



Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return

Neil Corcoran

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Elizabeth Bowen is a writer who is still too little appreciated. Neil Corcoran presents here a critical study of her novels, short stories, family history, and essays, and shows that her work both inherits from the Modernist movement and transforms its experimental traditions.

Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return explores how she adapts Irish Protestant Gothic as a means of interpreting Irish experience during the Troubles of the 1920s and the Second World War, and also as a way of defining the defencelessness of those enduring the Blitz in wartime London. She employs versions of the Jamesian child as a way of offering a critique of the treatment of children in the European novel of adultery, and indeed, implicitly, of the Jamesian child itself. Corcoran relates the various kinds of return and reflex in her work—notably the presence of the supernatural, but also the sense of being haunted by reading—to both the Freudian concept of the "return of the repressed" and to T. S. Eliot's conception of the auditory imagination as a 'return to the origin.'

Making greater interpretative use of extra-fictional materials than previous Bowen critics (notably her wartime reports from neutral Ireland to Churchill's government and the diaries of her wartime lover, the Canadian diplomat Charles Ritchie), Corcoran reveals how her fiction merges personal story with public history. Employing a wealth of original research, his radical new readings propose that Bowen is as important as Samuel Beckett to twentieth-century literary studies—a writer who returns us anew to the histories of both her time and ours.

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