

Light and Enlightenment in Elizabeth Bowen's Irish Novels

TONI O'BRIEN JOHNSON

I SHALL EXAMINE the theoretical stance which claims that *the reader produces meaning from the text* by a reading of Elizabeth Bowen's Irish novels which pays particular attention to her use of light and dark. This choice of focus immediately limits the range of meaning which can be extracted in this reading, and perhaps also restricts the explicative approach that can legitimately be used. But the extensive use of light and dark throughout Bowen's work, though recognized by Hermione Lee (141-43), deserves closer consideration than it has received.

First love and other close human relationships are presented as unsatisfactory in both *The Last September* and *A World of Love*, Bowen's only novels set entirely in Ireland. Not only do we never see the partners of the primary domestic relationship in *The Last September* address each other, but the budding instance of first love between Lois and Gerald is nipped by Lady Naylor's intervention and destroyed by Gerald's death. Besides, Francie Montmorency opts out of marital intimacy through ill-health, while her husband Hugo has a wandering eye if not the courage to follow it. All the marriages against which the action takes place are sterile — the Naylor's, the Montmorency's, and the Forgartys' (Mrs. F. has a "vast and useless bosom" [199]). The two young people staying at Danielstown, the Big House in which the novel is set, are merely niece and nephew to the owners and neither of them gives hope for happy relationships, while Marda's engagement is equally unpromising.

In *A World of Love*, the primary partnership between Fred and Lilia was instigated by Antonia, not by spontaneous "falling

in love." Accordingly, it conveys convenience at best, disinterest at worst. Antonia herself is a solitary divorcée, Maud is an odd twelve-year-old, and Jane, the heroine, is confused between an over-intense bond with her father on the one hand and her morbid response to a packet of love-letters from the long-dead cousin Guy, which she found in the attic, on the other. All of this leaves little basis for optimism when the reader is told as Jane meets Richard Priam at the very end of the novel, "They no sooner looked but they loved," (149), especially since Richard is the cast-off friend of the brittle, nouveau-riche parvenu Lady Latterly. (Note the significant name!)

This unsatisfactoriness in close relationships is elaborated through the use of light and dark, notably in connection with the heroines of these two novels, Lois and Jane. In addition to Bowen's characteristic interest in innocence and its loss, there is a related interest in the process of enlightenment which occurs accompanied by illumination from natural and artificial sources. Enlightenment can be a painful process, we learn, particularly if it is forced from without, and there is a constant sense that it is preferable that some things be kept in the dark. I shall use the term "enlighten" in its figurative sense, to convey a spiritual or intellectual state or process which can be spontaneous and involuntary; and I shall use the term "illuminate" in its general sense of throwing light on something, deliberately, from the outside.

Thus, Lady Naylor's thrice-repeated statement to Lois, "You have no conception of love," indicates her deliberate attempt to illuminate for Lois the impossibility of her marrying Gerald, as though Lois were an object clearly perceptible to Lady Naylor. Significantly, this occurs while Lady Naylor is trimming the wicks of the Danielstown lamps:

Lady Naylor, who wished for a clear steady light these lengthening evenings, saw to the lamps personally. In big yellow gloves she accurately trimmed the wicks, between the morning's headlines and a thorough talk with the cook. But the smell of oil was repugnant to her and now she said with some sharpness:

"You have no conception of love — You are in my light."

Lois moved from the lamp-room window. "I really have," she said, "really."

"Nonsense," her aunt said. . . . (*Last September* 167)

During the exchange which follows, Lady Naylor's thoughts wander twice to Anna Partridge's electric light in Bedfordshire; not once does she consider Lois as a subject of feeling; and she is utterly convinced of the clarity (and rectitude) of her view that love is impermanent, brains are important, and "there is no reason" why Lois should marry (168). The sub-text reads that she is excessively dependent on light, which causes her to complain a second time that Lois is depriving her of it.

The problem is one of transparency: Lady Naylor treats Lois's feelings objectively, regards her as an object. Lois's materiality seems to confirm this, for she is not transparent and thus blocks the light. It is not that Lady Naylor's view of what Lois should do about Gerald and marriage is unwise. On the contrary, since Lois's sense of dissatisfaction with herself and her situation lies behind the conclusion to which she came at the end of the preceding chapter (166) that "It was inevitable that she should marry Gerald," Lady Naylor's opposition to the liaison with Gerald is justified. What obtrudes is her impatient insistence on bringing it into the light, or as she sees it herself, bringing "the matter onto an intellectual plane at once" (167).

Besides, Lady Naylor handles language as though *it* were transparent. Lois is aware of her own muddled state, and confesses her difficulty in explaining her position: "'But I can't explain,'" she says (168). In reply, Lady Naylor says: "'Real feeling explains itself.'" This could mean either "real feeling finds the right words" or "real feeling doesn't need words." In either case, the sense is that words do not block the light for the speaker. Yet ironically, although Lady Naylor's eyes are tellingly described as "brilliant" (169), she finally fails to find the appropriate words for conveying her own position: twice she opens a sentence with "However . . .," and twice she fails to continue. Also, she offers Lois no reason for the opinion that she has no conception of love. She merely relies on repetition of the statement; and her replies are either dismissive or evade the issue by changing direction.

The reader is made aware of the limitations of the perceptions of Lady Naylor early in the novel, also with reference to light, so that one is prepared for the heightened significance of the lamp-room scene. We learn that she "nodded out of a window to someone distant coming out from some trees," and then the narrator comments "she could never learn how one vanishes in the dark of a house" (17). This comment emphasizes first how one can see without oneself being visible to others; and second, how darkness is relative to point of view and can veil presence. It also adumbrates the functional analogy which is explored throughout the novel between *house* and *being* in the matter of light and vision.

This analogy between house and being is present from the very first page of *The Last September*. The Montmorencys arrive at Danielstown in "yellow theatrical sunshine" while "the vast facade of the house stared coldly over its mounting lawns" (7). Towards the end of the novel, as Lois returns to Danielstown, "Twenty dark windows stared aloofly out of the light grey face of the house" (159). This recurrence of staring windows endorses the analogy between window and eye which occurs on several occasions during the novel (see 65, 85, 86). Besides, the *twenty* windows of Danielstown echo the twenty windows of the façade of Bowen's Court, Elizabeth Bowen's home, to which she was very attached and of which she wrote a history, *Bowen's Court*. In this history, she explicitly makes the connection between house and being when she writes of Big Houses:

With buildings, as with faces, there are moments when the forceful mystery of the inner being appears. This may be a matter of mood or light. . . . [A]ny one of these houses — with its rows of dark windows set in the light facade against dark trees — has the startling meaning and abstract clearness of a house in a print. . . . (20)

The interest here is in the hidden nature of meaning, apart from fleeting moments. The inner life of the human being remains largely a mystery to another; and the inner life of the Big House likewise remains a mystery to those outside it. In her article, "The Big House," Elizabeth Bowen comments that coming up the

avenue to the house one "meets the faded, dark-windowed and somehow hypnotic stare of the big house" which "in its silence, seems to be contemplating the swell or fall of its own lawns" (196). The house's silence gives no help to those bent on interpretation and the establishment of meaning.

In *A World of Love* we first learn that its Big House, which this time is only a "small mansion," has its "blind end" towards the nearby gorge, and "The half-asleep face of Montefort was at this hour drowned in early light" (10); thus the analogy between house and being is established. Jane, the twenty-year-old heroine, has to shade her eyes from the sun when she looks back "at two adjoining windows in the top storey" of the house where the "curtains were still drawn." These curtains have rents in them which "let through what were to be when the sleeper woke shafts of a brightness quite unupportable." (Note the typical Bowen inversion.) When Kathie, the maid, brings this sleeper, Antonia, her morning tea, she leaves the curtains undisturbed (23); and only when Jane arrives does Antonia say "Must have more air. Yes, you'll have to open the curtains," but not before "She reached for her sunglasses, put them on and sat up" (25). The emphasis on curtains and sunglasses conveys the idea that Antonia has virtually a phobia about light. When she appears without sunglasses we are specifically told so, as well as that she has her back to the light and the blinds are down (35f.). All of this suggests a wilful blindness on her part, corroborated by her reaction to Jane's finding the packet of love-letters in her house. She says:

"I've no idea what *is* in the house. Never have I known, and I never want to — by this time, who could know, and however should they? Not I, certainly: God forbid! Yet I can't help wondering what you've unburied — there may be much (I should think there probably is) that we should all do far better to leave alone." (37f.)

As it transpires that bringing these love-letters to light *does* have a disruptive effect on the entire household, Antonia's view, like Lady Naylor's, is justified. Yet the price of this resistance to light is high for Antonia, who finally continues to carry the burden of

the past herself by refusing to reveal at the end of the novel that the love-letters were not addressed to Lilia.

The shadow of the past is present from the opening of the novel, where the rising sun casts the shadow of an obelisk towards Montefort. This obelisk bears no inscription; Lilia, being English and thus an outsider, cannot remember why it was erected, but Fred, being local, can:

“Chap put it up in memory of himself,” said he, with a glance at the thing, for the first time struck by it.

“What, while he was still alive?” marvelled Lilia. “Rather peculiar, surely? What was his name?”

“Couldn’t tell you.”

“Oh, then he *is* forgotten!”

During the pause, Antonia joined the group, was asked, looked bored and supplied the name. She carried her cup and was drinking coffee. “Married the cook,” she went on, “went queer in the head from drinking and thinking about himself, left no children — anyway, no legit. So this place went to his first cousin. . . .”

(137)

Antonia can throw light on the origins of the obelisk better than anyone: she knows the name of the man who erected it as a substitute for legitimate children and that his first cousin inherited it. But this memory casts its shadow on the present ambiguous position of Montefort. Antonia owns it, but depends on *her* illegitimate cousin Fred to keep it going in a run-down way. Besides, being childless herself, she goes on to muse that “Guy’s death, even, had been contributory to Jane’s birth. And so, what was Jane for? Beautiful, yes; but why?” (140). Insofar as this question as to why Jane is beautiful (and implicitly, what her future will be) is answered by the novel, the answer is far from satisfactory. Not only has Jane been distanced from the life of Montefort by her English education, but she is merely the daughter of the illegitimate cousin of the owner. Furthermore, her romantic encounter at the very end of the novel holds little promise for allowing her to assume the role of mistress of Montefort, even if she does marry Richard Priam. The shadow of the past, like that of the obelisk, is long.

Lilia, though not so markedly resistant to light as Antonia, nevertheless objects to Jane's reading what she takes to be Guy's letters to herself: "'How *dared* you, poking and prying?'" she cried (42). Also, we are told that, after the Fête, she "had, all the time, been lying silently in the dark on a sofa" (28). As she sits in the overgrown garden recollecting the ambiguity of her farewell to Guy and his looking for a face unknown to her, she thinks "Better uncertainty; best no answer" (96). This same sentiment underlies her response to Fred's returning the packet of letters he takes to be hers in "the dense green gloom under this particular chestnut tree" (99): she doesn't open them. Instead of trying to clarify something from the past, she gropes her way towards present understanding with her husband, while

The chestnut, darkening into summer, canopied them over; over their heads were its expired candles of blossom, brown — desiccated stamens were in the dust. Over everything under the tree lay the dusk of nature. (104)

Only after the *candles* of blossom have expired can germination take place in the dusk of nature. Lilia herself is not very bright but has the earth-mother's affinity with darkness, and she is protected from enlightenment by the bright but childless Antonia.

In contrast with Lilia's earthy association with darkness is Lady Latterly's exaggerated attachment to light. Where Lilia's home is still lit by lamp and candle, Lady Latterly overdoes the electric light in her recently acquired and renovated castle. In her bedroom, "Crystal the chandelier dripped into the sunset; tense little lit lamps under peach shades were easily floated in upon the gold of evening" (56); and ironically, it is excess of light that causes her to cry "I can't see myself, you see! I can't see a thing!" to Jane as she is dressing for dinner. In her drawing-room, "impassive electric candelabra sprang into brilliance round all the eggshell walls, and by their light Jane, instinctively looking down, saw those indelible ancient grass-stains betraying the embroidered hems of her muslin" (61). Lady Latterly's lights are, like herself, heartless, and since her heart was not in the annual hunt Fête held in her grounds the previous day, she will never host it again, although everyone else enjoyed it. Thus its descrip-

tion is pervaded by an excess of light: there is a "dazzling concourse of marquees," a "kaleidoscopic shimmer over the Fête," and "urns blazed with geraniums," so that Antonia, "flashing her black glasses" tripped and "jarred the lens in her brain"; and "Like a bullet-hit pane, the whole scene shivered, splintered outward in horror from that small black vacuum in its core" (28f.). Antonia's sense of privacy is invaded by the aggressive brilliance surrounding Lady Latterly so that she retreats to Montefort with a bottle of whiskey to black it out. Jane, being more resilient, younger, and thereby less enlightened, survives a dinner-party at the castle by drinking too many martinis, so that in the candle-lit dining-room (with only "dimmed lamps over the serving-tables") she is able to conjure up Guy to fill the empty place opposite her and to fill the vacuum of shared identity and interests she feels with this "circle of the displaced rich" (67), who are all so much older than she.

The anachronism of Jane's presence at the castle dinner-party reflects the central anachronism of the novel, which is the impinging of Guy through his letters on the minds of the main characters. The temporal sequence of the fate of these letters, together with their relationship to light, gives the following pattern: in the *dark*, alone at Montefort, Jane lights a *candle* and goes to the attic where, out of an old muslin dress tumbles the packet of letters, "having found her rather than she them" (27). She reads them in bed by *candlelight*, then the following morning hides them out-of-doors in the early *sunshine*. Here Maud, who is concerned about living outside time since none of the clocks at Montefort work, and who therefore compulsively listens to Big Ben on the radio at nine o'clock, finds them and transmits them to Fred. Fred, the only character whom current time engages (he has a watch by which he runs the farm), returns the letters to Lilia under the *shade* of the chestnut tree. Here, Jane accidentally sees them lying abandoned heedlessly on Lilia's lap, which image later returns to her and advances her understanding of mutability (119). Next, they are found on the hat-stand by Antonia in "the *afternoon's bright shadows*" (115). Then, in the *dark* of the kitchen, Kathie catches Antonia about to burn them, still tied with

a ribbon. This ribbon, of current relevance to Kathie because it could be used to tie up her hair, becomes the pretext for Antonia's transmitting them to her with permission to read them. Kathie's being outside the family and not having known Guy liberates her to read them, which she does. She finds the name of the addressee which she reveals to Jane, who has now reached a point of development in relation to time which allows her to dress in a fashionable blazer, not an Edwardian dress. Jane summons Antonia "fretted by more of the *sunless glare*," and

Jane, as though all of Antonia's faculties must somewhere be in the dark of those twin pools, spoke directly into the sunglasses — "I *do* know who they were to," she said very hurriedly. "Shall I tell you?"

"What have you been doing?"

"Burning them."

"What, with this at the door?" asked Antonia, kicking a tyre of the van. "And, what do you mean? They were burned last night."

"No; Kathie got frightened. She found a name in them."

"Oh?" said Antonia.

Jane gave the unknown name, naturally adding: "So who was she?"

"I don't believe I remember," said Antonia. (139)

This crucial scene depicts the more mature disposition of Jane in relation to time in general and the past in particular, while it shows Antonia's continuing poor adjustment. Nevertheless, the dynamics of the relationship between Jane and Antonia here show the increased stability which has been present since the scene in the dining-room at Montefort where Jane, having deliberately let up a blind and seen that Antonia has grown old, embraced her and Antonia responded to the embrace (129-30).

Whereas at the end of *A World of Love* only the anachronistic language of the past (in the form of the letters) has been burnt, at the end of *The Last September* it is the Big House itself which is burnt down. In the earlier novel, things with much farther-reaching significance than the infidelity of one man or unexpressed incestuous feelings are kept in the dark: the general social threat to the life of the Big House from outside cannot be talked about.

This silence concerning the threat under which the Big House exists is dictated by Sir Richard and Lady Naylor. The idea that they prefer to remain wilfully blind to this threat is endorsed by the final sentence of the novel as they watch Danielstown burn: "Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, not saying anything, did not look at each other, for in the light from the sky they saw too differently" (206). At the beginning of the novel, Sir Richard had laughed off Francie's fear that they might be shot at if they sat out on the steps after dinner (23). Then, when Lois reports that three "men of the place" swear that there are guns buried in the lower plantation, and that Michael Keelan swears he saw two men digging there, Sir Richard explodes "'— Ah, that's nonsense now! Michael would see anything: he is known to have seen a ghost. I will not have the men talking, and at all accounts I won't have them listened to.'" Lois, however, insists that it would be better to investigate, for "'surely we ought to know,'" which brings the sharp reply "'And why would we want to know? You'll have the place full of soldiers, trampling the young trees . . . This country . . . is altogether too full of soldiers, with nothing to do but dance and poke old women out of their beds to look for guns. It's unsettling the people naturally . . . and also the army isn't at all what it used to be. . . .'" Sir Richard is benign, ineffectual in his account of his encounter with the Black and Tans, and together with Lady Naylor, is over-confident in his version of "the people."

For her part, Lady Naylor directly silences Laurence on the dangerous topic of "the troubles": "'Ssh!' exclaimed Lady Naylor. . . . She frowned, with a glance at the parlourmaid" (25). And later,

Lady Naylor continued: "From all the talk, you might think almost anything was going to happen, *but we never listen*. I have made it a rule not to talk, either. . . . And if you talk to the people they'll tell you the whole thing's nonsense: and after all what is a country if it isn't the people? For instance, I had a long conversation this morning with Mrs Pat Geegan . . ." (26)

Blissfully unaware of the self-contradictions involved, Lady Naylor goes on with a classic account of Mrs. Pat Geegan telling the

good lady exactly what she wanted to hear. Both women wish to maintain the *status quo* and therefore ignore the young and the change they are working towards on the one hand and perceive on the other. Lady Naylor has already been identified as someone who could not learn that darkness can veil presence, but her niece is more perceptive.

Lois, unlike her aunt and uncle, suffers neither from excessive attachment to light nor from blindness to the dangers of the dark. She walks down the avenue alone in the dark, yet when the shrubbery path is "solid with darkness" her fear of it "tugged at its chain, fear behind reason, fear before birth; fear like the earliest germ of her life" (33). This fear of the unknown brought on by the dark offsets the security in which she perceives those she left behind in the Big House: "The shuttered-in drawing-room, the family sealed in the lamplight, secure and bright like flowers in a paper-weight — were desirable, worth much of this to regain." But in daring to go out in the dark, Lois has foregone this security and accordingly hears and sees the man in a trench-coat who passes without seeing her because she refrains from breaking the silence, uncertain what form her greeting should take. She perceives that "His intentions burnt on the dark an almost visible trail" (34), and thereby recognizes the threat his presence poses. She realizes, however, that "it was impossible to speak of this" to the group assembled inside "tricked by the half-revelation of lamplight," for what "seemed most probable was that they would not listen," so she "lighted her candle and went up to bed" (34f.).

Lois, as merely the niece of Danielstown, is not rooted there. Besides, on seeing the man in a trench-coat, she cannot share the intentions concerning Ireland which are dispatching him on his hurried way: "She could not conceive of her country emotionally: it was a way of living, an abstract of several landscapes, or an oblique frayed island moored at the north but with an air of being detached and washed out west from the British coast" (34). Her unanchored position brings her a freedom of movement in relation to light and dark, but it also brings a painful sense of belonging nowhere. Thus when the man on the run says to her

in the mill " 'you had better keep in the house while y'have it,'" "Lois could not but agree with him. She felt quite ruled out, there was nothing at all for her here. She had better be going — but where? She thought: 'I must marry Gerald' " (125). But this escape towards England in the form of Gerald's apparent solidity becomes less satisfactory as Lois's sense of the complexity of the interplay of light and dark increases.

The simplicity of Gerald's identification with light is stressed from the beginning: at the tennis-party, "he almost shone" (35); after his night on patrol, he recalls "that keen truth of the first showing of daylight" (84); and at Sir Richard's distress on hearing that Gerald had captured Peter Connor, "Gerald was horrified. His duty, so bright and abstract, had come suddenly under the shadowy claw of the personal" (92). Waiting in the Danielstown drawing-room, "He turned in thought to confident English country . . . rooms small in the scope of firelight, neighbourly lights through trees" (87f.).

Such simple, "enlightened" domesticity is far from Danielstown. Looking down at this Big House,

it seemed to Lois they lived in a forest; space of lawns blotted out in the pressure and dusk of trees. She wondered they were not smothered; then wondered still more that they were not afraid. Far from here too, their isolation became apparent. The house seemed to be pressing down low in apprehension, hiding its face, as though it had her vision of where it was. It seemed to gather its trees close in fright and amazement at the wide, light, lovely unloving country, the unwilling bosom wherein it was set. (66)

In the juxtaposed epithets "lovely unloving" applied to the country in which Danielstown is set, all the ambiguity of the position of the Big House emerges, as well as the ambivalence of the perplexed young girl. Although overtly Elizabeth Bowen here refers to the physical location of the house against its landscape, beneath the physical, regardless of the author's intention, lies the social uncertainty or ambiguity of the lives of the occupants. Lois's distance from Danielstown at this point allows her to perceive the archetypal threat in the dark:

only the trees of the demesne were dark, exhaling darkness. Down among them, dusk would stream up the paths ahead, lie stagnant over the lawns, would mount in the tank of garden, heightening the walls, dulling the borders like a rain of ashes. Dusk would lie where one looked as though it were in one's eyes, as though the fountain of darkness were in one's own perception. Seen from above, the house in its pit of trees seemed a very reservoir of obscurity; from the doors one must come out stained with it. And the kitchen smoke, lying over the vague trees doubtfully, seemed the very fume of living. (67)

Danielstown poses for Lois a double problem in relation to darkness: first, that of distinguishing between the darkness that originates from without and that which originates from within; and second, that of being stained with the darkness of the house from which one comes.

Taking the symbolic significance of darkness and the forest as the threat of evil, the heroine's dilemma is that of identifying her moral position in relation to her social context. She is at a loss to know to what extent the threat comes from within herself or from without. Besides, there is no escaping the stain of the darkness of the house from which she issues. The exploration of this dilemma is carried out through the use of light and dark throughout the novel, with the main focus on close personal relationships. The moral dilemma in relation to the larger collective issues is barely adumbrated. The novelist avoids what for her was a painful issue: at the end of *Bowen's Court* she confesses, "The stretches of the past I have had to cover have been, on the whole, painful: my family got their position and drew their power from a situation that shows an inherent wrong" (453).

In *A World of Love*, written at a time when the circumstances of these collective issues had altered in Ireland and there was a relative political lull, the darkness of the Big House and its analogy in being is less oppressive. The threat from the surrounding forest is almost absent, and there are neither English soldiers nor stray locals to ruffle the still isolation of Montefort. Besides, the action of this novel takes place during a particularly hot, and therefore sunny, summer. Nevertheless, Antonia, whose age would allow

her to be Lois grown up, suffers, as we have seen, from an exaggerated sensitivity to light.

There is no doubt that the primary focus of surface interest in both these novels is the unsatisfactory nature of close personal relationships. By bringing traditional cognitive and associative baggage to my reading of them, I have produced a moral meaning for their use of light and dark. This reading is scarcely surprising to traditionalists, and is not at all what the deconstructionist would produce, for (s)he would refuse to grant the importance of this "embodied" meaning. Were I to adopt *that* approach to the production of meaning, I should open, not close, the disparity between the written sign and the assumed meaning. I should abandon those texts which are embedded in this traditional reading — those other primary texts from the Bible to Shakespeare to our own day (Patrick White, for instance), which also make use of the interplay of light and dark to explore the dynamics of good and evil but which are informed by an essentially liberal-humanist vision. I should also abandon seminal works of scholarship like Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* which elucidate the recurrence of such interplay. On the other hand, I should identify the extent to which Elizabeth Bowen's novels conform to the practice of classic realism and reinforce a conservative (colonial) ideology. I should also identify the point at which they transgress the limits within which they are constructed, or the gap between the ideological project and the ambitions of the particular literary form.

In other words, to meet these new expectations for the production of meaning, I should ask a number of questions which Elizabeth Bowen ignored. In particular. I should ask why, in *The Last September*, the Naylor of Danielstown neither listen to the locals nor talk to them — or more accurately, why they pretend neither to listen nor talk. Intuitively, and from a parallel knowledge of the fate of the Big House, I could answer this question in socio-political terms. I could even refer to other, non-fictional texts by Elizabeth Bowen and say, "because they know there is a fundamental conflict of interests between themselves and the locals, and that the days of the gracious and comfortable existence of the Big House

are numbered." But this would be to desert the text as it stands, and certainly to go beyond the author's intentions insofar as the novel embodies them.

Were I to ask why Antonia has a phobia about light, and the bringing to light of hidden things, I could suggest similar answers in a Marxist or feminist mode. But this would be to read into the text ideas from external sociological and biographical information. And were I to ask why Kathie wants to retrieve the ribbon tying Guy's letters, I would be led to a consideration of the material deprivation of the servant class in the context of the Big House, and thus would become embroiled in ideological issues which are once again alien to *A Word of Love* as it stands.

In all cases where I am forced to ask questions which the author herself did not address, I am obliged to "produce" and refer to texts (written or otherwise) which are not embodied in the texts I am pretending to deal with. Thus, all I can succeed in doing is substituting one set of texts for another, substituting texts which are not embodied in the original for those which are, or can be shown arguably to be. Were I to substitute a new set of texts, not demonstrably embodied in my primary text, I would merely be using the omissions, silences, and elusions of that text to construct my own. Thus my critical text would be constructed on the basis of a linguistic void, *ex nihilo* though not *in vacuo*. The deconstructionist, however, must first have a text to deconstruct functioning somewhat as prey or carrion. As a scholar and teacher I find this problematic in that primary texts retain the linguistic animation of their human author, whose language though public also serves a private or personal impulse.

Although the baggage of textual experience I bring to this exercise may be cumbersome and even out-dated, it at least functions as a basis for conference and perhaps communication by being recognizably embodied in the texts I pretend to consider. If we abandon the convention that primary texts receive consideration for their own sakes and for their embodied meaning, we must replace it with another convention. If texts not embodied in the primary texts inform the production of meaning, a clear definition of the assumed ideological stance will have to be in-

cluded in this new convention. Then I fear that Conservative, Marxist, Feminist, or Liberal will be drawn to engage only with their like, thus reinforcing old Cyclopiian perspectives.

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