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"Disjuncted Snapshots": Photography in the Short Stories of Elizabeth Bowen

Shannon Wells-Lassagne

- 1 Elizabeth Bowen wrote a vast array of critical articles, notably on the short story, and her comments are often highly revealing of the elements that she herself considers as important to the genre. Thus, in her preface to her wartime short stories, she refers to her work as a series of photographs: "Taken singly, they [the short stories] are disjuncted snapshots – snapshots taken from close up, too close up, in the middle of the *mêlée* of a battle". (Bowen 1986 : 99) This simultaneous acknowledging and belittling of the photographic influence on Bowen's work was typical of the author's critical commentary : thus, for example, she referred to her stories as visual sketches, but also emphasized that this visual component was often detrimental to the narrative nature of the short story. This quote can perhaps be put into perspective by comparing it with another where the visual arts are used to describe the short story ; in another of her prefaces to a collection of short stories she edited, she comments : "The story should be as composed, in the plastic sense, and as visual as a picture." (Bowen 1950 : 42-43) When such statements are juxtaposed with the recurrent appearance of the photograph in the plots of several of her short stories, the reader must wonder as to the relationship between her general statement and her particular practice : to what extent does photographic composition figure in her short stories ? Clearly, Bowen considered not only that the descriptive image is carefully composed to express the artist's vision, but also that this composition, and the heightened significance that it creates, are necessary elements of the short story. Thus, the photographic composition that I will be focusing on will be not just the way in which Bowen describes the careful structuring of each of the photographs, but essentially how the use of the genre allows the author to compose her own stories.
- 2 As is apparent from this first quote, Bowen was an author who considered her writing in very visual terms ; she had initially wanted to be a painter, and her critical writing is

filled with statements associating writing with painting, photography, or the cinema. Moreover, the influence of the sister arts on her literature was not by any means limited to a simple critical metaphor ; one of the particularities of her writing, both in her novels and her short stories, is the emphasis placed on the visual aspects of her texts : description, unspoken visual communication between characters, or the way in which appearance and reality are complex yet inextricably linked. Visual imagery appears to be especially important in Bowen's short stories, as she makes clear in the notes to a lecture at Wellesley College, "The Experience of Writing", included in Phyllis Lassner's book on Bowen's short texts:

The short story was good for me in two ways. 1) visual 2) the poetic stress on the moment. The impression for its own sake – spotlight, isolated – only slight need for rationalization and explanation. All my short stories have departed from a visual impression to which some poetic sign attached. (Lassner 122)

- 3 As we can see in the final phrase of this passage, the inspiration for her short stories is always visual. To relate this passage more clearly back to the idea of the photograph, it is interesting that both of the characteristic elements that for Bowen define the short story genre as she uses it, the visual and momentary nature of the medium, can also be related to photography : thus, beyond the simple idea that vision is the impetus behind the short stories, the use of the photo as the key element in the short stories discussed here heightens the prevalence of this visual element. As such, the recurrence of photographs in her short stories is a means by which to make concrete the relationship between language and vision in these texts.

- 4 The significance of the photographs in their plots is above all structural. Each of the stories basically uses the same sequence of events : it opens with a rather traditional visual description before introducing the conflict (of which the photograph is generally a part). Thus, the visual imagery that is present in the exposition of the story is both symbolized and justified by the photograph which follows it. An example from "Daffodils" should allow us to clarify this point :

Today the houses seemed taller and farther apart; the street wider and full of a bright, clear light that cast no shadows and was never sunshine. Under archways and between houses the distances had a curious transparency, as though they had been painted on glass. Against the luminous and indeterminate sky the Abbey tower rose distinct and delicate. ("Daffodils" 21)¹

- 5 In the story, Miss Murcheson, an unmarried schoolteacher trying to teach her students the value of small pleasures (like the flowers of the title), gains their esteem when they erroneously interpret a photograph of her as being proof of a romantic relationship. What is interesting in this introductory passage is the clear comparison made between the fictional world of visual imagery that the reader discovers and its artistic nature : the distances have been painted on glass, and the tower is described not as existing independently, but as an effect of contrast with the sky behind it. Thus, the reader is faced not with a description, but with an image, composed so as to give weight to certain elements of the landscape (the importance of contrasts, the unique nature of the light), but also so as to emphasize the aestheticism of the "reality" described. When photographs are introduced into the story, the visual nature of the composition becomes even more clear. Miss Murcheson goes home, and she is surrounded by photos. By moving them, she then becomes the subject of a photograph herself :

Quickly she entered the sitting-room and flung open the window, which [...] clanked the little pictures on the walls. The window embrasure was so deep that there was little light in the corners of the room [...]. The square of daylight by the

window was blocked by a bamboo table groaning under an array of photographs. In her sweeping mood she deposed the photographs, thrust the table to one side, and pulled her chair up into the window. "I can't correct my essays in the dark," she asserted, though she had done so every evening of the year. ("Daffodils" 22)

6 For once, Miss Murcheson has decided to take the place of the photos, and work by the light outside. As such, she is "framed" by the window, which itself displays the painted background already discussed in the exposition of the short story : she has become a portrait. Indeed, the image created here by the author is echoed throughout the rest of the story, which is in fact the discussion of her actual photograph, seen and misinterpreted. The use of this medium allows the author to emphasize previous elements in the story (notably the visual nature of her exposition, and the character's status as subject and object of the beholder's gaze – here the reader's, later that of the other characters examining her snapshot) so as to relate it thematically to the short story as a whole. Likewise, by using the photograph as a principle element in the plot, Bowen manages to better assimilate the idea of the visual into a language art, avoiding the idea of the reification that could occur with an over-abundant use of hypotyposis possible especially in the descriptive incipit, by relating this description to the narrative use of photos.

7 However, it should not be assumed that Bowen wishes all visual description to be assimilated directly to all the characteristics of the photographic medium. Indeed, in the introductory passage of "Daffodils" we have just examined, there seems to be an express desire to accentuate the textual and artistic nature of the scene described. The fact that it appears to be "painted on glass" is a clear reminder that though the author may be using the photographic medium to clarify its visual nature, here the description can be more closely associated with painting, all the while emphasizing that what we are reading is carefully created and composed to give the maximum effect with a minimum number of elements. It is not the picture, but the author's word painting that is composed. Thus, the visual imagery created through language is fictional. Photography, on the other hand, is characterized in Bowen's texts by its necessarily referential and mimetic nature. As Roland Barthes makes clear in his seminal work on photography, *La Chambre claire* (or *Camera Lucida* in English), language and photography are opposites, in the sense that language is always fictional, without the means to authenticate itself, whereas photography is necessarily authentic, referring back to a subject which must have been present in order for the photograph to exist² Indeed, in this short story as in several others, the referential nature of the medium is so strong that the subject of the photograph and the photograph itself are sometimes indistinguishable :

She felt them eyeing her stack of outraged relatives, the photographs she swept off on to a chair... ("Daffodils" 24)

"By the way," said Cicely [...] "look carefully round the room, Herbert, and see if you see anyone you know." Herbert [...] made an elaborate inspection [...] "Very well she looks up there, too," he said [...]. He had seen what he expected, the portrait of his beloved looking out coyly at him from between two top-heavy vases. ("The Lover" 65-66)

8 In the first passage, the confusion of the subjects with the photographs representing them is such that the reader is at first presented with imagery reminiscent of Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*: the stack of relatives cannot fail to recall the playing-card royalty of the children's tale. In the second passage, Cicely asks her brother to search not for the portrait of his fiancée, but for his fiancée herself, which is then described as if it were

itself acting as the character would no doubt do: "the portait of his beloved [was] looking out coyly at him". As such, the photograph is apparently presented in Bowen's short stories as the ultimate tool for mimetic representation, where reality and representation are literally indistinguishable, an attribute that may seem at odds with the author's own association with Modernist experimentation. However, the use made of photography in another story, "Recent Photograph", may allow us to re-examine the referential nature of the visual genre.

- 9 In "Recent Photograph", the protagonist, Bertram Lukin, is an ambitious newspaper reporter sent to investigate a grisly murder-suicide in the London suburbs. While interrogating the neighbours of the husband who killed his wife and then himself, Lukin is faced with two separate interpretations of the couple's relationship. The appearance of the second witness makes it clear that the reporter is not interested in truth, but in clarity :

He didn't want two stories, after all, and he knew perfectly well that Verbena was only going to contradict her mother's. He had the stuff half-written in his mind already; it was beginning to rise in his brain like a cake in an oven. The whole truth was, for the purposes of his profession, a thing of too various dimensions to be easily encompassed. ("Recent Photograph" 217)

- 10 Here language is clearly a fictional medium in which truth is, if not impossible, at least always complex (too much so for a newspaper). In the end, the second story is heard only because Verbena has a recent photograph of the couple, and it is this visual document which supposedly holds truth. However, at the conclusion of the story, the reader is still not clear on which story is going to be reported, or to what extent it will be an amalgamation of the accounts, or even an outright fabrication. Nonetheless, the photograph is "proof" of the story told, whatever that story may be. Though the visual medium is strongly mimetic and referential, the truth it contains is always subject to the interpretation of others. Therefore, the proof it gives is never final, except as a proof of existence ; the mimesis it affords is limited by the linguistic context in which it is ensconced.

- 11 Likewise, the mimesis so characteristic of the photograph is shown consistently in Bowen's short stories as being uninteresting, even senseless, without the context of the story to give it meaning. Pure mimesis therefore needs the fictional shape that language imposes on it. For example, in "The Needlecase", a threadbare bourgeois family hires a seamstress, Miss Fox, to give them an appearance of wealth (or at least, new upholstery) to impress the newest rich fiancée of the currently absent eldest son Arthur. Miss Fox is a source of much interest to the family : her fees are accessible because she is less than respectable with an illegitimate child whose picture is hidden in the needlecase of the title. The photograph is viewed twice, and it is significant that only the second glance is of any interest to the family. When a family member first views the photograph, without a context, it is simply the image of a child like any other ; upon its second appearance, two other family members view it while the seamstress recounts her meeting with Arthur. This second viewing, described once Miss Fox has told of her encounter with the family's eldest son, constitutes the climax of the story:

[Angela] and Frank both stared at the photograph of the child. They saw, as Toddy had seen, its curls and collar. Like Arthur's curls and collar in old photographs downstairs. And between the collar and curls, Arthur's face stared back again at the uncle and aunt. ("The Needlecase" 460)

- 12 The purely mimetic representation of the photograph is insignificant until it is accompanied by the story that allows the characters (and the reader, by the same occasion) to unlock its meaning. Bowen seeks to show that any visual aspects of the short story are dependent on language. Thus the short story emphasizes the limitations of each genre (the static nature of the photograph that in truth only mimics but cannot signify, as well as that of visual description, which can easily stop the flow of the narration, the mimetic representation the photograph offers that could in fact overwhelm its aesthetic meaning), and then shows how the juxtaposition of two arts can help overcome these limitations. The photograph is both a descriptive and a narrative element that often becomes the impetus or even the climax of the story, whereas the story gives (often ironic) meaning to the photograph itself.
- 13 The idea of the story giving meaning to the photographic medium is also apparent in the use of frames in the various short stories in which the genre appears. In this tug-of-war between the mimetism of the photograph itself and the aesthetic that it lends to the story by heightening the reader's awareness of the visual in the texts, the frame holds a place of choice. Indeed, as Derrida tells us in his work *La Vérité en peinture* (*The Truth in Painting*), it is the frame that separates visual art from its surroundings, thus giving it aesthetic value,³ emphasizing its nature as a representation, and diminishing the purely mimetic nature of the photographic medium. Indeed, when we examine the frames appearing in the texts, there is systematically the idea of aesthetic importance implicit in their presence. The passage from "Daffodils", where the window frame serves to clarify the image of Miss Murcheson as the subject of the photo, is clearly an example. The frame shows not only the aesthetic nature of this image, but of the other visual images throughout the story. Framed photographs tend to appear in the Bowen stories in which the composition of the pictures themselves is emphasized, thus confirming the link between the artistic nature of the medium and the frame which emphasizes the representational nature of the image. Likewise, the distance that the frame imposes between the mimetic image and the viewer is often examined in Bowen's texts. For example, in "Joining Charles", Louise had kept a framed portrait of her husband on her mantelpiece, not out of affection for the subject, but as a symbol of his status :

It would have been terrible if Louise had forgotten, as she so nearly had, to pack Charles's photograph. There it had stood these three months, propped up on the mantelpiece, a handsome convention in sepia, becomingly framed, from which the young wife, falling asleep or waking, had turned away her face instinctively. She folded back a layer of tissue paper before shutting her suitcase and poked down a finger to feel the edge of the frame and reassure herself. ("Joining Charles" 223)

- 14 Here it is not the photograph as the representation of its subject, but the photograph as pure object that is presented to the reader; the image is voluntarily put aside to focus on the purely aesthetic aspects of the image (whether it be the frame or the sepia ink). The frame creates distance between the representation and what is being represented by literally restricting its field. Likewise, in "The Return", there is a clear contrast made between two photographs, one framed, the other unframed : an unhappily married woman, Mrs Tottenham, receives a letter from a long-lost lover and decides not to see him again when she compares a framed photograph of herself as a young woman to her current appearance, and then looks at an unframed photograph she has kept of her lover. The photograph under glass is clearly put at a distance from the present, and is no longer relevant to it except as an aesthetic object, contained in a plush velvet frame.

However, the image of her lover is unframed, and her reaction to it is a physical reaction to the presence of the subject himself: "Mrs Tottenham made no answer; she was staring at the photograph. Her eyes dilated, and she licked her lips." ("The Return" 34)

- 15 Of course, as has been discussed, in a sense these photos are all framed, as they all exist only within the framework of the stories. As such, the stories themselves become framing *parergon*, making both the photographs and the stories themselves into works of art by increasing the aesthetic nature of each of these. This desire to reduce the mimetic nature of the representation and heighten its artistic nature is of course a major Modernist preoccupation and highlights the way in which the photograph operates as a crystallisation of Bowen's allegiance both to Modernist experimentation and to the Victorian desire for realism.
- 16 Beyond this interaction between the photograph and the story in Bowen's texts, it is also interesting to note the way in which the visual medium becomes an allegory for the genre itself. Indeed, to return to the quote that inspired the title of this article, the idea that short stories are conceived of as "disjuncted snapshots" makes clear that the link between the photograph and the short story in the author's mind is the emphasis on the particular, on the detail, and that as a result the genre is necessarily fragmentary. However, another text from her critical essays gives these characteristics new meaning:

The plot, whether or not it be ingenious or remarkable, for however short a way it is to be pursued, ought to raise some issue, so that it may continue in the mind. The art of the short story permits a break at what in the novel would be the crux of the plot: the short story, free from the *longueurs* of the novel is also exempt from the novel's conclusiveness – too often forced and false: it may thus more nearly than the novel approach aesthetic and moral truth. It can, while remaining rightly prosaic and circumstantial, give scene, action, event, character a poetic new actuality. (Bowen 1950: 43)

- 17 In and of itself, the fragmentary nature of the short story does not condemn it to being ineffective; on the contrary, it encourages reader participation and interpretation, thus coming closer to what the author sees as the goal of fiction: aesthetic and moral truth. In this view, the use of photographs in Bowen's short stories is not just a means by which to comment on her style of transartistic experimentation, but is also a comment on the very genre she is using: the relationship between text and image in these stories, where the photograph only acquires meaning through interpretation, is in fact an allegory for the short story itself, which is meaningless unless the reader gives significance to the text by subjecting it to critical analysis. Thus the photographs in "The Happy Autumn Fields", one of Bowen's short story masterpieces, are symbolic of the fundamental changes in literary representation. In the story, a woman in a bombed-out apartment in World War II London, Mary, is transported back in dreams to a Victorian scene, where the close relationship between two sisters is threatened by a possible lover. The photographs and letters later found in the apartment by Mary's lover allow him to piece together the past story and to guess at its conclusion. The text has a persistent back-and-forth movement between past and present, between dreams and reality, and once again the mimetic nature of the photograph is confirmed, as it is one of the agents allowing Travis (her lover) to reconstruct the story. However, the core meaning of the text seems to be that the fully coherent Victorian narrative in which the sequences taking place in the past are framed can no longer exist. All that is

now possible are fragments of the narrative, and more specifically visual fragments (like the photographs that Travis finds, or the short story itself), that can then be pieced back together into some new kind of whole, through analysis and interpretation. As I allowed Bowen's words to open this analysis, I hope these words will allow me to conclude on the importance of photography to the literary status of short stories as a whole : "The future lies, as in all arts, not with the artist only : the reader and critic have a share in it." (Bowen 1950 : 45) By showing just how important critical reading and interpretation are to the photograph, the author seeks to emphasize the importance of these same acts for the short story, and to induce the reader not just to enjoy the story, but to participate in it.

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NOTES

1. All short stories by Elizabeth Bowen quoted in this article are from the Ecco Press edition of *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, and will be referred to by title and page number.
2. " C'est le malheur (mais aussi peut-être la volupté) du langage, de ne pouvoir s'authentifier lui-même (...). Le langage est, par nature, fictionnel (...); mais la Photographie, elle, (...) est l'authentification même (...). C'est une prophétie à l'envers : comme Cassandre, mais les yeux fixés sur le passé, elle ne ment jamais ou plutôt, elle peut mentir sur le sens de la chose, étant par nature tendancieuse, jamais sur son existence. " (barthes 134-135) "It is language's downfall (but perhaps also its voluptuousness), to not be able to authenticate itself (...) backwards prophecy: like Cassandra, but with its eyes riveted on the past, it never lies, or rather, it can lie about the meaning of the thing, being by nature tendentious, but never about its existence." (translation mine)
3. " Le parergon se détache à la fois de l'ergon (de l'œuvre) et du milieu (...) Le parergon (...) peut augmenter le plaisir du goût (...), contribuer à la représentation propre et intrinsèquement esthétique s'il intervient par sa forme

(...) et seulement par sa forme. " (Derrida 73-74) "The *parergon* detaches itself both from the *ergon* of the work and from its surroundings (...) The *parergon* can increase the pleasure of taste, contribute to the representation itself and its intrinsic aestheticism if it contributes by its form and only by its form." (translation mine)

ABSTRACTS

Dans la préface de son recueil de nouvelles parues pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale, Bowen parle de son œuvre comme d'une série de photographies: "Taken singly, they [the short stories] are disjuncted snapshots – snapshots taken from close up, too close up, in the middle of the mêlée of a battle". Que Bowen assume et minimise l'influence de la photographie sur son œuvre simultanément est typique de son commentaire critique ; ainsi, par exemple, elle parle de ses nouvelles comme des esquisses visuelles, mais met aussi l'accent sur le fait que cet aspect visuel existe souvent au détriment de la nature narrative de la nouvelle. Toutefois, dans un certain nombre de ses nouvelles, la photographie est l'élément central de la trame, la source et l'incarnation de l'écriture elle-même : elle ne retire rien de l'écriture, mais crée un cadre pour la narration, dont elle devient ainsi un élément structurant essentiel. Les clichés donnent une forme concrète au principe visuel caractéristique de l'écriture de Bowen, et inspirent la trame de ses nouvelles, tout en fonctionnant comme un symbole de la réification possible de la forme littéraire de la nouvelle dans le cas d'un usage abusif de l'hypotypose, où les "clichés" prennent la place de véritables histoires. Dans cet article, je tente de montrer comment Bowen utilise la photographie dans ses nouvelles, et dans quelle mesure la nature paradoxale de sa présence correspond à une meilleure compréhension de ses buts artistiques. La photographie dans les nouvelles de Bowen est de fait un exemple intéressant d'un écrivain moderniste et ses tentatives d'étendre les possibilités du langage, et par conséquent de mieux cerner la nature éphémère de la réalité : elle représente à la fois la promesse et les limites de l'intertextualité transartistique.

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Shannon Wells-Lassagne, an associate professor of British literature at the University of South Brittany (Université de Bretagne Sud). After completing a PhD on the gaze in the novels of Elizabeth Bowen at the University of Paris III, she published several articles on Bowen, Graham Greene, and Ford Madox Ford, before turning to the study of film adaptation. She has co-organized three conferences on the subject, and has published collected articles (*De la page blanche aux salles obscures*) and a textbook (*Etudier l'adaptation filmique*) recently with the Presses Universitaires de Rennes. She is currently working on a book-length study on Bowen as well as a book on post-modern adaptations.