

"For here the two chains of intertwined assonance ('niche, thin, until, his, him' spliced into 'narrow, bones, disclose') only point up a surprising rhyme as it were in sense as well as in sound; 'disclose,' the one word in the poem whose first syllable chimes with the 'his' sequence as its second does with the 'bones,' has a meaning that is itself 'disclosed' (unclosed, opened up) as the poem unfolds or flowers towards it. And of course it is all true; the meaning

the promise that Blake made." (We are also divulging that we aren't serious in our cherishing of Blake.)

**I**N ITS COMBINATION OF INTENT reading (right in to letter-sounds), apt historical adduction, and willingness to meet a quirky author on his own terms, that essay (by an English-born Gentile) is a model of how to deal with something odd but rewarding; and it is totally undistracted by

**Only an Englishman who came here in mid-life could assess the naiveté of our literary opinion, and remind us that a New York Jewish poet can derive from Blake.**

of a word is disclosed to us as we narrow it down. And yet of a word like 'Jewishness,' and of the condition which that word denotes, it is true with a literalness which gives the truth a special intensity."

Not only is this masterly in its specification both of what the poem holds and of how its sounds bind it together, it points back in the essay, and forward: back to strictures on the fashionable or Portnoy literary Jewishness which helps keep Menashe's seriousness unnoticeable, and forward to a surprising adduction of Blake, which saves Menashe from the look of mere floating originality:

"The whole theme of the mystic and yet quite literal significance of the Jewish physiognomy depends for instance on a central Blakean tenet, conveyed up by Blake in aphorism: 'The body is that part of the soul perceived by the five senses.' To a Jewish child who knew his Scriptures only in their English version, Blake's short poems were not merely the logical next step but also the talisman and guarantee that the Jewish experience of exile had been, and could be again, naturalized into English."

And then to the key sentence, the moral of the essay: "If we continue to ignore Menashe, or allow him only the abstracted nod that we give to an unclassifiable oddity, we are in effect saying that he doesn't deserve to profit by

anxious looks round to make sure that at least some authorities are beaming approval.

Not that Davie has ever been unaware of what the gurus of the moment approve, and there've been times when he's had to trim his utterances carefully in order to safeguard his freedom to utter anything more. No one who made his start in England (where men still get "damned for one intelligent remark") can escape certain habits of accommodation, not unconnected perhaps with the fact that the *New Statesman* contributions which make up some 27 percent of Davie's bibliography account for only three of the pieces collected here.

Still, only one accustomed to gauging the winds every morning could have earned the right he often exercises, to round on the insularity these winds define, the inability to read not just the likes of Menashe but Olson, Dorn, Creeley, Pound himself, yes, even Eliot himself, who in insular innocence of the Symbolist heritage the English persist in reading as though he were a writer of narrative who left things out (see "Pound and Eliot: A Distinction").

And only an Englishman who came to this continent in mid-life (Davie moved to Stanford after teaching in Dublin, Cambridge, and Essex, and he is just about to move on to Vanderbilt) could assess the historical naiveté of American literary opinion, and remind

it that a New York Jewish poet can derive from Blake. He's too open to the new, too aware of his first people's insularity, to patronize Americans; it was not to take up the white man's burden that he expatriated himself. But he'll not forget, either, where much of the history of the language we speak was made.

The terminal essay, "English and American in *Briggflatts*," in addressing itself to the international theme as Davie precisely discerns it, offers a few sentences that can be turned to define his best critical qualities. In the Englishman Basil Bunting, as in the Americans George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky, he finds "a conviction that is wholesome, which the English reader needs to hear about even more than the American does: the conviction that a poem is a transaction between the poet and his subject more than it is a transaction between the poet and his readers."

So, ultimately, is the critical essay, alert to get something right. If unlike the poem it isn't really conceivable without readers whom it can address, still its effort is not to cater to their shortcomings but to afford them opportunities of raising their perceptions to the pitch of its author's, which on rare occasions, such as this book gathers, can be a high pitch indeed. □

**ELIZABETH BOWEN,**  
**A BIOGRAPHY, by Victoria**  
**Glendinning. Alfred A. Knopf,**  
**331 pp., \$12.50.**

## *A lady's life*

WILLIAM ABRAHAMS

**A**FTER THE DEATH OF A famous, much-admired writer, a process of decline will often ensue: the books go out of print; the reputation goes into a slump; and the name itself, which only a short time before had been trailing clouds of glory, is lost in a cloud of obscurity. This dismal fate is not uncommon, though there are happy exceptions. W. H. Auden, for example, who died in 1973, remains as celebrated as ever. But Eliz-

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abeth Bowen, that gifted Anglo-Irish novelist and short story writer who also died in 1973, already seems halfway to being forgotten. Only one of her 28 books is still in print, and she makes hardly a dent on the contemporary literary consciousness. Conceivably a Bowen revival may occur; meanwhile, the present state of her reputation is sufficient to explain the oddly combative tone with which Victoria Glendinning opens her authorized biography.

"Why a life of Elizabeth Bowen?" she asks, and goes on to answer in the brisk manner of a reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* (which in fact she is, and she is best-known there for her short, sharp reviews of fiction). "At this close remove," Glendinning admits, "her position is a little obscured by the established reputations of writers who precede her and by the impact of contemporary writing. But she is a major writer; her name should appear in any responsible list of the ten most important fiction writers in English on this side of the Atlantic in this century."

Well, this is to claim a great deal. I myself have been an admirer of Elizabeth Bowen's fiction for many years; even so, after reading that last assertive sentence, I jotted down in an irresponsible way a list of nine "important" fiction writers who fulfill Glendinning's qualifications (leaving out writers still alive). I came up with Henry James (the three late great novels belong to this century), Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Evelyn Waugh, and George Orwell. Now, it is just possible that the tenth niche *might* be filled by Elizabeth Bowen, rather than by Arnold Bennett or Aldous Huxley or Wyndham Lewis or Ivy Compton Burnett or Kipling or Katharine Mansfield, and if Glendinning had chosen to argue that case, the result might have been a valuable rather than a merely agreeable achievement.

The true answer to the question "Why a life . . . ?" is that Elizabeth Bowen was a writer, first, foremost, and always. Being a writer was the paramount and obsessive thing in her life, and it mattered more to her (and should have mattered more to her biographer) than the social activities that gauzed over the obsession. Her books were of more moment to her (and certainly to us) than, say, the dinner parties and house parties at which she was so deft a hostess, and which are chronicled here with tiring vivacity. Somehow

Glendinning has failed to establish her priorities: everything in her subject's life seems to be of equal importance to her. This is not to say that she has assembled a massive post-Strachey tome. When details are easily at hand, she includes them; the effort of extended research clearly does not appeal to her. She glides along briskly, noticing rather than examining things, and the story of a life extending from 1899 to 1973 is told in 301 pages.

cially passionate, which is not to say that they are not, in the ordinary course of events, consummated. So it would seem here. But nine years pass, and on page 106, we arrive at 1933—Glendinning maintains a brisk pace—when, for the first time, "Elizabeth fell in love. However great the strength and nature of the bond that united Elizabeth and Alan, it was not primarily a physical one. The man she fell in love with was brilliant, highly sexed, introspective,

***Incuriosity is no virtue in a biographer. The professional life, at least, must be probed—especially with a writer as deeply and absorbedly professional as Bowen was.***

Elizabeth Bowen's main subject would always be the relations between women and men. One would expect, quite properly, that in a story of her life those relations would be studied with very close attention, not only for their interest in themselves, but for the light they might shed on her fiction. But Glendinning will not look deeply. The depths are dangerous. In her account of Elizabeth's long, seemingly happy, and certainly quite odd marriage to Alan Cameron, she is elusive, chary of detail. Fearful of telling too much, she tells too little. Yet the importance of the marriage for an understanding of what Bowen wrote, and indeed, of why she lived as she did, surely can't be shrugged aside in a few elegant pages.

Elizabeth was 24 and Alan, a minor civil servant who had been badly wounded during the First World War, was 30 when they married in 1923. "Her clothes sense was very astray . . . and he took her in hand. . . . She had very long feet and Alan put her into sensible, expensive shoes bought at Fortnum's; in these and her tweeds he took her for long country walks." There is more of this sort of thing to establish the companionability of the pair. Then, on page 59, Glendinning writes, "Whether she was passionately in love with him when they married is doubtful." There is nothing more on that score; still, one is free to conclude that, after all, many marriages are not espe-

susceptible—much too introspective and susceptible to be classed as a cad—and eight years younger than herself. . . . By the time the friendship developed into something more, he was already engaged to be married to someone else."

A love affair is not to be wondered at; what is surprising in the account given here is the disclosure that Elizabeth, after nine years of marriage, was still a virgin: "Her lover believed—as he told his wife—that he had taken Elizabeth's virginity." This is surprising in itself, and it is exceedingly curious in terms of Elizabeth's development as a writer and as a woman. Yet Glendinning remains unruffled and lacking in curiosity. The subject is handled with sugar tongs, so to speak—as is the subject of Elizabeth's lesbian attachments—and then ever so discreetly dropped.

**I**NCURIOSITY, I FEAR, IS NO virtue in a biographer. And while it may be argued that in sexual matters allusion is better than directness, surely in the life of a writer, the *professional* side ought to be paid some attention—especially with a writer who was deeply and absorbedly professional. But details about the publishing of books, about reviews, about editorial advice—all that comes under the head of the professional side—are brushed in very lightly. For example, we are told

that Cyril Connolly admired Bowen's writing greatly—in a rather abstract sort of way: "Marvellous writer, Elizabeth . . . never could finish one of her books." This is pretty devastating, one would think, but it doesn't faze Glendinning, who adds in an ingenuous parenthesis, "He must, however, have finished at least one—her first novel, *The Hotel*, was the subject of his first-ever novel review for the *New Statesman*." But what did Connolly say in that review? Did Glendinning have the curiosity to look it up? In any case, we are not given a clue. And if Elizabeth and Cyril admired each other "enormously," wasn't it odd that Connolly, perhaps the most influential reviewer in England, never again reviewed a book of hers? Why didn't he, and how did Elizabeth feel about it?

Curiosity, no doubt, can be characterized as a form of bad manners: it is not proper or polite to ask too many questions. Elizabeth Bowen, we are told, was "reared in a precarious world in which grace, charm, courtesy, and respect for tradition were valued. She never reneged on these personal values. . . ." Yes, and again, yes, and all honor to her for the splendid, civilized woman that she was. But she was also a writer, a dedicated novelist, an artist, "that queer monster, the artist" in whom a daemon raged, must rage, however skillfully concealed under a façade of good manners. Glendinning concludes her Foreword with a beautiful stanza from Yeats's "A Prayer for my Daughter," with its classic lines,

*How but in custom and ceremony  
Are innocence and beauty born?*

But Yeats also believed in the mask, and he knew what good manners might conceal; he did not pray that his daughter should become a novelist, one who had to deal with the complexities and betrayals of contemporary life. The biographer of an artist does better, I think, to remember Louise Bogan's "Several Voices out of a Cloud":

*Come, drunks and drug-takers;  
come, perverts unnerved;  
Receive the laurel, given, though late,  
on merit; to whom and  
wherever deserved.*

*Parochial punks, trimmers, nice people,  
joiners, true-blue,  
Get the hell out of the way of  
the laurel. It is deathless  
And it isn't for you.*

**PLANET OF EXILE, by Ursula K. Le Guin. Harper and Row, 153 pp., \$7.95.**

**CITY OF ILLUSIONS, by Ursula K. Le Guin. Harper and Row, 208 pp., \$8.95.**

## New world for women

NOEL PERRIN

SCIENCE FICTION USED TO be as exclusively a male preserve as the City Club of Atlanta or the U.S. Senate, with this difference: even the most militant feminists had no wish to be part of science fiction. As recently as four years ago, a science fiction course I taught at Dartmouth had 164 students, of which 152 were men and 12 were women. In most science fiction—although perhaps not in the books we read in that course—women tended to figure mostly as sex objects, a

**Her great strength is the tendency to understand and to like any hif—“highly intelligent life form”—whatsoever.**

role complicated in the illustrations by the fact that their breasts had to show through space suits.

All this is changing with remarkable speed. In the current literature, there are now no roles in which women are not cast. There is nothing surprising about finding in a recent novella like Gene Wolfe's "Silhouette" that the captain of the space ship is a woman (and one of the male officers is her sex object). Nor is Wolfe pulling a mere

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switcheroo. He's simply imagining that kind of future.

In the world of s-f publishing, the most important new figure to arise in recent years is a woman: Judy del Rey of Ballantine Books. At least according to rumor, del Rey has more to do with the making of science fiction best sellers than anyone else in publishing. And among science fiction authors, the two most interesting to reach maturity in the seventies are Ursula Le Guin and the woman who writes under the name of James Tiptree, Jr. (her real name is said to be Alice Sheldon).

Tiptree and Le Guin are both major talents. Both can do what only a few male s-f authors have managed so far—they can create a dense human situation. And they can also do what all successful s-f writers have done since the beginning—what in fact almost defines the field—they can imagine more profoundly than most of us what kind of world (or universe) may result from the continuing interaction of human beings and technology.

Tiptree is the more limited of the two. In sheer narrative art, she is anybody's equal—at least at her best, as in the novella called "A Momentary Taste of Being." But her imagination circles around only two foci: sex in its transgalactic forms, and the idea of a world without men. (Her long story, "Houston, Houston, Do You Read Me?," though slightly flawed in the telling, is the most powerful imagining of an all-female future world I have ever seen.)

But Le Guin has the power without the obsession. She is one of that rarest of human types: a fantasizer who is also totally sane. She also can imagine a world without men, and she does so in her best-known novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. But her planet of Gethen is equally a world without women—everybody is both male and female—and the book manages to illuminate the meaning of each sex.

Le Guin's emergence as a central figure in s-f is currently being marked by the republication of her early work in findable (and reviewable) form. *Planet of Exile* came out as an Ace paperback in 1966. *City of Illusions* followed in 1967, also by Ace. Don't try to find either in the *Cumulative Book Index*; what the editors call "cheap paperback books"—which means the whole of early s-f—are excluded. And don't think that by consulting the *Book Review Digest* you can find out how they were received, either. "It is not possible to include reviews of paperback