

Spinozan Realism: The Prophetic Fiction of Jane Bowles

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Abstract

This essay argues that the critically neglected work of the American mid-twentieth-century writer Jane Bowles is a rare attempt at realism in modern fiction that takes as its metaphysical premise the reality referred to in Spinoza's pronouncement, "By reality and perfection I understand the same." Bowles' innately allegorical fiction is an effort to reveal the perfect reality of the world by prophetically creating the future rather than mimetically preserving the present and recovering the past, expressing a world that is existentially founded rather than representationally endured. The realism of perfection her prophetic creations strive to apprehend serves as a necessary reproof of the all too actual world reflected in merely mimetic fiction.

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"I keep forgetting what writing is supposed to be anyway."¹

--Jane Bowles, writing to Paul Bowles in a letter

"She had to manufacture her own hammer and all the nails."²

--Paul Bowles, commenting on Jane Bowles' writing process

My creative writing students are often frustrated that the stories they create from their most vital, precious, and traumatic experiences fail to work as fiction. Their frustration stems, at least in part, from the fact that art doesn't want to express their lives and emotions, but to express itself. And it is resentful of interference. By its nature, art strives to be its own cause and not dependent on another, and the art that succeeds at this the most is the most real and the most perfect. "By reality and perfection I understand the same," Spinoza wrote in the *Ethics*.³ Art, in Spinozan terms, must be understood not as representation or imitation, nor even

as memory or expression, but as virtue, freedom, necessity, and truth. Martin Heidegger was thinking in a Spinozan vein when he labeled art “the becoming and happening of truth,”⁴ as opposed to the usual modern understanding of truth as “the agreement or conformity of knowledge with fact.”⁵ Most of the time the world presented in so-called realistic art looks more or less like our own, which is indeed the conventional criterion of realism as it is practiced in fiction. But a very few fictional artists are able to create a world so revelatory in its reality that it makes our own look fake, calling into question our most basic assumptions. Almost everything that Jane Bowles wrote inhabits this universe of the prophetically real – of the world to come that is being prepared for a people to come, as Gilles Deleuze, a self-avowed Spinoza heir, describes it.⁶ For it is true that life imitates art,⁷ as Oscar Wilde famously pronounced, but art serves its inspirational purpose in a profound and prophetic fashion only when it is more real, more perfect, than the conventionalized life that surrounds it, and not a mere reflection or appendage of life as it is habitually known and experienced.

Jane Bowles had the prophetic gift, but in her late years of physical and mental decline, she came to hate it. Her hatred had nothing to do with her willingness to work. She was determined to work when she could work well – when her work resulted in a legitimate discovery, a happening of truth. But she stopped when her prophetic vision failed, when she no longer could create a fictive world more perfect in its reality than the one we habitually live in. Of course *not* writing for one so inspired and driven was much worse than writing, however tortured and difficult the process. She frequently complained to her increasingly famous writer husband, Paul Bowles, about her compositional difficulties, which amounted for her to an existential struggle, “I keep forgetting what writing is supposed to be anyway.”⁸ Paul’s emotional and editorial support were crucial to Jane’s completion of the rare work she was willing to let go of, before a severe stroke at the remarkably early age of thirty-nine effectively ended her writing life, transforming her habitual frustration with creation into a long-drawn-out despair. Although she never had been satisfied with her work, she understood its worth. But the stroke impeded the creative process. Paul said, “It was as though she were not running on full power, as if there had been a disconnection within her, and the lightning-quick changes in her feeling and thinking had been slowed.”⁹ The “Dead Jane Bowles,” she later referred to herself in reference to her earlier, vibrant writing.¹⁰

There *is* one suicide in her writing, one of her most compelling char-

acters. “Sister Sadie ... is a great lover of security,” Harriet says of her younger sister in “Camp Cataract.”¹¹ But Harriet is laboring under a misimpression, as the narrator – who does not pretend not to know her characters – tells us. Sadie is lost, is perhaps even, as she secretly fears, beyond hope. But she hides this state of affairs from herself by obsessively worrying about her sister, Harriet, and scheming to keep her in the family home, which Sadie herself hates so deeply and instinctively that her fledgling survival instinct has transformed the overwhelming emotion into its opposite: “Sometimes an ecstatic and voracious look would come into her eyes, as if she would devour her very existence because she loved it so much.”¹² And she does indeed do so. Sadie’s life and death is a cautionary tale, terrifying in its implication that when our emotions and their motives are hidden very deeply within ourselves, we are powerless to protect ourselves against them. As Spinoza wrote, “An emotion is bad, i.e. harmful, only in so far as the mind is hindered by it from being able to think.”¹³ Or as Wilde, a thoroughgoing but unrecognized Spinozan, put it, “There is no sin except stupidity.”¹⁴

Jane Bowles could not stop thinking. She wrote to Paul in a letter, “Please write to me. It is much easier for you to write than for me, because I always feel that unless I present a problem in a letter I have not really written one.”¹⁵ Her compulsion to agonize over choices and decisions was legendary. “She had no capability of relinquishing choice,” observed her resourceful and perceptive biographer, Millicent Dillon. “She had to choose and to accept the consequences of her choice.”¹⁶ Paul said, “Jane’s worry was that a choice had to be made and every choice was a moral judgment and monumental, even fatal. And that was so even if the choice was between string beans and peas.”¹⁷ Perhaps Tennessee Williams interpreted this character trait most insightfully: “All the indecision was a true and dreadful concern that she might suggest a wrong turn in a world that she had correctly surmised to be so inclined to turn wrongly.”¹⁸ Bowles was unable or unwilling to adopt a passive attitude toward her own existence and this placed huge responsibilities upon her shoulders. It was not enough for her to react to a situation, but she had to take responsibility for it and choose to act accordingly. Such an active approach to one’s own existence may seem to be a burden, but it brings with it ethical joy and power and freedom. Or, to look at it from the opposite direction, we could say that the possession of this ethical freedom and power and joy enables one to act, thereby entailing the responsibility of doing so. Spinoza wrote in “The Political Treatise”: “Freedom does not remove the necessity of action, but imposes it.”¹⁹ And in the *Ethics*, he explained: “The more perfection each thing has, the more it acts,

and the less it is acted on; conversely, the more it acts, the more perfect it is.”²⁰ Only through action can we posit the world as a reality that is founded rather than endured and exist in that world as a reality ourselves. In one of his last works, *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze hypothesized, “It may be that believing in this world, in this life, becomes our most difficult task.”²¹ When we are merely reactive sufferers, on the other hand, we endure existence as an imposition in a world that is inherently alien to us, “We have lost the world, worse than a fiancée or a god,”²² Deleuze concluded. In a statement that reads as a prophecy of the modern world’s debilitating spirit of alienation, Spinoza observed of the reactive, ignorant man, that “as soon as he ceases to be acted on, he ceases to exist.”²³

The great weight of ethical responsibility concerning choice is felt throughout Bowles’ work in the very succession of her sentences, which evolve out of one another unexpectedly and unpredictably, but necessarily and rightly, rather than progressing according to the plan of some overarching or underlying plot or convention. These sentences are neither representative of a disembodied abstract truth nor mimetic of an exterior or interior reality; they are, rather, expressive of their own reality, which is posited and proved at once. In the terms of Spinoza’s logic, they may be compared to “adequate ideas,” which are their own cause and evolve innately from “intuitive knowledge,” which “is inextricably joined to its own valid proof.”²⁴ Writing fiction in this manner, as the positing or founding of truth, is no doubt almost impossible, which is why we encounter it so rarely. In his introduction to Bowles’ *Collected Works*, Truman Capote wrote of Jane’s creative process that “it [was] difficult to the point of true pain.”²⁵ Paul gave an illuminating description of Jane’s remarkably arduous writing process in implicit comparison to his own more conventional approach:

I used to talk to Jane by the hour about writing. I’d say to her, “Just for the first page, say she comes in, sees this, does that.” And she’d say, “No, no, no. That’s your way, not my way. I’ve got to do it my way and my way is more difficult than yours.” . . . She couldn’t use the hammer and the nails that were there. She had to manufacture her own hammer and all the nails. She was a combination of enormous egotism and deep modesty at the same time.²⁶

Like their creator, the most notable fictional characters in Jane Bowles’s work are fixated on positing and proving reality through their choices,

although some of them relinquish their freedom in exhaustion, becoming slaves to the will of their whim. The contrast between the “two serious ladies” in the only completed novel is instructive in this manner. Christina Goering has an obsessive, fanatical nature, as her name implies. Although Bowles later said that she would not have used the name “Goering” if she had known the full nature of the Nazi leader’s character and actions as she was writing the book, in the middle of the war years, the choice obviously is meant to signify the character’s fanatical personality. The Christ reference (Christina) is also obviously intentional, as the character, when a child, “was in the habit of going through many mental struggles – generally of a religious nature,” sometimes organizing games with other children that “as a rule, were very moral, and often involved God.”²⁷ There is a degree of self-portraiture and self-travesty here. Several of Bowles’ characters fantasize when they are young about being a religious leader, and in an unfinished work, “Going to Massachusetts,” one of her most fascinating characters, Bozoe Flanner, is obsessed in adulthood with the connection between her private actions and character and the political-spiritual fate of the world: “At times she was frightened at the failure of her spirit – and so ashamed of it – that she felt the entire world – might turn totalitarian because of her.”²⁸ Jane Bowles herself believed that her creative failure in writing (which was always a felt danger, and later a resigned acknowledgment) was indicative of a failure of her spirit, of a whole life failure that threatened the reality of the world, both within and without of herself, resulting in an implicit servitude in the face of a tyrannical existence.

Jane Bowles’ fiction is a constant striving after existence, an effort to make the world real, or perhaps one should say, to comprehend the reality of the world. Spinoza contrasts the ignorant, reactive, and weak man, who is the slave of an existence that is always slipping away from him, so that even his dream of freedom is a nightmare of non-existence, to the wise and powerful man who is “conscious by a certain eternal necessity of himself, of God, and of things” and who therefore “never ceases to exist.”²⁹ In a letter to Paul, Jane attempts to explain her existential difficulty with writing the novel *Out in the World*, which she was never to finish:

When you are capable only of a serious and ponderous approach to writing as I am – I should say solemn perhaps – it is almost more than one can bear to be continually doubting one’s sincerity which is tantamount to doubting one’s product. As I move along into this writing I think the part I mind the most is this

doubt about my entire experience.³⁰

Nothing less than the truth will do. But the truth is not easy. It is not merely a matter of openness and of will, but of certainty; as Spinoza writes, “A false idea, in so far as it is false, does not involve certainty.”³¹ One cannot find the truth within one’s mind alone, because this does not involve certainty of the world. Rather the mind and the world must be made to correspond through the work of art in certainty and in truth. “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things,” Spinoza wrote.³²

So it is that the mock-epic allegorical hero of *Two Serious Ladies*, Christina Goering, “in order to work out [her] own little idea of salvation,” feels compelled to leave the family home, which “gives [her] a comfortable feeling of safety,” and go to “live in some more tawdry place and particularly in some place where [she] was not born.”³³ In venturing out from her cloistered environment, Miss Goering is attempting to forge a correspondence between her habitual inner world, emblematically ensconced in the all too comfortable family home, and the feared and “tawdry” world at large. Existentially, she is seeking to make herself a reality within a real world, while psychologically, her self-uprooting is the novel’s mock-epic rendering of the ego-hero’s riding forth from his castle of ego-defensiveness to meet the emotional dragons (anxiety and fear) that have penned her inside. Metaphysically, moreover, Miss Goering’s quest creates an exemplum of the parallel correspondence between mind and body, thought and matter, that is the basis of Spinoza’s philosophical system and the basic structure of allegory. Miss Goering’s decision to abandon her comfortable home and venture outward provokes outrage in her living companion, Miss Gamelon, whom Miss Goering feels instinctively is not a nice person:

“In my opinion,” said Miss Gamelon, “you could perfectly well work out your salvation during certain hours of the day without having to move everything.”

“No,” said Miss Goering, “that would not be in accordance with the spirit of the age.”

Miss Gamelon shifted in her chair.

“The spirit of the age, whatever that is,” she said, “I’m sure it can get along beautifully without you – probably would prefer it.”

Miss Goering smiled and shook her head.³⁴

A large part of the great humor of Bowles' work stems from the interactions between characters who are strivers after reality and those who are determined to get through life using as little exertion as possible. Then there are the characters who fall somewhere in between, who can recognize the beauty and joy of living an active life in the desired enhancement and fulfillment of one's individual being, culminating in the effort to comprehend reality from the standpoint of everything altogether – “under the species of eternity,”³⁵ as Spinoza famously put it – but who find themselves unable to control their emotions so as to be able to direct their actions toward the achievement of true self expression and fulfillment, which is to strive toward making oneself both perfect and real. This is not a selfish endeavor, since only those individuals who understand and fulfill their own nature (and to *understand* oneself – in Spinoza's terms – is to *be* oneself) are able to “live in accordance with the guidance of reason,” which is to make oneself useful to others as well, since “the highest good of those who follow virtue is common to all, and all can enjoy it equally.”³⁶ Miss Goering's “little idea of salvation” is thus a public as well as a private endeavor, and her success or failure has implications for the world she lives in, as well as for herself as an individual within that world.

The other “serious lady,” Mrs. Copperfield, by contrast, is a character beset by negative emotions, particularly fear, that hinder her nature when uncontrolled by reason and understanding. Miss Goering admires Mrs. Copperfield for her “courage to live with a man like Mr. Copperfield,”³⁷ who “made a point of never reassuring his wife. He gave her fears their just due.”³⁸ Mr. Copperfield, who obviously is based on Paul Bowles, is determinedly unsentimental, seeming somewhat dead inside. “My husband is a man without memory,” Mrs. Copperfield says to herself, whereas, “For her, everything that was not already an old dream was an outrage.”³⁹ Mrs. Copperfield is just as obviously based on Jane, on a side of her personality that corresponded in a particular manner with Paul's. Although they would seem to be conflicting spirits, they also would appear to be dependent on one another, as the opposing roof beams that hold a house together, active in stasis.

According to Spinoza, all contiguous bodies act on one another. As Deleuze glosses it, “Nothing is passive, but everything is interaction, even gravity.”⁴⁰ A positive and virtuous relation results from an interaction with another body that increases both beings' power, augmenting the self-contentment and potential for action of both individual natures.⁴¹ In such a system, the “good” is “that which satisfies a desire,” while the “bad” is “that which frustrates a desire.”⁴² The ethical categories of good and

bad replace the relative morality of good and evil, which are “extrinsic notions,” belonging to the laws and customs of a society, having nothing to do with “nature.”⁴³ Human nature, according to Spinoza, operates not according to right and wrong, but according to love and hate, so that we are naturally drawn towards that which we love and repulsed by that which we hate. Or, to be more accurate: we love something because we are drawn toward it, and hate something because we are repulsed by it. It is a matter of instinct and not of judgment. “This is not subjectivism,” Deleuze explains, “since to pose the problems in terms of force, and not in other terms, already surpasses all subjectivity.”⁴⁴ A mutually augmenting and interactive relationship is inherently pleasurable and rewarding, although it may appear to the observer to be violent and even abusive. But it is a combat that is mutually beneficial and enlivening, like the violation of the sexual act.

Deleuze contended that, in a world that has moved beyond the cultural realities of good and evil (which are mistakenly treated as absolutes, when they are socially relative), and toward the individual and natural ethical realities of good and bad (which appear relative in practice, but are absolute in instinct),

it is combat that replaces judgment. . . . it is the combatant itself who is the combat: the combat is between his own parts, between the forces that either subjugate or are subjugated, and between the powers that express these relations of force.⁴⁵

In this sense, *Two Serious Ladies* might be understood as the combat in Jane Bowles’ own personality between the personas and destinies of Miss Goering and Mrs. Copperfield, who represent opposing aspects of that personality. But within the fictive context of the novel’s narrative, Mrs. Copperfield is pitted against her husband in creative combat. She forsakes this difficult but enlivening relationship, however, for a one-sided, self-defeating and obsessive relationship with a young female prostitute, “Pacifica,” whose name is indicative of her role in Mrs. Copperfield’s psyche as representing a place of safety and stasis beyond activity and combat. “If you could only stop me from thinking, always, Pacifica,” Mrs. Copperfield says to her early on in their relationship.⁴⁶ This is an omen, indicating Mrs. Copperfield’s willful self-abasement into emotional servitude in order to avoid responsibility for her existence. Mr. Copperfield understands his wife’s danger and warns her against it in a letter: “Like most people, you are not able to face more than one fear during

your lifetime. You also spend your life fleeing from your first fear towards your first hope. Be careful that you do not, though your own wiliness, end up always in the same position in which you began."⁴⁷ And here is the scene containing Mrs. Copperfield's own prophetic self-analysis:

Mrs. Copperfield started to tremble.... She trembled so violently that she shook the bed. She was suffering as much as she had ever suffered before, because she was going to do what she wanted to do. But it would not make her happy. She did not have the courage to stop from doing what she wanted to do. She knew that it would not make her happy, because only the dreams of crazy people come true. She thought that she was only interested in duplicating a dream, but in doing so she necessarily became the complete victim of a nightmare.⁴⁸

The dream Mrs. Copperfield is compelled to duplicate is a recurring one in which she is "being chased up a short hill by a dog." At the top of the hill she finds a large "eight feet high" female mannequin fashionably dressed in "black velvet" and with a body "fashioned out of flesh, but without life." She wraps the mannequin's arms around her, after which they both topple forward and roll down the hill, "locked in each other's arms, with the mannequin acting "as a buffer between herself and the broken bottles and little stones over which they fell" – a fact which gives the dreamer "particular satisfaction."⁴⁹ We naturally are not surprised to find, in the last section of the novel, that Mrs. Copperfield has become "like a little baby" in her one-sided obsessive relationship with Pacifica, her paid partner.⁵⁰ Miss Goering, on the other hand, who has abandoned both her comfortable house and her devoted friends, and is preparing to force herself into a relationship with a brutal gangster, because it is something that she fears, is suddenly abandoned by him, prompting "a new sadness within herself. Hope, she felt, had discarded a childish form forever."⁵¹

Although she is a mock-epic figure, Miss Goering is a legitimate hero, attempting to live a life that will be individually challenging and fulfilling, while serving as a model and reproof to the people about her "who are grim because they still believe the earth is flat and that they are likely to fall off it at any minute. That is why they hold on so hard to the middle."⁵² Her pilgrimage away from her safe and comfortable home and into the netherworld that is, for her, the modern world momentarily aligns her with a series of life-defeated characters, each of whom she must

forcibly abandon when they prove themselves incapable of taking responsibility for their own existence and threaten to drag her down into their egoistic mire. True to their ignorance, these crippled and perverted souls repeatedly project upon Miss Goering their own monstrosity:

“You’re crazy,” said Andy. “You’re crazy and monstrous – *really* monstrous...”

“Well,” said Miss Goering, “perhaps my maneuvers do seem a little strange, but I have thought for a long time now that often, so very often, heroes who believe themselves to be monsters because they are so far removed from other men turn around much later and see really monstrous acts being committed in the name of something mediocre.”⁵³

One is reminded of Kierkegaard’s comment that the modern individual who is undergoing a “spiritual trial” will likely be regarded by others as “a very extraordinary sinner,” since “in our time people have no idea at all of spiritual trial.”⁵⁴

Jane Bowles’ life after the composition of *Two Serious Ladies* (which was published when she was only 26) was to be in some respects difficult but triumphant, like that of Miss Goering, and in other respects obsessive and self-defeated, like that of Mrs. Copperfield. What is remarkable throughout her biography is the degree to which her life experience is forecast by her fictional creations. Her last completed story, for instance, “A Stick of Green Candy,” is autobiographically both prescient and ominous in its depiction of the struggle and failure of a child approaching adolescence to maintain a belief in her imagined play-world. Those who delve deep down into the psyche through the creative process may experience the phenomena of creation’s power of prophecy and revelation in their own life history. This experiential phenomena relates to the modes in which fiction is written. What is commonly thought of as realistic or mimetic fiction is innately backward-looking, presenting the world as it was known, in the past tense. But we actually live our lives in the future tense, combining the past with the present in every forward-moving moment of our existence. The only truly realistic fiction, in this sense, might be thought of as that which prophetically creates the future. Jane Bowles is one of the rare fictional writers to practice this kind of realism almost exclusively in her writing – creating a fictive universe that is comprised of continual “mobility” and “states in the process of change,” as Henri Bergson (a crucial link between Spinoza and Deleuze) famously defined reality.⁵⁵ Bergson’s contrast between creation that is a backward-looking

“manufacturing” process and creation that is a forward-looking organic process of intuitive “organization” is apposite to the distinction between what is traditionally and conventionally thought of as mimetic realism in fiction and the prophetic realism practiced by writers like Jane Bowles.

Creation by manufacturing, according to Bergson, is an intellectual activity that “proceeds by concentration and comprehension” and works from “the periphery to the center,” and from “the many to the one.”⁵⁶ This is, of course, the typical trajectory of a mimetic-realist work of fiction, which proceeds by conscious imitative construction as it builds a world that is recognizable as our own, or at least a likely possibility. Creation by organization, by contrast, proceeds like natural life, working from the center to the periphery by a sort of “explosion” of concentric waves moving outward from that originating point.⁵⁷ The realist writer working in this mode proceeds by intuition – the kind of knowing that Spinoza defined as being posited and proved at once⁵⁸ – devising the hammer and nails as she needs them in order to fashion a virtual reality more vital with potential than our own tired version that has atrophied into cliché and opinion. As Deleuze wrote,

What counts for a great novelist ... is that things remain enigmatic yet nonarbitrary: in short, a new logic, definitely a logic, but one that grasps the innermost depths of life and death without leading us back to reason. The novelist has the eye of the prophet, not the gaze of a psychologist.⁵⁹

The danger for the committed prophetic realist artist lies not in the false appeal and easy answers of the merely mimetic world of cliché and opinion, but in the failure of intuition as a source and guide. The power of prophecy through intuition requires the attention of the whole self to the world’s appeal. The title of Jane Bowles’ unfinished novel, “Out in the World,” is indicative of a goal of merging the half worlds of our inner and outer, subjective and objective, mind and body realities into a whole that is perfectly meaningful and real.

Spinoza’s monistic model of the world is an apt description of this reality, in which the mind and the body are seen as two parallel and complementary attributes of one singular substance. In Spinoza’s metaphysics, there is nothing that is *not* out in the world. The soul is not inside our selves and God is not in some transcendental heaven. Rather the entire world is an expression through the parallel and dual attributes of mind and body, thought and matter, of the singular and perfect reality that is God or

nature. In fictive terms, Spinoza's model of reality is expressed as allegory.

The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.⁶⁰

--Spinoza

"I have always been seeking my spirit, Janet, and yet the more eagerly I seek it, the more

like a gorilla I seem to behave."⁶¹

--Jane Bowles, from an unfinished fiction manuscript

Little has been written about the allegorical nature of Bowles' fiction, and allegory is itself a practice that is inadequately appreciated by contemporary criticism. The hallmark of allegorical literature is its resistance to the appeal of the false transcendent: its insistence upon the materiality of metaphor and the immanence of existence. Traditional mimetic realist fiction is inherently devoted to the false transcendent; it works on the assumption that there exists a world of reality *elsewhere* that the fiction is representing, copying or imitating, commenting upon and arguing about. The assumption of the existence of this real world elsewhere is so complete that it is almost unrecognizable in the practice of mimetic fiction, or even in our everyday thinking concerning reality. But we are constantly positing its existence by our attitudes towards and arguments concerning it. In a scene in *Two Serious Ladies* in which a young man is railing against an economic and social system in which the owners oppress the laborers, "It is this security of theirs that makes us cry out at nights." Miss Goering comments, "You are interested in winning a very correct and intelligent fight. I am far more interested in what is making this fight so hard to win."⁶² What makes the argument so hard to win is that the very assumption of a class struggle determines its nature and makes one complicit in it.

By its parallel form, allegory innately questions its own assumptions. As Paul de Man famously observed, "The persistence of the referential moment . . . prevents the confinement of allegory to an epistemological and ethical system of valorization."⁶³ In other words, by keeping always separate but parallel the text of the world and its meaning, the allegorist highlights the ultimate incommensurability of one to the other. This is the manner in which Roger Scruton glosses Spinoza's parallelism, his

system of “ontological monism and conceptual dualism”:

Mind and body are one thing; but to describe that thing as mind and to describe it as body is to situate it within two separate and incommensurable systems. The details of those systems cannot be mutually substituted, and therefore the assertion of a causal relation (a relation of dependence) between mind and body is incoherent.⁶⁴

Deleuze gives a further analysis of Spinoza’s monistic dualism that allows us to apply it to the practice of allegory: “What is an action in the mind is necessarily an action in the body as well, and what is a passion of the body is necessarily a passion in the mind. There is no primacy of one series over the other.”⁶⁵ Although the body and mind form separate series, they are one single substance, as with allegorical figures and their parallel meaning. The relationship between the two series in life, as in allegory, is not arbitrary, but necessary, since “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.”⁶⁶

The challenge that life presents to us, according to Spinoza, is to understand the necessary and meaningful nature of an existence that appears to be random and meaningless, which is to “conceive things under a species of eternity.”⁶⁷ The modern malaise that Spinoza’s philosophy attempted to ward off, and which Friedrich Nietzsche later famously diagnosed as nihilism, results from our failure to understand that existence is necessary and meaningful, rather than arbitrary and absurd. Simone Weil, whom Bowles acknowledged as a kindred spirit and is key to understanding the prophetic nature of her fictive project, similarly distinguishes between a nihilistic belief that force is the ultimate reality of the world, and an essentially Spinozan conception of necessity as an eternally sanctioned limit that gives force its shape and meaning:

Brute force is not sovereign in this world. It is by nature blind and indeterminate. What is sovereign in this world is determinateness, limit. Eternal Wisdom imprisons this universe in a network, a web of determination. The universe accepts passively. The brute force of matter, which appears to us sovereign, is nothing else in reality but perfect obedience.⁶⁸

In a world in which brute force is deemed supreme, allegory is made to seem a mere metaphorical trick or convention, rather than a fictive

expression of the dual attributes of a singular perfect substance that is the real.

The dream-like flatness of Jane Bowles' fiction alerts us to its allegorical nature, pointing us insistently toward the realm of meaning parallel to its materialism. The characters in a Jane Bowles story always somewhat resemble the overtly theatrical characters of an explicit allegory like *The Faerie Queene* in their intense materiality and perpetually provisional meaning, seeming both more and less real than people we know. In a fundamental sense, they make us question the reality of such people and of ourselves. As allegorical theorist Theresa Kelley writes:

Because it is wayward, provisional, and openly factitious, modern allegory can assist a line of reasoning that breaks open self-enclosed symbols or systems and thus break out of the "habitus" of culture, whose patterns of received knowledge would otherwise close off inquiry.⁶⁹

In terms of fiction, conventional realism may be thought of as reflecting and representing the world as it is habitually known: static and finished and closed. In this sense, the often complex and sometimes ingenious plot complications of a conventional realist work may appear like the frantic maneuvers of a rat in a maze. They do not escape the conventional nature of the universe they inhabit and represent. Prophetic allegorical realism like that of Jane Bowles, on the other hand, is never finished or static, but perpetually surprising and open. The parallel series of materiality and meaning are continually moving forward, but never converging on a fixed point of judgment and closure. The always surprising and episodic nature of Bowles' fiction emphasizes this forward movement; likewise, the refusal of Bowles as narrator to limit her characters through judgment and interpretation emphasizes their perpetual signification.

The allegorist insists that human consciousness, which strains after closure and certainty, is necessarily approximate and provisional. It is therefore not a coincidence that allegory came into disrepute as a fictive mode at the same time that scientific discovery came to be thought of as an ultimate truth that human consciousness could apprehend with certainty. Coleridge's famous denigration of allegory in favor of symbolism, for instance, was allied with his effort to defend the literal scientific truth of the Bible.⁷⁰ Of course, contemporary post-quantum science knows better than to insist upon the certainty of its truth. As Karl Popper aptly noted, scientific truth is always prone to error, whereas certainty is never prone

to uncertainty; thus a distinction must be made between them. Scientific truth is a goal; certainty an ideal.⁷¹ What is most valuable for life in art, as necessarily distinguished from science, is precisely art's allegorical artificialness, by which it merges certainty and truth in and through fiction – that is, art's unique ability to lie convincingly, which Oscar Wilde identified as art's fundamental duty and prophetic purpose.⁷² Likewise the duty of the critic, as Wilde further argued, is to respond to authentic art imaginatively and to refrain from judging it in terms of habitual existence, which is to misunderstand and demean both art and life.⁷³

The advantage of allegory as a contemporary fictive mode is that it highlights the artificiality of art, and so prevents us from interpreting it as a mere representative slice of life. Likewise the frustration that allegory so often creates in the contemporary reader may be traced to its success in highlighting the provisionality of our assumed truths. In her essay, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," Weil pushes this point further, contending that the artificiality or lying nature of art is only apparent, the result of the "attempt to transport into a limited quantity of matter, modeled by man, an image of the infinite beauty of the entire universe. If the attempt succeeds," however, "this portion of matter should not hide the universe, but on the contrary, it should reveal its reality to all around."⁷⁴ This insightful observation can be read as a defense of fictive art in general, and of allegory in particular, in both their means and methods.

The general failure of contemporary readers and critics to recognize and appreciate implicitly allegorical creations like Jane Bowles' fiction is proof that our contemporary models of humanistic knowledge and thought are lagging behind the complex and sophisticated knowledge models of post-quantum scientific theorizing. As Deleuze wrote in his book on Foucault:

We have all too quickly forgotten ... the old sciences that are no longer useful, but in moral matters we are still weighted down with old beliefs which we no longer even believe, and we continue to produce ourselves as a subject on the basis of old modes which do not correspond to our problems.⁷⁵

Recent theorists such as Deleuze have attempted to address these discrepancies by insisting upon the necessary uncertainty of human knowledge through consciousness: "Consciousness is by nature the locus of an illusion. Its nature is such that it registers effects, but it knows nothing of causes."⁷⁶ Consciousness follows on the heels of the parallel series of

mind and body as they progress into the future, and consoles itself by imagining that the two series converge into a fixed point which can be registered by and in consciousness, and then used to predict the future and explain the past. Consciousness hankers after what, in physics, would be called a closed system. In reality, however, consciousness knows nothing definite concerning causes, but is single-mindedly working towards a desired end. As Spinoza wrote, "Human beings do everything on account of an end; namely, on account of something that is useful, which they seek."⁷⁷ Misery results from a human consciousness that mistakes ends for causes, confusing that which is merely "good and bad," in terms of aiding us in achieving our desired ends, with "good and evil," which are imagined as final causes that can be known, and by which we come to be judged. "All that one needs in order to moralize is to fail to understand," Deleuze observed.⁷⁸ Morality understood as an existential absolute is only an impediment to those who are devoted to understanding existence, resulting in ethical joy, rather than judging it, which ends all affirmative speculation.⁷⁹ One of Jane Bowles' friends commented, "Jane was fundamentally – and beyond anything – interested in human beings and their behavior. . . . Her whole attitude of mind was to understand and not to judge."⁸⁰ The final sentence is as apt for the temperament and philosophical project of Spinoza as for the personality and fiction of Jane Bowles.

The potential frustration for a committed ethical artist such as Jane Bowles is the life condition that impedes further affirmative speculation and understanding. In the unfinished work tentatively titled "Going to Massachusetts," Bowles focused on such an impediment in the psyche of one of her most intriguing characters, Bozoe Flanner, who attempts a self-diagnosis in explaining herself to her uncomprehending lover, Janet Murphy:

There is a Bozoe Flanner who goes forth to seek for happiness and glory with a wild uncontrollable greed, with the appetite of a gorilla – an appetite which is even more embarrassing since she has declared to herself the urgency of cultivating her spirit – however much like a bad flower it might be. To seek its shape is what she has declared she would do – declared not only to herself but to her friends. I have always been seeking my spirit, Janet, and yet the more urgently I seek it, the more like a gorilla I seem to behave – an earthbound gross woman, content to gratify base instincts.

The fact that I seldom do seem to gratify those instincts doesn't matter at all.⁸¹

Bozoe Flanner is caught in the existential dilemma whereby her great spiritual longing is necessarily represented by and through a bodily appetite. Alone of fictive modes, allegory allows for full expression of this dilemma. Bozoe's failure to satisfy her appetite is thus a dual failure, a failure to satisfy both the body *and* the mind-spirit, two aspects of one substance. Bozoe Flanner's dual failure is symptomatic of a modern world in which we have attempted to rid ourselves of the superstitious moral conception of a judging God, who is opposed to the satisfaction of our bodily appetites, only to be left with a body and mind-spirit that both have been made incapable of achieving satisfaction. The material "real" world has been made to seem hard-wired and animalistic, while the mind-spirit-soul world appears to us unreal. This is exactly the dilemma that Spinoza attempted to address through his monistic dualism at the beginning of our modern age. As Scruton acutely observed:

Spinoza, like Pascal, saw that the new science must inevitably "disenchant" the world. By following truth as our standard, we chase from their ancient abodes the miraculous, the sacred, and the holy. The danger, however, is not that we follow this standard, for we have no other. It is that we follow it only so far as to lose our faith, and not so far as to gain it. We rid the world of useful superstitions, but continue to see it in fragmented form. Oppressed by its meaninglessness, we succumb to new and less useful illusions – superstitions born of disenchantment, which are all the more dangerous for taking man, rather than God, as their object.⁸²

We must continue on our journey toward Spinozan enlightenment concerning the perfection of a singular reality within its parallel modes of body and mind, nature and God, of which the forked creature of man is but one expression. But first we must recognize our perilous and paralyzed condition in a world that assumes brute force to be the ultimate reality in a meaningless existence. The allegorical fiction of Jane Bowles is an attempt to shock us into such a recognition and is pointedly prophetic in this regard.

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.⁸³

--Simone Weil

"I fear nomads, I am afraid of them and afraid for them too."⁸⁴

--Jane Bowles, from "Camp Cataract"

Jane Bowles dramatizes our perilous modern spiritual state throughout her allegorical creations in and through the themes of homesickness and of sick-of-home-ness. The affinity she felt with the work of Simone Weil is doubtless related to Weil's own preoccupation with the existential "uprootedness" of modern man. In *Two Serious Ladies*, Mrs. Copperfield remarks upon arriving in a Panamanian port city:

"Now," she said to herself, "when people believed in God they carried him from one place to another. They carried Him through the jungles and across the Arctic Circle. God watched over everybody, and all men were brothers. Now there is nothing to carry with you from one place to another, and as far as I'm concerned, these people might as well be kangaroos; yet somehow there must be someone here who will remind me of something... I must try to find a nest in this outlandish place."⁸⁵

Weil wrote in her late work, *The Need for Roots* (composed in the same period of the early 1940's as was Bowles' novel): "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul"; adding, "It is one of the hardest to define."⁸⁶ Rootedness involves being at home both in place and time, which requires a sense of the presence of the past. "Loss of the past," Weil writes, "whether it be collectively or individually, is the supreme human tragedy, and we have thrown ours away, just like a child plucking off the petals of a rose."⁸⁷ In *Two Serious Ladies*, Mrs. Copperfield continues her reverie upon arrival in Panama:

"Memory," she whispered. "Memory of the things I have loved since I was a child. My husband is a man without memory." She felt intense pain at the thought of this man whom she liked above all other people, this man for whom each thing he had not yet known was a joy. For her, all that which was not already an old dream was an outrage. She got back on her bed and fell sound asleep.⁸⁸

Alice Toklas commented of Jane Bowles' complex personality that it was

easier to understand if one thought of her as an “Oriental D. P.[Displaced Person].”⁸⁹ When Jane followed Paul to North Africa and settled down in Tangier, she felt that she had simultaneously found her true home, and become permanently and finally dislocated.⁹⁰

In the novella “Camp Cataract,” Harriet’s spiteful drive to get away from her family’s apartment may be read as a commentary on Paul Bowles’ reactive drive to escape from Western culture. Sadie’s hankering after Harriet and her obsession with the family apartment likewise resembles Jane’s need to find a nest in the world, and Sadie’s fateful trip to Camp Cataract may be read as a prophecy and a commentary on Jane’s reaction to relocating to North Africa, where she completed the novella. Sadie’s suffocating and anxious home-life, and her unconscious yearning for “the dreaded voyage into the world,”⁹¹ serve as an intense dramatization of the modern condition of uprootedness masquerading as a domestic bliss of freedom and ease. It is telling that Sadie, who unconsciously hates her life in the alienating and anonymous city apartment, spends most of her conscious psychic energy scheming to keep Harriet confined there with her. Weil contends that those who are suffering from being uprooted feel a compulsion to uproot others.⁹² The irony is that Harriet is so committed to the specious values of an uprooted society that her only fear is of creating a “scandal,” which prevents her from making “an unseemly dash for freedom.”⁹³

Sadie’s true fear, as well as her almost unbearable longing, concerns her own nomadic instinct. She writes to Harriet at Camp Cataract: “I fear nomads. I am afraid of them and afraid for them too. I don’t know what I would do if any of my dear ones were seized with the wanderlust.”⁹⁴ As *Two Serious Ladies* is the comic and mock-epic version of the perils of uprootedness, so “Camp Cataract” is the prophetic and tragic version, and Sadie’s unconscious journey to self-destruction is as ominous, inevitable, surprising, and disturbing as that of Oedipus or Lear. After her arrival at Camp Cataract on her inspired mission to retrieve Harriet from a threatening homelessness, Sadie becomes herself finally and utterly dislocated:

A deep chill had settled into her bones, and she was like a person benumbed. Exactly when this present state had succeeded the earlier one Sadie could not tell, nor did she think to ask herself such a question, but a feeling of dread now lay like a stone in her breast where before there had been stirring such powerful sensations of excitement and suspense. “I’m so low,” she said to herself, “I feel like I was sitting at my own funeral.”⁹⁵

Sadie's long years of self-deception concerning her motives and instincts are about to take their toll, as the very success of the deception makes her powerless to forestall her doom:

She felt that something dreadful might happen, but whatever it was, this disaster was as remotely connected with her as a possible train wreck. "I hope nothing bad happens..." she thought, but she didn't have much hope in her.⁹⁶

"Camp Cataract" is a harrowing portrayal of spiritual malaise and paralysis, recalling Weil's comment that "for people who are really uprooted, there remain only two possible sorts of behavior"; either they obsessively work to uproot others, or they "fall into a spiritual lethargy resembling death."⁹⁷ When Sadie abandons her obsessive effort to rescue Harriet by retrieving her to the family home, she sinks into the lethargy that leads to her death. The conclusion of the story, in which Sadie presumably kills herself, is profoundly ambivalent. The preceding movements of the story, detailing Sadie's descent into a delusional reality, are so convincingly rendered, and so poignant in their psychological analysis and spiritual import, that we are prompted to wonder whether it is not the conventional reality the other characters inhabit that is the delusion after all.

In the overtly allegorical realm of Sadie's delusion, the material world through which she has spent her life drifting, as in a dream, becomes overwhelmingly and unbearably meaningful and real. The world so revealed displays for Sadie her own repressed instincts and emotions, in particular her lesbian proclivities and her hatred of her life in the family apartment. It is an awareness of her fundamental homelessness, a revelation that is extended to include an awareness of the uprootedness of the country and culture in general when Sadie observes the souvenir seller, who is an Irish-American man dressed up to resemble an American Indian, complete with head-dress and face paint: "She stared intently at his Irish blue eyes, so oddly light in his brick-colored face. What was it? She was tormented by the sight of an incongruity she couldn't name."⁹⁸ Her delusional response is to try to hide the Indian along with herself behind the waterfall, where his face loses "any trace of the incongruity that had shocked her so before. The foaming waters were beautiful to see. Sadie stepped forward, holding her hand out to the Indian."⁹⁹ Sadie's delusion and death are, like Prospero's island exile, at once a retreat from the conventional world of reality and a reproof of it.

“Camp Cataract” is arguably Jane Bowles’ masterpiece, as Truman Capote asserted in his introduction to her *Collected Works*,¹⁰⁰ and it is one of the most profoundly and disturbingly prophetic of modern stories in its unflinching envisioning of our age of existential anxiety and malaise; and yet it is largely unread and little analyzed or understood. Even the normally acute Paul seemed uncertain about it,¹⁰¹ an uncertainty that may have served to protect him from the unnerving implications of the story for his own life and marriage. It is also possible to interpret Jane’s subsequent writer’s block as a more or less unconscious effort to shield both Paul and herself from her uncanny insight. There is good reason, after all, that a prophet is unwelcome in his home country. Jane’s doctor in Tangier said of her that she seemed to understand everything.¹⁰² The reckless hard living that led to Jane’s early stroke and subsequent debility may likewise be thought of as an effort at self-preservation through self-destruction – martyrdom taking many forms, as Weil’s self-starvation attests.

Although Weil considered uprootedness to be a modern calamity for Western society, concerning which we are largely and tragically unconscious, she also contended that there is a form of self-uprootedness that is a useful and necessary creative and existential act. “When we uproot others,” she contends, “it results in unreality. But by uprooting oneself one seeks greater reality.”¹⁰³ In *Two Serious Ladies*, Mrs. Copperfield is uprooted by her husband’s reactive wanderlust and reacts by uprooting her kept lover, Pacifica. The novel’s mock-epic hero, Miss Goering, on the other hand, uproots herself in her effort to pursue her own “little idea of salvation.”¹⁰⁴ In Jane Bowles’ own life, she seems to have struggled to choose the uprooting that resulted from following Paul to North Africa. Near to death, she told her caretakers at a nursing home that moving to Africa had been good for Paul’s writing, but bad for her own.¹⁰⁵

In any case, the unfinished work she labored on for years in Tangiers is full of interest and promise. There seems little doubt that she was headed in a direction in her work in which the always implicitly allegorical nature of her writing was to become more pervasive and explicit. Such an allegorical expression of the world implies a belief in the necessary and meaningful nature of an existence that is without human purpose. As Weil writes, “The central truth to be known concerning this universe is that it is absolutely devoid of finality. Nothing in the way of finality can be ascribed to it except through a lie or a mistake.”¹⁰⁶ Such a Spinozan understanding of the eternally perfect reality of the world qualifies all

other truths and makes of our lives a perpetual quest to make ourselves amendable to a necessity that never entirely can be understood, but which nevertheless can be chosen by being loved. It is a quest that Bowles dramatizes repeatedly in her allegorical fiction, as when Bozoe Flanner attempts to explain to her lover the full import of her long anticipated trip to Massachusetts, which in true allegorical fashion represents both something other and more:

“I was born to make this voyage – I have never spent a moment of the day or night free from this knowledge.”

“Your life is your own, Bozoe.”

“My life is not my own.... Have you missed the whole point of my life?”¹⁰⁷

Jane Bowles’ sustained effort through her allegorical-realist fiction is to convince us that our lives are not our own, but are both other and more. She consistently attacks and undermines the figure of the modern individual who, reactively secure in his opinions and in the certain knowledge of his own seemingly self-evident reality, is entirely self-deceived. The prophetic allegorical realism she created implicitly asserts that the life of our mind that lies beyond consciousness is just as mysteriously and profoundly meaningful and real as the life of our body in its infinite complexity. As Deleuze elucidates:

What does Spinoza mean when he invites us to take the body as a model? It is a matter of showing that the body surpasses the knowledge that we have of it, and that thought likewise surpasses the consciousness that we have of it. There are no fewer things in the mind that exceed our consciousness than there are things in the body that exceed our knowledge.¹⁰⁸

Having thoroughly pondered and then rejected Descartes’ self-limiting cogito, Spinoza foresaw the inevitable dead-end to which the ideal of the individual’s disembodied soul (or one confined to the pineal gland) would lead us. Rather than posit disembodied souls as the ghosts in the machine of a material world, Spinoza sought to redefine our understanding of God as existing materially and mentally in and of and through all things, including ourselves, so that we are both more and less than individual beings, and are far more profoundly complex and mysterious than any individual consciousness would assume. “The human body is composed of very many individuals of a diverse nature, each of which is highly composite,” Spinoza wrote.¹⁰⁹ As Scruton observed, “There is really no place in Spinoza’s philosophy for the concept of an individual,

or for the distinction, so important to our ordinary thought, between an individual and its properties.”¹¹⁰

Conventional fictive realism proceeds upon the implicit assumption that the disembodied subject as creative artist can apprehend and represent the real world, the world elsewhere – “out there” – of which he implicitly is not a part, as the Cartesian individual as subject is self-confidently (and self-alienatedly) abstracted from the objective real world. Prophetic realism, on the contrary, such as that practiced by Jane Bowles, implicates the perceiving subject within the material world as a part of the world’s immanent reality, while it posits that world’s meaning allegorically on a parallel signifying plane, within the mind. The contemporary reader entering such a fictive world is typically disoriented by the lack of a presumed vantage point of judgment and by the feeling that every material aspect of this world is potent with meaning awaiting investigation and discernment. Weil gives a useful description of such a world, which can be expressed only in and through allegory:

This sensible universe in which we find ourselves has no other reality than that of necessity; and necessity is a combination of relations which fade away as soon as they are sustained by a pure and lofty concentration on the part of the mind. The universe around us is made up of mind materially present in our flesh.¹¹¹

Jane Bowles’ incomplete fictive project was directed toward the allegorical expression of such a universe. For her unfinished novel, *Out in the World*, Jane told Paul that she

had in mind something of the quality of Balzac, the creation of a world of sensory and realistic detail. But in addition she wanted her characters to be representative, each of them to represent an abstraction, almost in the sense of a morality play.¹¹²

This ambitious and unfinished project, like Jane Bowles’ allegorical fiction in general, represents a prophetic exhortation to the reader to comprehend the meaningful perfection of reality in its dual mind-body aspects. Both Spinoza and Weil insisted that the partial and necessarily subjective realities of our actual worlds are meaningfully true and truly meaningful only if they are considered from the point of view of a comprehensive mental-spiritual reality, to which Weil said that Christ was referring when he bid his disciples to be perfect, even as their father in heaven is perfect.¹¹³ This God’s-eye, under-the-species-of-eternity reality can only be

indirectly apprehended and expressed by human consciousness, as both Spinoza and Weil observed, but without such an effort of expression it doesn't exist at all in this world.¹¹⁴¹¹⁵ The prophetic allegory that Jane Bowles was struggling to create for modern literature is an effort at such expression, and the realism of perfection it strives to apprehend is an eternal and necessary reproof of the all too actual world of our habitual lives reflected in merely mimetic fiction.

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