

Excerpt from *The Cultic Code, The Living Books of Paul Bowles*, II.I.1.5 Journey and encounter in the Western literary tradition. Narrative as liminal

### 1.5 Metamorphosis: thematic process of change

The contextual theme of **metamorphosis** or rather **metanoia** is the focal point of existentialism. The possibility of physical transformation is included in the suggestions of ritualistic liminality. Bowles was fascinated by the reality of transformation as he experienced it in the Maghreb. In *Things Gone...* (1975) he retells folk tales, giving “accounts of people who have fallen into time ... – and whose lives have changed because of it.”<sup>1</sup> His short story *Here to Learn* is a study of more subtle but no less real transformation. In *The Circular Valley*, the Atlájala, a local spirit of autonomous conscience is the metonym for the writer, “who must try to understand his characters from within and so must inhabit them.”<sup>2</sup> Bowles follows the myth-making surrealism of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*: change, the essence of all myth and story is reflected in incredibility, thus removing the reader from the regular level of consciousness. In text, intellectual paradoxes of existence are overwritten by the transformation implicit in metaphoricity. It is the genius of Bowles that may be seen manifest in his novels as a synthesis of **transgressive perceptions**.

The transformative aspect of liminality is primarily aimed at regeneration and social, psychic hygiene. Through wrong conditioning or negative motivation, however, it may also turn into negative patterns of metamorphosis, as in the cult of Jekyll and Hyde. The psychoanalytical deconstructive school proposes no more than the threat of one’s own dark side, resolved by simply locking the evil spirit back into civil manners. The demonic animation of destructive inner forces, like the mythical Djinn and the Golem but particularly Mr. Hyde, does more damage to the general consideration of the unconscious than repression. These are basically evocations of unconscious, uncontrollable forces of destruction: no less than occult rites of black magic. By terrifying myths lacking metanarrative release, immeasurable harm is done to the psyche which is persuaded to lock all its passages to the intuitive unconscious. Providing audiences with unresolved negative image patterns is less reflective than projective. Kafka’s Gregor Samsa is the most direct victim of a complete negative metamorphosis. The story’s symbolic interpretation would keep too much distance, while its magical realistic approach would verge on the ridiculous. Its absurdity lies in the picturesque representation of the insoluble paradox, which may or may not open fertile hidden grounds in the psyche. Kafka’s problematic of metamorphosis, as well as of the labyrinth, reveals an insoluble helplessness, as he opens no metanarrative way out: at no point could the protagonist escape vertically. In comparison, Dyar in *Let It Come Down* commits a brutal and bloody act in a state of trance only after he experiences the epiphany of total freedom, given the option of change, but conditioned immediately in the negative, ego-centric, merciless direction by his circumstance. He is forewarned: “You have an empty hand, and vacuums have a tendency to fill up. Be careful what goes into your life.”<sup>3</sup> His physique is not altered but his fall into criminality is an indirect representation of the metamorphosis: he becomes a monster in his actions. The release of

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<sup>1</sup> Gena Dagele Caponi, *Paul Bowles*, 58.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>3</sup> *Let It*, 239.

Bowles's story is the series of metanarrative cycles where the protagonist is purified, liberated, and positively charged, given choices of metanoia. The fact that he falls is initially not evident or necessary. This is where Bowles differs cardinally from his literary relatives of metamorphosis.

It is Kafka himself who says in the final motto of *The Sheltering Sky*: "From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning back. That is the point that must be reached."<sup>4</sup> This warns how seriously the metamorphic potentiality of liminality is to be taken. But even more importantly: the point of no return releases the past, opening the way of ascent toward the future. Jane Bowles's method of stylistic metamorphosis arrives at this point literally. Her novel *Two Serious Ladies* is a groundbreaking and critically underestimated experiment, in which the gradual, subtle transformation of the narrative voice accompanies the psychic and eventual transgression of the heroines. In Paul's first novel, metaphysics and metabolism, eschatology and scatology are connected in Port's figure, as the bliss and terror of solitude and sexuality are connected along Kit's trials. Epiphany appears as the revelation of analogy: anagnorisis of ontological identity. Bowles's, as well as Joyce's iconoclasm reveals an ultimate, unconditioned submission to an element incorruptible, unburnable in the purge. The constant and unbearable pressure of thought and conscience is ultimately resolved in epiphanies.

Bowles has an affinity for extremes, and so **metamorphosis** is more or less directly his narrative and metanarrative goal. It may be considered a most extreme manifestation of transgression. But in the light of the natural cycle, transformation is the formal manifestation of an energetic rite of passage, like the seasonal change, or the shift of human, or historical ages. It is only the level and polarity of the liminal energy which makes variations. "In the Djemaa el Fna [in Marrakech] we saw a deformed man become a goat. He succeeded in bringing about a transformation within himself which made it possible for him to move like a goat, to sound like one etc."<sup>5</sup>

The short story entitled *The Scorpion* is one of Bowles's most surreal ones in terms of an intuitive transformation: "The story is transformational and surreal in its dreamlike quality, owing to a shifting narrative point of view and the fluidity of the boundaries between the ordinary and the unusual."<sup>6</sup> Bowles, however, considers his verse to be surrealistic, not his prose<sup>7</sup>. The surrealism of the novels is not in their narrative but in their matanarrative, and even here only in the sense that the morphosis of original ideas is beyond and prior to the empirical realm of reality. When he says, "I write unconsciously, without knowing what I am writing,"<sup>8</sup> he refers to the metanarrative flows, like the death scene of Port, which was written in a state of trance. Port's dead body feeds into the desert sand, and his liberated spirit revitalizes Kit. The rite of death and that of baptism are really two phases of a single cycle of metamorphosis.

The four novels explicitly manifest **transformation** in their narrativity. The fact of transformation is highlighted by the story returning to some key aspect of the initial condition: the slightly altered repetition of a motive directs attention to the change. Perfect cycles are drawn as the end feeds back into the beginning. *Sheltering* begins with Port trying to remember

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<sup>4</sup> *Sheltering*, 283.

<sup>5</sup> WS, 173

<sup>6</sup> Gena Dagele Caponi, *Paul Bowles*, 92.

<sup>7</sup> Gena Dagele Caponi (ed.), *Conversations with Paul Bowles*, 137.

<sup>8</sup> Gena Dagele Caponi, *Paul Bowles*, 89.

his dream in awakening, and ends with Kit forgetting her identity. The self-conscious man is transformed into his vacant wife, through juxtaposition, superimposition, and identification by a devastating experience of the desert. *Let It Come Down* begins with warm rain and ends with cold rain coming down upon Dyar, as his mediocrity transforms into monstrosity, through the infernal International Zone. *The Spider's House* has two distinct beginnings. The prologue describes Stenham's game of relativity in the maze of Fez, while the first book's first chapter begins with Amar's acceptance of his sacrificial role in the orchard. The novel ends with the empty highway separating the two invisibly, inexplicably connected people. The fulfilment of their common destiny at once drives them back to their separate worlds. Here the narrative's spiral movement becomes clear, as the final separation is semantically more than the initial distinction: through responsibility not taken by Stenham, and sacrifice made by Amar, the former did not gain anything, while the latter did not lose anything. The metamorphosis is here really the deepening or heightening of perspective in temporality. *Let It Come Down* begins and ends with an emotionally dead couple. The Slades's source of vital energy is travel, while for Grove and Thorny it is lethal parasitism. The former is the profanation of marriage, the latter that of friendship. The transformation is an extreme case of juxtaposition, superimposition, and identification, whereby the roles of the apparent aggressor and victim are exchanged. Negativity in the small lies and cruelty of the bored couple is thus magnified and transformed into the cynical monstrosity of the spoiled, interest-driven accomplices. Bowles is radical in his conclusion, and the doubled pattern leaves no doubt about the downward spiral of causality, in which a minor mistake of hypocrisy transforms into an overwhelming avalanche of disorder. The natural, literary, and cosmic law of transformation is centred in substance. Amar knows that "no man could be changed by anyone but Allah."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Spider's*, 71.