

Seen through the lattice: Elleke Boehmer's narrative poetics

Terence Cave^{1,2}

*Corresponding author. St John's College, Oxford, OX1 3JP, UK.

Elleke Boehmer's short stories belong to a modernist variant of the genre, showing close (sometimes textual) kinship with the stories of James Joyce and Katherine Mansfield. Read in relation to certain of her novels, they invite exploration, both formally and thematically, through their recurrent use of inferential modes. Narrative clusters and fragments act as a lattice through which the fraught geopolitical shifts of the global north-south trajectory, and in particular of Sub-Saharan Africa in the last half-century, may be viewed, not as abstractions, but as lived experience. Through close textual analysis of Boehmer's fictions and autofictions, this essay analyses the poetics of underspecification as it is embodied in complex forms of historical *kairos*, and individually in moments of recognition or epiphany. (Isabella Hammad's 2024 essay *Recognising the Stranger: Palestine and Narrative* is a key point of reference here.) In juxtaposition with the terms underspecification, implicature, and recognition, the poetics of the lattice metaphor may consequently be shown to point towards a deep cognitive structure—arguably, even, *the* deep structure of cognition.

The fictional works of the South African-born British writer Elleke Boehmer, author (to date) of six novels and two volumes of short stories, belong to a strand of late modernist writing that includes distinctive uses of the short story, autofictions, and strategies of underspecification. In particular, they invite exploration, both formally and thematically, through their recurrent use of inferential modes. That is the central topic of the present essay. At every point, the argument will be given substance through close readings from Boehmer's fiction and parallel readings of stories by other writers, and in particular by Katherine Mansfield, whom Boehmer cites as a major point of reference both for her own short stories and for their global north-south trajectories.¹ This approach is primarily designed to offer a lens affording a precise view of Boehmer's own cluster of stories; more widely, since her fictions map the outlines of a geopolitical problem—the

¹ Mansfield is specifically cited in one of the epigraphs of Elleke Boehmer's *To the Volcano, and Other Stories* (Brighton, 2020). See also Elleke Boehmer, 'Reflecting (upon) Ellipsis: Katherine Mansfield as Case Study', in A. Gasston, G. Kimber and J. Wilson, eds, *Katherine Mansfield: New Directions*, 29–42 (London, 2020). Among other related studies of Mansfield, see also Gerri Kimber, 'Modernist (dis)location: The Case of Katherine Mansfield', in M. Feldman, A. Svendsen and E. Tønning, eds, *Historicizing Modernists: Approaches to 'Archivalism'* (London, 2021), 242–57.

fusings and fissures of Africa in a postcolonial age—it also offers ways of reading modern narrative fiction at large in an era of global ideological pressure.²

KAIROS AND NARRATIVE UNDERSPECIFICATION

In Boehmer's stories, critical moments often gain their intensity from their positioning at a literal border, geographical or geopolitical. Indeed, her work as a whole—her academic writing as well as her fictions—is deeply concerned with borders, public and personal, spatial and temporal. The superimposition of these borders typically gives rise to extreme tensions and uncertainties, generating a *kairos*, a critical moment which may be decentred or designated beyond the immediate action of the text. So, for example, in *The Shouting in the Dark* (2011), the first-person protagonist Ella's return from South Africa to the Netherlands to resolve a passport problem created posthumously by her father has to be read together with the reader's knowledge of the major ideological shift that *subsequently* took place in South Africa between 1990 and 1994. Since the novel itself provides no narrative for that *kairos*, readers have to use their own historical and political hindsight to imagine what such a narrative might be. Formally, it constitutes both a dispersal and a compound. Its discrete chapters, collocated chronologically but with no explicit linear argument or narrative, gather together the fractured social and psychological lines of force generated by an apartheid culture at its moment of collapse and represents them as an amalgam, an unstable simultaneity.³

The narrative economy of Boehmer's work insistently explores the energies surrounding that moment of collapse. It is especially prominent in the poetics of the short story as instantiated by her collections *Sharmilla* (2010) and *To the Volcano* (2019).⁴ The term 'poetics' as used here embraces not only formal procedures, but also the precise relation between those procedures and the fraught materials they display. In order to achieve that fusion, a number of interconnected methodological strands will be followed. A group of terms derived from the interdisciplinary field of cognitive studies (underspecification, implicature, spreading activation patterns) will point above all to the modes of reader response that these stories elicit.⁵ The word 'cognition' and its derivatives, as used here and in a broad swathe of current interdisciplinary work, is not to be taken as antithetical to 'emotion', 'imagination', bodily response, and other conceptions. The field as it is now constituted seeks to avoid mind-body dualism and to understand cognition as a function of integrated living organisms and their evolution. (In that view, 'literature' is not separated as 'culture' from 'nature': culture is an expression of nature and shares its properties.) These terms will be used in conjunction with the notion of a 'latitude', a term suggested by the title of Boehmer's first novel, and which Boehmer herself employed in an essay on Mansfield as a metaphor to describe effects of ellipsis.⁶ The stories are further explored via the term 'recognition' (Aristotle's *anagnorisis*)—which, from its etymology upwards, may properly be described as a cognitive process—and its non-identical twin

² Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics*, 2nd edn. (London, 2018), likewise raises questions of poetics that are highly pertinent here.

³ See Terence Cave and Deirdre Wilson, *Reading Beyond the Code: Literature and Relevance Theory* (Oxford, 2018), 181–2, for a more detailed contextualized account of the approach adopted in this novel (Boehmer, *The Shouting in the Dark* [Dingwall, Scotland, 2015]).

⁴ Boehmer, *Sharmilla, and Other Portraits* (Auckland Park, South Africa, 2010), and *To the Volcano, and Other Stories* (Brighton, 2020). A third collection, *Azores*, is currently in preparation.

⁵ The terms, arguments, and perspectives of the current essay are set out in considerable detail and in the context of a wide range of literary examples, together with relevant scholarly references to the whole expanding field of cognitive studies, not only in *Reading Beyond the Code*, but also in Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* (Oxford, 2016) and *Live Artefacts: Literature in a Cognitive Environment* (Oxford, 2022), which carries a glossary designed to help readers unfamiliar with cognitive terminology.

⁶ Boehmer, 'Reflecting (upon) Ellipsis'.

‘epiphany’.⁷ This cluster of terms, conceptual paradigms, and metaphors converges on the representation of a temporal process, where time is grasped at a moment of (often dramatic) transition, a shift of perception or perspective, a ‘*kairos*’. Rooted as they may be in linear historical sequence (in the time of *chronos*), such moments—and this character is especially marked in ‘epiphanies’—are phenomenal: they point towards, or are conceived as, cognitive experiences.

Fiction, of course, has its own borders. It ends at a particular point, beyond which the reader can only go speculatively, predicting what might happen in a future which will never happen. Time stops there. That applies no less to postmodern fictions like Jorge Luis Borges’ famous story ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ (1941): the forking of those paths is a construct only realized in a single path with a singular point of termination, Captain Richard Madden’s arrival in the garden, leading to the murder of Stephen Albert and its consequences. It applies equally in fictions that provide alternative endings, whether through authorial revision (Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, 1861) or the denouement of the original story (Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, 2001). And it must even be held to apply in the case of the vast, loosely connected narratives of Karl Ove Knausgård: *My Struggle* (2009–11) is a single six-volume work which the reader must take as ‘finished’; the overlapping story lines of the *Morning Star* sequence are still (at the moment when I write this) in progress but will presumably not remain so indefinitely. Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27) features a number of semi-detachable novella-length episodes (*Combray*, *Un Amour de Swann*), but—not least because it has always been published under a single title—is typically not read as a collection of shorter narratives. Fictional stories are always thus contained: as artefacts, they close themselves off in the end (literally) from the contingencies of the world, however much contingency may be built into their narrative mode and sequence, and however much readers may be urged by the fiction to respond, beyond the act of reading, to the ethical or existential imperatives it might enjoin.⁸

A complementary perspective is provided if one substitutes the novella, or the short story, for the novel as the template for Borges’ fantasy garden. Contingency is deeply written into, embraced by, the form of the short story: convergent filaments make connections and point towards larger possibilities of interpretation. Accidental happenings are privileged; so are apparently ephemeral moments, time being the medium of the fortuitous par excellence. Since there is typically not enough narrative space in short stories to do more than gesture towards the building of a *kairos*, their forking paths may re-emerge, however tenuously, across the internal borders of a named collection, as they do in James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), Mansfield’s *The Garden Party* (1922) and—perhaps even more strikingly—Boehmer’s *Sharmilla* and *To the Volcano*. In such cases, the mere act of ‘collecting’ stories requires of the reader work that goes beyond what such collections normally seem to offer, a bag of assorted sweets to be picked out at random as it may suit the consumer’s taste or inclinations. Gustave Flaubert’s *Trois contes* (1877) imagine moments of quasi-transcendence that reverberate in the lives of their protagonists across three widely separated epochs and cultures. Joyce’s ‘Eveline’ (1904) and ‘The Dead’ (1914) both stage separations in time or space, separations that

⁷ On that perspective, see Cave, ‘Thinking with the *Poetics* in the Twenty-First Century: Anagnorisis as Cognitive Event’, in C. Mauduit, G. Navaud and O. Renaut, eds, *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Aristotle’s Poetics*, 342–56 (Leiden and Boston, 2025), which adds a crucial footnote to *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford, 1988). The trajectory thus traced opens up a line of critical and methodological reflection that can remain constantly available for modification and extension as it discovers new territories to explore. In such a retro-cognitive perspective, literature (‘poetry’, as Aristotle’s early modern heirs would have called it) emerges as an anthropological phenomenon, deeply rooted in the associative properties and uses of language itself.

⁸ I am thinking here in particular of Isabella Hammad’s injunction ‘Another act must follow’ in *Recognising the Stranger: Palestine and Narrative* (Dublin, 2024), 50, instantiated in her own novel *Enter Ghost* (London, 2023), which ends, as it were, in *medias res*.

interact with the characters' presumed internal experience to create extraordinary long-distance effects, the trajectories of whole life-times. Edith Wharton's stories 'Autres Temps...' (1911) and 'The Long Run' (1912) trace the forking paths of couples who, in one case, fail to run away together, and in the other, do run away, but with no happy ending. When Henry James, in 'Paste' (1899), where a fake necklace turns out to be real, reruns the plot mechanism of Guy de Maupassant's famous 'La Parure' (1884) with reversed coordinates (a real necklace proves to be fake), the paths fork beyond the borders of a collection and an authorial signature, manifesting a special instance of intertextuality.

Short forms lend themselves particularly well to such opportune connections and reuses, which can also be thought of as 'spreading activation patterns', a phrase coined by cognitive psychologists to trace the way semantic connections are made, successively and in time, in the brain. As I see it, the term could also be used for the way that 'implicatures' (see below) fan out from a given utterance and create arrays of possible meaning for the listener or reader. Most importantly in the context of this essay, 'spreading activation patterns' is a clear and even eloquent phrase, retaining much of its sense when used in non-technical language. Likewise, one could say that the tiny encapsulations of Mansfield's or Boehmer's stories are like embryonic cells that activate different outcomes when placed in different environments.⁹ In virtually all such cases, the act of narration is highly underspecified. By this I mean, not that it is somehow vague or diffuse, but that its specifications, however precise in themselves, emerge selectively, tangentially, often obliquely. Readers have to rely on minimal (though again, distinct) narrative traces or brief clues offered on the margin of the narrative in order to imagine the lives of the characters, their fictional worlds, and the relation of those worlds to social and historical realities.

Rather than a canonical term of literary theory, 'underspecification' is germane to Paul Grice's philosophical account of conversational 'implicatures', an account that is picked up, developed and transformed in the 'Relevance Theory' of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. Broadly, an implicature is a meaning, inferred by reference to context, which varies from the conventional meaning of the utterance in question: it is the meaning that will (probably, hopefully, eventually) be inferred by a listener who is contextually informed. Ironic utterances such as 'Brilliant!' (as a response to someone doing something foolish or disastrous) offer an instance from everyday language, where implicatures are in fact endemic, precisely because language in use is virtually always underspecified. It is true that 'literary' language in general is liable to display uncommonly rich modes of underspecification, but on a scale of widely differing practices which need to be analysed in specific terms. In the examples we are considering here, which belong broadly speaking to a modernist canon, there is a striking and consistent gap between the narrative fragments offered and the critical power and weight of the values which are at issue. Thus, to say that *The Shouting in the Dark* is highly underspecified implies that the reader will have to use all possible contextual clues to arrive at the complex implicatures to which the novel gives rise. And it is in times of impending *kairos* that the pressure to derive fragments of meaning from divergent evidence is especially urgent.

The approach I have been outlining here, then, is arguably one that is implied by the title of Boehmer's remarkable first novel, *Screens Against the Sky* (1990).¹⁰ The screens in question are a feature of hot-climate domestic architecture. A kind of fine wire meshing, they are put up in the early summer on the outside of windows both to mitigate the intensity of the heat and glare, and to allow the windows themselves to be opened in the evening without risking an

⁹ On 'connections' and related themes in Mansfield's stories, see also David Trotter, *The Literature of Connection: Signal, Medium, Interface, 1850–1950* (Oxford, 2020), ch. 5.

¹⁰ Boehmer, *Screens Against the Sky* (London, 1990).

invasion of insects trying to fly towards the light. In the novel, they are first referred to as hail-screens, protecting the windows against extreme weather events.¹¹ But the widow Sylvie, no longer able to rely on her husband for protection, finds them reassuring in a world in which violence is continuously imaginable. Beyond those more pragmatic functions, the screens offer themselves to be read as a figure for the filtering technique I have referred to as ‘underspecification’. Another striking instance is provided by Alain Robbe-Grillet’s classic *nouveau roman* entitled *La Jalousie* (1957), where the French word of the title means both ‘venetian blind’ and ‘jealousy’: when perception is only partial or intermittent, a great deal—both visually and psychologically—depends on the way in which the observer constructs the image of what is beyond. Robbe-Grillet’s novel belongs to an experimental genre that is at several removes from Boehmer’s poetics. What may be at issue here is perhaps rather a thread that runs through ‘modernist’ narrative as a whole, taking many different forms.

Boehmer’s second novel, *An Immaculate Figure* (1993), offers a powerful variant of this imaginative strategy, one that will bring us back to the domain of the short story. It stages from the outset a story-telling scene, in which the ultra-blonde beauty queen Rosandra White recounts her various ‘adventures’ to her former neighbourhood friend and still devoted admirer Jem. Her stories are for the most part fragmentary, though grouped (for readers of the novel) into three sections carrying the misleadingly big-narrative titles ‘An armed coup’, ‘Arms trade’, and ‘Armed response’. The fragmentation arises from Rosandra’s persistent naivety, her attachment to what she thinks might lead to the most glamorous outcome for herself. She is characterized above all by a blank stare: the potent political, social and ideological confrontations she witnesses are in effect invisible to her.¹² Jem listens in fascinated agony to her stories of relations with men and in particular the loss of her virginity: his gaze is obsessive, covetous, above all jealous.¹³ Both fail to see what is really going on in the ‘adventures’ Rosandra embarks on with Bass and then with Thony. The story-telling scenario sketches fragments of story which the storyteller herself barely understands, and then only retrospectively. Those fragments are indeed hard to grasp as a whole for any reader who does not have at her disposal a more informed knowledge of the social and political fabric of post-apartheid South Africa and the wider Indian Ocean arena across which the arms dealing of Rosandra’s various mentors unfolds. In short, *An Immaculate Figure* constitutes a further instance of the imbrication of the short story genre into the novel, and of the lattice mode of presentation—jealousy and all.

It is a commonplace of the psychology of perception (and of cognitive psychology more generally) that the neural processes of living creatures have to work with primary perceptual materials that are often partial, incomplete, fragmentary. If you see a cat passing along the other side of your garden fence, you will infer from the perceptual evidence that it is a cat, indeed your cat, not some mobile fragments of catness. You will *recognize* it. We shall return to the cognitive shape of recognition shortly. Meanwhile, let us briefly trace some of the thematic motifs that mobilize the poetics of both Mansfield’s and Boehmer’s short stories, together with the contexts within which they are set.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

It is indeed distinctive of both these collections that they compensate for the endemic atomization of the genre by means of recurrent yet proliferating thematic strands. Mansfield is pre-occupied with defining moments of both young adulthood and old age, with marital relations, with dissonances of class, and with travel, whether local (in Europe or New Zealand) or

¹¹ Boehmer, *Screens*, 9.

¹² Boehmer, *An Immaculate Figure* (London, 1993), 138.

¹³ Boehmer, *An Immaculate Figure*, 104.

between the continents. Boehmer's more tightly linked collections focus in particular on this geographical mobility, signalled to the reader already by the 'blue sky with aircraft' image on the cover of *Sharmilla*, and by the shot of a woman with a suitcase on a moving airport walkway that frames *To the Volcano* on the verso of the front and back covers.¹⁴ A terminal quotation from Mansfield ('I shall make for the south... and never go north again') is used as an epigraph for *To the Volcano*, where the north-south trajectory is especially prominent.¹⁵ In Mansfield, a sequence of stories with recurring characters ('Prelude', 'The Dolls House' and others) traces a geographical axis as a young family moves away from central Wellington to more rural areas of North Island. Here, it is social rather than ethnic mobility that gives rise to tensions, sexual and other. Boehmer's post-colonial story-worlds are marked by recurrent themes of racial consciousness that take the place of (although do not entirely supplant) the insistent social consciousness of Mansfield's.

Yet reverberations between these writers' stories are not hard to find; underspecification is predominant through the work of both. Boehmer's 'South, North' features an agitated female backpacker in Paris who is trying to discover the trajectory of her readings in French literature but feels herself increasingly vulnerable to potential sexual dangers. The journey of the 'little governess' in Mansfield's story of that name lacks the global perspective (and thus implications) of Boehmer's title: it runs only from England to southern Germany. But the young woman's naïve trust in an elderly gentleman she befriends on the way also leaves her dangerously exposed. What happens to the two protagonists beyond the borders of the fiction is left unstated; but both make cognitively tangible the potential violence of displacement within a world that initially seemed 'exciting' rather than unsafe. In that sense, and it is a crucial one, the collections of stories create clusters of interpretative meaning not only through immediately identifiable thematic links but also by means of larger-scale lattice effects. As in *The Shouting in the Dark*, fragments that may appear centrifugal tease out the network connections, the spreading activation patterns, of a global issue no less profound, in Boehmer's stories, than the status and identity of 'Africa' itself in relation to 'Europe' as mutually defining ideological entities.

RECOGNITION, EPIPHANY

Boehmer's 'Evelina', in *To the Volcano*, has affinities with the stories of *Sharmilla*—not least in its strained affective mode—but now spanning an imagined south-north trajectory across the American continents. It offers a striking topographical inversion of Joyce's 'Eveline' from *Dubliners*, where the would-be boyfriend sets off from Dublin to Buenos Aires, with Eveline in tow until the very last moment. But Eveline holds back at the station and is left behind; the *kairos* has irrevocably not been grasped: 'She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition.'¹⁶ In Boehmer's story, Evelina is left to follow after while her fiancé, Jorge, is meant to be setting things up for them in New York.¹⁷ She hears nothing from him, there is no reply to her telephone calls, yet they have already sent their box crates ahead and she has little else to carry as she makes her way to the airport.¹⁸ Airports, in Boehmer's fictions, are often places of fascination, hesitation, and ultimately rupture. Evelina is a travel agent, arranging other people's trips; since

¹⁴ Stories in which planes feature prominently include 'Paper planes' and 'Fold', which also belong to an 'old age' group, while the fear of flying, embodied by the narrator's mother, is the focal theme of a chapter in *The Shouting in the Dark*.

¹⁵ Unsent letter, Katherine Mansfield to Ida Baker, January 1923, in *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, v5, 1922-23: ed. Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott (Oxford, 2008), 348.

¹⁶ James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Oxford, 2008), 29.

¹⁷ Boehmer, *Volcano*, 52.

¹⁸ Boehmer, *Volcano*, 54.

Jorge's departure, she has visited the airport regularly, like a *voyeuse*.¹⁹ Now she hears the final call for her flight and imagines herself flying north over the waves: 'She made herself see the moving waters as if from high up in the dark sky, from the plane she would soon be flying in ...'.²⁰ But this is where the story ends, in the conditional 'as if' mode, and with an imagined vision of the 'black arrow of the plane's shadow rushing across the moving, churning sea'.²¹ There is not even the negative recognition of Joyce's 'Eveline'; Evelina's *kairos* remains suspended between two possibilities, an empty departure and a potentially empty arrival.

As we have noted, the stories of Joyce's *Dubliners*, despite their narrative fragmentation, display a palpable and frequently cited cluster effect. Unfolding through different narrative contexts and accidents, the encapsulating title allows the reader to infer a common anthropology.²² A set of social constraints, and a characteristic range of affective states or moods, move the protagonists, wittingly or unwittingly, towards the kind of recognition featured in 'Eveline'. Joyce himself famously used the word 'epiphany' to designate this cognitive experience, secularizing a term traditionally used for religious experience: it connotes both the intensity of a phenomenal experience and its local, time-bound character.²³

Time is of course critical in the short story, which lacks narrative space for the large-scale effects that are familiar from *Oedipus*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aethiopica* and later fictions, via courtly romance and *The Winter's Tale* (1623) to nineteenth-century novels such as *Great Expectations* (1861) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Moments in the short story may be incandescent, they may allow long-term outcomes to be predicted beyond the temporal fictions of the narrative, but they are liable to depend far more on the modes of underspecification—the 'lattice' effects—discussed above. For such reasons, the term 'epiphany', suggesting a phenomenal moment rather than a large-scale recalibration of identity, seems well suited to the scope of the short story. Following the 'non-identical twin' characterization suggested above, the 'epiphany' that is explicitly absent in Joyce's 'Eveline' may nonetheless be read as a variant of the kinds of denouement that Aristotle in the *Poetics* calls *anagnorisis*. Joyce's variant and Boehmer's would thus be assigned to a group of modernist recognitions that would include the final scene of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), where Nora discovers that her husband Torvald is not the man she thought he was (and vice versa); Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922), which has the character of an extended short story, would also lend itself to an extended treatment of this topic.

This connection would be reinforced as a feature of the modernist short story by recalling that Joyce's 'The Dead' closes with a scene in which Gabriel Conroy, having taken his wife Gretta to a smart hotel in Dublin after the party in the clearly implied hope of some intimate marital activity, learns that she has been reminded, by a song at the party, of her first love Michael, who used to sing the same song and who died soon after.²⁴ This memory intervenes in the relation between the married couple as a kind of estrangement: the husband finds that she is indeed not the woman, exclusively devoted to him and his desires, that he had imagined. Mansfield stages exactly such a scene in 'The Stranger' (1921). Here, a husband (Mr Hammond), after anxiously waiting for the arrival of his wife 'Janey' by sea from Europe, learns from her that a young man she had met on

¹⁹ Boehmer, *Volcano*, 49.

²⁰ Boehmer, *Volcano*, 62.

²¹ Boehmer, *Volcano*, 63.

²² More broadly, Joyce's early autofiction *Stephen Hero* may be read together with *Portrait of the Artist* and *Dubliners* as a complementary trio, not through the express interventions of an authorial surrogate but by inference.

²³ Joyce's use of this term, initially for *Stephen Hero*, has been highlighted in twentieth-century literary criticism and extended to other writers, not least Mansfield: see M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 11th edn. (Stamford, CT, 2013), 114. See also Sharon Kim, *Literary Epiphany in the Novel, 1850–1950: Constellations of the Soul* (New York, NY, 2012).

²⁴ Joyce, *Dubliners*, 175.

the voyage had died in her arms.²⁵ This young man is the ‘stranger’ of the title, but the word may also be read, by inference, to indicate the estrangement, in her husband’s eyes, of the wife herself. A passing foretaste of this same shock of recognition occurs already at the denouement of Mansfield’s early story ‘Bliss’ (1918), where Bertha, just as she had for the first time begun to feel sexual desire for her husband Harry, sees Harry and the mysterious Miss Fulton, for whom she herself seemed to have a distinct inclination, in a moment of ill-concealed intimacy as Miss Fulton is about to leave.²⁶ Towards the end of Boehmer’s latest novel *Ice Shock* (2025) there is yet another variant—characteristically involving a long drawn-out episode of waiting at an airport—which will lead the reader to assume that the meaning of the word ‘shock’ in the title of the novel must be taken to refer to the expressive effect of the denouement (a shock of flawed or cracked recognition) as well as to the more physical shock of Antarctic ice-melt and, beyond that, the reverberations of the climate crisis.

‘Recognition’ is a fundamental, even defining, feature of fictional narrative as conceived in a cognitive perspective. It is the very mark of fiction: an imagined contingency captured in a human neural network. After all, the driving force of the central nervous system that enables cognition (and put generally in this way, the remark applies to animal as well as human cognition) is the ability to order and comprehend the materials gathered on the fly by perception. The term itself, in its etymology, Greek or Latin, is recursive: it means ‘cognizing again’, a process which makes memory central to the act of thinking about and responding to the world. We are a long way here from the tenacious view that relegates ‘recognition scenes’ to the status of a dubious narrative trick, a kind of *deus ex machina* of the mind.

Eloquent confirmation of the power of recognition in the real world and its fictional remakings has been provided recently by Isabella Hammad’s use of the terms *epiphany* and *anagnorisis* in her published lecture *Recognising the Stranger: On Palestine and Narrative* (2024), with equivalent moments in her own imaginative writings providing fictional parallels. For Hammad, the term affords a framing which is at once political and ethical—and Boehmer is closer to the British–Palestinian writer in this context than either is to Joyce and Mansfield, because in the geopolitical weave of her narrative, the ethnic or racial angle of perception is always fundamental. Hammad’s and Boehmer’s near-life writings carry the explosive implicatures of two of the most powerful and formative narratives of the twentieth- and early twenty-first-century world: both, despite their difference in many respects, engage with enactments of apartheid, and both women (or their fictional surrogates) speak first-hand of the cognitive dissonance it breeds.

It is critical here to insist that recognition should not be assumed to impose a ‘happy ending’, or any other stable state of affairs, a ‘solution’, even if the word ‘denouement’ carries that latter sense in its etymology. Recognitions, like other forms of denouement, can dramatically expose rifts in relations that seemed settled, illuminate cracks in conceptions of identity, and leave the reader or audience in a state of downstream reflection and unease. A striking example is offered in Hammad’s micro-story, recounted in *Recognising the Stranger*, of an Israeli soldier who finds himself confronted with an apparently threatening Palestinian figure. It is only at the last moment in an increasingly violent engagement that this anonymous individual reveals himself at close quarters to be a naked man bearing a photograph of a Palestinian child.²⁷ Identities suddenly become clarified, but in a way that deeply problematizes the whole

²⁵ Gerri Kimber and Vincent O’Sullivan, eds, *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield, 1916–1922* (Edinburgh, 2012), 248.

²⁶ Kimber and O’Sullivan, eds, *Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*, 150.

²⁷ Hammad, *Recognising*, 26–7.

Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In such cases, the recognition scene opens up, far more than it closes down, the set of relations it brings into play.

TITLES AND IDENTITIES

Let us return, in that context, to the ways in which titles operate within the fine weave of fiction. Titles, both within fiction and outside it, are by definition metonymic, even synecdochic: this is apparent in the individual titles of Joyce's stories as well as in the topographical title of the collection *Dubliners* itself. Likewise, the chapter titles in *The Shouting in the Dark* ('Monsters', 'Sleep', 'Flights', 'Verandah', 'Parsley') resemble in many respects the titles of Boehmer's short stories: they are mood titles, epiphany titles, rather than indicators of the overall plot line of the novel. In the story-collections of Mansfield and Boehmer, this tangential status is essential to the finely calculated underspecification of the stories. Affording initial moves in an expressive dynamic, their apparently weak implicatures eventually emerge as critical coordinates. Typically, a marginal figure (sometimes named metonymically in the title) will in the end allow the reader to grasp analeptically the figure in the carpet, the import of the tenuous web of happenings or impressions spun by the narrative.

Thus Mansfield's story 'The Garden Party' begins *in medias res* with the preparations for an upper-middle-class garden party (the class is tangible right away), where frivolity engenders a socially displayed absence of empathy.²⁸ News arrives of the accidental death of a young man from an adjacent poor neighbourhood, leaving his wife and children destitute.²⁹ Young Laura, the 'reflector' of the action, takes left-over cakes from the party to the bereaved family, but sees at once that this is a mistake.³⁰ She is shepherded in to meet the bereaved wife, then to see the young man's body. This sounds like the climax of a disastrous visit: expecting to make a gracious gesture which will provide some comfort for the poor neighbours in their bereavement, she finds herself facing something gruesome, a dead body, something she has never seen before. But this brutal recognition is withheld. Instead, an epiphany supervenes: Laura's gaze lingers on the young man's body, 'beautiful' and at peace: a vision that is reassuring and comforting, and above all *marvellous*: 'this marvel had come to the lane'.³¹ The language hesitates insistently at the border of the supernatural, apprehended by a singular consciousness rather than through a staged anagnorisis.

The evidence of Mansfield's diary reveals that this epiphany projects onto the fiction her personal transfiguration of the death of her own brother, killed in 1915 on a training exercise on the way to the Front.³² Framed by this context, the whole story may be shown to be radically underspecified. Rather than a bitter satire on early twentieth-century social prejudice (though it is that too), it appears as a modernist reflection upon the 'Great War' as a social and ethical turning point. In order to arrive at that reading, one would need to call upon the sensibility and associations of the story's early readers, who lived in the affective and social aftermath of the slaughter the war entailed; for them, similarly, the young carter's accident, caused when his horse shied at a 'traction-engine', might have evoked the emergence of a new, 'modern' mechanical age which was beginning to sweep away the old rural order and its social hierarchies. These implicatures are only glancingly specified in Mansfield's story, and readers of the twenty-first century could hardly recover them without the assistance of

²⁸ Kimber and O'Sullivan, eds, *Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*, 401.

²⁹ Kimber and O'Sullivan, eds, *Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*, 407.

³⁰ Kimber and O'Sullivan, eds, *Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*, 411.

³¹ Kimber and O'Sullivan, eds, *Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*, 413.

³² See Christine Darrohn, "'Blown to Bits!': Katherine Mansfield's 'The Garden-Party' and the Great War", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 44 (1998), 513–39; and Gerri Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield and the Art of the Short Story* (Basingstoke, 2015), 80–4.

a historical criticism that belongs to our own age. The whole crux of this story is thus itself played out within the shifting frame of critical and historical underspecifications.

'Ginger', too, in Boehmer's *Sharmilla*, stages a party, together with a background thread that leaps into the foreground and changes everything. It begins, characteristically, with an airport arrival, introducing the perspective of a white South African who is returning after several years' absence ('They were all at the airport to welcome her. They were the ones who had stayed').³³ But what is the title 'Ginger' doing here? Does it refer to the edible root, or a distinctively non-African hair colour? The story proceeds without a character of that name or hair type. It sketches the brave new post-apartheid world, where Alison's erstwhile college friends do their best to signal their new values and identities. Chris, for example, 'had brought his Indian wife. He introduced her as Susie, which didn't sound like her real name. ... She looked shy, he looked proud, proud maybe of his advanced brand of marriage'. Ingrid, the next character to speak, comes up with: 'A girl at work, a white girl, has called her baby Sizwe'.³⁴ Names are in the forefront here, shifting awkwardly across borders (Susie, Sizwe). In this non-garden party (they have the barbecue indoors because someone forgot to bring the charcoal), the food is mostly of the fast type. A lot is said about hope for the new South Africa, but Boehmer's pitch-perfect dialogue phrasings indicate that it is somehow fake, a show to impress the visitor, or just a peer group fashion. Eventually they do all go out into the garden, to see 'the nice garden paving round the back'.³⁵ They also see the blue doghouse, with 'Swiss chalet-style windows painted on either side of its entrance' and a name in Afrikaans: '*Dom se plek*', laboriously glossed as 'Dom's place' for the visitor, who does not need the gloss.³⁶

From the dog's residence, the narrative gaze pans the yard as a whole, alighting as if casually on the outhouse to the garage, also painted blue. On the top step a young woman is sitting, drinking from a patterned paper cup and picking at a half-loaf of bread. Chris says to Jannie, whose house it is, 'You haven't introduced us to your maid'; 'That's Ginger', Jannie replies; she is not his maid, she works for a dentist, but sleeps in the outhouse to save her the journey home to Soweto.³⁷ Chris says that it is a good idea to turn maids' *kayas* into boarding rooms.³⁸ So this is a *kaya*, the maid's outdoor room which provides the title for the first story in this collection, a place that is taboo for white children. And it turns out that the woman in this *kaya* is also wearing a starched half-moon apron, like the one in the opening story. The name 'Soweto' has already afforded all of the identifying implicatures. The woman is Jannie's unavowed maid, and Liz is heard asking Jannie if she might be available to be a nanny for her children 'a few days a week. She looks very clean and neat'.³⁹ Everyone is clearly embarrassed by this garden scene: despite their claims of racial equality and social mixing, they are perpetuating all the old ethnic stereotypes and behaviours. Finally, Liz openly comments on the oddity of her name: 'To me it's not African, it doesn't really belong in South Africa'.⁴⁰ The recognition scene has run its course. Both protagonist and passive victim, the quiet girl on the steps, the girl from Soweto, does not work for a dentist, she is a standard apartheid-era maid, living in an outhouse, and given a nickname which is effectively a joke at the expense of her skin and hair colour.

It remains to consider the sense in which Boehmer reassigns Mansfield's 'garden party' to a more direct mode of underspecification. In the first place, the recognition (in no sense an

³³ Boehmer, *Sharmilla*, 53.

³⁴ Boehmer, *Sharmilla*, 54.

³⁵ Boehmer, *Sharmilla*, 60.

³⁶ Boehmer, *Sharmilla*, 61.

³⁷ Boehmer, *Sharmilla*, 61.

³⁸ Boehmer, *Sharmilla*, 62.

³⁹ Boehmer, *Sharmilla*, 63.

⁴⁰ Boehmer, *Sharmilla*, 63.

'epiphany') of the character 'Ginger' occurs in a staged public scene: everything happens at the garden party, where all the guests regather to view the garden and thence its inhabitant. Secondly, the story plays insistently from the outset on names and their implicatures, which virtually read themselves: this story collection as a whole is an assemblage of implicatures mutually designating a disjointed post-apartheid 'new order'. If Mansfield's 'The Garden Party' is a 'war story', there is no mention of war in the story itself, and the collection in which it appeared would scarcely provide support for such a reading. What links the two stories with each other is above all the garden party topos itself and the colourful display of social and cultural hierarchies it satirically affords: fragments of dialogue hang floating in the air, leaving the reader to figure them out as a kind of tapestry, a woven text.

'Ginger' has close affinities with 'Off-white' (also in *Sharmilla*), which offers a spectral analysis of the South African imagination of skin-colour as induced in the confused mind of a young girl. Likewise, *To the Volcano* has its own sub-group of stories with titles, or recurrent motifs, denoting colour. 'Synthetic orange' is the colour of the lifejackets worn by would-be migrants whom the focal character LeeAnn, who has herself been caught by a current during a night swim, imagines being pulled drowned from the waters on a Spanish beach.⁴¹ 'The mood that I'm in' features an old lady who remembers the bright orange colour of marigolds and also the pearl-fishers who sometimes drown while diving for pearls like those she wears in her ears.⁴²

'Blue eyes' is a particularly complex example, since it requires on the reader's part a knowledge of the precise historical context of the story. John, one of a group of young white soldiers, recently demobbed, who have come to South Africa to study, finds lodgings in the house of a tall blonde pianist called Patty.⁴³ He has been traumatized by his experience of combat and sleeps badly.⁴⁴ Patty takes him as a lover. Before long, his night-time emissions (consisting, one assumes, not only of sexual fluids but also of trauma sweat and potentially also incontinence), are aired in the dirty sheets that need to be frequently washed; Pat's black maid Iris (another ill-matched colour name) refuses to wash them, but ends up sleeping with John herself, after which Patty throws him out.⁴⁵

From the start, Patty had drawn attention to John's extremely blue eyes, but he says he does not want to think about them.⁴⁶ In the private world fashioned by his post-traumatic stress disorder, all he can see is the wide-open eyes of the female guerrilla in Mozambique who tripped and fell while he was pursuing her, and who looked up at him, clinging to him, until he kicked her away and went on kicking.⁴⁷ The story is composed out of these powerful motor and sensory details: they form the lattice that makes tangible, by indirection, the fraught politics and history of that particular moment in history. It was indeed a precise and tangled moment, comprising the long-drawn-out war waged by the forces of Zimbabwe liberation against Ian Smith's apartheid-style government in the Rhodesia of that time, with reverberations across the borders of Rhodesia into Mozambique and South Africa.⁴⁸ As indicated above, few readers—including many who were alive and alert to such matters in those days—will recall its complexity unless they take the trouble to retrieve the details. Yet Boehmer's story obliges us to take that trouble and thereby better to understand a *kairos* writ large, namely the spreading activation patterns arising from the various apartheid, counter-apartheid, and post-apartheid

⁴¹ Boehmer, *Volcano*, 111.

⁴² Boehmer, *Volcano*, 151.

⁴³ Boehmer, *Volcano*, 68.

⁴⁴ Boehmer, *Volcano*, 69.

⁴⁵ Boehmer, *Volcano*, 72, 76.

⁴⁶ Boehmer, *Volcano*, 70.

⁴⁷ Boehmer, *Volcano*, 76.

⁴⁸ This is the so-called 'Rhodesian Bush War' (the Chimurenga or Zimbabwe war of liberation) which began in 1964 and continued until 1979.

conflicts of the later twentieth century. In Boehmer's full-length novels, *An Immaculate Figure* provides the closest analogy to this aspect of her poetics, while *Bloodlines* (2000) affords a large-scale historical projection of the independence struggles by weaving a strand featuring the involvement of Irish troops in the Anglo-Boer War of the early twentieth century into the story of an imagined terrorist bombing that occurs in the closing years of the apartheid regime. In this latter instance, a slow-burn *kairos* emerges with its accompanying recognitions, rather than a cluster of fragments gesturing towards less publicly recognized happenings.

We may at this point reflect again here on what Mansfield's garden party is doing in Boehmer's story-world. 'Blue Eyes' is palpably a (post-)war story. It features no garden party, but it engages with prejudices, and it stages, at the end, a figure whose remembered death is graphically left to be inferred: a potentially beautiful but ruined body. This triangulation deserves further exploration as an emergent pattern of the screen that Boehmer fabricates between Mansfield's stories and her own.

A NARRATIVE NEXUS

To read 'Evelina' against 'Eveline', or 'Ginger' and 'Blue Eyes' against 'The Garden Party', or any of these against 'The Dead', is to show by synecdoche that the poetics of Boehmer's stories, at all levels, converges on a powerful core of implicated themes, issues, meanings. This nexus emerges from the individual storylines and finds correlates and counterparts elsewhere in Boehmer's fictional writings, regardless of the order in which the reader chooses to read them. The forking paths keep crossing at sensitive places; the discrete and the tangential become by sleight of hand the focus of attention; the network of implicatures expands outwards in spreading activation patterns, like a neural network. Conceived thus, Boehmer's story-world, her garden of forking paths, appears to this reader at least as an organism, a 'live artefact' affording complex possibilities of reflection.⁴⁹ It enacts principles of containment and atomization, encapsulation and dissemination, contingency and agency, recognition and its errors. And this is only provisionally a metaphor: it seems plausible, even necessary, to suppose indeed that the reader's neural networks, as they capture the narrative threads, enact the same movements, the same patterns. That is how and why the stories work, beyond or rather prior to the impact of all other issues, however crucial, of ideology or human values. Another way of making the same point is to suggest that the lattice metaphor, in juxtaposition with the terms underspecification, implicature, and recognition, may be shown to point towards a deep cognitive structure—arguably, even, *the* deep structure of cognition.

This critical perspective also lays bare the crossings-over that bind Boehmer's short stories to her novels. As we have indicated, one can in some instances read the novels as if they were tight-knit short story collections, and the short stories as if they were asteroids waiting to become a planet in some larger story-world. Given that the story-world clearly maps quite closely onto the topography and even the post-*kairos* chronology of Boehmer's own life history, one might in conclusion ask whether that history too might be glimpsed through the lattice.

The first epigraph in *To the Volcano*, attributed to Kudzanai-Violet Hwami, runs as follows: 'If you keep going south you will meet yourself: autofiction as recognition, and vice versa. In certain of Elleke Boehmer's fictions, the consonance between the names of their protagonists—Ella, Evelina—and her own sounds as if the names are meant to allude indirectly to personal experiences. The early 'life-history' that is sketched in *The Shouting in the Dark* (and before that, in *Screens Against the Sky*) undoubtedly fits with key elements of the author's earlier years in South Africa and Europe, as does the linguistic positioning of

⁴⁹ On this expression and its uses, see Terence Cave, *Live Artefacts*.

characters in some of the stories between English, isi-Zulu, Dutch and Afrikaans. In such instances, Boehmer perceptibly offers herself as a kind of lattice for the social and political realities she evokes, avoiding any dramatic self-positioning.⁵⁰ Her discreet and punctual mode of autofiction affords entry to those realities for the reader without sanctioning a biographical approach of the traditional kind. For a reader who might have begun to look in that latter—now suspect—direction, the final story of *To the Volcano*, ‘The Biographer and the Wife’, provides a salutary warning. Its narrative is notably lacking in delicate allusions and inferences. Its satire of the bloated, self-satisfied figure of the author and of the irritatingly successful biographical hack who manages to get his teeth into his quarry (and into the quarry’s wife, for a while at least) is unmistakable: this is the biographer, almost literally, as incubus. The result is that, guided by the autofictional ghost that Elleke intermittently yet arrestingly becomes, we are sent back by rebound, through the lattice, into the world of which Boehmer’s stories trace the lineaments with such imaginative variety and finesse.

POST-SCRIPT

This essay began life as a two-page analysis of Boehmer’s novel *The Shouting in the Dark* as an example of narrative collocation in an essay for a collected volume *Reading Beyond the Code: Literature and Relevance Theory*.⁵¹ Relevance Theory is a cognitive communication theory which lends itself well to literary analysis, both at the broader level as a conception of language in time, and as a means of critical access to micro-effects. Boehmer was a core member of the project from which that volume emerged, and contributed an essay of her own to it.⁵² In this piece, she meditates on a poem—Yeats’s ‘Long-Legged Fly’—fashioned from three micro-moments. Each of these has its own distinct character, yet when juxtaposed they point towards the implied parabola of a ‘grand narrative’, nothing less than a history of Western or European culture. Like tiny short stories, they together form a set, together with a meta-story (the hovering of the fly-like mind in each instance). It is left to the reader to carry out the necessary work of inference. Boehmer’s fictions likewise choose micro-materials—though none as iconic as Caesar at the Rubicon, Helen before Troy, or Michelangelo painting the Vatican ceiling—that map the outlines of a geopolitical phenomenon. They also feature moments of *kairos*: moments when a critical mutation is imminent.

Although Boehmer properly prefers to keep her academic work separate from her fiction, this sample of the way in which she has developed an inferential poetics arguably provides a retrospective explanatory frame for the poetics of storytelling she had implicitly adopted from the beginning. The connection is indeed made explicit in her article ‘Reflecting (upon) ellipsis: Katherine Mansfield as case study’.⁵³ As noted above, that study already deploys the ‘lattice’ to describe effects of ellipsis; like the current essay, it also brings to bear concepts borrowed from Relevance Theory (inference, underspecification) in a close, sentence-by-sentence analysis of Mansfield’s stories. Boehmer does not, however, explicitly apply these concepts to her own

⁵⁰ Mansfield’s stories seldom declare their author explicitly as an agent or an actor, yet they also lend themselves to an autofictional reading, in particular through the ways in which their social and physical geographies confer narrative cohesion.

⁵¹ Terence Cave, ‘Towards a Passing Theory of Literary Communication’, in Cave and Wilson, eds, *Reading Beyond the Code*, 167–84.

⁵² Elleke Boehmer, ‘The Mind in Motion: A Cognitive Reading of W.B. Yeats’s “Long-Legged Fly”’, in Cave and Wilson, eds, *Reading Beyond the Code*, 23–34.

⁵³ Boehmer, ‘Reflecting (upon) Ellipsis’.

stories. A recent conversation with Filippo Menozzi again focuses primarily on Boehmer's critical writings.⁵⁴

As this article goes to press, however, a further shift in the implied dialogue between fiction and criticism in Boehmer's work may be noted. Her latest novel *Ice Shock* takes the geophysical borders of her story-world to extreme limits and in the process embodies a poetics where the hot-countries metaphor of the lattice or 'screen' is replaced by a specifically environmental constraint, namely, the radical filtering (underspecification and interruption) of messages between Leah in the temperate north and Niall amid the dangerously fracturing surfaces of the Antarctic. The dramatization of distance effects of this kind, together with an enhanced fascination with deferred or fractured recognition scenes (as noted above), suggests that Boehmer's more recent critical work has encouraged a mutation of her poetics towards the thematic emergence of this cluster of issues.

¹*St John's College, Oxford, United Kingdom*

²*University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom*

⁵⁴ Filippo Menozzi and Elleke Boehmer, 'Below the Radar of Consciousness: A Conversation About Her Short Story Collection *To the Volcano*, with Elleke Boehmer', *Postcolonial Text*, 18 (2023), 1–9.