

Paula Derdiger and Allan Hepburn
TSAR Group
McGill University

Writing Circles: Bowen and Woolf, Taylor and Bowen

ALLAN: Elizabeth Bowen was a prolific correspondent throughout her life. She kept up with a wide circle of friends by writing letters: historian Veronica Wedgwood, philosopher Isaiah Berlin, poet John Lehmann, dilettante Stephen Tennant, diplomat Charles Ritchie—who was Bowen’s lover for three decades—and authors such as Rosamond Lehmann, Leonard Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Eudora Welty, Ottoline Morrell, Graham Greene, and Stephen Spender. These letters are far-flung. I have gathered and transcribed some of them at Durham University, the Bodleian at Oxford, Princeton University, the BBC Written Archives at Reading, Sussex University, and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. No one, to my knowledge, has yet examined Bowen’s business correspondence at the Jonathan Cape archives at Reading University. There are other important caches at the Huntington Library in Pasadena and the Mississippi State Archives. This talk today will concentrate on letters from Bowen to Virginia Woolf, held at the University of Sussex, and letters from the novelist Elizabeth Taylor to Bowen, at the University of Texas.

PAULA: So far, Bowen’s correspondence has not been gathered and edited. Bowen’s love letters to Ritchie appear in *Love’s Civil War* (2008). Hermione Lee included a smattering of letters to various people in her edited book, *The Mulberry Tree* (1984). In Lee’s opinion, Bowen’s letters tend to “upper-class gushing” with some correspondents, although they can also “give a sense of her character: dry, energetic, observant and generous” (*MT* 191). By and large, the letters are not about literary matters. In some cases, however, they are preludes to discussions

about fictional technique. In December 1942, Bowen wrote to Stephen Tennant to arrange a weekend at his country house, Wilsford, in Wiltshire: “It will be most lovely to see you and Wilsford again. I am longing to hear *Frontier Town*. I believe Charles Ritchie would love to come that week-end, but if you didn’t want to read *Frontier Town* to two people I am sure he would either go for a walk or go to sleep: I found him a nice ‘unadhesive’ guest when he stayed with me in Ireland” (Princeton). In his diary, Ritchie reports that there was much conversation about fiction during the weekend: “Elizabeth talked to Stephen of dialogue in the novel – of how every sentence must bear directly or indirectly on the theme – must be a clue or the counter-point to a clue. In that sense how ‘every novel is a detective novel’” (*Siren Years* 154).

ALLAN: Although Bowen has often been compared to Woolf, the elder writer’s influence is not evident anywhere in the younger’s novels. Before they met, Woolf, quite mistakenly, wrote in her diary that Bowen “tries to write like me” (4:74). The statement is far from true: Woolf is obsessed with character, death, and feelings; Bowen, on the other hand, concentrates on action, travel, and place. When they did eventually meet, Woolf confided that she found Bowen “conventional” (*D* 4:86, 164) and called her “a source of regret” (*D* 5:121). In an uncharitable mood—her desire to create an effect often caused her to over-reach—Woolf wrote that Bowen was “cut out of coloured cardboard but sterling & sharp-edged” (5:133-34). Bowen never permitted herself such acid comments. Notwithstanding their differences in temperament and opinion, the two writers, seventeen years apart in age, became close friends. They visited back and forth in London, dining and having tea. The Woolfs stayed with Bowen in Ireland, and Elizabeth spent weekends at Monk’s House, the country house in Sussex where the Woolfs gardened, wrote, and entertained. In June 1940, Bowen and Woolf had a

misunderstanding of some sort. Woolf called it a “snag” in their friendship, but she could not figure out what had caused it (*D* 5:293). Thinking the friendship might be over, Woolf suddenly allowed herself a pang of generosity about Bowen’s character: “we could talk seriously. And she’s the only one of the younger generation of women . . . But what’s the use of asking what can have happened? Some gossip? Some mischief making” (*D* 5:293). After a silence of three or four days, Bowen, who may have been away, wrote to say that she would love to see Woolf. For her part, Woolf was relieved to learn that she had jumped to a false conclusion about this friendship. In mid-February 1941, just weeks before Woolf’s suicide on 28 March, Bowen spent a weekend at Monk’s House. After Virginia’s death, Bowen wrote to Leonard Woolf: “it is no time to speak of my own feeling. As far as I am concerned, a great deal of the meaning seems to have gone out of the world. She illuminated everything, and one referred the most trivial things to her in one’s thoughts. To have been allowed to know her and love her is a great thing” (*MT* 221).

In a tribute that must have wrought terrible grief from Bowen, she reviewed Woolf’s last novel, *Between the Acts* for *The New Statesman* (19 July 1941): “When the book ends,” Bowen wrote, “it is, as at the end of the other books, as though a lamp had been switched off at its base, but the current is still waiting along the flex” (*CI* 74). Bowen continued to write and think about Woolf for the rest of her life. She reviewed *The Death of the Moth* (1941), as well as E.M. Forster’s book called *Virginia Woolf* (1942), and Bernard Blackstone’s study, likewise called *Virginia Woolf* (1949). In a preface for *Orlando* (1960), Bowen wrote, “Personal memories of Virginia Woolf cast, for me, their own light upon *Orlando*, though I certainly never spoke to her of the book, heard her speak of it, or attempted to find my way back to it while I knew her” (*MT* 133). In 1954, Bowen reviewed Leonard Woolf’s abridged version of Virginia’s diary, called *A*

Writer's Diary; mercifully, it contains no mention of Bowen. Notwithstanding her being edited out of Woolf's life, she knew about Woolf's acid comments by the mid-1950s, for she told Charles Ritchie that "Woolf's unpublished diaries show that she had no fondness for her friends including E[lizabeth]" (*Love's Civil* 232). Indeed, Bowen suspected the Bloomsbury world, with its narrow, often snobbish prejudices. In private, she divulged that she thought Woolf lived in a bubble, "a sort of Chinese world of intelligent complicated people who made a cult of her. From that world she never issued, she led a guarded life" (*Love's Civil* 30). In private conversation, Bowen disparaged the "ingrowingness of that little Bloomsbury world" and the "appalling habit of writing endless letters to each other, of analysing, betraying, mocking, envying each other" (*Love's Civil* 445). In a more public and official statement about Bloomsbury, namely a television documentary about Virginia Woolf made in 1970, Bowen recalled the extraordinary joy that the Bloomsbury writer brought to living and the way that, one day while they were mending curtains, Woolf rocked back on her heels and hooted with laughter.

PAULA: Bowen's letters to Woolf show her trying on the Bloomsbury manner. She typically plays up to Woolf, telling her things that she might like to hear: character observations, or impressions of places. In several travel letters—about arriving in France, about travelling in Italy—she goes in for cleverness and striking effects. "Mountains," she declares, "depend so much on where they are put" (*Sussex*; 26 August 1935). Witticisms are not Bowen's usual mode; she makes a special effort to make Woolf laugh. In a rambling letter from Rome written in the mid 1930s, Bowen adds a startling post script: "I had an audience with the Pope. And I was given a seat in a grandstand in the Fascist stadium to watch, a few feet away, Mussolini on a white horse reviewing police-dogs, bands, tanks – that was awful" (*Sussex* letter). Bowen,

knowing that Woolf did not want to hear much about Mussolini or the pope, makes these events afterthoughts.

ALLAN: Similarly, in letters written in 1940, Bowen mentions her covert work for the Ministry of Information in Ireland. But she breaks off, partly because the information was sensitive and secret, and partly because Woolf did not inhabit a world in which writers were familiar with the corridors of the Dominions Office **[handout]**: “Today, this morning, I went and talked to Lord Cranbourne at the Dominions Office about Ireland. I say talked, because he listened with very sympathetic and charming Cecil politeness. I know he had seen the reports I’d been sending in, and there were things I wanted to say that I couldn’t write. So I had asked David to put me in touch with him. Getting into the Dominions Office was such a business” (Sussex letter; 18 Feb 1941). Instead of talking about Ireland’s neutrality during the war, a sensitive subject and the object of Bowen’s information-collecting missions in Dublin, she diverts attention to scene-painting. Instead of commentary, she tries out descriptive passages and comic interludes to amuse the older writer.

Bowen thought that friendship might inhibit clear judgment of another writer’s work: “I am still not clear, and I suppose it never will be decided, whether a personal friendship between two writers helps the mutual judgment or distorts it” (CI 76). That caveat has to be borne in mind with regards to Bowen and Woolf’s correspondence. On 1 July 1940, Bowen wrote to thank Woolf for a weekend visit to Rodmell. At the same time, she returned Woolf’s essay “The Leaning Tower,” which had been lent to her. **[handout]** “I read your lecture,” writes Bowen, “which I’m sending back in this envelope, coming up in the train, with great excitement. The leaning tower metaphor seemed to me perfect. I’d never thought *into* those young men’s position

before, and your leaning tower, with the sense at once of unnatural angle and panic, made it (their position) suddenly comprehensible. The element of *fuss* about their work is explained, though not, I think, excused – and you don't excuse it. I didn't think you over-severe – did you think you were? – only deadly accurate" (Sussex letter).

Woolf delivered "The Leaning Tower" as a speech for the Workers' Educational Association in Brighton in May 1940. By the time that Bowen read the typescript, it was too late to say anything against it. In "The Leaning Tower," Woolf proposes that writers in the nineteenth century reaped the benefits of middle-class comfort. Walter Scott, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens lived in a "steady tower" from which they disseminated their particular "angle of vision" (*Moment* 138). But those writers who started publishing around 1925 and continued to publish through the 1930s, writers who benefited from their parents' largesse and a solid education—Day Lewis, Auden, Spender, Isherwood, and Louis MacNeice—looked around from their towers and saw "Everywhere change; everywhere revolution" (*Moment* 139). They wrote "under the threat of war" (*Moment* 140). Their writing, argues Woolf, is political and therefore not good:

All those writers too are acutely tower conscious; conscious of their middle-class birth; of their expensive educations. Then when we come to the top of the tower how strange the view looks—not altogether upside down, but slanting, sidelong. That too is characteristic of the leaning-tower writers; they do not look any class straight in the face; they look either up, or down, or sidelong. There is no class so settled that they can explore it unconsciously. That perhaps is why they create no characters. (*Moment* 140-41)

It is hard to imagine what Bowen, reading this condemnation of 1930s writers in the train as she headed to London, felt. Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood figured among her friends. By asking Woolf if she thought she was “over-severe” in her judgement of the “leaning tower” poets, Bowen may be alluding to a prior conversation, even a worry on Woolf’s part, that she had overstated her case. The essay is, in fact, categorical: good writing cannot be politically engaged. There is more than a little spite in the essay, spite directed against a younger generation whose political commitments and class sympathies were more overt than Woolf’s with her nineteenth-century sense of stability and values ever could be.

If Bowen did feel any discomfort about Woolf’s essay, she shrugged it off: “I liked very much the early part [of “The Leaning Tower”] – the part about family, books descending from books. I feel sure art ought to breed. The leaning tower people may be imitated (now) but they can breed nothing: they seem to me like mules or something” (Sussex ms). Wishing to be polite to Woolf, Bowen is somewhat hypocritical. In “The Leaning Tower,” Woolf writes that “Books descend from books as families descend from families. Some descend from Jane Austen; others from Dickens” (*Moment* 130). Woolf’s own books—filled as they are of people reading, as when Mr. Ramsay reads *Waverley* and Mrs. Ramsay reads a Shakespeare sonnet in *To the Lighthouse*, or Neville reads French novels in *The Waves*—are bookish books indeed. Bowen seldom descends into bookishness. Although Bowen professed her fondness for certain writers, namely Frances Burney, Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, George Meredith, and Katherine Mansfield, she found that she could not get on at all with George Eliot and she had nothing to say at any time about Joseph Conrad. Her own books are rarely allusive; they do not rely on a detailed familiarity with English literature in the way that Woolf’s novels do. While Woolf spent her life walled up

with books, Bowen spent her spare time going for walks. Like Woolf, however, Bowen took an interest in a wide range of writers. Just as she had been encouraged in her early writing career by Rose Macaulay, Bowen developed easy and helpful friendships with Rosamond Lehmann, May Sarton, Eudora Welty, and Elizabeth Taylor.

PAULA: Bowen's correspondence with Elizabeth Taylor – whose career began in 1945 – demonstrates changing attitudes among British women novelists toward fiction and writing communities in the postwar period. Born in 1912, Taylor and her generation were the first to read the works of high modernism with a little distance. Her twelve novels and four collections of short stories, especially those written in the 1940s and 1950s, demonstrate both the influence of high modernism and a critical evaluation of that literary tradition. In Taylor's first novel, *At Mrs. Lippincote's*, for instance, Virginia Woolf's modernism is slotted into a lineage of novels about women's experience, including works by the Brontës and Flaubert. Taylor's novel positions itself as inheritor of this literary history, but a smooth inheritance is challenged by the intrusion of historical circumstance, namely the Second World War, into the world of literary projects. Taylor's *oeuvre* dramatizes this historical invasion, and in doing so, aligns itself with Bowen's literary sensibility. Taylor was twelve years younger than Bowen, but despite this age difference and Bowen's formidable success, Taylor's letters indicate that the two writers had a frank, mutually respectful relationship. To be sure, Taylor expresses great admiration for Bowen's work, but she also posits herself as part of a collective of writers, including Bowen, with common experiences and artistic goals.

Two letters from 1949 and one from 1955, both written by Taylor to Bowen, tell us something about what novelists expect from other novelists after the war. In particular, they

indicate how the work of the novel was becoming a joint enterprise. Common novelistic concerns come to the surface: the desire to capture the implications of contemporary historical conditions; the aesthetic goal of realism; concern for dealing with the “ghost” of modernism. The letters also suggest that the two women were friends on equal footing who gave each other critical feedback and vocalized shared concerns about writing abilities and career. Bowen, in fact, became one of Taylor’s few close friends (novelists Ivy Compton-Burnett and Robert Liddell were two others), for Taylor was devastatingly shy and had a minimal public life. As a testament to their friendship and its impact on her writing, Taylor dedicated her 1964 novel, *A Soul of Kindness*, to Bowen.

In the first letter [**handout**], dated 24 February 1949, Taylor thanks Bowen for “this beautiful book, so well worth waiting for.” We can deduce directly that the book is Bowen’s 1949 novel about the blitz, *The Heat of the Day*, because Taylor mentions one of the characters from that novel, Louie. Taylor praises the novel for its “brave” depiction of the contemporary implications of the war: “It is wonderful and hopeful that it can be so true and so about *now*, and I think you are the only one to do this and it was brave of you.” Taylor values Bowen’s ability to articulate in the novel a collective psychological experience of the war: “You rake up the dead leaves in our hearts and say many things which we did not know how to say ourselves—which are only very faintly perceived before.” In terms of style, the letter suggests that in order to depict a collective, psychological experience of the contemporary world, it is necessary to employ a cinematic realism that moves beyond a Jamesian realistic mode in which the reader might feel lost or caught off guard. Taylor praises Bowen for her convincing, materially grounded quality of being *real*: “Yes they are all real and *physically* real. When they lift a hand, or laugh, it is a real thing that is done. No thin bits, nothing dull.” For Taylor, Bowen’s realism functions as a literary

haven for reclaiming perception and representation after the destructive experience of war: “And then the safety. Because we are sure you will never make us stumble and redden as Henry James does. No risks. Just as I was thinking: ‘It is nearly the time when we meet Louie again,’ I turned the page and her name was the first word. I almost glanced over my shoulder.” Finally, the letter ends with an empathetic gesture – “I hope it has made you happy” – which points to the novelists’ friendship and shared understanding of the emotional satisfaction that a writer desires from her work.

The second letter [**handout**], written a few weeks after the first, provides further evidence of the mutual friendship between Bowen and Taylor, and it establishes novel writing as a joint venture with high emotional stakes. Taylor tells Bowen, “I should so very much like to meet you,” but she explains frankly that domestic duties make it challenging to arrange a visit: “It is rather difficult for me to get away, as I have no one to stay with the children; but I must go to London on Tuesday, March 29 and if you will be there during the afternoon and not busy I should like to come to see you for a short time [...]” The tension between art and domestic duties or social roles figures prominently in a number of Taylor’s novels of the 1940s and 50s: *A View of the Harbour* (1947), *A Wreath of Roses* (1949), and *Angel* (1957), and other works. This tension troubled Taylor, but she did not necessarily privilege her writing over domestic commitments; instead, everyday domestic concerns should be considered alongside, or united with, her artistic projects.

In this letter, Taylor candidly admits that she is insecure about her abilities as a writer – “My hands become ice at the thought of my book being published.” In expressing this insecurity, Taylor is not belittling herself in relation to Bowen; on the contrary, Taylor points to shared

anxiety as part of the process of novel writing: “It comforts me that *you* worry, too. I shall remember this in the middle of the night when I feel at my most uncertain, even bogus; not a proper writer at all.” Bowen’s advice to Taylor is not didactic, but empathetic. This letter also reveals how both writers engaged with contemporary popular criticism of their work. Clearly, Bowen had expressed anxiety or frustration to Taylor after reading a review of *The Heat of the Day* (we know that *The Heat of the Day* is the subject because Taylor mentions Robert, one of the main characters in the novel), and Taylor responds to Bowen’s complaint by challenging the criticism and undercutting the validity of newspaper reviewers: “I think newspapers say very odd things. I thought Robert the best of them all. It is worse than writing for people who speak a different language.” Moreover, Taylor identifies Bowen’s experience with one of her own: “I once had a reviewer say: ‘This is a poor imitation of ‘Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm’ and has less than ½ the charm.’ I do not know whether to laugh or cry, so do both to be on the safe side.” Not only does Taylor participate in the critical reception of Bowen’s novel by joining in on Bowen’s “side,” but she does so in a collegial, self-deprecating way that unites the novelists equally and familiarly in their vocation.

Six years later, in February 1955, Taylor wrote to Bowen about her new novel, *A World of Love*, which depicts a troubled Anglo-Irish Ascendancy family in 1950s Ireland. As Taylor expresses it, the novel is a “haunting, haunted book” that captures the lingering ghosts of modernism, World War II, and colonialism in postwar Ireland. As with *The Heat of the Day*, Taylor praises *A World of Love* – and Bowen’s *oeuvre* as a whole – for its realistic representation of the physical world: “As always in your books light and climate, and countryside are so real to me.” Taylor also appreciates how Bowen’s novel creates a dialogue with Virginia Woolf, namely

that Woolf's modernism is a ghost that must be acknowledged and transcended. Referring to the obelisk that stands on the property of the family's Big House in the novel, Taylor writes, "And the menacing obelisk the dark stroke to complete the picture—I thought of Lily Briscoe in 'To the Lighthouse' putting that final dark line on her canvas. It is the most wonderful, haunting, haunted book." This Woolfian ghost of modernism is a common concern among female writers who are trying to reformulate the purpose of the novel in the postwar period. As Taylor recalls, "When you came to tea with Eudora Welty you spoke of that ghost."

The letters we have discussed today demonstrate a continuous, yet shifting concern for the various ghosts of literary heritage. With Bowen at the center of the shift, it is clear that the implications of these ghosts become increasingly political and historically grounded as novel-writing moves into the postwar era.