. Bowen’s memorial to her familial and class significance in this later work is an extension of the fractured social consciousness that the 1952 preface to *The Last September* captures incisively in terms of “ambiguity and near heartbreak.” In *The Last September*, Bowen describes the psychological turmoil of a people torn between “inherited loyalty to England—where their sons went to school, in whose wars their sons were killed, and to whom they owed in the first place their lands and power [which] pulled them one way; their own latent blood-and-bone ‘Irishness’ the other” \( (ix-x) \). She broaches the philosophical underpinnings of this hyphenated identity largely in terms of interiors and landscape, perhaps in an attempt to mitigate the specifics of a long colonial past that would otherwise be focalized through a less tractable socio-political dynamic:

> The not long past of these houses has been very intense: no Irish people—Irish or Anglo-Irish—live a day unconsciously. Lives in these houses, for generations, have been lived at high pitch, only muted down by the weather, in psychological closeness to one another and under the strong rule of the family myth \( (19) \).

In these lines, we may hear echoes of a long Protestant plaint of supernatural, or at least atavistic, prescience supposedly binding together the Irish and Anglo-Irish rural

---

\(^{87}\) The early 1940s were productive years, even allowing for Bowen’s disciplined standards of industry. The Cameron-Bowen residence was damaged three times by bombing before 1944—the writer carried out volunteer duties as a columnist for the British Ministry of Information, an activity which, along with the considerable time she spent living in England, subsequently colored much national debate about her claims to belong to or represent Irish society from any embedded perspective. Her reportorial work was punctuated by frequent removal between London and Ireland. In the spring of 1942, Bowen’s memoir *Seven Winters: Memories of a Dublin Childhood* appeared, followed by *English Novelists*, a volume commissioned by the British Council, and then, one month later, *Bowen’s Court*, which, as discussed, surveys the shaping force of her family in Co. Cork, the spur and metafictional stage for so much of Bowen’s early writing. Even an aphoristic account of Bowen’s output during these years suggests the extent to which the problem of an increasingly-global literary marketplace was marked by a disjunction with what we might call the apparently rural and provincial reterritorialization of many a modernists’ subcultural domain.
populations under pressures of colonial experience. In *Bowen’s Court*, the writer is at some pains to narrate the sources, or at least the lingering effects of, alienation that divide her from the “inherent emptiness” of the Irish countryside.

In the “Afterword” to *Bowen’s Court*, written from Oxford in 1963, Bowen, in spite of what she calls the “savage and austere” cruelties of WWII, the Declaration of the Irish Republic (following the controversies of Irish war-time neutrality), and even the demolition of her inherited estate itself, tenaciously asserts objective futurity for the “fairly ordinary” Anglo-Irish gentry:

[who] as a class, may or may not prove able to make adaptations; that is one of the many things we must wait to see. To my mind, they are tougher than they appear. To live as though living gave them no trouble has been the first imperative of their make-up: to do this has taken a virtuosity into which courage enters more than has been allowed (456).

Bowen’s philosophical resolutions to the problem of sectarian isolation written in the decade between the first and second editions of *Bowen’s Court* arguably appear in the long-unpublished “Ireland 1950.” We might interpret her ruminations there as at best, inspired by misplaced affection, or at worst, patronizing and chillingly-elitist. This essay effaces the rural laboring classes from the equation of provincial life, describing the

88 An iconic formulation of which appears in J.M. Synge’s essay “Oppression of the Hills” (1905). Surveying the primitive living conditions that catalyze psychological traumas common among the country-people in Wicklow, Synge performs a slight-of-hand analogous to Bowen’s lives “lived at high pitch, muted only by the weather.” Synge oscillates slightly from the binding ties of ‘family myth’ toward a demotic “peculiarity of the climate,” which, he argues, with its “alternating torrents of rain and radiant sunrises,” keeps up some habitual “tension of the mind.” Such forces have determining effects on “a population that is already lonely and dwindling, which has caused or increased a tendency to nervous depression among the people, and every degree of sadness…common among these hills.” (qtd in: *Handbook of the Irish Revival: An Anthology of Irish Cultural and Political Writings, 1891-1922*, Declan Kiberd and P.J. Mathews, eds. (Dublin: Abbey Theatre Press, 2015), p. 211.)
“thousands of Irish who [never] go further than their local country town[s]” as “not only small and scattered,” but, in the manner of history’s expendables “sift[ing] away into creeks and pockets, leaving great tracks of emptiness.” Bowen goes on to assert that while:

[T]he visitor may see Ireland as a peasant country with a kindly, somewhat primitive bourgeois overlay, in fact [Ireland] is at present a bourgeois country in search of a missing aristocracy. Passion for grandeur, written in stone or brick, can but effect the mentality. The ‘fall of the big house’ is a popular myth in romantic Irish writing: that it is, all the same, a myth should be stressed. Many mansions were burned during the fighting, but those not ruined are now inhabited…the way of life they preserve is a factor in the complexity of Ireland (177, emphasis in text).

It may well be that Bowen’s display of ambivalence regarding the Irish “passion for grandeur”—whether such conflict was presented in terms of inherited loyalty or the haunting architectural symbols of a “missing aristocracy”—derives in the last instance from what Declan Kiberd has called Bowen’s “outraged conviction that only the Anglo-Irish had, in the twentieth century, the courage still to live the myth of a traditional England.” 89 Such pressing attachment to a national mythography appears as an index of environmental determinism in Bowen’s narratives—a force exposed in the fiction as a very real condition of existence.

The Last September conflates, at the very level of syntax, the intimate paramilitary killings carried out in the countryside of Cork with the “death—the execution rather—of the three houses” belonging to the dissipated Gentry. In Bowen’s

---

textual economy, the ‘native’ Irish inhabitants of the “wide light lovely unloving
country” are apparitional and often stereotyped, yet they catalyze, in scenes spanning the
entirety of *The Last September*, the isolation and impending disarticulation of the Anglo-
Irish as a colonial class, bringing about in the final pages what the reader may plausibly
register as a providential act of history:

> It seemed, looking from east to west at the sky tall with scarlet, that the
country itself was burning; …the roads in unnatural dusk ran dark with
movement, secretive or terrified; …not a cabin pressed in despair to the
bosom of night, not a gate too starkly visible but had its place in the design
of order and panic (303).

The “design of order and panic” suggests a conception of the big house and its colonialist
significations as a sociological formalism in Bowen’s fiction. More than a referential or
historical symbol of modernity done poorly, the demesne, and the historical surplus of its
relations both willed and coerced, stands as an evasive, fugitive means of denoting a
representational problem.

Critical disquietude with Bowen’s modernist credentialing is evident in much
recent scholarship. Bowen’s fiction was generally allotted only minor attention in
accounts of Irish literature before the 1990s, and as her significance became more widely
acknowledged, critical consensus soon fractured around the issue of her status as a
modernist per se. As Keri Walsh notes: “Where [Bowen’s] prose subverts expectations of
realist fiction, she is more often described simply as an eccentric writer, rather than one
Maud Ellmann suggests in her psychoanalytically-focused account *The Shadow Across the Page* (2003), that Bowen’s stylistic innovations deserve reconsideration in the largely masculine story of ‘high modernism’...characterized by an arresting oddness, marked by reflexivity and material intrusiveness [Bowen’s writing] hovers on the borderline between classic realism and modernist experimentalism (x).  

Nels Pearson demonstrates another familiar trajectory: Bowen-the-cosmopolitan. Here, Bowen’s aesthetic appears softly-informed by colonialism, yet somehow kept separate in his analysis from “many” modernist epistemologies by dint of the author’s consistent application of “restlessness at the level of the personal”:

Indeed few things are more characteristic of Bowen than mobile characters, transient lives, and the exaggerated distances and proximities of war-time played out at the level of the personal. But, unlike many modernists, she does not treat this restlessness as part of a historically new, ontologically revelatory mode of thought and experience. Especially for her female protagonists, displacement is the norm of the present, but it has also been the mode of the past.

---


91 The first theoretically-motivated study of Bowen’s canon, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (1995) suggests some of the motivating insights of Ellmann’s work, and claims broadly that “Attempting to bring out the strangeness of [Bowen’s] suspense—the anticipation and hesitation, the enigmatic notion of reading people—we focus on the novels of Elizabeth Bowen precisely because of their apparent conventionality and stability: they supposedly represent a tradition of the realist novel untouched by the vagaries of modernist or postmodernist experimentalism” (xiv). They eschew ‘author-life’ criticism as a form of subordination, but I agree with many of their primary arguments assessing the undervalued nature of Bowen’s canon.

Bypassing what Pearson describes as a preference for, or reliance on, dislocation as any “ontologically revelatory mode” of being, Bowen implicitly denies the validity of her characters’ “desires to step outside their enabling systems and survey them as from without.”

This structural sensibility is what Bowen and Faulkner’s texts share transgenerically: an aftereffect of the plantation economy that continues to attest to exploitation and geographically-instantiated fantasies of minority exceptionalism. Both share a preoccupation with challenging genealogy as a formal mechanism structuring national development and each writer locates in their inherited alienation a new meaning for southern and Anglo-Irish ‘tradition.’ “A Rose for Emily” and “Her Table Spread” investigate the forces of environmental determinism on female protagonists who, as mentally limited or unbalanced characters, embody strains of naturalistic bias. Both Emily Grierson and Valeria Cuffe, however, have repurposed socially-scripted femininity to their own ends, and thus avoid the fates assigned to Bowen and Faulkner’s more intellectually-talented protagonists.

93 Quoted from personal communication with Declan Kiberd (6 March, 2017). In The Last September the character who insists on his ability to act on an objective ‘God’s eye’ principle regarding political history is the hapless Gerald Lesworth, who “a little vulgar, a little English,” “liked things square and facty.” On the absurdity of transcendence as a narrative project, see also the closing of Absalom, Absalom! (Conducted rather in the manner of a catechism between Shreve and Quentin, the protagonist’s closing lines are a desperate denial of any desire to escape the South that has long since decided his ending.)
In Faulkner’s narratologically deceptive, chorally-inflected narrative, the titular Emily Grierson is described as a “tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town.” Emily, thwarted in romance, yet indomitable in her performance of lady-like respectability, inhabits a Lost Cause folly—the ornate architecture of her family home evokes planter culture adapted in the decade following the Civil War to an emergent village society. Miss Grierson’s home, an object of fascination for the townspeople, symbolizes the recidivist tendencies of Southern folk memory, magnetizing in its “stubborn and coquettish decay”:

Her big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, [was] set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores. And now Miss Emily had gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson.

In so layering Miss Emily’s connotations to the town and its social pieties, the narrator clues the reader into her status as a necessary component in the realm of Confederate myth-making: Emily is, ultimately, to be (over)interpreted as one more “representative of [the] august names” in Jefferson’s history. This set of symbols is revealed to be already twice removed: from demarcating the elite living quarters of those who had survived the War (or, more pointedly, profited during Southern Reconstruction in the “heavily-

94 The narrator uses the first person plural more than 40 times in an 11 page story, signaling a subtle complicity between narrator, townspeople, and the heroine in styling Miss Emily as a symbol of Southern womanhood, as discussed below.
lightsome” Seventies), the dead are again abstracted into a litany of ‘august’ names, existing independently of the “ranked and anonymous graves” that testify to the town’s actual, and, it is implied, generally unremarkable, military past.

The title, bespeaking a token of affection pledged to the heroine, further suggests that we read the narrator’s account of her life and crimes as motivated by a collective desire to tailor Emily’s story to the narrative needs of Jefferson, microcosm of the Deep South. She, like the house she inherits, represents a landmark, embodying a South supposedly resistant to the “next generation with its more modern ideas.” Similarly, the townspeople initially approve of Emily’s refashioning of her Yankee love interest, Homer Barron, who arrives as a supposed harbinger of progress—a foreman of a street-paving project, dispatched by the Federal government to ameliorate the economic stagnancy of the region after the War. As Emily and Homer’s relationship becomes public knowledge, she sets about explicitly transforming him from the day-laborer who “with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth, reins and whip in a yellow glove,” drove them scandalously about the streets of Jefferson. Soon enough, the narrator recalls: “We learned that Miss Emily had been to the jeweler's and ordered a man's toilet set in silver, with the letters H. B. on each piece. Two days later we learned that she had bought a complete outfit of men's clothing, including a nightshirt, and we said, ‘they are married.’ We were really glad.”

The town’s assumptions prove premature, and when Homer simply disappears through the kitchen door of her mansion—the “last we saw of [him] and of Miss Emily for some time”—the narrator drops further signals of the townspeople’s complicity in willfully curating the heroine’s ‘statuesque’ standing in Jefferson, despite (or because of)
her legible criminality. When the druggist questions Miss Emily’s stated desire for “the best poison [he] has”: “Miss Emily looked back at him, erect, her face like a strained flag… her head tilted back in order to look him eye for eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic and wrapped it up. The Negro delivery boy brought her the package; the druggist didn't come back.” Emily, at first positioned by the narrator as a poignant synecdoche of traditional Southern femininity (a discourse that presumes to dictate her relevance even, or particularly, after her death), instead reveals the “strain” that tradition endures in the hands of the knowing subject.

Emily emerges from Faulkner’s story as an index of the constructed nature of cavalier idealism, creating a quite literal space of her own (“one room in that region above stairs”) within which to subvert the (now destabilized) demands of the society that would command a performance of socio-sexual conformity at any cost. As with Bowen’s Valeria Cuffe, Emily retains the world of the outmoded big house as her parish, registering and refusing the not-ever-past consequences of plantocratic control.

The Ascendancy mansion of which Bowen’s Valeria Cuffe is sole inheritor manifests the anachronism of noblesse oblige in both its Gothic testament to conquest (the Castle is hypostasized throughout the text), and in conflating the architecturally-meandering estate with the ‘abnormal’ psychological ramifications inscribed on the protagonist by an isolated and romanticized childhood:

[T]he Castle was built on high ground, commanding the estuary… the winding wooded line of the further shore could be seen, and nearer the windows, a smothered island with the stump of a watch-tower. Miss Cuffe was an heiress to whom the Castle belonged and whose guests they all were. But she carefully followed the movements of her aunt, Mrs. Treye;
her ox-eyes moved from face to face in happy submission rather than expectancy. She was continually preoccupied by attempts at gravity, as though holding her skirts down in a high wind. Mrs. Treye and Miss Carbin combined to cover her excitement (311, emphasis added).

While Valeria is initially viewed by both the family retinue and her pompous (and sexist) suitor, Mr. Alban as “abnormal” and “detained in childhood,” Bowen’s narrator gradually reveals Valeria’s studied behavior—which ranges between impetuosity and “happy submission”—as in fact strategically undermining of her stifling, class-bound existence. What does not please her, Valeria simply, and ruthlessly, denies imaginative existence—even when such forces take the form of a coercive courtship with the underwhelming visitor from London. The opening sentence ironizes Alban’s presumptions outside the frame of the diegesis, as he “had few options on the subject of marriage; [though] his attitude to women was negative [and] in particular he was not attracted to Miss Cuffè.”

As with the older generation comprising Valeria’s family, Alban is continually trapped between realizing the pressurized “now” as a function of the past, and fulfilling the dictates of an internalized, class-coded anachronism.

Bowen’s heroine demonstrates how the repressive values of "private" life, ostensibly confined within the colonial mansion that overlooks the “smothered island” below, actually mirror and enable the wars of "public" history (the most pressing symbol of which is docked in the form of an imperial destroyer in the estuary at the Castle’s slope.) That Valeria’s mad-cap behavior is, first, calibrated, and ultimately subversive of the Gentry’s social prerogatives, becomes evident near the story’s conclusion in the form of the (hitherto neglected) space of the Castle’s “life room.” Searching for the absconded heiress, Alban “blunder[s] among the apples and amphoras of an art school”—one of the
family’s many unsuccessful gambits designed to inculcate feminine charms in the young hostess—and in the middle of this abject enclosure, the form of “[ideal] woman revolved gravely.”

“Her Table Spread” concisely literalizes the spatial haunting of colonial history that Bowen’s novels convey as a structuring reality. While even the “realism” of The Last September depends on significant lapses of certainty—not least in readerly constructions of character—in the space of the short story, Bowen’s apparitions of the Gentry past can and do self-style to achieve a disruptive affect. In such narrative refusals of conventional aristocratic performance, Bowen’s fiction alienates the reader precisely by prolonging our attention to the plantation’s ongoing figural and material realities.
“KEEPING YOUR KINFOLKS AND YOUR TRAGEDIES STRAIGHT”: EUDORA WELTY’S PLANTATION ETHNOGRAPHY

“Increasingly Miss Welty has turned away from the lower-middle-class milieu of [her earlier stories] to that part of the Southern scene which is most available to myth and celebrative legend and, in general, to the narcissistic Southern fantasy.”

– Diana Trilling 95

“Nothing is so naturally subject to false interpretation as the romantic, and in furnishing that interpretation the Old South can beat all the rest. Yet some romantic things happen also to be true.”

– Eudora Welty 96

“I should like to think that Delta Wedding may, in time, come to be recognized as a classic.”

– Elizabeth Bowen 97

Aunt Mac Laws is Delta Wedding’s Civil War-widowed dowager, the head of a novelistic retinue of aunts so teeming and various as to pull Jane Austen up short. Alluded to in the phrase which titles this chapter, Mac Laws is, in a pivotal encounter in the text, revealed to the children of the Fairchilds plantation to be the self-same ‘Aunt Maureen’ of the old folks’ Confederate war stories whose feats of stoic heroism they’ve

memorized from childhood. Their “delicate and always dainty” maiden aunt, Primrose, who lives in “The Grove” among an archive of Fairchilds heirlooms, journals, and family portraits, is positively scandalized to discover the younger generations have no working knowledge of Aunt Mac’s double life—as background spinster in the planter’s household, about whose biography the children have never wondered—and the fabled, eccentric matriarch whose importance to the family’s survival they’ve consigned to history and so taken for granted. In their disinterested failure to “keep their kinfolks and their tragedies straight,” they have, in short, rendered Maureen a walking anachronism.

Dressed each day in full mourning attire for her husband Duncan Laws, killed in the Battle of Corinth sixty years earlier, Aunt Mac is a fierce, bright, taciturn creature the Fairchild children see as “little with age, but not dead at all” (15, 86). As it happens, Aunt Mac is sufficiently spry to “whistle…some vaguely militant or Presbyterian air that sounded archaic and perverse” as she takes regular inventory of the pantry. She also, quite literally, launders the plantation’s payroll. From a generation well able to recall the volatility of Confederate currency, Aunt Mac acts as self-appointed inspector of all bills retrieved from the bank in Fairchilds, washing and ironing anything but brand new...
money before salaries are distributed among the Shellmound Plantation inhabitants (86, 126).

As is true of many of Delta Wedding’s female characters, Mac Laws harbors secret knowledge of family and local history, but she is distinguished for her acerbic wit, which often manifests in rancorous monologues against her ostensibly-senile sister, Shannon. The source of this animosity is Aunt Shannon’s claim that she communes daily with the dead soldier brothers and husbands of the Fairchilds clan. Shannon’s displays of overly-familiar “access” to their deceased menfolk have “left an ineradicable coolness” between the women, a narrative insight which opens onto a meditation concerning the nature of time in patterning historical blame and its corresponding affect. Since “far back in Civil War days [this schism] seemed to have sprung from a jealousy between the sisters over which one agonized the more or the more abandonedly, over the fighting brothers and husbands. With every man killed in the end, the jealousy did not seem

---

99 It is one of Delta Wedding’s quiet affiliations with Irish and British novelistic tradition (i.e. the Brontes’ collective narrative recurrence to the paranormal) that Shannon’s belief in and practice of occult psychology is simply fact in the family, who never belittle her ‘communications.’ (On a related note: even Battle, the family’s gruff and self-indulgent patriarch, assumes it is natural for Shannon and Aunt Mac to, with their post-traumatic neuroses “throw open the cupboards every day to see how nearly starving they all were,” meditating that for their generation “if it isn’t the Reconstruction, it’s things just as full of trouble to [them]” (86, 314). While Adorno scathingly dismisses the occult as “metaphysics for dunces” in Minima Moralía (an opinion to which some of the novel’s reviewers seemed to incline), widespread interest in staging dialogue with the dead during the early Twentieth century is a historical phenomenon. It is, in Delta Wedding, as though spiritualism rushed into the void left by the discrediting of Christianity as a metaphysical system; Dabney ruminates that (Uncle) George is separate from them because he had shown her “that there was another way to be—something he knew all along, that when you felt, touched, heard, looked at things in the world, and found their fragrances, they themselves made a sort of house within you, which filled with all life to hold them, filled with knowledge all by itself, and all else, the other ways to know, seemed calculation and tyranny” (42). The occult may have been especially popular with women as a consequence of the enormous casualties of WWI—the novel conlates the deaths of Uncle Denis (who soldiered in the Mexican Revolution before being killed in Argonne) with the Fairchilds’ Revolutionary and Civil War casualties in Shannon’s meditations.
canceled by death, but extended by it; memory of fear and the keeping up of loyalties had its rivalries too” (155).

The paradox of protagonicity that Mac Laws embodies for Eudora Welty is that of crafting narrative between two national histories, of confronting the fractured heritage of an undead South replicated in, but not reducible to, the level of the family saga.

Publishing a novel many read as a simple, or at best winsome, plantation ‘romance’ in 1946, Welty’s fiction seems to anticipate the critical misdirection and generic foreclosures that her first novel *Delta Wedding* did in fact incur. *Delta Wedding*, I will argue, openly courts the risk of ‘false interpretation’ Welty would later attribute to the profoundly-national romance around the Old South even as the novel continually collapses frames of reference between masculine claims to historicity and the foreground of matriarchal gate-keeping, as between centuries and wars, whether civil, international, or the fruits of domestic imperialism. In what follows, I reconstruct scholarly and popular reception of *Delta Wedding*, to, in part, articulate how the novel constitutes a largely-unrecognized intervention in the lineage of the Southern plantation school. I then speak to how *Delta Wedding* negotiates Welty’s implied reader identities, a consideration I see bespeaking an aesthetic rupture in mid-century American literary criticism.

In an approach derived from primary readings in anti-colonialist literature, Rebecca Smith Wild contended in 1965 that Elizabeth Bowen and Eudora Welty shared the uncertain distinction of emerging from “tradition-laden cultures disparaged in the aftermath of unsuccessful civil revolt... [a link] in their careers during the changing aesthetic climate which followed the First World War.” For Bowen as for Welty, this
“changing aesthetic climate,” by the era of WWII, manifested in a renewed interest in realism, specifically as each writer experimented with recursive techniques for representing society apprehended, once again, as whole.\(^{100}\) I argue that, following two collections of short stories and the fairytale novella, *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), Welty turned to the domain of the plantation as a means of interrogating the resources of the realist tradition for post-war American fiction.\(^{101}\) Throughout her monograph, Wild attends to the doubled-consciousness Bowen and Welty cultivated as a corollary to the fractured societies they inhabited and often took as their diachronic subjects.

Although her study avows no driving theoretical armature, Wild’s readings of Bowen and Welty’s shared strategies of authorship display a fascination with what the critic terms “their ultimate writerly aim of distinguishing between poetic perception and its lyrical expression” (1, 29).\(^{102}\) Wild’s “Studies in the Shorter Fiction,” is therefore

---

\(^{100}\) Heather Bryant Jordan’s *How Will the Heart Endure: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), surveys Bowen’s WWII era fiction and salient journalism, elucidating how the author can be understood through a generational context of “total war,” in which the “introduction of historical context into the realm of private association, the atmosphere of a novel, always so important in Bowen’s work, became charged with a new force” (x). Quoting Bowen’s 1945 essay “The Short Story in England,” where Bowen claimed “we should not expect any comprehensive war novel until five, even ten years after hostilities cease,” Bryant delineates the ways in which *The Heat of the Day* structurally replicates this self-conscious transition back toward what I see as a rejuvenated realism—that novel did not appear until 1948, although Bowen had completed more than half of it in 1945. (151).


\(^{102}\) See also Bowen’s lecture “The Poetic Element in Fiction” (1950), where she tracks an abstracted history of the novel from bardic, “primitive” story-telling and poetic language to the Age of Reason, when it became “more firmly rooted to earth” and committed to facts and social realities. Bowen describes her interest in the form burgeoning from a period of “psychological overflow” (instancing the Russian novelists), when the novel opened up to “the irrational and unregimentable elements in humanity.”
predicated on interrogating the dialectic Bowen and Welty deploy to encompass time-bound acts of distilled philosophical or imaginative ‘perception’ (language that is coded masculine), within a discourse of epiphanic meta-representational narratives. In telescoping the critical and popular response to mid-century plantation literature, it bears reiteration that Wild’s monograph, along with Welty’s essay quoted above, appeared in a most volatile year—1965 was indelibly conditioned by those ongoing civil rights struggles that originated from both Ireland and the South’s experiences of historically-disenfranchised populations in “revolt.”

Admirer though she is of James and Proust, Bowen says the novel, by their time, was dragging along too much “heaviness.” The modern short story had a good influence and brought back poetry and simplicity into fiction. Her contemporary anxiety is about the pressure of “mass production” and “mass opinion”—the domination of “the generalized experience,” a dynamic Welty instances, in veiled language, from the mid-century on. Lecture reprinted in: Allan Hepburn, ed. Listening In: Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews with Elizabeth Bowen (Edinburgh University Press: 2010), pp. 153-162. Recording available online: https://soundcloud.com/92y/elizabeth-bowen-the-poetic-element-in-fiction

103 1965 opened with the assassination of Malcolm X in February, followed by Bloody Sunday and the Marches from Selma to Montgomery, events that subtended, at year’s end, the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The “anti-Treaty” IRA ended their third border campaign against RUC and British Army outposts in the late 1950s, facilitating, in January 1965, the first meeting in forty-three years between the Taoiseach, Sean Lemass (a veteran of the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, and the Civil War) and the new Prime Minister of NI, Terence O’Neill. This diplomatic overture instigated Ian Paisley to lead a 1,000 man protest march to Stormont and partly catalyzed the rise of his Protestant Unionist Party in 1966. The perceived movement toward detente also facilitated the 1969 split of the IRA, with the bloodiest years of the Troubles ensuing the following decade. (Interestingly, Paisley earned his honorary doctorate of divinity from Bob Jones University in South Carolina in 1966 and from that time served on its Board of Trustees, speaking often in support of the rise of fundamentalist Baptist ‘bible Protestantism’ across the South.) I do not intend, with this juxtaposition, to conflate histories of colonial separatist consciousness; as Kieran Quinlan has remarked in Strange Kin: Ireland and the American South: “Whether, and to what extent, Ireland has been a colony of England is an extremely vexed [question], as is the case also of the American South vis-à-vis the United States. It may even be the wrong question to ask, since it forecloses nuanced interpretations of complex facts.” Quinlan, however, takes up the ideological affinities apparent in the discursive formations of these two societies and goes on to quote Seamus Deane re: Paisley as a hell-fire and damnation orator in a stereotypically Southern vein: “Maybe they have classes on the hermeneutics of suspicion in Glengall Street or at the Bob Jones University.” Deane, “Wherever Green is Read,” quoted in Quinlan (Louisiana University Press, 2005), p. 256.
The dialectical work of the epiphany is perhaps signaled by an objective correlative in *Delta Wedding*; when the big-city photographer arrives late in the novel to take the image of the whole Fairchilds family after the wedding ceremony, the man reveals that the train that brought him down from Memphis had been delayed when the engine accidentally killed a young woman walking the tracks. Ellen, the plantation matriarch, had encountered this strange girl earlier in the week, as the young woman wandered the nearby woods after having been ‘seduced’ by the bride’s uncle. It is implied that this act compelled her to set off for the city. When the photographer blithely announces the grim news just before snapping their pose, what results is a picture showing Ellen “seeing a vision of fate” (287). Ellen realizes, as I discuss later, that this young woman’s death is ‘meta-cultural’ in that she first theorized the girl “setting out along the big road for Memphis, the old Delta synonym for pleasure, trouble, and shame,” and that the intersection of the ‘bayou girl’s’ life with theirs—unknown to all but Ellen and the family’s best-loved Uncle George—has resulted in her gruesome sacrifice to the planters’ social order (93). Essentially, the novel stages a dialectical turn, asking the reader to register Ellen’s shift from a subject (the first snapshot showed vestiges of

---

104 Welty was employed as a photographer under the WPA, and therefore had the opportunity, in returning from work in NYC during the War, to view her own community and broader swaths of the Deep South through the studied gaze of outside interest. She later collected these images in *One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression* (1971). There may be a bit of self-recrimination staged in the photographer’s unwitting impertinence in the novel. The ‘sacrificial’ element of the bayou girl to the reconciliation of George and Robbie’s marriage is underscored by the fact that when Robbie finally returns, she lets a startled bird into Shellmound, which the servant Vi’let frantically announces from the doorway: “‘Bird in de house! Miss Rob’ come in lettin’ bird in de house!’ ‘Bird in de house mean death!’ called Roxie instantly from the kitchen. She ran in from the other door, and the Negroes simultaneously threw their white aprons over their heads. ‘It does mean that,’ said Troy thoughtfully. […] There was real trouble in Robbie’s face, and the Fairchilds simply shied away from trouble as children would do. The beating of wings could be heard” (209).
her younger self as a “Mitchem Corners choral singer”) to an object of her own thoughts. This conceptual epiphany is externalized in the photographer's flash, wherein, in an act of commentary on the cavalier idyll, Ellen’s identity is evacuated and remade.

Very often the narrative hinge—between the exceptional, near-mythological imperative common to the romance and the question of typicality that drives novelistic character—is focalized, as in Welty’s later plantation story “The Burning,” (1950, 1955) through accounts of male usurpations of domestic big house space. All the would-be female readers in *Delta Wedding* are thwarted by male demands on their time or limitations set on privacy which they cannot effectively contest. It is one of the minor provocations of Shelley’s life that she cannot indulge in reading novels, specifically *The Beautiful and the Damned*, in her own room: “There was no way on earth Shelley could get a lamp brought in to read by in bed. ‘Plenty light to dress by, and you can read in the lower parts of the house with your clothes on like other people,’ Uncle Battle said, favoring Dabney as he did and she never read, not having time…It was hard for her to even see how to write” (108-109). Early in the novel Laura opines: “It was so hard to read at Shellmound. There was so much going on in real life. […] she went tip-toeing in the direction of the library, where no one ever went at this hour…She turned, and there was Uncle George. He gave Laura a serious look as she stood in the middle of the room, unconsciously offering him her open book with both hands” (69, 71).

So, while Welty’s comment on the ambiguous allure of the romantic characterizes Katherine Anne Porter and the delicate acts of intellection central to portraying a regional past, I suggest that, in alluding to the process by which genre conventions are themselves
imprinted by historiography, Welty harbored the mixed reception of *Delta Wedding* latent in mind. For a work that conducts numerous and varied scenes quietly devastating white class privilege and its pseudo-aristocratic imperatives, critics of *Delta Wedding*, then and since, have been hard-pressed to discern the author’s operative conception of history as unfinished business.

In a review that captures the binary appeal and vexed cultural work of the “Southern Poetic Novel” more broadly, Mary Colum noted in 1939 that the genre arose “out of the passion for giving America an inheritance,” before going on to assert that Southerners exhibit a native “faculty and inclination toward one that still actually exists.” Isaac Rosenfeld’s review (unwittingly entitled “Double Standard”) printed in the pages of *New Republic* nearly two decades later did little to interrogate such a position when he demolished both Welty’s novel and Carson McCullers’ *The Member of the Wedding* (also 1946) for the “oblique and self-centered relation” they presented to their “folk materials”:

---

105 Mary M. Colum, “Life and Literature: The Season’s Novels” in *Forum and Century (1930-1940)* Vol. 2 (Feb 1939), p. 74. (Although Colum doesn’t make the reference, one can’t help thinking Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God’s Little Acre* (1933)—the latter outsold *Gone with the Wind* by more than a million copies—had a hand in shaping this point of view, which collapses prevalent regional social conditions with a transparent folkloristic narrative tradition. Leigh Anne Duck describes this confusion of characterological experimentation with “hegemonic understandings of a backward South” as a “mappable grotesque” topography, a concept which rapidly permeated the lexicon of ‘realism,’ classifying Southern novelists as perpetuating some strange offshoot of realist literature by mere virtue of their regional settings. See: Duck, *The Nation’s Region*, p. 85-114. Wild, disinterested in the terminology of realism, makes a structuralist intervention and observes of “The Burning”: “Miss Welty manages not to write historical fiction, but she preserves the historical sense of political identity with the past’s decisions. Though she makes events particular by transcribing them into fictive lives, she retains historical perspective. Allusion and image provide the connotations by which we perceive.” (“Studies in the Shorter Fiction,” p. 152).
the South has legend, history and tradition, a relatively primitive folk culture among the Negroes and poor whites, a bourgeois culture in the cities and the trappings of a decrepit but still pretentious agrarian aristocracy; all of which elements put the Southern writer in a position somewhat similar to that of the Russian novelists of the nineteenth century. [...] I think the dullness of Miss Welty’s novel may be traced to the fact that though she draws upon social resources of custom and speech, it is not really a society that she is dealing with, but the sensations of one. In both novels, as in much of Southern writing, there is an unavowed double standard which divides the material used from the personal uses to which the author puts it. The subject matter, the color, the speech, the characters are all taken at first hand, from a deep social involvement; but the meanings that the author wishes to express are not so closely related to the Southern environment and share little more than its surface values.\(^{106}\)

While I am tempted to point out that these last observations, which Rosenfeld levels as critique, might just as easily be taken as the working definition of fiction writing, it is worth noting that he was in the cultural mainstream in assuming that the South was riven with atavistic contradictions. Such alienation, he implies, might even extend to rendering the region’s (tacitly male) authors subject to the disabling solipsism he identifies as an “unavowed double standard” in a “whole society that may be called the antithesis of art.”\(^{107}\)

As the South began to appear increasingly anomalous in its escalation of racial segregation and in upholding an anti-liberal politics of ‘traditionalism’ during and after the Second World War, critical appraisals of Southern literature frequently inclined to hypostatize an artefactual region. This was a South where, as Rosenfeld’s language indexes, both the stylized backwardness of poverty-stricken whites and auxiliary caricatural blackness was contoured by the receding romance of the failure of white


\(^{107}\) Rosenfeld, 634.
noblesse. As Leigh Anne Duck has argued, Southern modernists, dating from at least the earliest years of the Great Depression, faced a pivotal dilemma in “think[ing] their way through the purported temporal divide between the South and the larger nation”; this was especially true as critics embraced a framework characterizing the region as “non-contemporaneous with the dominant, linear, progressive temporality understood in the U.S. as the time of capitalist modernity.”

In *Delta Wedding* and “The Burning,” Welty stages the dubious racial and patriarchal legacies of planter ideology as a nexus for doubling the South’s quasi-separatist genealogy of plantation literature back on itself. While I will be arguing that Welty was excavating a regional tradition, it is the case that critics misread her fictive treatments of the plantation past and, in particular, the problematic to which both texts recur: that of rendering feminine subjectivity under such economic and ideological imperatives. At their least compelling, such critical accounts saw Welty’s interest in the plantocracy as little more than a superficial attempt to associate her praxis as a purveyor of Southern history with the canon of William Faulkner.

Instead, *Delta Wedding* strategically rearticulates the racial and class-bound ecologies the plantation school has bequeathed Southern writers. Welty adopts certain

---


109 *The Ponder Heart* (1955) likewise evokes, under different genre dispensations, the specter of the plantation in the form of the “Ponder Farm,” and its darkly-comic legacy for white southerners come
tropes and constellations of the plantation school imaginary to scrutinize black-white social relations, ultimately exposing—rather than celebrating—sexualized white class privilege as a constructed social ideal. To better understand formative critical disapprobation of the novel’s social project, however, I first discuss the dimensions of the plantation aesthetic recurrent in *Delta Wedding* which struck even admiring commentators as retrograde; cautious reviewers, in turn, found much to interpret as an outright affront to America’s modernizing race relations in the wake of the Second World War.\(^{110}\)

---

110 Without launching a full-blown discussion of the impact of the Harlem Renaissance on the critical reception of ‘Southern literature’ (as if these genres were hermetically sealed), the reviews of *Delta Wedding* are shadowed by the influence of Claude McKay, Hurston, and particularly, Richard Wright—who was born near Natchez—both *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son* had been out nearly a decade. Liza Kramer’s “‘Seeing Things as They Really Are in Mississippi’: *Delta Wedding’s Anatomy of Pure White Womanhood*” argues, rather specifically, that Welty’s novel can be understood in a diametric aesthetic relationship with *Native Son*: “By centering the plot on a modern-day likeness of the figure of pure white womanhood…Welty simultaneously reveals the self-absorption of the planter class, whose primary interest, well represented by Dabney, is self-preservation; the ultimately violent repression required to sustain white wealth…and the hunger of actual white women…to break out of social constraints.” in: Reine Dugas Bouton, ed. *Eudora Welty's ‘Delta Wedding’* (New York: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 135-157. I extend several of Kramer’s observations to discuss the larger contexts of post-WWI naturalism I see renegotiated in *Delta Wedding*.

The novel can be, in my view, rather easily misinterpreted as a racially-regressive affront both by virtue in its surplus of realist detail and Jamesian open-endedness, and in assuming a matriarchal and haut bourgeois point-of-view. Sterling North’s caustic bullet-pointed ‘review’ in the *New York Post* (April 18) summed up this objection in accusing Welty’s of an “inability to see the Fairchilds against the larger background of political and economic feudalism which keeps such families prosperous down where the Yellow Dog crosses the Yazoo” p. 30. No doubt Trilling, Ransom, Isaac Rosenfeld and others with like visibility would have been in quite a bind to make a case for any ‘responsible’ political representation in *Delta Wedding* outside the structural parameters Welty rather courageously, if tacitly, rejects. As Trilling notes, Welty neither "precipitates her observations as moral judgment," nor does she take cover in the "lower-middle-class milieu of her earlier stories." Ransom's remarks as quoted in my introduction are even more psychotherapeutic, as he tries to explain why he only sort-of admires a novel by a writer who had lately been so useful, in addition to being so gifted.
Welty’s novel diagnoses—sometimes sympathetically, but never with nostalgia—the self-interests of plantation-dwelling whites while consistently ascribing a problematic typicality to the “Fairchilds” family. Such reanimation of the nineteenth century subgenre allows her to largely avoid any outright critique of the appalling social residue of the plantation system—the rather more obvious tactic for narrativizing Mississippi’s barely-reconstructed Delta in 1923.\textsuperscript{111} Instead, her text moves toward a theoretical study of the fictional model of the plantation and its hierarchies, engaging, with greater or lesser obliquity, the frameworks of southern Gothicism as they dovetail modernist consciousness of the anti-pastoral.

*Delta Wedding* opens with a series of subtle signals that the land in particular is to be understood within a tradition of alienated Edenic spaces, imaginative perception of which proves inextricable from the acts of dispossession that produced their current social hierarchies: “the land,” the child-narrator notes in the opening pages “was perfectly flat and level but it shimmered like the wing of a lighted dragonfly. It seemed strummed, as though it were an instrument and something had touched it. […] The sky, the field, the little track, and the bayou, over and over—all that had been bright or dark was now one color. Laura, looking out…felt what an arriver in a land feels—that slow hard pounding in the breast” (3-4).\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{111} Welty changed their name from earlier drafts; see Amy Sickels, “Biography of Eudora Welty” in: Bloom’s BioCritiques: Eudora Welty (Chelsea House: 2004), p. 38. Assessing the Fairchilds as an ambivalent figure of collectivity is a trope I address throughout the chapter (particularly how such an impression is modulated and reinforced through perpetually-shifting points of view.)

\textsuperscript{112} Ruth D. Weston’s *Gothic Traditions and Narrative Techniques in the Fiction of Eudora Welty* (LSU Press: 1994) is so far the only sustained study of this complex dimension of Welty’s canon; Weston is largely concerned with “the nineteenth century ‘new’ Gothic tradition that merges with that of the
Delta Wedding deploys the feminized literary corpus of the plantation romance to elude the nets of masculinist criticism that positioned her and other female writers in the South as statically engaged in privatized portraiture and ahistorical modes of authorship; in so doing, she negotiates the fraught commitments contemporary Southern fiction might evince in promoting anti-racist and proto-feminist social change. By the time Welty published her review of Katherine Anne Porter, she valued open reflection on the manifold consequences that assumptions of cultural lag posed for the evaluation of Southern literary production. In the 1965 essay “Must the Novelist Crusade?” Welty, responding in part to an editorial denunciation of Faulkner’s canonical relevance, outlines a rebarbative defense of the profound contemporaneity of the Southern novel. Welty rejects any mandate imposed on Southern writers “to do something” about racial injustice at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, stating that “the zeal to reform, which quite properly inspires the editorial, has never done fiction much good. […] On fiction’s pages, generalities clank when wielded, and hit with equal force at the little and the big, at the merely suspect and the really dangerous.”

In this essay and the 1964 lecture that inspired it, Welty evades analysis of the social and racial privilege that would mark an author, in her terms, as primarily a novelist, as opposed to a writer who, constitutionally, ‘crusades in fiction’:

I do not presume to speak for my fellow Southern writers, a group of individuals if there ever was one. Yet I would like to point something out: in the rest of the country people seem suddenly aware now of what Southern fiction writers have been writing about in various ways for a great long time. We do not need reminding of what our subject is. It is humankind, and we are all part of it. When we write about people, black or white, in the South or anywhere, if our stories are worth the reading, we are writing about everybody.  

In these remarks, we might detect the discursive attitudes Welty assumes toward a performative theory of authorial obligation that rendered *Delta Wedding*, in the view of many commentators, an all-too-opaque meditation on the legacy of planter culture in the interwar South. The author is almost certainly responding, at the distance of some twenty years, to the charge Trilling made ubiquitous, i.e. that the novel lends itself to readings within “the established plantation fashion,” with all its “treasures of sensibility,” and that “if one finishes her book with a strong sense of confusion as to Miss Welty’s own judgment upon certain aspects of Delta life, one has no reason to feel that it is because

---

Miss Welty lacks the ability to communicate any content she wants to.”

(To no one’s surprise, John Crowe Ransom attempted to refute critiques of *Delta Wedding* by presenting it unqualifiedly as a “woman’s book” of historical fiction—“one of the last novels in the tradition of the old South.”)

Different as their (mis)readings are, both Trilling and Ransom attempted to assimilate Welty’s novel to critical standards she did not share.

As Suzan Harrison has argued, it is a fundamental mistake to presume that because Welty’s criticism often “rejects one particular paradigm of the relationship between fiction and politics, [she] thereby denies fiction’s connection to the world of social interaction, ethics, and value judgement.”

And as my introduction indicates, there were apparent, if often woefully self-serving, political reasons for post-War analysts of Southern culture to resist sensual forms that might be seen, even superficially, to perpetuate the “narcissistic,” mythomaniac byways of the Lost Cause. From the Northerly camp of literary debate, it was distressingly common for enthusiastic reviewers to praise *Delta Wedding* for all the wrong reasons. Boston’s *Christian Science Monitor*

---


struck a representative note, inflected with no detectable irony in championing Welty’s novel as “present[ing] the essence of the Deep South with infinite finesse.”

The tacit predicate of any “essential” South—with its corollary in elucidating presumed fidelity to, or deviation from, such customary poeticizing mores—proved a momentous stumbling block in the path of many critical appraisals of Welty’s uses of Southern history for decades to come. Not the least tractable of provincializing truisms employed to classify Welty’s literary-historical consciousness was the questionable comparison, frequently harboring a feminized compliment, between her representations of Southern historicity and the mythologizing novelistic universe of Faulkner. Admiring reviewer Robert Daniel, for example, nearly twenty years into Welty’s career, cast her as engaged in a “strategic decision to avoid rewriting Faulkner,” who admitted history “when it functioned at all in her works [only] to provide atmospheric verisimilitude.”

If such an appraisal seemed delimiting in the mid-Fifties, the outlook had barely shifted in Southern literary scholarship thirty years later. In 1980, Richard King reframed a version of the Faulkner pole-star thesis—earlier popularized by Leslie Fiedler in Love

---


119 A highly-influential concept in mid-century Faulkner studies viewed the Yoknapatawpha demimonde as enabled by an antiquated wholeness of society by definition available only to a provincial writer (cf. Cowley’s fantasy on Faulkner’s “lump of history” mentioned in the introduction.) Such a primitivist and empiricist frame of interpretation, with its ultimate basis in biography, bypasses, of course, the aesthetic character of the ‘Southern Renascence’ itself.

and Death in the American Novel (1960)\textsuperscript{121}—by omitting not only Welty, but also Carson McCullers, Flannery O’Connor, and Katherine Anne Porter from the pages of A Southern Renaissance because, in King’s estimation, such writers did not “take the South and its tradition as problematic.”\textsuperscript{122} If Delta Wedding was misrecognized generically and thematically even by friendly readers, my claim here charts the way in which this process

\textsuperscript{121} Fiedler included Welty among “the first generation of distaff Faulknerians,” a constellation [including McCullers and Porter] showing “the obsessive concerns of Faulkner and especially his vision of the South as a world of gothic terror disguised as historical fact…thanks to their transitional work, Mississippi has taken on for the imagination of the world the symbolic values attributed in the earliest years of the gothic to Italy.” Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel [1960] (Dalkey Archive Press: 2003), p. 475. One wonders if this ‘generation’ would have considered that ‘transition’ as either obvious or an achievement.

\textsuperscript{122} Richard H. King, A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 8. King asserts that “The women writers were not concerned primarily with the larger cultural, racial, and political themes that I take as my focus. They did not place the region at the center of their imaginative visions.” p. 9 (Also explicitly excluded from his study: Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.) The only female author given sustained treatment in the text is Lillian Smith, whom King admires for her outspoken morality, but who is given a drubbing for slighting the Agrarians-as-New Critics, especially Tate and Warren, whom she called out in 1945 for being among those who “love the South so much that they can’t bear to live in it” (qtd. King, p. 177). Otherwise continuing the Woodwardian school of post-Reconstruction exceptionalism, King states without qualification that “Historically, the South has been a ‘peripheral’ or ‘underdeveloped’ region in the European world-system and within the United States itself” p. 8. Worth noting that King considers himself a staunch liberal and an inheritor of that tradition with application to Southern writing, noting of his graduate work in literature at UNC that “Chapel Hill was an ideal place in many ways to be in the 1960s. Liberalism was a tradition there, not an aberrant impulse.” (viii) Michael Kreyling, on the opposite and pluralizing end of the Southernist studies spectrum, writing twenty years on in Understanding Eudora Welty, nonetheless shows little interest in “The Burning,” despite its status as one of Welty’s most obviously political texts, other than to remark the ways the story “shows she can match the most famous Faulknerian sentence loop for loop [establishing a] connection with the history of the South fundamentally through parody of Faulknerian style.” (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 170-172. For a treatment of Welty’s critics and the generalized ablation of her political impulses in favor of lyrical and psychological analyses, see: Albert J. Devlin, Eudora Welty’s Chronicle: A Story of Mississippi Life (University of Mississippi Press, 1983), esp. pp. 3-15.
was, in part, obscured by Welty’s orientation toward a regional naturalism defined against deterministic and masculinist prerogatives.\textsuperscript{123}

Welty’s texts contextualize the plantation’s representational functions over time, and take inspiration from an alternative Southern Naturalist (i.e. local color) tradition popularized in the late nineteenth century by Rebecca Harding Davis, Kate Chopin, and Ellen Glasgow.\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Delta Wedding} self-dramatizes such distinctions in defining its female characters’ conceptualizations of \textit{bildung} against both male Modernist and class-determined Naturalist markers of self-development. The novel’s series of roving, Woolffian narrators have a few significant traits in common: they are all women who,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{123} i.e. the genealogy in which I see Welty operating is constituted in opposition to the exclusively urban (or unrooted and indifferent), male, lower and working class milieu common to Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, and Sherwood Anderson. As I discuss below, \textit{Delta Wedding} seems to be running a diagnostic on the Naturalist convention of the (frequently) ill-educated or lower-class characters whose lives are governed by the forces of heredity, instinct, and passion. In her rendering of Pinchy, the black servant who spends most of the novel mysteriously “coming through” a process of self-knowing, and in the opaque and fantastic Aunt Studney and through the surprisingly-capacious “white trash” Robbie Reid, Welty exposes the gender-blind tropology of a caricatural naturalist approach to exercising free will when such characters are hamstrung by forces beyond their control. In this way, Welty finds Naturalism generative on intersecting novelistic planes. For a foundational discussion, see Donald Pizer, \textit{Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction}, rev. ed. (1984), where he states: “A naturalistic novel is thus an extension of realism only in the sense that both modes often deal with the local and contemporary. The naturalist, however, discovers in this material the extraordinary and excessive in human nature” (10).

\textsuperscript{124} Of the collected reviews available for \textit{Delta Wedding}, only Charles Poore, writing in the \textit{New York Times Book Review}, and Hamilton Basso, publishing in the \textit{New Yorker} less than a month later, attempt to conceptualize any explicit lineage for Welty’s writing on the ‘folk’ elements of Southern culture outside of comparison to Faulkner, Caldwell or, in Poore’s phrase “any other talented short-story writer who happened also to be a woman.” In the end, both critics point to Welty’s ‘sensitive individuality,’ rather than re-articulating her within any realist or naturalist genealogy. Poore lauds Welty’s “uncommon sense of the American realistic tradition,” before he rules out Ellen Glasgow “or the ancestor-haunted writers who come and go with the wind” as having any bearing on Welty’s “own South, [seen through] her distinctly individual perception.”
\end{flushright}
despite their deep familial connections to the Fairchilds clan and its plantation at Shellmound, understand themselves fundamentally as outsiders to the Delta and its customs.

In the opening paragraphs, we encounter nine year old Laura McRaven establishing her very sense of self in contradistinction to “her [deceased] mother’s people,” as she undertakes her “first journey alone, up from Jackson.” This enchanted, painterly central plain of Mississippi looks to her “as if a hand reached along the green ridge [outside the train window] and all of a sudden pulled down with a sweep, like a scoop in the bin, the hill and every tree in the world and left cotton fields [she saw] the Delta begin” (1-2). Laura, and her aunt Ellen serve as the focalizing narrators for much of *Delta Wedding*, although a limited omniscient consciousness and the Fairchilds daughters—including the recalcitrant Shelley and imminently-betrothed Dabney—also act as interlocutors, most poignantly when competing interpretations of the marriage at the novel’s center collide or break down.

*Delta Wedding* is structurally preoccupied by an Emersonian problem of ‘Other Minds’; we are told repeatedly, from Ellen’s perspective and also by the limited omniscient narrator, that Laura, despite featuring as our presumptive protagonist and

---

125 Welty depicts the Mississippi countryside with conspicuous ekphrasis in *Losing Battles*—a novel whose only plot consists in the re-telling of stories—where nearly every physical detail of the northeastern hamlet of “Banner” and surrounding countryside receives an idiomatic analogue and the perspective is revealed as a visual slowing coming into focus: “The distant point of the ridge, like the tongue of a calf, put its red lick on the sky. Mists, voids, patches of woods and naked clay, flickered like live ashes, pink and blue. The posts along the porch softly bloomed downward, as if chalk marks were being drawn, one more time, down a still misty slate. The house was revealed as if standing there from pure memory against a now moonless sky. For the length of a breath, everything stayed shadowless, as under a lifting hand…” Welty, *Losing Battles* [1970] (Vintage International: 1990), p. 3-4.
narrator during the first-third of the text, is thwarted in her assessments of the family by her very desire to belong with them. 126 “Laura could see as far as that she was the opposite of a Fairchild, and that was a stopping point” (25); “Laura wanted so badly to be taken to their hearts...that she almost knew what the Fairchilds were like, what to expect; but her wish was steadier than her vision and that itself kept her from knowing. Ellen saw it” (100). In some sense, Laura’s (undramatized) decision at the novel’s end to return to her father is the only developmental arc the reader can follow to completion. Having been effectively disinherited from her mother’s holdings in the Fairchild estate, Laura silently meditates that “in the end she would go—go from all this, go back to her father. She would hold that secret, and kiss Uncle Battle now” (313).

Shelley, the eldest, who fits few rubrics of conventional femininity, is presumably named for the estate, though she spends most of the novel acting out against the supposed pieties of a belle. She scolds her father for endangering her middle-aged mother Ellen with a tenth pregnancy, and moreover longs to avoid her “spoiled sister’s” wedding by departing for the Grand Tour (a college graduation present). Shelley’s journal repeatedly announces her longing to escape the “whole Delta [which is in and out of this house],” while she wonders, skeptically, if “Europe will change everything” (112-113). In the meantime, according to Ellen, her oldest daughter “who would hardly go to the dances, some nights, seemed to spend her time in the oddest places...ever since Dabney had announced that she would marry Troy,” Ellen meditates that Shelley had been

126 That Laura’s point of view is privileged, and was initially narratologically dominant, is indicated by the title for the short story turned novella: “Delta Cousins.”
“practicing, rather consciously, a kind of ragamuffinism. Or else she drew up, like an old maid. What could be so wrong in everything...There was something not quite warm about Shelley, her first child” (36, 278-279). Shelley’s androgyny and lack of ‘feminine’ affect is repeatedly invoked to gloss her lesbian affinities, hinted at in her affection for the “stolen late-blooming cape jessamines from Miss Parnell Dortch’s yard,” the only possession in her bedroom, aside from her diary, that Shelley seems to appreciate or enjoy (108).  

To emphasize Shelley’s modish awkwardness, her younger sister India refers to Shelley as “the Hipless Wonder, whose sweater belts go lower than anybody in Virginia’s,” while the omniscient narrator casually observes how Shelley’s “dresses [fall] flat as a bathing suit against her heart” (55, 110). The ambivalence of Shelley’s aspirational ‘new womanism’ is sustained throughout Delta Wedding; from the children’s point of view, the eldest daughter who vows never to marry, remains a “bookish,” overgrown “girl,” whose general obeisance to Ellen “lowered her some in the eyes of them all, white and colored” (94). Partial, as all the women are, to her Uncle George, Shelley, at novel’s end, continues to feel apprehensive disdain for most males outside the Fairchilds family. She is particularly alarmed over her sister’s choice of a husband. The overseer Troy incites in Shelley a barely-articulated and narratively-unresolved sense of panic; Shelley writes ominously in her diary: “I think T. likes to size

---

127 No context is given for Miss Dortch, though we are invited to speculate she was Shelley’s mentor, or perhaps high-school teacher; she later sends the same flowers to Dabney and Troy’s wedding, and Shelley, realizing who they were from “leaned over and buried her face in them” in front of her wondering parents (269).
things up. I would never love him. [...] because T. is always thinking of ways in or ways out, and I think he gets the smell of someone studying, as if it were one of the animals in trouble. Trouble acts up—he puts it down. But I know, trouble is not something fresh you never saw before that is coming just the one time, but is old...having your sister walk into something you dread and you cannot speak to her” (112).

India and Laura, both nine years old, are privileged narrators by virtue of being, on one hand, old enough to “recount narrations” reliably, without having their movements expressly limited by sexual maturation. While Laura’s perspective is structurally dominant, as I discuss below, India, it is implied, is as close as any of the characters to exhibiting omniscient consciousness—she is rather Dickensian in her passion for autodidactic mimicry and for ventriloquizing the voices of the characters observed in “her ever-watchful delight” (133). India retails the novel’s faux-dramatic centerpiece for the visiting Methodist preacher, occupying five pages of text recounting how Uncle George was ‘nearly’ killed in saving the young, mentally-disabled Maureen, whose foot was caught in the tracks of the oncoming Yazoo-Delta.128 For which trouble, India is scolded for her roving and her prurient curiosity. Her nettled father Battle tells her “she should go on the stage,” and from her mother’s perspective: “[India] kept her informed about what everybody was doing at all times, which she knew though she

128 It is of a piece with Delta Wedding’s studied reserve about the nature of George’s heroism that we later learn, only through Shelley’s diary, that Maureen actually saved them both. By shoving George very forcefully from her as he tried to free her foot from the tracks “what he could not accomplish by loosening her foot or by pulling her up free, he accomplished by falling himself. Wrenched bodily...Maureen fell with him” (115).
herself, as now, might be cutting paper dolls out of the *Delineator* on the hall floor…she seemed truly the only one who knew” (162).

The narrative continues to deconstruct the known terrain of high modernist childhood subjectivity, invoking Stephen Dedalus’ diary (and the hubris of longed-for exile) intertextually through Shelley, but also in calling on imaginative symbols from Proust with surprising explicitness. Immediately after Aunt Mac’s identity is thrust upon the girls by Primrose, the maiden aunts insist on making a wedding present to Dabney. Their gift is the priceless nineteenth-century glass lantern that her great-grandmother idealistically kept lit for her husband gone to the Civil War; the chapter ends with Dabney carelessly shattering the night light on the plantation’s porch as she rushes toward Troy, who then makes his first appearance in the novel as “a black wedge in the lighted window” (68). That the lamp is to be considered a metaphor for the family’s self-mythologizing tendencies is made obvious far later in the text when the outsider (and in Fairchilds parlance, ‘white trash’) Robbie Reid reflects on the family emotionally smothering and insidiously manipulating her husband George:

> The Fairchilds were always seeing him by a gusty lamp—exaggerating, then blinding—by the lamp of their own indulgence. While she saw him lighted up by his own fire—no one else but himself was there, a solid man, going through the world, a husband […] But oh, when all the golden persuasions of the Fairchilds focused upon him, he would vaunt himself again, if she did not watch him…For he evidently felt that old stories, family stories, Mississippi stories, were the same as very holy or very passionate, if stories could be those things (252).

While “little Robbie Reed” appears, from the family’s point of view, as nothing more than a social “upstart that George threw himself away on”, and is further charged with
“coarsen[ing] George” because he “married beneath them,” the novel repeatedly satirizes this classist grandstanding, and invites the reader to reflect on Robbie’s motivations as well as the validity of her commentary on the Fairchilds’ frequent ridiculousness (202, 271). Robbie’s worldview is not bounded by the privations of her poor background, nor is her marriage to George undertaken—on her side at least—out of any motivation but desire, for her a comprehensive force that encompasses both sexual prerogatives and the drive toward self-knowledge. The omniscient narrator makes a rare intrusion to mediate on the ways “Robbie desired veracity—more than she could even quite fathom, as if she had been denied it, like an education at Sunflower Junior College; from a kind of poverty’s ambition she desired it—as hard and immediate a veracity of the impact of George’s body” (195).

If the Fairchilds remain perfectly content to refer all meaning to their enclosed “fairy Shellmound world,” Robbie’s aim is to touch on something “real [and] undeceiving” (196). A far cry from the hoggish Snopes brothers, farther still from Margaret Mitchell’s gold-digging Emmy Slattery, Robbie Reid’s character gives the lie to the naturalist touchstones in the white trash pantheon, which W.J. Cash famously called in 1941 the South’s “savage ideal.” Robbie may well conform to some white-cracker nouveau riche role-playing (as when she “steals” her husband’s car and turns it over in a ditch outside Memphis), but her character is one striving organically against the limitations imposed by the Fairchilds classism—in their neo-Feudal baronage, they see

---

129 The Mind of the South (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971 [1941]).
her only “as Old Man Swanson’s granddaughter, who had grown up in the town of Fairchilds to work at Fairchilds store” (30).

Lambasting the matriarchs for pandering to their male relatives and winning power through flattery, Robbie’s outburst epitomizes an outsider’s perspective on the Fairchilds self-styled idyll, an ironized and deeply-historicized position (c.f. Rosenfeld’s description of the broken-down literary aristocracy) that few critics registered behind Welty’s subtle depiction of planter collectivity:

‘Aunt Mac Fairchild!’ said Robbie, lifting her voice again, and turning to the old lady her intense face. ‘Mrs. Laws! You’re all a spoiled, stuck-up family that thinks nobody else is really in the world! But they are! You’re just one plantation. With a little crazy girl in the family, and listen at Miss Shannon. You’re not even rich! You’re just medium. Only four gates to get here, and your house needs a coat of paint! [...] My sister Rebel is right. You’re either born spoiled in the world or you’re not born spoiled. And people keep you that way until you die’ (215).

Robbie is hardly the only character to imply that the Fairchilds are overbred and in the stages of disavowed decline; the acerbic Dr. Murdoch, who “brought all the Fairchilds into this world and slapped [them] to ticking,” encounters Laura and Shelley in the town cemetery, and echoes from an outside perspective the family’s absurdly egoistic sense of history:

All of you stay up too late, dancing and what not, you all eat enough rich food to kill a regiment, but I won’t try to stop the unpreventable. I grew up with [your uncle] Denis and knew him like a book, and George’s a second edition. How many more of you are there? Be a good thing if Maureen would up and die—that aunt of yours too, Aunt Shannon—both of ‘em, Mac’s a thousand years old. But—can’t do a thing about Delta people, said Dr. Murdoch. They’re the worst of all (176-178).
This gallery of side-lined characters forms a veritable chorus of latent criticism concerning the factors conditioning women's lives on the plantation in the culture of post-WWI Southern society. The privileged white women in the novel can find little time for reflection, connection, or self-discovery, as Ellen’s thoughts make clear shortly after the traumatic moment when the photographer discloses the anonymous young woman’s death; observing her brother-in-law during the wedding reception: “walking through, looking for somebody too. Suddenly she wished she could talk to George. It was the wrong time—she never actually had time to sit down and fill her eyes with people and hear what they had to say, in any civilized way. Now he was dancing, even a little drunk, she believed—this was a time for celebration, or regret, not for talk, not ever for talk” (291).

Such awareness exists in the novel with the considerably more oppressive realities of the black female characters, including the young servant “Pinchy,” who spends most of the narrative in a mysterious and sexually-charged process of ‘seeking,’ and ‘coming through.’ While her wandering is patronizingly condoned by the Fairchilds, their indifference to Pinchy’s predicament is quite likely self-serving. The inference becomes all too probable that the affianced Troy’s illicit access to the servant has conduced to this state of affairs when, late to his own wedding rehearsal, Shelley is sent to retrieve the overseer and discovers him:

[H]aving some trouble with one of the hands…Root M’Hook, a field Negro, held the knife drawn; it was not actually a knife, it was an ice pick. ‘You start to throw at me, I’ll shoot you,’ Troy said. Root vibrated his arm, aiming, Troy shot the finger of his hand, and Root fell back, crying out and waving at him. ‘Get the nigger out of here. I don’t want to lay eyes on him.’ ‘Pinchy cause trouble comin’ through,’ said Juju to the other boy
as they lifted Root and pulled him through the doorway. [...] Shelley…felt a sharp, panicky triumph. As though the sky had opened and shown her, she could see the reason why Dabney’s wedding should be prevented…but even as she saw the reason, Shelley knew it would not avail. She would jump as Troy told her, and never tell anybody, for what was going to happen was going to happen (257-258, emphasis in original).

As Barbara Ladd has argued: “Welty seems consistent in her determination to call attention to the potential for violence in the seemingly intact Fairchilds circle,” often calling on transient, even spectral, minor characters to achieve this effect. Along with Pinchy’s understated exploitation, the bayou ghosts, alongside an intertextual archive consisting of diaries, artwork, and auratic kitsch, connote the acute continuance of the past in the present—specifically as such history registers the varying levels of force exerted over women in the annals of the plantation economy. Delta Wedding is catalyzed not only by the overabundant Fairchilds jostling for resources and property, but also by a historically-overdetermined landscape that drives narrative forces of heredity and inheritance. The plantation at Shellmound, as the name suggests, was built on a Native American midden, and its attendant bayou is said to be haunted by the ‘ghost of an Indian

---


131 Marmion, a satellite plantation built during the late 19th century, rightfully belongs to Maureen (whose disability conveniently renders her, according to Battle, irrelevant as a potential heiress). In a quietly-disturbing aside, Welty intimates the shocking self-interest of the family in such matters, shifting between Laura’s presumed point of view and authorial omniscience: “‘Marmion can’t belong to Maureen!’ [Dabney] had cried, when she first asked. ‘Yes—not legally, but really,’ her father said; he thought it was complicated. So Dabney had said to Maureen, ‘Look, honey—will you give your house to me?’ They had been lying half-asleep in the hammock after dinner. And Maureen, hanging over her to look at her, her face close above hers, had chosen to smile radiantly. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘You can have my house-la, and a bite-la of my apple too.’ Oh, everything could be so easy!” (39). Meanwhile, Laura, who should inherit her deceased mother’s interest in Shellmound, is, as mentioned, cut out of their considerations when she chooses to return to her father in Jackson.
maiden,’ a feature of the place simply countenanced as fact by the female characters and children in the novel.

Recasting the central device of the nineteenth-century plantation wedding plot, Welty only nominally organizes her novel around the marriage of the vibrant but consciously under-articulated daughter Dabney\textsuperscript{132} to the consummate outsider in both class and temperament—the transplanted, plain-talking Troy Flavin. Troy hails from Tishomingo, the most northeast county in Mississippi, situated some 200 miles north of Leflore County, the fictionalized terrain of Fairchilds. Troy’s home is referred to throughout the novel with the tag “up Tishomingo hills.” A region peopled nearly exclusively by subsistence-farming whites, who comprised over ninety percent of the county’s population as far as census records exist, the extreme northeastern ridge of “red clay Mississippi” was infamous in the state’s folk memory for furnishing huge numbers of insurgent and deserting soldiers to the CSA in the Civil War.\textsuperscript{133}

Troy is permeated by linguistic and class difference, and often appears furtive and animalistic to the Fairchilds with his “foxy” red-hair and whiskers. Aunt Primrose, days before the wedding, admits she “wouldn’t have known him” from a stranger because she

\textsuperscript{132} Of all the Fairchilds children, Dabney’s emotional depth and intellectual capacity remains an enigma—her shallowness is remarked both by Ellen and Shelley, and her melodramatic outbursts are designed to leave the reader in a state of uncertainty about the future of her marriage with Troy: “Dabney gazed at them thinking, I always wondered what they would do if I married somebody they didn’t want me to. Poor Papa is the only one really suffering. […] You never had to grow up if you were spoiled enough. It was comforting, if things turned out not to be what you thought…” (244).

\textsuperscript{133} For a detailed discussion of inter-state racial politics in the segregated South and the factor of increased mobility among poor white rural populations, see Charles C. Bolton, \textit{Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi} (Duke University Press, 1994). Troy, in a rare confidence with Ellen, theorizes this migration as foregone economic necessity: “Well, there’s nothing easy about hills, and plenty like me have left them, four to my knowledge on one bend of the Tennessee River. They all come to the Delta. Sure gets you quick.” (125).
“always think[s] of him as part horse” with his ungainly stride and hurried bad manners (147). Even Little Battle, the third-youngest son, is given license to mock Troy, performing a skit that skewers the overseer’s bumpkin attachment to his birthplace when he’s asked where he from: “‘up near the Tennessee line,’ said Little Battle, in the voice of Troy. ‘Mighty good people up there. Have good sweet water up there, everlasting wells. Cool nights, you can tolerate a sheet in summer. The land ain’t what you’d call good.’” (242-243).

Aunt Tempe’s point of view extends his outsider status to a discord in the natural order of things as she ruminates on the rituals of the wedding ceremony. To her it seemed as if: “Troy came in from the side door, indeed like somebody walking in from the fields to marry Dabney. His hair flamed. Had no one thought that American Beauty would clash with that carrot hair? Had no one thought that? [Aunt] Jim Allen blinked her sensitive eyes.” (279). Perhaps displaying the ultimate authorial irreverence for the conventions of the plantation romance, Welty grants the wedding itself only six words in the text: “Mr. Rondo married Dabney and Troy” (282). While his class difference is played largely for comic relief, the sentiments Troy harbors that would have proved genuinely distressing for his literary predecessors—i.e. his inclinations to shift the plantation’s economic yield from cotton towards vegetables and livestock—are countenanced by the Fairchilds men, who, lacking any viable design for Shellmound’s future, make space for the likes of Troy in the postlapsarian plantation (325).

When Ellen makes a journey through the “old woods” to visit an aging black laborer, she is subconsciously perturbed by the thought of her daughter’s impending
marriage to the family’s “upstart” overseer, and she notes the “bayou banks [of] cinders; they said it was where the Indians burned their pottery, at the very last. The songs of the cotton pickers were far away, so were the hoofbeats of the horse the overseer rode (and once again, listening for them in spite of the quiet, she felt as if the cotton fields so solid to the sight had opened up and swallowed her daughter)” (89). With an even greater image of foreboding for Dabney’s future, Aunt Tempe’s thoughts during the wedding ritual reveal that Dabney’s self-definition as a proper Southern belle, adhering to an atavistic fantasy, leave her little more than a play-thing for her new husband: “‘Never more beautiful!’ that is what will always be said about a bride, thought Tempe, suddenly agitating her fan. And they all look dead, to my very observant eye, or like rag dolls—poor things Dabney is no more herself than any of them” (281).

Ellen’s meditations, as she walks along “almost anxiously enough to look back over her shoulder” are soon interrupted by the abrupt and mysterious appearance of a strange young white girl possessed of an ethereal beauty and an unconcerned ignorance of local customs. This aforementioned encounter exposes Ellen’s conditioned concepts of desire, which she can think only in terms of racial primitivism or spectral (male-authorized) allure: “In the beginning, I did think I was seeing something in the woods—a spirit (my husband declares one haunts his bayou here)—then I thought it was Pinchy, an ignorant little Negro girl on our place. It was when I saw you were—were a stranger—my heart nearly failed me, for some reason.”

The reason, Delta Wedding later implies, is that Ellen’s knowledge of the girl’s fate bespeaks an awareness of the way in which, as Faulkner once put it, Southern
cavaliers had created a “milieu where the other sex is separated into three sharp divisions, separated (two of them) by a chasm that could be crossed but one time and in but one direction—ladies, women, females.” In a novel where Ellen is left to listen to the bayou girl being a ghost, her appearance indeed “opens up a whole mystery of life.” (90-93).

---

“ANOTHER STRANGE RIDGE OF CHARACTER”: CLASS AND CONVERGENCE 
IN THE BIG HOUSE

“As the servant figure and the ideal of service are reduced, so correspondingly are the master figure and the ideal of mastery.” 135

“The one who attains recognition without reciprocating becomes the master, while he who recognizes but is not recognized becomes the slave. The master thus reduces the slave to a mere instrument of his will, yet in that very victory lurks a longer-term defeat. The tyranny of the weak over the strong becomes lasting indeed.” 136

Prologue: Anglo-Irish Pastoral and the Racial Grotesque

For all its potency as a symbol of both lived and literary colonialism, the twentieth century Irish big house has rarely been interrogated as a site productive of racial identities. Ranging over Molly Keane’s novels and late discursive prose, this chapter considers the class and sectarian-coded dimensions of the devolving culture of Anglo-Irish landlordism in her commercially successful but critically undervalued fiction. It is my contention that Keane’s narratives are radically transformed by the problematic of dominance, most often represented through manipulation of linguistic forms and the contestation of private and public memory. Her novels are driven by the sexualized and racialized undercurrents of master-servant relations, recurring to tropes of ‘breeding’ and...


bloodlines, and fixating on images of ethnic typology. The protracted collapse of actual big house ecologies from the First World War impacted literary production in a thematically distinctive, if philosophically contradictory way: characters appear increasingly caricatural within their Irish or Anglo-Irish social station, even as Anglo-Irish authors evince a highly-increased awareness of the underlying psychological and material confluence of these positions across cultural forms. I analyze Keane’s depictions of covert racial attitudes toward the ‘native’ servant classes to militate against a refusal of racial abjection in big house literary criticism. Ultimately, a focus on Keane’s oblique but persistent representations of the failure of Irish rural life, pursued in her fiction in economic and sociological terms, helps place the big house novel in a more avowedly realist framework, avoiding the politically satisfying but formally shallow indictments of the genre perpetuating a “conservative, end-of-empire tradition.”

137 Henry Green’s *Loving* (1945) is an intriguing, British-authored example of the typology here described. Set in a vaguely-drawn country house “100 miles from Dublin” during the Emergency, the novel radically inverts reader expectations of ‘upstairs-downstairs’ romantic comedy, dramatizing how the declining Ascendancy squires (surname: ‘the Tennants’) strategically absent themselves from the estate to avoid facing that their financial and personal affairs increasingly mirror those of their (partially-imported Cockney) servants. While questions of wages, shortages, and other deficiencies in respectable household management arise, Madam Tennant retreats to a strained conception of shared Britishness, murmuring to the head staff that “things are not what they used to be you know…we must all hang together in these detestable times in enemy country” (9-10). Mrs. Tennant meanwhile, typically refuses to learn the butler’s Christian name (‘Charley’), instead calling him Arthur “as every footman from the first had been called, whose name really had been Arthur, all the Toms, Harrys, Percys, Victors one after the other, all called Arthur” (6). The narrative centers on the butler’s ascension to head-of-household and the uneasy peace the rest of the staff must make with the Sinn Fein revolutionaries on one hand and the unreliable and sporadically-scandalous behavior of their employers on the other.

138 The phrase is Vera Kreilkamp’s, referencing Molly Keane’s total exclusion from the 1991 *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. Kreilkamp argued in the late 1980s (though the monograph was not published until 1998 as *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House*) that: “By imposing the circumstantial realism of the novel form onto the neo-feudal myths that helped sustain Anglo-Irish gentry life, Big House novelists create the special irony of the literary tradition” (23). Yet formalist criticism of big house fiction is plagued by ideological resistance to the genre’s imaginative and structural potentiality. Twenty years after Kreilkamp made that observation, Joe Cleary continued an influential line of interpretation—one
Keane’s “Forward,” composed for the 1989 publication of The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross is characteristic, both in wistful, elegiac tone and class-descriptive content, of the final essayistic writings of her long and prolific career. In this Forward, as in her introduction to In an Irish House (1988), and the prefaces she penned for reissued early novels, the author meditates at length on the motivations and prevailing world view of the past generation of Gentry writers. These discursive, semi-autobiographical treatments evince an overarching preoccupation with reconstructing the “vanished world of [her] youth,” dwelling on the quotidian specificities that established social roles for Irish servants, middle class “proles,” and the Ascendancy families to which Keane belonged.

implicitly condemning and marginalizing the genre as an ‘alien’ cultural form—dating at least to the analysis of Daniel Corkery in the 1930s. Cleary is influenced by the (in-part disavowed) dismissals of big house literature popularized by Seamus Deane in Celtic Revivals (1985), further discussed below. It is of course no coincidence that critical disengagement within Irish Studies scholarship has been the prerogative of mostly male critics, while many highly-successful writers of big house literature have been women.

Keane’s fourteen novels span the years 1926-1988, with all but the final three appearing under the gender neutral pseudonym M.J. Farrell. Keane also wrote or co-wrote four plays, published with Architectural Digest, and in addition to the prefaces, introductions, and coffee table book mentioned above, produced an anthology Molly Keane’s Ireland with her daughter in 1993.

“In the ‘twenties and earlier, families of the ascendancy divided themselves sharply from the ‘proles’ (the word deriving from ‘proletariat’ and comprising those in business, the law and even, sometimes, the Church). Marriage beneath one’s social status was looked on as a disaster and almost never occurred, no matter how scarce the contemporary and social equals of the young ladies of the time.” Keane, “Introduction” The Knight of Cheerful Countenance [1926] (London: Virago Press, 1993), p. 7-8. Molly Keane was born Mary Nesta Skrine in 1904 in County Kildare. Her father, Walter Skrine, a former colonial governor of Mauritius, was a man Keane later described as “belonging to that species of Englishman who falls in love with Ireland.” Her mother, who published under the name Moira O’Neill, was a celebrated poet; her Songs of the Glens of Antrim (1901) for the first decade of the century regularly outsold Yeats. Though Keane lived to be 91, no critical biography of her existed until her daughter Sally Phipps published Molly Keane: A Life earlier this year (2017). The Guardian review of that work by Joanna Moorhead nicely summarizes the studiously-casual contemporary British attitude toward the Ascendancy: “the Skrines were Anglo-Irish, part of Ireland’s English elite who inhabited large, draughty country piles and ran the country for more than 100 years. The Anglo-Irish practised a particularly concentrated form of upper-class
In an Irish House is quite transparent in adhering to a romanticized, aestheticized ("timeless") portrait of the Anglo-Irish influence on Irish culture: “Houses,” Keane asserts “have their tomorrows as well as their yesterdays. The nostalgic aura of melancholy and desolation exists—alas, with some truth—in complete contrast to the enthusiasm and determination to save and preserve much that the Ascendancy built with their hearts’ blood and their great vanity, and failed, as times went through their merciless changes.”\(^{141}\) Here her rhetoric courts the imprecations of nationalist critique where, in Joe Cleary’s words, the assumption of “willed amnesia” among big house writers perpetuates a reactionary form with “a rueful emphasis on the grace of a lost civilization tending to soften memories…of the violent monopoly of power that sustained the Ascendancy world.”\(^{142}\)

Yet Keane’s novels from these years—Good Behaviour (1981), Time After Time (1983), and Queen Lear (1988)—are of a darkly-comic and contingently gothic stripe, parodying the eclipse of the mythomanic Anglo-Irish from any conceivable position of social prominence.\(^{143}\) As Vera Kreilkamp has noted, “Keane’s last three novels insistently reject the formulations of a lost organic cultural tradition and ruthlessly expose


\(^{143}\) This is the title distributed in the U.S. in 1989; the same volume was published in the U.K. and Ireland as *Loving and Giving* in 1988.
the fictitiousness of personal memory.”

Affirming Kreilkamp’s reading, I find it all the more striking that Keane’s contemporary editorial prose inhabits an aloof, even ideologically oppositional, perspective. The essays mentioned above produce dynastic images of Anglo-Irish gentility and evince a desire for a past in which class distinctions really were kept straight. While Keane participated in the Thatcher-era’s codification of a highly-lucrative fantasy of Ascendancy grandeur, her unrelenting attention to the lingering effects of social stratification—an interest that becomes all the more pronounced when read across genre—strains against her unevenly regressive intellectual subjectivity.

Ruminating on the social milieu conditioning the fiction of Somerville and Ross, for example, Keane professes a “beguiling curiosity” regarding those literary records that “lend us a share in such enchanted spaces of leisure that we have lost and they knew so well how to occupy.”

Glossing the dynamic of ‘leisure’ and graciously enclosed living, Keane alludes to the luxuries the Anglo-Irish purchased in the form of domestic labor. The author’s concern in this piece and many that follow is to establish and

---


145 Molly Keane, “Forward” in: Gifford Lewis, ed. The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), xxi. “Social milieu” acting as shorthand for Ascendancy families living and writing in the immediate context of the Land Wars, wherein their categorical status as proprietors was dealt, so the historiography goes, its fatal blow. H.D. Gribbon’s overview: “…the landed gentry had seemed in the 1860s to be in an unassailable position, yet land legislation first regulated their relationship with their tenants, then drastically reduced their rental income, and ultimately eliminated them as rentiers, as their estates were exchanged for capital (over one-half by 1914, around two-thirds by 1921); [the Anglo-Irish] were steadily relieved of the responsibility and embarrassment, not to say danger, of landowning in Ireland.” “Economic and Social History,” in: A New History of Ireland, Vol. VI, p 331-332. [Violet] Martin of Ross (b. 1862) was from a particularly illustrative Gentry family, whose 18th century ancestors included Col. Richard “Humanity Dick” Martin, an MP whose influential work encompassed Catholic Emancipation agitation in the 1820s and a progressive record on Animal Rights’ Legislation, including the passage of Martin’s Act (1822) and assisting in the founding of the SPCA in London in 1824.
interrogate the long-entwined existences of Irish servants and the Anglo-Irish “Quality.” Keane approaches this dynamic specifically through analysis of the shifting ideologies conditioning attainment and policing of “good colloquial English” in Anglo-Irish society at the turn of the century. Ruminating on the lost possibilities of a colonial class supposedly less anxious of its own authority, Keane recalls:

[A] previous generation to our mothers with wonderful voices, not of the peasants or middle classes, but belonging strictly to their own social set. [...] Their daughters, our mothers, had English and French governesses and tutors. They went abroad to study languages. They spoke ‘proper’ English and insisted on their children doing the same. There was fierce correction for speaking like the servants.  

Keane’s determined evocation of an ethnographically-distinct foremother in this passage lays bare the primary figures of conflict that contour the discourse of class in her fiction. Here, she establishes a multigenerational patterning of ethnically-determined ‘separate spheres’ between the Anglo-Irish and the Irish, whose primary marker of difference is registered in erudite language acquisition (and the anxiety that betrays aspirational cosmopolitanism). Keane’s novels then privilege the perspective of the generation

---

146 Quoted in: Lewis, ed., xvii. In this passage, Keane recalls the last generations of the 19th century Ascendancy using now-lost subject constructions and idioms as well: “They said ‘me dear’, and ‘well, m’dear’, when embarking on any information.” Keane drops such purported archaisms into novelistic dialogue, usually when a member of the Gentry has come into sustained, too-close contact with Hiberno-English. In Time After Time, Baby June, the youngest Swift, “speaks like the people,” as, on account of the family’s depleted fortune, “there had been no English school for her. No one could teach her to read.” (9) June not only falls for the Catholic farmhand in their employ, Christy Lucey, she uses the contractions ‘you’ld’ and ‘I’ld’ and picks up ‘direct’ Irish-into-English expressions in the course of her maternal-erotic infatuation. “Looking distantly at his legs, so long and useful on a horse and then at his wide shoulders and light hips June felt a faint jealousy in the admission that his horrid mother was responsible for this gracious maturity. He was the inheritor of June’s past skills and past courage. She could translate them for him. They had the same use of words. There was an equality between them” (89).
following—those reared in fear of “fierce correction” for ethnic commingling—in order to contemplate historically-alternating trajectories of divergence from, and lived conflation between, the Ascendancy and the Irish ‘native.’ For Keane, the very habits of speech described above necessarily indicate a “strict” enclosure in one’s “own social set” (proposing a mythic settler type preserved above the political mire of a colonial past), but a position striated, nonetheless, with ‘ancestral’ “delight in the language of the country people and the lively stuff of Elizabethan English,” a linguistic-cultural affordance lost to the post-independence generations of big house society.\footnote{Lewis, ed., xvii. In fixating on an almost certainly legendary national past in which the most privileged and the most immiserated communicated in a now-beloved and arcane idiolect, Keane’s prose indexes certain affinities with the argument presented re: minor languages and subterranean imaginaries in Languages of the Night: where, in the case of Proust, a “native dialect [can] appear to the narrator to have miraculous qualities that protect it from time altogether…the narrator’s idea that Francoise possesses a precious linguistic heritage alien to his own comes first through his observation of her way of speaking his own language.” Barry McCrea, Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in Twentieth-Century Ireland and Europe (Yale University Press: 2015), p. 124.}

Emphasizing Keane’s plantation imaginary then allows the reader to elucidate the ways her fiction disturbs the archetypal Yeatsian dialectic between ‘Ascendancy’ and ‘Peasant,’ as she engages the tropology of the ‘native’ Irish servant to militate against the genre conventions of the Big House novel per se.\footnote{Resistance to a transatlantic heuristic by which to compare slave labor-driven plantation narratives alongside the colonialist Irish big house is largely built on the unspoken aversion toward metaphorizing slavery. Amy Clukey, in 2009, for example, could claim that “the generic conventions of plantation fiction have not yet been applied to Irish contexts,” and an innovative feature of her doctoral work is “to displace the assumptions that usually attend considerations of big house fiction, a category that fails to recognize that the structures which undergird the Irish big house form part of a larger, transnational economic phenomena.” Clukey, “Plantation Modernism: Irish, Caribbean, and US Fiction, 1890-1950” (Doctoral dissertation: Pennsylvania State University, 2009), p. 28. However, bearing sound resistance to trivializing representations of enslavement closely in mind, there is historical basis for considering the representation of racist attitudes among the Anglo-Irish as similar, if not in degree, then in kind, to those of former white slave owners in the American South. The sexual anxieties that reverberate across these traditions bear significant points of correlation in attesting to the tendentiousness of ‘pure’ Anglo-Saxon...} (\textit{Queen Lear} deploys and...
deconstructs this Yeatsian rhetorical tradition explicitly, as I discuss below.) Insofar as Keane’s novels are overtly and persistently concerned with the inner workings of the Anglo-Irish demesne, I resituate these works within the tradition of pastoral ethnography. Such recontextualization indicates the extent to which her novels, ostensibly foregrounding the conventions of manorial ‘society romance’ (often gone awry), remain preoccupied with a simulacrum of rural existence, and the specific failure of characters to actualize their affective ties within it.

A substantive body of criticism has analyzed Keane’s exacting and repetitious depictions of big house interiority, and with sound reason: with only slight exaggeration, an attentive reader could expatiate upon the lavishly-depicted dining rooms, gardens, lavatories, stables, or nurseries of such estates, producing descriptions replete with violets in the christening mugs adorning unvaryingly-vast dressing tables. Keane’s fetishistic materiality incarnates the contracting and irretrievable opulence of the Gentry, the encumbered foundations on which her fourteen novels reside. What has not been much noticed by critics is the degree to which such a semiotics of domesticity, and in particular, a peculiar habituation of functional spaces—enclaves typically of relevance only to servants or children—reveals a long-standing preoccupation with the big house as

white as historical justification for the subjugation and abuse of a systemically impoverished and disenfranchised labor force.

Studies by Rachael Sealy Lynch, Ellen M. Wolff, Vera Kreilkamp, Eibhear Walshe, and Sarah McLemore in particular have suggested the ways in which Keane’s fiction pragmatically archives, and so, in Kreilkamp’s phrase, commemorates the “intimate apprehension of Anglo-Irish life.” A rhetorical study remains to be made of Keane’s non-fiction (including her portrait of Irish hunting culture, Red Letter Days and In an Irish House) on this topic.
a persistent site of denial and forgetting. In her final three novels, the archival qualities of collapsing Ascendancy homes take on a distinct air of curation: in *Queen Lear*, “lack of space was not one of the problems that affected Deer Forest. There, nothing was abandoned, nothing thrown away. In the late ‘thirties, relics of previous lives and times were preserved in dignity and absolute uselessness” (104).

In *Taking Chances* (1929), and *Mad Puppetstown* (1931), the emotional arc of each novel is located in the defeat of the fantastic ambitions of Anglo-Irish integration into an idyll of organic country society (with the latter perhaps proving all the more intriguing for deferring the characters’ realization of that failure.) As Elizabeth Bowen recalled in *Bowen’s Court*, such illusions of symbolic belonging had long sustained disavowed prerogatives of social control: “If Ireland did not accept them, they did not know it—and it is that unawareness of final rejection, unawareness of being looked out at from some secretive, opposed life, that the Anglo-Irish naïve dignity and, even, tragedy seems to me to stand. Themselves, they felt Irish, and acted as Irishmen.”150 Warily acknowledging, but refusing to countenance the material origins of, the native’s “secret, opposed life,” Bowen valorizes a literal dead end for the Anglo-Irish in their elected country. Their “tragedy” is for her “dignified” and hermetically-sealed; unlike Keane, Bowen is finally unwilling to run an irreverent diagnostic on the presumptions that have curtailed Anglo-Irish futurity. From Keane’s early novels, I turn to *Good Behaviour*, and touch briefly on *Time After Time* and *Queen Lear* to discuss how her fiction deploys multivalent tragi-comic forms that reveal Irish Ascendancy lives to be dependent on,

while, as Bowen’s language indicates, fiercely wedded to an imaginative parallel existence with, the proletarianized Irish farming classes.\(^{151}\)

Translating the figures of the domestic servant and former tenant—typically marginalized and typecast across the nineteenth century realist canon—to the psychological centers of the text, Keane reimagines the big house novel from its representational periphery. With this act, she infers a disturbing conflation of the putative sources of racial and ethnic distinction obtaining between Irish underlings and Anglo-Irish masters.\(^{152}\) Keane’s fictional servants embody a truly alien quality in the eyes of all

---

\(^{151}\) As Polly Devlin notes in her introduction to the 1984 reprint of Keane’s first ‘chic, art-deco London novel’ *Devoted Ladies* (1934): “Those famous preoccupations of her four previous novels—horses, romance, snobbery, the world of the landed Gentry in Ireland, the hunt as tapestry, the glorious backdrop to life, and the houses of Ireland lying like temples at the very heart of her books—seemed, in the initial stage of *Devoted Ladies* to have been superseded” (i). What I’m calling Keane’s experimentation with pastoral ethnography has so far been read only in the relatively narrow tradition of the thoroughly-national Big House novel. Devlin’s discussion of the dependable duplication of those ‘themes’ in her early fiction, and their evolved reappearance in her late work is indicative of the insulated canon to which they have been ascribed (the least charitable estimation would see Keane producing reliable novelistic variations within an artefactually-given tradition.) In part this critical myopia was aided by Keane herself; the author was consistently over-modest in discussing both her talents and her reading habits, and self-deprecating in matters of intellectual filiation. Her daughter, and later collaborator, Sally Phipps recalls: “[Molly] did not often admit she had a gift. It was a burden she carried that kept her alienated…she hid her love of writing from others, and herself, until the process began to unravel in old age, when it became obvious that she was grief stricken.” Phipps, “Memories of Molly Keane” in: *Molly Keane: Essays in Contemporary Criticism* Eds. Eibhear Walshe and Gwenda Young (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), p. 17. Indeed, as early as 1934, the distinctiveness of Keane’s style and chosen subject features as an inside joke in *Devoted Ladies*, when one of the lesbian heroines comments on *Young Entry* (which she comes across in a “job lot” purchase of novels): “Oh, we’re in Ireland I see…it’s worse, my dear. It’s full of the lowing of hounds and everyone stuffing themselves with buttermilk scones dripping with butter. Plenty of picturesque discomfort, and cold bath water, and those incredible Irish mountains always in the distance.”

\(^{152}\) Of course Anglo-Irish authorial attraction to the native servant as minor character, and even narrator, staffing the big house novel has been a staple in the tradition dating to *Castle Rackrent*, but Keane’s strategic recalibration of the type differs considerably from a text that either projects a stereotypical consciousness onto a shrewd but formally ignorant type, or, as is the case with Thady Quirk, requires the definitional ambivalence of a character devised to mediate between two powers—i.e. Thady’s discursive style is none other than the expression of his predicament. And while Maria Edgeworth’s novel deploys stylized Irish vernacular to mostly comedic, light-hearted ends, her considered opinion of ‘native’
but the ad hoc ‘managerial’ chatelaines that the straitened households of the landlord class by the late 1920s began to require. The simmering distrust of Irish Catholic otherness becomes, I argue, the mechanism for investigating Anglo-Irish self-destruction. I stress the controversial racialized implications of these interrogations because, both during and long after the discursive fashion had deservedly run its course, Keane’s novels stridently invoke Irish domestics as ‘slaves,’ while structurally implying that such abjection in fact marks the long con tyranny of the weak. Alongside the charged language of involuntary servitude, Keane displays a gallery of imported American racist kitsch: “black plaster nigger” statues, relegated to the servants’ quarters in *Two Days in Aragon* (1941) resurface in the drawing room of *Good Behaviour*’s Temple Alice forty years later, in the latter case presiding over the surreptitiously queer and eminently expression was patronizingly imperialist in the extreme. In her co-authored text *Practical Education* (1798), for example, Edgeworth discourages parents from even letting their children associate with their uneducated servants because, “ignorance and vice are characteristics of servants, and . . . the Edgeworths leave no doubt that vernacular language, an aspect of behavior, is a manifestation of such shortcomings” (qtd in: Brian Hollingworth, *Maria Edgeworth's Irish Writing: Language, History, Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1997), p. 19. After the mid-1830s, Edgeworth abandoned Irish subjects and preferred didactic, moralistic narrators to the convoluted mechanisms of Thady in *Rackrent*. As Anne Hirsch Moffitt notes of the complex paratexts that mark *Rackrent* among the unstable novelistic assemblages of Ireland in the decades of the Union: “Realism of the 19th century proves an insufficient vehicle for Irish novels because its execution is reliant on concealing its underlying mechanisms, which is precisely what is of most interest in Irish literature.” Moffitt, “Reviving the Rural: The Modernist Poetics of the 20th century Rural Novel” (Princeton University: Ph.D. dissertation: 2012), p. 100.

153 “…The only tyranny that lasts.”: A point of structural irony in Wilde’s representations of feminine domesticity at work in the public realm, ala *A Woman of No Importance* (1893). While Keane’s fiction not-infrequently perpetuates, and occasionally deconstructs, the colonialist fantasy of the Irish servant, it is certainly not my intention to propose any facile equivalency between such Irish characters and the non-white servant classes appearing in the contemporary Anglophone literature of other plantation zones. A comparative analysis of the literary legacy of servitude among former slave-holding populations appears in: Elizabeth Christine Russ, *The Plantation in the Postslavery Imagination* (Oxford University Press: 2009), where she assesses the servant of color in post-WWI fiction in the American South within a Global Souths/trans-American framework. Her study ranges across the Spanish Caribbean, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil.
doomed relationship of the son of the estate. Keane is fascinated by the consequences of heterosexual male privilege in the big house economy, and shocking depictions of clandestine affairs, both of persecuted homosexual desire, and of master-servant exploitation, dot her novelistic canon.

_Taking Chances_ debuts several of the key themes treated in this chapter, albeit in passing, unevenly-developed form. The novel is suffused with scenes of muted violence, predicated on a pointedly cynical assessment of the self-mythologizing pieties of the rentier class. Keane’s embrace of the contemporary big house as novelistic fodder brought down the domestic critical censure I quote in the introduction (c.f. P.C. Trimble). Seemingly, so long as Keane was content to write novels for a London-based literary public without dwelling on representations of the ‘native’ Irish—encompassing the big houses’ many dependents and dynamic political contingencies within a context of colonialist architecture—she avoided attracting reviewers’ chagrin. Yet Keane’s politics were ambivalent regarding the prerogatives of Anglo-Irish hauteur from the beginning of

---

154 _Two Days in Aragon_ is perhaps Keane’s most provocative meditation on the sexual victimization of Irish Catholics as an underclass. A main plot line features the big house daughter, Grania, conducting an affair with a Sinn Fein-affiliated tenant, himself the son of a servant, Nan O’Neill, who was fathered by the aristocratic patriarch of Aragon. Grania reflects that Nan will be crushed by the revelation of the relationship, as her longtime nurse has internalized identification with the big house masters to a virtually-totalizing degree. “For a Fox, a daughter of Aragon, to carry on an affair with an O’Neill from the Mountain was as wrong, Grania knew, to Nan, as the love of black and white people seemed to her” (15). More generally, the servants in _Two Days in Aragon_ are aware of, and focalize for the reader, the long hidden past of erotic manipulation visited upon the working classes (including tenants) by the Fox family, whose illegitimate offspring among “the poor country girls who worked in the house…had been despised and aborted, unless they were lucky and found some man to put shoes on a Fox’s pleasure” (156). I do not treat the novel here because it (virtually alone) has received sustained attention along the lines I propose. See especially accounts by Vera Kreilkamp and Derek Hand.

155 Following, that is, her two juvenile works _The Knight of Cheerful Countenance_ (1926) and _Young Entry_ (1928)—novels interesting in their own right, if easily recognizable romans à clef, overly-parodic in their retailing of hunting culture.
her career. The omniscient narrator of *Taking Chances* frequently mocks the archetypal shallowness of the Sorriers at Sorristown, who:

like all families forming part of the English garrison in Ireland...have had their ups and downs. [But] the present representatives of the family do no discred...handsome and bold, and the women of the family charming and virtuous creatures. Tradition must be quoted, as the numerous family portraits which frown or simper from the walls of Sorristown are of a mediocrity which hardly supports the theory of persistent good looks. Roguey [the eldest son] was a good specimen of the males of his race (5-6, 51).

As events develop, it becomes clear that only one of the remaining Sorriers, the betrothed Maeve, in any sense conforms to the fictions of charm and virtue that have maintained the family’s local entitlements. Neither does Maeve’s “modest, innocent” nature and “ponderously obvious” tact avail in the changing times, as every male Sorrier and, tragically, Maeve’s new husband, Rowley, gravitates toward the thrill of the vivacious, unconstrained English visitor, Mary (98). Maeve constitutes a type of unimaginatively-obedient aristocratic femininity in Keane’s fiction (the less-lovable apotheosis of which, Nicandra, dominates *Queen Lear*). Failing to cast off the fetters of inherited privilege and its concomitant timidity of mind, Maeve appears as a remnant of colonialist detritus in the wreckage of the big house, adrift in a social order that no longer rewards the unreflective and merely dutiful arbiters of manorial privilege.156

---

156 That Maeve is to be read as a failed, though endearing, portrait of atavistic Anglo-Irish womanhood emerges through a virtually-obsessive sub-commentary in the novel comparing her socially-conditioned charms against Mary’s “undefeatable,” urban New-Womanism: “If Maeve had no more purpose than a lily, who has not known that cold thrill of entirely unsordid rapture that a bright lily growing gives? Is not that purpose enough?”; “It was not alone that [Mary] had a face and voice to throw spells, but there was all about this girl, breathing from her, an atmosphere of charm, secret and afar. She was exciting. Things, one felt, would happen round her. Mary was a factor for disturbance. [She was] a silver, lovely pirate craft, sailing into strange and uncharted seas” (30, 37, 74).
As Maeve’s promising marriage implodes under the forces of ennui, emotional estrangement, and adultery, the shrewd septuagenarian Aunt Edythe manages the faltering ledgers of Sorristown, controlling the youngest generation via her closely-guarded purse-strings and an imperious declamatory mode the upstart Mary labels “she-male haggery…You couldn’t be too careful with Aunt Edythe—she had all the money in the family and was as old as a bush” (34, 37). While the characters of April Swift and Aunt Tossie elaborate such logic in Keane’s last two novels, here Aunt Edythe initiates readers to the realities of the daily rites of the big house maintained by strained artifice, and only so long as matronly largess provides.

In its most audacious exercise of political commentary, *Taking Chances* scrutinizes the authoritarian sexual prerogatives of the Gentry. In a peculiarly fantastic subplot, Roguey impregnates and abandons the teenaged Lizzie Conroy, whose tenant family then blackmails the Sorriers for livestock, a ramshackle cottage, and arable plots of land. Meanwhile, in the big houses, events unwittingly replicate the Conroy debacle, as Mary becomes pregnant by Maeve’s husband, marries Roguey as cover, and attempts to induce a miscarriage. Even as Lizzie languishes, and eventually (it is implied) dies while giving birth to Roguey’s bastard, the eldest Sorrier shirks responsibility, meditating that “generations of his family had done as they pleased…his breeding came to his rescue. He’d see the [Conroy] fellow damned first and come down handsomely later” (205). Roguey’s illegitimate child, whose likely fate is hauntingly unconfirmed, is born a “horrid thing,” a “beastly deformity, not like a person at all.” Lizzie, surrounded by priests, but lacking access to proper care or even the less dangerous abortifacients that
Mary can acquire at will, “takes drugs and tries to do away with herself,” and the narrator’s condemnation of her death lands squarely at the Sorriers’ door (206-207). In the end, Sorristown is left with no heir, legitimate or otherwise, even as those members of the Gentry who bucked the conventions of familial duty in the first place abscond across the Channel, abandoning an intractable, squirearchal Ireland for the anonymous existence of deracinated cosmopolitans.

“Places and dependents mattered too”: Middle Management and the New Feudal Pastoral

In the process of delineating the forces that have left big house inhabitants as “isolated as echo in a cave,” Keane produces a suggestive hybrid figure in the genre: the managerial Gentry chatelaine. This character’s functional and acutely-stylized acceptance of the Anglo-Irishry’s reduced economic purview situates her as a shrewd intermediary between the servants and the unsustainably grand Gentry of the recent past. In the characters of Aunt Dicksie, Aroon St. Charles (Good Behaviour), and Aunt Tossie (Queen Lear), Keane models the fallout of an influential post-revolutionary theory of the Ascendancy’s options for societal survival by accommodation. A case articulated most

---

157 The phrase used to describe the hyperbolic deafness of the eldest Swift sibling in Time After Time. April Swift Grange-Gorman’s selective deafness, along with her financially-comfortable widowhood, lived out among elderly ‘virgin’ sisters and a closeted gay brother, are the key factors establishing her as “grossly over-familiar with the house and the lives it enclosed” (8).

158 Bowen, with initial publication support from Sean O’Faolain, elaborates a set of premises later taken up by Hubert Butler, whose essayistic voice in Escape from the Anthill champions the “still small countryman’s acquiescence in seemingly immutable things” as a failsafe against Ireland’s supposed loss of national community. For Butler, as late as 1985, the “minor gentry” to which he belonged (being a
extensively by Elizabeth Bowen, this strain of social prescription from the 1940s onward aspired to preserve key aspects of Anglo-Irish cultural privilege, wherein the big houses might, in Bowen’s phrasing “justify [their] existences in changed conditions” by reanimating forms of social relations(predicated on “good manners and good behavior” that “subjugate the personal to the impersonal.” Bowen’s formulation here recalls a common trope of Lost Cause literature in the American South: white hardship stands as a metaphor for class oppression and the sidelong appropriation of social victimhood. Put another way: Bowen’s nonrepresentation of the dreary reality of big house life for those “vestigial members of the class who lived in their [master’s] homes, whose hands opened their doors, cooked and served their meals [and] brought up their children” allows her to conjecture a future in which Anglo-Irish class privilege is sustained precisely by a continued refusal to see such laborers as they really were.

somewhat less prosperous cousin of the Bowens) serve, in the face of global capitalism ("international industrialism") as an introspective, self-sufficient manorial community set against the myriad "ravages of secondhand experience" in an Ireland anxious to sign on for economic acceleration, and the silencing of its recent internal upheavals, most obviously the Anglo-Irish and Civil Wars.

Elizabeth Bowen, “The Big House” in The Bell (Vol. 1, No. 1: October, 1940), as quoted in pp. 22-23 of the introduction. “The Big House” further deflects attention from the servants by meditating on “tradition” and Anglo-Irish “impersonality” in the form of an allusive rhetorical dodge: “these [big] houses have made no natural growth from the soil—the idea that begot them was a purely social one. The functional parts of them …were sunk underground, concealed by walls or trees…Yet, in another sense, the most ornate, spacious parts of these buildings were the most functional—the steps, the halls, the living rooms, the fine staircases—it was these that contributed to society, that raised life above the exigencies of mere living to the plane of art, or at least style. There was a true bigness, a sort of impersonality, in the manner in which the houses were conceived” (73). Much of the subtending philosophy of Bowen’s Court is, as the first chapter outlines, an elaboration of the Big House as a national symbol and trans-cultural model under whose dispensations “character is printed on every hour…house[s] in which something important occurred once, and seems, from all evidence to be occurring still” (20).

Far from endorsing any such trajectory of revamped noblesse by which to salvage class mores, Keane’s late novels in particular slyly diagnose such thinking as elitist wish-fulfillment. In *Good Behaviour*, Aroon juxtaposes the fretful, egoistic hypocrisy of Anglo-Irish economic deterioration with the abiding miseries of the servants on the socially-belated estate:

Temple Alice, after several generations as a dower house, came to Mummie when her mother died. Papa farmed the miserably few hundred acres that remained of the property. Leisure they may have enjoyed but they knew little about comfort. [They had] to escape from the land agent and other buzzing tormentors of a leisured life […] the servants wore holy medals and scapulars under their cotton dresses, and ate Robin starch from the laundry, partly as a thinning diet, and partly because they were hungry. They didn’t expect much to eat then, and they certainly didn’t get it. Dining-room and servants’ halls fed very differently (10, 12; 45).

Not until Aroon’s middle age, when ready money has at last evaporated and the St. Charles credit is openly ruined, does the family face anything resembling true poverty; it is the fear of hunger that finally binds Aroon and the servant Rose Byrne in a complicated state of dependency, one suggestive of true empathy and of psychological hybridity.

As Derek Hand has argued concerning the divergent aesthetic techniques Keane and Bowen manifest in pressurizing “the unconscious undercurrents surrounding sexuality, nation and gender,” Keane, unlike Bowen, did not inherit a family estate, and so, quite possibly, she did not mature under the “very real pressure of attempting to continue on with Big House life and tradition” in independent Ireland. ¹⁶¹ Overall, Hand notes, Keane “seems more prepared to consider the Big House in a compromised

---

form.” Keane’s expansive and abiding interest in the forces of psychological conformation between servants and masters allows her a distinctive vantage on the prevailing formal paradox for the post-independence big house novel: that of imagining inheritance and landed succession (the problem being lack thereof). *Good Behaviour*, *Time after Time*, and *Queen Lear* push this insight to the point of depicting the disavowed dependence of the Anglo-Irish on their heavily-Othered native servants as nothing less than an aporia, the lived experience of which often proves more damning for the revenants of the Gentry rather than those they oppress.

As Anne Moffitt has noted in “Reviving the Rural,” *Mad Puppetstown’s* opening series of declarations (“THEN: --They said: ‘You naughty man!’ They wore hair nets and tortoise-shell combs” and so on) demonstrates an almost studiously diametric style to Bowen’s “Preface” in *The Last September* (1929). Each author, in Moffitt’s analysis, opens by “establishing the past tense of her novel” to the shared effect of “transporting us into a past time as if she were carrying us into a foreign land, crossing a threshold [over which] everything exists on a different plane both materially and behaviorally from the...

---


163 *The Last September* is, so far, the only one of my novels deliberately set back in a former time. The ‘then,’ the Past, as an element, was demanded. From the start, the reader must look—and more, must be aware of looking—backward, down a perspective cut through the years. The ordinary narrative past tense, so much in usage as to be taken for granted, did not seem to me likely to be forceful enough, so I opened my second paragraph with a pointer: ‘In those days, girls wore crisp white skirts and transparent blouses clotted with white flowers; ribbons threaded through…appeared over their shoulders.’ Lois’s ribbons lead into history.” Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (New York: Knopf, 1952 [1929]), vii-viii.
contemporary.” Keane’s alternative imaginative trajectory for the Anglo-Irish lies, in part, in the historically-situated big house ‘bureaucrat.’ This character operates from the position of a ‘survivor’ of pseudo-aristocratic decrepitude, embracing an ethics of provincial self-sufficiency with societal roots in the historically-Protestant ‘Irish Countrywomen’s Associations,’ which De Valera’s national agenda did much to galvanize from the 1930s on. The agrarian energies that the mid-Twentieth century Gentry might have harnessed from De Valera’s conservative and pastoral political program form a largely untheorized component of big house literary thinking, and I argue for Keane’s evocative deployment of this historical phenomenon.

Because Keane’s career falls in two distinct periods, wherein she resumed novel writing in 1980 after a nearly forty year hiatus, the nascent insights she offers in the interwar fiction regarding the regulation of Irish women’s sexuality, in tandem with

---


165 The oldest women’s organization in the country, the ICA was founded in 1910, originally named the Society of United Irishwomen (UI). According to Aileen Heverin’s official history: “the founding members were predominantly middle-class Protestant women. Their work was mostly class based, often with the explicit understanding that a social superior had a duty to help a social inferior” (25-26). Partially in protest of the tightening atmosphere of censorship and gendered conservatism enshrined in the 1937 constitution, the ICA Guilds boomed—without state support—during the Forties and after. “In 1939, when war broke out, there were 78 guilds in 22 of the 26 counties; by 1949, there were 234 guilds nationwide” (83, 102). The ICA became a vital link between suffrage and the Equal Rights Movements of the 1970s. See Aileen Heverin, The Irish Countrywomen’s Association: A History 1910-2000 (Wolfhound Press: Dublin, 2000).

166 As Derek Mahon observed in his 1987 review “Keeping the Anglo-Irish Alive”: “[D]e Valera inspired particular fear and loathing among the Ascendancy, who called him ‘Valera,’ refusing him the aristocratic ‘de’ though they grew to admire him, however grudgingly, as it became clear that he was a man of vision and principle. Also, like them, he knew how to crack the whip.” Derek Mahon, “Keeping the Anglo-Irish Alive” Review of: Mark Bence-Jones, Twilight of the Ascendancy The Spectator (24 January 1987), pp. 28-30.
Anglo-Irish complicity in such social proscriptions, spring up forcefully in the late novels. In *Time After Time*, for example, May Swift, having no hope of marriage after a childhood incident severely mangles her hand, takes to “china mending, tweed pictures, the Irish countrywoman’s floral club…nothing was beyond her will” to appear a “very fulfilled person in the hermetic little world of the moneyless among the rich” (13-14, 71).

The mature texts critique not only the myths of mid-century national society which romanticized poverty and rural isolation, but also interrogate the waning Protestant role in what Clair Wills calls “the government’s drive toward consolidating Irish civic identity from the 1940s.”

Bankrolling what remains of the down-at-heel estates, Keane’s dowagers expose the squalid conditions of atavistic plantations—ranging from the thinly-fictionalized Puppetstown, or the moldering “servantless and silent” big house of Durraghglass in *Time After Time*, to the static and sterile Deer Forest in *Queen Lear*—as stand-ins for the failure of vertically-integrated neo-feudal patriarchy. These novels, taking class decline as a plot parallel to the trajectories of their characters, propose, as Vera Kreilkamp has described: “moving into the void created by politically and economically emasculated fathers and husbands. [As such,] twentieth-century big house women expend their voracious energies and appetites by decorating their homes, snubbing their social inferiors, or torturing their children.” These motifs are prevalent in Keane’s canon, but as generic convention they can account only for the fixed gothic elements common to

---


Anglo-Irish literature trans-historically. *Time After Time*, for example, depicts the Swift family as pragmatically unable, rather than just psychologically unwilling, to either effectively anatomize or integrate with contemporary Irish village life.\(^{169}\)

Keane’s houses, as Sinead Mooney observes, should be more broadly conceived as “the locus through which she dramatizes the determining mould of the past on an individual subject, particularly the female subject.”\(^{170}\) A central crisis of status in each novel exposes the big house as supremely vulnerable to social violence, and in response, the past, in the form of domestic ritual, becomes less recursive and subject to an ethic of experimentation. Most often such adjustments point Keane’s hereditary chatelaines toward a convergence with the laboring classes as well as an embrace of a petit-bourgeois

\(^{169}\) May’s ‘predicament’ points up the marooned, alien quality of the family’s life more generally, especially the plot twist which forces her to accept employment in the village antique shop, through which her sister April has been gradually auctioning off personal heirlooms to buoy her private accounts. May, kept waiting alone in the Victoriana-chocked shop on her sister’s errands, notices an enameled tea-pot, overlooked by the tawdry clerk as mere decoration, which to the trained eye of the straitened Gentry (accustomed to life with intrepid servants) appears an absurdly obvious place to lodge valuables. Simply to satisfy curiosity, May lifts the lid of the pot to see “Loose notes, two one pound notes, three five pound notes, and a wad of others held together by an elastic band, clustered like leaves in the dark circle of their container. May replaced the lid and put back the tea-pot. What a silly place to keep money. *Too* obvious was all she thought.” (222). Even as her class prevents her conceiving any interest in stealing easy money, May immediately and without scruple shop-lifts a china trinket that she spots as a coveted mate to a childhood bauble. She is subsequently apprehended and blackmailed into restoration jobs for the shop at “a wage far beneath her abilities and half that earned by the Jap she supplanted” (230). The many depictions of the grubbing “angry little Oriental” assistant with his lisp, give some idea of the racist imagery Keane was comfortable employing for contrasting class and ethnic effect. The critique Keane offers is one in which the Swifts land themselves in hot water with a mercantile economy that trades on the faded exoticism of the A-I as “mere tourist stuff” because they actually cannot understand, despite their privations, any worldview structured by ‘crass’ getting and spending.

matriarchy; fathers and male heirs are rendered as merely superannuated; debonair but emotionally maladroit, they are most often dispatched in accidental death.

The most arresting early iteration of Keane’s matronly country-house managers, Aunt Dicksie, is formed by her decisive defense of the Chevington estate at Puppetstown during the War of Independence. Perhaps again taking a cue from *The Last September*, Keane employs the scenario of the British subaltern murdered by the IRA as the primary factor marking Puppetstown for reprisal. To close the opening half of the novel, Aunt Dicksie obstinately refuses to flee with the family to England, despite the outrageous privations that ensue, and so saves the estate from arson. Her martyrdom to the big house engenders, both in the definition of Aunt Dicksie’s peculiar character, and the historic anxieties ghosting the manor house, a dazzling clarity in reduced circumstances. As the narrator informs us: “Puppetstown possessed Aunt Dicksie” (172). The interwar period then heralds “the absolute reign of Dicksie and her able prime minister [the long-time servant] Patsy Roche” (172-173).

Making a virtue of her hardships, Aunt Dicksie’s “extreme and unaffected uninterest in what her neighbors might think of her actions [allowed her to exercise] one of the few unassailable prerogatives left to the aristocracy.” Denying the unsustainable outlays of past hospitality, Dicksie allows a “strange ridge of character [to] develop in her happy loneliness.” Namely, Dicksie grows economical, even as she blossoms into an eccentric aesthete:

If her fishing tenants gave her a salmon, Miss Dicksie promptly sent it up to Dublin and sold it, and spent the money on roses for the garden. Her clothes wore out, but a darksome cupboard [filled with ‘bell-shaped’
antiques] filled up the deficiencies of her wardrobe to her own entire satisfaction. Patsy shot rabbits and skinned and cooked them (and he trapped them and sold them, too.) The last of an untrained series of sluts who had, under Patsy’s harsh ruling, formed the female staff of Puppetstown was dismissed and never replaced. ‘Aren’t we well enough as we are?’ said Patsy and settled down to his reign undisputed. Dicksie had always worked to keep Puppetstown for others, now for herself she made beautiful the things she cared about and neglected what seemed to her of no account (177-178).

In Part II, the heroine Easter Chevington is psychically compelled to return and claim Puppetstown by the paranormal consciousness she and her cousin detect in an Oxfordshire country house. (They are, in transparently Wildean fashion, expelled from England by the ghosts of lost ideas.) In the attic music room of Luddington Court, ten miles from Oxford, Basil and Easter are assaulted by turns with the relics of imperial adventure and the ghosts such objects harbor for the hyphenated races who “have room in their minds for them, poor things”:

Easter went through the door and up the stairs, a faint feeling of trespass in her mind as she did so. The stairs led straight to a room, no door dividing them from it. No one was there at all, yet Easter felt as though her coming had made a sudden hush in a room full of people…she went slowly to a tall, incredibly narrow window opened almost into the dark, slender pyramid of an Irish yew-tree. Obviously the window was not often opened, for a twig of yew was worn and elbowed from tapping on the glass. A glass-fronted cabinet held a collection of faded shells. Easter read ‘Mauritius, 1865.’ Easter sat down on the window-sill which was built wide and low to the floor. An old Punch lay near her hand. Easter read on—then with a feeling of satiety that was almost nausea she looked up, and on the moment all her mind and all the room were flooded with sadness so unspeakable as to terrify her. It came in a tide beating quietly between the narrow walls, flooding gently in like sea water between rocks. The room was filled with lonely, voiceless voices and sad hands unseen (224-226).
When Easter subsequently ruminates on their impending ‘restoration’ to the demesne in ‘Co. Westcommon,’ she characterizes the place-names of Ireland as “charming spells” harboring “wild, apocalyptic beauty”; she and Basil recklessly romanticize Ireland as “a littler, wilder sort of place…everything that England’s not.” (229, 236). Keane’s interest in burlesquing Matthew Arnold’s theories of the autochthonous, sensational Irish becomes legible in the topographical features Easter intones before travel: “Mandoran, Mooncoin, and the Black Stair”—an incantation of a mountain range lifted, perhaps, from a manual on Celtic Twilight prosody.

The young pair’s return, however, sets off a considerably more visceral and mundane process of excavation, both of totemic objects—as, in their presumptive comfort, Easter and Basil are confounded by Aunt Dicksie having hidden the Chevington valuables—and in eradicating the traces of Spartan food, shabby furnishings, and rebellious servants that testify to the altered circumstances of landlords in a newly-independent republic. “How did she dare to be so unlike the graceful, useful aunt they remembered?” Easter muses “And was it necessary for her to wear men’s laced and hooked boots, and a long purple skirt that very nearly had a bustle?” (252). Not the least of psychic changes to Puppetstown has been borne out in the strategic confluence of their aunt and the estate’s identity with the remaining hired help, as Easter and Basil at last register in shades of highly-ironized bafflement. Dicksie gives the returning claimants a cool welcome, wishing only to continue in her idiosyncratic economies even as they plow on, fortified with inherited money, determined to restore the estate to pre-War splendor.
In the midst of failing home improvements, Easter laments “unimaginatively” that Aunt Dicksie is “quite mad” and “as difficult as the house is. She’s worse than the plumbers. She doesn’t want us any more than the place wanted us. I don’t think she wishes us luck somehow. And I can’t tell you how frightful the cook was to-day—the things she said to me—she’ll have to go” (272). What the (otherwise unnamed) Dublin Cook has related to Easter is a bristling ultimatum, as her larder and her kitchen are an embarrassment to respectable living. When the mistress attempts to retreat into the habit of command and dictate to the cook what will and will not be tolerated in Puppetstown, the unperturbed servant treats Easter to the following prognostication:

‘God knows ye quit the place like rats when the Republic boys was in the sway. Two more years,’ she prophesized, ‘and ye’ll be under the grass and yer toes cocked in the grave’ (and cocked her two thumbs in grisly pantomime), ‘and not another word more about ye—God damn ye!’…Easter chose the moment for immediate flight (263).

Sensing that they may indeed be forced from Puppetstown if they make further enemies, Basil describes the process of reconciling Aunt Dicksie to what she considers the hoightly, “hard and efficient” ‘foreign’ affectations of the heirs as nothing short of “an exorcism” (277).

The politicized treatment of the serving class in Mad Puppetstown trains sustained attention on the power mechanisms structuring the Ascendancy estate, incorporating the reverberations of World War on the country house economy. Mad Puppetstown successfully demarcates Keane’s fictional project of attempting to capture two histories set in a single narrative: one emanating from the newly-modulated perspective of the degenerating Protestant Ascendancy, and the other contained in the counter-history of
peripheral, often primitivized, Irish Catholic servants, whose lives prove, across Keane’s fiction, increasingly entangled in the circumstances of the former’s historical decline. Through her canon, Keane remains interested in how the purportedly-benevolent impulses of the Ascendancy, exercised under the sign of regimenting ‘natural’ relations with Irish servants, reveal the structural supports of deep ideological oppression.

In Good Behaviour, Aroon St. Charles, aging only child of a formerly-grand family, registers the bleak knowledge that her search for human intimacy and social signification has been conditioned from earliest childhood both by the grievous loss of her governess and the competitive energies of the life-long family servant ‘Wild’ Rose Byrne, whose actions indeed form the first sentence of the novel. More practical than Nicandra Forester, Aroon discerns that her repressed sense of failure as an unlovely and unloved big house daughter stems from her “Mummie’s” constitutional refusal to acknowledge the unpleasant circumstances of their unraveling social order—to sustain the illusion of which Mrs. St. Charles is more than willing to sacrifice the happiness of her disappointing children.

The framing device of Good Behaviour establishes the pragmatically shrinking ground between servant and gentry, opening and concluding with a near-elderly, yet ruthlessly robust and conniving, Aroon having invalided her mother and relocated Mummie and Rose to Gull’s Cry, the “small Gothic folly of a house” which Aroon inveigles from poor relations after the sale of the ancestral demesne (4). The opening sentence slyly registers a pervasive anxiety that the long-impugned dignity of the servant has resulted in the effective mental colonization of the mistress: “Rose smelt the air,
considering what she smelt; a miasma of unspoken criticism and disparagement fogged the distance between us. I knew she ached to censure my cooking, but through the years I have subdued her. She has this maddening pretense of deafness. It is simply one of her ways of ignoring me. I know that. I have known it for most of my life” (4-5). As soon becomes clear, the threat of Rose withdrawing her affection, even after decades of negotiated domestic tyranny, instills in Aroon a sense of primal desperation. Just after Mummie’s abrupt and gruesome demise (for which Aroon is obliquely responsible, having forced on her an abhorred dish of rabbit), Rose lashes out, voicing a long-entertained desire to be done with the family.

Gripped by terror, Aroon immediately leverages the consequences: “I am her employer, I thought. I shall raise her wages substantially. I can afford to be kind to Rose. She will learn to lean on me. There is nobody in the world who needs me now and I must be kind to somebody” (9). No longer possessed of the coolly aristocratic confidence of her mother’s generation, who were concerned only that the servants did their duty, the novel dramatizes the ways in which servanthood, as a species of emotional and psychological slavery, makes, in the post-Ascendancy era, the dynamic of human dependency visible across class as a patterning of fundamental loss.

Counterpointing the dependence of the St. Charles family on Rose is the originary trauma of the English governess Mrs. Brock, and her role in forming the children’s structure of memory and thus the very shape of Aroon’s narration—what the protagonist labels an investigation back “into the uncertainties and glories of [her] youth,” in an effort to “understand more about what became of [us]” (10). Mrs. Brock represents the
idealized good mother, whose familial generosity to Aroon and her brother Hubert allows
the children a measure of security and sense of self-worth ("we loved her dearly from the
start to the finish of her reign"), even as her previous experience as governess to the
Massinghams at Stoke Charity, Dorset constitutes a fantasy narrative of colonial
interpolation. Mrs. Brock is dismissed from the Massingham family for her alarmingly
over-sentimental attachment to certain members of the family—ultimately a coded
imputation that she, with her Romantic poetry, her quaint manners, and her physically-
demonstrative nature, is "turning" their son Richard homosexual.

When Mrs. Brock arrives in the hinterlands of Temple Alice, she nonetheless
assumes the charge of modeling upright Britishness to the Anglo-Irish, who tacitly accept
her earlier proximity to aristocratic life as a credential worth inculcating in the St. Charles
children: "we lived again with her the conduct of life at Stoke Charity" (45). As Aroon
reconstructs this period of childhood: "Mrs. Brock found life in Ireland a complete
change from any previous schoolroom experience…As in Dorset, the servants loved Mrs.
Brock. Here they were wild and garrulous, speaking a strange language in which she was
disappointed at never hearing the word ‘Begorrah,’ but she could hear their distant
droning of the rosary at bedtime" (44).

Hubert St. Charles, freed from the stifling atmosphere of the estate by a university
education, later takes Richard Massingham as a lover. The men, in a tensely-romantic
subplot, then delude Aroon into believing she is Richard’s putative love interest so as to
camouflage their intimacy. That Mrs. Brock makes Richard’s entrée into their adult lives
possible and indeed desirable is an explicit preoccupation of the text:
Hubert and I adored Mrs. Brock. (Years afterwards Richard was to contradict or make explicit much of what she told us)...true to the intricacies of the rather cruel cult game that, years later, Richard, Hubert, and I were to play at Temple Alice. Richard, creator of the game, enjoyed recalling every level of life at Stoke Charity in that era of childhood when he lost his first love, Mrs. Brock. We joined in, despoiling our memories of her with horrid fun. [...] We taunted the separate childhoods, which had left us the people we were (31, 45).

No small part of the childhood traumas that have produced the shrewish and defensive Aroon fall at the feet of Mrs. St. Charles, who spends her days adamantly not noticing her husband’s many illicit affairs—even, or especially, when they are conducted with servants, thus inviting social upheaval onto the premises. Major St. Charles’ effortless seduction and impregnation of the naïve Mrs. Brock leads to her suicide, and thus to the effective end of Aroon and Hubert’s childhood and the only altruistic affection they’ve ever known.

Even as Mummie remains disdainful of her children’s respective failure to carry on the family fortunes in approved style, Mrs. St. Charles harbors a complicated relationship to Rose, the longest-serving domestic at Temple Alice, who, in the present-tense framing device of the text, emerges as the truly irreplaceable member of the family circle. On one hand, as Aroon hauntingly recalls throughout her own adolescence and early adulthood, madam is: “only too delighted” to have Rose attend to Mr. St. Charles’ every physical need. Mrs. St. Charles is habitually passive in the face of her husband’s philandering, and is acutely alienated from him after his leg is amputated following an injury in the First World War. In this way, the mistress classifies Rose as “her aide and slave” and instrumentalizes her to class-driven ends. Yet, Mrs. St. Charles does emit
signals of her disturbing culpability in Rose’s distorted status in the home across time. According to Aroon, Mummie painted the maid, “or drew her in hideous angular poses: long ribs, lean as a greyhound fit for the track…every painting or drawing was half-finished, and full of gaps and holes and unfailingly ugly, while Rose grew better-looking and blazed with more rude confidence every year that passed” (65).

Mummie’s psychic artistic admissions—a kind of reversal of the picture of Dorian Gray—index her tortured relationship not just to Rose, but to her son as well. When she paints the charismatic (and still closeted) Hubert, he describes the portrait as “a broken bicycle with two heads and one tiny eye” (78). His untimely death in a car crash, survived by Richard, effectively ends the family line. To pass the remaining time of the novel, Mrs. St. Charles restores Regency furniture until Temple Alice is impassably crowded with salvaged pieces, and she continues to paint “unimaginably ugly, angular, airified shapes in a graveyard atmosphere”—this is Aroon’s description of Mummie’s canvases filled with spring flowers (11). Mrs. St. Charles seems to be something of a surrealist, actually. Refusing her mother’s aesthetic standards in toto, Aroon in late life embraces a rebarbatively bourgeois identity, curating a twee “gallery” showcasing mementoes of Ascendancy hunting culture—and especially her Papa’s once-luminary role in it—in the sitting room of Gull’s Cry. Aroon’s museum of “silver cups, the model of a seven-pound sea trout, and rather misty snapshots of bags of grouse” predictably fails to arouse any expressions of “proper interest” in Mrs. St. Charles (4).

Ultimately, Aroon’s emotional dependence on Rose perversely parallels the relationship between Rose and Major St. Charles, who, bedridden by a stroke, relies
exclusively on her care and affection. As Aroon and Rose watch the patriarch die slowly in his bed, Aroon meditates: “[Rose] had been his nurse and washed and dressed him like a doll, and sat him up and laid him down. Now she stood apart from the difficulties of death…looking on as though at the death of an animal. I felt the same. He was changed. Changing and lessening every moment from a person to a thing” (213-214). In slipping between the ontological and semantic registers of ‘people’ (subjects who can know and exercise their ‘proper’ authority) and mere ‘things’ who exist in the big house economy alongside those servants whose dehumanization has formed the basis of their own eroded superiority, Keane indicates the Gentry as a social formation have been shown the historical door, and appear specifically ridiculous for clinging to the forms of their outmoded noblesse.

This logic finds its epitome in the ‘meta’ big house novel Queen Lear. The Forester family, whose patriarch Sir Dermot is described as “small and unapproachable,” and “genuinely indifferent to comfort and good living,” appears, in the eyes of his young daughter “as small as a doll” (20, 28, 102). Dermot is, after his wife abandons the family, managed by his widowed sister-in-law, Mrs. Florence Fox-Collier, known to all above stairs as Aunt Tossie. Tossie, in a “position of pseudo-authority” acts as liaison between the family and the servants, managing household protocol in a more administrative fashion before the Forester’s financial extinction (6). Tossie becomes cook and, essentially, head maid as the Thirties draw to a close. Owing to her tact and usefulness, the narrator informs us: “The servants all loved her and she liked them; her duties were
many and none of them seemed onerous to her. She kept her eye on things generally, and
never questioned or regretted her position. She was part of the family” (7).

As Queen Lear charts the economic collapse of the Foresters, the upwardly-
mobile servant ‘Silly-Willie’ Kelleher is revealed as both the driver of plot, and the
specter of the protagonist Nicandra’s literally fatal stupidity concerning reciprocity of
human affection. Nicandra and Willie’s contemporaneous childhoods form a study in
class contrasts: Willie begins life as the emotionally-troubled, illegitimate ‘idiot’ child of
a housemaid; he is “shut up in a back-room” of the manor’s West Gate Lodge, and
eventually succeeds, under the edifying, if not quite voluntary, tutelage of a local order of
nuns, to the post of devoted butler in the déclassé big house. Willie, promoted after the
butler of forty years suffers a stroke, “danced to the airs of a dying house, keeping its
remote stateliness alive above the enveloping neglect that clouded the memories of [the
head maid] Lizzie and her slaves” (102). Nicandra recalls their early interactions in the
third person, memories tinctured with such euphemism and traumatic repression they
appear sociopathic:

Nicandra had been such a good little Queen to [Willie]. She had enjoyed
bringing him goodies from the kitchen—ends of puddings in one of the
dog’s dishes, the last remains of cakes, meat, bones—only chicken bones,
because they were so bad for the dogs. She ordered him to dance [a jig] for
her before she bestowed the treats. Once, that was after Maman had gone,
and when his own mother was distant, she had compelled him to eat a
whole snail, slashing his legs with a nettle until he obeyed, and the
stinging of the nettle really enlivened his dancing. And there was another
little ‘it’ in the relationship between Queen and subject—a little incident
to leave strictly alone in the dark sludge of memory. After Maman went
away it excited her to hurt somebody. There was nobody to love (109).
When the extent of the Forester’s financial desperation is at length revealed, Willie, with his new-found license in the household’s “intimate affairs,” is described by Nicandra as “dancing on a grave…the death of the house. [Willie] was in power now, the only useful slave left to them. *He would* [she thinks] *rule them* out of necessity” (115, emphasis added).

Nicandra’s gratingly melodramatic childhood trauma—a Proustian set-piece in which she and her father are abandoned by hersadistically withholding *Maman*—leaves Nicandra a failed heroine; only the servants, who alternately face her persecution or indulgence, remain to buttress Nicandra’s lost sense of domestic intimacy and “proper” class authority. Desperate for the validation of romantic love, Nicandra is married for her family money and her class-instilled docility; as the former evaporates, the latter swells to appalling dimensions, but her boundless self-abnegation proves a useless strategy of marital preservation. Nicandra has miscarried her only pregnancy at her husband’s insistence, allowed him an affair with her childhood friend, and throughout the novel granted Andrew freedom to burn through the remaining Forester assets (the investments and savings of Aunt Tossie), yet nothing avails: “Without their horses and dogs, and the racing results, there was not a lot to talk about. There were hours when Andrew sustained good humor with whisky and Nicandra yearned silently for evening” (144).

Very near the conclusion, the omniscient narrator sums up the primal scene of parental abandonment and its irreversible narrative effects: “[Nicandra] lived again an evening of confused despair: the evening of the day when Maman, faultless and heartless, had gone away, leaving Nicandra with her great store of love unspent. Long ago, that
child had crossed into unreality. But the Nicandra who succeeded her was living on in a repeated loss where remembrance must be deprived of attention” (210). After such episodes spent taunting ‘Silly-Willie’ with foul language, or demanding he disrobe under bouts of whippings to satisfy her anatomical curiosity (the “little incident” of abuse that is revealed only in a parenthetical flashback), Nicandra primly refuses willed recollection of such cruelty, denying any acknowledgment of the servant’s humanity that might expose her own evacuated selfhood. Willie, in pointed contrast to Nicandra, is rendered empathetically throughout the text (whether in spite of, or owing to, his quiet tenacity and cunning is left an open question), and his social prerogatives prevail at the novel’s conclusion.

The reader of Keane’s late novels in particular is left to contemplate a shattered yet operative class hierarchy wherein the Ascendancy have been recast as characters in the story of an Irish servant. In such fictional portraits Keane registers a political intuition that few critics have discerned in gauging her contributions to the genre: namely, that the fate of the native laboring classes is profoundly integrated with the fate of Irish society on the whole.
“THEY HAD COME TO FIRE THE HOUSE”: CRIMINAL CONTENGENCIES IN THE NOVELS OF WILLIAM TREVOR

“Mr. Sullivan would not cease to nag, but his hopelessness, he knew, would continue to infect his solicitor’s authority…his outsider’s eye saw Lahardane, and the small household that had come about there, as something petrified, arrested in the drama there had been. Lucy was stilled too, a detail as in one of her own embroidered compositions.” 171

“The generation that came into literary ascendancy after the Second World War…had a special fondness for the hermeneutics of detection, which served them well in discrediting the ‘myth’ of character as a deep structure while providing them with a logically elegant paradigm for narrative construction.” 172

Published nearly twenty years apart, William Trevor’s *Fools of Fortune* (1983) and *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2002), the author’s first and final big house novels, may be understood as companion pieces in a theoretical study of psychological realism in twentieth-century Anglo-Irish fiction. In these novels, Trevor’s anti-romantic rendering of Ascendancy pastoralism renounces nostalgia as an interpretive paradigm accruing to the big house in decay. Both *Fools of Fortune* and *Lucy Gault* resist the temptation to emplot Anglo-Irish decline as a foregone conclusion, a feature of his work all too easily sidelined in light of the author’s penchant for impressively-unhappy endings.

---


Trevor’s novelistic non-resolutions are so disturbing that I argue for reading *Fools of Fortune* and *Lucy Gault* under the rubric of crime fiction, to consider how each presents meaning as constantly tendered by the engaged reader, and how these texts elucidate characters’ historical self-fashioning as a mechanics of plot. Both novels offer serialized points of view: *Fools of Fortune* consists of six coterminous books, titled simply with the names of their three alternating authors. Thematically, it positions the family as a microcosm of Irish social history spanning the years 1918 to 1983. *Lucy Gault*’s six books likewise explore a family’s fragmented life anchored in a declining big house, ending, in the middle 1990s, where the narrative began in 1921. Trevor’s structures implicitly dramatize a dialectics of pure contingency (what the philosopher Maurice Blanchot once called the awareness of “no other certainty than the concentration of chance”), as it contravenes in characters’ miscalculated responses to turmoil in the post-revolutionary Irish state.¹⁷³

Trevor’s critical reputation has been shaped by his modeling of Irish feminine consciousness responding, from widely-different vantages, to the agendas of the post-imperial nation.¹⁷⁴ *Fools* and *Lucy Gault* offer pointed critiques of—as well as alternatives to—the ‘nationalist son’ as a normative or celebrated figure of postcolonial subjectivity. Trevor’s scholarly accolades must be considered belated tribute aside his long-established popular readership. The first comprehensive study treating the majority


¹⁷⁴ On which *Felicia’s Journey* (1994) is perhaps the most widely-known along with the novels treated here.
of his fourteen novels did not appear until 2003. In it, Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt rightly claimed that “the Irishness of [Trevor’s] work, treating the North and the Troubles, the Big House, and the legacy of Ireland's domination by England has never been fully explored.”\textsuperscript{175} Trevor’s quietly-innovative returns to the big house tradition are in large part responsible for his reception as a writer of ‘women’s fiction.’ While many critics appear beguiled by Trevor’s prosaic and often-melancholy style (frequently pointing to the author’s professional training as an historian to buttress their evaluations), I argue there is no inherently or resignedly revisionist perspective in these works for the reader to inhabit. Both novels in fact dramatize that their characters, in the processes of reconstructing and interpreting obligations of class and religious difference, dictate how personal and public histories intersect.

Paramilitary arson is the catalyst of Anglo-Irish disarticulation in both novels; where the arsonists succeed in their horrific aims in the opening of \textit{Fools of Fortune}, in \textit{Lucy Gault} the act is thwarted but nonetheless productive of insurmountable tragedy for all involved. Each eruption of specifically colonial brutality is then processed by the novel as the formative experience of Ascendancy childhood. In \textit{Fools of Fortune}, Willie Quinton, the only male heir to the mansion and mills at Kilneagh, loses more than his family and patrimony to sectarian tragedy. Rationalizing violence to avenge the Quintons and reclaim his masculinity, Willie’s pathological trajectory serves to place the novel’s men of violence on ethical trial. Insurgent Catholic nationalist opinion endorses Willie’s reactionary brutality, even as the Church, represented here by the defrocked Fr.

Kilgarriff, condemns it. Trevor’s principled aversion to coding atrocity as the preserve of any one community is reflected in the reimagined arson plot of “Saints,” a short-story paratext of the novel. In the earlier narrative, as Vera Kreilkamp observes, the “attackers on Kilneagh, because they remain unnamed, are likely members of the IRA.”¹⁷⁶ In Fools, the scenario is recast to portray suffering inflicted by the colonialist forces on both Catholic and Protestant inhabitants of the estate. Both novels evince deep interest in the heuristic of sacrificial femininity styled as moral redemption. The Quinton women, and the family’s one-time maid, Josephine—the titular “saint” of the short story, who is institutionalized for grief-induced insanity—are clearly those most imperiled by acts of vengeance perpetrated by men on any side of the conflict.

While I affirm Trevor’s portrayal of the big house as a nexus of oppressive social relations, and one that proves acutely disabling for his female protagonists, it is my primary concern to delineate his disruptive uses of the Anglo-Irish literary tradition. Not the least of such experiments lies in Trevor’s characterization of the (Corkonian) Catholic solicitor, a figure revealed, in the Dickensian spirit of Mr. Jaggers, to be the centralized consciousness of plot contingencies. In Fools and Lucy Gault, Mr. Lanigan and Mr. Aloysius Sullivan personify the forces of an intensely parochial middle class in the process of being defined against both the “foreign” boundaries of Europe and the “greater crisis” of their own “country in upheaval” after WWI (LG, 60). Trevor’s solicitor-turned-detective emerges as a vital liaison, navigating the remaining Ascendancy through channels of national untimeliness and narrative misdirection. Toeing the line between

caricature and realist protagonist, Mr. Lanigan and Mr. Sullivan, in implementing the agendas of the masculine, public sphere in the lives of each novel’s socially-vulnerable protagonists, illuminate dubious distinctions of morality between Ireland’s rural and urban imaginaries.

Lucy Gault acts on a child’s impulse to run away when her parents announce they will be forced to leave their Co. Cork estate early in the War of Independence. A series of objectively banal, yet emotionally excruciating, errors of interpretation lead the Gaults to conclude that their child has drowned. When Mr. Sullivan, long-time counsellor of Everard and Heloise Gault, learns the truth and becomes desperate to make contact with the couple as they travel Europe in the interwar period, Trevor dismantles the hyper-positivistic impulses of the heroic detective, without discounting the dogged resilience Sullivan displays in dealing with the world’s casual absurdity and quotidian cruelty:

Mr. Sullivan shook Bridget’s hand…he wouldn’t desert them, he promised. He would continue to visit the house until a day of great rejoicing made that no longer necessary. No suggestion as to a place of exile rewarded his efforts—only surprise and concern that his enquiries should be necessary. In all this, Mr. Sullivan did not touch upon his own frustrations: since he spoke no foreign languages, his enquiries in likely countries had had to be channeled through official sources in Dublin, but the confused political hiatus before, and following, an unsatisfactory Treaty made communication far from easy. A transference of power, of order and responsibility, took place at its own slow progression; chaos prevailed while it did so. Receiving no reply to his letters, Mr. Sullivan had twice forwarded copies to offices that subsequently appeared to be unstaffed. He blamed himself as much as the circumstances of which he was a victim; for the urgency he sought to convey had clearly not registered. Some garbled version of his pleas might one day be disseminated, stale by then and carelessly strung together, the poignancy of a family’s agony reduced to nothing much […] ‘We must hope,’ he urged again that afternoon, although he did not now believe in hope. He wished Bridget good-bye and walked to his car beneath a rain-filled sky (LG, 55, 59-60).
Displaying Mr. Sullivan’s personal and professional knowledge thwarted by the lurching operations of numerous states in crisis, Trevor contests any imaginative annexation of the local and the subcultural by the diegetic prerogatives of the nation. Both *Fools* and *Lucy Gault* bring the operations of the police procedural to bear on the conventions of the melodrama and the historical romance to suggest new strategies of reading equal to a reconfiguration of the big house novel.

Appearing at two essential junctures in *Fools*, Mr. Lanigan, and his mute, though assiduous legal clerk, the “excellent Declan O’Dwyer” (whom Lanigan summons by rapping the office wall with a ruler), serves the formal ends of “discrediting character as a deep structure” while defying the bumbling function of the caricature as he is drawn:

Mr. Lanigan was a person of pyramidal shape, a small head sloping into the slope of his shoulders, arms sloping again as he spread them over his desk. A chalk-striped brown suit imposed a secondary shape of its own…two beady eyes were almost lost in the smooth inclines of his face, and artificial chins, created by a stern celluloid collar, all but obscured the flamboyance of a polka-dotted brown tie. Mr. Lanigan’s smile perpetually twinkled (71).

Lanigan, with his assumed geniality and prepossessing corpulence, seems drawn to evoke the reader’s delight, recalling Dicken’s archetypal police-detective, Mr. Bucket. Yet it soon becomes clear that, despite his perpetual twinkle, the solicitor is privy to confidential information that affects the fate of both Evie Quinton, and later, Willie’s cousin Marianne. His convictions compel him to assert the deceased Mr. Quinton’s instructions to the letter of the law. In the process, Lanigan callously overrides the widowed Evie, who in deep depression, seeks to avoid minor financial and bureaucratic
obligations pertaining to Kilneagh: “It is a fact of life,” Mr. Lanigan replied “borne out by so many of the intricacies of my profession, that the wishes of the departed take precedence over those of the quick” (73). Lanigan’s assertion becomes a kind of macabre mantra that Willie and Marianne tacitly replicate to their enduring misfortune.

Both Fools of Fortune and Lucy Gault are focalized primarily through the consciousness of eight-year-old Ascendancy children born shortly before Irish Independence. Each foregrounds an archetypal Anglo-Irish pastoralism, in which the big house, owned by multi-generational landlords profoundly empathetic to nationalist political imperatives, becomes embroiled in the escalation of paramilitary violence. In Fools, the Quintons’ ancestral nationalism extends to “longstanding identification with Irish Home Rule” and, in the family’s outrage at imperial injustice, to “having given away the greater part of [the] estate to those who had suffered loss and deprivation in the Famine” (13). The Quintons’ seemingly total identification with nationalist militancy includes repeated displays of “inhospitality” toward the local English garrison, ending in support of Michael Collins, for which, Willie recalls: “we were seen as traitors to our class and to the Anglo-Irish tradition” (33). These acts, perhaps inevitably, attract the vengeful attentions of Black and Tans who bring about the destruction of the very population their presence was officially designed to protect.

---

177 When, years later, Marianne approaches Mr. Lanigan for help locating Willie, the attorney is described in terms nearly-identical to his initial appearance in the novel (down to a new brown suit and “fresh, polka-dotted bow tie”). On this occasion, however, his function as a paternalistic bureaucrat is handled overtly; Lanigan is far less magnanimous when he realizes Marianne is pregnant, and makes it clear that he acts only “as an intermediary” to implement a “provision [Willie] made for the eventuality” his cousin should “find herself in need” (184). The narrator presents this chilling information—that Willie realized he might have left his lover pregnant before departing Ireland presumably for good, and attended to that “eventuality” with a stipend—without further comment on the now-absent protagonist.
Both novels garnered considerable academic and popular acclaim; while *Fools* and *Lucy Gault* dwell in the grisly specificities suggested above, these texts have been analyzed nearly exclusively in terms of their decidedly unrevolutionary style. “Elegiac,” “deft,” “understated” and “beautifully drawn” are the evaluations associated with Trevor’s novelist oeuvre, and an entrenched preference for descriptive and allusive commentary on his adroitly-conventional fiction is not as intellectually neutral as it might at first appear. Interpretation of Trevor’s fiction has largely assented, rather than reacted to, developments in contemporary Irish politics during the past three decades. An early and influential example of enlisting Trevor as a detached, revisionist author of the

178 Studiously apolitical praise is ubiquitous in Trevor criticism, especially concerning the novels, which generally privilege more sophisticated and affluent protagonists than his short stories (where, in the manner of Frank O’Connor, characters of working to lower-middle class predominate, sometimes venturing into the grotesque). Often, Trevor’s training as an historian at TCD and his later career teaching in that field are called on to buttress his ostensibly revisionist (non)ideology. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, for example, asserted recently that: “in classic liberal humanist fashion, Trevor places the individual securely at the centre of his work as the origin and focus of meaning…He is always on the side of the actual human rather than the abstracted ideal. His fiction calls for sensitivity to particularity, nuance and ambiguity…a balanced discrimination” see: “The battlefield has never quietened’: political violence in the fiction of William Trevor” in: *William Trevor: Revaluations* Paul Delaney and Michael Parker, Eds. (Manchester University Press: 2013), pp. 55-75, p. 55-56. For a shrewd analysis of *The Story of Lucy Gault* within the aesthetic matrix of ‘nuance and ambiguity’ see: Francine Prose, “Comfort Cult: On the Honest Unloveness of William Trevor’s World” in: *Harper’s Magazine* (1 December 2002), pp. 76-81. Other examples of reviewers confident that Trevor’s historically-erudite melancholia is the chief feature of his fiction include: Christopher Driver, “Entails” [on *Fools of Fortune*] in: *London Review of Books* Vol. 5 No. 9 (19 May 1983), pp. 22-23. Driver hedges his praise for the craft displayed in Trevor’s ninth novel, commenting—in a manner that might remind us of P.C. Trimble’s damning review of the skilled ‘portraiture’ on display in *Mad Puppetstown*—that “there is an enviable deftness about this novel and its leitmotiven...perhaps these episodes, short or long, would fit another book as easily as this one: Mr. Trevor’s capacious notebook travels with him everywhere, and he must now be able to borrow from himself, like Handel putting together an oratorio for the Dublin market” p. 22. As Eileen Battersby observed recently in the *Irish Times*: “Describing [Trevor] as a miniaturist exploring quiet lives of desperation is akin to saying Jane Austen wrote about girls in need of wealthy husbands. Trevor, in common with Austen, was an instinctive stylist, alert to the exactness of language, the power of nuance, be it Irish or English, Anglo-Irish Protestant, middle class Irish Protestant – the social milieu to which he belonged – or Catholic, and above all, he delighted in the captivating allure of ambivalence.” http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/william-trevor-made-the-ordinary-and-familiar-new-and-shocking-1.2877070 (21 Nov. 2016). This last remark is central to the constellation of ideas regarding genre that the present chapter pursues.
‘post-sectarian’ Anglo-Irish milieu appears in Vera Kreilkamp’s *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (1998), which classifies *Fools of Fortune* as “a romantic and melodramatic novel [that] attempts to address the injustices of Irish political history by transcending them” (224). Such sentiments shape reception of Trevor’s work nearly twenty years on, and have compounded, if not in fact enabled, his belated ascent to international literary prominence.\(^{179}\) As an interpretive strategy, a Cyclopean focus on Trevor’s subtle and elegant prose style rarely fails to scuttle sustained considerations of significant political ambivalence in his fiction.\(^{180}\)

On closer inspection, *Fools* and *Lucy Gault* foreground class and social barriers dominating the not-distant Irish past in a decidedly genre-disruptive fashion. Trevor’s

---

\(^{179}\) In Battersby’s aforenamed homage, which appeared the day after Trevor’s death, she alludes to but does not explicate the critical consensus regarding Trevor’s supposed lack of political commitments: “As with Heaney, Trevor was felt not to have engaged with the conflict in the North. This is untrue; he looked to the historical and then engaged with the political.” She then gives two instances of his fiction expressly meditating on the specificities of colonial history and moves on. Throughout the editorial, Battersby is compelled to assert on various fronts that “Trevor knew Ireland – and at every vocal and cultural register,” and is more generally required to expend her considerable critical energy defending truisms that prove no surprise whatsoever to Trevor’s readers.

\(^{180}\) Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (1998), characterizes *Fools of Fortune*, and Trevor’s “wide-angled account[s] of [Irish] society” more generally as containing a “revisionist aesthetic” that “reinscribes and simultaneously undermines the political, social, and economic divisions of the past through its depiction of the sensitive protagonist as new victim” (197). Kreilkamp, an astute and generous critic of so many big house novels, conducts a remarkably naïve and perfunctory reading of Trevor’s work in general. She ends with the assertion that Fools of Fortune’s “weaknesses and final collapse into easy sentimental resolutions [are] surely related to its presentation of a historically anomalous big house” (230). Her study may have been influenced in a general sense by Gregory A. Schirmer’s *William Trevor: A Study of His Fiction* (Routledge: 1990), in which he claims *Fools of Fortune* as a novel of “tragic vision” exploring the unintended consequences of history (149). More recently, many accomplished critics have continued to elaborate the basic premise that Trevor’s novel(s) should be primarily understood, as Tom McAlindon puts it in “Tragedy, History, and Myth: William Trevor’s *Fools of Fortune*”: as richly allusive work[s] [in which] the story of the big house between 1918 and 1983 is fashioned as a tragic and symbolic distillation of Irish history from the 16th century to the present day.” *Irish University Review* 33:2 (2003), pp. 291-306, p. 292.
manifest talent for producing the ‘well-made’ historical novel has obscured his politically-estranging deployment of the conventions of country-house crime novels. His Anglo-Irish protagonists repeatedly mistake their own motivations and corresponding social contexts, and the heavily-stylized forms (often travesties of the revenge plot), through which Trevor models voices of Protestant and Catholic social consciousness should more often assail than console the reader in suggesting how Irish cultural life continues to founder in sectarian division. These novels are self-reflexive on the paradox of interrogating the traumatic reverberations of revolutionary violence through displaced artistic creation. (It is conventional in Trevor criticism to accept Willie Quinton’s account of his childhood and adolescence as so much aide-memoire, steeped in the bathos of family tragedy, without, as I discuss below, accounting for the startling fact that the novel in its entirety should be considered the crafted apologia of a cold-blooded killer.)

Both novels are dominated by more general intertextual failures of literacy, faced with which, any cautious reader might take heed.

When the burning of Kilneagh results in not only the ruin of the main house but also the murder of six members of the Quinton household—only Willie, his mother, and their maid Josephine survive—\textit{Fools of Fortune} becomes legible as a text propelled by acts of criminal intrigue. As the adult Willie seeks to avenge his family’s tragedy, into which is enfolded the subsequent suicide of his grief-ravaged mother, violence

\footnote{181 It is highly probable that the irony of Trevor’s structure is later exploited in the premise and person of Freddie Montgomery, cultured Anglo-Irish murderer as unreliable narrator, in Banville’s \textit{The Book of Evidence} (1989).}
reverberates from Co. Cork to England, where, a decade later, Willie tracks down and savagely murders the Sargent responsible for ordering the burning. For much of the rest of the novel, the reader is placed in the position of detective; our empathies become co-constructed with Trevor’s female protagonists who live the aftermath of Willie’s half-century of exilic wandering—he has left behind his distant cousin Marianne, and (her existence unbeknownst to Willie), their daughter Imelda. The women’s stories comprise four of the novel’s six segments, and in their narratives, form and plots move together in what Charles Taylor has called “a metaphor for the basic experience of reading.”

The reader, for example, learns the details of Willie’s crime years after the fact through Imelda’s secretive research. In *Lucy Gault*, we follow the formation of the protagonist’s “character” in a literalized sense; lacking in familial or educative contexts, Lucy pieces together forms of behavior from the novels she encounters in early adulthood. She soon interprets her own story as one in which “the nature and the tenets of her life had already been laid down…she lay reading in the apple orchard another of the novels left behind by other generation. Enough of the world it was for Lucy Gault, at twenty-one, to visit Netherfield” (81).

Trevor’s genre interventions often interrogate the historical novel *as Anglo-Irish experience*, and emphasize stories as themselves ontological networks. Trevor’s short fiction offers a gallery of petty criminals, confidence men, and above all, actors and

---

artistes who habitually prey on the resources of the courteous and the genuinely kind.\footnote{Several examples, often ‘reworking’ narrative strands between short stories, the novella, and the novel, include: \textit{The Boarding-House} (1965), certain key treatments from which reappear in “The Hotel of the Idle Moon,” first published in: \textit{The Transatlantic Review} No. 23 (Winter 1966-7). Both texts feature surreptitious murder of the elderly by manipulative drifters. \textit{The Children of Dynmouth} (1976) follows the harrowing maturation of the callous blackmailer and small-time adolescent crook Timothy Gedge, who, arguably, resurfaces in the grown Francis Tyte of \textit{Other People’s Worlds} (1980), in which the protagonist is a pathological liar and keen exploiter of lonely women. “Saints” published in: \textit{The Atlantic Monthly} (January 1981), pp. 29-36, is often considered a short-form paratext of \textit{Fools of Fortune}. The short story focuses on Josephine, the Quinton family maid, who ‘devotes’ her life to Evie Quinton after the fire at Kilneagh and omits the romance between Marianne and Willie altogether. Trevor’s “Solitude” (collected in: \textit{A Bit on the Side} [Viking: 2004]), shares plot points with \textit{Lucy Gault}, including narrating from the point-of-view of a young girl who comes to believe herself guilty of a murder owing to an accident in childhood; in “Solitude” the girl is taken away with her parents to travel the Continent to escape this family tragedy, where in \textit{Lucy Gault}, the protagonist is the one left behind as her parents grapple with survivors’ guilt.}

It is, then, all the more surprising that his novels have so seldom been considered in their considerable reliance on the structures of mystery and detection. As Declan Kiberd remarks of the novels predating \textit{Fools of Fortune}:\footnote{Declan Kiberd, “Demented Brothers” [Review of: \textit{The Hill Bachelors}] in: \textit{London Review of Books} Vol. 23 No. 5 (8 March 2001), pp. 30-31}

Trevor invented and occupied his own England of the mind…completely and successfully…But it was an outsider’s imagining, the view taken by someone who stands on the edge of a society, in order to have the best view, and who recognises that its misfits are usually the key to its meaning. [In the late 1970s], he seems to have turned his thoughts back to Ireland, now troubled and sufficiently distant to seem redemptively strange.\footnote{Declan Kiberd, “Demented Brothers” [Review of: \textit{The Hill Bachelors}] in: \textit{London Review of Books} Vol. 23 No. 5 (8 March 2001), pp. 30-31}

\textit{Fools of Fortune} appeared at the bleak zenith of the Troubles’ hunger-strikes, and should, contrary to prevailing conceptions of Trevor’s ‘revisionist’ equanimity, be seen formally as a politically-committed novel by virtue of the juxtaposition it pursues between the contemporary diegetic moment and the first incarnation of the Troubles during the War
of Independence. The opening paragraphs further develop this correlation between imperialist conflicts by contrasting the tranquil survival of the sixteenth-century English “great house at Dorset”—and the gentrified tourist industry it commands—with the “more modest [Irish] Kilneagh…as quiet as a grave” (9). Trevor’s structure recalls the technique employed in The Last September and Absalom, Absalom!, moving from a precise, reportorial first sentence into a plangent abstraction suggesting how the gentry’s ritualistic habits of mind will inflect the narrative’s conception of time forming the self in potentia: “It is 1983 [where] the sense of the past…is only to be found in echoes at Kilneagh” segues to the 1918 burning of that estate by Black and Tans in the reprisal that engenders tragic developments effecting each character in turn.\(^\text{185}\)

The highly-distinctive quality of Trevor’s Anglo-Irish cultural imaginary lies precisely in the way that stories ‘about’ the Ascendancy and their influences appear as an epistemology in his novels. In one of the most frequently quoted, yet terminally under-analyzed, passages in Fools of Fortune the narrator Willie reflects on his (as yet unnamed) cousin who, in falling in love (with him) “caused history again to repeat itself, as in Anglo-Irish relationships it has a way of doing: she fell in love with a Quinton cousin and became, in time, the third English girl to come and live at Kilneagh” (10).

\(^{185}\) Trevor’s decision to preface Fools with Willie’s cleverly-disguised reportorial note may well be a means of acknowledging his debts to The Last September. In Bowen’s now-famous 1952 preface, she insists on the need to make the reader “look—and more [to] be made aware of looking—backward, down a perspective cut through the years” (vii). Deploying Bowen’s morbid reference to situating the “mood and cast of characters” within “the glow of a finished time” (of course both Danielstown and Kilneagh go up in arsonists’ flames), Trevor places himself in a lineage that formally flaunts elements of domestic realism in scrutinizing the tensions embodied in the histories of the big houses. Akin to the autobiographical Bowen describing the name-plate on the family home in Seven Winters, Trevor calls attention to the shaping power of Protestant and Ascendancy ancestral nominalism: “Wm Quinton it said on the sacks and the lorries, my name, and my father’s and my grandfather’s” (126).
This extraordinary rhetorical feint is nearly always attributed by critics to Trevor acting as omniscient narrator, although it appears in the segment titled “Willie” and logically comprises that character’s late-in-life summation of his own story.¹⁸⁶ In a formulation whose underlying concept is repeated several times throughout the novel, the narrator avers to the heroine’s exceptional ability to compel historical change (she “caused history to repeat itself”) before paradoxically linking that ability to an implied pattern, or cyclical causality (as “in time,” it “has a way of doing.”)

When Marianne decides to consummate her relationship with Willie, her torturous rationalizations oscillate between a tendentious awareness of her status as a ‘New Woman’ and the coldly-comforting nihilism of Anglo-Irish “fate” conducing to such an affair. Approaching Willie in the single sexual encounter that results in pregnancy, Marianne reflects that: “It seemed fateful that on that night of all nights you had intended to write to me…your footfall on the stairs seemed like fate also” (138). Yet, she proves

¹⁸⁶ For example, in his article on the narrative mechanics of the novel, Michael O’Neill unhesitatingly describes this section in the following terms: “After the novel’s first sentence, Trevor, employing the neutral tones of the omniscient narrator, passes into the contrast yet connection between places that are dominant in the novel”; it then (seemingly) occurs to O’Neill that Trevor may not be the presumed speaker of this first chapter, yet he goes on to simply refer to an external, third-party voice: “The narrator himself speaks in this opening section in a way that Trevor gently qualifies as much as endorses. He (the narrator) describes events as though they fell into a regretfully simple and circular pattern when he describes how the fortunes of the Quintons compose a pattern” (116). I can identify no logical or formal reason (aside from intentional fallacy) why the brief first segment of Fools of Fortune would be generated by (or should be attributed to) any consciousness other than Willie Quinton’s. The novel, after all, comes full circle in opening with the statement “It is 1983,” the point at which Willie concludes the work with his belated return to Kilneagh. See: Michael O’Neill, “‘Moments and subtleties and shadows of grey’: reflections on the narrative mode of Fools of Fortune” in: William Trevor: Revaluations Paul Delaney and Michael Parker, Eds. (Manchester University Press: 2013), pp. 110-124. Presumably, Trevor sought to clarify readers’ misapprehension with the opening of The Silence in the Garden (1988), whose first, brief paragraph is in fact relayed by an omniscient narrator: (“It is 1971, and the home that has been provided for Sarah Pollexfen for so long is still a provision that is necessary”); this voice is then immediately contextualized by the italicized diary excerpts of Sarah Pollexfen, dating to 1904.
capable in the moment of taking action to fulfill her desire in distinctly self-actualized terms: “I did not knock, even lightly, on the panels of your door but opened it instead. All judgment had gone from me, all fear and rectitude. I cared about nothing except that you should know I loved you” (138-139).

Ultimately, Trevor depicts the Anglo-Irish deployment of “fate” as an article of bad faith, brandished delusively in thinly-veiled self-interest. Marianne becomes a tragic heroine of melodrama whose unhideable pregnancy out of wedlock eventually forces her to retreat to a fantasy of fated design: she chooses to raise Imelda in the garden wing of the estate, near the ruins of Kilneagh. Marianne commits her life to adoration of Willie’s ‘heroism’ and their summer together, chronicling each day of their child’s life in diary form, and rehearsing stories for Imelda “about the time before the fire, what the house and the garden had been like then, even though she’d never known it herself” (192). Marianne abdicates will and accountability, ceasing as she does so to influence plot development:

Every second of my twenty years of life had to do with you, and I thanked God for the anxiety of our grandparents in India when they had worried so about your mother. Their anxiety had given us our summer and our love; it had given us our child. At Kilneagh I would wait for you. I would exist in whatever limbo fate intended, while you wandered the face of the earth (184).

Both Marianne and Willie are, Trevor implies, unwilling or unable to avoid role-playing their adolescent passions as a form of Anglo-Irish historicity. The allure of imbuing their dubious decision-taking with the vaunted rhetoric of culturally-ordained significance soon becomes neurotic. The disastrous effects are worked out in a further form of
feminine sacrifice, as their daughter Imelda confronts the contradiction between the hagiographic abstractions she has been fed by the family and townspeople about her absent father’s “heroism,” and the gruesome details she secretly unearths regarding his murder of the Sargent who burned the Quinton estate. While the “nuns at the convent spoke of him as a hero, even as somebody from a legend, Finn Mac Cool or the warrior Cuchulainn,” Trevor contrasts this caricatural heroism with Fr. Kilgarriff’s aggrieved insistence to Marianne that: “there’s not much left in anyone’s life after murder has been committed. God insists upon that, you know” (197, 207).

Imelda is in fact driven mad by her detailed knowledge of her father’s crime against Sargent Rudkin. Discovering a newspaper clipping hidden in her great-aunt’s desk, she learns that her father attacked Rudkin: “with a butcher’s knife…the head was partially hacked from the neck, the body stabbed in seventeen places” (216). Imelda slowly begins to withdraw into reveries of the long-ago fire at Kilneagh, tellingly juxtaposed with scenes of Rudkin’s mutilation. Her imagination is overwhelmed by actions housed in the novel precisely as images: “‘The head,’ Imelda said aloud, standing with her back to the writing-desk and leaning against it. She imagined the head, its weight tearing the flesh that still attached it to the body. She imagined the eyes and the mouth…she closed her eyes as tightly as she could, but nothing went away” (216, 219).

Imelda soon after stops speaking and eventually withdraws into fantastic recreations of Kilneagh’s luminous past. The narrator’s haunting and equivocal descriptions of Imelda’s silence deny those, including her parents, who would like to comfort themselves by assigning a redemptive moral to her story’s ending:
Imelda is gifted, so the local people say, and bring the afflicted to her. Her happiness is like a shroud miraculously about her, its source mysterious except to her…She is both elegant and beautiful, her face meticulously made up. She walks by the river and the derelict mill. She imagines the bones of Father Kilgarriff resting gently in the cemetery, and the bones of the Quintons in the Protestant churchyard, at the other end of the village. The children of the fire flank their father, their mother is a yard away. The family as it was is reflected in the arrangement of the Quintons’ bones; tranquility is there, no matter how death came (238).

In this unsettling conclusion, Trevor evokes what Maria DiBattista has called the “principled anti-psychologism” of the form of the detective novel with its “mandate of graphic description and measurement.” Yet he insists on subverting the conventions of detection, deploying crime fiction’s reliance on contingency to overturn any formally-conservative restoration of a coherent social order. Unknown—and pointedly unknowable—is how *Fools of Fortune* depicts the “mysterious sources” of Imelda’s consciousness, as well as her imaginings that suggest correlation, if not causality, resounding among the novel’s many tragic and imagistic endings.

Both *Fools* and *Lucy Gault* are fascinated by the ways that “chance orders fate,” an existential plight of the historical novel indexed in his characters’ interpretations of tragic death or violent murder (*LG*, 36). *The Story of Lucy Gault* was published in the end-stages of Ireland’s economic boom (and shortly after the ceasefire in the North), and

---


188 Given the allusion to Abelard and Heloise, and the way the former constructs his autobiography *Historia Calamitatum* to reflect his conviction that the fulfillment of providence comes by suffering and purification, it is surely significant that the omniscient narrator asserts many times over the point that “chance, not wrath, had that summer ordered the fate of the Gaults” (36). Abelard’s text available in English translation online: http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/abelard-histcal.asp
shares the problematic with *Fools* of excavating the traces of Anglo/Irish historical neglectfulness, though by radically distinct narrative means. Though both novels seem to find any stable assertion of Anglo-Irish identity impossible, *Lucy Gault* undermines the very conception of the bildungsroman; the narrative is fixated, as the title suggests, on the mechanics of the “story” of a heroine who is disinterested in or incapable of entering the social order of the Free State.

The compound at Lahardane comes under threat in the novel’s second paragraph, which, in Trevor’s preferred introductory style, soothes the reader with a distantly reportorial, even clinical inflection, though the setup subtends painful repercussions the novel will at length pursue:

> Captain Everard Gault wounded the boy in the right shoulder on the night of June the twenty-first, nineteen twenty-one. Aiming above the trespassers’ heads in the darkness, he fired the single shot from an upstairs window and then watched the three figures scuttling off, the wounded one assisted by his companions. They had come to fire the house, their visit expected because they had been before (3).

Lucy obstreperously plans to disappear and wait out her parents’ declared intention to move the family to England, but, as noted, she inadvertently constructs a chain of erroneous evidence resulting in her parents’ tormented departure from Ireland. The remainder of the novel processes the family’s grief through parallel accounts of the post-war decades passing at home and abroad. Everard and Heloise, in their ever-further wandering across the Continent, determine Lucy’s conception of herself as a social pariah (and eventually, if indirectly) a murderer, when years later, she learns her mother has succumbed to despair over Lucy’s assumed suicidal drowning. (Everard, early in their term of self-imposed exile, foreshadows the irrevocable nature of his wife’s inability to
process the loss, protesting to Heloise that “we are playing at being dead”—he is the only one to return, after a quarter century, to their ancestral home (84).

The title of the work establishes Trevor’s preoccupation with the ontological distance marking “the story” (with all its implied rhetorical artistry) from the quintessentially private first-person experience of Lucy Gault’s maturation that any such narrative must presume to portray. Separated from her parents for decades, Lucy Gault emerges as a pseudo-Victorian heroine who compulsively devours many of the “four thousand and twenty-seven” books stocking the shelves of the big house, a form of self-education that deludes her (as the narrator later makes clear), in the conviction that she “must keep a vigil” awaiting her parents’ return, forsaking marriage and personal happiness in her romanticized conditioning that “memories can be everything if we choose to make them so” (119). In fact, Lucy appears a poor theorist of the nineteenth-century literature surrounding her. Lacking the resources to live an independent life, she convinces herself that “novels [are] a reflection of reality,” and a trusty guide by which to interpret her passive experience among “all the world’s desperation and its happiness” (174).

In fact it is Lucy’s unacknowledged surrogate parents, the family servants Bridget and Henry, whose lives reflect meaningful currents of social reality. Listening to their stories in her own middle age, Lucy begins for the first time to gain an external perspective on “the world’s desperation and its happiness,” though the process appears too long delayed to alter the course of her existence:

A certain formality passed from the house with the Captain’s death, a way of proceeding that belonged to his past… ‘No. it is not necessary,’ Lucy laid down, not wishing either Bridget or Henry any longer to carry trays of
dishes back and forth between the kitchen and the dining-room. It was she who now, more and more, looked after them rather than they who attended her. In the kitchen [there was] talk now and Lucy listened (201-202).

The novel presents the shaping of external and collective accounts of Lucy’s life as both largely fabricated and inseparable from Lucy’s own understanding of herself as a character: “she should have died a child; she knows that but…has never included in the story of herself the days that felt like years when she lay among the fallen stones. Instead of nothing there is what there is” (227). The structural paradox of a protagonist who finds her entire life an exercise in counterfactuals is expressed formally in the narrator’s roving between a limited omniscient and third person point of view, and in instances of meta-critical reflection on what constitutes a tragic heroine per se:

What strangers made of past events was influenced in the present by the observation of a lonely life. Lucy herself was aware that this opinion was as temporary as the one that anger and distaste had once created: the story had not yet passed into myth, and would not be cast in permanence until her life was over, until it was reflected in time’s cold light. It did not greatly interest her that she was talked about (138).

To extend Declan Kiberd’s analysis, Lucy’s story makes “redemptively strange” the self-congratulatory strain in contemporary Irish politics that would seek to suppress the ambivalent legacies of the Ascendancy. In “sedate old age,” she bears witness to the changes that have come over the country, reflecting, in the company of the nuns who visit Lahardane:

‘I think what will happen,’ [Lucy] predicts, passing on a thought that came in the night, ‘is that they’ll make a hotel of the house.’ She lay sleepless and the transformation lingered: a cocktail bar, a noisy dining-room, numbers on the bedroom doors. She doesn’t mind. It doesn’t matter. People coming from all over, travellers like never before; that is the way
in Ireland now. Young fisherman from Kilauran with waiters’ suits on
them, and cars drawn up. ‘Ah, no, no,’ Sister Mary Bartholomew says
when she mentions a hotel again…They don’t like to think about all the
changes, even though they’re there already. They like the safety of what
has been, what they can come to terms with. The nuns will be displaced,
as the family that is still hers was…It had to be; it doesn’t matter. All
gone, it feels like, and yet not gone at all (225-226).

As this synopsis indicates, Trevor confronts us with the centrality of narrative as
itself an epistemology determining character. Both Fools of Fortune and Lucy Gault
probe the generic dispensations and philosophical conflicts of the historical novel as it
claims to depict—rather than interpretively telegraph—the ‘naturalized’ decline of the
Anglo-Irish. The mystery of Lucy’s disappearance is interrogated as a tragic event that
leads the community, for a time, to mourn the death of a living child, and the narrator’s
language might well warn the reader against complacent assumptions of foreordained
demise: “As the surface of the seashore rocks was pitted by the waves and gathered
limpets that further disguised what lay beneath, so time made truth of what appeared to
be. The days that passed, in becoming weeks, still did not disturb the surface an
assumption had created” (32). Trevor’s final novel insists on the pivotal role of
counterfactuals conditioning any understanding of historical emplotment. In his canon,
the big house tradition becomes a space to display the processes of continually becoming
Anglo/Irish, interrogating what a national community might be, and in so doing, imparts
a radically-open sense of ending.


