

## The Image of the Big House in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*

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This, which of all my books is nearest my heart, had a deep, unclouded, spontaneous source. Though not poetic, it brims with what could be the stuff of poetry, the sensations of youth. It is a work of instinct rather than knowledge—to a degree, a ‘recall’ book, but there has been nor such recall before.<sup>1</sup>

An Anglo-Irish writer, Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1975) wrote *The Last September*, in 1928, which is set in a “Big House,”<sup>2</sup> Danielstown in Ireland during the Anglo-Irish war (1918-1921); “The Troubles.”<sup>3</sup> In the tense atmosphere, Anglo-Irish people kept up a conventional social life as if they had noticed nothing. They invited British army officers stationed in the town to tennis parties or tea parties, while they continued their traditional relations with the native Irish people. Lois Farquar, the nineteen-year old heroine, is an Anglo-Irish girl who is staying with her uncle Sir Richard in Danielstown. An orphan, Lois is half-awake character, who is irritably aware of the real situation, but does not know what to do or how to change it. Bowen, the last inhabitant of her own Big House called Bowen’s Court, is the model for Lois, who wants to grow up and find her own place in society. However, of course, Lois is not Bowen herself, thus this novel is “semi-autobiography.” Bowen wants to remain at a distance from the story.

*The Last September* is the only one of my novels to be set back, deliberately, in a former time. For *The Last September*, that went into reverse—the “then” (the past) as an element was demanded. The cast of my characters, and their doings, were to reflect the mood of a vanished time. “All this” I willed the reader to know, “is done with and over.”<sup>4</sup>

In the opening page, we see “In those days, girls wore crisp white skirts and transparent blouses clotted with white flowers.”<sup>5</sup> The words “in those days” let readers think that the story starting now is set in the past; it is a part of history. Bowen wrote the story set in the 1920s, in 1928. In these eight years, she was no longer a tennis girl but a writer and married woman, and a kind of peace had settled in Ireland. Therefore she was able to see Ireland as another world in time and space. At the same time, she did not write the semi-autobiographical story about an Anglo-Irish family as that idealized, sentimentalized account so often found in Anglo-Irish memoirs. In her autobiography, *Bowen’s Court* (1942), she faced up to the fact that the Big House was basically an imperial outpost, “a negation of mystical Ireland”<sup>6</sup> and she felt no regret about the end of Anglo-Ireland. In her view of Bowen family history, the Ascendancy “drew its power from a situation that shows an inherent wrong. . . Having obtained their position through an injustice,

they enjoyed that position through privilege.”<sup>7</sup> Yet at the same time her essay “The Big House” is a plea to preserve those of its values that she thought worth maintaining. She loved her family, the Big House and the girlhood, but she also had a deeply doubtful and satirical coolness towards it. Thus she needed some distance from the story for a cool objective view.

In the first scene, the novel seems to start with “a moment of happiness, of perfection”; the long-promised meeting of the Naylor, the owners of Danielstown and their friends the Montmorencys. However, suddenly we read “the vast façade of the house stared coldly over its mounting lawns.”<sup>8</sup> The stare of the personified house is there like one of the characters from the opening. The House is one of the main characters as well as one big cynical and mysterious spectator. The novel consists of three chapters, “The arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Montmorency” “The visit of Miss Norton” and “The departure (death) of Gerald.” As these titles suggest, in the novel the characters just visit and leave the House at the end of summer. The Montmorencys, wanderers, having no house, no family, arrive at the Big House after a long interval. Hugo Montmorency, “an early version of the Jamesian spectators” always feels despair and dissatisfaction with his life. His wife, Francie, makes herself feminine and weak, always worrying about the unfaithful Hugo. Miss Marda Norton, the most attractive visitor, is about to make a rich but loveless London marriage, and quite cut off from Irish life. Lois idolizes Marda who seems promising and glamorous while Hugo, who is attracted by Marda, seems depressing. They are visitors to the Big House, and the Naylor, its owners, are also uneasy. They preferred not to notice the threatening situation, continuing to maintain their own life. Thus they are unconsciously afraid of the real world being brought by the newcomers. Lois also feels frustration in her closed sheltered life, and desperately wants to find “something, somewhere” for herself. On the sides of both visitors and hosts, there is an air of unease. The Big House “stared” at those people “coldly” with “the yellow theatrical sunshine” at the end of summer. It seems to mock those people who are individually worrying and lying to each other. We could feel the sense of the smallness of the people compared with the House. Phyllis Lassner says, “It is clear from Bowen’s design that the house and the characters serve as metaphors for each other’s destiny; in fact, Danielstown is the novel’s focus. Through a series of dialogues between the Naylor and their friends, and through the reflections of the characters about themselves and each other, the novel reveals the story of the life and death of Danielstown.”<sup>10</sup>

The Anglo-Irish people’s destiny is one of the central themes in Elizabeth Bowen, the descendant of an Anglo-Irish family. Their future is bound up with their Big House. Bowen’s Court, the house that Bowen owned, is the model for Danielstown. Bowen wrote in her essay,

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. It is possible that Anglo-Irish people, like only children, do not know how much they miss. Their existences, like those of only children, are singular, independent and secretive.<sup>11</sup>

Bowen often likens the Anglo-Irish family’s isolation to “an island” or to the situation of an “only child.” The world of the Big House is often like that of a small town, and as such it is a

“microcosm” of the greater world. The image of the Big House appears over and over in Bowen literature as an important and evocative feature, and this paper will show how Bowen creates dignified, safe, yet brutal and vulnerable images especially in the classic Big House novel, *The Last September*, which charts the process of disintegration of an estate, falling and dying gradually.

### Trees and the Big House

Big Houses are isolated like islands, and their “circle of trees” always surrounds them. In *The Last September*, there are some interesting descriptions of its situation.

The screen of trees that reached like an arm from behind the house—embracing the lawns, banks and terraces in mild ascent—had darkened, deepening into the forest. Like splintered darkness, branches pierced the faltering dusk of leaves. Evening drenched the trees; the beeches were soundless cataracts. Behind the trees, pressing in from the open and empty country like an invasion, the orange bright sky crept and smouldered.<sup>12</sup>

Trees are always connected with darkness compared to the light inside the house. The “screen of trees” surrounding the house is like an invader, and the circle of trees makes the Big House vulnerable and more isolated. We, however, also have the image that trees and the house are united into the same thing. They are never separated, and trees are in some sense the guardian angels of the house. They have an ambivalent image in relation to the Big House, containing a deep darkness that threatens and isolates it from the outside world, while the house depends on the trees, which cast some “spell”<sup>13</sup> that attracts people. And its inhabitants experience the house as “a magnet to their dependence.”<sup>14</sup> The “magnetism” of the house that drew people might be reinforced by the power of the trees; they make the house isolated, but also protect it in their own way. This relation is comparable to the habit of ignoring unpleasantness among the Anglo-Irish who were caught between the English and the native Irish, and so preferred to ignore reality. Blindness saves the Anglo-Irish family, but of course it also condemns them.

Far from here too, their isolation became apparent. The house seemed to be pressing down low in apprehension, hiding its face, as though it had her vision of where it was. It seemed to gather its trees close in fright and amazement at the wide, light, lovely unloving country, the unwilling bosom whereupon it was set.<sup>15</sup>

This is a key passage in this novel in that it provides a poignant metaphor for the position of the Big House in Ireland. The house is seen from above, personalized as a woman who fears and is threatened by some danger. Lassner comments, “Bowen recreates the house as a symbol of maternal omniscience and omnipotence. Its coldness, remoteness and emptiness, moreover, suggest a decidedly rejecting mother who commits her children to a cruel bind.”<sup>16</sup> The house in Ireland is set in “lovely” Irish land, but that land is “unloving” the house, because the house preyed on the produce of the land and so is unloved and isolated by the native Irish. The Big

House that has its own dignity and pride is also the public symbol of deep hatred, and contains paradoxical images.

### **Interior of the Big House**

Trees play an ambivalent role in relation to the Big House, containing darkness compared with the lightness of the interior.

Dark had so gained the trees that Lois, turning back from the window, was surprised at how light the room was.<sup>17</sup>

Ironically Lois felt “particular doom of exclusion” among the light room. She felt that all furniture in the room is “a cloud of witnesses.”

Inside, they would all be drawing up closer to one another, tricked by the half-revelation of lamplight. . . Chairs standing round dejectedly; upstairs, the confidently waiting beds; mirrors vacant and startling; books read and forgotten, contributing no more to life; dinner table certain of its regular compulsion; the procession of elephants that throughout uncertain years had not broken file.<sup>18</sup>

A piece of furniture is like a loyal servant in the Big House. They are “witnesses” of the “ghosts of the past”<sup>19</sup>; they see and know all the people and the events inside the long history of the house. They make their own world, thus, Lois who cannot emotionally connect herself with the Anglo-Irish tradition; cannot help feeling claustrophobia and excluded.

And she could not try to explain . . . how after every return – awakening, even, from sleep or preoccupation – she and these home surroundings still further penetrated each other mutually in the discovery of a lack.<sup>20</sup>

Lois feels haunted by the house, because its lack of an inner dynamic seems a reflection of her own.

One evening after a dinner party, Lois saw an Irish Nationalist among the trees in a trench coat. She felt urgently the need to tell her aunt and uncle, who pretended not to hear the ominous movement of Irish Nationalists outside. She ran back in excitement, however,

the house waited; vast on its west side, with thin yellow lines round the downstairs shutters. It had excluded, sad, irrelevant look outsides of houses take in the dark.<sup>21</sup>

The description reflects Lois’s concept of the house. The Big House veiled from Lois’s vision is always exclusive and dignified. It seemed to cast a spell over the furniture of its interior in order to negate Lois’s urgent desire to face reality. Declan Kiberd says, “the young should have their part in shaping the house, in bringing in new blood; but, instead, sex seems “irrelevant” and the

house asserts its absolute right to shape them.”<sup>22</sup> The house had to reject all invasions of different values and styles, because it was a symbol of the golden age of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. To notice and accept a different way of life meant death for the Big House. It also seemed to show hostility to another way of life; the English. Gerald was a soldier in the British Army, who fell in love with Lois. When he came to Danielstown, he felt that “ a square blank eye of the house.. looked down at him through the branches; he came out under the whole cold shell of it, streaked with rain and hollow-looking from an interior darkness.”<sup>23</sup> It seemed to be desperately bleak to Gerald, an English officer, making him feel out of place. The interior casts a cold spell, and Gerald compares his English home with the inhospitality. The house blinds people to the movements of Irish Nationalists, and it also rejects the interference of the English, because it must take no sides.

### **Rooms in the house**

Rooms have their own original roles and meanings in the house and to the people living and visiting there. Each room has its own function and its own meaning. The various qualities of the rooms help the house acquire a deeper and more attractive character in the story.

The ante-room is the symbol of the Ascendancy’s fear of recognizing reality and having their secrets overheard by others.

Four rooms opened off the ante-room; at any moment a door might be opened, or blow open, sending a draught down one’s neck.<sup>24</sup>

The high windows were curtainless and there were two locked bookcases of which the keys had been lost. Four doors and curtainless high windows suggested the precarious and unsettled quality of the room, and the keyless bookcases represent the pointlessness and futurelessness of the Ascendancy. However the room seemed to have a magical power that prompts people to talk about their secrets. While Lady Naylor and Francie were talking about the relation between Lois and Gerald, Lois in her own room, next to the ante-room, heard the fragments of the conversation. She felt angry, desired to hear it clearly but feared being faced with her own reality, and she finally escaped hearing the rest of “what Lois was. . .” by banging her water jug down in the basin. The ante-room represents the pointless and precarious situation of the Ascendancy, and their fear of hearing and being heard. The symbol of the fear has a sense of exhaustion after a long history. The room is filled with a smell of camphor; a smell of past, and the furniture is faded “exhausted by sunshine.”<sup>25</sup>

The dining-room contains the history of the Ascendancy in their golden period. In this room, there was a crowd of portraits.

Under that constant interchange from the high-up faces staring across – now fading each to a wedge of fawn-colour, and each looking out from a square of darkness tunneled into the wall.<sup>26</sup>

The portraits symbolize the Ascendancy's high dignity as well as its coldness and mockery. The room, however, is also full of a warm and peaceful atmosphere as in the golden age. It offers a place apart from the fearful and confused situation of the present. Actually, Lawrence often escaped from the difficult situations into the dining room, "which is the last place anybody would look for one between meals."<sup>27</sup> This had the historical face of indifference, and high-dignity and also had the dreamy calm air that frees people from the troubles.

The drawing room is the symbol of the chaos and of the magical power of the house itself. It is the place that Gerald feels coldness and compared it with his English home, and it is the place that Lois and Gerald kissed for the first time. The most powerful magical effect is there in the room.

The pale room rose to a height only mirrors followed above the level of occupation; this disproportionate zone of emptiness dwarfed at all times figures and furniture.<sup>28</sup>

The wideness, the emptiness, the high ceiling and five tall windows imply the depth and height of the house. The house gives some mischievous magic to the room, which wanted to be unkind to Gerald, but after several minutes, gave him a present of the first kiss. The room reminds me of the spiritual power and vastness in the house.

We can analyze the meanings of the rooms in the Big House like anatomizing a creature. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) often used the personification of the house in *The Fall of the House of Usher*<sup>29</sup> and in *The Haunted Palace*, the palace is described as a human head. Similarly the house in *The Last September* is obviously described as a living thing. The Big House is like a dignified person who contains its own order, manners and aristocratic nobility as well as being vulnerable and isolated. Therefore the final scene in the novel is shocking.

### Death of the Big House

Houses have their own ways of dying, falling as variously as the generations of men, some with a tragic roar, some quietly. . .from others—and thus was the death of Wickham Place—as the spirit slips before the body disintegrates.<sup>30</sup>

This is a passage from E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910). Danielstown also had its own way of dying. The final scene in *The Last September* is the description of burning Danielstown. The three Big Houses, Danielstown, Castle Trent and Mount Isabel were "executed" by Irish Nationalists in the same night on February in 1921.

A fearful scarlet ate up the hard spring darkness; indeed, it seemed that an extra day, unreckoned, had come to abortive birth that these things happen. It seemed, looking from east to west at the sky tall with scarlet, that the country itself was burning.<sup>31</sup>

Flames were "eating up" the house which was being killed. It was brutal execution of the Big House which had been living for a few hundred years. However we see the next sentence,

Then the first wave of a silence that was to be ultimate flowed back, confident, to the steps. Above the steps, the door stood open *hospitably* upon a furnace.<sup>32</sup>

The Death of the house is shocking, but it is inevitable. Even the opening scene in this novel gives readers some hints that the Big House is surrounded by an ominous atmosphere, and in the middle of the story, Lawrence said, "I should like to be here when this house burns." There are several suggestions that the end of the Big House is coming and nobody can stop it even if Lady Naylor and Sir Richard are so careful "not to notice." Thus, the death of the house in the final scene is shocking, but it is logical and acceptable. However in comparison, the death of Gerald happened too suddenly and against our expectations.

The shocking news reached Clonmore that night, about eight o'clock. It crashed upon the unknowingness of the town like a wave that for two hours, since the event, had been rising and toppling, imminent.<sup>33</sup>

Gerald's death gives readers a more cruel and surprising image than that of the Big House, since there is no reason that Gerald, a young English officer, should be killed so suddenly. However Bowen spares only three pages on Gerald's death, who is shot through the head in an ambush by an Irish Nationalist. It seemed surprising and strange that the death of human being is described like a small thing, but the center of the novel is the Big House. Following the death of Gerald, Lois also disappears from the novel. When we hear of her last, a fortnight after Gerald's death, she has left Danielstown for France to learn French. Lawrence has also left, and returned to Oxford. The visitors, the Montmorencys and Marda Norton have all gone. Beginning with death of Gerald, most of the characters leave the house and the story. It might be seen as preparation for the final death of the house. The house, which is left with the Naylor, seems to be waiting for its inevitable end. The dying house, whose door "stood open hospitably", does not lose its dignity. It kept confident silence even at the event of its own death. "Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, not saying anything, did not look at each other, for in the light from the sky they saw too distinctly" is the last sentence in the novel. What did they see in the "light"? They see their own soul that the Big House symbolizes killed through the burning of the house, because the Big House is the physical and mental shelter of the Naylor.

This event; the burning of three Big Houses, did actually happen in 1921 in Ireland. Bowen's father, Henry Bowen wrote to his daughter in Italy an account of the burning of the houses in the neighborhood of Bowen's Court.

I read his letter beside Lake Como, and looking at the blue water, taught myself to imagine Bowen's Court in flames.<sup>34</sup>

Her imagination was haunted by the image of the destruction of the Big House.

Bowen's Court survived – nevertheless, so often did I see it burning that the terrible

last event in *The Last September* is more real than anything I have lived through.<sup>35</sup>

The fantasy-image of burning of Bowen's Court inspired Bowen's description of burning of Danielstown in *The Last September*. Bachelard said in *The Poetic of Space*:

If we go from these images, which are all light and shimmer, to images that insist and force us to remember farther back into our past, we shall have to take lessons from poets. For how forcefully they prove to us that the houses that were lost forever continue to live on in us; they expected us to give them a supplement of living.<sup>36</sup>

The image of the death of Bowen's Court makes the story of the Big House, and Bowen proved that Big Houses "that were lost forever" continue to live on in her mind. The image of Big Houses that burnt in her memory and in her imagination is the central vision in *The Last September*. *The Last September* is Elizabeth Bowen's semi-autobiographical novel in which Bowen concentrated on the vulnerability of her love for the Big House, the symbol of her Anglo-Irish tribe. For Elizabeth Bowen, "the child of the house from which Danielstown derives", the image of the Big House has a central influence on her writing.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *Seven Winters and Afterthoughts*, New York: Alfred.A.Knopf, 1962,199.

<sup>2</sup> According to Otto Rauchbauer (1992, 1-6), after 1650 there were massive confiscations of land by the Cromwellian parliament, which saw Ireland mainly as a vehicle for paying its debts to soldiers and adventurers. The Battle of the Boyne in 1690, in which William of Orange put James II to flight, marks the beginning of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland which had far-reaching implications for the next century. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Protestant Ireland consolidated its position through a series of laws, which gradually dispossessed the Catholic Gaelic Irish of their land and, quite generally, relegated them to a marginal position in society. Most of the Irish Big Houses that Protestant Ascendancy people lived in, were not very big. The "bigness" is not of size but of the symbolic value that reflects the status and financial means of the owners. The main part of Ireland was characterized by a feudal system, which meant that a landowning Protestant Ascendancy consisting of aristocrats and gentry were thinly spread over the country. It represented a network of families whose income derived from the land that the Catholic Irish worked for them.

<sup>3</sup> By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Protestant Ascendancy, in spite of its uneasiness about its status as a minority culture, had nonetheless developed a great deal of self-confidence and an Irish identity, however different this may have been from the Catholic Irish. The Act of Union (1801) put an end to Irish aspirations of independence and locked the fate of Ireland with that of Great Britain. The Act of Union is the beginning of the decline of the Anglo-Irish, since as a minority they were now at the mercy of the Westminster Parliament. The increasing radicalization of Irish politics led to the Easter Rebellion of 1916, and to the Anglo-Irish War (1918-21). During this time, many Big Houses were burned. According to Mark Bence-Jones (1987 ), about 200 houses (out of a total of 2000) were destroyed during the troubled years.

<sup>4</sup> *Seven Winters*, 200.

<sup>5</sup> *The Last September*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *Bowen's Court*, New York: Knopf, 1942. 22.



- <sup>7</sup> *Bowen's Court*, 453,456.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Last September*,1.
- <sup>9</sup> Lee, Hermione. *Elizabeth Bowen*, London: Vintage, 1999. 49.
- <sup>10</sup> Lassner, Phyllis. *Elizabeth Bowen*, Baingstoke: Macmillan, 1990. 28.
- <sup>11</sup> *Bowen's Court*, 14.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Last September*, 22.
- <sup>13</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *Collected Impression*, London: Longmans, 1950, 30. Bowen says that "Life in the Big House, in its circle of trees, is saturated with character: this is, I suppose, the element of spell. The indefinite ghosts of the past, of 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."
- <sup>14</sup> *The Last September*, 67.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Last September*, 66.
- <sup>16</sup> Lassner, 29.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Last September*, 22-23.
- <sup>18</sup> *The Last September*, 34.
- <sup>19</sup> *Collected Impression*, 30.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Last September*, 166.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Last September*, 34.
- <sup>22</sup> Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995. 371.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Last September*, 86-87.
- <sup>24</sup> *The Last September*, 9.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Last September*, 9-10.
- <sup>26</sup> *The Last September*, 24.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Last September*, 104.
- <sup>28</sup> *The Last September*, 20.
- <sup>29</sup> Poe, Edgar.Allan. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Books of Wonder, 1839.
- <sup>30</sup> Forster, E.M. *Howards End*, New York: Vintage Books, 1910. 257.
- <sup>31</sup> *The Last September*, 206.
- <sup>32</sup> *The Last September*, 206.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Last September*, 198.
- <sup>34</sup> *Bowen's Court*, 440.
- <sup>35</sup> *Seven Winters*, 204.
- <sup>36</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beach Press, 1957. 56.

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