Robert Caserio: [00:00:00] Unseen rays of night pinpointed the nightingale in the concentrated and somehow burning blackness of its unknown tree. It sang into incredulity like the first nightingale in Eden. Note after note from its throat stripped everything else to silence. There was nothing but the absolute of its song.

It sang from a planet beyond experience, drawing out longings, sending them back again, frozen, piercing, not again to be born.

Jim Phelan: This is Jim Phelan, Director of Project Narrative at The Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative podcast. In a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me. And today, I'll be talking with Robert Caserio, who has selected Elizabeth [00:01:00] Bowen's \_I Hear You Say So\_, published originally in 1945 and included in the volume of Bowen's Collected Stories. Robert Caserio is Professor Emeritus of English, Comparative Studies, and Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies at Penn State University. As his appointment in three departments indicates, Robert has multiple areas of expertise, but perhaps most relevant for today's episode of the podcast are his deep knowledge of twentieth century literature and of narrative theory.

His 1999 book, \_The Novel in England, 1900 to 1950: History and Theory\_, was awarded the Perkins Prize by the International Society for the Study of Narrative, given annually for the best book in narrative studies. More recently, Robert has published the Cambridge Introduction to British Fiction, 1900 1950, that appeared in 2019, and he has edited the Cambridge Introduction to the 20th [00:02:00] Century English Novel, 2009, and co edited the Cambridge History of the British Novel, which was originally published in 2012 and reissued in 2020.

Robert, it's a pleasure to welcome you to the podcast.

Robert Caserio: Thank you, Jim. It's a great pleasure to talk with you and to share this story with you and listeners.

Jim Phelan: Yes, terrific. Is there anything you'd like to say about the story before we begin? Things you'd like listeners to pay attention to as you read it?

Robert Caserio: Well, I'd like them to hear one sentence from Bowen. Here's what she says.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Robert Caserio: &quot;The work of imagination causes a long, reflective halt in the reader's faculties.&quot;

Jim Phelan: Okay. Excellent. That's a good note on which to begin. So, here's Robert Caserio reading Elizabeth Bowen's \_I Hear You Say So\_.

Robert Caserio: A week after VE Day, the Nightingale came to London,

[00:03:00] unnoticed until it began to sing. It pitched itself in a tree in a northwest park. Until the first notes were heard, the warm night had been remarkably still. The air was full of lassitude after the holiday and of emanations of the peace, which, like any new experience, it was now about half past 10, the rose garden in the center of the park had been closed and locked, leaving the first roses to smolder out unseen as dark fell the whistle had sounded from the boathouse and the last doors had stopped splashing upon the lake.

The water birds one by one we're drawing in to settle among the dock leaves around the islands. The water, which had dulled as the sky faded, now began to shed as though it were phosphorescent, ghostly light of its own. From all around it came the smell [00:04:00] of trodden, exhausted grass. After sunset, the sky held for so long an intense liquid and glass like whiteness that people began to wonder if, after all, this might be going to be a polar night.

Just now, no miracle seemed impossible. The air did darken, but it remained transparent. Couples walking together or standing on the bridges never quite ceased to discern one another's features or the white reflections from the north in one another's eyes. Those lying down, however, became blotted into the monotone of the grass.

In streets outside the park and here and there along the terraces round it, there still hung victory flags. Householders were unwilling to take them in, and passers by were unwilling to see them go. This tense and [00:05:00] aimless, tired and tender evening loved the directive of the remaining flags, whose colors one gradually could not see.

Stripes, bunting showed with lymphatic softness against the evening hardened faces of the buildings. But the flags that were stretched on lines or hung out on poles stirred now and then over the windless perspectives of the streets, as though their own existences gave out breath. Best of all, outside a gate of the park, one flag was dipped back at a corner into its own colors by being caught in the ray from a lighted window.

High up, low down, the fearlessly lit up windows were like exclamations. Many stood wide open. Inside their tawny squares, the rooms to be seen into [00:06:00] were sublimated. Not an object inside them appeared Jim Crack or trivial, standing up with stereoscopic sharpness in this intensified element of life. The knobbed or fluted stem of a standard lamp, the bust like curves of a settee, the couples of photographs hung level, the fidgeting of a cockatoo up and down its perch, the balance of vases on brackets and pyramids of mock fruit in bowls, all seemed miraculous, after all that had happened.

In few of the rooms, oddly, were any inhabitants to be seen. Possibly, they were standing out in the street, looking in, wonderstruck, at their own windows. Rooms, in their mood tonight, seemed to have been illuminated in their own honor. Each of these theaters was its own drama. A moment [00:07:00] perpetuated an integration of all these living, unliving objects in surviving and shining and being seen. Through the windows, standing lamps and hanging bowls overflowed, spilling hot light into the warm dark.

The hulks of buildings of terraces that were still nailed up, blind, uninhabitable, and hollow were negatory. The unconscious people could have stumbled against them. They seem to belong to another time. Just inside the park, three poplars blasted the summer before by a flying bomb, stretched the uncertain leaves they had put out this year towards those of the showering unhurt trees.

And away down the lake lay one ruined island. These few scars, begging to be forgotten, had no part in the night. The only wireless that had been [00:08:00] turned on had been turned off inside an open window a minute or two before the nightingale began singing. One was not to know this. Violet, hearing the first notes, naturally said, Listen, they got a nightingale on the wireless.

On the grass slope some way up from the lake, she was lying beside her friend, one arm stretched out, and the back of her hand reposing against his forehead. He rolled round his head to listen. She raised her hand, but then let it drop back. That's not the wireless, he said. That comes out of the trees.

There's nothing, only the park all the way up there. After a minute, he said, That must be a thrush. The back of her hand was the only sensitive part left. In it, she could feel the now cooler stickiness of his forehead. They now lay a little apart, completely relaxed, knit [00:09:00] into a double crucified pattern by her arm.

His khaki, and from her crushed dress, the last drop of the scent he had sent from France, mingled with the exhalations out of the grass and syringa and a flower the other side of the path. The cigarette carton was stuck in a tuft of grass between their two bodies. She stared up into the particles, neither light nor dark, that made up the air, that made up the sky, and said, Why must it be a thrush?

Well, think, how could it be a nightingale, really? They listened. On paths that cross the different planes of the night were footsteps, army boots, summer shoes, and the dry grass back from their ears creaked as people came treading near them. Up through the pores of the ground came the vibrations of London and muffled pulse drumming [00:10:00] ringed the horizons round. Long whispers, exclamations, and laughter ran like waves towards them, then sifted back. It's flown away anyway, he said. &quot;Never mind.&quot; She said, Honey, if you and me heard a nightingale. You and me don't look for that sort of thing. It may have been all very well for them in the penst.

Still, there must still be nightingales, or they couldn't have put one onto the wireless. I didn't say they died out. I said they don't come round. Why should they? They can't sell us anything. She clenched her hand, making her knuckles dig into his forehead bone, and said, Oh, well, leave it. Well, can you wonder?

Oh, right, but look what's happened now. The war's over, they say. Well, it's over. [00:11:00] Look at last week. Half. Well, that's half the difference again. You begin to wonder. I don't say I know how I feel, but I seem to know how I could. I can't help thinking. Suppose the world was made for happiness after all. Hark, he said.

Hush, there it goes again. Unseen rays of night pinpointed the nightingale in the concentrated and somehow burning blackness of its unknown tree. It sang into incredulity like the first nightingale in Eden. Note after note from its throat stripped everything else to silence. There was nothing but the absolute of its song.

It sang from a planet beyond experience, drawing out longings, sending them back again, [00:12:00] frozen, piercing, not again to be born. Violet withdrew her hand from Fred's forehead. And for consolation, laid it against her own. He was right, she thought. We're not made for this. We can't take it. He felt for the carton against her thigh, pulling a cigarette out, that it rolled over onto his elbows, pressing his midriff against the ground.

Staring haggardly, he saw syringa blossoms printed on the trails of the bush. In the lake, a cigarette sputtered. It had been cast on the water, as though at a given signal, by a man who had been standing on the curb of the lake, glancing this way, that way, over his shoulders. This obsessed looking, aimless man, always seemed to be putting in time.

On tenterhooks, waiting for a clock to strike. Habitually, he patrolled the park like a keeper once dark fell. [00:13:00] His movements gave rise to the idea that there was something or somebody hidden there. Head down, he now started towards the bridge in a dodging hurry. He could not outdistance the throbs of the nightingale.

From the bridge, a family party, unequal skyline of figures, was staring down the lake. Three elbows rested on the high studded bridge rail, above two heads of children out late, clamoring on the trellis. Night loosely welded the party, whose inclination towards the singing end of the lake sent their behinds sticking out some way.

The boy, gripping the trellis, swinging out like a monkey, stared at the man dodging past the row of behinds and observed the light from a window flickering stealthily in his glasses. I'm mum, he said, jugging her elbow. I seen a burglar. She was pushing her pompadour [00:14:00] back with her other hand, saying to her sister, Who would have thought it, really?

Really, you'd think it knew, the sister's husband said. They don't know the difference. Ever so many of them we had out in France in the last war sang the guns down. One we had in the cops. It kept us awake three nights. Great fat bird by the sound, where we fed up. Where was the corpse then, Oswald? Cops, Kathleen.

Out there in no man's land. Ah, well. Hi, Mom. Stop pulling. Don't be so awkward. Listen. Why? Uncle O's been telling you, that's a nightingale. The boy began to whimper, but I thought the war was over. The mother, with jocular fondness like a she bears, pushed the boy's cap forward over his [00:15:00] face, explaining meantime to her sister Kathleen, He's disappointed he didn't see the floodlights.

She attended to a few more notes, then said, Oh, it keeps it up. Funny in London, when you come to think. Nothing, Kathleen said, seems funny to me now. Not after everything we've been through, it's all one to me. What I hear now, I tell you frankly, provided it isn't a sirene. I've heard lions roar off of this bridge, said Uncle Oswald.

I'd soonest a sireen, said the little girl, Pertly ducking and weaving under their elbows. She started imitating the nightingale, And the party, somewhat relieved, laughed, And laughing, trooped off the bridge Towards the gateless gate of the park. The boy's burglar man had not, after all, Left the range of song.

He stood staring about [00:16:00] him, Trying to calculate its effect on other people. At this side, benches were spaced out, facing the lake across a wide asphalt walk. Each bench was extinguished into darkness by having the canopy of a tree. It could here and there be seen and only sensed that not a bench was empty.

And the physical intensity of each silence was disturbing to the neurotic man. Ever since railings had been taken away, he had not ceased to brood on what must be the consequences, nor had he ceased frequenting the night parks. Now a big dog, like a bad spirit, ran past him and all along the seats, head down in silhouette against the gray of the lake.

All the time the nightingale paused and sang. Now a car, a plow of powerful light, swept round the road that swept round the park. [00:17:00] The headlamps floodlit the seats. On the first two, two middle aged women in whitish coats sat rigid, innocent, leaves flamed for the instant above their heads. They instinctively put up their hands to their hollowed faces until the car had gone.

That was too much, I'm afraid, said one to the other. Yes, that's all. It has certainly flown away. Wait, it has stopped before. To listen. They say they listen. Listen? A nightingale listen? How curious! Is it known what they expect to hear? I have no idea, Naomi. Disappointing for them to listen, perhaps, said Naomi.

But why not? Why should a nightingale get off scot free after everything it is able to do to us? [00:18:00] Poor bird. It's our fault. It's ourselves we hear. Why, Mary? Naomi? Nothing. Only you spoke in such a curious voice. Has there been anything you have never told me? No, why, is there anything you've never told me?

Nothing, I'm glad to say. Yes, said Mary doubtfully. Apparently, we have nothing to regret. Unless we begin to regret that we have nothing. Is that what you mean by what nightingales do to us? The nightingale, sounding near, trickled note by note up into song again. Now the fountain was balancing. Jug, jug, jug, jug, jug, it's getting cold, said Naomi, leaning forward, rewrapping her pale [00:19:00] coat across her knees.

How about returning home? Yes, how about going in? As they got up, Naomi observed in her firmest voice. Apart from anything, it's too soon, much too soon, after a war like this, even victories nearly been too much. There ought not to have been a nightingale in the same week. The important thing is that people should go carefully.

They'd much better not feel at all till they feel normal. The first thing must be to get everything organized. How I agree, said Mary, looking back at the lake. But can people live? Without something they cannot have, not all the lighted windows were now empty. Figures of listeners darkened them. Possibly they could not all hear.

Some had been merely drawn to the windows by the [00:20:00] sensation of something going on. At intervals, late night traffic in and out of London, changing gear at the traffic lights, drowned everything. A counter movement of people who did not know anything about the nightingale making their way home northwards around the park from the pubs and cinemas with linked arms whistling and laughing occurred in gushes.

These annoyed those who had come out to listen. Onto the balconies of the ornate houses farther up the park, most of which were still shut up, cars passing swung light over the chipped stucco columns, and made slow lightning in the mirrors of the long forsaken drawing rooms behind the balconies, tormenting memories of blue velvet nights.

Our ideas of Vienna began to crowd back. From one balcony, an old gentleman, keenly verifying the Nightingale after a few notes, bolted indoors to write the [00:21:00] letter that should be first with the times. In the top front room of one of these grander houses, a young woman woke to find herself standing in the middle of a carpet.

She often woke like this and was not surprised. But she asked herself to what room the carpet belonged this time. Here were two windows, outside which the sky was not quite dark. She failed to establish the position of the bed she had left while she was asleep. It might be anywhere. She was afraid to move until she was quite awake.

And as it always did, the hope flashed through her mind that the whole last year might be a dream. And that someone else lay breathing here in this room, having come back or else never gone away. But in that case, she would not have left their bed. The [00:22:00] telegram had sent her back again to walking in her sleep.

She was called Ursula. So when she was five or six, someone gave her the picture of Saint Ursula's dream, which set up the trouble of having to be the angel at the foot of her own bed. Until she outgrew that. And forgot that. And that was no longer even a funny story. Then, the night after she got the telegram, she found herself being the angel rather than be St.

Ursula. Her fear was that they would come in and find her before she woke up and lead her back to St. Ursula's narrow form. So this made her fugitive, never staying long under any kind of roof, always wanting to be in a hotel. or apartment house where she was no one's business. Lights traveled across [00:23:00] the ceiling and through her brain.

Tonight, she was in Roland's grandmother's house. A young widow staying with an old widow. An evening of trying to comfort the old woman who had come back to London and was brokenhearted at everything outside the reopened windows of her house. The beautiful spearheaded railings of the park were gone.

Every place was invaded and desecrated. Roland had left no child in Ursula's body. I shall be glad to go, said the old woman. Look at the shameless people rolling on the grass. Is it for this we have given Roland? Tomorrow, Ursula would be able to say, Grandmother, you never told me you had a nightingale in your park.

It must have been singing always. Roland slept in this room when he was a boy. Nothing in this room is impossible. [00:24:00] As a very young man, he stayed here to go to dances. He tied his white tie in front of the mirror. I am now seeing between two windows. Those were May nights, Ursula felt, in the presence of someone she had not met yet.

You have not known me, he said in the old days. Their short marriage was part, for him, of savage, tiring war. Strain, noisiness, hurry, passion, wondering where he was going to be next. It seemed to be all nights and no days. All they had hoped of the future had been really a magic recapturing of the past, the magic dilatory past they had not had, their really irreparable loss.

It was in this young room, probably. that he had been [00:25:00] himself. Standing in the middle of Roland's room, she listened to the nightingale with profound happiness. It had awoken her. Soon, its last note dropped. To her disappointment, it sang, or she heard it singing, no more that night. Disjected lines of poetry, invocations, came flooding into her mind.

I cannot see what flowers At my feet. She looked down at the carpet, wondering if a secret were in its pattern. Naturally it was too dark to see.

Jim Phelan: Okay, thank you Robert. I think there's a lot to try to unpack here, but maybe we can start with some of the ways this, you know, we might think about this as an ordinary post World War II [00:26:00] story, the re animation of life, and so on, and then maybe some of the ways in which it's clearly not such an ordinary story.

Robert Caserio: I was imagining a response that would say, well, the narrative begins with an enormous change from peace to promote a piece and then secondarily, the change, the event of change is the nightingales arriving in this London Park.

And then we get a cross section of responses from the population, and they're sad, they're happy. It's a touching story, but aren't there more important things here? It's 1945, it's the labor victory, it's the beginning of beverages, welfare state being constructed.

Let's move on to something more important, shouldn't we? Now that's, that's my imagination of a casual response.

Jim Phelan: Okay, yeah.

Robert Caserio: But not of a response that I think we're being asked to have, which is predicated on a constant [00:27:00] halting, as Browen would say, of the reader's faculties.

I'm stunned by the way in which this story is constantly inhibiting one's sense of narrative.

It's an inhibition that provokes suspense.

Jim Phelan: Right. I mean, we start with the arrival of the nightingale, but then we don't sort of pursue that, right? I mean, we have a couple of pages of exposition, of description, of all that, right? So we're, wait, let's get back to the nightingale.

Robert Caserio: Yes, let's get back to the nightingale. And that description, that interjection in effect the nightingale came back, but we're not going to get back to it.

We're going to be halted for two pages at least of descriptive atmospheres of objects that are both materially dead and alive, and that's only one of the halting places or spaces for a reader that is in this story.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, [00:28:00] right. And we announce that we're in the park, but then the narrator leaves the park and describes the empty rooms and the flags and those kinds of things before we get back to the park.

Robert Caserio: Yeah, what are we supposed to be reflecting on when we get the detail of the flag being you know, involved in its own colors and so on?

There are so many such points, what about these listeners? Why do we listen to them? So briefly, is there some centrality that we should understand? And it remains those questions to remain in suspense. I think the answers to them remained in suspense. Do you have a particular point, Jim, that you think of as one of the places where it's so oddly sequential or not?

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think, you know, so if we think about even like what we're talking about are, so we have the [00:29:00] nightingale, we have the exposition, we're getting all this atmospherics, as you say, then we get to Fred and Violet, right, and they have this talk about the nightingale, the thrush, the wireless, you know, all this kind of stuff, and then it, it turns into this more kind of philosophical thing when Violet says, you know I mean that Fred seems kind of cynical, right?

Robert Caserio: Yes.

Jim Phelan: Nightingale can't sell us anything, you know, all this. But then...

Robert Caserio: It's over, it's the past.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, right, right. I can't help thinking, Violet says, suppose the world was made for happiness after all. Then we get cut off from that, right? Hush, there it goes again, right? And then we get the description of them listening.

It was this amazing, amazing rendition of the song, right?

Robert Caserio: Of the bird, yes.

Jim Phelan: Of the bird. It sang into incredulity like the first night in Galen Eden. Note after note from its throat stripped everything else to [00:30:00] silence, right? There was nothing but the absolute of its song, right?

Robert Caserio: The absolute of its song, yes, and at the same time, you think, well this is a tremendous uplifting, upbeat thing, and yet what the Nightingale's absolute of its song does is to take longings, objectify them, and then return them to the people who are longing in a way that is insupportable, that pierces them, that is not to be born. And so, one asks, why does the narrator give us a nightingale that is at once transcendent and also insupportable?

Jim Phelan: Right, Yeah, right. And then that takes me to sort of, all right, there's something about this moment, right?

This, perpetuated moment, to use the phrase from the story, of the, the week after V E Day, right, but before V J Day, the blitz is over, the war is over, but [00:31:00] what are we to do, right? Where, where are we? Right? We're sort of people trying to get their bearings in this new order.

Robert Caserio: Right. and yet it just the wonderful generalizations, are we made for happiness, are our ways, I suppose, we're being given to see what the story is about. We're given such things as Mary saying we seem to regret having nothing to regret.

How can people live without wanting something they cannot have?

Jim Phelan: Right.

Robert Caserio: These are just questions that are raised for readers to hear and to make use of to reflect.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Robert Caserio: On this story, and yet the reflection is always going to be more questioning, more suspending of answers than of providing of answers.

Jim Phelan: Absolutely, right. There's no, no resolutions in these little things, right? It's this question, and just going back to Fred and Violet, [00:32:00] like, so, when you know, we have this, she raises that question, well, suppose the world was made for happiness, and the nightingale comes, we get the transcendent singing and then we get Violet thinking, Fred was right, we're not made for this, we can't take it, right? And then we just have this little thing.

Robert Caserio: We can't take happiness.

Jim Phelan: We can't take happiness.

Robert Caserio: We have to live, we can't live without frustration.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right. Right. Have to have something, yeah. And so it's really, it's very pointed in the way, right?

Because we have this Nightingale doing this thing and it's come back and all this, and yet, what is it?

Robert Caserio: We get, we to Ursula, who's the embedded story, there's a kind of an embedded story of St. Ursula's dream. But we have Ursula's experience and her presence at the end of the story, appearing in some way, recapitulating some of questions that have been raised and at the same time, she's presented in a way that duplicates the [00:33:00] nightingale's doubleness, the nightingale's absolute that is at once so compelling and so so painful.

Jim Phelan: Mm hmm.

Robert Caserio: And she's so happy to have been waked up by the bird. Wakes. Wakes. Saint Ursula's wake here.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Robert Caserio: Ursula's wake here. Roland's wake. She's so happy to be waked. And then, she's represented as thinking of Keats ,or somebody is quoting Keats, and she thinks that she can see what needs to be seen about her present and her future somehow in the carpet, and then she can't see anything.

Naturally, it's too dark.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just like in the poem, I can't see what flowers are at my feet. That mirroring of the ode and, and then her situation and that's, where we end, right? Naturally, it was too dark to see.

Robert Caserio: For me, the fact that we [00:34:00] end in suspense is a mark of this being a fiction.

Jim Phelan: Okay, yeah.

Robert Caserio: Because, I think that, and this will lead us to the status of history in the story, I think. Okay, yeah, how we take history. My thought is that in narratives that are non fictional, suspense is always a component.

Jim Phelan: Mm hmm.

Robert Caserio: But the purpose is to resolve the suspense.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Robert Caserio: Whereas in a fictional narrative, it seems to me we are always in suspense even when there's a happy ending, it's still a suspense of the reference to reality.

It's a suspended reference in a way that non fictional narrative wouldn't finally tolerate.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Robert Caserio: It doesn't drive that.

Jim Phelan: Right, right. I mean, if somehow this were her, if Bowen were a reporter and you were her editor and she brought this to you, you [00:35:00] would say, you would say, wait a minute, go back out there, right?

Find out.

Robert Caserio: No, no, Bowen was at the same time as she was writing this and other wartime stories, she was writing \_The Heat of the Day\_, which is, you know, really respectful of the reality of history.

But she tells us in prefaces that her short stories during the war were different. They were intended to be to make real things that were hallucinatory and to make that hallucination was necessary to recover life from all of its tearings and losses in the war.

So, she seems to be not afraid of hallucinations. She says they were visionary stories.

Jim Phelan: Right, okay. Yeah,

Robert Caserio: Not stories that were just about feeling, visions.

Jim Phelan: Right?

Robert Caserio: And that emphasizes, I think, their fictive quality, their suspense of reference to reality, [00:36:00] and she feels the need for that.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, although, I mean, maybe another way to get at it, not so much suspending reality, but sort of getting into a reality that's not captured by history, that the vision in a story like this is the kind of vision that history would not prioritize at all. I mean, history is trying to, as you said at the beginning, like, okay, you know, what are the events? What, what does VE Day, what does that mean? What does it signal for the future, and, you know, all those events that are coming whereas this is like, we're gonna freeze the event you know, we're a week after VE Day, we have the event of the nightingale, and then what vision comes out of that, right, in this series of responses, right? And so one way to think about it is okay that, you know, the fact that it ends with Ursula [00:37:00] and the of that, how does the story build to that, right, and how might these previous scenes make what she represents about Ursula's experience land more powerfully, right? I mean, there's a way in which you could say, well, you know, what if she just decided to make this an Ursula story, we had some of that exposition in the beginning, and then we just went right to Ursula.

Robert Caserio: Would it be as haunting for us?

I don't think so. The haunting is how much it makes us think about the experiences that it takes in from history. But at the same time, it is trying to create a space for thinking about what the nature of history is.

Jim Phelan: Okay, yeah.

Robert Caserio: In a way that prevents us from immediately going to that discourse that we think of as history and that masters us continually, especially [00:38:00] in literary critical realms, we're always historicizing.

Jim Phelan: Right, right.

Robert Caserio: And Bowen is historicizing. She's making use of World War II.

Jim Phelan: Absolutely.

Robert Caserio: And it's cessation. But at the same time, she's saying, well, it is half over, even though it was over by the time she wrote this, it's half over, it's still suspended, we don't know what it's going to mean, and if we pull this story into history outside of fiction too quickly, then we're going to not have the opportunity to think about other meanings.

Jim Phelan: Right, right. And something about, you know, sort of the texture of experience, as felt by ordinary people, right, that history wouldn't do, that there's something about what fiction can do and what fiction sometimes is concerned with that exceeds, even when it's, rooted in, in historical circumstance like this one, its interests [00:39:00] are sort of its own.

It's the interest of what fiction can do with this rather than what history would do with it.

Robert Caserio: Yes, I think that puts it beautifully. I really do. Yes. And I think that is not only true of this story, but of, perhaps what we take to be novels and, short stories and, Bowen was quite a theorist of the novel in her own right.

There are really interesting writings by her, and one of them notes about writing a novel is it's rough title, she says, well fiction is a lie, and you have to, the writer of fiction has to think, first of all, that words are actions. So, the choice of words is, as much of significant action as anything.

But she also says that fiction is a lie, and because it's a lie, it has to be compensated for by creating what is a kind of absolute truth in and [00:40:00] of itself, something that is Unchallengeable truth.

Jim Phelan: Okay. So yeah, interesting paradox, right? It's a lie, it's an action, right?

That I mean, you know, to say, okay, it's a verbal action and it's like, alright, I wanna recruit her for a rhetorical narratology, right? But, but the idea that the action presumably there's something direct in the action, which would be this incontrovertible truth.

Robert Caserio: Uncontradictable, uncontradictable is her word. Yes. Yeah.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. How might that apply to, \_I Hear You Say So,\_ right?

Robert Caserio: The uncontradictable truth perhaps ,is at least in \_I \_\_Hear\_\_ \_\_You\_\_ Say So,\_ that this is true in a way that can't be contradicted by history.

Jim Phelan: Okay, yeah.

Robert Caserio: So that's part of what I think we've been saying.

Jim Phelan: Right, that's a nice way to summarize that. And so here too, maybe, I sort of start to think about some of the differences between a story that's sort of high narrativity, you know, driven by the representation of change over [00:41:00] time, as opposed to a story which is maybe driven more by what we associate with lyric, lyric revelation, sort of the unfolding of feeling, thought, situation, you know, this kind of thing.

And, in that regard, this, you know, I think of this as story which is more dominated by that kind of lyric impulse and the idea of capturing this moment is a way of getting at that uncontradictable truth.

Robert Caserio: Yeah.

Jim Phelan: And for me, then again, it's like with Ursula, right? It comes down to her and the complexity of her response to this moment, to the nightingale. She's so happy to hear the nightingale, but yet, she's thinking about loss, right?

Robert Caserio: That's right. She can't see, I hear what you say, is the title, there's a lot of hearing and saying and seeing, right?

And the [00:42:00] seeing and hearing resolves itself into darkness or obscurity. There's something that's incalculable, just like whether or not we can live without missing something makes our lives incalculable.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, I like what you say there about the hearing. I mean, you know, obviously we have the reference to hearing in the title. And then as you were reading today, reading out loud, I was noticing, you know, how strongly the theme of listening and hearing and sound is, you know, throughout the whole story. But to say that, you know, then there's the questions, all right, what does it mean to listen? What are the payoffs, et cetera, right? And again, I think we have some kind of, you know, there's no clear resolution and the falling into darkness as part of it, I think, yeah, go ahead.

Robert Caserio: Yeah. I hear this story say something that situates itself in between [00:43:00] something you say in your debate with Matthew Clark and something that he says.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Robert Caserio: And in your debate with Matthew Clark you say that there is authors of both fictional and non fictional narratives engage with and seek to intervene in the actual world in some way, and that is absolutely true. And Clark says, perhaps we need a new term to describe the specific response to fictions, which involves engagement without either action or belief.

And it seems to me that between these, you know, this story kind of situates itself in the middle of that debate.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, I mean, I don't know if this fits with what you're saying, but what strikes me as, what this story does, is it like, is to dwell in this uncertainty with this, what's the questions, what's unresolved you know, the play of emotions and all that.

And just stay there, right? There's something to be gained by [00:44:00] staying there and thinking about Bowen in relationship to asking us to dwell.

Robert Caserio: Absolutely. Should we talk about the narrator here?

Jim Phelan: Yes. Yeah, what do you want to say?

Robert Caserio: The title has always shocked me.

And I keep trying to, who's this I? At one moment in the Ursula segment, suddenly Ursula is the first person narrator and what is it that is being said that is, what is being heard? In some ways there's something mischievous about the title because it suspends

any knowledge of the I and even suspends knowledge of the you.

Jim Phelan: Right. Right. It's another set of questions.

Robert Caserio: It's all knowledge of what's being said.

Jim Phelan: Right. One of the things I would start with with the narrator is the way in which the narrator has a sort of privileged observer position, right?

One could imagine the narrator being Bowen constructing it so that the narrator is somehow part of this community that's hearing the [00:45:00] nightingale, not just sort of reporting on it like so, maybe move to the first, first person plural at some point about our responses or something.

But that's not what she does, instead I see the narrator is clearly marked as this observer, but an observer with all kinds of privileges, right? She can do internal vocalization, she can She can do direct discourse of Ursula's thought about you know, the mirrors I'm looking at, he stood before you know, and she can get her thought where she's thinking of Keats, right? She doesn't say Keats out loud, the, I cannot see what flowers are at my feet, but the narrator can give that to us. She can move from scene to scene, sets of characters, sets of characters you know, all that.

So it's, it's this very kind of protean narrator, but, but also still like outside, right? I'm, I'm giving you access here. I'm not really part of it, but I'll give you this access [00:46:00] and I will make my comments along the way.

Robert Caserio: Well, that's really interesting, Jim. It sounds, of course, like that makes her, the narrator, omniscient.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Robert Caserio: But I'm also thinking that maybe the narrator is, despite her abilities are transcendent, she's also omniscient, that is, all not knowing, wants to be all not knowing too. \_I Hear You Say So\_ almost sounds like, well, there's a partial saying here rather than an omniscient saying. And I think that would go along with these fluctuations of knowledge in the narration. At the same time as it seems all powerful, it's also confessing to not being able to see, naturally it was too dark.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right.

Robert Caserio: Despite omniscience, there's still darkness.

Jim Phelan: Right. And I'm not going to be the, the one to give the [00:47:00] answers, right?

I have all these, I have all these privileges, I have these powers, but I'm not going to give the answers. Yeah.

Robert Caserio: Right. And there are other speakers that she is hearing. When Ursula is introduced, she's really introduced in the light of, do I wake her sleep?

Jim Phelan: Mm hmm. Sleepwalking,

Robert Caserio: Do I wake her sleep?

She of course is listening darkly.

Jim Phelan: Mm hmm.

Robert Caserio: And then so is Bowen in that final sentence.

She's darkly eyeless. And so, and yet, Keats is not the only voice.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Let's talk about some of those, those other intertexts.

Robert Caserio: The Wasteland.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Robert Caserio: Jug Jug to Dirty Ears, about the Philemela story.

And in fact, of course, the nightingale is Philemela who is the victim of a horrendous crime.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Robert Caserio: And who does not want to forget the horror .

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm . Right, so that layers the nightingale too, even as we're thinking about the transcendence, right? This is part of who [00:48:00] she is, who the nightingale is.

Right.

Robert Caserio: Well, the nightingale is a tradition of fictions that is being vitalized here or certainly evoked.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Robert Caserio: Called into life.

Jim Phelan: Right. Right. Absolutely.

Robert Caserio: In some way that complicates the questions and the answers.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Robert Caserio: Without, of course, forgetting that horror is involved.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Robert Caserio: In what has occurred.

Jim Phelan: Right. So the war, and again with Roland, right, I mean, we think about you know, the loss, right, and there's something going on with time, I think, in relationship with Ursula and Roland, and that's. That what's lost is the future in which they could share their pasts, right?

There's something poignant about that and also the way in which the story itself, while focused on, you know, this hour and a half or whatever it is, its own temporal duration, the end there, sort of [00:49:00] opens out into the past and the future as we think about Ursula and Roland and what they had and what they hoped for and what they lost and all that, you know, that, that's all part of the lyric revelation, I think.

Robert Caserio: Right. Right. And, strangely enough, there are moments of humor in this evocation of horror and peace at the same time, because that corpse thing. So again, this is a, a complication of the attitudes we can possibly adopt and think through in responding to this story in a halting way.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah, no, I think that's right. And the mistake would be to try to resolve. Right , right.

Robert Caserio: And, hardly recruit for one or another extra fictional end I think.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah. Maybe we should say a little, we've talked about the I of the title and so on.

What about [00:50:00] the you?

Robert Caserio: I don't know, I...

Jim Phelan: Yeah, who, I hear you say so, who is doing the saying, right, who is doing the listening.

Robert Caserio: I hear you all say so, I hear you all, I hear all of you, so it could be a plural, yeah, comprehensive you.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, that makes sense to me, and also the comprehensive in the sense of, okay, all these characters , but then all the intertext, right? I hear Keats I hear Elliot.

Robert Caserio: Keats, Ovid.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah. Right. Carpaccio,

Robert Caserio: Carpaccio. There's a wonderful memoir by Ford Maddox Ford 1933, \_It\_\_ Was The Nightingale\_ is the title.

Jim Phelan: Ah, okay.

Robert Caserio: And the nightingale is a poet figure, and Ford keeps playing, the book is about the genesis of Parade's End in Ford's mind, and the book is supposedly a memoir. But he keeps calling it a novel.

So he keeps handing back the history.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Robert Caserio: The historical part to the fictive part.

Jim Phelan: Okay. [00:51:00] Interesting. Yeah.

Robert Caserio: And he says, I wrote this novel because I wanted to obviate the prospects of another war.

And yet, at the same time, I don't believe in writing novels for particular polemic purposes.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, so they're kindred spirits in a way.

Robert Caserio: Yes, yes.

Jim Phelan: At least the way we're reading them. That's right. That's right, yeah. Yeah, well great. So we're coming to the end. Is there anything else that you hoped we'd get to that we haven't discussed?

Robert Caserio: No, I thank you very much for making this possible, I can't thank you enough for your work, as well as for this occasion.

Jim Phelan: Well, thanks, thanks very much, Robert. That's very kind. And thank you for being a guest, thank you for getting me to read this story, which I hadn't done before, and I really found it very moving and thought provoking and all those things, so, and I hope our listeners feel the same way, so.

Robert Caserio: Oh, I hope so too.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. So, I want to end by thanking our listeners and also saying that we're happy to get feedback, [00:52:00] which you can send to us at projectnarrative@osu.edu, or on our Facebook page or to our Twitter account, @PNOhioState. I'd also like to remind our listeners that you can find more than 30 additional episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts.

And if you listen on Apple, I invite you to rate and review us. Thank you again.