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Paul Bowles' Aesthetics of Containment

Surrealism, Music, the Short Story

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Introduction

During the 1930s and 1940s, Paul Bowles enjoyed an almost singularly diverse artistic career. A prominent classical composer, responsible for the ‘Tennessee Sound’ that accompanied Tennessee Williams first major theatrical successes, Bowles was also a highly regarded translator, whose profile was such that Jean Paul Sartre commissioned him to translate his play *Huis Clos*, which Bowles rendered in tellingly claustrophobic terms as *No Exit*.¹ His poetry was published in major avant-garde magazines, such as *transition*, and he was an important contributor to the American surrealist magazine *View*. The short stories he wrote over this period, which he would continue to consider as his most important works throughout his life, found publication in such venues as *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Mademoiselle*, alongside the intellectual redoubt of *The Partisan Review*. The significance of this work, however, and the implications of the context within which it was produced, have been overlooked by critics thus far, and in this thesis I hope to provide some balance to the critical framework within which Bowles’ writing is understood.

The relatively limited focus with which critics have considered Bowles’ writing can be attributed in large part to his long-term residence in Tangiers. Indeed, his popular image and later career were both shaped by this self-imposed exile in Morocco, where he lived for more than half a century. As his residence in Tangiers extended, the criticism of his works increasingly took his place of residence as its reference point, to the extent that the first book-length study of his work, the 1974 *Paul Bowles: the Illumination of North Africa* by Lawrence D. Stewart, was framed

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*, trans. Paul Bowles (New York: Samuel French 1958).

explicitly as a work as much about North Africa as it was about Bowles.² Stewart's title suggests, moreover, the fundamental relationship that critics have posited within his work: the mediation of 'Eastern' Morocco to 'The West'. Such a perspective, which renders Bowles predominantly as a cultural conduit, tends to subsequently consider Bowles within the parameters of Orientalism. Since Stewart's book was published, the body of criticism on Bowles has grown steadily. Brian Edwards has shown how "Bowles played a significant part in imagining the relationship of Americans to the foreign in general and to Europe's former colonies in particular", and argues that "Bowles's career challenged the circumscribed sense of what counts as American literature".³ In the same vein, Raj Chandarlapaty has suggested that Bowles' writings "mark a beginning for countercultural synthesis [of east and west]" within American letters, and that "discussion of Bowles's later works... are certainly substantial ground in the context of rapidly growing and internationally proactive American 'counterculture'".⁴ Along similar lines, Rob Wilson has more recently framed Bowles within the context of the Beat movement, exploring the "ethos of self-denial at the core of the life and work of Bowles from his first move to Tangier in 1947 until his death in 1999".⁵ All of these perspectives, however, focus on the connection between the site of Bowles' literary production, and the ideals with which he engages; Edwards posits that Bowles' "residence in Tangier... corresponds with a deep involvement in Moroccan affairs by the US government during which Bowles wrote frequently about North African politics and culture".⁶ The focus of Bowles

² Lawrence D. Stewart, *Paul Bowles: the Illumination of North Africa* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974).

³ Brian T. Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 307.

⁴ Raj Chandarlapaty, *The Beat Generation and Counterculture: Paul Bowles, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 19, 66.

⁵ Rob Wilson, "Masters of Adaptation: Paul Bowles, the Beats, and 'Fellaheen Orientalism'," *Cultural Politics* 8.4 (2012): 194.

⁶ Edwards, *Morocco Bound*, 307.

criticism, therefore, has been skewed by the facts of his biography, and by the enduringly romantic image of Morocco.

Along with the question of geography, however, the focus of criticism can also be attributed to the forms in which different examples of Bowles' works were produced. Certainly, the works that have received most critical attention have been those set in Morocco or North Africa; although at the start of his career Bowles used Latin America and even the US as the setting for his writing, over the long term his writing increasingly reflected his involvement in the culture of North Africa, particularly Tangiers. Equally, however, these North African works were published in a form that critics have been predisposed to prefer: the novel. Not only were all of Bowles' first three novels set in North Africa, the work that occupied the latter stage of his authorial career was also decidedly novelistic. Beginning in 1964 with the text *A Life Full of Holes*, Bowles enjoyed a secondary literary career recording, transcribing and translating Moroccan oral storytellers, whose work Bowles generally produced into the form of 'novels'; over the next 30 years, Bowles translated and published over 20 works by Moroccan authors.⁷ Given the intersection of North African setting and novelistic form, it is not surprising that Bowles' work within the genre of the short story has been critically occluded.

Looking specifically at the case of Ernest Hemingway, Robert Lamb has described the place of the short story in academia as "something of a bastard stepchild", "rarely... appreciated in the context of genre".⁸ Although the last 20 years have yielded two general, longitudinal studies of Bowles' short fiction, one in English and one in German, the focus of critical attention has been shaped nonetheless by a

⁷ Driss ben Hamed Charhadi, *A Life Full of Holes*, trans. Paul Bowles (New York: Grove, 1964).

⁸ Robert Lamb, *Art Matters: Hemingway, Craft, and the Creation of the Modern Story* (Louisiana: LSUP, 2010), xii.

general bias towards the novel as a literary form.⁹ From a number of specific perspectives, however, it is Bowles' short stories that still require the most critical attention. Accordingly, this thesis takes as its central focus Bowles' work within the genre of the short story. The first chapter focusses on the social and political contexts of mid-century America, considering the initial critical response to Bowles' writing, and exploring why it found a hostile reception. Bowles' involvement with surrealism, and career as a composer, guide the second and third chapters respectively; both consider the ways in which Bowles created an aesthetic model alternative to the dominant values espoused by postwar criticism. Finally, the thesis considers Bowles' conceptualisation of the short story as a genre, and the ways in which his writing used form to disrupt his readers' wider ideas about fiction and society

Bowles' first volume of short fiction, *The Delicate Prey*, was dedicated obliquely to the American master of the short story form, Edgar Allan Poe, reading: "To my mother, who first read me the stories of Poe".¹⁰ This subtle nod belies the extent to which Bowles actively styled both his personal life and his style of writing on his earliest literary influence; he explained the dedication of *The Delicate Prey* in a letter to David McDowell, at Random House, as follows:

The introduction should be 'For my mother, through whom I first became acquainted with Poe.' As a small child, I used to be read to by her, and the first short stories with which I came in contact that way were Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. They also made the greatest impression; and she told me the story of his life, so that I resolved then to go to the University of Virginia, which I did, solely because he had attended it.¹¹

⁹ Allen Hibbard, *Paul Bowles: a Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1993); Elke Stracke-Elbina, *Die Short Stories von Paul Bowles, 1939-1990* (Hildesheim and New York: G Olms, 1995).

¹⁰ Paul Bowles, *The Delicate Prey and Other Stories* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), Dedication. All further references to this text will be made with in-text citation (*DP*).

¹¹ Paul Bowles, *In Touch: The Letters of Paul Bowles*, ed. Jeffrey Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 219.

Although sometimes reticent to discuss his own writing from a theoretical perspective, maintaining the position that he had “never been a thinking person,” Bowles not only openly drew inspiration from Poe but, more broadly, was invested in the short story as a literary genre.¹² While his novels may have proven financial successful, as this thesis will argue his model of short story had much greater long term repercussions for the development of the form. Recognised today as one of its most important twentieth century practitioners, Bowles was invested in the form of the short story to the point that he constructed his first novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, as an extended short story – a formal development of short fiction, rather than a text constructed with stylistic principles of novel.¹³

Alongside its descent from Poe, the same volume of stories, *The Delicate Prey*, reflects another neglected aspect of Bowles’ earlier literary career: his involvement in interwar European artistic culture, particularly the movement of surrealism. Despite the wider connotations that the adjective ‘surreal’ has since accumulated, the surrealists themselves were originally an exclusive, self-regulating group of largely French, German and Spanish artists. Although never a member of this group, Bowles was closely affiliated with them – indeed, along with poet and editor Charles Henri Ford, he was the American writer most involved in the surrealist movement. This involvement was not limited to writing, however, and included musical compositions, magazine editing, and acting in surrealist film; during the 1930s in Paris, and the 1940s in New York, Bowles’ artistic production continually intersected with the movement. In terms of his writing, moreover, Bowles was not only involved in the production of explicitly surrealist works – which ranged from

¹² Paul Bowles, in conversation with Jeffrey Bailey, “The Art of Fiction LXVII: Paul Bowles,” *Paris Review* 81 (1981): 75.

¹³ Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky* (London: Penguin, 2009). All further references to this text will be made with in-text citation (SS).

poetry, to editorials, to collections of ‘surreal’ documents – but was also consciously reworking aspects of surrealism into an idiosyncratic artistic practice. Perhaps more interesting than narrowly surrealist work, Bowles’ short fiction offers an access point into the way that aspects of surrealist art became part of a more general American idiom. The stories collected in *The Delicate Prey* were written at a period where Bowles was transitioning from closely surrealist work, into a style that followed a narrower, more precise and closely structured aesthetic regime and, while attentive to many of the same concerns as surrealism, they reflect a distinctive, technocratic approach.

Aside from the theoretical considerations that influenced his use of the form, Bowles also considered himself to be best suited to writing shorter texts. Indeed, this tendency was a natural carry-over from his earlier work as a composer, where his musical compositions increasingly tended towards minimalism, and were characterised by short song forms, rather than extended pieces. The relationship between Bowles’ two ostensibly distinct modes of cultural production, however, has also remained unexplored territory. From the early 1930s until the late 1940s, Bowles’ primary career had been as a classical composer, and he offers an unique example of an artist who found equal success in both music and writing. Although many modernist writers had attempted to bring a musical aesthetic to their fiction, Bowles stands out as an author whose compositional practices drew on years of experience within a musical, rather than written, medium. Composed at the juncture of his musical and authorial praxes, *The Delicate Prey* represents as synthesis of artistic practices, aesthetic priorities and political motivations.

On a broader level, this thesis seeks to position Bowles within a framework that emphasises closure and containment. Taking their cue from *The Sheltering Sky*

and its endless Saharan landscapes, critics have figured Bowles in terms of expansiveness and freedom, often invoking the spirit of existentialism in the process; even Bowles' first critics considered his works to be populated by "the existential school of characters, who find no reason to live".¹⁴ From such a perspective, Bowles can be easily recuperated within the same countercultural tradition as the Beat generation, with studies as recent as those of Chandarlapaty and Wilson continuing to deploy Bowles as a parallel to Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. Despite distinctly countercultural ambitions, however, Bowles' position towards society and stylistic approach to writing diverge considerably from those of the Beats. Invested in establishing an alternative literary tradition, Bowles was fundamentally opposed to the ethos of individual freedom that motivated the form, and underpinned the social implications, for authors such as Kerouac and Ginsberg. Characterised by compression and claustrophobia, Bowles' writing instead evinced his intrinsically anti-democratic political beliefs, and opposition to the narratives of social and political progress espoused by the American government, and reinforced by cultural criticism in the postwar period. This critical stance was heightened by Bowles' awareness of the rapidly increasing influence that American culture was having on a global scale, where the "trend of this century is being set by America for the entire world".¹⁵ In short, this thesis seeks to present a Bowles quite distinct from the benign Moroccan guru of popular imagination. This Bowles is Jorge Luis Borges' first English translator, who adapted Federico Garcia Lorca's work for the stage, and travelled extensively through Latin America. He is a collaborator with Alexander Calder and Max Ernst, who worked with Salvador Dali to produce a ballet based on the poetry of Paul Verlaine. This Bowles studied under musical luminaries Aaron

¹⁴ Fanny Butcher, "A Brilliant First Novel that Lives," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 18, 1949, E4.

¹⁵ Bowles, "Windows on the Past," *Holiday* XVII (1955), 35.

Copland and Virgil Thomson, and was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to facilitate his work as a composer. Above all, this is a writer who saw his writing as “an exhortation to destroy,” and who considered writing to be nothing more than “patterns of words”.¹⁶

¹⁶ Paul Bowles, *Conversations with Paul Bowles*, ed. Gena D. Caponi (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993), 94, 213.

Chapter One

Freedom and Form

Bowles and the Critics

In his introduction for Paul Bowles' collected short stories, Gore Vidal pronounced them to be "unlike anything else in our literature".¹ Considering the influence that they have had on readers and writers who have followed, this scarcely seems like an overstatement – Tennessee Williams felt comfortable describing them as "masterpieces".² Bowles' distinctive aesthetic prompted wider developments in the form of the short story after the Second World War, and part of what made him so important was his peculiar reaction to postwar society; in Williams' words, he was "the American writer who represents most truly the fierily and blindly explosive world that we live in".³ Despite the extensive body of work he produced across his career, Bowles has been permanently defined by his first two volumes of prose, which were published little over a year apart. While Bowles placed higher value on his short stories, it was his first novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, which "seemed to locate his fictional vision for good in the minds of his readers".⁴ In particular, his juxtaposition of rootless, disengaged Americans with alien North African landscapes and people established a pattern of conflicted representations of modern society that derived directly from Bowles' own often deeply antagonistic feelings towards western

¹ Gore Vidal, "Paul Bowles's Stories," in *At Home: Essays, 1982-1988* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 212.

² Tennessee Williams, "Review," in *Paul Bowles: A Study of the Short Fiction*, ed. Allen Hibbard (New York: Twayne, 1993), 208

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Paul Theroux, introduction to *The Sheltering Sky*, by Paul Bowles (London: Penguin, 2009), v.

‘civilisation’.⁵ *The Delicate Prey* followed in 1950, an anthology of short fiction collecting works he had published in a range of literary journals over the previous five years that cemented his reputation for shocking violence and fine, almost delicate form, which James Lasdun has described as “the combination of refinement and delinquency”.⁶ Like *The Sheltering Sky*, these stories take place in a detached, alien landscape, and are written with what Joyce Carol Oates described as a “superlunary authority”.⁷ Both texts were able to generate a large amount of critical attention, from the *New York Times* to the *Kenyon Review*, while also taking a firm hold on the general public and “entered the travel guidebooks as something like required reading”.⁸ The critical reception of these works, however, swung sharply from the almost universal praise that greeted *The Sheltering Sky* to the general censure contemporary critics applied to *The Delicate Prey*.

The impact of Bowles’ debut novel was instantaneous. David Dempsey’s “Cross Section” in the *New York Times*, in January 1950 summed up “a score of nineteen critics rapturously in favour, eight slightly less enthusiastic, and only one... wholly against” – with a swathe of high-literary comparisons in tow, including Hemingway, Eliot and Faulkner.⁹ The tide of positive reception culminated in the inclusion of the novel by the arbiter of American value, William Carlos Williams, at the top of his list of “Best Books I Read this Year”.¹⁰ And, despite the extent to which the novel suggested serious problems with being American, this should not be that surprising. While critics consistently took issue with aspects of Bowles’

⁵ The question of what constitutes ‘civilisation’ and Bowles’ position towards it are challenging, and deserve fuller attention. I will analyse this within the particular context of surrealism later in this thesis.

⁶ James Lasdun, introduction to *Paul Bowles: Collected Stories*, by Paul Bowles (London: Penguin, 2009), x.

⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, “Aspects of Self: A Bowles Collage,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 32, nos. 3–4 (1986): 281.

⁸ Edwards, *Morocco Bound*, 83.

⁹ David Dempsey, “Cross Section,” *New York Times*, January 15 1950, BR5.

¹⁰ “Best Books I Read this Year,” *New York Times*, 4 Dec. 1949, BR4.

characterisation, they were drawn to a quality of ‘adventure’ in the journey of the protagonists, Kit and Port Moresby, which took them into the emptiness of the Sahara and offered a contemporary parallel to the American frontiersman heading into the west, as a “chronicle of startling adventure”.¹¹ Moreover, the personal quests of the Moresbys, for freedom from society, or from themselves, voiced an idea of individual freedom – of a desire to break free from external constraints – which resonated with readers. Cyril Connolly evaluated “the courage and intelligence of their despair” as being the “adolescence” of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* “fully grown up”; they captured an essential quality of the modern individual.¹² The characters’ desire to escape the ‘sheltering sky’ of the title even seemed to inflect the formal qualities of the text as a novel; chafing at the constraints of a traditional novelistic structure, it was initially rejected by his publishers because, as they saw it, it was “simply, not a novel”.¹³ So *The Sheltering Sky* was a success on both a popular and literary level. It offered a tale that conformed to popular expectations of the generic framework the ‘adventure story’, to the extent that it could be recuperated within it, and easily consumed (Tennessee Williams slyly suggested that “a good many people will read this book and be enthralled by it without once suspecting it contains a mirror... of moral nihilism”).¹⁴ But it also offered a vision of a search for freedom that critics could respect.

Bowles’ fellow author Oates once registered the pervasive, insistent power of his short fiction by noting how his stories “linger in the memory – disturbing, vexing

¹¹ Tennessee Williams, “An Allegory of Man and His Sahara,” *New York Times*, December 5, 1949, 21.

¹² Connolly, Cyril. “On Englishmen Who Write American,” *New York Times*, December 18, 1949, BR9

¹³ Evan Brier, “Constructing the Postwar Art Novel: Paul Bowles, James Laughlin, and the Making of *The Sheltering Sky*,” *PMLA* 121.1 (2006): 190.

¹⁴ Williams, “Allegory,” 21.

– literally for decades”.¹⁵ The effect that *The Delicate Prey* had on the literary world was characterised by this same phantasmic quality of haunting; much more than *The Sheltering Sky*, Bowles’ ‘brand’ of short story lingered in his peers’ memory, and contributed to shaping the genre. But American critics reacted almost as violently against *The Delicate Prey* as they had thrown their support positively behind his debut novel. The strongest sense across the reviews was that the work was irrelevant – simply “a bit of exotic reporting”.¹⁶ Critics remained clear that they were not criticising Bowles’ skill as a writer: Charles Jackson continued to praise the technical aspects of his writing, as “crystal clear, economical, unrhetorical, sophisticated”, while Leslie Fiedler thought that he “escaped completely the sort of enmity to language” that other contemporary short story writers seemed to bear.¹⁷ If anything, reviewers were supportive of Bowles’ abilities – they foregrounded his need to change his writing, so that he could reach the level that they considered him capable of reaching. Jackson revealed that he “look[ed] forward to the day when such a forthright and honest writer as Paul Bowles returns to his native scene [of America]”; if the stories of *The Delicate Prey* had been “truly stories... rich with life and meaning”, then he “would have been absorbed and moved, and he would have learned and felt and believed”.¹⁸ So it was not that critics had lost faith in Bowles’ skill, but that they felt his writing was dealing with subject matter that, in a crucial sense, did not matter; literature required a subject that possessed ‘meaning’, that could ‘absorb and move’ the reader. Moreover, Bowles’ failure to produce ‘literature’ was explicitly linked to his choice of form. Where *The Sheltering Sky* has been “that rare thing, a first novel which gets better and better as it goes on” – a text that succeeded because it

¹⁵ Oates, “Self,” 281.

¹⁶ Thomas Barbour, “Little Magazines in Paris,” *Hudson Review* 4 (1951): 281.

¹⁷ Charles Jackson, “On the Seamier Side,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1950, BR4; Leslie A. Fiedler, “Style and Anti-Style in the Short Story,” *Kenyon Review* 13.1 (1951): 170.

¹⁸ Jackson, “Seamier Side,” BR4.

conformed to expectations of ‘a novel’ – the stories of *The Delicate Prey* failed because Bowles produced something too different from what was expected of ‘a short story’.¹⁹

It would not have been shocking to anyone with a passing familiarity with Paul Bowles and his wife, Jane, to read Tennessee Williams arguing in the *New York Times* that “it would not be hard to identify [Port Moresby] with Mr. Bowles himself”.²⁰ Indeed, the western characters that populate *The Delicate Prey* often share a similar resemblance to the Bowleses – James Lasdun notes, for example, the similarity between the Bowleses holidaying habits and the tense scenario of the honeymooning couple in the story “Call at Corazon”.²¹ Jane Bowles resisted comparisons to Kit Moresby, however, and she was not the only person who took issue with the characterisation in *The Sheltering Sky* – in fact, it was the one consistently negative critique elicited by the novel. On the one hand, the characters were criticised for their solipsism. Fanny Butcher described them as part of “the existential school of characters, who find no reason to live (and make readers wonder why the author gave them that privilege)”, while Orville Prescott summarised them as “uprooted, self-centered, egoistic”; their introspection was too great for critics to comfortably accept, and resulted in a sense that they were “pointless”.²² But while they may have been prepared to grant Bowles some skill in rendering characters who “should have been locked up in a mental home”, critics still expressed an element of doubt as to whether they had been developed enough at all.²³ Denham Sutcliffe enunciated this most clearly when he suggested that “Bowles' people never

¹⁹ Connolly, “Englishmen,” BR9.

²⁰ Williams, “Allegory,” 21.

²¹ Lasdun, Introduction, xx.

²² Fanny Butcher, “A Brilliant First Novel that Lives,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 18, 1949, E4; Orville Prescott, “Books of the Times,” *New York Times*, December 5, 1949, 21.

²³ Prescott, “Books,” 21.

particularize; they continue to be uninteresting abstractions, devices for the expression of unrelieved despair”.²⁴ In order to have been satisfied with the Moresbys, therefore, contemporary critics thought that Bowles ought to have made them more real, as individuals capable of reflection and dramatic agency – instead, as Butcher argued, they came across as static: “every human being... is part of the picture and recorded as such, rather than as an actor in the emotional drama of the story”.²⁵ This criticism was even more prominent in the reception of *The Delicate Prey*, where the overwhelming feeling was that the stories were “less story and characterization than scenes and places described with great originality”.²⁶ As Jackson explained, there was nobody with whom the reader could relate in the anthology, a situation that Fiedler put down to Bowles’ “total inability to make intellectual notions as real as feelings, to specify men thinking as convincingly as he can specify men undergoing castration”.²⁷ While critics wanted to “take part in” the stories themselves, and become invested in their characters, they found themselves cut off from them, unable to relate to these ‘undeveloped’ figures.²⁸ Thomas Barbour summarised the reaction, declaring that *The Delicate Prey* was “lacking any... penetration of character”.²⁹

The distance that Bowles’ set up between the characters and his readers formed only part of the problem. In *The Sheltering Sky*, despite feeling a similar distance between themselves and the characters at times – Prescott, for example was “suspicious” that Port and Kit were ultimately just “decadent parasites” – critics still valorised many elements of the Moresbys’ representation.³⁰ In particular, the quest of Port to attain some kind of freedom – to escape “practically all the appurtenances of

²⁴ Denham Sutcliffe, “Novels of the Nebulous Self,” *Kenyon Review* 12 (1950): 734.

²⁵ Butcher, “Brilliant First Novel” E4.

²⁶ Jackson, “Seamier Side,” BR4.

²⁷ Fiedler, “Style,” 170.

²⁸ Jackson, “Seamier Side,” BR4.

²⁹ Barbour, “Little Magazines,” 280.

³⁰ Prescott, “Books,” 21.

modern life”, during which “balanced between fascination and dread, he goes deeper and deeper into [a] dreamlike ‘awayness’” – offered the reader an example of a worthwhile endeavour, an aspiration that lifted the novel above being a “first rate adventure”.³¹ But even with Port’s existential quest in mind, critics still questioned his suitability as a literary role model: simply put, the Moresbys were too lifeless to act for readers to emulate. Butcher put it most distinctly when she claimed that “the reader has no feeling whatever for the people to whom the horrors or the ecstasies happen”.³² While this was embedded within most of the criticism of *The Sheltering Sky*, to some extent or another, it emerged as an overt critique of *The Delicate Prey*, where the question of his characters’ freedom, and ability to offer a model for the reader, became much more insistent. The obvious lack of responsibility shown by the characters – to society, their families, or themselves – was an important concern, with Charles Jackson particularly concerned by the way “a young sailor is finally accepted by his hostile shipmates only after deliberately perpetrating a cruelty that surpasses their own”.³³ The question of the characters’ morality, and of the morality of Bowles’ storyworlds as a whole, placed *The Delicate Prey* under much greater scrutiny – what was the point in reading about such morally ambiguous, if not completely amoral, characters? Jackson described his “active anger at having to put up with [“A Distant Episode”] at all”, and the sense pervaded that the amorality of the characters in the anthology was too great for ‘proper’ literature; indeed, Thomas Barbour condemned the collection as “not fiction”.³⁴ But underlying this was an essential question about the characters’ agency. Did the inhabitants of these stories actually demonstrate any ability to direct their actions, or display any desire to do so? Or were their actions

³¹ Williams, “Allegory,” 38.

³² Butcher, “Brilliant First Novel,” E4.

³³ Jackson, “Seamier Side,” BR4.

³⁴ Ibid; Barbour, “Little Magazines,” 280.

subsumed by the impulse of the narrative, driven by something outside of them? Fiedler suggested this second possibility, arguing that Bowles' fiction operated by "devising ingenious literal levels for allegories of the unconscious"; rather than true characters, the figures in Bowles' fiction were actually components directed by the allegorical machinery of the stories.³⁵ The consensus of critics that the characters were uninteresting, not merely by virtue of being distant, but because they were not "rich with life", was fundamental to the negative judgments of the anthology.³⁶

While these contentions with Bowles' development and use of characters formed a large part of critics' negative reaction to *The Delicate Prey*, readers like Jackson were equally concerned about the world the characters were engaging with. Of the seventeen stories in the anthology, all but three are set in Latin America or North Africa. Employing a similarly 'exotic' setting to *The Sheltering Sky*, the spare villages set against imposing landscapes created an effect that was distinctly "alien", and the stories repeatedly orient themselves around, in the words of one review, "violence and tension arising from the clash of Eastern and Western worlds".³⁷ In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bowles had seemed justified in sending the Moresbys' to North Africa: critics like Prescott could equate its status as "a novel about the Sahara" with being "also about the spiritual wasteland in which its characters wander".³⁸ But in the stories of *The Delicate Prey*, the qualities of the landscape that were able to be extrapolated out to a metaphorical framework for the novel become major flaws, disconnecting his work from reality. Barbour was content to reduce them to "a bit of exotic reporting", while Fiedler suggested that "his work denies the world of our

³⁵ Fiedler, "Style," 160.

³⁶ Jackson, "Seamier Side," BR4.

³⁷ "New Books," *College English* 12, no. 5 (1951): 305.

³⁸ Prescott, "Books," 21.

every-day”.³⁹ Clearly the use of deliberately foreign settings was jarring for contemporary critics, and Jackson’s critique offers a clearer picture of why this was the case. Such landscapes have, he argues, the “connotation of romantic and far places” appropriate to “‘escape’ literature”; Bowles had used his settings for entirely the opposite purpose, to practice “brutality and horror” upon his reader.⁴⁰ Jackson juxtaposes Bowles’ use “the remote, the strange, the untypical” against where he ought to have set his work: his “native scene” where he could give “personal, intimate, and, shall we say, down-to-earth stories or glimpses of the small town in which he was brought up”.⁴¹ In other words, Bowles’ stories were disconnected from ‘reality’ because they failed to deal with relevant issues within an *American* setting. If he had merely intended to provide escapism, then these settings would have been more critically acceptable. But because his stories are challenging and confront their reader, aspiring to some *meaning*, they ought to have been located somewhere *real*. Bowles’ critics were very concerned with what the stories would mean to their reader: Jackson, for example, is desperate to find the stories “rich with life and meaning”, and to “have learned” from them.⁴² Detached from American life and the issues relevant to the reader, his stories were pointless as fiction; they were not “truly... stories”.⁴³

To dismiss Bowles’ short stories as merely exotic tableaux was one thing, but to use this as a justification for invalidating their status as ‘stories’ altogether seems a rather dramatic step. For critics like Jackson, however, the understanding of Bowles’ setting was linked to much larger questions of his prose style. The element that this criticism focused on in particular was the ‘picturesque’ quality of his prose. Across all

³⁹ Barbour, “Little Magazines,” 280; Fiedler, “Style,” 170.

⁴⁰ Jackson “Seamier Side,” BR4.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

of its initial reviews, *The Delicate Prey* was insistently described in visual, painterly terms: Fiedler was taken aback by “the astonishing ease and rhythmical beauty of the style”, while Jackson considered his writing “a series of brilliantly graphic, even poetic, descriptions”.⁴⁴ The treatment of landscape was at the heart of this reception, eliciting at once praise and deep critique. Bowles’ attention to landscape was contrasted with the lack of attention to the plot and action of his stories, to the extent that “they are less story and characterisation than scenes and places described with great originality.”⁴⁵ When critics were prepared to accept that they had some level of plot, it was only in a mythic, fable-like sense, detached from ‘reality’: as Fiedler put it, “his mythic North Africa and Latin America has its reality in the nightmare”.⁴⁶ This fable-like prose style was considered part of a faddish style of short story that was ‘corrupting’ the form, in this case, the decidedly European mode of “the ‘Kafka’ story”.⁴⁷ Indeed, Fiedler argued that “the short story has fallen heir to various alien obligations since its institution”, and suggested that Bowles offered a particularly clear example of the kind of ‘alien obligations’ that were burdening the American short story.⁴⁸ This sense of falling away from an ideal style of writing is exacerbated by the repeated comparison between Bowles and Hemingway – while *The Sheltering Sky* was “very nearly back at Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*” in terms of quality American writing, *The Delicate Prey* had fallen under the “influences [that] have joined to undermine the prestige of ‘plot’ in the short story”.⁴⁹ So on a broader level, the stories failed critically because, even as ‘fables’, they lacked the action critics thought was necessary for them to succeed as sophisticated fiction. While *The*

⁴⁴ Fiedler “Style,” 170; Jackson, “Seamier Side,” BR4.

⁴⁵ Jackson, “Seamier Side,” BR4.

⁴⁶ Fiedler, 170.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 158.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Connolly, “Englishmen,” BR9; Fiedler, “Style,” 159.

Sheltering Sky could be comfortably recuperated as a “gripping... series of adventures” by focusing on the Moresby’s movement across the Sahara – “a chronicle of startling adventure against a background of the Sahara” – *The Delicate Prey*’s stories were the equivalent of still-lives, stagnant and “actionless, which is to say characterless”.⁵⁰

This sense of stagnation does not have to be solely attributed to the amount of ‘action’ in Bowles’ stories, as it could equally be considered a result of the violence that is symptomatic of the entire collection of *The Delicate Prey*. Certainly, his overwhelming use of violence – shocking, graphic and visceral – was one of the most contentious issues for critics. Advertisements for the book deployed it as a major hook for potential readers, and even in 2011, the *Modern Classics* edition published by Penguin, collecting three of Bowles’ most famous stories, proclaimed them to be “unbearably tense tales from sun-drenched and brutal climes”, telling of “vengeance, abandonment, violence and cruelty enjoyed and suffered, in a surreal realm of horror”.⁵¹ On original publication, Bowles was condemned as “a pornographer of terror”, as a writer who produced “such unspeakable horror and brutality that there is no sense in trying to describe it”.⁵² The language used here is an important indicator of why the violence of these stories was viewed as so repugnant. It was not simply that Bowles was depicting horrifying events; Fiedler accepts that “we must, somewhere between the limits of squeamishness and abandon, learn to come to terms with horror”.⁵³ But Bowles presented his violence in a titillating way, in an approach that ran counter to any social use that its deployment could perform – he seemed “a

⁵⁰ Butcher, “Brilliant First Novel,” E4; Williams, “Allegory,” 21; Jackson, “Seamier Side,” BR4.

⁵¹ Rear cover of *Modern Classics: The Delicate Prey*, by Paul Bowles (London: Penguin, 2011). This edition included “The Delicate Prey,” “A Distant Episode,” and “The Circular Ruins.”

⁵² Fiedler, “Style,” 170; Jackson, “Seamier Side,” BR4.

⁵³ Fiedler, “Style,” 171.

secret lover of the horror he evokes”.⁵⁴ Rather than offering an image of violence that could help society grow, his use of violence seemed to actively frustrate growth. On a more particular level, the violence cut off the potential for the individual characters to grow within the stories. Some of the highest praise for *The Sheltering Sky* came for its ability to show the development of the individual in the modern world, “an allegory of the spiritual adventure of the fully conscious person into modern experience”.⁵⁵ In *The Delicate Prey*, however, the insistent violence cuts off any possibility for such growth and, as such, the text remains ‘characterless’. Bowles’ violence, then, was characterised as something that served no function, and reduced his stories to “a vehicle for the vicarious enjoyment of sadistic perversion”.⁵⁶ Moreover, it made his texts socially irresponsible, as it actively frustrated both the reader’s, and the characters’ growth – qualities that were critical in any *worthwhile* text.

Given its success, both popular and critical, it is scarcely surprising that feelings about *The Sheltering Sky* influenced how *The Delicate Prey* was received. Compared to Port and Kit Moresby, critics would naturally find the ‘abstractions’ of Bowles’ short stories thinly painted, or underdeveloped, just as their brief trajectories would seem ‘actionless’ compared to the ‘adventure story’ of the Moresbys’ trek into the Sahara. These apparent shortcomings were predicated upon the change in form, from novel to short story; a bias towards a novelistic mode of expression underpinned critics’ overwhelmingly negative response to the anthology. Their differing reactions to the texts, however, also reflect a broader literary agenda – it is possible to discern, across the critical responses, some clear common expectations from a piece of literature. Foremost was the ability of the characters to offer some kind of model for

⁵⁴ Ibid., 170.

⁵⁵ Williams, “Allegory,” 38.

⁵⁶ Barbour, “Little Magazines,” 280.

the reader, or at the very least, illustrate a ‘point’. Even the Moresbys were reasonably underdeveloped, but at least their actions could be extrapolated to suggest a model of contemporary, dislocated man; critics felt the characters of Bowles’ short fiction lacked any such ‘meaning’. Behind this lay a question of whether Bowles was actually presenting ‘characters’ in his stories at all. In order to qualify as literary characters, the criticism seems to argue, they ought to display some kind of agency. Instead, the figures in *The Delicate Prey* seemed more impelled by an external force than any self-direction. This is symptomatic of the action in the stories in general. Where *The Sheltering Sky* was driven forwards by the central journey into the Sahara, there seemed to be nothing human propelling these stories forward at all. It was ultimately, therefore, a question of the kind of ‘story’ that critics believed literature required. *The Delicate Prey* presented not novelistic action, but stories that read like fables, where meaning was couched not in the particulars of what happened, but in the story as allegory. Because Bowles was presenting ‘action’ and ‘meaning’ in a way that was not *specific*, critics were happy to dismiss it. In fact, the need for writing that took place in a context that was specific, and to which the reader could relate, emerged in the criticism of his settings, too, which were dismissed as ‘exotic reporting’, because readers could not relate to them, or take meaning from their use. Instead, Bowles was urged to write about America, as specificity could clearly only emerge from within a local context. From this perspective, Bowles’ anthology was considered to have failed on two important grounds: it did not offer ‘meaning’ for its readers, or for society more broadly, and it did not present stories that could be related to by its readers. Perhaps the best illustration of this is in the reception of the most controversial aspect of Bowles’ prose, the graphic violence. Fiedler argued that *The Delicate Prey* “compels from us the shocked, protesting acceptance of terror as an

irreducible element of being. The whole impact of his work is the insistence on the horrible”; while it may engage the reader with the story to some extent (by shocking them), it also alienated them through its depiction of action to which they could not relate.⁵⁷ Moreover, it offered no productive message, served no useful purpose. Instead, it confronted the reader with the reality of the opposite: violence, severance and decay.

Freedom and Liberal Criticism

Amongst the barrage of criticism *The Delicate Prey* was subject to in America, there were some plausible critiques of Bowles’ stories. His characters, for instance, certainly do not live up to a novelistic level of reflection or self-awareness; even a critic like Ihab Hassan, who largely admired Bowles’ prose, acknowledged his “inability to conceive and develop characters dramatically”.⁵⁸ The weight of negative criticism does, however, seem excessive, especially in light of the impact the anthology can be seen to have had in retrospect. Just as *The Delicate Prey* particularly irked contemporary critics, however, it also particularly appealed to contemporaries of Bowles such as Vidal and Williams. Understanding the mood of criticism in the postwar period, and the larger cultural and literary forces with which Bowles’ text was grappling, can make clearer why it had such a polarising effect.

In his 1971 monograph on American fiction between 1950 and 1970, *City of Words*, Tony Tanner described the “abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillness,

⁵⁷ Fiedler, “Style,” 170.

⁵⁸ Ihab Hassan, “Review,” in *Paul Bowles: A Study of the Short Fiction*, ed. Allen Hibbard (New York: Twayne. 1993), 219.

choices and repudiations are all your own”.⁵⁹ Having established a model in which the desire for freedom is the underlying principle in American literature, Tanner conceived of the dream for “a genuine freedom from all cultural patterning” as the defining feature of postwar fiction.⁶⁰ While his argument could seem naïve in hindsight, oversimplifying some of the complications that the period presents, it does capture something particularly compelling about America’s imaginations of itself. Indeed, it builds upon solid ground: almost from its inception, America has defined itself by its unique brand of freedom, and by its progress towards greater liberty. John Dewey, writing on the cusp of war in 1939, declared that “the attainment of freedom is the goal of [America’s] political history” – in a crucial sense, Tanner was capturing what was essential to America’s understanding of its own history, and future.⁶¹ The idea of freedom, moreover, was to become radically more charged after the Second World War, as America took on an international burden as democratic superpower, and “the American novel itself took on a new world role”.⁶²

Dewey’s declaration ultimately proved prophetic: the responsibility of America after the conflict it was about to be drawn into would be defined (at least by America) as one of ‘protector of freedom’. While the kind of freedom that had engaged politicians – and writers – before the war had been an individual, or at least local one, in the power vacuum after the Second World War, America “had to assume a world role”.⁶³ Moreover, as it found itself competing for hegemony against the Soviet Union, the concept of freedom was increasingly co-opted as part of the rhetoric of American dominance, “the claim to global authority” that “cold war American

⁵⁹ Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (London: Jonathan Cape), 1971, 15.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York: Capricorn, 1963), 4.

⁶² Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel* (Oxford: OUP, 1983) 159.

⁶³ Ibid.

asserted... in a narrative that permeated most aspects of American culture”.⁶⁴ This narrative relied upon a competition between two modes of existence – one free, one restricted – and the explicit equation of freedom with democracy. Turning to a speech delivered in July of 1950, just four months before the publication of *The Delicate Prey*, in which President Harry S. Truman addressed the American people on the subject of the Korean War, it is clear the extent to which concepts of freedom and democracy were conflated with an ideal of America as global superpower. They were a nation “determined to preserve... freedom – no matter what the cost... for all people”; Truman’s stress on America’s exemplary brand of democracy, “how free men, under God, can build a community of neighbors, working together for the good of all”, suggests the universal benefits of freedom, and the necessity of American involvement in its expansion.⁶⁵ But perhaps most importantly, his pronouncement that “the American people are unified in their belief in democratic freedom [and] are united in detesting Communist slavery” established a polar difference between America and the Soviet Union, where America’s democratic freedom makes it an exemplary world power. America’s image abroad, and its own conceptualisation of itself, were now intrinsically tied to an identity of freedom – a freedom that was at once individual, and contingent upon a democratic society.

Of course, this ideal of a shared American passion for freedom did not simply exist as an empty term in the realm of political rhetoric. Profoundly influential, it was argued for with equal force and conviction by a large body of literary critics in the postwar period who, from a liberal bastion in New York, developed a model of ‘ethical fiction’ whose goals accorded with those expressed by Truman to an

⁶⁴ Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narrative, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 4.

⁶⁵ Harry S. Truman, cited in Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion, 1950-1953* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 69.

extraordinary degree. Indeed, to understand the position from which Bowles' American readers approached the text, it is important to understand the priorities associated with 'liberalism' in postwar America. Indeed, liberalism could be considered as a unifying feature of the American political scene in the mid-twentieth century. To this effect, Louis Hartz, in his 1955 text *The Liberal Tradition in America*, offered a narrative of American history that is characteristic of the position held more widely by the loosely associated group of New York Intellectuals in the postwar period, in that it places the concept of 'liberalism' at the centre of American culture and history.⁶⁶ Basing his argument on what he described as "the storybook truth about American history," where the country was founded by men escaping the oppression of Europe to find freedom in a 'New World,' Hartz considered the most salient feature of American society to be that "the American community is a liberal community."⁶⁷ Rather than 'liberalism' sitting at one end of an ideological spectrum, in opposition to a conservative alternative, Hartz argued that there had "never been a 'liberal movement' or a real 'liberal party' in America," and that, instead, the belief in the primacy of individual freedom constituted the foundation for national identity: American society "only had the American Way of Life."⁶⁸ His characterisation of this trans-partisan ideology, where "'Americanism' brings McCarthy together with Wilson," suggests the particular importance that liberalism had taken on with the onset of the Cold War.⁶⁹ It had become the defining feature around which Americans

⁶⁶ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: an Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955). There is a substantial body of research on the New York Intellectuals from recent years; see Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: the New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and its Circle, 1934-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); and *The New York Intellectual Reader*, ed. Neil Jumonville (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁶⁷ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition*, 1.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

could orient themselves against the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, whether one aligned oneself with red-baiting McCarthyism or Wilsonian politics.

American critics of this era, particularly the New York Intellectuals like Lionel Trilling and Richard Chase, positioned themselves deliberately along ‘liberal’ lines and saw the role of criticism in the postwar period as particularly concerned with promoting fiction that emphasised personal responsibility and bore a close relationship to the ‘lived experience’ of the American people. This emerging strain of ‘modern’ literary criticism was designed, in Trilling’s words, “to construct people whose quality of intelligence, derived from literary study or refined by it, would ultimately affect the condition of society in certain good ways.”⁷⁰ Underpinning their desire for a new paradigm of fiction and criticism was a belief that, in the wake of the inexplicable violence that characterised the Second World War, contemporary society was uniquely in need of such a change. The ethical dimensions of their programme were impelled by the sense that at “perhaps at no other time has the enterprise of moral realism been so much needed.”⁷¹ Their perspective, however, just like the broader currents of ‘liberalism,’ was further inflected by the shadow of the Cold War and the demonisation of the Soviet Union as coercive and totalitarian. Geraldine Murphy has demonstrated how “formerly radical intellectuals like Trilling... felt it incumbent on them to deplore the ‘totalitarianism’ of the Soviet Union and embrace the ‘freedom’ of the west.”⁷² The concern that Bowles’ critics showed regarding his stories’ relationship to reality – especially the stipulation that it be grounded in ‘his native scene’ – is reflective of this broader concerns to shape a literature that could

⁷⁰ Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965), 186.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁷² Geraldine Murphy, “Romancing the Centre: Cold War Politics and Classic American Literature,” *Poetics Today* 9.4 (1988): 738.

oppose a Soviet culture characterised as restrictive and oppressive with a democratic, *American* aesthetic.

As Lionel Trilling proposed, in one of the clearest enunciations of the ambitions of this liberal criticism, society needs “books that raise questions in our minds not only about conditions but about ourselves, that lead us to refine our motives and ask what might lie behind our good impulses”.⁷³ Literature could be a powerful tool in bettering the individual, and helping to develop them into a more sophisticated entity. Trilling was not endorsing a programme of self-help, however, but a programme of literature that could communicate something that made the individual freer. After all, as Dewey argued, in America “the idea of freedom has been connected with the idea of individuality of the individual”; fiction that could offer its reader a greater level of self-awareness would necessarily give them a greater level of freedom.⁷⁴ Just as Truman’s speech suggested that the freedom of the individual could be co-opted as part of a strategy to win greater freedom for mankind, Trilling and fellow liberal critics argued that literature should engender a greater level of freedom for society as a whole. As such, the postwar author had an obligation to engage with contemporary issues, and communicate a vision for a better world, as literature needed “people who are specifically and passionately concerned with social injustice”.⁷⁵ Of course, fiction could not exist in a critical vacuum, or enact its social benefit without the help of a secondary apparatus. The vision of freedom that fiction could offer would be refined by the emerging strain of ‘modern’ literary criticism: designed “to construct people whose quality of intelligence, derived from literary study or refined by it, would ultimately affect the condition of society in certain good

⁷³ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (London: Penguin, 1970), 221.

⁷⁴ Dewey, *Freedom*, 24

⁷⁵ Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, 221.

ways”.⁷⁶ Underpinning the desire for this new paradigm of fiction and criticism in the late 1940s and early 1950s was a belief that contemporary society was uniquely in need of such a change. The urgency of their programme was impelled by a sense that at “perhaps at no other time has the enterprise of moral realism been so much needed”.⁷⁷ In this light, it seems hardly surprising that Jackson or Fiedler should place so much emphasis on the lack of freedom Bowles’ characters displayed, or the ‘irrelevance’ of his material – these were at the heart of contemporary criticism’s concerns.

Trilling’s assertion that society was in need of ‘moral realism’ suggests a particular aspect to this model of ‘ethical’ literature: a specific kind of engagement with reality. On a superficial level, this could be manifested in a sense of being in touch with the ‘reality’ of contemporary America, and the particulars of contemporary life. This is certainly reflective of critics’ insistence that Bowles return to the subject of his native land and write about the ‘local scene’; as Trilling argued, “the novel, then, is a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always the social world, the material of its analysis being always manners as the indication of the direction of a man’s soul”.⁷⁸ If Bowles were to produce ‘real’ literature, it would by necessity deal with America. Moreover, the sense that writers should be dealing with specifically American themes, presented in an idiom, and with an energy, that was peculiarly *American*, was charged with the ideals of Carlos Williams, whose concept of writing ‘in the American grain’ had, by the 1940s, gained traction. Like Benjamin Franklin, one of Carlos Williams’ central ‘American’ figures, Bowles ought to be

⁷⁶ Trilling, *Beyond Culture*, 186.

⁷⁷ Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, 221.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

“borrow[ing]... from the primitive profusion of his surroundings”.⁷⁹ But critics were also demanding a more particular model of engaging with ‘reality’. Trilling and his fellow liberal critics were deeply concerned with how the individual reacts to, receives and processes the ‘real world’ around them, arguing that fiction ought to provide a similarly nuanced interaction. In part, this could be engendered by a return to ‘realism’ in fiction; certainly, critics prioritised ‘realistic’ prose, and as Malcolm Bradbury notes, after the Second World War, there was a tendency of writers “moving back towards realism”.⁸⁰ But this new realism was inflected by a new sense of complexity that the experiences of war had suggested. As Thomas Schaub has argued, “the novel’s relationship to social history – to ‘reality’ – was the central preoccupation of the critics who wrote about narrative fiction in the years after World War II” – it was no longer possible to consider ‘reality’ as a straightforward, of self-evident, monolithic concept.⁸¹ Instead, they prescribed an attitude to reality that was at once realistic and nuanced with an awareness of the uncertainty of experience, and the nebulousness of morality. They, and many of the most prominent authors of the era, were “much concerned with moral uncertainty and metaphysical complexity”.⁸² In fact, because fiction was such a “perfect vehicle for the ironies and paradoxes of the moral life and the social history it produces”, authors had an *obligation* to acknowledge the uncertainty of modern experience, to produce “a fiction deeply conscious of alienation and anomie, often voiced in the despairing intonations of modernism, yet also turned towards society”.⁸³

⁷⁹ William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1956), 153.

⁸⁰ Bradbury, *American Novel*, 166.

⁸¹ Thomas Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 25.

⁸² Bradbury, *American Novel*, 163

⁸³ Schaub, *Cold War*, 22; Bradbury, *American Novel*, 166.

So far, this thesis has focused on the liberal critics based largely in New York, and has overlooked the dissenting voices of the Southern New Critics, and their emphasis on technique and style. Instead, it has followed a model that understands Trilling and his peers to be unconcerned with the finer points of prose styling, and attuned instead to the ‘ideas’ and ‘meaning’ of a text. But as Schaub so clearly notes, the New York critics and New Critics were surprisingly “in accord” that “how literature achieved [relevance] relied... on form”.⁸⁴ The presentation of the kind of reality that the liberal critics advocated relied upon a prose that was sophisticated and attuned to doubleness, uncertainty and indeterminacy; their ‘moral realism’ was as much a concept of style as it was of intent. The most prominent victim of this stylist ethos was naturalism – increasingly eschewed by authors, and condemned by critics, it presented a view of the world that was labelled simplistic and, in light of the newly complex understanding of the world, actively misleading. As Schaub makes clear:

During this time, ‘naturalistic’ methods seemed to provide too little access to how things really are or might be. In its materialism, its assumption of determinate behaviour, and its documentary methods [naturalism] relied too much for its truths upon surface detail and failed to provide an adequate portrait of the inner life.⁸⁵

Because naturalistic prose was too concerned with the ‘superficial’ appearance of the world, and was not sufficiently attuned to the complexities of interiority, or able to register deeper layers of meaning, it was seen as completely unsuited for the modern enterprise of literature. Moreover, it was unable to reflect a particular point of view, and “seemed bereft of moral conviction or ideological consciousness”.⁸⁶ From this position, naturalistic fiction was never going to be able to generate enough of a perspective to confer a sense of meaning to its reader. So while critics could still

⁸⁴ Schaub, *Cold War*, 33.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸⁶ Bradbury, *American Novel*, 162.

appreciate the skill of Bowles' prose – they were in no doubt over his technical capabilities as an author – their insistent definition of it as 'picturesque' was loaded with negative connotations. Bowles' short stories seemed to only present their action on a superficial level (using the same 'documentary methods' Schaub described) and his authorial voice was almost invisible, so it is understandable that his fiction should be considered naïve, or lacking relevance by certain critics. His presentation of violence, moreover, with its stark, uncomplicated brutality, was an active irresponsibility. Bowles had an obligation to invest its portrayal with some level of moral complexity, or inflect it with a partisan voice; to simply provoke the reader with 'pointless' violence was to commit a kind of literary crime against his reader.

The fear that underpinned this reaction to Bowles' use of violence was not simply that it might shock, or adversely affect the individual reader; critics were concerned that this kind of unethical fiction could harm society as a whole. As Truman's speech made explicit, American fiction was predicated upon a democratic model. Certainly, the freedom that both the political and critical machines were promoting was one that validated the individual, but as part of a broader programme whose ambit always recognised, even favoured, the development of society as a whole. If America's democratic identity was founded on the freedom of the individual, then its concept of freedom was just as inextricably linked to the welfare of the nation as a whole. In particular, its identity relied upon an idea of generative debate, and growth through difference; as Dewey explicated, "democracy is expressed in the attitudes of human beings".⁸⁷ American society was uniquely free because it allowed for the expression of personal, individual feelings, which, through dialogue with opposing ideas, continually shaped the country for the better, as Trilling

⁸⁷ Dewey, *Freedom*, 25.

suggested: “a culture is not a flow, nor even a confluence; the form of its existence is a struggle, or at least debate – it is nothing if not a dialectic”.⁸⁸ When, after the Second World War, America came into ideological collision with the Soviet Union, America’s image as defender of freedom became even more contingent upon this democratic dialogue. Literary critics in particular seized on this as a powerful expression of what was needed from contemporary literature: Trilling and fellow liberal critics “served to reinforce the dominant cold war polarities which privileged American democracy, imagined as a fruitful tension of conflicting groups, in contrast with the monolithic repressiveness of the soviet union”.⁸⁹ Because Bowles’ naturalistic prose was only able to present a single, uninflected view of the world, and failed completely to register conflicting perspectives or arguments, it was entirely unsuitable for the kind of role fiction ought to be playing. The short story as a form, moreover, was inherently limiting in scope; defined by its brevity, it was an unwieldy way to try and communicate the kind of ‘fruitful tension’ that critics commended, ill-equipped to deal with multiple perspectives, or even gesture to their possibility. *The Delicate Prey* was treated harshly because, in its inability to represent a democratic experience, it was implicitly aligning itself with an opposition towards America freedom. Moreover, there were questions about just how accessible his fiction, as short stories, was to a wider audience.

In fact, the short story was almost completely unsuitable for achieving the aims of this liberal critical agenda. If we return to Tanner’s vision for an ‘unpatterned, unconditioned life’, and a model of fiction that enunciates such a freedom, what seems most striking is the extent to which the literature he describes is underpinned by a *formal* freedom: a lack of restriction on style, on representation, on structure or

⁸⁸ Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, 22-3.

⁸⁹ Schaub, *Cold War*, 23.

lineage. This parallels the liberal critics' broader conceptualisation of fiction, as needing to enunciate in form, as well as meaning, the democratic freedom they envisaged – Tanner and Trilling were surprisingly in agreement that for fiction to deliver a message of freedom, it must communicate it in a prose that is equally open. As a form, the short story is characterised by its compactness, and its formal restrictiveness – there is only so much that can be expressed within the confines of such a limited word count and, at the end of the 1940s, before the advent of post-modernism, still only a limited number of accepted ways of communicating it. As I have argued, there was a strong feeling at this juncture, too, that the short story had been hijacked by an 'alien' agenda that was frustrating its ability to communicate anything 'worthwhile' to its reader. By contrast, the novel was ideally suited to communicate freedom. Open to experimentation, unburdened (in America) by tradition, or by editorial expectations, the novel had become "the central form in which the aspirations and contradictions of the changing American culture was expressed".⁹⁰ It allowed the expression of a story that could at once communicate the contingencies of modern life, render conflicting viewpoints (and, in fact, be driven by internal conflict), and enunciate a truly democratic freedom that could better the individual reader. By the 1950s, the novel that dominated American fiction, most valorised by critics, was a kind of sprawling picaresque. Fuelled by "romantic anarchism, emphasising spontaneity, instinct, open style and free expression", it propelled its characters from one adventure to another, creating a storyworld at once open and unpatterned.⁹¹ In this light, the relentless re-imagining of *The Sheltering Sky* as an 'adventure story' is much more explicable – the open, sprawling narrative of the Moresbys' almost random wanderings through the Sahara encapsulated this open,

⁹⁰ Bradbury, *American Novel*, 167.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

uncontained ideal of ‘adventure’. But at the same time as it allowed for a more original, more open kind of fiction, the novel was also still more closely related to the real world, and the ‘reality’ that was so important to postwar critics. Unlike the short story, which (as *The Delicate Prey* was criticised for doing) seemed to have accumulated layers of stylisation and allegory that disconnected it from ‘real life’, the novel was still considered to be fundamentally rooted in reality. Trilling argued that its value as literature was in part because it “tells us about the look and feel of things, how things are done and what things are worth”.⁹² So the unavoidable feeling that critics reacted adversely to *The Delicate Prey* simply because it was a collection of short stories, rather than a novel, is not baseless; the novel was undoubtedly the form of literature given primacy by the liberal consensus that unified criticism in the postwar period.

The burden that this critical agenda placed on writers was not insubstantial, and it could be suggested that it placed too much responsibility upon writers to produce novels that could communicate a larger, politicised model of individual freedom. From the perspective of the rhetoric surrounding postwar American identity, freedom itself was not simply a right: if Americans were free, then they owed a responsibility to that freedom. This is reflected, on a national scale, in Truman’s declaration that freedom was “the goal we seek not only for ourselves, but for all people”.⁹³ Just as America had a responsibility to protect global freedom, and ensure that they validated their own position as free; the individual (whether writer, critic, or reader) bore a responsibility to promote freedom in the same way. Truman’s speech also clarifies the extent to which the ‘proper’ use of this responsibility is based upon moral judgment – he envisages ‘freedom’ as “essential if men are to live as our

⁹² Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, 213-4.

⁹³ Truman, *Korean War*, 69.

Creator intended us to live”.⁹⁴ This development was not specific to the Cold War, however; freedom has traditionally been regarded as an intrinsically moral concept in America. American democracy has been consistently conceived of as “a way of personal life... which provides a moral standard for personal conduct”.⁹⁵ However, the relationship became particularly loaded as America was drawn into opposition with the Soviet Union: democratic freedom had to become even more connotative of morality, as its opposition to the inherently (for America) amoral position of communism increased. There was greater urgency to recognise that “the source of the American democratic tradition is moral”,⁹⁶ to give it greater validity against ‘godless’ and ‘moral-less’ communism. A naturalistic prose style, then, with its explicit lack of morality, would naturally be in conflict with the goals of liberal fiction (and the broader responsibilities of America), and seem “bereft of moral conviction”.⁹⁷ Worlds like those of *The Delicate Prey*, moreover, where events transpire ‘naturally’, in a way that is devoid of design, present a clear lack of *justice* – violence and retribution occur without any consideration or deliberation. America’s global role as a defender of freedom demanded that freedom and justice be aligned; for America to fight in Korea, the cause of freedom would have to be intrinsically ‘just’. When Truman asserts that “American people are unified in their belief in democratic freedom”, he is asserting that freedom itself is a just cause, one worthy of belief.⁹⁸ Bowles’ fiction, on the other hand seems to elicit no such belief from its reader.

There was a gulf that existed between Bowles’ style and the expectations that liberal criticism imposed on fiction. But even considering a broader view of America

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Dewey, *Freedom*, 130.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 162.

⁹⁷ Bradbury, *American Novel*, 162

⁹⁸ Truman, *Korean War*, 69.

in 1950, the discrepancies between the compression of *The Delicate Prey* and the general ideals of freedom and democracy is clear. There was a belief that literature needed to serve a useful function because, as Dewey had argued, “works of art once brought into existence are the most compelling means of communication by which emotions are stirred and opinions formed”.⁹⁹ So when Denham Sutcliffe reduced Bowles’ characters to “uninteresting abstractions”, he was taking issue with their disconnection from reality, and the persistent critique that these stories failed to account for the reality of the life of its readers was part of a fundamental questioning of the relevance of his fiction.¹⁰⁰ If he was not offering stories that were connected to ‘reality’, how could he communicate anything worthwhile? And crucially, the characters that populated his stories seemed to possess none of the freedom that was so essential to being American. Propelled by the machinery of the stories, rather than any agency or freedom, they offered an inverted image of the characters Tanner praised, ‘fettered’ and ‘patterned’. The prose in which he presented these characters, moreover, was completely unsuited for registering a nuanced perspective on morality. There was no space in his work for dialogic exchange – the monothetic lens of his stories offered only a single view of experience, offering none of the opportunity for growth through debate that was so crucial to American democracy. But to some extent, all of this criticism was predicated upon the fact that, as Jackson argued, they were not ‘truly stories’ because nothing of any worth happened in them. If Bowles were to communicate freedom, it would have to be through the action of his stories – just as *The Sheltering Sky* had created its sense of freedom through the ‘meaningful’ movement of Port and Kit into the wilderness of North Africa. This kind of action also provided the possibility for the necessary tension to arise that could shape the

⁹⁹ Dewey, *Freedom*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Sutcliffe, “Nebulous Self,” 734.

characters in an ethical, democratic way. Ultimately, for the tales of *The Delicate Prey* to have been assessed as ‘truly’ stories, and for them to have succeeded critically, Bowles needed to pass judgement, and make the reader aware of the morality of what took place, imparting meaning on them that the reader could access and, in doing so, grow.

Patterns of Words

It did not occur to critics that Bowles was engaging directly with the same values that they were endorsing, or that the absence of characterisation, freedom, or action could be anything other than omission on Bowles’ part. The idea that *The Delicate Prey* was offering a challenge to the orthodox view of freedom, and of fiction, was not even a possibility. But even the manner in which Bowles characterised himself as a writer offers a telling sign of the extent to which his view of fiction was in conflict with that of the liberal consensus that unified postwar critics. In a phrase that curiously echoes Carlos Williams’ aesthetic of ‘no ideas but in things’, he described a literary manifesto that matches his own praxis surprisingly well: “there’s nothing in writing except words, patterns of words.”¹⁰¹ In this formalistic interpretation of the writer’s role, which contrasts starkly with Tanner’s ideal of ‘unpatterned fiction,’ Bowles emphasised the craft that is so apparent in his work, but he also directly confronted the idea that fiction should be (or even could be) meaningful; as he argued explicitly, “what’s in a novel is not important... it’s how it’s told”.¹⁰² For Bowles, meaning was only ever a product of form – not the specifics of content – and the writer’s responsibility was not to a higher agenda of freedom or democracy, but to the

¹⁰¹ Bowles, *Conversations*, 213

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

necessarily controlled patterning of words. This is most apparent in his short fiction, the form he considered himself best suited to, and to which he devoted his greatest literary efforts. So, rather than as an artistic failure, something that was ultimately ‘not literature’, *The Delicate Prey* could be considered a challenge to the ideals of liberal critics, and to the very idea of freedom.

The dedication in *The Delicate Prey* reads “for my mother, who first read me the stories of Poe” (*DP, Dedication*). And throughout the anthology, the shadow of Poe can be felt, not simply in a gothic sense of the macabre that haunts the violence, or even in the orientalist flourishes of some of the North African stories, but in the insistently closed, complete feeling that each story possesses. Wayne Pounds, the only critic to significantly consider the influence that Poe had on Bowles, suggests that “it is in the stark, reiterated design of Bowles’s early fiction that his heritage from Poe seems especially direct and striking”.¹⁰³ This description resonates equally strongly with both Bowles’ own phrase, ‘patterns of words,’ and Poe’s famous “Philosophy of Composition,” in which he advocates the short story for its compression and ability to create the “vastly important artistic element, totality, or unity, of effect”.¹⁰⁴ Within *The Delicate Prey*, this tendency emerges in the effect of ‘totality’ that each story possesses; Bowles’ emphasis on patterning his fiction translates into a kind of story that feels autonomous and complete. This completion does not necessarily equate with resolution – in fact as often as not, it is manifested in the opposite. The dreamlike tale of “By the Water”, which follows the young Arab, Amar, as he decides it “is time to visit a neighbouring city” (*DP*, 266), where he escapes a subterranean bathhouse and its crablike proprietor, Lazrag. It concludes with him, startled by “an

¹⁰³ Wayne Pounds, *Paul Bowles: The Inner Geography* (New York: P. Lang, 1985), 424.

¹⁰⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 13.

enormous crab”, falling into the ocean, where he “lay still...the soft water washing over him”, as his small companion repeatedly tells him “I saved you, Amar” (276). The entire time, Bowles offers no suggestion as to why Amar makes his journey, or even why this ‘moment’ is one that should be chosen for a story – the story concludes with even less ‘resolved’ than when it began. This lack of development, which contemporary critics considered as stagnation, is in effect an essential part of how Bowles creates the patterned effect of his prose.

Bowles has, moreover, embedded the elements of the story’s conclusion in its beginning, and crafted it so that it loops back on itself, forming a circular whole that concludes where it began. Indeed, “By the Water” leads Amar from a city that is being slowly emerged in water, where “the melting snow dripped from the balconies” and there were “few spots... where the snow was ever cleared away” (266), to a beach that seems to engulf his surroundings in the same way. Bringing the story back to an iteration of where it began – different, but ultimately the same – Bowles closes off the structure of his story, fixing it with a completedness that actively contradicts the kind of openness that his critics were advocating. The structure closes off growth and frustrates character development. But Amar’s situation is complicated by his descent into the bathhouse, which mirrors his city even more starkly – almost completely submerged, the grotto repeats the motif of dripping, with “gray icicles” (270) hanging down from its ceiling. Effectively, Bowles is establishing a pattern for Amar’s life, defined by water attempting to immerse him – shaping the reiterative pattern that called to mind, for Pound, the fiction of Poe. This patterning suggests an alternative model of experience to that which a liberal model would presume: in Bowles’ stories, the actions of individuals are governed by something larger, that patterns the decisions that they make. Rather than directed outwards, towards new

opportunities, the characters' lives fold back on themselves, returning to where they began, without making any progress. There is no possibility that Amar could have reached anywhere other than the place from which he began.

While not all of the stories in *The Delicate Prey* follow such a clear pattern, they do generally share the same quality of inevitability. This is especially pronounced in the distance between the narration and the events of the stories; in many of his stories, Bowles' prose is clinically detached, rendering the events from a perspective that seems disinterested, uninvested, and removed from what occurs. Critics operating within a similar framework to Trilling's 'liberal imagination,' concerned with a prose that was inflected with a sophisticated perspective, considered a detached approach to fiction – such as that which Bowles' stories display – naïve. But there is an elegance and a clarity to the way that Bowles narrates his stories, and Lasdun draws attention to the "calm logic with which they unfold"; Bowles describes the action with an authority that suggests not a lack of perspective, but one that has a greater understanding of what is occurring than an involved viewpoint could possess.¹⁰⁵ This authority, as Lasdun notes, is often expressed through the way the stories begin: opening "with the impersonal simplicity of folk tales".¹⁰⁶ When the story "The Delicate Prey" opens with the statement that "There were three Filala who sold leather in Tabelbala" (*DP*, 277), the authority of the narrator – removed, and drawing our attention to the scene as if pointing out an interesting episode in a history book, or beginning a fairy tale – gives the story that follows a sense of impersonality and inevitability. The characters, relayed to us in such detached terms, take on a general, almost archetypal quality, just as "the Professor" (*DP*, 290) of "A Distant Episode", with his "dark glasses" (291) and "two small overnight bags full of maps,

¹⁰⁵ Lasdun, introduction, v.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

sun lotions and medicines” (290) needs no further description than the contents of his luggage; we are clearly intended to treat them, and what occurs to them, in a similarly detached fashion.

This presentation, deliberately distancing the reader from the characters, and reducing them to ‘types’, underscores the inevitability of the action of the stories, and emphasises the lack of freedom the characters actually have, just as the characters of a fable are inherently set on a specific course, based on their particular ‘type’. Fiedler, in particular, suggested that Bowles removed his narration to this distance in order to communicate an allegorical message – that he was perhaps only able to endow his stories with meaning through allegory. But it seems a very strained process to try and draw an allegorical meaning out of the abuse (and eventual insanity) suffered by the professor of “A Distant Episode”, or to suggest that the violence of “The Delicate Prey” offered a parable from which we were intended to draw a specific message. If anything, Bowles seems to frustrate his readers’ ability to superimpose such a reading on his stories. The blunt brutality of “the pain of the brutal yanking [and] the sharp knife” (301), as nomadic tribesmen remove the professor’s tongue, like the castration of one of the young Filala in “The Delicate Prey”, seems designed to emphasise that these have no ‘meaning’; they resist any attempt to reduce them to a moral conclusion. So, by removing his narration from the events of his stories, and creating suggestions of a fable-like narrative, Bowles not only heightens the inevitability of their action, but also highlights the futility of imposing ‘meaning’ on what occurs. We could even consider his stories a challenge to the very concept of literary meaning, as understood by liberal criticism.

Even outside the more explicitly fable-oriented stories, Bowles has a tendency to present his characters in a way that conforms to a certain ‘type’. The lack of

peculiarity – of ‘real’ touches, which would render them individuals that the reader could ‘believe in’ – made the characters an obvious target for criticism, which argued that Bowles’ characters needed to be better developed. But Hassan, noting Bowles’ “inability to conceive and develop characters dramatically”, suggests that Bowles actually turned this “main weakness” to his advantage.¹⁰⁷ Through his “tight control” of his characterisation, Bowles accentuates the inevitable structure of his stories, and builds the suggestion that the characters are being impelled by something outside them.¹⁰⁸ Even a character like Aileen, the protagonist of the story “The Echo,” who is not located within anything resembling a fable, seems not in control of her own actions. Moving through the story “in the midst of [a] deep dream” (*DP*, 156), she seems hardly conscious of making decisions; what little agency she does have is stolen by some external power, so that at night “she would lie transfixed for long periods” (153). The honeymooning couple of “Call at Corazón” exhibit the same sense of being directed by something outside them. Initially registering as acting “carelessly” and “without thinking” (*DP*, 66), their loss of agency sees the wife sleeping with a man “in the crew’s quarters” (76) of the boat they are on, and the husband leave her behind on the boat, not thinking, but aware only of “his heart beating violently” (77). Bowles actively draws his readers’ attention to this loss of agency, with his characters even acknowledging their own loss of agency; in “The Delicate Prey”, it occurs to professor “that he ought to ask himself why he was doing this irrational thing, but he was intelligent enough to know that since he was doing it, it was not so important to probe for explanations at that moment” (298). While conscious that they are not in control of their actions, the characters in *The Delicate Prey* are unable to take charge – instead, they continue on the courses on which they

¹⁰⁷ Hassan, “Review,” 219.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

have been set. This poses a serious question to both the reader, and the critics with whom Bowles' work seems to be directly engaging: do people really possess the freedom and autonomy that a liberal, democratic view would suggest? The lack of control that his characters display challenges the basic assumptions of the agenda underpinning the direction of postwar criticism, suggesting that individuals may only have a limited capacity for freedom and that, far from unfettered, they were subject to external pressures that controlled their lives and actions in a fashion they were powerless to resist.

There is a distinctly more tangible force at work in *The Delicate Prey*, which controls characters with much less subtlety: violence. Bowles' insistent use of graphic violence provoked the most visceral reaction amongst his critics, with Jackson arguing that it constituted "such unspeakable horror and brutality that there is no sense in trying to describe it".¹⁰⁹ But perhaps the most striking aspect of Bowles' violence is the extent to which he *does* describe it, in his distinctively clear, detached prose. When the professor in "A Distant Episode" has his tongue sliced out by a nomadic Reguiba tribesman, Bowles is careful to register the mechanics of the act precisely:

The man looked at him dispassionately in the gray morning light. With one hand he pinched together the Professor's nostrils. When the professor opened his mouth to breathe, the man swiftly seized his tongue and pulled it with all his might. The professor was gagging and catching his breath; he did not see what was happening. (301)

The graphic totality of Bowles' description emphasises the stark finality of the act: the professor's tongue has been unequivocally severed. Moreover, the act itself is invested with a greater sense of importance – given such prominence in

¹⁰⁹ Jackson, "Seamier Side," BR4.

the text, it comes to define the action around it. Across the anthology, violence is endowed with this quality of finality and, in narrative terms, marks an end to growth, as if the possibility for development has been cut off. Bowles emblematises this in the description of literal severance, which recurs throughout the anthology, but most prominently in the eponymous story, “The Delicate Prey”. Here the act of ‘severing’ cuts off *all* possibility for Driss, the young protagonist: it is the act that kills him. Bowles narrates how:

The Mougari turned [the boy] over and pushed the blade back and forth with a sawing motion into his neck until he was certain he had severed the windpipe. Then he rose, walked away, and finished the loading of the camels he had started the day before. (287)

The act of violence is all the more charged for the neutral tone in which it is described. It is assimilated within the everyday routine of the Mougari, and the contrast with his simply continuing life as normal, and the ending of Driss’ life, suggests a greater sense of finality. But perhaps the most important, and certainly the most confronting, act of violence in the anthology occurs earlier in the story. Impelled by a sense of unconscious action, the tribesman castrates Driss, severing his reproductive organs and cutting off any future for his line. Bowles’ prose is particularly crisp; the Mougari

... looked down, and saw the sex that sprouted from the base of the belly. Not entirely conscious of what he was doing, he took it in one hand, and brought his other arm down with the motion of a reaper wielding a sickle. It was swiftly severed. (286)

When Fiedler attacked Bowles’ use of violence for its lack of productivity, he was honing in on the same aspect that Bowles was himself emphasising through his use of language: the way that it cuts off development. Across *The Delicate Prey*, Bowles was offering the opposite vision to that which Fiedler or Trilling espoused: rather than

the prospect of development, and progressive freedom for the individual, Bowles' text promised an inherently limited freedom that would necessarily be cut off by violence.

In challenging the liberal imagination, then, Bowles engaged most clearly with the concept of freedom. Violence was one strategy for suggesting the limitations of such a model, and it exacerbates the qualities of compression and inevitability that characterise his prose. But even without explicit violence, Bowles is able to suggest a looming threat to freedom, that stifles the openness and expansiveness that was inherent to the paradigm of ethical fiction. *The Delicate Prey* is hemmed in with a sense of claustrophobia, and the characters seem suffocated, closed in, and trapped. Returning to Aileen, in "The Echo", it is apparent how much of the tension she feels is caused by her feelings of being "constrained" (145). With the physical presence of the rainforest hemming her in, this develops into a paralysis – she becomes "too agonised even to move her hand" (152), which leaves her "transfixed" (153). The visceral claustrophobia of the story is echoed in the conclusion to "The Delicate Prey", where (in retribution for his murder of the Filala) the Mougari is "trussed tightly" and dropped into "a well-like pit", where another group of Filala "filled all the space around his body with sand and stones, until only his head remained" (288). Bowles compounds the horror of this physical restriction with the suggestion of suffocation: buried in the sand, "the wind blew dust along the ground into his mouth as he sang" (289). This aesthetic of enclosure, mirroring the compression of his prose, finds its fullest expression in Bowles' Borgesian story "The Circular Valley". Here, a Latin American spirit, the Atlájala, attempts to escape from the circular valley from which "it could never leave" (*DP*, 124). Hemmed in "on all sides" and "ringed about by sheer, black cliffs" (122), the valley itself embodies the restriction of Bowles' style, while the Atlájala plays out the total lack of freedom that Bowles associates

with the human condition. Discovering that it could inhabit the body of humans, the spirit begins to understand “the meaningless gestures of human life”; its experience inside the human frame is “unbearably stifling, as though every other possibility...had been removed forever” (125). When eventually a pair of lovers arrive in his valley, the Atlájala inhabits the body of the man, and discovers “a world more suffocating and painful than the Atlájala had thought possible” (129). Bowles’ insistence on compression of form, and on the circular, enclosed nature of human experiences, is ultimately a manifestation of this belief: that life, far from free and open, is suffocating, stifling and claustrophobic.

Bowles’ emphasis on craft is suggestive of a broader conceptualisation of fiction: like a miniature object, it was something to be shaped, refined, honed down and perfected. This immediately contrasts with the attitudes of the critics who initially resisted his work with such overt hostility; for literary form to communicate what was essential about a democratic, American freedom, it needed to be open, complicated, ambiguous – able to register the contingency of experience. Bowles’ prose, focused into an expression of certainty and precision, allows for no such contingency. As the narrator of “You are not I” pronounces: “You are not I. No one but me could possibly be. I know that, and I know what I have done” (*DP*, 206). This precision can occasionally stray into a process of cataloguing – the same speaker narrates “I was up in the courtyard, and there was the paper wrapper off a box of Cheese Tid Bits lying on the bench. Then I was at the main gate, and it was open. A black car was outside at the curb” (207) – but its overall effect is not that of an onslaught of details. Instead, it creates a sense of significance in every observation: even when filtered through a particular character, the stories are still told from the ‘position of superlunary authority’ that Oates so admired. Lasdun notes the extent to which Bowles’ “technical

adroitness” defines his stories: although it does not always produce ‘great’ works, it can “make a story work in the most mechanical sense”.¹¹⁰ And this description summarises the difference between the kind of fiction critics expected, and that which Bowles produced. Instead of an organic growth, haphazard and contingent, that reflected ‘reality’, Bowles’ stories have the precision of clockwork – cold, focussed, and elegantly precise.

The critical reception of *The Sheltering Sky*, which successfully recuperated the novel into a novelistic generic framework, sits in striking contrast to Bowles’ own conceptualisation of the work. Not only did Bowles compose the novel for the explicit purpose of securing publication for his short stories, he deliberately crafted the work in line with the aesthetics of his short fiction. In 1947, when Bowles initially attempted to publish the book that would eventually be printed as *The Delicate Prey*, he was informed by Dial Press that he would be required to publish a novel first. In spite of receiving an advance from major publishing house Doubleday to produce the text, the publishers rejected the finished product, and demanded the advance be returned, as the finished text was “simply, not a novel”.¹¹¹ After a series of further rejections, *The Sheltering Sky* was eventually picked up by New Directions, but only after the intervention of Tennessee Williams, who “was, in short, Bowles's agent in deed if not in name”.¹¹² Not only was it “likely that New Directions never would have published Bowles’s novel” if it were not for Williams’ recommendation of Bowles to James Laughlin, New Directions’ editor, but the eventual success of the book was in part a product of Williams’ review for the *New York Times Book Review*, which “confer[red] legitimacy” on a potentially controversial text. The terms in which

¹¹⁰ Lasdun, Introduction, xii.

¹¹¹ Brier, “Postwar Art Novel,” 190.

¹¹² Brier, “Postwar Art Novel,” 193.

Bowles' text was initially (and repeatedly) rejected reflected Bowles' own feelings towards the book: he equally considered the text to be 'not a novel'. Instead, Bowles conceptualised the text as an extended short story, constructing it along the same principles as his short fiction, and intending it to have the same effect. Specifically, he constructed the 'novel' around one of his most visceral stories, and one which Williams had advised him never to publish: *The Sheltering Sky* was "basically the story of the professor in 'A Distant Episode'."¹¹³

As Bowles would stress in several interviews, the composition of the text developed in the same way as with his short fiction. One of the areas in which Bowles most overtly emphasised his text's departure from the conventions of the novel was characterisation. As I have argued, criticism of his short fiction focused insistently on the 'flatness' of his characters, and their lack of development. This is especially true of the characters in the stories Bowles' highlighted as his most successful: "Call at Corazon," "A Distant Episode," and "The Delicate Prey". In each, the characters operate as archetypes, rather than distinct individuals; Bowles marks them as general, rather than specific. Although "A Distant Episode" makes reference to a café owner, "Hassan Ramani" (290), the other characters, most notably the protagonist, are only marked by the roles that they play. The protagonist is "the professor", just as in "The Delicate Prey," the action occurs between "three Filala" (277) and "a Mounhari" (280), while in "Call at Corazon," the two protagonists are only referred to through pronouns, as "she" and "he", apart from one reference to the man as "her husband" (60), establishing their relationship. As in the composition of the text, the construction of characters as generic types reinforces the sense that their experiences are predetermined, or that they are following paths that are dictated to them. Indeed,

¹¹³ Bowles, *Conversations*, 52.

Bowles emphasised that they should only be considered as “integral parts of situations, along with the landscape”; in presenting flat characters, Bowles was deliberately opposing the idea that characters could exist outside the confines of their text, and that more generally, any person needed to be considered as a product of their own context, fundamentally limited by their own situation.¹¹⁴ So although, as one interviewer, Daniel Halpern, argued, “the behaviour” of Bowles’ characters could seem to some readers to be “far from standard”, Bowles himself felt that he could not “write about a character who struck me as eccentric, whose behaviour was too far from standard”.¹¹⁵ And on a wider level, this is integral to the kind of argument Bowles’ fiction makes about society: not only are our individual identities constrained, but our overall experience of life is essentially the same.

While as a ‘novel’, *The Sheltering Sky* generally found critical success, the characterisation within it was subject to equal scrutiny as Bowles’ short stories, and was found similarly lacking. Although critics could acknowledge the lack of depth in the figures of Port and Kit, registering them as “uninteresting abstractions, devices for the expression of unrelieved despair”, it seems not to have occurred to them that such generic protagonists could have been conscious components of the author’s strategy.¹¹⁶ Bowles, however, explicitly set out to populate *The Sheltering Sky* with characters who functioned as ‘abstractions.’ In expanding out “A Distant Episode,” Bowles was not intending to make one character in particular, – say, Port – equivalent to the professor, but was instead intending to convey that “they’re all the professor”.¹¹⁷ So although they are distinguishable by names, as well as a level of background information, the characters in *The Sheltering Sky* are effectively short

¹¹⁴ Bowles, *Conversations*, 92.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Sutcliffe, “Nebulous Self,” 734.

¹¹⁷ Bowles, *Conversations*, 54.

story characters, transposed into a novelistic world. If Bowles' primary critique of the novel was with the perspective it conveyed, then on a structural level, it was the characters he took issue with. In critically lionised novels such as *Invisible Man*, or *Catch-22*, the voice of the narration was inflected, either directly or indirectly, with the qualities of the protagonist; although they might appear rebellious, as characters oriented around freedom, autonomy and individuality, Heller's Yossarian and Ellison's invisible man actually endorse the values of contemporary American society. Certainly, as characters who had ostensibly open choices, and the possibility for growth, they reflect the underlying ideology of mid-twentieth century America, and encourage the reader to adhere to the conventional model of free, self-directed individuality which distinguished democratic America – in its own eyes – from communist totalitarianism. Bowles' short stories present an alternative perspective, through characters who are limited, and whose limitations align with a world that is structurally constrained; within *The Sheltering Sky*, however, the limitations on his characters are juxtaposed against the apparent endlessness of the text.

Part of the way Bowles constrains the development of his characters is by limiting, or negating their interiority. Even when he appears to give his reader access to the motivations of his characters, he undercuts this by emphasising their lack of reflection. So although Kit, for example, is aware that she makes certain comments in order "to please her husband," and Port is able to "recogniz(e) the gesture," because he does not "understand... why she was making it," he pays "no attention to it" (SS, 7). Although they are able to act on their motivations on a superficial level, because they fail to reflect on their experiences, they miss the opportunity for growth. Within the context of the kind of 'adventure story' *The Sheltering Sky* was compared to, the development of the protagonist is predicated on their ability to learn from their

experiences; their capacity to grow is commensurate with their understanding of their own interiority, and their ability to engage in self-reflection. Bowles, on the other hand, presents an alternative paradigm of behaviour, writing characters who only have limited access to their own thoughts, limited control of their own actions, and who do not develop, but instead decay.

Bowles' language insistently emphasises the extent to which his characters' behaviour is automatic – when exploring a city, Port “walked through the streets, unthinkingly” (13). He suggests, moreover, that his characters are actively aware of their own inability to think. Kit is aware, for example, that her own behaviour is governed not by rational thought, but by minor occurrences that she considers “omens”, to the extent that “a great part of her life was dedicated to the categorizing of [them],” and that, as a consequence, “her ability to go through the motions of everyday existence was reduced to a minimum” (37). Because she is not able to ‘rationally’ assess her experiences, then, difficult situations leave her “as if she had been stricken by a strange paralysis”, and even when she appears to be rational, Bowles emphasises that she is only “imitating mechanically what she considered rational behaviour” (37). Taking characters whose limitations, within the form of a short story, are an extension of their context, and placing them within a novelistic text, Bowles paradoxically demonstrates Kit's and Port's lack of awareness by demonstrating how aware they are of their own limitations. They are not simply unthinking, but conscious of being so.

To the extent that they are distinguishable by names, and a level of idiosyncrasy, Port and Kit stand apart from the characters of the *Delicate Prey* stories as, ostensibly, developed and individual. At the same time, however, the critique that they are simply ‘uninteresting abstractions’ is plausible, in so far as Bowles actively

works to generalise their identity and experiences. Even their names, which on the surface particularise them as individuals – rather than types – have a punning secondary sense that orients them as part of a generic framework. ‘Port Moresby’ is both a plausible name, and the capital of Papua New Guinea, while a ‘kit,’ amongst other things, refers to a young cat or fox; both names contain a tension between individual distinction, and a de-particularised generality. Similarly, their experiences of travelling seem, superficially, to distinguish them from their own culture, and mark them out as distinct individuals. Port conceptualises himself as a “traveller” as opposed to a “tourist”: while the tourist “accepts his own civilisation without question,” the traveller “compares it with the others, and rejects those elements he finds not to his liking” (5-6). Bowles immediately undercuts Port’s attempt at distinguishing himself, by emphasising the lack of specificity in their travels. Although they have travelled to “Europe and the Near East... the West Indies and South America”, none of these journeys have any distinction, and instead act as generic expressions of an underlying, systematic discomfort; Port “had only to see a map” and “he would begin to plan some new, impossible trip which sometimes, eventually, became a reality” (5). Indeed, Bowles stressed the extent to which their travelling is compulsive, and part of an identity that is not governed by rational decisions: he argued that “one realizes that Kit’s and Port’s having left America at all was a compulsive act. Their urge to travel was compulsive.”¹¹⁸ The events of *The Sheltering Sky*, while certainly more fatal than any of their previous experiences, are framed as being part of a cycle of behaviour, and arising from an urge that Bowles suggests is not particular, but systematic. This is reiterated in Kit’s argument that “the people of each country get more like the people of every other country. They have no

¹¹⁸ Bowles, *Conversations*, 91.

character, no beauty, no ideals, no culture – nothing, nothing” (7). Travelling, while theoretically marking them out as unusual people who can evaluate and reject their own culture, instead reinforces the homogeneity of experience, and the impossibility of an individual identity.

The feeling that Kit expresses – that the world is locked into a cycle of decay – not only reflects Bowles’ fatalistic vision of ‘civilisation’, but also, more particularly, corresponds to the structure of Bowles’ novel. Within his short fiction, Bowles renders his characters’ specific experiences as functioning in an allegorical register; their movement towards destruction is representative of the general trajectory of human existence. Within the extended framework of *The Sheltering Sky*, Bowles is able to structure a series of such encounters: as Port and Kit travel from one uncannily similar Algerian locale to another, their experiences become part of a repeated pattern, where each successive iteration is worse than the preceding one. Fundamentally, then, the narrative is underpinned by fatalism, which comes to govern the characters’ own perspective on the world. Although Port attempts to assert a less negative perspective at the start of the text, “asking himself if any American can truthfully accept a definition of life which makes it synonymous with suffering” (14), his wife encounters the world as framed by suffering, experiencing “days when from the moment she came out of sleep, she could feel doom hanging over her head like a low rainbow” (36). The repeated downward movements of the text, drawing the characters closer to death and extinction, rather than elevating them, serves as a kind of lesson, both to them and to the reader, of what Bowles considers to be the inherently destructive pattern of life.

From this perspective, Bowles’ text can be seen to expand the relationship he establishes in his short fiction between narrative form and the claustrophobia the

characters themselves experience. Kit comes to feel not simply a looming sense of dread, but a complete detachment from the world – which Bowles emphasises is to be considered a product of the repeated narrative movements of the text. The reiterative patterns of “the limpid, burning sky each morning”, which are “repeated identically day after day”, form an “apparatus functioning without any relationship to her, a power that had gone on, leaving her far behind” (302); the natural processes of day and night correspond to the patterned events of the narrative, which have moved beyond Kit’s control, and driven her to a state where she no longer has control over her own actions. In this sense, Bowles’ text is actively interrogating the role of narrative. Rather than a progressive mechanism, narrative traps characters in patterns that dictate their behaviour, leaving them without autonomy. Crucially, as Bowles himself stressed, this pattern is instigated by the characters themselves, as they “set in motion a mechanism of which they become a victim”; in the case of Port and Kit, the downwards trajectory of their action was instigated by their desire to leave – “the mechanism turns out to have been operative at the very beginning.”¹¹⁹ In contesting the possibility of narrative progression, therefore, Bowles was implicitly questioning the concept of individual freedom or autonomy. Port and Kit become subject to patterns that exist outside their control.

The patterned structure of *The Sheltering Sky* might, superficially, seem at odds with the compression and stasis of Bowles’ short fiction. Even if the characters’ journey is organised around decay, rather than growth, it is still predicated upon movement. The tension in the book’s title, however – between the openness connoted by images of ‘the sky,’ and the restrictive, limiting implications of ‘sheltering’ – is reflective of the same tensions that characterise Kit’s imprisoning vision of the rolling

¹¹⁹ Bowles, *Conversations*, 91.

sky as an ‘apparatus’ that has trapped her. As I have argued, Kit and Port are both static in the sense that they cannot develop, but moreover, even their literal movement deeper into the Sahara is signalled as being both limited and claustrophobic. Bowles achieves this by shifting the scale of his text, so that the openness of sky and desert becomes a limiting, “paralysing” circumference; although when Kit observes the “night’s landscape” of the Sahara, (it “suggested only one thing to her: negation of movement, suspension of continuity”) her vision gradually accommodates the image on an astral scale, where “the whole, monstrous star-filled sky” turns “sideways before her eyes” (240). Similarly, as Port draws closer to death, he can see “only the thin sky stretched across to protect him” (247). Rather than as endless, Port conceptualises the sky from an extra-terrestrial perspective, acknowledging its role as a barrier between the individual and a universe that operates on a cosmic scale. His final vision before his death is what will be revealed when “the sky draw[s] back”: he “would see what he never doubted lay behind advance upon him with the speed of a million winds... it went on and on” (248). Bowles draws the perspective of the text gradually further outwards, so that the cyclical behaviour that is evident from the beginning of the text is framed within the circumference of the earth as seen from space; on such a scale, human action is inherently limited, reduced to an insignificant atom, against the ‘monstrous’ movement of the stars.

Bowles’ model of fiction challenged the basic assumptions made by Dewey or Trilling about freedom, and offered an alternative view of fiction’s role in regard to reality. A necessarily finite form, focused around a particular ‘moment’ and defined by its brevity, the short story is, in and of itself, the contained counterpoint to the expansive, episodic form of the novel. Bowles chose to exacerbate those qualities that make the short story seem so controlled, with exactly precise word choices, a

carefully patterned structure, and an inescapable sense of inevitability. Looping back on themselves in a ‘reiterative design’, his stories confront the reader with a dramatically un-democratic model of existence: his characters are impelled through life by something outside them, only to conclude where they began. Across *The Delicate Prey*, the characters’ limitations and lack of agency suggest that their freedom as individuals is, to some extent, illusory. From the Moresbys’ dreamlike progress through *The Sheltering Sky*, to the professor’s dismemberment in the desert, the characters’ autonomy is subsumed beneath an external force that compels them along a course they cannot avoid. Moreover, their ends insist upon violence as the ultimate reality of the world. Hemming characters in, limiting their growth, and ultimately severing their futures, the violence of Bowles’ stories was so shocking because it challenged critics’ essential belief that freedom was attainable. Instead, Bowles argues that the human condition is one of suffocation and claustrophobia. His presentation of this world drew attacks as being naïve and incomplete – for it to have truly been literature, it should have registered the complexities of modern life, and acknowledged the depth of human experience, in turn validating freedom. But for Bowles, it was the liberal American understanding of the world that was naïve and incomplete. Trilling’s model of the world failed to account for the external forces that shape our actions and our lives, leading us to where we end up. It attributed agency and control to the individual, while ignoring the extent to which they act without consciousness. Ultimately, the liberal dream promised a freedom that Bowles’ stories show to be limited, and an openness that his language, structure and imagery show to be simply part of a pattern.

Narratives of Containment

Until now, the reader would be forgiven for thinking that the New York Intellectuals, and indeed postwar critics more generally, espoused a model of fiction that was totally open, embodying ‘freedom’ in every sense. Although the description ‘liberal’ is not inherently incorrect, or misleading, I have occluded the extent to which such critics were also responsible for a doctrine that was constrictive and conservative. It should be apparent that the kind of fiction they espoused occupied a narrow field, and that the parameters for producing such literature were restrictive and demanding – this is evident in their critique of Bowles, whose highly literary prose nonetheless failed their standards for ‘literature’. In a way, they were operating against Tanner’s ideal ‘freedom from all restrictions’, as they were arguing for a set of clear restrictions on fictive expression. This is particularly obvious when one places, as Schaub does, the explicitly formalist demands of the New Critics and these more tacit demands of the New York liberals side by side. With their openly demanding set of critiques, “the New Critics help demonstrate the degree of conservatism that liberal criticism embraced”.¹²⁰ And although contemporary America promoted its unique brand of freedom more vigorously than ever – defining itself by it on an international stage, even justifying its global hegemony on the basis of it – within its own borders, it was much more conservative than this image suggests. The 1950s saw conformity and homogeneity spread through America on an unprecedented level; this process, moreover, was enabled and advanced by the governments that promoted, to the outside world, an image of independence and freedom. In this light, Bowles’ stories can be considered to be dealing with a force larger than the liberal agenda of freedom. His short stories engage with the forces of conformity and conservatism within

¹²⁰ Schaub, *Cold War*, 26.

America (which had already led him into self-imposed exile in Morocco) in surprising, and complicated ways.

The popular image of America in the 1950s, continually reinforced by film and television, is one of consumerism and conformity. Oriented around a nuclear family, with traditional gender roles and an insistently ‘middle class’ identity, the typical conceptualisation of postwar America has a strong grounding in reality. Nadel summarises it as “a period, as many prominent studies indicated, when ‘conformity’ became a positive value in and of itself”.¹²¹ This was not a spontaneous re-organisation of society, but a move that was directed to a large extent by narratives deployed by the government: “the virtue of conformity... became a form of public knowledge through the pervasive performances of and allusions to the containment narrative”.¹²² The ‘containment narrative’ proved to be the essential element of the United States’ response to the perceived threat of the Soviet Union. Driven by a preeminent concern with “American security”, it originally referred to “U.S. foreign policy from 1948 until at least the mid-1960s”, where America would attempt to ‘contain’ the progress of the Soviet Union from a distance, rather than engage directly with them.¹²³ Its original proponent, diplomat George Kennan, described it as “a sort of long-range fencing match in which the weapons are not only the development of military power but the loyalties and convictions of hundreds of millions of people and the control or influence over their forms of political organisation”.¹²⁴ So, as a strategy, containment was fundamentally concerned with limiting and patterning – as much with regards to its own subjects as any foreign power. America’s branding of itself as

¹²¹ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 4.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ J.D. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: an Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 6; Nadel, 2.

¹²⁴ George Kennan, cited in Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 49.

global defender of freedom was part of a broader deployment of narratives around which American citizens could orient themselves, and were sometimes forced to orient. The anti-communist agenda of the House Un-American Activities Committee, for example, provides an example of the way that official organs of state ensured that the general populace conformed to a ‘democratic’ ideal. In a very specific way, this policy of containment affected Bowles; it was fear of reprisals for his membership of the communist party that provided the impetus for him to emigrate from America, permanently, to Morocco. But it exerted its influence on him in much less direct ways, too. Nadel makes very clear that “containment was perhaps one of the most powerfully deployed national narratives in recorded history”, and the extent to which it shaped the opinions and ambitions of critics and authors alike was of equal magnitude.¹²⁵

The most obvious influence was on the agenda of the New York critics, whose vision of a “greater social liberty” reinforced the orthodox narrative of America as a global defender of freedom.¹²⁶ Their model of fiction relied upon the communication of ideas, and endowing a text with meaning – literature needed writers “specifically and passionately concerned with social injustice”.¹²⁷ But their concern with effecting social change necessitated that they prioritise certain modes of communication, which coalesced around the form of the novel, the “medium through which a relation between art (novel as aesthetic form) and politics (novel as social history) might be sustained”.¹²⁸ This emphasis on a particular aesthetic – on moulding a text to shape and reinforce a particular meaning – inherently drew them away from their own ideal of liberty, and brought them closer in line with conservative, formalist critics: “in

¹²⁵ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 4.

¹²⁶ Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, 22.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 221.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 26.

valorising the literary idea the New York critics effectively endorsed the stylistic priorities of the New Critics”.¹²⁹ In this way, it is possible to imagine a reasonably coherent drive in American literary criticism in the postwar period, which argued for a specific kind of form and representation, and culminated in an insistently “prescriptive orthodoxy with which young writers after World War II had to contend”.¹³⁰ As I have argued, there is a clear pattern to the relationship with reality that criticism demanded. Taking issue with “the chronic American belief that there exists an opposition between reality and mind and that one must enlist oneself in the party of reality”, Trilling instead delineated a type of prose that would engage with reality, while still registering the complications and nuances which ‘mind’ threw in its way. Henry James’ *Princess Casamassina* offered a paradigmatic instance of this kind of prose and structure: “it is one of the great points that the novel makes that with each passionate step [the princess] takes towards what she calls the real, the solid, she in fact moves further away from the life-giving reality”.¹³¹ James could voice the complications of interiority, manifested in his protagonist’s ‘passionate steps’ and her own peculiar conceptualisation of ‘what *she calls* the real’, while still emphasising the power and authority of the external world real life. Transferring “the quality of ‘hardness’ from the material world to the emotional complexity of a psychological world engaged in tension with the outer”, Trilling prescribed a model of fiction that was oriented around the relationship between inside and outside.¹³² In this, Trilling and fellow liberal critics were drawing on a much more traditional pattern of literature: the use of contradiction and paradox as the central impulse of fiction. With a paradigm cutting across partisan lines, emphasising “the aesthetic, or

¹²⁹ Schaub, *Cold War*, 33.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³¹ Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, 24, 220.

¹³² Schaub, *Cold War*, 32.

formal, standard of contradiction as the central quality of great art”, and demarcating a set of parameters within which this standard could be achieved, it is no wonder that some writers felt hemmed in by criticism, even when it was ostensibly endorsing liberty and openness.¹³³

Faced with such a coherent series of critical demands, which exacted not only a particular social function from the text, but a tight model of how the text should be formed, writers began to chafe. Fiction during the 1950s attempted to radically assert its own independence from critical demands, resisting the ‘conformity’ demanded by both the general populace and the criticism of their work. The collusion between critics and the reading public, in spite of critics’ attempts to construct it otherwise, was great: both parties were equally interested in “social details” that “continued to assume a world of discrete, atomistic individuals interacting socially through rumour, dialogue, physical action and dress”.¹³⁴ Furthermore, as Schaub notes, “for the most part”, writers in the postwar period “saw themselves in distinct opposition to both their critics and popular audience, rather than engaged with them in a dialogue structured by shared assumptions”.¹³⁵ The most prominent group of writers who attempted to wrest control of literature from critics were the emergent ‘Beats’, who felt controlled by the force of critical expectations to the extent that their fiction “was influenced by an explicit determination to break free of it”.¹³⁶ With open, often seemingly un-formed prose, their fiction (and poetry) seemed to manifest an antithetical model to the prescribed boundaries that liberals and New Critics demanded alike. Moreover, it offered a challenge to the conformity of mainstream America; the Beats were “in growing revolt against the conformity, respectability and

¹³³ Ibid, 34.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 67.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 51.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

materialism of lonely crowd America”, and presented an alternative way of interacting with the world, and representing it on the page.¹³⁷ So their fiction represented a double challenge, to the conformity expected of them by critics, and to the conformity displayed by their audience. The challenge that they posed was explicitly oriented around the prose style which they adopted, and reflected in a broader trend amongst ‘countercultural authors’, from those who, like William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, were integral to the Beats, to more disparate, and unaffiliated writers; for dissenting writers “the logical strategy of choice was a way of telling stories which both reflected their rupture with society and established at the same time a legitimate source of autonomy for describing a redefined ‘reality’”.¹³⁸ Many of these figures, from Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, to Truman Capote, travelled to Morocco to visit Bowles, for the very reason that his own prose, and lifestyle outside conventional American society, offered a kind of parallel to what they were attempting to achieve, even though the manner in which they registered these oppositional impulses varied considerably.

Jack Kerouac offers the most exemplary instance of the Beats’ resistance to critical and public patterning. On a personal level, he admired Bowles, considering him a model for authorial independence – he once gave Bowles a copy of his novel *The Subterraneans*, which he had dedicated “to Paul – a man completely devoid of bullshit”.¹³⁹ In his now classic novel *On the Road*, he pioneered a style of prose that was free and unrestricted in an unprecedented way. Guided by a philosophy of ‘breath’, which he drew from jazz improvisation, his style valorised freedom and autonomy, in an explosion of “romantic anarchism, emphasising spontaneity, instinct,

¹³⁷ Bradbury, *American Novel*, 189.

¹³⁸ Schaub, *Cold War*, 68

¹³⁹ Bowles, *Without Stopping*, 342.

open style and free expression”.¹⁴⁰ Considering the first lines of *On the Road*, as originally composed by Kerouac, in which he established his model of open, anarchic freedom firmly for his readers, the extent to which he was offering an open challenge to the prescriptions of literary critics is clear:

I first met met [sic] Neal not long after my father died... I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about except that it really had something to do with my father's death and my awful feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Neal there really began for me that part of my life that you could call my life on the road. Prior to that I'd always dreamed of going west, seeing the country, always vaguely planning and never specifically taking off and so on.¹⁴¹

The long unpunctuated sentences, the unspecific, gestural method of referral ('it really had something to do with...') and the repetitive vocabulary all contrast markedly with the precision of Bowles' prose. Rather than locating his reader within any specific context, or structuring their encounter with his text, he launches into an unpatterned, conversational, and certainly *uncrafted* monologue. Most importantly, it clashes vigorously with the formal demands of even the liberal critics, offering an account of life that is too sprawling, too disordered, too free for their focussed model for enunciating freedom.

Written at the beginning of 1951, just months after Bowles had published *The Delicate Prey*, even Kerouac's method of composition for *On the Road* was an extension of this open resistance: typewritten on a single scroll, he famously wrote it in a single, extended sitting over three days. Of all the Beats, Kerouac was the “most outspoken critic of ‘craft’”, and he explicitly attempted to break free from this critical patterning with *On the Road*, offering a vision of fiction that no longer necessitated

¹⁴⁰ Bradbury, *American Novel*, 190.

¹⁴¹ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road: the Original Scroll* (Penguin: London, 2011), 109.

“subordinating experience to form”.¹⁴² This formative exercise in fictive liberation became a kind of icon for the Beats’ iconoclasm, and Raj Chandarlapaty conceives of Kerouac as part of a triad, along with Burroughs and Bowles, who “figured bravely in the making of countercultural global changes in modern man’s ethical experience”.¹⁴³ Burroughs shares with Kerouac the rejection of formal constraints; the foremost aspect of their counter-cultural resistance was their unconventional, open approach to form. And what was this prose embodying, if not a vision of freedom? But, at the same time, the Beats’ project of fictive liberation tapped into the same ideology that lay behind the containment narrative they aimed to resist: the ideal of the liberty of the individual and a freedom from external patterning. In attempting to challenge the formal demands of mid-century criticism, and the expectations of their homogenous reading public, the Beats (inadvertently) valorised and reinforced the ‘message’ of their opponents. Indeed, the language that critics like Chadarlapaty use emphasises the extent to which the cultural ambitions of the Beats and liberal critics overlapped: both were attempting to change the ‘ethical experience’ of the individual, were deeply conscious of America’s new place in a global community, and made explicit the extent to which the *modern* condition placed greater demands on the author to promote liberty and shape society. In a crucial way, the Beats were engaged in replicating the very process of containment, elucidating a narrative that strengthened the mainstream American ideal of freedom. While they were advocating for a different set of experiences to those that the critics or administrations might endorse, their vision was still one located within the same structures of liberty and freedom, and was communicated through a prose that reinforced this, even as it ostensibly challenged critical expectations.

¹⁴² Schaub, *Cold War*, 53, 54.

¹⁴³ Raj Chandarlapaty, *The Beat Generation and Counterculture: Paul Bowles, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 1.

In stark contrast with the improvised jazz flow of Kerouac's prose – which seems to spill almost uncontrollably across the page – Bowles creates the sense of a series of containers; almost a Russian doll of prose, each container of language is locked within a larger frame. While the images of suffocation and enclosure are the most obvious characteristics of his patterned style of short story, Bowles tuned even the individual sentences to contribute to his aesthetic of enclosure. To the smallest details of punctuation, Bowles' sentences are formed in a way that contains his prose, and resists any impulse to spill over, or break free. The opening lines of "The Echo," for example, illustrate his technical adroitness:

Aileen pulled out her mirror; the vibration of the plane shook it so rapidly that she was unable to see whether her nose needed powder or not. There were only two other passengers and they were asleep. It was noon; the tropical sun shone violently down upon the wide silver wings and cast sharp reflections on the ceiling. (*DP*, 135)

Unlike the haphazard spill of *On the Road*, here each idea has been broken up, and cleanly divided; even the process of the sun reflecting off the windows is broken down into two movements, hitting the wing and reflecting upwards, each of which is expressed in an individual active verb. This precision is also manifested in his word choice. Unlike Kerouac, whose style relies on a spiralling gestural quality, Bowles' prose mediates the fictional world to the reader through exactly specific descriptions. Kerouac attempted to convey the rhythms of speech through conversational diction and a free, almost unpunctuated text. Bowles, instead, deploys punctuation to deliberately control the flow of his language; semi-colons slow the pace of the prose and keep clauses distinct and confined from one another. In the very first sentence, the two actions of Aileen pulling out the mirror, and being unable to see her nose are held at bay from each other by the pause of punctuation. Each sentence ends clearly,

in a way that concludes the idea and resists any uncontrolled prose – the ensuing sentence moves on to a separate idea. On a broader level, moreover, when Bowles' characters move towards the verge of a more conscious experience, and come closer to a traditional sense of 'novelistic awareness', the structure of the prose cuts off the possibility. When the professor in "A Distant Episode" starts to question going into the desert, asking "why he was doing this irrational thing", before the sentence has concluded, the prose has already denied him this greater self-awareness: "it was not so important to probe for explanations at that moment" (298). The approach that Bowles takes to structuring and organising his prose, while still displaying the same level of authorial autonomy, offers the antithesis to what the Beats aspired towards. He deliberately limits its expression, connection, and possibility, and instead offers a parallel narrative of containment: his characters, and worlds, are trapped, like the Atlájala, within the confines of a literary circular valley.

The containment narrative represented a specific response to an external force: the threat of the Soviet Union. Although it was, on the one hand, designed to control American citizens, and mould them around a specific ideological position, on the other hand it offered, paradoxically, a chance to make them feel freer. By aligning the populace around a central narrative of autonomy and liberty, the containment narrative created a pattern under which they could best embody a particular image of 'free America' (however shaped and directed that idea might be). In the same way, the conservatism of the New York liberals with regard to form was part of a model designed to best promote the development of ethical literature, which could make fiction and society more liberal; by deploying theories of containment, they hoped to direct growth towards a particular paradigm of freedom. A crucial part of what gives Bowles' short stories such power, over half a century after they were written, is the

hopelessness of his vision. The compression and containment of his prose is not designed, as was Trilling's agenda, to show the potential for freedom, but instead to highlight the emptiness of the concept. The literal images of containment – being held captive, bound, or buried alive – are exacerbated by the extent to which Bowles' characters' agency is subsumed within a greater, external impetus which confines and restricts. But this sense of containment is given particular force because of its juxtaposition against an external landscape, the fundamental characteristics of which are those of openness and an untamed freedom. So, Bowles' strategy of contrasting western characters with an alien, uncivilized landscape takes on another level of importance: it is a way of recontextualising his characters' sense of freedom. Just as the professor's civilized expectations are shown to be hopelessly naïve when contrasted with the opportunism of North Africa, his conceptualisation of his own autonomy is revealed to be equally naïve, against the unrelenting openness of the Sahara as he is impelled by an external force, and acts without any control over himself. Aileen, in "The Echo", and the husband in "Call at Corázon", both display this same lack of freedom when re-located within an open, uncivilized context. Considering this contrast in much more general terms, as "the opposition between inside and out", Richard Patteson sees it as the "primary artistic 'figure'" in Bowles' work.¹⁴⁴ In effect, Bowles is using the very opposition that Trilling had thought necessary for ethical literature – a dynamic built around a tension between inside and outside – but deploying it to highlight the opposite. His focus on the landscape, which critics had tended to dismiss as an aspect of his 'picturesque' prose, is instead an integral aspect of how he creates the sense of containment and restriction in his fiction. Through the insistent subjection of the will of the individual to external

¹⁴⁴ Richard Patteson, *A World Outside: the Fiction of Paul Bowles* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 83.

guidance, and the loss of individual agency against an open, untamed landscape, Bowles' containment narratives reinforce the lack of freedom he perceived the individual to possess.

In retrospect, it is easy to see why the containment narrative was able to exert such force on the shaping of American culture of the 1950s and 1960s. With its Orwellian promise of freedom in conformity, it at once aligned citizens around a central – and essentially American ideal – and provided a structure for living their lives. In their model for ethical literature, liberal critics in the postwar period replicated the containment model and applied it to fiction. Their conservative expectations from literary form, which they considered necessary for communicating literary ideas effectively, offered an analogy to the specific roles expected of an American citizen. At its heart, the function of literature was to effect social change which, in the specific context of the postwar period, meant advancing the liberty of the individual – just as America's responsibility was to advance the freedom of its citizens, and of the global community. But both moved towards greater liberty by enacting a conservative narrative that controlled how individuals existed, whether authors or the general populace. The Beats attempted to resist the impulses of conservatism and conformity by producing deliberately unconfined prose. Their open expression, using 'experimental' formal structures, emphasised the autonomy of the individual, and validated the freedom of the author to communicate with an unfettered liberty. However, their aspirations bought into precisely those priorities which their erstwhile opponents were advocating: those of the “abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillness, choices and repudiations are all your own”.¹⁴⁵ Their fiction

¹⁴⁵ Tanner, *City of Words*, 15.

enacted yet another narrative of containment, with the same core ideology of individual liberty; the Beats were attempting to shape society through an *unpatterned*, rather than patterned, model of existence. But Bowles' short stories continually emphasize the restricted, the confined, and the patterned nature of individual existence. Bowles communicates this through a prose that is inherently confining, deploying images of suffocation and severance, and through a form that emphasises the patterned nature of our existence. *The Delicate Prey* voices the dark inversion of the American dream: from the perspective of Bowles' fiction, no matter how unlimited the world might seem, life is necessarily containing and confining.

Chapter Two

Bowles and Surrealism

American Surrealist?

As a polyglot composer, photographer and translator, Paul Bowles left a broad impression on the artistic world of mid-twentieth century America beyond his published novels and short stories. The combination of his peculiar style – strikingly precise, vividly violent – and the magazines with which he initially found literary success, saw him still classified ‘as late as the 70s’ as one of a select group of “American Surrealists.”¹ Indeed, Bowles had a close relationship with many of the leading figures within the surrealist movement, both in Paris and in exile in New York, and was an important contributor to Charles Henri Ford’s magazine surrealist *View* (1940-47). But while the popular association of Bowles’ prose with surrealism may have endured, Bowles himself went on to renounce any intellectual relationship, proclaiming that his fiction had “nothing to do with Surrealism.”² This chapter will explore Bowles’ encounter with surrealism, paying particular attention to his major artistic output, his short fiction. Tracing his early career in American surrealist publications, it will examine Bowles’ interpretation of Bretonian surrealism, exploring both the aesthetic and psychological influences that the movement had on his prose. His work suggests, moreover, some of the ways in which surrealism was adapted by American writers and reapplied to an American context. By analysing the reception by American critics of the work most consciously crafted along surrealistic

¹ Catrina Neiman, introduction to *View: Parade of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Catrina Neiman (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1991), xiii.

² Bowles, *Conversations*, 137.

lines – *The Delicate Prey* – it will also suggest some of the difficulties associated with the position of surrealism in America in the middle of the twentieth century. Although the preeminent art critic Clement Greenberg’s dismissal of surrealism is well known, there has been little consideration of how the broader intellectual climate of postwar America influenced the movement’s reception; the critiques levelled at Bowles’ work gesture towards some of the underlying cultural biases against surrealism. Bowles was generally seen as presenting a vision that was removed from the contingencies of real life, and violent in a way that served no social purpose; by considering his prose within the framework of surrealism, we can recuperate these disjunctive elements as part of an aesthetic that followed surrealist guru André Breton in challenging what they both understood as the deformed rationality of the western mind.

Bowles himself repeatedly cited Breton’s work on automatic writing, which he read in translation in the pages of Eugene Jolas’ Parisian magazine *transition*, as a crucial intervention in his own development as a writer. At the same time, however, Bowles made a point of distancing himself from the surrealist leader, and was never a member of the closely organised group. Despite assertions by other critics, Bowles never actually met Breton, avoiding him even when the two were working on the same issue of *View* during Breton’s wartime exile in New York. Instead, Bowles maintained long-term, personal relations with two of the most prominent surrealist painters, Max Ernst and Salvador Dali, with whom he would eventually collaborate in various ways during the 1940s. On leaving high school, Bowles had initially anticipated a career as a painter, enrolling in the School of Design and Liberal Arts in Manhattan; during his time in Paris during the 1930s, Bowles wrote back unceasingly to friends in America about the art scene, showing an acute awareness of the development of surrealist painting. He wrote to one friend that he was “especially

fond of Klee's work," and that the "[de] Chirico is superlative! Fortunately there is a bench directly in front of it, and one can regard it by the minute in comfort".³ Bowles felt comfortable making value judgments about the quality of the art he saw, and showed a clear preference for artists associated with surrealism, arguing that "the 'new' good [artists] are surely a very decided 'few.' Miró, Roux, Klee, Picabia, Tanguy, Chirico".⁴ He was attuned, moreover, to the way that the art was developing, writing of Max Ernst's work in 1931, that:

... he must be mad. certainly the farther he goes, the farther from land he seems to get. have you followed him at all? ten years ago his things were understandable. now they are the maddest maddest one can find anywhere anywhere.⁵

For Bowles, the 'madness' and incomprehensibility of Ernst's work was one of its strengths, and drew him to seek out the artist in person. Although he encountered Surrealism through Breton, he was nonetheless predisposed to engage with it in less dogmatic way, which was inflected by the visual arts.

So it is not as if surrealism were an alien imposition on Bowles' artistic career. From a young age, Bowles had consciously composed works within a specifically surrealist mode of production and his earliest literary efforts were oriented along specifically surrealist lines. In an unpublished letter to critic Neil Campbell in 1981, Bowles reflected back on his career, concluding he had "never written anything save in the shadow, at least, of the Surrealist tradition".⁶ In the spring of 1928, before Bowles was 18, his poem 'Spire Song' was published in *transition*. He had tailored this "long Surrealist effort" deliberately towards the aesthetic priorities of the

³ Paul Bowles, *In Touch: the Letters of Paul Bowles*, ed. Jeffrey Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 46, 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 70, (sic).

⁶ Unpublished letter: Paul Bowles to Neil Campbell, 29th July, 1981, Harry Ransom Center, Texas.

magazine and his success inspired two trips to Paris, where he would meet Gertrude Stein and later be propelled towards Tangiers, his future home in exile.⁷ While the next decade was dedicated to Bowles' musical career as a composer, mentored by Aaron Copland, when he returned to literature in the 1940s, his work appeared in the even more explicitly surrealist publication, Ford's New York-based magazine *View* (1940-47). With an article entitled 'The Jazz Ear,' Bowles made his entry into "one of the most important avant-garde magazines of the '40s."⁸ He would later recall how "ideologically *View's* policy adhered fairly strictly to the tenets of *The Surrealist Manifesto*," a stance that suited his perspective, and he quickly found a place as one of two "master linguists who would become *View's* chief translators."⁹ Bowles also collaborated in cross-disciplinary projects with Ernst and Dali. A long-time admirer of Ernst's collage novels, Bowles composed the score for a film on Ernst's masterpiece, *Une Semaine de Bonte*, which they later reworked for Ernst's segment of Hans Richter's 1948 film *Dreams that Money Can Buy*; in return, Ernst produced the cover artwork for a recording of Bowles' music issued by Peggy Guggenheim's 'Art of this Century' imprint. Bowles also collaborated with Dali on the ballet *Colloque Sentimentale*, based on poems of Paul Verlaine, and advised him on his illustrations for a 1934 edition of Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror*. Bowles had thus planted himself at the heart of wartime surrealism, amongst both exiled progenitors and local disciples, and his finely honed ear for the nuances of surrealism's fundamental aesthetics allowed him to flourish.

Even after he stopped working on material for an explicitly surrealist forum, moreover, Bowles' method of composition continued to rely upon the method of

⁷ Bowles, cited in Virginia Spencer Carr, *Paul Bowles: A Life* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 46.

⁸ Bowles, foreword to *View: Parade of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Catrina Neiman (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press), 1991, xi.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xi; Neiman, introduction, xii.

automatic writing, which had “liberated his style,” and continued to govern his artistic output.¹⁰ Bowles characterised his life as one that was largely “unthought,” suggesting that he had naturally “never been a thinking person,” and that his life went by “without [his] conscious knowledge.”¹¹ The moment, during his teens, of discovering Breton’s theories on automatic writing proved a pivotal one, for automatism allowed him to communicate through writing in a way that accounted for his own experience of the world: he could “write without being conscious of what [he] was doing,” just as he lived in an ‘unthought’ way.¹² He relished the freedom to be able to “make [his prose] grammatically correct and even to have a certain style without the slightest idea of what [he] was writing,” to the point where he did not even feel personal responsibility for what he had written.¹³ He protested that “I don’t feel that I wrote these books. I feel as though they had been written by my arm, by my brain, my organism, but that they’re not necessarily mine.”¹⁴ Given that a surrealist methodology underpinned his artistic praxis, it is not surprising that this is the one area in which Bowles’ critics have been prepared to concede a continued influence. Gena Dagal Caponi discusses this most fully, noting that Bowles “practiced unconscious writing daily.”¹⁵ Like discussions elsewhere, however, Caponi’s interest in the topic is limited: surrealism is worth considering as a ‘technique’ for literary production and no further. However, Bowles’ evocation of his experience of the world, much like his childhood writing, reveals the extent to which the aesthetics of surrealism resonated with him personally. It was not merely a movement that he

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹¹ Bowles, in conversation with Jeffrey Bailey, “The Art of Fiction LXVII: Paul Bowles,” *Paris Review* 81 (1981): 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, 76.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁵ Gena Dagal Caponi, *Paul Bowles* (New York: Twayne, 1998), 89. See also Pounds and Hibbard, who both similarly acknowledge Bowles’ surrealist praxis, while otherwise disassociating him from the context of surrealism.

became affiliated with, or a source of stylistic techniques, but a perspective on the world that accounted for his own disjunctive, disassociative experience of life, that followed the same unconscious, surreal logic proposed by Breton's writing.

Bowles' decision to change career, from composer to author, was instigated in part by the publication in *View* in 1943 of some of his childhood writings: a diary-narrative written from the age of nine, beginning at the end of 1919, the entries of which were framed as a surrealist text by the editors of *View*.¹⁶ Described by Ford in the volume's contents page as "the *chef d'oeuvre* of the primitive style," Bowles' work was recuperated, a-historically, as a proto-surrealist 'document.'¹⁷ *Bluey*'s four and a half months of daily entries concern the unfolding relationships of the heroine, Bluey, with the men Dolok Parasol and Henry Altman, and her transition to America (to the mythical city of 'Wen Kroy,' New York's inverted image), and negotiation of its social customs and mores. In the editors' eyes, its suitability for publication in the pages of *View* was unquestionable. Ford wrote that it was 'far more persuasive than the writing of many adults.'¹⁸ From its focus on cataloguing seemingly trivial details, its emphasis on the monstrous and disturbing, to its use of the staccato form of diary entries to enhance the discordant juxtaposition of Bluey's experiences with each another, it could readily be produced as evidence of the kind of unconscious connection-making that surrealism strove towards.

In many ways *Bluey* foreshadows Bowles' later achievements in short fiction, offering a prototype for the unconscious-driven narratives, which juxtaposed the alien against the civilised, that became his greatest literary legacy. Its publication in *View*, however, positioned it as a kind of proto-surrealist work instead that invited

¹⁶ Paul Bowles, "Bluey," *View* 3.3 (1943): 81-2.

¹⁷ Charles Henri Ford, "Contents," *View* 3.3 (1943), 71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

comparisons to the *First Manifesto*, in which Bretons' mock encyclopaedia entry declared surrealism to be "based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought."¹⁹ In this formulation, surrealism sought to cultivate 'a new awareness' of the world around the artist that would reveal a higher level of reality.²⁰ This process was, as is well known, anchored in the generative powers of the unconscious. *Bluey* references the unconscious, in part through the characters' peculiar habit of fainting every few days, initially with due cause – "Bluey was worse. Doctor says she has Pneumonia. She faints"; "Bluey has a blowout. Dolok dies. Bluey faints"; but increasingly, for no reason at all – "Bluey gets a maid. Lina Minner. Bluey faints."²¹ Moreover, the text develops a disturbing theme of madness and violence, also echoing the surrealists' pursuit of extreme psychic states. From the incipient conflict between Bluey and Henry – "Bluey has a fight with Henry. Bluey yells" and "Bluey hits Henry. Henry hits Bluey and gives her a black eye" – the text shifts its focus to the unfortunate Dolok Parasol's parents, who quickly succumb to sickness and insanity.²² After "Dolok Parasol's mother dies of grief for loss of Dolok," and his sister "weeps and weeps," for two days straight before contracting influenza, Mr Parasol "gets influenza," "goes crazy," and "almost dies."²³ Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Bowles' text is the way his characters seem to crave their madness. Localised again in the Parasol family, Dolok's sister Bessie, already sick with influenza, "has Chrisis"; her father, the following day, "wishes he would have

¹⁹ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1969), 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 160

²¹ Bowles, "Bluey," 81, 82.

²² *Ibid.*, 82.

²³ *Ibid.*

chrisis.”²⁴ Recalling the portmanteau words of the surrealists’ spiritual ancestor, Lewis Carroll, or their famous games of ‘Exquisite Corpses,’ Bowles blends ‘crisis’ with both ‘chrysalis,’ suggesting a kind of rebirth – following her chrisis, Bessie gets “better” – and Christ, suggesting a messianic sacrifice. Mr Parasol gets his wish for ‘chrisis,’ and subsequently dies.²⁵ Bowles’ naïve wordplay, reframed within the context of an issue of *View* organised around the theme of Narcissus, thus suggests the dual possibility of a madness that heals and destroys, just as surrealism promised both a death to rational thinking and a ‘rebirth.’

The claustrophobic sense of madness and dislocation in the text is emphasised by Bowles’ use of juxtaposition. The cornerstone of surrealist thought, the use of juxtaposition to form ‘previously neglected associations’ is the central process for generating meaning in surrealist writing.²⁶ Focused around clipped and selective diary entries, the structure of *Bluey* is comprised of a series of seemingly unrelated events that are brought together in a disturbing union: “Dolok gets worse. Bluey gets a Pierce Arrow Automobile”; “Greatest storm in world’s history. Bluey knocks Henry down.”²⁷ Through their inclusion together in that day’s entry, the events take on a powerfully suggestive, although never explicit, relationship. The text’s obsession with inane measurements, reflected in Bluey’s compulsion to re-weigh herself, recording even the fractional increase from 95lbs to 95½lbs, or the cataloguing of temperature and snowfall, becomes part of this broader strategy that makes connections between the mundane and the mysterious. We feel compelled to infer a relationship between the storm and Bluey’s violence towards her lover, just as we build a connection when

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 26.

²⁷ Bowles, “Bluey,” 81, 82.

we read, on February 21: “It starts snowing again. 34 degrees. Bluey wants a child.”²⁸ *Bluey*, compressed, violent and disjunctive, thwarts expectations of a rational, sequential narrative, offering a surreal network of connections and a radically disoriented perspective. Insofar as it differed drastically from the conventions of western cultural production, it could be readily reappropriated as an example of ‘primitive’ writing by the editors of *View* and thus co-opted into a wider narrative that set the ‘primitive’ or ‘outsider’ in opposition to the ‘civilised.’

Even if the editorial gaze of *View* did occasionally venture further afield, ‘the Surrealists were never far out of the line of vision,’ a statement that rings particularly true when it comes to Bowles’ contributions.²⁹ Dickran Tashjian has shown how, through increasingly high production values, the publication featured a wide range of visual material and a broad spread of interviews and criticism and “came to rival the French Surrealists’ *Minotaure* of the previous decade.”³⁰ By 1945, Bowles had established himself firmly enough amongst the magazine’s coterie to edit an issue, the suggestively titled “Tropical Americana,” in which he had the opportunity to enunciate his own surreal ‘Point of View.’ Aside from book reviews, letters and the regular columns on jazz and art, the entire magazine was composed of Latin American ‘documents’ assembled by Bowles, ranging from extracts from Mayan prophecies, to ethnographic notes on an Amazonian tribe, to photographs Bowles himself had taken on his own extended trips to Mexico. This cultural appropriation also signalled a change in direction for Bowles’ own fictional output; all but two of the stories in *The Delicate Prey* (and all four of his novels) deploy the non-western in opposition to ‘civilization,’ in the process reifying and objectifying the non-western

²⁸ Ibid., 82.

²⁹ Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 200.

³⁰ Ibid.

subject. In his editorial for *View*, Bowles draws on a *Time* magazine article on the Chavante Amazonian Indians, sketching out for the reader how the surrealist viewpoint mirrors the ‘natural’ outlook of the Indians and describing Chavantes as a “tragic, ludicrous, violent spectacle” of a region that “here... welcomes, there... resists the spread of so-called civilisation.”³¹ To an extent, Bowles even acknowledges that his editorial approach deliberately deploys the material in an objectifying and primitivising manner; he explains that his “aim is to present a poetically apt version of life as it is lived by the peoples of tropical America.”³² This version of life, moreover, is one that Bowles explicitly sets out to equate with an avant-garde position. Suggesting that “the avant-garde is not alone in its incomplete war against many features of modern civilization,” Bowles argues that “the ponderous apathy and the potential antipathy of the vestigial primitive consciousness” join it in the struggle against “civilization.” The avant-garde thereby denies the autonomy and self-determination of the peoples whose texts and so called attributes he appropriates.³³ This appropriation also recalls Bowles’ later comments in the essay “Windows on the Past,” where he asserts that contemporary society has “lost contact with the psychic soil of tradition in which the roots of culture must be anchored” having become too dependent on “the rational section of the mind”.³⁴

Co-opting this ‘primitive’ material for such partisan aims is a problematic strategy on Bowles’ part, particularly when some of the material he uses to illustrate this ‘vestigial consciousness’ originated from contemporary newspaper reports and an

³¹ Bowles, “The Point of View,” *View* 5.2 (1945): 5.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Bowles, “Windows on the Past,” *Holiday* 25 (January 1955): 32-34, 109-113, 34.

extract written by a prominent Mexican politician.³⁵ Removed from their original context and reframed within the contest between civilisation and ‘the primitive’ that Bowles’ editorial establishes, these pieces are made to speak in ways they were never intended. Bowles’ use of these documents reflects, moreover, a broader tendency amongst the surrealists, towards a reification of the non-western. There is now a considerable body of scholarship on the relationship between surrealism and non-western cultures, most prominently James Clifford’s seminal *Predicament of Cultures* and it is telling that Bowles classified the disparate array of translations, photographs and forgeries that he collected for *View* as ‘documents,’ for it is precisely in these terms that Clifford frames his argument about the ethnographic appropriations of surrealist artists and writers.³⁶ Bowles’ own work fits into Clifford’s understanding of the term “*Surrealism* in an obviously expanded sense,” which “circumscribe[s] an aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions - that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious.”³⁷ Within such a programme, the ‘primitive’ is deployed as evidence of an alternative to established patterns of western behaviour.

Certainly, Bowles’ representation of the Chavantes – and Latin America more generally – as exemplars of avant-garde behaviour, was motivated by his own feelings of hostility towards Western ‘civilization,’ which are manifested in the kind of documents he selected to publish in *View*. From a young age, he had felt a

³⁵ The two newspaper clippings, which Bowles’ simply entitles “two documents,” recount violent murders in Mexico city, while “Chewing Gum Land,” by the politician Raymond Beteta, is dislocated from its original, political context, and presented as a set of ethnographic field notes; *View* 5.2 (1945): 8-10; 6, 14.

³⁶ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, (Cambridge, Mass.: HUP, 1988); see also, more recently, Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic*, (London: Routledge, 2003).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

“compulsion” to escape, in whatever way, from America, an impulse he attributed directly to the kind of society that existed there: “I had a fairly good idea of what life would be like for me in the States, and I didn’t want it.”³⁸ One interviewer broached the issue with him by suggesting that “American technology has already contributed so much to making what you [Bowles] regard as an inevitably undesirable future,” which Bowles affirmed; he certainly saw little positive in contemporary American society and considered it “a great shame, what has happened there”, with the advance of ‘civilisation’ encroaching so far that he did not “think it will ever be put right.”³⁹ Surrealism had such a profound impact on him, not only because it accounted for his ‘automatic’ experience of living, but because it provided a model, in which the ‘exotic’ subject could be deployed in opposition to western culture. Indeed, in his autobiography, *Without Stopping*, Bowles explicitly identifies the creation of these ‘documents’ for *View* as the starting point of his career in fiction: “[I]ittle by little the desire came to me to invent my own myths, adopting the point of view of the primitive mind,” stating that, in order to “simulat[e]” this state, he used “the old Surrealist method of abandoning conscious control and writing whatever words came from the pen.”⁴⁰ So, Bowles constructed the stories of *The Delicate Prey* with motivations that drew explicitly on surrealism’s appropriation of the non-western, and set out to create fiction as a personal reinterpretation of the ‘primitive’ material he had deployed in *View*.

Bowles, nonetheless, also distanced himself from surrealism later in life, despite his close involvement with the movement throughout the early stages of his career. His work had been published almost solely through surrealist publications, and

³⁸ Bowles, *Conversations*, 68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 70, 69.

⁴⁰ Paul Bowles, *Without Stopping*, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1972), 261.

both exploited techniques germane to surrealist production and shared the movement's characteristic emphases on madness and psychic dislocation. However, Bowles' career after his association with *View* is better known and more celebrated. His short stories, which Vidal labelled "masterpieces," "amongst the best ever written by an American" made the greatest impact but Bowles decreed they "had nothing to do with Surrealism."⁴¹ In another unpublished letter, Bowles elaborates on this by explaining that although in his early writing the "Surrealist influence was almost complete," by the 1940s he had "become somewhat impatient with the dogmatic utterances of Breton, and of Surrealist Literature in general".⁴² This resistance to later association with surrealism resembles other Americans' appraisals of their involvement with the movement, not least the editors of *View*, Parker Tyler and Ford, who were never part of the surrealist movement in any official capacity and if they laid claim to any involvement with it, it was usually to critique or to revise its precepts and politics.⁴³ They actively distanced themselves from the movement's Marxist position and promoted a broader, and sometimes more commercial, interpretation of avant-gardism than the surrealists' comparatively more doctrinaire approach. In its initial conception, *View* was to be, like Ford's *Blues* (1929-30) before it, a magazine devoted to a broadly 'poetic' perspective – Ford "wanted to call the magazine 'The Poetry Paper,' and set it up like a tabloid" – yet it soon diversified and included a wide variety of visual and verbal material, not all of it resembling surrealism.⁴⁴ Similarly, many of their more prominent American contributors such as

⁴¹ Vidal, "Stories," 212; Bowles, *Conversations*, 137.

⁴² Unpublished letter: Paul Bowles to Neil Campbell, 10th December, 1981, Harry Ransom Center, Texas.

⁴³ For more on Ford, Tyler, surrealism and *View*, see Tashjian's *Boatload*, Neiman's anthology of *View*, along with the chapter "Queer Modernism: Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler's *The Young and the Evil*," in Juan Antonio Suarez, *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), and Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

⁴⁴ Tashjian, *Boatload*, 117.

Henry Miller, who contributed stories and articles to several issues of *View*, made similar claims to Bowles. Miller maintained that he “was writing surrealistically in America before [he] ever heard the word.”⁴⁵ Miller’s phrasing here is telling: while associating his style aesthetically with the surrealists, Miller also highlights a trend towards producing writing that resembled surrealism in America during the early twentieth century but that developed independently from it.

In the case of Bowles, the development of a style that overlapped with surrealism is clearly tied to his work as a translator. For the *Tropical Americana* issue of *View*, not only did Bowles provide translations from the Mayan holy texts the *Popol Vuh* (or, as his translation renders it, *Popol Buj*) and *Chilam Balam*, but he also translated the Spanish author Ramon J. Sender’s short story “The Buzzard.”⁴⁶ Bowles’ reading of contemporary Latin American fiction was broad, and the following year, in January 1946, *View* published Bowles’ translation of Jorge Luis Borges’ “The Circular Ruins,” the first Borges story to be published in English translation.⁴⁷ Bowles’ deployment of the ‘primitive’ in *The Delicate Prey* is complicated by the relationship between Bowles’ translations and his own fiction; this relationship can be better understood through a comparison with Bowles’ work with music.

After receiving a Rockefeller foundation grant in 1959, Bowles “set out for some of Morocco’s more distant and secluded locations” with two assistants, and over the year made four trips and traversed over 25,000 miles, as he attempted to chronicle

⁴⁵ Henry Miller, “An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere,” in *The Cosmological Eye* (New York: New Directions, 1939).

⁴⁶ Bowles was clearly drawn to Mesoamerican creation myths, which he collected various translations of, and which influenced stories like “The Circular Ruins.”

⁴⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, “The Circular Ruins,” trans. Paul Bowles, *View* 5.6 (1946): 6, 10, 14.

as many forms of indigenous music as possible.⁴⁸ As Foltz notes, however, the project ultimately came “to rather an abrupt end by decree of the Moroccan government which deemed indigenous folk music ‘degenerate’ and forbade Bowles from continuing the project.”⁴⁹ The hours of music that Bowles collected, often in desperate or dangerous conditions, have remained almost completely unreleased from Library of Congress archives, save for one single disk. Bowles himself was honest about the magnitude of the task he had undertaken, explaining:

My stint, in attempting to record the music of Morocco, was to capture in the space of the six months which the Rockefeller Foundation allotted me for the project, examples of every major musical genre to be found within the boundaries of the country ... By [December 1959] I already had more than two hundred and fifty selections ... as diversified a body of music as one could find in any land west of India.⁵⁰

He considered his task to be one of helping preserve something of a culture he deeply respected from the encroachment of western civilisation, but not, as he notes from “the by-products of our civilization” so much as from “the irrational longing on the part of members of their own educated minorities to cease being themselves and become westerners.”⁵¹ For Bowles, then, the issue with western, or more specifically American culture, was the extent to which its monolithic totality could absorb other cultures; his role, in recording, translating and publishing such works was to help slow, or prevent the transformation of the world into an America wrought miniature. His attraction towards surrealism was predicated on a particular desire to challenge American culture.

⁴⁸ Anne Foltz, “Paul Bowles,” *Review of Contemporary Literature* 20.2 (2002), 88.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Paul Bowles, “The Rif, to Music,” in *Paul Bowles, Music*, eds. Claudia Swan and Jonathan Scheffer (New York: Eos Music, 1995), 130.

⁵¹ Paul Bowles, *Their Heads are Green and Their Hands Are Blue: Scenes from the Non-Christian World*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), viii.

This stands in contrast with Bowles' attitude towards the use of "primitive" material within his own musical compositions. One of the most conspicuous aspects of Bowles' work as a composer was the extent to which he incorporated "folk" motifs from Spain, North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Rather than attempting to create works within these distinct musical idioms, however, Bowles consciously appropriated aspects of their sound and incorporated them into a larger musical montage. Indeed, he argued that he "never used Latin folk tunes," but rather "invented melodies in the manner of Latin folk music."⁵² These referenced folk music, not as whole pieces, but rather through fragments, which were, in Bowles' eyes, "of course... deprived of meaning" in and of themselves; as musical quotations, "they never had meaning in the first place."⁵³ For the casual listener, or the one not attuned to the nuances of Bowles' system of reference, his music could seem 'witty' in its appropriation of other musical sounds. But as his friend, music critic Peggy Glanville-Hicks explains, his use of aural references creates "a re-arrangement – a surrealism where fragments are stirred into a new relationship, but where each fragment is still glaringly what it was, recalling former juxtapositions."⁵⁴ So Bowles' own works were never meant to pass for 'primitive' works themselves, but incorporated fragments from them in what Bowles considered to be a deliberately abstracted way. In shaping his stories to resemble 'primitive' folk tales, Bowles was engaged in the same process as he was within his music; he was introducing an alternative perspective into his work, without claiming to actually represent that perspective.

⁵² Paul Bowles, in interview with Phillip Ramey, "You Didn't Want Even to Meet Prokofiev?" in *Paul Bowles, Music*, eds. Claudia Swan and Jonathan Scheffer (New York: Eos Music, 1995), 26.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Peggy Glanville-Hicks, "Paul Bowles – the Season of Promise," in *Paul Bowles, Music*, eds. Claudia Swan and Jonathan Scheffer (New York: Eos Music, 1995), 112.

Part of what distinguishes Bowles' stories in *The Delicate Prey*, then, from his issue of *View*, or from earlier works like *Bluey*, is their structure; Bowles deliberately organized these stories around reiterative patterns and a circular structure. On the one hand, Bowles consistently professed to practicing automatic writing and considered the "sensation of dreaming" one of the most important qualities in literature; he treasured his wife, Jane Bowles', novel *Two Serious Ladies* (1943) because of its circular pattern, "like the unfolding of a dream."⁵⁵ But at the same time, he also insisted that his stories were carefully structured and that the meaning of his work was in fact a product of that structure, arguing that "there's nothing in writing except words, patterns of words."⁵⁶ Recalling Miller's comments in his *Open Letter*, Bowles also conceded: "I don't think one could follow the surrealist method absolutely, with no conscious control in the choice of material, and be likely to arrive at an organic form."⁵⁷ Instead, Bowles focussed on structuring his texts to emphasise patterning, during their transcription from longhand to typescript. In this sense, Bowles might be said to construct an aestheticised form of surrealism, one impelled not so much by dream states *per se*, but rather a deliberate use of language to mimic somnambulant patterning.

Within *The Delicate Prey* this aesthetic emerges from the circular nature of each story; Bowles' emphasis on patterning in his fiction translates into a kind of story in which everything feels interconnected and inevitable. This reflects his increased interest in producing 'folk tales,' and contrasts sharply with Bowles' earlier work, such as *Bluey*. "The Echo," for example, sees student Aileen travel to visit her mother in Columbia. Her feelings become increasingly stifled and oppressed, focused

⁵⁵ Bowles, "Art of Fiction," 83.

⁵⁶ Bowles, *Conversations*, 213.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

around her mother's lesbian lover, whom she regards "with unmasked hatred" (*DP*, 151). The conflict mounts as the story progresses, to the point where even "when the tension should have been over, somehow it was not" (152). Even when Aileen bursts into the "violence" (156) that the pounding of a nearby waterfall has persistently suggested and attacks her mother's lover "with vicious suddenness," the story does not seem resolved. Instead, it closes with Aileen, heading back towards the airstrip, turning back "towards the house," and seeing the figures of her mother and her lover "standing side by side," unaffected by the 'terrible storm' of her presence. Closing with the 'story' in no more conclusive a place than it began, the comparison of Aileen's visit to a storm suggests that her visit has made only a temporary impression, that even her ferocious violence has engendered no change, either in her or her victim. But this lack of development, which contemporary critics had thought of as stagnation, is actually an essential part of how Bowles creates the patterned effect of his prose. "The Echo" begins on a plane, about to descend into Columbia. At the forefront of the narration is a sense of unsettling violence, with "the vibration of the plane" that shook "rapidly," and the sun shining "violently down upon the wide silver wings," which Bowles contrasts with the soporific air that surrounds Aileen; "sleepy," she seems almost in a dream, and reads a letter from her mother "as if to decipher a meaning that did not lie in the sequence of the words" (156). As the story closes, Bowles draws the narration back to these same elements. The violence is refigured in Aileen's outburst, which has the effect on the outside world of "a terrible storm," while Aileen herself, in contrast, is "still in the midst of her deep dream." The journey of the cart is even described as a "descent," against the yawning backdrop of "the gorge looming behind." Bowles has embedded the elements of the story's conclusion in its beginning, and crafted it so that it loops back on itself, forming a circular whole

that concludes where it began. The structure forces the reader to impose connections on the narrative, creating something that resembles but diverges from a surrealist perspective. A frequent interpretation of surrealist narratives is that they resist closure; in part, this is a necessary corollary to the process of automatic writing, where the author writes without a conscious awareness of the narrative trajectory. In Bowles' case, however, his stories are patterned in order to emphasise the inevitability of the action that occurs. In order to create the sense that the action of the stories was governed by invisible connections, Bowles has to himself relinquish the model of total unconscious production that automatic writing demanded.

What imbues these connections with a greater sense of authority, moreover, is the crisp, neutral prose that Bowles uses to describe them. As I have argued, there is elegance and clarity to the way that Bowles narrates his stories, with Lasdun noting the "calm logic with which they unfold."⁵⁸ Bowles describes the action with an authority that suggests not a lack of perspective but one that has a greater understanding of what is occurring than any participatory viewpoint could possess. This authority, as Lasdun explains, is often expressed through the way the stories begin: opening "with the impersonal simplicity of folk tales."⁵⁹ When "The Delicate Prey" opens with the statement that "There were three Filala who sold leather in Tabelbala," (277) the authority of the narrator – removed, and drawing our attention to the scene as if pointing out an interesting episode in a history book, or beginning a fairy tale – gives the story that follows a sense of impersonality and inevitability. The characters, relayed to us in such detached terms, take on a general, almost archetypal quality, just as the Professor in "A Distant Episode," with his "dark glasses" and "two small overnight bags full of maps, sun lotions and medicines" (290) needs no further

⁵⁸ Lasdun, introduction, v.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

description than the contents of his luggage. In much the same way that Dali's paintings take on a particularly haunting quality when one notices the skill of his draughtsmanship - the elegance of their execution gives their strange elements a surreal coherence - the cool, detached clarity of Bowles' prose lends the events an even clearer sense of coherence and inevitability. Although working across different media, both Bowles and Dali relied on artistic praxes that foregrounded technique and moved beyond a totally dissociative system of creation. Dali's fall from the brotherhood of surrealism was based in part upon the extent to which his process of painting failed to adhere to the tenets of surrealism's Manifestoes and it could be argued that Bowles, like Dali, was more interested in a technocratic version of surrealism, one that foregrounded through aesthetic means a simulacrum of the dream experience.

Surrealism in America

Given its rapid, and almost total evacuation from the American cultural scene during the late 1940s, it is not surprising that surrealism scarcely figures in the canonical accounts of twentieth century American literature. And it is certainly true that, as Tashjian has clearly illustrated, surrealist art had only a negligible impact on the development of the American artistic scene, particularly when compared to the influence exerted by Dada. At least initially, however, surrealist writing found a wide readership in America, and the influence of surrealism on the writers associated with the magazine *transition* is only just starting to be acknowledged by critics. Today, *transition* is perhaps best known as the initial venue for James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which Jolas published in instalments as "Work in Progress". At the time,

however, it enjoyed a comparatively high readership, and drew submissions from some of the most important writers of the interwar period, including Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, Hart Crane and Samuel Beckett. Equally, it spawned several imitations, including Ford's precursor to *View, Blues*. Surrealism, then, clearly had a level of intellectual and cultural currency in America during the late twenties and into the thirties. At the same time, it is important to remember that the aspects of surrealism that filtered through venues like *transition* constituted a necessarily reimagined version of the original – a “surrealism circumscribed by the magazines’ editorial policies and special interests”.⁶⁰ Perhaps more significantly, the guise in which surrealism appeared in *transition*, et al., was itself in contradiction to the movement’s perception of itself. In reference to Jolas’ emphasis on an aestheticised, literary form of surrealism, Tashjian notes: “Jolas’s interest in poetry itself was at odds with Breton’s antiliterary bent. As Breton said in his interview, poetry (by which he meant automatism) was simply a means to an end.”⁶¹ Its initial reception was, therefore, predicated on its recuperation within a depoliticised framework.

By the late 1940s, however, surrealism had all but vanished from the American scene. In artistic terms, its first and most vociferous proponent had been the gallerist Julien Levy, whose eponymous gallery enjoyed a long succession of specifically surrealist exhibitions. By 1948, however, Levy was forced to close the doors – owing to his unwillingness to shift the gallery’s focus away from surrealism. The year before, *View* had also published its final edition, with Ford recognising that the postwar climate in America was to be less than hospitable towards surrealism; he “could not depend on the surrealists to make his way”, and proceeded to follow his

⁶⁰ Tashjian, *Boatload*, 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

erstwhile mentor Carlos Williams in taking up an “American voyage”.⁶² In art historical terms, the decline of surrealism has been attributed to the rise of Abstract Expressionism in America, which, as Serge Guilbaut has argued, owed a great deal to the same shift in political climate that I have explored. Guilbaut has argued that “the unprecedented national and international success of an American avant-garde was not due solely to aesthetic and stylistic considerations... but also, even more, to the movement’s ideological resonance.”⁶³ Surrealism’s disappearance can, therefore, be linked in important ways with the cultural imperatives that similarly side-lined Bowles’ short fiction. In line with its adaptation by Jolas for *transition*, when Bowles took up writing prose fiction seriously over the mid to late forties, he used surrealism as an essentially aesthetic model for his writing. In fact, by 1948, when he was finishing the last stories of *The Delicate Prey*, he had been involved with the movement for twenty years, beginning with the poems Jolas had published in the very pages of *transition*. But as the decline of *View* and the Julien Levy Gallery makes clear, he was by now engaging with something that was regarded as out of date. The rejection of his work, then, can be attributed in part to this sense of obsolescence; the obvious imprint of surrealism was by now considered anachronistic. It was also informed by the new demands of postwar American culture, with their politicised impetus towards social benefit. But at the same time, Bowles was making a calculated move in invoking surrealism at a point at which it ran so against the cultural grain – a move that has been given essentially no critical consideration.

In fact, the reception of *The Delicate Prey* occluded any connection between the anthology and surrealism. As I have argued, critics seemed unwilling to

⁶² Ibid., 175.

⁶³ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 2.

accommodate Bowles' vision to any degree; the aspects of his prose that they did address reveal the rift between Bowles' influences and the intellectual currents in America in the postwar period. Perhaps more importantly, the responses to Bowles' work reveal some of the reasons that surrealism received such a hostile reception in America. While Greenberg's dismissal of surrealism is well acknowledged, there has been little consideration of how the broader intellectual climate of postwar America influenced the movement's reception; the critiques of Bowles' work gesture towards some of the underlying cultural biases against surrealism. Bowles' first novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, which had been published a year earlier in 1949, was repeatedly criticised for its lack of well-developed characters; Sutcliffe enunciated this most clearly when he suggested that "Bowles's people never particularize; they continue to be uninteresting abstractions, devices for the expression of unrelieved despair."⁶⁴ This criticism was even more prominent in the reception of *The Delicate Prey*, about which the overwhelming feeling was that the stories were "less story and characterization than scenes and places described with great originality."⁶⁵ While critics wanted to 'take part in' the stories themselves, and become invested in their characters, they found themselves cut off from them, unable to relate to these 'undeveloped' figures.⁶⁶ Barbour characterised the reaction, declaring that *The Delicate Prey* was "lacking any... penetration of character."⁶⁷

As I have established, without a greater degree of plot development and action, critics argued that Bowles' characters lacked the space to grow and develop. But Bowles' use of compressed structure and reiterative patterning drew emphasis away from action, creating a sense of claustrophobia – the inertia of the stories

⁶⁴ Sutcliffe, "Nebulous Self," 734.

⁶⁵ Jackson, "Seamier Side," BR4.

⁶⁶ Jackson, "Seamier Side," BR4.

⁶⁷ Barbour, "Little Magazines," 280.

rendered them “actionless, which is to say characterless.”⁶⁸ Descriptive prose was not inherently a negative aspect of Bowles’ writing, but its use, in conjunction with structural patterning, to replicate a dreamlike cohesion, ran directly against a desire for development and complex characterisation. The stories failed, moreover, to offer a framework within which their readers could position themselves and so ‘relate to’ the characters. The ‘primitive’ settings, which Bowles deployed in a deliberately confrontational way, were understood as an attempt “to deny the world of our everyday.”⁶⁹ Rather than suggesting there could be something provocative about this, however, critics argued that the stories’ disjunction from the quotidian, American world of his readers reduced them to “a bit of exotic reporting,” inconsequential and irrelevant.⁷⁰ This sense is registered most keenly in the suggestion that Bowles ought to return to his “native scene,” from which he could provide “personal, intimate, and, shall we say, down-to-earth stories or glimpses of the small town in which he was brought up”; in order for Bowles to express something worthwhile, according to these critics, he needed to locate his voice within an American context, and reproduce something that spoke directly of his own experiences.⁷¹

While critics were unable to avoid acknowledging elements that Bowles used to recreate a surreal aesthetic, they repeatedly misread them. Rather than considering Bowles as in some way working within a surrealist legacy, their critiques reveal their desire to recuperate him within a character-driven, specifically American framework. This pattern of misreading is particularly evident in the way critics, from Cyril Connolly to Carlos Williams, attempted to situate *The Sheltering Sky*, within the popular American context of the adventure story. As I have noted, Williams was

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Fiedler, “Style,” 170.

⁷⁰ Barbour, “Little Magazines,” 280.

⁷¹ Jackson, “Seamier Side,” BR4.

alone amongst the novel's initial readers in suggesting that such readings might be missing the point, when he observed that "a good many people will read this book and be enthralled by it without once suspecting it contains a mirror... of moral nihilism."⁷² In fact, the reconstruction of the novel as a frontier 'adventure' was part of a broader strategy to find 'substance' in Bowles' texts, which obscured the vacancy and nihilism at their centre.

Just as New York Intellectuals like Trilling made a dramatic shift from a formerly sympathetic position towards Marxism, to a nationalistic, anti-Communist stance, the surrealists themselves had undergone a political about-turn in the face of Stalinist reforms in Russia. But in spite of the split between the pro-Communist surrealists, like Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard, and the orthodox surrealists, led by Breton, who maintained an anti-Stalinist Marxist position, the critical response to surrealism from the prominent literary critics of the time was unable to overlook its association with the far left. Guilbaut has shown how the "slow process of de-Marxization and later depoliticization of certain groups of left-wing anti-Stalinist intellectuals in New York from 1939 on, coupled with the rapid rise of nationalist sentiment during the war," ultimately led to the emergence and success of American abstract expressionism and the decline of surrealism in New York.⁷³ Bowles had himself been a member of the Communist party before the war, which had contributed both to his permanent emigration to Morocco and to his inability to return to America later in life. Although very few of his short stories show any concern with politics, the protagonist of his 1955 novel *The Spider's House*, John Stenham, is a 'reformed' ex-Communist. While criticism of the text avoided 'outing' its author's former political affiliations, the reception of Stenham reflects the general bias against

⁷² Williams, "Allegory," 38.

⁷³ Guilbaut, *Modern Art*, 2.

any work tainted by association with Communism. One review for the New York Times described Stenham as “pre-occupied by an indefinable anxiety,” while another dismissed him as a buffoon who ‘blunders’ through the text, suffering “like many ex-revolutionaries” from indigestion.⁷⁴ Perhaps more importantly, both reviews dismissed the text’s relevance to an American audience: Bowles’ characters were “silhouettes of despair,” and overall, he “failed to give his story coherence and a point.”⁷⁵ As a text that could neither oppose communism nor offer a method of making American citizens better, *The Spider’s House* was completely dismissed.

The priorities of postwar American critics, particularly the New York Intellectuals, extended beyond a concern with the details of what literary texts communicated, to the kind of generic structures they were organised around. For a text to communicate something that could contribute towards the social renovation that Trilling emphasised, it needed to enunciate in its form the same qualities of freedom that its characters and actions expressed. This meant, in general terms, a novelistic mode of expression. Trilling described the novel as “a perpetual quest for reality” whose material offered an “indication of the direction of man’s soul.”⁷⁶ However, as Geraldine Murphy has argued, it was the conventions of the romance that offered such intellectuals a model to orient their arguments around. Elucidating the ways in which “American romance remained open-ended, resisting formal resolution,” she has demonstrated the extent to which the conventions of the romance – openness, integrity, a play between the real and the imagined – embodied the ideal of freedom that liberal critics used to define their literature against Soviet

⁷⁴ Charles J. Rolo, “Tension in Morocco,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1955, BR5; William Du Bois, “Books of the Times,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1955, 27.

⁷⁵ Du Bois, “Tension,” BR5.

⁷⁶ Trilling, *Beyond Culture*, 214.

totalitarianism: the romance “promoted freedom, just as American democracy did.”⁷⁷ Writers like Saul Bellow, or Ralph Ellison, were critically valorised for novels that offered sprawling, picaresque tales, whose freedom allowed their characters to develop in a supposedly autonomous manner. Action and characterisation were contingent upon a structure that could emphasise this sense of freedom.

In this light, the approach critics took to Bowles’ explicitly surrealist fiction can be understood as symptomatic of wider intellectual currents in America. The conflict between Bowles’ priorities, which were shaped by his reading of surrealism, and those of the New York Intellectuals, can be seen most clearly in Richard Chase’s 1952 review for *The Kenyon Review*, “A Novel is a Novel,” in which he compared Bowles’ second novel *Let it Come Down* with Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, both of which were published earlier that year.⁷⁸ Chase’s evaluation of *Invisible Man* rests on Ellison’s ability to express a nuanced version of reality, which is sensitive to “the ultimate contradictions of life,” yet can still offer an image of freedom through its “transcendent” vision.⁷⁹ His analysis emphasises the traditional aspects of Ellison’s approach, locating it within the specifically “romantic,” American framework of “the classic novelistic theme: the search of the innocent hero for knowledge of reality, self, and society.”⁸⁰ This sits in contrast to the “pallid and futile” attempts of Bowles, whose only “occasional real triumphs” come in the form of “scenery painting.”⁸¹ Just as in the critiques of his short fiction, it is Bowles’ “failure of characterization and of dramatic action” that Chase underlines, assessing him on the criteria on which the romance genre, like Ellison’s text, is predicated. The priorities of liberal criticism

⁷⁷ Murphy, “Romancing the Centre,” 738.

⁷⁸ Richard Chase, “A Novel is a Novel,” *Kenyon Review* 14.4 (1952): 678-684.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 679.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 682.

direct his reading of the text and Chase concludes by arguing that Bowles fails because of what he considers to be the inherent nihilism of his work – “it doesn’t matter what anyone does, since every act is equally valueless and equally without meaningful consequence” – which divests the characters of the responsibility required of a democratic society.⁸² Moreover, he reads Bowles’ patterning as a parallel to the coercive oppression of the Soviet Union, suggesting that since “the hero cannot go anywhere,” there “can be no dramatic action.”⁸³ The reaction against specific aspects of Bowles writing – his characterisation and structure – points to a larger issue: that Bowles’ writing was antagonistic towards the democratic, liberal trajectory of American society. Bowles had developed his model of short fiction out of his involvement with surrealism, explicitly in order to oppose the spread of American culture on a global scale. If critics like Chase and Trilling were opposed to Bowles, then their expectations were certainly antithetical towards surrealism, not simply on a technical level but based on their dedication to cultural production that enunciated a democratic model of individual freedom.

For Bowles, surrealism had offered a framework that accounted for his own experience of the world – it was a perspective that mirrored his own disconnected, dreamlike engagement with his surroundings. More importantly, it offered a model for engaging fictionally with the world in a way that challenged or contested the hegemonic discourse of rational, western civilisation. His interactions with the surrealists, both in Paris and in New York with *View*, gave him the opportunity to engage critically and reflectively with the movement, as poet, translator, and editor. Breton’s inner circle of surrealists, however, remained a select and almost exclusively European group; Bowles’ fellow translator for *View*, Édouard Roditi, stressed that

⁸² Ibid., 683.

⁸³ Ibid.

they “never sought admission.”⁸⁴ Bowles remained outside the strictures of Breton’s coterie and his fiction represents an attempt to reconstruct an aestheticized surreal state, rather than necessarily following the demands of surrealist processes. He seemed such an ill-fit in America because the tradition he was drawing on conflicted so markedly with the direction of postwar American literary criticism. Surrealism had developed out of opposition to the values of capitalism and the West and Bowles’ reproduction of surrealism’s oppositional stance in his fiction oriented it along starkly nihilistic lines. Criticism in America, on the other hand, whose perspective was underpinned by liberal ideals, drew directly on the qualities of moral realism that had antagonised surrealism and promoted a freedom that was deliberately opposed to the Soviet Union. Attempts to recuperate Bowles within an American context – for example, the frontier narrative, or the romance – would necessarily fail, because Bowles’ “nihilistic” emptiness frustrates any possibility for the kind of freedom associated with these generic structures.

What is most striking is that Bowles continues to be misread, within a framework that emphasises the same qualities of freedom and individual development that had been prioritised in postwar American thought. Rather than approaching his work as something influenced by surrealism, critics continue to accommodate him within a tradition predicated upon freedom.⁸⁵ The most popular understanding of Bowles is as the prototype Beat, who, in the words of Norman Mailer, “opened the world of the hip ... let in the murder, the drugs, the incest, the death of the Square.”⁸⁶ While he seems to fit into this tradition – particularly given his early association with Burroughs and his role as guru/icon for Kerouac, Ginsberg and Gregory Corso while

⁸⁴ Édouard Roditi, cited in Neiman, introduction, xii.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Chandarlapatay’s *Beat Generation and Counterculture*.

⁸⁶ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: Putnam, 1959), 468.

living in Tangiers – his fundamental concern for conveying a nihilistic alternative to the progressive model of American ‘freedom’ in literature placed him in opposition to the cultural and literary ideals that their work usually promoted. This insistence on reading Bowles within a countercultural framework and emphasising individual independence belies the extent to which the narrative of American liberalism continues to govern American culture. But this also indicates another important reason that Bowles has been continuously misread: surrealism has been understood too narrowly by American critics. The qualities that give Bowles’ stories a surreal perspective were not of interest to the dominant critics in postwar American society, precisely because they were crafted to emphasise containment and claustrophobia.

Violence as a Gateway to the Surreal

By considering Bowles’ short stories within the surrealist framework that informed both their aesthetic, and the oppositional stance they took towards Western society, I hope to account, in a general way, for the strong reaction of contemporary critics against them. The fundamentally constrictive structure and tone ran counter to the philosophical priorities of openness and freedom that characterised American literary criticism, and the texts that it valorised, during the postwar period. More specifically, however, the framework of surrealism provides a way of accessing and explaining the aspect of these stories that most confronted contemporary critics: Bowles’ graphic and often apparently inexplicable violence. While such a classification can at times be reductive – in the same way that, as Ernesto Suárez-Toste suggests, critics resort to the label of ‘surrealism’ for dismissing John Ashbery “whenever the poems in a volume are unusually dark” – the role that violence plays both within the philosophy

of the surrealists and associated artists offers a model for understanding Bowles' confrontational use of transgressive aggression.⁸⁷

Shocking and visceral, the violence of *The Delicate Prey* unnerved its American critics in a particularly uncomfortable way. After the Second World War, the question of representing violence in fiction had come to occupy an important place in the process of establishing a modern American identity. On the one hand, a naturalistic representation of violence seemed morally bankrupt in the face of the horrors of the war, "bereft of moral conviction or ideological consciousness".⁸⁸ But on the other, when violence became too abstracted, it lost the force to direct readers towards a more inflected consciousness. What was necessary was a middle road, where the use of violence would help guide society towards a greater moral awareness; the use of violence was contingent upon the social function it performed. Bowles, on the other hand, presented a violence that seemed crafted to shock the reader as much as possible. Graphic, to the point where it seemed it could serve no purpose other than titillation, it irked critics particularly because of the pleasure that they imagined Bowles took in writing so provocatively: in the mind of Leslie Fiedler, at least, Bowles was "a secret lover of the horror he evokes".⁸⁹ This seemingly wilful perversity resisted any attempt at recuperation within a democratic, freedom-oriented model of social use. Tellingly, *The Delicate Prey's* intransigently confrontational use of violence led critics to claim that it was not only perverse, but that it defied any intellectual comprehension; Bowles produced "such unspeakable horror and brutality that there is no sense in trying to describe it".⁹⁰ But the fact that Bowles' prose could

⁸⁷ Ernesto Suárez-Toste, "'The Tension is in the Concept': John Ashbery's Surrealism," *Style* 38.1 (2004): 1.

⁸⁸ Bradbury, *American Novel*, 162.

⁸⁹ Fiedler, "Style," 170.

⁹⁰ Jackson, "Seamier Side," BR4.

inspire such outrage is suggestive in itself of the kind of logic that lay behind its violence. It offered a deliberately insolent affront to the norms of western democratic society, disrupting the carefully mediated structure that critics were attempting to orient society (and literature) around.

Bowles' editorial for the "Tropical Americana" issue of *View* offers an insight into the extent to which, for him, the concept of disruptive violence was linked to both the processes and the philosophies of surrealism. Arguing that the Chavante Indians offered a striking parallel to the "tragic, ludicrous, violent spectacle" of the surrealists' 'revolution', Bowles emphasised that, above all else, it was the violence with which they "resist[ed] the spread of so-called civilisation" that made them suitable models for the avant-garde's agenda.⁹¹ But even without interpolating an ancient, primitive genealogy for surrealism's resistance to rational, civilised thought, it is clear that surrealism had a long, and close relationship with violence. The earliest experiments of its founders, which continued to drive the movement throughout its history, were impelled by their first-hand experiences with psyches that had been fractured by the violence of the First World War. At the same time, surrealism accumulated and co-opted motifs from popular culture that were characterised by violence, as part of their mission to disrupt and reconfigure society around them.

It would be easy to fall into the trap, as Robin Walz suggests, of simply pigeon-holing the surrealists as one of a myriad of artistic and literary movements that took their motivation, on one level or another, from the context of 'The Great War', and think of them as "yet another group of angry young men from the generation of 1914".⁹² Which is not to suggest that there is anything fundamentally wrong with this

⁹¹ Bowles, "Point of View," 5.

⁹² Walz, *Pulp Surrealism*, 115.

statement; in its broadest sense, the violence of the war was certainly a prompt for the initial initiatives of the surrealists. But as Natalya Lusty explains, the war provided a much more specific source of inspiration: “Breton’s early psychiatric training with shell-shocked soldiers had instigated his experiments with automatic writing”.⁹³ Lusty has shown how this initial fascination with fractured psyches – borne of direct experience with the damage inflicted by a modern, mechanised war – developed into one of their central preoccupations and artistic strategies. Eschewing the field of “traumatized masculinity,” Breton led the surrealists to instead explore the fractured (un)consciousness of the female: it was “specifically female madness that came to define surrealism’s revolt against the Cartesian subject of bourgeois, liberal ideology”.⁹⁴ In other words, the Surrealists had not merely taken the psychic displacement of traumatised combatants as the model for their own enquiries into the subconscious, but they had oriented the oppositional politics of their movement around the site of the violated or displaced figure of the madwoman. In both their aestheto-scientific experiments, and in their revolutionary politics, Breton, Aragon, and their avant-garde associates used the motif of violence against the psyche as the inspiration, and as the organising principle, behind their work.

In a much broader sense than this psychic displacement, however, surrealism was driven by an inherent sense of violence. An essentially revolutionary movement, its members saw themselves in direct conflict with the rational, fettered and bourgeois society around them. Breton proclaimed that “Surrealism, such as I conceive of it, asserts our complete *nonconformism* clearly enough”; while the eventual ambition of Surrealism was the general reconfiguration of society’s consciousness, in the short

⁹³ Natalya Lusty, “Surrealism’s Banging Door,” *Textual Practice* 17.2 (2010): 335.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

term its position was defined by an essentially insolent posture.⁹⁵ To some extent, we can attribute Bowles' distinctiveness from the Surrealists-proper to his distance from the "revolutionary politics that animated much of Surrealism's collective activity".⁹⁶ While Bowles may have been a card-carrying member of the Communist Party in earlier life (a factor that contributed to his departure from America in the wake of the War), he disavowed any possibility of a broader revolutionary scope to his work; his fiction was certainly designed to confront the reader, and oppose the normative ethical position of society, but Bowles had no designs on greater social renovation. But we can also attribute the difference between Bowles' fiction and surrealism to the fact of geography. The kind of revolutionary strategies employed by the surrealists had been drawn directly from the changing landscape of contemporary Paris. As Walz so strongly argues in *Pulp Surrealism*, as an aesthetic framework surrealism was contingent upon the "perceptual reorientations" that were taking place as a result of the modernisation of the metropolis, and the subsequent shift in culture; it "exploited this transitory moment for its own avant-garde artistic and political purposes" and oriented itself around "the juxtapositions of everyday life in the rapidly transforming Parisian landscape".⁹⁷ The violence of surrealist art, then, could be considered a result of the broader revolutionary ambitions of the movement, which were in turn dependent upon the conditions of early twentieth century Paris.

The extent to which this 'transitory culture' informed the development of both the aesthetics and the politics of surrealism can be seen not only in their appropriation of popular cultural phenomena, but in the resonances between their respective strategies of representation. The surrealists were avid appropriators across their

⁹⁵ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 47.

⁹⁶ Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics and the Psyche* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 1.

⁹⁷ Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 2, 3.

artistic expression, reclaiming quotidian material for partisan aims: their central techniques of collage, assembly and automatic writing all took contemporary source material, and recontextualised them in a way that suggested a surreal transcendence of the real or everyday. Steven Harris has suggested the extent to which the surrealist ‘object’, in particular, realises in a physical sense this broader reconstituting tendency. He argues that the “surrealist object is located, in an eminently dialectical relation, between art and politics”, so that at the same time it aestheticises, and politicises the everyday material that it reworks.⁹⁸ One particularly fruitful source of material proved the *fait divers* that appeared across the major Parisian newspapers – short pieces that covered miscellaneous events, often related to crimes, murders and suicides. Most vitally, the surrealists took inspiration from the *fait divers* that related to suicides, the perpetrators of which they re-imagined as counter-cultural heroes, taking the ‘brave’ step to end their lives in an ultimate defiance of the conventions of rational society. Their writing and art drew on and mirrored the aesthetic of the *fait divers*, and “appealed to an unconscious human resonance... with those desperate individuals who, like the surrealists, fundamentally rebelled against the meaninglessness of contemporary life”.⁹⁹ It was not simply a question of surrealism drawing on the figure of the suicide; the response elicited by the graphic and somewhat incoherent reports mirrored the conflicting pulls of attraction and repulsion that characterised the surreal object. The sensationalised, often melodramatic suicide reports at once aroused compassion for the desperate, marginalised and isolated individual, and repugnance at the lurid violence of their deaths. In reimagining the suicide, surrealists “emphasized the psychic disarray implicit in drawing together these sentiments of dread and

⁹⁸ Harris, *Surrealist Art*, 5.

⁹⁹ Walz, *Pulp Surrealism*, 11.

sympathy”, and in doing so co-opted the model of the *fait divers* as a means of engaging their readers in an emotional dialectic complicit with their political aims.¹⁰⁰

The relationship between the *fait divers* and surrealism, however, is not as straightforward as one of influence or appropriation; both were a response to the same changing cultural environment that surrounded their production. The disjunctive violence of both surrealist objects and automatic prose – each juxtaposing seemingly disconnected objects or observations, and driven, at least in theory, by the unconscious – paralleled in an uncanny way the conjunction of disparate, unconnected observations in the *fait divers*. This can be considered as, in part, a product of a shared heritage. It certainly seems particularly evident when accounting for the way that these pieces were composed, or rather, constructed: written without reflection – almost ‘automatically’ – on the basis of hearsay, second-hand reports from police secretaries, and shared rumours amongst apprentice journalists, they mirrored the process of collage, as they brought together and juxtaposed disparate material. This was then filtered through telephone operators and editors who reworked the articles in an equally haphazard, or coincidental fashion. In terms of their production the “short *fait divers* achieved surreality by juxtaposing material elements of uncertain meaning”, built around a “simultaneously saturated and fragmented structure”.¹⁰¹ Just like a surrealist assemblage, the conditions of modern reproduction, often mundane and reflexive, contributed to a piece of writing that seemed at once rich with connotative imagery, and lacking in terms of its internal logic and coherence. The distinction lies in the ends to which the surrealists put this process of juxtaposition. Appropriating the violent disjunctions of modernity, they turned them back on the culture that produced them, through an art that represented

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 129.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 132.

“an undoing of the logic and forms of bourgeois culture, threatening it with the loss of the distinction upon which any society is based”.¹⁰²

The Delicate Prey exemplifies Bowles’ adaptation of the surrealist aesthetic. While its production was certainly influenced by the concept of automatic writing, Bowles’ own insistent emphasis on the role of craft and technique is reflected in the stories’ carefully patterned structure. Instead, they present a simulacrum of the dream state – creating a surreal, oneiric experience for the reader, rather than presenting the products of a somnambolic praxis. Critics refused, however, to acknowledge that his stories bore any relationship to surrealism – instead, they attempted to recuperate them within a framework oriented around the concept of freedom. But the harsh criticism that *The Delicate Prey* received can also be seen to be, in large part, a product of one particular aspect of Bowles’ prose: his graphic and unrelenting use of violence. Critics revolted against this to the point that they characterised him a ‘pornographer of terror’ – yet, as I have argued to this point, violence can be considered an integral mechanism of both ‘pure’ surrealist art and the literary fiction of figures associated with the movement. By considering Bowles’ use of violence within this framework, we can see how, rather than a simple provocation of readers’ sensibilities, his use of violence constitutes an integral aspect of his larger oppositional strategy.

The particular story that Charles Jackson considered to present “such unspeakable horror and brutality that there is no sense in trying to describe it,” was “A Distant Episode”: set in Morocco, it follows a linguistics professor – intent on “making a survey of variations on Moghrebi” – who is taken prisoner by a nomadic

¹⁰² Harris, *Surrealist Art*, 14.

tribe.¹⁰³ By taking up where Jackson left off, and describing the violence of the story, the rationale behind his reticence is immediately apparent: after having his tongue severed, the professor is tied – inside a sack – to the back of a camel, before being fastened in a suit of armour made from the bottom of tin cans and forced to dance for the nomads’ amusement. The nomads train him in this parodic performance to a certain level of proficiency before selling him to some villagers; confronted with the written word on a calendar in his new home, the professor flies into a fit, tears apart a room, and runs into the desert, where finally a French soldier takes a pot-shot at him as he passes. This general sketch suggests several qualities that made this story, and Bowles’ use of violence more broadly, so repellent to certain readers. The actions are unmotivated, seemingly inexplicable, and break taboos: the violence is not simply unusual, it is exceptional.

It is not just that Bowles presents violent events to his reader – he describes them with precision of detail. When one of the nomadic Reguiba attacks the professor, Bowles does not just explain that he cuts out his tongue. Instead, he draws out the process, from the moment the man “pinched the Professor’s nostrils” and “seized the tongue and pulled on it with all his might”, through the professor “gagging and catching his breath”, to the seemingly interminable process of “endless choking and spitting that went on automatically”, until the professor’s “terror” calms, and he finally sinks “back into darkness” (301). In fact, the moment of the tongue being severed is comparatively obscure: rather than describing the action itself, Bowles renders it in terms of the professor’s experience of the action, as “the pain of the brutal yanking” and “that of the sharp knife” (301). In articulating the details of the professor’s experience in this way, he creates the sense that the acts are even more

¹⁰³ Jackson, “Seamier Side,” BR4.

exceptional. The way that they violate our expectations is much more specific, and much more affecting; by representing the encounter as a continuous, extended series of detail-rich descriptions, Bowles extends the moment of violence beyond a single action, giving it a much greater magnitude.

From this perspective, Fiedler's argument that Bowles was "a secret lover of the horror he evoked" seems more explicable.¹⁰⁴ Bowles dwells on the way that the 'horror' of his stories unfolds, actively drawing it out. In "The Fourth Day out from Santa Cruz", for example, the story suggests an imminent outburst of violence within a few pages – resentful of his neglect by other sailors, a young scullery boy feels "that if he sat still any longer he would explode" (*DP*, 167). Rather than dispelling this sense of impending violence, however, Bowles prolongs it. The story culminates with a small bird flying "falteringly" towards their boat; the bird repeatedly starts to fall towards the ship, before climbing into the air again, a process given a greater sense of peril when the scullery boy brings the "ship's mascot, a heavy tomcat" onto the deck. In the end, although the cat cannot catch the bird, it nonetheless plummets into the ocean, lifeless. Bowles extends the tension associated with this small moment of fatality, so that it dominates our sense of the story as a whole. Prolonging our anticipation of violence, Bowles entices the reader into continuing reading by creating an expectation of resolution, which he delays as long as possible. In doing so, he makes the reader at once emotionally invested in the story, and culpable for the violence that it resolves into – in continuing reading, we are tacitly condoning whatever eventuates. It is not simply that Bowles 'loves' the horror of his stories; he involves the reader in them in a way that makes them equally complicit.

¹⁰⁴ Fiedler, "Style," 170.

Like the *fait divers* which the surrealists had initially drawn such inspiration from, Bowles involves his reader in the violence of his stories in part through the lurid quality of the acts he describes. Rather than revolving around routine, comprehensible altercations or fights, which have long been recuperated as part of the mechanics of conventional literature, Bowles' stories hinge upon acts of aggression that violate societal expectations, and which transgress the boundaries of conventional behaviour. Aileen, in "The Echo", is provoked by her mother's partner, Prue, when she flicks some water into her face; her reaction is to jump "at her with vicious suddenness, kicking, ripping and pounding all at once" (155). The context of this attack is enough on its own to make it seem exceptional: a young, female university student, antagonised by her mother's lesbian lover, while stifled in the claustrophobia of a lonely manor in Central America. We have even been encouraged to think of the setting as out of the ordinary – Aileen has written to her mother describing her relationship as "peculiar" (138), emphasising to the reader the unconventional nature of their relationship. But it is the brutality of this ostensibly reserved and intelligent girl that gives it such a transgressive quality. Bowles describes the attack in markedly aggressive language that transforms Aileen from a person into a mixture of machine and animal: it is "mechanically, with a rapid, birdlike fury" that Aileen "hammer at the woman's face and head" (155-6). In "The Delicate Prey," Bowles takes this a step further, presenting a narrative in which a young Filala, crossing the desert to another town in Algeria, is attacked by a Mougari tribesman and brutally violated. Having bound him, and removed his clothes, the man castrates the boy "with the motion of a reaper wielding a sickle", before stuffing the genitals into an incision in his abdomen. He then inflicts "an ultimate indignity upon the young Filali" (286), eventually sawing the boy's neck "until he was certain he had severed the windpipe" (287). On

the one hand, like the bizarre suicides recorded in the *fait divers*, this violation draws the reader in, intrigued or titillated by the horrific events. But at the same time, Bowles' description of the minute details in this story is inescapably repellent: it is clear we are meant to be repulsed by the "round, dark hole" left after the boy's castration, let alone the description of him "screaming" as "the muscles all over his boy stood out, moved" (286). Bowles not only implicates the reader in the violence of the story, but engages them in an emotional dialectic where they are at once drawn in by it, even desiringly, and at the same time, repulsed.

While this kind of mutilation and violation might disturb its readers, it seems to hardly be noticed by the characters of the anthology. If anything, *The Delicate Prey* offers a series of diegeses in which violence is, of itself, scarcely remarkable. Even while being relentlessly attacked by Aileen, Prue "did very little to defend herself" (156); the text seems to suggest that she does not even register the degree of the attack – "she seemed half asleep". While the two servants, Concha and Luz, are at least somewhat "frightened" by the outburst, they certainly do not regard it as anything of any greater significance: fleeting and natural, they compare watching Aileen's rage to observing "a terrible storm pass over the countryside". Even her mother does not seem to consider her daughter's attack as significant as the reader does. When Aileen leaves, she can see "the two figures of her mother and Prue standing side by side on the terrace"; the figures are passive, unmoved, and seemingly unaffected by her actions. This failure to acknowledge violence is given even more explicit attention in "You are not I", narrated by a woman who appears to escape from an asylum in the wake of a train crash, and convinces an ambulance driver to take her to her sister's home. Here, with a peculiar weight of certainty, she smashes her sister's teeth with a stone; she draws attention to how pivotal this action is, informing the reader that it

marks “the turning point” (84). The narrator then finds herself in her sister’s place, watching the woman she clearly defined as herself be dragged back to the mental institute, while she remains in her sister’s home. In the face of this violent transformation, however, the only thing she finds “strange” is “that no one realized she was not I” (85). As in so many of the images of violence in Bowles’ anthology, it is not the act itself that is gestured to as the site of the unusual, but the reaction of the witnesses, and their failures in perception and in judgment. Rather than finding these transgressions unsettling, the onlookers seem scarcely to acknowledge they have occurred; the reader’s own repugnance is met with an attitude within the stories that accepts violence as a natural, even invisible process.

After Aileen so mercilessly assaults Prue, it is not only her victim and onlookers that fail to register the violence of her actions – Aileen herself does not seem to realise what she has done. Hearing an echo of her own screams, she seems to forget everything about her own actions; “it ended the episode for her” and Aileen carries on with her actions “still in the midst of her deep dream” (156). Perhaps more unsettling for a reader than the onlookers’ blindness, the perpetrators of the violence seem themselves unaware of what they are doing, or why. At least in the case of “The Echo” the reader has some access to Aileen’s motivations – the mutual antagonism between her and Prue establishes clear grounds for her actions. In “The Delicate Prey,” however, the Mougari who brutalises the young boy seems to have established a friendly relationship: they shared tea “to seal their friendship” (280), and the filali quickly “felt strongly toward the stranger” (281). When he finally does attack, although he bears a “malevolent face”, there is nothing to indicate what his motivations are – except, that is, for a “peculiar intensity” (285) in his face, which the boy attributes to “hashish”. Rather than attributing the violence to any rational

motivation, it occurs because the perpetrator has “escape[d] very far away from the world of meaning”. Bowles presents violence as impulsive, something that happens when the aggressor simply gets “carried away”; Aileen, before attacking Prue, feels a similar sense of raw, unarticulated impulse: “she felt choked with emotions, but they were too disparate and confused for her to be able to identify any one of them as outstanding” (154). Bowles juxtaposes the horrific nature of his stories’ violence with characters who are unreflective, and often not aware of having done anything out of the ordinary.

Although the characters *within* the stories might not actually acknowledge the violence around them, emphasising this is, to some extent, to misunderstand critics’ reservations about Bowles’ fiction. Their qualms about his writing arise not from the worlds that he represents, so much as the *way* that Bowles represents them: it is his own ‘pleasure’ in their violence that unsettles them. For the violence that Bowles represents to fulfil any useful social function, it was not necessary for the characters to acknowledge it as wrong, but for the text itself to do so – for the structure and language of the stories to reflect criticism of the violence, or at least some level of discomfort. Crucially, however, these events are integrated within the structure of the action without any disruption or tension. Far from upsetting the rhythm of the stories, their violence is incorporated into the everyday events without any perceptible shift in diction or pace. In fact, the violence is harmonised within the characters’ quotidian action, as in “The Delicate Prey”, where the narrative flows smoothly as:

The Mougari turned [the boy] over and pushed the blade back and forth with a sawing motion into his neck until he was certain he had severed the windpipe. Then he rose, walked away, and finished the loading of the camels he had started the day before. (286-7)

The text registers no distinction between the Mougari sawing at a boy's throat, and loading his camels to continue travelling – violence is not recognised as being of a different order to other everyday tasks. On the one hand, this could be considered an extension of the characters' indifference to violence; the text is capturing the fact that the characters treat violence as a normal and un-noteworthy occurrence. But while Bowles might extend the violence within his stories, and chose lurid kinds of acts to depict, his prose does not, in and of itself, mark them out as being unnatural. Indeed, the consistent rhythm of the text, even in the face of such violence, naturalises the violence, and renders it part of the everyday world. In this way, Bowles enacts a kind of double violence on the reader: not only are we confronted with the violence of the event, but there is a violence to its presentation. We expect this kind of social transgression to warrant recognition from the text, for the narrator, or the story itself, to signal it as unusual. Instead, we are presented a world where rape, abuse and dismemberment are natural, even unremarkable. The surprise of the narrator of "You are not I" at her onlookers' failure to acknowledge what has happened, draws our attention to the way Bowles' stories normalise and naturalise violence.

The initial spur for the development of surrealism lay in the violence of the First World War, and the psychic dislocation of shell-shocked soldiers – the influence of the movement's 'investigations' into their shattered psyches continued to have repercussions throughout the trajectory of their artistic output. Their fascination offers a straightforward framework for considering Bowles' use of violence: not only do his stories focus on figures who undergo serious psychic dislocation, but we could think of his texts as, in turn, enacting a violence upon their reader. This would align neatly with his initial critics' assessment of Bowles as providing violence simply to provoke his reader – his use of violence would, in this reading, be designed simply to violate

the reader's expectations. But this seems too simplistic an understanding and it ignores the way that the surrealists developed their strategies of dislocation through co-opting the images and techniques of the *fait divers*. Rather than simply shocking the reader, they – like sensationalist reports of suicides – at once drew in the sympathies of the reader, and repelled and confronted them. We could certainly understand Bowles' oppositional stance in similar terms to those of the surrealists: his seductive-repulsive dialectic gives his stories the same sense of insolent confrontation.

A Dream Logic

Geographically and temporally dislocated from the historical forces of the First World War and early 1920s Parisian culture, Bowles was nonetheless attentive to the relationship between insolent (and often incoherent) popular culture, and surrealism's avant-garde strategies, and political ambitions. Reflecting on *View*, he considered the “juxtaposition of... bits of authentic illiteracy and critical texts using surrealist analysis” to be the quality that above all else “helped to keep the magazine fresh”.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, his use of automatic writing as a literary strategy was predicated, at least in part, upon its oppositional power: its capacity to represent the world in a way that undercut the logic and assumptions of contemporary society. Nonetheless, it would be anachronistic to consider Bowles' use of violence in the same historically inflected context as that of Breton or Aragon. While this context shaped the aesthetic that they developed, and that Bowles in turn adopted and adapted, I want to expand this framework to include two authors who, like Bowles, were both inspired by and

¹⁰⁵ Bowles, foreword, x.

associated with surrealism. Like Bowles, they were also not themselves surrealists – and resisted, moreover, being labelled as such. Although neither Jorge Luis Borges nor Giorgio de Chirico were born in France, or ever an active member of the surrealist group, they each developed a distinctive style that has continued to be considered in relation to surrealism. The choice to focus on their *particular* interpretation of the methods and aesthetics of surrealism is not an arbitrary one: while their emphases are quite distinct, they share the peculiar distinction of receiving their first major (fictional) publication in English in the pages of *View*, in each case translated by Bowles. Turning our attention to the way that de Chirico's *Hebdomeros*, and Borges' short stories adapt surrealist strategies for their own aesthetic ends allows for an insight into the way that Bowles in turn developed his own distinctive literary approach.¹⁰⁶

In his introduction to the anonymous translation of de Chirico's *Hebdomeros*, John Ashbery argues that, while de Chirico “was ‘not really’ a surrealist”, his work remains the “finest” piece of surrealist literature, and that this mis-match in definition suggests that the idea of what it means to be ‘surrealist’ has been misunderstood: “the term ought to be refined to include him and also to exclude a great deal of drivel that can qualify as surrealism under the famous ‘automatic writing’ clause in Breton’s manifesto”.¹⁰⁷ The problem that Ashbery emphasises here is the same distinction that I have focused on, that is between works that were constructed through strictly surrealist praxis and works that convey the same aesthetic of oneiric dislocation but achieve the effect through more constructed prose. Ashbery highlights the extent to which de Chirico achieves the hypnotic quality of his prose through an intensely

¹⁰⁶ Giorgio de Chirico, *Hebdomeros* (Cambridge: Exact Change 1992); Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, eds. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (London: Penguin, 2000).

¹⁰⁷ John Ashbery, introduction to *Hebdomeros*, ix.

patterned structure, which forms “a transparent but dense medium containing objects that are more real than reality”.¹⁰⁸ As in Bowles’ stories, it is the “shifting, orchestrated texture” of de Chirico’s prose that creates the dreamlike impulse that impels the reader through its narrative.¹⁰⁹ As Suárez-Toste stresses, Ashbery has a particular affinity for this aspect of de Chirico’s writing. Both Ashbery, in his poetry, and de Chirico register an “unusual interest” in the “world of dreams”, and they each shape “characteristically uneasy atmospheres” through the way that they “subvert the logic of natural event and provide an alternative of their own”.¹¹⁰ It is this ‘subversion’ that creates the greatest sense of violence and dislocation when reading de Chirico and whose echoes can most readily be felt in Bowles’ fiction.

Regardless of Ashbery’s misgivings, Renée Riese Hubert argues that *Hebdomeros* is “almost impenetrable unless viewed from the perspective of the surrealist movement”.¹¹¹ Emphasising the same oneiric qualities as Ashbery, she suggests that de Chirico harnessed them to achieve a “state of immediacy”.¹¹² The role of this ‘immediacy’, however, is to disorient the reader: in *Hebdomeros*, “familiar objects appear strange... overwhelmed by a sense of disproportion, where, paradoxically, spatial references appear only sporadically”.¹¹³ In this way, Hubert aligns de Chirico’s prose with the surrealist’s strategy of dislocation, drawing the reader inwards, using this movement to disorient them. De Chirico’s prose could thus be seen to enact an insistent process of change, “metamorphosing” the familiar into the alien. This disjunction is coupled with an imagery that emphasises the violence of the structure, where the textual metamorphosis is accompanied by “powerful

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., xi.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Suárez-Toste, “Ashbery’s Surrealism,” 3.

¹¹¹ Renée Riese Hubert, “The Fabulous Fiction of Two Surrealist Artists: Gerogio de Chirico and Max Ernst,” *New Literary History* 4.1 (1972): 166.

¹¹² Ibid., 152.

¹¹³ Ibid.

geological transformations, creative and destructive outbursts, unbridled tensions”.¹¹⁴ As Hubert argues, “man emerges as a body of forces of aggression or repulsion rather than as a psychological being”.¹¹⁵ The structure of de Chirico’s text, in this reading, is one that at once entices the reader, and disorients him or her, confronting the reader with an image of the consciousness as driven by often violent conflicting urges and impulses.

Like Bowles’ stories, however, the immediacy of de Chirico’s text is modulated by a strong sense of detachment; his prose holds its reader at a distance from what is taking place. In a useful corollary to Hubert’s analysis, Peter Schwenger suggests that rather than attempting to create a dream state *per se*, de Chirico structures his text as if a hypnagogic experience. Hubert focuses on the text as one that *involves* the reader, but Schwenger suggests that *Hebdomeros* instead replicates the pre- and post-dream state of hypnagogia, in which “observation is from a distance; the images appear as if projected upon a screen, and one is oddly detached, observing the phenomenon with interest and curiosity”.¹¹⁶ This description seems particularly appropriate if we consider the extent to which de Chirico’s prose “enacts a dynamic of pure image”, where the structure of his text “not only detaches the image from any material reality but also fails to reattach it to anything else”.¹¹⁷ The rapid succession of images and experiences in *Hebdomeros*, which seem to shift and flicker without relating to any organising principle, are taken in as if from a removed position. However, Schwenger is also sensitive to the “repetitive patterns” of de Chirico’s text which, like Bowles’ reiterative style, creates a “calm elegance” that masks “the radical nature of the novel’s continual shifts, so that locally what one is reading seems

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 154.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Peter Schwenger, “Writing Hypnagogia,” *Critical Inquiry* 34.3 (2008): 424.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 426.

always to make sense or at least to be about to make sense”.¹¹⁸ From this perspective, the violence de Chirco enacts is not in the subversions and transformations themselves, but in the disjunction between the reader and the events. This disjunction, in turn, creates the space for the transformations of the text to take place; the distancing effect produced by *Hebdomeros* generates a sense of “the continual transformations of hypnagogia”.¹¹⁹

Bowles’ translation of several excerpts from *Hebdomeros* into English in the pages of *View* marked the artist’s first literary encroachment into America. And in *View*’s January issue of 1946, Bowles’ translation of “The Circular Ruins” heralded the arrival – some two years earlier than the next major translation – of Jorge Luis Borges into the English language. Critics generally distinguish Borges’ fiction from surrealism and instead classify it within the field of Magical Realism. This taxonomical difference did not, however, make Borges an ill fit for the pages of *View*; not only was Borges’ style greatly informed by surrealism, the focus of the magazine itself showed tendencies towards an aesthetic that drew influence from the concepts of magic as well as surrealism. In fact, Bowles’ noted that *View*’s editorials “extoll[ed] ‘magic’, which it claimed had supplanted Marx and Freud”.¹²⁰ In a similar way, the philosophy behind Borges’ stories eschewed a Freudian relationship between dreams and the real.¹²¹ As Seymour Menton explains, while “Surrealism is strongly based on each individual’s Freudian subconscious dream-world”, Borges conforms to a Magic Realist perspective, which “adheres to the Jungian collective unconscious, to the idea that all mankind is compressed into one, that all time periods are compressed

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 433.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 435.

¹²⁰ Bowles, foreword, ix.

¹²¹ For more on the trajectory leading from Freud to surrealism, see *Dreams and History: the Interpretation of Dreams from Ancient Greece to Modern Psychoanalysis*, eds. Daniel Pick and Lyndal Roper (New York: Routledge, 2004). The surrealist aesthetic that I am concerned with is one that deliberately eschewed the Freudianism of the original French surrealists.

into the one moment of the present, and that reality itself is dream-like".¹²² In this sense, Borges offered Bowles an alternative model for the relationship between dreams and reality: rather than by an aesthetic in which the dream world spreads into and disrupts reality, his stories were impelled by a dynamic that transformed the everyday into something even more uncanny than the 'magical'.

As well as signalling Borges' departure from the model of surrealism, however, Menton also (inadvertently) points us towards their shared heritage. His characterisation of Borges' style emphasises the same attention to quotidian details and architectural patterning that both Schwenger and Hubert point to in de Chirico: his stories create meaning on the basis of a "carefully structured set of parallelisms and symmetries".¹²³ This structure replicates, moreover, the basic surrealist mechanism of surprising or disassociating juxtaposition. Borges' stories have "a dream-like quality about them which is captured by the presentation of improbable juxtapositions in a style that is highly objective, precise, and deceptively simple".¹²⁴ So in terms of the techniques that Borges uses to defamiliarise the reader, he clearly draws on the same techniques that the surrealists had developed for provoking a sense of psychic dislocation. Schwenger considers these as aspects of the "Magic Realism *Weltanschauung*", where it is the "unexpected or improbable element" of the everyday that leaves "the viewer or reader somewhat bewildered or amazed".¹²⁵ However, in just as many of Borges' stories, of which "The Circular Ruins" is a notable example, the transformations that the text enacts resemble more closely those of de Chirico – the reader's sense of surprise is a result of a dreamlike *dislocation* from the everyday, rather than a transformation of these quotidian details.

¹²² Seymour Menton, "Jorge Luis Borges, Magic Realist," *Hispanic Review* 50.4 (1982): 413.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 424.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 412.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

The way that Bowles' stories naturalise violence is an important aspect of his larger adaptation of the aesthetics of surrealism. Rather than attempting to directly channel subconscious 'surreal' visions through automatic writing, Bowles reconstructs the Surrealist dream-state through a highly technical prose style, that relies above all else upon attention to detail. The extent to which his texts graphically reproduce acts of violence should not be surprising, considering the extreme degree of precision across all of his description. In fact, Bowles uses this prose style to create the dynamic of his texts, in the same way that de Chirico – in both literary terms (in *Hebdomeros*) and graphically, in paintings such as “The Red Tower” – creates a sense of immediacy through precise details, which in turn gives his images a sense of continuity, through their “shifting orchestral texture”.¹²⁶ So on a most basic level, the naturalisation of violence is one of Bowles' central mechanisms in creating the oneiric aesthetic of his stories – his stories feel like dreams, because violence occurs in a way indistinguishable (and undistinguished) from routine, everyday events. When the Professor in “A Distant Episode” is first attacked by the nomads, Bowles renders it in terms that recall the story's beginning, when the professor arrived on one of “the September sunsets” (*DP* 290) – the nomad “looked at him dispassionately in the gray morning light” (301). Moreover, his first action is to “with one hand [pinch] together the Professor's nostrils” (301), which Bowles describes as if a routine, entirely everyday action. Even the pain that the professor feels is represented in language that reinforces its status as equal to the quotidian actions around it:

The caravan left sometime toward midmorning. The Professor, not unconscious, but in a state of utter stupor, still gagging and drooling blood, was dumped doubled-up into a sack and tied at one side of a camel. The lower end of the enormous amphitheatre contained a natural gate in the rocks. (301)

¹²⁶ Ashbery, introduction, xi.

The text forces the reader to follow the narrative's flow without questioning the violence that occurs, suppressing their own judgments about what has occurred, and forestalling the possibility of judgement altogether. In effect, it forces the reader to engage with the world of the text as if it was a dream, rather than a world governed by rational thought or judgement.

From this perspective, Hubert's assessment of *Hebdomeros* seems a particularly apt way of accounting for Bowles' use of violence in *The Delicate Prey*. Her argument, that de Chirico reduces humans down to "a body of forces of aggression or repulsion rather than as a psychological being",¹²⁷ strikingly reflects the particularly derationalised experience that Bowles' structure forces upon the reader. On one level, the characters of the story are unable to judge their actions or those of other individuals around them – instead of considering things, or acting based on motivations, they are driven by pure impulse. In other words, Bowles reduces them to dream figures who, with an oneiric detachment, are driven by urges and connections that spring from their subconscious rather than conscious mind. But the way that Bowles' prose represents the graphic acts of violence that characterise his stories – in an unmodulated, insistently specific prose – renders them equivalent to any other action, and resists imposing judgment upon them. So the text forces the reader to engage with the action of the stories in the same way as the characters do. It reduces them to being, ontologically, equivalent to the actors of the text – similarly subject to dreamlike psychological impulses.

From another perspective, however, Bowles' use of violence can be considered an aspect of his broader engagement with western ideals and cultural norms. By forcing the reader to at once align with and feel repugnance for the

¹²⁷ Hubert, "Fabulous Fiction," 154.

violence in his stories, he confronts them with a disturbing image of themselves: they are forced to recognise the extent to which their desires lie beyond the boundaries of conventional behaviour. Rather than using the site of Parisian modernity to suggest an insolent alternative to conventional social structures and accepted behaviours, however, Bowles turns to Latin America and North Africa. Presenting their cultures as ones where violence is normalised, his stories confront the readers' attitudes towards violence, and suggest an alternative model for both the individual's perception of the world, and for broader societal attitudes. For the surrealists, as Walz has demonstrated, it had been the liminal state of early twentieth century Paris that had initially provided the model for insolent rebellion against the rational mindset of western society. They also, however, as both Clifford and Tythacott have explained, drew insistently on the idea of 'the primitive' as a way of opposing the conventions of western thought. Tythacott argues that "the Surrealists used the exotic... provocatively in order to transgress the European image of the world", and we could equally apply that description to Bowles' use of North African and Latin American settings and characters.¹²⁸ The violence of the 'primitive' characters challenges the order and structure of civilisation, and subverts the reader's expectations of rational behaviour.

More specifically, Bowles uses these 'primitive' cultures as emblems for a particular kind of behaviour: one characterised both by extreme violence, and by a perception of the world that does not recognise these acts as unusual or repulsive. His representation of primitive cultures is deliberately designed to confront 'civilised' western expectations around behaviour and perception, and relies upon graphic violence as catalyst for challenging these assumptions in the most extreme fashion.

¹²⁸ Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic*, 7.

While the prose structure might resist the imposition of judgment, the presentation of entire cultures where this behaviour is apparently so unremarkable inevitably confronts the reader's rational boundaries. Bowles deliberately dislocates the reader's expectations, and does so in the most violent way possible. The characters he focuses on, moreover, consistently evince broken or dislocated psyches themselves. The narrator of "You are not I" offers the most striking example of a consciousness that has fragmented or broken down – to the extent that she seems to be literally dislocated from her own body, in order to look out from her sister's eyes: "I saw myself sitting on the divan with my hands in front of my mouth" (*DP*, 217). This dislocation is contrasted with her initial, seemingly rational assertion of her own identity and faculties of perception, where she states that "you are not I. No one but me could possibly be. I know that, and I know where I have been and what I have done" (206). Perhaps more disturbing is the disintegration of the psyche of the professor in "A Distant Episode", whose initial status as linguistics professor signifies his position as representative of the codifying, organisational tendencies of western civilisation. He has turned the natural process of language into a mechanical process of categorisation, to the point where he misses the nuances of spoken language: "'Deceased?'" repeated the Professor, without noticing the absurdity of the word" (292). With his tongue removed, however, the professor "was no longer conscious" (302) – the violence dislocates him from the structure of a rational mind. The story closes when the threat of western rational order, presented in the form of a calendar, begins to undo the altering of his consciousness. The symbols of order, which he initially encounters disassociatively – "on the white paper were black objects that made sounds in his head" (306) – swell into a "music of feeling" in his mind, and the professor is swallowed by emotion: "he felt like weeping; he felt like roaring through the little

house, upsetting and smashing the few breakable objects”. In “A Distant Episode”, Bowles has taken the image of civilization, and stripped it of its consciousness, deploying ‘the primitive’ as a tool to engender this disintegration.

If the violence of “You are not I” can be seen to represent a disintegrating psyche, it can equally be considered to represent something positive, or at least productive. The narrator transforms from asylum inmate, imprisoned in an environment that “made [her] angry” (207), to apparent freedom, sitting in her sister’s room – even if she declines to move from the divan on which she is still sitting. Her relocation to with her sister’s body, whether real or imaginary, suggests the metamorphoses that characterise both Surrealist artistic production and revolutionary ideals. The natural impulse of surreal artworks is towards transformation; ready-made objects transformed quotidian components into a new, transcendent whole, just as the declared ambition of the Surrealists was to reconfigure the consciousness of the public at large. Turning to *The Delicate Prey*, we can see a similar image of metamorphosis resonates throughout his stories. We can think, of their insistent violence not simply as a shock tactic, a provocation of the reader, but also as a catalyst for this process of transformation. The brutalised professor sheds his rationalising, civilised perspective, to become a “holy maniac” (307), a figure not of words and dialects, but of movement and emotion, filled with a “music of feeling”. Even the visceral horror of “The Delicate Prey” can be considered in line with this mechanism of transformation. While, from a simplistic perspective, the Mougari tribesman’s violence towards the boy enacts a kind of feminisation upon him, a more surreal transformation develops as – almost in retaliation for severing the boy’s windpipe – the tribesman become a kind of instrument, or, if we take the image further, music. The story close with him, buried to his neck in the sand, transformed

to mouth and noise: “the wind blew dust along the ground into his mouth as he sang” (289). So as much as tales of violence, Bowles’ stories are promises of transformation.

It is worth asking what exactly this promise entails, however; evaporating into music, or diminishing into a crab does not seem much more positive than the disintegration of the psyche. De Chirico’s *Hebdomeros* offers a possible answer for this. While his novel definitely enacts an unnerving series of transformations, as Schwenger argues, it is not these subversions and transformations themselves that are violent, but the disjunction that they create between the reader and the text of his story. In de Chirico’s case, it is quite possible to read this disjunction as part of a deliberately hypnagogic strategy, but this structure does not translate quite so well onto *The Delicate Prey*; it would be difficult to argue that Bowles was attempting to create a hypnagogic state for his readers, *per se*. But Bowles certainly deploys violence and transformation as a means of distancing the reader from what is taking place, and, as such, his texts could be considered like de Chirico’s as attempting to offer an alternative way of viewing the world, based on the logic of dreams.

Bowles explicitly directed his writing towards confronting the ‘reign of logic’ and ‘absolute rationalism’, which he considered the worst characteristics of contemporary western society. The alternative model for perception that his stories present is contingent upon the use of violence to simultaneously confront, attract and repulse the reader. On the one hand, it disrupts the reader’s assumptions about how violence ought to be judged, and offers ‘primitive’ characters and settings that confront the structures and values of their own culture. But in a more technical way, these stories force the reader to withhold their own judgment, and engage with the text as if it were a dream; they resist rationalisation, and substitute it for a dream-

logic. This could be considered a replication of the processes of surrealism, which promised both a death to rational thinking, and a ‘rebirth’, that would open up a new perspective, where opposites were repositioned as part of the same discursive cycle; the “future resolution of [the] two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality”¹²⁹. But crucially, Bowles does not draw the reader completely into the diegeses of his stories; rather than transforming them into surreal vessels of pure receptivity, he distances them from what takes place. The kind of violence that Bowles portrays, the graphic quality of his descriptions, and the processes of transformation all serve to hold the reader at a distance from the text. In doing so, Bowles heightens their awareness of their own role in viewing the acts that he describes, and in doing so, draws their attention back to the question of perception that so preoccupied him. The artistic praxis that the Surrealists developed from their exploration of psychic displacement is distinct from that which Bowles employed: his stories rely on a series of patterned, repetitive frameworks that seems more in line with de Chirico and Borges’ fiction than many more strictly ‘surrealist’ works. If, as Ashbery suggests, we expand our understanding of Surrealism to include the strategies of writers like these (those who are interested in creating a sense of dislocation for the reader and lead them into a world inflected by dreams), then its relationship to Bowles’ fiction becomes more distinct. The dream state that these authors evoke – whether oneiric or hypnagogic – provides the impetus for transformation within the story and, perhaps, a model that shows the reader how to engage with the world with a more *surreal* perspective.

¹²⁹ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 14.

Chapter Three

Bowles and Music

“Essentially American”¹

In 1946, the same year that he published his short story “The Echo” in *Harper’s Bazaar*, Bowles took part in a series of personality tests that were published in *Life* magazine, as “one of four successful young New Yorkers,” where he was explicitly identified as “composer Paul Bowles”.² Quite apart from the fascinating conclusion, based on Bowles’ responses to a Rorschach test, that he was “amazingly complex and individualistic,” with “little in common with ‘ordinary’ people,” the article is useful because it indicates what a high profile Bowles had achieved as a composer at the point at which he turned to producing fiction.³ Over the last decade, there has been a gradually widening interest in the intersection between music and literature. While often neglected in the past, there is now a body of scholarship that focuses on what has traditionally been a secondary concern, compared to the relationship between literature and the visual arts. In general, this research tends to consider the links between the two forms from two distinct perspectives. The first is to think about the way that music, as an aesthetic model, has influenced writers formally and stylistically. The second is to take a wider view, to consider how the two forms of production have responded to similar cultural changes, or have negotiated similar terrain. The case of Bowles is unusual; he stands apart as someone who achieved critical and commercial success in both fields. Considering the relationship between

¹ Peggy Glanville-Hicks, “Paul Bowles: American Composer,” *Music and Letters* 26.4 (1945): 88.

² “Personality Tests: Ink Blots are Used to Learn How People’s Minds Work,” *Life* 7 Oct. 1946: 55.

³ *Ibid.*, 57.

his work as a composer and as a writer offers insight not only into Bowles' own artistic practice, but on the connections between music and literature more widely.

The period over which Bowles worked primarily as a composer, indeed the modernist period more generally, is now being recognized as a highly charged time of exchange between music and writing. In broad terms, the innovations that occurred in music – which critics often mark with the first performance of Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* in 1913 – provide fascinating analogies to the developments in literature.⁴ Writers themselves were keen to draw on such comparisons, and several prominent authors deliberately adopted a 'musical aesthetic' in their work. Naturally, the way individual authors chose to apply aspects of music to their work varied a great deal, as did their actual understanding of the elements they were theoretically appropriating. Music provided quite distinct inspiration for writers as diverse as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein, who all approached the appropriation of music with different sets of knowledge, and different aims in doing so. But it can be safely said, at least, that modernist writers turned to music primarily as a model of *formal* innovation, where the changes that occurred in classical music over the early twentieth century, particularly in terms of rhythmic structure and tonality, were used as a template for potential literary experimentation in structure and form. Another sign of the fertility of crossover between the two forms in this period is the prominence of collaborations between high profile authors and composers, generally in the context of opera. Pound, for example, worked with the American composer, and sometime friend of Bowles, George Antheil, in attempting to reconfigure his literary concept of Vorticism for an operatic format. Perhaps most famously, two of Bowles' mentors (in separate capacities) collaborated on a

⁴ For more on Stravinsky as emblem for modernism, see Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: the Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1989.

sensational opera staged in New York in 1934: Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Bowles was very much caught up in this atmosphere of cross-pollination; he wrote back enthusiastically to the absent Stein about the reception of *Four Saints*, and engaged himself in several such collaborations, in the capacity of composer.

Despite the intensity of literary appropriation of, and transgressions into music during the modernist period, and despite the growing recognition of the relationship between the two forms, discussion of the confluence of modernism, music and literature has been limited at best. Certain individual authors – most notably Joyce and Pound – have been the subject of specific investigation, however on a wider scale, only Alex Aronson's 1980 survey *Music and the Novel: a Study in Twentieth Century Fiction*, and Brad Bucknell's more recent (2001) *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics* attempt to engage with the larger question of this productive relationship.⁵ The most prominent, and problematic, reason for this gap in scholarship is a lack of technical knowledge on the part of critics. In his work on the representation of music within postmodern literature, Stephen Benson notes that when “required to account for music, there is an impulse to admit amateurish incompetence,” where the “fumbling attempts of the everyday listener” are implicitly held up against the standard of “the proper language of the professional”.⁶ Benson cites particularly abashed apologies from such notable critics as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean-François Lyotard, and it is worth noting that of the two general surveys I have indicated, Bucknell's biography emphasizes his own

⁵ Alex Aronson, *Music and the Novel: a Study in Twentieth Century Fiction* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980); Brad Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2001).

⁶ Stephen Benson, *Literary Music: Writing Music in Contemporary Fiction*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 3.

experience as “a studio musician, a songwriter, a singer, and a band leader – all before gaining a Ph.D. in English at the University of Toronto”.⁷ This signposting of technical qualifications serves to help legitimize this study, and in fact seems almost necessary for any work considering music and literature, in a way that would not be the case for a text that drew together, say, painting and the novel. When discussing prose texts, moreover, there is the additional problem of how to frame the relationship: beyond superficially claiming that ‘this literary technique approximates this musical technique,’ the vocabulary of literary criticism has not developed many tools for accounting for this relationship.

Perhaps the most limiting factor, however, has been the authors themselves; although often avid ‘amateurs,’ most of the authors who were involved in this artistic intersection had very limited technical knowledge of music. As a consequence, scholars have been reticent to draw out the musical allusions that authors have made, or limit themselves to trying, on a superficial level, to simply assess the accuracy of their claims. Although there were myriad ways in which modernist authors adopted and deployed elements of music in their writing, I have no intention of attempting a survey of them all, nor even of the most prominent ones, which is beyond the scope of this project. Instead, I want to use the example of Joyce – as the most discussed of these authors – to suggest the general tendency of such literary incursions into the field of music. In various places throughout *Ulysses*, but most prominently in the “Sirens” episode, Joyce consciously attempted to take musical form, and reconfigure it within a literary text. At various times, he referred to the episode as a ‘fugue’ and a ‘*fuga per canonem*,’ using the terms for two distinct musical forms to account for the structure he eventually developed. This analogy has led to a large body of scholarship,

⁷ Bucknell, *Musical; Aesthetics*, Author information page.

with a range of competing arguments about Joyce's intentions, and his success, in appropriating musical form for this section.

At the same time, however, it is also clear that Joyce's use of music was often connected to a wider, less stable conceptualisation. What has been described as Joyce's "supposedly 'musical' experimentation with words" is an attempt, on the author's part, to synthesise the two forms; it is an "attempt to 'fuse' language and music".⁸ Although he attempted (with mixed success) to align his writing with specific modes of music, the broadly synthetic approach he took tends to abstract music, rather than make specific connections. Here, music takes on a broader conceptual meaning, which Bucknell suggests "refers obliquely to an art which transcends referential or lexical meaning"—in other words, music loses its specific, often technical meaning, to become an abstracted ideal, which literature "can never fully encompass".⁹ Joyce is certainly not alone in this, with many modernist authors deploying music as a generalised concept, whose significance is as an abstracted mode of communication, juxtaposed against the all too specifically referential nature of language. Invoking music, then, serves to help destabilize the production of meaning. Directing the reader away from the indexical meaning of words, it can help suggest an understanding of language as sound, rather than word.

As his *Life* profile suggests, Bowles stands out not only in the modernist period, but more generally as one of a very small number of artists who had successful and distinct careers as both a classical composer and as an author. Indeed, despite his subsequent success as an author, Bowles had already achieved something of a celebrity status in 1930s and 1940s New York, and he made his return into the

⁸ Ibid., 121.

⁹ Ibid., 1.

world of writing through his skill as a prolific music critic. Yet this aspect of Bowles' artistic career has been largely neglected by critics, and the relationship between his music and his prose has remained unexplored territory. One anecdote that both Bowles and his subsequent critics have been quick to repeat, however, details Gertrude Stein crushing the young Bowles' ambitions as a poet by declaring his writings to be not bad, but simply not poetry at all. This moment provided Bowles with the impetus to pursue a different kind of artistic career – one that would remain his primary form of expression for the next twenty years. The story is particularly interesting for the relationship it suggests between writing and composing: for Bowles, the two were complementary forms of artistic expression. While many critics have, like Mangan, understood Bowles' insistence that music and writing were 'in two different rooms' as an assertion of their distinctness, Bowles evidently considered them to be simply two means of communicating the ideas important to him. He noted, in an interview in 1952, that he had "always felt extremely circumscribed in music" and that there were "a great many things I wanted to say that were too precise to express in musical terms"; equally, however, he thought writing would not be enough on its own, but that "the two work together very well".¹⁰ Bowles clearly considered his music, then, as a counterpart to his writing; not only were both the product of the same artistic impulses, but each form filled the inherent gaps in expression in the other. From this perspective, his musical oeuvre is the natural corollary to his body of fiction, accounting for some of the aspects of his prose that may not be clear on their own.

Where Bowles' literary career was marked by its divergence from America, both in the settings it developed and the values it subscribed to, his music was

¹⁰ Bowles, *Conversations*, 4.

characterised, to a large degree, by the extent to which it conformed to the developing American musical idiom. In 1945, Peggy Glanville-Hicks described him as “one of the most interesting of the younger American composers”, and her assessment that his music is “essentially American” has continued to govern the (rather limited) discussion of this aspect of his life.¹¹ From the perspective of influence, the American character of Bowles’ composition can be attributed to the man under whom he served his musical apprenticeship, and through whom he gained access to a circle of composers that included Virgil Thompson and Leonard Bernstein. When Bowles met Aaron Copland in 1930, he immediately recognised in the composer ten years his senior “the energy and talent for which he would later become famous”.¹² In fact, by 1945, *Music Quarterly* was able to assert that “few composers of our time... have developed a style so strongly and individually” as had Copland.¹³ Copland’s own early training in Europe influenced the sound of Bowles’ music – early listeners noted echoes of Erik Satie and Igor Stravinsky, suggesting his music had “a distinctly French accent”.¹⁴ Much more significantly, however, Copland’s use of both American folk motifs and jazz qualities were carried through in the music of his pupil, as Bowles developed a style that worked within a distinctly American idiom. By the time he had established himself as a figure “well known in contemporary musical circles”, his style sharply reflected the musical influence of Copland, Bernstein and Thompson, to the point where Glanville-Hicks felt she could not “discuss Paul Bowles in particular without making constant reference to American composers in general”.¹⁵ But equally, as Glanville-Hicks herself stresses, Bowles’ music was characterised by his “highly individual technique”, which she attributed to his “having

¹¹ Glanville-Hicks, “American Composer,” 88.

¹² Foltz, “Paul Bowles,” 84.

¹³ Arthur V. Berger, “The Music of Aaron Copland,” *The Musical Quarterly* 31. 4 (1945): 420.

¹⁴ Bob Gilmore, “Review of *Paul Bowles on Music*,” *Music and Letters* 86. 2 (2005): 318.

¹⁵ Glanville-Hicks, “American Composer,” 88-89.

learned in action the basic laws of composition without implanting in his style mannerisms and dogmas of other personalities”.¹⁶ While Copland played a significant role in the development of Bowles’ musical sensibilities, Bowles remained “essentially a self-taught musician”, who continued to feel insecurities about gaps in his knowledge of musical theory and praxis.¹⁷

Whatever reservations he may have had about his abilities, Bowles nonetheless felt comfortable enough to take on first a series of articles for the journal *Modern Music*, then a regular position as music columnist for the *New York Herald Tribune*. These would be Bowles’ first forays into writing since his early success with *transition*, and they were marked by both the variety of subject matter and the intellectual framework within which they considered music. *Modern Music* was “among the most important music journals of its day”, and offered both a critical and an “insider’s view” of the American Music scene from 1924-1946.¹⁸ The *New York Herald Tribune*, too, was marked by “the quality of its news coverage, the literacy of its writing and the affluence of its readership.”¹⁹ Bowles made use of this critical voice both to promote the music he considered most important – especially folk music from Latin America and North Africa and jazz, on which he wrote regular columns – but also to reflect intellectually on music and aesthetics in a way in which he was reluctant to engage with literature. At the same time as he was composing his own pieces, he was producing a “body of writing that can stand alongside Virgil Thomson’s as the most valuable of its era in New York”; Bowles’ visibility in

¹⁶ Ibid., 88.

¹⁷ Foltz, “Paul Bowles,” 81.

¹⁸ Mangan, introduction to *Paul Bowles on Music*, eds. Tim Mangan and Irene Herrmann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), ix.

¹⁹ Ibid., x.

American cultural life during the 1940s was a product of the clear and reflective voice he developed through his musical criticism.²⁰

In spite of the relatively high profile Bowles achieved in musical circles, however, his earlier career has remained “largely unnoticed”.²¹ Bob Gilmore’s review of *Bowles on Music* is suggestive of how a broader impression of Bowles has perpetuated this state of affairs: to the American public, Bowles is either “a composer who became a writer” or “possibly vice-versa: a writer who tried his hand at composing, gave up, and went back to writing”.²² During the nineties, there was a resurgence of interest in Bowles’ music among American listeners, but attention has largely been drawn towards his “handful of orchestral and chamber work” and, most prominently, to “lots of piano pieces and songs”.²³ Bowles’ compositions also extended to several operas and a number of ballets, including “Yankee Clipper” of 1937, which is noteworthy for its early place in the history of American ballet. By far the largest portion of his work as a composer, however, was dedicated to scores for theatrical productions and films. Bowles, like many composers, was forced to concede to the economic realities of the period, and the 1940s in particular became “an intense period of almost non-stop work” as Bowles produced scores for a succession of films and plays of varying prominence.²⁴ He developed a close relationship with Orson Welles’ theatre company, beginning with his score for the successful *Horse Eats Hat* and including his production of *Dr. Faustus*. He also began a lifelong friendship and collaborative relationship with Tennessee Williams – who proved to be one of Bowles’ canniest readers – with Bowles composing the score for

²⁰ Gilmore, “Review,” 318.

²¹ Foltz, “Paul Bowles,” 81.

²² Gilmore, “Review,” 315.

²³ *Ibid.*, 316.

²⁴ Foltz, “Paul Bowles,” 86.

The Glass Menagerie that received as positive reviews as the play itself. Towards the end of this period, Bowles himself would step into the world of theatre in a more literary capacity, producing the first American translation of Sartre's *Huis Clos* in 1946, and in the process providing its enduring English title, *No Exit*. Perhaps Bowles' greatest success – certainly the aspect of his composition that earned him the greatest intellectual praise – came from the score he composed for documentary films, where his “qualities [found] a true function” and he was able to produce “several remarkable scores”.²⁵ By the time he turned permanently towards writing, in 1949, Bowles had established himself as a prolific composer with a relatively high profile, but was equally an artist contingent upon economic necessities; he was seen as “a theatre musician *par excellence*”, who possessed “an entirely practical and workmanlike approach to his art”.²⁶

It was not simply as a composer that Bowles engaged with the medium of film – in his role as music critic, both for *Modern Music* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, Bowles produced regular columns dedicated to critiquing contemporary film music. This unusual and relatively unique critical perspective formed a “substantial part” of his music-writing career, in which he registered “an appealing mixture of seriousness towards the medium overall and lightness towards specific examples”.²⁷ He showed particular sensitivity to the way that music could contribute towards the aesthetics of the film, praising passages such as in Copland's score for *The City*, “in which visual and auditory elements merge” as “the most poetic moments in any

²⁵ Glanville-Hicks, “American Composer,” 89.

²⁶ *Ibid.* An important factor in Bowles' departure from the world of music was this limited scope for composition, in which his ability to express himself was circumscribed by the necessities of composing for somebody else's play or film.

²⁷ Gilmore, “Review,” 317.

American film score”.²⁸ Nor did he shy away from instances in which the ramifications of the score were less than positive, as in his condemnation of the “Nazi” implications of the “mindless super-slick kitsch” of Disney’s *Fantasia*, in which the music helped create “the perfect Fascist entertainment”.²⁹ Given the importance he saw in harmony between image and sound, it is not surprising that Bowles took greatest issue with the general disparity between the images of film and the soundtracks that accompany them. He is scornful of the status quo, within which an “unnoticeable score passes for competent when it doesn’t detract from the spectator’s interest in the film”, and which granted “alibis to film music for the privilege of being dull.”³⁰ He was equally conscious, however, of the extent to which this could be attributed to the disjunction between an audience’s understanding of filmic language and musical language. He notes that:

There is also the gloomy reflection to be made that the ear-poet has to deal in his public with a sense which has yet to be developed. There is no doubt that hearing is considered a secondary sense, one which is less directly connected with the intellect than sight is – more visceral and infinitely less differentiated. Auditory esthetics are pretty much unevolved, so that in spite of music’s impressive technical ramifications, it remains a low-grade cultural vehicle. And a great effort is constantly being made to keep it that way.³¹

Bowles was deeply aware of the limits of audiences’ grasp of musical language and the technical vocabulary that it depended upon. The ability of the composer – whether of film scores or orchestral works – to communicate his ideas to his listeners was inevitably circumscribed by their musical illiteracy, and as a consequence film scores remained at a basic level, despite purporting “to be satisfactory auditory counterparts of a visual art which has reached a technical level so much higher that the disparity is

²⁸ Paul Bowles, *Paul Bowles on Music*, eds. Tim Mangan and Irene Herrmann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

painful to perceive”.³² In articulating his frustration at the limitations of the composer, Bowles was also voicing his own growing concerns about the tenor of American culture more generally, in which art that relied upon a more sophisticated technical vocabulary was marginalised in favour of art forms that could be easily consumed by the public.

In response to his own concerns about the direction of film, Bowles expanded his collaboration with the Surrealists in New York to help produce the 1947 avant-garde film *Dreams That Money Can Buy*. The film was produced under the supervision and direction of Hans Richter, who had achieved fame both through his film *Rhythmus 21*, which he later contested had been the first abstract film, and his role in retrospectively theorizing Dada. Each of the film’s seven sections was written and sub-directed by a different avant-garde artist: Max Ernst was responsible for one, entitled “Desire,” Marcel Duchamp, another entitled “Discs,” and Man Ray, a third, entitled “Ruth, Roses, and Revolvers”. Bowles was responsible for the score for two of these sections, collaborating with Alexander Calder, and Ernst, whom he had once admiringly described as “the maddest maddest one can find anywhere anywhere”.³³ The film went on to achieve a remarkable success – considering its meagre budget and single set, a disused New York loft – winning the Venice Film Festival Award for best original contribution to the progress of cinematography. Some critics, such as Herman Weinberg, writing for *Monthly Film Bulletin*, considered it an artistic success and “easily the most startling and original film of the year”; he applauded its intellectual sensibilities, where “for the first time painters are working with colour on the screen, not set designers with the souls of interior decorators”, and whose result

³² Ibid., 9.

³³ Bowles, *In Touch*, 70.

was “ravishing to the eye”.³⁴ Evidently, the surrealist artists behind the work were intent on producing a piece that relied upon an artistic vocabulary that was sophisticated and reflected an avant-garde sensibility: the result was a film that aimed towards a new filmic vocabulary more in line with visual arts than popular culture. Weinberg’s assessment of Ernst’s “wry study in libido and frustration” as opening “up the first new vista in the psychoanalytical interpretation of dreams on the screen since Pabst’s *Secret of a Soul* [1926]” suggests the revolutionary nature of such a film in 1940s America.³⁵ Unsurprisingly, such a high-brow approach to film making drew equal amounts of criticism. Bosley Crowther’s high-profile review in the *New York Times* took particular issue with what he perceived as the difficulty of the film’s language, which he deemed too “obscure for the layman”.³⁶ The film would be particularly “troubling” for the average cinema-goer, whom Crowther imagined as “the patron who simply sits with an open mind, expecting entertainment” – exactly the kind of viewer/listener that Bowles felt such concern about.³⁷ But even Crowther conceded that the “musical score... is often more eloquent than the screen”; despite Bowles’ aspirations towards a more sophisticated sound, his music was still able to find popular support in a high-profile venue.³⁸

Bowles, then, was deeply invested in a programme of music that challenged the aural sensibilities of mainstream America; while his music may have been characterised by many of its earlier listeners as distinctly ‘American’, the personal idiom he developed, and the projects on which he worked, confronted the limited musical literacy of his listenership. Bowles’ fictional voice, which he began to

³⁴ Herman Weinberg, “The Dreams That Money Can Buy,” *Monthly Film Bulletin* 15. 60 (1947): 140.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Bosley Crowther, “‘Dreams That Money Can Buy,’ Psychological Study, at 5th Ave Playhouse,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1948, 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

develop over the second half of the 1940s, seemed so out of place in American culture because of its insistence on this same alterneity, and a divergent, often confrontational perspective on the world. By the time he worked on *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, Bowles had already been associated artistically with the Surrealists for several years through his work in the pages of *View*, most notably, as I have argued, the issue he edited on ‘Tropical Americana’, in which he collated a selection of stories and myths from Latin America, presenting them with an ethnographic framework as a divergent perspective on the world, emphasising magic, dreams and the subconscious. In the same way, he used his capacity as music columnist to promote music from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain, Portugal and North Africa, consistently placing priority on the aspects of their tradition, sound and aesthetic that contrasted with his readers’ expectations of music. Glanville-Hicks, who shared a long friendship with Bowles, argued that his “preoccupation with Hispanic cultures is one of the most important aspects of his whole nature and has greatly affected his thought and expression”; for her, the quality that defined him was his desire for something outside the bounds of American life.³⁹ Bowles began “propagandizing” for Hispanic and North African music from the beginning of his tenure as a music critic, but it was only during the 1940s that he seemed to find the confidence to develop this vein of criticism thoroughly.⁴⁰ Reflecting on Bowles’ career, Mangan emphasises his “painstaking ethnomusicological studies”, which he figures as “examples of the evils of commercialism” – the social critique of America implicit in Bowles’ writing was not lost on at least some of his readers.⁴¹

³⁹ Glanville-Hicks, “American Composer,” 88.

⁴⁰ Mangan, introduction, xii.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

When reviewing Bowles' career, it would be easy to imagine his artistic output switching irreversibly from music to literature with the publication of *The Sheltering Sky*. Not only did his writing of short fiction overlap with musical composition and criticism for at least the last five years of the 1940s, but some of his most important contributions to music occurred well after Bowles had, according to these critics, eschewed the mantle of 'composer' for good. Quite aside from theatrical music, which he continued composing almost until his death, or his 1955 opera *Yerma*, which he had conceived of more than a decade earlier, Bowles made, at the end of the 1950s, a contribution to the world of music that was significant in quite a different sense. After receiving a Rockefeller Foundation Grant in 1959, Bowles "set out for some of Morocco's more distant and secluded locations" with two assistants, and over the year made four trips and traversed over 25,000 miles, as he attempted to chronicle as many forms of indigenous music as possible.⁴² As Foltz notes, however, the project ultimately came "to rather an abrupt end by decree of the Moroccan government which deemed indigenous folk music 'degenerate' and forbade Bowles from continuing the project"; the hours of music that Bowles collected, often in desperate or dangerous conditions, have remained unreleased in Library of Congress Archives, with just a single disk having been released.⁴³ He considered his task to be one of helping preserve something of a culture he deeply respected from the encroachment of Western civilization, but not, as he notes from "the by-products of our civilization" so much as from "the irrational longing on the part of members of their own educated minorities to cease being themselves and become westerners".⁴⁴ For Bowles, the issue with western, particularly American, culture was the extent to which its monolithic totality could absorb other cultures; his role, in representing their

⁴² Foltz, "Paul Bowles," 88.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Bowles, "Point of View," viii.

alternative traditions, was to slow or prevent the transformation of the world into America wrought miniature.

Bowles' investment in Hispanic music went deeper than a general fascination with non-western culture, however; as Glanville-Hicks suggests, this music formed "one of the most important aspects of his whole nature".⁴⁵ That Bowles artistically valued the folk music traditions of Spain and Mexico is evident from the amount of space he dedicated in his columns to discussions of it. A more specific line of influence, however, can be drawn from two specific figures: the Mexican composer Sylvestre Revueltas and the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca. Bowles met Revueltas in Mexico City, and studied under him for a short time, yet however brief their personal encounter, it evidently left as deep an impact on Bowles as his long-term tutelage and friendship with Copland. He described his first encounter with Revueltas, in which the composer asked him "eagerly" if he had read Lorca, then "conjured up an impromptu orchestra in less than an hour and conducted a magnificent performance of *Homenaje a Garcia Lorca*", as "violently moving".⁴⁶ Revueltas made a significant impact on Bowles stylistically, and he seems to have particularly respected the intuitive approach with which Revueltas fashioned music – "with the instinct of an orator, he made his effects, barbaric and sentimental".⁴⁷ This approach is reflected in Bowles' own compositions, which displayed "a new melodic freedom"; his music was difficult to discuss "in terms of form in the accepted symphonic-form sense, for form reaches its height in music which is thought perpendicularly, whereas Bowles [thinks] horizontally and contrapuntally", a factor which Glanville-Hicks, at least, attributed to the influence of music like that of

⁴⁵ Glanville-Hicks, "American Composer," 88.

⁴⁶ Bowles, *Bowles on Music*, 29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

Revueltas.⁴⁸ Bowles' friendship with the Mexican composer was predicated, as he himself admitted, on their shared fascination with the second of Bowles' Hispanic influences: Federico Garcia Lorca. Bowles' two most personal works, the operas *The Wind Remains* and *Yerma* were both set to texts by Garcia Lorca: the first the fruits of a 1943 Guggenheim Fellowship, while the latter was the product of almost a decade's planning and re-working (although conceived of during the mid 1940s, Bowles did not complete the work until 1955).⁴⁹ When *The Wind Remains* was first performed, it generated "high interest", with critics noting that Lorca was clearly "a poet with whom he shares a definite affinity".⁵⁰ Bowles certainly found Lorca a rich source for inspiration both in content, and in theorization. He admitted that he considered Spanish music, "of all the popular music in the Western World", to be "most heavy with the strange quality which, for want of a more accurate word, we call magic", and he turned to Lorca's writings to try and account for this quality which so captivated him.⁵¹ While Bowles would collaborate with other writers over the course of his career, such as Tennessee Williams and Charles Henri Ford, putting their words to music, Lorca was the only author Bowles devoted, musically, so much energy to, and the writer whose theories on music he treated with the greatest gravity.

The trajectories of Bowles' musical and literary careers could seem to have travelled in quite separate directions; while the predominant critique of his fiction was that it was out of touch with American life, and that it needed to return to Bowles' 'local scene', his music was lauded as capturing the essence of the American idiom. In terms of both influences and aims, however, his work as a composer provides a

⁴⁸ Glanville-Hicks, "American Composer," 93.

⁴⁹ *The Wind Remains* was set to poems by Lorca, and *Yerma* was an operatic adaptation of Lorca's play of the same name.

⁵⁰ Glanville-Hicks, "American Composer," 93.

⁵¹ Bowles, *Bowles on Music*, 132.

surprisingly close counterpart to his prose fiction. Not only did Bowles promote North African and Latin American music in his columns, the compositions themselves reshape material from these places in the same way his stories and novels later would. His use of this material was predicated upon the same deep-seated opposition to the spread of American culture, and the loss of identity in the face of its totalising rational and commercialist values. He invested himself aesthetically in alternative traditions, and employed a parallel ethnographic praxis in recording Moroccan music to his translation of traditional Moghrebi tales and use of Moroccan and Latin American folk material in his fiction. His music, as much as his fiction, positioned him as running against the grain of American culture in the middle of the twentieth century.

“Hack work was often the rule”

While the postwar period saw a heightened intellectual anxiety around what it meant for cultural production to be American, particularly in light of their openly oppositional stance towards the Soviet Union, the question of defining the American idiom had preoccupied cultural critics and institutions since well before the advent of the second world war – especially since this period was often considered as one where “hack work was often the rule”.⁵² In no field was this dispute over the quality of national culture more heatedly contested than the realm of music, where both “the national and international position of American music was closely watched, fiercely debated, and highly freighted on its home turf”; the first three decades of the twentieth

⁵² Alfred W. Cochran, “Cinema Music of Distinction: Virgil Thomson, Aaron Copland and Gail Kubik,” in *Perspectives on American Music, 1900-1950*, ed. Michael Saffle (New York: Routledge, 2012), 345.

century witnessed unprecedentedly “anxious scrutiny toward American music”.⁵³ At the heart of this insistent disquiet about American music was a lingering sense of cultural inferiority to Europe. The desire to identify “a distinct American style in concert music and a great American composer” had begun in the nineteenth century, and critics such as Nadine Hubbs attribute it to “generations of American audiences, artists, and critics seeking to counter the domination of European cultural products and values, and to prove America’s high-cultural worth and maturation” – in other words, composers and critics alike saw it as incumbent on them to validate America’s global position, through the music they created and promoted.⁵⁴ This American sound would inherently gain its worth and seriousness in contradistinction to European music, and the “attempts to create a distinctly American music” were in part contingent upon institutions including “Tin Pan Alley and the recording industry attempt[ing] to mold public perceptions about the nation”; the idea of a national sound was just as important domestically as it was internationally.⁵⁵ But while the debate about a definitive national music had been ongoing, it was during the first part of the twentieth century that serious traction was made. As a period, it “brought a series of crucial transformations to the world of music” and the entailing “developments revolutionized the scope and range of American music”.⁵⁶ As this thesis has emphasised, moreover, this was a period during which America began to assert its cultural hegemony on a global scale, as “the United States became not merely the world’s foremost military and industrial power, but her foremost source of musical

⁵³ Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 71.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵⁵ Charles Hiroshi Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008), 13 (sic).

⁵⁶ Garrett, *Struggling*, 11.

entertainment as well”⁵⁷. If the changes that occurred within the world of American music led to a sound that could be authoritatively championed as American, the process of reaching this sound was reflective of the deeper cultural anxieties in America in the twentieth century.

While the ascendant cultural hegemony of America certainly contributed to the formation of a distinct musical idiom, inflected with jazz, blues and other popular sounds, as this chapter has already suggested, this idiom can also be attributed to the work of a small group of musicians. From the privileged perspective of the start of the twenty first century, it is clear that a circle of composers working within a classical- or art-music context that included Copland, Thomson, Leonard Bernstein, Marc Blitzstein, Ned Rorem and Bowles were “central to the twentieth century creation of an emblematic ‘American sound’”.⁵⁸ In particular, it is hard to avoid the continued repercussions of Aaron Copland’s emblematic compositions, which have come to be regarded as “*the American style in music*”; his scores for films such as *The City and Of Mice and Men*, and the ballets *Rodeo*, *Appalachian Spring* and *Billy the Kid* have become aural metonyms for American culture, and “ubiquitous” for “purposes of movies, television, and all events of national significance”.⁵⁹ But while Copland, as the most prominent member of the group, is the most recognisable figure of the circle, his role in shaping this American idiom was predicated upon the work of the other composers around him. In particular, there is a clear genealogy from Thomson to Copland: although only four years Copland’s senior, Thomson occupied the position of elder statesman and he was “a prime source of the musical innovations on which

⁵⁷ Michael Saffle, introduction to *Perspectives on American Music, 1900-1950*, ed. Michael Saffle (New York: Routledge, 2012), ix.

⁵⁸ Hubbs, *Queer Composition*, 4

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3, (sic).

the ‘Coplandian’ American idiom was founded.”⁶⁰ While Thomson acknowledged that “Copland was the author of ‘the most distinguished populist music style yet created in America,’” he was also clear that Copland “had modelled this style directly on Thomson’s music”.⁶¹ Bowles, as the mutual student of both composers, and equally influenced by their sounds, also contributed to their developing musical idiom, and the sound of their music “attests [to] Bowles’s musical influence on fellow modernists”.⁶² Together, this circle managed to shape a “musical idiom that serves as one of the most potent and recognizable cultural emblems of Americanness – a sonic representation of American vastness and rugged, simple beauty”.⁶³

While Bowles’ sound, like Copland’s and Thomson’s, may have been widely considered to be ‘essentially American’, almost as often his listeners registered his sound as French. Indeed the assessment of his composition as “lean, tonal, audibly French-affiliated music” could equally have been applied to much of the music of his mentors.⁶⁴ One of the ironies of the development of an American sound, intended to rival the musical dominance of Europe, was the extent to which it was contingent upon earlier developments among European modernist composers. Indeed, foremost among the group’s musical antecedents was the French composer Satie, whose music “drew not from the staid worlds that typically bore ballet expression in France, but, rather, the domain of the ‘everyday’ or ‘mundane’”; his sound was so distinctive, and disquieting, that one piece, his score for the ballet *Parade*, necessitated the invention of a new adjective: ‘surreal’.⁶⁵ While, on the one hand, it is clear that Bowles was more than receptive to the surrealist aesthetic, whether in literature or music, on the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁶¹ Ibid., 42.

⁶² Ibid., 109.

⁶³ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 115.

⁶⁵ Robert Schapiro, “Erik Satie,” in *Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook*, ed. Larry Sitsky (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 2002), 428.

other it is equally true that his peers were profoundly influenced by a French avant-garde musical tradition. Foremost of these was the widely acknowledged “Dada-influenced Thomson”, whose music was generally accepted to be “fundamentally influenced by the avant-garde work of the lesbian poet Gertrude Stein [and] Satie”.⁶⁶ Copland, Bowles, and the rest of the circle adopted the same “discipline of spontaneity” as Thomson, which “translated into a consonant, triadic, diatonic... and tonal music language”, which generated its complexity through “its notorious ‘blankness,’ its obscurity in – not abstruse complexity, as with Schoenberg – but vernacular simplicity”.⁶⁷ The contrasting use of Schoenberg here is significant, for the nascent American idiom was defined by its composers in clear contrast to a – broadly – ‘European’ sound, an opposition to what they considered to be the overblown aesthetics of German Romanticism and Schoenbergian serialisation. Instead, these pivotal composers were so involved in producing a surrealist-inflected sound, that Thomson contested with Breton the very origins of his aesthetic, arguing that “the discipline of spontaneity, which he was asking his surrealist neophytes to adopt, was new for language but something that composers had been practicing for centuries”.⁶⁸ Perhaps more importantly, this ‘lean, tonal, audibly French’ sound became widely equated with an *American* musical idiom. When Stein and Thomson collaborated on *Four Saints*, the account given by spectators “suggests they had witnessed a glorious and redemptive birth – of nothing less than the national culture”; the people who consumed these composers music readily accepted it as reflective of themselves and their environment.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Hubbs, *Queer Composition*, 83, 11-12

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 10, 33.

⁶⁸ Thomson, cited in Hubbs, *Queer Composition*, 89

⁶⁹ Hubbs, *Queer Composition*, 19.

The cultural politics represented by this opposition between a modernist French sound and a German one – extrapolated to signify ‘America’ and ‘Europe’ – were most publically, and influentially, contested in the realm of film music. Like Bowles, both Copland and Thomson made some of their most serious impressions on the public through the medium of cinema; they “exerted a profound influence on film music from the mid-1930s through to the early-1960s”, and although “the total number of film scores composed” by each of them was “relatively few”, Andrew Cochran stresses that “their impact upon cinema music was significant”.⁷⁰ Moreover, like Bowles they targeted the medium strategically, recognising its capacity to influence large audiences, both as a practical and long-term means. George Antheil, one of the first “composers to be successful in Hollywood”, also emphasised the enormous cultural power exerted by cinema by the late 1930s, explaining that “90,000 persons a week hear various Hollywood scores throughout the world” and that “No one interested in wider publics, the education of the people, or the general emotional vibrations of the times, can leave motion pictures out of his calculations”.⁷¹ From Copland’s perspective, the state of film music in the middle of the twentieth century offered a sobering testament to the need for a definitively American sound. He argued that most contemporary scores were composed “in the late nineteenth-century symphonic style, a style now so generally accepted as to be considered inevitable”, when what “screen music badly needs is... more feeling for the exact quality of each picture”.⁷² Not only were film studios “crank[ing] out film scores as quickly as possible”, with many “written by several composers working simultaneously according to formulas”, but “many of the composers who contributed to this ‘sound’

⁷⁰ Cochran, “Music of Distinction,” 323.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 325.

⁷² Copland, cited in Cochran, “Music of Distinction,” 324-5.

were European-born and they shared a similar compositional aesthetic”.⁷³ It was perhaps this quality, as much as any other, that spurred Copland and Thomson to use film as a field in which to contest their ideas of an American sound; they had continually “directed their efforts against Romanticism – specifically German late Romanticism”.⁷⁴ Their intervention was spurred both by the fact that the music furnishing contemporary movies was composed largely by Europeans, emulating the sound of European cinema, and by the fact that it did so by producing music that was inappropriate for the images that accompanied it. Their decision to do so, at this early point in the trajectory of Hollywood film music “changed the source and direction of film music profoundly” and their efforts “raised the standards in an industry where hack work was often the rule”.⁷⁵

It was not simply the European quality that irked these composers, however, but the low quality of the “distinctive ‘Hollywood Sound’ that Copland disliked so much”.⁷⁶ Not only were the predominantly European composers replicating a sound that did not reflect America, their music was treating the American public as musically infantile; Thomson and Copland were uneasy about the consequences of the low quality of the sound that accompanied America’s burgeoning film industry. Sensitive to the same low standards of musical knowledge among the public that Bowles had highlighted, Copland considered that the low quality of music in American films was actually responsible for America’s widespread auditory illiteracy. Questioning both the style and quality of the prevailing film idiom, he emphasised film composers’ “lack of contact with any real audience”, suggesting that they were

⁷³ Cochran, “Music of Distinction,” 327, 324.

⁷⁴ Hubbs, *Queer Composition*, 83.

⁷⁵ Cochran, “Music of Distinction,” 345.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 342.

trying “to simplify their musical language as much as possible”.⁷⁷ The role of the Copland circle, then was to enlarge the musical sensibility of the public, by creating a sophisticated sound, that was still comprehensible to the hundreds of thousands who would hear it; after all, as Copland asked, how people could “be expected to understand music that sounded as if it came from some other planet?”⁷⁸

In order to achieve this didactic sound, Copland and Thomson both set out to compose scores that had a veneer of simplicity, so as not to alienate their listener, but which contained a sophistication that would expand their musical sensibility. Thompson’s scores, for example, consist “mostly of a series of vignettes tied to one another”, and his “style ranges from the cerebral and austere to the quaint... but is always sensitive and carefully wrought”.⁷⁹ Cochran notes that his score for *The Plough that Broke the Plains* stood “in marked contrast to what was then often done in Hollywood”; it offered both a technical sophistication and a superficial elegance and simplicity.⁸⁰ In the same way, the score that Copland produced for the documentary *The City* – an “extraordinary score of power, intelligence, wit and sensitivity” which “helped the film claim its distinction as one of the best documentaries ever made” – relied upon a broad accessibility, which disguised the sophistication of the work.⁸¹ The music is “carefully crafted, with a distinctive harmonic language... a lean and transparent style of orchestration and, in places, prominent dissonance” and critics summarised it as “compelling music of great distinction”; it was “universally hailed as a superb film score”.⁸² The stated ambition of these composers, then – to establish a definitive American sound through classical

⁷⁷ Ibid., 326.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Cochran, “Music of Distinction,” 327.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 330.

⁸² Ibid., 331.

music – was also tied up with questions of accessibility and cultural value. In deliberately styling their film music to be accessible, Copland and Thomson were making a tacit claim about the capabilities of their audiences to listen to music and, more broadly, their ability to consume high culture.

Charles Hiroshi Garrett has noted that “perceptions of high and low culture have... served to delimit the field of American music”, and the question, over the first half of the twentieth-century, as to what constituted ‘American music’ was inherently caught up in a wider discussion of cultural value.⁸³ In his capacity as music critic, Bowles engaged with the whole range of musical production in America during the 1940s – he even reported on Frank Sinatra – but perhaps more importantly, he advocated for ‘low cultural’ forms of music, especially folk and jazz, both of which he was personally passionate about. Within their compositional work, both Copland and Thomson incorporated the idioms of popular American music into their scores. It was in part because of his use of folk motifs that Copland’s score for *The Red Pony* (along with his ballets, *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*) was able to “profoundly influence... people’s notions of what appropriate music for the American west should be”.⁸⁴ But in seeking to change the status quo of film music, Copland and Thomson were making a claim for their own music as something of higher cultural value, relegating the ‘Hollywood Sound’ to low culture. John Tibbetts has noted that these composers were not the first to aspire to something loftier in the medium of film: during the 1930s and 1940s there were a spate of Hollywood biopic films that dealt with American composers and musicians. Tibbetts stresses that although these films “pretended to be high art”, they ultimately reproduced the same nineteenth century sound that audiences expected of films – they simply “catered to the lure of popular

⁸³ Garrett, *Struggling*, 6.

⁸⁴ Cochran, 339.

acceptance”.⁸⁵ On the other hand, however, Copland and Thompson were both prepared to stand outside the system. Copland openly acknowledged the uniqueness of his sound, admitting that to “some in Hollywood” his music seemed “strange and dissonant”.⁸⁶ He felt that music in film needed to aspire to something greater and speak “with a new incisiveness and clarity”; asserting that he “did not condescend to compose film music” but instead “worked hard at it”, he staked a claim for film music to occupy an authentically high cultural position. At the same time, however, it is difficult to avoid the “depth and sophistication that Copland brought to bear in creating the illusion of apparent simplicity”.⁸⁷ Fundamentally, Copland was not intending to alienate his popular audience – he and Thomson targeted film scores as a means to accessing a wide audience and effecting a cultural change on a broad level.

The question over the direction of American culture occurred not only in music, but across a wider cultural sphere; while Copland and Thomson’s circle were attempting to shift cultural production in one direction, a number of groups contested the nature of that shift, not least of which were the New York Intellectuals. Not only were the New York Intellectuals invested in shaping the direction of literature in the postwar period, they were “the mid-century’s most prominent group of generalist cultural critics”, invested in defining the nature and content of American culture in every form from the 1930s until well into the 1960s.⁸⁸ While to some extent the ambitions and philosophies that underpinned both groups corresponded, they also diverged significantly. The extent of their divide can be seen in their nearly physical clash that took place at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in March 1949, one of several

⁸⁵ John C. Tibbetts, “The New Tin Pan Alley: 1940s Hollywood Looks at American Popular Songwriters,” in *Perspectives on American Music, 1900-1950*, ed. Michael Saffle (New York: Garland), 352.

⁸⁶ Cochran, 334.

⁸⁷ Cochran, “Music of Distinction,” 339.

⁸⁸ Jumonville, *Critical Crossings*, 3.

galvanising events in the development of the New York Intellectuals' sense of philosophy and politics. Here, their targets were – according to them – the ‘dangerously Stalinist’ academics and intellectuals who had gathered at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York, for an international peace conference. Both Copland and Bernstein were sponsors of the conference and, as Neil Jumonville clarifies, the New York Intellectuals “treated everyone associated with the events as pro-Stalinist or a Stalinist dupe”.⁸⁹ From their perspective, the sponsors of the event – Copland and Bernstein included – had a “duty as intellectuals to make finer distinctions about the kind of leftism they supported”.⁹⁰ While, superficially, positions on a leftist spectrum may seem to have fuelled this conflict, underpinning them were assumptions made about the intellectual and cultural capabilities of the public at large. This contest, over the question of the public’s capacity for taste and judgment was played out in debate over the categories of ‘high culture’, ‘mass culture’ and ‘middlebrow culture’, which, against the backdrop of the Cold War, preoccupied artists and cultural critics more than ever before.

For the New York Intellectuals, the “problem” of mass culture was the “central and most sustained” issue that they faced throughout their careers; not only were “nearly all of them... hostile to it”, but on a broader scale, the concept of “mass democracy had unnerved them”.⁹¹ Yet, at the same time, they were adamantly opposed to any detachment of art from the ‘real world’; fundamentally, they believed that “cultural criticism needed to be grounded in the experiences of work and the streets” and they “hoped to prevent the cultural intelligence in America from

⁸⁹ Jumonville, *Critical Crossings*, 31.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

becoming too ethereal, abstract, or disconnected from everyday real life”.⁹² Rather than elevating a mass-cultural mode of culture, such as film music, to a higher level of artistic sophistication and abstraction, they advocated a model of high culture that accounted for the everyday experiences of Americans, which would, in the process, allow the wider public access to material more sophisticated than their traditional fare. It is only natural, then, that the possibilities of middlebrow culture were much more unsettling than either abstracted high art or undiscerning mass culture. Confounding the boundaries between high and low, it was “much more subversive and detestable than unadulterated mass culture”.⁹³ While mass culture had no pretensions to intellectuality, ‘the middlebrow’ represented not “mass culture made better, but high culture made worse”; in other words, it was a worse crime for cultural production to be either “overly democratic” or “insufficiently cerebral” than for it to simply be lowbrow.⁹⁴ This represents, perhaps, the greatest distinction between the cultural intentions of Copland, Thomson and their circle, and the New York Intellectuals. While, from their practical point of view, the best way to effect change in their mass listenership was *through* adapting the mass-cultural medium, this embodied exactly the kind of watered down, middlebrow culture that the New York Intellectuals despised. Instead, they believed, to a large extent, in the possibilities of the population to engage with high culture, that “the common person in America inherently had a high cultural potential”.⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid., 7.

⁹³ Jumonville, *Critical Crossings*, 152.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 152-3

⁹⁵ Ibid., 153

“The Culmination of Beauty”

Bowles’ own appreciation for anti-musical sounds, which he considered the “culmination of beauty,” suggests the importance of Virgil Thomson to his aesthetic development.⁹⁶ Indeed, while Bowles undoubtedly shared a closer, and much more extended, relationship with Copland than with Thomson, in terms of the extent of the influence each had on their shared protégé’s musical development, it seems Thomson – at least in the ears of other composers – left the more pronounced impression. The personal affection Bowles and Copland had for one another can be gauged by the frequency of their letters to one another during the 1930s. Despite maintaining largely separate, and often wildly divergent routes of travel across Europe and North Africa, they managed to maintain a regular and emotionally frank correspondence, often leaving missives for one another with mutual acquaintances. Bowles regarded Copland’s skill as a composer, moreover, with something close to idolatry. He described in an interview with Philip Ramey that his admiration for Copland stemmed from the meticulous, architectural composition of his scores; listening to Copland, he felt “aware of every detail of its construction; its beams and struts are beautifully visible, unmarred by an ornamentation”.⁹⁷ In the same way that Bowles considered Stein the most effective poet, because there was “nothing in her works save the sense”, created by exact and precise word choice, Copland seemed to Bowles to be “the ideal of what a composer should be because he knew exactly why he put down every note”.⁹⁸ His reviews of Copland’s work even bore out this perspective – he described “the usual impeccable Copland taste and high musical integrity” to be

⁹⁶ Paul Bowles, “Bowles on Bowles,” in *Paul Bowles, Music*, eds. Claudia Swan and Jonathan Scheffer (New York: Eos Music, 1995), 5.

⁹⁷ Bowles and Ramey, “Meet Prokifiev,” 15.

⁹⁸ Bowles, *In Touch*, 80; Bowles and Ramey, “Meet Prokifiev,” 10.

“ever-present”.⁹⁹ As Glanville-Hicks insists, however, Bowles’ musical influences, sources, and praxis mark him out as “Thomson’s truest disciple”.¹⁰⁰

Perhaps more significantly, Glanville-Hicks registers their relationship as part of a direct line of musical succession: for her, “Thomson is today Satie’s truest disciple”.¹⁰¹ Thomson’s own formulation of Bowles’ significance echoes that of Glanville-Hicks. Not only did Thomson consider Bowles to be, at the age of “thirty-four... America’s most original and skilful composer of chamber music”, but he traced Bowles’ musical lineage back to his own musical predecessor: Satie was one of the two composers Bowles’ work “most resembled”.¹⁰² It was from Satie that Thomson had adopted his own surrealist/dadaist musical praxis, and this proved to be his most important contribution to Bowles. For, as Glanville-Hicks convincingly argues, “above all” Bowles “learned from Thomson not a technical, so much as an ideological, method of procedure”, which she describes as “the Dada idea of Erik Satie”.¹⁰³ In order to understand the implications of this, it is important to understand Bowles’ position in regards to both contemporary music and culture, and to the *concept* of music more generally. While Bowles intended, like both Copland and Thomson, to engender a change in contemporary music, he envisaged his work having quite a different effect, just as he imagined his own avant-garde heritage in a much more explicitly literary way than either of his predecessors. By understanding the way Bowles reimagined earlier modernist sources and aesthetics, both musical and literary, we can get a clearer perspective on the broader relationship between ‘high culture’ music and literature in 1930s and 40s America.

⁹⁹ Bowles, *Bowles on Music*, 34.

¹⁰⁰ Glanville-Hicks, “Season of Promise,” 107.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Virgil Thomson, “Music: Two B’s,” in *Paul Bowles: Music*, eds. Claudia Swann and Jonathan Scheffer (New York: Eos, 1995), 80, 81.

¹⁰³ Glanville-Hicks, “Season of Promise,” 107.

One of the foremost reasons that Copland's distinctive musical sound became so readily, and so totally, associated with an American sound was his easy and frequent adaption of motifs from popular music and jazz. This constituted one of the chief distinctions between his music and that of Thomson, who, although deeply invested in aspects of popular American music – as evinced by *Four Saints in Three Acts* – based his own musical aesthetic on a consciously French modernist aesthetic. Based on his musical criticism, it would seem that Bowles occupied a position somewhere between the two. He certainly praised and advocated jazz and folk music, whether American, Hispanic, or North African, regularly, and Caponi notes that he was in fact “one of the first Americans to review the music of African-American jazz artists in serious publications on a regular basis”.¹⁰⁴ But when it came to his own composition, Bowles avoided, at least consciously, attempting to model his music to any degree on a jazz aesthetic. His reticence stemmed, at least in part, from his admiration of jazz. Although, for example, he considered Duke Ellington to be “really the best source of inspiration”, he professed to have “never used” jazz techniques or structures in his own music as he thought he “wouldn't have been able to get the exact effect”.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps more crucially, however, Bowles eschewed attempts to integrate an authentic jazz idiom because of his general approach to popular music; instead, he appropriated aspects of their sound, and incorporated them into a larger musical montage. This is particularly evident in his treatment of folk music; he argued that he “never used Latin folk tunes”, but rather “invented melodies in the manner of Latin folk music”.¹⁰⁶ These existed, not as pieces as a whole, but as fragments, which were “of course...deprived of meaning” in and of themselves, because as musical

¹⁰⁴ Gena Dagele Caponi, “A Nomad in New York, 1933-1947,” in *Paul Bowles: Music*, eds. Claudia Swann and Jonathan Scheffer (New York: Eos, 1995), 55.

¹⁰⁵ Bowles, *In Touch*, 106; Bowles and Ramey, “Meet Prokifiev,” 20.

¹⁰⁶ Bowles and Ramey, “Meet Prokifiev,” 26.

quotations “they never had meaning in the first place”.¹⁰⁷ For the casual listener, or the one not attuned to the nuances of Bowles’ system of reference, his music could seem ‘witty’ in its appropriation of other musical sounds. But as Glanville-Hicks explains, his use of aural references creates “a re-arrangement – a surrealism where fragments are stirred into a new relationship, but where each fragment is still glaringly what it was, recalling former juxtapositions”.¹⁰⁸ This stratagem is foregrounded most clearly in, naturally enough, his collaborations with the surrealists themselves. In both the music he composed working with Dali for the ballet *Colloque Sentimentale* (based on a poem by Paul Verlaine), and his scores for Richter’s Surrealist film *Dreams that Money can Buy*, the juxtaposition of ‘quotations’ from different musical idioms is particularly evident. Across a large part of Bowles’ musical career, moreover, he practised a surrealist form of musical appropriation, which regarded popular music not as an aesthetic model, but as a source for references to be reimagined within a new context.

Just as Bowles’ drew his broader model of musical construction from the European avant-garde, he also drew specifically on the work of several modernist European composers. As Thomson’s verdict on Bowles’ work suggested, it not only resembled the music of Satie, but drew directly on his style; as I have argued, Satie, along with Stravinsky, was perhaps most responsible for Bowles’ own sense of what it meant to be composing ‘modern music’. As Jonathan Sheffer emphasises, moreover, Bowles emulated the minimalism that characterised certain aspects of their style, and locates his ‘references’ with a strictly delimited framework: he “employs a vividly specific vocabulary, leaving a narrow but incisive impression”.¹⁰⁹ In fact,

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Glanville-Hicks, “Season of Promise,” 112.

¹⁰⁹ Scheffer, introduction, 2.

Bowles pursued this particular aspect of European modernism further than either of his mentors, with the minimalism of his piano pieces “predat[ing] the works of minimalists such as Steve Reich and John Adams by two decades”.¹¹⁰ From Stravinsky, too, Bowles borrowed the striking discordance that had propelled the earlier composer to fame. Throughout much of his music, Bowles was, in Sheffer’s words, “toying with discord”, and consciously rebelled against the conventional narrative of art music, with his pieces “lacking... resolution” and characterised by “a relentless off-balance quality”.¹¹¹ However, while Stravinsky clearly left a lasting impression on Bowles – to the extent that he considered him his favourite composer – he had no liking for his later, “serial inflected pieces”; he thought that the composer’s “twelve-tone music” sounded as though “someone had rewritten some Schoenberg to sound like Stravinsky”.¹¹² Not only does this reflect the prejudices of the circle of composers Bowles was a part of – who considered twelve tone, serial compositions running almost as counter as German Romanticism to their own programme of music – but more specifically, it was a symptom of Bowles’ departure from what he considered to be the artificial conventions and structures of both American and European music. Instead, Bowles was interested in the possibility “of making music which would be expressive, and yet not in the oratorical way European art-music is expressive”.¹¹³ He thought of serialised compositions in particular as following a staid, and inorganic structure, and believed that “conversational inflections, even the ones of imaginary conversational remarks inside the head, should replace what seemed to [him] the incredibly formal idiom of delivery” which was taken for granted

¹¹⁰ Caponi, “Nomad,” 75.

¹¹¹ Scheffer, introduction, 2.

¹¹² Bowles and Ramey, “Meet Prokofiev,” 17.

¹¹³ Bowles, “Bowles on Bowles,” 6.

as “the psychological basis for forming melodic logic”.¹¹⁴ Bowles approached music, then, with a technique that was evidently surrealist, drawing on an assembly-logic, and patterns of juxtaposition. His attitude towards the conventional structures of music, moreover, approximated the iconoclasm of an European avant-garde sensibility, undercutting the formal ‘psychological basis’ of Western music with a surrealist opposition to rational authority.

This attitude towards how music should be structured ultimately stemmed from Bowles’ idiosyncratic conception of what music should ideally achieve. Indeed, his understanding of the power of music suggests why, more generally, he had been drawn both to a career as a composer, and to a European – in particular, surrealist – model of aesthetics. Considering the energy he later devoted to cataloguing Moroccan folk music, it is perhaps not surprising that the experience, at an early age, of hearing records of Arabic music had a definitive impact on his broader musical sensibility; he felt that Moroccan music was ideal, and that “there seemed very little else one could ask for in life”.¹¹⁵ But even before he imaginatively laid claim to a particular culture of music, Bowles had already formed a fundamental conceptualisation of the effect that music ought to achieve on a listener. He explained, in a 1944 article outlining his own perspective on music, that his “first interest in music came from a purely hypnotic reaction that musical sounds always had on [him]”.¹¹⁶ This effect was not necessarily produced, however, by what Bowles called “music itself”, which he suggested always “showed direction, had some sort of climax and worst of all had a predictable end”, but instead what captivated him were “the musical sounds” that he

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 6, 7.

¹¹⁵ Bowles, “Bowles on Bowles,” 5.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

could produce on everyday objects.¹¹⁷ Already, Bowles was defining a musical aesthetic in contrast to traditional standards of structure and form and, in this sense, his early definition of the function of music was also tied up with the idea of himself as actor – whether creating sounds by “spinning a large musical top or by sliding a metal object up and down the strings of a German Zither... or the creaking of a rusty door hinge”.¹¹⁸ For Bowles, “these sounds seemed... the culmination of beauty”. Not only was Bowles constructing a model of aesthetic beauty in terms of discordant sounds, but he was placing emphasis on his own role as creator. Moreover, the experience of listening to what the young Bowles understood to be music was a transcendent one. Rather than elevating him to a higher state of consciousness, however, his auto-hypnotic sonic experiments gave him the sense of emptiness and disjunction. He certainly figured them as deliberate methods for accessing his own subconscious, as they “always put [him] promptly into a non-thinking state which lasted as long as [he] repeated the sounds”.¹¹⁹ Even as an adult, Bowles thought these “basic infantile criteria”, which judged music on its usefulness as an auto-hypnotic tool, “still seemed perfectly valid”, as they operated on him “with as much force as ever”.¹²⁰

Although Bowles’ musical compositions relied not only on a specific musical vocabulary, the knowledge to understand the references that he juxtaposed within his works, his idea of aesthetic value, especially in music, was intrinsically tied to qualities of abstraction and disconnection. This paradoxical impulse is particularly evident when we consider Bowles’ claims about the kind of ‘expressive’ music he wanted to compose, which was contingent upon a natural, and coherent logic – the

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 6.

inflections of rational ‘conversation’. The implications of this apparent contradiction in his aesthetic are deepened, moreover, when we consider that his musical ideals of discordant beauty were reflected in the kind of artistic inspiration he drew on more broadly. He argued in one letter, dating back to when he was seventeen, that “pure inspiration is bound to be unintelligible, and until it is refined into something legible or intelligible it is worth understanding, but afterward it is as nothing”.¹²¹ As in his short fiction, Bowles is making a clear claim for an abstracted ‘dream logic’, as opposed to coolly defined rational order. This relates back, in part, to Bowles’ fascination with the ur-surrealist text of *Les Chants de Maldoror*, published in 1869 by the Comte de Lautréamont. This strange, anti-linear prose novel was a major inspiration for many of the surrealists; George Bataille described the “drawn out thrill” that both he and Breton felt in reading it, and Bowles later corresponded with Dali about illustrations for a reprint of the text.¹²² Bowles himself found the text indispensable, particularly in the 1930s when he had “it nearly all synopsisized” so that he might “turn to any page... without having to hunt for it”.¹²³ More importantly, Bowles figured his own desire to create music in terms of *Maldoror*: he wrote to Copland that above all else he “should like to make some music that is heard in les Chants... Maldoror Music!”¹²⁴ He imagined that this kind of music would be a musical counterpart to a particular kind of surrealist painting: it would be “in the manner of Dali”.¹²⁵ In technical terms, Bowles conceived of this sound as “unrelieved calm with synthetic climaxes, if any”; rather than structured around the conventional narrative patterns of music, Bowles conceived of his ideal sound as oriented along

¹²¹ Bowles, *In touch*, 3.

¹²² Georges Bataille, “The Age of Revolt,” *The Absence of Myth*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2006), 160.

¹²³ Bowles, *In Touch*, 133.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

deliberately anti-narrative lines, echoing in musical terms the effects of surrealist painting.¹²⁶ It was the lack of conventional resolution that Bowles' envisaged in this putative project that carried through most notably to his other works. Scheffer emphasises that, across Bowles' oeuvre, his music "doesn't employ development, but favours a succession of short song-forms".¹²⁷ From *Maldoror*, Bowles was able to develop a musical aesthetic that drew on both literary and visual surrealism, and which could combine the two competing impulses in his artistic expression. On the one hand, such music relied on the kind of detailed technical composition found in the draughtsmanship of Dali – technocratic surrealist painting – but at the same time, it confounded the traditional narrative structures of western music, employing instead a system of unrelieved tension, built around short, disjunctive, sequences which never satisfactorily resolve themselves.

It should not be surprising that Bowles developed a compositional style that favoured short fragments over extended narratives, for it was not just Lautréamont's writing that inspired Bowles to compose. The author from whom he seems to have derived the initial drive to write fiction also supplied him with inspiration within the domain of music; Bowles wrote to Daniel Burns, as early as 1931, of his "desire to set some of Poe's poems to music".¹²⁸ In composing such music, Bowles' was not intending for his audience to recognise it as being Poe's work. In fact, he noted that he intended to use Poe's earlier works, as the latter ones, "*because* of their Poësque qualities, have 'lost something'"; such compositions would instead work by conveying something essential about the poems, without being clouded by knowledge

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Scheffer, introduction, 2.

¹²⁸ Bowles, *In Touch*, 58.

of their original form.¹²⁹ This stratagem, of abstracting literary work, in order to convey it more potently as music, underpinned a surprising amount of his work – much more, I would argue, than anyone has considered so far. For as Bowles confessed to Copland, he “often” required “a literary skeleton to think around” when he was composing, “even if it is all covered up in the end”.¹³⁰ A well-recognised component of Bowles’ career was the body of poems by his peers which he put to music, including works by Williams and Ford. In this respect, he was following in the footsteps of Thomson, whose collaboration with Stein on *Four Saints in Three Acts* had proven a source of inspiration for Bowles – he wrote to Stein of wanting “to write several lieder on [her] words” – although he admitted that his attempts so far were “as different from Virgil’s settings as anything could be”.¹³¹ Ultimately, his composition for a letter Stein had written to him, *Letter to Freddy* found relative success. Perhaps more importantly, Bowles found literary models almost essential to his composition, and they were *more* important when they were obscured. While Thomson had foregrounded his use of Stein’s work, with much of the initial success of his opera due to the visibility of her name and her brand of poetics, Bowles deliberately occluded most of his literary sources. Their references and structure, just as the folk music he referenced in his compositions, was suggestive precisely because it was abstracted.

While Thomson and Stein’s opera had prompted audience members’ disbelief that “something so beautiful could be made in America”, Bowles’ pieces, although not necessarily as overtly confronting, did not find the same level of popular

¹²⁹ Ibid., 59, original emphasis.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 112.

¹³¹ Ibid., 129.

support.¹³² Bowles himself acknowledged the almost iconoclastic nature of his own compositions, and was certainly aware of the alienating effect that his pieces could have: he noted that “people are not interested in psychological realism in music”, and his choice to compose in a certain way was “probably disastrous” for his popular career.¹³³ Although he considered his music to provide an authentic psychological performance, then, he never intended his pieces to achieve great recognition, or to necessarily effect any degree of change. The financial necessity during the late 1930s, however, of composing for film and theatre, changed this attitude, and afforded him a much greater capacity to develop the sound he had envisaged. He later conceded that the theatre was “the perfect medium” for exploring the ideas that he had “subconsciously been trying to express” in his other compositions; it was “no longer a crime, but a virtue, for a composer to prescind the emotional content of his music before presenting it; here he can say exactly what he wants, and everyone will understand it”.¹³⁴ What particularly attracted Bowles to work in film and theatre was the ability to compose the kind of surreal scores to which he most aspired. He had followed the work of French surrealist compositions for film with “enthusiasm”, eventually collaborating with the surrealists in the same capacity, and he felt that in this domain, one could, “with immunity write climaxless music, hypnotic music in the exact sense of the word”; he wanted his music to make “its effect without the spectator’s being aware of it”.¹³⁵ While his documentary work earned him particularly high praise, Bowles’ work for theatre stands out in retrospect for the profile of the men he collaborated most prominently with: his first composition was for Orson Welles’ *Horse Eats Hat*, and he enjoyed extended relationships with both Welles and

¹³² Bowles, “Bowles on Bowles,” 7.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 7

¹³⁵ Caponi, “Nomad,” 60; Bowles, “Bowles on Bowles,” 7.

Williams (beginning with William's first major success, *The Glass Menagerie*). Bowles contested that, even in the world of theatre, where he considered his peculiar sound to be more appropriate, his work would still go largely unnoticed. From his perspective, "of course, no one listens to it because the spoken word and the visual action take precedence in the exercising of the spectator's receptive faculties".¹³⁶ But fellow composer Ned Rorem and critic Nadine Hubbs have argued that Bowles' compositions for the theatre in fact left a greater impression than Bowles himself would have credited. Rorem suggests that, after *The Glass Menagerie* had started to be performed, "heightened, or rather, delineated by Paul Bowles's background score, which came to be known among musicians as 'the Tennessee sound'", a change took place in the culture of American music ("a queer goyische flavour was sprouting out of the war and would burst in a few years"), whilst Hubbs emphasises "Bowles's musical impact on fellow modernists and modernism, including Copland, Bernstein, Menotti, Rorem, and those postwar musicians who came to know the by-now-unheard-of 'Tennessee sound'".¹³⁷

The qualities that characterised Bowles' sound itself, and the philosophy he applied to composition, are best evinced in the work he produced with the time and funds afforded by a Guggenheim Fellowship. Performed in 1943, and conducted by his friend and sometime associate Leonard Bernstein, it was entitled *The Wind Remains*. Given the freedom to compose music with his own subject matter, no longer for theatre or film, Bowles immediately "turned to Federico Garcia Lorca, whom [he] was always busy reading" and decided upon his "Surrealist play *Asi que Pasen Cinco Años*" as the subject of the project.¹³⁸ This choice is telling: not only did he turn

¹³⁶ Bowles, "Bowles on Bowles," 7.

¹³⁷ Ned Rorem, cited in Hubbs, *Queer Composition*, 110; Hubbs, *Queer Composition* 110.

¹³⁸ Bowles and Ramey, "Meet Prokifiev," 27.

to a literary source for the basis of his work, but his decision was founded on the work's Surrealistic qualities. Having read Bowles' notebooks for the project, Caponi has revealed that Bowles wrote: "its Surrealist technique fitted it for the fragmentary treatment I wanted to give it".¹³⁹ In keeping with his deliberately disjunctive strategies in earlier compositions, Bowles intended to emphasise the text's anti-linear structure, subverting both the narrative order, and traditional aural logic at the same time. He conceived of the "the thread of dramatic action" in the work as being "motivated by dream logic", and was particularly "intent on transferring into musical terms the essence of Garcia Lorca's poetic language"; he envisaged his own use of musical structure achieving the same effect as a written avant-garde poetic.¹⁴⁰ With *The Wind Remains*, Bowles took this tendency – evident in both his art-music, and soundtrack music – a step further, and rendered Lorca's text as a series of fragments, spread across a range of deliveries. Referring to it loosely under the Spanish term *zarzuela*, the performance combined dramatic delivery, operatic singing, dance to instrumental music and pieces sung in folk-music style. As with his use of Latin American folk music, however, Bowles was abstracting the form of the *zarzuela*, replicating its elements, although decontextualised and accompanied by music that represented as much a modernist French sensibility as a Spanish folk sound. Not only did Bowles' use of the mode of *zarzuela* confront his American audiences' expectations about musical genres, particularly in regards to the presence of narrative – many assumed they were attending a Spanish-themed 'light opera' – but even the folk structure he was employing was abstracted and recontextualised within a musical form of Surrealist montage. Glanville-Hicks has commented on the similarities between Bowles' approach to *The Wind Remains* and his short fiction from the 1940s; reading

¹³⁹ Bowles, cited in Caponi, "Nomad," 66.

¹⁴⁰ Caponi, "Nomad," 66.

the latter, she suggests, “one becomes aware of the presence of both the qualities and the lacks that are manifest in his music.”¹⁴¹ In both, Bowles is precise in his references, and in the way he communicates them – “the terms of expression and the ideas are exquisite in their selectivity” – and he turns to deliberately unusual material, which he conveys in an abstracted form: his “material is exotic, unusual, poetically brilliant fragment by fragment”.¹⁴² Bowles’ emphasis on abstraction, fragmentation and precision, however, resulted in pieces that can seem, to the listener, incomplete, unresolved, or lacking “some emotional degree that would weld the vivid components into a meaningful whole”.¹⁴³ This, from Bowles’ perspective, was entirely the point. At its heart, his music was intended to confront the idiom of rational coherence traditionally associated with the canons of western art.

Fragments of Culture

When critics have acknowledged Bowles’ earlier career as a composer, they tend, as with Pounds and Caponi, to portray the situation as one of a sudden and irreversible change: from 1949, and the publication of *The Sheltering Sky*, Bowles took up the mantle of author and left behind composition. Not only did Bowles’ writing extend far back into the 1940s and 30s, he continued to work on scores, both personal and public, throughout the remainder of his life. The most fertile crossover between these two forms of expression came in the writing of *The Delicate Prey* – although its stories were only published as an anthology in 1950, at least ten of its fifteen were written and published in literary magazines during the period from 1945-1949, before

¹⁴¹ Glanville-Hicks, “American Composer,” 147.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid

Bowles had permanently settled in the Tangiers apartment he would occupy until his death in 1999. During the time he was writing these stories, he was still as actively engaged as a composer as any period before, and his musical sensibility is reflected, on a superficial level, simply in the precise awareness of sound that his characters and narration register. Like the spirit of the Atlájala in “The Circular Valley”, the stories are “conscious of each gradation in sound and light and smell” and attentive to the process of change and degradation that sounds undergo – the “slow, constant disintegration” that transforms the soundscape around them (*DP* 124).

It is no coincidence that, through the Atlájala, Bowles emphasises the decay and discord of sound. Not only do his musical compositions draw on a Stravinskian model of discordance, but within his stories, the most prominent feature of the sounds he describes is their dissonance. In some cases, this means registering the noises that throw the characters off balance, or disturb their rhythm. These can be as small as the “thin wail of mosquito wings” (*DP* 75), or as all-consuming as the monstrous “sound of the nocturnal insects” in the heart of the rainforest, which is “unbearably loud – an endless, savage scream above the noise of the wind... a million scraping sounds in the air” (8). Instead of drawing attention to ‘harmonious’ sounds, as we might expect a composer, or someone with an ear for musicality to do, Bowles instead prioritises sounds that are disturbing and unsettling. This is especially the case with the music that features in his stories, which is universally represented as scratched, broken, or out of context. When the American Pastor, Dowe, is forced to play his old phonograph to Indians in Central America, he is immediately disturbed by the “hopping rhythmical pattern” (35); he is surprised when his “audience was delighted, even though the sound was abominably scratchy” (54). The language Bowles uses to register the music – ‘hopping,’ and ‘abominably scratchy’ – works to create a sense of

the sound being viscerally discordant, and the reactions of the listeners reinforces this sense of being knocked off balance by the noise. In “Under the Sky”, Bowles takes this discordance to its logical extreme, where the few notes of music that can be heard in the street are almost totally subsumed by static: all that can be heard is “a great crackling and hissing that covered the sound of the marimbas” and only “occasionally a few loud notes of band music rose above the chaos” (84). Noise, and music in particular, is characterised in *The Delicate Prey* not by its beauty, but by its chaotic irregularity.

The soundscape of the text is not simply uncomfortable, but inescapable. From the perspective of the characters within the stories, it forms an almost physical component of their worlds – it surrounds them, envelops them, almost suffocating them in the process. Perhaps the most extreme example of this comes in “Señor Ong and Señor Ha,” where, after the village begins receiving an influx of money thanks to construction on a local dam, “most [of the villagers] bought huge radios which they kept going from early morning until night, all tuned in full strength... so that when they walked the length of the main street they were never out of earshot” (90). The aural aesthetics of Bowles’ stories rely on this totality of sound. But they are equally contingent on the characters’ sensitivity to this noise. Their awareness of the constant presence of noise is particularly clear in “Call at Corazón,” where the honeymooning husband is insistently conscious of the “repeated screams of laughter” (69) around him on the paddleboat, and enveloping him, “louder than all the sounds”, was the “rush of water made by the huge paddles” (68). To reinforce the constant pressure of this noise, Bowles notes the moment of peace granted when the boat stops for a stretch of river, before “the great noise of the water in the paddle wheel recommenced”; this is the one moment the husband “tried to sleep” (74). The

claustrophobia of this compressed environment is replicated across all of the stories, even when Bowles sets them in the heart of the rainforest or the expansive clearings of a Mexican ranch. In “At Paso Rojo,” the homestead of the title is ostensibly a place of calm reclaimed from the wilderness, “a great clearing that held the jungle at bay”, but Bowles hems even this space in with oppressive sound. The noise of monkeys, aping the sound of people, surrounds the characters of “Paso Rojo”; they hear “the monkeys... calling from one side to the other” (5) at the ranch, and as the story continues, “the monkeys called to each other from different sides” (8). Within the often repetitive patterns of action in the stories, the incessant noises that suffocate them serve to reinforce their sense of circularity. Like the “red and blue macaws”, which “screamed, endlessly repeating their elliptical path in the sky” (10), the constant soundscape of *The Delicate Prey* shapes the actions it brackets into parts of a clearly discernible pattern of repetition. In terms of Bowles’ compositions, moreover, it replicates the short, repeated cycles of music his compositions rely upon, which stand in contrast to his peers’ extended song forms.

While dissonance may play an important role in Bowles’ deployment of sound across his stories, there are also a series of moments where there is a clear correlation between the noise and action. In particular, Bowles uses sounds in conjunction with the acts of extreme violence that characterises his fiction. Occasionally, these can verge on the melodramatic, as in the “shrill crashes of thunder” which “echo” as the husband abandons his wife, taking all of their luggage, on board the ship bound for the interior of Central America (63). More often, however, the sounds that accompany violence are uncanny. Before Jacinto, a young man, threatens and rapes an older blonde tourist in “Under the Sky”, he is framed by the eerie half-noise of music distorted by the wind: as it “grew more active, it brought with it, welling and dying,

long dying marimba trills from a distant part of town” (84); in “Senor Ong,” when the young boy, Nicho, makes the decision to steal from his stepfather, “solemnly, as if there were no alternative”, above him “all the cockatoos” begin “screaming at once” (103). While these particular sounds provide instances that could be considered pathetic fallacy, the development of the oppressive soundscapes across the stories actually creates a building tension, of which these noises are simply the culmination. This is most strikingly presented in “The Echo”, where the continual sound of a waterfall finally culminates in intense physical violence. Before Aileen, the story’s protagonist, has reached her mother’s Columbian estate at Jamoncal, she is already subconsciously being swallowed up by this sound: she “had a clear memory of its presence, of the sensation of enormous void beyond and below that side of the house... the distant hollow sound of water falling from a great height, constant, soft background of sound that slipped into every moment of the day” (139). As the story continues to exert this sonic pressure on Aileen, her tension increases until finally she assaults her mother’s lesbian lover. This is accompanied by an equally disturbing burst of noise, as “her voice rose in pitch and volume” before “she stopped for an instant” from her attack and “then, raising her head, she uttered the greatest scream of her life. It came back immediately from the black wall of rock across the gorge, straight through the noise of water” (156). In Bowles’ score for Richter’s *Dreams that Money can Buy*, he added similar emphasis to the score, accompanying the surreal sequences with a dissonant music that builds, through short cycles, to a burst of violence. Within his fiction, Bowles builds and sustains an even more intense pressure, through the claustrophobic soundscape, which is released in a striking and dislocating moment of extreme violence: a surreal eruption of madness. From this

perspective, Bowles can be seen to have drawn directly on surrealist film in his use of sound within the short story form.

Although neither his narrative structures, nor the kinds of imagery he favours, resemble those of the medium of film, overall Bowles' use of sound can be seen to draw directly on the world of cinema: in particular, his own experiences composing scores for films, whether government funded documentaries, or Richter's surrealist masterpieces. Bowles had appreciated the capacity to compose, within film scores, "hypnotic music in the exact sense of the word"; just as he had first been drawn to music by its hypnotic qualities, Bowles' stories reflect this same obsession with hypnotic sounds. The patterns of noises that culminate in his tale's violence often exert a strange hold on the characters' consciousness. Chalia, in "Paso Rojo," seems induced to sleep with the Indian Roberto by the rhythmic noises of the jungle: she "felt as if she were hanging on to consciousness only by the ceaseless shrill scream of the cicadas" (15-16). Similarly, Pastor Dowe seems impelled in a state of hypnosis when makes into depths of the rainforest, following mysterious Indians across a lagoon and ultimately into a small cave decorated with "a red hand painted on the rock... charcoal... ashes... wooden spoons" (50) – even as he progresses, he "wished he had stayed behind" (48), yet he nevertheless continues to follow them deeper into the jungle. Bowles' narration stresses the repetitive noises that surround the Pastor as he begins to make the journey, through hypnotic 'music,' like the trees "dripping slowly in a solemn, uneven chorus onto the wild coca leaves beneath" (44).

Considering the role that sound plays in driving, however subconsciously, the action of the stories, any moment of silence has particular significance. In general, the lack of noise provides a moment of mental clarity for the characters, corresponding to the end of the repetitive noises that had been impelling them. When Chalia escapes the

noises of the rainforest, she stops in her tracks, “calmed by the sudden entrance into the green world of silence and comparative coolness” (14); the sudden silence halts her progress. Equally, when the Pastor finally leaves the village of Tacaté, and is about to head out into the emptiness beyond, he pauses when confronted by the silence of the night and “only the light wind among the leaves and vines”; Bowles emphasises the “bats reel[ing] soundlessly back and forth” to underscore the stillness, physical and sonic, of the moment (59). But just as the reawakened chorus of the rainforest continues to drive Chalia to seduce Roberto, Pastor Dowe hears the sound of his own breathing, which rekindles his sense of impetus: after he “took a deep breath”, he “got up, and went on” (59). The noises that accompany the action of Bowles’ stories not only drive the characters forward, but grant them momentary peace when they subside; from a reader’s perspective, however, they can seem to function more as a soundtrack to the tales, marking the rhythm and pauses of the action. As Bowles himself emphasised, film music was ideal for engendering something close to hypnosis and, in his fiction, he approximates the hypnotic quality of his scores through the sounds that enclose their action.

As many commentators have been quick to emphasise, Bowles’ short stories often focus on the bizarre nature of exchanges in which two vastly differing cultures intersect; his fiction continues to be promoted on this basis, with Penguin Classics advertising *The Delicate Prey*’s stories through language that continues to draw attention to the “sun-drenched and brutal climes” which act as the setting for Western “people facing hostile environments and the innate savagery of humanity”.¹⁴⁴ While this kind of representation of Bowles’ fiction tends to misinterpret his use of ‘exotic’ cultures, it does reflect the extent to which music in these stories can be a source of

¹⁴⁴ Rear cover, *The Delicate Prey*.

cultural misunderstanding. Bowles himself draws attention to the interplay between music and culture, a tendency particularly evident in the disjunction between different characters' expectations of what music should sound like, and how it should be used. Not only does Pastor Dowe find the music he eventually plays for his indigenous congregation unsuitable in terms of its quality, more pressingly it is unfit for use within the context of religious instruction. On a superficial level, playing popular music while trying to instil a sense of Christian religiosity in his audience is "unheard of!"(30). Moreover, of the music available to him – the "first [phonograms] he examined were 'Let's Do it,' 'Crazy Rhythm,' and 'Strike up the Band,'" – Pastor Dowe considers "none" to be "proper accompaniment to his sermons"; his protestation, "'so here we are,' he sighed 'without music'" reinforces the sense that, in the wrong context, his resources do not amount to 'music' (34). For his prospective audience, however, music is intrinsic to religious ceremony. As the Pastor is informed by a village representative, in no uncertain terms, "they will not come again to hear you without music" (30). The cultural dislocation the Pastor and his music experience in this story are heightened when he eventually concedes: when he plays 'Crazy Rhythm' to his manservant Mateo, his "expression changed to one of admiration bordering on beatitude. '*Qué bonito!*' he said reverently" (35); his 'congregation' are equally transfixed, as "everyone sat absolutely quiet until the piece was over. Then there was a hubbub of approbation" (36). From the abstracted position of the Indians, the Western music is perfectly suited for a religious occasion; recontextualised, the music becomes a fragment that signifies wider Western culture, without any of the *particular* significance with which its usual context would endow it. Its newfound significance is perhaps best testified to by the terse exchange when the Pastor threatens to withhold the music, arguing that "the music is old. There will be no

more” (37); the village spokesperson interprets this as withholding cultural knowledge: “you say that. But you do not want us to have it... We like you because you have given us music when we asked you for it” (37). Just as Bowles’ musical compositions used fragments of sound drawn from Latin American folk music, decontextualised and abstracted, as signifiers for an exotic culture, the sounds of ‘Crazy Rhythm’ become a sign for western civilisation, even though for the Pastor, who understands their context and appropriateness, it is almost blasphemous to be using the music in such a way.

The emphasis that Bowles places on music’s capacity for misinterpretation and alienation is reflected in the spoken communication between his characters. In the same way that he renders music as an abstracted fragment, his characters’ attempts to communicate with each other break down, transformed by their listener into something strange and often unnerving. Given that several stories in *The Delicate Prey* rely upon a juxtaposition of two different cultures, it is only natural for language barriers to affect the way that characters understand, or fail to understand, each other. Appropriately, the linguistics Professor in “A Distant Episode” struggles in practice to communicate in Arabic, such as when he has to “resort... to French for the word ‘quarry’ whose Arabic equivalent he could not call to mind” (295). His smaller instances of failures of expression gradually come to stand for a broader difference in both speech and thought. The Professor asks his guide “What are you thinking about”, and although his guide “seemed about to speak”, and “his expression changed to one of satisfaction”, still “he did not speak”; ultimately, not only is the Professor unable to engage meaningfully with his companion, but he is driven to “a state of nerves” by the strangeness of his replies, which switch from Arabic to French and are punctuated by spitting, chuckling, and the Professor’s apprehensions about being “hysterical”

(297). The speech of anyone else becomes increasingly less rational or intelligible to him, and by the end of the story he is barely “conscious” of an “old man’s Arabic”, which he understands only as “more gibberish” (305). Pastor Dowe reflects on this same process with a somewhat more lucid perspective, when he realises that his sermons are communicating a different meaning to his native audience than that which he understands them to have; he realises that “to their ears *everything* must have a pagan sound. Everything I say is transformed on the way to them into something else” (42). In an important way, this is true of anything that is said within *The Delicate Prey*; attempts by characters to communicate within their own language are just as susceptible to transformation and reinterpretation as cross-cultural exchanges. In “Call at Corazon”, the husband continually fails to understand his wife. This failure to comprehend is illustrated from the beginning of their trip, when he asks “What do you mean?... You’ve always said you loved the boats. Have you changed your mind, or just lost it completely?” (61). His wife’s change in tactics, from obstruction to acquiescence, exacerbates this sense of de-rationalisation:

She stopped and turned. “I’d love you to have it. I really would. I think it’s sweet.”

“I don’t get you at all.”

She smiled. “I know. Does it bother you very much?” (62)

The repetition of such misunderstandings creates an effect comparable to the wearing down of the phonograph of “Crazy Rhythm”, transforming each ensuing conversation into something stranger and more divergent.

The Professor’s disquiet at his partner’s silence is not only prompted by his failure to respond as part of a dialogue, it also corresponds to a much larger preoccupation with being silenced and of losing one’s voice. The “sound of a flute” which rises “from the depths below at intervals”, seemingly surrounding him, is

enough to reassure the Professor that “these people [in the area] are not primitives”, but once the sound of the flute has faded, and he “heard only the wind going by in his ears”, he loses his composure, and is seized by “a violent desire to run back to the road”; in his fear of the silence, he is reduced to being “like a child” (298-9). This extreme fear of silence is reflected in the most unsettling moments of violence in Bowles’ stories, which invariably involve the loss of the ability to speak. In “A Distant Episode”, this translates to the Professor’s loss, quite literally, of his tongue: when he is abducted by the nomadic Reguiba and has his tongue removed, the Professor “could not distinguish the pain of the brutal yanking from that of the sharp knife”, and the loss of his ability to speak sends him into a catatonic state, “not unconscious, but in a state of utter stupor” (301). The most lurid violence of the anthology, however, comes in “The Delicate Prey”, where a Mougari tribesman assaults the young Arab, Driss, castrates him, then “studiously stuffed the loose organ [into an incision] until it disappeared”, before raping him; this violence culminates in an even more lavishly described act where, after “Driss moaned faintly” (286), the Mougari “pulled [his] blade back and forth with a sawing motion into his neck until he was certain he had severed his windpipe” (287). The horror which, clearly, this particular violation holds for Driss’ fellow Filala is reflected in the punishment they choose for his violator: he in turn loses his voice, by being buried to his neck in the desert, where he finally “fell silent” (289). In both of these stories, it is not only the physical loss of speech which is horrific, but the loss, in any way, of the ability to communicate with people. The Mougari seems equally as terrified by the constant silence of his captors, as they conduct their punishment in complete silence themselves; “he might have been singing a song for all the attention they paid to his words” (288-9). Within the context of his stories’ hypnotic patterns of sound, which

seem designed as much to entrance and compel the reader as the characters, Bowles uses silence to represent the threat of a return to consciousness. Being silenced, and being left in silence, signifies a painful awakening to the harsh reality of the world – suddenly aware, as the Mougari is made, of “the cold hours... that would bring first warmth, then heat, thirst, fire” (289).

The peculiar horror of being withdrawn from the world of sound, then, renders the loss of a tongue, or the severing of a windpipe, an act of extreme dehumanisation. But at the same time, it allows the individual, at least momentarily, a respite from the hypnotic lull of the noise that normally envelops them. Equally, the characters’ speech often serves more to dehumanise them than it does to validate their humanity; Bowles insistently uses sound as a way of reducing his characters to below the human. On the one hand, this is regularly enunciated through the characters, in a manner that can seem, superficially, to be simply a matter of representing western prejudices – as in “At Paso Rojo,” where one of the ranch owners describes the indigenous farmhands as “Indians, poor things, animals with speech” (4). Later, when she attempts to murder him by rolling his unconscious body over a cliff, she reflectively notes him “making an strange animal sound as he hit” (24). This often, therefore, simply entails comparing the strangeness of foreign speech to something beyond the boundaries of humanity, like an infant who was “making a series of meaningless sounds” before it “ceased making its parrotlike noises” (35). The cumulative effect of this use of sound, however, is to suggest a fundamental bestiality to human actions particularly as it becomes apparent that this is not a tendency restricted to non-western characters, or to the biases of diegetic perspectives. In her primal scream, thrown back by the acoustics of the ravine, Aileen in “The Echo” becomes an almost supernatural force, transformed into a noise that blends with, and

rises above “the noise of the water” (56). Instead of the physical transformations that characterised the artworks of his visual inspiration, Ernst and Francis Picabia, Bowles achieves a metamorphosis that is equally unnerving, through the use of sound.

Whether in terms of the external sounds that compel them towards unpremeditated action, or in terms of their own strange, usually misunderstood speech, the characters in Bowles’ stories seem governed by sound. Their automatic responses to the world are clearly, to large extent, a product of ‘music’ in the sense which the young Bowles had understood it, as hypnotic noise, and their lack of interior thought corresponds to a disjunction from their surroundings: “people, animals, flowers and stones were objects... they all belonged to the world outside...their juxtapositions... made hostile or friendly patterns” (17-18). Rather than being governed by a rational consciousness, his characters are impelled by a dream logic, which dictates their actions almost without their own awareness. When Chalia, in “At Paso Rojo,” notices that she had begun “to feel that almost all of her had slipped out of the inside world”, she is displaying an unusual degree of mindfulness, but this layer of consciousness is only fleeting (18). Instead, Bowles uses noise and music as a way to draw the characters out of themselves, and sustain their state of somnambulance. The violence that characterises this anthology, moreover, is consistently a product of this hypnotic compulsion; his aggressors are driven towards violence musically. When he explodes into violence at the end of “A Distant Episode,” the Professor’s actions are explicitly framed within the structures of music:

The tiny inkmarks of which a symphony consists may have been made long ago, but when they are fulfilled in sound they become imminent and mighty. So a kind of music of feeling began to play in the Professor’s head, increasing in volume as he looked at the mud wall, and he had the feeling that he was

performing what had been written for him long ago. He felt like weeping; he felt like roaring through the little house, upsetting and smashing the few breakable objects. His emotions got no further than this one overwhelming desire. (306)

Ultimately, we could consider all of Bowles' characters as operating in the same way – built with an internal score, or an underlying symphony, which drives their actions without their own control. Explicitly antirational, his characters' basic impulses are emotional and violent, transforming them into something at once less than, and more than, human.

Chapter Four

Bowles and the Short Story as Genre

The Question of Genre

In accounting for his writing process, Bowles provided two quite distinct explanations. On the one hand, he was preoccupied with both the precision of his work and the structuring of his texts to the point of obsession; his own assessment of other authors' work was similarly based on their use of language and presentation of material, rather than more conventional criteria. As his early enthusiasm for automatic writing attests, however, Bowles also largely considered his writing process to be driven by his subconscious mind. Indeed, he rejected the idea of having authorial control over his texts, which seems to contrast fundamentally with his attention to structuring his works. This dichotomy between control and automatism can be understood by looking at the specific genre of 'Bowlesian' short story, which Bowles considered to be his most significant personal achievement, and which his peers ranked most highly of his literary achievements.

In one of his final interviews, with Gilles Herzog in 1996, Paul Bowles lamented the critical and popular obsession with *The Sheltering Sky*. Suggesting that readers reproached him "for not having perpetually re-written" the same novel, Bowles declared that he had only "one thing to say: 'I'd really like to forget [*The Sheltering Sky*]'."¹ Indeed, despite the enduring success of his debut novel, Bowles himself clearly prioritised his short fiction, and considered himself pre-eminently

¹ Paul Bowles, in *What Good are Intellectuals: 44 Writers Share their Thoughts*, ed. Bernard Henry Lévy (New York: Algora, 2000), 6.

suiting for the short story form. He explained to Phillip Ramey that “short, simple pieces were the most satisfying,” and that he was “least ashamed of some of the short stories, more so than the novels”.² The importance Bowles placed on this work is evident even in his novels; although they received the majority of critical attention, Bowles wrote his novels only in order to secure publication for his short fiction, and composed them with the same set of concerns as his short fiction. In his article on the publication history of *The Sheltering Sky*, “Constructing the Postwar Art Novel,” Evan Brier draws attention to the fact that Bowles began work on the text only after he was unable to get an anthology of short stories published. While he had found a venue for individual pieces in both avant-garde journals, such as *transition* and *View*, and popular publications, most notably *Harper’s Bazaar*, Bowles wanted to reach a broader audience through a published collection. The collection that eventually came out – *The Delicate Prey* – would remain the book Bowles considered the most successful, and closest to his heart.³ In 1947, however, when Bowles initially attempted to publish this collection, he was informed by publishing house *Dial Press* that he would require a published novel first. The writing of *The Sheltering Sky* was motivated, therefore, by Bowles’ desire to gain a wider audience for his short fiction; as Brier stresses, Bowles explicitly “set out to write a novel as a way to get his short stories published”.⁴

While *The Sheltering Sky* provided Bowles with the credibility and financial success that he needed to be able to publish his short fiction, it was itself almost not

² Paul Bowles and Phillip Ramey, “A Talk with Paul Bowles,” accessed July 9 2013, <http://www.paulbowles.org/talk.html>

³ In an interview with Daniel Halpern, Bowles emphasised that “of the published volumes, I like *The Delicate Prey* the most.” Bowles, *Conversations*, 99.

⁴ Brier, “Postwar Art Novel,” 195.

published, rejected by *Doubleday* as “simply, not a novel”.⁵ The terms in which Bowles’ text was initially (and repeatedly) rejected reflected Bowles’ own feelings towards the book: he equally considered the text to be ‘not a novel’. Instead, he conceptualised the text as an extended short story, constructing it along the same principles as his short fiction, and intending for it to have the same effect. Specifically, he constructed the ‘novel’ around one of his most visceral stories, and one which Williams had advised him never to publish: *The Sheltering Sky* was “basically the story of the professor in ‘A Distant Episode’.”⁶ This willingness to equate what are, formally, two quite distinct works, reflects Bowles’ broader preoccupation with the genre of his writing. From both interview responses and personal letters, it is clear that Bowles’ writing was consistently dictated by his approach to genre, and that his conceptualisation of genre was both sharply developed, and idiosyncratic. Indeed, when discussing the classification of his stories, he appears deliberate to the point of pedantry, quibbling with interviewers over their taxonomy. When, for example, John Spiker described many of Bowles’ stories as stories of “a passage from the ordinary world”, Bowles responded by systematically refuting this classification, asking Spiker to “take the *Collected Stories*” as an example, where “out of thirty nine, there are five which could be said to involve ‘a passage from the ordinary world’.”⁷ Instead, he uses the examples of “If I Should Open my Mouth,” and “You are not I” as “tales of mental alienation”, while “Allal” represents “a folk fantasy told in realistic terms”.⁸ This attention to the specific generic frameworks of each story is so strong that some of Bowles’ work can feel contrived; as James Lasdun suggests, his “technical adroitness” defines his stories to

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Bowles, *Conversations*, 52.

⁷ Ibid., 137-138.

⁸ Ibid.

the point where, although it does not always produce ‘great’ works, it can “make a story work in the most mechanical sense”.⁹ Indeed, Bowles’ own emphasis on the genre of his writing suggests the extent to which his compositional process was directed by the wider sense of the kind of story he wanted to tell.

Bowles’ insistence on the classification of his work is particularly unusual given his general reluctance to comment critically on his own work, or the works of others (outside of his role as a music critic). In interviews, his frequent evasiveness when questioned about his writing suggests a reticence to explain his own art. Caponi has noted the frequently contradictory responses he gave in accounting for his writing process; within Bowles’ explications of his philosophy and praxis “answers to questions about his state of mind and ideas about his work change from one interview to the next”.¹⁰ Even in personal letters, Bowles generally avoided discussing his thoughts about literature. Bowles joked in a letter to Charles Henri Ford that he was a terrible correspondent, and paraphrased a comment from Gore Vidal: “If you get a letter from Paul, it’s about what he had for breakfast,” with Bowles himself adding “I can’t believe I ever wrote an ‘interesting’ letter.”¹¹ Indeed, across his 40 years of affectionate correspondence with Vidal (addressing each other as ‘Luap’ and ‘Erog’), and 50 years of letters with Ford, Bowles steadfastly refused to comment on his own intellectual life – from reading habits to critical commentary – instead resolutely reporting on the mundane. Bowles’ explanation of the genre of his fiction, therefore, represents one of the few lines of critical discourse with which his opinion can be directly engaged.

⁹ Lasdun, introduction, xii.

¹⁰ Caponi, introduction to *Conversations with Paul Bowles*, ed. Gena Dagele Caponi (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), xii.

¹¹ Bowles, to Charles Henri Ford, 13 March 1938, University of Delaware, Newark.

Given Bowles' investment in the short story, however, his preoccupation with genre should not be surprising. Within the criticism of the short story, it has become something of a trope to acknowledge, rather shamefacedly, the spectre of genre. Indeed, as Martin Scofield emphasises, in the *Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story*, "any discussion of the short story has, sooner rather than later, to deal at least briefly with the vexed question of genre"; it is incumbent on the critic, an unwelcome obligation.¹² The long history of attempts to curtail the short story within the definable limits and rules of a 'genre,' however, offers a clear framework within which any particular writer can be easily located. Within the context of America, the desire to restrict or define the parameters of what a short story can (and should) do dates back to one of the form's earliest practitioners – Poe – and has continued to preoccupy subsequent authors, who want to know what we talk about when we talk about 'short stories'. Within contemporary criticism, however, genre is, more than ever, a problematic category. In her introduction to the 2007 *PMLA* issue dedicated to the question of genre, Wai Chee Dimock notes that theorists "have long objected to the concept of genre, pointing out that something as dynamic as literature can never be anatomized ahead of time."¹³ While in the past genres have been understood as monolithic and unchanging, this strict taxonomical approach has come to be replaced by a "continuum of genres", within which critics need to place "less emphasis on the division of knowledge and more on its kinships, past present and future."¹⁴ For Bowles' contemporaries, however, discussions of genre were figured in precisely the opposite terms: those of taxonomy and division. Indeed, during the 1950s, critics became particularly concerned with providing a universal account of

¹² Martin Scofield, *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), 3.

¹³ Wai Chee Dimock, "Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge," *PMLA* 122. 5 (2007): 1377.

¹⁴ Dimock, 1384.

genre, and this anxiety most notably resulted in two texts: the 1948 *Theory of Literature*, written by René Wellek and Austin Warren, and Northrop Frye's 1957 *Anatomy of Criticism*, both of which have proved to have enduring significance for literary criticism.¹⁵

Just as critics associated with the New York Intellectuals, such as Trilling, considered themselves to be responding to a particularly urgent demand for a new understanding of literature, and an accompanying renovation of the critical thinking which attended it, Wellek and Warren framed *Theory of Literature* within terms of urgency and necessity. Indeed, Wellek argues in the book's introduction that the text is directly responding to "the great need of literary scholarship today."¹⁶ There is, however, an immediate distinction between the ambitions of Wellek and Trilling. Trilling conceived of the critic's function as one that contributed directly to society; his work would actively improve 'the public,' as it was designed "to construct people whose quality of intelligence, derived from literary study or refined by it, would ultimately affect the condition of society in certain good ways".¹⁷ Wellek, on the other hand, saw literary criticism as needing a *more* detached perspective; the role he outlines for the critic is one removed from society, operating as objectively as possible. He argues that the ideal critic must "translate his experience of literature into intellectual terms, assimilate it to a coherent scheme which must be rational if it is to be knowledge", thus outlining an epistemology predicated upon clinical definitions, and a rejection of emotion.¹⁸ This reflects, moreover, Wellek's understanding that the "characterisation" of "the individuality of a work of an author, of a period, or of a

¹⁵ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949); Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

¹⁶ Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, 8.

¹⁷ Trilling, *Beyond Culture*, 186.

¹⁸ Wellek and Warren, *Theory* 3.

national literature” – which, in his view, is the purview of “Literary criticism and literary history” – “can be accomplished only in universal terms, on the basis of a literary theory”.¹⁹ *Theory of Literature*, therefore, asserted the need for a radical new paradigm of literary analysis, based on science, and a theory of universal knowledge. Where Trilling was motivated by a desire to exert a positive influence on society, Wellek was motivated by a desire to create a rigorous, and definitive system for understanding literature that was removed from any particular context.

Like Wellek, Northrop Frye positioned his now famous text, *Anatomy of Criticism*, as a response to what he perceived to be a gap in contemporary literary criticism. Rather than an attack on any one branch of literary criticism, Frye offered these four essays as a model of ‘comprehensive criticism’ – a tentative step towards what could be a universal approach to analysing literary texts. His approach was predicated upon his ‘belief’ in the possibility of defining and delimiting both the field and the methodology of literary criticism; he argues that the book’s “primary aim” is to explain his “reasons for believing in... a synoptic view” of the “scope, theory, principles and techniques of literary criticism”.²⁰ From this perspective, Frye engaged, broadly, with the same practice of taxonomy as Wellek. Frye emphasises, moreover, that the same “scientific” principles must be applied to modern literary criticism: if “criticism exists, it must be an examination of literature in terms of a conceptual framework derivable from an inductive survey of the literary field”.²¹ The terminology he uses here, as he admits himself, “suggests some sort of scientific procedure”, which can be understood as part of a wider attempt to direct criticism towards a universal function, “from the casual to the causal, from the random and the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Frye, *Anatomy*, 3.

²¹ Ibid., 7.

intuitive to the systematic”.²² More than simply suggesting a new direction for criticism, however, Frye is responding to an implicit attack on criticism *per se*, justifying why “criticism has to exist”.²³ His response was a work that sought to achieve a universal approach to literary criticism, whereby any work could be understood within the same, general framework, and analysed by the same methodology.

In spite of his proximity to these two critical endeavours, and his specificity about the genre of his own works, Bowles himself had an oblique attitude towards genre more broadly. In part, this can be attributed to a lack of faith in his own critical voice; he admitted to Halpern that he did not “know any of the answers” about his own motivations, and that he had “no way of finding them out”, exclaiming “I’m not equipped to dig them up, nor do I want to”.²⁴ This attitude, however, is also symptomatic of his more general hostility towards the over-interpretation of literary works. Bowles himself stressed that “there’s nothing in writing except words, patterns of words,” and as I have argued, the quality that consistently characterised Bowles’ writing was its formalism.²⁵ For him, the meaning of a literary work came not from its content, but from how it is written – “what’s *in* a novel is not important to me. It’s how it’s told, how the words go together”.²⁶ In both Wellek and Frye’s accounts of genre, the formal qualities of a text were secondary to the literary affiliations of their content. For Bowles, however, it was precisely the form of his stories he was writing that constituted their ‘genre,’ and he resisted the kind of criticism that sought to provide an interpretation of a text based on its content.

²² Ibid.

²³ Frye, *Anatomy*, 4.

²⁴ Bowles, *Conversations*, 93.

²⁵ Bowles, *Conversations*, 213.

²⁶ Ibid.

This position on writing is clearer in light of one important exception to Bowles' general reticence to engage in a critical discourse: his friendship with, and admiration for, Susan Sontag. Having met in New York, the two maintained correspondence, with Sontag making a trip to visit Bowles in Tangiers in 1965. Bowles would quote Sontag in both conversation and letters – a favourite being “seriousness has less prestige these days” – marking one of the few times Bowles engaged explicitly with another intellectual perspective.²⁷ More specifically, Bowles aligned his own thinking with some of the ideas expressed in Sontag's *Against Interpretation*. In an unpublished letter, written in 1966, he wrote to Sontag that he “enjoyed [the book] immensely... particularly the first two and the last essays”.²⁸ In return, Sontag had clear respect for Bowles' writing; when Bowles was nominated for membership to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1980, nominated by Joyce Carol Oates, Sontag seconded the nomination, securing Bowles the spot.²⁹ The congruence between Bowles' conceptualisation of genre in his own work, and the possibilities that Sontag suggests, in the essays that Bowles admired, for a literature that would defy ‘interpretation,’ suggests the extent to which the two were invested in a similar programme of writing.

Susan Rubin Suleiman has noted that Sontag is often portrayed “as an intellectual who had moved from the formalism and aestheticism of her early work to the ethically engaged stance of her later essays”.³⁰ I would argue that Bowles admired the work collected in *Against Interpretation* precisely because of the formalist stance it took against the “overemphasis on the idea of content” in the interpretation of

²⁷ See, for example, Bowles, *Conversations*, 121.

²⁸ Unpublished letter, 11/11/66.

²⁹ Virginia Spencer Carr, *Paul Bowles: A Life* (New York: Scribner, 2004) 308.

³⁰ Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Culture, Aestheticism and Ethics: Sontag and the ‘Idea of Europe’,” *PMLA* 120. 3 (2005): 839.

literature.³¹ In the titular essay, Sontag argues that literature has been overtaken by the process of interpretation, and that in both writing and in criticism, “what is needed, first, is more attention to form in art”.³² Like Bowles, Sontag’s main issue with criticism is its ‘overemphasis of content,’ where critics ignore the form of a text in favour of explicating its ‘ideas’; as Sontag explains, most criticism assumes “that a work of art *is* its content”.³³ This approach to understanding literature is a product of what Sontag considers a utilitarian attitude to texts, where the critic finds ‘meaning’ in the text by making it “about something”.³⁴ In giving a text a functional role, the critic “makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories.”³⁵ Sontag’s resistance to interpretation, therefore, is the resistance to the imposition of a reductive framework that ignores the form of the text, a framework that translates its words into a meaning that exists discretely from the text. As her general call for ‘more attention to form in art’ suggests, however, Sontag sees at least some of the responsibility for the state of affairs she described as borne by the artists themselves. In fact, she argues that “novels and plays (in America)... don’t reflect any interesting concern with changes in their form”, and her primary criticism of contemporary American writers is their failure to attend to the form of their work – she dismisses the majority as “either journalists or gentleman sociologists and psychologists” who are “writing the literary equivalents of program music”.³⁶ Her solution – a model of writing that would “elude the interpreters” – is reminiscent of Poe’s ideal of unity: Sontag argues for “making works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the

³¹ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*, (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967), 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

work can be... just what it is.”³⁷ Indeed, given her emphasis on the formal integrity of the ideal work, it seems natural that Bowles should agree so thoroughly with Sontag’s position, which seems to refigure his own ideal of writing as ‘patterns of words’.

In writing short fiction, then, Bowles was setting out to compose texts with the same formal integrity as Sontag’s ideal, anti-interpretative text. Given his personal resistance to the imposition of critical interpretation onto his own work, moreover, his compositional aesthetic was motivated at least in part by the same considerations as Sontag: Bowles emphasized the formal patterning of his work so that any interpretation of his work would have to be predicated on the way in which it was told. In particular, it seems that Bowles considered his choice of setting to dictate the form of his prose. He wrote to one editor explaining that “places have always been more important to me than people. That is to say, people give the landscape scale: the landscape is not a background for them”.³⁸ Bowles’ settings, then, dictated the rest of the work; characters were contingent upon their setting, and ultimately only present to reinforce the location of the story. The meaning of Bowles’ stories was, therefore, predicated upon their context, with the characters “generally presented as integral parts of situations, along with the landscape,” so that, in Bowles’ view, “it’s not very fruitful to try to consider them in another light”.³⁹ From a compositional perspective, Bowles organized the stories around their location, with the other elements of the story emerging in relation to their setting. In terms of a story’s effect, moreover, Bowles felt that “the motivation of characters in fiction like mine should be a secondary consideration,” as he thought “of characters as if they were props in the general scene of any given work” – individual characters were simply extensions of

³⁷ Ibid, 11 (sic).

³⁸ Bowles, *In Touch*, 440.

³⁹ Bowles, *Conversations*, 92.

the setting.⁴⁰ Bowles explained to one interviewer that, in his stories, “the characters, the landscape” and “the climatic conditions” were “one” with “the formal structure of the story”; his work was organized around achieving a coherence that resisted the separation out, and explication of, the individual elements.⁴¹ Indeed, Bowles felt that his “characters are made of the same material as the rest of the work”, and that “since they are activated by the other elements of the synthetic cosmos, their own motivations are relatively unimportant.”⁴² Introducing alternative geographies to his texts, therefore, afforded Bowles the opportunity to introduce alternatives perspective to his work, without overlaying them with explicit meaning.

As with Sontag, however, Bowles’ antipathy towards ‘meaning’ did not necessarily mean that he felt his writing was functionless. Instead, as he confided in Herzog, Bowles intended his texts to have a subconscious effect on his readers, as “the surest way to win is through conspiracy: not by expressing oneself openly. Sometimes, you win at a decisive moment, by doing everything by surprise.”⁴³ But what kind of victory was Bowles aiming for? On the most basic level, he considered it the responsibility of the writer to critique contemporary society. Although he acknowledged that “human behaviour is contingent upon the particular culture that informs it,” he strongly believed that writers should “reject, at this moment in history, the mass society”.⁴⁴ In fact, the success of any given text could be measured by the extent to which it provoked its reader to reconsider society. Bowles articulated this most clearly when he declared that “If a writer can incite anyone to question and ultimately to reject the present structure of any facet of society, he's performed a

⁴⁰ Ibid., 91.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Bowles, *What Good are Intellectuals?* 28

⁴⁴ Bowles, *Conversations*, 58, 48.

function.”⁴⁵ This is not to say that Bowles was proposing that American society become more like the ‘primitive’ societies on which his stories insistently focus – “certainly I’m not suggesting changes,” he avowed – but instead, he was “trying to call people’s attention to something they don’t seem to be sufficiently aware of”, to shift their perspective and, more broadly, engage them in critiquing society themselves. Despite this critical reticence, therefore, it is clear that Bowles wrote with a contemporary American audience in mind. As I have argued, Bowles’ use of ‘exotic’ settings for his stories is symptomatic of his wider agenda to contest and disrupt the nationalistic narratives of postwar America and, more specifically, Bowles adopted Surrealist strategies and motifs to convey an alternative model of perception, governed by the irrational and oneiric. We can think of Bowles’ fiction, then, as directed towards challenging a specifically American audience, through an aesthetic strategy of disruption.

At the same time, Bowles’ position on the sort of textual integrity that Sontag proposed is explicitly indebted to Poe, and is reflected in Bowles’ emphasis on the ‘natural’ logic of his stories. While critics have questioned the sometimes fantastic plots of his stories, Bowles himself explained that ““It has always seemed to me that my characters act naturally, given the circumstances””.⁴⁶ He considered his character’s behaviour to be essentially “foreseeable”, and explained that within his stories, “characters set in motion a mechanism of which they become a victim”.⁴⁷ The initial premise of Bowles’ stories, therefore, dictated the way the plots would develop; he considered the ensuing action to be a natural consequence of the initial set up. As his precise generic classifications of his stories suggest, moreover, the ‘mechanism’ of

⁴⁵ Ibid, 96.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 91.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

the story is tied to the genre he is working with – “generally the mechanism [is] operative at the very beginning”.⁴⁸ Linked to his choice of genre was his selection of location. As I have argued, Bowles classified his stories as much by their settings as their structure, and the location of his stories exercised an equally strong power over the development of the tales. Bowles considered that “the transportation of characters” to the ‘exotic’ settings he insistently focused on acted “as a catalyst or detonator, without which there’d be no action.”⁴⁹ The context that Bowles set up for his stories, then, guided their production to an almost total degree; the choice of genre determined the nature of the story. Indeed, Bowles felt that every element in his texts was designed to reinforce the central motif, so that “the characters, the landscape, the climatic conditions, the human situation, the formal structure of the story or the novel, all these elements are one”.⁵⁰

Although Bowles was more guarded about his opinion of contemporary writers in the 1950s, he gave clearer views on writers from the 60s, and had a particularly low view of what he considered “the ‘popular school’” of American fiction, “as exemplified by Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon – that sort of thing”.⁵¹ Bowles found the “point of view” behind such novels particularly troubling, and argued that their “cynicism and wisecracking ultimately function as endorsements of the present civilisation”; even when they seemed to be rejecting society, such writers actually replicated the dominant ideologies, and enforced them.⁵² On a formal level, moreover, Bowles found their prose style “very difficult”, not because the ideas were challenging, but because there was so little

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 100.

⁵² Ibid.

attention paid to form. He characterised this style as “literary magma,” reflecting the apparent formlessness, which occluded, rather than enhanced the text, proving “too much to have to swim around in”.⁵³ Such texts failed Bowles’ basic requirement for fiction – to critique society – and failed as a direct consequence of their lack of formal precision. Bowles’ own preoccupation with the patterning of his texts, then, fulfilled a double role. The unity of his stories gave them resistance to critical interpretation, but it also made them ideal vehicles for critiquing society themselves.

As I set out in my initial chapter, Bowles sought to contest the narratives of democratic freedom that governed the intellectual discourse of postwar America. His choice to work within the short story form was in part based upon its formal opposition to the ‘open,’ picaresque novel that critics suggested could be considered as an ideally ‘democratic’ form. More specifically, however, Bowles deployed a combination of compression and structural patterning as a way of crafting a fiction that formally opposed the novel, and contested the values such writing endorsed through the way in which it was written. He wrote predominantly in the short story form because it allowed him to create precise, compact, claustrophobic works, and he admitted that, of his four novels, the one he preferred most was *Up Above the World* “because of the way things are expressed there in a very concise, rather terse fashion.”⁵⁴ Equally, he felt that his early stories, especially “‘A Distant Episode’, ‘Pastor Dowe at Tacaté’, ‘Señor Ong and Señor Ha’ and ‘Call at Corazón’”, were “better than the later ones” because they “seem to be more compact: in the material, in the way it's presented.”⁵⁵ Even here, Bowles is unable to separate the formal structure of his stories from their subject matter. For him, a successful story would

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 213

⁵⁵ Ibid.

feel stylistically compressed, and claustrophobic in what was presented. At the forefront of Bowles' literary agenda was the desire to challenge his readers, and lead them to question the society around them, and his choices in constructing his texts were dictated by the critique he hoped to effect. In focusing his texts around such 'exotic' settings, Bowles was hoping to present a particular, alternative viewpoint – one that regarded the world as not as open and expansive, but contained. Sending Western characters into alien landscapes, as in three of the four stories Bowles cited as his favourites, was not intended, therefore, simply as a way of juxtaposing the 'civilised' with the 'savage'. Instead, it was a way to suggest a different understanding of the world to his reader: not one that was free, but where everything was constrained and hemmed in.

Bowles and Poe

When Bowles finally published the collected stories of *The Delicate Prey* in 1950, he dedicated his most significant work, both personally and stylistically, to “my mother, who first read me the stories of Poe”.⁵⁶ In tacitly acknowledging the influence of Poe on the stories of his anthology, Bowles was affirming his own position outside what he took to be the mainstream of midcentury American culture. Vidal once famously described Bowles as writing “as if *Moby Dick* had never been written,” and as I have argued, his fiction did not align with the dominant narratives championed by cultural critics around the direction of American literature and culture in the wake of the Second World War.⁵⁷ Rather than drawing on the canonical tradition of American literature that such critics proposed, Bowles looked to Poe as an alternative literary

⁵⁶ Bowles, dedication to *The Delicate Prey and Other Stories* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006).

⁵⁷ Vidal, *At Home*, 213.

precursor, and consistently modelled his fiction around that of Poe as a way of deliberately opposing the democratic narratives of mid-century America.

In his choice to work predominantly in the short story form, Bowles was obviously influenced by both aesthetic and intellectual priorities. At the same time, however, he explicitly intended his work to have social repercussions: he wrote his short fiction with the intention of challenging the assumptions of his readers and, more broadly, of effecting a change in the literary landscape. As the first chapter established, the novel, particularly sprawling picaresques like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, was co-opted by postwar critics as a literary expression of the democratic freedom that America embodied on the world stage. The existence, moreover, of an historical tradition of 'classic' American novels concerned with freedom provided a narrative that actively reinforced America's authority to speak for 'the West'. Within canon-forming texts like Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, the American novel was characterised by its ability to articulate a model of individual autonomy. Trilling had summarised the programme of 'modern literature' as "directed toward moral and spiritual renovation" where the 'modern' author was the one who could offer a vision that could lead to a better (in the context of America's hegemonic agenda, a freer, more democratic) society.⁵⁸ In other words, literature was being directed towards a vision that realised the ideal of freedom both thematically and structurally. Criticism was intimately concerned, moreover, with how an author could assert his own individuality (and express some ideal of freedom) within the necessarily confining medium of literature; the question of form was a pressing one.

In diverging from, and resisting this tradition of freedom, Bowles actively rejected the ideology it represented. Indeed, he argued explicitly that his "characters

⁵⁸ Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, 220.

don't attain any kind of freedom,” and that instead, freedom was an illusion; people are inherently “bound by physical laws, bound by your body, bound by your mind”.⁵⁹ Although the individual always had the option to achieve freedom through death – Bowles explained that “the cage door’s always open” – he believed that people implicitly “want freedom inside the cage”.⁶⁰ By working within a form characterised by closure and compression, and by intentionally emphasising those qualities, Bowles could contest the novel on a formal level, and at the same time undermine the larger social implications that were being attributed to the novelistic form. On a more particular level, however, Bowles could use of Poe as a direct model for his short fiction. Poe himself could “scarcely be said to be at home” within the democratic context of mid-century criticism; as a Southerner, with clearly anti-democratic views on “the horrid laws of political economy”, and an aesthetic predicated upon compression and enclosure, Poe was naturally incompatible with the progressive project that Matthiessen and others saw as integral to the course of American literature.⁶¹ The qualities that rendered Poe such an uncomfortable fit within this critical context were precisely those that drew Bowles towards him as an alternative literary model. Indeed, as the introduction to this thesis suggested, Bowles actively styled his lifestyle, as much as his writing, in an echo of his spiritual ancestor; he explained to David McDowell, at Random House, that he “resolved then to go to the University of Virginia... solely because [Poe] had attended it.”⁶²

Poe, therefore, formed Bowles’ earliest literary influence, whose example guided Bowles in both lifestyle and in literary style. More significantly, Bowles

⁵⁹ Bowles, *Conversations*, 94.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman, “Introduction: Beyond ‘The Problem of Poe,’” in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), iv; Terence Whalen, “Edgar Allan Poe and the Horrid Laws of Political Economy,” *American Quarterly* 44.3 (1992): 381.

⁶² Bowles, *In Touch*, 219.

continued to rely on Poe as a literary ancestor, precisely because of the un-American qualities of his fiction: as a literary model who seemed to turn his back on America, Poe represented to Bowles a literary model that incorporated his own feelings of dislocation. On a deeper level, moreover, Poe's macabre obsession with violence and decay spoke to Bowles' own rather fatalistic appreciation of life. In stark contrast to the constructive optimism of postwar American narratives of freedom and democracy, Bowles saw the world as inherently destructive, arguing that "the process of life presupposes violence" and that "our life is predicated upon violence".⁶³ This perspective made America's newly assumed responsibility "to build the kind of world in which men can live in freedom and peace" seem particularly hollow, and Bowles contended instead that "the entire structure of what we call civilization... can collapse at any moment".⁶⁴ Ultimately, what appealed to Bowles most about Poe was a shared disdain for the entire narrative of a democratic society, which Bowles considered "a fiction that serves as an anaesthetic"; from responses to interviews, it is clear that he saw the world as claustrophobic, violent and spiralling towards collapse, and considered the idea of building an open, shared future for a global community to be a deliberate falsehood.⁶⁵ At the heart of his understanding of the world, Bowles believed that "everyone is isolated from everyone else. The concept of society is a cushion to prevent us from the knowledge of that isolation".⁶⁶ In contesting the narratives of contemporary America, it is natural that Bowles would turn to a writer who mirrored his own anxieties about society, and whose style offered a model for opposing the critically championed form of the novel.

⁶³ Bowles, *Conversations*, 80.

⁶⁴ Truman, in Casey, *Korean War*, 69; Bowles, "Art," 80.

⁶⁵ Bowles, *Conversations*, 80.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

The critical outrage against *The Delicate Prey*, which unanimously savaged the collection, is a testament to the extent to which the textual strategies Bowles employed ran counter to the tenor of contemporary criticism. The fact that, at the same time, Poe was being critically maligned, is indicative of why Bowles chose to adopt him as a literary model. Poe's position in American culture in the middle of the twentieth century was so compromised precisely because of the qualities that made him attractive to Bowles. Poe was excluded from the definitive American canon-forming texts, and smeared for his "vulgarity".⁶⁷ An integral aspect of this apparent 'vulgarity' was his resistance to the quotidian and socially acceptable; "the quintessential outsider", it is clear from his stories (always located in "no actual physical place at all, but the realm of the imagination") that "he is concerned not with civilization but with sentience".⁶⁸ While this necessarily made Poe an awkward fit in the world of American letters, after the Second World War Poe's persona fell further short of the expectations of a militantly democratic American culture. *American Renaissance* left Poe "virtually out of the picture", while R.W.B. Lewis' *American Adam* "overlooked Poe's fiction altogether".⁶⁹ In large part, this can be attributed to the kind of demands being placed on fiction in the wake of the violence of the war. Poe's fiction seemed to question the entire relationship between fiction and society; his disdain for American culture led him "not simply to another, more European culture, but to a total redefinition of art's reliance on culture".⁷⁰ The qualities that made him such an idiosyncratic author – "the obnoxious misfit of American letters", whose fiction "resists assimilation into the broad interpretive paradigms constructed

⁶⁷ J. Gerald Kennedy, "The Violence of Melancholy: Poe against Himself," *American Literary History* 8.3 (1996): 534.

⁶⁸ Kennedy, "Violence," 534; Larzer Ziff, "'Moby-Dick' and the Problem of a Democratic Literature," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 8, American Literature Special Number (1978): 68.

⁶⁹ Ziff, "Problem," 68.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

to define [America's] national literature" – naturally alienated him from the mainstream American literary agenda.⁷¹ Particularly contentious was his rejection of the principles of democracy, foremost "the idea of universal equality", which he described as "against all the visible laws of heaven and earth".⁷² While Poe had been "hauled... before a literary un-American committee" long before the Cold War, castigated for his "rejection of much that America represented abroad", it was the emphasis of literary critics on a new model of ethical fiction that saw his work marginalised by critics.⁷³

So although Poe's personal views on democracy and his imaginative flight from contemporary society might seem to provide an adequate explanation for his vanishing act from American criticism in the fifties, this explanation overlooks one of his preeminent qualities: his preoccupation with structure. After all, one of the most pervasive concepts of this archetypal author is "the image of Poe-the-engineer", the critic-composer applying "something that sounds like a mathematical principle to the creation of art".⁷⁴ Whether it can be seen as a hoax, pastiche, or entirely genuine reflection of his ideals and praxis, "The Philosophy of Composition" has proven to be one of Poe's most influential writings. His tenets on compression, repetition and insistent emphasis on the consideration of 'effect' have now been the commonplace of creative writing manuals for the better part of a century, while his reformulation of the principle of unity as "the immensely important artistic element, totality, or unity of effect" (*ER*, 15) came to underpin the future direction of the American short story. Scott Peeples has demonstrated, moreover, how greatly Poe's theoretical obsession

⁷¹ Kennedy, "Violence," 535, 534.

⁷² Ziff, "Problem," 68.

⁷³ Charles L. Sanford, "Edgar Allan Poe: A Blight Upon the Landscape," *American Quarterly* 20.1 (1968): 54.

⁷⁴ Scott Peeples, "Poe's 'Constructiveness' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher'," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 178.

with structure was reflected in his fiction. Focusing on Poe's "constructiveness", Peeples has shown not only Poe's "adherence to his own principles of good construction", but illustrated the extent to which he was "preoccupied with construction as a theme or trope".⁷⁵ It is clear that Poe was very attentive to his works' structure, and attaining a sense of artistic completion that was in direct competition with the open, deliberately un-crafted model of fiction that was being championed in the postwar period.

What is not clear, however, is why Poe's fixation should irk critics in the postwar period more strongly than at any other time. Other seminal authors, whose fiction bore similar evidence of attention to form and structure, still found themselves a comparatively warm welcome within the family of ethical literature. The reason lies in the twofold effect of Poe's model of composition. As Poe so insistently reminds his reader, in the ideal story every element builds toward the conclusion, so that the effect of the work is cumulative, with each step inexorably leading towards the denouement. This gives the work a certain sense of inevitability, even of circularity – a quality reflected in Poe's suggested process for fashioning a narrative. Beginning with the final effect, and working backwards, so that the story's beginning is a natural derivation of its conclusion, Poe argues for fashioning one's tales in the manner of the ouroboros, with their tails in their mouths. While this may accentuate the work's 'totality', by shaping a story where everything works in harmony, it also draws the reader's attention to the artifice of the work. The 'constructiveness' of the stories is what gives them away, alerting the reader to the author's total control over the shape of the narrative, and the characters' total subordination to their maker; through the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 178-9.

artifice of the text, Poe is “hiding his ‘signature’ in plain sight”.⁷⁶ Of course, the ambitions of ‘ethical’ literature followed an entirely different trajectory. The kind of fiction that they endorsed was irresistibly open – a sprawling picaresque confronting the limitations of the written word. Their model could hardly accommodate an author whose manipulation of characters, subordination of their impulses to narrative control, and emphasis on metatextuality insisted upon a lack of freedom. Poe’s texts confront their reader’s expectations of independence, and question the characters’ ability to function with autonomy, undermining the narrative of ‘American’ freedom that critics were so keen to promote.

It seems not to have occurred to the critics who savaged *The Delicate Prey* that Bowles could be deliberately confronting his reader by styling his text around such an oppositional perspective. In order to do so, he emphasised in his short stories the very qualities that made Poe so critically maligned. This is evident perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the structure of his stories. Pounds has suggested that “it is in the stark, reiterated design of Bowles’s early fiction that his heritage from Poe seems especially direct and striking”; his description resonates equally strongly with Bowles’ formulation of his own literary philosophy and with Poe’s ideals as set out in “The Philosophy of Composition”.⁷⁷ In fact, the structure of Bowles’ short stories is modelled directly on Poe’s template. This emerges most clearly in the ‘totality’ that each story seems to possess; Bowles’ emphasis on patterning his fiction translates into a particularly ‘Poe-ish’ kind of story, one that feels autonomous and complete. Perhaps more darkly even than Poe, Bowles saw the world around him through a clouded lens, to the point where Williams characterised his work as “a mirror... of

⁷⁶ Ibid, 186.

⁷⁷ Wayne Pounds, “Paul Bowles and Edgar Allan Poe: the Disintegration of Personality,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 32.3/4 (1986): 424.

moral nihilism”.⁷⁸ Poe’s model of fiction offered a way of engaging with the world fictively that contested the optimism of ‘democratic fiction’. By shaping his stories to achieve Poe’s artificial level of ‘totality of effect’, Bowles could challenge the narrative of democratic freedom, not through ‘ideas’, but through ‘patterns of words’.

This level of formal completion, however, does not necessarily equate with resolution. As I have argued, Bowles’ musical aesthetic is organised around fragmentation; although heavily patterned, his music resists development and completion. Within his short stories, this is manifested in a similar deferment of development, which nonetheless creates an extremely powerful unity of effect: the reader is confronted by a story crafted to reinforce a single, dominating feeling. The lack of resolution can be seen by returning to the dreamlike tale of “By the Water”, which follows Amar as he decides it “is time to visit a neighbouring city” (*DP*, 266), where he escapes a subterranean bathhouse and its crablike proprietor, Lazrag. It concludes with him, startled by “an enormous crab”, falling into the ocean, where he “lay still... the soft water washing over him”, as his small companion repeatedly tells him “I saved you, Amar” (276). The whole time, Bowles offers no suggestion as to why Amar makes his journey, or even why this ‘moment’ is one that should be chosen for a story – the story concludes with even less ‘resolved’ than when it began. Similarly, “The Echo” sees student Aileen travel to visit her mother in Columbia. She grows increasingly stifled and oppressed, her feelings focused around her mother’s lesbian lover, whom she regards “with unmasked hatred” (151). Yet although the conflict mounts as the story progresses, and even “when the tension should have been over, somehow it was not” (152), when Aileen’s feelings burst into the “violence” (143) that the nearby waterfall has persistently suggested, and she attacks her

⁷⁸ Williams, “Allegory,” 38.

mother's lover "with vicious suddenness" (155), the story does not seem resolved. Instead, it closes with Aileen, heading back towards the airstrip, turning back "towards the house", and seeing the figures of her mother and her lover "standing side by side", unaffected by the "terrible storm" (156) of her presence. Just as "By the Water" closed with the 'story' in no more conclusive a place than it began, the comparison of Aileen's visit to the house suggests that her visit has made only a temporary impression – that even her ferocious violence has engendered no change, in her or her victim. But this lack of development, which contemporary critics had thought of as stagnation, is actually an essential part of how Bowles creates the patterned effect of his prose

As the criticism of Bowles' anthology suggests, Poe's fiction was out of place within the progressive programme of mid-century American criticism because of the formal constraints of his style, as much as any of his personal beliefs. Oriented around compression, and a stark formal perfection, the terror and claustrophobia of his tales provide an aesthetic that not only appealed to Bowles' sense of isolation and fatalism, but offered an alternative view of fiction's role in regard to reality; the qualities that made Poe such an ill-fit within the stylistic programme demanded by contemporary criticism also made him the ideal model for Bowles. Indeed, for an author like Bowles, who considered himself cut off from America, and who refused to subscribe to the hegemonic narratives of postwar criticism, an alternative literary tradition was needed. By focusing his stories through the closed structure that Poe had proposed, Bowles argued that the human condition is one of suffocation and claustrophobia. Their insistent violence punctures the 'anaesthetic' of the democratic narrative, and instead relentlessly exposes the frailty and isolation of the individual. Ultimately, the narrative of 'American Democracy' promised a freedom that Bowles' stories peel

back and expose as an illusion, and an openness that his language, structure and imagery reveal to be simply part of a pattern. Poe, marginalised by Matthiessen and other critics in the postwar period for his intransigent resistance to democratic ideals, proved the perfect model for enunciating an alternative view to the dominant narrative of mid-century American criticism – a model for communicating a fiction that ran against the postwar American grain.

Composition and Intoxication

Bowles' position on genre, therefore, was clearly oriented around the formal coherence of a text, following the model of Poe. His predominant use of the short story across his literary career can be understood as a symptom of his wider aesthetic concerns – above all else, the desire for compression – and he found his own ideas refigured in Sontag's aestheticist criticism. This conceptualisation of literary form, however, was almost exclusively a product of his own compositional practice.

Considering the influence Bowles' musical career exerted on his writing, therefore, his attitude to genre and development of a particular model of short story need to be understood within a specifically musicological framework. This is especially relevant given Bowles' critical engagement with music; although he remained reticent about engaging in a critical discourse on literature, Bowles was a thorough commentator on music, particularly in his role as primary music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*. In introducing an alternative fictional model to the American literary scene, Bowles was hoping to challenge his readers to critique their own society; by introducing a musically inflected mode of writing, Bowles could focus attention precisely where he wanted – on the aesthetic and formal qualities of his texts. At the

same time, however, Bowles repeatedly disavowed authorial control over his own work, and explained it not as a product of his conscious thoughts, but of a practice of automatic writing. By turning to a neglected aspect of his personal life, and considering his long term use of narcotics alongside his relationship with Jean Cocteau, Bowles' ostensibly divergent positions on patterning and automatism can be understood as fundamentally motivated by the same principles.

Given his emphasis on the patterning of his texts, Bowles' process of writing would seem to be oriented around consciously shaping his texts to create the greatest degree of coherence. Despite consistently emphasising the patterning and precision of his work, however, Bowles also continually and firmly rejected the idea of authorial control over his texts. More specifically, Bowles argued that his works were the result of Surrealist automatic writing, and that his own writing was not "an intellectual thing" but "unthought".⁷⁹ Indeed, he went so far as to characterise himself as having "never been a thinking person", who "learned how to write without being conscious of what [he] was doing", and "even to have a certain style without the slightest idea of what [he] was writing."⁸⁰ Crucially, then, Bowles felt detached from the writing process. While, as this chapter has posited, he clearly took great pains over the initial context of his writing, beyond this point he wrote 'automatically', detached from the compositional process to the point where he did not feel his works could be attributed to his consciousness. In one interview, he confessed: "I don't feel that I wrote these books. I feel as though they had been written by my arm, by my brain, my organism, but that they're not necessarily mine."⁸¹ From this perspective, his disinterest in the person of the author is understandable. He expressed frustration that "Americans

⁷⁹ Bowles, *Conversations*, 120.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

expect an artist's work to be a clear reflection of his life”, and argued that an author’s own life “doesn’t seem very relevant” to a consideration of their works.⁸² Bowles’ own detachment from his work was so great that he refused even to revise his texts, protesting “I can’t revise”; he qualified his position by admitting that he wrote his texts by hand “then the same day, or the next, I type the longhand”, and conceding that there were “always many changes between the longhand and the typed version”.⁸³ In spite of these apparently mechanical changes, however, his position was definitively that “the first draft is the final draft”, reflecting a larger belief that his writing originated in a pre-rational, hallucinatory aspect of the self – one not readily amenable to subsequent rationalistic scrutiny or revision.⁸⁴

Bowles consistently maintained this position on his writing, insisting on the importance of automatic writing in the production of his texts. Such declarations, however, would seem to contrast fundamentally with the other set of values that Bowles also consistently espoused: the importance of patterning and structure. Indeed, Bowles maintained that his stories had an inevitable and intrinsic pattern to them, and in modelling his own literary style pre-eminently on that of Poe, he aimed to write stories that possessed an extreme degree of patterning and order; his stories reveal an insistent preoccupation with formal repetition and circularity. When assessing the work of other authors, moreover, Bowles foregrounded the importance of their texts’ structure: “what’s *in* a story is not important to me. It’s how it’s told, how the words go together, what makes a good sentence.”⁸⁵ A text’s value to Bowles, therefore, was predicated on the quality of the writing, and his admiration of authors as individuals was equally based on their capacity to write *well*; he particularly

⁸² Ibid, 101.

⁸³ Ibid, 90.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Bowles, *Conversations*, 213.

admired the writing of W.H. Auden, with whom he also lived for several months, because he was “an infallible” who had “an unparalleled ability to use the English language.”⁸⁶ Despite his own protestations of innocence from the process of writing, then, Bowles recognised the importance of the individual in the quality of their writing, and judged other works based on their deliberate use of language and their conscious patterning. Beyond this, he approached genre as a system of patterns, comparable on a macro-scale to the miniaturist patterns within his stories.

These seemingly competing values of composition can be reconciled by considering Bowles’ understanding of genre within a musical, rather than a literary, sense. Bowles certainly saw composition as exerting a considerable influence on his writing. In one of his most candid moments, an interview in 1953 for his old newspaper, the *New York Herald Tribune*, Bowles explained the extent to which he thought of musical and literary forms as complementary, or even indistinguishable

I think music and writing have been intertwined since I was six. At four I wrote a story titled “The Fox and the Wolf,” and between seven and eight I turned out an opera “in nine chapters.” You can see from that how closely tied the two were.⁸⁷

His understanding of form and structure, even when applied to a literary text, were guided by music. He admitted, moreover that his career as a composer changed the way that he wrote, and that within his work “there is a considerable influence” from music.⁸⁸ Indeed, he felt that, after spending his formative years in a musical apprenticeship under Copland, where he “had a lesson every day,” his “whole musical and intellectual background was formed by him.”⁸⁹ Bowles, therefore, regarded music

⁸⁶ Ibid., 99.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 7.

– specifically the kind of music Copland was interested in – as his predominant intellectual framework. Bowles approached both the broader genre of his texts, and their specific structure, therefore, from a musical, rather than literary perspective. As he explained, “If you’re a composer, that’s going to determine something about the form in which you construct your prose.”⁹⁰

More specifically, I would argue that Bowles composed his texts as if they were pieces of music. When another interviewer, Oliver Evans, asked if there had been “a carry-over from the rhythms of music to the rhythms of prose”, Bowles confirmed that musical structures had “absolutely” shaped the structure of his writing.⁹¹ He argued that “one’s attitude towards form is bound to be influenced by the fact of one’s having been involved in musical form for years”, and that musical form “*is* form, as far as I’m concerned.”⁹² So although he may have been pedantic about the literary classification of his texts, Bowles also inherently considered their form in musical terms, and wrote them with the same set of considerations as if he was composing a musical score. Indeed, despite his occasional reticence to acknowledge a connection between the two forms, Bowles conceded that he structured his texts along musical, rather than literary lines. This was perhaps most prominent in his development of *The Sheltering Sky*, where, as Bowles explained, he had considered “the three parts as separate ‘movements’”.⁹³ In very specific ways, moreover, Bowles composed his texts with an attention to musical qualities – as he explained: “I do think in terms of music”.⁹⁴ His writing had its particular and distinctive qualities because Bowles thought “in terms of syncopation, counterpoint,

⁹⁰ Ibid., 110.

⁹¹ Ibid., 43.

⁹² Ibid., 44.

⁹³ Ibid., 4

⁹⁴ Ibid., 45.

simultaneous motifs, solo and tutti passages” – however subconscious, or automatic his writing process was, it was always guided by a very clear set of aesthetic values.⁹⁵ He even attributed his precision to his musical way of thinking, arguing that it helped “make things more precise” in his mind as he wrote.⁹⁶ At the same time, however, one of the qualities Bowles valued most in musical composition was the ability to improvise; his regular pieces on jazz for the *New York Herald Tribune* affirm this, as do comments like his lament that, in Morocco, “first-rate intuitive musicians have become twelfth-rate learned musicians”.⁹⁷ Both strands of Bowles’ compositional agenda, therefore, can be traced back to his musical sensibility. His attitude towards writing was fundamentally shaped by his training as a composer and, as an author, he continued to work within the same model of composition.

Considering this conceptual approach to writing, I would suggest that Bowles’ reliance on specific generic frameworks in structuring his stories is a result of his fundamentally musical approach to composing texts. He used specific subgenres of the short story as if they were musical forms: structures for composition that had implicit rules, and dictated the inclusion of particular patterns, substructures, and motifs. By positioning a story within a specific genre – which was further modified by the story’s setting – Bowles could then write his stories ‘automatically,’ without consciously thinking about them, while still maintaining the patterned, measured formal structure he so valued. In one of his few concessions to an otherwise absolute position on automatic writing, Bowles explained: “I don’t think one could follow the surrealist method absolutely, with no conscious control in the choice of material, and

⁹⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 15.

be likely to arrive at an organic form.”⁹⁸ By maintaining control over the setting and genre of the story – its essential premise – Bowles could achieve this organic form. This was contingent, however, on Bowles’ musical sense of rhythm and balance and on the rules that his choice of genre dictated.

The respect that Bowles held for what he considered to be the precision of Auden’s writing reflects not merely a familiarity with the author’s work, but with him personally. The crossover between Bowles’ work in music and prose took place over the years 1941-42, when Bowles began to write music criticism and translate pieces for *View*, while still fully immersed in the world of composition. At the same time, Bowles moved into a house on Middagh Street, in Brooklyn Heights, which was run by Auden and inhabited by an eclectic group of artists, including Benjamin Britten. At this point, Britten and Auden were engaged in a period of fruitful collaboration, and with the entrance of Bowles (and his upright piano) the intensity of cross-disciplinary artistic discussion grew dramatically. Bowles often attributed his return to writing in the early 1940s to Jane’s work on her novel, which would eventually be published as *Two Serious Ladies*, and which she was working on during their time at Middagh Street. The charged artistic atmosphere of life with Britten, Auden and their associates, however, must also have contributed directly to this shift. Certainly, Bowles’ attitudes towards the relationship between music and literature, and the function of art more generally, took firm shape in dialogue with Auden over this period. Their views, however, were not always aligned, and Bowles took an increasingly divergent position on both subjects, to the point where Auden eventually ejected Bowles from the house, permanently.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

Auden's position on the role of music, and on its relationship to literature, is most clearly enunciated in his 1952 essay "Some Reflections on Music and Opera".⁹⁹ Here, he orients his perspective around a principal distinction between music and writing, setting out that "music is immediate, not reflective," and therefore presents a more emotionally authentic piece of art.¹⁰⁰ To this extent, he is interested in the formal qualities of music, and the way that it circumvents an intellectual analysis. Drawing a comparison with theatre, he notes the extent to which our appreciation of an actor's skill is based on a kind of analytical assessment; when "we say his performance is good, we mean that he simulates by art, that is, consciously, the way in which the character he is playing would, in real life, behave by nature, that is, unconsciously."¹⁰¹ However, the immersive totality of a musical performance means that it defies such an indexical appraisal; "for a singer... there is no question of simulation... his behavior is triumphantly art from beginning to end".¹⁰² In other words, the value of music to Auden lay at least in part in its abstraction, and emphasis on purely aesthetic qualities – music is not required to be held accountable to real life. This would seem to correspond to Bowles' perspective on music, where his primary concern was with the abstraction of music, and its aesthetic impact on the listener. If anything, Bowles represents a more concentrated perspective than Auden, arguing that the function of music was entirely abstract: "good concert music expands the philosophy of sound: where sounds come from and what they do."¹⁰³ The inclination towards understanding music in these discrete terms can be traced back to Bowles' tutelage under Copland, whose own approach to composition was predicated upon

⁹⁹ W.H. Auden, "Some Reflections on Music and Opera," in *The Essence of Opera*, ed. Ulrich Weisstein (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 353-360.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 357

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 354.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Bowles and Ramey, "Meet Prokofiev," 13.

such abstraction. Bowles later recalled that, in training him in composition, Copland was pre-eminently “interested in the construction of music”.¹⁰⁴ The exercises through which he trained Bowles – such as reconstructing a figured bass from a Mozart piano sonata – were both practical and guided by an underlying philosophy that prioritised sounds as part of formal constructions. In his own works, Bowles took up the mantle of Copland, paring his own musical works back to the point where some of his pieces are so abstracted that their “pungent austerity” can be considered “more severe than anything Copland had created”.¹⁰⁵ Bowles also admitted that this training exerted a strong influence on his literary composition, explaining that he “learnt a great deal” from Copland that was applicable “in literary terms” as well as musical ones.¹⁰⁶ His subsequent emphasis on the patterning of his fiction was a direct product of the practice of composition he developed under the musical apprenticeship of Copland, and signals an important correspondence between Bowles and Auden.

Their thinking differed, however, in terms of their understanding of the wider role of music, beyond its immediate effect on the listener. The ways in which Bowles diverged from Auden’s position, moreover, reveal the extent to which his own position on form was aligned with the kind of perspective Sontag would later put forward in *Against Interpretation*. In “Reflections on Opera,” Auden frames the importance of music – and Opera especially – in terms of the symbolic meaning that can be ascribed to it. It is for this reason that Auden equates “the golden age of opera, from Mozart to Verdi” with “the golden age of liberal humanism, of unquestioning belief in freedom and progress”; he feels that opera needs to be considered in terms of

¹⁰⁴ Bowles, cited in K. Robert Schwarz, “There are Those Who Refuse to See Bowles as Anything More Than a Dilettante,” in *Paul Bowles: Music*, ed. Jonathan Scheffer, New York: Eos, 1995, 37.

¹⁰⁵ Schwarz, “Dilettante,” 44.

¹⁰⁶ Bowles, cited in Schwarz “Dilettante,” 41.

the moral message it can impart.¹⁰⁷ Equally, he suggests that contemporary scenarios are unsuitable for operatic works, as the audience would be too involved to be able to understand the ‘meaning’ of the work:

... a contemporary tragic situation like that in Menotti’s *The Consul* is too actual, that is, too clearly a situation some people are in and others, including the audience, are not in, for the latter to forget this and see it as a symbol of, say, man’s existential estrangement.¹⁰⁸

Opera performed a role beyond that of purely auditory experience for Auden, and was connected instead to a higher moral purpose and, given his emphasis on the ‘liberal humanism’ that informed ‘the golden age of opera,’ this purpose must necessarily be connected to idea of personal freedom. Suggesting that “music in general is an imitation of history,” Auden argued that “opera in particular is an imitation of human wilfulness; it is rooted in the fact that we not only have our feelings, but insist upon having them at whatever cost to ourselves”.¹⁰⁹ It is to this effect that he maintained that, within opera, the orchestral music was directed not at the audience, but at the cast; the effect of operatic works was necessarily a product of the essentialised humans of its cast.

In contrast, Bowles was only interested in music to the extent that it could be abstracted from such humanistic concerns. One of the ironies of his musical career is that, despite composing vast amounts of work for torch singers such as Libby Holman, stage music for plays by Williams and Welles, and setting the poetry of Stein, Cocteau and Ford to music, Bowles himself intensely disliked singing. This was directly related to the kind of abstracted, aesthetic experience he thought music ought to entail, and he explained: “when listening to music I don’t want to be

¹⁰⁷ Auden, “Some Reflections,” 360.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 355.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 356.

reminded of human beings”.¹¹⁰ This was made worse by what Bowles considered to be the unnatural mode of singing that dominated western music, exclaiming “Singers spend years learning how to be unnatural. *Bel Canto!* It’s a horrible noise”; such singing detracted from a musical work, because of its incongruity with the orchestral music.¹¹¹ Instead, Bowles preferred an oriental model of singing, finding “the way Asian singers sound is much more natural and satisfying” because they sounded “more like instruments”.¹¹² Moreover, his resistance to the interpolation of symbolic readings onto texts led to direct conflict with Auden during their time together. His overall predilection for purely orchestral music, then, reflects his two foremost aesthetic concerns: the unity of the work, and its resistance to ‘interpretation’; singing could both disrupt the aesthetic coherence of a work and make the work more clearly ‘about’ something.

When he began to compose short fiction again, during the height of his success as a composer, Bowles wrote with the same aesthetic priorities that characterised his music. As I have already argued, his work often employs specific musical motifs and structure, but on a generic level, the particular model of short fiction he developed was inflected with a formal, musical, sensibility. Within his music, Bowles focused his compositions around reiterative patterns, in pieces that, while unified, often have the sense of being fragmentary. Such a style offered a way of emphasising the purely aural experience of music, and translated into detached, abstracted works – as Scheffer notes, Bowles’ music “doesn’t employ development, but favours a succession of short song-forms”.¹¹³ Pieces such as his “Sonata for Flute and Piano” employ a “vividly specific vocabulary,” which creates “a narrow but

¹¹⁰ Bowles and Ramey, “Meet Prokofiev,” 21.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Scheffer, introduction, 1.

incisive impression”, and overall Bowles worked to shape his music as closely around a single concept as possible.¹¹⁴ Technically, this relies upon a pattern and repetition that bears the influence of jazz, which is particularly prominent in his use of “reiterative bass”.¹¹⁵ Indeed, Caponi notes the “Debussy-like repetitive phrasing that is characteristic of Bowles’ music,” and the level of coherence his works have can be attributed to this high degree of patterning.¹¹⁶ At the same time, Bowles’ music is notable for its static quality – although reiterative, its repeated phrasings generally do not employ development. The kind of structures Bowles employs in his music to emphasise unity, therefore, also contribute to the fragmentary feel of his work. Rather than an accidental consequence, however, Glanville-Hicks argues that this is a deliberate strategy on Bowles’ part. As one of Bowles’ most astute listeners, Glanville-Hicks emphasises the jazz motifs that Bowles assimilated into his works (sometimes secondarily, via Copland), and argues that “he has sought a pattern of construction and a type of unrhethorical, unclimactic music that has no real European prototype.”¹¹⁷ In fact, much of Bowles’ music can be considered as working directly in opposition to the kind of highly rhetorical operatic work that Auden praised. The emotional sophistication Auden attributed to such works was a product of their sustained thematic development, which conformed to a narrative pattern not unique to opera. Bowles, however, deliberately styled his music around an idiom that used repetition to resist development, and created a sense of delayed climax; the listener’s expectation of the repeated motifs to progress is thwarted.

The complementary sense of fragmentation evident in his short fiction evinces the extent to which Bowles’ musical training informed his literary compositions. The

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹¹⁵ Glanville-Hicks, “Season of Promise,” 107.

¹¹⁶ Caponi, “Nomad in New York,” 74.

¹¹⁷ Glanville-Hicks, “Season of Promise,” 106

formal characteristics of his short stories developed out of the practices he honed as a musical composer; he structured his texts around the same qualities he prized on a purely auditory level. This crossover is equally a product, however, of the techniques Bowles maintained when writing. The surrealistic ‘automatic writing’ he insistently professed to employing is the same mechanism he employed when composing music – detaching himself from the process of creation. Schwarz notes that “Bowles’ description of his compositional method implies not so much a haphazard approach to form as a cultivatedly subconscious one,” and even suggests that this approach guided the form of music he produced: “Bowles would discover that in music such a surrealist approach would work far better in free-associative, self-generated structures than in the rigorous forms inherited from the Classical masters”.¹¹⁸ In terms of both aesthetic priorities, and means of production, Bowles’ musical career provided a blueprint for his development of a striking model of short fiction.

At the same time, Bowles’ approach was marked by his extensive use of narcotics while writing. This can be traced back to 1931, over a period of several months staying in Paris before convening with Copland to travel to Berlin, when Bowles made a special point of seeking out Jean Cocteau, whose works the young Bowles particularly admired. Bowles recounted their first meeting with enthusiasm in a letter to a friend in America, where he emphasizes Cocteau’s larger than life personality:

... he rushed around the room with great speed for two hours and never sat down once. Now he pretended he was an orangoutang, next an usher at the paramount theatre, and finally he held a dialogue between an aged grandfather

¹¹⁸ Schwarz, “Dilettante,” 47.

and his young grandson. I think I have never seen anyone like him in my life.¹¹⁹

Throughout the next two decades, Bowles continued to meet and correspond with Cocteau, both in Paris and in New York, but perhaps their most important collision was one that failed to happen. Arriving spontaneously at Cocteau's residence one day, he was met at the door by the actor Jean Desbordes, who informed Bowles that Cocteau was "au fond de son lit" – deep in his bed, which the naive Bowles soon learnt to be a euphemism for smoking opium. Cocteau and Bowles remained in touch, and even collaborated artistically, with Bowles setting some of Cocteau's work to music, and working with Cocteau on Hans Richter's 1958 film *8x8: a Chess Sonata*. But their intersection in 1931 represents the confluence of two of the most famous literary drug users of the twentieth century, and the resonances between their approach to narcotics suggest further implications for understanding Bowles approach to composition

Bowles met Cocteau shortly after reading the French author's *Opium: Journal d'une Désintoxication*, and was startled by the almost transcendental influence that the drug had on him, writing that Cocteau "still smokes opium every day and claims it does him a great deal of good. I daresay it does. By definition, the fact that it is considered harmful for most mortals would convince me of its efficaciousness for him."¹²⁰ While a freshman at the University of Virginia, Bowles had experimented with inhaling ether for poetic inspiration, however his meeting with Cocteau marked the beginning of serious drug use by Bowles. Given that one of his earliest literary endeavours, at age nine, had been an opera whose protagonist was an opium

¹¹⁹ Bowles, *In Touch*, 21 (sic).

¹²⁰ Jean Cocteau, *Opium: The Diary of his Cure*, trans. Margaret Crosland (London: Peter Owen, 1990); Bowles, *In Touch*, 21.

trafficking bigamist, Bowles was clearly inclined towards admiring a figure like Cocteau, whose major works, including *Les Enfants Terribles*, had been affected by his dependency on opium. Although appealing to an impressionable young American like Bowles, however, by the 1930s Cocteau's use of Opium had begun to seem rather anachronistic from an European perspective, a faded pattern of behaviour hanging on from the Romantic era that one critic has compared to duelling codes and the practice of magic. The aesthetics of opium use that Cocteau developed, moreover, drew directly on the tradition of romantic poets both British and French, who considered the dream-visions induced by this 'gentle seducer,' or 'milk of paradise' to be powerful stimuli on waking artistic work, but for whom the drug eventually proved, in Charles Baudelaire's words, to be a 'terrible friend'. Within his own diary of disintoxication, which he wrote during a stay in a clinic in St Cloud, Cocteau suggests that "opium leads the organism towards death in a euphoric mood," and even as he is attempting to wean himself off the drug, Cocteau admits that "the euphoria it induces [is] superior to that of health," and the he owes to it "my perfect hours".¹²¹ Indeed, opium's importance for Cocteau is as a kind of psychopomp, a guide that can lead the user to a point between life and death. He writes that "everything one does in life, even love, occurs in an express train racing towards death. To smoke opium is to get out of the train while still moving. It is to concern oneself with something other than life; with death."¹²² Even at the end of his 'cure', Cocteau is aware that, in order to function creatively, he will be taken in once more; his work demands it. The tragedy of Cocteau's intoxication is that his creative energy also drew him closer to extinction.

¹²¹ Cocteau, *Opium*, 24.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 36.

While his opium use may have been an important factor in his artistic process, the act of setting down an, admittedly fragmented, treatise on its effects transfigured Cocteau's intoxication into something like a manifesto, and made coherent his aesthetics of drug use. Yet, perhaps most interesting, is the plea that Cocteau sets down in his *Journal d'une Désintoxication*, for medicine to provide an opium that does not harm its user. Indeed what Cocteau ultimately aspires towards is not romantic sublimity, but something more quotidian and mundane; he writes "I would rather not be concerned any more about writing well or badly; and achieve the style of numbers".¹²³ In a striking prefiguration of Bowles' later position towards form and authorial control, Cocteau suggests that narcotics could help him distance himself from his literary production, and produce works of a purer structure, less influenced by his own conscious control. Bowles' attempt to take up Cocteau's challenge, however, was complicated by his dalliances with the Surrealists. Given Cocteau's works' evocation of life and death, and investment in the world of dreams, it should be hardly surprising that Cocteau too had a fascination with the project of the Surrealists, particularly their investigations into the role of the subconscious in the production of art. However, Cocteau himself remained well outside the official coterie of Surrealism, and indeed was often vilified by Breton.

One of their many areas of divergence, moreover, was the use of narcotics; Breton maintained a strict line on drug use, which was predicated on the movement's ultimately psychological foundations: the dreamlike connections that surrealism made manifest were aspects of the human psyche, and the stimulus of narcotics would naturally interfere with the investigation of these unseen connections. Indeed, it became a central trope among the movement that surrealism was itself a drug; in her

¹²³ Ibid., 19.

analysis of Breton and drugs, Anna Balakian has suggested that Breton “agree[d] with Baudelaire that every man had a powerhouse of natural intoxicants” and that he “made of this hypothesis the apex of surrealism”, which seems particularly apt given Breton’s characterisation of Surrealism as “a new vice” that “acts on the mind in the manner of narcotics”, opening the possibility for new mental voyages, but equally creating an at times crippling dependency.¹²⁴ The resonances between Cocteau’s conceptualisation of opium as a psychopomp and Breton’s ideal of the surreal mind intoxicated on its new powers of sensory perception are telling: rather than departing from a romantic attitude to narcotics Breton and the surrealists instead co-opted its language and aims, but with one significant modification: the surreal state, if properly attained, would entail an indefinite growth, rather than a cycle of enrichment and loss. This left an author like Bowles in a compromised position, seduced by the influence of narcotics on literary production, but unwilling to compromise his own surreal potential.

Rather than turning to opium, then, Bowles instead became a serious cannabis user, admitting in one interview to “chain smoking kif” for 25 years, and “using it consciously in most of [his] books”.¹²⁵ Kif, a Moroccan method of finely cutting cannabis and mixing it with tobacco, became Bowles’ opium, which he considered almost indispensable to his writing process, and which would later increasingly form the subject matter of his fiction. In contrast to Cocteau, the strategies that underpinned Surrealist artistic exercised a powerful hold on Bowles – more specifically, Bowles argued that his works were the result of Surrealist automatic writing, and that his own writing was not “an intellectual thing” but “unthought”; he characterised himself as having “never been a thinking person”, who “learned how to write without being

¹²⁴ Anna Balakian, “Breton and Drugs,” *Yale French Studies* 50 (1974): 96.

¹²⁵ Bowles, *Conversations*, 64.

conscious of what [he] was doing”, and “even to have a certain style without the slightest idea of what [he] was writing.”¹²⁶ Crucially, then, Bowles felt detached from the writing process, to the point where he did not feel his works could be attributed to his consciousness. In one interview, he confessed: “I don’t feel that I wrote these books. I feel as though they had been written by my arm, by my brain, my organism, but that they’re not necessarily mine.”¹²⁷

Rather than smoking kif in order to find inspiration, then, Bowles used the drug to sustain his dissociative states of automatic writing, or in his words, to help give himself “longer breath” – to extend his ability to sustain writing.¹²⁸ Indeed, Bowles maintained that his habitual kif use owed a lot to the drug’s lack of hallucinogenic effect – although it could “provide flashes of insight,” Bowles considered it to “act as an obstacle to thinking. On the other hand, it enabled [him] to write concentrated for hours at a stretch without fatigue.”¹²⁹ So the model of drug use Bowles developed was oriented around a specifically surrealist mode of composition. At the same time, however, Bowles did draw directly on the model provided by Cocteau, using narcotics for the purposes of literary inspiration – and specifically, from drawing himself closer to death. His interactions with Cocteau had an enduring effect on him – one of his few prized possessions was an original French printing of *Opium*, with a note from Cocteau pasted inside – and his intimacy with Cocteau had proved to him that “for the writer,” intoxication could be “an extremely useful tool”.¹³⁰ Rather than opium, however, it was to another cannabis product that Bowles turned: the Moroccan cannabis jam called ‘majoun,’ which Bowles once described as

¹²⁶ Bowles, *Conversations*, 119.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 89

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

tasting like “old and dusty fudge from which all flavor has long since departed,” and for which Bowles later furnished *Rolling Stone Magazine* a traditional recipe. Finding himself suffering from writer’s block halfway through *The Sheltering Sky*, Bowles used majoun to find the poetic inspiration to describe the novel’s turning point, the death of the protagonist, Port. Bowles explained that, while powerless to describe the event while sober, “under the effects of this marvellous *majoun*, I just handed the job over to my subconscious mind”.¹³¹ Moreover, Bowles’ description of the effects of Kif – “splitting the self” so the user had an “awareness and non-awareness at the same time” – resonates with Cocteau’s dissociative feelings of using opium.¹³² So although he recuperated his use of kif within a praxis of automatic writing, there is still a strong, direct line of intoxicatory influence from Cocteau to Bowles.

In mediating an earlier age of romantic drug use, however, Bowles was also adapting it to the exigencies of what was, in the wake of the Second World War, a decidedly post-romantic world. Rather than advocating an all-consuming intoxication, Bowles instead developed a more quotidian model of drug-use, where the artist could gain clearer insight through smoking kif every day, without losing control to the negative side-effects of the drug. The most important characteristic of kif, for Bowles, was that it made sense of what was an inherently nonsensical world: he explained that “by using kif-inspired motivations, the arbitrary could be made to seem natural”.¹³³ Ultimately, smoking kif became essential to Bowles’ creative process; he admitted, at various times, to its intrinsic role in the writing of all four of his novels, while also using it as an increasingly recurrent subject matter in short stories. In working it into a daily ritual that allowed him to write without conscious control, and produce texts

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 22.

¹³³ Ibid., 103.

governed by an underlying sense of rationality, Bowles also came closer to achieving Cocteau's aspiration for a mundane drug, which gave him the ability to, in Cocteau's words, 'achieve the style of numbers'.

Fragmentation and the Short Story

Throughout this thesis, the kind of 'Bowlesian' short story I have described has been characterised by, on the one hand, this kind of detached abstraction, and on the other a Poe-esque unity of effect. Bowles himself stressed the importance of coherence to his fiction, and a large part of his stories' effectiveness in forming an alternative literary model was based on his use of structure to create closure and circularity. However, this focus has been to ignore one of the most visible aspects of the short story: its incompleteness. As a literary form, the short story is defined by its gaps. And while Bowles' fiction is certainly heavily patterned, and styled to present a sense of unity, it is also notably fragmentary. In fact, many of the elements of his composition that contribute towards a sense of completion also exacerbate their sense of 'gappiness.' Like his literary composition process more generally, the fragmentation of Bowles' fiction is linked, to a certain extent, to the aesthetics of his musical work; his musical compositions eschewed narrative continuity in favour of abstraction and fragmentation. This fragmentation, however, also relates to Bowles' insistent return to violence, both as subject matter, and as a stylistic technique – and, in this sense, contributes to his works' disjuncture from mainstream American fiction just as much as his attention to coherence.

The Argentinian author, Julio Cortázar, produced an influential account of “the short story as a literary genre” that was first published in English in 1983.¹³⁴ Noting that the genre of the short story is itself “exotic” outside of Latin America, Cortázar describes it as “a snail of language, a mysterious brother to poetry in another dimension of literary time”.¹³⁵ Rather than working solely within a literary register, Cortázar sets out a paradigm for understanding the short story that sets it in direct contrast to the novel, and draws on visual media to explicate their formal distinctions. Using the analogy of cinema and photography, “in that the film is in principle ‘open ended’ like the novel, while a good photograph presupposes a strict delimitation beforehand,” Cortázar places equal responsibility on the author and the form itself for the sense of compression in the short story, just as the limitation of the photograph is “imposed in part by the narrow field of the camera cover” and in part by “the aesthetic use the photographer makes of this limitation.”¹³⁶ Cortázar’s analogy, therefore, provides a productive framework for thinking about the relationship between the short story and the novel, focused around presence and absence; while a film generates its plot, its aesthetics, and formal distinctions from the accumulation of details – even on a basic level, the technology of film relies on the compound effect of many images – a photograph instead generates its meaning from what it omits and excludes. In the same way, while a novel generates its meaning from the accumulation of material, whose individual sections – like a film still – only have meaning in relation to the rest of the text, the short story generates meaning through its omissions.

¹³⁴ Julio Cortázar, “Some Aspects of the Short Story,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 19.3 (1999): 25.

¹³⁵ Cortázar, “Some Aspects,” 26.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

From this particular perspective, the short story is defined by its gaps. This focus seems apt, given that, as Cortázar rightly emphasised, even in terms of its designation as a ‘short’ story, this form is distinguished by its brevity. Once a piece exceeds a certain number of words, it strays into the territory of either the novella, or the short novel, whose nebulous dimensions can be nonetheless safely distinguished from what would be accepted as a ‘short story.’ Much more than any other literary form, therefore, short stories are defined by their limitation. In this sense, any writer who chooses to compose a short story is foregrounding the process of ‘selection,’ determining what material is chosen to be included. Given that, in a novel, the author could have conceivably included any, and as much, material as they wanted, the selection of plot and description for a short story, and its location within the narrative, becomes much more noticeable; because it is defined by its limitation, the act of selection and placement is much more prominent. Equally, the author’s omissions are registered with greater intensity, precisely because there is so little material. If there is a disjuncture in the narrative, information about characters or events that the reader feels is missing, or if the larger context of the events is unclear, because of the scale of the short story, such gaps feel proportionately more significant than they would in even a short novel.

As part of his ambition to create stories with total coherence, Bowles worked diligently to ensure that every part of his works related to the other and that the narrative followed a generally circular pattern. In composing these pieces, moreover, Bowles worked from a tightly controlled initial set-up – he explained his approach as developing out of a precise, aesthetically coherent concept of a particular episode. The very coherence of Bowles’ writing, however, also contributes to the fragmentation of the episodes. This process is perhaps most obvious in the story “A

Distant Episode,” where even the work’s title encourages the reader to consider the narrative in terms of a compressed, coherent narrative unit. The first sentence – “The September sunsets were at their reddest the week the Professor decided to visit Aïn Tadouirt, which is in the warm country” (290) – sets out with complete authority the initial premise of the story, which the third sentence then positions within a larger temporal framework: “ten years ago he had been in the village”. But the style that Bowles adopts to convey cohesion and compression also provokes questions that the text refuses to answer. Where is Aïn Tadouirt? Who is the Professor, why is his title capitalised, and where has he come from? In rich visual images, Bowles structures the text to suggest a patterned circularity to the events. The Professor emerges into the text seemingly out of the sky, as “the bus bumped downwards through ever warmer layers of air” (290) and ends the story melting back into it, his “cavorting figure” growing “smaller into the oncoming darkness” (307). The coherence of the Professor’s emergence from, and return to ‘the sky,’ while structurally effective, also contrasts with the work’s title: as an episode, the reader has an expectation that the story will fit clearly into a larger narrative framework. Instead, the clarity of the story’s premise and the circularity of its action serve to dislocate the story from any possible overarching structure. Indeed, Bowles’ style deliberately enhances this sense of fragmentation, opening up questions about the text at the same time as, superficially, eliding any gaps.

Bowles likewise uses the title of “Call at Corazon” to indicate the episodic structure of the story; from the onset, the reader is cued to read the narrative as a single part of a larger journey. The story starts with un-framed dialogue, giving an immediacy to the action quite unlike the detached introduction of “A Distant Episode.” However, the closely observed setting – a marketplace at a dock – and the

distant authority of the narrator, who refers to the two protagonists simply through pronouns, effects the same sense of an almost allegorical experience – the distance that led Tobias Wolff to describe Bowles’ stories as moving “with the inevitability of myth.”¹³⁷ References to other legs of the honeymooning couple’s journey reinforce the sense, present in the title, that this story is concerned with one stop of many on a journey – an episode in a larger narrative series. Bowles concludes the story, however, in such a way as to disrupt this framework. Discovering his wife “half clothed” (76) in the arms of one of their ship’s crew, the husband leaves his wife, alone and without any luggage, at their next stop “smiling at the shining green landscape that moved with increasing speed past the window” (77). There is a direct tension between the trajectory that Bowles establishes in the story’s title, then, and the divergent path the conclusion takes. Because the narrative unfolds with the seamless logic characteristic of Bowles’ short fiction, however, which does not seem to question the logical coherence of the action, the reader is confronted with an abrupt, and fragmentary gap between their expectations and the final position of the story.

The logical coherence of these stories is in large part due to Bowles’ narration, which sets out events in a manner that overrides any questions of motivation. When, in “A Distant Episode,” one of the tribesmen cuts out the Professor’s tongue, it is done with no explanation; the man looked at the Professor “dispassionately in the gray morning light” before he “swiftly seized his tongue... pulled on it with all his might” and excised it (301). The lack of any explication for this event creates the sense in the reader – as Bowles explicitly intended – that the events are unfolding ‘naturally’ or ‘inevitably.’ At the same time as smoothing over such gaps, however, Bowles also calls the reader’s attention to them, deliberately underlining the

¹³⁷ Tobias Wolff, “Reconsidering Paul Bowles: an Essay,” *Narrative Magazine* Winter (2011): 3, accessed October 23, 2013.

discrepancy between the seamlessness of the narration and the characters' own lack of understanding. Leading him into the desert, ostensibly, to buy some camel-bladder-boxes, the Professor's guide acts in an increasingly strange way, which the narration nonetheless describes in a coherent, disinterested tone. But Bowles registers the strangeness through the voice of the Professor: "the *qaouaji* squatted close beside him. His face was not pleasant to see. "What is it?" thought the Professor, terrified again" (296). The narrative smoothness is disrupted by the professor's incomprehension, gesturing towards wider problems with the apparently seamless narration. This coherence is further broken down, as Bowles generates a sense of indeterminacy about the action; the Professor's guide "spat, chuckled (or was the Professor hysterical?), and strode away quickly" (297). On the one hand, this can be read as a moment of free indirect discourse, where the narrative voice assumes the Professor's own state of mental indeterminacy. It equally represents, however, a rupture in the narrative coherence – a gap Bowles has deliberately opened in the narrative.

Part of the way Bowles fragments his narratives, then, is through a disjunction between the 'natural' logic of events, communicated through the disinterested, detached narration, and the characters' own lack of understanding. The blind panic of the Professor, which renders him unable to accurately register what is occurring around him, is a product of the *lack* of coherence in what is happening. On the one hand, this is shaped by the narrator's ability to place the story's events within a larger context. The story is to be taken as "a warning which in retrospect would be half sinister, half farcical" (300) – the narrator is clearly able to contextualise the events within a pseudo-allegorical structure. Also owing a great deal to the characters' unwillingness to try to comprehend their situation, Bowles' characters frequent

suppress their own rational powers (mirroring Bowles' own understanding of himself as an 'unthinking' person). This is particularly so in the case of the Professor, where Bowles emphasises this act of deliberate incomprehension: "it occurred to [the Professor] that he ought to ask himself why he was doing this irrational thing, but he was intelligent enough to know that since he was doing it, it was not so important to probe for explanations at that moment" (298). Like this illogical journey into the desert, taken outside of their narrative context the events of Bowles' stories are often bizarre and mysterious, and in fact, Bowles explicitly set out to use the settings and events of his stories to destabilise his readers. The juxtaposition of the narrators' ability to make sense of events, and the characters' inability to do so, exacerbates the reader's own sense of dislocation and indeterminacy.

Bowles extends this indeterminacy to its logical extreme in "You are not I," one of only two stories in *The Delicate Prey* in which Bowles uses first person narration. The narrating protagonist's seemingly unshakeable certainty in the authority of her story, however, is contrasted with a high degree of narrative indeterminacy. Asserting, in the opening sentences, that "You are not I. No one but me could possibly be. I know that, and I know where I have been and what I have done" (77), the narrator makes a case for both the coherence of her experience and her own unique ability to represent those experiences authentically. In fact, she seems almost to be defying the reader to question the authority of her account. Bowles increasingly forces the reader, however, to question the reality of what this woman narrates. When, with the same weight of certainty that she claimed narrative authority, she breaks her sister's teeth with a stone – "the turning point", she informs us (84) – and finds herself in her sister's place, transposed with her and watching the woman she had so clearly defined as herself be dragged away to a mental institute, the only

thing she finds “strange” is “that no one realized she was not I” (85). The reader is forced to decide whether to believe that the two women really have changed place, given the certainty with which the events are narrated, or whether to trust their own understanding of what can, in real life, occur. Has some metamorphosis taken place, or is the narrator (as seems increasingly likely) herself an escaped lunatic?

Conclusion

During his own lifetime, Bowles noted with a touch of bitterness the extent to which critics had focussed on *The Sheltering Sky*. Although there is now a wider body of scholarship that considers Bowles' writing from a number of perspectives, his work has still been primarily understood within a specific critical matrix. The romance of Morocco and Bowles' long-term residency there have together contributed to most critics emphasising the importance of Bowles' home-in-exile to his writing. Given the critical bias towards the novel, which is as present in contemporary scholarship as it was amongst mid-century criticism, attention has also focussed largely on Bowles' work within the form of the novel. This thesis, however, has taken a different perspective. To begin with, I have focussed specifically on the American context of Bowles' work; whatever his feelings about America, and wherever he was writing from at the time, Bowles' work was nonetheless always composed with America as its point of reference. His fiction – especially the stories of *The Delicate Prey*, which were written before Bowles had left America – needs to be understood in terms of the social conditions that informed its production, and the context in which it was received. Two major aesthetic contexts that informed Bowles' writing have likewise received little critical attention: surrealism, and music. By considering Bowles' involvement in these two occasionally overlapping fields, I have hoped to show the ways that Bowles' aesthetics developed out of his peculiar place in early twentieth century artistic culture. Perhaps most importantly, I have focussed specifically on Bowles' anthology *The Delicate Prey*, and his approach to the form of the short story,

which, despite the commercial success of *The Sheltering Sky*, represents his most influential contribution to twentieth century literature.

At the time his works were published, Bowles occupied a critically ambiguous position. In spite of the success of *The Sheltering Sky*, as I have emphasised, reviewers continued to respond negatively to subsequent works, both novelistic and in the form of short stories. His reputation, then, owes more to the high esteem in which his works were held by other authors. Bowles had a remarkable ability to elicit praise from diverse writers whose positions were often in conflict with one another. A noteworthy example is the case of Vidal and Mailer: despite their high profile rivalry (about which Vidal and Bowles corresponded frequently) both wrote laudatory reviews of Bowles' short fiction. Indeed, it was Bowles' short fiction in particular to which other writers were drawn and which they considered to be his most significant achievement. I have cited examples from authors ranging from Stein to Vidal to Oates, all of whom emphasised Bowles' particular success in developing a peculiar model of short story. There is evidence that writers corresponded with each other recommending Bowles' short stories – Miller, for example, received recommendations from Vidal, whom Miller “despise[d] as a person but acknowledge[d] as a mind”.¹ Contemporary authors such as Wolff, moreover, continue to both champion Bowles' short fiction and express their own indebtedness to it. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider the long-term repercussions of Bowles' short fiction, it is important to note that it is his work within this particular form that has left the most noticeable impression on subsequent writers. Stylistically, *The Sheltering Sky* exerted little influence on other authors, but ‘the Bowles story’ has become a recognisable

¹ Gore Vidal, unpublished letter to Paul Bowles, 29 August 1978, University of Delaware, Newark.

type, surmounting the negative criticism that hindered the reception of *The Delicate Prey*.

Bowles' emphasis, across interviews and letters, on the formal qualities of his own writing could suggest that his work was composed with purely aesthetic considerations. In spite of his reticence to comment on his political position after his Ezra Pound inspired letter to *Front*, however, Bowles was vocal about his resistance to American culture, and in particular, the fetishisation of the concept of freedom in the wake of the Second World War. As I have argued, he considered the writer's foremost responsibility to be that of providing a critical perspective on contemporary culture and to challenge the mainstream values of his or her own culture. To this effect, he intended his own works to provoke self-reflexivity in his readers; he aspired to challenge the accepted status quo and destabilise American societal values. Many of these values were those that had been co-opted by both politicians and cultural critics in the postwar period, and as such he was providing a model that contested the canon forming projects of American literature and the social narratives that were deployed as America entered the Cold War. Bowles' insistent use of images of claustrophobia and containment were in part designed to provoke a critique of the concept of 'progress', whether manifested as personal, technological, or political development. In critical terms, the need that writers like Trilling expressed for Americans to engage in personal betterment was linked to specific formal qualities of the novel, such as the progressive development, in picaresque novels, of the protagonist through testing situations. On a broader level, Bowles also sought to question the concept of societal progress and the frequent conflicts and juxtapositions between 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' characters, in conjunction with the 'exotic'

settings of his fiction, were designed to provide his reader with an alternative, non-Western, perspective.

Bowles wrote to his editor, James Laughlin at *New Direction*, in response to the negative reviews that *The Delicate Prey* was eliciting, in the process bringing up the concept of a “New School of Decadence.”² This concept had developed out of one of the anthology’s few positive reviews, which came – as with *The Sheltering Sky* – from Tennessee Williams. In his review, Williams had argued that the negative terminology used by critics to dismiss Bowles work, and the works of others like him, “could be combatted by means of a manifesto,” with Williams proposing that such a group be considered as “The New School of Decadence.”³ Bowles himself was dismissive of the concept in his letter to Laughlin, and suggested that the idea of grouping his peers into a ‘school’ – “lumping together such disparate writers as Gore [Vidal], Truman [Capote] and Tennessee [Williams]” – was “manifestly ridiculous.”⁴ Despite Bowles’ aversion to the term, however, decadence could in fact provide a useful framework for considering the relationship between Bowles’ social commentary and use of form. As a term that refers back to late nineteenth century French poetry and the so-called “School of Decadence,” which included, amongst others, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and Paul Verlaine, the term ‘decadent’ contextualises Bowles’ preoccupation with patterning and structure by relating it to the intricate use of structure by such poets.⁵ In its literal sense meaning ‘falling away,’ moreover, the word ‘decadent’ captures Bowles’ nihilistic, confrontational position towards contemporary society. As I have argued, Bowles expressed a very literal

² Bowles, *In Touch*, 228.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Such a connection also places Bowles on a trajectory that begins with Poe, and includes the decadent poets and surrealist writers. It is surprising that Bowles rejected such a comparison, given the extent to which he sought to establish just such an alternative literary tradition.

desire to ‘tear down’ American society; his ambition for his fiction was to instigate a decadent turn in his readers, creating an impulse that would run counter to the cultural pursuit of progress.

If Bowles’ work *was* characterised by an aesthetic decadence, then, this came from his ability to reconcile aesthetic models drawn from surrealism and music within the form of the short story. Bowles was drawn to surrealism through a personal fascination with the subconscious, and long before he became personally involved with any of the activities of the movement, he had begun using automatic writing as a process for guiding his composition; surrealism offered, at least initially, a technique for literary production. Increasingly, however, Bowles turned to surrealism as a source of aesthetic inspiration and, as I have argued, used his short fiction as a way of mediating an aestheticised form of surrealism to an American audience. On the one hand, Bowles recuperated the dream aesthetics of surrealist work within a deliberately patterned structure. He was preoccupied with hypnotic and somnambulant experiences, and he worked to shape his texts into simulacra of dream experiences, in contrast to the surrealist model of presenting comparatively unstructured ‘dream images.’ On the other hand, he also drew on surrealism’s fascination with the ‘primitive,’ in order to develop his own model for presenting alternative perspectives within his fiction.

Through his work on *View* in particular – translating a range of texts, from works by writers like Borges, to sensational murder cases from Mexico, to Mayan sacred stories – Bowles shaped what was, again, a consciously aestheticised version of a ‘primitive’ or ‘non western’ perspective. In both cases, the kinds of aesthetic patterns that Bowles developed out of his involvement with surrealism were complemented by elements he drew directly from his work as a composer. However he may have figured the relationship between the mental processes involved in composing literary and musical

works, Bowles actively recuperated aspects of his distinctive musical aesthetic within his written works. The kind of music that Bowles prioritised was characterised at once by its abstraction and by its echoing of motifs from folk music and jazz. The strategies that he developed for rendering these elements of his music within his short stories overlapped with, and in some cases were inseparable from, the way that he adapted particular aspects of Surrealism to fit the short story.

More than any other quality of his writing, however, it was Bowles' formal developments within the genre of the short story that secured his reputation, especially amongst other authors. Throughout this thesis, I have returned to Bowles' preoccupation with the patterning and structure of his texts, and this general concern with precision – quite aside from any specific types of patterns – owes a considerable debt to Bowles' training and practice as a composer. On a practical level, Bowles composed his stories in a peculiarly musical way. In spite of his protestations that his work was innocent of authorial control, he judged his own works' success based on how well structured they were. He admitted, moreover, in several interviews that he conceived of form in a musical way, constructing his texts as if they were pieces of music, with the appropriate awareness of development, repetition and syncopation. Indeed, the apparent contradiction between his two accounts of his writing process – automatism on the one hand, following a surrealist model, and highly patterned precision on the other – can only be reconciled by understanding the influence of his work as a composer. Bowles developed his compressed, fragmented and reiterative model of short story, therefore, through an application of musical structure to aesthetic practices he drew from the work of the surrealists. This model was equally influenced, however, by Bowles' wider social considerations. Although certain of Bowles' interview responses may suggest that he was writing in a critical vacuum, he

was in fact very conscious of the trends in American literature – both in the writing itself, and in its criticism. In fact, the Bowlesian short story was directed by the oppositional stance it took towards the qualities that contemporary critics valorised as essentially American. Bowles’ insistence on claustrophobic narratives was intended as a direct challenge to his readers’ and critics’ expectations of open, expansive texts.

Understanding the relationship between Bowles’ use of form and his position towards mainstream American culture, along with the critical reception of *The Delicate Prey*, opens up wider implications about American literary culture in the immediate postwar period, and into the second half of the twentieth century. To begin with, the criticism that the text elicited suggests the extent to which nationalistic sentiment guided cultural criticism; critics’ encouragement to Bowles to ‘return to his native scene,’ and write about life in contemporary America reflects a broader preoccupation with the relationship between cultural production and society. The striking similarities between the specifically *formal* criticisms of the stories, moreover, indicates the extent to which the kind of liberal consensus that, as described by Hartz, governed American criticism at the time. In retrospect, the qualities most often used to describe America in the 1950s are those of conformity and consensus, and I would argue that this is reflected in the culture of mid-century literary criticism, which advocated a particular kind of narrative, based upon specific ideological resonances. In the same review in which he brought up the concept of a “New School of Decadence,” Williams noted the extent to which this consensus had rendered American culture rigid, arguing that “contemporary American society seems no longer inclined to hold itself open to very explicit criticism from within”.⁶ Even writers who positioned themselves and their work as countercultural – such as

⁶ Tennessee Williams, “The Human Psyche – Alone: *The Delicate Prey and Other Stories* by Paul Bowles,” *Where I Live: Selected Essays*, ed. John S. Bak, New York: New Directions, 2009, 202.

Kerouac, with works like *On the Road* – still organised their texts along the same formal and thematic lines that were advocated for by cultural critics like Trilling. As Williams argued, instead of “moving forward,” Bowles articulated his criticism of American culture through form, and a formal “retreat” into compression and isolation.⁷

Given his opposition to contemporary American culture, Bowles’ fiction was necessarily oriented around the presentation of an alternative perspective. Considering his fiction through the aesthetic influences of music and surrealism highlights both the technical and affective means by which he achieved such a perspective. It suggests, moreover, the possibility of broader inquiries into the representation of cultural alterneity. As I have argued, the negative reception of *The Delicate Prey* was motivated, at least in part, by Bowles’ increased use of non-western characters as protagonists; *The Sheltering Sky* communicated the experiences of three American travellers, but Bowles’ short fiction insistently took up the position of the ‘primitive.’ This formed one part of a wider network of alternative perspectives that Bowles was involved in mediating, from his incorporation of folk music into his own composition, to his work translating for *View*. As the first published translator of Borges into English, the first widely available translator of de Chirico’s *Hebdomeros*, and the first American translator of Sartre’s *Huis Clos* – and the originator of its English name, *No Exit* – Bowles played a significant role in expanding the cultural sphere of America beyond its own borders. Although he derived some of this energy from his involvement with Surrealism, however, the way that Bowles attempted to represent alternaeity through his short fiction moved beyond an ethnographic curiosity to cultural criticism.

⁷ Ibid, 203.

In considering Bowles from this perspective, his work prompts a wider line of study of dissonant or critical voices within mid-century America and suggests an alternative way of thinking about how its literary culture is understood now. Rather than focusing on questions of personal freedom, or textual expansiveness, this thesis instead suggests looking at an inward turn in literature – or indeed, a falling, or decadent turn. Bowles used a compressed and fragmented form of fiction to articulate a dissident perspective and positioned himself outside of the mainstream American literary tradition; indeed, the reception of his work suggests the value in considering other writers’ use of form to contest or challenge contemporary society. Considering the reception of *The Delicate Prey* retrospectively provides an access point for understanding the significance of Bowles’ work more generally. Although he spent the second half of his life in geographic isolation, Bowles’ writing belies the extent to which he was continuously invested – intellectually and artistically – in American culture, acknowledged little by subsequent critics. Often treated as an outsider, Bowles’ fiction has had an uncomfortable relationship with the traditional trajectory of American literature; this thesis has aimed to reconsider Bowles’ position and demonstrate the extent to which his isolation was a direct response to American culture.

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