

4. Cultic forms

Bowles was in conscious quest of the high culture of uncivilized life: original tribal music, the mythical oral tradition of storytelling, and the “natural man.”¹ His collection of authentic, archaic Moroccan music, and translations of original yet archaic tales is invaluable. Equally invaluable (but more accessible) are his fine descriptions of cultural customs, phenomena, and ritual forms e.g. precise musical processes, in both non-fictional and fictional works. The “natural man” he found and eternalized in the figure of Amar in *Spider’s* was his personal role-model of the effortless mystic.

Bowles gained access to **subjective revelations** as well as to **objective observations** of ritualism. These suggest that all cultic forms employ the same principles, same structures and patterns. He observes the same repetitive and processive patterns of rhythm, paths and characters of instrumental melody, pitch and words of singing. Here I attempt to reconstruct genres of tradition which Bowles explicitly observes and notes, with the addition of language. The cultic model of all of these will be seen crystallised in my reconstructed model of literary substance.

In observations of rites, religious, transcendent, magical, their contemplation and participation is hidden. Bowles’s fascination with rites and spirits results in both his thematic, narrative considerations of ritualism, and in his utilization of ritual forms. What is revealed is a universally organic system of initiation, invocation, evocation, with basic principles of passage across the border of ego-illusion-bound existence, no rules but natural forms of paths, figures of encounter and evaluation.

4.1 Ecstatic practice

At the age of twenty-one, he saw “[his] first brotherhoods in action” to “**achieve transcendence of normal consciousness** (a psychic necessity all over the African continent).”² This action is the threshold to a metanarrative human world: neither arbitrary, nor gratuitous, it is a primal bridge between human and cosmic energies. In the ritual complexity of the novels, it is metanarrative (liminal passages and the emblematic system of titles) which manifest the agency of transgression. While narrative represents the realm of division and partiality in the novels, metanarrative presents identification and totality, i.e. “transcendence of normal consciousness”. The identification between interiority and exteriority, subject and object can only be intuited by the participants, in a par excellence ritualistic sense of the novels. On the one hand, therefore, metanarration concerns transcendence of normal into universal consciousness, as narrative into liminal textuality, and of the physical limits of the book into consciousness. On the other hand, transcendence also signifies a reversed tendency, which is the appearance of a revelative entity on a textual, material plane.

Transcendent ecstatic practices are common in all religions, and Bowles was greatly influenced by pre-Islamic mystery rituals. His discovery of trance music performed by Sufi brotherhoods became a significant influence on his perception of ritualism³, particularly the ritual function and operation of music. These practices Bowles considers “authentic and valid,”⁴ and thus he implements them in the metanarrative order of his writings.

Amar’s blissful ascent in *Spider’s* is also in this category of happy ecstasy. But Bowles also recounts **shocking** Moroccan rites of hypnotic musical act, as self-laceration, ecstatic dance or uncontrolled writhing. Shock is a method of reintegration, by provoking participation as a rite of courage, through which purification

¹ Caponi, Gena Dagele (ed.), *Conversations with Paul Bowles*, 90.

² *WS.*, 150.

³ Sisterhoods also perform such rituals.

⁴ Paul Bowles, *Africa Minor*, in: *THAG*, 34.

is achieved, and order reconstituted.⁵ He is “present in a café during a Jilala ritual [during which the ‘performer’] **slashed himself**”⁶ in order to “purify all who watched.”⁷

Bowles also uses shocking narratives, and for the same ritual therapeutic purpose, not in the least for gratuitous reasons. In the occasional disturbing **violence** of his stories, Bowles cuts through the body of Western consciousness, symbolically through that of the reader, in order to liberate a cultural core of archetypal order and identity, and a re-unified, universal sensibility and consciousness. The ritual aim is “**to triumph over** pain, and by extension, over **death itself**.”⁸ It is therefore in this apparently most gruesome aspect of Bowlesian ritualism, that his most clear affirmation of life is manifest. The ritual of **purification** is a tabula rasa by **absolution**. It may be seen as the sacrificial offering of the consciousness of the writer, released and absolved by the reader’s participation, and vice versa. It is here that the level and polarity of the rite is decided. Regardless of the object and the subject unified, the process of rituals is identical in every case, so danger, even mortal peril is present, either in the unprepared subject or in the wrong object. “Security is a false god; begin making **sacrifices** to it and you are lost.”⁹

The shocking passages of the novels, as Port’s extended death scene, or Dyar’s macabre act of murder, should not be considered as negative incantations, but experienced ultimately as universal **sacrifice**. The subordination of victim to murderer is unnatural, because that is always gratuitous self-righteousness, and in every case signifies injustice. In the decisive mythologies of many races, the lesser brother murders the more sufficient one. This becomes the negative fusion mould and root of misunderstanding the necessity of sacrifice: it is not the objective other but the subjective self that must be overcome in rites of reintegration in ontological unity and totality.

In sacral sacrifice, however, it is the reestablishment of the hierarchy within the entity that takes place: proving “the power of the spirit over the flesh.”¹⁰ In *Spider’s*, the political double massacre of the people is a shame, while the people’s offering of their animals is triumphant: the sheep they sacrifice during the spring rites become the extension of their own body, affirmed by “the voices of the thousands of sheep roundabout ..., greeting the day on which they were to die for the glory of Allah.”¹¹

Ritual is in every case the enactment of the taboo of abnormality, where the regular laws of life are suspended, and the gates of heaven or hell opened for consciousness. The rites observed by Bowles in Morocco are enacted in life by the protagonists, to their **misfortune**. Ritual death, as in the tale of “Tea in the Sahara” in *Sheltering*, is an enactment of universal death in sacrifice, which is part of the natural cycle. Bowles’s Western travellers make the mistake of confusing rite with life, and live out the rituals of the Maghreb. Their doom calls attention to the great significance of ordered, conscious ritualism.

The influence of these practices on Bowles¹² is proved by his devotion to collecting music of the brotherhoods like the Aissaoua, Jilala, or Jajouka of Morocco, in regions “where the cult of Pan was still alive.”¹³

In Morocco, magic is practiced more assiduously than hygiene, though, indeed, ecstatic dancing to music of the brotherhoods may be called a form of psychic hygiene. ... Westermarck, in his book on pagan survivals in Morocco ... recognized their patron Bou Jeloud, the Father of Skins, to be Pan the little goat god with his pipes. ...He is the Father of Fear. He is, too, the Father of Flocks.¹⁴

⁵ In contrast, the masked, violent Indian fiesta of fear in *Up Above* is portrayed as a rite of mass psychosis.

⁶ *WS.*, 310.

⁷ *Let It*, 294.

⁸ Paul Bowles, *Africa Minor*, in: *THAG*, 28.

⁹ Paul Bowles, *Notes Mailed at Nagercoil*, in: *THAG*, 53.

¹⁰ Paul Bowles, *Africa Minor*, in: *THAG*, 24.

¹¹ *Spider’s*, 335.

¹² Bowles was originally a composer, studied with Aaron Copland, wrote music for several cultic off-Broadway theatre pieces, composed continuously.

¹³ *Spider’s*, 310.

¹⁴ Brion Gysin, *The Pipes of Pan*, 122.

Bowles took his friend Brion Gysin to hear the Master Musicians of Jajouka in 1950, and he was immediately struck by their ritualism. Gysin describes the wild rites of Pan in the following terms: “faint breath of panic,” “sheer lightning to shatter the air,” “swirl in great circles and coils around one Wildman in skins.” “You feel sorry and loving and tender to that poor animal whimpering, grizzling, laughing, and sobbing there beside you like somebody out of ether. Who is that? That is you.”¹⁵ When Amar describes the quasi-Dionysian festival to the nationalist leader, he reflects Moulay Ali’s own modernizing view, calling the Sufi rituals “filth,” shameful dance “jumping up and down like monkeys.”¹⁶ Typically, the external view of trance as ridiculous or hideous belongs to the non-participant’s reservations.

4.2 Magic

At this point, the sacrality of rituals borders on confuse magic. Again, there is a thin and delicate borderline. It may be established that original magic is strictly positive, using the triadic principle of transgression in the enhancement of creation and evolution. But the same principles also apply to the downward pole along the axis, and the abuse of this process is common among negatively conditioned subordinators. Bowles apparently “objects to the control magical beliefs hold over such people as the Jilala,”¹⁷ although he “knew literacy would change Morocco, destroy the magic, in both its good and evil forms.”¹⁸ The type of enchantment Bowles’s characters fall into, like holes in time, are strongly defined by personal and narrative conditioning, including the collective psyche of the place. But Bowles warns: “one culture’s **therapy** is another culture’s **torture**.”¹⁹ It is a crucial point of differentiation for comparative considerations, another thin line, between the universally and the partially beneficial.

The consideration of rite as **magic** is a delicate aspect of transgression, unless the negative polarity is categorically excluded. Bowles displays instances of sorcery, as in *Up Above*, where Soto abuses certain partial insights into the organism of temporality, matter, and sound, for his own purposes. Positive magic, however, may be viewed as a clear process based on the implementation of the simple triadic principle of rites. Witnessing his first street procession is revelative: “I had suspected that someday I would stumble onto a scene which would show me the pulse of the place, if not the exposed, **beating heart of its magic**.”²⁰ The simultaneous rawness and enchantment of life is what he presents in the word. This, indeed, was an area of the earth’s surface which “contained more **magic** than others.”²¹ N.B. Likewise, it may also be suggested that certain literary places contain more magic than others. He settled and remained in Tangier, because the place represented for him magic as the revealed and concealed “secret connection between the world of nature and the consciousness of man, a hidden but direct passage which by-passed the mind.”²² Bowles exposed himself to the process of “verbal magic in the metaphorical sense of an energy common to words and things.”²³ This confirms that the verbal ritual, when it achieves transcendence of the normal indirect bond between object and subject, becomes a form of magic. Consequently, the metanarrative capacitated in Bowles’s novels, is latent magic, to be activated by the reader. How does one know it is a good spell? The obvious sign of his positive magic is that the metanarrative resolution is in every case an unmistakable triumph of life.

4.3 Music

Bowles observes that „the most important single element in Morocco’s folk culture is its **music**.”²⁴ He is “particularly interested in the hypnotic music used to accompany brotherhood ritual

¹⁵ Ibid., 124.

¹⁶ *Spider’s*, 369.

¹⁷ Gena Dagal Caponi, *Paul Bowles*, 96.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *WS*, 367.

²⁰ *WS*, 150.

²¹ Ibid., 125.

²² Ibid.

²³ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, 11.

²⁴ Paul Bowles, *The Rif, to Music*, in: *THAG*, 91.

dancing, the music of “mass participation” designed to induce trance states.”²⁵ The whole **ritual monument of such performances as well as of his works is based on an underlying rhythm of structure: the rhythm of the psychic core.** The limping beat presents the central heart-beat, repetition the circular movement, and counterpoint the act of present consciousness looking into its mirror of timelessness. Rising from narrative structure, each liminal part is an “electrifying counterrhythmic solo”²⁶ of anti-structure in juxtaposition. These liminal passages manifest a structure more elemental than the “continuing basic design”²⁷ of storyline. Their syncopated emergence is impossible to predict or follow: a most complete contemporaneity is necessitated for their appreciation.

As time, so is music a wholly different concept in Morocco than in the West.

To Europeans, the music of the Jilala is Moroccan folk music being played on long, low-pitched transversal flutes and large flat hand drums. To a member of the cult, however, it is a sequence of explicit choreographic instructions, all of which are designed to bring about a state of trance, or possession.²⁸

And the cathartic i.e. purifying ritual experience is savage: “the ceremony of self-laceration was the normal concomitant, and indeed the sole purpose, of the music.”²⁹ In a “1952 letter [he] compared [*The Sheltering Sky*] to music.”³⁰

Not only is traditional **music** more untouched by uninitiated hands of history, it is also more direct than words which must go through a dubious rational processing. Music goes straight to the intuitive, emotional centre. The acoustic aspect of experience is clear and universal. Therefore the traditional ritual music Bowles found in the Maghreb is really a treasure, or rather a map to a treasure. The novels include a number of detailed descriptions of the precise progress and structure of the music. Not only are these passages guidance to the text, but also delightful accompaniment, an evocation of music as such, as sheer emotional charge. Not, however, in any way as entertainment show. Below are three different examples from *The Sheltering Sky*:

There was music in the next room: the sharp reedy rhaïta and the dry drums beneath. ... In front of the musicians in the middle of the floor a girl was dancing, if indeed the motions she made could properly be called a dance. ... The motions, graceful and of an impudence verging on the comic, were a perfect translation into visual terms of the strident and wily sounds of the music.³¹

...an orchestra of drums was playing, little by little gathering up the loose strands of rhythmic force into one mighty compact design which already was revolving, a still imperfect wheel of heavy sounds, lumbering ahead toward the night.³²

... the music began, and the women around her all screamed together in her honour ‘*G igherdh ish’ed our illi,*’ sang the musicians below, over and over, while the rhythm of the hand drum changed, slowly closing in upon itself to form a circle from which she would not escape.³³

The first example emphasises the perfection of essential identification between different forms

²⁵ Gena Dagel Caponi, *Paul Bowles*, 111.

²⁶ Paul Bowles, *The Route to Tassemsit*, in: *THAG*, 184.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *WS*, 363.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 364.

³⁰ Lawrence D. Stewart, *Paul Bowles: The Illumination of North Africa*, 52-3.

³¹ *Sheltering*, 139.

³² *Ibid.*, 172.

³³ *Sheltering*, 311.

of expression, the condition of which is total presence, achieved by suspending the division between sound and movement. N.B. “The classical theory of art too, which bases all art on the idea of mimesis, *imitation*, obviously starts from playing in the form of dancing, which is the representation of the divine.”³⁴ In the second example, the evolving impetus of the sonic wheel is related, and lastly the cycles as creating a vortex for consciousness – which Kit experiences as negative, while it is meant to be her status elevation into marriage. It is significant to recognize that these descriptions primarily belong to the narrative realm of the novel, but in contemplation, or in poetic or dramatic focal intensity they can easily transform into metanarrative parts. The thin and unfixed line between narrative and metanarrative is clearly presented here: the freedom of categorical division is given to the reader, whose **level and polarity of consciousness** draws the border. “There is a **drumming** out there most nights,” he writes in his autobiography. “It never awakens me; I hear the drums and incorporate them into my dream, like the nightly cries of the muezzins.”³⁵ These instances of music are anthropological signs of an ancient cult still alive in the closed communities of the Maghreb in the second half of the 20th Century. Its religious and cultural specificities are almost entirely irrelevant. N.B. The musical tradition of seed cultures is unquestionably connected by the characteristic pentatonic scale.

4.4 Story-telling

His concern for the mentality of **oral** cultures came to peak through a Moroccan night guard,

an acquaintanceship which ultimately added a whole new dimension to my writing experience.... A few anecdotes he told about his life impressed me deeply, not with their unusual content, but because of the way in which he recounted them. His rhetorical sense was extraordinary; he knew exactly which nuances and details to include in order **to make a tale complete and convincing**.³⁶

It is more than likely that the literary fertility of Bowles is the result of his mastering the archaic technique of story-telling. Nuances and details abound in such intensely vibrant places, but these alone, however well selected and placed, would not make good stories. What provides the backbone of his tales is the basic mentality of structuring: it is from this that the sense of completeness stems.

4.5 Recital

The point of live recital of prayers, tales, and poems is participation. The participant transfers himself by extension, by the metaphoricity of language, to the reality evoked and projected in words.

...when we start **reciting the poem** and dive into it we reach purification and forget about all that is material – that’s the essence of spirituality. You get cured. That’s my cure. Trance is my cure. I’m afraid these things might be forged. All the doctrines take different ways, but the aim is one: the praise of God, the one to be worshipped, and his prophet to be praised and followed. If you take this path you get purified and all the mundane trouble disappears from within and around. This is happiness.³⁷

Moroccans know the therapeutic effect of the suspension of the ego. This is realised directly in recital, but may also be realised in every narrative action of life. “Good luck, like bad luck, comes directly from Allah to the recipient; the intermediary is of little importance.”³⁸ In this cultic mentality, every narrative character and event is an intermediary of God. This means two key things, both highly important for this research. First, that narrative derives from the metanarrative source of Divinity.

³⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 113. Cf. also Koller, *Mimesis* (1954)

³⁵ *WS*, 366.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 348.

³⁷ *Sense of a Maze*

³⁸ *Let It*, 211.

Directly or indirectly, all narrative elements and processes are part of a great chain of causality, the source of which is absolute. Second, that *I* am both actor and recipient: both subjective self and objective instrument.