

Notes to *The Cultic Code, The Living Books of Paul Bowles* on metaphysical desire

Human personality, as well as human relation is a dynamic configuration of binary value couples or polar fields. “The alchemists worked on such fields to transform them from a dominant fusion dynamic (in which one person fears, or actually is overwhelmed by the emotions of the other) into a field that had a rhythmical dynamic of separation and fusion, with neither polarity dominating. ...**Desire**, with its powerful, compulsive quality, is the single most dominant element which impedes the purification of the Attis-Cybelle field. Yet, in its transformed state ..., **desire** is the key ingredient, the fire which drives the process.” (Schwartz-Salant 31-32) The former is the desire to bear and be born in **new form**, the latter is the desire to penetrate and be penetrated by **arch-substance**. the two are but **the pulse** of universal life.

“That there is somewhat higher than either of these two (sensual and intellectual perfection), no other proof doth need than the very process of man’s **desire**, which being natural should be frustrate, if there were not **some farther thing** wherein it might rest at the length contented, which in the former it cannot do.” (Hooker) i.e. the “farther” realm of unreachable spiritual perfection provides the **challenge of dimensional leap** as well as the **promise of repose**.

We may suspect the existence of Divine-Divine love, and we may experience human-human love. But in a mysterious way, the key to both seems to be **Divine-human love**. parental providing on the one hand, and filial devotion on the other, this dyad seems to reach the peak of its heat and light in **marital love** between totality and partiality, Sun and Moon, Sky and Earth: **marital love between the celestial figure and the Earthly figure**, God and man. this marital love lifts the human factor into the very **heat of Divine action i.e. creation and salvation**: it is the special grace of divinity to endow mankind with the role of co-Creator and co-Saviour. In other words, the Book of Life gives time and space for the human adventure first into amnesia then back into recognition. This great historical cycle, the flight of the mind, takes its mould from the dual nature of the soul, being at once self-contained (still, silent) and motivated (moving, sonic).

The heart as the organ of connective empathy, and source of metaphysical and emotional **desire** is the ritual centre. The central sound of Sufi poetry is this **amorous, transgressive yearning for God**:

Yet once more I shall die as man to soar
With angels blest. But even from an angel
I must pass on: all except God must perish.
When I have sacrificed my angel soul,
I shall become what no mind ever conceived. (Rumi)

The **desire** to be higher or lower: fear is the **desire** to be lower. polarity merely marks the ends (positive and negative), the point is that change is not only possible but necessitated by desire.

The postcolonial paradigm may be seen not only as historical/geographical consequence of empirical disintegration (in both the political and the epistemological sense), but as an autonomously structured liminal process in itself. Since the colonial imbalance remains unresolved, the main concern of post-colonialism as a distinct collective rite of passage is neither status elevation nor status reversal (Turner), but a **status equation** manifest in the act of identification. This ritual form may be seen as a civilized even Christian form of temporarily invalidating imbalanced dichotomy and social/economical hierarchy.

1. pre-liminal phase: separation and deconstruction of dualistic values and dialectic operations, rationalized incompatibility of opposites, an extremity of juxtapositional polar tension. epistemological revolution.
2. liminal phase: *communitas* realized in
 - i. formal superimposition,
 - ii. essential identification (agent **desire**, core of transgression and transference) in an indivisible, generative anti-structure (super-structure)
 - iii. the constructive morphogenetic phase: “becoming,” “presencing” in conception.
3. post-liminal: open super-structure of liminal pattern, different scale

The significance of Bowles’s novels in this respect is that in them the process of individuation is depicted as the metaphor of collective post-colonial individuation: the death of the old form, the immersion in a wholly different existential substance, and the birth of a new context.

The loss of identity in superimposition is the effective threshold: it **opens a new space** in the self where the moment/movement of **identification, the second and central liminal sub-phase** in the formation of *communitas* may now take place. “When it encounters resistance from the Other, self-consciousness undergoes the experience of **desire**.” (xviii.) Fanon dares to propose that **desire for the Other**, as clarified in the post-colonial paradigm, is “**the open door of every consciousness**.” (Fanon, *Black Skin* xx.) Yet the drive of desire seems to be not the functional polemic, polar tension of interiority and exteriority as self and other, but the **essential deep unity between the hologram (mould of totality) and the holon (mould of particularity)**, the sea and the drop of water, the desert and grain of sand.

The proposal of this article is that **desire** is like a crosswind that yanks the self irreversibly through the threshold of formal superimposition into the abyss not of the other, but of the super-self. Since will power is ineffective in the liminal zone, **desire** is the agent of the **transgressive act**. More than biochemical substance, it is the connective resonance of the heart by which the **self and the other become inseparably one in the act of extending the narrative core self into metanarrative core self**. This common electromagnetic resonance seems to be the matter of the super-(anti-)structure of identified consciousness.

As much as this liminal act is referential to the self-other unification, it is also referential to the self-mask and the self-universal unification. Fanon vocalizes the former as “insight of [a]

lasting tension of freedom in which the self ... disavows the image of itself ... and confronts the paradox of its own making,” (Fanon, *Black Skin* xxiv) and as “crucial engagement between mask and identity ... from which comes the lasting tension of freedom and the lasting impression of ourselves as others.” The latter extension of self: “**I believe that the individual should tend to take on the universality inherent in the human condition.**” (Fanon, *Black Skin* 12) the individual taking on the universal in the liminal instance. paradox: the instance of dissolution as “recapture the self” and total engagement as “lasting tension of freedom” (Fanon, *Black Skin* 231) freedom – both trans-personal and supra-personal

In close philosophical connection to Fanon is Lévinas, whose “metaphysical desire” (33) and “freedom in peril” (35) are the **status elevative** liminal counterpart of Fanon’s status equation.

Seen from this beyond, therefore, alienation as death-experience is only a possible passage into the liminal, which in its suspension of time appears as a wholly different realm of existence. Bowles provides ample example. **Identification** of self and other is the very core of liminality, practically the heart of change, the essence of transference, the indivisible, unprocessable, indefinable source of existence. “I am not merely here and now, sealed into things. I am **from somewhere else and for something else.**” (Fanon, *Black Skin* xx.) The vaguely circumscribed “else” is the mysterious, irrational, central and generative anti-structural source of existence. As the Orientalist Stenham recognizes in his culminative experience: “*Cogito, ergo sum* is nonsense.” (334) While the previous stages of pre-liminality and liminality are potential, **the point of identification is a fulfilment.** This is the target of Bowles in every novel. The motto of Book Three in *The Sheltering Sky*, Kafka’s target of the **point of no return** indicates this **point of total transgression.**

From the dichotomy of father and son rises the **desire** of the mother in the last section of Ulysses (690-732). Molly Bloom’s meditation from “Yes because” to the cascade of unconditioned “Yes” is a projection of pure new affirmative life, not simply a reminiscing but a clear re-living that becomes a ritual evocation of vitality, and finally an act of resurrecting the body of the text in its beholder.

Locating the threshold of temporal/spatial human existence in liminal experience, Franz Fanon’s philosophy moves forward from the sophism of Lévinas. “I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it.” (Fanon 1952. 232) The paradox of interiority-exteriority is resolved by the key act and fact of **transgression.** In Jungian psychological terms, while the unconscious provides the stepping stones for evolving consciousness, the driving challenge to overstep the threshold of conscious-unconscious arrives through a third, “**transcendent function**”. Fanon’s philosophy remains concerned with skin, body, and earth, and so barely overcoming violence, his short life allowed him no more than a brief vision of the new philosophical paradigm. His transferent **desire** makes an exit in the liberating gesture of identification: “freedom given to me in order to build the world of the You.” (Fanon, *Black Skin* 232) Bending metaphysics towards ethics in *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas constructs with the same *modus operandi* as Fanon: if metaphysics is incapable of metamorphing into sensation, now emotion is used as the agent of transference towards exteriority. His statement

“The metaphysical movement is transcendent,” (Lévinas 35) strikes a harmony with Fanon’s epistemological revolution (Said, *Culture* 325).

Misinterpreting the notion of “transcendent” as exterior is the problem, if not the fraud of the colonial problem paradigm. “The metaphysical **desire** tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*,” (Lévinas 33) towards the “absolute exteriority of the metaphysical.” (Lévinas 35) Representing “a radical break from “the illusions of the subjective,” (Lévinas 290) he also warns that the absolute objectivity of the exterior is a death: **“To die for the invisible – this is metaphysics.”** (Lévinas 35) This lethal abstraction, the dead end of Western metaphysical philosophy is what Port falls prey to and is at once liberated by in his passages of passages. Bowles guides us back from the magnetically barren desert of infinity, into the humane sanctity of *communitas*. Clearly, in his novels successful, fully transgressive rituals are performed only in the form of vital connection.