The apparent choices of art are nothing but additions, predispositions: where did these come from, how were they formed? The aesthetic is nothing but a return to images that will allow nothing to take their place; the aesthetic is nothing but an attempt to disguise and glorify the enforced return. All susceptibility belongs to the age of magic, the Eden where fact and fiction were the same: the imaginative writer was the imaginative child, who relied for life upon being lied to – and how, now is he to separate the lies from his consciousness of life? If he be a novelist, all his psychology is merely a new parade of the old mythology. We have relied on our childhoods, on the sensations of childhood, because we mistake vividness for purity; actually, the story was there first – one is forced to see that it was the story that apparelled everything in celestial light.¹

The appearance of two biographies of Elizabeth Bowen and the reissue of her novels, short stories and family chronicle, Bowen’s Court, have been greeted with considerable enthusiasm. Yet recent appraisals mirror the conflicted opinions critics have always expressed about Bowen’s place in literary history. Most critics agree that she is a consolidator of ‘modern comedies of manners’, who connects a line from Virginia Woolf to that of Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark (VG XV).² Bowen’s themes and subjects are usually placed in the English realist tradition of Jane Austen, George Eliot, E.M. Forster, and Henry James.³ But for those who emphasise Bowen’s portrayal of intense
emotion, she is a novelist of sensibility. This appraisal also takes two directions. Her use of houses as symbols of psychological oppression reminds readers of the gothic and romance fiction of the Brontës while she is also identified with the modernism of D.H. Lawrence since she defines her characters by their states of feeling.

Attempts to make her fit the traditions of the English novel say more about canon formation than they do about Bowen's work. In Hermione Lee's view, 'Elizabeth Bowen is an exceptional English novelist because she fuses two traditions – that of Anglo-Irish literature and history, and that of a European modernism indebted to Flaubert and to James' (11–12). Victoria Glendinning has suggested that her 'original inimitable voice' captures cultural dislocation and personal loss so pointedly and poignantly only because she is a transitional figure (VG V). As feminist scholars point out, however, viewing a woman writer as a connecting link in a primarily patriarchal tradition diminishes and conceals what is exceptional about her work.

In their recognition of literary traditions of women writers, feminist scholars and critics provide an opportunity to read Bowen differently. These readers have explored the unique contributions of women writers within the social, religious, political and psychological contexts which shaped their individual creative consciousness. Identifying the narrative strategies and voices which emerge from these contexts places women writers in traditions of their own. As Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar have shown, we can now see women writers not as slipping between one patriarchal tradition and another by writing in their margins, but as marginalised people who show their understanding of 'The Great Tradition' by critiquing it and revising it as 'a literature of their own'.

Bowen is a marginalised figure in several ways that are transformed imaginatively into a distinctive style and persona. Neither English nor Irish, she was born Anglo-Irish,