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Elizabeth Bowen's 1955 novel *A World of Love* arrives in our hands today like a letter from the past, insisting that we recognize the nonhuman forces at work in every act of writing and reading—as well as the ethical injunction such an apprehension engenders.

## Addressed to You: Nonhuman Missives from Elizabeth Bowen's *A World of Love*

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JEMMA DEER

*The future can only be for ghosts. And the past.*

—Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

**W**hat is a “world”? What is “love”? And what happens to you, or in you, when you read? Who are “you,” reading? These are some of the questions that present themselves in Elizabeth Bowen’s oneiric masterpiece, *A World of Love*. It is a text about revenance, about *Nachträglichkeit*, about what begins by coming back. It concerns reading, and the response or responsibility to what is read. The forces that move it are more or other than human and, arriving in our hands today, it takes on a strange new significance, as we find ourselves the readers of another text from the past—a text we are calling the Anthropocene. While other critics have emphasized the nonhuman aspects of Bowen’s writing,<sup>1</sup> this essay will look at how *A World of Love* becomes newly legible today, as if it had always been addressing itself to a future in which the

distinctions between animate and inanimate, human beings and the “environment,” distance and proximity, would become increasingly untenable—a future in which our capacity for response or responsibility would become as uncertain as it is crucial.

There are certain aspects of Bowen’s novel that correspond with, in a strange and prescient way, the second volume of Jacques Derrida’s *The Beast and the Sovereign*, so that the two texts seem to speak with or respond to each other, despite their differences in time, language, and genre. Both are concerned with the survival of traces, with what happens in writing and reading, and what happens to what remains after death. “Like every trace,” Derrida writes, “a book, the survivance of a book, from its first moment on, is a living-dead machine”—a machine capable of transcending its time, of sending itself into the future, and of outliving the person that wrote it (131). This capacity for survival “is the case not only for books, or for writing, or for the archive in the current sense, but for everything from which the tissue of living experience is woven, through and through” (132). Such a recognition—that what we call “the world” itself is constituted via a structure of traces sent and received—begins to trouble any rigorous distinction between what we call “fiction” and what we call the “real world.” There is no world (of love or otherwise) without fiction.

In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida asks what we are to do when faced with “the undeniable fact that there is no world” (266). The word “world” is only a fiction, for “no one will ever be able to demonstrate, what is called *demonstrate* in all rigor,” he writes, “that two human beings, you and I for example, inhabit the same world, that the world is one and the same thing for both of us” (265, *emph.* Derrida’s). One must instead live with the knowledge that “between my world and any other world there is first the space and the time of an infinite difference” (9). Such a realization engenders the following injunction:

where there is no world, [. . .] what I must do, with you and carrying you, is make it that there be precisely a world [. . .] or to do things so as to make *as if* there were just a world, [. . .] to make as if—for you, to give it to you, to bear it toward you, destined for you, to address it to you—I made the world come into the world, as though there ought to be a world where presently there is none, to make the gift or present of this *as if* come up poetically, [. . .] in the world that is going away, that will go away [. . .] leaving no trace, a world that has forever been going to leave and has just left, going away with no trace, the trace becoming trace only by being able to erase itself. (268, *emph.* Derrida’s)

In order to live with or through the unbearable lack of a shared world—in order to live with the infinite distance that comes between you and any other living being, in order to live with a world that is disappearing without a trace—one must, Derrida

writes, “*make as if*” there were a world. This is not to *act* as if there is a common or shared world, a community of the world in which we all live, but rather to *make* as if there is one: “to make the gift or present of this *as if*,” whilst at the same time living with the knowledge that this is a *fiction*, something *made*, “poetically.” As Michael Naas puts it in his illuminating reading of Derrida’s seminar, the injunction turns on “this almost imperceptible difference of an *as if*, the difference between living a world *as if* it were like that, as if it were what it is said to be, and making the world *as if*, leaving a trace of the end of the world within the world by means of this performative” (60, *emph.* Naas’s). It is an injunction, then, to make and acknowledge fiction, to accept its necessity, and, with or in spite of this knowledge, to address oneself to the other: to make the world “for you, to give it to you, to bear it toward you, *destined* for you, to *address* it to you”—to make as if, perhaps, one were sending a love letter. And you? What is your part in this? If I am to *make as if* there is a world, if I am to destine it to you, will you receive this address, will you read it, will you respond? That this can never be guaranteed is both the condition and the absolute risk of any letter. It is the future of a text that can never be given in advance. Derrida’s preoccupations here—the infinite distance or difference between “worlds,” the necessity of making and apprehending fiction, the necessity of addressing oneself to, and responding to, the other—are precisely what animate *A World of Love*.

In Bowen’s novel, the domestic space of Montefort—a strained and claustrophobically static Irish country house in the 1930s—is disrupted and transformed by a chance encounter with a bundle of old love letters, the author of which has been dead for many years. Falling from the folds of an old dress the 20-year-old Jane Danby has discovered in the attic, the letters “found her rather than she them” (27). At first reluctant to read them at all, Jane soon finds herself summoned into being *as* the reader. It does not matter that, as her mother Lilia indignantly points out, “they’re not *to* her” (41), they “never, never were *to* her,” for, in the act of reading, Jane feels herself *becoming* the addressee (42, *emph.* Bowen’s). She cannot help but submit to “that inexplicable feeling of being summoned,” to the feeling that she “*had* been sent for” (27, *emph.* Bowen’s). This “falling in love with a love letter” works to bring its dead author palpably back on the scene (39). To put this in terms of the passage from *The Beast and the Sovereign* that I quoted above, Jane receives via the letters the “gift or present” of a world of love that seems to be destined or addressed to her (and we can read “present” here in its general sense: the love seems to present itself to her, to be *present* with her). Despite the fact that this world is “infinitely distant,” a world that is “going away, that will go away” (it comes, after all, from a dead man), it nevertheless arrives to “make as if” there were a world. This is not, however, a one-way process. It is only in reading

and responding to the letters, in answering the call that they make to her, that Jane reanimates Guy. He could not have made a world of love alone.

Jessica Gildersleeve notes in *Elizabeth Bowen and the Writing of Trauma* that the “letters of *A World of Love* enact the possibility of what Derrida terms *destinerrance*, or adestination” (141)—the paradoxical logic of the post that he elaborates at length in *The Post Card*. The conditions that enable me to write to you, address myself to you, are the same conditions that enable my text’s going astray; to write to you is always to take the risk that you might not “get” it, either receive it or understand it—even, or especially, when I am sending my love. “A letter can always—and therefore must—never arrive at its destination. And [. . .] this is not negative, it’s good, and is the condition [. . .] that something does arrive—and that I love you” (*Post* 121). The might (both power and possibility) of the missive is that it misses its mark. There is no communication that is not also telecommunication, and therefore no relation with an other that does not have to cross over the uncrossable distance of an abyss, without safety net, without guarantee that it will reach the other side—and of course this applies not only to the traces that pass between human beings. “As soon as there is, there is *différance* (and this does not await language, especially human language, and the language of Being, only the mark and the divisible trait), and there is a postal maneuvering, relays, delay, anticipation, destination, telecommunicating network, the possibility, and therefore the fatal necessity of going astray.” What is sent and received, intercepted or misinterpreted, is not limited to human language—though the latter is of course conditioned by this “postal maneuvering.” A generalized concept of “the posts” is not merely metaphorical, but instead conditions “what essentially and decisively occurs, everywhere,” “as soon as there is” (66), contriving to make what we think is “the world.” As Derrida puts it in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, “the community of the world is always constructed, simulated by a set of stabilizing apparatuses, [. . .] language in the broad sense, codes of traces being designed, among all living beings, to construct a unity of the world that is always deconstructible” (8-9). Indeed, what makes human language possible is a force that (necessarily) operates beyond human intention and control—that is what makes my writing readable in my absence; it is the condition of possibility for any letter and any language in general—so even verbal language (so often assumed to be “proper to man”) is nonhuman in its force and capacity for survival.

All letters are traces, but not all traces are (human) letters, and Bowen’s writing shows a remarkable awareness of this fact; the work insists we apprehend, as the narrator puts it, that “something more than human was at intensity” (97). The world of the novel and the world of love that arrive for Jane are both produced by the strange

conjunction that happens when a text meets a reader and, as Bowen's writing demonstrates, texts are not limited to what might be written in a book, or what might come through the post box; readers are not necessarily human. Here is the novel's opening paragraph:

The sun rose on a landscape still pale with the heat of the day before. There was no haze, but a sort of coppery burnish out of the air lit on flowing fields, rocks, the face of the one house and the cliff of limestone overhanging the river. The river gorge cut deep through the uplands. This light at this hour, so unfamiliar, brought into being a new world—painted, expectant, empty, intense. The month was June, of a summer almost unknown; for this was a country accustomed to late wakenings, to daybreaks humid and overcast. At all times open and great with distance, the land this morning seemed to enlarge again, throwing the mountains back almost out of view in the south of Ireland's amazement at being cloudless. (9)

World is text: the landscape reiterates yesterday's heat just as Bowen's sentence reiterates the title of her previous novel, *The Heat of the Day*. A "coppery burnish" comes, like a ghost, "out of the air," and "lit *on*" (rather than perhaps "lit up") the land: it is a scene of surface and trace. Just as Jane's reading of Guy's letters will bring into being a world of love, here we find that the "light [. . .] brought into being a new world—painted, expectant, empty, intense." Are we to read that "expectant" as expecting/awaiting a reader? Or is the world pregnant—just as the land is "great with distance"—with something to be born in, or borne into, the future? As Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle suggest, in this novel "attention is concentrated not only on the intricate configurations of the past within the present, but also on the sense of what is dedicated, transferred, bequeathed to the future" (104).

The paragraph prefigures the temporal disruption of the letters and thereby demonstrates from the outset that the force that moves them is not reducible to human language. We are faced not with "the light at that hour," but "*this* light at *this* hour," the repeated use of "this" redoubling the specificity of the moment—the way that a trace always arrives *now*, when you read—before the passage zooms out again, to note that "the month *was* June." The past presents itself even as it absents itself: "this hour" appears only to disappear into the distance from which it was sent. The summer is or was "almost unknown," presumably suggesting that the weather has been so extraordinary that it is unlike any that has been known in the past. Bowen's phrasing, however, works to again complicate temporality, as the "almost" suggests a progressivity or movement, a striving toward some future thing (almost there), and then the "unknown" turns itself back to the past: not a summer unknowable, but a summer unknown. To be "almost unknown" is to be not-quite unknown, which is to

say, to be known—but this is a knowledge that is passing toward non-knowledge, as if attempting to cancel itself, or the knower, out. As Maud Ellmann suggests, “Bowen’s prose conspires to efface the human subject” (67); “her syntax—with its double negatives, inversions, and obliquities; its attribution of the passive mood to human agents, and of the active mood to lifeless objects—constantly ambushes our ontological security” (7). Indeed, to say that “this was a country accustomed to late wakenings, to daybreaks humid and overcast” is not only to emphasize the contrasted strangeness of this early, bright, and clear daybreak, but the odd phrase “late wakenings” also invokes the return or re-awakening of that which is no longer living: persons deceased or *late*, suggesting a place “accustomed” to hauntings or revenants, to the return of traces from the past.

“At all times open and great with distance, the land this morning seemed to enlarge again, throwing the mountains back almost out of view in the south of Ireland’s amazement at being cloudless.” We could read in this line precisely the characteristic that Ellmann identifies: an effacement of the human through the animism of the landscape. At the same time, however, there *is* a human subject implicated in the scene. It is *you*, the reader. We find that “the land this morning *seemed* to enlarge again,” and this word—“seemed”—serves to transform the entire passage, turning it from a constative description to a performative summons. You are called into being as the one to which the land seems to enlarge, the passage miming the apostrophe of the letters: “*if only YOU had been here!*” they say, seeming to address *you*, and only you (48, *emph.* Bowen’s). Seeming is always a matter of interpretation, of subjectivity, of how something seems *to* someone: it is a reading effect. This is why a letter can seem to be addressed to more than one person at once: when Lilia hears of Jane’s appropriation of Guy’s letters, she says “but it seems to me, private letters are private letters,” and Antonia says “that’s how it apparently seems to Jane” (42). Just as the world of love brought into being by the letters does not exist without Jane’s reading of them, the world of Bowen’s novel does not exist until it is read; its land only *seems* to enlarge when we cast our eyes and ears to it.

When Jane returns to the place where the letters were written, “she put an ear to the ground, to one of the turfy spaces between bracken, to seem to be hearing returning footsteps as a pulse in her head started to beat down” (48). She does not hear the footsteps, nor even does she “seem to hear” the footsteps, she puts her ear down “*to seem* to be hearing”: to whom does she want to seem to be hearing? One can only assume it is Guy; her action is her response to the call of the letters, which were written *to seem to be* addressing her (“*if only YOU had been here!*”), and it is this reciprocal call and response that brings Guy back to life, as “the pulse in her head” becomes

his “returning footsteps.” It is the pulse in *your* head, reader, that beats out the returning footsteps of everything you read—like, for example, the text called *A World of Love*, or indeed the text you are reading now. This is the strange conjuration or conspiracy that happens in reading, when we answer the call—that comes always from the other—to “make as if” there is a world.

A text is, Derrida writes, “a dead thing that resuscitates each time a breath of living reading, each time the breath of the other or the other breath, each time an intentionality intends it and makes it live again by animating it” (*Beast* 131). One cannot, that is to say, “make as if” there is a world without engaging the other. Guy’s letters—which at first appear to be mere “husks, left to be nothing more by the evaporation from them of passion” (Bowen 34)—need “the breath of the other” (Jane’s reading) in order to “live again.” At the same time, however, the life they live also comes from elsewhere, arrives at Jane as the breath of the other, and so she finds herself irresistibly swayed by their power of affect: the relation in reading is reciprocal.

Returning to the place in which the letters were written, Jane lays “face down among growing bracken” and lets “the deep keen dream come combing through her, keeping her being running like tressy water-weed, like Ophelia’s drowned hair” (47)—opening herself to the letters, as they opened themselves to her. The writing here is remarkable; not only flowing with multiple significations, the words seem to be in aural and semantic correspondence with one other, each replying and replaying previous sounds and meanings. Aurally, the “E”s of “deep,” “keen,” “dream,” “keeping,” and “weed” all resonate at one frequency, while the hard “C”s of “keen,” “come,” and “combing” initiate another. Further, the heavy rhythm of the first four monosyllables (“deep keen dream come”) is countered by the trochees of the four present participles (combing, keeping, being, running). While it has been noted that Bowen’s often convoluted syntax can be seen as miming the folded temporality of the narrative—as Jane Hu notes, the writing “enact[s] grammatically its thematic return of letters and words” (1205)—I am struck by the way that this is also at work in the materiality of the words, through the relays of assonance, alliteration, and rhythm. Later, Jane senses Guy’s voice, “just not here or there, just not now or then but at the same time everywhere and always, in extraneous overrising or underlying notes, tones, syllables, modulations in the now crowded vociferous general talk” (69), and we might also read this as a description of Bowen’s prose, in the way that its “underlying notes, tones, syllables, modulations” constitute another register of sonic correspondence under that of the plot. Such effects redouble the sense that the materiality of words (or letters) belie a force that is more or other than human. As David Wills writes in *Inanimation*,

Every time we read or hear a repetition in language, beginning with an alliteration, assonance, or rhyme, and going all the way to rhetorical emphases and thematic motifs, we receive them as the text's responding to itself and so animating or livening itself, calling and responding to itself as though it were conversing with, singing, or orating to itself. What iterability adds to that idea, transforming it in the process, is the insistence that there is harboured within such repeatability [an] irreducible automatism [. . .], rewriting language's self-response as an *autospontaneity*—language functioning *sponte sua*, of its own accord—which is a mode of the automotricity or autokinesis that we understand to be at work in every life-form. (89, *emph. Wills's*)

Bowen's letters—that is, both the letters that make up her prose and the letters described by her narrative—evinced an automatism beyond or before any notions of authorial control, bespeaking the novel's insistence that something more or other than human is at work in any act of trace-making.

Jane “let[s] the deep keen dream come combing through her, keeping her being running like tressy water-weed, like Ophelia's drowned hair.” Above, I suggested that the words here are not only in correspondence with each other aurally, but also semantically, and I would like to return to that second claim. The polysemy of various words in this line engages different networks of correspondence, so that associations within the line itself work to bring out the multiplicity of meanings, as if the words are already reading each other before they arrive to us. As Sarah Wood writes, “Bowen knows how to uncover the life of words without freezing or piercing them” (111). The verb “combing” is not only to separate or disentangle with a comb—as invoked by the image of Ophelia's hair—but also carries the meaning of “to roll over, as the top of a wave” (*OED*), which is called up by the water imagery. The “running” of Jane's being (her livingness) is paradoxically likened to the dead Ophelia's hair—which is no longer combed (in the first sense just given) but rather combed (in the second sense: overcome) by the waters in which she has drowned. The word “keen” also divides itself between meanings: the “keen dream” can be read as being both “sharp” or “penetrating” (that pierces her being, like the teeth of a comb), and “eager,” “ardent,” “fervid,” as Jane yearns for or feels yearned for by the love of the letters (she “let[s]” the dream come, welcoming its effects). Further, a “keen” is also “an Irish funeral song accompanied with wailing in lamentation for the dead,” coming from the Irish *caoinim*, “I weep, wail, lament” (*OED*). The reference to Ophelia calls up her own keening song for Polonius shortly before she drowns herself:

And will he not come again?  
And will he not come again?

No, no, he is dead,  
 Go to thy death-bed,  
 He never will come again. (*Hamlet* 4.5.190-94)

Ophelia is of course lamenting her father, not her lover, but, as Antonia exclaims later, Jane “should have been [Guy’s] daughter!” (80). Like Polonius, Guy will never “come again,” but traces of him live on, and come combing, keening, through the world brought into being through Jane’s reading. Indeed, Ophelia’s song, and the others she sings, are anonymous folk songs that, in the context of *Hamlet*, come to seem to be about her father: her repetition of them is—as any act of citation must be—already a reading, and their oblique evocation here works to multiply the scenes of reading (hers, the other characters who hear her, us, Bowen, etc.) into the tressy weave of significance that flows through the text.

If we look at the passage leading up to the moment discussed above, we find acts of writing or trace-making clearly not reducible to what happens in or through human language. “Water-mint wet in the dwindling current and meadowsweet creamily frothing the river bank sent up a scented oblivion round her; a hot tang came from the bracken fronds crushed into bedding by her body” (47). Scent is also sent, just as later when the “secretive night-scents” of a hedge “whispered to the senses with their ‘again’” (72). Senses are sent-for, scent-for, and the message being whispered is “again”: the disruptive power of the letters, the “oblivion” or trancelike state that they induce in Jane—“Why are you in this trance?” asks Antonia (26)—their return or coming “again,” is voiced in the fragrances of the river bank and the scented whisper of the hedge. The plants send out traces that—like the letters—invite reading and, given the imminent mention of Ophelia, we might come to ascribe some significance to the “water-mint” and “meadowsweet,” just as she says that rosemary is “for remembrance” and pansies are “for thoughts,” and so on (*Hamlet* 4.5.176-78). Mint is named after the nymph Minthe who, in Greek mythology, became Hades’s lover and was transformed into the herb by the enraged Persephone (Larson 159). Mint, then, would be for a lover who comes between a couple—as Jane insinuates herself between Guy and the person to whom he had originally written. Meadowsweet (also known as “Bride-wort”) was historically strewn at weddings, and so would be for marriage—and Jane seems to be dreaming of consummating her love on the “bedding” of crushed bracken: the “hot tang” it gives out not only sharply pungent, but also perhaps *tangible*, affective, as is onomatopoeically suggested in the twang of the *hot tang*.

Antonia, who has not read Guy’s letters, also finds herself beset with something very like the “inexplicable feeling of being summoned” that Jane experienced earlier, as she feels the traces of the past issue from the landscape (27):

Drawn she was, all but knowing why. Going to stand in the doorway, she was met at once by a windlike rushing towards her out of the dark—her youth and Guy’s from every direction: the obelisk, avenue, wide country, steep woods, river below. No part of the night was not breathless breathing, no part of the quickened stillness not running feet. A call or calling, now nearby, now from behind the skyline, was unlocatable as a corncrake’s in uncut grass. A rising this was, on the part of two who like hundreds seemed to be teeming over the land, carrying all before them. [. . .] All round Montefort there was going forward an entering back again into possession: the two, now one again, were again here—only the water of their moments had run away long since along the way of the river; the root-matted earthiness and the rockiness were as ever their own, and stable. All they had ever touched still now physically held its charge—everything that had been stepped on, scaled up, crept under, brushed against or leaped from now gave out, touched by so much as air, a tingling continuous sweet shock, which the air suffered as though it were half laughing, as was Antonia. (77)

There is again a scene of mutual constitution: Antonia is not only drawn *to*, but drawn *by* the scene: “Drawn she was,” just as Jane has been drawn *into*, and drawn (or traced) *by*, the reading of the letters. The word “drawn” also recalls Bowen’s epigraph, from Thomas Traherne: “There is in us a world of Love to somewhat, though we know not what in the world that should be. . . Do you not feel yourself drawn by the expectation and desire of some Great Thing?” (2). One is constituted by a relation to the future—the “expectation” and “desire” of what is to come. Traces—of the past, of the letters, of Bowen’s novel—always send themselves into a future in which they may or may not be read. The place bodies forth and re-presents the past, “her youth and Guy’s,” seeming to address Antonia just as the letters have addressed Jane. The material support in this case is the enduring landscape: the “root-matted earthiness and the rockiness” that have remained “stable” and have therefore retained the imprints of having been “stepped on, scaled up, crept under, brushed against.” To write is to make a mark, to read is to apprehend it otherwise, as it transforms—and is transformed by—the context into which it is borne. The “call or calling” by which Antonia feels herself addressed is like that of a corncrake’s: not only nonhuman, but “unlocatable,” as it simultaneously collapses and constitutes the distance from which it sounds (“now nearby, now from behind the skyline”), just as the letters do.

The line “a windlike rushing towards her” seems to be missing a main noun, as if it should say “a windlike [*thing*] rushing towards her.” As it is, the sentence antanaclastically transforms itself partway through. At first we read that “she was met at once by a windlike rushing”—“rushing” here substantivized by the syntax—but then the following words serve to turn “rushing” back into a verb (“rushing towards her out of

the dark”). The effect is to render whatever it is that is doing the “rushing” both there and not there, present and absent. A trace appears to disappear; it only becomes a trace “by being able to erase itself” (*Beast* 268). Bowen’s writing is engaged in a perpetual action of simultaneously drawing and withdrawing, leaving traits even as it retreats. Such effects are reinforced by the profusion of double negatives in the next line—“No part of the night was not breathless breathing, no part of the quickened stillness not running feet”—where every element seems to be effacing itself. Is “breathless breathing” being short of breath—gasping, panting—or is it a strange breathing without breath, a breathing that is breath-less, which is to say, lifeless or dead? Likewise, is “quickened stillness” a sped-up motionlessness, or is it a revivification, a resuscitation (the *OED* defines “to quicken” as “to make alive; to revive or resurrect; to animate”) of something dead? Perhaps both the “breathless breathing” and the “quickened stillness” could be thought of in terms of the *survivance* of the trace, which is “neither life nor death pure and simple” (*Beast* 130) or, to return to the line I quoted earlier, “a dead thing that resuscitates each time a breath of living reading [. . .] makes it live again by animating it” (131). Antonia’s reading answers the “call or calling” of the landscape and brings into being the “tingling continuous sweet shock” of her experience.

In one line, the word “again” appears three times, thereby redrawing and withdrawing itself as effectively as Bowen’s double negatives: “All round Montefort there was going forward an entering back again into possession: the two, now one again, were again here.” The looping motions of the sentence enact the spatio-temporal foldings of the novel (going forward, entering back, again, again, again), and the near-palindromic formation that follows (“away long [. . .] along the way”) redoubles the effect. At the same time, however, “again” is never really “again.” The iterability of a trace, Derrida writes, “is all at once a resource, a decisive power, and a catastrophe of repetition or reproduction”; it “repeats the same while displacing or altering it” (*Beast* 75). The past does not come “again,” repeating itself as if it was the first time, but it comes back like a ghost, haunting the possibility of a “present” as such. The phrase “entering back again into possession” first suggests a reclaiming of the house and land which Antonia has relinquished to Jane’s parents, but also suggests the possession of Antonia by the place as she opens herself to the trace of the other through her reading. Finally, the insistence of the present participle throughout the passage—knowing, going, rushing, breathing, running, calling, rising, teeming, carrying, going, entering, tingling, laughing—endows the scene with an ongoing dynamism, a past in perpetual becoming: neither present nor absent but spectrally drawn and withdrawn. Like the letters, the scene is in transit, always arriving otherwise.

In Bowen's writing, the traces that come from the literal letters and the landscape are structured by sending and receipt, by a scene of mutual constitution—what Derrida calls the “passageway of deferred reciprocity between reading and writing” (“Force” 12). Text thereby appears to close the distance from which it is sent. When Guy's letter says “if only YOU had been here!,” Jane answers his call by returning to the place to which he refers: “Seeing how brief all time was it seemed impossible she could be too late: this valley held waiting in its keeping, suspense in the glitter of its air. Here was the hour, still to be lived! [. . .] Between him and her dwindled the years: where indeed was he if not beside her? They could not now miss one another, surely?” (48). Despite the strength of the feeling to which she is subject, the here and now of a letter is divided or lost from the moment of inscription, even if one is in the “same” place and the “same” time. “But here I am. Oh, here I am!” she protests (48, emph. Bowen's). Now is not here, and it never was: the letter says “if only you *had been* here,” already referring to an ir retrievable past. The power of the letters is that she can feel *as if* there is a “here” that is present, stable, shareable: in reading, in animating the trace of the other, she can feel, momentarily, that there is a world.

The “uncrossable difference” between worlds is, Derrida writes, “what language and the address to the other cross lightly” (*Beast* 267). Language acts as if one could traverse the “abyss” of “the vertiginous untranslatable” that always comes between oneself and any other (266). Whether one is speaking from beyond the grave through a long-buried letter or speaking in the same room through the air, or speaking silently through touch or scent, the distance remains non-traversable: even when the fiction of address makes it seem that this is not the case. Because this fiction is both necessary and unavoidable, the injunction is to use it and acknowledge it: to live across, without denying, the distance that divides us from every other. Distance in *A World of Love* is remarkably palpable. Not only does Bowen inscribe a distance between the living characters—Lilia “spoke to [Antonia] from a distance” (18), “remark[s] from a distance” (40), and speaks “remotely” (91); Jane stays “distantly” by a window when replying (128); and Maud “drew herself away and became remote” (39)—but the land too is “great with distance” (9); “the distance swam into view”; beyond the hedges “breathed distances cool with hay” (26); and the landscape “flow[ed] into distances” (132). The effect of all this distancing—along with the alignment of the traces of the letters with other nonhuman and nonverbal traces, as we have seen—is to show that the distance between Jane and Guy is, at bottom, no greater than the distance between Lilia and Antonia, nor between the characters and their “environment.”

The uncrossable distance is what makes the traces that pass between us so necessary, even or especially if they cannot close the distance. The lack of a shared or shareable world, as Naas notes, does not engender some collapse or retreat into solipsism,

but is in fact the very condition for relations with otherness: the “separation or isolation,” the “distance or difference,” between worlds “does not spell the end of every social relation, the dissolution of every [. . .] bond, but is in fact what first *constitutes* it” (52, *emph.* Naas’s); “it is precisely because of this distance, on the basis of this lack of foundation, that ethics is born” (57). One cannot make as if there is a world, that is to say, without addressing oneself to an other.

Derrida writes that “however little I know about what the alterity of the other or the others means, I have to have presupposed that the other, the others, are precisely those who always might die after me, survive me, and have at their disposal what remains of me, my remains. The others—what is that? [. . .] the other is what always might, one day, do something with me and my remains [. . .]. That’s what is meant, has always been meant, by ‘other’” (*Beast* 126-27). These remains are not only the corpse or ashes of a body, but also include bodies of writing, traces in a general sense, the survival of which always depends upon these others. When I write or address myself to another, it remains to them to read. The reader is, then, not only, as Wills writes, “the joint author of the book” (“Post/Card” 34), but is in fact the one who has sovereign power over the text, the one with whom the future of the text—if there is to be any—remains.

In *A World of Love*, there is a stone obelisk that stands by the house, and “cast towards Montefort its long shadow” (9). Jane’s father explains that it was put up by some previous inhabitant, “in memory of himself,” whose name, however, he cannot recall (137). The base “bore no inscription and had been polished only by rubbing cattle, whose hoofs had left a bald-trodden circle in the grass” (10). The absence of inscription seems to render the man’s attempt to preserve his own memory a failure—“then he *is* forgotten!” as Lilia exclaims (137, *emph.* Bowen’s)—a suggestion further underlined by the contrasting endurance of the cows’ marks: the polishing of the stone, and the circle in the grass. The obelisk stands not “in memory of himself,” but in memory of *itself*, and the man who erected it has no sway over its in/significance. His address to the other—“Remember me!” the obelisk seems to say, a stony ventriloquism of the ghost of Hamlet’s father—does not arrive. As Claire Colebrook writes, “the inscription of a text or monument allows it to continue into a future and open up further senses, as yet unimagined, but that same inscriptive process will also yield a senselessness or dead letter” (35). Or as Lilia remarks of Guy’s letters: “What he’s saying here well might not make sense to me any longer, whether it *was* to me or to who knows else” (101, *emph.* Bowen’s).

Colebrook’s article from which I just quoted is concerned with the new form of human legibility we are calling the Anthropocene, a time which explicitly realizes the nonhuman and nonliving force of traces, as well as making starkly visible the scene of

response and responsibility within which we are implicated. Like the characters in *A World of Love*, we too are “creatures of an impossible time, breathing in wronged air—air either too empty or too full” (45), as the atmosphere of our planet becomes an unconscious repository for the traces of the past. Yet as these traces return, they send out “a call or calling”—a letter from beyond the human—that insists upon a response. Just as the Anthropocene marks the stratification or becoming-legible of the human, it also opens onto a possible future in which such traces might remain unread or unreadable. As readers of the Anthropocene we find ourselves altered by a past that comes back differently: what were once the marks of “progress” or “development”—the footprints or imprints of air travel, industry, increasing human populations, etc.—return meaning something different, signifying something like a deconstruction of anthropocentrism as human extinction enters the horizon of possibility.

While I am not suggesting that *A World of Love* is “about” climate change or the Anthropocene, its attention to the nonhuman and nonliving play of traces, its concern with death and survival, and its apprehension of reading as an altering force all seem to resonate differently today. In an essay on Joseph Conrad’s “Typhoon,” Nicholas Royle writes of the “*futurological power*” of a text, “its propensity to come back (precisely in the manner of a *revenant*), [. . .] its capacity to cast light on what comes later, on what ostensibly post-dates the work,” so that it “carries its own future in itself” (43, emph. Royle’s). This strange power is also at work in Bowen’s text. The way that *A World of Love* arrives in our hands today, *othering itself* and the context into which it is born, is already staged within the narrative through the arrival of Guy’s letters to Jane, and the arrivals of the various nonhuman traces that are written and read in the text.

The fact that the letters in Bowen’s text are love letters makes their affective power all the more potent. Love opens to alterity, to the “deep keen dream” that “comes combing through” the self. As Wills writes, “we cannot remain ourselves and be in love, or we cannot be ourselves and remain in love” (*Inanimation* 212-13). Love is perhaps the point at which we agree to “make as if” there is a world, even as we recognize the distance remains non-traversable. Lyndsey Stonebridge suggests that “the sensuality of [Bowen’s] late writing becomes fully, and finally, poignant” when read as inscribing “an ethics of love” (130)—an ethics which, as I have shown, depends upon an address and response to the other. If we are to read the traces that voice themselves in the Anthropocene—for while these traces may have been made by humans, their force operates beyond human intentionality and control—the injunction of *A World of Love*, as Derrida’s is in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, would be to read them as if one was reading a love letter, to open to the otherness of the nonhuman, to “make as if” there is a world and therefore to feel and respond to the summons made upon us. For we risk, otherwise, becoming as unreadable as an obelisk.

## NOTE

1/ See Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle; Maud Ellmann; and Jane Hu.

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JEMMA DEER has recently completed her PhD on radical animism at the University of Sussex. Her work can also be found in the December 2016 issue of the *Oxford Literary Review*.