

Sartorial Connections: Fashion, Clothes, and Character in
Elizabeth Bowen's To the North

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In theory, dress is an art. The architecture of textiles ought to rank only less high than the architecture of stone in so far as textiles are less durable [...].¹

I

Elizabeth Bowen's writing eludes critical definition. Generically fluid, her novels and short stories include aspects of the Gothic romance, the ghost story, the spy thriller, the comedy of manners, classic realism, and the Anglo-Irish Big House novel. As its author vehemently claims in her unfinished autobiographical sketch Pictures and Conversations, "Bowen terrain cannot be demarcated on any existing map; it is unspecific."² Due partly to this conceptual elasticity and partly to the myth-inspiring eccentricity of the author's biography,³ literary scholars continue to claim her fiction for incorporation in different critical fields. Even though she chose Ireland as a setting only for a marginal part of her fiction, the surfacing of Irish Studies as an academic subject was nonetheless instrumental in putting Bowen onto the critical

map in the 1980s and 90s. To be sure, scholars such as Vera Kreilkamp have argued persuasively that the "tensions and discordances of her Anglo-Irish experience" are central to understanding Bowen's art.⁴ Paradoxically, though, it is also the responsiveness of Bowen's fiction to conventional modes of writing that further emphasizes its formal mutability. Although Virginia Woolf is commonly considered "Bowen's friend, mentor and, in some ways, her model as modern, professional female author,"⁵ an unpublished letter in the Elizabeth Bowen collection in the Harry Ransom Centre in Austin reveals that Bowen regularly sent her publications to another, more unlikely, recipient for critical inspection and approval: Agatha Christie.⁶ Positioning Bowen accordingly between the commercially successful crime writer and the high priestess of literary modernism suggests that her writing willingly lends itself to both a "high-brow" as well as "popular" label. Links have thus been forged between Bowen's stylistic idiosyncrasies and the innovative experimentalism of the literary avant-garde. At the same time, her fiction with its apparent focus on "feminine experiences" such as love, manners, and the domestic is seen to respond to the conventions of the mainstream novel—a fact advancing Nicola Humble's suggestion that Bowen's "intellectual abstruse

novels" are best positioned "at the highbrow end of the middlebrow."⁷

What has been foregrounded in many recent attempts at critically locating Bowen's fiction, however, is its synchronized reliance on both realist and modernist literary conventions.⁸ This article aims to add critical leverage to this ongoing debate by considering the central role that clothes and fashion play in Bowen's novel To the North. What the following pages will show is that Bowen's narrative relies heavily on textiles and fabrics in the development of character and plot. But while dresses, frocks, and other sartorial markers loom large in her fiction, Bowen's novel sidesteps the overt dependence on materiality and description that distinguishes the realist novel she inherited from such writers as Henry James or Edith Wharton. As we shall see, clothes, like no other objects in Bowen's novel, carefully orchestrate the literary representation of the connections that exist between characters' interior composition, their intersubjective relations, and the landscape of the exterior. In To the North clothes literally connect people. For that reason, it is Bowen's enthusiasm for representing the world of material objects—a feature conventionally associated with classical realism—that provides,

incongruously perhaps, an opportune moment to interrogate Bowen's own relationship to the aesthetics of literary modernism.

II

At the outset it must be noted, however, that Bowen's encounters with the world of fashion were far from opportune. Apparently, her "dress sense" was "atrocious" at the time of her marriage to Alan Cameron, who took on the daunting task of organizing her wardrobe.⁹ Victoria Glendinning, Bowen's biographer, notes that "large earrings, necklaces of false pearls or great glass bobbles, and flashy fake jewellery" were classic Bowen accessories.¹⁰ One glance at existing photographs of Bowen makes clear that she was hardly a trend-setter when it came to matters of personal appearance. By the same token, Bowen's busy career as a journalist for Vogue and Mademoiselle, in the 1940s and 50s,¹¹ might well have been spurred, as Allan Hepburn suggests, by "the necessity of paying household bills" to keep her ancestral home Bowen's Court up and running.¹² That said one can still discern an apparent affinity to the vagaries of the modern fashion industry in Bowen's writing. In a 1956 essay, for instance, she justifies her stylish eccentricity by stressing the need to

avoid conformity and a slavish devotion to the norm:

"Fashion," Bowen writes, "today, no longer is a dictator, rather a would-be ally of the identity; it deals no longer in 'musts' but in possibilities. There are an infinity of ways of avoiding the mass-produced look. Even what may seem to be universals, the grey suit or the black dress, subtly are invitations to personality; everything depends on the way of wearing them, the unique touches, the language of the accessories."¹³ Clothes and other fashion ornaments, in other words, can be effectively manipulated in order to create "that subtle blend of individuality and fashion."¹⁴ Indeed, in her essays Bowen consistently returns to the assertion that fashion and subjectivity are intimately linked. "Clothes," as she writes in a review of the design historian Willett Cunnington's English Women's Clothing in the Nineteenth Century, "never remain a question of pure æsthetics; far too much personal feeling is involved in them" ("Dress," 112). Were it not for this intriguing connection between dress and psychology, garments, robes, and other sartorial objects would not be such complex and intricate texts waiting to be deciphered.

Although sartorial references pervade all of Bowen's writing, this article considers the centrality of fashion and clothes in Bowen's To the North—her 1932 novel that

investigates the formation of personal attachments in a modern, ephemeral world driven by excessive consumption and the velocity of modern travel in trains, planes, and automobiles.¹⁵ Of course, the composition of social networks (and their volatility) is a classic Bowen topos. After all, her first novel, The Hotel (1927), examines the fleeting nature of personal attachments formed among guests convening coincidentally in an Italian Riviera boarding house, whereas a later novel is more explicitly entitled Friends and Relations (1931). Moreover, a 1950 lecture on "The Poetic Element in Fiction" illustrates the extent to which prose writing was, for Bowen, connected to the exploration of interpersonal relations: "Is it to be allowed that the only spokesman for our time, the only remaining voice for our time, and a voice which may not always be easily heard, should be the voice of the poet, and of the lyrical and self-contemplative poet, at that," she asks rhetorically, before stating that there

must be the conflict between consciousness of the one and of the other person. There must be the movement and the impact of the passion upon the passion, the project on the project. We cannot really accept, even in our most introverted individualism, the idea of a one-man world, of

the solitary consciousness reflecting everything else. And that really, that fact that it concerns itself with two people, with three, with an unnumbered cast of persons, placed in a pattern relating to one another and acting upon one another, does constitute the hold and the future promise of the story, whether it be in [...] the novel of sensation, whether it be in the novel of allegory, the Kafka novel, or whether it be in the short story with its simplified invisible view.¹⁶

But even though the topic of human interactions figures prominently in all of Bowen's texts, To the North—her most cosmopolitan novel, spotlighting like none of her other works the instability of interpersonal connections in modern, metropolitan London—occupies all the same a special place in her literary universe. Related here is the story of two young women, sisters-in-law Cecilia and Emmeline Summers, who set up house together in 1920s London after the death of Cecilia's husband and Emmeline's brother. While the glamorous and unpredictable Cecilia contemplates a second marriage to the eligible bachelor Julian Tower, Emmeline, co-owner of a small Bloomsbury travel agency, forms an ill-fated emotional attachment with the predatory Markie Linkwater. Their affair ends catastrophically, and

the novel culminates on a cataclysmic note: after a constrained and awkward dinner with Julian and Cecilia, Emmeline, in an emblematic death-drive scene, provokes a car accident that will, in all likelihood, kill herself and Markie.¹⁷

The contextual setting to this description of the characters' complex emotional and personal transactions is a world in which consumption and personal relations threaten to become interchangeable and the novel's apparent interest in metropolitan consumer culture might well be responsible for the abundance of sartorial references in the description of Emmeline's personal tragedy and Cecilia's blossoming romance. Meteorological conditions are reported with allusions to "[w]et lace" and "sopping chiffon" (To the North, 219). Cecilia, we are told, is "charmingly dressed" (4) in "pink folds" (307) or an expensive "fur coat" (1). Lady Waters, Emmeline's and Cecilia's exasperating and exasperated relative, exhibits, in "her black moiré skirt" (15), an "expensive disregard of the fashions" (14). Elsewhere in the novel, Bowen draws attention to a "white tie" (24), a "black tie" (60), Emmeline's "green dress" (138), her "long yellow dress" (81), and her "red leather slippers" (125). More unconventionally (and disturbingly perhaps), a schoolgirl's

"blue knickers" are on display in a "dignified but dégage somersault" (94), while the novel, in its final scene, zooms in on "Markie's white scarf that he had forgotten" and "Emmeline's gloves that she would not wear" (307)—the latter an image that produces nervous anxiety in the otherwise blasé Cecilia. But even to a reader who does not ransack Bowen's novel for references to clothes, fabrics, and textiles, this sartorial color chart must seem overdetermined. While Bowen herself admits that "[t]en minutes talk about clothes (except between perfect friends) tends to make everyone present either overbearing, guarded or touchy" ("Dress," 111), her novel, like its author, over-accessorizes. So what can be the point of this slightly inelegant and ungainly accumulation of sartorial references in Bowen's narrative?

A possible answer can be found by looking at Bowen's representation of objects. In their seminal study Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel (1995), Andrew Bennett and Nicolas Royle suggest that objects in Bowen's work function primarily to represent, metonymically, the characters that inhabit her fictional world.¹⁸ However, Maud Ellmann has recently complicated this critical notion by arguing that Bowen's fiction anthropomorphizes inanimate objects, especially furniture, and provides them with

mnemonic abilities.¹⁹ Things become guardians of the past—a past that characters no longer want to assimilate, store, or confront. Ellmann, it could be said, registers a certain psychological emancipation of Bowen's artifacts. They are no longer figuratively tied to the human mind. Instead of simply representing characters, objects take on a more active and autonomous role in Bowen's fiction. Maintaining that the "idea that places and things could have sentience and cognition," "regardless of whether or not a human mediator is present to act as the source of or inspiration for such acts of personification," Elizabeth C. Inglesby further advances the study of Bowen's "literary animism."²⁰ In Bowen's fiction, Inglesby argues, artifacts sense, form connections, and communicate with each other. Not only does Bowen's fiction insist on the spiritual independence of the material world, but it also reveals objects' potential and desire for independent agency.

My own reading of dress and garments in To the North is influenced by the critical consensus that "things" matter in Bowen's fiction. But clothes, I would argue, can nevertheless be distinguished from many of the objects that have been given specific attention by Bowen's critics. Whereas houses, furniture, and other domestic items represent tradition, customs, and history (nostalgia made

material), clothes are consumer products, temporary of nature, transient, and short-lived. Unsurprisingly, in his 1902 pamphlet "Wirtschaft und Mode" ("Economics and Fashion")—the first sustained analysis of fashion's fiscal power and international reach—the German social economist Werner Sombart identifies the instability and vicissitude of human nature as one of the inevitable consequences of an emergent capitalist economy. While Sombart notes that "[c]hange has been transformed from an individual into a social fact," he also suggests that "the relationship between human beings and articles of daily use has been stripped of [its] sentimental and romantic attraction."²¹ Clothes and other disposable consumer articles are certainly no memorabilia. Conversely, they represent—in a way that houses, tables, or chairs do not—the energy, the dynamic changes, and the mobility associated with modern capitalism.

At this point, it is tempting to suggest that Bowen, in To the North, is simply endorsing a specific ideological perspective: Karl Marx's well-known theory of commodity fetishism. And as we shall see later, traces of capitalism's alienating influence are certainly apparent in her novel, while Bowen, in another place, overtly acknowledges modernity's sedating and paralyzing

influences. As she argues in "The Poetic Element in Fiction," "[w]e could be very easily numbed and very easily made anonymous, unaware of ourselves, by this heavy looming up of invention, of buildings, of process of speed, of similarity, of mass production."²² However, in To the North, garments, dress, and fashion ornaments are also infused with a particular force and verve, and it is precisely their vitality that is responsible for mobilizing or generating interpersonal energies between characters. While the ontological distinction between subject and object becomes therefore increasingly blurred in To the North—her protagonists often appear like passive chessboard pieces—it is, paradoxically, through their reliance on sartorial objects that characters in Bowen's fiction seem to be able to bond at all with other individuals. In To the North clothes function determinedly as agents of intersubjectivity.

III

That Bowen consistently associated clothes with social networking is suggested early on in To the North, when Emmeline's and Cecilia's social behavior is assessed with the help of a sartorial image: "Mutability seemed to Emmeline natural; if her own friends, like her evening

dresses, outlasted Cecilia's, it was simply because she did not wear them so hard or—to pursue the sartorial image—cut so close to the figure" (To the North, 24). Cecilia, it seems, is a consumer, Emmeline a collector. But while the two women differ in their feelings toward clothes and friends, To the North constantly synchronizes its apparent interest in dress with an equally decisive analysis of its characters' social networks and connections. Unsure of whether or not to accept Julian's offer of marriage, to form a new attachment, Cecilia displaces her indecision and uncertainty onto the problematic task of selecting new items for her wardrobe: "Besides the agonies of decision—green, white or flame-colour?—she could never order a new evening dress without a sense of fatality: how much would have happened before it was worn out? . . . On Saturday there had been that disturbing passage with Julian" (105). Cecilia's thoughts about the purchase, consumption, and the wear and tear of garments parallel her attitude towards her social engagements. Does she, who "loved strangers, strangeness" and who "could enjoy in a first glance all the deceptions of intimacy" (6), really want to form an attachment that is to outlast her new evening dress? Does one want to find stability and permanence in a swirling world that pays lip service to the "slick mundanity of

Vogue" (7)? However, excessive consumption is not solely the problem of the flighty Cecilia. Accused by his siblings of going "through life too easily, forming too few ties and buying too many pictures" (40), Julian, Cecilia's suitor, is equally accountable for a too fashion-conscious attitude to life. In Bowen's novel consumption and intimacy, like mismatched ornaments, do not seem to go together.

However, if some of Bowen's characters seem reluctant to form lasting attachments her own fiction is extremely loyal to one particular sartorial object: the tie. Cravats, neckties, and their close sartorial relatives, scarves, are everywhere in To the North. Whereas the school tie of Julian's adolescent niece, Pauline, becomes the subject of an aesthetic debate (195-96), Emmeline, during her first meeting with Julian at a party that triggers a discussion of her travel agency, glances "once or twice at his white tie" (24). Likewise, Cecilia reports that her first conversation with Markie on the train came to pass because she "looked at his tie" (18)—"at his Old Harrovian tie: the only tie, for some reason, she ever recognised" (3).²³ In this last case, a fashion accessory motivates a fleeting encounter on the train, which has, nevertheless, more long-term and ultimately unfortunate repercussions because it connects Markie and Emmeline.

This unconcealed concern with ties is certainly puzzling. But if Bowen's novel relies heavily on this particular fashion ornament, it is, of course, for the explicit purpose of exploiting the semantics of the homonym "tie" and to stress the associative connection between sartorial objects and social attachments. Accordingly, Peter, Emmeline's business partner, in an early scene in the novel, is seen to maintain "an air of slightly disdainful discretion" during Emmeline's talk with a parlor-maid, "as though he were thankful he had no ties" (36-37). Such playful conceptual fusion on Bowen's part confirms Neil Corcoran's proposal that her fiction is extremely alert to the "semantic, acoustic, and etymological interconnections between words" and that she consistently aims to merge discursive fields associated with particular linguistic referents.²⁴ Extremely apparent (and comical) is this overlap between the sartorial and the socio-psychological when Lady Waters hopes that Cecilia, after her marriage, will "travel with Julian, or have more ties" (274). In Bowen's To the North—a text that develops bizarre grids of ties—sartorial ornaments and personal relationships, in a deft (or daft) play with linguistic signifiers, seem to become exchangeable.

Moreover, it seems as if Bowen was extremely fond of this particular image, using it again in The Heat of the Day (1949), another of her novels exploring the ephemerality of human connections—this time in WW2 London. Forced to reconsider the “ambiguities of her tie”²⁵ with her lover Robert Kelway, who might or might not be a Nazi spy, the protagonist Stella Rodney, in one of the novel’s key scenes, is asked to provide an opinion on Robert’s necktie: “‘Don’t you agree,’ he asked, ‘it’s about time I scrapped this tie?’” (Heat of the Day, 101-102). This conversation about Robert’s necktie, odd as it must appear in the first place, is awkwardly pinned to a chapter reviewing emotional rapports between individuals—personal ties—in the time of war. Death and the dangers faced daily and nightly during the Blitz function, according to Bowen’s narrator, like an aphrodisiac:

So, among the crowds still eating, drinking, working, travelling, halting, there began to be an instinctive movement to break down indifference while there was still time. The wall between the living and the living became less solid as the wall between the living and the dead thinned. In that September transparency people became transparent, only to be located by the just darker flicker

of their hearts. [...] There was a diffused gallantry in the atmosphere, an unmarriedness: it came to be rumoured about the country, among the self-banished, the uneasy, the put-upon and the safe, that everybody in London was in love [...] (92, 94-95).

Intruding on this atmosphere of romance and passion is a man called Harrison, who forces himself (and certain unwanted information about Robert's intelligence work) on Stella. With her suspicion awakened, Stella, who is unable to confront her lover directly, nonetheless decides to investigate Robert's case: what follows is an intricate dialogue about Harrison, Stella's "friends" (102), and Robert's relatives—a conversation that produces uneasiness, the crucial "tie question" (102) and an emotional outburst: "'The thing is,' [Stella] cried, kneeling by him with the tie in her hands, 'that really I cannot judge any tie you wear. Just as I cannot judge ... How should I feel, for instance, if somebody tried to tell me something preposterous about you?'" (102). In the emotionally charged atmosphere of war-time London, where human associations form rapidly and intimacy becomes discountable, all sorts of ties, it seems, might easily become oppressive or burdensome and finally will have "to go" (102).²⁶

In To the North, the novel's fad for ties is most seductive for the affectionate, devoted, and emotionally consistent Emmeline, whose strong attachment to Markie has such drastic consequences. Unexpectedly finding her lover in her garden one morning, she registers his "dishevelled white tie" (To the North, 126), an ostentatious marker of an eventful night. And although Bowen's novel does not record Emmeline's discomposure and agitation directly, the sartorial image does provide clues about Markie's nocturnal activities and Emmeline's emotional response. "To get his tie like this," we are told, "someone must have been holding him tight round the neck" (127). For Emmeline, we can deduce, Markie's "crumpled tie" (127) advertises the possibility of either a violent encounter or of sexual betrayal. But instead of giving the reader access to the internal, psychological organization of Emmeline's character, Bowen externalizes her sentiments and perceptions by concentrating on a fashion ornament. It is the characters' garments that can reveal emotional states. Accessories thus become the focus for a close-reading of Markie's activities and Emmeline's character. The reader turns, like the elusive Emmeline herself, into a vigilant examiner of fashion ornaments. At the same time To the North opts for representing the world—to use Bowen's own

expression—not through the lens of the “solitary consciousness reflecting everything else,” but through investigating the relationships of “a cast of persons, placed in a pattern.” As it happens, Bowen, in the described scene, emphasizes the associative connection between sartorial and social fabrics by coordinating the reading of characters’ clothes and personal relations. Emmeline’s attention to Markie’s tie illustrates that clothes consistently facilitate the inspection of other people’s personal connections.

But Emmeline is by no means the only alert and fashion-conscious reader in To the North; in that role she is, in her travel agency, outstripped by her secretary, “recently down from Lady Margaret Hall” (35)—the bland and neglected (but appropriately named) Miss Tripp. Oblivious to the stenographer’s display of increasingly striking clothing, put on for “Emmeline’s eye alone” (149), and to Miss Tripp’s bottled-up emotions, Emmeline finds herself in a tight spot one day when walking into the office in an arresting green silk dress. Arriving late, “agitated and bright-eyed” (143) from a lunch date with Markie, she must realize that her unpunctuality and her unusual choice of dress provoke Miss Tripp’s “hectoring intimacy” (143) and an emotional crisis. Unfortunately for both women, Miss

Tripp has misread the significance of the green frock. In principle Emmeline is a version of what the psychologist J. C. Flügel calls "the duty type" in his 1930 study The Psychology of Clothes—a person for whom "certain kinds of clothes have indeed become outward and visible signs of a strict and strongly developed 'Super-Ego' or moral principle" and who would "draw a sharp distinction between clothes worn for work and the less severe and more ornamental garments worn for rest or recreation."²⁷ Emmeline, we are not surprised to hear, "never came to work in anything but a coat and skirt, or a linen dress as severe," so Miss Tripp is partly vindicated in thinking that there is really "no reason why this departure from precedent should be allowed to pass without comment" (To the North, 143).

Evident in the tense exchange between employer and employee now ensuing in Emmeline's agency is the alienating aspect of modern office work that threatens to mechanize and standardize human life and labor. It is precisely this "impersonality" (148) that Doris Tripp criticizes in Emmeline's behavior—especially in a place that prides itself on taking "personal care of clients" (26). Although Doris knows better than to allow "personal feeling to impinge on business relations" (148), she refuses to be

regarded as "an automaton" or, worse even, "a platinum blonde" (151). "But where was the confidence," wonders Emmeline's employee, "[w]here were the smiles, the gleams of satirical understanding, the dear sense of impositions endured together, of jokes shared grimly enough, that should cement an association between females?" (150). Tripp, who takes up Emmeline's request for dictation, "smiling, as though at an invitation to dance" (146), wants intimacy while her employer expects nothing but "punctuality, bridling diligence" (153), and "the seductive efficiency" "implicit in [the] use of 'stenographer'" (154).

In writing this specific scene from To the North, Bowen registers that fashion dictates, to a certain extent, the problematic office politics depicted in such detail. By associating the image of modern and stylish femininity with the attractive picture of women's competence and efficiency, the fashion industry, in the 1920s, had started to set standards for female dress and demeanor in the workplace. In To the North, a particular "type" of employee is required by the business partners—one who is "cheap," "wrote the King's English, absented herself at tea-time, and did not sniff" (153). Not individuality, represented by Tripp's "striped, checked or polka-dotted" dresses (149),

but compliance with the ready-made image of female professionalism is in high demand on the 1920s job market.

For this competition Tripp is, unfortunately, ill-equipped or ill-fitted. But although she is certainly not the kind of employee desired by the business partners, Bowen nonetheless sides with this sartorial and social outsider. The scene from To the North, in spite of an underlying strand of satire, shows compassion and sympathy for the young woman, who "worked for ten shillings a week and the experience" (35). Indeed, given her well-developed taste for individuality and intellectual autonomy, Bowen—who argues elsewhere that "beauty, once its early dazzle is past, is very very much a matter of identity" and "the gentle brilliance of individuality"—could only have been offended by fashion's regulation of female appearances and social roles through the alluring imagery of prêt-à-porter models.²⁸ In all likelihood, Bowen would have classified herself as a "non-combatant" in this battle for modish uniformity. She is, therefore, responsive to the cry of "the elderly and the old"—who argue "that everyone, nowadays, looks exactly the same as every one else"—before she pessimistically concludes that the "truth, probably, is that everybody would like to look like one preconceived person, a figure suggested to them by the propaganda of

fashion: they believe the figure to be their private ideal and do not realize how general the figure is. Stenographers with good figures, quick eyes and uncomplex natures approximate to this ideal most neatly" ("Dress," 113). Bowen senses that the cultural prescriptions of contemporary fashion create notions of femininity that threaten to erase personal differences and idiosyncrasies.²⁹

However, Bowen's apparent critique of fashion's democratizing influence aside, it must be said that Emmeline's dress, whose sleeves are "rubbing against the desk" and whose "silk was still warm from the sun" (To the North, 145), is certainly unsuitable for office work. In fact, the inappropriateness of the green frock is colorfully illustrated by a 1924 feature in British Vogue that offers "A Guide to Chic for the Business Woman." "[A]ny woman who is working in the City among men may be said to be best dressed in the very plainest of smart ways," the columnist asserts, before denouncing "the sleeveless street gown" and very "short, tight, bright dresses" as "unsuitable" in the work place. Emmeline has committed the modern office woman's worst sartorial faux-pas: adorning herself, as the Vogue fashion arbiter calls it, with "an eye to the social side of life, and for the sake of mid-day or evening engagements." She is therefore

being very "ill turned out for [her] employment."³⁰ Bowen herself is even more severe in her criticism of unbefitting clothing than the Vogue columnist, suggesting that "[a]n unsuccessful appearance is more than a pity; it is a pathological document" ("Dress," 112).

But even if Emmeline's green dress is unsuitable for work, Tripp's advancement is equally misplaced. Although the frock carries the distracting memory of Emmeline's lunch with Markie and their plans for a short trip to Paris—memories out of place in the work space—it is not an invitation to an intimate and friendly tête-à-tête between "girls" (To the North, 143). Back in the office, Emmeline is once more detached and impersonal, as surprised by Miss Tripp's emotional outbreak "as though the very furniture had complained" (148). Yet the green frock does motivate Tripp to speak and to seek Emmeline's confidence. However improvident, misguided, or undesirable Tripp's effort might have been, Emmeline's clothes become the reason for this shot at intimacy. "'If I hadn't come in in this wretched dress'," Emmeline correctly concludes, "'she would not have spoken'" (155). In Bowen's novel costumes and outfits are therefore responsible for producing emotional energies between characters.

Even the capricious Cecilia is not immune to the seductive allure of the personal—as long as it speaks to her and lets her speak through sartorial referents. Having finally decided to tie the knot with Julian, she faces the task of befriending Julian's teenage niece, Pauline. Confronted with the girl one evening during one of Lady Waters's tedious country outings, Cecilia, after a number of awkward attempts to build rapport, finally offers to assist Pauline in getting dressed: "'Does your dress do up at the back?'" she wants to know before suggesting, "'Perhaps I could hook it'" (201). Although Pauline rejects the well-meant offer, Cecilia's concern about Pauline's dress and hair produces a "burst of confidence" (201) in the young girl. Bowen's novel leaves no one in doubt that Pauline and Cecilia have hooked up with one another, especially since Pauline recalls the scene for the benefit of her uncle Julian: "'A girl of my age might easily feel de trop,'" she says, "'but they are all determined to make me feel quite at home. Mrs. Summers came in last night and offered to hook my dress, but it hooks at the side'" (To the North, 210). Clothes consolidate, once more, a personal connection.

Needless to say, the fact that To the North consistently interrogates the relationship between material

goods and human relationships also suggests that Bowen's text contributes to an ongoing debate exploring the extent to which contemporary consumer culture had an alienating effect on modern individuals. It is well known that Karl Marx—in his remarks on the fetishism of commodities—expressed a deep mistrust of consumer objects because of their ability to commoditize human labor. In Marx's words, "whenever, by any exchange, we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them."³¹ But in contrast to Marx's assumptions, Bowen shows in To the North that sartorial items (and her characters' reliance on those millinery objects to establish intersubjective relations) can obtain assembling powers. In her fiction material items such as clothes and other fashion accessories have significance and acquire affective qualities through the personal associations they construct and encourage. Bowen's use of fashion accessories thus moves beyond critical paradigms that pessimistically envision, pace Marx, estrangement and personal isolation as the logical consequence of capitalist modernity. Although she frowningly records the evanescence of intimacy and personal connections in a modern world of mass production and consumption, her fiction also shows that it is,

paradoxically, precisely through those mass-manufactured consumer objects that emotional rapport can occasionally be established. In To the North, Bowen remains committed to investing in sartorial items and materiality. But this investment is always motivated by emotive, not by materialist, concerns. Her writing continues to be dedicated to uncovering—through the focus on the objects that crowd their world—the emotional energies among her characters.

While Bowen's characters thus form what I would like to call sartorial connections and let themselves be directed and conducted by the energy of their clothes and fashion ornaments, the novel's reader also forms strong links to the characters' fashion accessories and thereby to Bowen's fictional personalities. We become intimate with her characters, are fastened to them, through getting to know their clothes and dresses. When the emotionally tormented Emmeline, in one of the novel's last scenes, turns to her wardrobe for inspiration on what to wear for Cecilia's dinner party, she has the choice between "the yellow in which she had dined with Markie, the silver in which she had first met Julian" (284). Both dresses are associated, in the reader's (and Emmeline's) mind, with the men, who, in one form or another, have contributed to

terminating her tenancy at Oudenarde Road and to interrupting her comfortable intimacy with Cecilia. For Markie, however, the experience of spotting Emmeline in "a long silver dress that he did not know" (286) rekindles his sexual desire. Like the unknown frock, Emmeline represents novelty, a renewed offer of consumption. With the words, "'You are looking lovely: is that dress new'" (289), Markie advances, prepared to start all over again. But the reader is aware, unlike Emmeline's lover, that the silver dress does not represent a clean slate. Intimacy with Emmeline has intensified since we first saw her in the shiny silver dress. With the help of the sartorial reference we are able to follow her in recalling decisive moments in her past—like her first encounter with Julian. By the end of the novel it has therefore become apparent that the casual personal attachment desired by Markie is clearly incompatible with Emmeline's emotional intensity. Accordingly, the fabrics in Emmeline's wardrobe assist in associating and evaluating different elements in Bowen's textual design. When we connect text passages with the help of sartorial references, our familiarity with her protagonists stabilizes and intensifies. In Bowen's fiction it is exterior attributes such as clothes, dress, and fashion ornaments that generate ties between the characters

as well as between characters and the reader. Not the characters themselves but the consumer objects that surround them are, in many cases, the agents of the narrative. Bowen's protagonists might well lack agency. Instead it is the inanimate world of frocks and ties that provides them with stimulating impulses, energetically determining their choices. Clothes not literary characters, in other words, are responsible for driving Bowen's plot.

IV

Given the fact that the revolution of literary characters was a key aspect of modernism's experimental agenda it is at this point that the dialogue between Bowen's writing and the aesthetics of modernism should be considered. In 1924 Virginia Woolf published her pamphlet "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," a text that would obtain ambassadorial status for literary modernism's pioneering art of "character-reading." In this essay on the generational shift in novel writing Woolf argues that "it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved."³² The writers of the previous period—Edwardians such as Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and John

Galsworthy—have failed, according to Woolf, in representing human nature in fiction by laying “enormous stress upon the fabric of things.”³³ This focus on the material texture of the world produces, in her literary precursors, a slavish reliance on factual realism criticized severely by Woolf. “What appalled her,” Elizabeth Bowen writes in a 1954 review of Woolf’s recently published diaries, “were the non-moments, the bridge passages, the ‘narrative business of the realist [...].’”³⁴ By abandoning realism’s exclusive focus on exteriority, observation, and the world of material objects for a representation of character that prioritizes introspection and “an intense inner existence,”³⁵ Woolf’s modernism radically challenges the conventions of novel writing.

Obviously, Bowen did not share Woolf’s dislike for representing objects in fiction. On the contrary, her writing relies on negotiating the intricate relationship between the modern individual and the material and social composition of the world. As Maud Ellmann convincingly claims: “The difference between Bowen and Woolf is that Bowen relishes the narrative business of the realist, insofar as it releases her from the stifling rose-house of inner life into the world of cars and cocktail-shakers, typewriters and telephones—in short into the modern world,

which claims her attention just as much as the archaic phantoms of the mind.”³⁶ In To the North, Bowen, instead of developing the modernist depiction of interiority advocated by Woolf, allows us to read her protagonists through their accessories. This means that Bowen’s fiction evinces—in an all but realist fashion—a determined devotion to style, forms, and surfaces. For Bowen, the kaleidoscopic organization of the modern social landscape marked by fast-paced consumption, commercial exchanges, and the ephemeral nature of human connections, proved to be too exhilarating and fascinating to be neglected. Individuals, in her fiction, are shown to be thrown into a modern force-field of competing social and economic energies that can be anesthetizing and galvanizing at the same time.

But since we have seen that Bowen’s apparent attention to sartorial markers refuses to fall neatly into line with an unwavering materialist outlook, her aesthetic commitment to realist conventions, set up by critics as modernism’s outdated but contending literary practice, should be further investigated. Whereas the realist writers criticized in Woolf’s essay would insist on the solidity of the material world—the concreteness and substance of objects surrounding characters in fiction—Bowen foregrounds, like other modernist writers, the ephemerality

of the world. Moreover, in her novel psychological interiors and external appearances form complex alliances. On the one hand, costumes and clothes offer an invitation to the reader to speculate on the emotional make-up of characters. On the other hand, Bowen's play with linguistic signifiers emphasizes the instability of these sartorial connections. To use Roland Barthes's expression, dress "is a priori a kind of text without end."³⁷ Like Miss Tripp and Markie, readers might misjudge characters' clothes and thus their states of mind, both of which become attributes that are provisional and temporary of nature. In a modern world, in which experiences are short-lived and nothing is static, personal characteristics become as volatile as fashion objects. To the North reproduces this sense of instability through Bowen's playful pooling of sartorial and linguistic accessories. So it is precisely this conceptual elusiveness in Bowen's fiction that unhinges scholarly interpretations focusing exclusively on her writing's realist facets. Although she remained, throughout her writing career, dedicated to literary practices of the realist tradition—to representing "the fabric of things" as Woolf called it—Bowen nonetheless offers a different way of representing the interdependence of human subjects and the world of objects surrounding them—one that notes the variable nature

of personal associations and one that brings into play the suggestion of consumer objects' energetic intervention in the world of human connections.

In "The Poetic Element in Fiction" Bowen explicitly criticized "introverted individualism" and "the idea of a one-man world" while arguing at the same time that the individual is always part of a complexly woven, interceding social fabric. For this reason her novel rejects Woolf's proposition that objects obtain ontological significance predominantly through the subject's oscillating perceptions and creative interventions. As an alternative, objects—because they connect individuals with the outside world—are put firmly back into the picture in To the North. They are presented as items that have the ability to determine the modern individual's psychological choices and obligations, and it is therefore through her use of sartorial objects that Bowen advances the study of human characters in fiction and joins the ranks of those twentieth-century writers whose engagement with the material world of objects remained unbroken but interrogative.³⁸

V

Inevitably, perhaps, the analysis of sartorial styles in To the North has given way to the difficult task of defining

Bowen's writing style. As the last few paragraphs have shown, the analysis of clothes and other millinery objects in To the North raises the question of its generic affiliation and indicates how much Bowen's fashion-conscious writing unsettles both realist and modernist conventions. Her novel thus presents a significant challenge to her critics because it severely stretches established scholarly paradigms for literary analysis. However, by simply noting the apparent formal promiscuity of Bowen's fiction critics are in danger of evading the issue of defining her unconventional style through too much critical circumspection. At present, the debate about her generic, intellectual, or formal loyalties is therefore ongoing and resembles, in its complexity, discussions focusing on Bowen's ambiguous political allegiances. It seems that in the encounter with Bowen's fiction, scholars are redirected to consider their own analytical utensils—all of which seem to be lacking in conceptual precision. What has become apparent in the foregoing analysis, though, is Bowen's consciousness of sartorial, social, and generic patterns. Their mutually responsive relationship allowed her to revolutionize subject-object relationships in modern fiction and to develop her eccentric literary practices. In

her writing, as much as in matters of personal appearance, Bowen, it seems, delighted in the idiosyncrasy of style.

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Notes

¹ Elizabeth Bowen, "Dress," in Collected Impressions (London: Longmans, 1950), 112. Henceforth abbreviated parenthetically "Dress."

² Elizabeth Bowen, "Pictures and Conversations," in The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen, Hermione Lee, ed. (London: Random House, 1986), 282.

³ Bowen's life story is marked by a genteel but unsettled upbringing in the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy class, the Troubles in Ireland in the 1920s, her role as A.R.P. warden and as a spy for the British Ministry of Information during WW2, as well as her post-war work on the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment.

⁴ Vera Kreilkamp, The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 143.

⁵ Andrew Bennett, "Bowen and Modernism: The Early Novels," in Elizabeth Bowen, Eibhear Walshe, ed. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 29.

⁶ In this letter, the celebrated crime writer acknowledges the receipt of a Bowen novel—in all likelihood The Heat of the Day—with the following remarks: "You don't know how very much I appreciate your having send it to me and written in it. Like "Death of the Heart" and "The House in Paris," it makes a wonderful impact on one—I shall be able to read it many times and enjoy it each time." Unpublished letter from Agatha Christie to Elizabeth Bowen, March 2, no year, Elizabeth Bowen Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, box 10, folder 6.

⁷ Nicola Humble, The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 13, 78n.

⁸ See, for instance, Maud Ellmann, Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), x, 5 and Neil Corcoran, Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

⁹ Maud Ellmann, Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page, 33.

¹⁰ Victoria Glendinning, Elizabeth Bowen (New York: Knopf, 1978), 47. Bowen's lover Charles Ritchie also felt that her unorthodox taste in jewellery demanded commentary: "E was wearing a necklace and bracelet of gold and red of the kind of glass that Christmas tree decorations are made of... ." See Love's Civil War: Elizabeth Bowen and Charles Ritchie: Letters and Diaries, 1941-1973, Victoria Glendinning, ed. (London: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 28. And Bowen herself addresses the constant pressure of dressing adequately in a 1956 broadcast and essay "On Not Rising to the Occasion": "When I was fourteen, fifteen, the dress-problem raised its ugly head. It was necessary to look nice, as well as be nice. Still more, it was necessary to look 'suitable.' But, my heavens, suitable to what? [...] Fashion, now so kind to

that age-group, took no account of us. So trial-and-error it was, for me. Outcome: error." See Listening In: Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews by Elizabeth Bowen, Allan Hepburn, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 110.

¹¹ Bowen's contributions to Vogue in the 1940s and 50s included such diverse articles as a 1948 evaluation of "Prague and the Crisis," a reflection of post-War Christmas rituals in the 1950 "The Light in the Dark," or the 1946 essay "Ireland Makes Irish" on Irish castles and country houses. See Elizabeth Bowen, People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen, Allan Hepburn, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 37-40, 81-85, and 155-61.

¹² Allan Hepburn, ed., "Introduction," in People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen, 3.

¹³ Elizabeth Bowen, "How to Be Yourself—But Not Eccentric," in People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen, 415.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, "Introduction to The ABC of Millinery, by Eva Ritcher," in People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen, 189.

¹⁵ Not for nothing is "[m]ove dangerously" the slogan of the protagonist's travel agency, which aims to distinguish

itself from its monopolistic competitor Cook's. See Elizabeth Bowen, To the North (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 25. Henceforth abbreviated parenthetically To the North.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Bowen, "The Poetic Element in Fiction," in Listening In: Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews by Elizabeth Bowen, 159-60.

¹⁷ Needless to say, clothes also feature prominently in other Bowen novels. However, in many cases—such as The Last September, where "crisp white skirts and transparent blouses clotted with white flowers" denote girlish innocence and sexual inexperience—sartorial objects often obtain a more straightforward symbolic function to represent characters' states of mind. In its deployment of sartorial markers, To the North, due to its explicit urban setting, differs significantly from, for instance, Bowen's "big house" fiction. See Elizabeth Bowen, The Last September (New York: Knopf, 1952), 3.

¹⁸ Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle, Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 132.

¹⁹ Maud Ellmann, Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page, 142.

²⁰ Elizabeth C. Inglesby, "'Expressive Objects': Elizabeth Bowen's Narrative Materializes," Modern Fiction Studies 53:2 (2007), 306-333, 306-307.

²¹ Es ist härter geworden und damit sind auch die Beziehungen des Menschen zu den Gegenständen seines täglichen Gebrauchs jenes oft so gemüthvollen und romantischen Zaubers entkleidet, der in die Zimmer unserer Eltern trotz aller ästhetischen Versündigungen doch jene Wärme hineintrug, die heute den glänzenden Salons der Enkel [...] fehlt. See Werner Sombart, Wirtschaft und Mode (Wiesbaden: J. F. Bergman, 1902), 10. [Translation mine].

Bowen parrots Sombart's comments on the temporary nature of human associations in a 1952 Vogue essay, "The Art of Respecting Boundaries:" "Our parents and grandparents, possibly, were either less eager than we are or less impulsive. They gave more time, all time, to getting to know their friends; they were reticent or more adroitly guarded; and intimacies, such as there used to be, were rarer, more temperate—were they perhaps more lasting?" See People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen, 398.

²² Elizabeth Bowen, "The Poetic Element in Fiction," 159.

²³ In a memoir of her friend and publisher Alfred A. Knopf, Bowen records that she was, during their first encounter,

similarly arrested by his tie: "Circling the room, I succeeded in getting my back to the windows, put on my spectacles (I am near-sighted) and again looked round, more worried if less blinded. There seemed to be several women in their thirties (my then age) any one of whom might well have been I. It struck me that Alfred might be in the same quandary as myself: possibly he might have become bored by the puzzle and gone home? Or, had something gone wrong, had he not come? He could not possibly be anyone I had looked at so far. Then my eye lit on a tie, some distance away. The sun glinted on it. The tie was not so much magenta as the dark-bright purple-crimson of a petunia, and it was worn with a shirt of a light green, just too blue to be almond, just not blue enough to be verdigris. Tie and shirt were at some height from the ground; their wearer stood leaning in a doorway or archway, a vantage-point some way away from the throng. He looked almost sleepy. With an onlooker's great calmness, one might say indolence, he was considering everybody, including me. 'I wondered how we should find each other,' I said, as we shook hands."

Elizabeth Bowen, "Alfred Knopf," in Listening In: Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews by Elizabeth Bowen,

222.

²⁴ Neil Corcoran, Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return, 4.

²⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, The Heat of the Day (London: Random House, 1998), 114. Henceforth abbreviated parenthetically Heat of the Day.

²⁶ A typescript marked "alternative version" in the Elizabeth Bowen Collection in the Harry Ransom Center illustrates that Bowen, at some point, wanted to make more explicit this link between the sartorial and the social. First of all, the optional ending of the chapter emphasizes sexual jealousy on Robert's part who asks Stella overtly not to "'two-time with Harrison, will you?'" Moreover, the two lovers discuss their relatives and relations in more detail. Accordingly, Stella provides a reason for her request to meet Robert's family: "'After all, you've met Roderick [Stella's son] not only once but often—in fact, I should be miserable if you hadn't.'" Likewise, Robert volunteers more personal information: "'Oh, so should I; but we both know perfectly well that my mother and Ernestine aren't to me anything like what Roderick is to you. He is part of you; they're my origin—if you like.'" Finally, the "khaki tie" features even more prominently as a focal point in the scene. Stella, in an exchange that references a famous case of mistaken affection, even

wonders if it could function as keepsake: "'Yes,' she said, looking straight at the tie, 'this will have to go. To feel I should like to keep it is idiotic.' 'Like Harriet Smith and Mr Elton's toe-nails?' 'No, dear; it was sticking-plaster she kept.'" Elizabeth Bowen, holograph draft and typescript of The Heat of the Day with revisions and inserts, 19-20, Elizabeth Bowen Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, box 5, folder 2.

²⁷ J. C. Flügel, The Psychology of Clothes (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), 97-98.

²⁸ Elizabeth Bowen, "The Beauty of Being Your Age," in People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen, 356.

²⁹ It should be noted again that Bowen was, in spite of her critical inspection of fashion's unifying tendencies, extremely entranced by clothes and other fashionable items. Indeed, her correspondence with Blanche W. Knopf and Charles Ritchie after WW2 shows how delighted she was whenever they sent her clothes, cosmetics—or shoes: "Dear Blanche, I was in the middle of a more than belated letter to you when I got your cable—I'm now beginning again, as I feel so awfully bad you didn't know the shoes had arrived. Alan said he had sent off a line to you saying they'd come—I was then here, in Ireland. He was nearly as thrilled as I

was: you know how he loves shoes! (short, I think, of being a fêichist [sic]). I got back to London for a few days early this month, fitted them on and they are perfect—as easy to wear as they are on the eye. I can't tell you what they will do for my morale, this coming depressing London weather, or how angelically thoughtful I think it was of you to send them—not least to find them, for I know that elegant shoes in my outsize are far and few." Unpublished letter from Elizabeth Bowen to Blanche W. Knopf, October 26, 1947, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Records, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, box 685, folder 14. See also Love's Civil War, pp. 69, 74–75.

³⁰ Vogue 64:6 (Late September 1924), 71.

³¹ Karl Marx, Capital: Volume 1 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983), 78.

³² Virginia Woolf, "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," in Virginia Woolf: A Woman's Essays, Rachel Bowlby, ed. (London: Penguin, 1992), 75.

³³ Virginia Woolf, "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," 82.

³⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, "A Writer's Diary by Virginia Woolf," in The Mulberry Tree; Writings of Elizabeth Bowen, 179.

³⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, English Novelists (London: William Collins, 1946), 48.

³⁶ Maud Ellmann, Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page, 5.

³⁷ Roland Barthes, The Language of Fashion, Andy Stafford and Michael Carter, eds. (New York: Berg, 2005), 28.

³⁸ Critics such as Douglas Mao have recently questioned the problematic theory that modernist aesthetics maintained a strained relationship with materiality and with material culture. He accordingly states that modernist writers aim to "show how the discrete object, as the particular representative or crystallization of non-human Being, could exert a powerful hold on the imagination at a time when questions about the meaning of existence seemed unusually pressing" to illustrate modernism's evident fascination with the things that crowd the modern world. See Douglas Mao, Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 17.