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## LITERATURE, LAW AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

# The State of Exception and Exceptional States in Elizabeth Bowen's Wartime Ghost Stories

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In this article, I consider Elizabeth Bowen's depiction of the impact on citizens of their changing political and legal relationship to the British state during World War II, using Agamben and Freud's writing about wartime behaviour of the state to illuminate Bowen's short fiction, in particular 'The Demon Lover' and 'Green Holly.' Although from different points on the political spectrum, Agamben, like Bowen, is opposed to the expansion of the state into the lives of citizens. As a legal philosopher, he has written extensively on the early to mid-twentieth century, and the article takes his theory, expressed in *The State of Exception*, as its starting point. The article goes on to compare the evocation of the state's presence and treatment of its citizens in 'The Demon Lover' and 'Green Holly,' incorporating Freud's essay 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death.' I then focus on Bowen's portrayal of the socio-legal predicament that women were placed in through consideration of the literary antecedents to 'The Demon Lover,' the history of state surveillance of war widows, and Bowen's short radio play, 'A Year I Remember – 1918.' The article culminates with the most exceptional state in the stories, and in Freud: the ghosts. I discuss the extent to which they represent the unmourned wartime dead or the existential anxiety experienced not only because of the threat of death during war, but also, the threat to individuality, rights and legal status created by the state of exception.

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*'The individual who is not himself a combatant – and so a cog in the gigantic machine of war – feels bewildered in his orientation, and inhibited in his powers and activities.'* (Freud 1985: 62)

*'During the war, I lived, both as a civilian and as a writer with every pore open... We all lived in a state of lucid abnormality.'* (Bowen 1945)

*'World War One (and the years following it) appear as a laboratory for testing and honing the functional mechanisms and apparatuses of the state of exception as a paradigm of government.'* (Agamben 2005: 7)

Elizabeth Bowen wrote her wartime collection of short stories – *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945) – under the stress of living through the London Blitz. As an Anglo-Irish writer, employed to spy in Ireland by the British Government's Ministry of Information, she was an active participant in the state's increased involvement in the lives of its citizens, and those beyond its borders (Lee, 1999: 150). Despite this, Lassner (1991: 157) could still write that 'interest in Bowen's historical and political concerns [has] been limited.' Since then, more attention has been paid to Bowen as a political writer, including by Lassner herself, who produced the first full-length study of Bowen's short fiction, considering the 'psychological experience' so often focused on in Bowen's writing, but within the context of 'social, economic and political forces.' (1991: 3) Her focus, along with many subsequent critics, was on Bowen as politically informed by 'her Anglo-Irish history,' where 'the horrors of Ireland's endless strife' inform her story writing (1991: 6).<sup>1</sup> More recently, Janice Ho (2015: 88) has explored Bowen's relationship to the British state in her chapter on *The Heat of the Day*, demonstrating that, 'The question of what ought to be the

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<sup>1</sup> Bowen's writings are often included in critical works on Ireland and Irishness. See, for example, D. Kiberd (1995), *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, London: Jonathan Cape; D. Hand (2011), *A History of the Irish Novel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and N. Pearson (2015), *Irish Cosmopolitanism: Location and Dislocation in James Joyce, Elizabeth Bowen, and Samuel Beckett*, Florida: University Press of Florida.

proper relationship between the state and the citizen...lies at the heart of Bowen's novel.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I consider Bowen's engagement with the changing political and legal relationship between the British state and citizens during World War II, whilst she herself was actively engaged in work for the state.

In that time, as Bowen wrote in 1945 in a magazine article titled 'The Short Story,' she found that 'the discontinuities of life in wartime make such life a difficult subject for the novelist,' but 'the short story is the ideal *prose* medium for wartime creative writing' (2008: 314–315). As such, it was as she was living 'as a civilian, and as a writer,' and as a government agent (albeit in a minor way), 'with every pore open,' that she produced her wartime short stories (Bowen, 1945). The first time she read them through as a collection in 1945, she was struck by what she termed the 'rising tide of hallucination', as the exceptional state of 'lucid abnormality' created by the war permeated the stories (1945). This heightened psychic state is exactly why her stories have been read from a psychological and psychoanalytical critical viewpoint,<sup>3</sup> often with a particular focus on her ghost stories as being in an Irish Gothic tradition.<sup>4</sup> Bowen's writing, including these comments on her own stories, reflects the fact that 'Freudian psychoanalysis' had become 'both familiar and influential in the interwar years' (McKibbin, 1998: 299). In this article, I consider how Freud's theories on the wartime behaviour of the state and its impact on citizens illuminates Bowen's writing. In his 1915 essay, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,' written while his sons were fighting in World War I, Freud writes about state legitimisation of the illicit treatment of its citizens, including violence, and the psychic creation of ghosts in the face of death (Freud, 1985). It is these two areas, and how they interact, that I focus on in Bowen's well-documented story, 'The Demon Lover,' published in 1941, and her less examined piece, 'Green Holly,' published later in the war, in 1944. This will build on previous criticism and extend the analysis into considering the political elements of these two ghost stories.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Stonebridge (2011) on human rights and the social contract in Bowen's post-war writings.

<sup>3</sup> See Ellman (2002), Corcoran (2004), Thurston (2012) and Gildersleeve (2014).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Lassner (1991: 10) and Bryant-Jordan (1992: 130).

In addition to being written during different stages of the war, the stories, between them, span the period from World War I (1914–1918) to World War II (1939–1945). In 'The Demon Lover,' the protagonist, Kathleen Drover, visits her evacuated home in post-Blitz London, only to find a letter from her former lover, a soldier reported to have died in the First World War (Bowen, 1980a). The impact of that earlier conflict is incorporated into the story by a flashback to their last meeting, and also through the threat of the soldier's ghostly return. In the later story, the characters have been working in a remote house as government intelligence workers (not unlike Bowen) since the beginning of the war (Bowen, 1980b). Moved to a new property at the government's insistence, they are haunted by ghosts of former occupants of the house.

In the period between Freud writing about the inhibitions placed on non-combatant's 'powers and activities' (1985: 62), and Bowen's short stories, the ability of the state to intrude on the lives of citizens had, in fact, seen an unprecedented expansion. My opening quotation, from legal philosopher Giorgio Agamben's book *The State of Exception*, expresses his concern that this period enabled governments, including 'England...and Germany', to further develop the 'systematic expansion of executive powers' which had increased 'during World War I, when a state of siege was declared...in many of the warring states.' (2005: 7) Agamben writes of this expansion as establishing a state of exception, which we might initially understand as similar to a legal state of emergency which provides governments with extensive powers (Agamben's theorisation of this concept is explained further below). Although he is well-known for his, sometimes controversial, comments on our contemporary political climate, as a philosopher who started out his academic life studying law but was converted to philosophy by Heidegger himself, having, metaphorically, at 'his side a second guide: Walter Benjamin,' and a subsequent focus on the writings of Carl Schmitt, Agamben has been engaged with the inter-war period for his whole career (de la Durantaye, 2009: 363). As such, his writings on the state of exception provide a relevant and helpful theoretical context for the situation in which Bowen was writing. She too was increasingly concerned about the 'inflation of state power';

while for Bowen, it might be 'nostalgia for the minimalist state of classical liberalism', Agamben is far more radical in his approach (Ho, 2015: 88). Both stand opposed to the encroachment of the state into the lives of citizens.

Before exploring how Bowen's depiction of the exceptional states of citizens resonates with Agamben's concerns about the growing reach of the state of exception, the complexity of his theory demands consideration. Having introduced this in some detail, this essay will go on to compare the evocation of the state's presence and treatment of its citizens in 'The Demon Lover' and 'Green Holly,' incorporating Freud's writings on the topic. The argument then moves to focus on the particular socio-legal predicament women were placed in, giving a detailed analysis of the 'unnatural promise' (Bowen, 1980a: 746) by Kathleen to her soldier fiancé in 'The Demon Lover,' through consideration of the literary antecedents to the story, the history of state surveillance of war widows, and Bowen's short radio play, 'A Year I Remember – 1918' (2010: 63–76). The article culminates in investigating the most extreme hallucinatory, exceptional state in the stories, the ghosts, considering the extent to which they represent 'all the dead,' who, '[u]ncounted...continued to move in shoals through the city day,' (Bowen, 1948: 90), or whether they act as an expression of the existential anxiety experienced not only because of the threat of death during war, but also, the threat to individuality, rights and legal status created by the expansion of the state.

In publishing *The State of Exception* (*Stato di eccezione*) in 2003 (translated into English in 2005), the contemporary Italian philosopher Agamben reinitiated a strand of political thought that had lain dormant since the 1920s and 1930s. Originating in the writings of Carl Schmitt, the phrase, to cite a footnote by Schwab (Schmitt's translator), 'includes any kind of severe economic or political disturbance that requires the application of extraordinary measures' (2005: 5). As is clear from the first sentence of Agamben's text, he engages directly with Schmitt's philosophy, referring to his *Politische Theologie*, or *Political Theology*, published in 1922, and Schmitt's 'famous definition of the sovereign as "he who decides on the state of exception"' (Agamben, 2005: 1). Agamben acknowledges that this definition of the

sovereign 'has been widely commented on and discussed'; however, what had not been considered was a 'theory of the state of exception in public law,' with it being treated rather 'as a *quaestio facti* than as a genuine juridical problem' (2005: 1). It is this problematic juridical nature of the state of exception that Agamben explores in his text, and which has consequently become a much-debated topic across many academic disciplines.

Although there has been a rise in interest in Schmitt's philosophy in recent decades, given his historic involvement with the Nazi party, engagement with him is seen as controversial. Agamben is no exception, and his relationship to Schmitt's philosophy is subject to the usual fears, accusations and defences, as to how far his thinking is intertwined with that of the 'conservative revolutionary' (de la Durantaye, 2009: 363). However, Agamben takes issues with Schmitt's conception of the legal basis and status of the state of exception. In his second chapter, Agamben sums up Schmitt's theory of the state of exception, whose goal he identifies as being 'the inscription of the state of exception within a juridical context' (Agamben, 2005: 32). Schmitt posits that in the state of exception, when emergency powers are invoked, 'the juridical order is preserved even when the law itself is suspended' (Humphreys, 2006: 682). As Agamben points out, this is 'a paradoxical articulation,' and to achieve it 'what must be inscribed within the law is something that is essentially exterior to it, that is, nothing less than the suspension of the juridical order itself' (2005: 33). Agamben goes on to sum up the ways in which Schmitt, across both his earlier works, *Dictatorship* (1921) and *Political Theology*, identifies mechanisms which he posits legitimise the state of exception; Agamben opposes these attempts to re-inscribe the state of exception within the remit and bounds of the law (2005: 50).

For Agamben, 'the state of exception is neither internal nor external to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold...where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with one another' (2005: 23). Agamben goes on to further refine what this 'ambiguous zone' (2005: 2) might involve, stating that 'the state of exception is a space devoid of law, a 'zone of anomie,' (2005: 50) where the usual moral and social norms are lacking. Earlier on in his argument he illustrates the legal impact on individuals subject to this state

of exception, citing the extreme example of Guantanamo and Nazi concentration camps. He argues that 'the "military order" issued by the President of the United States on November 13, 2001' went further than the Patriots Act because it 'radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnameable and unclassifiable being' (2005: 3). He finds that the 'only thing to which it could possibly be compared is the legal situation of the Jews...who, along with their citizenship, had lost every legal identity' (2005: 4). Even when writing about the modern day, Agamben's deep seated engagement with the first half of the twentieth century is apparent. He goes on to include the English legal system in his 'brief history of the state of exception' (2005: 13):

World War One played a decisive role in the generalization of exceptional executive [*governamental*] apparatuses in England as well. Indeed, immediately after war was declared, the government asked parliament to approve a series of emergency measures that had been prepared by the relevant ministers, and they were passed virtually without discussion. The most important of these acts was the Defence of the Realm Act of August 4, 1914, known as DORA, which not only granted the government quite vast powers to regulate the wartime economy, but also provided for serious limitations on the fundamental rights of the citizens (in particular, granting military tribunals jurisdiction over civilians) (2005: 19).

This example further illustrates the significance of Agamben's insistence that the state of exception cannot be treated as linked to a legal, juridical order. The passing of DORA involved a legal process, which served to suspend the normal functioning of the juridical system and rights. The ambiguity created is also clear – it is not simply that all law has been suspended, yet, nor can it be said that the law is still operating fairly. Leland puts it well in his comprehensive *Critical Introduction to Agamben*, when he writes that for Agamben 'the state of exception is the point at which the law provides for its own suspension; it is the legal suspension of the distinction between legality and illegality' (2009: 338).



Bowen, from writing 'The Demon Lover' in 1941 to 'Green Holly' in 1945 and on to *The Heat of the Day* in 1949, increasingly depicts individuals as citizens who are living in a world of legal ambiguity. This was the case, from the beginning of World War II through to the post-war world; that Agamben's analysis of the government's powers in 1914 is directly applicable to 1939 and beyond is made clear in an article published in the Daily Telegraph, dated September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1939. The journalist writes of the 'new laws that affect every citizen,' opening by stating that 'during the last few days as many regulations have become law as were enacted in the first year of 1914–18' (Stannard, 1939). He goes on to list some of the highlights, giving government agencies' extensive powers over land and persons, including 'drastic precautions for the security of the State.' Agamben was certainly not wrong when he wrote that after World War I 'the principle of the state of exception had been firmly introduced into English law' (2005: 19). It could be objected that the government did so out of necessity, to defend its citizens from a nation committing worse breaches of laws and rights. Yet this does not change the legal stance taken up, and the actual historical events make such clear-cut distinctions between nations far less comfortable. Although in '1939 it was not the original intention of the British authorities to embark on a policy of *mass* alien internment as had been carried out in the First World War...by mid-1940 the situation had changed' (Brinson, 2008: 288). As a result, 'by the summer of 1940, around 25,000 men and perhaps 4,000 women found themselves in internment camps on the Isle of Man and elsewhere.' (Brinson, 2008: 288) Although some were 'pro-Nazi' sympathisers, 'the vast majority' were 'refugees from Nazi oppression' (Brinson, 2008: 288). Of course, this is not to suggest that there is any parity between such internment camps and the Nazi concentration camps. Nonetheless, it does point to the ambiguity of claims by the British government to be acting wholly differently to her enemies. This is an ambiguity Bowen eventually expressed in her doubling up of the two Roberts in *The Heat of the Day*, with one being a British spy and the other a Nazi sympathiser.

The difficulty that surrounds attempts to define what is licit or illicit behaviour in the state of exception, from another angle, is also a question of violence. This is a question that Agamben considers through what reads as an exciting discovery

of the supposed 'covert engagement' beyond the 'known – scanty – relations' between Walter Benjamin and Schmitt, on the legal status of political violence (de la Durantaye, 2009: 342). Agamben argues that Schmitt's attempts to claim the state of exception as part of the legal system look to 're-inscribe violence within a juridical context' (2005: 59). And it is this move to legitimise all forms of violence, for use by the state, that Agamben notes that Benjamin's position counters, but in a potentially unexpected way. Instead of arguing that some violence is legal and some is not, Benjamin posits the category of 'pure violence,' by which he means violence that has its total 'existence outside of the law' (2005: 59). This beyond-law violence could sound very alarming, and almost exactly like the kind of state of exception abuses Agamben appears to be arguing against. Arguably the situation is not helped by the fact that neither Benjamin, subsequent commentators, or Agamben provide a concrete illustration of what this violence might look like. However, this is perhaps because its significance lies in its power as a theory, and not in practice, in that it looks to theorise a violence beyond the reach of the law, while the law wants to claim it back. Or, as de la Durantaye puts it:

For Agamben, Benjamin is not referring to actual acts of physical violence that he wishes to isolate, glorify, or purify but is instead playing a conceptual game with theorist[s] of the state who instrumentalize the use of violence. His surprising recourse to the term is, for Agamben, a subtle and unexpected move that allows him to surprise...his conservative opponents. (2009: 344)

Having introduced the conceptual legal framework for this paper, we can now consider Bowen's war-time stories 'The Demon Lover' and 'Green Holly' alongside Freud's 1915 paper.

'The Demon Lover,' written in late 1941, tells of Mrs Drover's return to her London house to pick up a few things to take back to her family, who are safely living in the countryside. Bowen herself stayed in London throughout the War, working as an Air Raid warden, including during the extended bombing lasting from September 1940 to May 1941. The story is set in the following August and London is eerily

quiet and depopulated, as 'no human eye watched Mrs Drover's return' and 'her once familiar street' has 'an unfamiliar queerness' (1980a: 742). The uncanniness carries a subtle sense of threat or paranoia, as on opening her house, 'Dead air came out to meet her' (1980a: 743). On arriving, there is a letter on the hall table addressed to her. Bowen, in a passage reminiscent of Henry James, gives another turn of the screw to the disturbing atmosphere, as Mrs Drover tries to logically explain how the letter came to be there, initially thinking that 'the caretaker *must* be back,' only to acknowledge that he did 'not know she was due in London today' (1980a: 744). She assumes he has been negligent in sending it on to her, is briefly annoyed, and picks up the letter without looking at it. The narrator informs us that 'Her reluctance to look again at the letter came from the fact that she felt intruded upon – and by someone contemptuous of her ways' (1980a: 744). Writing of Bowen's later novel, *The Heat of the Day*, Janice Ho observes that 'individual behaviour was increasingly subject to regulation by the wartime security state' (2015: 105). In a similar vein, while concern with the state's expansion is also evident in this earlier short story, it is more apparent in 'Green Holly,' written in 1944, by which time the impact and effect of state intrusion on daily life was felt more intensely (Bowen, 1980b: 811).

The characters in this story have been requisitioned to do secret government work, with 'their confinement' to a remote house dating 'from 1940,' and the narrator informs us that they 'were Experts' but archly adds 'in what, the Censor would not permit me to say.' (1980b: 811) For a moment such secretive work is almost glamorous, but Bowen quickly charts the more sinister impact of the state of exception on these individuals, who had 'dropped out of human memory' so that their 'reappearances in their former circles were infrequent, ghostly' (1980b: 811). The story itself charts the increasing levels of interference and control practised by the nation, as 'The Army, for reasons it failed to justify, wanted the house they had been in since 1940; so they – lock, stock and barrel and files and all – had been bundled into another one, six miles away' (1980b: 812). It could be argued this makes little difference to their lives; however, Bowen comically points out that it has actually made small but keenly felt changes, as 'their already sufficient distance from the market town with its bars and movies had now been added to by six miles'

(1980b: 812). As a result, the local village only has 'a public-house on whose never-open door was chalked 'No Beer, No Matches, No Teas Served', and a vicar' who 'had sent up a nice note, saying he was not clear whether Security regulations would allow him to call' (1980b: 812). As if their confinement was not already hardship enough, they have now lost access to the meagre community services of a local pub, while religion's authority has been easily undermined. The impact of these privations on the characters will be returned to later in the essay; meanwhile, the aspect in which the state's use of houses impacted on individuals, namely the occupation of private property, continued to concern Bowen after the war had ended.

In her article published in *Vogue* in 1945, 'Opening up the House,' Bowen writes about people 'going home', focusing particularly on, 'Houses that had to be left when war came, and which were thereupon occupied by unknown people,' describing them as confronting, 'their returning owners with their own complex mystery' (2008: 132). Bowen interprets the changes to the houses themselves as subtle, but lasting:

Those unnumbered human beings who came and went – kept it in motion by the clockwork of wartime... – have left something behind them, something that will not evaporate so quickly as the smell of unfamiliar cigarettes. These now departed dwellers in one's house cannot fail to be seen as either enigmas or enemies; one must try to dwell on them as enigmas (2008: 133).

Despite her advice, the unsettling sense of the wartime occupants of the house as the enemy remains, undermining simple distinctions between the British state and her opponents, while also problematising the legality of governmental action during wartime. The equivalent of such supposed enemy dwellers, who are to be treated as an 'enigma,' in 'Green Holly' (ironically, given they are supposed to be doing intelligence work), also suffer from increasingly attenuated identity and rights, to the point of becoming ghostly. And indeed, in her magazine article, Bowen refers to the 'ghostly indentations of someone's doodling' which can be 'found on the left-behind telephone pad' (Hepburn, 2008: 133). The expansion of the state into private lives and property leaves a haunting, ghostly, mysterious air in its wake: an

exceptional state, more fully explored in Bowen's short stories than this article aimed at readers of *Vogue*, which perhaps unsurprisingly, looks to end on a more hopeful note, with a returning occupant declaring: "I felt for a moment, just now, as though I had never been away!" (2008: 135). The tone of the endings of the two short stories will, however, prove to be far from straightforward.

Although Bowen's engagement with the nation's use of the state of exception to intrude into private property and private lives is explicit in her writings towards the end of the war, it is still developed in 'The Demon Lover,' beyond the opening air of paranoia. More subtly, in the earlier short story, the narrative reveals through a flashback to August 1916, that the letter which has mysteriously appeared on the hallway table is from a soldier who was Mrs Drover's fiancé. Less explicitly than a government agent on a mission, he necessarily carries with him the shadowy presence of the nation state, and, to use Agamben's term, the expansion of the state of exception. Their last meeting is almost, but not quite, the clichéd romantic parting of lovers in wartime; saying good-bye in the dark she 'had not ever completely seen his face' so that 'from not seeing him at this intense moment' she felt 'as though she had never seen him at all' (1980a: 745). In the same instant 'she verified his presence... by putting out a hand, which he each time pressed, without very much kindness, and painfully, on to one of the breast buttons of his uniform. That cut of the button on the palm of her hand was, principally, what she was to carry away.' (1980a: 745) It is as if she has been branded by the official imprint of the buttons of his uniform, so that years later, 'she instinctively looked for the weal left by the button on the palm of her hand' (1980a: 748). There is something disturbing about this act of intimacy, which is painful, unwanted and imposed. As in other literature from this period, the violence of World War II is experienced as a return of the violence from the First.<sup>5</sup> For Mrs Drover, the repressed memory of that farewell meeting with the soldier contains

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<sup>5</sup> As early as 1930, Waugh's *Vile Bodies* culminates in a war that repeats World War I; see also Marina Mackay's 'Modernism and the Second World War' in *Modernism, War, and Violence* for comprehensive consideration of how 'literature of the Second World War...explicitly recalls the traumas of the First World War.' (2017: 105)

a physical and psychic trauma so powerful that she expects to see it embodied on her hand.

Freud's essay is illuminating here, particularly his argument that the 'sense of disillusionment' caused by World War I was in part because of the 'low morality shown externally by states which in their internal relations pose as the guardians of moral standards' (1985: 67). Freud identifies a central hypocrisy in the behaviour of nations, which especially came to light during the exceptional state of being at war:

Within each of these nations high norms of moral conduct were laid down for the individual, to which his manner of life was bound to conform if he desires to take part in a civilized community. These ordinances...demanded a great deal of him – much self-restraint, much renunciation of instinctual satisfaction (1985: 63).

As such, 'It was to be assumed, therefore, that the state itself would respect them, and would not think of undertaking anything against them which would contradict the basis of its own existence' (1985: 63). Whereas of course, wartime reveals that this is exactly what the state does; it 'permits itself every such misdeed, every such act of violence, as would disgrace the individual' (1985: 66). The revelation of this extraordinary, paradoxical behaviour creates, for Freud, the potential for intense psychological pressure on citizens. This is a point echoed by Janice Ho, who argues that the "psychological impact" of wartime legislation in Britain:

"was considerable" as Britons were faced with the paradoxical championing of a liberal form of citizenship in which individual rights and liberties were ostensibly sacrosanct and the concurrent subordination of "[e]very private interest" for the national community' (2015: 85–86).

This is taken to an extreme in 'Green Holly,' where the occupants of Mopsam Grange have lost almost every individual liberty. Nonetheless, their situation is rather mocked, and trivialised, compared to what we see enacted in 'The Demon Lover,' as the legitimised force that the soldier is permitted to perform against people of other

nations is directed not just at a fellow citizen, but against his lover. In a move that Agamben would arguably approve of, Bowen destabilises the boundaries between legal and non-legal violence, suggesting the cruelty of the soldier and state, and depicting the concurrent impact on Mrs Drover's psyche.

However, it is not just the violence itself, but also the accompanying demand that the soldier makes of Kathleen, which contributes to this instability; the wonderful ambiguity of Bowen's prose demands it is quoted at length.

'You're going such a long way.'

'Not so far as you think.'

'I don't understand.'

'You don't have to,' he said. 'You will. You know what we said.'

'But that was – suppose you – I mean, suppose.'

'I shall be with you,' he said, 'sooner or later. You won't forget that. You need do nothing but wait.'

Only a little more than a minute later she was free to run up the silent lawn... she already felt that unnatural promise drive down between her and the rest of all human kind... She could not have plighted a more sinister troth (1980a: 746).

The soldier's demand, that she wait even if he is killed – or she hears that he is killed – requires the subordination of her private interests to the potential demands of his role as a soldier. She can hardly assert her right to be freed of the obligation if he dies, while he is ostensibly fighting to protect her. In some ways, it is a question that *he* should never have asked; it is an 'unnatural promise.' Yet, it could be argued, it is the kind of sentimental, romantic promise that abounds: particularly in wartime, or indeed, in literature. In fact, as Neil Corcoran reveals in his chapter on Bowen's wartime short stories, the promise has its origins in the title of the story: 'The Demon Lover' is the name of a Scottish ballad sometimes also called 'The Carpenter's Wife' (2004: 4). There are of course variants, but the tenets of the original narrative are

worth comparing to Bowen's story. In it, a woman who was betrothed to a sailor, who she thought had drowned at sea, is now married to another man (usually a carpenter) and has a family. The story consists of a spirit or devil in the form of the former fiancée returning to lure the woman away with the promises of riches, only for her to realise she has been tricked, and then she either dies or descends to hell. The woman is condemned for her unfaithfulness – for breaking her promise to wait for the return of her betrothed, even though he has died. This traditional tale would suggest that there is nothing unusual, or untoward, in the promise extracted from Kathleen.

However, there are a few crucial distinctions. As discussed in further detail later in this article, Mrs Drover does not choose to flee with her former lover, but is trying to escape his threatened return. The overall effect of Bowen's story is not to morally judge the woman's behaviour. In fact, the narrative voice instead points out that the soldier's demand is socially isolating and aberrant. Although Bowen's choice of the soldier can be likened to the sailor, not least in the likelihood of them dying, the authority with which he speaks is different. The soldier is depicted as exploiting the wartime situation to make a demand that extends beyond the grave. He does so through an oath – a form that should epitomise legal, normative bonds between people, but Bowen has located Kathleen in a twilight world, where she seems unable to avail herself of whatever socio-legal conventions underpin courtship (not that such conventions are at all straightforward). While the ballad of 'The Demon Lover' provides a framework for the genre expectations of the story, it is far more difficult to establish what standard practices were between men and women in the earlier half of the twentieth-century. So much so that, 'despite the difficulties historians face in accessing intimate physical experiences, we seem to know far more about English sexual lives than about how men and women contracted, negotiated, and maintained emotional intimacies prior to marriage' (Langhamer, 2007: 174). Nonetheless, we do know there was an expectation that 'the war widow...was expected to remain faithful to her fallen husband' (Bette, 2015), and a 'war widow who did not behave in an exemplary manner risked reprobation' (Lomas, 2000:



137), as well as loss of her widow's pension. The ambiguity of Kathleen's position is heightened because she was not married to the soldier; if she were, one aspect of the state's expectation would have been for her to remain faithful to him. In fact, an extensive system of surveillance was established by the government to ensure that widows' behaviour was of the appropriate moral standard (Lomas, 2000: 131–132). However, as Kathleen would not qualify for such investigation, it is as if the soldier has taken it upon himself to carry out the state surveillance, writing in the letter, 'I was sorry to see you leave London, but was satisfied that you would be back in time' (Bowen, 1980a: 744). Her anxiety at remarrying was such that, on living her married life as Mrs Drover, we are told she had to actively dismiss 'any idea that [her actions] were still watched' (1980a: 746). Nonetheless, it could be argued that the soldier's expectations do not differ significantly from societal expectations. However, a radio play that Bowen wrote after World War II demonstrates her appreciation of the equivocal legal status occupied by women like Kathleen.

In the play, 'A Year I Remember – 1918,' aired on 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1949, the narrator recalls working in a hospital in Ireland, set up in a 'gimcrack house in the country, overlooking a river' for 'men wounded...in the mind. Shell-shock cases' (Bowen, 2010: 66). The piece involves broadcasts and recordings from the earlier period, along with snatches of conversations between the nurses. A gramophone is heard 'playing "Widows are Wonderful"' which is followed by 'the subsequent conversation':

**FIRST YOUNG GIRL'S VOICE:** Wonder if they *are* wonderful.

**SECOND YOUNG GIRL:** Who?

**FIRST YOUNG GIRL:** Widows.

**SECOND YOUNG GIRL:** Oh. (*Pause*) Someone said, that's what we are.

**FIRST YOUNG GIRL:** What, wonderful?

**SECOND YOUNG GIRL:** No, widows. Without being wives. (*Pause*) There may not be anyone left for us (Bowen, 2010: 67).

The combination of wartime loss of life and governmental policy leaves the women in a social and legal no-man's land; this is in effect where Kathleen becomes located,

or dislocated to, as the 'unnatural promise' he extracts which drives 'down between her and the rest of all human kind[,] in effect asks her to behave like a widow without being married (Bowen, 1980a: 746). The extremity she was in causes her, years later, to ask herself, 'What did he do to make me promise like that?' claiming that she 'can't remember' only for the narrator to add, 'But she found that she could' (Bowen, 1980a: 748). Yet she avoids revealing why, instead describing how *well*: 'She remembered not only all that he said and did but the complete suspension of *her* existence during that August week' (Bowen, 1980a: 748). The equivocal legal status of her unnerving betrothal left her in a state of psychological limbo, even after he 'was reported missing, presumed killed' (Bowen, 1980a: 748). She is not that upset, in fact, 'her trouble, behind just a little grief, was a complete dislocation from everything.' (1980a: 746) In remaining subject to the socially aberrant promise, she occupies a liminal state where she is neither betrothed nor not betrothed. Kathleen, and to an extent the women in the play, have been placed in Agamben's zone of anomie, created during the wartime state of exception, and it leaves her in a dislocated, exceptional state. Suffered as trauma in 'The Demon Lover,' it perhaps isn't a coincidence that the girls' conversation in the play is interrupted by the arrival of Sergeant Rose, with whom there is something the matter, so they ask him, 'You been seeing the ghost?' (Bowen, 2010: 67). Alongside their legally liminal status, as neither widows nor not-widows, it is 'said the house was haunted' (2010: 67).

In Bowen, the ambiguous presence of ghosts becomes one of the extreme symptoms of the psychic stress experienced by civilians during wartime. In 'The Demon Lover,' Bowen delays the revelation that the soldier was presumed dead, allowing the uncanny to develop into a suggestion of 'the supernatural side of the letter's entrance' (1980a: 746). Kathleen refuses to dwell on this, ruminating that 'As things were – dead or living the letter-writer sent her only a threat' (Bowen, 1980a: 746). She is haunted by the spectre of her former lover, whether he is a ghost or not, so that she hopes 'she had imagined the letter' (Bowen, 1980a: 746). In, almost playfully, having her character consciously rule out the hallucinatory, Bowen keeps open the possibility that Mrs Drover is sufficiently in charge of her mind for the

demon's appearance at the end of the story to be real. Indeed, this is how Lassner interprets the story, so that on Mrs Drover's return, 'The empty house is now haunted...by the presence of a mysterious letter from her fiancé, who perished in World War I' (1991: 64). Certainly, the presence of the letter in the house is hard to explain otherwise, although Bryant-Jordan argues the opposite, claiming that 'the piquancy of memory compels her to imagine that this man has written a letter to her' (1992: 133). Significantly, Bowen does not allow the reader to be so sure of this, maintaining the ambiguity around the ghost; as Corcoran (2004: 158), in keeping with Ellmann (2002: 176), sums it up, the 'revenant is one of the 'missing' of World War I, 'presumed dead' but never actually found—so that his return may, just about, be susceptible to rational explanation.' This ever-oscillating uncertainty increases the uncanny tension in 'The Demon Lover,' especially when compared to 'Green Holly,' where Bowen almost seems to be parodying the clichés of ambiguity surrounding the presence of ghosts. From the description of the 'Gothic porch and gables' (Bowen, 1980b: 812), to the wry narrative comment, 'And not, you could think, by chance did the electric light choose this moment for one of its brown fade-outs,' during the apparition of the ghost, so that 'the scene...faded under this fog-dark but glass-clear veil of hallucination' (Bowen, 1980b: 818). The ironic tone seems to imply Mr Winterslow's vision of the ghost at the top of the stairs is a product of psychological strain. However, as will be discussed a little later in the essay, the ghost in 'Green Holly,' is crucially different from Bowen's other haunting spectres: some of the story being from her perspective, albeit through free-indirect discourse, lends far greater veracity to her existence.

In 'The Demon Lover,' Bowen adds to the central ambiguity by continuing to create an atmosphere ever more psychologically charged:

The desuetude of her former bedroom, her married London home's whole air of being a cracked cup from which memory...had either evaporated or leaked away, made a crisis – and at just this crisis the letter-writer had...struck (1980a: 747).

And, just as in Auden's poem 'As I Walked Out One Evening,' written in 1937, 'the crack in the tea-cup opens/A lane to the land of the dead' (1991: 134). The crisis is created by the war, the state of exception that has returned and brought with it the ghosts of the past. It is here that Freud's claims about the creation of ghosts as a means of coping with death have resonance (1985: 82). In his paper, he writes of primeval man that, 'It was beside the dead body of someone he loved that he invented spirits, and his sense of guilt at the satisfaction mingled with his sorrow turned these new-born spirits into evil demons that had to be dreaded.' That such illusory spirits abound during a time of war is implicit in the psychological pressures that give rise to them. Freud writes that, 'Just as for primeval man, so also for our unconscious...the two opposing attitudes towards death, the one which acknowledges it as the annihilation of life and the other which denies it as unreal, collide and come into conflict' (1985: 87). As such, ghosts arise out of conflicting, contradictory drives in mankind: they are borne out of ambivalence (Freud, 1985: 82). The belief in our own immortality conflicts with the reality of death, and during 'war...[d]eath will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it' (Freud, 1985: 79), while there is a mixture of love, relief and guilt directed towards those that die. Crucially, for modern man, all of this conflict is located in the unconscious, rather than in the presence of literal ghosts.

Without recourse to the primitive coping mechanism of unambiguous ghosts that can be exorcised, London and Mrs Drover both become haunted by the threatened presence of an equivocal ghost. In the 'dead air' of her house, surrounded by the empty, watching streets of wartime London, death becomes both undeniable and insupportable (Bowen, 1980a: 743). Here 'Green Holly' adds an interesting element to this concern, as it is the ghost itself that experiences the 'two opposing attitudes towards death' (Freud, 1985: 87). Her 'visibleness' is dependent 'on having fallen in love again', this time with the unpromisingly named Mr Winterslow, but 'because of her years of death, there cut an extreme anxiety: it was not merely a matter of, how was she? but of, *was she* – tonight – at all?' (Bowen, 1980b: 815). As Lassner argues, the ghost herself feels existential anxiety, which is not caused by the war, but by her lack of existence (1991: 56). However, Lassner's argument that 'The isolation of

the group' of intelligence officers 'is matched by the acute loneliness of the ghost' suggests parallels between them (1991: 56). The fact that 'Death had left [the ghost] to be her own mirror' causes her to try and verify her existence in being seen by a man, which is what she puts all of her energy into achieving, as 'She gathered about her, with a gesture not less proud for being tormentedly uncertain, the total of her visibility' (Bowen, 1980b: 816–817). Yet her attempt fails bathetically, as not only does he just want her to let him past her on the stairs to get his 'spectacles' but he also then can't really see her, asking, 'Where are you?' (Bowen, 1980b: 818). In this, the ghost reflects the position of the other women in the house. Earlier in the story, we are told that 'Miss Bates had been engaged to Mr Winterslow; before that, she had been extremely friendly with Mr Rankstock,' and that 'Mr Rankstock's deviation towards one Carla...had been totally uninteresting to everyone' (Bowen, 1980b: 812). In their anonymity, as Lassner argues, no matter how 'significant their war work, the threat of annihilation and the ambiguity of their intelligence work leave them in limbo. The ghost thus signifies the terrifying possibility that, they too, might not exist' (1991: 56). Ironically, whereas ghosts for Freud's primitive peoples carried a terrifying reassurance of our immortality, in Bowen they express fear of annihilation.

This threat of non-existence emerges in a more terrifying sense in the climax of 'The Demon Lover' as Kathleen takes refuge in a taxi, where:

Through the aperture driver and passenger...remained for an eternity eye to eye. Mrs Drover's mouth hung open for some seconds before she could issue her first scream. After that she continued to scream freely...as the taxi...made off with her into the hinterland of deserted streets. (1980a: 749)

Coming face-to-face with her fear, whether that is the ghost of her former lover or an hysterical projection, involves being whisked away to join the dead for 'eternity.' As in 'Green Holly,' parallels between the citizen living through the strain of wartime and the ghost emerge. Notably, the letter left in the house is signed 'K,' her own initial, (Bowen, 1980a: 744) and given that she admits that '*under no conditions* could she remember his face,' it is not clear if she recognises the driver (Bowen, 1980a:

748). The ghostly presences summoned in response to the pressures of wartime are strongly identified with by the living, are persistent, and resist being exorcised. The ending of 'Green Holly,' depicts this even more firmly, with Miss Bates revealing that she also saw the ghost of the dead man at the foot of the stairs, which the ghost of the femme fatale had referred to earlier in the story, which leads her to exclaim, 'But who was *she*...? – I could be fatal' (1980b: 819–20).

As we have seen, for Freud, ghosts operate as a primitive way of coping with the belief in our own immortality when faced with death, whereas Bowen's ghosts reflect, and in some cases, *create* existential anxiety. Freud distinguishes between the practices of primeval peoples and contemporary European society. Although often guilty of primitivism, Freud actually commends practices of the so-called less civilised as they are connected with coping with violence and death, and in particular, for their practice of atoning 'for the murders they committed in war by penances' before they could even 'set foot in their village' (1985: 84). This acts as an acknowledgement that violence committed against others, even in war, is still deserving of guilt, something that Freud believes modern humanity does not allow for (Freud, 1985: 84). Interestingly, this atoning does not rid us of the primitive 'fear of the avenging spirits of the slain' (Freud, 1985: 84). Yet, in a surprising move, Freud asks at the very end of his essay whether we would be better admitting that 'in our civilized attitude towards death we are once again living psychologically beyond our means' and whether would be better 'to give a little more prominence to the unconscious attitude towards death which we have hitherto so carefully suppressed' (Freud, 1985: 89). The unconscious attitude is the same as the primeval viewpoint, suggesting that for Freud, we would be psychologically healthier for acknowledging our guilt, and believing in ghosts.

Not so for modern humans, as rituals associated with mourning the dead, and in particular those who died in war, were actively reduced by the British state in the inter-war period. This began during World War I, where:

Bodies of dead combatants and the funerary rituals associated with their disposal became the property and duty of the state, the Imperial War Graves

Commission burying the dead, when conditions allowed, close to the site of battle, in cemeteries that emphasized their commonality with their comrades, rather than their civilian identity (Noakes, 2015: 75).

Of course, this did not lessen the psychological need for the bereaved to process their grief, as is suggested by, 'The numbers who queued to visit the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior and the Cenotaph in 1920' (Noakes, 2015: 75). Rather, it is another instance of the expansion of state powers into the private lives of citizens as a result of the state of exception caused by war. The extensive and deliberate nature of such steps is evidenced by the fact that when in the 1930s the 'Home Office and the Ministry of Health became concerned about the number of corpses aerial warfare was expected to create' they looked to amend World War I policy, which had been 'to inscribe the deaths of civilians in the limited air raids of that conflict with sacrificial meaning' (Noakes, 2015: 77). As a result,

New guidelines were issued, discouraging the use of horses to draw hearses, and putting an end to the tradition of undertakers and mourners walking ahead of the cortege...and the government and local authorities planned for mass civilian casualties by stockpiling cardboard coffins and shrouds (Noakes, 2015: 77).

In addition to the huge numbers of deaths, this state control of mourning practices is in part responsible for the rise in the 'popularity of spiritualism in interwar Britain,' as 'the need of many of the bereaved to make contact with the dead continued' (Noakes, 2015: 75). This need to be in contact with the dead is palpable in the almost séance like atmosphere of 'Green Holly,' and crucially, of course, Kathleen's soldier was 'reported missing, presumed killed,' and so, other than at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, could not be ritually mourned (Bowen, 1980a: 746). It is likely that, the officially sanctioned 'silencing of grief may well have made the process of bereavement, or even witnessing death, harder to bear,' leading to a proliferation of ghosts, literary and otherwise, refusing to be laid to rest (Noakes, 2015: 83). Additionally, the extension of the state's jurisdiction over

mourning for the mass civilian casualties caused by the total war of the 1940s, is felt in Bowen's characters' identification with the ghosts in 'The Demon Lover' and 'Green Holly.'

In her 'Preface' to *The Second Ghost Book* Bowen questions why 'ghosts should today be so ubiquitous' (1952, quoted in Lassner, 1991: 137). If 'Tradition connects with the scenes of violence,' Bowen asks whether this means that 'any and every place is, has been or may be a scene of violence?' (Bowen, 1952, quoted in Lassner, 1991: 137). In response to her own question, she acknowledges that, 'Our interpretation of violence is wider than once it was,' and includes, 'Inflctions and endurances, exactions, injustices, infidelities' (Bowen, 1952, quoted in Lassner, 1991: 137). During World War II, the civilian population was subtly, but increasingly, subject to such inflctions and injustices by the operation of the nation state. The legal philosophy of Agamben and psychoanalysis of Freud demonstrate the fraught nature of the complexities that arose as a consequence for citizens, a complexity that is reflected in Bowen's stories which provide 'snapshots taken from close up...in the middle of the mêlée of a battle' of the exceptional states experienced as a consequence of living through the wartime state of exception (Bowen, 1945).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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