

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Angels and Monsters: Embodiment and Desire in *Eva Trout*

TINA O'TOOLE

‘Books continue each other’, Virginia Woolf suggests, ‘in spite of our habit of judging them separately’. Elizabeth Bowen’s final work *Eva Trout* (1968) is clearly a case in point in that in order to fully realize the dissident potential of this novel, it is necessary for the reader to revisit some of her earlier experiments with gender and sexuality. It is evident that the transgressive knowledge available to the writer (and reader) of *Eva Trout*, specifically in relation to issues of female masculinity and same-sex desire, stretches back in place and time to foundations laid in *The Last September* (1929). Here, the connection made between the adolescent Lois and the older, more sophisticated, Marda, who keeps to herself a deeper awareness of such transgressive knowledge particularly in relation to sexual desire, prefigures the central relationship in *Eva Trout*. This pattern of constructing identity and writing desire between women is reworked and worried throughout one seam of Bowen’s fiction, and is particularly evident in ‘The Jungle’, *Friends and Relations*, *The Hotel* and *The Little Girls*, as has been discussed in some depth by scholars such as Renée Hoogland and Patricia Coughlan.¹ In addition, while continuing to address key questions raised in Bowen’s earlier work, I link her project from the experiments ongoing in the work of her contemporaries, which I address below. I will contend that in *Eva Trout*, Bowen ‘continues’ the cultural and social work of other twentieth century novelists, including Radclyffe Hall (among others) and arguably, contributes to the kinds of engagement of feminist writers, such as Monique Wittig, whose first novel *The Opoponax* was published in 1964, in relation to gender and sexual identities. Thus, by reading Bowen’s fictional experiments

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in tandem with those of her peers, we may gain more insight into the cultural and social experiments relating to gender and sexuality during the period.

As *Eva Trout* has been discussed in the previous chapter, I will briefly sketch in those episodes relevant to my chapter. The novel is concerned with the eponymous Eva, and in particular, her involvement with, and attachment to, an influential teacher, Iseult Smith, at the boarding school she attends briefly as an adolescent. Dealing with these episodes retrospectively, the novel opens with Eva, heiress to a large fortune, wanting to escape from the home of her now-married teacher, Iseult Arble, where she has been placed by her guardian Constantine until she should come of age. Her disaffection with Iseult, who concludes that Eva has now 'fallen in hate' with her,² is tangible in the early passages of the text. Finally setting up home independently for the first time, Eva propels herself into a peripatetic existence, spending many years living in a variety of North American cities where she adopts a baby, Jeremy, by illegal means. As my discussion chiefly relates to Part I of the novel, suffice it to say that she later returns to England and begins a liaison with a young man whom she persuades to marry her. However, on the morning of the wedding, Eva is shot dead by her young son, who uses a gun left behind by Iseult in their luggage.

In *Pictures and Conversations*, Elizabeth Bowen, discussing her removal from Ireland to England as a child, comments: 'At an early, though conscious age, I was transplanted. I arrived, young, into a different mythology – in fact, into one totally alien ... Submerged, the mythology of this 'other' land could be felt at work in the ways, manners and views of its people, round me.'³ As any reading of Bowen's work, whether fiction or memoir, illuminates: for Bowen what you remember and how you remember it are central tenets of identity formation. In this particular instance, she is discussing her national identity, and the dawning of an awareness in her child self that in different places, there are different 'mythologies' at work, as she describes them. However, it strikes me that this perspective could be summarized 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 fictions, but in particularly in *Eva Trout*, Bowen constructs the

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central character as an outsider in a gender-divided and heteronormative environment, who struggles to understand the dominant culture as evinced in the ways, manners and views of its people around her. I will contend that Eva, with no access to an alternative model, nonetheless struggles to recover something 'submerged' in this culture, to gain access to a 'different mythology' to which she was once (perhaps) privy, and which, it is clear, she was then conditioned to forget if she was to survive. Thus when her teacher exclaims: 'What caused the girl to express herself like a displaced person?' (ET, p.18) the reader may observe that this is precisely because she is displaced, although not quite in the same way as her teacher uses the term. As the novel progresses, Eva's efforts to re-member herself, to match her own 'submerged 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.

To focus then on this 'outsider' figure as it is realized in *Eva Trout*, it seems to me that Braidotti's work on monsters can usefully inform our reading of Eva: 'The monstrous or deviant is a figure of abjection in so far as it trespasses and transgresses the barriers between recognisable norms or definitions'.⁴ Everything about Eva is larger-than-life 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. (ET, p.13)

More than just her size and shape, it is suggested, are monstrous. In attitude, she is 'monolithic', which suggests a being inflexible or immune to the environment around her. Furthermore, her physiognomy is indicative to Mrs Dancey, whose perspective this is, of someone who does not (*cannot?*) think as others do. This is later echoed in Eric Arble's view of Eva: 'there she sat, twisted against the window, keeping fanatical watch on the Channel skyline. Uncomprehending? Dumb, anyway, as a rock' (ET, p.99). The use of comparisons with immutable objects to describe Eva's thought processes continue throughout the text. We are

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told that at school, her teacher Iseult Smith had made an effort to 'induce flexibility' but in terms of both language and thought, these attempts came too late: 'her outlandish, cement-like conversational style had set. Moreover – the discouraging fact emerged – it was more than sufficient for Eva's needs. She had nothing to say that could not be said, adequately, the way she said it' (ET, p.18). To return to the opening scene, something of Mrs Dancey's awe, or perhaps even fear, of this 'giantess' is transmitted in the following lines, suggestive of a Gothic narrative⁵: 'sure enough, Eva was coming back! Purposeful strides could be heard returning over the turf made iron by black frost. They passed the car, not a pause, and continued onward. Going after the children?'. Continuing in the same vein, Eva is referred to as the Danceys' 'captor', an accurate description of their sense of her power over them – all, that is, except for 12-year-old Henry who, we are told, was 'qualified to deal with Eva ... treating her on the whole as he might an astray moose which when too overpowering could be shooed away' (p.15). Thus, the outsized Eva is introduced in the text, with later accounts describing her as an 'Amazon at bay' (p.85) and a 'she-Cossack' (p.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'.⁶ Of course, in the case of Eva Trout it is her father, Willy, who is more obviously 'to blame' in terms of a breach of 'acceptable' (read: 'normative') sexual practice. Willy's homosexuality, and more specifically his relationship with Constantine, is the cause of much that is out-of-order in Eva's social context. We are told that Willy 'passed' in the dominant culture: 'The entire cut of the jib of Eva's father could have given the lie to that obsession. Big in height and frame and in a big way easy in movement, stalwart and open in countenance ... he looked what he otherwise was: a crack polo player, with a pretty wife. He had been popular' (p.19). Thus, despite having fulfilled all of the necessary obligations of happy heterosexuality – a wife, a child, friends, a large physical (manly) presence and success at sport – Willy's 'obsession' with Constantine, i.e. his homosexual identity, is his downfall: 'It was in him

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to deviate' (p.19). It is this 'rocky side' of his nature which causes his wife and child to be 'defrauded' (p.19). The pretty wife, Cissie, flees the scene, allegedly with her lover, two months after the birth of Eva. However, her escape bid is not a success as she is killed in a plane crash. It is suggested thus, that both Eva's parents are guilty of the kind of sexual excess outlined by Braidotti. Constantine, not necessarily truthfully, later suggests that Cissie was 'unhinged' (p.122) which increases the shadow over Eva's genesis.

With regard to socialization, we only later learn that Eva has an extended family from whose influence she is removed by her father, who has 'violently quarrelled' with them following events in which they 'rais[ed] heaven and earth, writing insulting-denouncing letters and wielding threats, in efforts to get Eva away from him, out of contamination-range. Some even charged him with Cissie's death, that having arisen from her flight' (pp.223-4). Their central objection to Willy is his relationship with Constantine and more specifically his insistence on rearing his child himself with his new partner. Allowing free reign to homosexual domesticity in this way has a destabilizing effect on the social order within (and perhaps also without) the text as it suggests flaws in the ideological construction of heteronormativity and the family institution. The surrender of patriarchal authority – Willy loses his right to rule in the heterosocial order by revoking his investment in the law of the fathers – is made all the more striking by the fact that homosexual desire is never actually named in the text. Willy is something of an absent presence in this text at every level. At no point does he give voice to his own sexual identity – it is outlined only through the eyes of Eva, his daughter, and Constantine, his lover. As such, Eva occupies the unusual position of being the spectator, as a child, of two men involved in a love affair, overturning the more typical configuration of same-sex desire between women as a spectacle for the male voyeur. Parallels may be drawn between this central triangle and that of an earlier Irish novel *The Land of Spices* (1941), by Bowen's countrywoman and contemporary, Kate O'Brien. As with Willy Trout, the homosexuality of Henry Archer in *The Land of Spices* causes him to relinquish patriarchal authority and this breakdown is a central strategy through which O'Brien empowers her main characters. This strategy, the deployment of male homosexuality as an enabling factor which ultimately frees her central characters from the

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rigidities of heteronormativity in O'Brien's text – could conceivably have lent itself to Bowen's construction of this novel. Comparatively however, as we shall see, Eva's encounters with the dominant culture are not hived off into a women-only space, as they are in the convent at the centre of *The Land of Spices*, and her efforts to make her way in the world outside such a liminal space are met with considerable opposition.

While Eva does not criticize her father's sexual identity, as her counterpart in *The Land of Spices*, Helen Archer, implicitly does, it is clear that she hates Constantine and blames him for her father's early death. As such, sexual deviance between men is the initial wild card, or disruptive sign in this text, a point which has tended to be neglected by critics of the novel to date. The impact of this same-sex relationship on Eva's upbringing is clearly indicated as the 'cause' of her being at odds with the codes of the dominant social world later in her adolescence. Following the barrage of letters from her extended family, Eva situates herself in opposition to these, her father's 'enemies', thus rejecting the social world on terms her father would approve of. She later realizes that: 'She had first been withheld from, then forfeited her birthright of cricket matches and flower shows' (pp.223–4). In this way, we come to understand Eva's liminal position, her outsider status is cemented.

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. People Eva encounters outside her charmed circle tend to either fear or pity her, but certainly 'Other' her. This is evidenced in particular when she moves into a new neighbourhood and rents a house from Denge, a local estate agent. His version of this episode, as passed on by telephone to Iseult, is later recounted by her:

That a violent outbreak had caused him to flee the premises, into which you then barricaded yourself, as 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. (p.118)



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Fears of 'mania', and more specifically, pyromania, are hinted at in Denge's account of his encounters with Eva, and his fear of her 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.⁷ 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.⁸

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 flumped 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'. (p.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 (manufactured, modern and mundane)



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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'. 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-cage demonstrates the impact of Eric's actions as having merely affected the surface of her body – which could be said to be indicative of the effect of the opposite sex upon Eva throughout the novel.

Rather than being contrasted in bodily terms with Eva, Iseult Smith seems no less 'embodied' in this text than does her devoted pupil. This is partly due her being rendered in Eva's memory as someone with 'a face already becoming unearthly' (p.78) whether because she has already assumed, in Eva's mind, the role of goddess, or more simply because Eva is beginning to forget her exact features, is not made clear. In the same passage, Eva thinks of her as having had an 'involuntary beauty' (p.78) which we may link with what Iseult herself constructs as the involuntary nature of her attachment to Eva. Bowen deftly juxtaposes this memory of Iseult's ethereal beauty with her rather more mundane appearance on her 'present-day' arrival at the train station where she's met by her husband: 'Make-up staled and caked on her face by the long day gave her the feel of wearing her own death-mask. The feathered turban irked like an iron circle.' Moreover, this appearance demonstrates the hobbling of the divine Iseult, who is now buried under a cake of make-up and imprisoned in a

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feather hat, by all of the trappings of contemporary femininity, in fact. However, reflecting back to a time long before this, Eva describes her 'Miss Smith' as a being 'disembodied': 'neither then nor later did Eva look upon her as beautiful or in any other way clad in physical being. Miss Smith's *noli-me-tangere* was unneeded in any dealings with Eva – who *could* have touched her?' (p.70). Comparing this with Eva's own untouchable character in later episodes, and in particular, with the scene outlined above where Eric shakes Eva, might we conclude that the pupil has constructed her own *cordon sanitaire* within which she may be handled, but never really touched? Unlike Eva, however, whose disembodied nature is studied (possibly partly as a reaction to her father's investment in the bodily) Iseult's '*noli-me-tangere*' results from her devotion to a life of the mind. Iseult's intellectual depth is gestured to on a number of occasions, her ability as a teacher is attested to by many pupils, the books 'mustered on the low white shelves' in her room, the desk holding fragments from tombs and temples which she uses as paperweights; and she can unerringly take down any needed volume from the school library without looking. This retreat into intellect, it is suggested, has the effect of removing her from the material world. Describing her room, we are told that 'But for a cherry-coloured cardigan – which, tossed away, had fallen short of the divan on to the floor – and Miss Smith herself, little betrayed the fact that anybody inhabited this room' (p.74). Interestingly, 'Miss Smith herself' is something of an afterthought here, which suggests that perhaps there is no-body really *there* to inhabit the space. Feeding only her intellect, Iseult has neglected to develop herself bodily and emotionally, and the effect this neglect has upon her in later life as well as on the rest of Eva's life, is catastrophic:

that particular spring at Lumleigh, the young teacher was in a state of grace, of illumined innocence that went with the realisation of her powers. They transcended her; filled her with awe and wonder, and the awe and wonder gave her a kind of purity, such as one may see in a young artist. No idea that they could be power, with all that boded, had so far tainted or flawed them for her. About Iseult Smith, up to the time she encountered Eva and, though discontinuously, for some time after, there was something of Nature before the Fall. (pp.70–1)

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Of course the Fall, when it comes, will have far-reaching effects on the lives of almost everyone in the novel, as well as perhaps on the social world into which the text represents, as Hoogland and others have discussed.

As I mentioned at the outset, it is difficult to disconnect Bowen's interrogations in *Eva Trout* from the experiments of other twentieth-century writers such as Radclyffe Hall. While *The Well of Loneliness* was first published in 1928, due to censorship it was in fact only made available to the wider reading public in a popular edition in 1968, the same year as *Eva Trout*. Some elements of *The Well* are clearly echoed in Eva's struggles with her body and identity, such as Iseult's comment that Eva's child had to be a boy, because: "Girl" never fitted Eva. Her so-called sex bored and mortified her; she dragged it about after her like a ball and chain. Why should she wish to reproduce it when she chose a child?' (p.287; my emphasis). This is almost a direct reflection of Stephen Gordon's perspective on her body: 'She hated her body with its muscular shoulders, its small compact breasts, and its slender flanks of an athlete. All her life she must drag this body of hers like a monstrous fetter imposed on her spirit. This strangely ardent yet sterile body' (my emphasis).⁹ Nor, regrettably, is it possible to look back at these twentieth-century fictional writings on female masculinity from a post-revolutionary perspective, as Halberstam reminds us: 'despite at least two decades of sustained feminist and queer attacks on the notion of natural gender, we still believe that masculinity in girls and women is abhorrent and pathological'.¹⁰ *Eva Trout*'s aberrant body image creates just such a reaction in those about her. One of her schoolfellows asks 'Trout, are you a hermaphrodite?', to which she responds 'I don't know' (p.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 idealized 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 Dancy 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

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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'.¹¹ 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 Stephen Gordon, however, who struggles to adjust or 'fit in' to the heteronormative social context, Eva takes the opposite course – striving 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. This separatist desire is clearly viewed with suspicion by others: "Mr Denge has gone", Eva told [Eric], with the utmost complacency. Her euphoria had for Eric, for the first time, almost an overlap of insanity' (p.100). She chooses a remote suburban desert for her new life, one which even the locals have trouble finding, as Constantine tells her:

I had trouble finding Cathay. My taxi driver maintained it did not exist, and one drew a blank wherever one stopped to ask. One can only think it has faded from human memory ... Is it your aim to fade from human memory? From the way you've been going on one supposes so'. (115–16)

Having rid herself of Denge, Eric Arble and Constantine, Eva sets about constructing her own utopian space within the house, which becomes a decidedly non-domestic space. Unlike Iseult's retreat from the material into a world of books, Eva fills the house with the most up-to-date audiovisual equipment. This is later a motif in her life with Jeremy, her deaf mute son, with whom she moves from one North American city to another; the only cohesion given to this existence comes from the time they spend together watching movies and newsreel in hotel rooms. Thus, these 'heavenly twins' become voyeurs, lookers-on at the material world through the filters of contemporary media, which they have the means to switch on and off at will.

Eva's time in North America is delineated by these visual encounters

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at a remove from the material world, rather than an investment in local community or adult relationships. This is hardly surprising, given that her efforts to construct a space within the social world where she might have a relationship with another woman were all doomed to failure. As a schoolgirl, shortly after the 'hermaphrodite' discussion, Eva forms her first attachment to a young girl, Elsinore, who is gravely ill. When finally Elsinore is taken home by her mother, presumably to die, Eva, who has not even been recognized as the primary carer for this girl over many months, suffers her first experience of heartbreak and loss.¹² Her later love for Iseult is not simply spurned by her teacher, but quashed by an inability to admit the possibility of lesbian desire at all. Iseult's reaction is read by Smith as a classic case of 'lesbian panic': 'the panic evoked by presence of the lesbian or even the perception of lesbianism [which] has long functioned as a pervasive narrative strategy in literature representing women's lives and consciousnesses'.¹³ In retreat from Eva, or lesbian possibility, Iseult 'throw[s] herself away' (p.18) in marriage to Eric Arble, a man who is clearly not her equal on any terms:

Iseult Smith's abandonment of a star career for an obscure marriage puzzled those for whom it was hearsay only – but the reason leaped to the eye: the marriage was founded on a cerebral young woman's first physical passion. The Arbles had been the Arbles for some years – so far, no children. (p.19)

Eva's later hold over Iseult cannot be understood by Eric Arble, although his efforts to find the root cause of his wife's unhappiness threaten to destabilize Eva's new-found security:

"Old Eva – what can she do to you? Or what *does* she do?" She turned again in the chair – he received a sudden, as it were stolen, view of her face: its bereftness, its unresigned weariness of its exile. He took a leap in the dark. "Remind you of what you could do? – of what you used to be, when you liked?"

Iseult's terrified response: 'What do you mean?' ... 'Don't go away from me – don't!' (p.28) is really very revealing. For all that her 'exile' has transformed her from a woman at the height of her powers to a 'marionette' housewife (p.25), her fear of abandoning the known social world for a 'sapphic relationship' (p.216) will keep her in her place.

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Eva, on the other hand, 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. Nor do her efforts to define herself take the form of a nostalgic reflection of the past – she does not, for example, model herself upon a projected image of her mother or of her teacher/surrogate mother, Iseult. Rather, her struggle to re-member herself 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’ (p.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 even those, such as Iseult, who would appear to have much to gain from its disruption: ‘expos[ing] that not only her own subjectivity, but subjectivity generally is no more than a necessary fiction with no meaning or essence’.¹⁴ This is threatening to Iseult, of course, because she – as a mature adult with a successful teaching career – realizes the potentially fatal consequences of claiming either a dissident social identity or worse, a transgressive desire, within the prevailing climate. As Hoogland’s work has masterfully demonstrated, these struggles with same-sex desire and sexual identity are a central forcefield within this text and thus the main tensions are here produced as a kind of ripple-effect from Eva’s re-constructions of her narrative of desire and development.

Earlier, I suggested that *Eva Trout* derives from some of the same philosophical and critical interventions developing in the work of other *avant garde* writers of the mid-century. I would contend, for example, that we may see Bowen’s work as being coterminous with the early work of radical feminist thinkers such as Monique Wittig, particularly in *Les Guerrillères*, which was published the following year. This is not to suggest that Wittig’s earlier texts directly informed Bowen’s writing of *Eva Trout*, or *vice versa*, but rather that both authors were involved in comparable experiments during the same period using a similar knowledge-base and, arguably, with some of the same aims in mind. At the centre of *Les Guerrillères*, for example, is an attempt to overturn the symbolic order, as the women declare that they have ‘no need of myths or symbols’.¹⁵ Wittig asserts that a lesbian is not a woman: ‘for what makes a woman is

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a specific social relation to a man ... a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or stay heterosexual'.¹⁶ Based on this, her theory of the 'lesbian sign' used to dismantle the binary codes of heteronormative discourse discloses the act of social construction implicit in the label 'woman'. Offering a radical analysis of Rousseau's social contract, which Wittig reads as a 'heterosexual contract', she argues that that Lévi-Strauss' theory of the exchange of women 'exposes heterosexuality as a political régime', a social contract from which women are explicitly excluded from benefiting.¹⁷ Set beside this discourse, Eva's rejection or 'misreading' of the social code or, as Hoogland frames it, her 'failure to enter the phallogocentric order', perhaps does not seem quite such a radical move on Bowen's part. However, we can see that in fictional mode it contributes to and continues this feminist dialogue interrogating the construction of the social order. In a later essay, 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.'¹⁸ By rejecting a 'normal' heterosexual relationship (even her later relationship with Henry is characterized by its performativity rather than its intimacy) 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.

While these rejections may perhaps be constructed as deriving from her ignorance of the 'conventions and rules' or 'mythologies', of the social bond, nonetheless, Eva struggles to reshape the social contract to conform to an ethic she sets about constructing for herself. This may be compared to the way in which, in *Les Guerrillères*, the community works to develop a territory outside patriarchy, clearing ground for the development of a whole range of other social and sexual identities. Thus, it seems clear to me that a redefinition of the social contract is a central concern of both texts.

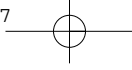
Furthermore, both Bowen and Wittig operate from a position which sees gender roles as socially constructed within the material world. While Eva tries for a time to remove herself totally from the material world, both by moving to the house in Broadstairs and subsequently through her various removals in the USA, this separation is never quite

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complete. To follow Wittig's statement above, whether *Eva* wants to or not, it becomes clear that she must engage with the hegemonic order if she is to disrupt its codes. Throughout the text, 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. Thus, in the later work of Bowen and the early work of Wittig, there is a clear commitment to a gendered world in flux, rather than a static account of immutable patriarchal oppression and arguably, both propose concrete strategies for change. However, unlike Wittig whose project is the construction of a counter-culture or alternative social world, Bowen reimagines an affective life only at the level of the individual. 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',¹⁹ we can clearly see how an *Eva* might benefit from such a utopian space. Bowen however, will never be amenable to the revolutionizing of the social world on a grand scale and, like her predecessor Radclyffe Hall, Bowen's reactionary political views and complete lack of interest in state social development are indicative of this. Nonetheless, bringing to mind Halberstam's comment that figures such as *Eva Trout* (and Stephen Gordon) have 'challenged gender systems for at least two centuries', 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,²⁰ we might read the figure of *Eva Trout* as a harbinger, Bowen's attempt to reconfigure notions of fixed gender and sexual identities and to open up a space for new forms, redefinitions. 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 also plunge people's ideas into deep confusion ... you only have to pass' (pp.209–10). 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



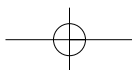
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flowers, but on the lapel of the jacket a spraying-out subcontinent of diamonds; a great brooch. (pp.309–10)

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'.²¹ 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) language (mother tongue) and project a moving-beyond the text into unknown and unknowable spaces.

NOTES

1. P. Coughlan, 'Women and Desire in the Work of Elizabeth Bowen', in *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*, ed. E. Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997); R. Hoogland, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).
2. Elizabeth Bowen, *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989 [1968]), p.37, hereafter referred to in the text as ET.
3. Elizabeth Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), pp.23–4, hereafter referred to in the text as PC.
4. R. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p.65.
5. See also C. Connolly, '(Be) longing – The Strange Place of Elizabeth Bowen's *Eva Trout*', in *Borderlands: Negotiating Boundaries in Post-Colonial Writing*, ed. M. Reif-Hulser (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp.135–43.
6. R. Braidotti, 'Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences', in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, ed. J. Price and M. Shildrick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp.290–301 (p.291).
7. D. Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', in *The Gendered Cyborg*, ed. G. Kirkup et al. (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.50–7.
8. J. González, 'Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research', in *The Gendered Cyborg*, ed. G. Kirkup et al., pp.58–73 (p.61).
9. Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Virago Press, 1982 [1928]), p.187.
10. J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p.268.
11. *Ibid.*, p.45.





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12. Elsinore, who did not in fact die as a child, later returns in a chance meeting with Eva in Chicago and offers her a second chance to form an adult relationship with her. Eva refuses her, realizing that it is now too late – whether for this relationship or for Eva to have a fulfilling same-sex relationship, is not made clear.
13. Smith, p.571.
14. Hoogland, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing*, p.241.
15. M. Wittig, *Les Guerrillères* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985 [1969]), p.30.
16. M. Wittig, 'One is not Born a Woman', in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, ed. M. Wittig (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992).
17. M. Wittig, 'On the Social Contract', in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, ed. M. Wittig, p.40.
18. *Ibid.*, p.39.
19. Wittig, 'One is not Born a Woman'.
20. Braidotti, 'Signs of Wonder', p.295.
21. L. Irigaray, 'Sexual Difference', in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. T. Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1987), p.126.

