

Two kinds of non-realist Modernist Space:  
a comparative reading of the 'deep-space' and 'layered-space' works of  
Mary Butts (1890-1937) and Jane Bowles (1917-1973).

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the  
University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy

by

Nathalie Isabelle Blondel

July 1989

## ABSTRACT

Two kinds of non-realist Modernist Space:  
a comparative reading of the 'deep-space' and 'layered-space' works of  
Mary Butts (1890-1937) and Jane Bowles (1917-1973)

by Nathalie Blondel

The aim of this thesis is to rescue from neglect the work of two Modernists: the English writer, Mary Butts and the American writer, Jane Bowles. These particular writers were chosen for two reasons. First, their work has not received any serious critical attention or booklength study, and in the case of Mary Butts, her novels have been out of print since they were first published in the 1920s and 1930s. This thesis, therefore, draws attention to their writing in the face of an unjustified neglect by providing contextual information as well as extensive bibliographies which include contemporary reviews. Second, these two writers present in their narratives qualitatively different kinds of non-realist Modernist prose involving characteristics which are highlighted through the terms 'deep space' and 'layered space' borrowed from the art critic, Harold Rosenberg.

A close reading of Mary Butts's work argues that it is an example of deep-space prose, that is, the continuation of Romanticism within Modernism as defined by Frank Kermode in The Romantic Image. The thesis discusses the extent to which her work is representative of the interests of her time (eg. the use of Grail symbolism, classical imagery and Freudian as well as Jungian psychoanalysis) and highlights the belief underlying all her writing that there are truths which transcend any single historical epoch.

The equally close reading of Jane Bowles's work focusses not only on her published prose narratives but also on the unpublished notebooks for a projected but never completed novel held by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at Austin, Texas. Her fictions lie outside the evocation of unending resonance depicted and embodied in both the content and style of Mary Butts's deep-space prose which draws the reader into a world where 'behind every deep another deep opens' (Robert Duncan). By contrast, Jane Bowles's idiosyncratic prose-style creates through wit and obliqueness a 'layered space' where her people are 'privacies' (Alfred Kazin) who exist in overlapping but isolated worlds. This thesis discusses how her shifting, elusive fiction systematically defies any single characterisation and denies the existence of any normative truths.

## Table of Contents

	<u>page</u>
<u>Acknowledgements</u>	i
<u>Introduction</u>	ii
<u>Chapter I</u> <u>Mary Butts (1890-1937): An Introduction</u>	1
<u>Chapter II</u> <u>Mary Butts's Deep-space Prose: Romanticism within Modernism or 'the Primordiality of the Sacred'</u>	43
<u>Chapter III</u> <u>Jane Bowles (1917-1973): An Introduction</u>	158
<u>Chapter IV</u> <u>Jane Bowles's Layered-space Prose: The 'Reproduction' of a Literary 'Landscape without Depth'</u>	190
<u>Conclusion</u>	282
<u>Bibliography</u>	286

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisor, Dr David Seed for his encouragement and particularly his unfailing assistance towards obtaining the crucial bursaries which enabled me to study unpublished material both in England and America; to Geoff Ward for first introducing me to Two Serious Ladies and for his enthusiastic support throughout the thesis; to the librarians of the Inter-Library Loan Office at the Sydney Jones Library, the British Museum and the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at Austin, Texas for their cheerful assistance; to Margaret Burton for typing the all too often illegible manuscript.

I am grateful to Robert Byington for allowing me access to his unpublished biography of Mary Butts; to Paul Bowles for his valuable comments and interest both during my discussions with him in Tangier in July 1987 and since then whilst I have been editing Jane Bowles's unpublished notebooks; and especially warm thanks are due to Camilla Bagg who has repeatedly extended her hospitality, allowed me to read unpublished material, provided much elucidatory information and shown unceasing enthusiasm and support for my work on Mary Butts.

My greatest thanks are reserved for Sara and my husband, Paul who at any time of the day and night were always willing to listen to and discuss my ideas or reassure me during my periods of self-doubt and without whom this thesis would never have been written.

## Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to rescue from neglect the work of two Modernists: the English writer Mary Butts (1890-1937) and the American writer Jane Bowles (1917-1973). The continued lack of critical attention to their works is reflected in their exclusion from both the most recent edition of The Oxford Companion to English Literature (1988) and the new Cambridge Guide to Literature in English (1988). The main part of the thesis will be arguing that the fiction of these two writers possesses an interest and value of its own, qualities which can be obscured if the reader approaches their works with inappropriate expectations of realism.

In the case of Mary Butts her work has for the most part been out of print since it was first published in the 1920s and 1930s so that much basic research was needed in order to compile what is in effect the first comprehensive bibliography of her work in prose.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Jane Bowles her work has been republished and it has received more attention mainly as a result of the 1981 biography by Millicent Dillon, A Little Original Sin. However despite a number of contemporary essays, reviews and longer articles to which I refer throughout the thesis, no full-length critical work exists on either writer.

As a result this thesis is partly an introduction to these two writers, describing (especially in the case of Mary Butts) the social and literary context within which they lived and worked. Although my reading is not a biographical one because this would do a disservice to the works themselves, nonetheless it will be helpful to consider the conditions under which they wrote. An important part of this context will also be to consider contemporary evaluations of their prose.

---

1. Her poetry (she wrote over one hundred and fifty poems) lies outside the parameters of this thesis.

For the sake of clarity the thesis is divided into four main chapters, two on each writer. The first and third chapters provide introductions to Mary Butts and Jane Bowles respectively, whilst the longer second and fourth chapters present a close reading of their fiction. The very large amount of material involved and its unfamiliarity due to its neglect necessitated a certain selectivity. The following discussion therefore concentrates on their longer prose narratives - Ashe of Rings (1925), Armed with Madness (1928), Death of Felicity Taverner (1932) by Mary Butts and Two Serious Ladies (1943) by Jane Bowles - although use is made of their other works wherever relevant. Since Mary Butts was a critic and essayist as well as a writer, reference is made to a number of her reviews and essays as well as to her historical fictions, short stories, letters and autobiography. Jane Bowles by contrast was never either a critic or reviewer; on the contrary it is reported that she never talked about her work and once declared in a letter, 'I have no opinions really. This is not just neurotic. It is very true.'<sup>2</sup> Apart from Two Serious Ladies reference is thus confined to her play, her short stories and her letters and whilst the thesis makes use of unpublished material with regard to both writers it does so particularly in the case of Jane Bowles whose notebooks are held by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at Austin, Texas. A number of interviews were also undertaken including several with Jane Bowles's former husband and literary executor, Paul Bowles and with Camilla Bagg, Mary Butts's daughter, both of whom provided much helpful information with regard to the two writers as well as a certain number of reviews of their work.

---

2. Jane Bowles to Paul Bowles (undated), Feminine Wiles (Santa Barbara, 1976), p.76.

There is little cross-reference between the chapters on Mary Butts and those on Jane Bowles as the reason for bringing them together is not based on any consonance between their work. Whilst both writers produced prose fictions which lie beyond the margins of realism, they are similar only in the scant long-term recognition their work has received in spite of high praise accorded by more famous contemporaries, such as Marianne Moore, Bryher, Charles Williams and Ford Madox Ford in the case of Mary Butts and John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote in the case of Jane Bowles. She was twenty when Mary Butts died yet they never met although curiously they did have friends in common, such as the American art collector Peggy Guggenheim and, more specifically, the American composer Virgil Thomson was a very close friend of both writers and was responsible for the publication of Mary Butts's work in small American magazines including Antaeus, which was edited by Paul Bowles. However whilst Jane Bowles may have read Mary Butts's work, she makes no mention of it in her letters and it certainly bears no resemblance to her own. Indeed the aim of this thesis is to show that their work occupies two different kinds of non-realist Modernist space; a generic difference which is considered with the help of two terms borrowed from the art critic Harold Rosenberg. In The Anxious Object (1964) he compares the 'deep-space concept of traditional painting ... to the layered space of post-Cezanne art' (my emphases).<sup>3</sup> The phrase 'deep space' will be used to denote writing which presents a unified symbology where meaning is acceded to through the central touchstones of memory and belief. The contrasting term 'layered space' denotes prose which denies the existence of normative truths or hermeneutic systems, presenting instead constantly shifting and hence elusive, overlapping worlds.

When reading Mary Butts's work the reader is drawn into a deep space

---

3. Harold Rosenberg, The Anxious Object (Chicago and London, 1982), p.114.

which involves an almost hypnagogic state in which the world is presented as a place of continually unfolding experiences. The overall impression is one of a journey of rediscovery of a familiar space which is powerfully evoked by cyclical reference to the relationship between past and present. In effect Mary Butts's work acts as a remembrancer, constantly reminding the reader that whilst things change, the fundamentals of human existence stay the same. The result is that her writing (like that of T.S. Eliot) provides the continuation of Romanticism within Modernism as described by Frank Kermode in The Romantic Image (1957). By combining a discussion of Kermode's argument and the development of the more graphic deep-space quality of her prose with reference to the French semiotician Jean Baudrillard's definition of some art as 'representative' in Simulations (1983), this thesis illustrates through a close reading of Mary Butts's work the extent to which it provides a (wrongfully and to some extent wilfully) neglected example of Romantic Modernism.

The reading of Jane Bowles's prose by contrast highlights that far from presenting a deep space into which the reader can gaze, it defies, like abstract painting, any sense of familiar depth. Instead the reader is offered a layered space which denies any sense of centre, boundaries or narrative closure. Whilst Mary Butts's work involves [re]discovery, Jane Bowles's work remains resolutely untenable, unfixable. Instead it is a concatenation of sliding layered spaces where people slip in and out of the text and each other's attention so that her writing accords with what Baudrillard terms an unending series of 'reproductions', in contrast to 'representative' fiction which infers a central model. Where Mary Butts's work provides a deep space which resonates and reverberates with meaning[s], the power of Jane Bowles's prose is achieved through a style where pain, humour, irony and inconsequentiality are melded in such a way as to defy any single critical characterisation.



Chapter I

Mary Butts (1890-1937): An Introduction

We are spectators of a situation which is a mask  
for another situation that existed perhaps some  
remote age or in a world outside time.

(Ashe of Rings, p.59)

There are men who make art new, there is no man  
who can make new art.

(The Macedonian, p.4)

(i)

In spite of her sudden death at the comparatively early age of 46, the literary corpus of the English writer Mary Butts (1890-1937) is substantial. It includes: three novels, three collections of short stories, two historical fictions, a partial autobiography, a prose narrative arranged in the form of letters, two pamphlets as well as a considerable number of poems, reviews and critical articles in a wide range of English and American little magazines and small press publications.<sup>1</sup> In 1974 the Ecco Press republished one of her historical fictions, Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra and in 1979 the epistolary narrative, Imaginary Letters was reprinted by the Talon Press. Aside from these two reissues and the recent publication of an expanded version of her autobiography, The Crystal Cabinet, Mary Butts's work has been out of print since it was first published in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 Respectively Ashe of Rings, Armed with Madness, Death of Felicity Taverner; Speed the Plough, Several Occasions, Last Stories; The Macedonian, Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra; The Crystal Cabinet; Imaginary Letters; Traps for Unbelievers, Warning to Hikers. Full details of poems, reviews, articles etc will be given in the bibliography.

2. Mary Butts, The Crystal Cabinet, second edition (Manchester, 1988). All references will be to this edition.

Whilst an incomplete list of her work is included in the New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature (1972) and in David Daiches's earlier literary history The Present Age: after 1920 (1958), Mary Butts's work was excluded by Daiches when he edited The Penguin Companion to Literature I: Britain and the Commonwealth (1971) and it is similarly absent from Modernism 1890-1930 edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane. More surprising even is Mary Butts's complete absence from two works which deal specifically with the period in which she wrote: Hugh Kenner's The Pound Era (1972) and Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940 (1986) by Shari Benstock.

In this introductory chapter I shall present some of the themes and motifs which characterise Mary Butts's fictional prose. I shall also include a certain amount of biographical information in order to provide some hypotheses as to why her work has on the whole been neglected both during her lifetime and (except for a few exceptions) in the fifty years since her death. It would be untrue, however, to say that Mary Butts has been entirely overlooked; for whilst no full-length critical study exists, a 760 page biography entitled 'The Quest for Mary Butts' was completed over a period of twenty years by an American academic, Robert Byington. Whilst containing valuable information, this biography remains unpublished. Byington claimed at a small conference held in America in 1984 on 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts', to which he had been invited, that his position was that of 'a literary historian and biographer. I am not a literary critic,' he added, 'I am interested in her works principally for the light that they throw upon her life.'<sup>3</sup> The only recent literary study to include Mary Butts is Writing for their Lives (1987) by Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia Smyers, with the subtitle The Modernist Women 1910-1940. It examines the 'connections' between

---

3. 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts' (23-24 February, 1984), unpublished tapescripts, p.2.

what they call a 'network' of less well-known women writers of the period. Alongside H.D., Bryher, Dorothy Richardson, Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy and others is Mary Butts. Whilst important in that it draws attention to Mary Butts's existence, Writing for their Lives (as the title suggests) tends to focus on the writing from the viewpoint that 'these women lived-what-they-wrote or wrote-what-they-lived' (Hanscombe).<sup>4</sup> This biographical approach - Smyers writes of her 'biographical obsession, [her] need to know the people behind the names and the work' - overshadows the critical reading of Mary Butts's work which is partly due to the constraints of the framework chosen, selective and brief.<sup>5</sup>

Mary Butts was born in South Dorset in a fairly large secluded property called Salterns situated about 12 miles from the prehistoric site of Badbury Rings in December 1890. This landscape provides the setting (with modifications) for all three of Mary Butts's novels and several of her short stories; the importance of growing up and living in a rural rather than an urban landscape is repeatedly stressed in her writing. Partly in response to the tremendous rise in popularity of hiking in the 1920s and 1930s, Mary Butts wrote Warning to Hikers a 1932 pamphlet which warns against the increasing prevalence of the 'cult of nature', the use of the countryside not as place to live in, but simply as another source of 'free' leisure.<sup>6</sup> Mary Butts writes (with respect to her own experience):

---

4. Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers, Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910-1940 (London, 1987), p.xv.

5. Hanscombe and Smyers, p.xviii.

6. The reviews of Warning to Hikers reveal the extent of the interest in hiking at this time, eg: John Hargreave, 'Happy when they're Hiking?', The New Age (9 May, 1932), 69-70; C. Henry Warren, 'Love of Nature?', The Bookman, 82, no. 488 (1932), 116-117; 'Townsmen and the Countryside', The Glasgow Herald (7 April, 1932), 8.

If it has been one's fortune to be brought up among physical beauties, natural and created, if one's senses and tastes have been formed on them; if also one was taught their use as a standard and to reject passionately all that was not like them, adult life becomes a greatly enhanced but not an easier thing.

Mary Butts compares this with 'a kind of psychic shock or rather strain' which will be endured by the dwellers of 'the majority-home of England, in a town or a suburb of a town'.<sup>7</sup> The people inhabiting her fictions are sharply divided between those who are 'town-tuned' (eg. Judy Marston, Serge Fyodorvitch in Ashe of Rings, Dudley Carston in Armed with Madness and Nick Kralin in Death of Felicity Taverner), and those who respond to the mysterious forces of Nature (eg. Anthony, Van and Val Ashe in Ashe of Rings, and Picus, Scylla and Felix who occur in both Armed with Madness and Death of Felicity Taverner). The importance of the countryside in the work of Mary Butts is explained by Hugh Ross-Williamson, a writer who was enticed by Mary Butts's work in the twenties and who became acquainted with Mary Butts in the 1930s. In his 'Portrait of Mary Butts' (published in The Bookman in December 1931) Ross-Williamson declared:

Country-writers we have had in plenty. There are those who turn to Nature as a highly-idealised form of escape from urbanity; and there are those, inspired by reaction from this school, who delight in exhibiting the sordidness and narrowness of rusticity by reminding us that a picturesque village may contain more squalor than a hideous slum. With neither class has Mary Butts anything whatever to do. In the first place she accepted the country without comparisons. To live there was not a mode of existence to be contrasted with the lot of the city-dweller; it gave her the only background for experience she knew. If she judged it by any standards, they were the historical ones of family tradition. She was the heir of Hellas. It was on a hill that Endymion slept; Aphrodite had risen from the sea and in the woods Adonis died: Persephone haunted the meadows and Pan the pursuer still lingered by the reeds in the marshes. She had inherited their land. Gradually she came to understand them. If they began as real people, they ended as equally real forces, which refused to be moralised over but demanded acceptance. The earth had magic, but it was

---

7. Mary Butts, Warning to Hikers (London, 1932), pp.6, 8-9.

not necessarily good magic - and, good or bad, it could not be explained away. More, in certain cases it could not even be explained. All she knew was that she was the child of it. She must express it as well as she could, but Blake had taught her that the perception of a mystery does not carry with it the power or the necessity of rational and logical interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

The influence of Blake on Mary Butts was pictorial rather than literary (with the exception of her autobiography named after Blake's poem, 'The Crystal Cabinet'). Her great-grandfather Thomas Butts had been the patron and friend of William Blake and Mary Butts grew up surrounded by a large collection of his paintings, until a change in family fortunes forced their sale to W. Graham Robertson in April 1906 who eventually gave and bequeathed them to the Tate. Mary Butts's early childhood was spent in Dorset at Salterns, the family home, with her parents and much later a younger brother until her father's death and mother's remarriage. She was sent away to school in St. Andrew's in Scotland in her early teens. On leaving school she returned to her birthplace, studied at Westfield College in London and then returned once again to Salterns. A detailed account of her life until this point just before the outbreak of the First World War is given by Mary Butts in The Crystal Cabinet (1937), written shortly before her death. The manuscript, already in proofs, was then heavily edited by the dedicatee of The Crystal Cabinet, her friend and literary executor, Angus Davidson (who at one time had been the assistant to the Woolfs at the Hogarth Press) and it was published two months later in May 1937. Whilst the writer and friend of Mary Butts, Naomi Royde-Smith claimed that The Crystal Cabinet was conceived when it was written, this was disputed in 'Recognition not Farewell', a posthumous tribute to Mary Butts, by Bryher [Winifred Ellerman], the writer and editor of Life and Letters Today.<sup>9</sup> Bryher

---

8. Hugh Ross-Williamson, 'Portrait of Mary Butts', The Bookman (Xmas, 1931), p.189.

9. Naomi Royde-Smith, 'The Crystal Cabinet', Time and Tide (5 June, 1937), p.756.

claimed that The Crystal Cabinet had been in Mary Butts's mind for many years as she had given an oral version of it to Bryher when they had spent time together in Florence in 1924 (strangely, in view of the eulogic character of 'Recognition not Farewell', Bryher makes not even a passing mention of Mary Butts in her memoir, The Heart to Artemis (1963) in which she speaks of her time in Florence).<sup>10</sup> The Crystal Cabinet became Mary Butts's most popular work but caused a certain amount of controversy about its degree of veracity, as her brother, Anthony Butts responded to a review of The Crystal Cabinet in The Spectator with a letter in which he disputed aspects of Mary Butts's account, especially where she describes how her mother burnt some of her father's books shortly after his death.<sup>11</sup>

During the First World War Mary Butts worked with her future husband, the writer and publisher John Rodker, whose Ovid Press published T.S. Eliot's Ara Vos Prec (1920) and the first publication of Ezra Pound's 4th Canto in 1917 and Hugh Selwyn Mauberley in 1920. In spite of Kenner's exclusion of Mary Butts from The Pound Era, several accounts including Humphrey Carpenter's recent biography of Ezra Pound, A Serious Character (1988) state that Pound and Mary Butts knew one another at this time.<sup>12</sup> Iris Barry wrote that in 1916 'another regular diner [at Pound's table] was Mary Butts, with her long white Rossetti throat and vermilion red hair ... just married to John Rodker at the other end of the table'.<sup>13</sup> Nor was she merely an acquaintance, for from his correspondence with Ford

- 
10. Bryher, 'Recognition not Farewell', Life and Letters To-day, 17 no.9 (1937), p.159.
  11. The Crystal Cabinet, pp.107-108; J.M. Hone, 'Mary Butts', The Spectator (4 June, 1937), pp.1059-1060; Anthony Butts, 'The Crystal Cabinet', The Spectator (18 June, 1937), p.1149. The accuracy of Anthony Butts's own account is questionable as he was not present at the incident in question and would have been a very young child at that time.
  12. Humphrey Carpenter, A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound (London, 1988), p.335.
  13. Charles Norman, Ezra Pound, second edition (London, 1969), p.197. In fact Mary Butts and John Rodker were only married in 1919.

Madox Ford, it can be seen that Pound admired Mary Butts's work and encouraged its publication as it began to appear in small magazines at the end of the war, and one of Pound's biographers writes that they met in Paris in 1924, whilst Mary Butts also visited Pound the previous year in Rapallo.<sup>14</sup>

Mary Butts and John Rodker had a daughter but soon separated and Mary Butts then left England for the Continent in the company of Cecil Maitland, a Scottish artist and Joyce critic who shared with Mary Butts a fascination for the occult and magic. Whilst uncertain whether they practised magic privately, a friend of Mary Butts, the writer Douglas Goldring, (who had worked as Ford's assistant when he was editor of The London Review in 1908) records that there were pentangles and circles chalked on Maitland's bedroom floor. Mary Butts and Maitland's interest led them to visit the English arch-magician Aleister Crowley (The Beast 666) at his abbey at Cefalu in Italy in 1921 where rites involving magic, sex and drug-taking were performed. Goldring, who devotes a chapter to Mary Butts and Maitland in South Lodge (1942), maintains that Mary Butts merely 'dabbled' in the occult, but this is disputed by various other accounts including the Great Beast's autobiography, The Confessions of Aleister Crowley (1969).<sup>15</sup> Crowley, who tends always to exonerate himself in his memoirs introduces Mary Butts as 'a large white red-haired maggot'.<sup>16</sup> The reason for this unflattering physical description together with his open contempt for her work (see pp.20-21 below) is given by John Symonds in his biography of Crowley The Great Beast (1973). In a chapter called 'Cakes of Light

- 
14. Pound/Ford: The Story of a Literary Friendship, edited by Brita Lindberg-Seyersted (London, 1982), pp.34, 36, 77, 186; Norman, p.267; C. David Heymann, Ezra Pound: The Last Rower (New York, 1980), p.193; Douglas Goldring, The Nineteen Twenties (London, 1945), pp.213-214.
  15. Douglas Goldring, South Lodge (London, 1942), pp.159, 148, 161-162.
  16. The Confessions of Aleister Crowley, edited by John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (New York, 1971), p.969.

for Mary Butts', Symonds states that Mary Butts was one of the few people whose 'clairvoyante capacity' was equal to that of Crowley himself.<sup>17</sup> This claim is supported by Hugh Ross-Williamson, 'I'm quite sure in those early days at The Salterns,' he declares 'she would chat with the gods and goddesses. And in that sense she knew more than anybody. There was nothing that Crowley could teach her, really. I mean not from that point of view.' (Ross-Williamson's emphases).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, whatever his personal antagonism for Mary Butts, Crowley himself pays tribute to her knowledge of the occult. In 1921, at the time of Mary Butts's visit to the Abbey, Crowley was revising Magick, a treatise which was published in 1929. 'I showed the manuscripts to Soror Rhodon (Mary Butts),' he writes in his autobiography:

and asked her to criticise it thoroughly. I am extremely grateful to her for her help, especially in indicating a large number of subjects which I had not discussed. At her suggestion I wrote essay upon essay to cover every phase of the subject. The result has been the expansion of the manuscript into a vast volume, a complete treatise upon the theory and practise of Magick, without any omissions.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst proving Mary Butts's extensive knowledge of magic and illustrating her helpfulness to Crowley, it is reported that when Mary Butts and Maitland returned to Paris they looked 'like two ghosts and were hardly recognisable', maintaining that the experience had left them weak and addicted to opium.<sup>20</sup> It was an experience of which neither they nor H.D., Bryher and McAlmon who visited them at the Abbey, would later speak, Mary Butts only breaking her silence a year later to give an interview to the Sunday Express in November 1922.<sup>21</sup> The latter article

- 
17. John Symonds, The Great Beast, second edition (St. Albans, 1973), p.313.
18. Robert Byington, 'The Quest for Mary Butts', unpublished manuscript, p.742.
19. The Confessions of Aleister Crowley, p.1018.
20. Nina Hamnett, Laughing Torso, second edition (London, 1984), p.177; South Lodge, p.148.
21. Hanscombe and Smyers, pp.108-109.



entitled 'Complete Exposure of "Drug Fiend" Author' increased Crowley's notoriety by declaring that 'the story of the bestial orgies conducted by Aleister Crowley in July sounds like the ravings of a criminal lunatic'. Mary Butts was not mentioned by name in the article but its effect was to constrain Crowley's publishers to let his novel, Diary of a Drug Fiend go out of print.<sup>22</sup>

A month later Mary Butts gave another interview to the press, this time in connection with a court case where she and two other women were included on the jury. The case of Nelson versus Moir was one of slander in which the plaintiff Nelson claimed that the defendant James Moir a heavyweight boxer had accused him of committing 'an act of indecency' with the defendant's son. The defendant denied damages. Since the case would involve 'evidence of the most unsavoury kind', the three women on the jury were given the option to 'retire', an option which Mary Butts and one other woman declined. It was, declared Mary Butts in an interview to the Pall Mall Gazette:

a question involving several important principles. It is not enough for a woman merely to take advantage of the judge's permission to retire if the case is such as he thinks likely to offend her susceptibilities. There is much more in it than the factor of delicacy alone.

To begin with, it does not at all follow that because a woman knows and hears many of the unpleasant facts of life she is thereby coarsened. In any case women know a great deal more than they are credited with knowing, and are quite capable of forming a reasoned judgement on the facts.

Women are now taking a continually increasing part in public life, and they must, if any good is to come of it, take their part thoroughly. There must be no shrinking or shirking.

... I consider it most necessary that there should be a frank and adequate knowledge on moral and criminal questions. The law's decisions will be hampered and woman's usefulness will be rendered abortive unless all obscurantist prejudice is done away with.

And this view is one which is more broadly held than the mass of the public are at present aware of.<sup>23</sup>

---

22. 'Complete Exposure of "Drug Fiend" Author', Sunday Express (26 November, 1922), p.7; Symonds, p.332.

23. 'Unpleasant Court Cases', Pall Mall Gazette (20 December, 1922), p.5.

When the case came up for appeal in the following February it was rejected but not before the issue of women jurors in 'unpleasant court cases' was once again raised. Supporting the right of the two women to stay, the presiding Judge, Lord Justice Bankes was reported as saying that 'whether one agreed or disagreed with them, one could not look on their motive in remaining in the jury-box to listen to disagreeable statements otherwise than as an honourable motive and he refused to draw any conclusions from the fact that these two women did not retire ... In any case there were only two women on the jury, against ten men'.<sup>24</sup> Thus even though the judge's own sense of propriety was not offended, it is interesting to note that he felt the need to reassure the public that the imbalance in the numbers of women to men would ensure that their presence constituted no threat to 'justice' ...

The fact of Mary Butts's outspokenness on this delicate issue (unlike in the 'drug fiend' interview, her name is cited here) and its taking place shortly before the publication of her first volume of short stories Speed the Plough in March 1923, may well have predisposed her future reading public against her work. At the very least the publicity given to the trial means that her name would not have been unknown at this time.

During most of the 1920s Mary Butts was based in Paris from where she travelled to Austria, Germany and Italy with Maitland. She did spend some time in London where we catch a glimpse of her in Evelyn Waugh's autobiography, A Little Learning. Waugh wrote, 'my brother Alec introduced me to a bohemian world. ... There was Mary Butts, a genial voluptuous lady of the avant-garde who had been in Aleister Crowley's black-magical circle at Cefalu. She had been married once in the inner circle of Montparnasse. Now she had a large house in Belsize Park which served as a lodging for the shifting community of mostly unmarried couples'.<sup>25</sup> In fact, after

---

24. 'Court of Appeal', The Times (17 February, 1923), p.4.

25. Evelyn Waugh, A Little Learning (London, 1963), pp.211-212.

her separation from Maitland in 1925 she continued to live mainly in Paris until the end of the decade. In 1930 she married the artist, Gabriel Aitken who had in his youth been involved with the Bloomsbury Circle (especially Maynard Keynes) and whose head had been immortalised in a sculpture by Epstein entitled variously 'Seraph' and 'Cherub'. Mary Butts and Aitken moved between Sussex, London and Newcastle before they finally settled at Sennen Cove, a small village on the Cornish Coast in January 1932 and this landscape features in several of her short stories written in the 1930s such as 'Look Homeward, Angel' and 'The Guest'. During these years Mary Butts began to write reviews regularly for The Bookman (then edited by Hugh Ross-Williamson) as well as Time and Tide (edited by Bryher). She stayed in Sennen after her separation from Aitken in 1934 and died there suddenly from a haemorrhage in March 1937.

Ford Madox Ford who considered Mary Butts to have a 'streak of genius' knew her in Paris where he published some of her work in his short-lived but prestigious journal, The Transatlantic Review (1924).<sup>26</sup> Like Ford, Mary Butts had a strained relationship with members of the Bloomsbury circle. At one time she was involved with Roger Fry although, like Bryher, he omits any mention of her in his memoirs. Quentin Bell knew Mary Butts quite well and wrote an (unpublished) account of his visit to her flat in Paris in the 1920s entitled 'Bugs at the Rue de Montessuy'. In 1949, twelve years after Mary Butts's death, E.M. Forster remembered only her red hair and the fact that he 'found her "flashing" but seemed to know little of her work'.<sup>27</sup> Considering that her work received over 150 critical reviews during her lifetime, Forster's alleged ignorance of her work seems rather unlikely. Especially when we consider the fact that Virginia Woolf's diaries and letters reveal that she met Mary Butts

---

26. 'South Lodge, pp.xvii, 2, 147; Ford published Mary Butts's short story 'Deosil' ['Widdershins'], The Transatlantic Review, 1 no 3 (1924), 40-50 (see below, p.64) and her poem 'Pythian Ode', The Transatlantic Review, 2 no 3 (1924), 235-239.

27. Robin Blaser, 'Afterword', Imaginary Letters (Vancouver, 1979), p.64.

several times and rejected both Ashe of Rings and Armed with Madness in the 1920s for the Hogarth Press. Of Ashe of Rings Virginia Woolf wrote in a letter to Katherine Arnold-Forster that it was 'an indecent book about the Greeks and the Downs', but she did concede after rejecting Armed with Madness in July 1927, 'I fancy that we don't do as well as we should with novels'.<sup>28</sup>

Mary Butts was no more successful with regard to T.S. Eliot (who later claimed, in a letter to Byington to have known her 'slightly'), for as editor of Faber and Faber, he rejected Mary Butts's historical novel The Macedonian in 1932.<sup>29</sup> This occasioned some bitterness on the part of Mary Butts as Eliot mislaid the only copies of Aitken's illustrations to The Macedonian, which had been sent with the manuscript. She was similarly unsuccessful when she submitted a short story 'Mappa Mundi' to Eliot, this time as editor of The New Criterion, as it was rejected in February 1937.<sup>30</sup> Yet not only was most of her work published in England during her lifetime, but according to Goldring, she was by the time she died 'in a fair way towards becoming one of the most respected of our "high-brow" women writers'.<sup>31</sup>

Quite apart from a number of general book reviews three of Mary Butts's articles deserve a separate mention: Edgell Rickword had been the editor of Calendar, a highly regarded journal of the 1920s which had published a short story by Mary Butts.<sup>32</sup> Rickword then collected and published two volumes of essays on contemporary writers. In the second volume of

---

28. The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume II: 1920-1924, edited by Anne Olivier Bell (London, 1978), p.209; The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf. Volume II: 1912-1922, edited by Nigel Nicolson (London, 1976), p.579; The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume III: 1925-1930, edited by Anne Olivier Bell (London, 1980), p.150.

29. Byington, pp.74, 298.

30. Byington, p.273.

31. South Lodge, p.151.

32. Mary Butts, 'Later Life of Theseus, King of Athens', Calendar, 1 no.4 (1925), 257-265; subsequently included in Georgian Stories, 1927, edited by Arthur Waugh and collected in Several Occasions (1932).

Scrutinies (1931) alongside an essay on Virginia Woolf by William Empson, one on James Joyce by Jack Lindsay, one on Wyndham Lewis by Rickword himself, and others, was an essay on Aldous Huxley by Mary Butts.<sup>33</sup>

Her critical history of supernatural fiction entitled 'Ghosties and Ghoulies', published serially in The Bookman in 1933, reveals the extent of Mary Butts's knowledge of the supernatural, which she explored in fictional form in short stories such as 'With and Without Buttons' and 'Mappa Mundi'.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, her essay on M.R. James in The London Mercury in 1934 has since been acknowledged as the first critical article on his work.<sup>35</sup> The inclusion of Mary Butts in The Author's and Writer's Who's Who 1934 is a sign that her work was beginning to be recognised and Mary Butts herself points to this possibility in a letter written shortly before she died. When advising what should be done with her manuscripts, diary and letters, she writes that their value 'all depends on my future reputation. If it goes on as it is going now they might be really valuable'.<sup>36</sup>

However, apart from a few tributes following her death, a general article on Mary Butts's work by an American, Louis Adeane in the World Review in 1951, several scattered reviews and a selection of extracts from journals edited by Robert Byington and Glen Morgan published in Art and Literature in 1965, thirty years after her death Mary Butts's work had

---

33. Mary Butts, 'Aldous Huxley', Scrutinies. Volume II, collected by Edgell Rickword (London, 1931), 74-98.

34. Mary Butts, 'Ghosties and Ghoulies', The Bookman, 83 no.496 (1933), 386-389; no.497 (1933), 433-435; no.498 (1933), 493-494; 84 no.499 (1933), 12-14.

35. Mary Butts, 'The Art of Montagu [sic] James', The London Mercury, 29 no.172 (1934), 306-313; Michael Cox, M.R. James: An Informal Portrait (Oxford, 1986), p.141.

36. Byington, p.504.

neither been republished nor received any serious recognition.<sup>37</sup> Frank Baker, a writer who knew Mary Butts in Cornwall, pointed to the continuing neglect of her work in his autobiography I Follow But Myself (1968), in which he includes an entire chapter on his impressions and reminiscences about Mary Butts in which he wrote:

Since her death, which was lamented by those few critics who saw the value of her work, she [has] remained an elusive and mysterious figure on the literary scene of her times. Few people now know her name and her books are long out of print.<sup>38</sup>

It is still generally the case that if Mary Butts is known at all today it is as a result of the artists of the Lost Generation whom she knew in Paris in the 1920s. Whilst Nancy Cunard, the English heiress who owned The Hours Press in the 1920s, maintained that Mary Butts was 'a well-known literary figure in those days', the American painter Eugene MacCowen who also knew Mary Butts has pointed out that her work 'enjoyed precious little [interest] during her lifetime'.<sup>39</sup> One of the reasons for this lack of recognition may be that given by a contemporary of Mary Butts, the writer and critic Rebecca West, who is quoted as saying that 'Mary Butts had a great reputation as an avant garde writer, but nobody read her books'.<sup>40</sup> This claim is echoed by Kitty Cannell, a figure of the 1920s who also maintained that she had never read Mary Butts's books although she knew her well. However this claim is disputed by Margaret

---

37. Naomi Royde Smith, 'Letter to Editor', Time and Tide, 18 (1937), 378; John Raynor, 'In Memoriam: Mary Butts', Time and Tide, 18 (1937), 408; 'Miss Mary Butts, Imaginative Gift', The Times (13 March, 1937), 146b; Bryher 'Recognition not Farewell', Life and Letters To-day, 17, no.9 (1937), 159-164; David Hope, Mary Butts, Fire-Bearer, Sennen Pamphlets, 1 (Sennen, 1937); H.F. Ingram, 'Poole's Forgotten Genius: The Story of Mary Butts', Poole and Dorset Herald (23 February, 1966), 2; (2nd March 1966), 2; Louis Adeane, 'Mary Butts', World Review (November 1951), 23-27; John Wieners, untitled review, Floating Bear, 26 (1962), 287; Robert Byington and Glen Morgan, 'Mary Butts', Art and Literature, 7 (1965), 162-179.

38. Frank Baker, I Follow But Myself (London, 1968), p.141.

39. Byington, pp.67, 349.

40. Byington, p.378.

Anderson who along with Jane Heap 'loved Ashe of Rings', and J.C. Squire, editor of The Mercury, admired Death of Felicity Taverner and Several Occasions.<sup>41</sup> Certainly it is Mary Butts's flamboyant personality rather than her work which is highlighted as she 'flits through the voluminous memoirs and autobiographies of the expatriates in Paris in the twenties like an iridescent titian-haired will-o-the-wisp'.<sup>42</sup> She appears, to give some examples, in The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams, Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company, Harold Acton's Memoirs of an Aesthete, Stella Bowen's Drawn from Life, Nina Hamnett's Laughing Torso, Peggy Guggenheim's Out of This Century and endless others. In her journal Mary Butts writes of her visit to Gertrude Stein's flat in Paris, and in a letter she describes a party given by Natalie Barney for Djuna Barnes.<sup>43</sup> In an interview given in 1971, the poet Edouard Roditi when asked about Djuna Barnes replied, 'she was one of the two very strange writers in Paris. The other,' he continued:

an English writer, was called Mary Butts. Mary Butts is almost forgotten; very few people read her, but she was an extraordinary writer too. They both led very odd solitary lives - extremely neurotic lives.<sup>44</sup>

In Djuna (1983), his biography of Djuna Barnes, Andrew Field claims that she 'might sit more comfortably on the Parnassus of her time with Proust, Eliot and Joyce than many writers who show clear signs of becoming period pieces'.<sup>45</sup> One of the writers or 'period pieces' named by Field is Mary Butts. Field's comment about Mary Butts is not an uncommon one; on the contrary, a 1943 study entitled The Literature of England AD 500-

---

41. Byington, pp.422, 175, 629-630.

42. Byington and Morgan, p.163.

43. Byington and Morgan, pp.171-172; 'The Writing and the World of Mary Butts', unpublished tapescripts, p.5.

44. Daniel Halpern, 'Interview with Edouard Roditi', Antaeus, 2 (1971), p.104.

45. Andrew Field, Djuna: The Formidable Miss Barnes (Austin, 1985), p.120.

1942 by W.J. Entwistle and E. Gillett cites Mary Butts only once as one 'among other women writers who have written workmanlike and, at times, satisfying fiction'.<sup>46</sup> The dismissive character of this comment is repeated in James R. Mellow's 1975 study Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and her Company. 'The little magazines were a feature of the 20s,' writes Mellow in a chapter suitably called 'Entrances, Exits':

The same names - Joyce, Pound, Stein, William Carlos Williams - appeared from an issue to the next, crossed over from one magazine to another. They were names that survived the decade, others - Harold Loeb ... Mina Loy ... Mary Butts - were to drift out of sight.<sup>47</sup>

In 1925 Mary Butts spent the summer with friends at the Hotel Welcome in Villefranche-sur-Mer. This visit as mentioned in the following three accounts by an English, a French and an American artist reveals the wide-ranging and overlapping character of the social groups within and around which Mary Butts lived and wrote. It helps to explain how her work could have drifted out of sight, for as an artist Mary Butts never became integrated in any single modernist movement; whilst she spent much time with the expatriate writers in Paris of the 1920s, and her work is sometimes set in Paris, yet for the most part, it is determinedly deeply embedded in the English landscape; so much so that in an essay in a collection entitled, On Living in an Old Country (1985) Patrick Wright explored the relationship between Mary Butts's writing and the English landscape between the wars.

In Saying Life (1961), the English painter, Francis Rose writes of Mary Butts that she was:

very pale and English in her appearance. Her fine voice was cultured and high-pitched, and was as much a part of

---

46. W.J. Entwistle and E. Gillett, The Literature of England AD 500-1942 (London, 1943), p.237.

47. James R. Mellow, Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company (New York, 1975), p.341.



her personality as the wheel of pale green jade that hung from one of her ears, generally entangled in her untidy red hair. Mary lived between her studies of perfect English (in general via Fowler), and the dramas of her friends. When she arrived at Villefranche she was accompanied by Nina Hamnett, the fashionable artist of the Bloomsbury set. Nina Hamnett was perfectly dressed by Chanel without entirely hiding her famous figure, which was already known as the 'Laughing Torso'. She was ... incredibly neat ... One could not imagine her ... travelling with the untidy dramatic Mary Butts ...

Mary Butts, between writing, smoking opium, arranging misamours of Igor her muscular, hysterical boy-friend, managed to teach me a great deal about English poetry, ... Many evenings were spent in her room reading aloud Shelley and Keats and translating some works by Cocteau. I owe a great deal to Mary Butts. She taught me to find delight in the sound of English words and to see poetic resonance in a Blake-like way. 48

The French Surrealist artist Jean Cocteau, who was in Villefranche at this time recovering from a disintoxication cure from opium, mentions Mary Butts in his (posthumous) autobiography Professional Secrets (1972) although, surprisingly, not in Opium (1930), the account of his cure.<sup>49</sup> The friendship between them is reflected further in the line drawing Cocteau did of Mary Butts in 1926 and his illustrations which accompany Mary Butts's Imaginary Letters, a fictional series of letters published privately and anonymously in Paris. Mary Butts's short story 'The House Party', first published in Pagany in 1930 is loosely based on the time spent in Villefranche. It is dedicated to Cocteau and the protagonist, André is modelled on him. Furthermore there are repeated references in Mary Butts's work to the Paris nightclub 'Le Boeuf sur le Toit', named after one of Cocteau's farces and which he opened in Paris in the 1920s.

Nor is Cocteau's the only drawing of Mary Butts; two other portraits were also painted - one by Nina Hamnett in 1918 and the other in 1924 by the English painter Cedric Morris, who later established the East Anglian

---

48. Francis Rose, Saying Life (London, 1961), p.58.

49. Professional Secrets: an autobiography of Jean Cocteau, edited by Robert Phelps (New York, 1972), pp.102-103, 107.

School of Painting in Norfolk.<sup>50</sup> In 1953 Angus Wilson published his semi-fictional, semi-biographical satire subtitled A Scrap-book of the Twenties and whose title For Whom the Cloche Tolls, is a parodic reference to Hemingway's 1940 novel, For Whom the Bell Tolls. Wilson's satire was illustrated by Philippe Julian and one of the illustrations reveals the crowded terrasse of La Coupole, a Paris cafe which with Le Dome, La Rotonde, Les Deux Magots and others, was much frequented by expatriate artists. The caption accompanying the illustration maintains that it was drawn in 1925 and claims that two of the figures depicted are Mary Butts and Aleister Crowley.<sup>51</sup> That Mary Butts should be included in this satire points to how well-known she was at the time.

The third artist to mention Mary Butts in Villefranche was the American writer and publisher Robert McAlmon who in Being Geniuses Together describes how Mary Butts's hair (her most often remembered feature) 'which looked as though it had been soaked in red ink, framed her full white face and her thin-skinned lips'.<sup>52</sup> As editor of Contact Editions McAlmon was responsible for publishing Mary Butts's first novel, Ashe of Rings, in 1925 after its rejection by the Hogarth Press. McAlmon's reference to Mary Butts's visit to Villefranche is oblique, but nonetheless pertinent. He is discussing Four Saints in Three Acts by Gertrude Stein which the American composer, Virgil Thomson had set to music:

... now that Florine Stettheimer's stage designs and a chorus of Harlem negroes have given a New York success to Thomson's and Gertrude Stein's opera [one cannot] doubt either the force, originality, or genius of the Stein or the Thomson. Thomson ought better, however, to have set Mary Butts and Villefranche to music. There were more than four saints there, with Cocteau the 'Master'.<sup>52</sup>

- 
50. Denise Hooker, Nina Hamnett: Queen of Bohemia (London, 1986), p.114; A reproduction of the Cedric Morris painting accompanies the Byington and Morgan article.
51. Angus Wilson and Philippe Julian, For Whom the Cloche Tolls (London, 1953), p.44.
52. Robert McAlmon and Kay Boyle, Being Geniuses Together: 1920-1930 (London, 1984), p.113.

As McAlmon knew, an artistic collaboration between Thomson and Mary Butts could have been extremely feasible in that as Thomson confirms in his autobiography, he and Mary Butts had an affair in 1927 which at one point seemed likely to end in marriage.<sup>53</sup> Instead Thomson returned to America but was responsible for submitting (unbeknown to Mary Butts) three of her short stories and three poems to the American magazine Pagany, which accepted them in spite of their claim to print work only by Americans.<sup>54</sup> Thomson's constant support for Mary Butts's work from that time on, served to increase what was an already welcoming interest in her writing from other little American magazines such as The Dial, The Little Review and Hound and Horn. It was as a result of Thomson's enthusiasm that a short story by Mary Butts, 'The Golden Bough' was included in a special prose volume of Antaeus in 1974. As the American Black Mountain poet Robert Duncan has pointed out, there was 'more of a carte blanche for Mary Butts's writing in America in the twenties and thirties than there was in England'.<sup>55</sup> Along with Marianne Moore, the American poet who reviewed Armed with Madness in 1928 and who in Predilections (1963) wrote that she still remembered the 'impact' of reading Mary Butts's short story 'Speed the Plow' in The Dial in 1921, Robert Duncan is one of the few writers to openly acknowledge the influence of Mary Butts's work on his own, a point which I shall consider later.<sup>56</sup> That Mary Butts had an

- 
53. Virgil Thomson, Virgil Thomson (London, 1967), pp.86-89; K. O'Donnell Hoover and John Cage, Virgil Thomson (Sagamore, 1959), pp.68-73.
54. Letter from Mary Butts in November 1931 to Richard John, editor of Pagany, cited in Byington, p.591; Mary Butts's contributions to Pagany were the following: 'The House-Party', 1 no.1 (1930), 7-24; 'Heartbreak House', 1 no.3 (1930), 1-4; 'Scylla and Charybdis', 1 no.4 (1930), 6-17; 'Thinking of Saint Petronius Arbiter', 2 no.1 (1931), 95-97; 'Rites of Passage', 2 no.2 (1931), 62-63; 'Green', 2 no.4 (1931), 1-13.
55. 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts', p.20.
56. Marianne Moore, 'The House-Party', The Dial, 85 (1928), 258-260; Marianne Moore, Predilections (London, 1956), p.104.

influence is certain for two American poets, Frank O'Hara and John Wieners refer to her in their poetry.<sup>57</sup> Yet why she should have more success with American rather than English magazines during her lifetime seems partly to be explained by the lack of proximity between herself and American editors. For Mary Butts's eccentric personality and lifestyle led her to make personal enemies in England which influenced attitudes to her work whilst American editors had no such close contact.

Attitudes to Mary Butts and her work are revealed in a number of thinly veiled satirical portraits, illustrating the extent to which ignorance about her work in England was perhaps based more on personal dislike than a lack of knowledge about the works themselves. In 1922 Crowley published Diary of a Drug Fiend, his account of addiction to cocaine, heroin and opium. It is here that the first person narrator, Peter Pendragon, introduces us to the unnamed but clearly recognisable Mary Butts as:

a fat, bold, red-headed slut. She reminded me of a white maggot. She exuded corruption. She was pompous, pretentious, and stupid. She gave herself out as a great authority on literature; but all her knowledge was parrot, and her own attempts in that direction the most deplorably dreary drivel that had been printed even by the chattering clique which she financed.<sup>58</sup>

Mary Butts's work, her 'most deplorably dreary drivel' is later alluded to in equally contemptuous terms in what is an obvious reference to her stay with Maitland at Crowley's Abbey the previous year. Peter Pendragon has arrived at King Basil Lamus's [Crowley] Abbey and is being warned about the dangers of laziness by Athena (sic), King Lamus's

---

57. Frank O'Hara, 'Cantata', The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara, edited by Donald Allen (New York, 1972), p.489; furthermore, his poem 'Blue Territory' was originally entitled 'For Mary Butts', see p.539; John Wieners, 'Klugwerth', Selected Poems 1958-1984, edited by Raymond Foye (Santa Barbara, 1986), p.245.

58. Aleister Crowley, Diary of a Drug Fiend (York Beach, 1985), p.14.

pupil.<sup>59</sup> She declares:

We had two people here last year, absolutely hopeless rotters. They called themselves writers, and imagined they were working if they retired solemnly after breakfast and produced half a page of piffle by lunch. But they didn't know the meaning of the word; and the place nearly drove them insane. They were bored with the Abbey, and bored with each other, and were very insulted because everybody laughed at them. But they couldn't see the way out, and wouldn't take it when it was shown them. It made them physically ill, and they went away at last to every one's relief to an environment where they could potter about indefinitely and pose as great geniuses.<sup>60</sup>

It was after this novel was published that Mary Butts divulged her account of the visit to the Abbey to the Sunday Express.

The following year Aldous Huxley's Antic Hay was published. In this 'swingeing frolic of the twenties' (Baker), Myra Viveash is reminiscent of Mary Butts, who is immediately recognisable from the 'bright coppery hair', the 'cloak of flame-coloured satin' (like Wyndham Lewis, the self-styled Enemy in his black cape, Mary Butts often presented a dramatic persona to the world) and in the reference to her interest in the supernatural and the magic of the earth - Myra Viveash walks we are told, 'like she were treading a knife edge between goodness knew what invisible gulfs'.<sup>61</sup> Mary Butts appears fleetingly in Wyndham Lewis's 1930 satire, The Apes of God as 'a big carrotty english intelligentsia' who was briefly married to Julius Ratner (John Rodker) until 'one fine day this buxom heiress marched off to Rome with a lover' (Cecil Maitland).<sup>62</sup> In John Rodker's heavily autobiographical novel based on his pacifism in the First World War, Memoirs of Other Fronts (published anonymously in 1932), Muriel is clearly modelled on Mary Butts and Lawton on Maitland.

---

59. Mary Butts and her friends used to refer to heroin as 'basil'; a reference perhaps to Basil Lamus, alias Crowley?

60. Diary of a Drug Fiend, p.320.

61. Baker, p.119; Aldous Huxley, Antic Hay (London, 1936), pp.63, 88.

62. Wyndham Lewis, The Apes of God (Harmondsworth, 1965), p.147.

In 1945 William d'Arfey's Curious Relations was published. In his introduction, the English writer and critic William Plomer wrote that 'William d'Arfey is the pseudonym of a man no longer living. He was a wonderful raconteur and in particular told many stories and anecdotes about his kinsfolk in late Victorian and Edwardian times'.<sup>63</sup> The author's real name was Anthony Butts, Mary Butts's brother who was a painter who studied at one time with Sickert, and from whom Mary Butts was estranged. Plomer, who had suggested the title Curious Relations and who 'published and cut [the] rough draft' which Anthony Butts left on his death in 1941, was his longtime friend and companion. The book describes Mary Butts's 'kinsfolk', especially her mother and father, but does not mention Mary Butts directly. However, seven years later Plomer published Museum Pieces (1952) which is a clear (fictional) sequel to Curious Relations. In this work the protagonist is Toby [William] d'Arfey himself and the antagonism Plomer felt towards Mary Butts is reflected in his biting portrait of her as Lydia Delap, who is introduced as 'a girl with an opulent Edwardian background who had turned Bohemian in a nineteen-twentyish way and had written a couple of novels. I hadn't read them but imagined them to be decidedly precious'.<sup>64</sup> Alongside unflattering physical descriptions of Lydia Delap [Mary Butts], Plomer satirises some of her novels under the titles of Poisoned Milk (Ashe of Rings), Bones of Wonder (Armed with Madness) and Offlimits (Death of Felicity Taverner), thereby refuting his own claim to not having read them (indeed in 1933 Plomer had reviewed Ashe of Rings for The Spectator). As an establishment critic and friend of the Woolfs (Angus Wilson also dedicates For Whom the Cloche Tolls to him), Plomer explains his prejudice against Mary Butts in his memoirs

---

63. William d'Arfey, Curious Relations, edited by William Plomer (London, 1945), p.7.

64. William Plomer, Museum Pieces (London, 1952), p.12.

At Home published in 1958.<sup>65</sup> It is revealing as a historical document, for it illustrates the degree of antagonism which was shared by several of Mary Butts's English contemporaries. Writing about Anthony Butts, Plomer declares:

A complication was that he had an elder sister, Mary, who hated her mother and was neither liked nor trusted by Anthony himself. She wrote books. They had a tone of precious knowingness, and the fatal limitation of being too much of their period. In a sense they were vulgar: J.B. Yeats, writing of the paintings of Orpen, defined vulgarity as 'the excess of the means of the expression over the content'. I do not mean to imply that the writings of Mary Butts had anything like the technical brilliance of Orpen's paintings, but they did show excess of manner over matter. They had for a time a certain vogue. She also wrote an autobiography, about which the most memorable thing was not modesty, nor good sense, nor veracity, but the frontispiece - a reproduction of a drawing of the author by Cocteau.<sup>66</sup>

(ii)

'Most Anglo-Saxon writers,' wrote Harold Acton in his memoirs, 'are preachers who have mistaken their profession. On the fringe of the Montparnasse bars were a few talented story-tellers running to seed, like poor generous red-haired Mary Butts ... [who] improvised the vivid stories one hoped she would write'.<sup>67</sup> Acton's description of Mary Butts as a 'preacher' is pertinent as all her writing is the utterance of a

---

65. Virginia Woolf's friendship with William Plomer and Anthony Butts may well explain her predisposition against Mary Butts's work, for she writes in her diary in 1931 'Mary Butts ... [Anthony reports] "I cannot say anything of my sister - she is a bad woman - pretentious - I can see no merit in her books - pretentious. She corrupts young men. They are always committing suicide. She has now married Gabriel Atkins [Aitken] - without any character. They were given twenty-five decanters for their wedding." Tony is ashamed of Mary, who thus defiles the Butts' blood'. The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume IV 1931-1935, edited by Anne O. Bell (London, 1982), p.84; my emphasis.

66. William Plomer, At Home (London, 1958), p.67.

67. Harold Acton, Memoirs of an Aesthete (London, 1984), p.174.

prophetic voice. But if she is a preacher, her sermons are not dull ones, nor has she in being a writer, 'mistaken her profession'. On the contrary, writing is her vocation, her means of making more permanent resonances which she felt were being overlooked. Thus Traps for Unbelievers (1932) opens 'It is continually being brought to our notice by different people in various ways that for about the first time in history, the Western World is going about its business, to a great measure without the belief or practice of religion, organised or private'.<sup>68</sup> This 'strident indifference' to belief which she discerns, includes not only Christianity, but all religions; life without God(s) arising, she maintains, from the misconception that to discard God(s) will free us from the constraints of social morality. In actual fact this banishment of belief has repercussions which extend far beyond the physical and social realms of life. She agrees that Gods are not needed when all is well, until:

the time arrives when something disagreeable happens quickening often with secret and horrible vitality, into tragedy; and one begins to notice what happens to natures who have only human nature to fall back on; not strengthened to meet pain by any of the receipts and for whom no new ones are available. Receipts which linked the phenomenal world to the eternal, condemned events by reference to concepts not affected by change or by any vicissitudes of man.<sup>69</sup>

By focussing on and giving priority to 'human nature' at the expense of the 'phenomenal world' (ie Nature: that within which the human(s) exist but which is other than human) and the 'eternal' (ie the supernatural: that realm acceded to by religious belief), an anthropocentric interpretation of existence has been formulated which cannot bear the tragic, the unordered, unnameable sides of existence. What is now absent because it has been lost, is 'a very peculiar kind of awareness' which Mary Butts

---

68. Mary Butts, Traps for Unbelievers, pp.16-17.

69. Traps for Unbelievers, p.17.



locates not only in religious belief, but in primitive mysticism and the occult. Whilst regarding the practice of magic as 'very largely primitive science' she discerns 'behind' that, a kind of awareness which is, she concedes:

difficult to describe. It has something to do with a sense of the invisible, the non-existent in a scientific sense, the relations between things of a different order: the moon and a stone, the sea and a piece of wood, women and fish. Its appellation by means of primitive guess-work is one of the most shocking records of human trial-and-error in history, but it is by no means quite so sure that all of the original guesses were unscientific or the original "awareness" quite such nonsense.

This perception has no more died in man than has his sight or any other of his senses; only he does not now try it out or at least not often...<sup>70</sup>

This awareness or 'perception' is not, as far as Mary Butts is concerned, a luxurious sixth sense which enables a richer, more complex life - we are not presented in her writing with an aesthetic consciousness like that of Henry James who explores the never-ending 'beautiful difficulties'. Rather, it is a crucial filtering process through which we can see how things are, and thus without which life under its disabling aspects is intolerable. Thus in Mary Butts's third novel, Death of Felicity Taverner Picus Tracey declares: 'You can get a first in Greats or fly around the crater of Vesuvius, but what you depend on for your private life is your degree in witch-doctoring. How much you can smell out the propitious from the unpropitious'.<sup>71</sup> You can have any amount of success in human terms, it is not, however, how the world rates or reads you which is important, but the extent to which you are able to read the world - its implications as well as your implication in it which will ultimately save you. Mary Butts's short story 'Mappa Mundi', is an allegory which shows how easily you can be lost forever.

---

70. Traps for Unbelievers, p.25.

71. Death of Felicity Taverner, p.24; subsequent references incorporated into text with abbreviation DFT.

To 'smell out the propitious from the unpropitious' is not a question of passivity since there is no theory or methodological blueprint with formulas, or a step-by-step language which can be taught. As the term 'witch-doctoring' implies, this awareness lies beyond modern scientific explanations and rhetoric. It is significant that Mary Butts should find this 'awareness ... difficult to describe' although she tries several descriptions: 'a sense of the invisible, the non-existent in a scientific sense, the relations between things of a different order'. Her inability to put this awareness into words, to define it, to pin it down, reveals not her inarticulacy, but the limitations of articulacy itself - the fact that there are areas where language cannot go, or at best only go 'around' by a series of metaphors or paraphrases. Language is not synonymous with awareness, it is the means of communicating it. We have bodies, we live in space(s) and we have language. These are not of the same qualitative order. Mary Butts's works try to link up the phenomenal human world to the eternal one: 'Holy, holy, holy sang our fathers and they felt better. What they were doing was very ancient magic'.<sup>72</sup> Thus all of her works whether stories, poems, essays or criticism, both incorporate and are themselves remembrancers or signatures.

It is illustrative of Mary Butts's persona that during the time when Acton felt Mary Butts was 'running to seed' in Paris, telling stories which he could only 'hope she would write', she was constantly writing. Even before Acton knew Mary Butts in the 1920s, she had already completed her first novel. Ashe of Rings was substantially completed by 1919 and from that time she tried, without success, to get it published. Sections were included in The Little Review in 1921, but after its rejection from the Hogarth Press in 1922, it was a further three years before it was accepted by McAlmon's Contact Editions in Paris. Her adoption by McAlmon

---

72. Traps for Unbelievers, p.32.

led Mary Butts's work to be included in his Contact Collection of Contemporary Writers, also published that year, of which a reviewer in Calendar wrote: 'The best stories are those by Miss Butts, Mr. Ford and Miss Barnes'.<sup>73</sup> As with most writers published by McAlmon's press, Ashe of Rings was then accepted by an American publisher, A. & C. Boni, who published it in 1926. It was not, however, until 1933, that a third (unaltered) edition of Ashe of Rings was published in England by Wishart and Company, after they had already published Mary Butts's two other novels. Armed with Madness which Mary Butts began writing as early as 1923/4 was described by her in a letter to Goldring as 'something rather good and magnificently unsaleable'.<sup>74</sup> After its rejection by the Hogarth Press in 1927, it was accepted by Wishart and Company in 1928 and published by A. & C. Boni in America that same year with a later cheap reissue by Wishart and Company in 1932. Death of Felicity Taverner, which Mary Butts declared in her journal that she 'enjoyed writing and wrote rapidly' was written between 1930 and 1932 after Mary Butts had returned to England.<sup>75</sup> It was published by Wishart and Company in 1932 but never went beyond this first edition.

I shall be considering these three novels in detail in the following chapter; at this stage it is interesting to note, however, that contemporary reviews of the works vary considerably. In his entry for Mary Butts in The Present Age from 1914 Edwin Muir would write in 1939 that 'Her stories show a concern with "mystical" evil which often declines into melodrama'.<sup>76</sup> In a review of Ashe of Rings in 1925 he declared:

---

73. D.M.G. 'Contact Collection of Contemporary Writers', Calendar, 6 no.6 (1925), pp.487-8.

74. The Nineteen Twenties, p.213.

75. Byington, p.497.

76. Edwin Muir, The Present Age from 1914, Introductions to English Literature, 5 (London, 1939), p.25.

The story itself [is] as old-fashioned as the style is modern. Miss Butts's characters are not merely good and evil, they are conventionally good and melodramatically evil ... That she has talent both her technique and her imagination, sentimental as it often is, tells us. If that talent were integrated, it might produce something above the ordinary. But at present it is not integrated, and from that fact flow all the main faults of the book.<sup>77</sup>

In The New Criterion an anonymous reviewer found that Ashe of Rings's 'error ... lies in the fact that it is so bewilderingly fluent, ... so glib' adding: 'The manner of delivery is intense and artistic in effect ... The subject matter is handled delicately and with precision. Yet the whole utterance is in some curious way mechanical, lacking personality. It is like the communications of a medium'.<sup>78</sup>

In his 1931 article, Hugh Ross-Williamson describes not only his reaction to Ashe of Rings but also comments on its relation to Armed with Madness. By 1931 Ashe of Rings had not yet appeared in England but Ross-Williamson had reviewed its first (Paris) edition in 1925. He wrote:

[It was] 'difficult' - with that difficulty which may perhaps always limit Mary Butts' appeal to a limited audience; it created an atmosphere which added to the difficulty, because it defied rational analysis; its staccato style, combining the direct narration of prose with the elliptical suggestiveness of modern poetry, produced something of the effect of a rhythmic incantation: the story itself, though contemporary in its setting, dealt with forces and fears reminiscent of 'The Golden Bough'.<sup>79</sup> To read Ashe of Rings is to surrender to an experience, at the end of which one feels moved to quote: 'how wonderful, how glorious - but what an escape!'

... Ashe of Rings though it had an American edition was never published in this country. Speed the Plough [short stories written later but published before Ashe of Rings] met with the predictable fate of any book of intelligent stories by an unknown author. And when, in

- 
77. Edwin Muir, 'Ashe of Rings by Mary Butts', Calendar, 1 no.6 (1925), p.478.
78. 'Ashe of Rings by Mary Butts', The New Criterion, 4 no.1 (1926), p.209.
79. Mary Butts wrote a short story entitled 'The Golden Bough' which was included in Speed the Plough. Ross-Williamson could also be referring to J.G. Frazer's study The Golden Bough which Mary Butts greatly admired.

1928, Mary Butts made her bow to the English public with a novel, it was unfortunately a work so difficult to understand that it was almost a despair to her admirers. For Armed with Madness marks no advance on her previous work either in thought or in technical achievement, and it is representative only in the sense that it is an epitome of it. What a reader unacquainted with Ashe would make of it I cannot imagine. As an introduction to the public it was foredoomed to failure.<sup>80</sup>

Indeed a review of Armed with Madness in the Times Literary Supplement called it a 'singular piece of fiction', adding:

The case of so savage a crew of young people in a predicament so dreadful, is a curiosity, no doubt; but even in this aspect its interest is impaired by the author's method of telling their story. For by a desperate stroke of consistency she describes this carnival of lunacy in a style no less disordered - in such a series of jerks and shocks and abrupt surprises that the reader, emerging from the wild experience, can be expected to offer no lucid account of it.<sup>81</sup>

As Marianne Moore pointed out in her review of Armed with Madness for The Dial 'one need not read Mary Butts if one has not a feeling for feeling' for whilst 'there are gruesome things here, as there were continually in the minds of the maddened conversers - "while high over them the gulls squalled like sorrow driven up" ... there are many graces. And it is a triumph for the author that it is a mistake to recount anything she wrote without recounting it in her own words'.<sup>82</sup> Either Mary Butts's prose is considered 'so conscious, so mannered as to hold up the reader's attention; the way of saying a thing distract[ing] from the thing said' as L.A. Strong wrote of Death of Felicity Taverner in The Spectator or, conversely, it is considered one of its very strengths, so that paraphrase, as Marianne Moore stated, only weakens its evocative impact.<sup>83</sup>

---

80. Ross-Williamson, p.188.

81. 'Armed with Madness by Mary Butts', Times Literary Supplement (24 May, 1928), p.397.

82. Marianne Moore 'The House-Party', The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore, edited by Patricia C. Willis (London, 1987), p.147.

83. L.A. Strong, 'Fiction', The Spectator (23 December, 1932), p.900.

It is precisely this evocative impact praised by Ross-Williamson and deprecated by most reviewers which appealed to Robert Duncan who declared that 'Mary Butts was in 1941, when I was 22, an essential part of an initiation'.<sup>84</sup> The term 'initiation' is not used lightly; in 1947 Duncan 'collected signs and rumours' with his friends because, as he explained, 'Mary Butts's Armed With Madness incited us to traffic in myths and to derive a "scent" by charging every possibility with overtones and undertones, to make thunderheads, storm weather - but to hold it unreleased - for the power's sake, living in actual life as if it were a dream'.<sup>85</sup> A fellow poet, Robin Blaser declared in his 1978 'Afterword' to the republication of Imaginary Letters that the influence of Mary Butts was enormous:

Mary Butts was one of many introductions Duncan prepared for us in those young days ... Brilliant Jack Spicer gave his first lecture on Armed with Madness during the Fall term, 1949, even then interested in the 'sacred game' or an excuse for it such as the Grail. Thus, Mary Butts became a figure inside the imagination of what was later to be called the 'Berkeley Renaissance,' and then, with important changes of emphasis, the 'San Francisco Renaissance.'<sup>86</sup>

As I shall discuss in the following chapter, Mary Butts's use of the Grail myth in a modern setting is characteristic of the writing of the 1920s and 1930s where the convergence of older forms and contemporary contexts appear in more familiar works like Eliot's The Wasteland (1922) and Pound's Cantos (1925 onwards) as well as novels such as Charles Williams's War in Heaven (1930) and Many Dimensions (1931) and John Cowper Powys's The Glastonbury Romance (1933). Yet when drawing attention to a neglected writer there is a tendency to assume that they can be fitted somewhere in the already established literary history of their time, and

---

84. 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts' conference brochure.

85. Ekbert Faas, Young Robert Duncan (Santa Barbara, 1983), p.227.

86. Blaser, p.67.

that any influence or resemblance is seen as arising from more well-known writers.<sup>87</sup> As Benstock points out, however:

To retrace the literary history of a period is to open that history to question. ... Feminist criticism directed towards rediscovery and reevaluation of the work of women writers has already altered our view of Modernism as a literary movement ... It has exposed the absence of commentary on women's contributions to Modernism and has rewritten the history of individual women's lives and works within the Modernist context.<sup>88</sup>

Mary Butts's work illustrates the fact that no literary history is definitive. Not only did Mary Butts declare in her journal in September 1927 that far from being influenced by Eliot, she and he were working 'on a parallel', but also a comparative study of influence concerning Mary Butts's interest in the Holy Grail and that of Powys and Williams reveals that the publication of War in Heaven (1930) postdates Armed with Madness by two years and that A Glastonbury Romance (1933) postdates the publication of all three of Mary Butts's novels.<sup>89</sup> Whilst the Arthurian myths are explored in much of her work (particularly in Armed with Madness) it is a sign of how little her work is known that a recent study The Return of King Arthur: British and American Literature since 1900, by Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer should include both Williams and Powys whilst Mary Butts is never mentioned.

Similarly, the fact that Benstock should not have included a single mention of Mary Butts in Women of the Left Bank, considering that she lived there throughout the 1920s and knew all the figures concerned, highlights the widespread ignorance of her work.

Yet it was over twenty-five years ago that Robert Duncan raised the

---

87. See George Pendle, 'Traps for Unbelievers by Mary Butts', Twentieth Century, 3 no.15 (1932), p.30.

88. Shari Benstock, Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940 (Austin, 1986), pp.1, 6.

89. Byington and Morgan, p.172.

question of the unacknowledged influence Mary Butts's work probably had on H.D. (although in her recent biography of H.D., Herself Defined, Barbara Guest mentions Mary Butts only in passing and never considers her as a literary influence).<sup>90</sup> In a section from his uncompleted book on H.D., published in Sumac in 1963, Duncan discusses H.D.'s novel, Palimpsest. It was published by McAlmon's Contact Editions in 1926, the year after Ashe of Rings. Duncan's comments are pertinent not only to the question of influence but also because the kind of language he uses to describe H.D.'s prose applies in the same way to that of Mary Butts. Palimpsest is made up of three chapters or stories, 'Hipparchia', 'Murex' and 'Secret Name. "Excavator's Egypt"'. Referring to the final chapter Duncan declares:

We too are excavators. In the vulgar eloquentia of our day [1960s] we have a valuable coinage 'to dig', that may mean in the popular sense 'to go in for'; that makes sense, deeper sense, in the light of how archaeology has awakened our imagination of origins or sources in time past, as meaning to dig thru layers of what a thing is, to get back to the roots and to reconstruct from fragments. Back of that, the love one must have for the idea of Troy or the Mayan thing to go digging for it.

Here, anyway, is a last find for the day. Some glimpse of another precious world, though it was a contemporary also, seen in the genre of 'Secret Name'. 'Hipparchia' and 'Murex' may be compared with the novels and short stories of Mary Butts, to the life of Speed the Plough, which appeared in 1923, or of Ashe of Rings, which was published by Contact Editions, closely associated through McAlmon and Bryher with H.D.'s world. And in her later historical novels of the thirties, in The Macedonian and Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra, Mary Butts portrays the dawn and the height of the Hellenistic spirit. For the connoisseur of The Little Review, The Dial, Pagany or Life and Letters To-day, Mary Butts and H.D. appeared in one context and must have had their resonances.<sup>91</sup>

---

90. Barbara Guest, Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and her world (New York, 1984), pp.155, 215, 232.

91. Robert Duncan, 'Night and Days. Chapter 1', Sumac (1963), pp.144-145.



Quite. Whilst H.D. has Hipparchia declare repeatedly in Palimpsest 'we do not escape the dead', Mary Butts writes in her journal: 'stronger than the living the dead surround me; figures and men-gods and I hardly need say, distingués'.<sup>92</sup>

When on the opening page of Death of Felicity Taverner a character is described as 'our ring of Polycrates' Mary Butts is sending us back not into obscurity, but to the fact declared by her in The Macedonian, that 'There are men who make art new, there is no man who can make new art'.<sup>93</sup> Whilst in 1988 we flinch at the form 'man' used to signify 'person', the content illustrates that when Mary Butts sends us to the past, it is in order to make us understand the present better. 'For with a certain kind of English person,' she declares on the same opening page of Death of Felicity Taverner, 'a classical allusion has the weight and function of a text'. In terms of its classicism, Mary Butts's work fits more comfortably in The Pound Era than Women of the Left Bank, for Benstock attacks Kenner's insistence on classicism in The Pound Era:

Need it be noted that the knowledge of Latin and Greek was not to be taken for granted among women educated in these years? H.D., Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien learned Greek on their own in order to read the fragments of Sappho that became available in the 1890s, and the one woman Modernist whose writing consistently turns on classical sources of English words is Djuna Barnes, who received no formal education at all and who learned etymology by reading The New English Dictionary.<sup>94</sup>

Since Mary Butts was a 'woman Modernist' writing at that time, among those women, yet whose writing is redolent with references to classical myths and history, it can only be assumed that Benstock did not know of her work when making the above claims for Djuna Barnes.

---

92. H.D., Palimpsest, second edition (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1968), p.37; 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts', p.9.

93. Mary Butts, The Macedonian (London, 1933), p.4.

94. Benstock, p.25.

(iii)

It would be a mistaken representation of Mary Butts's prose, however, to view it as incorporating solely a backward gaze, for it is the combination of the old and the very new (contemporary with the time of writing) which gives it its vitality. As I have stated, her three novels are set more or less when they were written. Leaving aside for the moment Mary Butts's historical fiction, the large majority of her short stories are set, like her novels, in the 'long weekend' between the wars; many of them were published in magazines and all (except two) were collected in three volumes, all of which were published in England.<sup>95</sup>

It was Douglas Goldring who instigated the publication of Speed the Plough and other Stories by introducing Mary Butts to Alec Waugh, who in turn persuaded Chapman and Hall to publish the nine short stories. Already Mary Butts had received some attention as the title story of this collection, 'Speed the Plough' had been included in Georgian Stories 1922. Goldring was not alone in thinking Mary Butts's story 'much the best thing in that curious collection', which included stories by D.H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Violet Hunt, Ethel Colburn Mayne (to whom Mary Butts dedicated Speed the Plough), E.M. Forster and Algernon Blackwood.<sup>96</sup> A review of Georgian Stories 1922 in the Times Literary Supplement described 'Speed the Plough' as 'one of the best stories in this volume, possibly the best of all', and reviews in both The Observer and the Weekly Westminster Gazette lamented Mary Butts's absence from John Cournos and Edward O'Brien's Best Short Stories of 1922.<sup>97</sup> The critical response

---

95. Mary Butts, 'Magic', The Little Review, 7 no.2 (1920), 3-6; 'Change', The Dial, 72 (1922), 465-470.

96. Douglas Goldring, 'A London Bookman's Day Book', Sunday Tribune (October 1922).

97. 'Georgian Stories 1922', Times Literary Supplement (6 July, 1922), p.440; 'The Best Short Stories of 1922', The Observer (4 February, 1923), p.4; 'The Short Story', Weekly Westminster Gazette (9 June, 1923), p.20.

was far from universally positive, however, as Winifred Blatchford's review of Georgian Stories 1922, entitled 'Nasty Georgian Fiction, whilst finding 'Speed the Plough' 'remarkable', accused it and the collection as a whole of undue obscurity and morbidity.<sup>98</sup>

These two charges were repeatedly levelled at Speed the Plough: of its obscurity one reviewer wrote that 'much can only be apprehended imperfectly and much not at all', whilst another declared that Mary Butts belonged to 'the new school [which] scorns lucidity'.<sup>99</sup> As to its morbidity the collection was described in one review as displaying the 'modernist fetish for ugliness', a further reviewer maintaining that 'like so many so-called realists, Miss Butts' realism runs mostly to distasteful things; she finds more inspiration in a dustbin than in the stars'.<sup>100</sup> So widespread was the 'absence of normality and health' and the 'offense against good feeling' which the stories variously evoked, that Speed the Plough was banned by the public libraries for indecency, this act being praised by one reviewer who included it, alongside Aleister Crowley's Diary of a Drug Fiend, in an article entitled, 'Books we'd like to Burn'.<sup>101</sup>

It was shortly before the publication of Speed the Plough that Mary Butts made her statements about the Nelson versus Moir trial. Notwithstanding the adverse publicity this doubtless caused her, the overall impact made by this volume of short stories was far from wholly negative. Indeed, The Daily Telegraph included it in its 'Books of the Week' column

- 
98. Winifred Blatchford, 'Nasty Georgian Fiction', The Clarion (4 August, 1922), p.4.
99. [Untitled review], The Weekly Review (24 March, 1923); K.K. 'How to See', Evening Standard (12 April, 1923), p.12.
100. 'The Georgian Short Story', The Bolton Evening News (22 March, 1923), p.3; 'Speed the Plough by Mary Butts', The Bookman, 64 no 384 (September 1923), p.298.
101. 'Literary Surgery', The Liverpool Post and Mercury (11 April, 1923), p.9; D.L. 'In a Napkin', Review of Reviews, 67 no 402 (June 1923), p.632; 'Book Banned', Daily Courier (16 March 1923); Frank Vernon, 'Books We'd like to Burn', John Bull, 33 no 882 (28 April, 1923), p.18.

and Brodie Fraser of The Sunday Times declared that 'any "obscurity" is redeemed by the brilliance of the writing'.<sup>102</sup>

Mary Butts's gratitude to Goldring is expressed in her dedicating to him the second volume of short stories, Several Occasions when it was published by Wishart and Company in 1932. The final volume, Last Stories, was published posthumously in 1938 by Brendin Publishing Company at the instigation of Bryher. Yet although it dates the stories as having been written between 1925-1937, this is actually not the case for 'Lettres Imaginaires' was one of Mary Butts's first stories to be published in The Dial in 1919. Whilst this is not the place to describe the thirty-one stories in detail, they can be divided into four categories: the first comprising four stories is historical, which I shall consider later; the other three are geographical, as with the exception of 'The House-Party' set in Villefranche, 'Angele au Couvent' set in Scotland and 'Lettres Imaginaires' which is not set anywhere, Mary Butts's stories take place in London, Paris or the South-West English countryside (either Dorset or Cornwall). Five are set in Paris, six in the country and the largest number, eleven, occur in London, with 'Speed the Plough' and 'The Golden Bough' moving between London and the surrounding countryside.

Almost all of her stories involve social gatherings, collisions between people in situations whose significance is perceived by some but not by others. There are direct references to cafe-life in Paris (eg. 'From Altar to Chimney-Piece', to its Bohemian counterparts in London, where references are made to James Joyce's Ulysses (eg. 'The Dinner-Party'; 'From Altar to Chimney-Piece'), des Esseintes's tortoise from Huysmann's A Rebours and Saki's stories (eg. 'A Lover'), Frazer's The Golden Bough

---

102. 'Books of the Week', The Daily Telegraph (24 March, 1923), p.10; Brodie Fraser, untitled review, The Sunday Times (11 March, 1923).

eg 'The House').<sup>103</sup> These literary allusions merge with the older resonances of Daimônes, Kêrês and Greek Gods, just as 'Voi che sapete che cosa è amor' from Mozart's The Marriage of Figaro is a recurring motif alongside the latest jazz tunes and songs of the inter-war years, such as 'Honey, Get Your Gun' (the title of one of her stories). On occasion the situations are caused and resolved by the people involved (eg 'The Warning', or 'The Dinner-Party', or 'After the Funeral'), but usually they are caused by people disturbing (purposely or accidentally) the mysterious forces which exist in the world (eg 'Brightness Falls', 'Mappa Mundi', 'Friendship's Garland', 'With and Without Buttons').<sup>104</sup> Whilst the Bright Young Things inhabit her stories, the narrator is older, never completely able to be one of the crowd or the 'bunch' as McAlmon's generation were called.

Mary Butts explains in The Crystal Cabinet why she felt at one remove from the interwar generation. She attributed it to her upbringing close to the old forces emanating from Badbury Rings. She declares:

Without the Rings I know what would have happened to me - whirled away in the merry-go-round of the complex and the wish-fulfilment and the conditioned reflex, with Jung and Pavlov, Julian Huxley and Bertrand Russell, in group-consciousness of the post-war young. On those rocking-horses I might have pranced for ever, with the rest of us, at our version of Vanity Fair. ... On that merry-go-round I might have stayed; until I was persuaded, as Mr Huxley assures us George Herbert was persuaded, that, in its last analysis, a man's life is no more than a duologue between his higher and his lower self. 'Without man there is no God; without nature there is no supernature - ' Round widdershins, against the course of the sun, and whirled off into the limbo of those who though they have seen, have yet refused to believe.<sup>105</sup>

---

103. 'From Altar to Chimney-Piece', in Last Stories (London, 1938), pp. 147, 152; 'The Dinner Party', in Several Occasions (London, 1932), p.67; 'A Lover', in Last Stories, pp.116, 125; 'The House' in Last Stories, p.213.

104. The title 'Brightness Falls' is from Thomas Nashe's poem, 'In Time of Pestilence', from which Mary Butts quotes several lines as an epigraph to the short story; 'Friendship's Garland' is named after Matthew Arnold's 1871 fictitious epistolary narrative of the same title.

105. The Crystal Cabinet, p.265.

Anticipating Acton's description the Welsh writer, Rhys Davies in his review of Last Stories in 1938 declared:

Mary Butts possessed something becoming rare in literature: the vision of a seer. In her stories continually she tried to convey the activities of forces unknown to the ordinary senses; magical forces.

... Her prose is almost menacing in its demands on the reader's intelligence. ... This book is one of the most interesting collections of stories published for ten years; it is interesting for its writing and its experiments, its faithful adherence to its writer's vision, its artistic integrity. Mary Butts' death last year, at a comparatively early age, is to be lamented.<sup>106</sup>

At the time of her death Mary Butts was engaged in a historical novel about Julian the Apostate, the Roman emperor who abandoned Christianity. In his obituary Charles Williams, who admired Mary Butts's work for its 'strong individuality and imagination and ... remarkable style' alludes to this unfinished work. 'Julian,' he writes 'wants in English some nobility of the kind. There was every indication that her rich imagination would have surpassed itself in another "turn of the event"<sup>107</sup> of which she had already recorded two.'<sup>108</sup> These other two were The Macedonian (1933) and Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra (1935). Williams who preferred the latter declared that it was 'a remarkable book' because:

She [Mary Butts] managed Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra herself with remarkable skill, with a most credible accuracy, and with moments of pure thrill. It combined at times pure incantation with an easy colloquialism that made its modernity no more than the mere stuff of which dress at any period might be made. Her figures remained Roman and Egyptian, whatever transitory language they used.<sup>108</sup>

---

106. Rhys Davies, 'A Note on Mary Butts', Wales 6/7 (1939), p.207.

107. Williams is referring to a declaration on the opening pages of Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra: 'When human life breaks in upon the unhindered patterns of Nature, when things are about to happen that have never happened before, at the Turn of the Event, not one pair of eyes in a million has the luck to know what is up'. Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra (London, 1935), p.3.

108. Williams quoted in an anonymous review 'Miss Mary Butts, Imaginative Gift', The Times (13 March 1937), p.14b.

Yet whilst Williams felt that The Macedonian has a certain 'remoteness',<sup>108</sup> Hugh Ross-Williamson maintained that it incorporated Mary Butts's 'real genius, for here,' he believed, 'everything that is essential to it is utilised to the full. Her scholarship, her knowledge of Greek life, her intense feeling for family, her archaeological interests, her power of suggesting elemental forces, her irony, her vivid sense of colour...'<sup>109</sup> Indeed The Macedonian was esteemed highly enough to have an extract included in The Imaginary Eye-Witness (1937), a text-book used to teach history through fictionalised accounts.

Whilst Mary Butts's last novels are historical ones, her interest in history, as can be seen from the three volumes of short stories, spanned her entire writing career. Two of her four historical stories were included in the first volume, Speed the Plough: 'Bellerophon to Antaeia' is a series of letters from Bellerophon who is recounting and accounting for (to Antaeia) his feelings promoted by his exile. 'Madonna the Magnificat' presents the Annunciation and its consequences from the perspective of Mary, as a young girl. Several Occasions and Last Stories each contain a historical monologue: 'The Later Life of Theseus, King of Athens' and 'A Roman Speaks' respectively.

Whilst her interest in Cleopatra seems to have been one of her time, since a 1935 review claims that Mary Butts's Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra is one of six biographies of Cleopatra since 1931, that same reviewer describes her account as both 'more human' and 'more difficult'.<sup>110</sup> This is because Mary Butts's 'passionate interest' in Cleopatra and Philip of Macedonia which Jack Lindsay found her to have in his conversations with Mary Butts in the early 1930s lies more in the forces which caused them to act than the achievements themselves.<sup>111</sup> Yet as one reviewer of The

---

109. Ross-Williamson, p.188.

110. 'Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra', Times Literary Supplement (27 June, 1935), p.414.

111. Jack Lindsay, Fanfrolico and After (London, 1962), pp.145-146, 249.

Macedonian in 1933 objected:

This is all very well for those who have fresh in their memories the external details of which a knowledge here is taken for granted; but we fear that the greater number, unless they have lately been reading their Grote, will fail to catch many an allusion to the historical facts which are the manifestation of that inner life and the motive to the study. 112

A reviewer of Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra in 1935 is far more sympathetic: 'Her knowledge of what we call ancient history,' he declares: 'is so profound and so imaginative that I am altogether on her side ... Those who run are not recommended to read this book, but the worthy readers for whom it is written will derive from it an infinite enjoyment'. 113

Mary Butts declared her ambition as a writer in the following way:

There is more divine life in me than in any man I have known. I wish to formulate a theory - a perception of the universe as yet unknown to man. I want to fix it in man's mind. It would turn man into god and send the demi-gods spinning. I have to make a living clarity of it - great art and power, life-giving, would flow through me, enough, at least to refresh my generation. 114

And at one point she described herself to Maitland as 'a fierce, elemental power that will not rest until it is worked into every fibre'. 115

Whether in her novels, her historical studies or her short stories, Mary Butts's prose attempts to make 'a living clarity' of this 'fierce, elemental power' she saw herself as embodying from the earth. In 'Ghosties and Ghoulies' she felt that:

---

112. 'The Macedonian', Times Literary Supplement (20 July, 1933), p.494.

113. Henry Baerlein, 'New Fiction', Time and Tide, 16 (1935), p.1226.

114. Undated journal entry cited at 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts' conference, p.7.

115. Undated letter cited at 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts' conference, p.7.



The time may be coming when their ritual origins faced, their ways and settings chased through our subconscious, we should know what powers we have evoked exterior to us. How far also it depends on man which he chooses; who, at his word, from among the seraphim, the angels, the demons, the daimones will come.

and she concludes, darkly:

If we do not find out, we had better look out for ourselves. We have been careless lately what spiritual company we have kept; in our choice of ghostly guests. The results are observable. 116

In 'Psychology and the Troubadours', an essay first published in 1916, Ezra Pound described his understanding of why the Greek myths arose. It is a description which is reminiscent of the theories of Jane Ellen Harrison, a widely admired archaeologist, and those of Mary Butts herself. Since it was written at the time when Pound knew Mary Butts, it could well be that she is one of the people referred to in the essay. Pound declared:

I believe in a sort of permanent basis in humanity, that is to say, I believe that Greek myth arose when someone having passed through a delightful psychic experience tried to communicate it to others and found it necessary to screen himself from persecution. Speaking aesthetically, the myths are explications of mood: you may stop there, or you may probe deeper. Certain it is that these myths are only intelligible in a vivid and glittering sense to those people to whom they occur. I know, I mean, one man who understands Persephone and Demeter, and one who understands the Laurel, and another who has, I should say, met Artemis. These things are for them real. 117 (Pound's emphasis)

Whether or not it was Mary Butts to whom Pound is alluding when he writes of 'another who has, I should say, met Artemis' can never be proved; but it was because Mary Butts understood Persephone, Demeter, the Laurel and Artemis and felt them to be 'real' that she distrusted the

---

116. 'Ghosties and Ghoulies', p.14.

117. Ezra Pound, 'Psychology and Troubadours', The Spirit of Romance, second edition (London, 1970), p.92.

Freud-Game (as I shall discuss in detail later) on the grounds that such a perception cut resonances short whilst myth allowed one to 'probe deeper'. A close reading of some of her works in the following chapter will focus on and illustrate the deep-space character of her writing, with its emphasis on memory and belief.

Chapter II

Mary Butts's Deep-space Prose: Romanticism within Modernism  
or 'the Primordality of the Sacred'

(i)

Given the wide range of characteristics associated with the term 'Romanticism', I have chosen to concentrate on those aspects defined by Frank Kermode in The Romantic Image (1957). Kermode maintains that much of Modernist poetry (he centres his discussion around the work of Yeats but claims that T.S. Eliot would have been equally apt) comes out of Romanticism via Symbolism, through its implicit and explicit adoption of the Image (ie. symbol) as its 'aesthetic monad' (term coined by A.G. Lehmann); that is, the essence, source and aim of all art. Whilst the focus of the present discussion is Modernist prose rather than poetry, Kermode's general thesis of the heritage of Romanticism within Modernism remains nonetheless equally pertinent. As he declares:

I use Romantic in a restricted sense, as applicable to the literature of an epoch, beginning in the late years of the 18th century and still not finished, and as referring to the high valuation placed during this period upon the image-making powers of the mind at the expense of its rational powers, and the substitution of organicist for mechanistic modes of thinking about works of art.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of this definition to a clarification of deep-space prose lies not in Kermode's citing and situating the beginnings of Romanticism; rather in its description of what the 'still not finished' Romantic perspective involves. According to Kermode's definition, the term 'Romantic' combines both a creative and a critical aspect which are closely interrelated. In the realm of creation Romantics hold that the

---

1. Frank Kermode, Romantic Image (London, 1986), p.43.

'image-making powers of the mind' are more important than 'its rational powers'; that is, that imagination is more important than reason or rationalism. In criticism, that is, when 'thinking about works of art' the 'organicist ... modes of thinking' are preferred to the 'mechanistic' which, as I shall show, can be broadly paraphrased as a preference for a religious rather than a secular or scientific perspective.

The extent to which Mary Butts's deep-space prose conforms to Kermode's definition of Romantic in all her work is encapsulated in miniature by the following description she provides in The Crystal Cabinet of an eighteenth century landscape painting which, she claimed, influenced her as a child. It depicted a storm in which 'the glare of the evil and terrible thunderlight, the quenching of the sun, of all radiance, by a white light, was supposed once to be the light of Hell. Or rather,' she continues:

to be the physical description of a supernatural quality, lying as it were behind the natural world, known only in translation, and which that particular state of the weather made visible. The translations were being made all the time, and the analysis science made of the mechanics of the change were no explanation of the thing itself, or substitute for our direct experience of it.<sup>2</sup>

The memorable feature of this painting for Mary Butts does not reside in the realism of its storm-depiction, ie., in the fact that the artist has created through the medium of paint a recognisable portrayal of a natural phenomenon. Mary Butts is not interested in its outward appearance as such; or rather, its realism, far from being the end of its effect is in fact the starting-point of its 'deeper' significance. What is important is the painting's ability to 'represent' (I use the term advisedly) a 'translation' enacted by the storm, as it is the 'physical expression of a supernatural quality', the latter existing not within but 'as it were

---

2. The Crystal Cabinet, p.35.

behind' the natural world. In The Crystal Cabinet Mary Butts quotes from Spenser, 'without supernature there is no nature'.<sup>3</sup> Mary Butts is using the term 'supernatural' in this sense - as embodying something more and other than the natural and underlying it. She defines the word in more detail in 'Ghosties and Ghoulies', her article on supernatural fiction, as 'a stirring, a touching of nerves not usually sensitive, an awakening to more than fear - but to something like awareness and conviction and memory'.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the storm can be apprehended by the senses, the quality it evokes can only be grasped by the imagination. Furthermore, crucially, it is the fact that the 'visible' storm translates (ie. translates, literally carries across) the imagined quality, which in turn endows this natural phenomenon with its significance. Without the depth - that resonance whereby the storm becomes more than itself - it would not be a memorable image for Mary Butts. Thus we can see that the image-making powers of the mind are of primary consideration for Mary Butts. Similarly, her anti-mechanistic perspective is explicitly stated as the power of this deep-space image - where the imagination as well as the 'eye' of the beholder is awakened and invoked - is compared to the detriment of a scientific 'analysis' of a storm. Yes, she says, science can provide an account of the 'mechanics' involved in changing meteorological conditions. Yet bound within the world, bound by its physical, natural laws which must be accessible to proof by the five senses or by rational logic, science can neither provide an 'explanation' for the storm's deeper significance, nor an equivalent 'substitute' for a 'direct experience' of it.

It should be pointed out that Mary Butts's anti-scientific stance is not directed at science per se; but at the fact that this thought process has been made to support, by replacing, a perception which lies beyond its

---

3. The Crystal Cabinet, p.265.

4. 'Ghosties and Ghoulies', p.386.

conceptual domain. As she declares in Traps for Unbelievers: 'Pre-occupation with the "unseen", with the whole complex of emotions we call the religious attitude, has vanished from our world as a straight reaction', and quoting from Aldous Huxley and Rebecca West who share her views, Mary Butts states that as a result 'the word Religion with its vast connotations' either occupies 'the category of the shame-making or obscene' or, worse still, it is not even attacked but is, rather, ignored.<sup>5</sup> This decision to 'dispense' with the religious attitude has been made: 'in the name of scientific truth, an activity, which for all its overwhelming importance, was not designed to deal with the emotion behind the experience of religion'.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the rise of the nineteenth century materialism with its 'scientific truth' emphasising the mechanistic operations of the universe has led to a displacement and denigration of the 'religious attitude' on the grounds that it is qua religious, unscientific. On the surface it does not matter: 'They are getting along quite nicely without it in the West. So they say' mocks Mary Butts darkly, the superficiality of the non-religious attitude being underlined by the facile social nicety of the expression 'quite nicely'.<sup>7</sup> Yet the fundamental link between the visible world and its invisible but immanent 'supernatural qualities' has been lost. All of Mary Butts's work from her prose narratives and poetry to her essays and criticism is organically interrelated, concerned to re-establish this link. Her literary pursuit of the sacred is described disparagingly by her biographer Robert Byington as the 'alchemization of reality'; rather more positively, the American poet Robin Blaser describes it as the 'primordially of the sacred'.<sup>8</sup>

---

5. Traps for Unbelievers, pp.9, 10, 17, 47, 12; see also pp.33-34.

6. Traps for Unbelievers, p.30.

7. Traps for Unbelievers, p.11.

8. 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts', conference brochure.

In 1927 Forster delivered a series of lectures which were then published under the title Aspects of the Novel. There he speaks of some novels having 'the fantastic-prophetical axis', which demand 'something extra' of the reader, 'some additional adjustment'.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly his definition of the terms 'fantastic' and 'prophetic' are particularly pertinent to the case of Mary Butts's work. Fantasy, according to Forster, 'implies the supernatural, but need not express it', whilst 'prophecy - in our sense - is a tone of voice'.<sup>10</sup> Speaking of Melville and Dostoevsky, two novelists whom he considered prophetic (as compared to George Eliot and Dickens), Forster describes their work as 'not a veil, it is not an allegory. It is the ordinary world of fiction but it reaches back'. Forster means by this that their 'characters':

ask us to share something deeper than their experiences. They convey to us a sensation that is partly physical - the sensation of sinking into a translucent globe and seeing our experience floating far above us on the surface, tiny, remote, yet ours. We have not ceased to be people, we have given nothing up, but 'the sea is in the fish and the fish is in the sea'.

There we touch the limit of our subject. We are not concerned with the prophet's message, or rather (if matter and manner cannot be separated) we are concerned with it as little as possible. What matters is the accent of his voice, his song. (my emphases)<sup>11</sup>

Thus we may now in Forster's use of the term 'deeper' begin to feel the sense in which 'deep space' is an accurate term for Mary Butts's work; the fact that it 'reaches back' ('as it were behind') beyond the 'ordinary world' and draws us as readers into that space which lies 'deeper than ... experiences' and which is evoked by the 'accent' or the 'song' rather than an inherently 'deep' content. Although by the time Aspects of the Novel was published in 1927 Mary Butts's Speed the Plough (1923) and Ashe of

---

9. E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (London, 1969), p.101.

10. Aspects of the Novel, pp.105, 116.

11. Aspects of the Novel, p.124.

Rings (1925) had already appeared, it is symptomatic of the lack of regard for her work on the part of the English establishment that Forster should make the mistaken declaration that 'D.H. Lawrence is the only writer today [1927] who is a prophetic novelist'.<sup>12</sup>

One of the best descriptions or subtitles of Mary Butts's work is the title she gives to a prose poem 'Rites of Passage' published in Pagany in 1931. Here she declares:

Passages have played a large part in my life.  
The corridors at Salterns were white and green. Great  
places to run in but they never met ...

... passage rites, extension of the thing that is:  
modification of reality: analogy, stylization, art at  
best, transition at a careering place or stumbling.  
Flight.<sup>13</sup>

All of Mary Butts's writing involves and invokes a rite of passage, this 'extension of the thing that is' and it is this which makes a reading of her work an 'initiation'. Jane Ellen Harrison, a Greek Scholar whom Mary Butts admired greatly declared in Ancient Art and Ritual (1913) that 'art is in fact a later and more sublimated, more detached form of ritual'.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, this generalisation applies to Mary Butts who sees her role as an inherently prophetic one, as she notes in 'Ghosties and Ghoulies':

It is curious. Up to our age a writer, even the most detached artist, was allowed to teach. Having special love or knowledge of something, he was supposed to hand it on. The present world, its majority suddenly become literate, unless the subject is technical, faints at the thought. Until it is noticed that, having read any imaginative work from Aristophanes to Ronald Firbank, and taken pleasure in it, something of its quality has entered in and become part of oneself. Has made one more aware and sensible, using the writer's eyes. So that one finds out that, after all, one has learned.<sup>15</sup>

---

12. Aspects of the Novel, p.132.

13. Mary Butts, 'Rites of Passage', Pagany, 2 no.2 (1931), pp.62-63.

14. J.E. Harrison, Ancient Art and Ritual (London, 1919), p.255.

15. 'Ghosties and Ghoulies', p.389.



Mary Butts's aim is to teach not a single message but a way of perceiving: a deep-space perspective. Hence the aptness of 'Rites of Passage' as a title for her work since, as Harrison explained in Themis: a study of the social origins of Greek religion (1912), these are the means by which 'change which is life is emphasised, represented' both in totemic groups as well as in Ancient Greece. Hence 'to consult an oracle you need a rite de passage just as much as much as to be made a member of a tribe because to know is to be in touch with mana, ... to be sanctified, to pass inside the region of tabu'.<sup>16</sup> As we shall see, to 'know' in this sense, is the most important characteristic which Mary Butts confers on some of the people in her fictions and it is this almost visionary capacity which sets them apart from their companions, giving them extra 'privileges and duties'.<sup>17</sup> But before considering this aspect in some of her works in detail, it is necessary to understand what Mary Butts means by the words 'mana' and 'tabu' since they belong to a group of concepts which recur across her narratives. In Traps for Unbelievers Mary Butts writes:

Mana; the word which science has taken from the Polynesians; that which gives a man or a woman potency in every act or situation. It is not easy to write about the all-prevalent. Mana has been taken for granted since man became man. It is what Chaucer meant by the 'law of kind,' that which makes a horse a horse and a sword a sword, a man a man, and each man the kind of man he is up to the limit of his expression in individual terms; and so on with every object, animate and inanimate throughout nature. If something poisonous were to sap this, the biologic pressure under which each man lives, that which keeps him man, would become unendurable. He feels that he would fly apart, that one part of his nature or one aptitude would grow at the expense of the rest. Not an over-development or an over-specialisation which would leave the whole of him essentially intact, but a growth of cells become hostile, a malignant cancer.<sup>18</sup>

- 
16. J.E. Harrison, Themis: a study of the social origins of Greek religion (Cambridge, 1912), p.512.
17. The Crystal Cabinet, p.18.
18. Traps for Unbelievers, p.40.

Mary Butts is at pains to point out that mana and religion should not be conflated, for 'mana is not religion. It is the "virtue" or part of the virtue behind every religion, the law of kind in action, and, with the classic gods, the law of human kind'. Thus mana is to religion what the supernatural quality is to the storm in the painting: 'as it were behind' - a quality to be translated and only ever knowable in translation. That mana is an element in an overall organic structure is clear, for without it a fundamental balance is impossible; the whole cannot be kept 'essentially intact'. Instead its absence makes way for a malignant cancer, which is not immediately visible, but nonetheless fatal. It can be growing even while it is said that we are getting on 'quite nicely'. As with mana, so 'tabu has weakened; tabu the check, often the ridiculous and superstitious check, but also a technique for dealing with crude power, the dangers inherent in the law of kind'.<sup>19</sup>

Asked in an interview published in the last issue of The Little Review in 1929, 'what things do you really like?' Mary Butts replied:

A generalisation which unifies a number of apparently unrelated things. Substances like jade, coral or ivory, objects out of the past. Everything living or growing or static, which is 'according to its kind', a bad kind or a good, but 'good' in relation to what it is.<sup>20</sup>

Mary Butts's declaration illustrates the organic elements within her deep-space perception. It restates her predilection for the Chaucerian order of everything 'according to its kind' where 'kind' is preferred to 'good'. This is an important point which shall be considered in detail when I discuss Ashe of Rings, Armed with Madness and Death of Felicity Taverner, for, contrary to Edwin Muir's 1933 review of Ashe of Rings Mary Butts's work does not merely confine itself to a portrayal of a battle

---

19. Traps for Unbelievers, pp.42, 44.

20. 'Questionnaire', The Little Review (May 1929), pp.21-22.

between good and evil (see previous chapter). The search for things of the same 'kind' is bound up with Mary Butts's concern for the unification of what might be (apparently) unrelated but which, once the appearances are transcended, reveals an organic order existing 'as it were behind'. Embedded in this organic view is a personal desire for 'objects out of the past'. Indeed in The Crystal Cabinet Mary Butts goes further, declaring how 'to-day I cannot touch a lump of crystal, coral or amber, lapis or jade without the deepest sensuous joy'.<sup>21</sup> Jade in particular has a special resonance for Mary Butts; it is in some senses her 'signature' appearing in some form in almost all of her works (see below p.125). Yet this backward glance to the past is, as mentioned in the introductory chapter, far from being an idiosyncrasy of Mary Butts's symbology. On the contrary, it is a crucial characteristic which she shared with T.S. Eliot among others.

In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', an essay published just after the First World War in 1919, Eliot declares the need for having a sense of the past in order to write in the present. This sense is not a question of simple re-enaction of what has been passively inherited, for, writes Eliot, 'we have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition'.<sup>22</sup> What Eliot means by 'tradition' is 'a matter of much wider significance' than simple repetition: As he explains:

Tradition cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year.

This 'historical sense' which is equally pertinent in the case of a prose-writer beyond her twenty-fifth year, writes Eliot:

---

21. The Crystal Cabinet, p.8.

22. T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Selected Essays (London, 1946), p.14.

involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with the feeling that the whole of the literature from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.<sup>22</sup>

Thus the historical sense is far more than a deferential acknowledgement to (the works of) time past; rather 'a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and temporal together is what makes a writer traditional. And,' continues Eliot in a statement which preempts the possible misconception that 'traditional' might in some way be seen as synonymous with 'old-fashioned' and hence 'superseded', 'it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, in his own contemporaneity'. This is because, and here we see how conceptually Eliot and Mary Butts are of one voice: 'No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone'.<sup>23</sup>

What I am concerned with here is not the validity itself of Eliot's definition of tradition (which Eliot also sees as the 'business of the critic to preserve'), but the fact that it is shared by many Modernists; that the past lies in the same relation to the present as the supernatural quality to the storm - 'as it were behind', but not as something superseded; rather it is immanent, resonating, part of an organic deep-space.<sup>24</sup>

The post-First World War preference for an organic account of meaning inherited from Romanticism as expounded by Mary Butts and T.S. Eliot is illustrated in the work of the English Philosopher, A.N. Whitehead, particularly in a series of lectures published in book form in 1926 entitled Science and the Modern World. That Mary Butts knew Whitehead's work is signalled by her quoting from its penultimate pages as the epigraph for her epistolary fiction Imaginary Letters, published two years

---

23. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', p.14-15.

24. T.S. Eliot, '1920 Introduction', The Sacred Wood (London, 1960), p.xv.

later in 1928: 'We must not expect all the virtues. We should be satisfied if there is something odd enough to be interesting'. A brief exposé of Whitehead's argument will reveal why it should be particularly favoured by Mary Butts. Whitehead develops and discusses a philosophy of nature which, in opposition to the more fashionable contemporary materialistic and mechanistic credos of science and capitalism, is through and through organic. In a chapter entitled 'Science and Philosophy' he declares that 'the organic starting point is from the analysis of process as the realisation of events as dis-posed in an interlocked community'. For the emphasis, according to Whitehead, is that a 'community' (like Eliot's sense of 'tradition') is: 'one entity and not ... the sum of its parts. The relation of the parts, to each other and to the whole, are their aspects, each in the other'.<sup>25</sup> One of the criticisms of the organic or, as Whitehead terms it, the '"cosmological" outlook', is that it seems to imply an undifferentiated sameness. However, as Whitehead explains, organicism is based not on mere repetition of the same (re Eliot's belief that tradition is not simple repetition) but the 'endurance of a pattern' which like a 'tune' can at any time involve internal contrasts (my emphasis). The danger, we are told in a chapter entitled 'Requisites for social progress', results from the fact that the modern scientific mentality is at odds with the 'aesthetic needs of a civilised society [because] its materialistic basis has directed attention to things as opposed to values' (Whitehead's emphases). For 'when you understand all about the sun and all about the atmosphere and all about the rotation of the earth, you may still miss the radiance of the sunset'.<sup>26</sup>

To know the facts then, is no substitute for the appreciation and understanding of their 'value', as Mary Butts herself declares in reference

---

25. Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (Cambridge, 1932), pp.189, 186.

26. Whitehead, pp.166, 252, 248.

to the storm-painting (see above, p.45). Whitehead concludes that a 'comprehension of modern life' will only be possible through the recognition that an actuality, far from being a set of extractable factors, is, in fact, 'a process: it is a becomingness'; 'a through and through togetherness - togetherness of otherwise isolated eternal objects and togetherness of all actual occasions'. Whitehead believed that 'the future course of history depends on the decision of this generation [of 1926] as to the relations between [religion and science]'.<sup>27</sup> Whilst science is essentially materialist at base, concerned with knowing how nature functions, religion, by contrast, is founded on a concept of organicism. Not a 'research after comfort', religion is:

The vision of something which stands beyond, behind and within the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realised; something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of possible facts; something that gives meaning to all that passes, and yet already eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good, and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest.<sup>28</sup>

The term 'quest' will have particular resonance when we consider the subject matter of Armed with Madness; it is enough here however, to note the consonance between Whitehead's 'hopeless quest' and Mary Butts's 'corridors which never meet' in 'Rites of Passage' - both symbolise a never-ending, ongoing process. Indeed the shared organic ontology between Mary Butts, Whitehead and Eliot is revealed not merely in spirit but literally to the letter, as can be seen by the following extract from The Crystal Cabinet. Mary Butts is describing how just before the First World War her younger self wandered around the prehistoric Badbury Rings in her native Dorset:

---

27. Whitehead, pp.245, 217, 218, 224.

28. Whitehead, p.238.

Each going from place to place became a knot in a pattern: each place, each time unique in itself. Of incalculable importance for the future, as I knew, yet each perfect only for what it was. In the end is my beginning as Mary of Scotland took her device. The meaning of everything was there and would make itself plain in due course. When I was old or perhaps not till after I was dead; but the pattern was being shown to me there and then, the pattern and the meaning of the pattern. The visible and the invisible world, the veil drawn exactly as much as I could bear.<sup>29</sup>

The younger Mary Butts moving around the physical landscape is performing a self-conscious sacrament to the 'pattern' - the word used by both Mary Butts and Whitehead - which underlies and shapes all things. Indeed the word 'pattern' is repeatedly used by Mary Butts; she describes earlier in The Crystal Cabinet how as a very young child she learns of 'the first knowing of the pattern on which life is strung. Awareness of the repeating earth, the beginning of all natural religion, its sacrament'; and how after these early experiences 'life began to take on coherence and pattern. I knew there would be repeats, and new things that were part of old things; that however new would be the same, yet, however alike, never exactly the same'.<sup>30</sup> (This last statement is particularly full of Tennysonian echoes from In Memoriam: 'the same yet not the same'; Mary Butts admired Tennyson's work.) The Mary Butts writing of this rite is twice the age of the Mary Butts performing it, but there is never any indication that the older Mary Butts understands an essential truth which the younger Mary Butts could not appreciate. On the contrary, Mary Butts writes in The Crystal Cabinet of how as an adult she has 'managed to keep the same eyes' as her childhood self and she claims that her childhood pointed to:

the ancient belief in an essential personality, passing through the stages of growth as though they were no

---

29. The Crystal Cabinet, p.273.

30. The Crystal Cabinet, pp.5, 9.

more than illustration of its nature, or shadows confusing its reality, the pure being, the same when the body is at six months or sixty years.<sup>31</sup>

Within four years of the earlier initiating rite Mary Butts had completed Ashe of Rings, which like Armed with Madness and Death of Felicity Taverner is based on the relation between 'the visible and the invisible world' or to use and hence reveal the fittingness of Whitehead's words: that 'something which stands beyond, behind and within the passing flux of immediate things'. It is Mary Butts's continual awareness of the 'pattern and the meaning of the pattern' which makes the w-rite-ing of The Crystal Cabinet not so much an act of anamnesia through which to re-collect her past, as a testimony to a sense of an essential self rooted and hence deepening but never qualitatively changing in its awareness. Hence the aptness of the citation 'in the end is my beginning' whereby Mary Butts alludes to the organic repetition of nature's cycles. The use of the quotation illustrates the link between Mary Butts and Eliot in its more famous yet later occurrence in Eliot's cyclical poem Four Quartets which was published in 1944, seven years after The Crystal Cabinet. Furthermore, the use reveals the degree to which she and Eliot accord with Eliot's definition of the 'traditional' writer, for, although Mary Butts cites it as the device of Mary of Scotland, its source is older, coming as it does from the Bible, which is itself, as the American critic Northrop Frye has pointed out in The Great Code, 'a single, gigantic, complex metaphor .., [in the] sense of containing a structure of significantly repeated images'.<sup>32</sup>

One aspect of Mary Butts's organic perception is illustrated in the relationship between Armed with Madness and Death of Felicity Taverner.

---

31. The Crystal Cabinet, pp.10, 74.

32. Northrop Frye, The Great Code: The Bible and Literature (London, 1983), pp.63-64.



Three of the figures who are prominent in Armed with Madness - Scylla, Felix and Picus - reappear in Death of Felicity Taverner and the marriage of Scylla and Picus (somewhere in the invisible margin 'between' the two works) means that chronologically speaking the 'situation' of Death of Felicity Taverner does occur after that of Armed with Madness. The idea of Death of Felicity Taverner following Armed with Madness in time is supported by the appearance of Boris (albeit with a different surname), the 'hero' of Death of Felicity Taverner, on the threshold literally, in that he arrives by boat on the edge of the Taverner's land at the very end of Armed with Madness, and metaphorically in that his entrance occurs on the edge of the timeless margin which joins the end of Armed with Madness and the beginning of Death of Felicity Taverner.<sup>33</sup>

Yet whilst there are comments made in passing in Death of Felicity Taverner which refer back to the 'situation' of Armed with Madness (eg. Clarence Lake the companion/lover of Picus in Armed with Madness is mentioned once by name in Death of Felicity Taverner) these cross-references, whilst appealing to a sleuth-reader, do not shed more light retrospectively (when both books have been read) on the meaning of either work. This is because these two books are not linked to one another through the unfolding of a causally established narrative across both works. There is a crucial distinction between chronological sequentiality and narrative linearity as Death of Felicity Taverner is not the sequel or the conclusion of a story of which Armed with Madness is the beginning or the prequel.

---

33. The margin itself provides a curious expansion and contraction of time as the years which have passed between the finishing of Armed with Madness and the writing of Death of Felicity Taverner for Mary Butts, are collapsed for the reader since it is simply a question of closing one book on Boris to find him there when the next one is opened. However during the course of reading Death of Felicity Taverner, we discover that two years have passed since Boris first arrived at the end of Armed with Madness (see Death of Felicity Taverner, pp.44, 48, 190) which mirrors the actual timespan between the publication of Armed with Madness in 1928 and the time when Mary Butts began writing Death of Felicity Taverner in 1930.

Novel series ranging from Trollope's Barchester Novels (1857-67), Galsworthy's Forsyte Saga (1906-21) through to the more gyrating tetralogy Parade's End (1924-8) by Ford Madox Ford or The Alexandrian Quartet (1957-60) by Lawrence Durrell share, despite their differences, an underlying structural assumption: the incomplete or partial character of each book within the whole sequence. Each book can be read singly and still make sense, but to read the whole set is to obtain the illusion of a more complete picture, since it is based on the premiss of mechanistic accumulation whereby the whole is the sum of its parts. Armed with Madness and Death of Felicity Taverner are not bound together in this way and this is a crucial point, as notwithstanding the French poststructuralist Roland Barthes's proclamation in The Death of the Author (1976) that we read beyond or against authorial intention, our position as readers would be qualitatively different if Mary Butts led us to expect that we were presented in these two works with 'What the Taverners did' and 'What the Taverners did next'. For then we would be reading a narrative sequence inherited from the nineteenth century novel; although, as we shall see, memory is at the heart of a deep-space, Romantic perspective, it is not built up by Mary Butts from within a set of interrelated texts as is the case in a novel series.

The misconception on which social realism is based is that we can somehow translate experience directly through the soi-disant invisible medium of language onto paper - a belief belied by a reading of James Joyce's Ulysses, since allusive and labyrinthine though it is, it still illustrates the inherent and inevitable limitations of literary realism, as never could even a single day be put into words as it was experienced. Part of the problem with the tenets of social realism is the refusal to acknowledge the slippery nature of words; that in prose as much as in poetry language is a medium and hence open to a variety of readings; that

the linear structure of prose narrative often determines a form which does not accord with how life is experienced - a fact explored by Joseph Frank's seminal essay 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature' (1945) - and that crucially, since works are written and read and there are a minimum of two people involved in every composition, an inevitable partiality and selectivity underlies every piece of writing. As Gertrude Stein once remarked in 'The Superstitions of Fred Anneday, Annday, Anday: A Novel of Real Life' (which having only seven pages is itself questioning the definition of the term 'novel' and its usual coupling with the concept of 'real life'):

It is not confusing to live every day and to meet everyone not at all confusing but to tell any one yes it is confusing even if only telling it to any one how you lived any one day and met everybody all of that day. And now what more can one do than that. And doing more than that is this.<sup>34</sup>

The 'this' in Stein's case involves a literal breakdown of language in an attempt to break through the constraints imposed by the prose of social realist novels. The extent to which Stein's method is experimental is debatable if we consider the following passage which appears to be pure Stein: 'At her feet he bowed, he fell, he layed down: at her feet, he bowed, he fell: where he bowed, there he fell down dead'. And yet it comes from the Bible (Judges 5:26-7), this fact supporting and hence bringing us back to Mary Butts's Romantic view that 'There are men who make art new, there is no man who can make new art'.<sup>35</sup> Mary Butts's use of 'man' dates her work: for she uses it always to denote not men as distinct from women - hers is not a feminist claim that the future of art lies with women - but humanity in general. As far as the content of her

---

34. Gertrude Stein, 'The Superstitions of Fred Anneday, Annday, Anday: A Novel of Real Life', How Writing is Written, Previously Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein, Volume 2, edited by Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles, 1974), p.28.

35. The Macedonian, p.4.

statement is concerned it is itself echoing Ecclesiastes (1:9-10):

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.

Is there any thing whereof it may be said. See, this is new? It hath been already of old time, which was before us.

There is also a rather more serious problem with Stein's method in that it is often difficult to read, a fact stated both by her contemporary, E.M. Forster and more recently by Randa Dubnik in The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language and Cubism (1984) when she declares the aptness, the necessity even of a structuralist methodology to decode Stein's work.<sup>36</sup> It is also commented on indirectly by Mary Butts in her diary entry following a visit to Stein's flat in Paris in 1927. Mary Butts's entry consists of a list of objects seen there, eg.:

Two cups and saucers of rose porcelain, and medallion heads in profile on the box.

A blue and white glass house.

...

A paper picture by Picasso in a glazed wooden box.

A papier-maché ashtray like a Chinese cup, green inside, black and white within.<sup>37</sup>

This listing reveals her desire for beautiful objects, which she declared she had inherited, and she uses this desire as the central motif for her short story 'In the House' (1929) and states it as one of the characteristics of Felicity Taverner in Death of Felicity Taverner.<sup>38</sup> Simultaneously, by echoing Stein's literary style (eg. her use of lists in 'Tender Buttons' (1915)) Mary Butts's style also mocks the meaningfulness of merely listing things as a satisfactory replacement for nineteenth century realist prose.

---

36. Aspects of the Novel, pp.41-42; Randa Dubnik, The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, language and Cubism (Urbana, 1984), p.x.

37. Byington and Morgan, pp.171-172.

38. The Crystal Cabinet, p.12; Death of Felicity Taverner, pp.16, 80.

An alternative and older way of reading to that of meaning reliant on cumulative linearity, is that of 'typology' as described in Frye's The Great Code. Here he explains that the relationship between the Old and New Testaments is that of 'type' to 'antitype', saying: 'The New Testament ... claims to be, among other things, the key to the Old Testament, the explanation of what the Old Testament really means'. He continues:

The general principle of interpretation is traditionally given as 'in the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed.' Everything in the Old Testament is a 'type' or adumbration of something that happens in the New Testament, and the whole subject is therefore typology, though it is typology in a special sense.

According to this interpretation Adam is a type of Christ and Christ is his antitype; similarly: 'In Peter 3:21 Christian Baptism is called the antitypos of the saving of mankind from the flood of Noah'.<sup>39</sup>

Frye's typological account of the two testaments presents the Bible as a system based on a metaphorical interrelationship: that is, where the antitype 'stands for' the type and vice versa, so that the Bible acts in some sense as a bilingual translation, the Old Testament providing one language and the New Testament the other. Such a reading sites meaning as lying somewhere between the two testaments, which act as the walls of a hall of mirrors producing a coherency based on interreflection/reflexion. The terms are supposedly all there, present in the Bible to be read metaphorically rather than literally, but nevertheless comprehensible to all once the 'right' approach is adopted.

Armed with Madness and Death of Felicity Taverner, however, in contrast to both nineteenth century cumulative linearity and the biblical typological system, are related not directly the one to the other so much as via a symbolic relationship where they are connected to and through a third point 'as it were behind' the texts themselves, both functioning

---

39. Frye, p.79.

within the same linguistic symbolism which incorporates both and to which both refer. Thus the relationship between Armed with Madness and Death of Felicity Taverner is based on the fact that they 'represent' the same thing. To some extent this may be seen as the difference between typology and symbolism, that whilst the former denotes a direct link between two equivalencies - this stands for that (hence the notion of bilingualism) - the latter links the symbol not to something else on the same plane but to a system (the -ism within which the symbol operates) which is far larger than itself and which it opens up and out onto. Hence the adage recurring through Mary Butts's writing: quod inferius sicut superius est (ie. as above so below).

I have used the term 'represent' in a particular sense. It is that used by the French semiotician Jean Baudrillard in Simulations (1983) where he declares that:

perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images, murderers of the real of their own model as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity. To this murderous capacity is opposed the dialectical capacity of representations as a visible and intelligible mediation of the Real. All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange - God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum - not unreal, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference.<sup>40</sup>

In a 'gigantic simulacrum' is, according to Baudrillard, where we now live, within which 'the very definition of the Real becomes: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction ... (classical representation is not equivalence, it is transcription, interpretation, commentary)'.<sup>41</sup>

---

40. Jean Baudrillard, Simulations (New York, 1983), p.10.

41. Baudrillard, p.146.

The connotations of the term 'reproduction' will be explored later with reference to the layered space of Jane Bowles's work; what concerns us at this stage is how Baudrillard describes 'representation'. It involves 'transcription, interpretation, commentary', establishing 'not equivalence' but the 'wager ... that a sign would refer to the depth of meaning'. Baudrillard's 'representation' is a more recent renaming of Kermode's 'Romanticism', where Kermode's 'image' or symbol has been renamed 'sign'. Yet within it the relationship of sign to meaning, symbol to symbolism remains unaltered; both refer to something larger than themselves ('not equivalence'), something 'as it were behind'. The particular consonance between Mary Butts's deep-space prose and Baudrillard's 'representation' is foregrounded by Baudrillard's description of the latter as conveying a 'depth of meaning', whilst Mary Butts writes of the 'mysterious links and repetitions of history ... Reborn, now here and now there, making one feel that such happenings and such repetitions are not fortuitous'.<sup>42</sup>

As will now be beginning to be apparent, Mary Butts's prose represents (ie. re-presents) not so much a single moral message but the evocation of the depth of meaning itself and the necessity for a deep-space perspective in order to invoke it. Mary Butts declares in 'Ghosties and Ghoulies' that 'what a man can conceive, he can become "like" ... This is the truth about the Gods. Give yourself up to your conception of them, and you will become in some sense a repetition of them, an image of them'.<sup>43</sup> Quod inferius sicut superius est. Serge in Ashe of Rings is unable to distil the magic of the Rings precisely because he was lacking in this perception (see below, p.121). Before returning to the relationship between Armed with Madness and Death of Felicity Taverner a brief glance at an exchange

---

42. 'Ghosties and Ghoulies', p.12.

43. 'Ghosties and Ghoulies', p.434.

in a short story by Mary Butts provides a metaphor for her prophetic aim as a writer. The story follows Dick Tressider, a soldier who has just returned to London after fighting in the First World War:

At the [British] Museum Gates he saw a man he had known who said: 'Is that you Tressider? I didn't know you were in town.'

'I came up last night.'

'Wishing you were back?'

'Wishing I could smash these lumps of stone or get men to see their cosmic significance.'

The civilised man winced. The idea might be tolerable, but one should not say it like that.<sup>44</sup>

The aim of Dick Tressider is analagous with Mary Butts's aim: to get readers 'to see their cosmic significance'. The reaction of the 'civilised man' is the reaction of most of Mary Butts's readers - as Hugh Ross-Williamson pointed out, Mary Butts would always have only a small readership for such a stark and raw message.<sup>45</sup> That Mary Butts herself was aware of this is revealed by the bibliographical history of this story. It was one of her earliest stories to be published, accepted by Ford Madox Ford for The Transatlantic Review in March 1924. At that time its title was 'Deosil' which means 'clockwise' or with the sun and it was under this title that it was included in The Best Short Stories of 1924. But by the time it was republished in Several Occasions (1932), Mary Butts had changed the title to 'Widdershins', Deosil's opposite, meaning anticlockwise with a secondary, inferred meaning of 'against the grain'. If Mary Butts has been overlooked it is not so much for the 'matter' of her work ('the idea might be tolerable'), but the intensity of its 'manner' ('one should not say it like that').

---

44. Mary Butts, 'Widdershins', in Several Occasions, pp.17-18.

45. Hugh Ross-Williamson, p.188.



Returning to the relationship between Armed with Madness and Death of Felicity Taverner we can now see that it is not that the former conceals what the latter reveals, nor that the latter concludes what the former initiated, for as the plot descriptions below highlight, in neither narrative is the ending more than a temporary reprieve. Instead they embody Mary Butts's anti-mechanistic, anti-rationalistic Romantic symbology. Social realist novels are dominated and supported by a humanist conception of the world. For writers such as George Eliot and Trollope human-human relationships provide the framework, the boundaries of their interest. In Mary Butts's writing, however, the human-human dimension is, whilst present, subordinated to the human-nonhuman relationship. Hers is not a (egalitarian) framework predicated on an anthropocentric view of the world. She is not writing about class or social groups, nor does she deal directly with the day-to-day life of industrial urban England of the 1920s and 1930s. Like the First World War in Armed with Madness which whilst occurring simultaneously, is not visited but is part of the shadow under which Van Ashe and her companions play their parts, so in Armed with Madness and Death of Felicity Taverner the problems of an increasingly mechanised, industrial and denaturalised England as well as the heritage of the First World War are translated by a sense of 'dis-ease'. 'What was she worried about?' Scylla asks herself on the tenth page of Armed with Madness. 'Money of course,' is her first reply, 'and love affairs; the important, unimportant things'. But it is more than this. 'Hitherto God had fed his sparrows and as good fish had come out of the sea. But' now in contrast to this Paradise Lost:

everywhere there was a sense of broken continuity, a dis-ease. The end of an age, the beginning of another. Revaluation of values. Phrases that meant something if you could mean them. The meaning of meaning? Discovery of a new value, a different way of apprehending everything. She wished the earth would not suddenly look fragile as if it was going to start shifting about.

Every single piece of appearance. She knew it was only the sun, polishing what it had dried. Including her face, her make-up had made pasty with sweat. There was something wrong with all of them, or with their world. A moment missed, a moment to come. Or not coming. Or either or both. Shove it off on the war; but that did not help.<sup>46</sup>

The practical personal worries about money and love affairs suddenly shift to the quintessential epistemological problems of 'the meaning of meaning'. The sense of 'broken continuity' attributed to a chasm created by the war ('shove it off on the war') was felt by many who had, like Mary Butts, been young artists at the time and had had their youth sapped by it. But, as Scylla realises, the war is not the cause and thus to blame the war 'did not help'. Fear of a fragile-looking world 'as if it were going to start shifting about' (in itself a prophetic utterance in view of how the world appears today from our nuclear-shadowed perspective), is partly rationalised away by Scylla as the effect of the sun's heat on the landscape and her make-up, in an attempt to ascribe her mental discomfort to physical causes. But only partly. For all these - lack of money, love affairs, make-up, war - they are real problems but they are also to a varying degree symptoms or symbols of 'something wrong with all of them, or with their world'. In a letter to Goldring in 1922 shortly before commencing Armed with Madness, Mary Butts announces that she is reading Jung's Psychoanalysis of the Unconscious (1916). Expressed here by Scylla is the Jungian belief that in the Individual, physical illness has its cause in a psychic often subconscious dis-ease, compounded and magnified. Scylla is troubled then, not at the world's trouble but because the world is in trouble; something is wrong at the cosmic, daimonic level from which she (as is the case for all the people inhabiting Mary Butts's fiction whether or not they acknowledge it) is inseparable.

---

46. Mary Butts, Armed with Madness (London, 1928), p.10; subsequent references incorporated into text with abbreviation AWM.

The writer Frank Baker states that 'Daimon' is a term which Mary Butts used repeatedly in both her speech and her writing. He describes it as 'this wilder, old spirit in my nature'.<sup>47</sup> Mary Butts provides a rather more precise and expansive description of 'this Greek word which may be unfamiliar and for which English has no exact equivalent' in her introduction to The Macedonian (1933). As Barbara Guest points out in her biography of H.D., Herself Defined there was before the First World War a fashion for all things Greek so that Mary Butts's use of such terms was one of her time rather than idiosyncratic; H.D., like Mary Butts, often referred to her 'daemon'.<sup>48</sup> However, by the 1930s such widespread familiarity with the classical world was no longer prevalent and consequently, writes Guest, by 1934 H.D.'s work (which was heavily influenced by classical imagery) had gone out of fashion.<sup>49</sup> Mary Butts's assumption of a familiarity with such terms on the part of the reader in her fictional work, coupled with her early death in 1937 when her kind of idiom was unfashionable, might partly account for the lack of recognition of her work. That she herself was aware of this shift in the 1930s is revealed by her tendency to give definitions of Greek terms in her critical writings and essays of these later years. Hence in the introduction to The Macedonian she explains that

Daimôn - from which our 'demon' but with a specifically bad sense - is a potency, never a god; though some of the Greek daimones attained personality and became gods. A daimôn is sometimes as definite as a season personified, such as water or Spring; but usually is the sheer force that lies behind the manifestations of life - the 'mana' even of a dead man or a tree or the sea or the wind, or an idea such as Plenty or Nemesis or Luck (my emphasis).<sup>50</sup>

---

47. Baker, p.126.

48. Guest, pp.33, 84.

49. Guest, p.230.

50. Mary Butts, 'Preface January-August 1931', The Macedonian, pp.x-xi.

Once again Mary Butts draws our attention to a force that lies not visibly in the world, but 'as it were behind', 'behind the manifestations of life'.

(ii)

'This story as I see it,' said the second old man,  
'is true Sanc grail.'

(AWM, p.193)

The numerous references to Freud and Jung scattered throughout Mary Butts's work reveal her familiarity with their ideas. In a review for Time and Tide in June 1933 she declares: 'I am old enough to remember what it was like when the theories of Freud first escaped from the study and the clinic, and the great game of Hunt-the-Complex began, to the entertainment and alarm of a war-shattered and disillusioned world'.<sup>51</sup> In her short story 'Brightness Falls' (in Several Occasions, 1932) Mary Butts provides a fictional presentation of Freud's Psychopathology of Everyday Life (1914) in which she reveals what she considers to be the shortcomings of his theories. Likewise in Armed with Madness Mary Butts's dissatisfaction with Freudian ideas is explored on a larger scale within the context of a motif or situational metaphor taken not from a contemporary theory but a story dating back to the twelfth century: the legend of the Holy Grail. In order to consider the effectiveness of Mary Butts's use of the myth and why she should have chosen it, it is necessary before looking at Armed with Madness in some detail, to give a brief account of the legend and some examples of the contemporary interest in it.

In the nineteenth century this medieval tale had attracted the interest of the Poet Laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson resulting in his poem,

---

51. Mary Butts, 'Taking Thought', Time and Tide, 14 no.2 (1933), p.738.

'The Idylls of the King' (1859-1885) as well as inspiring Richard Wagner's opera, Parsifal (1877-82). In painting, the fascination of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement in the late nineteenth century for all things medieval had led William Morris to illustrate a new edition of Malory's Morte d'Arthur which was rediscovered at this time. Just as Ford Madox Ford's childhood was steeped in the art of the Pre-Raphaelites (one of its leading exponents was his grandfather Ford Madox Brown), so Mary Butts would have been familiar with this tale not only through the literature she read as a child but also through the friendship between her father and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Central to the literary interest in the Grail Myth in the 1920s was Jessie Weston's anthropological study, From Ritual to Romance. Published in 1920 Weston's work aimed to bring together her amassed knowledge about the Sanc Grail as portrayed in Christian legend and folk-lore in order to claim that far from having its origins wholly either in ecclesiastical writings or popular tale, the Grail with its attendant myths derives from both these sources. Quickly superseded in terms of its scholarship (From Ritual to Romance was attacked as early as 1925 by the Supernatural writer, Arthur Machen in his Introduction to 'The Secret of the Sangraal' in The Shining Pyramid),<sup>52</sup> Weston's account is generally remembered today as a footnote to a much more famous work, T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land. The fact that From Ritual to Romance should come to be known as a footnote appended (ie. coming after and hence secondary) to The Waste Land reveals in itself the extent to which history distorts or at the very least modifies the way in which we read texts; this should not, however, detract from the widespread influence which the book had in the 1920s. In her 1933 article on supernatural fiction Mary Butts cites her admiration for 'Miss Weston's From Ritual to Romance', describing it as 'the work to

---

52. Arthur Machen, Introduction to 'The Secret of the Sangraal', in The Shining Pyramid (London, 1925), pp.73-75.

which T.S. Eliot owes so much'.<sup>53</sup> Whilst T.S. Eliot's own notes to The Waste Land are to a large extent a poet's half-mocking response to the critics' desire for elucidation beyond the poem itself, Eliot does recommend From Ritual to Romance for its own 'great interest'.

Indeed, as I shall show, not only is the subject matter of Weston's work of particular relevance to Armed with Madness, but also its manner or conceptual framework is illustrative as an example of organic form. For just as the legend, according to Weston, is seen as drawing from both non-Christian and Christian world-views, so the symbols within the legend - the cup, the sword, the stone, the spear etc. - are aspects of a 'connected whole'. It is imperative therefore, she urges:

that they be not separated from one another, and made the subject of independent treatment but that they be regarded, in their relation the one to the other, and that no theory of origin be held admissable which does not allow for the relation as a primitive and indispensable factor (Weston's emphases).<sup>54</sup>

It is the importance of the 'relation'; that is, the interrelationship of one thing to another within a 'connected whole' for which Weston is arguing, as against what she regards as

the modern tendency to specialise which is apt to blind scholars to the essential importance of regarding the object of study as a whole, that fosters in them a habit of focussing their attention upon that one point or incident of the story that lends itself to treatment in their special line of study, and which induces them to minimise or ignore, those elements which lie outside their particular range.<sup>54</sup>

Dealt with separately, the various symbols of the legend will not combine into a 'harmonious whole' but will remain 'like pieces of a puzzle, each of which has been symmetrically cut and trimmed, till they lie side by

---

53. 'Ghosties and Ghoulies', p.14.

54. Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (Cambridge, 1920), p.64.

side, unfitting and unrelated'.<sup>55</sup> Just as Eliot argued for a diachronic organicism in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', so Weston and Whitehead expatiate on the need for a synchronic organicism. Mary Butts's aim within and across her work is to combine the two, sharing with her contemporaries a desire for a deep-space writing which extends Romanticism into Modernism.

It would be misplaced, however, to regard the revival of interest in the Arthurian legends as confined to intellectual and artistic circles. An illustration of the popular fascination can be found in a newspaper article of 1907 which describes the purported 'discovery' of the cup of the Holy Grail in a well. It was in response to this article that Arthur Machen originally published 'The Secret of the Sangraal' (1907) in which he gives the following synopsis of the legend:

Logres, that is Britain, is supposed to be in the doleful condition of enchantment; physically and spiritually the land languishes, and the keeper of the Graal is sick of a mystic wound. All that is required is for the chosen knight of the adventure to come to the Graal Castle; and then the holy vessel is borne before him as he sits in the hall. He must then ask what the Graal is and whom it serves; whereupon the evil enchantments will be annulled, the sick keeper will be healed, and all that is broken will be made whole. For one reason or another the knight does not ask the question on his first visit; consequently the doleful state of Britain continues and the wounded keeper of the mysteries is unhealed. It should be mentioned that the keeper is sometimes called the King Fisherman, sometimes the King Fisher; this title, be it noted, is not the smallest of the many difficulties in this extraordinary tale.<sup>56</sup>

There are many versions of this legend which has its Christian counterparts, recorded by what Machen calls 'High History'. Indeed in 1910 The High History of the Holy Graal was published in the Everyman Library, and in the previous year the philosopher A.E. Waite published

---

55. Weston, p.65.

56. Machen, p.86.

The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail: its Legends and Symbolism (1909).

(He also published a long poem in 1921 entitled The Book of the Holy Grail).

In High History the holy vessel is said variously (by Machen) to be:

(1) the container used by Christ at the Last Supper from the contents of which he washed the Apostles' feet; (2) the cup with which Joseph of Arimathea caught some of Christ's blood at his crucifixion; (3) the sepulchre in which Christ's body was laid to rest after the crucifixion (and to that extent it provides the 'type' of the chalice, its 'antitype' in which the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ are taken at Holy Communion); lastly (4) from being the pater (the stone slab, placed on top of the grave) it becomes an altar stone used by St. David of Wales who was regarded as the 'Sovereign of the saints of the Isle of Britain'. This altar which is supposed to have innumerable virtues as a result of Christ's body having rested beneath it, disappears after the death of St. David.<sup>57</sup> Thus we can see that even in the official High History this sacred vessel has no fixed form.

It is because the legend of the Holy Grail was so much explored in the early years of this century that Machen was prompted to point to the dangers of the contemporary fascination in The Shining Pyramid (1925). Both his 'Mystic Speech' (included in The Shining Pyramid) and Pound's 'Psychology and the Troubadours' (mentioned above in the previous chapter) were originally lectures given to The Quest Society, the existence of such a society reflecting the degree of public interest. This is an important consideration when assessing the relative obscurantism of Mary Butts's use of the myth from a 1980s perspective, since at the time of writing it would have been the opposite of obscure. Its appeal for Mary Butts would also have lain in the fact that the Grail legend is an inherently unsolved and unsolvable mystery. As Machen explains:



attempts at explanation are far from being satisfactory because they attempt at a task which is in the nature of things impossible. If you are asked to explain the Grail legend you are really being asked a dozen questions not a single question; and the attempt to reply to all these interrogations with a single answer is bound to end in failure.<sup>58</sup>

It is therefore the perfect story for the deep-space perspective of Mary Butts as it provides the epitome of organic form. It denies closure and provides a spiral of interrelations. Mary Butts's use of this never-ending, never-to-be-ended story as a metaphor for Armed with Madness (and to a lesser extent Death of Felicity Taverner) increases the mirroring effect of these two narratives by heightening the fact that every aspect imparts and reflects a sense of mutual interdependence because everything is interconnected...

The title Armed with Madness is a quotation from a classical text, 'Armed with madness I go on a long voyage' cited by Mary Butts as the frontispiece (although she does not name the title of the text). The voyage of the narrative is a modern-day Quest and like the medieval Quest there can be no possible point of arrival. Baker describes Armed with Madness as:

a novel about a postwar set of young men and one girl in a decaying country house who disintegrate and disperse in isolation and chaos because one of them has found in an old well a cup which might have been the chalice of the Holy Grail, and they have done it dishonour.<sup>59</sup>

Fundamentally this description is correct in centering the work around the cup of the Holy Grail and the repercussions of its discovery. Baker's characterisation of the people involved as 'a postwar set of young men and one girl' is rather misleading, however, as it conflates the fact

---

58. Machen, p.90.

59. Baker, p.141.

that the situation takes place in the postwar period (more or less when it was written - the mid 1920s) with the two generations (pre- and postwar) to which the set belong. The story involves two households and one visitor - the household of the 'decaying country house' is made up of a sister and brother, Scylla and Felix Taverner, and a friend, a painter called Ross. The other household is that of their cousin Picus Tracey and his companion (and lover although this is never explicitly stated) also a painter, Clarence Lake.

Felix and Ross visit Picus and Clarence and it is whilst they are there (we are later told) that Felix unearths a cup with a spear from the bottom of a well, which was being dredged by Clarence and Picus, due to its being the only water supply and its having mysteriously dried up. The cup is brought over to the Taverner household, where Scylla is entertaining Dudley Carston whom she went to meet from the station at Starn, the nearest village a few miles away. Carston is an American whom Felix had met in Paris and whom he had invited over rather to the dismay of Scylla and Ross. Together with Carston, Picus and Clarence become residents in the Taverner home as they are without water at their own house. This meeting between them all establishes the beginning of the 'situation' of Armed with Madness as they discuss the significance of the discovery of the cup. Only Felix and Carston are postwar generation and this together with Anglo-American differences (everyone else is English and apart from a brief journey to Paris, the book is set in England), determines their knowledge of and attitude to the grail myth.

As its significance is explored Scylla and Picus secretly become lovers and Carston, who is jealous, reveals this to the group when everyone is assembled together. This causes more tension for whilst it emerges that the cup had been stolen from his father by Picus and deliberately placed in the well, this is by no means the end of the

matter as this initial act is outweighed by the consequences. Whilst the cup itself may or may not be the Holy Grail, 'the story as I see it,' says an onlooker, 'is true Sanc-Grail' (AWM, p.193). The increasing tension accompanying its presence causes the group to 'disperse in isolation and chaos' as Baker rightly points out. But this is not the end of the matter either, nor the end of the book. Rather, the scattering of Scylla et al is only a temporary breathing-space in the quest. The worst is yet to come as the knights slowly gather again.

Scylla is one of the first to return. We are told that prior to her brief affair with Clarence's companion, Picus, she and Clarence had been close friends. She is aware that this friendship has now been threatened, and yet there is an important reason why she must visit Clarence, in spite of the alienation. During the interlude Scylla visits Lydia, a mutual friend of hers and Clarence (Lydia had at one time been Clarence's fiancée) and as a result of a misunderstanding Lydia has sent Clarence a rather bitter and malicious letter, which, Scylla realises in Clarence's present fragile state of mind could have dangerous consequences. Indeed, by the time Scylla visits Clarence after the dispersal (during which time he has been alone and afraid) she has come to represent for him not only 'a woman who had sapped [Picus] up for her body's sake and her vanity' - an unpleasant but recognisable reaction of jealousy - but much more: the cause of all his problems, as he associates her with the emergence of the cup from the well. Whilst Clarence is entwining the cup and Scylla in his mind, Picus and Carston are being advised by the local priest that the cup should be put back in the well where it was found. Separately but synchronically, Clarence has come to the same conclusion and by the time Scylla appears, she has become the cup for Clarence and he tells her that he is going to throw her back into the well (AWM, p.199). In a similarly symbolic attempt to gain

protection from Clarence, Scylla runs to the lifesize statue of Picus (sculpted by Clarence) to which she is then tied by Clarence who shoots her with arrows made from a gull's feathers he has killed. This continues until Carston arrives and Clarence's fit subsides. It is Picus who knowing of Clarence's previous fits of insanity has to make him realise what he has done. 'I think you know that you actually did a dream' (AWM, p.215; Mary Butts's emphasis) he tells Clarence, referring to Clarence having enacted his subconscious desires against Picus and Scylla. Scylla escapes death but only just. The story ends without ending as Carston departs and Felix (who had gone to Paris) returns to their land by boat with a white Russian exile called Boris.

In The Truth and Life of Myth (1968) the American poet Robert Duncan writes of the 'double-speak' character of some works of art which convey 'the truth that only those who know the truth can penetrate'.<sup>60</sup> If you must already 'know' in order to understand what is being conveyed, this necessarily means that somehow you must belong to some sort of initiated élite. Just as in the case of the Eleusinian Mysteries of Ancient Greece which Mary Butts declared she knew, the extent to which the resonances of the Holy Grail legend can be understood depends on your knowledge of the various versions of the myth. For as Machen points out, there is no single 'textus receptus of the story'.<sup>61</sup> I have already alluded to the fact that in Mary Butts's narratives there is a sharp delineation between those who 'know' and those who do not and, as I shall show, even among the initiates there is a hierarchy of knowledge. This capacity to know and understand the significance of a 'situation' is linked (in all of Mary Butts's work) to how far a person is able to commune with the forces 'as it were behind' the natural environment. Or, as Duncan pointed out,

---

60. Robert Duncan, The Truth and Life of Myth (Fremont, 1968), p.74.

61. Machen, p.91.

'One of the strong things in Mary Butts is that you are or you are not a native of a country'.<sup>62</sup> The relationships between Scylla, Felix, Ross and Picus are the result of their relationship to the land. As in Ashe of Rings so in Armed with Madness the land which precedes, contains and transcends its inhabitants is the first image described. Thus Armed with Madness opens:

In the house in which they could not afford to live, it was unpleasantly quiet. Marvellously noisy, but the noises let through silence. The noises were jays, bustling and screeching in the wood, a hay-cutter, clattering and sending up waves of scent, substantial as sea-waves. Filling the long rooms as the tide fills a blow-hole but without roar or release. The third noise was the light wind rising off its diamond blue sea. The sea lay three parts round the house, invisible because of the wood. The wood rose from its cliff-point in a single tree, and spread out inland in a fan to enclose the house...

The silence let through by the jays, the haycutter, and the breeze was a complicated production of stone rooms, the natural silence of empty grass, and the equivocal, personal silence of the wood. Not many nerves could stand it. People who had come for a week had been known to leave the next day. The people who had the house were interested in the wood and its silence. When it got worse, after dark or at mid-day, they said it was tuning-up. When a gale came up-Channel shrieking like a mad harp, they said they were watching a visible fight with the silence of the wood.

A large gramophone stood with its mouth open on the verandah flags. They had been playing to the wood after lunch, to appease it and to keep their dancing in hand. The house was empty. Their servants had gone over to a distant farm. The wood had it all its own way. They were out. (AWM, pp.1-2)

That this is a world where human absence is of no importance is a fact which 'the people who had the house' are well aware. They do not dominate their land; rather their relationship to it is one of subservient guardianship (re Ashe of Rings, see below p.108). As Mary Butts was to write in Warning to Hikers (1932): 'The earth is indifferent always. The earth has its eyes open night and day, an infinite number of eyes.'

---

62. 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts', unpublished transcripts, p.15.

Utterly observant, utterly indifferent eyes'.<sup>63</sup> Likewise the inhabitants of the land are aware of its indifference to their fate. Yet as natives their nerves can 'stand ... the equivocal, personal silence of the wood'; their dancing, we are told, had been partly prompted by their desire to keep 'their dancing in hand', but also to 'appease' the wood. In Ancient Art and Ritual J.E. Harrison writes of the totemic attitude to dance, not as a form of enjoyment but as a prayer, an integral part of life. As she explains:

The savage is a man of action. Instead of asking a god to do what he wants done, he does it or tries to do it himself; instead of prayers he utters spells. In a word, he practices magic and above all he is strenuously and frequently engaged in dancing magical dances.

Harrison then provides an example of how one tribe sees work and dancing as synonymous activities. To appreciate this, she declares,

we have some modern prejudices and misunderstandings to overcome. Dancing is to us a light form of recreation practised by the quite young from sheer joie de vivre, and essentially inappropriate to the mature. But among the Tarahumares of Mexico the word nolavoa means both 'to work' and 'to dance'. An old man will reproach a young man saying, 'Why do you not go and work (nolavoa?). He means 'why do you not dance instead of looking on?' It is strange to us to learn that among savages as a man passes from childhood to youth, from youth to mature manhood, so the number of these 'dances' increase, and the number of these 'dances' is the measure pari passu of his social importance. Finally, in extreme old age he falls out, he ceases to exist, BECAUSE HE CANNOT DANCE; his dance, and with it his social status, passes to another and a younger.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly the relationship of the natives to their land in Armed with Madness is described by the narrator as 'a kind of ritual, a sacrifice, willing but impersonal to their gods' (AWM, p.7) with the result that the interconnection between the land and the people is as entangled as that

---

63. Warning to Hikers, p.30.

64. Ancient Art and Ritual, pp.30-31.

between the symbols of the Grail myth itself. As Mary Butts writes in Armed with Madness, 'The story of the house could not be told without the wood, the house-party could not be described without the cup' (AWM, p.162). This is no mathematical or mechanical equation (house is to wood as house-party is to cup) for the four elements are inextricably intertwined. This is why Mary Butts's prose is not social realism since it is not a question of human concerns against the backdrop of landscape as the American visitor, Dudley Carston, who comes with this expectation learns almost as soon as he arrives. 'Life was to him an elaborate theatre, without scenery', we are told; he sees life as a 'human scene' (AWM, pp.151, 17). A 'town-tuned' person he is immediately discomfited by the Taverner's landscape as 'to him straight from London, Paris or New York, the silence was intolerable'. Carston realises what his peace of mind depends on: 'it might be quite all right,' he thinks, 'if there was not too much scenery that called for too high a quality of attention'. Instead, 'the scenery seemed to be the play' as there is an incessant communication/communion between the human and the non-human (AWM, p.15). 'They had been playing to the wood', we are told. Always there are signs that the natural environment is part of (if not actually directing) this continual dialogue. Sometimes the heat determines their actions or 'the last of the lightning winked at them, the rain turned to a sweet shower, or afterthought' (AWM, p.50). When Picus and Scylla become lovers and are alone by Gault Cliff, the narrator writes that: 'High above them the gulls squalled like sorrow driven up. At long intervals the water tapped the rocks like memory driven away' (AWM, p.77). Or sometimes the sounds are not 'signatures' but merely nature making its presence felt: 'phat', 'bing', 'chuck' (AWM, pp.47, 60, 78).

Never fully fleshed out but acting rather as masks or types, the 'people' of Mary Butts's fictions are distinguished from one another more

by their abstract qualities and the attitudes they embody than an actual individual physical presence. As J.C. Squire, the editor of The London Mercury and an admirer of Mary Butts's work stated:

Her [Mary Butts's] characters are mostly intelligent, and even neurotic; they are perpetually aware of things unspoken; they have incomes or can sponge, or are artists, have a skin less than other people, and can afford the time to watch the reactions of the thin skin. They are not seen working; they remain in Paradise, with the snake in attendance, as it were...

Yet the material must be granted; all artists who wish to arrive at the ultimate refinements of the human soul have to place it 'in vacuo' economically. Miss Butts is doing no more with her modern dreamers and decadents than Shakespeare did with his Lears and Hamlets.

... Most of us do not have the time to refine things as her characters do; but, put into one of her aquaria, we probably should, and her observations are illuminating.<sup>65</sup>

Mary Butts's highly sensitized figures ('a skin less than other people') move through a landscape which has a far more forceful presence than they do. Yet as Squire points out, we may not know the world as they do but 'put into one of her [Mary Butts's] aquaria, we probably should, and her observations are illuminating'. Ross, of all the figures in Armed with Madness comes closest to the personification of a 'daimon'. His 'rough' clothes are the external indication that his is not an interest in fashion or sophistication, but a naturalness: 'whenever he touched it life grew' we are told of him, where 'life' includes and is more than merely the human 'translations': 'Plants and dogs and children. Eggs hatched. And men? They were there to make him laugh. If they found rest in him, he was indifferent as nature and in general not as kind' (AWM, pp.150-1). Picus and Scylla know that the 'utterly indifferent, utterly observant' Ross is less involved in the human sphere than they are. They feel that he is qualitatively different from themselves with

---

65. J.C. Squire, 'The Modern Revival of the Short Story: Miss Mary Butts' Success', The Daily Telegraph (8 March, 1932), p.16.



'their old conviction that Ross had some sort of stable tip in invisible affairs' (AWM, p.153). When considering her own sense of 'dis-ease' Scylla articulates this difference embodied in Ross. That he would always be 'all right', thinks Scylla, is because:

once his strong appetites were satisfied he did not want anything in human life at all. It was something to eat and drink, to embrace and paint. Apart from that he knew something that she was only growing conscious of. And wouldn't tell. Not he - laughed at her for not knowing, and for wanting to know.  
(AWM, pp.10-11)

It is Ross who advises Scylla not to continue her affair with Picus because of its possible dangerous consequences, which Scylla will not heed and which are borne out. And it is Ross (it is significant that he should never be given a surname, thereby having no human family or context) who on the day on which the book opens which is the day before Carston's arrival and the synchronic 'discovery' of the cup, calls it 'the last day's peace' (AWM, p.5). His words are prophetic - there is indeed little peace in Armed with Madness from that moment on.

Throughout the narrative Ross is watching, advising but never immersed, like a Greek god he observes the dénouement whilst 'paring his fingernails' (Joyce), unaffected. Always one step ahead of any given situation and never interfering, it is of Ross that the narrator writes: 'with violent, silent amusement, he said 'it's beginning' (AWM, p.60).

In Felix's 'pretty' clothes we discern his interest in fashion, to that extent representative of the postwar world attitudes where appearances for the Bright Young Things are all-important. In Paris, he is described as a 'flower-skinned, sapphire-eyed boy' and 'a young god' (AWM, p.172). Just as his name, Felix, tells us that he is of the 'happy' generation, so his nickname is revealing: 'L'oeuf sur le toit' (AWM, p.172). Le Boeuf sur le Toit was the name of a cafe in Paris frequented by Mary Butts and her contemporaries in the 1920s. Mary

Butts refers to it in several of her short stories. The name comes from a line by Cocteau who opened the cafe; meaning 'Ox (beef) on the roof' it is a pun on the assonantal French phrase for 'fried egg': 'oeuf sur le plat'. Felix's nickname is half-way between the two. When the figures disperse 'in isolation and chaos' and go their separate ways, Felix goes to Paris and to this café yet is unable to be completely comfortable in the postwar atmosphere there. (As his nickname implies he cannot quite fit in.) Although he tries to be. The war is always a sharp divider for Mary Butts, the distinction residing in the difference between morality and amorality. 'Even when I was new,' declares Scylla, who is the mouthpiece for Mary Butts's generation who were born in the 1890s, 'we tried the bad to see it might not be good. But the new lot [ie. the postwar generation] aren't interested. Don't give a button for the good any more' (AWM, p.41). To which Felix 'shouts melodiously' at this half-generation behind him: 'I'm post-war. I'm just through getting clear of you. I admit you can scare me, but in reality you bore me. I don't care any more. I may be a mass of inhibitions, but I'm out of myself - ' (AWM, p.124). 'Post-war', 'I don't care', 'a mass of inhibitions', 'I'm out for myself' - these describe succinctly the young, the Lost Generation of the 1920s as Douglas Goldring portrays them in his aptly titled study The 1920s (1945), and of which in Armed with Madness Felix is the type, the mask, the 'translation' for Mary Butts.

Generally speaking, Mary Butts's figures who breathe through her writings like ghosts or gusts of wind, often forceful but bodiless, are described either by comparison to animals - the nicknames for Scylla, Picus and Ross are 'bird-alone', 'cat-by-himself' and 'bird-catcher' respectively (AWM, p.171), or according to mythological or classical personages. Thus 'they called Scylla from her name Prusilla, altering it because they said she was sometimes a witch and sometimes a bitch'

(AWM, p.4). Picus, Felix explains to Carston: 'only does one or two small things like whistling, but he does them perfectly. Riding and blowing eggs. You saw how strong his body is, but he's like a bird. Off in a flash. Hence the name. Picus was the woodpecker' (AWM, pp. 24-25). In Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion J.E. Harrison tells us more: that 'Picus was an oracular bird, a tree guardian, a guardian of kings; he was also a king, king over a kingdom ancient and august'.<sup>66</sup> Together with Faunus Picus is not of the godly status of Jove, but both are 'numina, spirits, genii'. Harrison also adds that Picus was a 'magician and medicine-man', concluding that:

In the figure of Picus are united, or rather as yet undifferentiated, notions, to us incompatible, of bird, seer-magician, king and daimon, if not god...

Finally, Picus enshrines a beautiful lost faith, the faith that birds and beasts are mana other and sometimes stronger than the mana of man. The notion that by watching a bird you can divine the weather is preceded by the far more primitive notion that the bird by his mana actually makes the weather, makes and brings the rain, the thunder, the sunshine and the spring. Beasts and birds in their silent, aloof goings, in the perfection of their limited doings are mysterious still and wonderful. We speak of zoo-morphic or theriomorphic or ornithomorphic gods, but again we misuse language. Birds are not, never were, gods; there is no definite bird-cult, but there are an infinite number of bird-sanctities. Man in early days tries to bring himself in touch with bird-mana, he handles reverently bird-sanctities.<sup>67</sup>

This long quotation from a text highly regarded by Mary Butts illustrates the multiple resonance in the names used by her in her works. Like the Bible, like Shakespeare, like Blake, Mary Butts's work demands a concordance, for integral to her deep-space art is the fact that behind every name there is a story or a mythic prototype (or both) sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit. In my end is my beginning... In my beginning is my end, as we delve ever further. As Duncan pointed out,

---

66. Themis, p.104.

67. Themis, pp.106, 107, 109-110.

in Mary Butts's writing 'behind every deep another deep opens' (my emphases).<sup>68</sup>

The most important characteristic of the Sanc Grail legend and which bears repeating is its reliance on a conceptualisation of the universe as resonating with interconnections. So to 'read' it, we must abandon the linear step-by-step methodology of logic. Machen's disagreement with Weston's thesis in From Ritual to Romance lies in his belief that it is the Christian aspects of the legend which are the dominant ones, whilst Weston claims that the prechristian primitive rituals are the primary sources. As an anonymous review of Death of Felicity Taverner points out, Mary Butts's work is not, like Machen's, 'avowedly Christian in philosophy. It is the memory and power of an older religion and a more natural faith that haunt her, and give her narrative[s] a vehement conviction'.<sup>69</sup> The result is that both interpretations find their way into Armed with Madness where we are told of the Taverners that: 'There was something in their lives spoiled and inconclusive like the grail story' (AWM, p.91). Explicitly then Mary Butts cites the grail story as an analogue for these people's lives - if we consider the fact of no single source, no textus receptus, then Armed with Madness becomes itself as valid an account of the Grail myth as its predecessors. Scylla herself points to the fact that

like the effect got at séances where the interesting, the decisive, the clear is always on the point of arrival, and invariably fades out before the point is reached. [So] ... now she considered it, [it was with] the whole Grail story, the saga story par excellence that has never come off, or found its form or its poet. (AWM, p.91)

The Holy Grail 'par excellence' cannot have a perfect version of

---

68. 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts', unpublished tapescripts, p.17.

69. 'Tale of Two Worlds', The New Statesman and Nation, 4 no.96 (1932), p.837.

itself because it denies the notion of perfection. This is the difference between realistic writing which is controlling a metaphor for its own ends, such as a narrative-centred account like Somerset Maugham's where the 'events are made to fit the story', and a writing as reenactment where the very metaphor used (in this case the grail story) is itself part of a series of interpretations of a symbolic story.<sup>70</sup> That Mary Butts is doing this knowingly - basing her story on a shifting never-ending story - is substantiated within Armed with Madness itself in an incident surrounding Carston which undermines the illusion of the safe knowable England as conveyed by realist novels.

Of all the house-party the foreigner, the American, whilst introduced as Dudley Carston, is almost always referred to by his surname. A sign of his not being integrated (compare Ross who has no surname), which is revealed in a number of ways: when they are discussing the significance of the cup of the Sanc Grail, Carston says, 'That means nothing to me' (AWM, p.23). When they play the 'Freud game' of associated word-play Carston (mis)uses the occasion to flatter Scylla to whom he is attracted, thereby completely missing the point (AWM, pp.38-39). This is because he can only view life on a human scale. 'His usual problem,' we are told, 'is how to make a fresh event serve his turn, relate it strictly to personalities especially to his own' (AWM, pp.18-19). It is hardly surprising then that this 'American gentleman in an uneasy place' should feel literally out of his depth (AWM, p.47).

As a foreigner with literary aspirations, his only knowledge of England is through books. His first comment on his arrival is his recognition that the land (which is Dorset but never named as such) is 'Hardy country' and when he has become completely confused and lost by the situation which he does not understand, it is once again to literature that he turns, this time to the novel: 'Carston knew what you did,' we are

---

70. 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts', unpublished tapescripts, p.11.

told. 'In Trollope in cases of spiritual difficulty, you consulted the vicar. Whether it turned out well depended on whether you found a good vicar or a bad' (AWM, p.183). Already, Mary Butts has been mocking the style of realist prose writers in relation to Carston: 'we will follow him, as earlier writers say so prettily...' the narrator of Armed with Madness had written (AWM, p.180). So it is of little surprise to us that Carston's introduction to 'English ecclesiastical life' by Picus does not live up to his preconceptions. At first he is relieved: 'Atleast there would be something he had been led to expect. The old man in his library looked and spoke right'. However when the vicar looks at the cup his remark is hardly elucidatory as far as Carston is concerned. 'I cannot tell you anything,' says the vicar, adding:

'A piece of jade, this time, for the question mark to the question we none of us can answer.'

'What is the question?' said Carston.

'Our old friend. Whether a true picture of the real is shown by our senses alone.'

'Can't we leave it that we don't know?'

'Then the picture we have becomes more and more unintelligible.' (AWM, pp.189-90)

Carston who views the world through his 'senses alone' is lost when all is not what it seems, and thus represents the Realist, the Rationalist who in contrast to the Romantic cannot accede to the reality lying behind and beyond the visible world. As we can see, once again it is the old dilemma of Imagination versus Reason, Organicism versus the Mechanical.

But it is not the vicar so much as the unnamed 'second old man' whose intervention so contradicts Carston's expectations that finally, we are told, 'he gave up trying to cut providence', ie. read the situation through its appearances as if it were a Trollope narrative. The second old man says of the situation of Armed with Madness:

This story as I see it is true Sanc-Grail. The cup may have been an ashtray in a Cairo club. But it seems to me that you are having something like a ritual. A

find, illumination, doubt and division, collective and dispersed. A land enchanted and disenchanting with the rapidity of a cinema. Adventures. (AWM, p.193)

A concession within the text itself that it is unimportant whether or not the cup is a fake (in Armed with Madness as in the legends, conflicting accounts are given as to its origin). What is important is that its occurrence has provided 'something like a ritual'. Thus the symbolism of the situation is explored as much by the figures within the story as it is by us as readers of the narrative; we are not in a more privileged position than them.

The word 'adventures' is picked up again at the end of Armed with Madness when we are told that Carston, even though he now understands the house-party better and has acquired a sense of history hitherto inaccessible to him, cannot stay in this 'adventure' but must go 'off to Paris on his own folk-adventure' (AWM, pp.220-221). In Malory's fifteenth century account of the Holy Grail, the 'queste for the Sankgreall' is also called the 'adventure of the Sankgreall'.<sup>71</sup> It will begin according to Lancelot, when the sword is removed from the stone in the water. Galahad, who has been introduced to King Arthur's Court by 'an olde man' - to whom the 'second old man' of Armed with Madness is doubtless an allusion on the part of Mary Butts - removes the sword easily where 'ryght good knyghtes have assayde and fayled'. Yet Galahad is not surprised. 'Sir,' he says to King Arthur, 'ht ys no mervayle, for thys adventure ys not theyrs but myne'.<sup>72</sup> 'Adventure' in Maloryan terms has rather more extensive connotations than its modern meaning of something out of the ordinary; 'That which happens without design; chance, hap, luck; a venture, an experience' (Shorter OED). In 'Balyn's Tale or the Knight with Two Swords' Balyn declares, 'I shall take the adventure ... that God woll

---

71. Sir Thomas Malory, Works, edited by Eugene Vinaver, second edition (New York, 1978), pp.519, 517.

72. Malory, pp.519, 520.

ordayne for me'. Later his brother, Balan, echoes his words to him when Balyn's courage is failing, by saying, 'Ye must take the adventure that God woll ordayne you'. And yet again, later, Balyn repeats: 'what adventure shall falle to me, be it lyf or dethe, I will take the adventure that shall come to me'.<sup>73</sup> Repetition here stresses the importance of the word for Malory; that it means 'what shall come'; ad-vent; the future. It is not a question of undertaking something through one's own choice; on the contrary it is inescapable. We can do no other but face our future, our fate, Nemesis. It is this meaning of adventure as fate which underlies Mary Butts's use of the word and use of the grail myth in Armed with Madness. (In echoing Malory, Mary Butts's work enacts Eliot's deep-space claim that: 'No poet, no artist of any art has his [her] complete meaning alone' (see above p.52).) Just as we shall see with Serge in Armed with Madness and Boris in Death of Felicity Taverner, Carston cannot stay where he does not belong; his fate lies elsewhere.

A further point of relevance to a consideration of the deep-space quality of Armed with Madness arises within Machen's discussion of the Holy Grail legends. He maintains that 'the legend of the Graal ... is the glorious version of the early Celtic sacramental legends'. That he should attribute it to Celtic rather than to Roman origins has crucial significance resulting from the 'very great difference between the Roman and Celtic attitudes towards ... relics and holy objects'. As Machen explains, 'The Roman view was that the more you looked on relics the better for you; the Celts, on the other hand, held that unless you had certain special qualifications you had better not come near the relics, under pain of blasting or death'.<sup>74</sup> Not only is it dangerous to look

---

73. Malory, pp.40, 44, 56.

74. Machen, pp.110-111.



on relics without the proper authority; according to the Celtic tradition, it is dangerous to speak of their meaning also. The figures of Armed with Madness are aware of both these conflicting attitudes to the appearance of the holy grail, from the Roman and the Celtic liturgies. But their tendency is to see it in accordance with the Celtic interpretation: not only are we told that by its appearance 'something has happened', according to Scylla; this is later qualified by the words 'nothing neutral is coming' and Ross's prophetic declaration, 'there is trouble about. The kind that comes with brightness' (AWM, pp.17, 18, 21, 65).

Initially, as I have said, the cup is fished out of the dried-up well at Picus and Clarence's house by Felix with the aid of a spear, handed to him by Picus. It is because they have no water that Picus and Clarence are forced to become part of the Taverner house-party. According to Weston in From Ritual to Romance the origin of the Grail legend is in 'Nature Cults'. As she explains, 'Throwing onto, or drenching with water is a well-known part of Fertility's ritual: it is a case of sympathetic magic, acting as a rain charm'.<sup>75</sup> It is because (rain) water and fertility were connected, that the Tarot, she points out, was originally used not to predict the future in general (as it came to be used by magicians and those interested in the Occult, eg. Aleister Crowley and W.B. Yeats) but to predict the 'rise and fall of waters'.<sup>76</sup> It is because they are looking for water that the cup is found; and it is because they have no water that Picus and Clarence and the rest of the figures are 'gathered together'. Thus the Maloryan gathering together of all these people in the same place, on the same 'adventure' is explained in Armed with Madness through a combination of allusions to

---

75. Weston, p.48.

76. Weston, p.76.

Grail myths: the search for water (with its connection to fertility enacted in Picus and Scylla's affair which is first consummated near water (see AWM, pp.77-79), not forgetting the etymology of Picus's name: the Woodpecker who 'by his mana actually ... makes and brings the rain ... and the spring', as well as the Arthurian version where the knights are 'gathered together'.<sup>77</sup> Weston also explains that the shapes of the symbols of the grail myth (eg. cup and spear, vase and lance etc.) are not fortuitous but repeat the sexual act in their coupling together and hence, by extension, fertility and 'life'.<sup>78</sup> All this symbolism, this deep-space resonance is by no means lost on the Taverner household. For when they see that the cup means 'nothing' to Carston:

A good deal was told Carston, casually, about Kelts and Saxons and Romans and early Christianity; things completely over so far as he knew - Not that they talked about what he hadn't heard. Only they talked as if there was no time, no progress, no morality. He knew, of course, that there was no progress, and no morality.

Then Ross said, roughly and softly, as though he were loving something:

'The thing was that we fished it out with a spear.'

Scylla said: 'Ross, that's odd.'

... Felix stared ... [Carston] tried to think what a spear had to do with it.

Felix said, sharply:

'Good old Freud.'

'Idiot!' said Ross, and turned away furious and contemptuous. (AWM, p.20)

As can be seen, there is nothing I have said that is not alluded to in the text itself, and understood by the Taverner household. Felix's reaction is the postwar reaction and the one we are most likely to 'jump' to when we think of a cup and a spear in contact with one another. Yet Ross's reaction of annoyance to Felix's remark is based on his belief that to consider it in Freudian terms is to cut short the symbols'

---

77. Themis, p.109.

78. Weston, p.71.

resonance. Spear and cup may very well equal sex, but why? It is Scylla who explains to Carston that there is something about the situation which a Freudian analysis cannot accede to. She speaks of it in terms of the 'pattern' (that word which we find repeated again and again throughout Mary Butts's work):

to Carston she said that odd things were always happening, and old patterns repeated themselves. That it was sometimes alarming when they did, and Freud very useful in the case of irrational fear. Very true too when there had been a row and no one could feel what was just and what was not. Always look out for the suppressed wish that's taken the wrong turning. But that what had happened today [ie. the 'discovery' of the cup] was objective and odd. (AWM, p.21)

Thus, Freud is helpful within the boundaries of the human-human relationships, but not in the human-non-human realm. The problem now, as far as Scylla is concerned, is that if she and her friends have 'our jokes, our senses, and our moments of illumination', it is all part of 'swank ... and instinct. To cover quite intolerable pain' because they feel 'lost [and] know what despair is' (AWM, pp.40-41). This despair results from a sense of lost power because of a general cosmic dis-ease. As she attempts to explain to Carston:

We live fast and are always having adventures, adventures which are like patterns of another adventure [re Malory] going on somewhere else all the time. A different sort of affair, a state suggested if you like in a good work of art. The things down here seem hints of it, but there is nothing to make us sure that it is a reality. Quite the contrary. We get into trouble over it, it runs after us, runs away from us, runs away with us, makes fun of us and fools of us. Because of it we have no money, and the wrong lovers and our instinct for power is starved... And the new name for this is our subconscious minds... Now can you see why we felt we were being laughed at, dangerously, when we lifted that cup out of the well on the point of a spear? (AWM, p.41)

For Scylla, Felix, Picus and Ross - to whom every thing and action

has its concomitant 'pattern' (ie. meaning) somewhere else 'as it were behind', since everything has significance in a symbolic order - this 'apparent' reenactment of the finding of the cup of the holy grail is too close to be comfortable. Whilst the 'new name' for the sense of loss of power is the 'subconscious', Scylla is aware that it is not wide enough to account for that sense of 'rebonding' (a term used by Duncan to describe the effect of reading Mary Butts's work) with that 'other adventure going on somewhere else all the time'.<sup>79</sup>

What is constantly being highlighted in Armed with Madness is a hierarchy of responses: for Carston and Clarence the darker and inexplicable resonances of the holy grail myth are irrelevant. They are too absorbed in the Human interrelationships. Carston wants Scylla and Clarence wants Picus. For Carston, the cup becomes a 'mystery' to be solved in order to gain Scylla as the prize. It becomes his 'pilgrimage' but of the sort where he is the knight in shining armour (AWM, p.110). Whilst for Clarence the cup and Scylla come to represent as I have stated above his loss of Picus. In a sense he is right, as the 'big magic' of the appearance of the cup (as Picus calls it) is part of the 'sacred game' for Scylla and Picus in which, symbolically, Picus gives the cup to Scylla (AWM, pp.57, 93, 58, 87). When Scylla is troubled, she plays 'an old game, that she was lying out on the wood's roof: translating the stick and leaf that upheld her into herself: into sea: into sky. Slowly back into wood, flesh and sea' (AWM, p.92). This act of phenomenological metamorphosis where the human and the non-human become fused, is the same 'kind' of process as her love for Picus. For Carston, passion and sex are a question of physical 'possession' and 'relief', and he is aware that for Picus and Scylla it is a qualitatively different

---

79. 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts', unpublished tapescripts, p.3.

kind of experience. 'And what was there to do,' he moans, lying on his bed alone, 'but think of those two [Picus and Scylla] up somehow high in air, kissing, or finding some strangeness in nature, and forgetting to kiss' (AWM, p.83). A relationship where kissing can be forgotten because it is subordinated to 'finding some strangeness in nature' transforms sex for pleasure's sake to sex as part of an Orphic ritual (a fact which I consider below in relation to Ashe of Rings). The narrative continues:

he [Carston] lay staring and fretting until with slow alarm growing like a dream he saw the lost cup, by itself on the end of his mantelpiece. And earlier in the day, they had passed in and out of his room looking for it. (AWM, p.83)

The morning had been spent looking for the cup which had 'mysteriously' [re]disappeared. However, that the 'lost' cup should reemerge at this precise moment so that it synchronises with Carston's realisation of the ritual symbolism of the sexual act between Scylla and Picus is crucial. For his inability to see what the cup signifies is parallel to his inability to see sex as more than a physical experience - that he perceives it is different for Picus and Scylla does not change his own attitude to sex but makes him realise that Picus is more likely to succeed with Scylla than he is. That he should then see the cup when he has been concentrating on something supposedly unconnected reveals the extent to which what we 'see', even when it is 'staring us in the face', depends on the kind of perception we have as observers. After a morning's extensive search for the cup the general conclusion is that 'short of idiocy, a miracle, or a trick, the thing was off the map... Carston, no more than the others, was quite ready to say that, since six pairs of eyes had failed to see something, then that thing must have been hidden, and hidden well' (AWM, pp.72-73). Yet Edgar Allan Poe's tale, 'The Purloined Letter' (1845) in which a letter is hidden from view

precisely by making its presence obvious, explores the close relationship between vision and expectation. If you look for something in the wrong ways you will not see it simply hanging there. Similarly Carston sees the cup only when he is not looking for it directly; yet even then he is unable to appreciate the significance of its reappearance at that precise moment'. This is because his is a logical, mechanical and not a symbolic perception of the world.

We learn subsequently, that it was Picus who placed the cup in the well (when it was full of water) and that it was he who hid the cup in Carston's room. So that at one level the whole grail symbolism as read by the Taverners has indeed been the result of a 'trick' initiated by human hand and not some inexplicable power. Carston tells Picus's father, Mr Tracey (who maintains that Picus stole the cup from him) how 'Miss [Scylla] Taverner told me one day that what they wanted had been lost out of the world' (AWM, p.104). Scylla realises that Picus has played on this sense of 'loss' by providing its perfect symbol which has never been - and can never be - found: 'Picus should not have pretended it was the cup of the Sanc Grail,' thinks Scylla. 'That will do in weaker minds and more violent imaginations than mine and Ross' (AWM, p.114). For what has been partly initiated by human hand has gone out of control (a situation which Mary Butts's explores in detail elsewhere in a short story entitled 'With and Without Buttons' (in Last Stories (1938)). It threatens the transsubstantiative element of their passion which will in turn, Scylla knows, disturb powers outside their control. As Ross warned her it would, but which - whilst she knew it was true - she had preferred to ignore. For to parody a mystery in this way is equivalent to being in the wrong place at the wrong time (a situation explored by Mary Butts in her short story 'Mappa Mundi' (Last Stories (1938) ) or misusing an object: 'A cathedral had better not turn

mouse-trap, or a chalice a cocktail shaker. A ten inch gun should not be trained on a mark that is not there' (AWM, p.159).

For Mr. Tracey (Picus's father) talking to Carston the entire situation is the result of a hangover of perceptions which have now become obsolete. The Sanc Grail he maintains, belongs to that realm of:

romantic ideas now that we know they are lies, which are liable to fall into very silly and very evil practices. Excuses for perversions.

... 'What is superstition over here?' [asks Carston]  
'A disgusting relic of non-understood natural law.'  
'I'm at sea.' (AWM, pp.103-4)

Of course, Carston is 'at sea' as he can only deal with a material world of relative values. He is of his [postwar] time; the time which denies the Inexplicable, the Mysterious, as symbolised by the Sanc Grail, the time which denies faith. As E.M. Forster declared in 1939, 'I do not believe in Belief ... Faith, to my mind is a stiffening process, a sort of mental starch, which ought to be applied as sparingly as possible. I dislike the stuff. I do not believe in it, for its own sake at all'.<sup>80</sup> It is Scylla who describes for Mary Butts the danger of the materialist perception of the world:

If the materialist's universe is true, and not a working truth to make bridges with and things, we are a set of blind factors in a machine. And no passion has any validity and no imagination. They are just little tricks of the machine. It either is, or it isn't. If you hold that it isn't, you corrupt your intellect by denying certain facts. If you stick to the facts as we have them, life is a horror and insult. Nothing has any worth, but to tickle our sensations and oil the machine. There is no value in our passions and perceptions, or final differences between a life full of design and adventure and life crawled out in a palace or a slum. The life of Plato or Buddha, apart from the kick of the illusion, was as futile as the lives of the daughters of Louis XV. Old talk, you say, and remember IN MEMORIAM. But notice what is happening now people have become used to the idea. Any little boy in a Paris bar, who never heard of physics knows.

---

80. E.M. Forster, What I Believe, Hogarth Sixpenny Pamphlets, 1 (London, 1939), p.5.

Everyone gets the age's temper. With results on their conduct - 'Why be good any more' they say, and the youngest ones not that. (AWM, pp.123-4)

As we can see, the belief in a relativised mechanistic universe leads, according to Scylla, directly to the dissolution of morality (as she describes it above see p.82). The danger of this is not the loss of cultural mores since Mary Butts is continually attacking the vestiges of Victorian values in her work (in Ashe of Rings they are embodied in Melitta Ashe and in Death of Felicity Taverner in Julia Taverner). Rather than the dissolution of societal notions of 'good and bad', it is the loss of the concomitant powers of Good and Evil that concerns Mary Butts. Powers which she believes to be immanent in the world and which, because they cannot be explained by the theories of relativity and psychoanalysis, are simply ignored. This is why the Grail myth is an important metaphor for Mary Butts; having 'per se' no possible explanation or solution it represents the world as transcending a rational, scientific perception of it. In the Sanc Grail legends the king and land are sick which is why the cup is sought. When the right question is not asked the land and King continue to be sick. In Armed with Madness Picus enables the cup to make its appearance in response to Scylla's belief that the world is suffering from an unrecognised dis-ease; the cup brings Scylla and Picus together whilst some of the accompanying disasters from its misuse are averted. Yet at the end of Armed with Madness there is no sense of final closure, but rather a reprieve. On the opening pages of Death of Felicity Taverner the question is reopened, the queste starts again as we are immediately introduced to a death and as the story unfolds it becomes clear that the land itself is threatened by a touristic (ie. profit based) venture. In Armed with Madness Carston who represents the modern desire to get somewhere, realises at the end that the whole situation, the whole adventure has, like a riddle, no



arrival point. 'Then we get nowhere,' he says to Scylla. 'Nowhere,' she replies. 'Only in ghost stories and those not the best, do you get anywhere that way' (AWM, p.196). For Mary Butts's writing is not linear, not about movement forward, but a movement inside what is already there, what has always been there. It is an example of deep-space modernism concerned with the organic circular character of experience and reality and concentrating not only on the human realm (as Realist prose does) but on what lies behind and beyond that realm which is acceded to by the imagination. As is said of Carston at one point, it is a question of 'insight'; that Carston can to some extent be seen as the reader who has realist expectations is reinforced by his own realisation when he stands high above the Taverner landscape:

On the down-crest, the earth was a map of naked beauty he saw in the piece and understood. 'I've been living inside a work of art' - living what was meant to be looked at, not lived in; not to be chewed, swallowed, handled, missed. (AWM, p.98)

Like the reader, Carston has been living inside a 'work of art'. What Mary Butts provides through and repeatedly across her work is 'insight', ie. 'sight into', 'moments ... exceedingly unlike the flashes by which they are generally described, more like obstructions removed, revealing a landscape that had always been there' (AWM, p.10). Mary Butts tries to make us see into that landscape.

(iii)

We are spectators of a situation which is the mask of another situation that existed perhaps some remote age or in a world outside time. (Ashe of Rings, p.59)

I have already commented on the fact that in her autobiography The Crystal Cabinet (aside from a few comments on retrospective understanding), Mary Butts stressed the extent to which her life was not one of development

leading to greater self-understanding as time passed; rather than the awareness she felt she had, she had possessed from a young age. A feeling which, interestingly, was shared by H.D.<sup>81</sup> The Crystal Cabinet perceived and presented by Mary Butts is 'autobiography' in Robert Creeley's terms as described by Robert Duncan: '"auto-bio-graphy" - a life tracking itself'.<sup>82</sup> The description Mary Butts gives of Dick Tressider, the protagonist of 'Widdershins' is equally valid as self-description:

He lay and remembered something about himself ... that he was a mystic; and that among the people he met the word meant a snub, a cliché, an insult, or very occasionally, a distinction: that he knew a great many people who almost realised his plan, and yet did not. ... What he needed was magic.

It is doubtful if he understood the idea of progress, but whether he did or not, he disliked it. It may be certain but it is obviously slow. ... He knew, if any man living knew he knew, that sometimes things were improved, or rather that they changed; and that in individual action there were moments of a peculiar quality that expressed the state in which he knew the whole earth could live all the time, and settle the hash of time, progress and morality once and for ever. What he wanted to happen was for some man to say a word of power which should evoke this state, everywhere, not by any process, but in the twinkling of an eye. This is magic. Lovers did it, especially his lovers; and saints, when he and one or two men were being saints ... at night, in a smoky room. There were moments too, under the hills, breaking-in horses, when it came, the moment of pure being, the co-ordination of power.<sup>83</sup>

Mary Butts's description of 'moments of a peculiar quality' reveals the extent to which the focus of her writing is consonant with that of several of her contemporaries, as highlighted in James Joyce's use of 'epiphanies' and Virginia Woolf's 'moments of being'. This is not to say that Mary Butts's work is derivative; rather that it shares the language and interests of her time, as the notion of 'epiphany' is also important, for example, in Eliot's work. Differences exist, however,

---

81. Guest, pp.269, 271, 322, 329.

82. Young Robert Duncan, p.11.

83. 'Widdershins', pp.12-13.

for whilst Joyce uses the term 'epiphany' as a religious metaphor only, Mary Butts's 'moments' are much more literal epiphanies in that they are used to give access to a timeless dimension.

In order to illustrate the validity of Mary Butts's claim to having awareness from an early age I shall now discuss in detail pertinent aspects of Ashe of Rings written ten years before Armed with Madness but with a complicated bibliographical history (see previous chapter). I have already mentioned how Hugh Ross-Williamson, one of Mary Butts's earliest English admirers and critics declared that 'Armed with Madness (1928) makes no advance on her previous work [Ashe of Rings (1925) and Speed the Plough (1923)] either in thought or in technical achievement and it is representative only in the sense that it is an epitome of it'.<sup>84</sup> By providing a reading of Ashe of Rings - the earlier work - after that of Armed with Madness - the later work - it is possible to test the extent to which the claims of Mary Butts herself, H. Ross-Williamson and my own deep-space interpretation of Armed with Madness holds true for Ashe of Rings.

In the 'Afterword' to the 1933 publication Mary Butts described Ashe of Rings as 'a fairy story, a War-Fairy-Tale'.<sup>85</sup> By combining the terms 'war-tale' and 'fairy-tale' Mary Butts confuses the possibility of any clear notion of genre expectation on the part of the reader. In The Crystal Cabinet she writes disparagingly of the fairy-tale genre saying that 'Fairy-books had nothing to do with [primitive animism]. Fairy-books I understood from the first to be art, not life. And, often with some contempt, judged them as such'.<sup>86</sup> The fairy-tale with its

---

84. See chapter I, pp,28-29.

85. Mary Butts, Ashe of Rings (London, 1932), p.312; subsequent references incorporated into text with abbreviation AOR.

86. The Crystal Cabinet, p.134.

connotations of transcendence of the constraints of the ordinary day-to-day world usually involves strangeness and unrealistic situations. By contrast stories of the War - it is the Great War 1914-1918 which Mary Butts refers to, Ashe of Rings opening in 1892 with Parts II and III taking place in 1917 (when Ashe of Rings was actually being written) - involve accounts of a disturbance of the ordinary order of peacetime existence. Far from being associated with the (childlike) escape into fantasy, the War was, rather a time of despair, meaninglessness and death on a huge scale. Ashe of Rings is not war reportage but by combining fantasy and a historical event Mary Butts creates through narrative a 'situation' which whilst unfolding in time also defies temporality by lying outside that specific time and hence being timeless: 'We are spectators of a situation which is the mask for another situation that existed perhaps some remote age or in a world outside time' (AOR, p.59). Ashe of Rings presents a 'situation' (encompassing a series of situations) whose importance lies not in its intrinsic existence but through what it as a deep space 'translates'. What this involves, is a heightened state of awareness as embodied primarily in Anthony Ashe and his daughter Van Ashe as well as (to a lesser extent) in Serge, Valentine Ashe and the butler, Clavel.

'Once one starts disturbing old things, one raises something one did not know was there to be disturbed,' Melitta Ashe is warned by Anthony Ashe early in Ashe of Rings (AOR, p.22). It is a warning which is reminiscent of Henry James's allegorical tale 'The Last of the Valerii' which partly revolves around the impiety of digging up a statue of Juno, except that in Ashe of Rings what is being disturbed is not the statue of the Greek goddess, Juno, but the land itself. The first part of this 311 page novel, set in 1892, opens with a description of the land on which both the beginning and the end of Ashe of Rings take place:

Rings lay in a cup of turf. A thin spring sun shone on its stones. Two rollers of chalk down hung over it; midway between their crest and the sea, the house crouched like a dragon on a saucer of jade. (AOR, p.3)

The house derives its name from the three concentric prehistoric stone rings which surround it. Its owner Anthony Ashe is returning to the property after a long absence. His first wife and son are dead and he has returned in order to marry so as to leave an heir to Rings. He chooses Muriel Butler, a woman thirty years his junior, whom he renames Melitta. As we shall see this loss of Muriel's Christian name to Melitta (as well as the more usual loss of her family name) is significant. Anthony Ashe's need for an heir is not in order to have someone to leave Rings to; rather the Rings have demanded this of him. We are told of Ashe that 'the Rings preserved him' (AOR, p.17), not the other way round. His raison d'être is to provide an offspring to continue his priestship after his death. 'We are a priestly house, like the Eumolpidae,' he declares at one point (AOR, p.24, see also pp.34, 142). He understands the death of his first son Julian before the book opens in terms of Julian not having been suitable for the task. He remarries Melitta because '"There must be children. And for that some strong girl" ... What was left of his life could be given to her training - a lively sacrifice to this place [ie. Rings]. It did not matter whom' (AOR, p.6). The inseparability of Anthony Ashe and Rings is recognised by Muriel Butler when she declares 'who marries Ashe marries Rings' (AOR, p.12). Ashe marries out of a desire for procreation, Muriel Butler out of social aspiration. Their first child is a girl, Elizabeth Vanna Ashe. Some years later Anthony finds Melitta and a neighbour, Morice Amburton together up on the Rings, a place to which Anthony had always dissuaded Melitta from going. He is horrified, not because of the sexual act involved since 'it is in nature, and ... in nature there is no shame',

but because of where it has taken place. 'This will draw down on my Vanna the anguish of Rings,' declares Anthony as the 'temenos of [the Ashe] race' has been desecrated (AOR, pp.51-52). Shortly afterwards Anthony dies and Melitta finds herself pregnant, unsure whether the child is that of Anthony or Morice. When Valentine Evelyn Ashe is born, Melitta is convinced that it is Anthony's son. She then marries Morice. Relations between Melitta and Vanna, who have never been very close, worsen as Anthony's death has left Vanna distraught and lost - 'a child,' we are told, 'to be extinguished under the tiara of Rings' (AOR, p.65). By the time Part I ends it has become clear that Van Ashe has inherited her father's sense of priestly guardianship of Rings, but because of the birth of a younger brother she is no longer legally the heir to Rings.

Part II opens in 1917. Van is now an adult in London studying to be an actress. Her flatmate, Judy Marston, has a lover Serge, a white Russian exile and painter who is illegally in England. It is wartime; the war is never visited in that we never literally visit the War Front, but the atmosphere of War is visited on the inhabitants of Ashe of Rings. Even as we are introduced to Serge and Judy, their love affair seems fragile as 'some essential oil had gone, a minute secretion, infinitely slow to replace, and without which anything evil between human beings is possible' (AOR, p.77). The relationship between Judy and Serge 'represents' the War in microcosm: Judy 'must be fed on blood' (AOR, p.78), we are told, descriptions of her revolving around vampiric blood imagery. She paints her lips and her bitten nails red (AOR, pp. 86, 94, 114, 203), the paint mingling with blood when she tears at Serge's flesh, attacking him from behind, her 'distorted face, crimson, the mouth open and wet'; Van remembers the incident in terms of its blood-letting as a 'red smear' (AOR, pp.161, 164). Serge calls this mutually self-destructive relationship a 'dance of death', thinking of

Judy as a 'she-devil' and a 'she-wolf', who has 'a drop of poison under each nail - for them both death' (AOR, pp.156, 114). Serge is dependent on the financial support of Judy for the life of material luxury both he and Judy need. Resenting this, Judy abandons Serge in order to become engaged to Peter Amburton, Morice Amburton's nephew who is to inherit Amburton Hall (which borders on Rings) at his Uncle's death. Serge retires to his lodgings and almost dies of starvation and cold but is rescued from death by Van Ashe whom he sees symbolically as a life-force. The 'pleasure' they feel in one another's company is short-lived, however, as all three are entangled in a war brought about by the Rings.

For Judy's greed is not merely financial or material; her choice of Peter Amburton, whom she admits to Serge is a 'shell-shocked lump of carrion' (he was wounded at the Front) (AOR, p.157), is part of a huge attack on Van, the aim of which is to debar Van from retrieving Rings of which she has been disinherited by her younger brother, although Van does not believe that he is Anthony's son. There is never any reason given for why Judy should want to do this. Van sees her as an 'understudy' for some evil forces (AOR, pp.257, 304) and her interpretation is shared by Serge who thinks of Judy not as evil herself but rather that she 'called up the deathless evil'. He addresses her in thoughts saying 'You are the war's smallest doll' and hence, by extension, 'You are the war' (AOR, pp.257, 304, 112). Later when Judy's plan to keep Melitta and Van apart fails, she leaves for London. Our last view of her is symbolic, illustrating the extent to which Mary Butts views her as the 'agent' of evil:<sup>87</sup>

She [Judy] went down the rainlogged steps. At the third she fell and lay, face down on the yellow

---

87. See Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger (London, 1985), p.98 for a discussion of the 'internal psyche [or] evil eye' of an agent of 'spiritual powers' and the 'external symbols'.

gravel. She got up, dumb, with amazed, sad eyes, wiped her face and walked down the avenue in the rain. (AOR, p.276)

In Part III Van and Serge return to Rings in order to fight for it, Van having learned from her stepfather that her mother's second child, Val Ashe is her true and not her half-brother. Significantly, Amburton describes Van and Serge not as lovers but as 'young soldiers' and they face their first 'battle' against Judy and Peter Amburton after their reunion with Val (AOR, p.146). The two lines face one another on the Rings, Peter shouting at Van, Val and Serge: 'We're going to clean you out of the world. That's what the war's been for' (AOR, p.218). This perversion of the act of purification which itself mirrors the justification for the huge numbers of deaths at the War Front, is not simply a verbal threat made by Peter whose confused mind is being manipulated by Judy (Serge describes him as being 'under suggestion' (AOR, p.218). For this confrontation is merely the prequel to the major battle when Judy and Peter meet Van as she is walking over the Rings alone during the night. They have just sacrificed their dog and Judy tells Van that they are going to sacrifice her, not by blood-letting but by rape. A virgin and hence 'pure', Van, who sees herself as the priestess of Rings, only escapes by lying practically naked on a white stone and willing her pale skin to merge into the whiteness of the stone in the moonlight. The distracted Peter, left alone by Judy to rape Van, turns and flees not so much out of pity for Van, as because his troubled mind perceives her in her whiteness as the metamorphosis of the blood of the dog turned to white poison.

This act of bizarre and ritualistic self-sacrifice avenges the dishonour done to Rings by Melitta and re-establishes Vanna in her childhood home through the eventual reconciliation between the mother and daughter. All that is left is for people to leave and the book ends on



the eve of departure: Val is to go to War and Serge is to go back to London to his war-relationship with Judy (who has fled back there after the aborted sacrifice). Van's action has propitiated Rings but she has not 'saved' Serge. Described earlier in the narrative by him as 'Christ-like' (AOR, p.194), Van declares her love to Serge and claims that she lay on the stone for them both. 'How can you save another?' declares Serge; 'I see that now' replies Van. Serge has no choice but to return to Judy because 'she had been born for him. Credo' (AOR, p. 287). Serge is unable to communicate with Van because he cannot commune with Rings (for the two are inextricably linked). The reason for this is given in a conversation between himself and Clavel, the butler who is the only person now left who was present at Anthony's arrival at the beginning of the narrative twenty-five years previously. When Serge enters his room he finds Clavel packing for him. He sees:

Val's cigarette box stuffed with socks.

'I don't think Mr. Val meant me to have that.'  
[says Serge]

'He did, sir. You see Mr. Serge, it's for a remembrance of your being here, and what you all have done here. It may remind you, sir, that nothing comes to an end.

'Suppose I only want to go away, and forget this place utterly.'

'You would not say that Mr. Serge, if it hadn't power; nor hate it if you did not feel yourself nearer to loving it more than you dare love. What Miss Vanna wanted to do for you can't be done; but the Rings are here for ever; and odds and ends of jewelry may remind you.'

'Why should this place and these people insist on following me?'

'They have the right, sir, to keep themselves remembered. Mr. Anthony Ashe told me that Memory was the Mother of the Muses from whom all good things come.'  
(AOR, pp.293-294)

Serge had spent the previous weeks walking alone on the Rings trying to evoke and invoke the magic and power felt by Van, Val, Clavel and before them, Anthony. Unable to do this Serge wants to 'forget the place utterly' but just as he is given a remembrancer in the form of Val's

cigarette box, so the text itself is a remembrancer. This is true for all of Mary Butts's writing: in the short story 'From Altar to Chimney-Piece' the 'glimpse of something final' is beheld of which the narrator writes: 'As he told it to himself and as I learned it from him, he called it the translation of a translation of a translation'.<sup>88</sup> In an earlier story 'The Dinner Party', we are told that someone 'had guessed that there was a situation behind a situation'.<sup>89</sup> Everything in Mary Butts's fictional worlds is a translation, in its literal, etymological sense (ie. something carried across: trans-latum), of older forces which 'have the right ... to keep themselves remembered'; so Clavel, who is himself the messenger of the now-absent Anthony reminds Serge that Memory is the vital touchstone through which all situations can unfold their significance.

The above resumé of Ashe of Rings reveals the extent to which the narrative is allegorical: the characterisation by Serge of Judy and Van as death and life forces respectively, involves not merely a parallel with (the) War which I have adduced, but also the sexual act itself. The description of passion between Judy and Serge is pitched at a Lawrentian level in which death and eros are inextricable - hence the association of Judy with blood and her warmongering attitude to Serge, whilst the battles at Rings also resemble sexual climaxes or orgasms.<sup>90</sup> The relationship between Van and Serge by contrast is one of agape. Both describe their relationship on separate occasions as one in which they are 'almost' lovers but never completely (see AOR, pp.209, 305). There is a strong link between them but they are aware of the unbridgable gap: 'You're a decent creature, but you're like a weak drawing,' declares

---

88. 'From Altar to Chimney-Piece', Last Stories, p.153.

89. 'The Dinner Party', Several Occasions, p.60.

90. Hugh Ross-Williamson felt that Mary Butts's work combined characteristics of both D.H. Lawrence's and T.S. Eliot's work (Byington, p.741).

Serge to to Van, and she replies that, 'to talk to you is like a person with a cold talking to a person in consumption' (AOR, pp.201, 302). These striking metaphors are conceded in a tone of resignation not venom, this calmness revealing the lack of (sexual) energy between them. Thus for Serge there is no real choice; his 'credo', his love-death instinct is for Judy: 'A bitch for the asking he knew he'd have her again. That was it. He wanted her still' (AOR, p.224). All that Van has been able to do is to disentangle him from his credo temporarily; yet even when she literally saves him from death when Judy leaves him, Van has to use Judy's sheets, perfume etc. so that Serge is never free from his dependence on Judy (see AOR, p.125). For Serge this 'rebirth' can only be an interlude, in that like all births it implies death. For a time he is able to escape his allotted time, his destiny; however just as he cannot transcend his mortality, so Serge knows that he cannot escape his fate which is embodied in Judy.

For when Serge claims that he has 'no choice' but to return to Judy, that she is his fate, his destiny, it is not the expression of a personal preference for Judy over Van; his is a momentous moral decision - he is choosing to follow his (passive) death-instinct rather than his (active) life-instinct (AOR, pp.136-137). Just as Van's Aunt Vera articulated the relationship of Anthony and Van Ashe to Rings in terms of the metaphor - 'a situation which is the mask for another situation' - similarly Judy and Van are 'masks', in the Greek sense of the word as representing rather than simply concealing certain forces, certain interpretations of existence.

If Serge is forced to choose Judy, if the conflict is never a true one, it is because his fundamental criterion is that on which his relationship with Judy is based: sexual attraction. Van cannot compete in this space as she has no sexual existence. She is vital,

intense and passionate, but her passion is subsumed in her role as (exiled) high priestess of Rings. Like her father Van is aware of the powers of Rings, the family property in which they have in turn been born, the place from which they come and to which they return. Ashe is a Dorset name and it also connotes their mortality just as the name of their family home (their niche, their space in the phenomenal world) 'Rings' implies the cyclic energy of all earthly beings, be they human or animal or vegetable. 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust' reverberates from their family name; likewise, 'in my beginning is my end ... in my end is my beginning' is inferred by the circular name of Rings. Just as circles are considered by occultists to have magic powers, so Anthony and Van Ashe are part of a 'priestly race' (see AOR, pp.24, 34, 142) and have powers vested in them to enable them to protect Rings. Ashe of Rings is not merely the title of the book, it is the 'title' of Ashe, what it means to be a true Ashe. Deprived of this role, all of Van's energy is directed towards recovering it, so that passion in her case is linked not to sexuality but to its Latin root - pator, to suffer. Her attitude to sex is contrasted to that of Judy:

Judy had found her in a cinema-studio. She observed her careless acquaintance with men and distinguished it from her own reserved concentration. Van did not care in the least, but she knew the tricks. A Kirchner girl in boy's clothes she had seen her intrigue a man to have the run of his library.  
(AOR, p.83)

From this we can see that Van's lack of sexual experience does not result from naivety but from a conscious displacement. Sexuality is either a human, personal issue as in the case of Judy for whom it is the focus of 'reserved concentration', or it is a means of transcendence, as for example according to Aleister Crowley (like most occultists) sex has magic powers which he believed were so strong that he used it as a ritualistic experience to achieve transcendence. Similarly, Mary Butts

writes in her journal in August 1927 that a certain lover 'should be in my arms for an hour a day and let natural magic do its work. Half the reason for sex is not children or orgasm but the mutual exchange of psychic life'.<sup>91</sup> Van does not 'care in the least' about sex for its own sake because obsessed with Rings she has no individual identity separable from it; her rejection of sex is not, however, out of a belief in virginal purity as 'she knew the tricks'. She is prepared to use them if they can help her, albeit indirectly, in her quest for her holy grail (ie. recovering Rings). To elevate her preoccupation with Rings to the level of a 'holy grail' is not to overstate the issue, as the following quotation of Van's description of Rings to Serge reveals just how it is able to displace her sexuality by consuming all her energy. (It takes place before Van learns that Val is her true and not merely her half-brother):

Coffee-dregs and cigarette stubs floated in a red bowl. Van stirred it with a match. It bubbled between them [Van and Serge] in the ashes, a vent hole for infernal powers. She wished it had been ink for a mirror to show him the passion of Rings. She drew her figure through the ashes, and sat inside the circle, and recited the saga of the house and the tower. Contemptuous of his impassivity, she extolled the hill, the triple crown and the wood, impregnated by wind, which could be heard to laugh. She made an image for him of a cross on which every Ashe must hang, and every Ashe descend, a master of pleasure, and reascend of his own will. Then the facts of the case -  
'The woman my father married is stronger than Rings. A bastard will have it. We may call him that.'  
'What will you do?'  
'Live to plague him. I am Elizabeth Ashe of Rings.'  
(AOR, pp.96-97)

Van's passion is Rings. The French poststructuralist Roland Barthes declares in The Pleasure of the Text (1976) that 'language always comes from some place'.<sup>92</sup> The places Van's language comes from are numerous:

---

91. 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts, unpublished tapescripts, p.8.

92. Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text (London, 1976), p.28.

magick (the transformation of the harmless daily coffee-dregs, cigarette stubs and ashes in an ashtray into something resembling a cauldron: 'a vent hole for infernal powers'; Van sitting 'outside the circle' where magic is usually performed); Freudian psychoanalysis (the 'Tower', the rings of the 'triple crown', the 'wood'; the whole being 'impregnated'); and the Bible ('a cross on which every Ashe must hang ... descend ... reascend'). Yet all these places or sources of language are, like Van's use of sexuality, elliptical, providing her with only an indirect means of reunion (temporarily) with her source, her place: Rings. Displaced from Rings, Van deals with the extremity of the felt exile by allusions which are themselves metaphors of transcendence, be they magic, psychoanalytic or religious (pagan and Christian). This displacement or deferral of her sexuality is explicitly acknowledged by her when returning to Rings with Serge. For once there she is united with Rings 'through' her reunion with Val, this 'new' Ashe, her brother:

Van looked over the hills, and her contentment rose like a great pyramid of pride. She had given the earth a tiny shape that was pure. Three friends would go down the hills together. What were the snatchings of sexual love in comparison with this? She looked at her brother with hot eyes, and they kissed. (AOR, pp.209-210)

Once reunited with Rings, the beginnings of sexual arousal in Van are directed not at Serge but at her brother. This is because as an 'Ashe' he is far more linked to Rings than Serge can ever be, so that to kiss Val is the closest Van can come to kissing Rings, ie. consummating her relationship with it.

Thus we can see that Van does not exist in Judy's human-to-human sexual world and therefore she cannot possibly be a (sexual) rival to Judy. The fact that her feeling for Serge is qualitatively different from Judy's is revealed in her lack of jealousy at finding Serge and Judy in bed together; she is only concerned to warn them of Peter

Amburton's imminent arrival and the fact that the police are searching Serge's flat. 'Damnable divinity. Divine toleration. Had she no passions? She had found him in bed with another woman', is Serge's discomfited reaction; his use of the word 'divine' emphasising that Van's is not a human (ie. not on a par with Judy's) reaction (AOR, p.172).

Van's displacement of her sexual feelings away from Serge is matched by his lack of sexual attraction for her. This is not a matter of chance or body chemistry, however, for Serge acknowledges that sexuality for him is bound up with all the things Judy represents: violence, greed, materialism, war; all of which are finding an explosive outlet in the Great War which Judy supports. Serge is attracted to Judy because he despises her world of war; being able to look 'down' on it, see 'through' it, he feels in control, choosing voluntarily to be a passive sacrificial victim to it. Van, however, does not belong to that War-world, but to a world outside it, beyond it. For Serge, Van's description of Rings is that of a 'fairy tale'; by reducing it in this way to the level of a child's fantasy (AOR, p.131), Serge tries to dismiss all that Van represents. However whilst stating that he and Van cannot be lovers because Van does not appear to him as a sexually attractive woman, Serge admits that the true reason is that he cannot 'despise' her, ie. that he cannot relegate her to Judy's war-world (AOR, p.176). He describes Van in the following images: 'a child'; like a 'pale glass cup with a nasturtium in it'; a 'small, archaic statue'; a 'weak drawing' (AOR, pp.84, 114, 205, 126, 301). (Serge is, after all, a painter). More ethereally even, he sees her as 'holy', a 'celestial voice' or 'a mood the mind made flesh' (AOR, pp.185, 126, 148). All these images and metaphors illustrate Serge's attitude to Van; the fact that he views her not as a human woman but something 'other' than that, belonging to some different typology which can only find approximation in word or image. When Van saves him from death he views their relationship as a 'delicious

interlude' from his life with Judy, which he perceives as his real life (AOR, p.127). However, when he rejects Van to return to Judy (/death) it is not so much Van he is relinquishing as the 'space' she provides for him as an artist, and the concomitant struggle it demands. For what Van actually provides Serge with is the opportunity to exist, however momentarily, outside time. She does this by suspending his inexorable battle with death (ie. Judy) and hence enabling him to cross over the threshold, between being a painter and actually painting. Whilst Judy maintains that Van will deprive Serge of the opportunity to paint, the converse is true as the three occasions on which Serge draws in the book are ones in which Judy's influence has been displaced not by the qualitatively equally forceful presence of Van, but on the contrary by the lack of constraint she establishes around him. During his convalescence after Van has symbolically as well as literally brought him back to life, Serge paints her and is filled with the sensation that the 'burden' of Judy has been reduced to 'a grain of discomfort, a speck on the surface of his peace' (AOR, p.154). Later, at Rings when he is 'left alone ... he began to enjoy himself' as he draws a group of pigs and feels 'his body on the edge of health again. His drawing had a quality he liked, he felt a little surprise and a great well-being' (AOR, p.195). Once again he considers his attitude to Judy at this point and finds her as distant as 'an unpleasant religion or a theoretically poisonous antipodean fruit' (AOR, p.196). (The third sketch is one which he makes of Morice Amburton when he visits Serge and Van in London.)

As we can see there is a direct correlation between painting and health for Serge which he admits to himself when he reflects on the importance of getting his personal life 'down to realistic fact. So that painting may be unrealistic and abstract. He began to feel well again, health stirring in his veins' (AOR, p.224). To paint, for Serge, is to



enter a time of regeneration; each painting gives him a little more 'life', hence his association of Van with life forces in that it is she who enables his temporary resuscitation from death (Judy) by providing the external space for his painting. That Van is aware of this need on Serge's part is highlighted when Val asks her 'What sort of a chap is your friend?' 'He has been very unhappy and ill,' Van replies, adding 'He is worth preserving for his painting' (AOR, p.209). In this utterance we can see the see-saw or chiasmic relationship between Serge to painting: painting to Serge. For it is not a question of Serge dying for Art's sake but its inversion: living for Art's sake, Art providing simultaneously the key to a longer life. In his essay, 'The Breaking of Form' the American critic Harold Bloom talks of art (in this case poetry but the same holds true for prose) as a form of 'evasion':

Evasion is a process of avoiding, a way of escaping, but also it is an excuse. Usage has tinged the word with a certain stigma, but in our poetry what is being evaded ultimately is fate, particularly the necessity of dying.<sup>93</sup>

Likewise, through painting Serge evades 'fate, particularly the necessity of dying'. This is what I mean when I say that through his relationship with Van Serge accedes to a space outside time. The space may have its internal chronology just as in a painting the passage of time is presented not sequentially or linearly, but in its portrayal of depth through perspective. We do not look along a picture as we do words, film stills or musical notes; rather we look into the painting from 'outside' its frame, partly inside and partly outside and as we do so we escape (temporarily) from time, from our mortality. So it is with Ashe of Rings, where Mary Butts presents a deep-space situation which enables this 'evasion'.

---

93. Harold Bloom, 'The Breaking of Form', in Bloom et al., Deconstruction and Criticism (New York, 1979), p.9.

Bound within a materialistic perspective Judy cannot view Van as anything other than an oddity, an enigma and ultimately a threatening force precisely because Van's actions are inexplicable according to Judy's terms of reference - hence Judy's bafflement and her attempt to reduce Van to her own language by attacking her in Van's own space (ie. Rings) yet within Judy's terms (ie. the rape, the (failed) attempt at sexual abasement). Van declares later to Melitta that 'one form of insanity is a weakness for symbolic actions' (AOR, p.308). Not only does Judy attack Van's sexuality but she also tries to destroy the winnow corb in which Van had been baptised; not only Van's good name (her reputation) but her very name (her identity) itself. Interestingly Van feels the need to balance the evil intention by another symbolic ritual in which the knife used by Judy to ruin the corb is neutralised.

Serge represents a rather more precarious perspective because of its ambivalence, in that he can understand not only the materialist space of Judy but also the transcendental space occupied by Van. Unlike Van who can perceive both spaces but is not tempted by Judy's, Serge exists on the threshold of both, desirous of both. It is Val Ashe who realises that Serge originates from the same space as Van in that they share a loneliness which lies beyond the human materialistic world of Judy:

The moon is an old, white light, much older than the sun. Man burst out of the sun's yellow seed-ball; he cannot humanise the old moon's light ... [thinking of this] ... it occurred to Val for the first time, that he shared a general life; that, enclosing his beauties and opinions, there is a common warmth in man, a kind, sad, animal thing. He knew that he was lonely and that it was good to find that his sister and Serge and he were under the same yoke. (AOR, p.213)

The narration of Ashe of Rings (as with all of Mary Butts's works) passes fluidly from the third person narrator into the thoughts or words of her figures. This is because there is no attempt on Mary Butts's part to present the illusion of a rounded character; rather, they are

presences, embodiments of different sorts of awareness. In this case Serge, Van and Val share the awareness, the 'same yoke', that the phenomenal world transcends any 'humanised' interpretation of it.

Serge's painting is to a large extent a ritualisation of this awareness - an experiential mantra through which he recognises and accedes to life's sources, to the fact that life's true energy occurs not in the passionate glare of the sun but in the 'old' moon's light which unlike the direct heat of the sun exists as a limpid, quiet prehuman light, there but not transformable for human purposes. A parallel can be made between Serge's relationship to painting and that of primitive people to their enactment of rites. The American psychologist William James developed the term 'medical materialism' according to which he maintained that visions or dreams were the direct result of purely physiological disturbances either from indigestion or drugs. 'There is no objection to this approach,' comments the anthropologist Mary Douglas on James's interpretation in Purity and Danger (1966), 'unless it excludes other interpretations'. She continues, 'Most primitive peoples are medical materialists in an extended sense in so far as they tend to justify their ritual actions in terms of aches and pain which would afflict them should the rites be neglected'.<sup>94</sup>

Whilst Serge does not articulate his situation in this way, his painting parallels the primitive ritual in the sense that life outside it (ie. with Judy, whom he does not paint) is one of weakness, illness and a hastening of death. I raise this analogy because it highlights the immanent primitivism in Mary Butts's writing, particularly in Ashe of Rings, which if we consider its time of writing - the 1910s - was a period of general interest in primitivism in the arts (eg. Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Gaudier-Brzeska). Ashe of Rings explicates several of the

---

94. Douglas, p.32.

practices which William James and Freud preferred to believe had been superseded by scientific rationalism. In 'The Uncanny' (1919), for example, a text contemporary with Ashe of Rings, Freud writes about the 'superiority of rational minds', as compared with the 'residues of animistic mental activity'; our 'primitive fear of the dead' occurring only because we think 'as savages' on this topic.<sup>95</sup> Later in the same article he maintains that as moderns we have 'surmounted' or have 'finally rid' ourselves of primitive beliefs, the assumption being that primitive or animistic interpretations are purely the result of scientific ignorance or neurosis, a claim clearly disputed in the writings of Mary Butts.<sup>96</sup> It is also disputed by Mary Douglas. Her main thesis in Purity and Danger is that despite apparent differences between modern hygiene and primitive ritual, these two interpretations of pollution are closer than is generally recognised. Her disagreement with James's 'medical materialism' is that it is too reductive. 'Our practices are solidly based on hygiene,' she writes, 'theirs [primitive peoples] are symbolic: we kill germs, they ward off spirits'.<sup>97</sup> Her concern is that we should not be too hasty in pronouncing these two interpretations as inherently incompatible. As she points out, the term 'primitive' has become a slur, yet to read Ashe of Rings is to rediscover the old runic England whose primitive symbolism percolates through the modern materialist veneer.<sup>98</sup> For the Great War is itself a symptom of this materialist veneer - the outcome of an anthropocentrism which has resulted from a gap opening between the human and the phenomenal world. Morice Amburton goes to fight in the war; Peter

---

95. Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in Art and Literature, Pelican Freud Library 14, edited by Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp.352, 363, 365.

96. 'The Uncanny', Art and Literature, pp.370, 374, 371.

97. Douglas, p.32.

98. Douglas, pp.73-74.

Amburton is shell-shocked from the war; Melitta returns to Rings from warwork - yet whilst there are these references to the war so that it hangs darkly over the situations of Ashe of Rings, it is held back and apart by Mary Butts's narrative to highlight its symptomatic rather than causal character. What dominates Ashe of Rings is the power of Rings - the land - to keep itself from further desecration. This is the central theme of Mary Butts's work that recurs in Armed with Madness and especially in Death of Felicity Taverner, so that as Scylla in Armed with Madness declares, 'something is wrong with them and with their world'. For Mary Butts, writing is essentially symbolic, metaphorical; the people and situations are never opaque appearances but are tied and linked by a series of Baudelairean 'correspondances' to life and death forces. Mary Butts's work makes us aware of these forces. As Baudelaire declares in 'Correspondances' (1861):

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers  
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;  
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles  
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.<sup>99</sup>

Each figure in Mary Butts's narratives passes through the world via a 'forest of symbols' out of which they organise and interpret their passage in the world. The perspectives of Anthony Ashe, Van, Val and Clavel resemble that of primitive people for whom contact between the human and the phenomenal (and hence to eternal forces) is direct. Mary Douglas quotes Skinner on the Aboriginal worldview:

Most of the choir and furniture of heaven and earth  
are regarded by the Aborigine as a vast sign system...  
He moves not in a landscape but in a humanised realm  
saturated with significations.<sup>100</sup>

Similarly Leinhardt on the Dinka rain ceremonies:

---

99. Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondances', in Les Fleurs du Mal (Paris, 1961), p.13.

100. Douglas, p.87.

their symbolic action moves with the rhythm of the natural world around them, recreating that rhythm in moral terms and not merely attempting to coerce it into conformity with human desires.<sup>101</sup>

As an anthropocentric or materialist's attitude does. Mary Butts believed that by removing itself more and more from direct contact with the natural, phenomenal world Western society has denied itself this correspondence with nature which predominates in primitive societies. Anthony, Van and Val Ashe avoid this displacement through their close affiliation to Rings; yet even when the phenomenal world is ignored, its inhabitants cannot but evolve out of a particular symbology however distorted. As the French poststructuralist, Jacques Lacan explains:

Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him 'by flesh and blood'; so total that they bring to his birth, along with the gifts of the stars, if not with the gifts of the fairies, the shape of his destiny; so total that they give the words that will make him fruitful or renegade, the law of the acts that will follow him right to the very place where he is not yet and even beyond his death.<sup>102</sup>

The more we delve into the Symbolic, that realm lying masked or 'as it were behind' 'solid' pathogenetic attitudes to health and hygiene, the more predominant becomes the fairy-tale space of Rings vis-à-vis the materialist war-world of Judy. The 'symbol' as used by Lacan is not that of 'primitive' interpretation, nor that of a nineteenth century Urban Romantic, but a modern psychoanalytic and poststructuralist account of how we come to language. Arising out of structuralism, a self-consciously scientific methodology for reading texts which presents itself as a 'science of signs' in opposition to the more 'traditional humanistic interpretations', Barthes describes the text in The Pleasure

---

101. Douglas, p.66.

102. Jacques Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', in Sherry Turkle, Psychoanalytic Politics: Jacques Lacan and Freud's French Revolution (London, 1979), p.77.

of the Text as 'tissue'.<sup>103</sup> In fact, as far as he is concerned,

Text means TISSUE; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a readymade veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in the tissue - this texture - the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as an HYPHOLOGY (HYPHOS is the tissue and the spider's web).<sup>104</sup>

The text is presented by Barthes as a woven structure in which the reader is enmeshed, the term 'tissue' connoting not only the cloth-like interlacing of the text but also its organic character (eg. cell tissue etc). The text as corporal is crucial to Barthes' distinctions between the pleasure (plaisir) and the bliss (jouissance) of a text.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, his interpretation of the text as organic extends beyond the text itself in that he claims that it is, for the reader, part of a great organic structure: a 'literary cosmogony', a 'circular memory. Which is what,' he continues 'the INTER-TEXT is: the impossibility of living outside the infinite text - whether this text be Proust or the daily newspaper or the television screen: the book creates meaning, the meaning creates life'.<sup>106</sup> Thus, according to Barthes, the work involves a multiple telescoping of sign-systems: interweaving within the text and interweaving between texts (ie. the 'inter-text'), both occurring and interweaving within the 'infinite text'. Since the seemingly non-textual television screen (ie. it is imagistic and verbal rather than written language) is as much part of the infinite text as a book or a newspaper (which are much more obvious examples of texts), the distinction

---

103. Jonathan Culler, On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticisms after Structuralism (London, 1983), p.20.

104. Barthes, p.64.

105. Barthes, pp.17, 51.

106. Barthes, p.36.

between living in the world and turning the pages of a book is collapsed: it is all reading.

Therefore whilst proclaiming 'new' ways of reading, even recent critical theory like that of Barthes and Lacan is surprisingly close to a 'primitive' interpretation of the world. For Barthes it is an 'infinite text'; for Lacan it is a world of symbols - a 'symbology'. Whatever the terminology, both can be represented by Mary Butts's metaphor of the witchdoctor as described by Picus in Death of Felicity Taverner where he declares: 'You can get a first in Greats or fly around the crater of Vesuvius, but what you depend on for your private life is your degree in witch-doctoring. How much you can smell out the propitious from the unpropitious' (DFT, p.24). Also, just as Mary Butts used the invisible powers of Rings, Lacan feels the need to adduce the metaphors of the fantastic and the mystical to speak of how we are woven into the world with language, since he maintains (as quoted above) that our 'destiny' is given us, along with 'the gifts of the stars if not with the gifts of the fairies'. The word 'fairy' has gone full circle, from the initial association with magic to E.M. Forster's claim that by 1947 'fairies' was a word 'consecrated to imbecility' through its association with homosexuality (back) to the Lacanian use which evokes its magical, inexplicable quality.<sup>107</sup>

An Ashe has to learn that there is life outside good and evil. Most people don't get so far. (AOR, p.62)

So Evans the tutor reminds Van as a child. When Serge rejects life with Van he reveals that he is like 'most people'. His awareness can transcend his space, his symbology is close enough to Van's to understand

---

107. Aspects of the Novel, p.103.



hers but not enough to live in her transcendental space. Whilst she is able to protect herself from violation by her belief in the powers of Rings, Serge is unable to tap that power although he is aware of its existence. 'I've been to Rings too,' thinks Serge towards the end of the narrative, 'day after day I've been and they might have blessed me. Only Van gets that blessing ...' For Serge the Rings retain their inscrutable physical appearance - a place of 'wet grass and high trees ... a cold wet place ... [in which he] chewed on wet leaves and laid on stone' (AOR, p.286). It is Clavel who 'with the propriety of a butler' explains to Serge why it is so: 'It's like this, sir. Every situation has its formula. Every person has his situation. I have mine. I've found the formula for my situation, sir'. When Serge declares his frustration at how the Rings 'are no good to me', Clavel replies:

'Perhaps you haven't got what Mr. Anthony Ashe called the words of power, Mr. Serge.

'Magic is no good unless you believe in it, Clavel.'

'Quite, sir, the only good in it is to take out of you what is already there. Inside out is the rule. (AOR, p.294)

Thus Serge's inability to completely accede to that magic space (in which the Ashes live) arises from his lack of belief. Caught in the world of good and evil Serge has no choice but to return to Judy and to relegate his relationship with Van to an 'interlude'. On a personal level he recognises that Judy needs him whilst Van does not; later Clavel points out to Van that she is strong whilst Serge is and always will be weaker. However it is not the personal relationship which carries the weight of Serge's abandonment of his 'evasion' of mortality though the practise of his art. Rather he presents his return to Judy/death in apocalyptic terms:

Yes: see it to the end: submit to [Judy]: exalt torture through hysteria to ecstasy. In the end he would turn her right about face, and there would be an end to the world.

Epicurus would have none of these things  
He didn't understand life. He thought: Van doesn't understand. There would be awful pain, then anaesthesia, then vision.

...

the belief that, if he endured it to the end, there would be a reversal into beauty and accomplishment Van could not achieve: that would bring about the end of the world.

Perhaps it was not like that at all. Perhaps by his nature he was drawn into a dance of death. At any rate he would go back to Judy. Van would understand. (AOR, pp.159-160; Mary Butts's emphases)

Faced with the sustained 'temperance' of Van and the violence of Judy, Serge chooses the more explosive path (AOR, p.128). He is attempting to obscure his sense of isolation by extreme passion; personal crucifixion through martyrdom. Since he cannot save the world he would rather it disappeared entirely: 'exalt torture through hysteria to ecstasy ... awful pain, then anaesthesia, then vision'; such orgasmic violence seems the more powerful and hence convincing path because of its apparent forcefulness. Yet even as Serge dons his symbolic sackcloth and ashes (!) and crawls on to his cross, Van's voice reaches him in that he remembers her words: 'Epicurus would have none of these things' so that 'perhaps it was not like that at all'.

Epicurus is often misrepresented as being the opposite to Zeno in that, unlike Zeno's followers, the Stoics, who believed in constant self-denial, Epicureans maintain that life involves a constant searching after pleasure. In fact, Epicurus's philosophy was based on the avoidance of pain, so that far from being hedonistic at all costs, he taught the importance of moderation in all realms of life so that present activities should not incur future pain. Educated in Greek philosophy and mythology Mary Butts embodies in Van the temperance based on this Epicurean tenet (AOR, pp.92, 141). Evans says to Vera on the death of Anthony Ashe 'Ashe is dead. Long live Ashe ... she'll [Van] never forget her Greek'

(AOR, p.60) ). It is in this way that Van's voice enters and balances Serge's thoughts. He convinces himself that the energy of the 'dance of death' is inherently better than the quietness of solitary painting, even though painting gives him life not death. He tries to pass his incomprehension about life on to Van: 'He didn't understand life. He thought: Van doesn't understand'. However he cannot delude himself to this extent, rightly concluding that 'Van will understand'. Indeed long before this Van had perceived Serge's ambition: 'You are looking for your crucifixion,' she had told him. 'It is not sophrôn (AOR, p.96). The difference between crucifixion and sophrôn is the difference between Serge's self-glorification of death through passivity and Van's active confrontation of her attempted violation on Rings. Both involve self-sacrifice - suffering for others - but whilst crucifixion is anchored in the Christian symbology of good and evil, sophrósyne (the Greek for self-control, temperance, moderation) is 'a thing ... that help(s) you through both of them' from outside (AOR, p.61). As Clavel explained to Serge, every person occupies a situation and every situation has a formula. Clavel's situation is to be guardian of Rings in the absence of an Ashe. Serge is unable to find the formula for his situation as an artist and hence prefers to relinquish that situation and the space proffered for it by Van Ashe of Rings in order to be subsumed and hence disappear (ie. 'die': the Stuarts and Elizabethans called orgasms 'dying'), into Judy's space.

Yet whilst Serge's imminent departure from Rings occurs at the end of Ashe of Rings the relationship between Serge, Van and Val is not, despite my prolonged attention to it, the main focus of Ashe of Rings; just as Parts II and III follow on sequentially from Part I so, they are dependent on it. Personal relationships as I have shown are symbolic. Ashe of Rings is not social realism precisely because it is not centred

on and bound by merely human interaction within the world, the phenomenal environment acting as a neutral stage, frame or backdrop. When personal relationships fail it is because they are incidental to the huge achievement of Van against what can be described as an act of cosmic pollution. 'Because [Ashe of Rings] is a fairy-story' wrote Mary Butts in the 1933 'Afterword', 'it had to end happily' (AOR, p.312). To understand Ashe of Rings's symbolic ending we must return to the beginning. Within Ashe of Rings Anthony Ashe, Van Ashe and the narrator refer to the exchange of properties between time and space, so that time becomes something physical, something to enter or stand outside. Anthony Ashe draws Melitta's attention to the way in which the house physically reverberates with 'a burr, a tinkle, a humming [like the] bronze note of a clock'. He adds:

Can you feel how time is made sound and we listen to it, and are outside it? Have you thought what it is to be outside time? (AOR, p.15)

In Part II when Serge thinks he heard a knocking, Van transforms the sound into a metaphor:

'on the door through which we both enter into time.' He jumped at the phrase. (AOR, p.175)

Time in fact becomes so physical, so tangible, an entity which can be viewed exoscopically as well as 'entered', that, we are told:

Time hung like crystal before the leaping fire.  
(AOR, p.178)

Similarly the narrative of Ashe of Rings itself is not framed by a temporal beginning and ending so much as a physical space, for just as the phenomenal world precedes and postdates each human existence, so Ashe of Rings opens not with the description of the mortal and temporal human Ashe but the more immutable site of Rings. Hence, let us examine once again the opening sentence:

Rings lay in a cup of turf. A thin spring sun shone on its stones. Two rollers of chalk down hung over it; midway between their crest and the sea, the house crouched like a dragon on a saucer of jade. (AOR, p.3)

Almost immediately we learn that this description is given not by the narrator but the returning Anthony Ashe. Thus our first introduction to Ashe in this 'fairy-tale' space - the property stretches down to the sea: 'There,' we are told, 'Rings ended and the world began' (AOR, p.3) - is through his birthplace, his source. It is his relationship as guardian of Rings which is important, not his life before or outside it. That the citing/sighting of Rings is by Anthony Ashe himself, is partly revealed by the use of an oriental metaphor ('like a dragon on a saucer of jade') as we are later informed that he has just spent the last three years in the East. We learn however that jade is linked to Rings so that it appears in several forms as symbols of its immanent power. I would also maintain that it is through this recurrent surfacing of jade that Mary Butts reveals her presence as her 'signature' in the text: the first mention of jade is Rings itself. Then when Van is a child her father gives her a lar, a 'green man'. A lar, explains Anthony Ashe, is 'a little god of indoors' (AOR, p.38). This jade figure has a counterpart in Serge's room or at least he 'thinks' he sees one, but it is actually an instance of trompe l'oeil: 'He saw that he was staring at the eye the kettle handle made with the scribble on the wall. A quiet god of indoors watching him' (AOR, p.160). Watching is important in Mary Butts's cosmogony - elsewhere Serge asks Van who is watching out for her; she replies: Clavel. The above 'misreading' by Serge also illustrates his imagistic interpretation of the world as well as weaving another associative thread between him and Van.

When Van tells Serge about Rings she talks of the Chinese room in which there is a 'set of jade chessmen' (AOR, p.130). Chess is of

crucial significance in Ashe of Rings: the first time it is mentioned is in a conversation between Anthony and Melitta which reveals the perceptual 'gap' between them. Melitta says to Anthony: 'You pretend that there are ways of looking at things which have nothing to do with Christianity'. To which he replies 'Little Melitta, Christianity is a way, a set of symbols, in part to explain, and to make men endure the unutterable pain that is in the world. There are other sets like chessmen. But only one game' (AOR, p.25). Melitta, like 'most people' interprets the world according to Christian symbols, her actions and her moral language revolving, like Serge, around good and evil. For her, existence on earth is perceived in the context of its non/post-earthly consequences. Anthony, on the other hand coming from the space of Rings has a concomitant 'spatial' philosophy in which there is no such sequential morality. As in a game of chess, the action of 'being here' involves movement in terms not of progression so much as a constant relational situation. All actions incur and involve a new situation, just as the chess pieces form a new pattern; but whilst you can be in a better or worse position, it always remains relative. To look to the end of the game, beyond it to when it is over, will not help you make decisions within the game itself. It is the organic world within its frame, just as the game is bordered and bound by its chequered board, which provides the situation. The only certain moves are the past moves but such knowledge is only partially helpful. As Eliot remarked in 'East Coker': 'we are only undeceived/of that which deceiving could no longer harm'.<sup>108</sup> Thus, like Lacan, Anthony Ashe perceives life according to 'sets of symbols': his space apart enabling him to realise and yet not escape the inescapable, the fact that there is 'only one game'.

Jade surfaces next during the first conversation between Val and

---

108. T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker' II, 87-88.

Van: when Val appears on the Rings with a 'long jade holder, like a green trumpet' Van's immediate desire is to 'suck' at it (the sexual overtones are obvious here). Val replies that it is a gift for her (AOR, p.207). Thus, like their kiss, the passing of the jade between Val and Van is symbolic of their close union, their both being Ashe. Finally, we are told that Van has a 'Spanish shawl the colour of jade' which she wears on her return to Rings (AOR, p.212). Always jade is associated with Ashe, always it brings to the surface the link between Ashe and Rings; always Mary Butts is there, invisible, but like a signature, present in these light touches.

As mentioned above, Anthony Ashe's death is followed by Melitta's remarriage to Morice Amburton. The link between these two events is important as crucial to this latter relationship is its place of inception since it is on the Rings that Melitta and Morice first consummate their affair. On finding them there it is not the sexual relationship which disturbs Ashe; it is the fact that it reinforces what he already knows: 'I see,' he declares. 'I must hurry up and die. I've been too long on the stage'. It is the long-term consequences of the act which alarm him - what this unlawful violation of the Rings symbolises. He explains to Evans, the tutor: 'It was on the Rings: up there: in the wood itself: I tell you this will draw down on my Vanna the anguish of Rings' (AOR, p.52). Put in these terms the dénouement of Ashe of Rings, like that of a Greek tragedy is now established, as the lex talion is set up according to which Van's disinheritance of Rings by her mother is the *sophrôn* placed on her by the forces of Rings because they have been violated. (The sins of the parent will be visited on the child ...). Van is aware that her mother's presence at Rings is wrong, not as a personal grudge, but in terms of an imbalance of forces, so that Van's sophisticated interpretation of the situation is based on a primitive,

symbolic view of pollution. Mary Douglas is helpful again here when she collapses the distinction between the symbolic or ritual pollution of primitive society and the modern notion of hygiene:

The old definition of dirt is matter out of place. ... It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. ... It is a relative idea. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to leave them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawingroom; clothing lying on chairs; outdoor things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; underclothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on.<sup>109</sup>

When Van explains to Serge that she will live 'to plague' her mother and her alleged stepbrother, this is not a human-to-human vendetta but a cosmic one in which they are agents of different forces. Judy, the Great war and Melitta's presence at Rings are all symptomatic results of 'matter out of place'. Van's is not a simple care for the environment, but a desire for the right thing/person in the right place. The reconciliation of Van Ashe and her mother and the consequent reestablishment of a true Ashe at Rings is set in motion when Van 'opens' herself to the threatened [re]violation of the Rings by Peter Amburton (Judy). In this way Butts has obviated the Greek tragic ending from the tale and interposed a 'fairy-tale' ending. 'One sees now,' she writes in the 'Afterword', eight years after the first publication of Ashe of Rings, 'that this would not necessarily have been the true end; that as things are, there would have been far less chance of peace for the Ashe children. ... The essential triumph, with which the book ends, would very likely not have happened. One can think of any number of grim alternatives'

---

109. Douglas, pp.35-36.



(AOR, pp.312-13). However she finds it 'impossible to alter' and sends the 1918-1919 manuscript back to the printer with the single word: 'stet'.

Thus if Ashe of Rings is a fairy-tale, it is an escape from reality in the Bloomian sense of 'evasion', in that through its temporary escape we can stand outside time and space long enough to realise the significance of life, its religious nature and its 'deep-space' character. The runic or primitive framework of the book whereby it resonates not only with the England of the 1910s when it was written but, coming up through that the England of prehistoric times is crucial, for it is only by going back to a world of prescientific interpretation that Mary Butts can portray the transcendental character of 'being': the way in which we are symbolically tied not merely to one another but to the phenomenal world and beyond.<sup>110</sup> Mary Butts's work demands what Bloom calls a strong or 'alert' reading because of its 'agonic, combative' character, or what Barthes calls in The Pleasure of the Text an 'applied reading'.<sup>111</sup> It is the kind of reading which Mary Butts demands that makes her a Modernist. As Barthes explains:

Read slowly, read all of a novel by Zola and the book will drop from your hands; read fast, in snatches, some modern text and it becomes opaque, inaccessible to your pleasure: you want something to happen and nothing does, for what happens to the language does not happen to the discourse: what 'happens', what 'goes away', the seam of the two edges, the interstice of bliss occurs in the volume of the languages, in the uttering, not in the sequences of utterances: not to devour, to gobble, but to gaze, to browse scrupulously, to rediscover - in order to read today's writers - the leisure of bygone readings, to be aristocratic readers (Barthes's emphases).<sup>112</sup>

---

110. Mary Butts repeatedly stresses the lessons which can be learnt from an examination of Greek civilisation, see for example 'The Past in the Present', The Bookman, 82 no.490 (1932), p.206, which opens 'one reason why we study the classics, why we assume, or used to until lately, that whatever an educated man did or did not know, he must know something about the language and thought of the antique world, is because we feel that we are dealing there with men who had the same assumptions as our own.'

111. Bloom, p.5.

112. Barthes, pp.12-13.

The distinction for Barthes between the premodern (eg. Zola) and 'today's writers', resides in the displacement of the narrative (what 'happens') from the centre of the stage by the very means which convey what 'happens', ie. language itself. Language written self-consciously and read self-consciously is above all the focus of the Moderns and it is because language is now the protagonist that we cannot as readers have access to a text if we read fast. Unlike the premodern novel where the narrative's sheer length and detail enables (according to Barthes, 'forces') the reader's attention to wander, modern texts demand a generically different kind of reading - one which must be slow because each word is to be plumbed otherwise the text will become 'opaque'. (Hence the aptness of the term 'deep-space' in that it conjures up the 'well-like' character of the text). So in order to apportion this attention democratically, we must have and take time like 'aristocrats'.

Ashe of Rings is a modern text. However it is important to stress that Mary Butts's style is not self-consciously modern in the way Gertrude Stein's work is, where through the use of anacoluthon Stein dislocates not merely narrative but actual sentence patterns. Nor is Mary Butts's work overtly experimental like that of Borges or Brooke-Rose who both, in different ways, draw attention to the eye behind each 'I'. We have to read Mary Butts's work slowly because of the resonance of the imagery and the language's multiple palimpsests working within the organic structure of the text which is itself a 'palimpsest'; H.D. uses the term as the title to her 1926 fictional work which, like Mary Butts's narratives, refer us back (especially to classical Greece). H.D. cites the definition of 'Palimpsest', 'a parchment from which one writing has been erased to make room for another', as the epigraph to Palimpsest. Rarely in Ashe of Rings does the narrator/author remind that we are engaged in this act of reading (although as the following reading

of Death of Felicity Taverner illustrates, Mary Butts's presence is far greater in the later work); rather we read Ashe of Rings as its inhabitants 'read' their situation: like the Aborigine or the witch-doctor, symbolically, making sense of what is given, reading the signs.

Mary Butts's own attitude to language reveals that this 'applied' reading is inherent and not simply superimposed by a 1980s reader. In The Crystal Cabinet she writes that she was sensitive to words from an early age:

The musical intelligence I should have inherited from both sides of my family translated itself more and more into pleasure at verbal sound. I cannot remember a time when I was not enraptured at or tortured by words. Always there have been words which, sometimes for their sound alone, sometimes for their sound and sense, I would not use. From a loathing of their grossness or their sickliness, their weight or want of weight. Their inexactitude, their feeling of acidity or insipidity. Their action, not only on the intelligence but on the nerves, was instant: instant and constant, as my joy at other combinations, and also at what was nothing more nor less than our old friend le mot juste.<sup>113</sup>

Nor was it a question simply of an acute sensibility through which Mary Butts lived in a world of words where she was 'enraptured' or 'tortured' in turn. For she was aware that there is a power, a living force inhabiting words as they are used, which transcends a purely sensual reaction. As she explains:

There were words. I could make words do things. But words could do things to me. Words would make me use them. Only of my own will I was afraid to begin, because once I had begun they would not let me stop.

What was worse, I might not be able to do what they said. That would be a new pain, not being able to find what you must.<sup>114</sup>

Mary Butts is trapped in the flux of a dialectical relationship with language: both active ('I could make words do things') and passive ('but

---

113. The Crystal Cabinet, p.119.

114. The Crystal Cabinet, p.120.

words could do things to me. Words could make me use them'), she is never outside the influence of language but remains conscious of being simultaneously controlled and controlling, creator and created. Nor is this strange power of language neutral, as it unleashes different kinds of power ('I was afraid'; 'a new pain'). On the one hand the power of words involved a continual opening up of meaning and power which had no naturally in-built finality; on the other there was a danger of paralysis, of being inarticulate, when the words might not come so that instead of not being able to stop, she might not be able to say what had to be said ('to find what you must': in a letter to the editor published in Time and Tide shortly after Mary Butts's death, Naomi Royde-Smith discusses the difficulties Mary Butts had in writing).<sup>115</sup> Once again the same fear is expressed by Eliot in Four Quartets where he writes of the ever-elusive character of language. 'So here I am' he declares in 'East Coker':

Trying to learn to use words and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start and a different kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it.<sup>116</sup>

Inarticulacy and lack of finality are not alternative positions but two aspects of the inescapable state of flux of language. Mary Butts and T.S. Eliot are in media res: there is no beginning and no end, and hence, no exit. Implicated in the world with language, a heightened consciousness of this serves only to make them know their situation, not enable them to escape it.<sup>117</sup> Likewise declares Mary Butts, it is as

---

115. Naomi Royde-Smith, letter to Editor, Time and Tide, p.378.

116. T.S. Eliot, East Coker V, 172-178, Four Quartets, p.26.

117. See J. Hillis Miller, 'The Critic as Host', in Deconstruction and Criticism, p.123 in which he discusses the fact that there is 'no escape' from the 'prisonhouse of language'.

impossible to escape from neuroses as it is to escape from language. All one can do is to displace one neurosis by another. In her journal she writes that her visit to Crowley's Abbey at Cefalu in 1921 where she took part in magic rites 'has given me quite a different outlook. Once it was a blind discomfort; now I know what caused the discomfort, my various fears, I was and am troubled by them instead'.<sup>118</sup>

That Mary Butts should write stories is not synonymous with her being unselfconscious, rather that she prefers to draw attention to language within the usual human parergon: for telling stories whilst being as old as time as she declares in The Crystal Cabinet is also present in today's and everyday linguistic exchange.<sup>119</sup> We spend our life telling stories which are always extended metaphors referring to themselves and beyond themselves. Inside Armed with Madness and Ashe of Rings names are incessantly evocative. Furthermore, in Ashe of Rings there is a mirroring in the name of Melitta Ashe and her more suited second husband, Morice Amberton whose initials reflect hers - (M.A. : M.A.) and the two 'true' Ashe children have the same initials (Vanna Elizabeth Ashe and Valentine Evelyn Ashe. Serge reinforces the idea of a mirroring between Van and Val when he describes Val as a 'duplicated' image of Van (AOR, p.193). Thus when brother and sister exchange extravagant compliments (see AOR, pp.207-8), what is actually happening is a displaced act of narcissism).

The act of naming in Ashe of Rings is fundamental as it is the means by which Anthony Ashe passes on his 'title' (ie. his guardianship of Rings) to his daughter. In response to Melitta's wish for a Christian baptism, Anthony refuses preferring a primitive ceremony because 'ours is the one that lasts' (AOR, p.27). This utterance is prophetic as Van's name, Ashe, is her overriding preoccupation; also Anthony's use of the term

---

118. Byington and Morgan, p.171.

119. The Crystal Cabinet, p.121.

'ours' when referring to Ashe ancestors (eg. Florian and Ursula (see AOR, pp.9, 13-5, 23, 25) are felt to have more presence, more reality than non-Ashe contemporaries. In this way each Ashe is bound to a life force which defies temporality - since Anthony has fulfilled his duty to provide an heir for Rings his imminent death is never a matter for fear; rather it involves an extraordinary image of metamorphosis: 'It would soon be time to fall down into the room, the room whose air was like the sea' (AOR, p.40). Time and space distinctions will dissolve for Anthony in the same way that the edges of the property of Rings merge with the sea.

Like Scylla in Armed with Madness (and as we shall see her namesake in Death of Felicity Taverner) Van embodies many of Mary Butts's beliefs. Thus when Van and Val are discussing their father's theory of Rings as 'lovely ladies, bacchantes, oreads, dryads', Van disagrees. She sees her father's interpretation as belonging to the 'nineties', which she maintains is 'no good for us'. She has, however, no 'myth' with which to replace it, only the belief that there is magic in the Rings, a magic which is 'not a métier' and that 'there aren't any words or shapes or sounds or gestures to tell it by - not directly'. When Val suggests 'Art', Van replies darkly, 'Art's there to be art, not patently to tell secrets about something else' (AOR, pp.226-227). Similarly, Art is not for Mary Butts a possible substitute for belief; it exists in a different space which we can enter but which we eventually leave. However by reading / experiencing art we can come back changed. One of the constant lessons we learn from Mary Butts's circular symbology is that quoted above from Ecclesiastes: 'there is no new thing under the sun'. Mary Butts uses new metaphors to tell us old truths, to remind us that nothing has changed. It is to this extent that her writing is deep-space for by presenting narratives which undermine their temporal elements we arise from a reading only to find ourselves in the position of Eliot when he declares in 'Burnt

Norton' 'I can only say there we have been but I cannot say where / And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time'.<sup>120</sup>

There is a qualitative similarity between the work of Mary Butts and Eliot arising from the fact that both wrote modernist works based on palimpsests; both were deep-space or Romantic writers. In Ashe of Rings Mary Butts seems to me to be referring to Eliot's lines from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1917):

I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.<sup>121</sup>

when she writes:

A crab groping over the floor of dim seas. Little crab,  
eat your supper. (AOR, pp.140-141)

So that on this occasion an element of Eliot's poem is incorporated as part of the palimpsest from which Ashe of Rings arises. Yet the influence is not one-sided as both writers (despite Eliot's disavowal of this; see previous chapter) are 'parasitic' (as defined by Hillis Miller in 'The Critic as Host').<sup>122</sup> As Mary Butts wrote in her diary in 1927 at a time when she would have already completed Armed with Madness with its grail motif: 'Eliot and I are working on a parallel ... Eliot only writes of my quality, dislikes me and my work, I think. But what is interesting is that he is working on the Sanc Grail, on its negative side, the Waste Land. Up to now he has been before me with my titles, The Sacred Wood and The Waste Land'.<sup>123</sup> In a letter to Hugh Ross-Williamson (a friend of Eliot as well as a critical writer on his work) in 1931, Mary Butts goes further:

---

120. T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' II, 68-69, Four Quartets, p.15.

121. T.S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', in Selected Poems, (London, 1976), p.14.

122. Hillis Miller, p.220.

123. Byington and Morgan, p.172.

I've always felt between him [Eliot] and me there is a link of some kind, of the magic kind, far more significant than our distant and rather irritating personal relations. The Waste Land of our time is my subject too, and the comings and goings of the San-Grail. And there is some kind of significance in my husband [John Rodker] and I printing his first poems [Ara vos prec (1920)], when we were all pretty young.<sup>124</sup>

Whilst admiring The Waste Land, describing Eliot as the 'greatest poetic intelligence of our times', Mary Butts criticises it (once again to Hugh Ross-Williamson) for what she describes as 'plain stealings from other poets'. When he reminds her that this use of palimpsest is an intrinsic part of her own style, Mary Butts realises that it is true:

I suppose you're right ... though, honest to God, I never noticed it. It's queer, I can hardly remember Ashe but at that time Eliot and Pound had started the fashion of putting bits in. Eliot, Pound and above all, Joyce. I was simply copying the people I admired. Oh and when I come to think of it I still do it. Alexander is full of it. So I take it all back.<sup>124</sup>

Whilst this illustrates the extent to which Mary Butts was writing in the style of her time, there is one further comment she makes about The Waste Land which highlights a crucial difference between her writing and that of Eliot (and Pound and Joyce). 'Why catch up with the Holy Spirit, when he is hovering over Asia and saying "shantih". He is in a nut in a Glastonbury thicket'.<sup>124</sup> It is the case that the vast majority of Mary Butts's works (except of course her historical narratives) are centred in the English landscape, continually drawing the reader's attention to the forces within its most (apparently) ordinary features.

In his poem 'Cantata', the New York poet Frank O'Hara, writes of his ... 'great orange cat Boris (Armed with Madness) Butts'.<sup>125</sup> This reference resonates with allusions: to Mary Butts's second novel Armed

---

124. 'The Writings and the World of Mary Butts', unpublished tapescripts, p.L9.

125. O'Hara, p.489.



with Madness, to Van's orange cat, Thamar, in Ashe of Rings (and possibly to the fact that Mary Butts was a redhead) and to Boris, the Russian who appears not only in Armed with Madness but, in a more central role, in Death of Felicity Taverner (1932). The connections made within and from O'Hara's poem mirror the threading and weaving of symbols across Mary Butts's work illustrating Barthes's 'infinite text' and Lacan's symbology. In The Great Code Northrop Frye distinguishes between two types of older stories, the 'myth' and the 'folktale'. 'A myth,' he explains, 'takes place in a mythology, an interconnected group of myths [so that there is] some sense of canon'. Folktales by contrast are essentially 'nomadic'.<sup>126</sup> Mary Butts's works form a myth, a single work. Everything interconnects across texts as this reading attempts to reflect by quotation and reference wherever relevant from her short stories, The Crystal Cabinet and criticism as well as a detailed consideration of her three novels. For what underlies Mary Butts's myths is a sense of canon, Mary Butts's canon, her deep-space view of the world which her writing opens up.

(iv)

(Remember also that I shall have to try round and say a great many things that are not true until I start a truth.) (DFT, p.10)

There must always be two kinds of art, escape-art, for man needs escape as he needs good and deep sleep, and parable-art, that art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love.

(W.H. Auden, 'Psychology and Art Today', in The English Auden, pp.341-342)

A reading of Death of Felicity Taverner (1932) Mary Butts's third and final novel (before she turned to the writing of historical fictions) further illustrates the deep-space character of her work, yet revealing

---

126. Frye, p.33.

a far greater control and intervention on the part of Mary Butts as narrator than in Ashe of Rings or Armed with Madness. Set in the same landscape of Ashe of Rings and Armed with Madness real Dorset place names such as the Dancing Rocks and Gault Cliffs are set alongside the imaginary ones of Stone End, Starn and Gullstown. Never does Mary Butts state explicitly that her setting is her native Dorset but we are told that the 'situation' of Death of Felicity Taverner takes place in 'the oldest of the old part of oldest England' (DFT, p.238). In contrast to Ashe of Rings and Armed with Madness the opening sentence of Death of Felicity Taverner delays briefly the evocation of the landscape by introducing us to some of its inhabitants: 'A young man who had arrived uninvited from France lay under the green slate roof of the verandah, perfecting the idea he had suggested to his hosts, that, if he had not come, they would have sent for him'. This Jamesian opening to the narrative both draws the reader into the situation whilst keeping its distance as the young man and his hosts are unnamed but immediately they are introduced it is in connection to some unspoken problem which faces his hosts. Whilst he has arrived 'uninvited', they would, he maintains, have 'sent for him'. This latter expression with its overtones of older hierarchical modes of living establishes the slower stately tempo of Death of Felicity Taverner set entirely (except for brief reminiscences) in the one landscape. What the problem might be and who these people are, is only to be divulged piecemeal amidst the scent of the setting. Like its predecessors Death of Felicity Taverner is a modernist allegory. It is also a detective story (indeed its situation is explicitly compared to one) and a paean to a landscape whose presence is continuously evoked. This latter atmospheric quality is best illustrated by a consideration of the opening paragraphs of Death of Felicity Taverner which will by the same token introduce us to Death of Felicity Taverner's world as a reader

would enter it. The narrative follows on from the above sentence:

He had not had to walk the ten miles from Starn to their remote house above the sea. A cart had given him a lift along the lanes. He still smelt of dust and crushed nettles. And already the brother and sister and sister's husband were reinstating him - their minds making delicate interior adjustments to excuse their weakness - into his position as a cherished family curse. Scylla, his hostess, did it best. 'He is our ring of Polycrates,' she had cried out suddenly in the hour of spiritual angularity just after he had appeared. 'We are infinitely well-off here.' 'Polycrates, exactly,' said Felix, her brother. 'It didn't end there.' Still after that, the situation had run more easily; for with a certain kind of English person a classical allusion has the weight and function of a text. Instantly their minds had gone out to sea: Samos; the Thalassocrats; and their eyes had sought it from where they stood, beside a very old stone house, built under a green down, set with its lawn deep in the base of a triangular wood, stream-bisected, which ran down to a blunt nose of cliff and a ledge of rock to the sea. Terrible cliffs, airy, bird-trodden, flanked their quiet land-cup and its easy promontory of worn gold stone. The turf hills backed it, a chess-board of fields filled it. Round one side curved a village of extraordinary beauty. On the other, two miles off, sprang their wood. Centuries ago, their house had been built there - in the most ancient part of the wood within sound of the sea.

There was no road between the village and their wood, only three paths. The easy ribbon along the little cliff, the field-path half-way up to the hills, and the third - the first ever made by man - the green road along the down top. Past Five Kings' Barrows on your right and on your left seventeen geographical cows. On that road a light car could bump itself quietly along the top of the world and down a flint slope to the gate outside the wood and the dark path to the house.

The land's way is important in this story, because its people will be continually running to and fro by hill or shore or field - from the house in the wood to another house, a little above the village across the cup. (DFT, pp.5-6)

We learn the interrelationships of the hosts - brother, sister and sister's husband; we learn the name of the brother and sister, Felix and Scylla (but not those of the guest nor Scylla's husband); most of all we learn about the land, particularly its established and unspoilt character. The hosts live in a 'very old stone house' built 'centuries ago' in the

'most ancient' part of the wood, close to the sea, to the downs and to prehistoric earthworks, in a remote spot ten miles from the nearest village of Starn. Whilst the narrator does make occasional comments in Ashe of Rings and Armed with Madness her position as explicitly that of Mary Butts is far more prominent from the outset in Death of Felicity Taverner. She draws the reader's attention to two crucial points: first, that the hosts are examples of 'a certain kind of English person [for whom] a classical allusion has the weight and function of a text', ie. that they are familiar with the classics in a way which date Death of Felicity Taverner, which is set between the wars more or less (as with Ashe of Rings and Armed with Madness) when it was written. Second, that 'the land's way is important in this story'. From the very beginning the topography of Death of Felicity Taverner is presented not as one of the aspects of the storyline but as both the parergon and the theme itself of the story. As Boris senses early in the narrative: 'this place for all its utter detachment, appeared to his mind as something that had its eye on him' (DFT, p.102).

Felicity is dead and her land is to die too. (DFT, p.115)

The 'situation' of Death of Felicity Taverner is as follows. Published four years after Armed with Madness and set two years after its close, Death of Felicity Taverner revolves around the Taverner household, whilst the action takes place between three houses which form, the narrator tells us, the three apices of a triangle. In one live Felix and Scylla Taverner. Also living there are Picus Tracey, Scylla's lover in Armed with Madness and now her husband, and the 'uninvited' visitor, Boris Polteratsky, Felix's Russian friend. Allusion is made during Death of Felicity Taverner to Boris's first visit (when he arrived at the end of Armed with Madness) which highlights differences in attitude

between the household and him. The Taverner's old nanny (who still looks after them) does not 'trust Mr Boris not from the day two years back when she'd seen him land, come up there at their feet out of the sea. Love them he might, but his loving was not their loving' (DFT, pp.44-45). Similarly, Boris himself is uncomfortable: 'Against his doctor's orders (he was his own doctor), Boris was undergoing a katharsis. It had happened to him before in England, with the Taverners, that he had not been quite able to follow his instincts and extract profit out of bad or worse' (DFT, p.48). The complex relationship between Boris and his hosts is unravelled within the main situation of the narrative as he has arrived to find his hosts in unspoken mourning for their cousin, Felicity Taverner (the erstwhile owner of the second house of the triangle) who has died in mysterious circumstances:

Her death was still a kind of death to the three of them, to whose family the two houses in the hollow land belonged - to Felix Taverner and to his sister; whose husband Picus Tracey came from a variation of the same stock and the same country a hundred bee-miles inland. It was now spring, but the thought of their cousin's death in the past winter remained like a small tide mounting and retreating, reversing the usual formula for death ... [They] did not know if it had been suicide which had left her, bloody and dirty, beside the road, under a rock where the Lower Corniche rises at Villefranche. (DFT, pp.6-7)

Scylla decides that Boris's presence will provide the occasion for them to talk about and hence dispel a little their grief. 'Let us try to talk about it after dinner,' she says to Boris. 'We have been too silent about it. After dinner, listen to us. Make us speak' (DFT, pp.8-9). Repeatedly in Death of Felicity Taverner the inhabitants request each other's help in a way which is reminiscent of Henry James's world where people constantly 'see each other through' their 'beautiful difficulty' (see The Golden Bowl, The Ambassadors et al.). Thus, initially the subject of Felicity Taverner's death is raised by her cousins in order to

resolve their sense of loss by providing her with a 'requiem' (DFT, p.9). As the narrator explains, their aim is 'to loose the memory of her and to preserve it, but to keep rather than to destroy' (DFT, p.78) (where the word 'loosening' rather than 'losing' reinforces the sense of some imbalance being righted). Just as with the short story 'After the Funeral' (published in the London Mercury for December 1932, ie. the same month as Death of Felicity Taverner was published and probably originally part of the main narrative) the text of Death of Felicity Taverner acts as a kind of memorial to its dead protagonist, to the unseen but immanent Felicity Taverner who embodied, we are told, the 'saintly chastity' described in Milton's Comus (see DFT, p.215). Her death at the age of thirty-three and the fact that she is described as having been 'crucified', reveal her as a Christ-like figure who had to die, her cousins retrospectively declare, because she was too good, too pure (see DFT, pp.84, 122-123, 155), or as Boris puts it, she sounds like 'someone the gods loved and took young' (DFT, p.4). Felicity's presence haunts the narrative, literally, in the shape of her ghost (see DFT, pp.211, 213, 217, 225, 242); so much so that Adrian Taverner declares at one point: 'I've half a mind ... to go to a séance in town. The land where they guarantee a Direct Voice Manifestation. I presume that one is allowed to answer back. This place is somehow full of Felicity' (DFT, p.217). Felicity's signature in the landscape is the petals from fruit trees: 'Felicity seemed always to be perched up an almond tree or a pear, shaking down petals for blessing on the unjust or the just' (DFT, p.11). Just as during her life: 'In her Paris-place ... hungry boys would come, hopeless and she would feed them, and climb some tree in Paradise and shake down a petal-storm over them' (DFT, pp.29-30; see also p.71).

Felicity's death is explained by her cousins as brought about indirectly by three people: her uncomprehending mother, their Aunt Julia

Taverner who bound by Victorian morals was unable to understand her. By her brother Adrian who refused to save her from penury. Shortly after the beginning of Death of Felicity Taverner Julia and Adrian Taverner arrive in the area where they take up residence at Pharrs, the third house of the triangle. Unknown to the cousins they have leased Felicity's house (which at her death had passed to her brother) to her estranged husband Nick Kralin, a Russian-Jew who is the third person (according to the Taverners) responsible for Felicity's death. Kralin is described by Mary Butts as the 'new man', a type who is in direct opposition to the 'oversensitive' Taverners (DFT, pp.111-112, 229). Utterly 'cerebral' and 'wolf-like' he is devoid of any humane qualities or belief in the supernatural or religious aspect of life. The narrator explains:

He [Kralin] twitched with impatience. Ivy in growth is ivy, and lobster lobster, and man man. Lobster turns into man and man into lobster. Nothing could be more mysterious. As though God had said, 'Be yourself' to the whole creation: who had obeyed him. Had man? Kralin did not know and would not have cared, did not the question sometimes nag at him. Was he himself? He did not know, or if he had a self to know. In that ignorance and his assured indifference lay his satisfaction, his strength and a fear. If man's test is the attainment of biologic security, he would pass. Very comfortably established. Besides - it was when his meditation reached this that there came a look into his face no man so far has been able to name; while, whatever his shapely hands were doing, a finger lay against his increasing nose, and through the snigger which replaced his rare frank laugh, you caught a word of his secret. The reason for his reason. Which reason was - and at such moments he had the power to convince - that there was no reason; no meaning to meaning: that not only is man incapable of conceiving truth, but the truth is that there is no truth for him to conceive. (DFT, pp.69-70)

As Picus explains to Boris, Kralin exists 'for no reason at all. For the what's-its-name virtuosity of Unreason. Which is a God. Nick Kralin's answer is that there's no answer. If you asked him the meaning of meaning, he'd answer, 'no meaning at all' (DFT, p.21). The embodiment of

existentialism ('there was no reason; no meaning to meaning') Kralin represents not the postwar 'lost generation' as Felix had done in Armed with Madness, but a ruthless impersonal and anti-religious mentality. As such he is a combination of all that Mary Butts found negative and senseless and hence dangerous in the postwar age, especially its denial of the organic relationship between humans and the superhuman nature and its replacement (in Mary Butts's view a reduction) of all that is inexplicable and mysterious in life by a mechanical psychoanalytic scientism. Town-tuned like Carston in Armed with Madness Kralin is at a loss in the country: 'geraniums and lobelias ... as a Londoner was as far as his [botanical] vocabulary if not his imagination went' (DFT, p.109). Compared to the Taverners who: 'country-bred, they went to capital cities in the same way as their ancestors, for their amenities and for the people they would find there. To the country they returned, as head-hunters or sea-raiders to examine spoil, but never as though their home could be anywhere else' (DFT, p.182). Their life in the country, their activities and their sense of communion with the land is described at length by Mary Butts. Her choice of images is significant for it is an evocation of a paradisaal deep-space living which is to be threatened by Kralin. Three weeks before the narrative opens, when 'into this life and land Boris had broken and been absorbed' (DFT, p.207) the Taverners had:

tumbled out of the train at Starn - stale with parties, high-speed transit and the excitements that private mourning no longer interferes with, into the spring. The week that followed had been a sacre du printemps. A rite that was like a bath, a purification, a becoming mana again, with which goes tabu. A separation for them from other people, from all that is inessential, a time to reject what they had experienced, or make it their own; a taking-back, in a profound sense, into caste. They had begun to move at leisure, think quietly, speak only when they had something to say, enjoy each act of living. There Picus became a musician again and a gardener, a maker in wood and wax of the 'phantasies of his peculiar thought': Felix a bird-watcher and a naturalist. Scylla's passion ... was - spending if



necessary all her life over it - to leave behind her the full chronicle of their part of England, tell its 'historie' with the candour and curiosity, the research and imagination and what to-day might pass for incredulity of a parish Heroditus. There was material there, for ten miles round about them, which had not been touched, not only manor rolls and church registers or the traditions which get themselves tourist-books. She had access to sources, histories of houses, histories of families, to memories that were like visions, to visions which seemed to have to do with memory. To her the people talked, the young as well as the old; and there were times when the trees and stones and turf were not dumb, and she had their speech, and the ruins rose again and the sunk foundations, and copse and clearing and forest changed places, and went in and out and set to partners in their century-in, century-out dance. There were times, out on the turf at sun-rise and set, when in the slanted light she saw their land as an exfoliation, not happening in our kind of time, a becoming of the perfected. (DFT, pp.182-183)

The Taverners' life in the country is in some senses a retreat: a 'purification', a 'rite', a 'sacre du printemps'; but it is not a retreat from their urban life considered to be the more real life. On the contrary, their country-life provides a space not only of recapitulation ('a time to reject what they had experienced or to make it their own') but, simultaneously, a rejuvenation, a rebirth. Life regained as a phenomenological experience, their activities are closely bound to the landscape in which they dwell. So much so that time in the sense of chronology is subsumed into a continuous present - 'an exfoliation not happening in our kind of time' (where 'our' is a reference to the more prevalent consciousness of time dominated by a linear, sequential perspective). Instead, the 'exfoliation' is 'a becoming of the perfected' (where the use of a continuous present tense denies a sense of closure). In such a deep space we are transported into an Orphic world where not merely people, but trees and stones and turf have voices; where landscapes dissolve and are remade in kaleidoscopic formation as past and present are seen not as contra-distinctive, but as fluid interrelating passages.

Later in the narrative Boris articulates this same deep-space perception of life in terms of a 'pattern' (a concept discussed in detail at the opening of the chapter):

There are people my Taverners call mystics, who say that none of this is by chance, that an appropriate design runs through our lives, a pattern; that what happens on the great stage is played again on the small, as it is played in heaven and again in hell. They believe in something like this, and I think that it may be true. (DFT, p.207)

Whilst Felicity Taverner who shared with her cousins this organic deep-space view of existence is being mourned, Kralin who regards women as objects (a woman's body being a 'blood-driven engine for secretion and excretion' (DFT, p.69)) has filled her erstwhile home with Rops etchings, fashionable and expensive contemporary works of pornography.

It emerges gradually that Kralin is endeavouring to buy Felicity's house from Julia Taverner and her son, who having none of their cousins' scruples about Kralin, see it as an opportunity to make a lot of money. When all three households are assembled and Julia Taverner asks for the 'fantastic' price of £10,000 Kralin responds with a threat to publish Felicity's diaries and letters (which he found in her house) and which he will edit as a 'lasting memorial' to Felicity. For the proposed text is, according to Kralin, a perfect example of 'the ultimate psychology of our behaviour', including 'material for the practically complete study of the Electra-complex' (DFT, pp.133, 135). He offers the papers in exchange for the house and when accused of blackmail he explains his plan to transform the surrounding land into a tourist resort with golf-links, bungalows and 'a cinema ... with all the new sex films' (DFT, p.115). Personal loss has become the potential loss of the natural landscape; the signs of spring growth making the irony even more perceptible. The narrator describes the transformation from personal to cosmic loss:

The death of Felicity Taverner - the double-death, to the body and to the memory of her - that was terrible, it held much of the horror of life, but as if in a crystal, in a miniature, full of anguish, it was at the same time, a manageable tragedy, and so to be endured. But behind it lay the second attack immeasurably the most formidable, the attack on their bodies, nerves, roots, the essence of their make-up, in the attack on their land. (DFT, pp.239-240)

As Felix declares, 'the ruin of the land will unquiet her [Felicity's] ghost and bring vileness. Multiplying vileness' (DFT, p.179). Furthermore the cousins, more sophisticated than their aunt, realise that even were she to agree to Kralin's blackmail demands, he would publish the psychoanalytic study on Felicity regardless. Thus what was to be a 'requiem' to Felicity has also been undermined. She is dead, her land is to die and her reputation also. 'Where was Felicity?' is the resounding question with its simultaneous (and literal since Felicity means 'happiness') sous-entendu: where was happiness? (DFT, p.46).

Faced with this threat the mutual dislike felt between Julia Taverner and the cousins is muted by the shared desire to save the land. For Julia's redeeming quality is her love of the landscape: 'a countrywoman by instinct' we are told, 'she did not fully understand what it was that Kralin would do ... [but] the threat to their countryside was a plain issue clear to her, touching less that was savage in her and all that was generous' (DFT, pp.136-137). The Taverners discover that Kralin already has the options for all the remaining unsold land in the area. At this point of apparent hopelessness, reprieve comes through the agency of Boris, who, it emerges, had known Felicity in Paris and had done nothing then to save her from her death. Gradually Kralin comes to represent for Boris his own sense of guilt vis-à-vis his past when as a white Russian he escaped from Russia whilst his family died. The 'cross' he has to bear is symbolised in an actual cross his mother had given him and which he lost while in Paris (see DFT, pp.197, 202). Kralin represents Red Russia

for Boris and it becomes his 'natural destiny to destroy him (DFT, p.152). His final decision is made when Kralin parades before his eyes an 'obscene ikon ... [with] the same subject as the ikon Boris had lost'. At the time Kralin 'noticed Boris say something to himself when he recognised the subject of the ikon: saw that his eyes were looking through his surroundings, and then the nod he had made to himself as of some decision taken' (DFT, pp.248-249). But Kralin has no idea that it is his own death that has been decided on. Under the pretext of showing Kralin one of Felicity's haunts(!), an underground cave which Kralin could use as a tourist attraction, Boris knocks him unconscious there. This underground cave has a 'siffleuse, a blow-hole', through which the sea is driven at high tide and through which Boris expects Kralin's drowned body eventually to be expelled. (Interestingly, the blowhole is mentioned as a feature of the landscape at the opening not of Death of Felicity Taverner but Armed with Madness, establishing yet another of the myriad links between Mary Butts's works). By stunning rather than actually murdering Kralin, Boris's role as agent of the land is emphasised. 'One thing I have put right who have not put many things right', he declares and once this act of displaced atonement is completed Boris joins Felix, Scylla, Picus and Adrian who were to have lunch with Kralin at Felicity's house (DFT, p.260). When they ask for an account of Kralin's disappearance the book ends with Boris's oblique reply 'He [Kralin] will tell you himself when he returns'.

Whilst necessarily omitting several aspects of the narrative, the above plot outline illustrates the allegorical character of Death of Felicity Taverner. It is a rephrasing of the same themes as Ashe of Rings and Armed with Madness. Felicity (happiness) is no more because she was too good; she lived in the world as it ought to be lived but can no longer be. The dead Felicity has the same metaphorical importance in

Death of Felicity Taverner as the cup had in Armed with Madness; the grail myth carries on. The quest-ion is still being asked.

There are two kinds of outsider in Mary Butts's fiction: those immersed in the new materialist worldview such as Judy and Melitta in Ashe of Rings, Carston and Felix in Armed with Madness and Kralin and Adrian Taverner in Death of Felicity Taverner, and those belonging to a dying/extinct order: the Russian aristocracy, eg. Serge in Ashe of Rings, and Boris in Armed with Madness and Death of Felicity Taverner. Exiled, Boris is described as on a 'pilgrimage to no-where' (DFT, p.190), his main aim is to 'scurry through life to artificial oblivion' (DFT, pp.190, 198). Russia, like England is an old country and Weston points out in From Ritual to Romance that the Grail story was known in Russia.<sup>127</sup> Also there is a special affinity between Russian and English people as Boris tells Felix: 'we [ie. the Russians] like the English best of all races' (AWM, p.187). It has been stated in various reminiscences about Mary Butts that she had a special interest and concern for the exiled Russians who wandered through Europe in the early decades of this century. Imaginary Letters centres around a relationship between an English woman and a Russian exile in Paris and Russians inhabit several of her short stories (eg. 'Scylla and Charybdis'). In Death of Felicity Taverner Mary Butts gives a long account of the world of these exiles:

Boris understood little of the public events of his revolution, perplexed by what had happened as any young gentleman not trained to politics might be. Scylla and Felix were far better informed. But certain things that he knew, he knew well. Something the Taverners could not know, that few Englishmen realise, the lives of people who may be called the under-tow of the world's tides. People of mixed or exiles' upbringing; of fallen, uncertain or bastard origin; of no fixed caste or situation. A world not necessarily criminal, though criminals are drawn from it; nor a world - as it sometimes poses - of thwarted talent or genius, though creative intelligences are found there.

---

127. Weston, p.107.

The untraditional part of humanity, poor materially, supplying the ordered ranks of societies with crooks, cranks, criminals, creators. For these are not always rebels or throw-outs at first-hand from the world-groups. Discontent, protest, gifts, misfits or sheer bad character or sheer brilliance may run in families; and these, unless they inherit wealth or their women stop them, have a way of turning up in the under-tow. These are international waters, not properly charted, and little of any value is known or has been written about them to-day - though the picaresque novel, from the Satyricon down, is full of them. For their picture-making qualities are obvious, and their nature is that any fish can come out of them (including the fish whose chief ambition is to find the upper sea again and rejoin its shoal).

Russian emigration is making a world within this world. Persons whose position in society has been taken away with their goods, and who lack the chance or the will to re-establish themselves. Slavs who have given in to the slav character. Boris, his short flat nose in the air, had been running about in it, curious, fatalistic and amused. To his Taverners it was a world for an occasional spree, suspicious of it and aware that it had nothing to do with the Bohemia of the arts where they were perfectly at home, to which it pleased them to think that they belonged. (DFT, pp.202-203)

Boris's impulse to destroy Kralin and hence save the land is prompted by his past; his ability to do so derives from the fact that he is able to understand the way in which Kralin's mind works (what he 'represents'), where the Taverners are incapable. They realise the danger and what is at stake:

It was at this moment, as though all that Kralin had done was to open a door on to a stadium for the players of the sacred game. On which field he had his place also. They also felt they understood a great many things that had previously happened to man. At Eleusis an initiation, the appearance and disappearance of the Sanc Grail, the meaning of the Waste Land. The splendour was full of joy and the divine sense of danger, and hope and the love of daring were powers of pleasure, not of temptation or fear. They knew, too, that they would find their way; and were without desire to coax God for success. Boris watched their faces and did not understand, face to face with a power that he did not share. It was he who brought them back, but without sense of loss, to earth. (DFT, pp.160-161)

The Taverners have the language and literary metaphors necessary to articulate the precariousness of their position. They see themselves and Kralin as 'players of the sacred game ... at Eleusis an initiation, the appearance and disappearance of the Sanc Grail, the meaning of the Sanc Grail'.<sup>129</sup> This provides them with a sense of imaginative power which Boris 'did not share'. Yet in practical terms they are as powerless as Felicity to deal with the forces working through Kralin for they love only the one formula: to match his 'dishonour ... lies ... spite ... and filth [with] more honour ... truth, charity ... and loveliness' (DFT, p.160). It is Boris who has to bring them 'back ... to earth', make them aware of their 'impotence' because it is only he who realises that in order to destroy the forces embodied in Kralin, he must deal with them on Kralin's terms, not those of the Taverners. When Boris has decided on his plan of action towards Kralin (which he divulges to no one) the necessary displacement from the Taverner world is represented by the breakdown of his English, as though their language is no longer valid where he is going. He is aware of this for when Adrian asks him what his plan is, Boris replies 'I cannot explain now. You will see ... Do not ask me any more now. Tomorrow you will see. My English is all going...'. The following morning Boris described as like a 'soldier ... before a campaign or even before a battle' (like Van and Serge in Ashe of Rings) tells Adrian:

Listen to me, mon ami ... I cannot tell it you all now, but I have found something out. ... Something to the discredit of this man [Kralin], something he has done. If we use it against him, it may give us power and save us ... So, do you make the car to march this morning, while I take him out and talk to him. (DFT, pp.151-152)

'My English is all going ... I cannot tell it you all now ... do you make the car to march ...' - the breakdown in Boris's previously

---

128. The term 'sacred game' is also used in Armed with Madness, pp.57, 87.

perfect English syntax highlights the sense of separation from his friends. It is this oblique position held by him, whereby he simultaneously comprehends the worlds both of the Taverners and Kralin and yet is not wholly within either of their worlds, that gives him a special insight and hence a special power. The Taverners may embody a greater 'goodness', but integrity alone would not save them as it did not save Felicity. As Boris explains to Scylla, Felix and Picus:

'There is a kind of ambience around us here - or wherever you are - that I cannot explain. As if we were all inside a magic ring. You do not ask me to change myself, yet it seems that I am changed.'

They agreed. Besides 'ambience' had it. Race apart, class apart, tastes apart, he was their own kind. Yet Boris was a bad man.

He sat back, the russian boy, and for the first time they saw an air of power about him.

'Think of the world, my friends, that is, outside our world. For, living here, nature repeats to you what you are yourselves. There are worlds enough, but one that is outside you, outside this place, killed your cousin, Felicity. A world that is like Nick Kralin.'

To which they admit: 'We know that, but not what it is' (DFT, p.83). Within their 'magic circle' the Taverners have extraordinary powers of understanding and influence (Boris: 'You do not seem to ask me to change myself, yet it seems that I am changed') so that they are part of the 'pattern' which links up nature to the supernatural, the human to the non-human ('nature repeats to you what you are'). Yet once attacked from outside their 'world, ... outside this place [by a] world that is like Nick Kralin', they are not only devoid of the necessary power and terms to deal with it, it actually harms them. Thus when Felix visits Kralin, contact with him makes Felix 'feel - not sick, but uneasy and strange, as though nerves in him were being uncovered, which once exposed would hurt horribly, with a new pain, go on hurting all the rest of his life with a pain that had not been felt before'. The result is that Felix knows 'he must get away very quickly'. Once out of Kralin's sight he starts to run



'forcing himself - or being forced - beyond his pace' and as he tells Picus and Scylla afterwards: 'I did not get my wits back till I was lost again, outside in the wind and the sun' (DFT, pp.111-112). Only the restorative power of the landscape and its natural elements enables him to shake himself free of Kralin's power. Likewise Scylla and Picus react with a sense of physical dis-ease. Towards the end of the narrative Scylla falls ill in reaction to Kralin's proposed destruction of their world and when, earlier, Kralin tells Picus of his plans:

Picus felt ... a pain somewhere deep in the middle of his inside. ... As he listened he could hear at the same time a long cry, a wail, a lamentation from outside that never stopped. A mourning somewhere in creation that the freshest earth there is should lose its maidenhood, become handled and subservient to men, to the men who would follow Nick Kralin... There was a wound going through his long thin body. His feet and her feet and her brother's would walk on knives always after this. (DFT, p.115)

Not only does Picus feel this intense physical reaction, but the sense of 'imbalance' incurred by what he has learned is highlighted in the following contrast between the land in spring and Picus's condition:

Up the path through the Sacred Wood, up from the sea. Many years ago it had been pebbled. With the polished, colour-taking sea-moulded eggs of local marble, a tender fancy of Victorian gardeners in that part of the south. Now moss almost covered them, and rarely swept twig and leaf; while the centre was trodden back to its earth, clay in this case, and bound with roots, their ridges polished down to the core of the wood. On the blackest night [the narrator tells us] they [the Taverners] had each learned where not to stumble, an exercise when they were children in disaster and pride. Yet

and once more the impending threat to the land is represented by the effect on one of its natives:

on his way back Picus tripped and fell flying, and lay for more than a moment, face-down, spread-out, the young light dappling his body. He got up, bewildered like a man who has been knocked down in his own home. (DFT, pp.116-117)

Kralin's threat dis-ables Picus literally, disturbing his long-established dexterity and nimbleness. By flooring him it foreshadows the potential razing of the land. Here the primitive's dancing prayer to the land is inverted as Picus does not enact what he wants the world to bring about - 'In Swabia and among the Transylvanian Saxons it is a common custom, says Dr. Frazer, for a man who has some hemp to leap high in the field in the belief that this will make the hemp grow tall' declares Harrison<sup>129</sup> - rather, he experiences in advance what the land will suffer, reflecting the extent of the close pattern between the land and its natives (his 'own home'). In their reactions Picus and Scylla are representing in a different context the old Sanc Grail myth; their sickness is that of the Fisher King and his land. As Arthur Machen pointed out, versions of the myth vary as to whether the sickness began in the king or the land.

(v)

Mary Butts declares at the opening of Death of Felicity Taverner that the reason Felicity Taverner 'must have' her requiem was two-fold: 'give occasion for a good story, and so to her survivors some peace, since ballads were no longer within man's capacity' (DFT, p.9). As with the storm painting described at the beginning of this chapter Mary Butts is concerned not with a 'good story' which just exists as its own end, but with a deep-space ballad - a tale handed down which embodies a truth 'as it were behind', just as the storm 'translates' the supernatural force behind it. In 'A New Vision', an article published two years after Death of Felicity Taverner, Mary Butts considers a collection of essays which examine 'what is the attitude and sometimes the answer of Catholic Christianity to nine aspects of the modern world'. She praises an essay

---

129. Ancient Art and Ritual, p.31.

by A.E. Baker, particularly for his statement that 'all that is natural and human is to be valued according to its capacity to help man to lead the supernatural life'. To which she adds in an aside which incorporates her own belief: '(The life that the artist for one must lead, whether he believes in it or not. Which led without belief may bring him into some very queer country ...)'. She then describes what Baker means by the 'supernatural life':

[It] used to be called 'the practice of the presence of God' or 'the turning of the human soul to the divine'. Such practice gives back instantly confidence, tranquillity, delight, power over men and things, the harmonized nature the psychologists are all so anxious about. A man is set free. 'Free? for what?' as Nietzsche asked so uncomfortably and for which the psychologist has no answer but his own preference.<sup>130</sup>

The problem, for Mary Butts, is not so much that Western society has lost its Christian faith; as Scylla reflects 'there were fifty good reasons for supporting the non-existence of God' (AWM, p.11). Rather, that nothing of equal force has replaced it. 'We are back,' she warns in Traps for Unbelievers, 'in a historical situation which Nietzsche described of a people "for whom God is dead, and for whom no baby-god is yet crying in his cradle"'.<sup>131</sup> With one ominous difference:

Something not very far off the deification of man is on us now, not, or not yet, of the kings and millionaires, but, and again, and this is primitive, of the conspicuous young men and women, our sexually desirable ones, whose nature it is to wax and wane and be replaced. Our Year-in-Year-out spirits, eniautoi daimones, 'whose beauty is no stronger than a flower'.

Human nature was not meant for that strain. The star-dust at Hollywood is full of dead stars. For the potency of the human god wanes, and his end is horror.<sup>132</sup>

---

130. Mary Butts, 'A New Vision', Time and Tide, 15 no.21 (1934), pp.675-676.

131. Traps for Unbelievers, pp.49-50.

132. Traps for Unbelievers, p.151.

For Mary Butts a humanist or human-based faith and perception of existence cannot survive the 'strain' it is placed under. I commented earlier on her belief that a writer should be 'allowed to teach'. Throughout her work she creates what W.H. Auden defined in the mid-1930s as 'parable-art'. In contrast to 'escape-art' (defined above, see epigraph to subsection iv), 'parable-art' is - as its name implies - an art that teaches. It is of necessity oblique because:

You cannot tell people what to do, you can only tell them parables; and that is what art really is, particular stories of particular people and experiences, from which each according to his immediate and peculiar needs may draw his own conclusions.<sup>133</sup>

One reviewer of Death of Felicity Taverner pointed out that it worked at two levels. It was both 'a plain story of murder and revenge', and an allegory: 'the battle between the nature which is below nature, as it denies the responsibility of consciousness and the nature which is above nature, as it admits from whence any of the responsibility has come'.<sup>134</sup> The relationship between the two levels is represented by a distinctive metaphor repeatedly used by Mary Butts: the knight's move in chess. As she explains: 'The other moves [in chess] are comparable with ordinary activities. Only the knights move two squares and a diagonal, on and sideways and can jump'.<sup>135</sup> Occasionally she uses the metaphor as an example of imagist description: in her short story, 'The Dinner-Party' the relational position of two guests around the table is such that they 'talked at an angle like a knight's move'.<sup>136</sup> More frequently it represents 'the interaction of other worlds with ours' and she praises

---

133. W.H. Auden, 'Psychology and Art Today', The English Auden (London, 1977), p.340.

134. 'Tale of Two Worlds', p.837.

135. 'Ghosties and Ghoulies', p.433.

136. Mary Butts, 'The Dinner Party', in Several Occasions, p.62.

E.M. Forster's supernatural fiction for the very fact that 'Mr Forster knows the knight's move, its oblique turns in human adventure'.<sup>137</sup>

Likewise in Death of Felicity Taverner the Taverners realise early on that there is an 'oblique help in Boris' (DFT, p.8). He is able to save them and their land precisely because he realises the oblique forces which are acting through Kralin who has 'learned the attack which looks as though it were part of a different war about something else; and [whose] move is like the knight's move in chess' (DFT, p.208).

Thus throughout her work Mary Butts creates a deep-space art, where as John Wieners has pointed out, 'every book is a re-affirmation of life, who says in every book that that other was to be fought'.<sup>138</sup> As my reading above shows, it is also a continuation of Romanticism within Modernism, the confirmation of Kermode's claim that Romanticism is 'still not finished'.

---

137. 'Ghosties and Ghoulies', pp.433, 14.

138. John Wieners, 'Untitled entry', Floating Bear, p.287.

Chapter III

Jane Bowles (1917-1973): An Introduction

The human animal is the funniest animal of all.  
(*'A Guatemalan Idyll'*, p.68)

The world and the people in it had suddenly slipped beyond her comprehension and she felt in great danger of losing the whole world once and for all - a feeling that is difficult to explain.

(*Two Serious Ladies*, p.116)

[Jane Bowles's] people are displaced persons ... A perverse slippage affects their relations with each other. No two arrive at the same point at the same time.

(Muriel Haynes, *'The Toughness of Jane Bowles'*)

(i)

The American writer Jane Bowles (1917-1973) was once described by New York poet John Ashbery as 'a writer's writer'.<sup>1</sup> Whilst her first and only completed novel *Two Serious Ladies*, published in America in 1943, brought her neither popular success nor a particularly favourable critical reception, Jane Bowles's work quickly acquired an avid underground readership among artists. Throughout the 1940s, '50s and early '60s her total published output comprised this novel, seven short stories printed in various magazines and a play, *In the Summer House* which was performed on Broadway in 1953 and was included in Louis Kronenberger's *Best Plays of 1953-54*. A letter sent to a fellow artist by the New York poet Frank O'Hara in July 1959 attests to her reputation at this time, the difficulty of obtaining her work notwithstanding: 'I love Jane Bowles's play *In the Summer House* which I could lend you,'

---

1. John Ashbery, 'Up from the Underground', *New York Times Book Review* (29 January, 1967), p.5.

writes O'Hara, 'and alas her marvellous novel Two Serious Ladies is very hard to find; also a few wonderful stories are scattered about in such odd places as an old Harper's Bazaar, etc.'.<sup>2</sup>

It was only in the mid 1960s that her work became more readily available. In 1965 the English publisher Peter Owen brought out Two Serious Ladies and in 1966 he also published in England Jane Bowles's seven short stories in a volume entitled Plain Pleasures. 1966 also saw the publication of The Collected Works of Jane Bowles in America which included Two Serious Ladies, Plain Pleasures and her play In the Summer House. The dust jackets of these three publications provided an opportunity for fellow writers to state their admiration for her work: 'My favourite book,' declared the American playwright, Tennessee Williams adding, 'I cannot think of a modern novel that seems more likely to become an imperishable work, which I suppose means a classic'. The English novelist Alan Sillitoe described Two Serious Ladies as a 'landmark in twentieth century literature', whilst the American novelist James Purdy called Jane Bowles 'the eagle-woman of American letters - an unmatched talent'. The Collected Works of Jane Bowles prompted a review by the New York poet and critic John Ashbery significantly entitled 'Up From the Underground' in which he wrote that 'it is hoped that she will now be recognised for what she is: one of the finest modern writers of fiction in any language'.<sup>3</sup> High praise came also from other writers. In sharp contrast, however, mainstream critical reviews have continued to vary considerably in their evaluation of her talent.

Jane Bowles had been apprehensive at the time of the 1965 republication of Two Serious Ladies because, as she wrote in a letter to a friend,

- 
1. Frank O'Hara to Jasper Johns, 15 July 1959 [unpublished letter; Bill Corbett collection].
  2. Ashbery, p.5.

she knew she would be 'torn to bits by the press naturally'.<sup>4</sup> The following extracts from two reviews, one English and the other American, confirm her prediction. An anonymous review in the Times Literary Supplement in February 1965 entitled 'Two Empty Ladies' (my emphasis) began, 'It is difficult to see what Two Serious Ladies is about'. In answer to its own suggestion that 'perhaps it is about impotence' the review concludes with the following forthright condemnation of the book:

The impotence which the reader may scent as a possible theme is probably just an accidental impression given by a skinflint style, inconsequential actions and insignificant characters. The writer may have thought that in order to express impotence she should write impotently. But of course, impotence and failure are understood only in terms of power and success, and the only real and recognizable failure in the end is not that of the characters as people, but of the book as a book.<sup>5</sup>

Not as dismissive but nonetheless dissatisfied is the tone of Stephen Koch's review of The Collected Works of Jane Bowles for the (American) Book Week in February 1967. Whilst initially praising her 'rich talents as a stylist' - a comment which echoes Truman Capote's introduction to the volume in which he calls Jane Bowles 'one of the really original prose-stylists' - Koch states that Two Serious Ladies is 'not quite so good a novel as it might be ... [It] is unconventional, but it is not unconventional enough'. The weakness according to Koch, lies in a lack of 'innovation ... in form' so that 'when compared to the most extraordinary achievements of twentieth century literary modernism, [her] work seems to me to hold a place roughly equivalent in stature to that held in music by, say, Francis Poulenc or Samuel Barber'.<sup>6</sup> That Koch should not

- 
4. Jane Bowles to Libby Holman, 8 August 1964, in Out in the World: Selected Letters of Jane Bowles, edited by Millicent Dillon (Santa Barbara, 1985), p.251.
  5. 'Two Empty Ladies', Times Literary Supplement (4 February, 1965), p.81.
  6. Stephen Koch, 'Jane Bowles' Plain Pleasures', Book Week (12 February, 1967), p.18.



have felt the need to name the 'extraordinary achievements of twentieth century modernism' suggests an assumption on his part as to a general consensus about a modernist canon which is in direct opposition to the very idea of 'modernism'. Yet as Peter Faulkner states in the opening sentences of Modernism (1977), a historical study of the concept:

Modernism is part of the historical process by which the arts have dissociated themselves from nineteenth-century assumptions, which had come in the course of time to seem like dead conventions. These assumptions about literary forms were closely related to a particular relationship between the writer and his readers - on the whole a stable relationship in which the writer could assume a community of attitudes, a shared sense of reality.

With the breakdown of a literary consensus in the twentieth century, Faulkner stresses the need for 'care and precision' when using the term 'modernism', 'if it is to help our understanding of the works it is applied to'.<sup>7</sup> Such 'care and precision' when using critical terms has become more rather than less pertinent in the face of the proliferation not only of new words but entire methodologies and languages now used in the criticism of texts (eg. postmodernism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction). This general difficulty that we cannot (any longer) assume, as Koch does, a shared critical language of response to a work, let alone a common familiarity with a hierarchy of so-called modernist texts, is compounded in this instance by the relative obscurity of Koch's analogy for Jane Bowles's stature. The result is that his statement in terms of providing a clarification of her importance is rather unhelpful. Yet its very obscurity highlights a difficulty experienced by both negative and positive critics when considering her work. The problem, namely, of how to characterise her writing within the context of twentieth century (American) literature.

---

7. Peter Faulkner, Modernism, The Critical Idiom 35, edited by John D. Jump (London, 1977), pp.1, ix.

In the last fifteen years since her death in 1973 the published corpus of Jane Bowles has been enlarged. In 1976 Feminine Wiles was published in America. This volume, edited by her husband, the writer-composer Paul Bowles, and with an introduction by Tennessee Williams, includes four stories and sketches from her notebooks as well as a short play, six letters and a selection of photographs. More recently both Two Serious Ladies and Plain Pleasures have been republished and two expanded collections of Jane Bowles's work have appeared: My Sister's Hand in Mine published in America in 1978 was reissued in England in 1984 under its previous title The Collected Works of Jane Bowles. Apart from the titles, these two volumes are identical including Two Serious Ladies, In the Summer House, Plain Pleasures, three stories from Feminine Wiles and three further extracts from her notebooks. However, even with these additions the notion of a 'collected' works remains inaccurate as three more stories have since appeared in an American magazine, The Threepenny Review: 'Looking for Lane' (1984), 'Senorita Cordoba' (1985) and 'Laura and Sally' (1987) and I am currently engaged in a more thorough editing of Jane Bowles's unpublished notebooks held by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas.

To date, then, the published work of Jane Bowles comprises a novel, two plays and sixteen short stories and extracts totalling around six hundred pages. Much of it has been translated and in recent years In the Summer House has been performed in several countries including Germany and France. The last ten years have also seen a number of longer and more favourable critical reviews of her work, partly prompted by the publication of a biography A Little Original Sin (1981) by Millicent Dillon, who has subsequently edited a selection of Jane Bowles's letters entitled Out in the World (1985).

In spite of these sporadic bursts of interest and attention since

Two Serious Ladies was first published forty-five years ago, however, the work of Jane Bowles is still omitted from anthologies of twentieth century American literature as well as most general literary histories and more specific critical studies of this period - for example, Frederick R. Karl's American Fictions 1940-1980 does not mention any of Jane Bowles's work. The aim of these chapters is to explore this lack of recognition, explain why it should be so and draw attention to the importance of Jane Bowles's work by virtue of the kind of literary space it occupies. It was Jane Bowles, once signing herself in a letter as 'your friend from another century', who gave the reason for the neglect of her work when she wrote that critical 'recognition' is only given to writing which is 'recognisable to the world outside'.<sup>8</sup> She knew that hers was not. My claim is that the disregard for her prose is not due to its being of supposed 'minor' importance - the encomiums from other writers alone refute that mischaracterisation - rather the opposite is the case: her work has not been given its due 'recognition' because it has not been 'recognised', ie. understood. Thus it has suffered from the neglect common to writers of originality. Examples abound of the difficulty experienced when trying to describe what or whom her work is 'like': for example, the cover of the 1943 publication of Two Serious Ladies included an account of it as 'indescribable but if you can imagine a combination of Wuthering Heights and Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, this is it'.<sup>9</sup> In 1967 Ashbery suggested that 'if one can imagine George Ade and Kafka collaborating in a modern version of Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress one will have a faint idea of the qualities of Two Serious Ladies',<sup>10</sup> and in his introduction to the 1985 republication of Denton Welch's In Youth is

---

8. Jane Bowles to Mike Kahn, January 1951, Selected Letters, p.165; Jane Bowles to Paul Bowles, August 1947, Selected Letters, p.33.

9. Lincoln Kirstein, American author and critic.

10. Ashbery, p.5.

Pleasure (1945) William Burroughs wrote:

I think the writer to whom Denton is closest is Jane Bowles. Both writers are masters of the unforgettable phrase that no one else could have written. The prose of both writers is impregnated with a unique personality; each has a very special way of seeing things. And they never deviate into whimsy.<sup>11</sup>

It has been claimed that the neglect of Jane Bowles's work is due in part to the obscurity of the praise it has been accorded by other writers. Certainly only a widely-read person would have the familiarity necessary to 'imagine' her work more clearly on the basis of a graft of Emily Bronte and Anita Loos or George Ade, Kafka and Bunyan. Yet it is the very fact of having to look to a grafting of writers of different sexes, centuries, nationalities and kinds of prose style in order to have a 'faint idea' of the qualities of Jane Bowles's work which highlights its intrinsic incomparability. Similarly, Burroughs does not compare the work of Denton Welch and Jane Bowles directly, (indeed their prose in terms of content and style has nothing in common); rather what he is comparing is their quality as writers - the 'unique personality' of their respective prose. They are similar in both creating 'the unforgettable phrase ...; each has a very special way of seeing things. And they never deviate into whimsy'. They are equal in being unlike anyone else; they are equally original. Burroughs knew Jane Bowles when she lived in Tangier after the Second World War, yet he declared in an interview in 1980 that 'it was a number of years later that I read her book and realized what an extremely talented writer she was'.<sup>12</sup> Of her original prose style he [mis]quotes from 'Plain Pleasures' in an essay. "In his youth he had considered raising alligators in Florida. But there was

---

11. William Burroughs 'Foreword' to Denton Welch, In Youth is Pleasure (New York, 1985), [pp.2-3].

12. Victor Bockris, With William Burroughs: A Report from the Bunker (New York, 1981), p.49.

no security in the alligators." Janey Bowles who else?'<sup>13</sup>

Nor is Burroughs alone in commenting on Jane Bowles's originality as it has been intermittently recognised ever since her work was first published. On the dust jacket of the first edition of Two Serious Ladies in 1943 John la Touche declared that 'Jane Bowles has created her own universe populated with fantastic and wonderful citizens' (my emphasis). Whilst in her review Edith Walton did not like the book, she did concede that it was 'certainly original' and that in writing it 'Mrs Bowles has developed - and exploited - her own brand of lunacy and that she is, perhaps fortunately, unique'.<sup>14</sup> When In the Summer House was first published the American playwright Tennessee Williams declared that it was 'a piece of dramatic literature that stands alone, without antecedents and without descendants unless they spring from the same one and only Jane Bowles'.<sup>15</sup> In the same vein a 1978 review of My Sister's Hand in Mine by Daphne Merkin maintained that 'Bowles's voice is an uncompromisingly independent one and it bespeaks a vision of life so unflinching as to challenge most of our assumptions. To read My Sister's Hand in Mine is to submit to a demanding presence. Jane Bowles is one of those writers who can simply be said to inhabit a country of her own making' (my emphasis).<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to Mary Butts, the existence of Millicent Dillon's extensively researched biography as well as the Selected Letters removes the need for a copious introduction to Jane Bowles's life. The following few details are helpful however in that they provide an explanation for

---

13. William S. Burroughs, The Adding Machine: Collected Essays (London, 1985), p.39.

14. Edith H. Walton, 'Fantastic Duo', New York Times Book Review (9 May, 1943), p.14.

15. Millicent Dillon, A Little Original Sin: The Life and Work of Jane Bowles (New York, 1982), p.227.

16. Daphne Merkin, 'My Sister's Hand is Mine by Jane Bowles', The New Republic (11 February, 1978), p.30.

the diversity of settings in Jane Bowles's narratives, whilst the testimonies of friends cited by Dillon support the claim of Jane Bowles's originality.

Born in New York in 1917 Jane Bowles travelled widely as an adolescent and spent much time in Europe, speaking French fluently by her mid-teens in which language her first literary attempt, 'Le Phaéton Hypocrite', a burlesque novel was written between 1935 and 1936. Whilst Virgil Thomson praised it highly at the time, the manuscript has since been lost. The honeymoon following her marriage to the composer-writer Paul Bowles in 1938 was spent in Central America and Paris, where she began work on Two Serious Ladies. The rest of Jane Bowles's life accorded with a nomadic lifestyle. Between 1940 and 1942 she made two trips to Mexico with Paul Bowles where Two Serious Ladies was completed. One of these trips is fictionalised in Gordon Sager's Run Sheep Run in which Paul and Jane Bowles appear as Kevin and Gill Greenfeather. The following few years were based in New York until 1948 when Jane Bowles followed Paul Bowles to Tangier where she spent the greater part of the next nine years apart from trips to Europe, New York (to prepare In the Summer House for its Broadway production) and Ceylon. In 1957, the year in which 'A Stick of Green Candy' was published in Vogue, she suffered a stroke from which she never fully recovered. In 1967 she was institutionalised in a clinic in Malaga where she remained apart from a brief return visit to Tangier in 1969 until her death in 1973.

Reports about Jane Bowles's inscrutability from those who knew her convey an elusive quality which emanates also, as we shall see, from her writing. In the mid-1930s she was introduced to the 'art-literary-music world of New York' by her friend, John la Touche. Millicent Dillon describes the impact she had on its habitués:

She had a 'wonderful, alluring voice' [declares John la Touche]. Saying whatever came to her mind she was the 'hit of the occasion'. 'All her observations were weird and screamingly funny.'

Maurice Grosser painted a portrait of her, just after she'd come to the salon for the first time. She sits rather primly, unsmiling, elegantly dressed. She is wearing only one glove. She had lost the other in a taxi. Her expression is puzzling and mysterious. 'People loved her,' says Virgil Thomson, 'but what she cared about no one knew'.<sup>17</sup>

Thomson was far from alone in finding her unfathomable, for Oliver Smith who provided the financial backing which enabled Jane Bowles to start writing In the Summer House between 1945 and 1947 described her as 'mysterious, with a marvellous sense of humor and wit'.<sup>18</sup> The impact of her presence prompted Carl van Vechten to take two photographs of her in 1951, Virgil Thomson to compose a musical portrait of her, Jane Bowles Early and as Remembered (which he began in 1942 and finally completed in 1985) and Truman Capote to use several of her characteristics for the main character of his short story 'Among the Paths to Eden' (1960). The American composer Aaron Copland who met Jane Bowles through Paul Bowles (who studied with Copland for several years) refers to her inscrutability in the following account. 'I never knew what went on in her head,' he declares. 'She was far more mysterious to me than Paul was. He was reserved, but open with those he knew well. She had a curious childlike quality. She was very sensitive and easily upset, but only at certain things, and you never knew why. You only knew that whatever her response would be, it would be original'.<sup>19</sup> Once again it is Jane Bowles's originality which is highlighted.

Dillon's biography provides numerous further examples of the impact Jane Bowles made on the people she met, yet one contemporary of whom

---

17. Dillon, p.35.

18. Dillon, p.121.

19. Dillon, p.63.

there is no mention in A Little Original Sin is the Southern Gothic novelist, James Purdy. This is a curious omission in view of the fact that, as Purdy explained to me in 1988 in a letter 'not only did I greatly admire Jane Bowles's work, but it was she who secured for me financial assistance from the funds of an American book collector'.<sup>20</sup> More importantly even, when we consider the question of literary influence, is Geoffrey Wagner's (misplaced) description of In the Summer House in 1963 as 'two acts of minor Malcolm, which was second rate Albee out of Purdy'.<sup>21</sup> In fact by the time Purdy published his first collection of short stories, Color of Darkness in 1956, Two Serious Ladies and In the Summer House had already been published and all the short stories of the Plain Pleasures volume (except 'A Stick of Green Candy') had appeared in magazines. The importance Purdy attributed to Jane Bowles's opinion of his work as it progressed is revealed in a letter sent to Paul Bowles after the publication of his first novel, Malcolm (1959). 'I am too happy to say in words what I feel about Jane's liking Malcolm so much!' he wrote, adding, 'Thank her from the bottom of my heart for me; I am sending her today her own reading copy of the book'.<sup>22</sup> When questioned whether Jane Bowles's work (which he described as 'very beautifully controlled') had any influence on his own style, his reply is evasively ambiguous: 'I do not think I was influenced by Jane Bowles,' he declares, but adds immediately, 'I can see that my work bears a resemblance to hers'.<sup>23</sup> Whilst acknowledging her importance he also ascribes the contrived relative neglect of Jane Bowles's work to its originality. 'It is not surprising that Jane Bowles's work is not

---

20. James Purdy to Nathalie Blondel, 9 February, 1988.

21. Geoffrey Wagner, 'The Collected Works of Jane Bowles', Commonweal 85, no.17 (1967), p.494.

22. James Purdy to Paul Bowles, 20 January, 1960, mss held by Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center.

23. Purdy to Blondel.



appreciated by the New York establishment. They admire only the safe and the unimaginative'.<sup>23</sup>

(ii)

I shall be discussing Two Serious Ladies in considerable detail in the following chapter; the remainder of this introductory chapter will give a brief analysis of her short stories and notebook extracts.

The short stories of Jane Bowles are no less intense for being shorter than Two Serious Ladies although length has usually been the deciding factor in determining reviewers' and critics' responses.

'Jane Bowles is a better short story writer than novelist', declared one reviewer on the grounds that 'a short story encourages concentration and offers some resistance to the tendency to sprawl'.<sup>24</sup> Whether or not Two Serious Ladies could be considered to 'sprawl' is debatable. However this review is not alone in considering Jane Bowles a better short story writer than novelist for Stephen Koch agrees, although the reason he adduces is even more questionable, relying as it does on the assumption that the short story is 'a form in which it is almost impossible to imagine doing anything new. You can only do the same old thing beautifully, as Mrs Bowles does'.<sup>25</sup> Some reviewers have preferred Two Serious Ladies to the short stories, one considering most of them 'mere moral muckraking'; and there is a certain amount of disagreement as to which of the stories are preferred.<sup>26</sup> According to one reviewer, 'A Guatemalan Idyll' is 'a story so fine that it ought soon to find its way into anthologies'; another claims that 'A Quarrelling Pair' is

---

24. Fred Shaw, 'Even Genius is no Bar to Dulness', The Miami Herald [unidentified issue and page number; Paul Bowles collection] (1967).

25. Koch, p.18.

26. Charles Thomas Samuels, 'Serious Ladies', New York Review of Books (15 December, 1966), p.39.

'almost a stylistic self-parody'; a third maintains that it is 'Andrew' which 'shows Bowles at her most original'; a fourth declares that Jane Bowles's 'best work' is 'Plain Pleasures'.<sup>27</sup>

Those who have liked all her work equally - and it has tended to be writers - have done so out of recognition that Jane Bowles's originality lies in her prose-style so that considerations of length and form are essentially irrelevant. Whether the sentences occur in the twenty-page 'Plain Pleasures' or the two hundred-page Two Serious Ladies, the quality is the same. Jane Bowles herself whom Paul Bowles declared as having a 'hypercritical view of her own work', described the collected works as 'a STYLE book, very hard to describe' (my emphasis).<sup>28</sup> As I shall discuss in the following chapter, it is Jane Bowles's style which sets her apart, and which forces an undivided, concentrated attention on the part of the reader since her sentences are no less 'gloriously unpredictable' (as Miss Goering in Two Serious Ladies is described) than the people they depict. Nor any less intense. Webster Schott reviewing The Collected Works of Jane Bowles for Life Magazine in 1967 declared that Jane Bowles's stories 'must be read like poetry, with pause and care. For like poetry they come upon truth by laying the feelings bare'.<sup>29</sup> It is a view that echoes Ashbery's comparison between Jane Bowles's prose and poetry in general:

- 
27. Arthur Edelstein, 'A Certain Narrative Chaos fails to obscure Jane Bowles's Talent' [unidentified newspaper cutting; Paul Bowles Collection] (1967); Patricia MacManus, 'Women Out of this World', Saturday Review (14 January, 1967), p.87; Muriel Haynes, 'The Toughness of Jane Bowles', Ms (April 1978), p.65; Robert Nye, 'A Peasant World', The Guardian [unidentified issue and date; Paul Bowles Collection].
28. Paul Bowles quoted in Millicent Dillon, 'Between Deceit and Silence', The Nation (28 August, 1976), p.153; Lewis Nichols, 'In and Out of Books', New York Times Book Review (12 February, 1967), p.8.
29. Webster Schott, 'A Shriek from Wanted Women', Life Magazine (16 December, 1967), [unidentified page number, Paul Bowles Collection].

Mrs Bowles's seemingly casual, colloquial prose is a constant miracle; every line rings as true as a line of poetry, though there is certainly nothing 'poetic' about it, except in so far as the awkwardness of our everyday attempts at communication is poetic.<sup>30</sup>

Jane Bowles's prose is not weak poetry, it is imbued with the same miraculous quality. Her style requires the kind of continually sensitive and attentive reading demanded by poetry because of its unpredictability and intensity whilst its 'seemingly casual, colloquial' character with its fluid and slippery lucidity provides no assistance or resistance to the reader as it moves 'inexorably' forward, always at the same tempo. Everything is equally vital, everything is equally insignificant. In terms of vocabulary it is extremely simple; the concatenation of words, however, is such that her language always remains at one remove, separate from our gaze: 'it becomes itself as we watch it'.<sup>30</sup>

For the purposes of presentation I have divided the sixteen published short stories and extracts into four groups. The question of Jane Bowles's importance predominantly as a stylist is particularly pertinent to a consideration of her shorter fictions since their form has for the most part resulted from Paul Bowles's editorship, and latterly that of Millicent Dillon.

The first group includes 'A Guatemalan Idyll', 'A Day in the Open' and 'Señorita Córdoba'. These three stories all take place in South America as they were all originally part of a longer narrative about a third serious lady, which Jane Bowles excised when editing the manuscript which we know as Two Serious Ladies. They were written therefore in the late 1930s.

---

30. Ashbery, p.30.

The stories circle round the interrelationships of the Guatemalans Señor and Señorita Ramirez and their two children Lilina and Consuelo, Señorita Cordoba, and the (unnamed) Traveller from North America. 'A Guatemalan Idyll' takes place in the Pension Espinoza where the Traveller has a brief sexual encounter with Señora Ramirez who is staying there with her daughters. Señorita Córdoba is also a resident there. Señor Ramirez who is absent from this story is the businessman who takes out the two prostitutes Julia and Inez for a picnic by a river in 'A Day in the Open'. Like 'A Guatemalan Idyll', 'Señorita Córdoba' opens once again in the Pension Espinoza where Señor Ramirez is making a brief visit. Señorita Córdoba plans to open a dress shop in Paris from the money she hopes to get through seducing Señor Ramirez. The latter is extremely amenable to having sex with her and so in the room of a nearby Hotel he starts 'to unbutton his pants'. At this point:

Señorita Córdoba remembered that many men were not interested in ladies nearly so much after they made love to them as they were beforehand so she decided that she had better make sure that she received a check first. She did not know how to do this tactfully but her own greed and the fact that he was drunk, and that she thought him a coarse person anyway, made her believe that she would be successful.<sup>31</sup>

However her lack of tact alienates Señor Ramirez who, frustrated, leaves in a rage whilst the 'ridiculous' Señorita Córdoba is left puzzled because of her myopic perspective: 'She was like' we are told 'certain mediocre politically-minded persons upon whose minds failure leaves no deep impression, not because of any burning belief in the ideal for which they are fighting, but rather because they are accustomed to thinking only of what to do next'.<sup>31</sup> As we shall see in the following chapter the myopic perspective of Señorita Córdoba is shared by all of Jane Bowles's people.

---

31. Jane Bowles, 'Señorita Córdoba', The Threepenny Review, 21 (1985), p.21.

The second group includes six short stories all set in North America and exist as separate entities: 'Plain Pleasures', 'Camp Cataract', 'A Stick of Green Candy', 'A Quarrelling Pair', 'Lila and Frank' and 'Looking for Lane'. The latter describes two middle-aged sisters, Dora and Lane Sitwell who live together in a log house on the edge of a small secluded town. It is autumn and they comment on a white dog passing by the house into the woods. Whilst Lane either 'picked on her sister night and day' or sat there withdrawn and moody, Dora 'loved the existence she led with Lane so passionately that she had actually to sit still on the sofa during certain moments of complete awareness of it, the impact of her joy acting upon her like a blow'.<sup>32</sup> The title 'Looking for Lane' is the name of a game invented by Dora when they were children. The five year old Lane disappears one night and after searching for her for several hours 'it suddenly comes to her [Dora] that she loved Lane more than anything else in the world'.<sup>33</sup> When Lane is eventually found Dora picks her up and Lane bites her in her groggy confusion; unaffected 'Dora kissed Lane passionately for a long time'. It is after this that Dora organises the game 'Looking for Lane':

It was the usual hide-and-seeK game that children play but it gave Dora a much keener pleasure than any ordinary game. Finally the search extended over the countryside and Dora allowed her imagination to run wild. For example, she imagined once that she would find Lane's body dismembered on the railroad tracks. Her feelings about this were mixed. The important thing was that the land became a magic one the moment the search began. Sometimes Lane didn't hide at all, and Dora would discover her in the nursery after searching for nearly a whole afternoon. On such occasions she would become so depressed that she wouldn't eat.<sup>33</sup>

---

32. Jane Bowles, 'Looking for Lane', The Threepenny Review, 16 (1984), p.3.

33. 'Looking for Lane', p.4.

Lane remains impassive - 'she never explained anything' - we are told and the game 'stopped abruptly when Dora was fourteen and she never again thought about it'.<sup>33</sup> Her infatuation with Lane as an adult is matched in intensity by Lane's conviction that she herself had 'never really formed any attachments. She felt attachment neither for her home, for her sister, nor for the town where she had been born. This secret bitter but small in the beginning when she had first become conscious of it, had slowly come to contain her whole life'.<sup>34</sup> Ignoring Dora's constant cheerful talk and questioning, Lane looks out of the window, and the story ends with Dora declaring 'If you're looking for that white dog, Lane, he's certainly deep into the woods by this time'. The constant rapid transition between the inconsequentiality of Dora and Lane's actions and words and the intensity of their feelings confers on the story a dual atmosphere of static banality and immediacy; a duality which is characteristic of Jane Bowles's prose style whereby it simultaneously draws in and defies the reader.

'Lila and Frank' was first published in Antaeus in 1977 after Jane Bowles's death. Its six pages present a brother and sister, Lila and Frank of the title ostensibly discussing Frank's visit to a local bar called 'The Coffee Pot'. In actual fact their conversation revolves around a series of lies and feigned indifference and is one they have had before, 'many times'. What is important to them is not the content of the conversation but the 'mood' it creates; because 'the excitement they felt in conversing together was very great ... the repetition of things added to rather than detracting from the excitement'.<sup>35</sup> The following metaphor explains the oblique nature of their relationship, which relies on Lila living her life vicariously through Frank. By

---

34. 'Looking for Lane', p.3.

35. 'Lila and Frank', Plain Pleasures (London, 1985), p.231.

the end of the conversation Lila is in a 'state' which the narrator tells us:

might be compared to that of the dreamer when he is near waking, and who knows then that he is moving in a dream country which at any second will vanish forever, and yet is unable to recall the existence of his own room. So Lila moved about in the vivid world of her brother's lies, with the full awareness always that just beyond them lay the amorphous and hidden world of reality. 36

The four remaining stories in this group were edited by Jane Bowles. 'Plain Pleasures' and 'Camp Cataract' were first published in Harpers Bazaar in 1946 and 1949 respectively, 'A Stick of Green Candy' was published in Vogue in 1957 although completed eight years earlier. 'A Quarrelling Pair' is a Punch and Judy-like sketch acted by puppets about two sisters which was performed in 1946 and then two decades later by The Little Players. These four prose pieces were all included in the Plain Pleasures volume of 1966.

The protagonists of 'A Quarrelling Pair', Rhoda and Mildred, are in their early fifties and their seven-page dialogue has the same half-inconsequential, half-momentous quality of all the conversations in Jane Bowles's narratives. It is evening and Mildred, 'the stronger puppet', opens the dialogue:

Mildred: I hope you are beginning to think about our milk.

Rhoda (after a pause): Well, I'm not.

Mildred: Now what's the matter with you? You're not going to have a visitation from our dead, are you?

Rhoda: I don't have visitations this winter because I'm too tired to love even our dead. Anyway, I'm disgusted with the world.

Mildred: Just mind your business. I mind mine and I am thinking about our milk.

Rhoda: I'm so tired of being sad. I'd like to change.

Mildred: You don't get enough enjoyment out of your room. Why don't you?

Rhoda: Oh, because the world and its sufferers are  
always on my mind.

Mildred: That's not normal.<sup>37</sup>

Mildred explains to Rhoda that in order to be happy Rhoda needs to have a smaller heart like she has. Rhoda moves between wanting to save the world and fearing that Mildred's heart is so small that there is no room for any love in it for Rhoda. In their quarrelling Rhoda knocks a glass of milk out of Mildred's hand which she had gone to prepare and Mildred hits her in return. Both sing songs and when Mildred finally tells Rhoda to leave if she wants to, Rhoda declares, 'The moment hasn't come yet and it won't come today because the day is finished and the evening is here. Thank God!'<sup>38</sup> She then offers to make Mildred some milk and Mildred's comment concludes the exchange. 'Oh I'm so glad the evening has come! I'm nervously exhausted (They exit)'. Duopianists Robert Fitzdale and Arthur Gold who knew Jane Bowles in the mid-1940s declared that 'the way she said things had the implication that we were all just like real people, but we weren't actually. She even saw our piano-playing as a theater outside of our lives'.<sup>39</sup> It is this paradoxical quality which pervades 'A Quarrelling Pair' as the puppets are 'just like real people but [aren't] actually'. Their quarrel is simultaneously like life and a 'theater outside' life - a mere puppet show. The result is that in laughing at it we laugh at ourselves.

'Plain Pleasures' describes the brief meeting of two middle-aged neighbours, the widow Mrs Perry and the freelance truck driver Mr Drake. From a situation where 'they had never exchanged more than the simplest greeting in all the years that they had lived here in the hillside house', Mr Perry invites Mr Drake to share the potatoes she is baking outside.<sup>40</sup>

---

37. 'A Quarrelling Pair', Plain Pleasures, pp.161-162. .

38. 'A Quarrelling Pair', p.168.

39. Dillon, p.123.

40. 'Plain Pleasures', Plain Pleasures, p.8.



Mr Drake later invites Mrs Perry for a meal at a nearby restaurant where as a result of her inebriation Mrs Perry disappears upstairs. Mr Drake is persuaded to leave by the restaurant owner who it is implied but never openly stated, rapes Mrs Perry. The next morning she 'did not know how she had gotten there'. The reason we are given for her not being 'hysterical at finding herself in a strange bed' is her sense of detachment: 'although she was a very tense and nervous woman, she possessed a great depth of emotion and only certain things concerned her personally'.<sup>41</sup> Mrs Perry's unpredictability is conveyed by the end of the story when she walks down into the restaurant with a feeling of tenderness directed not at the restaurant owner whom she does not consider, but at Mr Drake. 'John Drake' she whispered, 'my sweet John Drake'. The inconclusive ending of 'Plain Pleasures' whereby we are left not with a sense of closure as might have been provided by a comment on the part of the narrator, but rather with Mrs Perry's own words, is characteristic of the determined absence of a coherent overview in Jane Bowles's fictions. Thus at the end of the story we are left 'hanging' alongside Mrs Perry's inscrutable perspective.

'Camp Cataract' is the longest of Jane Bowles's stories totalling sixty pages. Harriet is at Camp Cataract, a holiday camp near the Niagara Falls to which she has been coming for the last few years in order to disengage herself from her life with her sister, Sadie. Both middle-aged, Sadie and Harriet live with a third sister and her husband, Edie and Bert Hoffer. Harriet's desire to lead her own life is intense, but governed by her stronger notions of propriety. She therefore refuses to 'make an unseemly dash for freedom' because she would then be known as 'Sadie's wild sister Harriet'.<sup>42</sup> To avoid this, she has a 'plan'

---

41. 'Plain Pleasures', p.24.

42. 'Camp Cataract', Plain Pleasures, p.92.

which she describes to her friend Beryl at the camp as:

extremely complicated and from my point of view rather brilliant. First I will come here for several years ... I don't know yet exactly how many but long enough to imitate roots ... long enough so that I myself will feel: Camp Cataract is HABIT, Camp Cataract is life, Camp Cataract is not escape.<sup>43</sup>

The crucial distinction for Harriet is that 'escape is unladylike, habit isn't'. The advantage for Harriet of her plan is that eventually from Camp Cataract she can 'start making sallies into the outside world almost unnoticed'.<sup>43</sup> Sadie who 'doesn't want people to live on their own', considering them to be 'nomads', is aware of Harriet's desire to move away from her and seeks her out in Camp Cataract.<sup>44</sup> Yet Sadie's 'mission' has catastrophic consequences as she becomes increasingly convinced that her trip will be a 'failure'. The two sisters arrange to meet on the morning following Sadie's unannounced arrival at Camp Cataract, Sadie's fears being slightly alleviated by the fact that the people on the crowded restaurant terrasse will 'realize that I'm no vagrant, but a decent woman visiting her sister'.<sup>45</sup> Yet as one reviewer points out, we are drawn 'filament by filament' into a situation which was initially Harriet's but slowly becomes Sadie's 'agony'.<sup>46</sup> In coming out of her apartment after Harriet Sadie is aware that it is she who is experiencing 'the dreaded voyage into the world - the very voyage she had always feared Harriet would make'.<sup>47</sup> Her ensuing suicide into the cataract is never explicitly stated. Instead the narrative returns to Harriet's perspective and we are once again at the morning of their arranged meeting. When Sadie does not arrive Harriet sends Beryl to

---

43. 'Camp Cataract', p.93.

44. 'Camp Cataract', p.89.

45. 'Camp Cataract', p.133.

46. MacManus, p.87.

47. 'Camp Cataract', p.138.

look for her behind the waterfall. (No explanation is given for Harriet's intuition). The story ends with Beryl's return and her refusal to 'say anything of what she has seen. The ending of 'Camp Cataract' defies chronological sequentiality; the result of the repeated time sequence which intermeshes the two different endings, dissolves the distinction between subjective and objective realities, as an employee of the camp dressed as a Red Indian is included in both accounts in such a way as to deny the possibility that both accounts could have occurred. Sadie's seems to have been imagined rather than experienced but if so, how she gets to the waterfall (and how Harriet knows she is there) is never explained.

In an essay in The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing (1979) Nathan Scott describes Jane Bowles as belonging to a group of writers who 'were choosing to seek their effects by the unsaid and the withheld, by the dryly ironic analogy of the muted voice'.<sup>48</sup> It is certainly the case that Mrs Perry's rape, Sadie's 'suicide' and the 'death' of Vivian Constable in Jane Bowles's play, In the Summer House, derive their power from being 'unsaid'. However, as with most descriptions of Jane Bowles's work, Scott's characterisation of its 'effect' through 'the unsaid and the withheld' is only taking into account one of the features of her work. Like Beryl at the end of 'Camp Cataract', Jane Bowles 'would not say anything' explicitly about these events or any of the other unfilled gaps in her narratives (for example we are given no information about Mrs Copperfield's childhood in Two Serious Ladies), yet the very power of these incidents is achieved by their contrast to descriptions of complete frankness, as in the sexual encounter between Señora Ramirez and the Traveller in 'A Guatemalan Idyll':

---

48. Nathan Scott, 'Black Literature', in Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing, edited by Daniel Hoffman (Boston, 1979), p.295.

'Dear God!' she said. 'Dear God!' They were in the very act of making love. 'I have lived twenty years for this moment and I cannot think that heaven itself could be more wonderful' ... When it was all over she said to him: 'That is all I want to do ever'.<sup>49</sup>

'A Stick of Green Candy' is a fifteen page account of a solitary child's imaginary life as 'head of a regiment'. Yet Mary's experiences in the clay pit with her 'men' is not mere childplay imitating the adult world around her; rather it is her means of separating herself from it. 'At this period' we are told 'she was rapidly perfecting a psychological mechanism which enabled her to forget, for long stretches of time, that her parents existed'.<sup>50</sup> The effort of intense will power this involves is revealed by the fact that any change in her regiment's routine is the result of 'concentrating' and 'convincing herself' that this change is necessary, as 'she never told [her men] anything until she really believed what she was going to say'.<sup>51</sup> Her regimental life takes place on the other side of the 'dark gulf' that had always separated her from the adult world' and to which she accedes 'by closing her eyes' whenever she feels intruded on by adults. In terms of plot, all that occurs is that a small boy comes across her playing 'alone' in the pit and when Mary follows him home his mother offers her a stick of green candy. However Franklin's appearance constitutes an interruption of (literally a 'break into') her world with irrevocable consequences in that having fallen in love with him Mary is suddenly no longer able to separate herself off into her imagined regiment. In her resulting confusion she addresses her regiment 'for the first time in her life' without the initial bugle call. 'Shocked' she realises that she has lost accession to that security because 'she had begun to cheat now, and she knew that

---

49. 'A Guatemalan Idyll', Plain Pleasures, p.62.

50. 'A Stick of Green Candy', Plain Pleasures, p.172.

51. 'A Stick of Green Candy', p.170.

it would never come'.<sup>52</sup> The tale ends with her walking away from her men, her 'cold face' as silent as that of Beryl at the end of 'Camp Cataract'. This story has been described as 'a good piece ... an "absurd" variation on the stock theme of awakening adolescence'.<sup>53</sup> However more powerful than its theme of awakening adolescence, which is explored rather more vividly in the dialogue between Enrique and Lilina in 'A Guatemalan Idyll' (see chapter IV below), is the tone of 'A Stick of Green Candy', which as Ashbery points out has a 'new austerity'.<sup>54</sup>

This new austerity is especially prominent in the third group of short stories all of which are set in North Africa, where Jane Bowles lived after the Second World War. 'Everything is Nice', 'The Iron Table' and 'Curls and a Quiet Country Face' are the most explicitly autobiographical stories in character and the most stark, 'Curls and a Quiet Country Face' overtly so. Not published until 1976, but actually written in 1956, its brief one and a half pages are a description of how Jane Bowles envisaged her life in Morocco at that time. Whilst her plans to become closer to two Moroccan women, Cherifa and Tetum, are still 'like a daydream', she is haunted by fears of procrastination vis-à-vis her writing. The piece concludes, 'The hardest time is now' and its tone resembles that of her autobiographical entry in World Authors 1950-1970 in which she wrote that from her first day there 'Morocco seemed more dreamlike than real. I felt cut off from what I knew. In the twenty years I have lived here I have written only two short stories and nothing else. It's good for Paul but not for me'.<sup>55</sup>

---

52. 'A Stick of Green Candy', p.184.

53. Samuels, p.39.

54. Ashbery, p.30.

55. 'Bowles, Jane Sydney' in World Authors 1950-1970, edited by John Wakeman (New York, 1975), p.204.

'Everything is Nice' was originally written as a magazine article for Mademoiselle in 1951 under the title 'East Side: North Africa' in which Jane Bowles gives a first person account of some impressions of Morocco. When editing it for the Plain Pleasures volume Paul Bowles changed it to a third person narrative. In its ten pages Jeanie [Jane], an American woman briefly visits the house of a Moroccan woman called Zodelia. This occasions a comparison between Nazarene (ie. Christian) and Moslem women, which in terms of its content oddly resembles the focus of interest in Paul Bowles's stories. Similarly, 'The Iron Table' first published posthumously by Paul Bowles in the magazine Antaeus in 1977 and later included in My Sister's Hand in Mine and The Collected Works of Jane Bowles (Peter Owen), is a four-page dialogue between two Americans in Africa about whether to travel into the desert. This is a symbolic act, part of an ongoing debate as to whether it is possible to 'escape from Western civilisation'. He thinks it is; she does not. 'The moment when they might have felt tenderness had passed, and secretly they both rejoiced'.<sup>56</sup> Extracted from Jane Bowles's notebooks and undated, this brief account either foretells or echoes the quality of the relationship between Kit and Port in Paul Bowles's 1949 novel, The Sheltering Sky as I discuss in the following chapter.

'Andrew', 'Emmy Moore's Journal', 'Going to Massachusetts', 'Laura and Sally' and 'Friday' make up the fourth group in that they have all been subsequently edited from a projected but never completed novel which Jane Bowles was writing between the mid 1940s and the mid 1950s. Entitled Out in the World, Jane Bowles described this novel in her notebooks as a 'book about travesties'.<sup>57</sup> The only visible trace of

---

56. 'The Iron Table', in Plain Pleasures, p.227.

57. Dillon, p.215.

their previous narrative connections is in Andrew Mclane being the subject of both 'Andrew' and 'Friday'.

'Andrew' first published in Antaeus in 1970 is in two parts, the first describing Andrew's desire to leave his parental home. Although he believes that 'it's natural when you're young to want to go away', he has an 'inner conviction that his own going away was like no other going away in the world, a certainty he found it impossible to dislodge'.<sup>58</sup> The sense of isolation this gives him results in his becoming 'more expert at travesty'.<sup>59</sup> In the second part Andrew has been inducted into the army where he meets another new recruit called Tommy, whose solitary nature attracts him. Yet when Tommy offers Andrew some sparklers to play with, it awakens 'old sick feelings' in Andrew from his childhood and disturbs the picture of Tommy he has made for himself: 'He liked the fact that Tommy was poor' we are told, 'but he did not want him to be so poor that he seemed foreign'.<sup>60</sup> Whilst Andrew is aware that there 'was really no logical connections' for his distaste, 'yet he himself felt that there was one. Sometimes he wondered whether or not other people went about pretending to be logical while actually they felt as he did inside, but this was not very often, since he usually took it for granted that everyone was more honest than he'.<sup>61</sup> The convoluted character of Andrew's reasoning is typical of Jane Bowles's people and its complexity increases their inscrutability and unpredictability. These qualities are present even in her briefest stories as in the five pages of 'Friday' first published in Antaeus in 1977. It is set in The Green Mountain Luncheonette where Andrew is having lunch alone on a Friday. He is

---

58. 'Andrew', Plain Pleasures, p.186.

59. 'Andrew', p.187.

60. 'Andrew', pp.193-194.

61. 'Andrew', p.194.

accosted and forced into conversation by a woman sitting at a neighbouring table: "My name is Agnes Leather," she said in a hushed voice, as if she were sharing a delightful secret.'<sup>62</sup> She then gratuitously tells Andrew that she never feels like eating, 'even though', she adds inconsequentially, 'I do live in a small town'. When Andrew expresses polite disagreement with her lack of desire to eat, her reply reflects the fragmentary inconclusive quality of Jane Bowles's writing:

'You'd understand if I could give you the whole picture,' she said. 'This is just a glimpse. But I can't give you the whole picture in a lunchroom ... it's impossible for me to explain it all to you, so I might as well say I'm from a small town as to say my name is Agnes Leather.'<sup>63</sup>

People, situations, perspectives are never totally explained in Jane Bowles's fiction.

At different times in the work of Jane Bowles, people write and receive letters - in Two Serious Ladies Mrs Copperfield receives a letter from Mr Copperfield, Arnold's father writes to his wife and passes on a letter to Miss Goering from Arnold and in the course of 'Camp Cataract' Harriet reads a letter from Sadie - the stories 'Emmy Moore's Journal' and 'Going to Massachusetts' revolve around letters. 'Emmy Moore's Journal' first published in Antaeus in 1970, is a first person narrative in which Emmy Moore is copying a letter to her husband Paul Moore into her journal. 'Let there be no mistake,' she writes. 'My journal is intended for publication. I want to publish for glory, but also in order to aid other women'.<sup>64</sup> She is staying at the Hotel Henry where she has come to try to become 'a little more independent'. In this ten-page story Emmy Moore tries to account for the difference between her and American women in general, although she admits that her 'secret

---

62. 'Friday', Plain Pleasures, p.236.

63. 'Friday', p.237.

64. 'Emmy Moore's Journal', Plain Pleasures, p.196.



picture of the world is grossly inaccurate'.<sup>65</sup> However when she has finished copying out the letter, she feels disheartened because, as she declares, 'I have said nothing at all. I have not clarified my reasons for being at the Hotel Henry. I have not justified myself'.<sup>66</sup> The tale ends in silence with her settling into her 'favorite wicker chair' with a bottle of whiskey. This withdrawal from language into silence reinforces the sense of circularity conveyed by the story. No climax is possible because no progression exists; the contradictory character of Emmy Moore's journal with its mixture of extreme ambition ('publish for glory') and lack of self-confidence ('grossly inaccurate') illustrates this situation of stasis. Emmy Moore's awareness of this leads her to replace the action of writing with that of alcoholic abandonment.

Similarly static is 'Going to Massachusetts' which opens in a New York bus station from where Janet Murphy a middle-aged garage owner is accompanying her companion Bozoe Flanner who is going to Massachusetts. The rest of the story takes place in Janet's apartment and revolves around a letter which Bozoe has sent to Janet explaining why she had to go - it is a justification which involves telling Janet her faults. Janet is reading this letter to Sis McEvoy whilst they are drinking together:

I have never admired being human, I must say, [writes Bozoe] I want to be like God. But I haven't begun yet. First I have to go to Massachusetts and be alone ... I don't feel that I can allow you to sink into the mire of contentment and happy ambitious enterprise. It is my duty to prevent you from it as much as I do for myself.<sup>67</sup>

Sis McEvoy considers the letter to be that of a 'lunatic mind at work' and ridicules it. Disregarding any sense of loyalty to Bozoe, Janet's

---

65. 'Emmy Moore's Journal', p.201.

66. 'Emmy Moore's Journal', p.205.

67. 'Going to Massachusetts', Plain Pleasures, p.216.

aim in reading the letter to Sis McEvoy is to try and win her sympathy because 'she felt that in this way the bond between them might be strengthened'.<sup>68</sup> When first published in 1972 this story with reference to Janet's vain plan was called 'The Courtship of Janet Murphy'.

'Laura and Sally' opens in Camp Cataract where Laura and Sally are staying. Sally's attitude to the camp harkens back to Harriet's in 'Camp Cataract': 'Camp Cataract, for so many a symbol of escape from the strife of different human relations, had become since Laura's arrival the very seat of this type of strain'.<sup>69</sup> 'Laura and Sally' explores the 'strife of human relations' between the middle-aged Laura Seabrook and Sally McBride. They visit the Cassalottis where amidst offers of beer and Mr. Cassalotti's home-made ravioli each person in the crowded restaurant is struggling against a feeling of isolation. 'Laura's joy at being among the Cassalotti's reached its peak - and with it came a familiar chill at the bottom of her heart'. 'O God,' she thinks, 'I had almost forgotten for a moment. I wish I could really be here, having the kind of fun I think it is to be here'.<sup>70</sup> Laura's sudden dilemma: the 'silly struggle over two silly alternatives - to eat ravioli or to walk in the woods' is nonetheless real in spite of her ironic self-mockery.<sup>71</sup> She solves the immediate problem by remembering social etiquette, although she is only constrained by these rules when it suits her purposes. Meanwhile Sally who experiences a sudden feeling of 'suffocation' as in the general conversation the others 'had all forgotten [her] presence' becomes obsessed with a desire to leave the room. Going to a window she pulls aside the curtains only to find a

---

68. 'Going to Massachusetts', Plain Pleasures, p.215.

69. 'Laura and Sally', The Threepenny Review, 31 (1987), p.25.

70. 'Laura and Sally', p.26.

71. 'Laura and Sally', p.27.

black shade 'Mr. Cassolitti had hung there so that no daylight would ever penetrate the restaurant [because] he thought that to eat by electricity was more elegant'.<sup>72</sup> Sally lifts this black shade which is representative of the barrier between these people's inner struggles and their outer appearances and flees into the woods, where she becomes immediately oblivious of Laura and the Cassalotti sisters, Rita and Berenice. 'As far as she was concerned, they did not exist'.<sup>72</sup> This capacity for sudden amnesia is mirrored in Laura as the conversation between Rita and Berenice and herself becomes ever more entangled and oblique, she too leaves. Yet although she sees Sally 'far ahead of her, out of hearing but not out of sight', their slippage away from one another is revealed in the story's last line: 'Laura had forgotten about her completely'.<sup>73</sup>

Muriel Haynes has declared that Jane Bowles's writing is that of 'a deadpan tourist in the byways of a cockeyed America who caught the chill at its center'.<sup>74</sup> Yet as another critic has pointed out, the 'off-center world of Mrs Bowles ... takes its light from the how of her highly personal vision much more than from the what of its content'.<sup>75</sup> As an illumination of this, Haynes's description of Jane Bowles's perspective as that of a 'deadpan tourist' is particularly apposite. For, it is to write from a position of one passing through but not wholly tied to the world being described; it is to have a perspective dominated by the surfaces and appearances of settings and people; it is to have heightened impressions and sensations because of the unfamiliarity of the environment and its transitory character; it is to explore a situation from an angle

---

72. 'Laura and Sally', p.28.

73. 'Laura and Sally', p.29.

74. Haynes, p.65.

75. MacManus, p.87.

slightly outside its constraints. The vacational quality of such a vision lends itself to a generous interpretation of what is seen whilst it also leaves one an outsider, only ever partially involved.

Thus Jane Bowles's worlds are populated by people who if adults, are introduced by their surnames even in the most apparently intimate situations. For example, in 'A Guatemalan Idyll' where the sexual encounter of Señora Ramirez and the Traveller leaves them as formal and separate after the experience as before it. We never learn the Traveller's name and the only time we learn Señora Ramirez's christian name is when she signs a note inviting the Traveller to lunch at her table with her children. Her use of her full name, Sophia Piega de Ramirez, at this point is for effect so as to impress the Traveller, and not in order to break down barriers of formality. As throughout all of Jane Bowles's work identity is closely bound up with status and money, it is very important to Señora Ramirez that she should be wealthy, a lady and a mother. Whilst for the Traveller the whole incident is part of a 'bad dream' he wishes he could forget so that he leaves the pension early to return to his own familiar North American world, the feelings the experience evokes for Señora Ramirez lead her to another sexual encounter with a young boy. Neither she nor the Traveller enter each other's perspective but remain firmly in their own; a fact which enables them to take their leave with impeccable manners and due regard to social niceties: 'Well goodbye, Señora. I was very happy to have met you', lies the Traveller. 'Adios, Señor, and may God protect you on your trip' she replies.<sup>76</sup> Yet for all the apparent indifference the Traveller is well aware that the experience has made an unforgettable impression on him, even as he accepts Señora Ramirez's invitation to lunch with her daughters after the night they spend together:

---

76. 'A Guatemalan Idyll', p.86.

'Now this is really stranger than fiction,' he said to himself. 'Here I am sitting with these people at their table and feeling as though I had been here all my life, and the truth of the matter is that I have only been in this pension about fourteen or fifteen hours altogether - not even one day. Yesterday I felt that I was on a Zulu Island, I was so depressed. The human animal is the funniest animal of all.' 77

The simultaneous resonance of oddity and comedy within the word 'funny' as it is used in the expression 'the human animal is the funniest animal of all' leads it to act as the implicit subtitle and conclusion of all Jane Bowles's fiction. For such a comment with its embracing and yet distancing quality is typical of the 'deadpan tourist' perspective of her writing where the laughter it evokes is always one of empathy and never one of condemnation.

In order to delineate some of the characteristics of Jane Bowles's original prose style, my discussion of her work in the following chapter revolves around what I call - in contradistinction to the 'deep-space' work of Mary Butts - its 'layered-space' quality. I shall be concentrating in detail on Two Serious Ladies because it is in this work particularly that her unusual narrative skills show themselves.

---

77. 'A Guatemalan Idyll', p.68.

Chapter IV

Jane Bowles's Layered-space Prose:

The 'Reproduction' of a Literary 'Landscape Without Depth'

He [Tommy] flashed a ravishing smile at Andrew but which seemed rather destined for someone else or perhaps simply a different conversation.

(Unpublished notebook 31, 'Not imp. but for novel Lottie')

'Hallo,' he said. 'Did you decide to come over to the mainland again?'

'Why certainly,' said Miss Goering. 'I told you I would.'

'Well,' said Andy, 'I've learned in the course of years that it doesn't mean a thing.'

(Two Serious Ladies, p.165)

(i)

In this chapter I shall illustrate through a close and detailed reading of Jane Bowles's fictional prose some of the ways in which her writing lies outside the parameters of various critical responses to modern prose. Through the development and delineation of the term 'layered space', I shall foreground several characteristics of the literary space her work inhabits. Since a large number of references will be made to Jane Bowles's longest prose narrative, Two Serious Ladies, a short outline of the story is helpful from the outset.

Two Serious Ladies is divided into three chapters of unequal length containing a number of subsections. Within its two hundred pages we are presented with two intercalated narratives centred on the two serious ladies of the title, Miss Christina Goering and Mrs Frieda Copperfield. The first chapter is the shortest having only thirty-five pages. In it we are introduced to Christina Goering (mainly) as a thirteen year old

child. Five pages in, she is referred to as Miss Goering as she is now an adult, a wealthy New York spinster whose solitary existence has been altered three months previously by her inviting a stranger, Miss Gamelon, into her mansion as her companion. Attending a party some time later, Miss Goering converses with her friend Mrs Copperfield who voices her apprehension about her imminent journey to Panama with Mr. Copperfield. At this same party Miss Goering also makes the acquaintance of Arnold who takes her briefly to his parents' flat where he still lives. Later that night Miss Goering returns home. The next day she announces to Miss Gamelon that she intends to sell up her mansion and live meagrely in a very small house on a nearby island. Miss Gamelon is horrified but grudgingly decides to accompany her, and Arnold, who is also present, expresses his wish to visit them there.

The second chapter of about eighty pages opens with the Copperfields' arrival at Panama. Their various experiences there result in Mr. Copperfield pursuing his exploration of the Panamanian 'interior' and beyond alone, whilst Mrs Copperfield takes a room in the same hotel-cum-brothel where her newfound friend Pacifica, a prostitute, lives and works. Mr Copperfield's attempts to dissuade Mrs Copperfield are unsuccessful.

The ninety-page final chapter reverts to Miss Goering 'some months later'. She is now living in acute poverty on the island with Miss Gamelon, Arnold and (briefly) Arnold's father. Miss Goering extends this circle of relationships by forays into a small town on the mainland where she meets Andy in a bar. She lives with him for a week and then leaves him in order to meet another man called Ben, whom she had noticed in the same bar during her visits there. On the night of their first meeting they go to a restaurant where Ben conducts business at one table whilst he tells Miss Goering to sit alone at another. She rings up Mrs

Copperfield who is back in New York with Pacifica. They arrive and the two serious ladies have a conversation in which they express their disappointment in each other with regard to their respective behaviour and the ways they have changed since they last met. Miss Goering leaves alone reflecting, 'Certainly I am nearer to becoming a saint ... but is it possible that a part of me hidden from my sight is piling sin upon sin as fast as Mrs Copperfield?' The book then closes with the following non-conclusion:

This latter possibility Miss Goering thought to be of considerable interest but of no great importance.<sup>1</sup>

It is not that Two Serious Ladies defies description; on the contrary as this plot summary as well as those in the previous chapter reveal, Jane Bowles is a writer who tells stories which are recountable. Problems immediately arise, however, when attempting to ascribe a significance or meaning to these stories. 'It is not often,' declared one of Two Serious Ladies's earliest reviewers, 'that one comes across a novel which makes as little sense as this one'.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to see what Two Serious Ladies is about,' wrote another, two decades later.<sup>3</sup> One reviewer who found it 'incredibly bad', based his dislike on the fact that 'the book is about nothing'.<sup>4</sup> Jane Bowles's biographer, Millicent Dillon declared when considering Two Serious Ladies that 'many things make no sense', and even a highly favourable reviewer had to concede that 'what it is all meant to signify I haven't a clue'.<sup>5</sup> Whilst bafflement may partly account for the lack of critical recognition, it is unhelpful towards reaching a clear account of the kind of narrative

- 
1. Jane Bowles, Two Serious Ladies (London, 1984), p.201; subsequent references incorporated into text with abbreviation TSL.
  2. Walton, p.14.
  3. 'Two Empty Ladies', p.81.
  4. Wagner, pp.493-494.
  5. Dillon, p.101; MacManus, p.88.



space Jane Bowles's prose projects and occupies. This is because a reading of her work which evaluates it on the basis of 'what it is all meant to signify' or 'what it is all about' will necessarily be thwarted since her narratives cannot satisfy such considerations.

To maintain, however, that this is a weakness of her work is to mischaracterise it for as one reviewer pointed out, it is precisely the 'glacial disregard for significance which makes Two Serious Ladies [and all Jane Bowles's work as we shall see] wonderfully self-possessed, but elusive'.<sup>6</sup> To the extent that her work purposely disregards significance, the following statement on the work of the New York poet, Frank O'Hara, holds true for Jane Bowles's work also. In 'Gay Language as Political Praxis - the poetry of Frank O'Hara' Bruce Boone considers O'Hara's poetry with reference to an earlier article by Charles Altieri entitled, pertinently, 'The Significance of Frank O'Hara' (my emphasis). Boone writes:

What kind of 'presence' Altieri asks, is it that the O'Hara text affirms? First and foremost, he answers, it is a presence 'stripped of ... ontological vestments', the present as a 'landscape without depth' and with 'no underlying significance of meanings to be interpreted'. The language disruptiveness of the text can only refer us over and over again to itself alone - not social practice.<sup>7</sup>

The textual presence of Jane Bowles's fiction is, likewise, that of a 'landscape without depth'. This oxymoron - since 'landscape' is usually associated with depth and perspective - draws attention to the fact that such writing in contradistinction to deep-space writing has 'no underlying significance or meanings to be interpreted ... the text can only refer us over and over again to itself alone: not social practice'. Lack of significance partly explains why Jane Bowles's work

---

6. Samuels, p.39.

7. Bruce Boone, 'Gay Language as Political Praxis - the poetry of Frank O'Hara', Social Text, 1 (1979), p.62.

has been overlooked by mainstream accounts of twentieth century prose. As can be seen if we consider a conventional response to the twentieth century American novel as expressed by the English critic Malcolm Bradbury in his recent study entitled The Modern American Novel (1983). One of Bradbury's stated aims in this work is to highlight 'the central role that American writing has played in any adequate conception of the modern novel'.<sup>8</sup> In spite of this ambitious aim and the importance publicly accorded Two Serious Ladies by a fairly disparate group of writers, Bradbury's account is one of the many which makes no mention even in passing of Jane Bowles's work (nor is she included in the list of Major American Twentieth Century Novels which appear in an appendix to his book). I would maintain that this is because Two Serious Ladies lies outside the conceptual parameters of Bradbury's critical approach notwithstanding their apparently all-embracing character which he describes in his introduction:

We may still regard the Modern American Novel as predominantly a product of the culture out of which it is created, as deriving from distinct history, ideology and cast of mind; we may also regard it as a central and flourishing instance of the novel as living modern genre. I have sought here to balance the two: to take, so to speak, an approach that comes from American Studies, which attempts to see literature in the context of American history, and relate it to one that comes from comparative literature, which looks at the international relation of literary forms. I am concerned with the modern history of American culture; I am also concerned with the broad evolution of the modern novel as a species.<sup>9</sup>

Bradbury's approach results from the synthesis of two definitions of the novel. It is both the 'product of the culture out of which it is created' and also a 'living modern genre', and as such transcends specific cultural determinants (including its author). Thus in his

---

8. Malcolm Bradbury, The Modern American Novel (Oxford, 1983), p.v.

9. Bradbury, p.vii.

chapter on the novel of the 1940s and 1950s - the one in which Two Serious Ladies would appear were it included - it is significant that Bradbury should consider novelists in terms of how far they represent 'the spirit of the post-war generation' as this is necessarily a central consideration for a critic who considers the novel to be a 'species' and who describes his search for the novelists of these two decades as involving the 'problem of succession'.<sup>10</sup> The Modern American Novel could not be expected to include every modern American novel, yet the exclusion of Jane Bowles's work is, I believe, due not to a lack of book-space; rather it is the critical space which cannot include her. For Bradbury's critical methodology is based on a specific way of reading: since for him a novel reflects its author's culture (which can include international literary influence), so novels are necessarily considered to be secondary life-forms, products of the primary 'reality' which they reflect. As a result his literary history is a genealogical tree of the novel-species throughout its 'succession' in the twentieth century and it is a succession in which Jane Bowles's work does not fit.

If it is accepted that novels are realistic and reflectionist, that is that they reflect a contextualised view of reality, then it seems entirely plausible that a critic-reader who necessarily approaches the novel from outside that context (by virtue of not being its author) and with hindsight will be able to explain and hence categorise it. This is the assumption on which Bradbury's approach is based.

There is, however, a fundamental flaw within the very premiss of this familiar way of reading texts. It is a flaw which is discussed in the following extract from Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (1985), where its author, Toril Moi is considering a 1972 study entitled Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives edited by Susan

---

10. Bradbury, p.127.

Koppelman Cornillon. 'In Cornillon's volume,' Moi declares, "'reality" and "experience" are presented as the highest goal of literature, the essential truths that must be rendered by all forms of fiction'.<sup>11</sup>

Cornillon's volume is a critique of the bias towards a male perspective of women within fiction with the result that huge areas of women's experience are excluded from what is considered 'literature'. Moi's response foregrounds the identical assumption underlying the approaches of both Bradbury and Cornillon. As she explains:

I would not be surprised if Cornillon turned out to be right - toe-nail clipping and the disposal of sanitary towels also seem neglected as fictional themes - but her complaint rests on the highly questionable notion that art can and should reflect life accurately and inclusively in every detail. The extreme reflectionism ... advocated in Images of Women in Fiction has the advantage of emphasising the way in which writers constantly select the elements they wish to use in their texts; but instead of acknowledging this as one of the basic facts of textual creativity, reflectionism posits that the artist's selective creation should be measured against 'real life', thus assuming that the only constraint on the artist's work is his or her perception of the 'real world'. Such a view resolutely refuses to consider textual production as a highly complex, 'over-determined' process with many different and conflicting literary and non-literary determinants (historical, political, social, ideological, institutional, generic, psychological and so on). Instead, writing is seen as a more or less faithful reproduction of an external reality to which we all have equal and unbiased access, and which therefore enables us to criticise the author on the grounds that he or she has created an incorrect model of the reality we somehow all know. Resolutely empiricist in its approach, this view fails to consider the proposition that the real is not only something we construct, but a controversial construct at that (Moi's emphases).<sup>12</sup>

If reality is a 'controversial construct' rather than something shared which we 'somehow all know'; then it is not feasible to use it

---

11. Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London, 1985), p.45.

12. Moi, p.45.

as a criterion or a guide for elucidating what all novels are trying to signify. Yet Moi is not saying by this that no criticism is possible; on the contrary, she continues:

Literary works can and should of course be criticised for having selected and shaped their fictional universe according to oppressive and objectionable ideological assumptions, but that should not be confused with failing to be 'true to life' or with not presenting 'an authentic expression of real experience'. Such an insistent demand for authenticity ... reduces all literature to rather simplistic forms of autobiography. <sup>13</sup>

Interestingly enough, that possible consequence of a realist or reflectionist approach to literature stated by Moi, whereby it is reduced to autobiography is precisely the reading adopted by Jane Bowles's biographer, Millicent Dillon. In the 'Prologue' to A Little Original Sin she writes of a number of coincidences between her life and that of Jane Bowles and then defines the role of the biographer:

Whether the identification with one's subject is imagined or based on coincidence, the biographer must cling to the ideas of separation and community - to see what is unique in the given life and to see what is shared, human, common. The writer's task mirrors the reader's. We seek to know another's life, knowing at the same time, through that life we seek knowledge of our own. We look for the meaning of an individual life in a time when the meaning of an individual life has lost much of its force. <sup>14</sup>

The position of the critic and the biographer are clearly not synonymous, but Dillon does blur the boundaries between the two perspectives in her biography, which is subtitled The Life and the Work of Jane Bowles. The ordering of 'life' before 'work' is significant, as the difficulty she shares with earlier mainstream reviewers in understanding Jane Bowles's work - 'it is a puzzling novel to read ... Many things seem to make no sense' - combined with the fact that she merges

---

13. Moi, pp.45-46.

14. Dillon, p.2.

her own life with that of Jane Bowles's - 'identification with one's subject ... through the life we seek knowledge of our own' - leads her to explain the work by the life.<sup>15</sup> Hence she writes:

Two Serious Ladies is an autobiographical novel but not in the confessional sense. It is autobiographical rather in that in every moment of the novel Jane is present in each of her characters. She lives the fears she has known, the confusions she had, and her own small meannesses. She uses the arguments she has heard and the tenderness she felt. The characters are not Jane, but she is in the characters, creating them and herself.<sup>16</sup>

There are indeed many attitudes and experiences incorporated into Two Serious Ladies which were held by Jane Bowles. Yet if in this extract Dillon were stating the fact that as a writer Jane Bowles wrote out of her life (both experiential and imaginative) she would merely be expressing a truism about the act of writing - as the American novelist, James Purdy once declared: 'I prefer not to give a biography since my biography is in my work' - but she goes much further than that.<sup>17</sup> Not only is it the case that (like other writers) Jane Bowles 'modeled the physical form of her characters on people she knew' whom Dillon identifies, but also Dillon tells us that 'Jane was not simply creating characters as she wrote; she was also creating herself and her life to come'.<sup>18</sup> Thus Two Serious Ladies is not only autobiography in terms of describing her past life, it is also a prediction of the way the rest of her life would turn out. From her privileged position of hindsight, Dillon makes this point explicitly when she claims about Two Serious Ladies that 'the book can be looked upon as the splitting of Christina Goering, from the time she was thirteen into the two characters of Mrs Copperfield and

---

15. Dillon, p.101.

16. Dillon, p.99.

17. 'Purdy, James (Otis)', Contemporary Novelists, edited by James Vinson (London, 1982), p.540.

18. Dillon, pp.104, 107.

Miss Goering. It is a confirmation of a bargain, a decision once made. And as Jane wrote of the past, she also predicted her future'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Dillon identifies Jane Bowles with her 'characters' (Dillon's term) so completely that when considering the relationship Jane Bowles had with Helvetia Perkins, Dillon tells us of Jane Bowles that 'like Mrs Copperfield, she was only seemingly compliant' thus explaining the author by reference to one of her imagined people.<sup>20</sup>

I have raised this issue partly because it illustrates Moi's point about a reflectionist/realist approach tending towards a reading of literature as autobiography, and partly for the following reason. Jane Bowles's life was unusual. Dillon's biography illustrates and explores the widespread curiosity about her life.<sup>21</sup> The consequence, however, is that the literary originality of Jane Bowles's work is defused and hence not considered on its own terms but interpreted (and hence made more accessible) by stress on its lived quality.

As mentioned earlier, the fact that there are autobiographical elements in Jane Bowles's work is not being disputed; rather the issue is the importance attributed to this interrelationship between life and work. Somewhat more helpful and pertinent in this area is the view expressed by the American writer Tennessee Williams about Jane Bowles's work. He declares:

---

19. Dillon, p.107.

20. Dillon, p.109.

21. This curiosity is illustrated in the following articles and reviews: John Giorno, 'Vitamin G: Obituary', Ant-Rite, 8 (1973); Margo Jefferson, 'What Killed Jane Bowles?', The Soho News (11 August, 1981), 15-16; Seymour Krim, 'Profile of an Artist's Decline', Daily News (28 August, 1981), 7-8; Jack Collins, 'Jane and Paul', The Threepenny Review, 8 (1982), 8-9; 'Two Serious Talents', Elle (Summer 1988), 109-115; and Kevin Killian, That, advertised in Poetry Flash (March 1988): a play based on the rumoured poisoning of Jane Bowles by her Moroccan lover, Cherifa.

I read it and explained my opinion of it as spontaneously as if I'd stumbled into a wonderland of new, totally fresh sensibility - which indeed I had.

I knew Mrs Bowles personally, but it was not her unique charm as a person that drew from me the opinions which I hold regarding her work. I consider her the most important writer of prose fiction in modern American letters without reference to my close, intuitive friendship with her, and my knowledge of her physical disabilities and spiritual torment during her last years.

Her work doesn't need an appreciation influenced by sympathy with the circumstances of her life. Of course her work was at the heart of her life, but it deserves to be appraised as if you had never known her, and it is fully able to stand undiminished by this detached view.<sup>22</sup>

Thus contrary to Dillon's claim Two Serious Ladies is not autobiography. Similarly it does not satisfy Bradbury's definition of a modern American novel, since it neither represents a particular social group or set of experiences whether they be religious, generational, political or sexual; nor does it reveal to any large degree any obvious literary ancestors or contemporary influences. Only a reading which rejects the parti-pris autobiographical or realist approach which maintains that her life was at the heart of a work in favour of a more 'detached view' which considers that it 'deserves to be appraised as if you had never known her', will be able to enter the kind of modernist space the prose of Jane Bowles inhabits.

As stated in the previous chapter, the American reviewer Stephen Koch claimed that Two Serious Ladies was not successful because of a lack of 'innovation in form' (see above p.160); the questions this comment raises about the nature of innovation and its recognisability were considered by Jane Bowles herself: 'Maybe some people will like it, those who are not enthusiasts of the cut-up method', she wrote to Libby Holman in August 1964 about Two Serious Ladies in anticipation of its

---

22. Tennessee Williams, 'Foreword', Jane Bowles, Feminine Wiles (Santa Barbara, 1976), p.7.



1965 republication.<sup>23</sup> Written by 1939 but only published in 1943 Two Serious Ladies predates the first experimental novel of the cut-up method, William Burroughs's The Naked Lunch (1959) by twenty years. Originality is often a term used to describe what has as yet no name, yet as Jane Bowles's own comment rightly states, Two Serious Ladies's originality is not due to its being a cut-up avant la lettre. Considering the importance and influence of the cut-up method as an 'innovation in form' used to explore and extend the boundaries of prose fiction, it will be helpful to examine briefly what it entails to determine (if somewhat negatively) the difference between its innovation and that of Jane Bowles's prose.

In an article which describes the discovery of what was to be the cut-up method in 1958, its actual originator the painter-writer Bryon Gysin declared:

While cutting up a mount for a drawing ... I sliced through a pile of newspapers with my Stanley blade and thought of what I had said to Burroughs some six months earlier about the necessity for turning painters' techniques directly into writing. I picked up the raw words and began to piece together texts that later appeared as 'First Cut-Ups' in 'Minutes to Go'. At the same time I thought them hilariously meaningful. I laughed so hard my neighbours thought I'd flipped. I hope you discover this unusual pleasure for yourselves - this shortlived but unique intoxication. Cut up this page you are reading and see what happens. See what I say as well as hear it.<sup>24</sup>

The result as developed by Burroughs is a prose which continually explicates the way it is constructed. Both lyrical and brutal his cut-ups draw attention to the nature of language as palimpsest in that each sentence attests to its necessarily derivative status whilst nonetheless creating something new by virtue of its reorganisation. Consequently

---

23. Selected Letters, p.252.

24. Bryon Gysin, 'Cut-ups: a Project for Disastrous Success', in William S. Burroughs and Bryon Gysin, The Third Mind (London, 1979), pp.43-44.

the inherent 'selectivity' of writing is highlighted as well as the traditional notions of author-ity being undermined and hence questioned. Whilst of course open to perpetual rewriting, cut-ups point to the element of risk and chance in composition to which the work of Jackson Pollock attests in painting. A comparison between extracts from a Burroughs cut-up and from Jane Bowles's prose reveals immediate visible differences of form on the page. First an extract from The Naked Lunch:

There's a boy across the river with an ass like a peach; alas I was no swimmer and lost my clementine.

The junky sits with a needle poised to the message of blood, and the con man palpates the mark with fingers of rotten ectoplasm ...

Dr Berger's Mental Hour ... Fadeout.

TECHNICIAN: 'Now listen, I'll say it again, and I'll say it slow. Yes' he nods 'And make with the smile ... The SMILE.' He shows his false teeth in hideous parody of the toothpaste ad. '"We like apple pie, and we like each other. It's just as simple as that." - and make it sound SIMPLE, country simple ... Look bovine, whyncha. You want the switchboard again? Or the pail?'<sup>25</sup>

compared to a section from Two Serious Ladies:

'That slob upstairs,' said Miss Gamelon, 'is eventually going to give up going to the office at all. He's going to move in here completely and do nothing but eat and sleep. In another year he's going to be as big as an elephant and you won't be able to rid yourself of him. Thank the Lord I don't expect to be here then.'

'Do you really think that he will be so very fat in one year?' said Miss Goering.

'I know it!' said Miss Gamelon. There was a sudden blast of wind which blew the kitchen door open. 'Oh I hate this,' said Miss Gamelon vehemently, getting up from her seat to fix the door. (TSL, p.113)

Later works by Burroughs go much further in dismantling conventional prose, yet even in this extract from The Naked Lunch his use of one-sentence paragraphs, gaps, suspension marks, uppercase words (SMILE, SIMPLE), words transcribed according to pronunciation (whyncha) and the

---

25. William S. Burroughs, The Naked Lunch (London, 1988), p.113.

omission of the usual links between the speaker and his speech (TECHNICIAN: 'Now ... ' rather than 'the technician said, "Now ..."') draw attention to form. Compared to this cut-up, the extract from Two Serious Ladies appears to be an example of conventional prose narrative with its everyday language neatly ordered in paragraphs and dialogue. It is perfectly fluent and clear. The difficulty lies in where this prose of 'inexorable' (Ashbery) lucidity leads us, as the experimentation occurs elsewhere, in the inter-relationship between what is said and this glassy surface. In the broken form of the cut-up we are led to expect to be surprised and disoriented; we know that we are reading an experimental wordscape in which preconceptions are explicitly challenged, as it is an explosion of the linguistic and behavioural boundaries - or, rather it is an explodING which explores the concept of 'significance' on Burroughs's premiss that 'language is a virus from outerspace' and hence shifting, uncontrollable.

In contrast to this, the experimentalism and innovation of Jane Bowles's prose occurs as an implosion beneath the surface of a conventionally ordered narrative. Yet whilst its orderliness conforms to realist fiction, a closer examination of the above extract from Two Serious Ladies reveals that realist expectations are being continually disrupted through Jane Bowles's exploitation of both the metaphorical and the literal dimensions of language. What at first appears to be a conversation between Christina Goering and Lucy Gamelon is, in fact, a somewhat askew exchange of comments as they talk at rather than with each other. In her fury with the 'slob upstairs' Miss Gamelon adduces in order to illustrate his sloth and greed that 'in another year he's going to be as big as an elephant'. Miss Goering ignores however the underlying reason for the metaphor, concentrating instead on its literal implications with the result that she asks, irrelevantly: 'Do you really

think that he will be so very, very fat in one year?' The very earnest and measured manner ('do you really think ... so very, very fat') in which this tangential remark is delivered as well as the inherent absurdity of the consideration itself (whether it would be physically possible for the slob to become as fat as an elephant in one year) is extremely comical. Bound up with its humourous effect - I shall consider the importance of wit in Jane Bowles's style below - is the rather bleaker fact of the lack of communication. For between the speakers there is a space or gap across which they make their remarks, yet which remains unbridged by them. Words are exchanged but this does not lead to a closer, mutual understanding; rather we are aware of their irremediable separateness from one another. Far from confined to this specific extract or particular relationship this lack of communication or ability to communicate is a general feature of the conversations and relationships of Jane Bowles's people across all her work as is illustrated in the following two extracts. The first comes from 'Camp Cataract'. Sadie has arrived one evening at the camp with the intention of persuading her sister, Harriet, who is staying there, to return home. Entering an immense room Sadie walks through 'the accumulation of chairs and settees which surrounded it' to a large fireplace:

... peering out of the fireplace she noticed for the first time that she was not alone. Some fifty feet away a fat woman sat reading by the light of an electric bulb.

'She doesn't even know I'm in the fireplace,' she [Sadie] said to herself. 'Because the rain is so loud, she probably didn't hear me come in.' She waited patiently for a while and then, suspecting that the woman might remain oblivious to her presence indefinitely, she called over to her. 'Do you have anything to do with managing Camp Cataract?' she asked, speaking loudly so that she could be heard above the rain.

The woman ceased reading and switched her big light off at once since the strong glare prevented her seeing beyond the radius of the bulb.

'No, I don't,' she answered in a booming voice. 'Why?'

Sadie, finding no answer to this question, remained silent.

'Do you think I look like a manager?' the woman pursued, and since Sadie had obviously no intention of answering, she continued the conversation by herself.

'I suppose you might think I was manager here because I'm stout, and stout people have that look; also I'm about the right age for it. But I'm not the manager ... I don't manage anything, anywhere. I have a domineering cranium all right, but I'm more the French type. I'd rather enjoy myself than give orders.'

'French ...' Sadie repeated hesitantly.

'Not French,' the woman corrected her. 'French type, with a little of the actual blood.' Her voice was cold and severe.

For a while neither of them spoke, and Sadie hoped the conversation had drawn to a definite close.

'Individuality is my god,' the woman announced abruptly, much to Sadie's disappointment. 'That's partly why I didn't go to the picture show tonight. I don't like doing what the groups do, and I've seen the film.' She dragged her chair forward so as to be heard more clearly. <sup>26</sup>

Whilst Sadie initiates this conversation, breaking the silence by speaking loudly so as to be heard above the rain, she is unable to give a reason for her question and she does not speak again except for the word 'French', which she echoes 'hesitantly' from the other woman's declaration. In stark contrast to Sadie who 'remained silent ... had obviously no intention of answering ... who hoped the conversation would draw to a definite close', the other woman once she has been questioned is not in the least embarrassed by Sadie's silence. On the contrary, like Miss Goering in Two Serious Ladies 'her fears [are not] of a social nature' (TSL, p.127; see below p.266) and she 'continued the conversation by herself'. Sadie had originally spoken because she felt that otherwise 'the woman might remain oblivious to her presence indefinitely'; however, although talking, the woman does not take any more notice of Sadie (whom we are told she 'corrects' in a 'cold and severe' tone) except as the focus (Sadie is standing in the hearth) of her comments.

The complete lack of communication between them is made more stark by the woman's necessity to speak in a 'booming voice', not only because of the rain but because of the fifty foot space between them. Since Sadie is physically trapped by the armchair and fireplace as in a cage, her only means towards the ending of the conversation is silence - the action of non-participation. Yet not only does the other woman ignore this obvious sign of incommunicativeness, she actually 'pursues' the one-sided conversation and Sadie by 'dragging her chair forward so as to be heard more clearly'. This contraction of physical space between them only serves to highlight by contrast the continued static gulf in mutual understanding.

Similarly in Jane Bowles's unpublished notebooks an exchange between Andrew and Tommy reveals the same dislocation between the participants who this time do not have the excuse of being complete strangers. It is part of the same narrative from which the story 'Andrew' was later extracted and edited by Paul Bowles. Both conscripts at an army camp, Andrew had first met Tommy in a clearing where Tommy had come to cook his ration of meat on an open fire, an activity about which he eulogises to Andrew on that occasion.<sup>27</sup> It is this fact which strikes Andrew the most about Tommy with whom he falls in love and tries to meet again, a meeting which finally takes place seven days later:

Tommy was in his clearing seated on a log. His eyes were fixed on the fire he had made. He looked up and greeted Andrew in a bright tone.

'Hallo there,' he called out. 'Taking a turn in the evening air' - ... [Andrew] sat down on the log and admitted he was. He looked around for the grate and the food bundle but saw none.

'Where's your food?' Andrew asked with a note of consternation in his voice.

'I haven't gotten any with me,' [Tommy] said in a brisk alert manner. 'Just building myself a little fire.'

Andrew was astonished and not a little disturbed at the fact that Tommy had brought no food along with him.

---

27. See 'Andrew', pp.189-191.

'I was sure you'd be cooking a dinner,' he said frowning.

'I'm not cooking,' Tommy said again very gaily. 'I just got it in my head to build a bonfire.' He didn't ask Andrew to sit down.

'What I meant was,' said Andrew flushing furiously, '... was to ask you why you didn't bring food along.'

'I ate,' said Tommy with little or no expression in his voice.

'Well ...' Andrew hesitated. 'I guess you'd rather have it the other way.'

'... what.'

'Well I guess you'd rather have cooked your meat out here ... like you do on other nights.' Andrew flushed as if by bringing up the meat he had committed some indiscretion.

The boy shook his head as if baffled by the world.

'Well you do like to cook out of doors better than you do indoors - you said so - and more than once too. ... You do, don't you?'

'Like to come here?' Tommy was busily snapping twigs in half.

'Of course.' Andrew shook his head impatiently. 'You love to come here. You hate to eat indoors. You like to bring meat here and cook it on that grate you have. You've made an elaborate arrangement with the chef.'

'He gives me meat,' said Tommy in a cool manner without looking up.

'I know that,' said Andrew emphatically, trying hard to control his voice so that it wouldn't rise. 'But isn't cooking supper out of doors your favorite pastime?'

'The food tastes better when it's cooked out of doors,' Tommy went on in the same placid manner, 'that's why folks like picnics, I guess.'

He flashed a ravishing smile at Andrew but which seemed rather destined for someone else or rather perhaps simply a different conversation.

'But you don't mind the fact that you come here without any meat to cook,' said Andrew.

'I don't mind,' Tommy said. 'I'm having a nice time.' Andrew crouched on his haunches near the fire. The firelight played on his taut face which Tommy gazed at with blank peaceful eyes. 28

Unlike the extract from 'Camp Cataract' quoted above, a conversation is definitely taking place between Tommy and Andrew, although Tommy is not always able to follow Andrew's line of questioning (Andrew: 'I guess you'd rather have it the other way.' Tommy: 'What?'; Andrew: 'You do, don't you?'. Tommy: 'Like to come here?'). Yet throughout the

conversation the sense of dislocation separating Andrew and Tommy is foregrounded by the contrast between Andrew's tenseness ('a note of consternation in his voice; not a little disturbed; frowning; flushing furiously; shook his head impatiently; emphatically; taut face') and Tommy's placidity ('bright tone; brisk alert manner; very gaily; little or no expression in his voice; cool manner; same placid manner; blank peaceful eyes'). That they are not occupying the same psychological space is emphasised especially in Tommy's sudden smile which, we are told, was 'flashed ... at Andrew but which seemed rather destined for someone else or rather perhaps simply a different conversation'. The complete disjunction enclosed in this description reveals that Tommy is not purposely ignoring Andrew's presence (as the other woman ignored Sadie in the previous extract) as actually being unaware of it in spite of holding a conversation with him. In fact Tommy is so 'distant' from Andrew that he is able to declare that he is 'having a nice time' whilst Andrew is about to explode because of his all too acute consciousness that Tommy is unaware of him. As Alfred Kazin declared in Bright Book of Life (1971) with reference to Two Serious Ladies but it holds true for all of Jane Bowles's work: 'nothing advances by dialogue, there is no natural exchange of experience, only a mystified scratching by the characters themselves on the impenetrable surface of each other's personalities'.<sup>29</sup> Thus Kazin pinpoints the irreducible distance between the speakers. Increase in volume or intensity on the part of Andrew in an attempt to force himself verbally on Tommy's consciousness only increases his own sense of frustration and bewilderment as Tommy's 'surface' remains 'impenetrable' to him - the only hint that he is aware of Andrew's distant 'scratching' occurs when Tommy shakes his head 'as if baffled by the world'. Their exchange of words leads to no contact;

---

29. Alfred Kazin, Bright Book of Life (London, 1974), pp.175-176.



rather they remain just as disconnected psychologically. This pattern of physical contiguity without communication is repeated again and again in and across Jane Bowles's fictions: Mr Drake and Mrs Perry live in the same apartment block and eat at the same restaurant table ('Plain Pleasures'); Sadie and Harriet live in the same apartment and meet at the same holiday camp ('Camp Cataract'); Lila and Frank share the same house ('Lila and Frank') as do Mildred and Rhoda ('The Quarrelling Pair'); Señora Ramirez and the Traveller share the same bed ('A Guatemalan Idyll') as do Mrs Copperfield and Pacifica, Miss Goering and Andy (Two Serious Ladies). Yet whilst they may be in close and often constant touch physically and even sexually, their perception of the shared situations always remains distinct so that no organic reciprocity is possible. Instead of sharing the same deep space they exist rather in contiguous layered spaces.

(ii)

In the main critical chapter on Mary Butts's work I delineated and explored the term 'deep space' with reference to Baudrillard's concept of 'representation' where 'a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, a sign could exchange for meaning' in that it involves 'a transcription, interpretation, commentary' on meaning (Baudrillard's emphasis).<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard contrasts 'representation' with the concept of 'reproduction' which is, likewise, helpful towards outlining what I mean by the term 'layered space'. 'Reproduction' (Baudrillard is using this term with reference not to eugenics but to capitalism with its endless manufacture of identical products; whilst Simulations is a political polemic which attacks the capitalist system, my use of his terms is confined to their helpfulness in clarifying a critical term) is part of a system of

---

30. Baudrillard, pp.10, 146.

'simulation' which enacts the 'death sentence of every reference' by producing 'a weightless ... simulacrum - not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference'. In such a universe, claims Baudrillard, not only is there the 'absence of a basic reality', but also the sign 'bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum'. Thus whilst as we have seen the 'representation of an order of sacrament' is embodied and enacted in the deep-space texts of Mary Butts; in layered-space writing there is, on the contrary, 'no order of appearance at all'.<sup>31</sup> What this actually means when reading Jane Bowles's fictional prose, is that it is impossible to locate any narrative centre or dominant voice either in any one of the texts' inhabitants or in the narrator. The only 'view' put forward is that of the existence of a multiplicity of views, or as Baudrillard puts it: a situation of infinite 'counterfeit' with the result that reality is defined as 'that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction'. He continues:

At the limit of the process of reproductibility, this real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced. The hyperreal. ... The hyperreal transcends representation only because it is entirely in simulation. The tourniquet of representation tightens madly, but of an implosive madness that, far from eccentric (marginal) inclines towards the center to its own infinite repetition.<sup>32</sup>

Thus in contrast to a resonant deep-space text which explodes or opens up meaning(s), maintaining a connection to some reality or truth which it 'represents', Jane Bowles's layered-space narratives do not lead anywhere - one reviewer (Arthur Edelstein) described Jane Bowles as having 'fashioned walkers on directionless roads'<sup>33</sup> - and consequently

---

31. Baudrillard, pp.10-12.

32. Baudrillard, pp.146-147.

33. Edelstein, [p.1].

they enact Miss Goering's own inconclusive reflection at the end of Two Serious Ladies of being 'of considerable interest but no great importance'. Interestingly Baudrillard's image of an implosive tourniquet to describe this situation of an endless reproduction of realities is inferred in the American writer Anais Nin's earlier account of her reaction to Two Serious Ladies. She wrote in her diary:

I remember I was so distressed by the tightness, the involuted quality, the constricted coiling inward (not to an infinite interior but to a tight one) that I wrote her [Jane Bowles] a careful, gentle letter warning her of the danger of constriction for a writer and she took it as a condemnation (a wrong interpretation).<sup>34</sup>

The existence of an analogous resistance to significance and resonance both within the narratives (ie. the content) and at the level of the textual surface (ie. the style) is highlighted most clearly in Robert Lougy's article, 'The World and Art of Jane Bowles' in which he states that 'her [Jane Bowles's] art depicts a world of impenetrable surfaces: hard and opaque, it permits only fleeting moments of clarity that must ultimately die, aborted perceptions untranslated into actions'. Likewise of her style he writes that 'Bowles's language, like her world consists of hard, impenetrable surfaces. Words are flat, disconnected'.<sup>35</sup> Literally Jane Bowles's language is 'like her world'. As a general comment on the relationship between style and content, Lougy's use of identical descriptions of both ('hard, impenetrable surfaces') to reveal the consonance between them, is far from unusual. On the contrary, it is characteristic of much of literature that the style echoes the content. Nor is the thematic content of multiple realities inferred in Jane Bowles's narratives out of the ordinary. It may have been noticed that my

---

34. The Journals of Anais Nin: Volume 5 1947-1955, edited by Gunter Stuhlmann (London, 1979), pp.119-120.

35. Robert E. Lougy, 'The World and Art of Jane Bowles', CEA Critic, 49, 2-4 (1986-1987), pp.161, 166.

discussion shifts between the consideration of textual portrayals of reality and questions of textual significance. This is because the two are closely connected, both being dependent on consensus. If 'reality' is not shared but, rather, idiosyncratic, then the notion of significance or shared meaning is not possible. If we all perceive the world differently, then language that system of consensus through which we communicate with one another can no longer be trusted to carry our meaning(s) across. The resulting situation is one where the links between the signifier, the signified and the referent are broken. And not least in the series of paradoxes explored by much contemporary literary textual theory and criticism, is the fact that I am using language - that untrustworthy medium - to articulate this breakdown in significance and communication. That the lack of a shared reality is the Modern Condition is declared by the American critic, Leslie Fiedler in 'No! In Thunder' (1940):

The vision of a truly contemporary writer is that of a world not only absurd but also chaotic and fragmentary. He tries in his work to find techniques for representing a universe in which our perceptions overlap but do not coincide, in which we share chiefly a sense of loneliness: our alienation from whatever things finally are, as well as from other men's awareness of those things and of us. <sup>36</sup>

Apart from Fiedler's misplaced use of the masculine pronoun to describe the 'truly contemporary writer', his description of the modern condition in general is closely echoed in Patricia MacManus's description of Jane Bowles's work in particular. In 'Women out of this World' (1967) she writes:

In his introduction to Jane Bowles's collected works, Truman Capote speaks of 'the never-realized relationships between her people' and to my mind,

---

36. Leslie Fiedler, 'Introduction: No! In Thunder', No! In Thunder: Essays on Myth and Literature, second edition (New York, 1972), p.19.

this is as close to a central issue as one can get in attempting an over-all view of this writer's hauntingly - sometimes tantalizingly - oblique art. Her characters drift into one another's orbits, their lives fugitively overlapping but rarely joined even in an illusory permanence; singleness and separation from the mainstream of existence seems, ultimately, to be their natural condition [in this] ... off-center world created by Mrs Bowles. 37

Jane Bowles's 'oblique art' - Paul Bowles once spoke of Jane Bowles's 'wonderfully elliptical way of seeing' - creates a world which is 'off-center' because its inhabitants 'drift into one another's orbits' yet never meet up.<sup>38</sup> The inescapability of this isolation is foregrounded by the kinds of linguistic qualifications used by MacManus: 'fugitively overlapping but rarely joined even in an illusory permanence'; words whose closeness to Fiedler's own description of the modern universe where 'our perceptions overlap but do not coincide' stresses the 'truly contemporary' character of the consciousness of Jane Bowles's people. Separate(d) from the 'mainstream of existence' - one inhabitant, Bozoe Flanner describes herself as 'condemned ... exiled ... banished' - Jane Bowles's people are intensely idiosyncratic, sharing this innately divisive and isolating characteristic as they do the fact that they are what Kazin pertinently calls 'privacies'.<sup>39</sup> Some strive towards what Miss Goering calls 'salvation': '... I am merely working out something for myself'; others share Mrs Copperfield's search for 'happiness': 'I have my happiness which I guard like a wolf' (TSL, pp.188, 197). Yet an inherent respective inscrutability means, as Millicent Dillon points out, that 'exactly what she [Mrs Copperfield] means by happiness is almost as mysterious as what Christina Goering means by salvation'.<sup>40</sup> Quite.

---

37. MacManus, p.87.

38. Dillon, p.51.

39. Unpublished notebook, 24, 'Imp. for novel [Going to Massachusetts]'; Kazin, p.177.

40. Dillon, p.100.

It is a feature of Jane Bowles's layered-space prose that singly neither Mrs Copperfield nor Miss Goering dominate the work ('as mysterious as') but rather 'reproduce' (in Baudrillard's sense) private systems of modi vivendi predicated on beliefs and goals which are never wholly disclosed. Instead, as one critic pointed out, Jane Bowles's people 'enacting obscure destinies in tragic but also hilarious ways, are frequently enigmatic to the point of inaccessibility'.<sup>41</sup> 'Obscure ... enigmatic ... inaccessibility' - repeatedly the response to Jane Bowles's work (whether positive or negative) has been dominated by terms which draw attention to its slippery and elusive character.

To return to and to support Fiedler's point that isolation and alienation are the major features of a truly contemporary consciousness it is noticeable that alongside 'salvation' and 'happiness', one of the recurrent aims which preoccupies several of Jane Bowles's people (especially in the later fictions) is 'normality': the desire to be within and part of the world, to have a life of one's own. In 'Camp Cataract' we are told of Sadie that

like many others she conceived of her life as separate from herself; the road was laid out always a little ahead of her by sacred hands, and she walked down it without a question. This road, which was her life, would go on existing after her death, even as her death existed now while she still lived.<sup>42</sup>

That one's life can be 'lost' is a fact of which Mrs Perry, in 'Plain Pleasures' constantly reminds her sister, Dorothy, using the same metaphor as that used by the narrator to describe Sadie. For Mrs Perry explains to Mr Drake how:

We each have only one single life which is our real life, starting at the cradle and ending at the grave. I warn Dorothy every time I see her that if she doesn't watch out her life is going to be left aching

---

41. Collins, p. 8.

42. 'Camp Cataract', p.132.

and starving on the side of the road and she's going to get to her grave without it. ... It's always better to stay alongside of your life. I told Dorothy that life was not a tree with a million different blossoms on it.<sup>43</sup>

The simultaneous desire for a 'normal' life and conviction that this is impossible prevails over almost all the inhabitants of Jane Bowles's projected but never completed novel Out in the World (the title is not fortuitous). Of Andrew we are told that he 'suffered from a feeling of being shut off from other human beings. ... He had always felt quite certain that he had no life and that this lack of life was a rare and shameful phenomenon'.<sup>44</sup> 'When Agnes Leather sees Andrew's home,' writes Jane Bowles in one of the other unpublished notebooks, 'she rejoices openly though it is twice as depressing as her own. She is not depressed by it and feels that she is in the world at last'. Later Agnes who holds the 'conviction that just beyond her reach was the complicated sensitive world of human beings' decides to ask Sister McAvoy to come and live with her. Her reasons for doing so are governed wholly by her feeling of exclusion:

This plan, preposterous as Agnes knew it would appear to an outsider, did not seem so to herself. She needed to mark her separation from another living being more desperately than most and so the urgency of her need blinded her to any incongruity in the means she used to justify it. In order that she might live out such a feeling of separation in a truly vivid way, she needed to move into a house with whomever she was going to be separated from.<sup>45</sup>

Always the reasons given for as well as the effect of action in Jane Bowles's fictions are oblique. Nor is this sense of separation from life held only by Andrew and Agnes for Jane Bowles writes that:

---

43. 'Plain Pleasures', p.11.

44. Unpublished notebook 34.

45. Unpublished notebooks 35, 'Imp. for novel'; 37, 'For Novel Lubia'; 39, 'Agnes Leather Lorette'.

Emmy Moore decides that Sister McAvoy and Agnes Leather are much more interesting than the Cassalottis. She gets to know them and tries to give money to Sister McAvoy so that she may leave Agnes Leather. She writes to her husband that she is at last entering life.

...

Mr. Cassalotti himself was not in the least bit enterprising or far sighted. In fact what characterised him was his lack of gusto and even a seeming disconnection with what he was doing.

...

[Tony Pirelli] could not stand life as it was and felt no connection with it (my emphases).<sup>46</sup>

However, what the 'mainstream of existence' consists of from which Jane Bowles's people feel so acutely excluded is never presented in her fiction except as an a priori, assumed to be so self-evident that no normative figure is apparently deemed necessary. Interestingly several initial accounts concur with this assumption - for example Alfred Kazin's account of Two Serious Ladies in Bright Book of Life is predicated on the belief that normality (like Bradbury's assumption of the existence of a single shared reality) is something which 'we' (the readers including presumably Kazin himself; who 'we' are is never made clear) embody, whilst Miss Goering and Mrs Copperfield exist separately 'closed off from the rest of us'.<sup>47</sup> In using this emotive rhetoric as the sole justification and explanation for the waywardness of what he calls Jane Bowles's 'provisional guests in the world', Kazin is actually superimposing a/his normative framework on Jane Bowles's texts which is not to be found in the texts themselves.<sup>48</sup> In doing this Kazin's reading is attempting to give a deep-space interpretation of Jane Bowles's layered-space work, since 'normality' in these narratives is portrayed only through the varying perceptions of it by inhabitants themselves.

---

46. Unpublished notebooks 35, 27.

47. Kazin, p.175.

48. Kazin, p.177,



What is given is a series of descriptions which far from providing a helpful, stabilizing centre, actually reinforces the 'layered-space' character of Jane Bowles's world as they furnish yet more elliptical structures - 'reproductions', in Baudrillard's sense - which remain as 'obscure ... enigmatic ... inaccessible' as the inhabitants themselves. As the following examples illustrate this is doubly disconcerting partly because of the expectation that explanations, definitions, descriptions etc de natura will provide greater clarification and hence lead to understanding, and partly because the fact that they do not do this is never attributable to the kind of language involved. For jargon, technical vocabulary, difficult concepts and *recherché* references are noticeably absent from Jane Bowles's work; instead the utterances consist of simple day-to-day words and images. Nonetheless, what 'normality' might mean or entail is 'as mysterious' as 'salvation' or 'happiness'. Let us consider first an extract from Jane Bowles's unpublished notebooks in which Bozoe Flanner describes 'normality' in a letter to Janet Murphy (it belongs to a longer unfinished narrative from which 'Going to Massachusetts' was later edited by Paul Bowles):

I am writing to you before I go to Massachusetts so that you will know exactly how I feel about having stayed overnight here above Larry's Bar and Grill. ... I am going downstairs soon to have cornbeef stew with Larry and his sister. I think it is good for me to spend one normal day like this. It is not a happy day but it is a normal one. Even the food they eat seems to be part of the food eaten by the great general public. They seem to belong more to the world than you or I do. Even though you do own and operate a garage. ... I don't know why I say that Gwen Fitzpatrick seems to belong more to the great outside public than you do or than I do. She wears a hat all the time and has spent all morning by herself in a corner of the long empty room over the bar reading at a dusty table.<sup>49</sup>

'I am writing ... so that you will know exactly how I feel' - the

---

49. Unpublished notebook, 24.

intensity of her desire to communicate through language is paralleled only by the sense of frustration felt previously by Bozoe in her daily attempts to explain her position to Janet at the garage, since she cannot, as she herself admits ('I don't know why I say that ...'), pinpoint how wearing a hat and spending time reading at a dusty table should be closer to 'normality' ('to belong more to the world') than owning and operating a garage.<sup>50</sup> This is because it is not a question of certain activities being inherently normal; rather their 'normality' is wholly dependent not on their enactment but on how they are interpreted. This is revealed in Andrew's desire to leave home in 'Andrew':

It's natural when you're young to want to go away; he would say to himself, but it did not help; he always felt that his own desire to escape was different from that of others. ... [He had an] inner conviction that his going away was like no other going away in the world, a certainty that he found impossible to dislodge. He was right, of course, but from an early age his life had been devoted to his struggle to rid himself of his feeling of uniqueness.<sup>51</sup>

This feeling of 'uniqueness' is, paradoxically, the only link between the inhabitants of Jane Bowles's universe. It is not one of exalted exclusiveness (as that felt by Mary Butts's figures); rather it involves a sense of exclusion and isolation which echoes across all of Jane Bowles's writing. Nor is it the case that the sense of multiple isolation occurs only within the narrative's parergon as the reader's potential understanding of each inhabitant is repeatedly frustrated and disoriented by the narrator's random yet authoritative sanction of an inhabitant's sense of uniqueness and isolation ('he was right, of course'), whilst providing no justification or explanation for this occasional switch from outward depiction or statement of Andrew's feelings to collusion with them by mere affirmation of their validity. The

---

50. See 'Going to Massachusetts', pp.210-211.

51. 'Andrew', p.186.

expression 'of course' (and its synonym 'naturally' often used by Jane Bowles) is the linguistic equivalent of the constantly mentioned but absent 'normality' which her inhabitants perceive outside themselves but which they can never quite inhabit, as it implies universal consensus by appeal to some assumed common standard whilst usually supporting a statement which is the exact opposite of self-evident. There is a sense in which Jane Bowles uses the expressions 'of course' and 'naturally' in the same way as she uses the term 'ossir' in her letters. 'Ossir', explains Millicent Dillon is 'a word used frequently in Jane's mother's family (of Hungarian origin?). It implies the denial of what's just been said'.<sup>52</sup> Nothing is fixed in Jane Bowles's work; this holds true for the narrator as much as it does for the inhabitants since even when the narrator explicitly interrupts the narrative to consolidate a particular inhabitant's perception, her collusion shares the inhabitant's quality of emphaticness but also remains, ultimately, as unreliable. The continual shifting effect which Jane Bowles aimed at in all her work is illustrated in her description of a never completed play which she began in December 1954. 'She had in mind, she told Paul, a drawing-room comedy with drawing-room conversation, that would not be a drawing-room comedy at all'.<sup>53</sup> Naturally. The lack of overall authority invested in Jane Bowles's narrator is highlighted in the following extract from 'Laura and Sally'. Just as we think that we have discovered a set of perceptions which have been sanctioned by the narrator and hence form a central pivot around which others can be compared and judged, the sanction itself loses its force by means of a qualification, so that this brief sense of certainty slips away. In this extract the narrator tells us of Laura how

---

52. Selected Letters, p.31; for Jane Bowles's use of the word 'ossir' see also pp.40, 48, 75, 239.

53. Dillon, p.260.

In moments of stress she was apt to see connections between her intimate world and the actions of other people, as if the adverse behaviour of others were dependent at least indirectly upon an earlier wrong decision concerning a private matter of her own. She realized the idiocy of such reasoning but at the same time thought that everyone felt that way without noticing it. Certainly nothing was so personal to her as this way of being. In fact it was impossible for her to give it up.

Even so, to witness the shock Berenice had suffered as a result of her own careless remark was to Laura the worst possible punishment, because in the face of Berenice's distress, which overwhelmed this girl so naturally that any question or doubt as to whether she could choose or not choose to overlook her feelings was unthinkable, Laura's own feelings against herself assumed a grotesque and petty quality which made her blush. She continued, however, even though humiliated, to suspect that had she not eaten raviolis [with Berenice, Rita and Sally] but really gone walking instead through the woods, she would not have found herself faced by the present quandary. How she was able to feel herself to be grotesque and comical, and at the same time so important that the outcome of her decisions controlled somehow the behaviour of people not in the least connected to it, was a puzzle to Laura herself.

She saw all these things and even more, for she was educated enough in psychological matters to conceive that the source of Berenice's own violent reaction to her remarks about hating her mother lay not in what she, Laura, had decided earlier on the bottom step, or even in Berenice's genuine moral indignation, but in a hatred that Berenice might have felt and concealed from herself, at one time or another for her own mother. Laura knew about such things but that did not help her one bit when she was in the midst of a calamity.

With all these details very clear in her mind, still (like a person who jumps deliberately into a pit) she was falling deeper and deeper by the second into such an abject terror of Berenice's resentment that she longed for forgiveness more than anything in the world. She appealed to Rita, hoping that after all she had imagined something amiss in Berenice's behaviour while actually everything was really just as it had been a little while before. She often enough imagined that she had horrified a friend when nothing of the kind had occurred.<sup>54</sup>

In this extract the narrator is describing Laura's interpretation of a conversation which has just taken place between herself and Berenice.

---

54. 'Laura and Sally', p.29.

First we are told of Laura's sense that the behaviour of others is somehow indirectly determined by decisions she makes in entirely unconnected private matters; in this case what she described earlier was 'a silly struggle over two silly alternatives - to eat ravioli or to walk in the woods'.<sup>55</sup> Whilst she is conscious of the 'idiocy of such reasoning', it dominates her at times of 'calamity'. She thinks that what distinguishes her from 'everyone' is not this kind of reasoning since 'everyone felt that way', but the fact that she is aware of it whilst everyone else 'felt that way without noticing it'. Whilst this briefly gives the reader the impression of Laura's superiority, the narrator immediately undermines this by maintaining that it is in fact an idiosyncrasy of Laura's. Thus as soon as some kind of hierarchy within a universal characteristic is raised - albeit temporarily - it is promptly brought into doubt. This is why it is not possible to centre one's reading either in any single person within the narrative or the narrator herself. The shift or disparity between them continues as Laura's obvious sophistication is highlighted by her psychological assessment of Berenice's 'violent reaction to her remarks about hating her mother'. Laura realises that Berenice's reaction is determined not by her earlier entirely distinct moral dilemma nor because Berenice is shocked that Laura should have hated her mother, but rather because it points to 'a hatred Berenice might have felt and concealed from herself ... towards her own mother'. Here Laura's grasp of human psychology and greater selfconsciousness and self-knowledge (as compared to Berenice) is clearly illustrated. This would seem to support her sense of superiority and counter the narrator's qualifications, yet just as she is unable to discard her belief that 'the outcome of her decisions controlled somehow the behaviour of people not in the least connected to it' - although she

---

55. 'Laura and Sally', p.27.

herself concedes that such reasoning is idiotic - so her knowledge of human psychology 'did not help her one bit' in times of stress when it would be of most use. The dislocation between what she knows to be true and what she feels to be true so that neither is dominant enough to help her out of a quandary is encapsulated in the metaphor used by the narrator: Laura '(like a person who jumps deliberately into a pit) ... was falling deeper and deeper into ... an abject terror'. By describing Laura as 'falling' with what is syntactically a metaphor ('like') but which is semantically an opposite action to falling ('jumping deliberately') the narrator is neither presenting Laura as wholly the victim nor conversely entirely the creator of her psychological confusion. Rather, by implying that both characteristics apply, the description effects empathy for this vacillating condition instead of either condemnation or sanction. One critic has commented on Jane Bowles's 'non-judgemental' portrayal of sexual relationships in her work; in fact this non-judgemental quality is present in every aspect of her work, not only the sexual domain.<sup>56</sup>

Even at the very peak of her quandary Laura herself is unable to decide whether she has not 'after all ... imagined something amiss in Berenice's behaviour'. All we as readers know (like Laura) is that Berenice had decided abruptly to leave the room. Yet when Laura seeks clarification from outside, from Rita, Berenice's sister who was also present at the exchange between Laura and Berenice, we are brought no closer to any solid certainty:

'Rita,' Laura pleaded, 'why do you think she [Berenice] went away?'

Rita shrugged her shoulders. She never paid much attention to Berenice's comings and goings, and had actually scarcely taken notice when Berenice left the table. Rita yawned and got up.<sup>57</sup>

---

56. Philip French, 'Writing at the Edge of Danger', Observer Magazine (9 March, 1986), p.25.

57. 'Laura and Sally', p.29.

Thus Laura's sense of calamity cannot be resolved by appeal to a witness, since Rita's reaction leaves her as uncertain as ever as to whether she has or has not offended Berenice. This lack of resolution whereby the situation and Laura herself remain a 'puzzle' is all the more disorienting because so much information has been provided without bringing us any closer to certainty about them. In fact certainties of any sort are, if present at all, only temporary as they are immediately qualified at every level - in this instance: within the thought process of one of the participants (Laura); by the fact that such a certainty goes unnoticed by another person who was present (Rita); and by the narrator herself who never provides an overview through which these disparities are made to cohere. Ever-shifting, the text presents a 'landscape without depth' like that of a Magritte trompe-l'oeil painting where there exist simultaneously both orderliness - the neatness of the textual surface of Jane Bowles's prose has the same pristine finish as Magritte's canvases - and a lack of internal coherence. Nor, furthermore do the style and content act in unison for just as in Magritte's La Condition Humaine I (1933) we can see but cannot acknowledge the presence of the view through the window and the landscape painting on the easel at the same time, so the style and content of Jane Bowles's work cohabit but do not cohere to produce a sense of unity. Rather, like a gestalt structure they act as 'image' and 'ground', each distinct only if the other is ignored temporarily since they are neither part of each other, nor do they form together a (third) greater whole. This is because whilst acting in identical ways (hence Lougy's description of the same quality embodied in the style and the content, see above p.211) the lack of anything other than the briefest collusion between narrator and inhabitant of Jane Bowles's fiction mirrors the relationship both between the people within her narratives as well as that between her people and the reader, ie.

the enactment or 'reproduction' (in Baudrillard's sense) of the same quality of isolation and separation which is translated in terms of plot and style into a sense of distance and unpredictability. As John Ashbery pointed out: 'it is impossible to deduce the end of a sentence from its beginning, or a paragraph from the one that preceded it, or how one of the characters will reply to another'.<sup>58</sup> This unpredictability is occasionally commented upon within Jane Bowles's narratives, as for example in the following exchange in Two Serious Ladies between Miss Goering and Andy, when she returns to the mainland to visit him for a second time:

'Hello,', he [Andy] said. 'Did you decide to come over to the mainland again?'  
'Why, certainly,' said Miss Goering. 'I told you I would.'  
'Well,' said Andy, 'I've learned in the course of years that it doesn't mean a thing.' (TSL, p.165)

From the continuation of the quotation given above of Fiedler's description of what he calls the 'negative novel' (see above, p.212), we can see that the difference between Jane Bowles's prose and Fiedler's characterisation lies in a qualitatively divergent relationship between style and content:

Rapid shifts of view; dislocation of syntax and logic; a vividness more like hallucination than photography; the use of parody and slapstick at moments of great seriousness; the exploitation of puns and the vaudeville of dreams - these experiments characterise much of the best work of recent decades ... [including] Joyce's Ulysses ... and Djuna Barnes' Nightwood.<sup>59</sup>

Fiedler's characterisation of a 'truly contemporary' text is one in which the world 'not only absurd but also chaotic and fragmentary' is

---

58. Ashbery, p.30.

59. Fiedler, p.19.



reflected both in terms of content and style resulting in: a fragmented plot involving 'rapid shifts in point of view'; the subversion of an orderly realist setting through a 'vividness [more like] hallucination and the vaudeville of dreams ... than photography'; the undermining of order in the very medium through which plot and setting are conveyed by 'experiments' with language and style. The 'dislocation of syntax and logic ... and the exploitation of puns' together with the 'use of parody and slapstick at moments of great seriousness' all combine to represent the chaotic, fragmentary and absurd state of the world. Whilst, like Bradbury, Fiedler is specifically considering twentieth century prose, his lack of mention of Jane Bowles's work is due (as with Bradbury) to the fact that it does not satisfy his general characterisation of the relationship between style and content. For as we have seen above where Jane Bowles's style is compared to that of Burroughs's, hers is not an explicitly experimental style involving the dislocation of syntax.

It is of course the case that Jane Bowles is far from being the only writer whose presentation of reality as involving isolation because it is multiple rather than a single shared entity does not disrupt syntax as can be seen in the work of contemporaries such as Paul Bowles, James Purdy, Donald Windham and Samuel Beckett. Yet what sets Jane Bowles's work apart is the lack of unification between setting, narrative voice and plot, whereby a coherent portrayal of isolation is built up. The following detailed comparison between aspects of the work of Paul Bowles and Jane Bowles illustrates the qualitative difference between their work which revolves around their respective use of landscape and narrative voice. Their mutual interest in and respect for each other's work and the fact that the setting for much of their narratives is the same makes such a comparison particularly pertinent.

(iii)

Jane Bowles's work has been criticised for failing in its effect because 'to be in a perpetual hallucination is scarcely to exist at all; expressionist fantasy ... is most effective when welded to a secure understanding of the reality under satire, or what is 'around' one as well as within one'.<sup>60</sup> Lougy makes the same point but considers it a positive feature of Jane Bowles's prose, declaring:

One notices in her fiction the absence of a vision grounded within a particular social or cultural context, such as we find, for example, in her contemporaries like Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers with their southern sin-haunted figures or Eudora Welty and her vision of the American mid-west and its people. ... Rather, her landscapes are more like those found in medieval morality plays or the landscape of Samuel Beckett and Kafka [:] spatial limits ...<sup>61</sup>

Lougy specifically contrasts Jane Bowles's settings to the kind of writers whose work is characterised and explored by Bradbury as having 'a distinct history, ideology and cast of mind'. Instead her 'landscapes' or 'spatial limits' appear to resemble more closely Fiedler's description of a 'vividness [consisting more of] hallucination and the vaudeville of dreams ... than photography'. Indeed in Bright Book of Life Kazin goes further, maintaining that the 'world' of Jane Bowles's Two Serious Ladies never attains any resemblance of a recognisable reality but exists rather as 'an inconsequential background ... a series of farcically tenuous stage sets - islands, country estates, tropic bordellos. These are cities not on any map, streets that do not lead into each other, islands that are unaccountable' (Kazin's emphasis).<sup>62</sup> Kazin attributes the lack of impact of Two Serious Ladies's settings (his description evokes the

---

60. Wagner, p.494.

61. Lougy, pp.157-158.

62. Kazin, p.177.

shifting insubstantiality of Djuna Barnes's Nightwood or Arthur Symons's Spiritual Adventures) to the fact that 'the prevailing strangeness and unconnectedness of these women makes each of them a presence which just bulks everything else'.<sup>62</sup> Yet whilst it is true that the 'presence' of the inhabitants is the dominant feature of Jane Bowles's work, it is not the case that the relative lack of prominence of the settings is due to their irreality. This characterisation reveals, rather, a reading which does not examine the landscapes of her fiction closely enough. For if we consider Two Serious Ladies in detail, it can be seen that unlike absurd fiction - to which Two Serious Ladies has been mistakenly compared - this narrative defies and undermines the logic of its conventionally realistic landscape whilst still simulating it. One of its very first reviewers pointed out that Jane Bowles's 'world ... is an almost frighteningly fantastic one - the more so because its outward lineaments are so natural and normal, because their background is so soberly realistic' (my emphases).<sup>63</sup> Francine du Plessix Gray makes the same point in more detail: 'Mrs Bowles's oeuvre is all the more unique because of its Grand Guignol hilarity, its constant surprises and a blend of realism and grotesqueness' with the result that there is in Two Serious Ladies:

an extraordinary tension between the sturdy, super-normal physical world she [Jane Bowles] describes and the gloriously unpredictable, fantastic movements of the eccentric personages who inhabit it. These superstraight middle-aged women going to pot in their ballgowns, leaving home to make war on their inhibitions in landscapes of photographic literature, speak, move and acquiesce to debauchery as they would in the dream freedom of a Delvaux painting. All 'normal' logic of social behaviour is disbanded. Total strangers decide to move into one another's houses after their first cup of tea together ...<sup>64</sup>

---

63. Walton, p.14.

64. Francine du Plessix Gray, 'The Literary View', New York Times Book Review (19 February 1978), pp.3, 28 ; reprinted as 'Introduction' to Two Serious Ladies (London, 1984).

Far from not recognising 'what is around one', the context of Two Serious Ladies is as du Plessix Gray points out, a 'sturdy, supernormal physical world' involving 'landscapes of photographic literalness'. Indeed, there are several passages of description in Two Serious Ladies which situate the 'personages' (du Plessix Gray's term) by the sea, in the streets of Panama City and in the inside of several bars, hotels, houses and flats. It is precisely because the site is recognisable that Dillon is able to appeal to the autobiographical character of the writing as she locates the unnamed island and mainland town of Miss Goering's wanderings as Staten Island and New Jersey. Nor is she the first critic to do this as a 1978 review points to the presence of recognisable landscapes in Two Serious Ladies from:

the section of the book located in Panama [which] is energized by postcard-garish splotches of local colour [to the] greyer, more monotone tints [in which Jane Bowles] catches the desolate meanness of urban landscapes in what is presumably Manhattan and Staten Island. The whole has a recognisable downhome USA-on-the-move-and-on-the-sprawl character - tourists, bums, dreary bars, seedy hotels, hustlers, big deals and little deals, lost ladies.<sup>65</sup>

Superficially at least, Two Serious Ladies does occur within the world in a series of geographical locations having much more physical presence than the chimeric descriptions of Paris and New York in Djuna Barnes's Nightwood (1935) or the spareness of Samuel Beckett's interiors and anonymous coastlines, and yet far less than the detailed portrayal of South and Central America in Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano (1947) or Paul Bowles's Up Above the World (1965). Yet the contrast implied in the above extract between the 'postcard-garish splotches of local colour in Panama' and the 'greyer, more monotone tints' of Manhattan and Staten Island is slightly misleading in that whilst Panama would automatically be considered the more exotic setting of the two, no such

---

65. Haynes, p.35.

comparison occurs at the level of disorientation and surprise when reading the two intercalated narratives. We may be introduced to papayas, guacamayas and 'junglescapes' in Panama which have no obvious equivalents in the bland conurbations of North America (although the outlandish occurs in the remembered figure of Belle, a girl who has neither arms nor legs); yet for all that, the narrative centred around Mrs Copperfield is by no means more strange or bizarre than that centred around Miss Goering. This is because there is no direct consonance or correlation between the kinds of settings Jane Bowles uses in her work and the 'mindsapes' of their inhabitants. The same sense of separation and disjunction which characterises the relationships between the 'provisional guests' (Kazin) themselves, exists between the guests and the world(s) they pass through. Indeed it is this lack of interaction or mirroring which provides one of the most fundamental points of contrast between the work of Jane Bowles and Paul Bowles.

Early in Paul Bowles's Up Above the World (1965) the Slades, two Americans who are on their honeymoon through South America, become acquainted with Mrs Rainmantle. Their diverging reactions to her symbolise the fundamental lack of communication between them which will, indirectly, lead to their deaths:

'I think she's rather touching,' Mrs Slade murmured pensively, looking after the retreating figure [of Mrs Rainmantle]. Dr. Slade did not reply. He stared out across the still harbour, and there came to him the idea that it was sometimes possible for two people who were close to one another to be very separate indeed. His eye followed the fuzzy line of the forested mountains above the landlocked harbour, and the word touching took on an unaccustomed dimension for him as he pursued the course of his thought. <sup>66</sup>

---

66. Paul Bowles, Up Above the World (London, 1984), p.15.

Close and yet very separate indeed. The gulf or void which this implies between himself and Mrs Slade is one which Dr Slade does not attempt to confront by discussing it with his wife. On the contrary, far from attempting to verbalise and hence perhaps reduce the gulf through sharing his sense of it with Mrs Slade, Dr Slade does not even consider the 'distance' between them as constituting a personal problem. Instead, he gazes silently at the landscape whilst depersonalising the issue, regarding it as one which affects not himself but 'people'. By looking out and following the contingent line of the landscape of the world he considers the word 'touching' as a concept, having resonances in the world but not in some internal landscape. The closest Dr Slade can come to introspection is the admission of an 'unaccustomed, disturbing dimension' to the word as uttered by his wife, yet without seriously considering its implications. Importantly Mrs Slade had said it not so much to her husband as for herself. It is, after all, 'murmured pensively' as though an aside or comment to herself. She, unlike Dr Slade is acutely introspective. The double entendre of the word 'touching' (ie. to find someone 'touching' and to be 'in touch' with someone); the different reactions it represents; the fact that the situation causes them to turn away from each other to their own thoughts - all this reveals that the Slades are out of touch with one another. This is highlighted by their lack of sexual contact. Whilst a sexual relationship is not for Paul Bowles the ultimate form of communication, its absence from most of the relationships portrayed by him in his works increases the sense of isolation embodied in his characters.

Dr Slade's relationship to his wife is explained early on in Up Above the World: 'She could be my daughter or even my granddaughter for that matter' he says of Mrs Slade revealing the huge age difference between them.<sup>67</sup> His resulting sense of protectiveness towards his wife

---

67. Up Above the World, p.16.

is influenced also by the fact that 'in his experience, the world was a rational place'.<sup>68</sup> When worried or disturbed by anything (as is the case in the extract quoted above) Dr Slade's conviction as to a rational explanation for everything combined with his desire to 'protect' his wife lead him to remain silent. Only silence, therefore, follows the above passage, a silence which is emphasised by its occurring at the end of a chapter. There will be no discussion between Dr Slade and his wife.

Unable to intercede we the readers can only watch the damaging effects of Dr Slade's paternal rationalism on his wife, witnessing also the irony that she can read his character far more astutely than he can understand hers. For whilst Mrs Slade's reluctance to articulate her thoughts is as great as her husband's, her reasons for remaining silent reveal their diverging attitudes to language:

Seeing that Dr Slade was watching her, she [Mrs Slade] pretended to have a cinder in her eye. If he suspected any preoccupation in her, he would end by prying it all out; it was his belief that what he called negative emotions immediately ceased to exist once they have been exposed to the blazing light of reason. He would force her to put it into words, and words in this case were not what she wanted: they would only make it all the more real.<sup>69</sup>

Dr Slade believes in the therapy of a simplified Freudian psychoanalysis. Language is for him opaque, a straightforward tool, his therapeutic theory based on a dual premise. First, that a preoccupation can be put into words, and second, that the act of doing so automatically dispels the preoccupation. (It is not, as we have already seen, a therapy he exercises on himself.) Mrs Slade, whom Dr Slade feels the need to protect, is well able to prevent herself from undergoing any unwished-for psychoanalysis, not out of fear of Dr Slade, but rather out of disagreement with its results. To put her preoccupation into words

---

68. Up Above the World, p.14.

69. Up Above the World, p.42.

will not, as Dr Slade believes, cause it to disappear. On the contrary, she is afraid that 'words ... will only make it all the more real'. We are told previously that haunted by what she has seen during the night she feels ill the next morning: 'If I can throw it up, she thought. But it was as impossible as trying to retch up the night; the night was still there and the fiery sourness inside her'.<sup>70</sup> Thus for Mrs Slade it is as inconceivable to consider removing memory by the physical action of retching as it is to eject it by putting it into words. This qualitative separation between the physical (retching) and the non-physical (words, memories) perceived by Mrs Slade is one which she realises does not exist for her husband, who sees no distinction between mental and physical discomfort. Her recognition of this is illustrated in the passage quoted above: she knows that Dr Slade will 'pry out' any 'preoccupation' she might have as soon as he sees signs of one. Thus in order to conceal her fears, she substitutes a physical discomfort for them by pretending to have a cinder in her eye. In this way she enables Dr Slade to satisfy his need to 'protect' her by providing him with a physical symptom to pry out whilst safeguarding herself against his 'prying ... out' words and memories from her, since she knows that this would only exacerbate her inner discomfort. It is the fact that the same verb - to pry out - can be used in the context of the non-physical preoccupation as well as the physical discomfort that enables Mrs Slade to deflect Dr Slade's attention from her fears. What results is silence, mutually desired, as Dr Slade refuses to articulate his problems out of a misguided protectiveness for his wife (and himself) whilst Mrs Slade stays mute out of a fear of the problems themselves. This has fatal repercussions as these two Americans have unknowingly become entangled in a murder, that of Mrs Rainmantle whom Mrs Slade befriends on the boat primarily in order to avoid having

---

70. Up Above the World, p.49.



to be alone with her husband. This desire to keep her distance results in Mrs Slade offering to share her hotel room with Mrs Rainmantle whilst Dr Slade is forced (through his unquestioning obedience to social etiquette) to occupy the more uncomfortable room which had been allocated to Mrs Rainmantle. During the night Mrs Rainmantle is murdered on the orders of her son. Mrs Slade is only half-aware of this and the early morning departure of the Slades prevent them from being present during the burning-down of the hotel which is undertaken to hide the murder. Mrs Slade says nothing of the bad night to Dr Slade although it haunts her (see quote above) and similarly Dr Slade who reads of Mrs Rainmantle's death 'through fire', keeps the news hidden from his wife in order to protect her. Once in Latin America they are 'befriended' by a wealthy Latin American, Mr Soto. Unknown to the Slades, Mr Soto is the murderous son of Mrs Rainmantle who, convinced that the Slades know more than they do, slowly traps them and eventually kills them. His initial action is to drug them both leaving them with memory blanks. The Slades' mutual need yet disinclination to discuss these blanks means that they are never able to overcome them, Dr Slade reassuring himself that in time 'they would be able to put together the jumbled pieces'.<sup>71</sup> Yet they never have/take the time and therefore deny themselves the only possible way out of the trap laid for them by Mr Soto, who is able to manipulate them easily because of this self-imposed reluctance to communicate with one another.

In terms of the plot of Up Above the World, the Slades are innocent tourists, who become the victims of having been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Their inexorable nightmare is presented by Paul Bowles, however, as partly of their own making - had Mrs Slade not insisted on becoming acquainted with Mrs Rainmantle against Dr Slade's wishes, they

---

71. Up Above the World, p.155.

would not have been felt a threat by Mr Soto after he has his mother murdered. Also, once they are involved, they are incapable of extricating themselves. To that extent the plot itself is incidental, symbolic. The Slades allow themselves to be destroyed through their passivity to external events. Representative of the self-destructive nature of Western (American) civilisation, according to Paul Bowles, this married couple on their honeymoon (the time when traditionally couples are alone together) symbolise the very opposite of unity. Too busy defending themselves against their idiosyncracies and what they perceive to be the potential threat of the other within their private microcosm, they leave themselves vulnerable to the dangers of the outside world which destroys them.

The unfamiliarity of the foreign setting of Up Above the World highlights the lack of communication between the Slades. For significantly Dr Slade responds only to foreignness when he perceives it in the landscape - he is aware of its physical dangers and receptive to its unfamiliar beauty. However, as soon as people within it begin to resemble familiar figures, he is unreceptive to possible risks and consequently easily duped; hence he submits to Mr Soto's control because of an inability to judge him other than by appearances. Mr Soto appears westernised and thus Dr Slade reacts to him as though he were Western. Because of his general uncommunicativeness Dr Slade remains fairly aloof but, importantly, he takes Mr Soto at his word. Thus when the Slades have been drugged Dr Slade is all too willing to accept Mr Soto's explanation that they have been affected by the high altitude. The explanation is rational and credible and there are no reasons to disbelieve it; once Dr Slade's critical criteria have been satisfied he is content to accept Mr Soto's offer to 'nurse' Mrs Slade and himself back to health. Preferring to trust this stranger's word because it is

reasonable rather than the intuitive fears of his young wife, Dr Slade's own lack of imagination and innate harmlessness prevent him from considering Mr Soto as anything other than the polished civilised surface he presents. Even at the moment of truth Dr Slade (the irony of his being after all, a doctor and yet unable to save himself is emphasised by Paul Bowles) is unaware of the truth as his drugged body is thrown off a cliff. His refusal to delve beneath the surface - the visual landscape - leads him to be tossed ruthlessly away into that landscape. And only we as readers know why.

For Up Above the World presents us with the dénouement of a situation in which the Slades are visibly doomed. We can only watch helplessly as these two characters with all the rigour of Greek Tragedy live out their inevitable fate. By placing us up and above the framework of the narrative (we are, after all, 'up above the world') Paul Bowles emphasises also a central feature of Greek Tragedy other than its inevitability: Oedipus Rex is, after all, as much detective story as tragedy. Thus we watch and learn of the Slades' fate as they experience it, for much of the explanation for their death is reserved for us as readers as we are shown how the Slades' lack of communication indirectly brings about and subsequently facilitates the murderer's task. Nor is the technique which Paul Bowles uses to distance the reader from the characters that of the usual 'who dunnit' detective narrative; rather, the riddle-like labyrinth of the tale is more sphinx-like than puzzle-like as Up Above the World provides not an escapist soluble entertainment but a severe presentation of human limitations in a dangerous world. Far from being one safe context, the work is rigidly split - first into the world of the Slades on the one hand and the world of Mr Soto and his companion, Luchita on the other, and then split again into the worlds of the various characters each acting out of personal motives which are made clear to the

reader but not to each other. Thus Luchita will do anything which will increase the chances of Mr Soto paying for her to go to Paris; Mr Soto organises the deaths of the Slades in order to conceal the murder of his mother; his accomplice, Thorny acts out of greed; whilst the Slades' actions are governed by a desire to enjoy themselves (!) and protect themselves from one another. All these worlds overlap but they do not 'touch' one another.

The relativistic nature of reality as exemplified by Up Above the World is not confined to this work but is fundamental to Paul Bowles's world view. In an interview in 1975 Paul Bowles declared 'in any case there is not one meaning to life. There should be as many meanings as there are individuals - you assign meaning to life. If you don't assign it, then clearly it has none whatever'.<sup>72</sup> That life has only one meaning which each person imposes on it is the basis of Existentialism as conceived by Sartre. Bowles has been considered to be an existentialist; yet whilst Sartre sees the fundamental non-meaning of life as positive in that it provides the individual with the freedom to choose (with all the attendant responsibilities), Paul Bowles's existentialism is rather more negative. For him, the blank presented by life whilst essentially irremediable, is an unhappy truth. It engenders a relativistic world or set of worlds and Paul Bowles is concerned in his fiction to present what is rather than what ought to be or could be, but his is an essentially religious temperament trapped inside an existentialist consciousness so that in contrast to Jane Bowles's works his is deep-space writing.

Paul Bowles's conviction which he shares with Jane Bowles that it is impossible to transcend one's relativism is incorporated in Mrs Slade, who whilst more perceptive than her husband is no more able to save

---

72. Daniel Halpern, 'Interview with Paul Bowles', Triquarterly 33 (Spring, 1975), p.169.

herself than he is. This is because she believes that communication is illusory and therefore unattainable. When she finds Dr Slade unconscious, her search for Mr Soto, initially to find a doctor, turns into a conversation with him which is cut short only because she is cold. She returns to the bedroom in search of a shawl:

and as she hurried along ... she found herself marvelling that she should be able to go on talking while Taylor [Dr Slade] lay unconscious. It seemed to help prove the truth of a suspicion she had long entertained: people could not really get very close to one another; they merely imagined they were close.<sup>73</sup>

Mrs Slade's view of her relationship to Dr Slade (again perceived by her as representative and not exceptional) mirrors that of Dr Slade's quoted above (see p.229 ). The journey which should have brought them closer to one another leads them to separate death because they remain on parallel but never communicating (ie. 'touching') paths.

This theme of incommunicability which Paul Bowles explores in all his work is for him a Western (American) neurosis and is experienced therefore by almost all his characters. His works explore this theme which is highlighted by a generally non-Western setting, often Latin American but usually Moghrebin.

Thus in his first novel The Sheltering Sky (1949) the Moresbys like the Slades are unable to communicate either verbally or sexually. The important difference between the two couples is that unlike the Slades, Kit and Port Moresby are conscious of the harm this inability to communicate is doing them to the extent that their trip to Algeria is a tacit attempt to reestablish contact with one another. However, when they seemingly are on the brink of doing so, Port Moresby dies of typhoid. Kit's reaction to his death is to walk literally 'into the blue', into

---

73. Up Above the World, p.178.

the non-verbal Sahara Desert. From the beginning of the narrative Kit's fear of the uncertain nature of life has made her long to give up control or responsibility for herself. Her fear and her sense of responsibility reside in her consciousness and thus for her, to remove consciousness is to remove the fear. For both Kit Moresby and Mrs Slade entrance to their everpresent consciousness is through language. Thus, as quoted earlier, Mrs Slade does not want to articulate (ie. bring into the world) an inner fear because it will make it more forcefully present to her. Similarly Kit's flight into the desert is a flight from herself, from a linguistic world she can all too easily see through. Hence her apprehension at her imminent return from the desert existence to linguistic consciousness. 'In another minute life would be painful. The words were coming back and inside the wrappings of the words there would be thoughts lying there. The hot sun would shrivel them. They must be kept inside in the dark'.<sup>74</sup>

In another of his novels, The Spider's House (1957) Paul Bowles has the American John Stenham explain the crucial distinction between the Arab and Western civilisations. It is an explanation which sheds light on how Kit could consider that by entering the Arab (desert) culture, she might escape (her) consciousness. John Stenham says of Arab culture that:

It's a culture of 'and then' rather than one of 'because' like ours. ... In their minds one thing doesn't come from another thing. Nothing is the result of anything. Everything merely is, and no questions asked. Even the language they speak is constructed around that. Each fact is separate, and one never depends on the other. Everything's explained by the constant intervention of Allah. And whatever happens had to happen, and was decreed at the beginning of time, and there's no way even of imagining how anything could have been different from what it is.<sup>75</sup>

---

74. Paul Bowles, The Sheltering Sky (London, 1949), pp.289-290.

75. Paul Bowles, The Spider's House (London, 1957), p.182.

Kit Moresby is trying to escape from consciousness ('because') to a non-conscious ('and then') existence. Since consciousness and language are inextricable, the way out lies in entering a culture where (her) language is redundant. In this way she loses consciousness. The desert sun is appealing because its blank heat prevents thought. When she learns the desert Arab's language it does not awaken her consciousness because its construction is alien to Western thought patterns. Only when she is rejected sexually by the Arab, Belqassim, does she return to her former social world. But once brought back, Kit knows that it can only restore pain and immediately tries to run away again. The futility of her action because of the basic inability to transcend consciousness (and stay alive and sane) is conveyed in the last sentence of The Sheltering Sky where as Kit disappears, we follow her bus along its route until Paul Bowles's final phrase: 'it was the end of the line'. This is as far as we are able to follow Kit; just as she has nowhere to go, so we the readers are likewise left suspended, unable to know more because Paul Bowles denies us a sense of completion or conclusion, by stopping his narrative. 'The end of the line' is literally, linguistically the last line of the book - it is also the last glimpse we have of Kit as she moves away from us. Words which enabled us to accede to the space of The Sheltering Sky now, by their cessation, remind us that we cannot stay there; that we have been reading into that world and that it cannot be [re]solved.

It is Jane Bowles who focusses on the importance of isolation in Paul Bowles's work, commenting on how it differs from her kind of isolation and how the difference explained his success as a writer whilst she remained still largely unknown. She writes to him in 1947:

You have always been a truly isolated person so that everything you write will be good because it will be true which is not so in my case because my kind of

isolation is an accident and not inevitable. ...  
Not only is your isolation a positive and true one  
but when you do write from it you immediately  
receive recognition because what you write is in  
true relation to yourself which is always  
recognisable to the world outside. With me who  
knows? <sup>76</sup>

That Paul Bowles has always felt isolated is a fact he himself declares in his autobiography Without Stopping (1972) and a thinly veiled autobiographical short story based on his childhood, 'The Frozen Fields' (1957). Thus Jane Bowles's comment does not come only from her view of Paul Bowles. Yet by centring her examination of his work around his feeling of isolation she provides the key to both the style and content of his writing. As I have shown, a dominant theme in Paul Bowles's fiction is that of incommunicability which is closely related to a feeling of isolation. As far as the works are concerned the characters' inability to communicate comes out of their isolation and not vice versa. Indeed so fundamentally isolationist is his fiction that the English critic, Eric Mottram, feels the need to defend the reader from such a non-social perspective. 'It is absurd,' he declares. 'Lonely tunnelling into self without limits, authority or sense beyond obsession, may be stoic but it is futile. The self has to be a part of a sociality if it is not to move rapidly toward a kind of barbaric puppetry, Paul Bowles's special area of consideration'.<sup>77</sup> Yet whether or not it is 'acceptable', Paul Bowles's fiction is powerful precisely because what it depicts is recognisable. Regardless of whether we like what we see, we do know where we are and as Jane Bowles pointed out literary recognition is ultimately given to a recognisable (albeit disturbing) fictional context.

The particular force of Paul Bowles's writing is due to his 'lucid

---

76. Selected Letters, p.33.

77. Eric Mottram, 'Paul Bowles: Staticity and Terror', The Review of Contemporary Fiction, 2, no. 2 (1982), p.10.



control' (Mottram). As stated above, isolation is presented thematically through the content. Stylistically Paul Bowles's isolation is present in his detachment. He describes himself as 'a registering consciousness and no more' and to read his works is to be aware of an everpresent dispassionate eye (Allah?) above the desert or jungle which hold the comparatively minute human pinpoints whose isolation is reinforced by their insignificance in relation to the landscape.<sup>78</sup> Each character is in his/her own world but each is aware that the separate existences are like single grains of sand to the desert: irrelevant. Their irrelevance is accentuated by the landscape's apparent staticity which defies chronological time. Thus in The Sheltering Sky Kit scans the desert horizon at night only to find that:

The air, doubly still now after the departure of the wind, was like something paralysed. Whichever way she looked, the night's landscape suggested only one thing to her: negation of movement, suspension of continuity.<sup>79</sup>

Later we are told how desert days resemble one another:

The coming of day promises a change; it is only when the day has fully arrived that the watcher suspects it is the same day returned once again - the same day he has been living for a long time, over and over, still blindingly bright and untarnished by time.<sup>80</sup>

An unchanging landscape can both present the suspension of time and more insidiously it can resemble the abandonment of life's changing character which is death. Both are present in Paul Bowles's fiction as his is a writing which is not confessional but dispassionately controlled. Whilst his characters are aware of their powerlessness vis-à-vis the element of chance (inch'allah) within a world which is oblivious to their

---

78. Paul Bowles, Without Stopping (London, 1972), p.53.

79. The Sheltering Sky, p.216.

80. The Sheltering Sky, p.256.

fate, nothing that Paul Bowles introduces into his writing is random or unnecessary. His technique resembles that of Edgar Allan Poe (whom he admires) who maintained of 'The Raven' that 'no one point in its composition is referrible either to accident or to intuition - the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem'.<sup>81</sup>

As with Poe's tales we can find in the precision of Paul Bowles's writing a powerful illustration in contrast to Jane Bowles's work of the coherence of style and content. If his presentation of a character's journey to death is ruthless, this is because the Exotic has been stripped of its usual associations with Escapism. What he provides in terms of atmosphere is crucial to the work and by no means merely the background against which the characters act. Rather, the detached, isolated eye depicts the simultaneous beauty and indifference of the landscape as the characters react to it and within it. The result is an extraordinarily pure and clear style as we can simultaneously 'see' the point made by his fiction as well as the landscapes within which his themes are developed. A powerful example of the interaction between mental and physical landscapes can be found in The Sheltering Sky where Port Moresby reflects on his almost 'feverish' delight at travelling into the unknown:

The idea that at each successive moment he was deeper into the Sahara than he had been the moment before, that he was leaving behind all familiar things, this constant consideration kept him in a state of pleasurable agitation.<sup>82</sup>

As he dies of typhoid, death is symbolised by the same imagery of the journey into the Sahara:

---

81. Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition', Edgar Allan Poe: Viking Portable Library, edited by P. Van Doren Stern (Harmondsworth, 1977), pp.551-552.

82. The Sheltering Sky, p.101.

[Port] was aware of the straight road beneath him. The twisting roads of the past weeks became alien, faded from his memory; it had been a strict undeviating course inland to the desert, and now he was very nearly at the centre.<sup>83</sup>

Thus we can see that the landscape in Paul Bowles's fiction is simultaneously actual and symbolic.

In Without Stopping Paul Bowles wrote that it was after having read Two Serious Ladies in 1941 that he was able to reconsider writing fiction - 'a territory I had considered forever shut to me'.<sup>84</sup> I have discussed the extent to which the perspective of isolation pervades both the style and content of Paul Bowles's work. The importance of Jane Bowles's recognition of the centrality of isolation to Paul Bowles's writing (quoted above, see p.239), is that whilst it postdates the publication of Two Serious Ladies (1943) it actually predates the publication of the bulk of his work (The Sheltering Sky was only published in 1949). Thus Jane Bowles's letter of 1945 reveals the extent to which the two Bowles were concerned with the issue of isolation. It forms in fact the link between them. Their writing, however, is not at all similar. For both, isolation is the starting point and the foundation on which their narratives are predicated, yet their diverging attitudes to isolation produce texts which are not variations of the same basic worldview; rather they are generically different.

I have described Paul Bowles's work as deep-space because whilst depicting isolation both through style and content, and exploring various aspects and consequences of isolated people in an isolating world, there is always a sense of context within and against which such isolation is 'represented' (in Baudrillard's sense). Conceptually, Paul Bowles's

---

83. The Sheltering Sky, p.188.

84. Without Stopping, p.259.

work presents the other side, the reverse of social realism, in that rarely is there a sense of something shared, something positive which is held in common. However, the exclusive quality of his perspective does not prevent him from being a Romantic / deep-space writer. (Indeed in Without Stopping he declares at one point: 'I am a Romantic'<sup>85</sup>.)

Symbolism abounds in his work as I have shown in the correlation between the language applied to the natural landscape and the 'mindscapes' of the characters, and it is this symbolic system which provides the reader with a sense of coherence. Whilst it is the case that, paradoxically, what the characters hold in common is the sense of being excluded and isolated and hence are unable to communicate with one another, Paul Bowles's writing provides us with a deep space into which we move as we read, move into and along the landscapes even as we are held at a distance from the isolated characters.

Jane Bowles once wrote that 'one is never quite totally in the world: it is intolerable to be in the world without a myth'.<sup>86</sup> In Paul Bowles's works the world is presented as having no meaning; it is world in which people construct their own myths or exist without any. This is his conception of the world on which his works are based. There is no doubt or uncertainty here - the world is a dangerous place because of the unending multiplication of meanings within it. The only unalterable fact of existence is one's isolation, and his writing draws its conviction and consequent persuasiveness from the fact, as Jane Bowles pointed out, that Paul Bowles's isolation is a 'true' one. Yet to believe in Nothing is at base no different from believing in Something; in both cases there is belief. Paul Bowles's writing provides the reverse or inverse of Romanticism but not its subversion. His is an original voice but the

---

85. Without Stopping, p.125.

86. Dillon, p.299.

perspective, the space in which he writes is one of depth, inherited from and continuing Romanticism within Modernism.

(iv)

'I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America,' declared the Black Mountain poet, Charles Olson. 'I spell it large because it comes large here. Large and without mercy' (Olson's emphasis).<sup>87</sup> For Olson, space lies at the root of every American's conception of being in the world; it is thus through space, he argues, that the American consciousness can be understood: 'Logic and classification had led civilisation toward man and away from space. Melville went to space to probe and find man'.<sup>88</sup> To understand 'man' Melville wrote about the huge space of the sea and the whale (Moby Dick); similarly Paul Bowles centres his fictions in huge inhuman spaces - not seascapes but the desert with its dissolution of physical and temporal borders. Whilst he has spent most of his adult life away from America, Paul Bowles has been described as 'an American who remembers America as though he never left'.<sup>89</sup> It is by placing American characters in non-American settings that Paul Bowles has repeatedly attacked what he sees as the limitations of the American consciousness as the vastness of the space outside corresponds to the inner isolation. Yet whilst in Paul Bowles's work the physical landscape and setting mould and invade the consciousness of his characters this is not so in Jane Bowles's work; consequently the space is more difficult to identify for as mentioned above the settings of Two Serious Ladies are, whilst recognisable, not

---

87. Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (London, 1967), p.15.

88. Olson, p.18.

89. Paul Metcalf, 'A Journey in Search of Bowles', The Review of Contemporary Fiction, 2, no.2 (1982), p.34.

the dominant feature of the work; both the more distant (culturally) Panama and the more familiar New Jersey settings (for the projected American reader) are equally disorienting. One of the reasons for this is that Jane Bowles's fiction splits the world into a layered space of personal worlds as the narrative's perspective is shifted from an overview to a myopic scale. I use the term 'myopic' advisedly since several comments have been made on Jane Bowles's acute nearsightedness by friends and acquaintances and it is a factor which, I believe, determines the settings of her fiction.<sup>90</sup> For Jane Bowles once declared: 'if I can imagine anything I can write it' and the following anecdote related by Paul Bowles in Without Stopping illustrates how closely her capacity for imagining something and hence being able to include it in her fiction was tied to her being able to 'see' it.<sup>91</sup> During the writing of 'Camp Cataract' Jane Bowles asked Paul Bowles a series of questions about how a particular type of bridge functioned on which Sadie was to stand. Paul Bowles writes how:

We talked for a while about the problem, and I confessed my mystification. 'Why do you have to construct the damned thing?' I demanded. 'Why can't you just say it was there and let it go at that?' She shook her head, 'If I don't know how it was built I can't see it.'

This struck me as incredible. It had never occurred to me that such considerations could enter into the act of writing. Perhaps for the first time I had an inkling of what Jane meant when she remarked, as she often did, that writing was 'so hard'.<sup>92</sup>

Her refusal to include what she could not 'see' in her writing - she once wrote how something 'must become real to me, otherwise I can't write it' - may account for the fact that her fictional settings tend to be on an intimate human scale (especially interiors) rather than involving the

---

90. Dillon, pp.53, 73, 222; Paul Bowles also confirmed the fact of Jane Bowles's myopia when interviewed by myself in July 1987.

91. Selected Letters, p.53

92. Without Stopping, p.287.

huge unpeopled landscapes which dominate Paul Bowles's fiction.<sup>93</sup> For, not surprisingly, Jane Bowles's inability to see very far meant that as Paul Bowles recounts:

She was afraid of anything unknown, of the jungle or the mountains. ... Nature in general horrified her. Her idea of a beautiful landscape was a meadow with cows grazing, no mountains in the distance, nothing else. The sea or storms frightened her. She'd say, 'Yes, yes they're beautiful, but it's terrible. I don't want to look at it, thank you. Let's go inside. It's almost the cocktail hour.' What was unknown, overpowering, not within human measure, geysers, tornadoes, thunderstorms, she hated.<sup>94</sup>

Jane Bowles conveys this fear through Mrs Copperfield's inability to explore the Panamanian jungle with Mr Copperfield once they are at its edge (TSL, p.60) and likewise in the published fragment from her notebooks entitled 'The Iron Table', the conversation between a married couple revolves around the wife's refusal to enter the desert. In the notebooks Jane Bowles wrote that Bozoe Flanner's 'obsessive one-tracked [sic] mind seldom concerned itself with natural phenomena - particularly natural phenomena at a distance' and repeatedly her people are described as 'peering' or 'staring' at one another, a characteristic of myopics.<sup>95</sup> Thus, where Paul Bowles's portrayal of the world could be described as seen through a wide-angled lens (as inferred by some of his titles, eg. The Sheltering Sky; Up Above the World), Jane Bowles's fiction reduces the world to a series of multiple close-ups. The following description of Jane Bowles by a friend applies also to her writing: 'Jane was fundamentally - and beyond anything - interested in human beings and their behaviour. ... She seemed at times to view life through a microscope and therefore see a very small part highly magnified to the

---

93. Selected Letters, p.145.

94. Dillon, p.133.

95. Unpublished notebook 25

exclusion of everything else'.<sup>96</sup> The level of detail in all of Jane Bowles's narratives is indeed microscopic and as the following extracts illustrate, no-one is spared her scrutiny: in 'Everything is Nice' Jeanie notices that Tetum, the old Moslem woman has tiny blue crosses tattooed on her bony cheeks and knuckles.<sup>97</sup> In 'A Day in the Open' we are told how Señor Ramirez 'had just shaved, and the talcum powder was visible on his chin and on his cheeks'.<sup>98</sup> In 'Señorita Córdoba' the narrator describes how

Miss Córdoba's armpits were wet with nervous sweat. She was terribly embarrassed since she had entered the room in her ball dress. She was bending over the English lady with one hand placed flat on the table, and she noticed that the English lady was looking at her bodice, a faint expression of disgust visible in her face, the disgust of an English person who does not like to be near to a foreigner.<sup>99</sup>

In Two Serious Ladies such details abound. We are told how the thirteen year old Christina Goering:

took off her shoes and stockings and remained in a white underslip. This was not a very pleasant sight to behold, because Christina at this time was very heavy and her legs were quite fat. (It was impossible to foresee that she would turn out to be a tall and elegant lady.) (TSL, p.5)

During their first meal together Miss Goering 'looked drearily at Miss Gamelon, who was eating her second helping of chicken cooked in wine. There was a little spot of grease in the corner of her mouth' (TSL, p.11). Miss Goering meets Arnold at a party where she is talking to Mrs Copperfield; our first sight of him is through her eyes:

---

96. Dillon, p.348; Jane Bowles herself confirms this declaring 'My interest is in people. They are mysterious'. Dust jacket, Two Serious Ladies (New York, 1943).

97. 'Everything is Nice', Plain Pleasures, p.31.

98. 'A Day in the Open, Plain Pleasures, p.149.

99. 'Señorita Córdoba', p.19.



for the last second or two she had been staring at a short dark-haired man who was walking heavily across the room in their direction. As he came nearer she saw that he had a pleasant face with wide jowls that protruded on either side but did not hang down as they do on most obese persons. He was dressed in a blue business suit. ... [His] face was ... inscrutable. ... there were some sweat beads on his forehead. (TSL, p.16)

Whilst Mrs Copperfield 'stared at him with distaste', Miss Goering by contrast is not put off by his appearance; instead, her face, we are told, 'suddenly brightened' (TSL, p.17).

In Colon, a detailed description is given of Pacifica, when she is very drunk:

Her hair was pushed up on her head. It looked now somewhat like a wig which is a little too small for the wearer. Her pupils were very large and slightly filmed. There was a large dark spot on the front of her checked skirt, and her breath smelled very strongly of whisky.

Mrs Copperfield who is looking at Pacifica is not in the least critical, but, rather, murmurs, 'it's so lovely' (TSL, p.95). A little later they go to the beach. Pacifica swims naked and when she emerges from the water 'she took tremendous strides and her pubic hair hung between her legs sopping wet. Mrs Copperfield looked a little embarrassed'. When Pacifica persuades her to undress and enter the water Mrs Copperfield is described as:

very white and thin, and her spine was visible all the way along her back. Pacifica looked at her body without saying a word.

'I know I have an awful figure,' said Mrs Copperfield. Pacifica did not answer. 'Come,' she said getting up and putting her arm around Mrs Copperfield's waist. (TSL, p.96).

Such microscopic detail is always 'dead-pan' on Jane Bowles's part; its effect is to bring the reader close up to her people as features such as fat, sweat, stains, breath, dripping pubic hair are tangible and

visible only in intimate contact. Any sense of judgement however, is confined to the inhabitants of her fiction whilst Jane Bowles herself 'reproduces' these very human details without voyeurism, condemnation or satire.

Alongside the mass of minutiae in terms of physical appearance which denotes a myopic narration is the tendency of Jane Bowles's people to be themselves introspective and slightly detached - characteristics which could be caused by a limited field of vision. I mentioned how Rita Cassalotti in 'Laura and Sally' does not even notice Berenice's departure from the room. Elsewhere in the notebooks she is described as 'insensitive' and 'not observant'.<sup>100</sup> Likewise one of the first things we are told about Christina Goering is that she 'had an active inner life that curtailed her observation of whatever went on around her' (TSL, p.3). Intensity in terms of their inner lives is a feature shared by all of Jane Bowles's people who describe themselves and each other as unbalanced fanatics, maniacs and lunatics. Yet what remains incalculable and hence disconcerting and unsettling is what will awaken the interest of these 'privacies' as they wander in and out of (each other's) focus. Whilst Andrew is rendered almost apoplectic by Tommy's sudden change from obsession with to indifference at cooking his meat out-of-doors (see above, p.207), in 'locking for Lane' Dora feels no such bewilderment when her sister, Lane, falls into a trance-like state which Dora calls 'passing into darkness'; on the contrary:

Each time that Lane 'passed into darkness' Dora had a curious reaction that was not unlike that of a person who remembers a sexual gratification when he does not expect to. She was never alarmed nor did she feel lonely. To live with a person who is something of a lunatic is certainly a lonely experience even if it is not an alarming one, but Dora had never felt loneliness. Sometimes, although

---

100. Unpublished notebook 27.

she knew Lane was having a spell, she continued talking.<sup>101</sup>

Here the narrator's intervention in the narrative ('To live with a person ...' etc.) does not confirm Dora's feelings but rather increases her inscrutability for the reader by stating how in defiance of what one would expect, Dora is sexually aroused rather than alarmed by Lane's odd moods. Kazin claims of Miss Goering and Mrs Copperfield that 'things happen to them without modifying them'.<sup>102</sup> Whilst as with all unqualified statements about Jane Bowles's fiction, this comment is only partially accurate, it is the case that Jane Bowles's people are only modified when they respond to what happens to them - what is unpredictable is whether and if so how they will respond: when Mrs Copperfield is left alone in the streets of Colon we are told that 'People passed by on either side of her but none of them interested her yet' (TSL, p.44); likewise earlier in Two Serious Ladies it is written that 'Christina wasn't yet sure what she was going to do but she was very much excited' (TSL, p.6; my emphases). 'Yet' - it is in this space of expectant suspension (Millicent Dillon describes it as a 'willed delay') that Jane Bowles's fictions place the reader.<sup>103</sup> Comments are made on the unpredictability of the two serious ladies; for example, Mrs Copperfield declares to Miss Goering:

You can't possibly have any respect for me, but that doesn't make any difference because I have the utmost respect for you ... You are gloriously unpredictable and you are afraid of no one but yourself. (TSL, p.15)

Similarly Mrs Copperfield is introduced as:

---

101. 'Looking for Lane', p.4.

102. Kazin, p.177.

103. Dillon, p.336.

completely dominated by Mr Copperfield as she was by almost anyone with whom she came in contact. Still certain people who knew her well affirmed that she was capable of suddenly making a very radical and independent move without a soul to back her up. (TSL, p.58)

Yet even the description of Miss Goering and Mrs Copperfield as 'unpredictable ... eccentric personages' (du Plessix Gray; see above p.227) is not wholly accurate for the narrator tells us of Mrs Copperfield that 'like most people in the world she never believed that one terrible thing would happen after another' (TSL, p.46). Likewise when Andy puts on a loud record of the Washington Post in his flat, Miss Goering, we are told: 'felt as uneasy as one can feel listening to parade music in a quiet room' (TSL, p.155). 'Like most people', 'as one can feel'; in these gestures towards typicality even the unpredictability of the two serious ladies is revealed as not a constant. Instead the reader is presented with a fictional world which repeatedly defies description because of the absence of a fixed perspective either from within or without the inhabitants. The result is that the narratives are by turns recognisable, bizarre, orderly and unexpected. Taken separately each aspect of the narrative is utterly feasible; for example the settings are recognisable geographical locations and the reasons people have for moving around it are, taken out of context, individually coherent. Consider, thus, Miss Goering's reason for moving from her luxurious home in New York to a broken down cottage on a nearby island. She explains to Miss Gamelon that her proposed move is part of a scheme of moral salvation since her New York mansion 'gives one a comfortable feeling of safety, as I have explained to you at least a dozen times. However, in order to work out my own little idea of salvation I really believe that it is necessary for me to live in some more tawdry place and particularly in some place where I was not born' (TSL, p.28). Once

established in 'some more tawdry place' however:

Miss Goering did some serious thinking. ... Already the house, to her, had become a friendly and familiar place and one which she readily thought of as her home. She decided that it was now necessary for her to take little trips to the tip of the island, where she could board the ferry and cross back over to the mainland. She had hated to do this as she knew how upsetting it would be, and the more she considered it, the more attractive the life in the little house seemed to her, until she even thought of it as humming with gaiety. (TSL, p.124)

'To her; ... she readily thought of as; ... seemed to her; ... she even thought of it as' - Miss Goering's perception of what goes on around her is determined and confined by her 'little idea of salvation'. This involves constant defamiliarisation, and the time spent in her new abode has transformed it for Miss Goering into 'a friendly and familiar place; ... a home; ... a little house ... humming with gaiety' in spite of its complete lack of privacy and material comfort. The problem is that no sooner has she acquired a sense of being 'at home' in the world, than Miss Goering feels compelled to move on; once familiar, the new abode is stifling for her having changed from refuge to prison. As Lionel declares in In the Summer House:

Suppose I kept on closing that door against the ocean every night because the ocean made me sad and then one night I went to open it and I couldn't even find the door. Suppose I couldn't tell it apart from the wall anymore. Then it would be too late and we'd be shut in here forever once and for all.<sup>104</sup>

Similarly Miss Goering's restlessness is precipitated not by the desire for adventure in a safe world, but a constant attempt to balance one fear and apprehension against another. Thus she declares in response to the romanticisation of her imminent trip by Arnold's father as 'a train ride into the blue' with the words 'it is not for fun that

---

104. 'In the Summer House', The Collected Works of Jane Bowles (London, 1984), pp.272-273.

I am going ... but because it is necessary to do so' (TSL, p.124). When Mrs Copperfield articulates her fear at her imminent journey to Panama, Miss Goering's reply reflects her own modus vivendi: 'I don't think I can bear it,' [Mrs Copperfield] said. 'Really, Miss Goering, it frightens me so much to go.' 'I would go anyway,' said Miss Goering' (TSL, p.18). Whilst Miss Goering continually and purposefully seeks out the Unfamiliar, Mrs Copperfield's professed ambition once in Panama City is to find 'someone who will remind me of something' because for her 'all that which was not already an old dream was an outrage' (TSL, p.40). The importance of her relationship with Pacifica, whose very name connotes the pacifying influence she has on Mrs Copperfield; why everything else must be forfeited for its sake (even though it includes her marriage to the man 'whom she liked above all other people' as well as her sanity) - is that it embodies the Familiar for her. Through it, as she declares, she is attempting the impossible: 'to reduplicate a dream' (TSL, pp.104, 107).

What makes for the surprise when reading Jane Bowles's fiction is that there is never any attempt to provide a continual and consistent account of why people act as they do; just as the world shifts in and out of focus as people loom up and disappear so only partial accounts of their mindscapes are disclosed. Instead of one deep space, no single perspective is given anything more than a brief prominence as the layers overlap. Now you think you know where you are, now you don't - the following description of Miss Gamelon is equally one of the reader of Two Serious Ladies:

The world and the people in it had suddenly slipped beyond her comprehension and she felt in great danger of losing the whole world once and for all - a feeling that is difficult to explain. (TSL, p.116)

Faced with this 'difficulty to explain' Two Serious Ladies yet in acknowledgement of its power, attempts have been made to describe it in

allegorical terms: 'All of Jane Bowles's fiction,' declares Ashbery, 'deals in some way with the conflict between the weak and the strong, a conflict which in Mrs Bowles's work usually ends in a draw'.<sup>105</sup> This reading, which maintains that the two serious ladies represent 'strength' and the people they meet 'weakness', tends towards an oversimplification of Two Serious Ladies as a result of trying to fix it to a single characterisation. Mrs Copperfield and Miss Goering may be the protagonists of the title but they are neither the heroines nor the anti-heroines of a humanist fiction. It is the case that their companions ascribe to them a manipulative omniscience and omnipotence, Miss Gamelon declaring to Miss Goering: 'You can never sit down for more than five minutes without introducing something weird into the conversation. I certainly think you have made a study of it', and on one occasion Mrs Copperfield is described as 'a little bit sadistic' whilst on another Miss Goering acts 'a little maliciously' (TSL, pp.123, 103, 151). Yet any strength they have is far from being based on wanton perversity or total control since as Lougy points out they are, along with all the occupants of Jane Bowles's fiction, 'too human not to be lost and lonely'.<sup>106</sup> The following examples reveal their vulnerability.

When Miss Goering and Miss Gamelon have their first meal together:

Miss Goering said that she couldn't face eating in the diningroom and she asked the servant to lay the table in the parlor instead. She spent a great deal of time switching the lights off and on.

'I know how you feel,' Miss Gamelon said to her.

'I don't particularly enjoy it,' said Miss Goering, 'but I expect in the future to be under control.' (TSL, p.11)

Just as Miss Goering cannot stop herself switching the lights off and on, this simultaneously uncomfortable and humorous predicament is mirrored in an incident where Mrs Copperfield shows her lack of grasp

---

105. Ashbery, p.5.

106. Lougy, p.172.

and hence control of the situation. Pacifica and she are talking to some men in a bar and Pacifica takes exception to the way she is addressed:

'Copperfield, I think we have just been insulted,' said Pacifica, drawing herself up. Mrs Copperfield started to march out of the room in mock anger, but Pacifica was already thinking of something else and Mrs Copperfield found herself to be in the ridiculous position of the performer who is suddenly without an audience. She came back to the bar. (TSL, p.77)

Similarly at the level of dialogue the two serious ladies are not always capable of understanding the drift of the conversation. Pacifica's friend Lou is unsure whether to believe Mrs Copperfield's claim that she has been to Paris. 'Are you a screwball or were you really in Paris?' he asks. When she insists that she has been there, he says:

'Then you're fancy?'  
'What do you mean, fancy?' [said Mrs Copperfield]  
'Fancy is what fancy does.'  
'Well, if you have to be mysterious it's your right, but the word "fancy" doesn't mean a thing to me.'  
'Hey,' said Lou to Pacifica, 'is she tryin' to be highhat with me?'  
'No, she's very intelligent. She's not like you.' (TSL, p.74)

'Fancy' (like 'screwball' and 'highhat') is a word which belongs to a world which is not that of the socially superior Mrs Copperfield and so she cannot understand it.

Concurrently, in a bar in New Jersey, Frank the bartender has listened to Miss Goering's conversation with Dick and Bernice about the Marxist struggle. On passing her table he then turns to Miss Goering and declares:

'I think that the earth is a very nice place to be living on and I never felt that by going one step too far I was going to fall off it either. You can always do things two or three times on the earth and everybody's plenty patient till you get it right. First time wrong doesn't mean you're sunk.'



'Well I wasn't talking about something like that,' said Miss Goering.

'That's what you're talking about all right. Don't try to pussyfoot it out now. But I tell you it's perfectly all right as far as I'm concerned.' He was looking with feeling into Miss Goering's eyes. 'My life' he said, 'is my own, whether it's a mongrel or a prince.'

'What on earth is he talking about?' Miss Goering asked Bernice and Dick. 'He seems to think I've insulted him.'

'God knows!' said Dick. (TSL, p.143)

Linguistic exchanges in Two Serious Ladies overlap with one another to produce layers of meaning. No one, not even the more perceptive Miss Goering and Mrs Copperfield, is able to comprehend all the layers. As one review has pointed out about Jane Bowles's people: 'a perverse slippage affects their relation with each other. No two arrive at the same point at the same time'.<sup>107</sup> Just as Mrs Copperfield does not understand Lou and he does not understand her, so Frank does not understand Miss Goering, and neither Miss Goering nor Dick understand him.

In contrast to this continual 'slippage', differences between geographical locations make little impact on the reader. Especially when, if the settings are examined closely, it becomes apparent that Panama is heavily influenced by North American products. For example the bus which Mr and Mrs Copperfield board in Panama to go to the jungle is called '"Shirley Temple". On the insides of the doors were painted pictures of Mickey Mouse. The driver ... was drinking a Coca-Cola when they got on the bus' (TSL, p.63). There are several other resonances across the worlds: A bar acquaintance of Pacifica's in Colon expresses a preference for women 'dressed in ruffles'; when Miss Gamelon and Arnold become friends on the island, Miss Goering notices that Lucy Gamelon suddenly appears 'with a ruffle round the neck of her dress' (TSL, pp.76,

---

107. Haynes, p.35.

16). The Hotel Washington in Panama City where Miss Copperfield grandly rescues Mrs Quill from financial embarrassment has a lobby floor which is of 'imitation yellow marble'; the lobby of Andy's apartment house in New Jersey where Miss Goering stays for a week has a floor of 'imitation marble, yellow in color' (TSL, pp.82, 147). Such mirroring of details, alongside verbal resonances - eg. when a Negress bumps into Mrs Copperfield in Panama City, she apologises with the words, 'I can't tell you how sorry I am. I can't tell you'; when Miss Goering arrives late for a meeting with Arnold's father, she exclaims, 'I can't tell you, my dear, how sorry I am ... I can't tell you' (TSL, pp.41, 179) - across the narratives gives a reassuring sense of conformity to the different worlds by drawing them closer together, hence making them more intimate. Yet beyond an increased sense of recognisability, these images and words remain as closed or self-referential as everything in Jane Bowles's fictions. For these are not examples of symbolism which connect landscapes to mindscapes. Even whilst we can picture what ruffles and yellow marble floors look like; even if they are familiar objects to us - after all John Ashbery describes Jane Bowles's prose as depicting the 'nutty America we have to recognise as ours' - outside their connotation of familiarity they do not embody or withhold a 'meaning' which connects them to anything outside the narrative.<sup>108</sup> Instead, like a mirrored image, their presence reflects each other ad infinitum whilst remaining impenetrable when considered from the perspective of their 'significance'. Surrounded by the same objects and using the same words the 'slippage' occurs repeatedly, affecting even the two serious ladies since by the end of the narrative when they meet once again, their journeys have destroyed even their respect for one another. After expressing mutual disparagement they leave separately, unaffected by the other's criticism;

---

108. Ashbery, p.30.

Mrs Copperfield after admitting that she has 'gone to pieces', nonetheless has her 'happiness' which she guards like a wolf, whilst Miss Goering finds the possible similarity underlying their position only of 'considerable interest but no great importance'.

In Djuna Barnes's Nightwood Paris and New York are sparsely described. Yet here visual descriptions of place are consciously discarded in favour of atmosphere, the atmosphere not of daylight landmarks but nighttime instability. Nothing is solid in Nightwood; place is merely the shifting backdrop against which the characters interact. Whilst in Jane Bowles's fiction there is little visual description this is not in contrast to Nightwood in order to make room for atmosphere. Rather, we learn where to find the 'space' in her fiction from a letter she sends to Paul Bowles in 1950. 'With me as you know it is always the dialogue that interests me and not the passages so much or the atmosphere. In any case I cannot express these last two in writing'.<sup>109</sup> Thus if we are to locate the isolation of Jane Bowles's people from one another it will not be in terms of their relationship to their physical environment as in Paul Bowles's narratives; instead, we will find it in their verbal exchanges, for as has been intimated above it is here that the huge spaces and deserts exist:

Mr and Mrs Copperfield stood on the foredeck of the boat as it sailed into the harbor at Panama. Mrs Copperfield was very glad to see land at last.

'You must admit now,' she said to Mr Copperfield, 'that the land is much nicer than the sea.' She herself had a great fear of drowning.

'It isn't only being afraid of the sea,' she continued, 'but it's boring. It's the same thing all the time. The colors are beautiful, of course.' Mr Copperfield was studying the shoreline. (TSL, p.35)

Initially (as with the extracts quoted earlier, see above pp.204-7) what we seem to be reading is a conversation between Mrs Copperfield and her

---

109. Selected Letters, p.154.

husband. Except that he does not say anything. Nor would it appear that he is even listening to her as we are told that he 'was studying' the shoreline. To have used the simple past ('studied') would have implied that he had listened to her and then turned his attention to the shoreline, whilst the use of the past continuous tense ('was studying') reveals by its very continuity an abstraction which precedes and even perhaps rules out his hearing her words. She comments on the sea, he looks at the shore. The absence of communication is exemplary rather than exceptional as Mrs Copperfield is clearly used to speaking to and for herself by the way in which her words, thoughts and assumptions form part of a continuous flow. Hence she says that the land is nicer than the sea and then we are told by the narrator that 'she had a great fear of drowning'. That she then continues speaking with words that take this fear of drowning into account reveals that the narrator's interjection merely relates what Mrs Copperfield herself is thinking at the time about herself. Often this explanatory middle stage is omitted which is how Jane Bowles's fiction moves forward elliptically. Nor is it only a question of the progression of dialogue being elliptical, for Mrs Copperfield's words about the sea are themselves the indirect or elliptical means of considering something else - she recognises that she is afraid of the sea, but this is not the only reason as the sea is 'boring', never-changing. Her final words are concessionary: 'the colors are beautiful, of course' being merely a reminder to herself that 'of course' the sea has some qualities. This is not some unchecked stream of consciousness. Rather than a monologue, it is in fact a measured dialogue with herself. She appears to be talking to Mr Copperfield, she appears to be considering the merits of the sea; actually she is commenting on her relationship to the world, the way her life interacts with other lives within it.

In her description of tourists Mrs Copperfield distinguishes herself from them on the grounds that hers is an active verbal relationship with the world whilst theirs is a passive visual reaction. She writes in her diary:

Tourists generally speaking are human beings so impressed with the importance and immutability of their own manner of living that they are capable of travelling through the most fantastic places without experiencing anything more than a visual reaction. The hardier tourists find that one place resembles another. (TSL, p.45)

Visual delight is precisely what Mr Copperfield experiences foregoing the comfortable Hotel Washington overlooking the harbour in favour of a grubby cheap hotel deep inside Colon. He likes travelling for its own sake whilst Mrs Copperfield (as mentioned earlier) comes to Panama only because her husband wants to. Once there alone with Mr Copperfield outside Panama City she announces that she is unhappy:

'Again,' said Mr Copperfield. 'What is there to be unhappy about now?'

'I feel so lost and far away and frightened.'

'What's frightening about this?'

'I don't know. It's all so strange and it has no connection with anything.'

'It's connected with Panama,' observed Mr Copperfield acidly, 'won't you understand that?'  
(TSL, p.60)

Once again this is no minor disagreement between the Copperfields. Their inability to communicate with one another is due to their incompatible perspectives on the situation. The result reflects their divergence as they literally go off in opposite directions. Mr Copperfield, the prototype of Mrs Copperfield's 'tourist', departs into the jungle. His is a search for visual exotica which denies any serious consideration for the reality of the human inhabitants of Panama. Whilst not wishing to see the 'foreign' from the safety of an air-conditioned coach, his is nonetheless a purely visual reaction as he leaves the city (where people

are) to enter the non-verbal jungle. This is no journey into the unknown à la 'Heart of Darkness'; for Mr Copperfield it is a botanical and zoological adventure. What he sees there absorbs him and leads to no introspection. He describes his desire to see the jungle as 'penetrating into the interior'. The joke is that he is incapable of 'penetrating' anything (as the above dialogue reveals), the 'interior' having a single opaque geographical meaning for him - hence the guidebook language. A competent ('hardy') tourist, he can speak Spanish, but his attitude to language is wholly pragmatic as, far from giving him access to the Panamanian inhabitants, he remains interested and touched only by what he sees. It is as though he is watching a film about Panama in 3D and his tourist detachment keeps him so safe that he is incapable of feeling fear himself or, consequently, of empathising with Mrs Copperfield's fear. Mrs Copperfield describes her husband as having no memory (TSL, p.40). Bound within the visual, Mr Copperfield has not enough imagination to look at or make connections outside the present vision.

In stark contrast to her husband Mrs Copperfield is miserable and frightened only as long as she remains in the detached tourist relationship to Panama. That she had felt trapped by his presence (despite liking him, TSL, p.40) is indicated when he leaves her briefly in the streets of Colon: '"I love to be free", Mrs Copperfield said to the woman after he had left. "Shall we go into your little room? I've been admiring it through the window".' (TSL, p.43). Far from wishing to separate herself from the Panamanian inhabitants, Mrs Copperfield is eager to enter their world, their 'little room[s]' (re my discussion of myopia above). She is finally happy when having left Mr Copperfield at the jungle's edge she returns to Colon. Once there she leaves her hotel not for the comforts of Hotel Washington - 'It's not a question of comfort at all,' she had explained earlier to her husband, 'it's

something much more than that' (TSL, p.39) - but in order to move to the Hotel de las Palmas. She wants to live there because it is the home of Mrs Quill, the proprietress, and Pacifica, a prostitute, whom she has befriended. Thus whilst Mr Copperfield may be the hardy tourist entering the Panamanian jungle, it is 'little' Mrs Copperfield who actually 'penetrates' a Panamanian interior.

That Pacifica is a prostitute and the Hotel de Las Palmas is more a brothel than a hotel are facts of which Mrs Copperfield is well aware. I raise this particular point because its misrepresentation by Alfred Kazin forms part of a widespread misreading of Jane Bowles's fiction. For it is a reflection of the 'non-judgemental' (Philip French, see above p.222) quality of Jane Bowles's prose that her people pass from the 'high' society of Miss Goering's New York social set or the world of the Hotel Washington to the 'low' life of the Hotel de las Palmas or the 'whore-house' activities of Julia and Inez in 'A Day in the Open' where they walk around naked at the request of the half-clad Señor Ramirez, without Jane Bowles ever commenting on or condemning one kind of life rather than another. Sexuality pervades her writing from the undescribed rape of Miss Perry in 'Plain Pleasures' to the described 'act of making love' between the Traveller and Señora Ramirez in 'A Guatemalan Idyll'. More obliquely sexuality is present in countless small incidents such as when in 'A Guatemalan Idyll' the child Lilina sleepily 'ran her fingers along her mother's lips and pushed them into her mouth. Señora Ramirez snapped at the fingers like a dog. Then she laughed uproarously'.<sup>110</sup> Or when Lilina suggests to another child, Enrique, that they buy a rabbit together:

Enrique thought about this for a while. He began to feel almost light-hearted, and even a little afraid.

---

110. 'A Guatemalan Idyll, p.65.

'All right,' he said. 'Let's buy two rabbits, a man and a woman.'  
They finished their ices and talked together more and more excitedly about the rabbits.<sup>111</sup>

Whilst pervasive this presence of latent and conscious sexuality never brings people any closer to one another than does their social 'intercourse'; neither of which is given more importance or attention than the other by Jane Bowles. Reviewers however, even whilst appreciating its wit, have overlooked or misread the non-judgemental quality of her prose. In one review Miss Goering is described as having become by the end of Two Serious Ladies a 'classy whore'.<sup>112</sup> This description reflects the assumptions of Ben who when meeting Miss Goering in a bar declares to her, 'you work as a prostitute after a fashion, don't you?' Miss Goering laughs at this suggestion and replies, 'I don't object to prostitutes, but really I assure you I am no such thing'. When Ben refuses to change his opinion of her she simply remarks 'All right ... I'm tired of arguing' (TSL, p.185). There is, however, never any mention of Miss Goering receiving any payment from the men she sleeps with; indeed throughout the narrative she assumes total financial responsibility for Miss Gamelon and repeatedly buys drinks for strangers in bars. Yet in the same vein but rather more disturbing in view of its otherwise feminist intentions is Francine du Plessix Gray's 1978 newspaper article which was adopted by the feminist press, *Virago* for their 1979 reprint of Two Serious Ladies. In her article du Plessix Gray declares, 'if there is a common denominator in Mrs Bowles's work, it is women's relentless search for autonomy and self-knowledge, for release from all conventional structures'.<sup>113</sup> Yet du Plessix Gray herself uses those very 'conventional structures' to describe Two Serious Ladies when she claims

---

111. 'A Guatemalan Idyll, p.83.

112. Schott, [p.1].

113. Francine du Plessix Gray, 'Introduction', Two Serious Ladies [p.2].



that it 'documents the ... decline into debauchery of two ... women' (she repeats the term 'debauchery' later in the same article, see above p.227) and calls Miss Goering not a 'classy whore' but a paraphrase - a 'high-class call girl'.

Yet this is not to say as Alfred Kazin does in Bright Book of Life that the two serious ladies 'live in the world by not understanding it'. For his claim that Miss Goering and Mrs Copperfield pass through the world as Innocents, whilst modifying the misreading of Miss Goering as a prostitute is equally misleading. He declares of the two serious ladies that:

their gracious innocence in depraved joints in Panama is Jane Bowles's joke, but it's not a joke on them; they become fond of whores, pimps and the obvious confidence men without knowing what these strangers do. Their 'innocence' is indeed what interests Jane Bowles in her characters - their incommunicable queerness. (Kazin's emphasis)<sup>114</sup>

Here Kazin reveals implicit agreement between himself, du Plessix Gray and other reviewers by displacing his condemnation of the protagonists on to their world of 'depraved joints' through his insistence on their naivety, ignorance and innocence. However, as the exchange with the bus driver outside Panama City illustrates (see TSL, pp.64-65) Mrs Copperfield is well aware of what 'las putas' are, and that Pacifica is one. Like Miss Goering she is completely indifferent to these facts.

Mrs Copperfield is attached to Pacifica partly because of the latter's understanding perception of her - 'You like things which are not what other people like don't you?' (TSL, p.50) - and partly because Pacifica provides a social world in which Mrs Copperfield can lose herself, which means, losing her consciousness: 'If you could only stop me from thinking always, Pacifica' she declares. That Pacifica does not share her worldview is revealed in her response: 'You don't want to stop thinking,'

---

114. Kazin, p.177.

she argues. 'The more you think, the more you are better than the other fellow. Thank your God you can think' (TSL, p.72). 'Thinking' for Pacifica is about being quick-witted in a world where survival depends on attracting men and their money. For the wealthy Mrs Copperfield 'the sole object in life was to be happy' (TSL, p.40) and this involves the continual attempt to escape thinking.

If in their relationships with other people the two serious ladies appear stronger, it is only because their preoccupations are not conventional ones. We are told of Miss Goering that 'her fears [were not] of a social nature' and shy 'little' Mrs Copperfield astounds everyone in a bar in Panama City when without warning she bursts into song (TSL, pp. 127, 73-74). The difference which links Miss Goering and Mrs Copperfield and which separates them from the people they meet is encapsulated in a description of Miss Goering as a child. It is an account which reveals why they share the title of 'serious ladies': 'Christina was horribly troubled by ideas which would never have occurred to her companions and at the same time took for granted a position in society which any other child would have found unbearable' (TSL, p.4). Through their wealth and connections both Miss Goering and Mrs Copperfield take for granted their status in society as 'ladies'. Miss Goering cannot understand why the woman she accosts on the train should not wish to speak to her even when she declares 'I assure you that I am a lady like yourself' (TSL, p.128) and Mrs Copperfield uses her social standing to rescue Mrs Quill from financial embarrassment at the Hotel Washington (TSL, pp.92-94). As we have seen neither the content of their troubles nor their manner of dealing with them is the same; yet they share the same quality of unpredictability and unconventionality which are the result of being 'horribly troubled by ideas which never would have occurred to [their] companions'. Just as Mrs Copperfield wishes Pacifica could stop her

from thinking, so Miss Goering admits to Frank the bartender, 'I just hate thinking [my own thoughts]' (TSL, p.184). Edith Walton entitled her review of Two Serious Ladies 'Fantastic Duo', but the nature of their similarity is such that they never dance together, only the same kind of dance solo.

Yet du Plessix Gray's claim that the 'common denominator' in Jane Bowles's work is that it places the 'relentless search for autonomy and self-knowledge, for release from all conventional structures' on women is inaccurate. In stating this she is echoing Kazin's claim that 'woman is the idiosyncrasy' in Jane Bowles's fiction because 'woman [is the] heart of a heartless world' with the result that she has created a fiction where 'women are the point of it'.<sup>115</sup> Not only is Kazin's conflation of 'women' and 'woman' derisory in that it implies a set of innate universal characteristics to which all women conform, but it is also a misrepresentation of Jane Bowles's fiction. For whilst it is true that a large number of people in Jane Bowles's narratives are women, it is also the case that several men eg. Andrew, Tommy, Tony Pirelli, Mr Cassalotti as well as children of both sexes feature prominently in her work.

The plainness of her tone and style is not in the least altered by the appearance of children in her work; rather children are portrayed as having an equally complex, intense and unsentimentalised inner life as the adults. To this extent there is a similarity between the work of Jane Bowles and that of the English novelist, Ivy Compton-Burnett, to whose 'habit of irony' one reviewer compared her.<sup>116</sup> For both writers present no distinction in sophistication between children and adults; hence the following conversation between two young sisters, Rose and Viola, after they have been 'safely tucked up for the night' in Darkness and Day

---

115. Kazin, p.178.

116. Merkin, p.30.

(1951):

As the door closed, Rose addressed her sister, disregarding her closed eyes.

'Did you hear what was said about our being friends?'

'Yes,' said Viola, without opening them. 'But I knew you had to say it. Nothing we say to Grandma will have any meaning.'

'Did you cry for Father because you wanted him?'

'Well, I didn't really want anyone but Fanshawe. But I didn't want him to ask me why I had forgotten [to ask to be carried upstairs]. And I did forget. And it was partly because - '

'Because you had to have something to cry for?'

'Yes, that was it,' said Viola, as though a light broke upon her. 'The day had so many hours, and the house was so high, and I forgot Mrs Spruce [the cook] and had to remember her. And all of it - '

'Made you want an outlet.'

'Yes, an outlet,' said Viola, her face settling into peace. 'And I had it, didn't I? Don't you ever want one?'

'Well, when I nearly cried about the book - '

'Yes, I heard. But no one knew.'

'I don't cry over books,' said Rose. 'I have read too many.' 117

Whilst existing in very different social settings the following extracts from Jane Bowles's narratives reveal an equal degree of sophistication and pride in each child's consciousness. 'Even' at the early age of ten Christina Goering is described as having:

the look of certain fanatics who think of themselves as leaders without once having gained the respect of a single human being. ... Every now and then a schoolmate would take pity on her and try to spend some time with her, but far from being grateful for this, Christina would instead try her best to convert her new friend to the cult of whatever she believed in at the time. ... She was in the habit of going through many mental struggles - generally of a religious nature - she preferred to be with other people and organise games. These games as a rule were very moral, and often involved God. (TSL, pp.3-4)

A description is given of a 'very special game' devised by Christina at thirteen called 'I forgive you all your sins' during which she half-drowns another child, Mary, whilst holding her under water (see TSL,

pp.6-8). The consonance in seriousness between the life of Christina Goering as a child and an adult is revealed in the response she gives to Mary's query as to whether the game will be 'fun'. Christina replies, 'It is not for fun that we play it, but because it is necessary to play it' (TSL, p.6). A statement she echoes to Arnold's father before leaving for the mainland (see above, pp.253-254).

The combination of violence and vulnerability is visible in the frustrations experienced by Lilina and Enrique in 'A Guatemalan Idyll' (see above pp.263-264) and Consuela in 'Señorita Córdoba', whilst 'A Stick of Green Candy' (as described in the previous chapter) centres on the obsessions of a child called Mary whose command of an imaginary regiment in a deserted clay pit forms part of a strategy to keep herself separate from the adult world. The sudden appearance of another child, Franklin, whom she follows into his house, forces her to acknowledge the existence of adults in the form of his mother because the latter addresses her as she would an adult. Mary's reaction to being addressed in this way is extreme: 'She closed her eyes seeking the dark gulf that always had separated her from the adult world. And she clutched the seat cushion hard, as if she were afraid of being wrenched from the chair.'<sup>118</sup> What she is in fact being 'wrenched from' is the haven in the form of the military command which she created for herself as a protection from the pain inseparable from human contact. The next afternoon her thoughts of Franklin awaken within her 'something wonderful and new' yet make her forget her long-established code by which she had always preceded any command to her men by a bugle call. Once she realised this 'she was shocked and her heart beat hard against her ribs ... she closed her eyes seeking the dark gulf again' but she is unable to recapture that sense of invulnerability associated with the command, because she had begun to

---

118. 'A Stick of Green Candy', p.180.

'cheat' her own rules.<sup>119</sup> All too aware she can only turn her back 'literally' on that 'mechanism' as the story ends with the words, 'She turned her cold face away from the pit, and without dismissing her men, crept down the hill'. The 'new austerity' detected by Ashbery is visible also in the following exchange taken from the unpublished notebooks. Agnes Leather has come to visit Sister McAvoy in order to persuade her that they should live together. At this point Sister McAvoy has left the room briefly leaving Agnes Leather alone with her young daughter, Laurie.

The air in the room was stifling and Agnes Leather ground her teeth in a paroxysm of physical discomfort and impatience.

'What's the matter?' the child asked, hopping out of bed. 'Why are you making a face?' Her voice was clear and there was a note of disapproval in her tone.

'I'm not making a face,' Agnes answered her, 'I'm sitting here.'

'We built this to hide the stove,' the child told her pointing to a screen made of old poles and some silk dress material.

'It's very nice,' Agnes told Laurie trying not to sound listless.

'I don't like this screen,' the child answered her, drawing it aside and exposing the little stove. 'I don't like anything in this room.' She kneeled down and opened the oven door, her stiff skirt circling round her like a parasol which is bashed in on one side.

Agnes Leather was naturally pleased that the child disliked her room. 'This should make it easier for me to ask them if they would like to move out,' she told herself. But despite such an advantage Agnes Leather was not truly pleased. It seemed to her that the little girl was unusually stern and cold.

'Why do you wear that pretty orange skirt in your bed?' she asked Laurie although she knew that it was utterly useless for her to try to charm a child.

'I get bored,' said the child. 'I get bored with this room and I get bored with these four walls.'

'And if you wear your costume to bed you don't feel so bored ... I guess,' Agnes Leather suggested trying to sound alert. She was almost overcome with heat now that Laurie had opened the oven door.

'I don't know,' said the child sullenly. 'I don't know if I'm bored in bed with the costume on or not - I like cooking for her [Sister McAvoy] though - but

---

119. 'A Stick of Green Candy', p.183.

sometimes she don't come down. It costs one dollar and eighty-five cents a week for me to make patties every night. I fill them up with peas and flour. Five peas go into each one. There's six every night, six patties and there's thirty peas,' she added closing the oven door and dragging the shaky screen into place.

Agnes winced a little when she climbed into bed cramming her stiff skirt under the bedclothes with small brutal hands.

'You'll ruin your costume,' Agnes told her.

'I don't like this costume,' Laurie said. 'I like things that are orchid color.'

Sister McAvoy, Agnes thought was taking an extraordinarily long time to borrow cocktail crackers and she hated having to carry on in this irksome conversation with Laurie instead of being able to sit peacefully in the chair and think about her plans.

'I get hot chocolate with a marshmallow down at the drugstore,' the child went on, 'but even when I go, I come back here and make the patties. We eat them whenever the devil she gets in.'

'Isn't ten o'clock late for a child?'

Laurie shook her head. 'I can have a plate at Felicia Bernstein's if I want - she's got five sisters and brothers. Mother would pay them on Saturdays. Five plates and it would add...' 120

Once again we find the same dislocation between speakers as in the dialogues discussed earlier between Miss Goering and Miss Gamelon, Tommy and Andrew, Sadie and the Woman, and Mr and Mrs Copperfield because both participants follow their own line of thought. That Agnes is the adult provides her with no greater percipience or superiority over Laurie; rather she feels more uncomfortable because of a sense of responsibility resulting from her being the adult eg. when she 'winces' at Laurie ruining her costume and her concern that the child ought to be in bed by ten. Throughout the conversation Agnes is aware of her inability to 'charm a child' and so finds the exchange 'irksome'. Just as Tommy is oblivious to Andrew's frustrations, so Laurie is too engrossed in her own changes of mood and activities (6 patties, 5 peas = 30 peas) to make any attempt at a smooth conversation. Only the expression 'whenever the devil' reveals the indirect influence of the adult world as it stands out from

the rest of her language as an imitation of some adult expression. Never is there any indication that the inner life of the child is less intense than Agnes's; rather, as in all the conversations in Jane Bowles's fiction the position of the speakers in relation to one another is like that expressed by Sally in 'Laura and Sally' when she declares that whilst she can hear the others talking, 'they seemed far away, as if they were speaking in a separate room'.<sup>121</sup> No contact is made between the slipping layers.

Thus, in contrast to Paul Bowles's novels where inner isolation is reflected in the bare landscapes in which his characters find themselves often alone, this is rarely the case in Jane Bowles's fictions where dialogue is used not as the lead-up to action, but rather as the main activity itself, the impetus for and endproduct of all movement in her narratives. To some extent they occupy the space usually given to the description of landscape.

Thus in Two Serious Ladies whilst neither Mrs Copperfield nor Miss Goering are interested in direct communication, whilst both remain outsiders, their actions misunderstood and criticised by their social groups (eg. in Mr Copperfield's letter to Mrs Copperfield (TSL, p.110-111) and Andy's mixture of supplication and condemnation (p.187-188)), neither ever considers spending time alone. On the contrary, both constantly look for new people to talk at. Always separate and never assimilable into any kind of society, they are never comfortably self-isolated. There is no conscious choice to be apart; rather for Miss Goering and Mrs Copperfield isolation is a fact of life, the reason why they are both 'serious'. This is illustrated in Miss Goering's decision to leave the island. Unlike Kit in The Sheltering Sky whose departure into the desert landscape belongs more to the Romantic 'into the blue' language

---

121. 'Laura and Sally', p.28.



of Arnold's father, Miss Goering's undertaking is not a gesture at escape. In expressing her proposed trip into the unknown she is articulating what she has been doing throughout the narrative - simply replacing one situation by another. Nor is her journey 'into the blue' since she leaves at night and what she seeks is the opposite of empty, silent spaces, conceding to Arnold's father that, like him, she hates 'to be alone' (TSL, p.125). She heads straight for the bar - the epitome of the social space - and her journey is propelled by various askew dialogues as she talks (and frightens by her insistence on talking) to a woman on the train, an old man in the street and Frank, Dick, Bernice and Andy in the bar. When life becomes too familiar and hence constricting with Andy she approaches Ben ...

(v)

As mentioned earlier Jane Bowles defined her Collected Works as 'a style book, difficult to describe', a comment which locates its elusiveness not in its content - as I have shown, isolation as a theme is one she shares with her contemporaries - but in its 'style'. A distinctive feature of what Carson McCullers called her 'curious, slanted and witty style' is the absence of a climactic structure as no indication is ever given that some sections of her narratives are more important than others.<sup>122</sup> Instead we never know where we are going until we are there as the distinction between main speeches and small talk has been eradicated. People appear and disappear and no attempt is made to fill in the background or explain the interrelationships (eg. we know a little about Miss Goering's childhood but nothing about Mrs Copperfield's). Jane Bowles once wrote of a complicated situation to Paul Bowles 'if you

---

122. Dillon, p.382.

don't understand it right off you never will' and there is a case in which this holds true for her fiction also where critical characterisation is defied at every turn.<sup>123</sup> Thus in Two Serious Ladies the brief meetings between the two serious ladies do not serve to explain their experiences when they are apart. Rather they highlight the gap which cannot be bridged as all attempts to ascribe an overall coherence to their words and actions is defied by their inscrutability. Hence the final dialogue does not in any way resolve or explain Two Serious Ladies but rather leaves the text where it began: hanging in space.

The same is true for all her writing whatever the age or sex of its participants; doomed to feel separate her people try to place others between themselves and their isolation. Thus in Two Serious Ladies Mrs Copperfield remembers a recurring dream in which

She was being chased up a short hill by a dog. At the top of the hill there stood a few pine trees and a mannequin about eight feet high. She approached the mannequin and discovered her to be fashioned out of flesh, but without life. Her dress was of black velvet, and tapered to a very narrow width at the hem. Mrs Copperfield wrapped one of the mannequin's arms tightly around her own waist. She was startled by the thickness of the arm and very pleased. The mannequin's other arm she bent upward from the elbow with her free hand. Then the mannequin began to sway backwards and forwards. Mrs Copperfield clung all the more tightly to the mannequin and together they fell off the top of the hill and continued rolling for quite a distance until they landed on a little walk, where they remained locked in each other's arms. Mrs Copperfield loved this part of the dream best; and the fact that all the way down the hill the mannequin acted as a buffer between herself and the broken bottles and little stones over which they fell gave her particular satisfaction. (TSL, pp.97-98)

Mrs Copperfield realises that her attachment to Pacifica results from the fact that Pacifica 'resurrected the emotional content of her dream' (TSL, p.98). Throughout the whole of Jane Bowles's fiction people's relationships are predicated as this need for a 'buffer'; the reality of the

---

123. Selected Letters, p.50.

desired one being delineated and defined by the need, so that like Mrs Copperfield's mannequin they are considered to be 'fashioned out of flesh, but without [a separate] life'. Hence in 'Laura and Sally' we are told how:

Sally's fits of temper and shame were becoming more and more necessary to Laura. They stirred her blood. And while she hated Sally to such an extent at [certain] ... moments that she wanted to strike her face, her own dignity at once seemed to swoop down upon her like some great and unexpected bird. It was not to comfort Sally, therefore, that she followed her to the village, but to enjoy for a while this calm and noble self born each time out of the other woman's rage. <sup>124</sup>

Similarly, we are told that Sally:

set herself the task of conquering Laura - although exactly in what sense she meant to conquer her friend she did not know. Hers was an instinctive chase with a concealed objective. It is a curious fact that Sally, whose life was a series of tests and rituals of purification upon herself, should have reacted so unscrupulously to the superiority ... of another woman. It was probable that she related the best and most spiritual part of her mind and heart to her life's purpose and only coarser elements in her nature to her friends. <sup>125</sup>

Thus in 'Laura and Sally' there is a mutual exploitation, of which both participants are unaware because they are so locked within themselves. Indeed, as these passages show, the narrative voice whilst allowing the reader access to each consciousness foregrounds the isolation from each other. What is said of Sally (whose obsession with 'tests and rituals of purification upon herself' likens her to Miss Goering) by the narrator: 'hers was an instinctive chase with a concealed objective' holds true for all Jane Bowles's people; no-one is accorded a superior vision - instead everyone has blind spots. <sup>125</sup> Hence in her unpublished notebooks Jane Bowles describes what she calls the 'Theme of Andrew's life':

---

124. 'Laura and Sally', p.24.

125. 'Laura and Sally', p.25.

Tommy is the wall that prevents his [Andrew's] entering into his life and which he must scale - but he is the breach in the wall too - through which other fields can be seen. The road far behind the wall is through Tommy but he mistakes this and thinks only by reducing Tommy to something that fears his stamp and then ridding himself of the boy (as a sacrifice to his life that is to be) will he find his life. But he cannot find his life because he cannot capture Tommy in order to lose him - thus the mad dance begins. ...

The night Tommy stays in Andrew's house there is an apple on his night table. Andrew goes in to close the window when he hears the rain. He sees for a moment Tommy as the breach in the wall instead of seeing him as the wall. He tries to get the image of him righted as part of his plan because he is frightened by it. It is unexpected and as foreign to the inner landscape as a bare winter tree hung with fruit.<sup>126</sup>

Having decided that Tommy is the 'wall' which prevents his entering his life Andrew cannot accept his brief realisation that Tommy constitutes the 'breach' in the wall. Nor is it finally clear which it is that Tommy actually represents as the narrator oscillates between both definitions (as with Laura 'falling' and 'jumping', see above p.222). Instead the reader shares Andrew's uncertainty in this 'mad dance'. In his explanation as to why Shakespeare returned to Comedies at the end of his life, the English writer and critic, Charles Williams, provides a hypothesis for the connection between the absence of judgement and the use of wit:

Shakespeare in turning at the end to comedy threw over the parti-pris of tragedy. His genius was freeing itself from all views, and therefore returned to comedy. I think this is true, because I rather feel that if one were utterly free, one would be 'comic' rather than 'tragic'. (Williams' emphases)<sup>127</sup>

The absence of 'parti-pris' in Jane Bowles's writing, the impossibility of attributing a dominant characterisation or single significance to her various fictions, is due to its 'deadpan' presentation of multiple

---

126. Unpublished Notebook 35.

127. Alice Mary Hadfield, Charles Williams (Oxford, 1983), p.115.

layered spaces whose inhabitants may well judge one another, but who are never condemned or ridiculed from outside or above these worlds.

Rather, as Lougy has pointed out: 'Comedy is closely aligned with the grotesque and the horrible, and in Bowles' art, the comic moment stands not against the chaotic and the lonely, but rather serves to give them further definition'.<sup>128</sup> That the comic moment stands 'not against ... but rather serves to give further definition' to chaos and loneliness is the reason why, as an earlier reviewer pointed out, Jane Bowles's writing is not 'black humour ... Although Mrs Bowles has the right style for it - primitive, disjunct ... Something deep within disqualifies her. It's compassion, a dirty word to the black comics. She sees the tragedy, the awful human waste signaled in apartness, aloneness and eccentricity'.<sup>129</sup>

Thus when we laugh, it is in acknowledgement of a shared position. As readers we are not superior to Jane Bowles's people; rather we are all included in the Traveller's declaration in 'A Guatemalan Idyll' that 'the human animal is the funniest animal of all'.<sup>130</sup> Jane Bowles depicts the objects and designs with which the world is filled, eg. in 'Plain Pleasures' Mrs Perry visits her sister, Dorothy in whose house:

The parlour was immaculate but difficult to rest in because of the many bright and complicated patterns of the window curtains and the furniture covers, not in the least disquieting of which was an enormous orange and black flowerpot design repeated a dozen times on the linoleum floor covering.<sup>131</sup>

In Mr Cassalotti's restaurant there is:

a glassed-in scene that Mr Cassalotti has inserted in a large wall niche. The painted drop was of a cottage with lawn and woods and a little stream

---

128. Lougy, p.166.

129. Schott, [p.1].

130. 'A Guatemalan Idyll', p.68.

131. 'Plain Pleasures', p.14.

running to one side of it. Mr Cassalotti had extended the real lawn by using stage grass, and there were even little trellises about, stuck with old paper roses, too many of them contrasting oddly with the pastel-shaded flowers painted on the drop. Crowding the lawn was an assortment of poorly selected men and women fashioned in different styles and out of different materials, some being brightly painted lead and others carved out of wood. There was also, to complete the pointless staging, a child's miniature orange automobile set down right in the very midst of the lawn gathering and driven by a tiny rubber baby doll. The scene was illuminated from the sides and at this moment supplied the only light in the dining room.

The immediate urge of any diner with even the slightest degree of sensibility, if not to the actual aesthetic offense, then at least to the offense against order and the fulfillment of intention, was to punch through the glass and remove the automobile, if not half the figures. Only to the Cassalotti family and to children there was no disturbing element in this glassed-in scene. (my emphasis) <sup>132</sup>

Within and against these settings Jane Bowles points to small comic details, such as the iron doorstep in 'Friday' which is in the shape of a cat, and the 'yellow crock designed to imitate a squash' from which Dora pours herself sherry in 'Looking for Lane'.<sup>133</sup> Yet the most powerful aspects of her wit reside not so much in the inanimate objects and designs of her world as the portrayal of the comic almost slapstick human gestures which invariably accompany intense emotions. Thus for example, in Two Serious Ladies '"Let's not talk about my life," said Andy, putting up his hand like a traffic officer' (TSL, p.148), and in 'Plain Pleasures' the overwrought, inebriated Mrs Perry responds to Mr Drake's oblique offer of marriage in a restaurant in the following way:

'I suppose,' she said smiling joyously, 'that you would like a lady to mash your potatoes for you three times a day. But I am not a mashed-potato masher and I never have been ...'

Mrs Perry fumbled through the contents of her purse in search of a handkerchief and, coming upon

---

132. 'Laura and Sally', p.24.

133. 'Friday', p.238; 'Looking for Lane', p.3.

her sister's string of beads, she pulled them out and laid them in her gravy. 'I am not a mashed-potato masher,' she repeated, and then without warning she clambered out of the booth and lumbered down the aisle.<sup>134</sup>

Millicent Dillon maintains that 'Jane discards her writing wiles in 'Out in the World' [the never completed later novel]. There is in this novel none of the witty detachment, the sardonic grace, the playfulness that was part of her craft in Two Serious Ladies'.<sup>135</sup> Yet the following examples of Jane Bowles's wit from her unpublished notebooks refute Dillon's claim: 'Janet's face irradiated a calm encountered more frequently on the faces of people seated in barber shop chairs', writes Jane Bowles in one notebook whilst in another she describes how 'Winnie's remark hurt Doll so much that she stood still in the road, slightly bent at the waist like a person who has been struck suddenly by a flying missile. She even said "Oh" so deep felt was her dismay'.<sup>136</sup> Jane Bowles's striking images occur across all her work and as well as through gesture her humour is revealed in the inappropriate and understated verbal expressions of her people. In a recently completed short story edited from her unpublished notebooks Tony Pirelli invites Berenice Cassalotti to his father's restaurant. Once he has picked her up the narrator declares '"I'd slit my throat if I didn't have a car," was Tony's only comment on the way to the restaurant', and when Berenice invites his mother to go on a picnic she replies 'My greatest ambition is to die in my sleep'.<sup>137</sup> In Two Serious Ladies Miss Goering arrives late for a prearranged meeting with Arnold's father: '"Oh I can't tell you, my dear, how sorry I am," said Miss Goering taking both his hands

---

134. 'Plain Pleasures', pp.20-21.

135. Dillon, p.194.

136. Unpublished notebooks 25, 27.

137. Unpublished notebook, 27.

in hers and pressing them to her lips. He was wearing woolen gloves. "I can't tell you how these gloves remind me of my childhood," Miss Goering continued' (TSL, p.179). The spontaneous sincere 'I can't tell you' of her apology, full of compassion, is deflated by the 'I can't tell you' comment which follows about gloves and childhood. This swift change is characteristic of Jane Bowles's style as Millicent Dillon points out:

The prose slips and glides in unexpected associations. Something is said and before it can be elaborated something else is said that completely contradicts the serious dialogue or feeling. There are ellipses of thought and feeling but before we can catch these something else preoccupies the characters. Feelings come and go and overlies each other like polyphonic music. And yet the final effect is very funny.<sup>138</sup>

Where Millicent Dillon is wrong, however, is to attribute the wit a secondary ('and yet') importance. On the contrary it is not so much an aspect of her style through which the serious content is conveyed; rather it is as prominent as any theme or motif. Compared (often to her disadvantage) to the English writer Ronald Firbank (1886-1926) and to the American writer Carl van Vechten (1880-1966) Jane Bowles's wit is in fact far less florid or exotic (or even difficult in terms of the unusual vocabulary used by both these writers). This is visible in the following sentence from Firbank's Valmouth (1919) where 'Lady Parvula considered with a supercilious air the immaterial green of a lettuce leaf'.<sup>139</sup> The pleasures of Jane Bowles's style are far plainer.

It is Millicent Dillon who unwittingly reveals that style and theme are inextricable when she writes of Two Serious Ladies:

The novel is a series of repetitions, variations on a theme or themes. It is as though the work proceeds

---

138. Dillon, pp.103-104.

139. Ronald Firbank, Valmouth, Prancing Nigger, concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli (Harmondsworth, 1961), p.35.



by a series of analogies, all tied to the original scene with Christina as a thirteen-year-old. In that scene Christina, about to baptize Mary, says, 'It's not for fun that we play it, but because it's necessary to play it.' Christina as an adult, embarking on her trips to the mainland, says, 'It is not for fun that I am going, but because it is necessary to do so.' Ben the gangster says to Christina, 'I can't stand what people call fun.' And Christina answers, 'Oh, I love all that. Fundamentally I am a light-hearted person. That is, I enjoy all the things that light-hearted people enjoy.' <sup>140</sup>

To describe the progression of Two Serious Ladies as analogic rather than consequential is astute (although Jane Bowles herself maintains that Two Serious Ladies is not a novel). <sup>141</sup> However as this extract reveals, it is not one of a variation on a theme or themes. For whilst there is a consonant repetition between Christina Goering's words as a child and an adult, her very 'seriousness' is undermined by her exchange with Ben where she maintains that she is 'a light-hearted person'. Placed where it is in Millicent Dillon's argument, this exchange should reinforce it; however it illustrates the impossibility of confining Christina Goering to a 'serious' character who personifies a central theme. In claiming that Two Serious Ladies involves a number of themes which are wittily enacted, Millicent Dillon attempts to impose a deep-space characterisation based on 'significance' on Jane Bowles's prose. Yet her own close quotation from the text undermines the possibility of such a reading. Instead Two Serious Ladies as does all Jane Bowles's work remains elusive because it 'reproduces' a constantly shifting layered-space narrative.

---

140. Dillon, p.102.

141. Selected Letters, p.63.

### Conclusion

It is gratifying to see that in 1988 more attention has been directed in England towards the work of Jane Bowles and Mary Butts. In that summer Virago published the first English edition of Millicent Dillon's A Little Original Sin and in August 1989 they are bringing out an expanded edition of Jane Bowles's Collected Works to include the three stories published in The Threepenny Review with an introduction by Paul Bowles. Likewise, in July 1988 the English public were presented with an expanded edition of Mary Butts's autobiography, The Crystal Cabinet by Carcanet (with a simultaneous American edition by Beacon Hill Press of Boston) which, not surprisingly for the work of an unknown writer, prompted only two reviews: one by Joy Grant in the Times Literary Supplement and one by myself in P.N. Review. However I am presently engaged in a longer general article on Mary Butts commissioned by P.N. Review and hope to persuade Carcanet to publish a Selected Works containing some of her stories, poems, essays and reviews as a preparation towards the long overdue republication of her novels. With regard to Jane Bowles, P.N. Review have also decided to devote an issue to her work which will contain the short stories recently edited by myself together with Paul Bowles entitled, 'The Three Durkee Sisters', 'Berenice and Tony' and 'Old Lady Sender'. The longer term proposal of Carcanet is for me to edit a collection of these unpublished stories (including the three above) with a general critical introduction to her work.

Notwithstanding the cheering thought that the work of Mary Butts and Jane Bowles is at last slowly attracting the attention of publishers, separate full-length critical works are needed to enable the rightful recognition of these two important Modernists. This thesis has prepared the ground by showing the need for two such works, whilst also highlighting

the qualitatively different kinds of 'difficulty' presented by Mary Butts's and Jane Bowles's prose. The use of the terms 'deep space' and 'layered space' have helped to illustrate the ways in which their works are 'difficult' and by extension for what reasons their work has been overlooked by most critical histories.

In the case of Mary Butts (as discussed in Chapter I) the reasons for her neglect are partly social and partly historical: First, she belonged to no definite literary group and tended to be alienated from the English literary establishment of her time as dominated by the Bloomsbury Group and T.S. Eliot. Second, she was a victim of history in dying prematurely at the age of forty-six from a haemorrhage mainly due to the date and place of its occurrence (ie. in the country in 1937) when medical aid was not as prompt as it later became. Her early death had several repercussions not least in that it cut short her writing career at its peak (one remembers Charles Williams's comment quoted in Chapter I that had she lived, 'there was every indication that her rich imagination would have surpassed itself in another "turn of the event"'). Furthermore, her death just prior to the Second World War robbed her of even the belated recognition which was granted several of her contemporaries whom she had known in Paris in the 1920s and who, as Shari Benstock points out, were on the whole extremely longlived:

[Edith] Wharton, who died at 75 (as did Sylvia Beach), was one of the shorterlived of these women [of the Left Bank]. Stein died at age 72 of cancer, but Natalie Barney lived to 96; Djuna Barnes, Katherine Anne Porter, and Alice B. Toklas to 90; Winifred Ellerman [Bryher] to 88; Margaret Anderson to 87; Janet Flanner ... to 86; Mina Loy to 84.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst the contribution to Modern Letters of all these women has since been documented, it has not been the case for Mary Butts, who in addition never found a tireless supporter of her work during her lifetime as did

---

1. Benstock, p.6.

H.D. in the person of Norman Holmes Pearson. She has never been completely forgotten: John Wieners declared in an interview that in his very first meeting with Robert Duncan in 1946 the latter 'started recounting about Mary Butts' and in that same year when C. David Heymann met Ezra Pound he was 'recommended books for reading ... [including] the stories of Mary Butts'.<sup>2</sup> Yet her work as a powerful example of deep-space writing which has continued Romanticism into Modernism has not yet begun to be given its proper due.

The reasons for the neglect of Jane Bowles's work are rather different as highlighted by the need for a new term ('layered space') to describe her writing since, unlike the work of Mary Butts, that of Jane Bowles does not occupy any recognisable prose genre. Paul Bowles declared when interviewed by me that the poor critical reception of Two Serious Ladies was partly due to its being a wartime publication, yet the continued bewilderment expressed by critics and reviewers in the ensuing decades reveals that while Mary Butts's work only needs bringing back into print in order to gain recognition, Jane Bowles's prose will always cause bafflement amongst most readers and critics. This is because her writing presents a 'serious surprise' (Ashbery) and the linking of the Serious with the continually Surprising together with her Wit and Inconsequentiality defies, as has been illustrated in this thesis, any single characterisation. Just as it is not possible to describe an abstract painting according to criteria of traditional perspective, so it is not possible to apply deep-space characteristics (as presented in the very different works of Mary Butts and Paul Bowles) to the layered-space fictions of Jane Bowles. Her originality demanded a new term, which by doing justice to it would provide an opening for the long overdue critical debate about her work. That has been the aim of this thesis.

---

2. 'John Wieners interviewed by Charles Shively', in Gay Sunshine Interviews Vol. 2., edited by Winston Leyland, p. 66; Heymann, p.193.

Thus whilst very different from one another the works of both Mary Butts and Jane Bowles defy a reading if it is bound by expectations of realism. Mary Butts's writing achieves this within the context of the idiom of her time (eg. in her use of Grail symbolism, classical imagery and reference to Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis) as her work undertakes the quest for the Sacred in whatever form it presents itself. Mainly it is to be found in the land so that the setting of most of her narratives is her native countryside of Dorset (and to a lesser extent in her later stories the Cornish coast) which she continually evokes and invokes in stories which provide an extraordinarily vivid paean to its power. To read her work is to be given a sense, however brief, of the transcendence of worldly temporality, a state she described in her autobiography:

I sat at my table, looking out through the winter branches, into the dark that held the Harbour with the living tide for bloodstream and pulse. One of those hours - I used to have them - when something of my future and my past seemed to meet, in a present that was more than present, and with it went the sense of a vast fate, waiting for the world and for me round the next corner in space.<sup>3</sup>

If Mary Butts's writing confounds realist expectations by transcending the limitations of phenomenal description, Jane Bowles's narratives subvert them by contracting and breaking the world into a kaleidoscope of perspectives. The 'privacies' (Kazin) who pass through her fictions have no less presence for not being 'rounded' characters, but rather come and go, exhibiting idiosyncracies, obsessions, sharpness of intellect and bewilderment which is all the more compelling for their non-judgemental presentation by the narrator. There is no unified symbolic context here; instead, as Tennessee Williams remarked, the reader is introduced to a 'wonderland of totally fresh sensibility'.<sup>4</sup> It has been one aim of this thesis to give a critical account of this sensibility.

---

3. The Crystal Cabinet, p.242.

4. 'Foreword' to Feminine Wiles, p.7.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Material

(a) Mary Butts

(i) Works

Ashe of Rings (Paris, 1925; New York, 1926; London, 1933).

Armed with Madness (London, 1928; New York, 1928; London, 1932).

Death of Felicity Taverner (London, 1932).

Speed the Plough and other Stories (London, 1923).

Several Occasions (London, 1932).

Last Stories (London, 1938).

The Macedonian (London, 1933).

Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra (London, 1935; New York, 1974).

The Crystal Cabinet (London, 1937; second edition, Manchester, 1988).

Imaginary Letters (Paris, 1928; Vancouver, 1979).

(ii) Essays and Uncollected Fiction

'Vision', The Egoist, 5 no 8 (1918), 111.

'Magic', The Little Review, 7 no 2 (1920), 3-6.

'Change', The Dial, 72 (1922), 465-470.

'Rites of Passage', Pagany, 2 no 2 (1931), 62-63.

'Questionnaire', The Little Review (May 1929), 21-22.

'Aldous Huxley', Scrutinies II, edited by Edgell Rickword (London, 1931), pp.73-98.

Traps for Unbelievers (London, 1932).

Warning to Hikers (London, 1932).

'Ghosties and Ghoulies', The Bookman, 83 no 496 (1933), 386-389; 83 no 497 (1933), 433-435; 83 no 498 (1933), 493-494; 84 no 499 (1933), 12-14.

'The Art of Montagu James', The London Mercury, 29 no 172 (1934), 306-313.

'Baron Corvo', The London Mercury 30 no 175 (1934), 619-624.

(iii) Book Reviews

'Aldington's Images of Desire', The Little Review, 6 no 4 (1919), 35-36.

'The Works of Thomas Vaughan', The Little Review, 6 no 10 (1920), 47-48.

'The Wind-Flowers of Asklepiades', The Little Review, 7 no 4 (1921), 45-47.

'A Story of Ancient Magic', The Bookman, 80 no 478 (1931), 210.

'A Glimpse of the Victorian Scene', The Bookman, 82 no 488 (1932), 119.

'The Past in the Present', The Bookman, 82 no 490 (1932), 206.

'The Real East End', The Bookman, 83 no 493 (1932), 24.

'Hesiod, an Hellenic Prophet', The Bookman, 83 no 494 (1932), 113-114.

'Vision of Asia', The Bookman, 83 no 495 (1932), 223-225.

'Rome: of the Renaissance and Today', The Bookman, 83 no 495 (1932), 254.

'This England', The Bookman, 83 no 495 (1932), 274.

'Josephus', The Bookman, 83 no 496 (1933), 405.

'The Girl through the Ages', The Bookman, 84 no 500 (1933), 110.

'Aristophanes', The Bookman, 84 no 501 (1933), 152.

'Taking Thought', Time and Tide, 14 no 24 (1933), 738-740.

'Our Native Land', The Bookman, 84 no 503 (1933), 252.

'Ancient Greek Literature', The Bookman, 84 no 504 (1933), 84.

'The Dark Tower', Time and Tide, 14 no 39 (1933), 1153-1154.

'It was Like That', The Bookman, 85 no 505 (1933), 44.

'A Russian Prophet', Time and Tide, 14 no 4 (1933), 228-230.

'Magic of Person and Place', The Bookman, 85 no 507 (1933), 141-143.

- 'England', The Bookman, 85 no 507 (1933), 256-258.
- 'The Drama of the Weather', The Bookman, 85 no 507 (1933), 309-310.
- 'The Real Wordsworth', Time and Tide, 14 no 48 (1933), 1446-1448.
- 'Unparalleled Swift', Time and Tide, 15 no 2 (1934), 44-45.
- 'A Man Possessed', Time and Tide, 15 no 7 (1934), 212-214.
- 'King Harry', Time and Tide, 15 no 13 (1934), 412-413.
- 'The Isles of Greece', The Bookman, 85 no 510 (1934), 505.
- 'The Past Lives Again', The Bookman, 86 no 511 (1934), 44-45.
- 'Scandal or History', Time and Tide, 15 no 18 (1934), 584-586.
- 'A New Vision', Time and Tide, 15 no 21 (1934), 675-677.
- 'Gardens and Gardening', The Bookman, 86 no 513 (1934), 161.
- 'The Great Dumas', Time and Tide, 15 no 23 (1934), 732-734.
- '"A Waste of Shame"', Time and Tide, 15 no 25 (1934), 802-803.
- 'The Bull or the Fighter', Time and Tide, 15 no 27 (1934), 860.
- 'Two Blind Mice', The Bookman, 86 no 515 (1934), 255.
- 'Five Also Ran', The Bookman, 87 no 518 (1934), 129-130.
- 'Two Artists', Time and Tide, 15 no 45 (1934), 1430.
- 'A Swedish Childhood', Time and Tide, 16 (1935), 55.
- 'The Eighteenth Century', Time and Tide, 16 (1935), 1337-1346.
- 'Imperial Rome', Time and Tide, 16 (1935), 1403-1404.
- 'The Funeral March of a Marionette', Time and Tide, 16 (1935), 1450.
- 'The Finer Corvo', Time and Tide, 16 (1935), 1800-1801.
- 'The Lady on a Black Horse', Time and Tide, 17 (1936), 417-418.
- 'Cleopatra's Daughter', Time and Tide, 17 (1936), 488-489.
- 'Flickering Genius', Time and Tide, 17 (1936), 680-681.
- 'Chartres - The Symbol', Time and Tide, 17 (1936), 856.
- 'The Real Voltaire', Time and Tide, 17 (1936), 1596.
- 'Eminent Romans', Time and Tide, 18 (1937), 470-472.



(b) Jane Bowles

(i) Works

Two Serious Ladies (New York, 1943, 1984; London, 1965, 1979, 1984).

In The Summer House, in The Best Plays of 1953-1954, edited by Louis Kronenberger (New York, 1954).

Plain Pleasures (London, 1966); second edition (London, 1984).

The Collected Works of Jane Bowles (New York, 1966); second edition (London, 1984).

My Sister's Hand in Mine (New York, 1978).

Feminine Wiles (Santa Barbara, 1976).

Out in the World: Selected Letters of Jane Bowles 1935-1970, edited Millicent Dillon (Santa Barbara, 1985).

'Looking for Lane', The Threepenny Review, 16 (1984), 3-4.

'Senorita Cordoba', The Threepenny Review, 21 (1985), 18-21.

'Laura and Sally', The Threepenny Review, 31 (1987), 24-29.

Unpublished notebooks held by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin.

Secondary Material

(a) Works on Mary Butts

- Adeane, Louis, 'Mary Butts', World Review (November 1951), 23-27.
- Allingham, M., 'New Novels', Time and Tide (1 October, 1938), 1356.
- Anon [Rodker, John], Memoirs of Other Fronts (London, 1932).
- Anon., 'Georgian Stories', Times Literary Supplement (6 July 1922), 440.
- Anon., 'The Best Short Stories of 1922', The Observer (4 February 1923), 4.
- Anon., 'Book Banned', Daily Courier (16 March 1923).
- Anon., 'The "Georgian" Short Story', The Bolton Evening News (22 March 1923), 3.
- Anon., 'Speed the Plough', Times Literary Supplement (22 March 1923), 196.
- Anon., 'Books of the Week', The Daily Telegraph (24 March 1923), 10.
- Anon., [Untitled Review], The Weekly Review (24 March 1923).
- Anon., 'Literary Surgery', The Liverpool Post and Mercury (11 April 1923), 9.
- Anon., 'The Short Story', Weekly Westminster Gazette (9 June 1923), 20.
- Anon., 'Speed the Plough by Mary Butts', The Bookman, 64 no 384 (September 1923), 298.
- Anon., 'Ashe of Rings by Mary Butts', The New Criterion, 4 no 1 (1926), 209.
- Anon., 'Armed with Madness by Mary Butts', Times Literary Supplement (24 May 1928), 397.
- Anon., 'Hard Playing', John O'London's Weekly, 19 no 475 (1928), 222.
- Anon., 'Several Occasions by Mary Butts', Time and Tide, 13 no 13 (March 1932), 352.
- Anon., 'Townsmen and the Countryside', The Glasgow Herald (7 April 1932), 8.
- Anon., 'Several Occasions by Mary Butts', Times Literary Supplement (14 April 1932), 273.
- Anon., 'Tale of Two Worlds', The New Statesman and Nation, 4 no 96 (1932), 837.

- Anon., 'Death of Felicity Taverner', Times Literary Supplement (29 December 1932), 988.
- Anon., 'The Macedonian', Times Literary Supplement (20 July 1933), 494.
- Anon., 'Ashe of Rings by Mary Butts', Times Literary Supplement (5 October 1933), 673.
- Anon., 'Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra', Times Literary Supplement (27 June 1935), 414.
- Anon., 'Miss Mary Butts, Imaginative Gift', The Times (13 March 1937), 14b.
- Anon., 'A Dorset Childhood', Times Literary Supplement (29 May 1937), 404.
- Anon., 'A Novelist's Memoirs', The Times (8 June 1937), 22c.
- Anon., 'A Writer and Early Contributor', Life and Letters Today, 17 no 8 (1937), 3-4.
- Anon., 'The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns by Mary Butts', The Listener (9 June 1937), 1159.
- Anon., 'Last Stories by Mary Butts', Times Literary Supplement (October 1938), 649.
- Anon., 'The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns', Publishers' Weekly (24 June 1988).
- Baerlein, Henry, 'New Fiction', Time and Tide, 16 (1935), 1226.
- Baker, Frank, I Follow But Myself (London, 1968).
- Bell, Quentin, 'Bugs at the Rue de Montessuy' [unpublished memoir].
- Blakeston, Oswald, 'Plutarch's Siren', Books and Bookmen (March 1971), 29.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 'Dangerous Enchanter', Gay News, 245 (25 November-8 December 1982), 30-31.
- Blaser, Robin, 'Afterword', to Mary Butts, Imaginary Letters (Vancouver, 1979), pp.61-76.
- Blatchford, Winifred, 'Nasty Georgian Fiction', The Clarion (4 August 1922), 4.
- Blondel, Nathalie, 'Mary Butts, The Crystal Cabinet', P.N. Review, 15 no 3 (1988), 53-55.
- Blunden, Edmund, 'Alexander', Time and Tide, 14 no 17 (1933), 501-502.

- Bryher, 'Recognition not Farewell', Life and Letters Today, 17 no 9 (1937), 159-164.
- Butts, Anthony, 'The Crystal Cabinet', The Spectator (18 June 1937), 1149.
- Byington, Robert, 'The Quest for Mary Butts', [unpublished manuscript].
- Byington, Robert and Morgan Glen E., 'Mary Butts', Art and Literature, 7 (1965), 162-179.
- Crosbie, M., 'A Cromwellian Interlude', John O'London's Weekly, 27 no 677 (1932), 21.
- Davies, Rhys, 'A Note on Mary Butts', Wales, 6/7 (1939), 207.
- Ellis Roberts, R., 'Short Stories', The New Statesman and Nation, 3 no 5 (1932), 338-340.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 'A London Letter', The Saturday Review of Literature (11 January 1936), 17.
- Fraser, Brodie, [untitled review], The Sunday Times (11 March 1923).
- G., D.M., 'Contact Collection of Contemporary Writers', Calendar, 6 no 6 (1925), 487-488.
- Goldring, Douglas, South Lodge (London, 1942).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 'A London Bookman's Day Book', Sunday Tribune (October 1922).
- Grant, Joy, 'Glimpses and Grievances', Times Literary Supplement 24-29 December 1988), 1414.
- Hanscombe, Gillian and Smyers, Virginia L., Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910-1940 (London, 1987).
- Hargreave, John, 'Happy when they're hiking?', The New Age (9 June 1932), 69-70.
- Hone, J.M., 'Mary Butts', The Spectator (4 June 1937), 1059-1060.
- Hope, David, Mary Butts, Fire-Bearer, Sennen Pamphlets 1 (Sennen, 1937).
- Ingram, H.F., 'Poole's Forgotten Genius: The Story of Mary Butts', Poole and Dorset Herald (23 February 1966), 2; (2 March 1966), 2.
- J., M., 'Ashe of Rings by Mary Butts', The New Age (30 November 1933), 58-59.
- K., K., 'How to See', Evening Standard (12 April 1923), 12.
- L., D., 'In a Napkin', Review of Reviews, 67 no 402 (June 1923), 632.

- Moore, Marianne, 'The House-Party', The Dial, 85 (1928), 258-260.
- Muir, Edwin, 'Ashe of Rings by Mary Butts', Calendar, 1 no 6 (1925), 476-478.
- O'Brien, K., 'Fiction', The Spectator (16 December 1938), 1062.
- Oppe, A., 'Mary Butts, The Crystal Cabinet', The London Mercury and Bookman, 36 no 212 (1937), 200.
- Pendle, G., 'Traps for Unbelievers by Mary Butts', Twentieth Century, 3 no 15 (1932), 29-30.
- Plomer, William, 'Fiction', The Spectator (29 September 1933), 420.
- Priestley, J.B., 'Speed the Plough by Mary Butts', The London Mercury, 8 no 43 (1923), 99.
- Pritchett, V.S., 'New Novels', The New Statesman and Nation, 5 no 110 (1933), 419-420.
- Quennell, P., 'New Novels', The New Statesman and Nation (1935), 829-830.
- Raverat, G., 'New Fiction', Time and Tide, 13 no 49 (1932), 1348.
- Raynor, John, 'In Memoriam: Mary Butts', Time and Tide, 18 (1937), 408.
- Ross Williamson, Hugh, 'Portrait of Mary Butts', The Bookman (Xmas 1931), 188-189.
- Royde-Smith, N., Letter to Editor, Time and Tide, 18 (1937), 378.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 'The Crystal Cabinet', Time and Tide, 21 (1937), 756-757.
- Sackville-West, E., 'A Poetical Autobiography', The New Statesman and Nation, 13 no 329 (1937), 974.
- de Selincourt, B., 'A Haunted Childhood', Times Literary Supplement (30 May 1937), 5.
- Shanks, E., 'Memories of her Childhood', The Sunday Times (30 May 1937), 12.
- Spilleth, Meg, 'The Effects of Childhood', Minnesota Daily (28 September 1988).
- Squire, J.C., 'The Modern Revival of the Short Story: Miss Mary Butts' Success', The Daily Telegraph (8 March 1932), 16.
- Strong, L.A., 'Fiction', The Spectator (23 December 1932), 900.
- Symonds, John, The Great Beast, second edition (St. Albans, 1973).

- Thomson, Virgil, Virgil Thomson (London, 1967).
- Vernon, Frank, 'Books We'd like to Burn', John Bull, 33 no 882 (28 April 1923), 18.
- Warren, C. Henry, 'Love of Nature?', The Bookman, 82 no 488 (1932), 116-117.
- Westcott, G., 'Speed the Plough by Mary Butts', The Dial, 75 (1923), 282-284.
- Wieners, John, [untitled article], Floating Bear, 26 (1962), 287.
- Wright, Patrick, 'Coming Back to the Shores of Albion: The Secret England of Mary Butts (1890-1937)', in On Living in an Old Country (London, 1985), pp.93-134.

(b) Works on Jane Bowles

- Anon., 'Confessions of an Honest Playwright', Vogue (1 May 1954), 137.
- Anon., 'Two Empty Ladies', Times Literary Supplement (4 February 1965), 81.
- Anon., 'New Fiction', The Times (23 June 1966), 16c.
- Anon., 'A Serious Lady', Times Literary Supplement (30 June 1966), 579.
- Anon., 'Two Serious Talents', Elle (Summer 1988), 109-115.
- Ashbery, John, 'Up From the Underground', New York Times Book Review (29 January 1967), 5, 28-30.
- Bassett, Mark T., 'Imagination, Control and Betrayal in Jane Bowles' "A Stick of Green Candy"', Studies in Short Fiction 1, (1987), 25-29.
- Bradbury, M., Mottram, E., Franco, J., eds., 'Bowles Jane (1918- )', The Penguin Companion to Literature: United States and Latin American Literature, 3 (Harmondsworth, 1971), p.40.
- Collins, Jack, 'Jane and Paul', The Threepenny Review, 8 (1982), 8-9.
- Cook, Roderick, 'The Collected Works of Jane Bowles', Harpers Magazine (January 1967), 98.
- Curley, D.N., Kramer, M., Kramer, E.F., eds., 'Bowles, Jane (1917- )', A Library of Literary Criticism: Modern American Literature, 1 (New York, 1969), pp.135-137.
- Dillon, Millicent, 'Between Deceit and Silence', The Nation (28 August 1976), 53-54.
- \_\_\_\_\_ A Little Original Sin: The Life and Work of Jane Bowles (New York, 1982; London, 1988).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 'The Three Exiles of Jane Bowles', Confrontation, 27-28 (1984), 72-74.
- Edelstein, Arthur, 'A Certain Narrative Chaos fails to obscure Jane Bowles' Talent', [unidentified newspaper cutting; Paul Bowles collection] (1969), [1].
- French, Philip, 'Writing at the Edge of Danger', Observer Magazine (9 March 1986), 24-27.
- Giorno, John, 'Vitamin G: Obituary', Ant-Rite, 8 (1973), [1]; [Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center Collection].

- Haynes, Muriel, 'The Toughness of Jane Bowles', Ms (April 1978), 33, 35, 65.
- Howard, Jane, 'A Talk in the Casbah with Jane Bowles', The Washington Post Bookworld (19 March 1978), 111-113.
- Jefferson, Margo, 'What killed Jane Bowles?', The Soho News (11 August 1981), 15-16.
- Koch, Stephen, 'Jane Bowles' Plain Pleasures', Book Week (12 February 1967), 4, 18.
- Krim, Seymour, 'Profile of an Artist's Decline', Daily News (28 August 1981), 7-8.
- Lougy, Robert E., 'The World and Art of Jane Bowles', CEA Critic, 49, 2-4 (1986-1987), 157-173.
- Loveman, Amy, [unidentified title], The Saturday Review of Literature (17 April, 1943), 7.
- MacManus, Patricia, 'Women out of this World', Saturday Review (14 January 1967), 87-88.
- Merkin, Daphne, 'My Sister's Hand in Mine by Jane Bowles', The New Republic (11 February 1978), 30-31.
- Nasso, Christine, ed., 'Bowles, Jane (Sydney) 1917-1973', Contemporary Authors - Permanent Series, 2 (New York, 1978), pp.75-76.
- Nichols, Lewis, 'In and Out of Books', New York Times Book Review (12 February 1967), 8.
- Nye, Robert, 'A Peasant World', The Guardian (1984) [specific date and page unidentified; Paul Bowles collection].
- du Plessix Gray, Francine, 'Jane Bowles Reconsidered', New York Times Book Review (19 February 1978), 3, 28; reprinted as 'Introduction' to Jane Bowles, Two Serious Ladies (London, 1984), [pp.1-4].
- Riley, Carolyn, ed., 'Bowles, Jane 1917—', Contemporary Literary Criticism, 3 (New York, 1975), p.84.
- Samuels, Charles Thomas, 'Serious Ladies', New York Review of Books (15 December, 1966), 38-40.
- Schott, Webster, 'A Shriek from Wasted Women', Life Magazine (16 December 1967) [unidentified page number; Paul Bowles Collection].
- Shaw, Fred, 'Even Genius is no Bar to Dulness', The Miami Herald (1967) [specific date and page unidentified; Paul Bowles collection].
- Stewart, J.I.M., 'Other Things', London Review of Books (2-15 February 1984), 16-17.



- Wagner, Geoffrey, 'The Collected Works of Jane Bowles', Commonweal,  
85 no 17 (1967), 493-494.
- Wakeman, John, ed., 'Bowles, Jane Sydney', World Authors 1950-1970  
(New York, 1975), pp.202-204.
- Walton, Edith H., 'Fantastic Duo', New York Times Book Review (9 May  
1943), 14.
- Williams, Tennessee, 'Foreword', to Jane Bowles, Feminine Wiles  
(Santa Barbara, 1976), pp.7-8.

(c) Other Works Consulted

- Acton, Harold, Memoirs of an Aesthete (London, 1984).
- Aldington, Richard, Life for Life's Sake (New York, 1941).
- Aldridge, John W., After the Lost Generation, second edition (London, 1959).
- Allen, Donald, ed., The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara (New York, 1972).
- Anon., [Lunn, Arnold, ed.] Georgian Stories 1922 (London, 1922).
- Anon., 'Complete Exposure of "Drug Fiend" Author', Sunday Express (26 November 1922), 7.
- Anon., 'Unpleasant Court Cases', Pall Mall Gazette (29 December 1922), 5.
- Anon., 'Court of Appeal', The Times (17 February 1923), 4.
- Anon., John O'London Anthology (London, 1961).
- Baker, Carlos, Hemingway: the Writer and Artist (Princeton, 1963).
- Barnes, Djuna, Nightwood (London, 1979).
- Barthes, Roland, The Pleasure of the Text (London, 1976).
- Baudelaire, Charles, Les Fleurs du Mal (Paris, 1961).
- Baudrillard, Jean, Simulations (New York, 1983).
- Beach, Sylvia, Shakespeare and Co (London, 1960).
- Bell, Anne Olivier, ed., The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume II: 1920-1924 (London, 1978).
- Bell, Anne Olivier, ed., The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume III: 1925-1930 (London, 1980).
- Bell, Anne Olivier, ed., The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume IV: 1931-1935 (London, 1982).
- Benstock, Shari, Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940 (Austin, 1986).
- Bloom, Harold, 'The Breaking of Form', in Bloom et al., Deconstruction and Criticism (New York, 1979), pp.1-37.
- Bloomfield, B.C., An Author Index to Selected British 'Little Magazines' 1930-1939 (London, 1976).

- Bokris, Victor, With William Burroughs: A Report from the Bunker (New York, 1981).
- Boone, Bruce, 'Gay Language as Political Praxis - the Poetry of Frank O'Hara', Social Text, 1 (1979), 59-92.
- Bowen, Stella, Drawn from Life, (London, 1940).
- Bowles, Paul, The Sheltering Sky (London, 1949).
- The Spider's House (London, 1957).
- Without Stopping (London, 1972).
- Collected Stories 1939-1976 (Santa Barbara, 1979).
- Up Above the World (London, 1984).
- Bradbury, Malcolm, The Modern American Novel (Oxford, 1983).
- Bradbury, Malcolm and McFarlane, James, eds., Modernism 1890-1930 (Harmondsworth, 1978).
- Bryher, The Heart to Artemis (London, 1963).
- The Days of Mars (London, 1977).
- Burroughs, William S., The Adding Machine: Collected Essays (London, 1985).
- The Naked Lunch (London, 1988).
- Burroughs, William S. and Gysin, Bryon, The Third Mind (London, 1979).
- Carpenter, Humphrey, A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound (London, 1988).
- Charters, James, This must be the Place (London, 1934).
- Cocteau, Jean, Opium: The Diary of a Cure (London, 1957).
- My Contemporaries (London, 1967).
- Compton-Burnett, Ivy, Darkness and Day (London, 1951).
- Cowley, Malcolm, A Second Flowering: Works and Days of the Lost Generation (New York, 1973).
- Cox, Michael, M.R. James: An Informal Portrait (Oxford, 1986).
- Crowley, Aleister, Diary of a Drug Fiend (York Beach, 1985).
- Culler, Jonathan, On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism (London, 1983).
- H.D., Palimpsest, second edition (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1968).

- H.D., Bid Me to Live (London, 1984).
- Daiches, David, The Present Age: after 1920 (London, 1958).
- Daiches, David, ed., The Penguin Companion to Literature I: Britain and the Commonwealth (Harmondsworth, 1971).
- Delafield, E.M., ed., Time and Tide Album (London, 1932).
- Dickson, Albert, ed., Art and Literature, Pelican Freud Library, 14 (Harmondsworth, 1985).
- Douglas, Mary, Purity and Danger (London, 1985).
- Drabble, Margaret, The Oxford Companion to English Literature (Oxford, 1988).
- Dubnik, Randa, The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language and Cubism (Urbana, 1984).
- Duncan, Robert, 'Night and Days: Chapter I', Sumac (1963), 101-146.  
————— The Truth and Life of Myth (Fremont, 1968).
- Edel, Leon, The Psychological Novel (London, 1955).
- Eliot, T.S., Selected Essays (London, 1946).  
————— The Sacred Wood (London, 1960).  
————— Selected Poems (London, 1976).  
————— Four Quartets (London 1979).  
————— The Waste Land (London, 1980).
- Eliot, Valerie, ed., The Letters of T.S. Eliot: Volume I 1898-1922 (London, 1988).
- Ellis, Edward F., The British Museum in Fiction (Buffalo, 1981).
- Entwhistle, W.J. and Gillett, E., The Literature of England AD 500-1942 (London, 1943).
- Faas, Ekbert, ed., Towards a New American Poetics: Essays and Interviews (Santa Barbara, 1978).
- Faas, Ekbert, Young Robert Duncan (Santa Barbara, 1983).
- Faulkner, Peter, Modernism, The Critical Idiom 35, edited by John D. Jump (London, 1977).
- Fiedler, Leslie A., Waiting for the End: The American Literary Scene from Hemingway to Baldwin (London, 1965).  
————— No! In Thunder: Essays on Myth and Literature, second edition (New York, 1972).

- Field, Andrew, Djuna: The Formidable Miss Barnes (Austin, 1985).
- Firbank, Ronald, Valmouth, Prancing Nigger, Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli (Harmondsworth, 1961).
- Fitch, Noel Riley, Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation (Harmondsworth, 1988).
- Ford, Hugh, The Left Bank Revisited: Selections from the Paris Tribune 1917-1934 (University Park, 1972).
- Published in Paris: American and British Writers, Printers and Publishers in Paris 1920-1939 (London, 1975).
- Forster, E.M., What I Believe, Hogarth Sixpenny Pamphlets, 1 (London, 1939).
- The development of English Prose between 1918 and 1939: the fifth W.P. Ker Memorial Lecture delivered in the University of Glasgow, 27th April 1944 (Glasgow, 1945).
- Aspects of the Novel (London, 1969).
- Foye, Raymond, ed., John Wieners Selected Poems 1958-1984 (Santa Barbara, 1986).
- Frazer, J.G., The Golden Bough (London, 1922).
- Freud, Sigmund, The Psychopathology of Everyday Life (Harmondsworth, 1938).
- Frye, Northrop, The Great Code: The Bible and Literature (London, 1983).
- Gathorne-Hardy, Robert, Recollections of Logan Pearsall Smith (London, 1941).
- Gifford, Barry, ed., As Ever: The Collected Correspondence of Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady (Berkeley, 1977).
- Goldring, Douglas, Northern Lights and Southern Shade (Boston and New York, 1926).
- Odd Man Out (London, 1935).
- The Nineteen Twenties (London, 1945).
- The Last Pre-Raphaelite: A Record of the Life and Writings of Ford Madox Ford (London, 1948).
- Goode, Stephen H., Index to American Little Magazines 1900-1919 (New York, 1974).
- Index to American Little Magazines 1920-1939 (New York, 1969).

- Guest, Barbara, Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and her World (New York, 1984).
- Guggenheim, Peggy, Out of this Century (London, 1980).
- Haas, Robert Bartlett, ed., How Writing is Written, Previously Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein Volume 2 (Los Angeles, 1974).
- Hadfield, Alice Mary, Charles Williams (Oxford, 1983).
- Halpern, Daniel, 'Interview with Edouard Roditi', Antaeus, 2 (1971), 99-114.
- 'Interview with Paul Bowles', Triquarterly 33 (Spring 1975), 159-177.
- Hamnett, Nina, Is She a Lady? A Problem in Autobiography (London, 1955).
- Laughing Torso, second edition (London, 1984).
- Harrison, J.E., Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion (Cambridge, 1912).
- Ancient Art and Ritual (London, 1919).
- Prolegomena to the study of Greek Religion (London, 1961).
- Hemingway, Ernest, A Moveable Feast (New York, 1964).
- Herbert, David, Second Son: An Autobiography (London, 1972).
- Heymann, C. David, Ezra Pound: The Last Rower (New York, 1980).
- Hillis Miller, John, 'The Critic as Host', in Bloom et al., Deconstruction and Criticism (New York, 1979), pp.217-253.
- Hooker, Denise, Nina Hamnett: Queen of Bohemia (London, 1986).
- Huddleston, Sisley, Bohemian, Literary and Social Life in Paris (London, 1928).
- Back to Montparnasse (London, 1931).
- Huxley, Aldous, Antic Hay (London, 1936).
- James Henry, Ten Short Stories of Henry James (London, 1948).
- Jones, Herbert and Blakeston, Oswald, eds., Seed, 1 (London, 1933).
- Kazin, Alfred, Bright Book of Life (London, 1971).
- Kenner, Hugh, The Pound Era (London, 1975).
- Kermode, Frank, Romantic Image (London, 1986).

- Knoll, Robert E. ed., McAlmon and the Lost Generation (Nebraska, 1962).
- Lehmann, John, The Ample Proposition: Autobiography III (London, 1966).
- Lejeune, Anthony ed., Time and Tide Anthology (London, 1956).
- Lewis, Wyndham, The Apes of God (Harmondsworth, 1965).
- Leyland, Winston, ed., Gay Sunshine Interviews Volume 2 (San Francisco, 1982).
- Lindberg-Seyersted, Brita, ed., Pound/Ford: The Story of a Literary Friendship (London, 1982).
- Lindsay, Jack, Fanfrolico and After (London, 1962).
- Loeb, Harold, The Way it was (New York, 1957).
- Lockitt, C.H., The Imaginary Eye-Witness (London, New York, Toronto, 1937).
- Lowry, Malcolm, Under the Volcano (London, 1967).
- McAlmon, Robert and Boyle, Kay, Being Geniuses Together: 1920-1930 (London, 1984).
- Machen, Arthur, The Shining Pyramid (London, 1925).
- Malin, Irving 'Purdy, James (Otis)', Contemporary Novelists, edited by James Vinson (London, 1982), pp.539-541.
- Martell, Edward, ed., The Authors and Writers Who's Who 1934 (London, 1934).
- Medley, Robert, Drawn from the Life: A Memoir (London, 1983).
- Mellow, James R., Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company (New York, 1975).
- Mendelson, E., ed., The English Auden (London, 1977).
- Metcalf, Paul, 'A Journey in Search of Bowles', The Review of Contemporary Fiction. 2 no 2 (1982), 32-41.
- Meyers, Jeffrey, The Enemy: a biography of Wyndham Lewis (London, 1980).
- Moi, Toril, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London, 1985).
- Moore, Marianne, Predilections (London, 1956).
- Mottram, Eric, 'Paul Bowles: Staticity and Terror', The Review of Contemporary Fiction, 2 no 2 (1982), 6-30.

- Muir, Edwin, The Present Age from 1914, Introductions to English Literature, 5 (London, 1939).
- Nicolson, Nigel, ed., The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II: 1912-1922 (London, 1976).
- Norman, Charles, Ezra Pound, second edition (London, 1969).
- O'Brien, Edward G. and Cournos, John, eds., The Best Short Stories of 1924 (London, 1925).
- O'Donnell Hoover, K. and Cage, John, Virgil Thomson (Sagamore, 1959).
- Olson, Charles, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (London, 1967).
- Ousby, Ian, ed., The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English (Cambridge, 1988).
- Phelps, Robert, ed., Professional Secrets: an autobiography of Jean Cocteau (New York, 1972).
- Plomer, William, ed., William d'Arfey [Anthony Butts], Curious Relations (London, 1945).
- Plomer, William, Museum Pieces (London, 1952).
- At Home (London, 1958).
- Pound, Ezra, The Spirit of Romance, second edition (London, 1970).
- Powell, Anthony, To Keep the Ball Rolling: the memoirs of Anthony Powell (London, 1976-1982).
- Powys, John Cowper, A Glastonbury Romance (London, 1933).
- Preston Kerrison, ed., The Blake Collection of W. Graham Robertson (London, 1952).
- Ray, Man, Self Portrait (London, 1963).
- Rorem, Ned, The Paris Diary of Ned Rorem (London, 1966).
- Rose, Francis, Saying Life (London, 1961).
- Rosenberg, Harold, The Anxious Object (Chicago and London, 1982).
- Sader Marion, ed., Comprehensive Index to English-language Little Magazines 1890-1970, 1 vol 2 (New York, 1976).
- Scott, Nathan, 'Black Literature', Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing, edited by Daniel Hoffmann (Boston, 1979), pp.287-341.
- Stein, Gertrude, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (Harmondsworth, 1983).



- Stuhlmann, Gunter, ed., The Journals of Anais Nin: Volume 5 1947-1955 (London, 1979).
- Symonds, John and Grant, Kenneth, The Confessions of Aleister Crowley (New York, 1971).
- Tindall, William York, Forces in Modern British Literature 1885-1956 (New York, 1956).
- Turkle, Sherry, Psychoanalytic Politics: Jacques Lacan and Freud's French Revolution (London, 1979).
- van Doren Stern, P., ed., Edgar Allan Poe, Viking Portable Library (Harmondsworth, 1977).
- Vinaver, Eugene, ed., Sir Thomas Malory, Works, second edition (New York, 1978).
- Vinson, James, ed., 'Purdy, James (July 14, 1923- )', Twentieth Century American Literature (London, 1980), pp.1172-1175.
- Ward, A.C., The Nineteen-Twenties: Literature and Ideas in the post-war decade (London, 1930).
- Ward, A.C., Twentieth-Century Literature 1901-1940, eighth edition (London, 1942).
- Waugh, Alec, A Year to Remember: Reminiscences of 1931 (London, 1975).
- The Best Wine Last (London, 1978).
- Waugh, Arthur, ed., Georgian Stories, 1927 (London, 1927).
- Waugh, Arthur, A Hundred Years of Publishing: Being the story of Chapman and Hall Ltd. (London, 1930).
- Waugh, Evelyn, A Little Learning (London, 1963).
- Weales, Gerald, 'Drama', Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing (Harvard, 1979), pp.396-438.
- Weaver, Mike, William Carlos Williams: The American Background (Cambridge, 1977).
- Welch, Denton, In Youth is Pleasure (New York, 1985).
- Weston, Jessie L., From Ritual to Romance (Cambridge, 1920).
- Whitehead, Alfred North, Science and the Modern World (Cambridge, 1932).
- Williams, Charles, Many Dimensions (London, 1931).
- War in Heaven (London, 1947).
- Williams, Tennessee, Memoirs (London, 1976).

Williams, William Carlos, The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (New York, 1967).

Willis, Patricia C., ed., The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore (London, 1987).

Willison, I.R., ed., The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature, 4 (Cambridge, 1972).

Wilson, Angus and Julian, Philippe, For Whom the Cloche Tolls (London, 1953).

Zukovsky, Louis, ed., An "Objectivists" Anthology (France, 1932).