Modes of Consciousness: Paul Bowles' "The Hours After Noon" and "Too Far From Home"

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Now that his place in the American literary canon seems secure—with the 2002 publication of a two-volume Library of America edition—it is worth recalling the combination of alarm and dismissiveness that greeted Paul Bowles' first story collection *The Delicate Prey* (1950). Leslie Fiedler gave him the memorable title "pornographer of terror"(171), and Hilton Kramer lumped him in with Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers and Truman Capote as writers who "have a special need of violence and terror in their works: again and again it rescues them from the inertia to which the denigration of their medium exposes them"(qtd. in Pounds 304). After a decade and a half had gone by and Bowles had not duly given in to that inertia, *Time* grudgingly named him "American fiction's leading specialist in melancholy and insensate violence" (qtd. in Hibbard 229).

There is no gainsaying the violence that appears in Bowles, particularly in the early stories and the novels *Let It Come Down* (1952) and *Up Above the World* (1966). It is hard to take seriously Bowles' 1975 comment "Let's say there are sixty stories, and two of them have unprecedented violence. Therefore I write only about violence. That's really ridiculous" (qtd. in Caponi *Paul Bowles* 67), since he had had to write a letter to his mother to assuage her alarm at the unrelenting bloodiness of *The Delicate Prey* (which he had dedicated to her). But in a 1982 interview, Bowles gave a conceptual view of his work that makes no mention of violence at all, and that does deserve serious consideration: "I can only say: What is my writing but a constant exploration of possible modes of consciousness? You could almost qualify the entire body of work as a series of variations on the theme of human perception" (qtd. in Caponi *Conversations* 138).

In a sense, Bowles' exasperation at his public image is understandable. Although a few critics, Wayne Pounds[1] notable among them, have argued for this focus on consciousness, it appears that some of the violent early stories have cast a long shadow over the entire Bowles oeuvre. Yet one of the best cases in point for Bowles' interview claim is an early work, the 1949 novella "The Hours After Noon," from the collection of the same name. The story bears an epigraph from Baudelaire: "If one could awaken all the echoes of one's memory simultaneously, they would make a music, delightful or sad as the case might be, but logical and without dissonances. No matter how incoherent the existence, the human unity is not affected" (217)[2]. In a conversation tape-recorded by Lawrence D. Stewart, Bowles explains that this quote

> is an affirmation of the subjective, the power of the subjective side of the personality. Because it's the same consciousness taking all these things in, no matter how disparate they all are, the memory will be harmonious because they all happened to you and you saw them all. (qtd. in Stewart 81-82)

The consciousness that opens the story is that of Mrs. Callender, who with her husband runs a pension in Tangier frequented by Western expatriates. The Callenders await the return of their daughter, Charlotte, from school in England, and the arrival of Monsieur Royer, a caddish fiftysomething Frenchman who Mrs. Callender fears may have designs on Charlotte. "Oh, you're a *man!*" she cries to her husband in view of the other men in the pension dining room, defending her women's intuition of the danger. "What does a man know about such things? I can tell you how much: absolutely nothing!" (217) Indeed, Mr. Callender seems unconcerned, as does Mr. Van Siclen, an American archaeologist who crassly remarks, "A girl's education has to start somewhere, sometime" (220).

From the outset, the central question has been posed: can Mrs. Callender's subjective consciousness be trusted? The focus will remain on her consciousness because she is a character fearful of involvement with

others and disinclined to act at all. This standofishness is reflected in her sense of embattlement by hostile psychological forces that will be familiar to readers of Bowles.

The first of these forces is in fact internal: the longing for the lost happiness of youth, "when her life lay ahead of her, inexhaustible, as yet untouched" (236). The memories to which the epigraph refers are in fact destructive things. "Voluptuous memories burned in the mind like fire in the tree stump: they were impossible to put out, and they consumed from within, until suddenly nothing was left. If she had had a great many memories instead of only a few, she reflected, she would surely be lost" (220).

Her second oppressor is the specter of human treachery, and Monsieur Royer is not its only agent. When Van Siclen suggests offhandedly that she send Royer out to his excavation site in the countryside—"If he chases the girls around out there they'll find him in a couple days behind a rock with a coil of wire around his neck" (221)—she feels besieged: "Now, she always felt surrounded by the ugliness of humanity; the scheming little human mind was always present" (221).

The third force to which Mrs. Callender feels herself subjected is the inanimate world around her. She makes a fine illustration of Pounds' comment that "what composes the 'situation' in a Bowles story is precisely character and landscape, concealing and revealing each other: landscape, the externalization of character; character, the internalization of landscape" (309). At one point she senses "too intimate and mysterious a connection between what she felt, and the aspect of the countryside" (236), and in the passage that gives the story its title, the aptly named Mrs. Callender imagines her own "scheming little human mind" to be the work of celestial bodies: "It was the hours after noon that she had to beware of, when the day had begun to go toward the night, and she no longer trusted herself to be absolutely certain what she would do next, or what unlikely idea would come into her head" (222).

The point of view shifts to Charlotte, arriving from England, and dismayed to the point of rebelliousness by her mother's superficiality. "The kind of irresponsibility she saw in her mother amounted to a denial of all values. There was no beginning and no end; anything was equal to anything else" (227). We are inclined to agree, remembering why Mrs. Callender did not keep Royer away from her daughter by simply refusing him a room: "There was always something in one of the stores in town which she coveted at the time: a silk scarf, a pair of shoes or gloves, and the only money which came in was that paid by the guests who stayed at the pension" (218). When Van Siclen drives Charlotte out into the countryside one night and assaults her with a violent kiss, we fear that Mrs. Callender's faulty intuitions have put her daughter in peril.

Rather than seeming at the outset like a sexual predator, Royer invites comparison to Mrs. Callender herself. He too is fixated on his own memory, but instead of remembering his own young life he struggles throughout the story "to recall a passage of something he had once read and loved" (222). Only fragmentary in the story, the quote is from Gide's *Amyntas* (1906), a full translation of which Bowles provided in an interview: "The time that flows here has no hours. But everyone's lack of occupation is so perfect, that it doesn't seem empty. That one is not conscious at all of there being nothing" (qtd. in Stewart 84). The fact that Gide visited a child prostitute in North Africa is a subtle clue of what lies ahead; plainer are the moments when Royer beats a Moroccan urchin in a marketplace for begging from him, and tells Charlotte that local Moroccan girls have no will of their own, and so "one can scarcely go against it, can one?" (233) Nonetheless, Royer—who is shocked at his own cruelty to the urchin—makes a charming enough impression that Charlotte's companionship with him seems a believable form of rebellion against her mother.

Increasingly desperate, Mrs. Callender overcomes her disinclination to act. What she does makes inevitable the story's bloody conclusion—and yet it hardly seems to be action at all. She simply suggests offhandedly that Van Siclen take Royer out to his excavation site in the countryside for a few days. "Play up the the native life a bit...You know him, after all. You know what amuses him" (237). When Charlotte disappears (for unrelated reasons), a terrified Mrs. Callender has herself driven out to the site and confronts Van Siclen, who has not seen Charlotte—and also tells her that Royer wandered away the previous night. Now it is Mrs. Callender's turn to try to remember some half-forgotten words, and when Van Siclen warns her to beware of the barbed wire around the site, she does: "Now it was complete. Everything

had been said. All she had to do was go on breathing deeply, facing the sea. Of course. A coil of wire around his neck. Behind a rock" (241). The story ends with a flashback to the night before, when Royer sat in the moonlight with a small Berber girl on his knee, trying one last time to recall the now thoroughly relevant passage from Gide, and unaware of the vigilante creeping up from behind with wire in his hands.

> He began to murmur it to himself, even at the moment her expression changed to one of terror as, looking up over his shoulder, she saw what was about to happen.
>
> "*Les temps qui coule ici n'a plus d'heures, mais, tant l'inoccupation de chacun est parfaite—*"
>
> This time he might have completed it. (242)

It is a thought-provoking finale, ending with the snuffing out of consciousness midstream. The only firm conclusion we can draw is that Mrs. Callender's suspicion of Royer was justified after all (although Charlotte was too old to be prey). Gena Dagel Caponi writes, "The reader is left pondering the relative guilt of the parties involved: Monsieur Royer, the pedophile; Mrs. Callender and Van Siclen, silent conspirators" (*Paul Bowles* 73). This is a Bowles hallmark, as Wendy Lesser points out: "Bowles is that rare item, a moralist who does not come down on the side of morality. That response is left to the reader, whose own social values—and, by definition, moral assumptions—are brought sharply into relief by Bowles' fictions" (407).

Near the end of his life, in 1993, Bowles wrote another novella that has so far largely escaped critical attention, and that invites direct comparison to "The Hours After Noon." For all its Bowlesian violence and horror, "Too Far From Home" shares its predecessor's overt concerns with the theme of human perception. The setting is the West African nation of Mali, where a recently-divorced American woman named Anita visits her brother Tom, a painter living there on a Guggenheim fellowship. Anita strives for a state of perceiving consciousness even more rarefied and remote than Mrs. Callender's: whereas "The Hours After Noon" opens with Mrs. Callender fiercely defending her own subjectivity, Anita longs for the ability to be objective. In the letters to friends at home that dominate the first six of the story's eighteen sections, she uses Tom's vocation to contrast herself with him.

> By being completely aware of, and focusing his attention on the smallest details of the life going on around him, Tom manages to objectify the details, and so he remains outside, and far from them. He paints whatever is in front of his eyes at any moment…My trouble is that life sweeps me along with it in spite of me. I mean that I am being forced to participate in some sort of communal consciousness that I really hate. (145)[3]

A *Publishers Weekly* review calls Anita's letters an "ultimately stale device," but in fact they are crucial to a story of a woman fearful of the full humanity that subjective consciousness implies. Their documenting presence in the early pages marks the objective starting point of a slow and terrifying descent into subjectivity. We recall again Pounds' comment on the symbiosis of character and landscape when Anita explains in one letter why she does not describe the terrain of the Niger River Valley: "I can't. I don't believe I could be objective about it, which would mean that when I finish you'd have less of an idea what it's like than before I started" (143).

The depth of subjective consciousness is, of course, the *sub*conscious. So it should be no surprise that Anita's ultimate destination is a dream—or, since this is a Bowles story, a nightmare. Even in the early pages, the longing for a vanished past that she shares with Mrs. Callender is expressed not through memories but dreams: "small, precise images complete with the sounds and odors of a certain incident in a certain summer. They had not meant anything to her at the time of experiencing them, but now she strove desperately to stay with them" (147).

It soon becomes clear that Anita's upbringing has had a dark influence on her too. One morning, Tom asks her to walk into town with Sekou, a native man who supervises the house staff, to buy film for his camera. On the way to the camera shop they stop to drink Pepsi in the shade of a storefront, and in Anita's thoughts we see that her awkwardness around Africans ("They're all black," she writes in one letter, "but nothing like 'our' blacks in the States" (145)) is a dilution of the outright racism of her mother.

> What would be [her mother's] reaction if she could see her only daughter sitting beside a black man in this dark little refuge? "If he takes advantage of you, remember that you asked for it. It's just tempting Providence. You can't treat people like that as equals. They don't understand it." (152)

This reflection is the key to understanding what

happens next. Two white American youths on a motorcycle barrel wildly down the road toward them, villagers scrambling from their path, and crash in an attempt to avoid hitting Sekou. Dusting themselves off, the young men casually toss a racial slur at him, and Anita is outraged. "You've come too far from home, my friends, and you're going to have trouble... Trouble! And I hope I'll have a chance to see it" (153). The hostility is directed at least partly at her mother, but where the youths are concerned she is prophetic. Alone in the desert some days later, she climbs a dune and glimpses them again.

> There were large boulders down there; the cycle had skidded, hurling the suntanned torsos against the rocks. The machine was twisted grotesquely and the two bodies were jumbled together and uniformly spattered with blood. They were not in a condition to call for help; they lay motionless there in the declivity, invisible to all save to one who might stand exactly where she was standing. (157)

Anita's fatal deed is even more passive—and chillingly plausible—than Mrs. Callender's: she simply turns and leaves, and tells no one what she has seen.

Here the story reaches the nightmarish depths of its subjectivity. Anita repeatedly dreams of visiting an apothecary staffed by one of the motorcycle riders. When he ushers her into the basement she finds the other youth on a spotlit throne, his arms where his legs should be and vice versa, and his head missing. Anita chokes and vomits, and then awakens with a preternatural feeling that Sekou has been standing there in the darkness, willing the dream upon her—and reminding us of her complaint of "being forced to participate in some sort of communal consciousness."

The finale of "The Hours After Noon," as Caponi pointed out, achieves its power by leaving questions of blame and judgment to the reader. "Too Far From Home," on the other hand, ends with a disappointing piling-on of interpretive closure: Tom offers an analysis of Anita's dream; Sekou tells Anita that her tirade against the motorcycle riders ("You're going to have trouble") was a curse, and that in a dream he went to her and asked her to forgive them; Anita is duly reflective and contrite. Bowles would have done better to end the story with Tom's news of the discovery of two dead Yale students in the desert, which adds a touch of the macabre worthy of Poe: the boys did not die quickly.

> "The damn fools were wearing no clothes. Only shorts. Nobody's sure when the accident happened, but they must have lain there naked for two or three days, getting more burned and scorched by the hour. It's a mystery why nobody from the village saw them before that. But people don't wander around in the dunes much, of course." (169)

This is the source of the story's power: Anita's disastrous desire to remain pure consciousness. Indeed, an attempt to maintain a permanent vivisectionist's view of humanity runs through both "The Hours After Noon" and "Too Far From Home." But while the futility of Mrs. Callender's attempt leads to a finale of violence (which one cannot therefore call, to borrow the phrasing of the *Time* reviewer, "insensate"), the failure of nerve in the second story is Bowles' own.

That the author shared the aloofness of Mrs. Callender, Anita, and many of his other protagonists is a commonplace of Bowles scholarship. Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno, who titled his biography *An Invisible Spectator*, called Bowles "an individual alone, isolated in his self-involvement" (322). Yet perhaps there has been insufficient recognition of the challenge posed by fiction writing—in contrast to music composition, Bowles' first career—to an artist so uninterested in human manners. In his notoriously unreliable autobiography *Without Stopping* (1972) Bowles offers this explanation for his late start as a fiction writer: "Long ago I had decided that the world was too complex for me to ever be able to write fiction; since I failed to understand life, I would not be able to find points of reference which the hypothetical reader might have in common with me" (262). This quote is generally not taken at face value—and indeed Bowles' distinguished writing career belies it—but I think the discomfiture it reveals is significant. Writers can draw vital energy from internal conflict, and it could be the struggle to write about people while circumventing them that makes Bowles' oeuvre, in his own words, "a constant exploration of possible modes of consciousness."

Perhaps the most striking evidence of this struggle can be found not in a Bowles story but in an indignant letter he wrote to Hilton Kramer, the critic who cast him together with Williams, McCullers and Capote. Bowles differentiated himself from those authors in the following terms:

> ...the members of our Deep South contingent,

> no matter what you may say, are essentially interested in people, in the details of their lives, their mannerisms, their speech, their thoughts and tastes ~~whereas for me the people are shadows, abstractions. If it were possible, I should write without using people at all.~~ (qtd. in Pounds 307)

Having placed his own ethos in the greatest possible contrast to that of the "Deep South contingent," Bowles then changed his mind and crossed it out. In the end, he never mailed the letter at all.

Notes

1. For the most succinct elaboration of this position, see Pounds' "The Subject of Paul Bowles."
2. Page numbers for "The Hours After Noon" are from *Collected Stories, 1939-1976*.
3. Like Mrs. Callender's relationship to memories and landscape, this sentiment of Anita's is common to Bowles characters. In fact it is a virtual paraphrase of John Stenham's credo from *The Spider's House* (1955):

> ...a man must at all costs keep some part of himself outside and beyond life. If he should ever for an instant cease doubting, accept wholly the truth of what his senses conveyed to him, he would be dislodged from the solid ground to which he clung and swept along with the current, having lost all objective sense, totally involved in existence.(203)

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