

Excerpt from *The Cultic Code, The Living Books of Paul Bowles*, II.I. Separation of narrative, and observation of its metanarrative tendencies. Journey and encounter in the Western literary tradition.

2. Point of break-through: encounter with substance

Journeying within the foreign element is the linear movement in all four novels, a prolonged series of encounters leading to **one central experience** as the test of the protagonists' substance. Real encounter in terra incognita holds a mirror to the hero. The encounter takes place inside, the point of break-through is within. It is non-descriptive **poetry** which is capable of capturing this entirely **metanarrative moment** of encounter.

2.1 Orientalism

Bowles's literary context concerning the encounter with the cultural Other is orientalist and postcolonial literature. Its ontological autonomy and originality mostly disregarded, the iconic image of the East is built as a wall by **colonial orientalism** to secure a rational dualistic world view, where identity remains a fixed and separated set of characteristics. It cannot be disregarded that "by the end of World War I Europe had colonized 85 percent of the earth."¹ The West itself broke, and broke twice in epyrosis (Gr. conflagration). Said claims that "modern Orientalism has been an aspect of both imperialism and colonialism, [and] embodies a systematic discipline of *accumulation* ... of human beings and territories."² He further suggests the existence of an ongoing cultural imperialism beyond geographical hegemony, that the imperialistic discourse of the West is still decisive in political terminology e.g. "terrorism" or "fundamentalism".³

The belief that Asia could revitalize Europe was popular in the Age of **Romanticism**, provided that the novelty factor remains at a comfortable distance. Still, "with the Romantic movement, the Orient richly entered the consciousness of Europe... By 1890 or so, Kipling could say: "Once you have heard the call of the East, you will never hear anything else."⁴ Bowles himself claims the significance of the romantic sensibility: "Primitivism implies ignorance of the psychological probing made possible by romanticism, whereas Neo-Classicism connotes its rejection."⁵ A brief and general list of significant works and figures demonstrate the literary inspiration drawn from the idea of the ideal Orient: Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (1816), Poe's *Al Aaraaf* (1829), Disraeli's *Tancred*, Flaubert's *Salambo*; De Nerval, Goethe, Byron, Hugo; Kipling, Melville, Twain. However, Edward Said claims in *Orientalism* (1978) that an unbiased approach is practically impossible, and Western artists approaching the East, particularly in the age of pseudo-empires, are unable to shake off their attitude of superiority in their observations. There is slight suggestion that the American transcendentalists were potentially different, stronger and perhaps more authentic in their approach due to the

¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 123.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 375. N.B. Said's polemic is still within the colonial discourse, not only for linguistic, cultural, and political reasons, but because acclaiming the reality of oppressive empires excludes the reality of a single meta-historical system, the Empire of Life, which is the common all-encompassing, all-connecting field of substance. The existence of political empires cannot be proven, whereas the existence of the Empire of Life is proven by the metaphysical code, the common underlying structure and principle of creation.

⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, *Seven Nights*, 46.

⁵ Lawrence D. Stewart, *Paul Bowles: The Illumination of North Africa*, 71.

spirituality of the movement. The eclectic philosophy of the **Concordian Group of Transcendentalists** opened their intellectual and religious capacities to the mystical influx of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam etc. Thoreau in *Walden* speaks of the direct influence of Vedic thought. Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Brahma* (1856) is perhaps the first to propose the Oriental question in the form of a paradox. From c. the 1880s, "oriental teachers and founders of cults have been flocking to America, and this trend has continued up to the present day."⁶ Emerson reflects in *Nature*: "Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put."

The 20th century begins with the completed oeuvre of Nietzsche, whose Zarathustra concludes the philosophical juxtaposition of Orient-Occident in a formal superimposition of the Eastern fire god and the genius of the West. A poeticised similar superimposition of Eastern patterns on Western psyche is Lebanese-born Kahlil Gibran's influential *The Prophet* (1923)⁷. The long prose poem is a linguistic phenomenon of Oriental, traditionally oral structuring, melody, and imagery. Written in the language of inflective, linear, left-brain dominated English, however, its literary value is questionable, if not second-rate. Both Gibran and Bowles performed the presentation of the same "sacramental vision," but with different results. While Gibran died in New York, misconceived as a mystical poser and often stigmatised as esoteric, Bowles died in Tangier, misconceived as travel writer and stigmatised as nihilist. The substance they present is more or less the same, but their definitive difference is the quality of language used: while Gibran speaks in his acquired American style of simple, dogmatic and sentimental kitchen mysticism, the style of Bowles is not only refined by mastering the European and American cultural palette, a number of languages, and the language of music, but made particularly complex by his aim to camouflage. Gibran was weakened by the drive to prove himself, while Bowles was stoic about his image, strengthened by the fact of his misconception.

Modernism incorporates Eastern influences with more subtlety. Ezra Pound develops a mysticism and music based on Chinese and Japanese poetry and drama. A decisive poetic illumination is that the letters of the Chinese language are themselves images. Here begins the elimination of rhetoric from English poetry, and the direct presentation of images. Besides the conceptual revelation, Pound uses the Japanese haiku and waka form to induce sensory immediacy through logical contradiction e.g. *In a Station of the Metro* (1916). This phenomenon of poetic process is a crucial analogy for Bowles's metanarrative: here, too, as in zen, an intuitive unity is realised between the unique and the universal, individuality and totality, subjectivity and objectivity. What was realised in poetry in this period, Bowles took further by subtly incorporating it in narrative prose. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is a direct East-West synthesis. The Sanskrit "Da—Datta—Dayadhvam" stands as a thundering moral warning, and the closing "Shantih shantih shantih" elevates the poem to a resolution of presenced sanctity.

Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and the future

⁶ Khalil S. Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His background, character and works Kahlil Gibran*, 112.

⁷ The Gibran-phenomenon is particularly intriguing because *The Prophet* by the Lebanese-American poet-painter was the second most widely read book of 20th century America after the Bible.

Are conquered, and reconciled,
Where action were otherwise movement
Of that which is only moved
And has in it no source of movement. (T.S.Eliot: *Day Salvages*)

This “impossible union” is the encounter, the *mysterium coniunctionis* which is the aim and source of journeying, narrative, and dynamism. W. B. Yeats’s spiritual thinking was majorly effected by the Eastern syncretic views of the Theosophical movement, but his inspiration came directly from Celtic mythical notion. Gaelic is in fact much closer to Tamazight ritualism and language, the two much closer to an a-historical common organic source, than modern restorations of occultism. In *Mohini Chatterjee* (1929) the paradox innate in the cyclicity of the natural world is evoked, surpassed, and revitalized within the same verbal act:

Birth-hour and death-hour meet,
Or, as great sages say,
Men dance on deathless feet.

The *coincidentia oppositorum* is the resolution brought about to surpass rationality, in a juxtaposition of irreconcilables. Analogously, to provide an immediate, total enigmatic experience, both sensual and intuitive, is the goal of the tightest forms of world literature: haiku, koan, sonnets and sacral liturgy are entirely enigmatic, intellectually irresolvable genres of metanarrativity. The artist’s awe of the East, as a treasure chest of truth and beauty, most significantly a treasure chest of metanarrative perception: that all is centred, ordered, cyclical, at once constant and ascending, interior and exterior. “From Poetry to Prophecy. From light – Clairvoyance!”⁸

2.2 Liminal experience

For both Conrad and Bowles the **liminal geographical space** of Africa was a captivating experience for life, they both remained under its spell. The life-changing shock of terra incognita is so similar in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Sheltering Sky*, they have so many complimentary aspects, that we could almost read one as the explanation, complementation of the other. It is the shock of facing one’s immanent darkness at the bounds of comprehension, the internalization of pervading separateness which brings forth a generic connectivity of vision. The appearance of **inexplicability** turns Conrad away from moral judgment to a stance of stoic compassion. “There is no suddenly appearing and amazing magic which would captivate man like when he can take a glance at **the mysterious nature of material things.**”⁹ For both Conrad and Bowles this was a central experience, they both remained under its spell, and were able to form varieties of narratives around the same ritual axis.

Bowles’s artistic definition begins with the “baptism of solitude.” The encounter with the **desert** opens an **existential space**. Sahara (the Tenere) is a tabula rasa: a “meaning-deficient ‘prehistoric’ landscape.”¹⁰ Along the apparent journey, therefore, the first phase of

⁸ Ira Cohen, in: Big Bridge on-line (http://www.bigbridge.org/issue5/art_ira.htm)

⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Personal Record*

¹⁰ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 223.

transformation, or paradigmatic change is the *nigredo*, death, the “world of desert.”¹¹ The desert is a barren space which traps and transforms time. The Western mind is paralyzed by the experience of it, but its natives draw wondrous rituals from its well of inspiration. Port Moresby’s desert of endless sky is the contrary counterpart of Kurtz’s dark jungle, both representing cultural death, an invalidation of moral and intellectual values. This is Hesiod’s theogonistic “gaping void” between heaven and earth: the rift in-between is a space of existential helplessness. “The complications of the three desert religions colliding ... are at the heart of Bowles’s Morocco,”¹² the critic says, but it is really the basic attitude towards the sense of the Absolute in nature, which is decisive only at this preliminal stage. The key of dying well here is submission to unconditionment¹³. Whether as infinite earth or sky, stars or sun, the Absolute has the power to annihilate and redeem (see *Sheltering*, 98-99.): to transform. Under desert conditions, the conception of **time as “eternal stasis”**¹⁴ extinguishes the linear concept of movement. If a vertical movement is not realized in the disintegration of narrative structures of identity, this phase becomes a wrong way, a dead-end, with everything lost and nothing gained. The dissolution of the ego brings no joy or salvation for Bowles’s protagonists, but on a higher level of the reader’s involvement, the regeneration is to be seen, a regeneration of self, an in-flux of experience in the reader’s consciousness. As the final notebook entry in *The Time of Friendship* says, “Now she knew that the mystery & beauty were not to be found in the dark corners of the earth, but under the glaring face of the Absolute, in the desert.”¹⁵ The key to the vitalizing glimpse of the Absolute is the face: once the subject is certain that the terrible force of no attributes has a human face i.e. a mentality or spirituality, the potential nothingness becomes a greater scale of humanity. Through the **threshold experience** of dying to the Western paradigm, the Bowlesian protagonist’s definitive encounter with Africa Minor opens the liminal space which reveals the essence of existence. The alien spirit and culture, and most significantly the natural yet inhuman scenery of the Sahara dislocate him from his hypocritical bourgeois Western background, offering a different, total perspective. The illumination of pure, intense substance is extremely demanding of the psyche.

The **liminal space** of Bowles’s works is not only geographical but also **mental**. The literary topos of **trance** is **psychologically** closely related to the desert experience of dissolution and reintegration is. The state of ecstasy is of majorly romantic fascination in 19-20th century literature, both as source of artistic inspiration and as source of existential fear. In mesmerism as well as in the literature of madness the transgression of psychic borders is the condition of change. These genres constitute an avant-garde of psychoanalytical preoccupation with self-reflective colonial fears and desires. The nature of their interest is often psychotic, pathological e.g. Poe, venturing no further than the deconstruction of the psyche, and so they constitute the preliminal phase of a paradigmatic shift. Bowles labelled his collection *The Delicate Prey and*

¹¹ Northrop Frye, *Words with Power*, 314.

¹² Caponi, *Paul Bowles*, 116.

¹³ The notion of submission appears in the novels as the meaning of Islam: ‘the first duty,’ prior in importance is: ‘To surrender. *Al Islam! Al Islam!*’ (*Spider’s* 329) This attitude can only be the right path, however, in the preliminal phase of breaking down and purifying the ego in the face of exteriority. The further phases of conception and creation require further patterns: the liminal phase totalizes, while the postliminal reconditions. Being stuck in the first phase of annihilation, with only a glimpse into the existential bliss of totality is the unfortunate fate of most of Bowles’s protagonists.

¹⁴ Paul Bowles, *In Absentia*, in: *Collected Stories*, 604.

¹⁵ Lawrence D. Stewart, *Paul Bowles: The Illumination of North Africa*, 143.

Other Stories “detective stories”¹⁶. The darkness of the self-centred heart and narcissistic mind (the negative conditioning factor of verticality) produces material for crime and intellectual intrigue, and Poe’s influence is here significant. The manifestation of mystery in such vortexes brings other associations also, such as Borges and magical realism.

The most direct and lasting literary impression Bowles made is on the Beat movement, by not simply breaking away, out of “alienation, the restlessness, the dissatisfaction,” as Burroughs puts it, but also “heralding a change of consciousness.” Beat is “basically a religious generation ... on a quest, and the specific object of their quest was spiritual.”¹⁷ Burroughs’s cultic *Naked Lunch* is a step from Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* into the liminal “Interzone” of Bowles’s Tangier. Rising out of the failure and disintegration of previous identity sets, is the post-war, postcolonial, postmodern vacuum in which Bowles planted his metanarrative seeds of new life. The sense of **liberation** in his vertically opened texts gives his novels the initiatory aspect, providing the story lines with influx of vitality¹⁸. This pre-literal, pre-colonial mentality is to Bowles’s Western protagonists the challenge, to dive and die into an entirely **different, unsplit mode of existence**. Significantly, none of them come out whole again, their disintegration is irreversible. But through their tragedies, the ritual invocation of their baptisms is itself a form of initiation: a **revelation, a promise of new life**.

¹⁶ Ibid., 79.

¹⁷ Ann Charters, Introduction to Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, xxx.

¹⁸ Bowles’s beloved Tangier is located as one of the few naval points of the Earth, supposedly of a significant vertical energy field.