Monique Wittig, addressing ideological activism and social change at the end of the twentieth century, proposes the Trojan Horse as a model for counter-cultural movements and avant-garde writers: ‘at the time it is produced, any work with a new form operates as a war machine, because its design and its goal is to pulverise the old forms and formal conventions. It is always produced in hostile territory’ (‘The Trojan Horse’, 1992b: 75).

The experimental work of Irish writers George Egerton (1860–1945) and Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973) presents a similar ideological challenge to the gender and sexual binaries of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bowen’s life and work is relatively well-known within the canon of both British and Irish literary scholarship but Egerton, on the other hand, is much less well-known and has only recently begun to emerge within the canon of contemporary literary criticism (e.g. Ardis 1990; Showalter 1992; Pykett 1995; Ledger 1997). Focusing on her early fiction, I will consider the ways in which Egerton deployed protagonists who are clearly marked out as exiles, outsiders to the hegemonic order, partly as a means to destabilise that order. I will then move on to the work of Elizabeth Bowen and will contend that in her work, particularly in her 1968 novel, *Eva Trout*, Bowen extends the blueprint forged by writers such as Egerton. I will argue that Bowen further develops the interrogation of gender and sexual identities developed by the ‘New Woman’ writers and that in her last novel in particular, there is evidence of a gendered social world in a constant state of flux, rather than some kind of static account of immutable patriarchal oppression. Such an engagement with gender and sexual identities contributed to the contemporary work being carried out by 1960s feminist writers, such
as Monique Wittig for example. Thus, by reading Bowen’s fictional experiments in tandem with those of her peers, and as part of a continuum with the earlier experiments of Egerton and others, we may gain more insight into the cultural construction and deconstruction of gender and sexual identities in these two generations of feminist writers.

Born Mary Chavelita Dunne in Melbourne, the daughter of an Irish (Catholic) army captain, George Egerton grew up in a number of colonial outposts before settling as an adolescent with her family in Dublin. Taking part of the name of her first husband, George Egerton Clairmonte, as her pseudonym, she went on to become a writer whose work would ultimately be associated with that of artists and activists such as Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner and George Gissing, among others, who were associated with literary decadence at the fin de siècle. The interrogation of sexuality was a central project shared by these ‘New Woman’ and ‘Decadent’ artists of the 1890s, who sought to challenge the heterosocial status quo by addressing topics such as women’s rights, gender roles, and sexual identities and expression (particularly in relation to women’s sexuality). Possibly the best-known figure in this project is Sarah Grand, whose novel, The Heavenly Twins (1893) is one of the most important of this period. Grand began to publish in the 1870s and her influence on the work of later New Woman writers, as well as on other literary and political movements of the period, has been given much scholarly attention in recent years (e.g. Bonnell 1995; Mangum 1999; Heilmann 2004). George Egerton’s work came slightly later in the period and her work influences the writing of Grand, Mona Caird, and others, all of whom were striving at the time to develop a feminist literary aesthetic. To outline in brief the Irish context for this material, it is acknowledged that the New Woman project has tended to be seen almost solely as a radical movement within the history of English literature, with its natural home in the 1890s London literary metropolis. Yet the number of authors involved in these radical cultural experiments who had Irish backgrounds is intriguing: Sarah Grand herself (1854–1943) was born in Donaghadee, Co. Down, and brought up in Co. Mayo, where she set one of her best-known works, The Beth Book (1894); ‘Iota’ [Kathleen Mannington Caffyn] (fl. 1893–1900), was born and brought up in Co. Tipperary; L. T. Meade (1844–1915) was born in Nohoval, Co. Cork, and lived in Youghal throughout her life; E. L. Voynich [Ethel Lillian Boole] (1864–1960), author of the best-selling novel The Gadfly (1897) was the daughter of mathematician George Boole and Mary Everest Boole, and was born and brought up in Cork; and Katherine Cecil Thurston [née Madden] (1875–1911), was the daughter of Paul Madden, the Home Rule Mayor of Cork, and spent most of her adult life in Waterford. To go back to Egerton herself, her groundbreaking collection of short stories Keynotes (1893) was written while she lived in Millstreet, Co. Cork, and as I have discussed elsewhere, the local context to this apparently most Scandinavian of her works is evident in several of her narratives.\footnote{For further biographical/bibliographical material on these writers, see O’Toole. 2005. Dictionary of Munster Women Writers. Cork: Cork University Press; also <http://www.munsterwomen.ie> (accessed 1 July 2010).}

Perhaps the political considerations gestured to by Hansson above, may explain the considerable attention paid to The Last September (1929) by Irish Studies scholars to the almost complete exclusion of almost everything else written by Bowen.\footnote{See O’Toole. 2008. ‘Ireland: The terra incognita of the New Woman Project’ in Hansson (ed.) New Contexts: Re-Framing Nineteenth-Century Irish Women’s Prose. Cork: Cork University Press: 125–141.}
Egerton, having spent her formative years in a number of different countries, sustained this *wanderlust* throughout her early adulthood. This migrancy had a clear impact both on her writing and, ideologically, on her sense of liminality in relation to the dominant culture of whichever country she happened to live in. In the late 1880s she spent some time living in Scandinavia where the experiments of writers such as Ola Hanson, as well as Ibsen and Nietzsche influenced her own writing, and her first publication was a translation of Knut Hamsun’s *Sult* (1890). *Keynotes* (1893?), her celebrated first fiction collection certainly proved to be the ‘keynote’ of this *fin de siècle* intellectual world. It was published by the Bodley Head (a publishing house synonymous with Decadence since its publication of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* in 1894) where publisher John Lane clearly recognised his chance with this new author to develop links with the New Woman writers of the period. Lavishly produced, *Keynotes* was also illustrated by Beardsley, and launched the Bodley Head’s *Keynotes* series, publications by a range of different authors which included Grant Allen and Richard Le Gallienne. Egerton’s short stories, which reconstructed women’s subjectivity from their own perspective and tackled taboo subjects such as women’s sexual identities and autonomy, thus became synonymous with the New Woman phenomenon. The toast of the 1890s literary set, she contributed to *The Yellow Book*, the journal most closely associated with literary decadence and she was lampooned by *Punch* in a series entitled ‘She-Notes’ by ‘Borgia Smudgiton’. She mixed with other *fin de siècle* writers and intellectuals including Arthur Symons, Havelock Ellis, W. B. Yeats and Richard Le Gallienne. Described by William Frierson as the first writer in English to delineate the ‘sexual instinct’ as experienced and expressed by women, Egerton interrogates desire and sexual identity from a woman's perspective. In her work, we find a whole range of transgressive relationships which disrupt the ideologies of the social contract and set her protagonists apart from nineteenth-century canonical heroines. Some of her short stories, notably ‘The Marriage of Mary Ascension’ and ‘Gone Under’ (from the *Discords* collection, 1894), focus on the social and economic reasons as to why women marry, just as Bowen would later do in *Eva Trout*. On the whole then, Egerton approves of those who defy the social contract and follow their instincts in relationship matters. It is worth speculating that perhaps Egerton’s own outsider status enabled her to perceive ‘natural’ social relations as part of an oppressive hegemony. Her national identity and her early experience of having been uprooted several times to move with her family to a new barracks in another country or continent may have contributed to this perspective. More particularly, perhaps the fact that she herself lived outside of social norms, first as the mistress of a married man, and later as a single mother, enabled her to analyse the conventions which oppressed her, and to deconstruct them.

We find Egerton’s construction of the outsider figure in all of her texts. Having established the psychological depth of her protagonist in ‘The Child’, Egerton goes on to show that such depth marks out the individual from the crowd. Among her playmates, the nameless child is a star: ‘They are waiting for her, for is she not the most daring, the most individual amongst them?’ (Egerton 1894: 6–7). However, this singularity ceases to be an asset as the child grows up. In the second part of this story, Egerton comments: ‘[The girl] ... is too sharp-tongued, too keen-eyed, too intolerant of meanness and untruth to be a favourite with her classmates – too independent a thinker, with too dangerous an influence over weaker souls to find favour with the nuns’ (12). The chance for an individual intellect to choose its own path is seen as potentially seditious by one of the nuns. Egerton writes: ‘For to the subdued soul of this still young woman who has disciplined thoughts and feelings and soul and body into a machine in a habit, this girl is a *bonnet-rouge*, an unregenerate spirit, the embodiment of all that is dangerous’ (13). Juxtaposing this with Bowen’s ‘unregenerate spirit’, Eva Trout, who is a singular figure even within the context of the radical educational experiment which comprises her only experience of school, we can only imagine what the nuns depicted here might have made of an Eva Trout.

A key feature of New Woman texts is the depiction or creation of unfamiliar worlds, thus Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) challenged social mores by constructing new ideological relationships in alien landscapes. Another way in which New Woman writers removed their readers from the known social world and thereby challenged gender and sexual binaries was through the introduction of untraditional or transgender figures. Much
scholarly attention has been paid to the Boy within the context of Wilde’s work and that of the Decadents, however, we also find the Boy in some New Woman fiction, and to some extent, we might argue that ‘he’ is a crossover figure between these fin de siècle groups. To the New Woman writers the Boy was one avenue through which they could access male privilege, at least temporarily, as we find, for example in several of Sarah Grand’s novels including The Heavenly Twins and The Beth Book. Some New Woman texts address the possibilities for young women in carrying their exploration of the role of Boy into adulthood, thus opening up a range of social roles for female-to-male transvestites within their narratives. This deployment served an important function within New Woman discourses, by demonstrating that women were just as capable intellectually, emotionally, and physically, to operate within the public sphere and to take on the responsibilities and roles open only to men at the fin de siècle. Furthermore, in exposing the ways in which gender is constructed and performed (to use Butler’s formula), it pointed up the flaws within an essentialist, gender-divided system of social organisation. There were also those who carried their experiments with gender performance from the textual into the social world, of course, as Shari Benstock’s research illustrates. Laura Doan’s work on 1920s fashion illustrates the ways in which the visibility of masculine women in the European metropolis of the day influenced fashion in general, as women began to favour a ‘boyish’ style. In other words, this fictional phenomenon is not at odds with the contemporary social world.

There are a number of examples of New Woman texts which bring this kind of gender troubling into play. One such is Katherine Cecil Thurston’s 1909 novel, Max, which explores the radical potential of the Boy figure and demonstrates the challenge posed by this discourse in fiction to the separate spheres of the contemporary social world. Max is a female-to-male transvestite who, as ‘Maxine’ ran away from her home in Russia and her marriage to a man she had come to despise, along with her place in the rigidly gender-segregated upper-caste world of her birth. Thurston’s Max in several ways mirrors an earlier fictional episode in Grand’s The Heavenly Twins when Angelica cross-dresses in order to gain access to the public world of men. In both of Grand’s excursions into the territory of the Boy, she exposes the ways in which women deliberately construct themselves as Boys, detailing lovingly the exact process by which Angelica carries off her gender-swap, from sending her measurements to a tailor to the way she hides her hands in order to distract attention from their diminutive size. With statements such as: ‘isn’t it surprising the difference dress makes? I should hardly have thought it possible to convert a substantial young woman into such a slender, delicate-looking boy as I make. But it just shows you how important dress is’ (Grand 1893: 452), Grand underlines what Marjorie Garber defines as the ‘resistance to the female-to-male transsexual’. Garber suggests that this results from ‘a sneaking feeling that it should not be so easy to “construct” a man – which is to say, a male body’ (Garber 1992: 102). Just as in Grand’s text, throughout Thurston’s Max there are quite specific physical descriptions of the Boy, many of which incorporate traditionally masculine attributes in the description of how he projects himself:

Zeal, endeavour, ambition in its youngest, divinest form [...] and none who had known Max [...] ever viewed him in more characteristic guise than he appeared on that February morning, clad in his painting smock, the lock of hair falling over his forehead, his hands trembling with excitement, as he executed the first bold line that meant the birth of his idea. (Thurston 1909: 143)

As we do not at this point in the novel know the significance of this lock of hair, which symbolises the long tresses Max/ine’s left behind with his feminine identity, the potential for gender ambiguity built into this scene is lost in the first reading. Later in the novel when Max wishes to assert himself, the narrator describes the scene and his appearance in a way which leaves no room for ambiguity of any kind:

The warm sun fell upon a rigid severity of aspect, as though the room had instinctively been bared for the enactment of some scene. Max himself, in a subtle manner, struck the same note. The old painting blouse [...] had been discarded for the blue serge suit,

unrelated to the birth mother, and adding to this by depicting the enmity between the two central women in the child's life, its birth and adoptive mothers, Egerton goes on to add to the oddness of their domestic arrangement through this deployment of a New Woman as mother. Certainly, the arrival of the child brings changes to the life of her central protagonist, but these do not include the denial of her professional aspirations, as she continues to travel widely and to publish her work, i.e. she continues to engage with the public sphere rather than being silenced by the private sphere of motherhood and domesticity. Egerton's approval of this state of affairs permeates the narrative, and there are clear elements of projection here, from her own biography. As I made clear above, this kind of gender trouble is not uncommon in New Woman fiction, however, it was more usual even within this aspirational fiction for a 'career woman' protagonist to be single and certainly childless. Iota's best-selling New Woman novel *A Yellow Aster* (1894), for example, turns on just such a point. The protagonist at the centre of *The Yellow Aster*, Gwen Waring, is a New Woman who is emotionally and sexually barren. In the absence of any meaningful work for women to do (one of the key rallying points of feminist campaigns of the period) Gwen's only vocation in life is marriage, which she undertakes as 'an experiment' with a young man who has been one of her intellectual companions. She soon discovers her mistake: 'You can't call your soul your own […] it's bondage worse than death' (Iota 1894: 245). However, rather than suggesting a radical shift in heterosocial mores, as Egerton proposes, Iota's solution is finally to reduce her character to an essentialist mother-figure. On giving birth to her first child, Gwen abandons her earlier desire for a career and embraces her higher role as mother, proclaiming: 'I am a woman at last, a full, complete, proper woman, and it is magnificent. No other living woman can feel as I do; other women absorb these feelings as they do their daily bread and butter […] they slip into their womanhood; mine has rushed into me with a great torrent' (304). The capitulation of the New Woman at the end of this novel to the sentimentality of nineteenth-century representations of the mother-child bond is depressing but perhaps predictable, indicative of the strength of hegemonic social identities. It also prefigures the ultimately anti-feminist message at the end of *Grant*.
Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895). As I discuss below, Bowen arranges an equally ‘odd’ domestic scene around her central protagonist in *Eva Trout* who, no more or less than Egerton’s New Woman, takes a somewhat unconventional approach to motherhood, rejecting the hegemonic constraints of marriage and biological parenthood.

Unlike Egerton, Bowen grew up in Ireland and spent more of her adult life living in Ireland than Egerton did, but she did so at something of a remove from what would become the dominant culture, the Catholic nationalist majority, as I mentioned above. In *Pictures and Conversations* she discusses the impact this sense of difference had on her, describing her awareness even as a young child of different ‘mythologies’ at work in the culture (Bowen 1975: 23–24) and her realisation that she was differently placed in relation to these discourses. It seems to me that this perspective on her relationship to different (and competing) national identities could be deployed to discuss identity formation more generally and it becomes clear in reading her fiction that Bowen’s delineation of the ‘mythologies’ in relation to gender and sexuality was equally incisive, and divided in the same binary fashion. Thus, in several of her novels but particularly in *Eva Trout*, Bowen constructs the central character as an outsider in a gender-divided and heteronormative environment, who struggles to understand and assimilate to the dominant culture. Thus when Isuelt, at a loss to understand Eva, exclaims: ‘What caused the girl to express herself like a displaced person?’ (1975: 18); we may observe that this is precisely because she is displaced, although perhaps not quite in the way this term is usually meant. As the novel progresses, Eva’s efforts to re-member herself, to match her own ‘mythology’ with that of the social world she moves through, result in a series of disjunctures, or ripples, in the surface of the dominant culture.

Braidotti’s work on monsters can usefully inform our reading of such outsider figures: ‘The monstrous or deviant is a figure of abjection in so far as it trespasses and transgresses the barriers between recognisable norms or definitions’ (1994: 65). Everything about Eva Trout is monstrous and it is obvious from this first description of her that her large frame is somehow out of kilter in relation to those around her:

> The giantess, by now, was alone also [...] shoulders braced, hands interlocked behind her, feet in the costly, slovenly lambskin bootees planted apart. Back fell her cap of jaggedly cut hair from her raised profile, showing the still adolescent heaviness of the jawline [...]. Monolithic, Eva’s attitude was. It was not, somehow, the attitude of a thinking person. (Bowen 168: 13)

More than just her size and shape, it is suggested, are monstrous. In attitude we are told that she is ‘monolithic’ and her physiognomy is indicative to Mrs Dancey, whose perspective this is, of someone who does not or cannot think as others do. The use of comparisons with immutable objects to describe Eva’s thought processes continue throughout the text. We are told that at school, efforts had been made to ‘induce flexibility’ but in terms of both language and thought, these attempts came too late: ‘her outlandish, cement-like conversational style had set’ (18). Thus, the outsized Eva is introduced in the text, with later accounts describing her as an ‘Amazon at bay’ (85) and a ‘she-Cossack’ (93), this from Mr Denge, following Eva’s ‘attack’ on him. Discussing the genesis of the monster in European texts from the sixteenth century on, Braidotti tells us that the ‘monstrous birth’ is commonly attributed to the sinfulness or guilt of the parents: ‘The most common form of parental transgression concerns the norms for acceptable sexual practice [...] sexual excess, especially in the woman, is always a factor’ (1999: 291). The homosexuality of Willy, Eva’s father, and his relationship with Constantine specifically, is presented as the ‘cause’ of much that is out-of-order in Eva’s social context. Her mother, Cissie, had left her husband and baby two months after Eva’s birth. As Cissie too had taken a lover, we may conclude that both of Eva’s parents are guilty of the kind of sexual excess described by Braidotti. Following Cissie’s departure, Willy and Constantine move in together, making themselves subject to a barrage of letters from Cissie’s extended family who object to

---

4 The New Woman figure Herminia Barton conceived a child in a ‘free union,’ in other words, she did not marry the child’s father. In later life, her daughter reacts badly to the truth of her origins, and Herminia, unable to provide her daughter with the conventional background she needs in order to find a husband, commits suicide.
this ‘unnatural’ domestic setting for the raising of a child. When she is old enough to do so, Eva takes her father’s side in this dispute, thus rejecting her kin and by extension, the social world. She later realises that: ‘She had first been withheld from, then forfeited, her birthright of cricket matches and flower shows’ (Bowen 1968: 223–224). In this way, we come to understand Eva’s liminal position, her outsider status is confirmed.

To return to Eva’s construction within the novel, having established a monstrous social identity for her central protagonist, Bowen demonstrates Eva’s oddity in a number of key episodes. This is evidenced in particular when she moves into a new neighbourhood and rents a house. The experience of Denge, the letting agent, during this transaction, which is later relayed to Iseult, suggests that Eva has lost her mind completely:

That a violent outbreak had caused him to flee the premises, into which you then barricaded yourself, so violently; that a messenger subsequently sent out by him with a kettle had turned tail, leaving the kettle to its fate, on being grimaced at ‘hideously’ from a window, and that no further sort or kind of any communication has been had from you since; though sallies into Broadstairs, in incomplete control of a powerful bicycle, have been reported. (118)

Denge’s fear of Eva and more specifically, his fear that she will burn his house down, extends to this manifestation of woman and bicycle somehow moulded together into a monstrous organism, or perhaps a cyborg, to use Donna Haraway’s formula. Jennifer González points out that:

The image of the cyborg has historically recurred at moments of radical social and cultural change [...]. In other words, when the current ontological model of human beings does not fit a new paradigm, a hybrid model of existence is required to encompass a new, complex and contradictory lived experience. (2000: 61)

It seems to me that Bowen, particularly in episodes such as this, is attempting to forge a new paradigm, as I will discuss below.

While the perception of Eva’s body is central to this text, she is rarely herself presented as one who is ‘centred’ in her own body, to the extent that in some episodes she does not appear to be at home within a human body at all. Eric Arble is the first person to come into close physical contact with this creature, but his alcohol-fuelled attack on her heightens, more than anything else, the sense that Eva is somehow not-human. There is a strong suggestion in this passage that treating Eva badly, even violently, is not quite the same thing as abusing another human being:

Eric got hold of Eva, by the pouchy front of her anorak and shook her. The easy articulation of her joints made this rewarding – her head rolled on her shoulders, her arms swung from them. Her teeth did not rattle, being firm in her gums, but coins and keys all over her clinked and jingled. Her hair f lumped all ways like a fiddled-about-with-mop. The crisis became an experiment: he ended by keeping her rocking, at slowing tempo, left-right, left-right, off one heel on to the other, meanwhile pursing his lips, as though whistling, and frowning speculatively. The experiment interested Eva also. Did it gratify her too much? – he let go abruptly. ‘That’s all’ he told her. ‘But mind your own business next time.’ (101)

Crucially, even in such an acutely physical scene, where one person lays hands on and violently shakes another, our attention is drawn not so much to Eva’s physical body, as to her inanimate aspects. She is shaken by the pouchy front of her anorak and when shaken, she clinks and jingles, suggesting a robot or again a cyborg, but certainly not something composed of human hair or flesh and blood, but rather fabric, metal and mop-hair. If anything, she is transformed here into a large rag-doll, and like a child, Eric ‘experiments’ with the effect of his shaking her, apparently with no complaint from his human doll. Having sustained this for quite some time without any cry from her, Eric concludes that this abuse in some way gratifies Eva and it is only at this point that he stops abruptly, telling her sternly ‘that’s all’. In the aftermath of this violent scene, as both Eric and Constantine leave her alone in the house once more, we are told that there is ‘not a trace left [of these various visitors] but for damage to Eva’s frame … She now yawned: so dismissive a yawn that it distended her rib-cage to cracking-point, just not dislocating her jaw by the grace of heaven’ (126). Again, the reference to ‘frame’ suggests the woman/bicycle cyborg, but her yawn, travelling as it does down through her body tissue and her bones, has quite a different effect. Both the flippancy of this gesture in the wake of the departing men, and Eva’s ability to wrack her own body by the simple introduction of air into her lungs, is suggestive of someone reasserting herself bodily. That this effect is produced deep inside her rib-
Eva Trout's aberrant body image creates just such a reaction in those about her as did the 'learned lady' in Egerton's 'The Spell of the White Elf' or the unregenerate spirit of her protagonist in 'The Child'. When one of her schoolfellows asks 'Trous, are you a hermaphrodite?' she responds 'I don't know' (58). This scene is not rendered negatively, however, as her classmates immediately begin to discuss the case of Joan of Arc, who was 'supposed to have been' a hermaphrodite. In other words, the possibility of having a transgender identity is dealt with in positive terms here, from the perspective of the young Eva, made consistent with the identity of an idealised role model (albeit one who dies a tragic and untimely death, as will Eva). However, this episode causes us to examine more scrupulously our earlier impressions of Eva's bodily form: 'the giantess' described by Mrs Dancey now appears less 'monolithic' or monstrous, than masculinised. Halberstam suggests that one reason for the kinds of reaction to female masculinity produced in the Mr Denges of contemporary society is that its manifestation undermines traditional notions of masculinity and thus patriarchal power. Furthermore, she notes that the masculine woman has tended not to be read as a 'historical figure, a character who has challenged gender systems for at least two centuries' (Halberstam 1998: 45). This is a timely reminder in the context of our reading of Eva Trout, a novel now forty years old, enabling us to situate this discourse at the centre of a series of ongoing struggles in the arena of female masculinity.

Unlike the 'learned lady' of Egerton's short story, however, who assimilates to the heteronormative familial and social context, Eva takes the opposite course – attempting to bring the social context around to her way of seeing the world. Beginning with her removal to Cathay, the house in Broadstairs, she attempts to construct a life for herself on her own terms, refusing any interference from friends or family, and rejecting any imposition from the local community into her new world. Eva will not seek to reconstruct herself within the terms of the heterosexual contract, but instead by adopting Jeremy, she attempts to construct a family for herself without entering into marriage or domesticity – somewhat as Egerton's character had earlier done, although within a slightly more conventional framework. Eva's struggle to establish her own identity in relation to the dominant culture derives from her own, sometimes mistaken, reading of the 'mythologies' which surround her and thus, as Hoogland points out, Bowen's text 'depicts what happens when a (female) subject does not effectively enter the phallogocentric order' (Hoogland 1994: 209). In fact at times, Eva's readings of the social code turn out to be more prescient than that of those around her, effectively disturbing the hegemony in ways which threaten to disrupt the code itself: 'expos[ing] that not only her own subjectivity, but subjectivity generally is no more than a necessary fiction with no meaning or essence' (Hoogland 1994: 241). In a similar vein, Wittig observes:

> Whether we want it or not, we are living in society here and now, and proof is given that we say 'yes' to the social bond when we conform to the conventions and rules that were never formally enunciated but that nevertheless everybody knows and applies like magic. (1992a: 39).

By rejecting a 'normal' heterosexual relationship as well as the family unit constructed around her by the Arbles, and finally, by rejecting a normative approach to motherhood, we can outline a range of ways in which Eva Trout rejects the social bond. Throughout Eva Trout, constant flux reshapes notions of a fixed family institution, and to some extent, redefines family as a communal commitment, the components of which are inclusive as opposed to exclusive, distinct units. However, unlike her New Woman predecessors, and also unlike her feminist contemporaries, whose project is the construction of a counter-culture, Bowen has an aversion to radical activism in the public domain. Her Eva Trout reimagines an affective life only at the level of the individual and we get little sense here of public discourses intruding upon or conditioning the private zone. Eva appears to operate in a completely free space outside of (or above?) the public domain which might, for example, reinforce gender and sexual norms, or refuse to condone her illegal adoption of Jeremy. Her wealth insulates Eva from the public world, keeping her safe from the legislation of any nation-state with a habit of intruding into the private lives of its citizens. Thus Bowen allows...
Eva free reign within the private sphere, traditionally a place where alternatives to the mainstream are possible. This enables the author on the one hand to establish a counter-cultural identity for her privileged protagonist while on the other preserving intact the social laws Bowen likely deemed necessary for the regulation of the masses. Thus, when Wittig later declares that her aim is to effect ‘a whole conceptual reevaluation of the social world, its whole reorganisation with new concepts’, we can clearly see how other Evas might benefit from such a utopian space. Bowen however, will never be amenable to the revolutionising of the social world on such a scale. Having said that, bringing to mind Halberstam’s comment that figures such as Eva Trout have ‘challenged gender systems for at least two centuries’ (45), it seems to me that Eva has been deliberately constructed as a challenge to the status quo, albeit in something of an exceptionalist way.

To return to Braidotti, whose ‘monstrous other’ encompasses both the divine and the abject (1999: 295), it seems to me that we might read down through a line of these transgressive protagonists who emerge in the New Woman narratives of George Egerton and others, and are later reconfigured by Elizabeth Bowen, and see them as harbingers who open up a new space, and attempt to reconfigure notions of fixed gender and sexual identities. As Henry Dancey points out: ‘Here’s another thing about you, Miss Trout: you leave few lives unscathed. Or, at least, unchanged. [...] Ethically perhaps you’re a Typhoid Mary. You [...] plunge people’s ideas into deep confusion [...] you only have to pass’ (Bowen 1968: 209–210).

In the final scenes of the novel, Eva is described thus:

Not far off, in one of those chance islands of space she stood tall as a candle, some accident of the light rendering her luminous from top to toe – in a pale suit, elongated by the elegance of its narrowness, and turned-back little hat of the same no-colour; no flowers, but on the lapel of the jacket a spraying-out subcontinent of diamonds; a great brooch. (309–310)

Irigaray posits the role of the angels, divine messengers, as a strategy to move beyond the prescribed roles allotted to sexual identity in Western culture. She reminds us that in Judaeo-Christian mythology, the angels act as mediators who ‘circulate between God, who is the perfect immobile act, and woman, whose job it is to look after nature and procreation’ (Irigaray 1987: 126). Within this discourse, the angels open up the closed nature of the worlds of identity, action and history. Here, this luminous Eva could be described as taking up the role of angel in the text, rejecting the use of woman-as-signifier to determine place (motherland, alma mater) and language (mother tongue) and project a moving-beyond the text into unknown and unknowable spaces.

Bibliography


