On Pain of Speech

Fantasies of the First Order
and the Literary Rant

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At the conclusion of Jane Bowles’s only novel, *Two Serious Ladies*, published in 1943, the two ladies of the title meet for the last time at a swanky hotel bar. Possessed of “the desire to tell someone everything that had happened,” each hopes that her newly found seriousness will find means for the telling. A break in the text announces the coda before the final scene resumes the narrative with the stark phrase “The restaurant was not very gay,” a phrase emblematic of the surprising ways that Bowles’s life and writing struggled to name her most profound intuitions in the most naive language. Yet the very moment when readers might reasonably expect a climactic end, the hope of confessional kinship is dashed by a real scene, an embarrassing spectacle, as the sober religious zealot, Miss Goering, speechless and stiffly transfixed, watches while the other becomes seriously, publicly drunk. Having entered with a “scream,” Mrs. Copperfield sinks and pitches through the scene as she “walk[s] a crooked path to the bar,” where she sits “gulping down her drink, occasionally spilling a little of it over her chin.” By the end “terribly gay,” Mrs. Copperfield orders a round for the house, an extravagance punctuated by equally extravagant outbursts waveringly aimed at anyone within earshot. When finally Mrs. Copperfield, supported between her girlfriend and the girlfriend’s fiancée, makes her stumbling exit, she does so only after speaking her piece. “I have gone to pieces, which is a thing I’ve wanted to do for years. I know I am as guilty as I can be, but I have my happiness, which I guard
like a wolf, and I have authority now and a certain amount of daring, which, if you remember correctly, I never had before.”1 Abjed speech at its core, her message misses its mark to call forth only more blank speech, for this little rant breeds incomprehension and lack of connection in the place of sovereignty and self-mastery, here perceptible only in the negative space surrounding the failed speech act. Modeling for the bar of abjection in Bowles’s fiction, the meeting between stiffness and bodily dislocation, between silence and tirade, between the sobriety of incomprehension and the intoxication of speaking one’s piece, fails to explain or offer a theoretical discourse for what it displays: or as Pacifica, Mrs. Copperfield’s Panamanian lover, puts it, “She is like a little baby. I tried to explain it to my young man, but I can’t explain it really to anyone.” In the very place of a failure to name its meaning, this little drama raises a series of questions about meaning, specifically the possibly gay meaning of its own invocation of confession, impossibility, self-description, and regression.

We learn from reading Bowles that if the bar is not very gay, this is because, within the epistemological framework of the novel, being terribly gay means returning speech and its body to a primitive state like drunkenness or being a baby, states or conditions that risk losing authority in the very claim that one has won it. Losing it does nothing to secure these women as sovereign subjects of their speech; rather, the scene allegorizes the sexual politics of containment, irrelevance, and incomprehension pursuing the characters, despite their wanderings in Latin America and New England. Each is barred from speaking the nature of her predicament because to speak it would mean to be it, and each suffers that failure of naming as a perpetual repetition consigning her to the fate of “piling sin upon sin” or “going to pieces” again and again. The indeterminacy of this unspeakability, as much as its overwhelming presence, exerts a constant pressure on the narrative, so much so that by the time we enter the bar we are prepared to witness the dramatization of obstruction, not its transcendence. The signature mark of Bowles’s fiction, its most instructive point of obsession, lies in its powerful ability to materialize the law of its own abjection through the dramatization of failure rather than sovereign triumph. The law appears because the characters fail to manifest its accomplishment. The project of materialization is connected in Bowles not only to a restrictive economy of gender, but also to a broader, less distinct work of aggression that overflows the borders of her fiction and ties the aesthetic to her biography in ways that demand a reading of key
aspects of her life. Aggressivity working its way through complaint and recrimination is one stylization of the rant in Bowles. Silence is another, for between Bowles’s fiction, plays, and letters, the address of ranting persistently aims at the law, but without the sound and fury that characterizes Wilde’s understandable breakdown. Consistently, Bowles’s fiction strives to manifest the regime of symbolic organization in order to enact fictively an address to that law; thus scenes of breakdown, pathetic and infantile declaration, and vertiginous speech have as their function the positing of a symbolic law and the simultaneous upbraiding of that law. When orchestrating such moments of nonarrival and nonappearance, Bowles’s narrative art conducts its own study of power and subjection by attending to the least capable, most dependent personalities. These failed denunciations manifest in their failure the symbolic prefiguration of power by a prior act of social erasure and foreclosure, yet Bowles’s insistence on figuring the law prevents her text from isolating a consistent, single image, instance, or object as the absolute, and masterful, origin of symbolic exclusion. This simultaneous positing and rebuke of the law is basic to ranting and something we notice in a wide range of rants, for instance, as a feature of Valerie Solanas’s The S.C.U.M. Manifesto, which hammers away at its fundamental insight, that men cannot call a thing by its name nor feel a genuine emotion so addicted they are to sublimating all truth in their cultural fictions; this denunciation reaches a crescendo in the claim that “even sex is sublimation” for a man. A mad assertion, perhaps, but Solanas knows that when even sex is sublimation, a major rejection of the body and its primitive history is underway.

In the previous chapter we followed Wilde’s rejoinder to the social foreclosure of his desire and read his rant as the attempt to reenact the sublimations that enable fantasy to transfigure abjection. The stubborn refusal to lose the beloved, and with him the means of loving, expands the self-berating character of melancholia in De Profundis to an impossible act of reproach against the law that enjoins loss itself as the abyssal ground of love and culture. Although intending to write his own vita nuova, Wilde produces instead a form of melancholic speech unable—indeed, unwilling—to complete mourning and thus finally and definitively to lose the ideal object of desire; to renounce Bosie would amount to renouncing Wilde’s desire entirely for the simple reason that Bosie had come to embody an ideal imperfectly realized in life. This circularity has no resolution apart from its continuation on another plane, aimed at another, and thus manic recuperation becomes a fictive
resolution. *De Profundis* ends with the articulation of a new kinship lived in defiance of what the letter describes as a barbaric symbolic law of family life, yet this is a resolve that Wilde could not put into practice.

Bowles’s characters suffer the bar of foreclosure differently, in part because they inherit the queer legacy of Wilde, but as drifting, rootless women, wives, tourists, and runaways. They are the great unnoticed, the trivial, the insignificant. No aesthetic movement hangs on their words; they set no fashion and have no influence. The bar is in full force at this point of seeming freedom, for they suffer the lack of attention as a lack of possibility in their lives. The lesbians in her fiction are frustrated and dowdy butches or dreamily wounded femmes who lament their failure to be adequately butch; the Latinas and mixed-race women are stereotyped sisterly prostitutes. What these characters share is their relation to a primitivism that equates psychic states of inadequacy or regression, deviance, low social class, and “foreignness,” all viewed from an imaginary perspective of the norm. The repeated figuring of this primitive equation symptomatically reveals the implicit theory behind Bowles’s scenes of ranting dislocation. Ranting in Bowles is the last resort of a fearful and failing subject. The resulting speech projects subjective aggressivity outward and reflects an intensity of humiliation, hyperbolizing the weakness of the speaker. Of the many abject figures in her repertoire, only the melancholic, collapsing American femme possesses the power to launch an address at the law whose silent audition is always “dubbed” by a relation or friend. Because the rant’s address is an allegorical one, rantical outbursts directed at the law always miss the ear they aim for and find instead a substitute hearer who metaphorically and structurally represents that law. Ranting in Bowles is the melancholic speech of someone suffering the bar of foreclosure where speech itself will fail to authorize the speaker as authorized to speak.

In this chapter we leave behind nineteenth-century aestheticism to track the ways that Wildean wit and the dandy’s provocations are stigmatized when decadence is performed by a modernist woman writer in the 1940s. The figure of Bowles’s feminine dandy has been largely ignored, and the modernist innovation she forged during World War II has not been part of the canonical tale of Anglo-American modernism. Despite substantial stylistic overlap between Bowles’s formal innovations in light satirical style and the primitivism of American postmodernists (Charles Henry Ford) or the spare narratives of the early Beckett, Bowles does not figure in the story told of the rise and fall of high mod-
ernism. Nor can her sentimental and primitivist fiction be assimilated to an early postmodern cool. We will examine Bowles’s practice of ranting through two interlaced optics: through the historical context of her literary production, which includes both a Parisian modernist expatriate milieu and a Moroccan domesticity, and through a psychoanalytic engagement with the notion of a symbolic law, lived as taboo and foreclosed inscription. This discussion of a psychic law that produces social foreclosure prepares the way for chapter 3’s discussion of Lacan’s theory of foreclosure, while our consideration of Bowles’ complicity with colonial and racial narratives paves the way for Meddeb’s explicit and critical recall of colonial violence and postcolonial normativity. Where decadence breaks down into primitive fragments in Bowles, it is resumed in Meddeb’s masterful poetics of ranting, which weds the primitive and the decadent into a new synthesis to be wielded as a powerful anti- and postcolonial critique. Unable to sublimate her social marginality, Bowles negotiates it by ranting from the space of foreclosed inscription that recalls both C.L.R. James’s abject appeal and Genet’s insight that he must use the master’s words to forge his own unique expression.

In Bowles’s case the rants are split between letters appearing in the fiction and moments of descriptive intensity and drama conveyed in dialogue or as the narrating voice itself. This tendency to animate and literalize the ranting voice in fiction is complicated by Bowles’s writing practice in the years following the onset of her writer’s block in 1947. She did not cease writing entirely; rather, she began an epistolary career that lasted until her death in 1973. These letters, for which she had her own generic designations, are often amusing but always stuffed with complaints, brimming with self-reproach and obsessional details. They are full of self-reflective commentary on their own style and content: “I am being vague and half cocked about plans because I’m trying to fool myself out of an ‘agonizer.’ I can feel this letter slipping into one.”

“Agonizer” is Bowles’s own term for a letter that veers off into self-reproach and almost does not make it to the post: “I am going to walk to town and mail this before I throw it away. I have as usual gotten too wound up about some remark which you have by now forgotten.” The rant form dominates nearly all the letters as they upbraid the addressee for a minor infraction and neglect or obsessively work over some deficiency in their author. The overwhelming epistolary strategy is to turn the addressee into a substitute authority, a misplaced ear filled to brimming with her plaints.
Bowles called these letters “literary exercises in precision,” a description that authorizes them as a literary form of autobiography intended for interpretation. The letters show an appetite for self-exposure that extends to her piecemeal discussions of her writing block and the struggle to find a way back to writing. It is in the letters that she fosters a link to writing, first surprisingly and then with finality foreclosed to her. This epistolary ranting chronicles the decline of her writing powers as it stubbornly registers her paralysis and marginality. The letters exercise her right to be read even in the absence of a writing that might authenticate that reading. Thus her inability to write becomes another strategy of hyperbolic self-abjection painfully displaying her being-for-the-law even as its ambition is to scatter light off the law and thereby make it glancingly visible.

Into the gap of a suspended writing Bowles introduced a theme binding the biography to the fiction. One of the plots of *Two Serious Ladies* follows the erotic career of a weary femme, Mrs. Copperfield, as she travels unwillingly behind her adventurous husband to Panama. Because the husband refuses the lures of the tourist town with its colonial hotels and expatriate bars, she finds herself in the parallel “native” town with mixed-race prostitutes as the only source of feminine company. She becomes attached to Pacifica, a carefree and practical survivor whose charms inspire in Copperfield fantasies of protection and shelter. Interestingly, this plot prefigures, at a remove of more than ten years, Jane Bowles’s pursuit of Cherifa, a Moroccan grain seller whom Jane spied in the Tangier marketplace. In the letters that chronicle one side of their relationship we find Bowles at pains to establish a domestic economy of difference and order—kinship—which would enable her to “believe” in herself as a serious writer, grounded in a place and a world of practices. By setting up a household with Cherifa, Jane establishes a realm of desire that is separate from her mission as a writer and that seeks to literalize the primitive as something materially apart from herself; in this way, becoming hostess absorbs the injury of infantile femininity and disseminates it within another register, one of defined social practices and limited but legible power. Cherifa is for Jane an irreplaceable link to a stable identity and one that continues to shore up the gap of absent writing. My reading of one side of their relationship suggests that while Bowles’s fiction may labor to materialize the law of foreclosure on her desires, in her life she strove to shift the burden of that primitive outside onto another.

Jane Bowles was often struck by blockage in the middle of writing
fiction, asking, “How can I write it if I can’t see it?” Caught between the demand of writing and the failure of vision, which shifts unstably in her texts between meanings suggesting both perception and imagination, Bowles describes the impasse of her blockage with the question “how?” How, we might ask in turn, are we to read such a statement? Not quite a question, neither is it an accusation. As with all the rantical moments in her fiction, this fragment of her literary effort at precision appears torn out of a heated dialogue on the possibility of writing at all. Addressed to an imaginary taskmaster, it aggressively dodges the harsh injunction to write, but considered from another angle she seems to ask for a way out of an impasse. Rhetorically, the how is both too full and too empty, for if she beseeches the listener merely to witness her arrested progress, the affective fullness of the how empties it of its semantic contents. On this reading the how turns toward the hearer and entreats a hearing. Read another way, the question begs an answer, a map, directions through the impasse of the end of sight. The emptiness of this how demands to be filled in with the sensible substance of imagination: this is how you write when you cannot see. Servile and insubordinate by turns, the how of vision fails to be the end of writing by reducing down to an infinitesimal particle the drama of writing to which Jane Bowles is subject. Vision, still the warrant of her writerly aspiration, undergoes a change as it passes through her frustration to give evidence in the fiction that writing is born in the failure of sight. What is foreclosed to Bowles subjects her to writing where she pursues the themes of impasse, failure, and exclusion in tiny irruptions of ranting address. This paradox, which brings foreclosure to a standstill, offers our consideration of ranting a difference of scale, for bombast is not her mode; rather, ranting in Bowles is a persistent, stubborn, and relentless agonizing punctuated by an occasional flamboyant upsurge of noise.

The impasse she continually stages derives, at least in part, from her failure to find a readership. Despite the good reviews that welcomed the author of Two Serious Ladies as a delightful new voice, Bowles dismissed her small and devoted readership and her career as nothing more than “writing for one’s friends,” while ten years later the largely uncomprehending reviews of her stage play In the Summer House corroborated her growing sense of marginality and failure. Characteristic of her literary reception is the inability of her critics to distinguish a consciously “primitivist” style from the author’s unorthodox personality and openly lesbian relationships. This conflation constructs a
“primitive” figure of infantilized femininity to substitute for a reading of the same subject depicted in her fiction, while her writing explores the motivations behind figurations of primitiveness, marked as “oriental,” and shows that such figures become the fractured language of feminine subjection. If the feminine appears passive, indolent, infantile, and psychically regressed, this is because such moods and modes are the language available. As we shall see, Bowles’s reception shows that her peers consistently mistook her subjects for her character, her literary style for her person. This collapse of personality into style suggests that the femininity she explored was in some way imperceptible to her audience or illegible as an aesthetic. Such a conflation works to circumscribe the range of allowable topics and styles of writing through a refusal to understand naiveté or exaggerated femininity as modes of fiction. Again and again, stories like “A Stick of Green Candy,” “Camp Cataract,” and even the puppet play explore a complex theory of gender through the naive language and narrative fantasies of women and girls. In the same era of de Beauvoir’s first feminist publications and Levi-Strauss’s study of kinship and the gender system, Bowles returns to the primitive arcana of domestic scenes to restate the law of feminine abjection in other terms, yet this twist of the norm passed largely undetected by her contemporaries.

In her failure to write Bowles stumbles upon the paradoxical structure of the symbolic law of gender, which dictates that gender appear as the utterly natural, fully known, and thus complete, total system, despite the challenge to that transparency revealed by the difficulty Jane Bowles experiences when she tries to “see it.” The same instability between literal and figural meanings, which brings her to the pitch of her rhetorical questions, commits her to write about femininity, especially lesbian femininity, as a realm of symbolization foreclosed. This, then, is why she chooses a primitivist style and why she returns to childhood and infantilized femmes to demonstrate a socially enjoined loss. What Bowles cannot see guarantees her writing; this powerlessness to see the thing she must depict or to know the things she must know captures the ambivalence at the heart of primitiveness as it is imagined by modernism and theorized by psychoanalysis. Freud’s primitive builds up a picture of the world by throwing out his ambivalences onto objects. Spirits then animate the objects, granting them life and an unsteady but predictable place in ritual practice. The primitive on this account is both too full—filled with ambivalent love and hate—and too empty for having jettisoned his affective property to accomplish
his desire in totemic objects. The primitive is thus the very antithesis of Wilde’s tempered man and much closer to the appetite-driven modern type. By this account, primitive achievements derive from a belief in the omnipotence of thought, of which there remains, for Freud, only one cultural vestige in modern societies: “Only in art does it still happen that a man who is consumed by desires performs something resembling the accomplishment of those desires and that what he does in play produces—thanks to artistic illusion—just as though it were something real. People speak with justice of the ‘magic of art.’” Bowles’s increasing inability to realize her desire in writing is matched by her insistent foregrounding of that impossibility in the letters that substitute for writing. Yet, like Freud’s primitive artist, she learns to accomplish magically desires unmet by writing. The genre of the letter exempts her from her blockage, and in the place of a less “authorized” writing she manages to express what is denied to her in fiction. This magical art substitutes readers for a readership by enabling her to deviate around the criticism or indifference that her fiction elicited. Whatever else the epistle might be, as practiced by Jane Bowles, it is not a manly art, for it participates in the schema of address evoked by her rhetorical questions.

Before we turn to Bowles’s use of the overlapping figures of the primitive, the regressed feminine, and the oriental, all ways of alternately manifesting and resisting foreclosed inscription, an example from Two Serious Ladies offers a context for the peculiar and harsh literary reception of her work. This 1943 publication, her second novel but the only one to be published, was described as “incomprehensible” by some, celebrated by others in the literary press, and largely ignored by the critical press. Poor reception among friends and family added to Bowles’s disappointment; she reacted by repudiating the work as “not even a novel.” If by 1943 the experiments in stream of consciousness, the antics of surrealism of the 1920s, and resurgent American interest in the gothic amply suggest a complex literary genealogy for Two Serious Ladies, the strangely subtle frankness of Bowles’s explorations of sexuality proved more resistant to critical understanding. The plot of the novel, like that other largely unread erotic masterpiece Mademoiselle de Maupin, details the erotic life of children, female sexual license, prostitution, cross-racial sex, complications of kinship, masturbation, erotic religious fervor, and lesbian love and obsession. The opening scene of Two Serious Ladies involves a series of sadomasochistic children’s games, justified as religious play, and intro-
duces us to one of the novel’s two protagonists, Christina Goering, who suffers from “mental struggles—generally of a religious nature” (MS, 4). Growing up to become a “religious leader” without a religion, Christina later seeks out poverty and prostitution as her own private forms of saintly mortification, as she delights in “piling sin upon sin” rather than the sin itself, but in this early scene her religious passions are clearly aroused by her older sister’s favorite playmate. Provoked by her jealousy that Mary “belongs” to sister Sophie, the sadistic games reflect the “desire to have Mary to herself of an afternoon” (MS, 4). In the first of these saintly games Christina performs for Mary a sun dance that conflates pagan ritual with a species of monotheism.

“No don’t take your eyes off me,” she said. “I’m going to do a dance of worship to the sun. Then I’m going to show that I’d rather have God and no sun than the sun and no God. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Mary. “Are you going to do it now?”

“Yes, I’m going to do it right here.” She began the dance abruptly. It was a clumsy dance and her gestures were all undecided. When Sophie came out of the house, Christina was in the act of running backwards and forwards with her hands joined in prayer.

“What is she doing?” Sophie asked Mary.

“A dance to the sun, I think,” Mary said. “She told me to sit here and watch her.”

Sophie walked over to where Christina was now twirling around and around and shaking her hands weakly in the air.

“Sneak!” she said and suddenly she pushed Christina down on the grass. . . . For a long time after that, Christina kept away from Sophie, and consequently from Mary. (MS, 5)

The very simple language intensifies the farcical character of Christina’s improvised ritual performed here only in a flimsy slip. Christina’s attempted seduction proceeds entirely in this ponderous style, and, quite undeterred by Mary’s slightly deflating “Are you going to do it now?” Christina will continue to try to get next to Mary, herself always positioned between an only slightly believable conceit of ignorance and a complicity. In other stories Bowles will repeat this coupling with adult characters, in scenes in which one woman inexpertly desires another woman who smoothly but unaccountably shifts from real or feigned ignorance to reciprocation.11 Given Bowles’s psychic and literary investment in depicting, dramatizing, and living out the limit experience of impediment, it should come as no surprise that the erotic situations she most often writes about also reflect an impasse. The dynamic between a self-conscious lesbian desire and a mysterious because shifting
interest and repudiation of lesbianism repeats throughout the novel and Bowles’s stories, where the barrier between two women is always figured as something definitive and irrefutable. At times the barrier emerges as the specter of a violation of the incest taboo or as unspeakable murder; in her puppet show “A Quarreling Pair,” child’s fare serving up adult longing and thwarted desire, it is figured by a prop, “a rod or string dividing it down the middle to indicate two rooms” (MS, 414).

Awkward and unprecedented children people her fiction to strain the conventions of realism as they pursue unnamed but palpable desires. Later Christina and Mary strike a gaming bargain in the “tower where the children often gather.” This is another of Bowles’s joking references to the carceral spaces allowed for childish play, spaces that run the gamut from the tower’s place of tortures to the Kinsey Memorial Playground in “A Stick of Green Candy.”

She asked her if she would not like to play a very special game with her. “It’s called ‘I forgive you for all your sins,’” said Christina. “You’ll have to take your dress off.”

“Is it fun?” Mary asked.

“It is not for fun that we play it, but because it’s necessary to play it.” (MS, 6)

Mary agrees to this necessity. They prepare Mary’s costume. She is tied into a sack with holes punched for her eyes. In a state of high excitation, Christina fumbles for purpose, and in the landscape of the wooded stream she hits upon the mud as another necessity of the ritual.

“No, near the mud?”

“Then you want to be clean and pure as a flower is, don’t you?” Mary did not answer.

“If you don’t lie down in the mud and let me pack the mud over you and then wash you in the stream, you’ll be forever condemned. Do you want to be forever condemned? This is your moment to decide.” (MS, 6)

Feigning control, Christina obliges the other girl to obey. These commands must be seen, she says, as obvious facts emanating from the world as naturally as the stream at the end of the wood, and nature is called upon to verify the facticity of her own fantasy’s order. The only sin attributable to Mary is that of inciting desire, yet hers is the sin elaborated by Christina’s ritual. Between the first spectacle of the
sun dance and this game of expiation, Christina has learned that Mary can be manipulated and, equally, that she responds to Christina’s older sister largely because Sophie dominates her.

“The mud’s cold,” said Mary.
“The hell fires are hot,” said Christina. “If you let me do this, you won’t go to hell.”
“Don’t take too long,” said Mary. . . .
“Oh, please no, not the water—I hate to go into the water. I’m afraid of the water.”
“Forget what you are afraid of. God’s watching you now and He has no sympathy for you yet.”
She lifted Mary from the ground and walked into the stream, carrying her. . . .
“Three minutes will be enough,” said Christina. “I’m going to say a little prayer for you.”
“Oh, don’t do that,” Mary pleaded.
“Of course,” said Christina, lifting her eyes to the sky.
“Dear God,” she said, “make this girl Mary pure as Jesus Your Son. Wash her sins away as the water is now washing the mud away. This black burlap proves to you that she thinks she is a sinner.”
“Oh, stop,” whispered Mary. “He can hear you even if you just say it to yourself. You’re shouting so.”
“The three minutes are over, I believe,” said Christina. “Come darling, now you can stand up.” (MS, 7)

A series of masks comes into play: concealing Mary in the sack, covering her with mud, holding her down, declaiming and enjoining her to pray. These acts signal that the prohibition on touching Mary will be circumvented by covering, suffocating, purging her. After the ceremony Christina’s energies are spent; she has no further interest in the younger girl. The girls’ play converts from pagan dance to Christian mortification, from theatrical ritual to humiliation and expiation of sin, from spectacle offered to the god to sadistic ritual enjoined by him, yet both the pagan and the Christian are equated in their ritual aspect. Christina accomplishes her desire to touch Mary by means of a game that looks like the antithesis of desire and that is justified in terms of antithesis: “It is not for fun that we play it, but because it’s necessary to play it.” And this becomes key to the character’s desire throughout; even as she prostitutes herself to a cartoonish gangster or watches impassively an almost incomprehensible act of masturbation, Christina Goering revels not in the sexual but in the degradation that she rains down upon herself. Self-mastery through abjection is the twist on sovereignty orchestrated through unmotivated plot turns and flat, unembroidered characters in
a narrative that refuses to ease the reader’s confusion through a masterful authorial voice. These bathetic qualities offer little to the salacious imagination as the eros depicted is both mysterious and utterly singular; neither moral emetic nor merely obscene, these scenes demand a reading of desire as both enigmatic and vulnerable to naming.

Unstably located between the magical arts of primitive religion and the desire-driven play of the artist, Christina’s rite follows a logic similar to that outlined in “The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words,” in which Freud reflects on the “strange tendency of the dream-work to disregard negation and to express contraries by identical means of representation.”

Reviewing K. Abel’s recent book on the origin of antithetical meanings in “the Egyptian language, this unique relic of a primitive world,” Freud champions the philologist’s argument that “every conception is . . . the twin of its opposite,” for “Man has not been able to acquire even his oldest and simplest conceptions otherwise than in contrast with their opposite; he only gradually learnt to separate the two sides of the antithesis and think of the one without conscious comparison with the other.”

Christina plays in the space of this antithesis by reversing the order of faith and expiation just as the antithetical words altus and sacer enact both high and low, sacred and profane. “We remember how fond children are of playing at reversing the sound of words”: To render Mary “clean and pure as a flower,” she will pack her in mud, cold as hellfire is hot. To address Mary as “darling,” Christina will contradict every expression of desire and dread the other girl offers. “Wash her sins away as the water is now washing the mud away,” she urges her god, but how did Mary get so dirty? What exactly is her sin? Mary’s sin is Christina’s desire, the very thing that goes unnamed and unavowed throughout the ritual game.

It is through recourse to the primal sense of “primitive” words and rituals that the thing foreclosed by the law, that second meaning of sacer, can return to the scene of its evacuation. These allegorical children reflect back upon the putative immobility of kinship laws and sexual prohibitions that would circumscribe their desire in their play. Scenes like this one track the “origin” of lesbian object choice as a lost object and reflect a sophisticated understanding of the place of play, religious rhetoric, and prohibition in the sexual fantasies of children. For Bowles the price of choosing to return to these “oldest and simplest conceptions” to explore what Freud rather cavalierly refers to as “a lack of social possibility” in women’s lives and object choice was misrecognition and obscurity, as the slippery antithetical sense of
primitivism worked against her to stigmatize her person and her writing. The following pages sketch a context for understanding this (non-)reception and for situating it within the Freudian analysis of contagion occasioned by the extension of blood ties to kinship ties, where the latter are understood to be fundamentally those of metaphor. The writing block that ensued from this cultural misrecognition caused the moments of fictional ranting to blossom into a living practice, manifest as an epistolary discipline. From foreclosed speech to ranting, Bowles found new ways to secure her modernist project of self-invention.

LESBIAN MODERNISM AND THE ORIENTAL JANE

The strangest fact seems to be that anyone who has transgressed one of these prohibitions himself acquires the characteristic of being prohibited—as though the whole of the dangerous charge had been transferred over to him. This power is attached to all special individuals, such as kings, priests or newborn babies, to all exceptional states, such as the physical states of menstruation, puberty or birth, and to all uncanny things, such as sickness and death and what is associated with them through their power of infection or contagion.

Sigmund Freud, Character and Culture

In the fall of 1949 Jane and Paul Bowles passed through Paris, paying a visit to Alice Toklas, who had, along with Stein, adopted Paul into their household in the ’30s. The Toklas-Stein household occupied a place of great influence in the lives of the American literati living in Paris both before and after the war, and the opinions of the widow Toklas carried a certain authority even in 1949. Toklas and Stein provided Paul with a domestic mentorship of a somewhat tyrannical nature. It was Stein who encouraged, even ordered, him to Morocco for the first time, and she who announced that he should give up writing, going so far as to chastise him for publishing his poems, which she found laughable and, indeed, laughed at in front of him. He obeyed her in both cases, laying down his pen until the 1940s, when, under Jane’s influence and after Stein’s passing, he resumed writing. The encounter between Alice and Jane, beginning with this first meeting and lasting until 1964, is a significant one for tracing a lineage in lesbian modernism both as
a literary and a broader cultural history. Their meeting draws a fault line within lesbian modernism, one that figures a generational shift in the terms of a wider cultural derogation of the primitive as against the adult and the civilized. In essence, this generation gap marks Jane as a failed femme, while her failure to live up to the lesbian femme ideal is coded in Toklas’s letters as a racial and psychic difference.

Though Jane belongs to a generation of expatriate writers who inherit the legacy of modernism, she is distinguishable from them by the fact that, unlike many of the “women of the Left Bank,” she was fluent in French. Not only did she write her first novel in French, but she was also well versed in French modernism. In fact, her literary vocation was forged in a Swiss sanatorium at Leysin, where reading became her most passionate and essential link to the world, and where her French tutor made sure that she read Gide, Proust, Céline, and Montherlant, among others; her letters tell us that she was reading Sartre and de Beauvoir before the major translations. Writing for her was mixed with a fervent adulation of the avant-garde, and she liked to be seen in Paris and New York with a volume of Simone Weil or Kierkegaard under her arm. This worshipful attitude is borne out by one of the many fables she would circulate about herself. Returning to New York on the liner Champlain in 1934, a man interrupted Jane reading Voyage au bout de la nuit, with the comment, “I see you’re reading Céline.” “He is one of the greatest writers in the world,” she said. “Céline, c’est moi,” he replied. Such brushes with fame, told and retold by a young woman determined to be a writer, in advance of any actual writing, betray a desire for the celebrity of authorship, but it was her misfortune to be most famous for being the wife of a noted writer. The crushing misogyny of this scenario was policed from “within” the expatriate lesbian cultural milieu of Paris by Alice Toklas.

Toklas’s letters are completely unabashed and indiscreet in their judgment of Jane; peppered with censorious declarations, the letters are emblematic of the responses Jane drew from the sophisticated establishment that now controlled modernist fashion. These letters to friends, among them Paul, paint the picture of a severe femme working to enforce femininity in the Bowles marriage, at the price of Jane’s writerly reputation. Things begin nicely enough, with Toklas writing that Jane’s novel is a delight, though unwisely published at the beginning of the war, “obviously not a propitious moment to present gaiety and insouciance.” Even here, however, Toklas announces that Jane is “like” her novel, a claim that Toklas will later expand into a wholesale
condemnation of the fiction as a form of nonfiction. As we shall see, Jane will end up in the Toklas account not an author at all but merely someone who “projects” her view of the world onto the stage of fiction. Her fiction will be “like” her, an unmediated and artless emanation of a peculiarly primitive character.

“She says she is working regularly—but is she. Has she any intimate acquaintance with either work or regularity—can and should one introduce them to each other.”17 So begins the myth of an undisciplined Jane, too self-indulgent to adhere to the rigorous schedule Toklas imagines to be key to writerly life. The condescension is all the more surprising in a letter addressed to Paul Bowles. In a world ordered by a strict code of feminine refinement and elegant hospitality, Toklas’s condemnation is couched in the language of that domestic order. “Can and should one introduce them” pits the power of a feminine world of teas and lunches against the unruly childishness of play and impulses. Throughout the letters she struggles to sum Jane up in a single pattern or type. “Jane Bowles’ play never came off in New York—someone told me—it may even be true—that she messed things up by falling in love with the actress who was to be the leading lady—who wasn’t interested. Dear Jane . . . she is to her misfortune true to type.”18 Well in advance of any misfortune, Toklas has already cast Jane in the role of the badly behaved child, monster of eros, lacking the basic structuring regularity of a lady who does not allow emotions to make a “mess.”19

This tendency to cast Jane in a tragic role she had yet to play in life is evident in nearly all the testimonials upon which Millicent Dillon’s biography of Jane is based. Ned Rorem claims that Jane was a childish and “impossible person” who thrived on pointless complications; Edouard Roditi, though more sympathetic, fully embraces the narrative of squandered talent bound to a self-destructive drive and doomed from the first. None of these minor modernists consider the effects of their judgment or the possibility that the queer “establishment” of postwar literary circles might have been creating the little monster they were so eager to lament after her tragedy. On April 4, 1957, she suffered a stroke, leaving her with permanent brain damage affecting her vision and language skills. As we will see, the experience did not impair her literary drive; she continued to write—in one form or another—until her death in 1973. Interesting for a literary and sexual genealogy, these testimonials—there are hundreds of them, comprising a modernist compulsion to remember Jane always within the clear outline of a particular “type,” the abject femme of wasted talent, childish charm,
and complication—conspire to build up an image of Jane as everything a postwar modernist would not want to be, especially if she were a lesbian. This compulsion to typecast Jane reveals a disavowal of an identification at work in the loose social body of queer modernism in the aftermath of the war. Abjecting Jane is a symptom of the social activity of foreclosure with which queer, especially lesbian, modernism sought to define its boundaries.

Toklas’s irritation at Jane’s uniqueness grew with the reputation of the author. Even her way of being lesbian came under fire. After seeing Jane with a lover, Toklas concludes, “Jane is strange as an American but not as an Oriental—especially an Oriental D.P. It was to this conclusion that seeing her with Libby Holman brought me. If accepting this makes her more foreign it at least relieves the strain—that morbidity—she originally seemed at first to be consumed by.” This judgment, though unique in the record, expresses a common thread of the reactions to Jane Bowles. She is said to be morbidly on her way to destruction, strangely foreign in a way that ruffles and strains because she threatens to infect her companions with disorder and death. Her presence evokes oriental chaos and laxity at a time when sexual dissidents and artists were denounced as decadent impediments to national unity. To see Jane with the even more feminine torch singer, Libby Holman, throws up a projection of that which can become legible only on the condition that it first be rendered foreign. The Orient, signifier and carrier of a decaying, dying culture, an incoherent trope of primitive decadence, provides the anchor for this mobile morbidity and explains away what could not be understood. Within the logic of this commonplace orientalism, seeing Jane with Holman provides Toklas the harem tableau of two feminine women together from which she can then reconstruct an understanding. The unoriginality of Toklas’s commonplace prejudice authorizes the American as the model of a vital yet stable eros to ground a sexual identity and from which one might engage in the artifice of fiction without risk of self-exposure. An entire theory of the relation of life to art and race to life lurks behind the trivial gossip; the effects of that theory were not so trivial, however. That Toklas, a Hungarian American Jew, says this of another Hungarian American Jew only confirms the projective logic working to distinguish between them by invoking a figure of failure and regression. Toklas finds it less of a strain to willfully imagine Jane as an “Oriental”—signifying neither a geography nor a people so much as a way of death.

Like every policing activity, this one thrives in company. A letter
to Mercedes de Acosta offers up a comprehensive judgment of Jane, complete with pathologizing pseudo-psychoanalytic assessment. It is instructive for the way an aesthetic judgment is linked to a psychological diagnosis that relegates Bowles’s writing and her character to an abjectly juvenile status, and it reveals the extent to which Freudian models and vocabulary were naturalized as common parlance by the late 1940s. Telling, too, is the way Toklas prevaricates around the question of her own substantial preoccupation with Jane. Incapable of admitting a fascination with the younger woman, she will relish the portrait of Jane in another woman’s words.

When I asked you to tell me about Jane Bowles’ play it was not to ask you to take time to analyse it in detail as you did but what you had to say fascinated and interested me beyond words—for it was an exact portrait of Jane herself and as I suspected the play is nothing but a projection of herself—ergo neither she nor the play are adult. As you so very clearly saw. What in her seemed based on fear—her strongest realist emotion—you have put your finger on—fear of taking an adult attitude to her weakness—more particularly even fear of facing adult responsibilities. If mistakenly I mistook the reason of her fears the moment you gave the right one we were agreed. And I was relieved for it had worried me a bit—of course it diminishes one’s interest in her to have the answer.21

How do adults play? Evidently, they are not to play with projections—and still less with children. Here we see nothing if not the collusion of two women at the expense of a third. That this looks more and more like a baroque erotic intrigue bears out the staginess of the disavowal at work in the exchange. Casting Jane as the craven child sacrifice, Toklas preserves for herself the space of adult femininity uncontaminated by the queerly childish threat. The letter moves from excitation to disinterest through the spectacle of Jane’s failure to write a play sufficiently infused with the bracing airs of adult renunciation. This genre of collaboration to exclude another effectively performs the law’s cut where it throws up the symptomatic representations of projection. “As you so very clearly saw” is perhaps the most important link in the chain that binds the correspondents together, for it will be on the basis of a shared perception that they will decide Jane’s character and her literary worthlessness—“perception” will set the stage for the fundamental disavowal of fascination and similitude. To see Jane’s primitive projections staged is to know her for a narcissistic child who can do no more than repeat herself where the rigors of artifice ought to be. Toklas adds to this an assertion of her own adult, feminine character by invoking stock
poses of the delicate femme, worried and disturbed by the disordered irruption of a regression and paranoid projection where there should be serious art. “If I wasn’t shrewd enough to find it out for myself—I do thanks to you know now what worried me and why there could be no real pleasure in knowing Jane.”

No “real” pleasure: but substantial investments of time, words, fantasy, and violent judgment culminate in the knowledge that all that came before, those false pleasures of scrutinizing Jane, are now at an end. With Mercedes’ help Alice can now disavow the evident desire aroused by Jane where knowing “why” means knowing that there can be no pleasure in knowing Jane. The girl who was “a delight” a few years before has become a child and is thus banned from the stately regime of lesbian desire.

The twinned logic, binding together the decaying, primitive Orient and the regressed, psychically primitive child, flows consistently through the testimonials, yet the more approving portraits give us something closer to a witty, feminine dandy. In fact, the personality so often remarked as childish, hysterical, impulsive, and enigmatic is a cipher largely because it is that of a dandy, self-consciously using the gestures of the dandy: feckless and transcendent self-construction, mediated through and by the poses, phrases, and tantrums of a precocious young aesthete. Picturing her personality becomes almost an object of obsession for every critical essay, every bit of biographical memoir published about her. Essential to this depicting-drive is her eternal, fixed character.

Jane, with her dahlia-head of cropped curly hair, her tilted nose and mischief-shiny, just trifle mad eyes, her very original voice (a husky soprano), her boyish clothes and schoolgirl’s figure and slightly limping walk, is more or less the same as when I first knew her more than twenty years ago: even then she had seemed the eternal urchin, appealing as the most appealing of non-adults, yet with some substance cooler than blood invading her veins, and with a wit, an eccentric wisdom no child, not the strangest wunderkind, ever possessed.

One camp of those who survive her holds that she is regressed, fixated in a regressive state, falling away from adulthood through a lapse of will: in a word, decadent. If she is unchanging it is because she has always been limping away from the destiny of a complete and full development. Preserved by that “substance cooler than blood invading her veins,” she is half-dead in life, eternally surrounded by flowers. Capote’s description of Jane here casts her as the eternal urchin but locates her appeal in the promise of something beyond the “adult.” In the husky soprano of an original voice, Jane’s hybrid gender captures
something at the threshold of boyish clothes and a girlish figure, where the adult world simply fails to appeal.

The contrast between the responses of Capote and Toklas represents a cultural and generational divide that might be understood as two reactions to the same threat. If Capote relishes Jane’s “thorny wit,” which he drinks up like a “newly tasted, refreshingly bitter beverage,” it is because the gamble of wit does not terrorize him, and the figure of desire only draws him near. Toklas, on the other hand, seems consumed by fear of Jane’s alluring oddity and sees her inventiveness only in terms of excess and eccentricity. Capote’s pleasure in knowing Jane relates, in part, to the fact that that pleasure is not captured and trapped within a rigidly gendered schema. He can join in her games, playing with this “most appealing of non-adults” without risking the edifice of his desire, because play is that desire and because his openly gay identity takes its refreshment in the play of wit.24

Toklas is quite another story. A brief sketch of Toklas’s expectations of lesbian gender norms fleshes out the terms of the cultural policing she attempts to enforce. In Shari Benstock’s history of Left Bank lesbian modernists, gender role-playing comes to the fore as a primary activity of community and cultural life. “If class status and economic privilege allowed women of the Paris community to act freely on nontraditional sexual choices, these privileges also bound women more closely to the institution of patriarchy.”25 The Toklas-Stein household was run strictly along the axis of a butch-femme casting, where “his majesty the baby” was distinctly, and only, male. “As a couple, they followed the conventions of nineteenth century Victorian domesticity, and their coupling reproduced an entire cast of family characters: Stein, who at first was ‘husband,’ also played ‘Baby’ to Toklas’ role as ‘Mama,’ while Carl Van Vechten—one of Stein’s most steadfastly loyal supporters—played ‘Papa.’” Benstock describes a domestic economy where Toklas reigns as the maternal femme, called alternately “Mrs.” and “little Jew,” who occupied a position with respect to (and in respect of) this same law: her “husband” and “baby” may have been biologically female, but “he” acted as a male, leaving Alice to take the female role. She feminized this role intensely—from her choice of beaded jewelry and lace handkerchiefs, careful manicures, and love of perfumes, to her fondness for rich pastries and sweet desserts. Toklas paid an enormous price for the role she created for herself in Stein’s life, and this suffering was made worse by the self-imposed law that prevented her from ever admitting—even to her closest friends—that Stein was often unkind to her.26
While Benstock’s narrative of the abused and masochistic femme follows rather too easily from the few details she quickly outlines, the portrait of strictly enforced—and pleasurably enforced—gender performance within the relationship reveals a systematic culture of gender that determines Toklas’s discomfort with Jane Bowles. If the feminine is rigorously delineated as caretaker, and if babydom belongs exclusively to the masculine position, is it any wonder that Toklas reacts with venom to the spectacle of a baby-dandy who is fully femme but not richly bedecked, one who hates sweets and rebels against feminine finery with all the energy of a teenager? Jane is resolutely femme but just as resolutely indifferent to the specific markers of feminine gender that were so productive and vital to an earlier generation. The stakes of the animus Toklas palpably felt and communicated to others only mount if that seductive baby-femme were to arouse her passions. If there is something like a generational schism between these two ways of being lesbian and performing femininity, there is certainly no way to posit one as more “closely tied to the institutions of patriarchy,” as Benstock argues. Rather the example of Toklas and Bowles’s relationship shows the impossibility of being “untied” from the institutions that shape one’s desire and identity. Equally, the relationship reveals the operation of foreclosure and repudiation in a lesbian setting, for they are not equally and stably situated at the border of heterosexual normativity but are in their interaction traversed by the same bar that would seek to foreclose their desires, their identities, and their appetites. The weapon Toklas levels at Bowles is the apparatus of a hyperfeminized lesbian culture—which is to say that Toklas has found a way of shaping and delimiting a being-in-culture that reworks, displaces, and consolidates the ideality of norms. Bowles, who within this strict regime fails to be “adult,” becomes the abject whose company no cultured person could or would enjoy. Toklas, who cannot not-be the scolding maternal figure in this pairing, stakes out a set of norms culled from the antique world of modernism’s early negotiation with sexuality and gender and rigidly holds Jane to a standard of gender decorum that is for Jane the very figure of the law she consistently resists in her life as in her work.

If the narrative joining of the theme of the regressed child to that of the mad and the primitive seems familiar, it is so perhaps partly because of an earlier attack on Gertrude Stein by Wyndham Lewis. In the pages of Time and Western Man Lewis advances his critique of modernism as a mere “cult of childhood” that “uses the forms of infantile or immature life,” making an art of technical imperfections
and exploiting “natural ignorance,” which he views as evidence of a desire to be a child. 28 According to Lewis, the child cult in Stein extends beyond her work to characterize the period of “revolutions of sentiment or of ideologic formula today.” Further, “the cult of the savage (and indirectly that of the Child) is a pointing backward to our human origins, either as individuals (when it takes the form of the child-cult) or as a race (when it takes the form of ‘the primitive’).” 29 Such primitivism or infantilism is no more than a form of romantic affectation, deriving from a sentimentality that Lewis characterizes as morbid, “mournful and monstrous, composed of dead and inanimate material... Its life is a low-grade, if tenacious, one.” 30 His dismissal of Stein bears an uncanny resemblance to Toklas’s denunciations of Jane. “My general objection, then, to the work of Miss Stein is that it is dead. My second objection is that it is romantic... It is the personal rhythm, the obvious bias, that of a peculiar rather than a universal nature... all this excess, this tropical unreality, I find... in Miss Stein.” 31

It is precisely Jane’s peculiar rather than universal nature that comes under fire. She elicits and absorbs the cultural baggage of what must be functioning as a queer unconscious among a certain generation of modernists. 32 How else to explain the eerie rematerialization of these terms of odium? “This excess, this tropical unreality” is not so far from an “Oriental D.P.,” simultaneously languorously morbid and compulsively overemotional. Lewis neatly links the metonymic series, child-primitive, to its metaphoric capital conceived in terms of an exploration of personal and racial psychic prehistory. That Lewis advances the theory of the child-primitive in the genre of literary criticism does not make it either more or less significant than its reemergence as gossip in Toklas’s letters, but it does signal that his criticism of Stein finds its way into the discourses of queer modernism under the sign of a taboo that will work to decide the proper and the improper. As we know, “a taboo is not a neurosis but a social institution,” 33 and it is the social institution of the taboo on regression that we see exercised in Toklas’s letters about Jane. Modernism consigns Jane to the status of the abject, excessive, modern problem child, who, always making scenes and inventing complications, returns the new to the old, revives the child where the adult should be. To situate Jane within the context of lesbian and gay modernism after the war is to engage with the active exclusions of that social institution. 34

Jane Bowles seems caught between insult, envy, and dependence in her own letters about Toklas. She clearly found her isolation as a writer
unbearable and consistently compares Paul’s fame to her own marginal obscurity. “Your literary success is a fact now and it is not only distinguished but widespread. I think to have [Cyril] Connolly and Toklas and a host of other literary people, plus a public, is really remarkable and wonderful.”

Equally clear is the significance of Toklas’s judgments, as is evident in a vignette narrated to Paul in 1950.

I see Alice Toklas now and then, but I’m afraid that each time I do I am stiffer and more afraid. She is charming and will probably see me less and less as a result of my inability to converse. This is not a result of my shyness alone, but of a definite absence of intellect, or should I say of ideas that can be expressed, ideas that I am in any way certain about. I have no opinions really. This is not just neurotic. It is very true. And Alice Toklas gives one plenty of opportunity to express an idea or an opinion. She won’t serve me those little bread sandwiches in different colors any more because she says I like them more than the cake, and so eat them instead of the cake. I do like them better. And now I must go there and eat only sweets, which makes me even more nervous. Maybe she’ll never speak to me again.

Toklas’s charm seems to lie in her ability to conjure away Jane’s powers of speech by simply sitting and waiting expectantly. This terrifying expectation leads to the mortification and passivity identified by Toklas as Jane’s essential personality. The severity of her audience finds further expression in Toklas’s condescending enforcement of food taboos. Teatime becomes an ordeal in which the victim must navigate the hard and angular surfaces of completely unaccountable hostilities and forbidden zones. “I am stiffer and stiffer” describes the effect of super egoic injunctions conveyed as a senseless and magical silence. When an explanation is ventured it is also senseless: “She says I like them more than the cake.” Toklas appears to embody in Jane’s enflamed imagination a panoptic discipline, one that Jane had already written about in “A Stick of Green Candy,” a story detailing the enforcement of femininity through gift exchange and a market in unwanted candy. If sweets were a signifier of feminine rigidity for Jane, the signifying potential of food is no less conscious and deliberate for Toklas, whose only claim to authorship rests with her cookbook. One detects, too, the ghost of Gertrude Stein and her equal obsession with food as a mobilizing reference conveying both wit and a silencing disavowal of complication. Urged to leave by the American consul after the fall of France, Stein claims to have decided the matter by saying to Toklas, “Well, I don’t know—it would be awfully uncomfortable and I am fussy about my food. Let’s not leave.”
“You shall like cakes” encodes for Bowles only the worst and most constraining form of femininity. A distaste for sweets represents in her fiction, too, the distaste a girl feels for the deflection of her imagination into conventional and gendered, thus allowable, regions and forms. While Bowles will repeat some of the aspects of the Toklas regime of the feminine in her relationship with Cherifa—turning Cherifa into the irrational and tyrannical butch-baby who must be obeyed or humored—Bowles’s writing and her mythology of the writer’s burden prevents her from taking up the selfless, sacrificing drag of the hyperfemme. Some part of Bowles’s very public self-berating and melancholia is in the service of resisting what was for her a mortifying law of the feminine.

Cringing and indulging her appetites by turns, Jane could never be mistaken for a “model” modernist woman. What’s good for Jane is not good for all; it is this that makes her such an irritant, that and the fact that in “refusing to grow up” she poses a temptation in fantasy. Not only does she seem to allow herself all, to live in the most abject state of dependence on fate and the charity of others, she is constantly making plans that have no real objective restraints. She seems to go where and to do what she pleases. She throws up a specter of what life could be if every little appetite and sorrow were indulged. She mimes the neurotic regression as an avowed one, willful and fun, nervous and tortured.

The charge of projection—“the play is nothing but a projection of herself”— leveled at Jane Bowles is yet another variation on the Lewisian theme of the child-primitive, for it claims to identify a form of literalization in an aesthetic failure. As such, “projection” becomes a feature of the abjecting discourse that isolates Jane as an exception to be excluded. “What is in question is fear of an infectious example, of the temptation to imitate—that is, of the contagious character of taboo. If one person succeeds in gratifying the repressed desire, the same desire is bound to be kindled in all the other members of the community.” To be exceptional is always to be vulnerable to censure, as Freud’s analysis of the social institution of the taboo shows. Jane’s failure to conform to an outmoded standard of the feminine as well as her naive attention to “trivial” details of women’s lives in her fiction situates her on the frontier of the social world to which her marriage introduced her. Jane’s letters of this period tell the story of being ignored in society until someone discovers that she is the wife of Paul Bowles. Invisible unless bound to a man, she finds her marginality remarked over and over by this negative form of attention. She was, however, not living with her husband during her many visits to Paris;
she usually lived with many different women. One thing is made clear through her relationship with Toklas, however; Jane unsettles like and through her play. She conjures up ambivalence and then must live it out in the nowhere of abjection. Too like “them” to be dismissed, she is too unlike them to be suffered; thus, Toklas and others conspire to teach her place—dictating that she is bound to them only through the metaphoric tie of marriage.

METAPHORIC RELATIONS

The possibility of incest would seem to be a temptation in phantasy set in motion through the agency of unconscious connecting links.

*Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo*

At the outset of Freud’s elaboration of the analogy between “primitive” and neurotic man we find the psychoanalyst digressing to explain the curious fact of hostility between a son-in-law and his mother-in-law. This relation of irritability and malevolence has its roots, according to Freud, in an unconscious temptation emanating from the always already repressed incestuous desire for the parents, lost somewhere in the prehistory of the son-in-law’s object choice. That first, incestuous desire falls under the bar of repression, learns the law of substitution, and, in doing so, leaves behind a trail that Freud has no difficulty identifying as primarily “genealogical” in nature. “Because of the barrier that exists against incest, his love is deflected from the two figures on whom his affection was centred in his childhood on to an outside object that is modelled upon them . . . . His horror of incest insists that the *genealogical* history of his choice of an object for his love shall not be recalled.”^40^ The mother-in-law “offer[s] him a temptation to incest,” defended against through the expression of hostilities that are only the consciously felt aspect of a long-standing unconscious ambivalence. Freud thus derives a genealogy of unconscious investment from the evidence of irritability and petty hatred produced by the metaphoric extension of kinship to the “in-laws.” The metaphoric relation of being-in-law finds its analogue in “the agency of unconscious connecting links,” which distort, displace, and suggest the disturbing genealogy that must remain beyond any recall. The metaphoric relation so predictably produces this effect of the “in-law” that a cultural norm arises to name or contain the fact. The danger that the metaphoric
relation evokes is one that Freud repeatedly describes as “an infantile feature,” for it bubbles up out of the genealogical past as though the careful labor of reinscribing abandoned object choices had never occurred, as though that work could be undone.

The being-in-law of the metaphoric relation reveals the havoc wrought by an association that is both too close and not close enough, an association so familiar that her mere presence calls up that which should remain beyond recollection. Her proximity to the parents, here specified as the mother but increasingly throughout Freud’s text identified as the father, retrieves a souvenir of unconscious infantile fantasy that has been laboriously worked over, lost to good purpose. On the basis of the loss of this original object, the subject is inaugurated into the regime of gendered order, for the first loss creates the propulsive play of identification and, finally, avowed object choices. The irony of the metaphoric relation lies in its ability to show the fragility of that normative order, which teaches the subject, here resolutely male, to compensate himself with allowable objects. That it should be a “metaphor” that evokes the unconscious, repressed object in the mode of fantasy is no accident. The mother-in-law is like the desired original object but not like enough to be assimilated by the subject’s practiced arts of repression. These ready-made defenses founder precisely where the genealogy ceases to produce substitutions and threatens to take its object unmediated. Unlike a blood relation with whom Freud says the “possibility of incest is an immediate one and the intention to prevent it may be conscious,” the metaphoric relation of being-in-law remains a threat to the subject’s very constitution, a threat all the more menacing for being established in fantasy.

From this speculative detour Freud deduces a key difference between the so-called “primitive” or “savage” peoples and the pitfalls of neurosis in modern man. Primitives handle their horror of incest by securing ritual as the measure of avoidance and installing a social vocabulary to take up the burden of individual defenses against the desires of fantasy; according to the Freudian reading of anthropological findings, their social world assumes the responsibilities of unconscious ambivalence; the social institution of taboo, Freud’s earliest definition of the term, is lived as a collective and thus learned practice. Because “modern” man lacks the “saturations of the superego” that color the social landscape of primitive life, he must reinvent the wheel of his earliest repudiations once a metaphoric relation has worked its destabilizing magic. Or so goes the fable shared between Freud and Lacan in their modernist narrative
of a sickly and broken modernity that has shattered the fine networks of traditional relations. Not so much a narrative of disenchantment as a story of misfit and bad casting, the projection on the body of the mother-in-law is a faded and weak substitute for primitive ritual; but for the modern son, friction with the mother-in-law is the next best thing to genuine peril. In arguing for infantile fantasy as a common ground of psychic life between primitives and moderns, Freud inserts a developmental model into the account where a genealogical one had sufficed to describe the trajectory of fantasy and desire in the son-in-law.

Psychoanalysis has taught us that a boy’s earliest choice of objects for his love is incestuous and that those objects are forbidden. . . . A neurotic . . . invariably exhibits some degree of psychical infantilism. He has either failed to get free from the psycho-sexual conditions that prevailed in his childhood or he has returned to them—two possibilities which may be summed up as developmental inhibition and regression. Thus incestuous fixations of libido continue to play (or begin once more to play) the principal part in his unconscious mental life. . . . It is therefore of no small importance that we are able to show that these same incestuous wishes, which are later destined to become unconscious, are still regarded by savage peoples as immediate perils against which the most severe measures of defense must be enforced. 43

The temporal logic of this move is counterintuitive, for, rather than arguing that the primitive is less aware or less conscious of his fantasiescape, Freud maintains that the primitive is more aware and suffers consciously from the terrible potentiality of fantasy’s temptations. Superstition is merely the symbolic cultural evidence of a knowledge of fantasy, proof of its inescapability. The primitive will continue to exhibit his knowledge of collective temptations, mediated by rituals of all kinds; as the primitive proliferates taboos in the landscape he will have to multiply knowledges to cope with the increasing pollution of his environment by the psyche. By contrast, the neurotic suffers from a fixation of libido in an infantile play that relegates his psyche to perpetual servitude to the unconscious. What has been “overtaken by repression” fails to be sufficiently taken over by the mediations of the later object choices that substitute for the earliest incestuous ones, now lingering like tyrants in his psyche, and so the neurotic himself lingers somewhere between return and fixation. He suffers from a “developmental inhibition” analogous to the lack of repression in primitive life on the basis of their shared relation to the “temptation in phantasy.”

Freud posits a lack of unconscious repression in the primitive only to
effect a speculative retraction of that putative lack at a later point. The primitive is said to be lacking yet replete in ambivalent projection, and so the historical trajectory of development becomes legible in *Totem and Taboo* as an increasing internalization of ambivalence under the bar of repression. What is primitive in the primitive is a certain kind of knowledge or know-how. What is modern in the neurotic and normative subject alike is a haunting inhabited by temptations and figures of fantasy that find only partial, compromised outlets. As Freud unravels the genealogy of this primitive/modern relation, his text shows, in an oscillation not entirely under its author’s control, that the social function of projection in the primitive community is not so far removed from—and, in fact, is metaphorically related to—the social function of sacrifice and abjection in modern man.

When Freud says that “a taboo is not a neurosis but a social institution” he shows the “social” becoming the sexual as hostile impulses fall under prohibition and are displaced inward. The law itself becomes displaced inward: “This impulse is repressed by a prohibition and the prohibition is attached to some particular act, which, by displacement, represents, it may be, a hostile act against the loved person.” And later, “The instinctual forces that are diverted and displaced in neuroses have a sexual origin. In the case of taboo the prohibited touching is obviously not to be understood in an exclusively sexual sense but in the more general sense of attacking, of getting control, and of asserting oneself.” Repression of aggressivity thus preserves the aggression against the other within the psychic terrain of self-relation. This activity of prohibition and retrieval of aggressivity is to be distinguished from the regulations of foreclosure. Repression and its compromised expressions are ways of continuing to live within a landscape that has utterly banished other possibilities. The repressed desire and hatred felt toward a representative of the incest taboo does not express a compromised array of feeling and symptoms toward the law of the incest taboo, but toward the representative of that law. The law lurks behind the figure that raises the specter of desire and hatred. Thus, the ambivalence felt toward the law’s representative gives only indirect clues about that law; it cannot speak the law itself.

Freud speaks here of “taboo conscience,” or a taboo sense of guilt, and takes this to be the prehistoric, primitive version of the conscience. If Toklas’s venomous assessment of Jane is evidence of the installation and maintenance of a taboo, projection seems all the more present on both sides of the judgment, for projection is not merely a defensive
mode of dealing with emotional conflict. Projection also functions as a means of perception, and as the citation below indicates, the structuring effect of perception conceived on the model of projection is analogous to the activities of abjection—always in relation to a law foreclosed—illustrated by Toklas’s letter about Jane.

The projection outwards of internal perceptions is a primitive mechanism, to which, for instance, our sense perceptions are subject, and which therefore normally plays a very large part in determining the form taken by our external world. . . . Internal perceptions of emotional and intellective processes can be projected outwards in the same way as sense perceptions; they are thus employed for building up the external world, though they should by rights remain part of the internal world.  

The text argues for a second sense of projection, as that which is both the mechanism by which we jettison the troubling noise of ambivalence and the means by which we perceive the world. We are not very far away from Wilde’s lighter formulation, “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life,” for here it is the phantasmatic interior of feeling that manifests the world. To build up the world on the basis of internal emotions and thoughts, to build that world in the image of all that you hate and love, this is the primitive psychic process upon which psychoanalysis hopes to shed light.

It was not until a language of abstract thought had been developed, that is to say, not until the sensory residues of verbal presentations had been linked to the internal processes, that the latter themselves gradually became capable of being perceived. Before that, owing to the projection outwards of internal perceptions, primitive men arrived at a picture of the external world which we, with our intensified conscious perception, have now to translate back into psychology.

Where the primitive derives a picture of the external world, psychoanalysis will arrive at an analytic text offering descriptions of the internal world. This would imply that the translation effected by abstract and analytic language is one from the image to the word. The image is, yet again, the literal ground of a direct transmission—something lacking in mediation, supine before the projections of theory. Like the Muslim patient in chapter 3, below, Jane will find her writing relegated to a pre-scriptural picturing activity where the work of foreclosure seems to be most evident in the text produced by her interpreters.

The metaphoric relation of picturing and writing is something her own writing refuses to repress. She stubbornly insists that the written
must derive from a reality granted by vision. Her persistent pursuit of vision is certainly one mode of frustration, but it carries with it the essential and common feature of all Jane’s frustrated and productive endeavors. This is among the reasons that her literature always lapses into the “analytic” language of the agonizers. She turns the explanatory narratives of psychological states into ways of picturing the world from the point of view of obstruction.

**TURKISH LADIES AND THE WORLD PICTURE**

During the thirty-year period of her writing block, Jane Bowles completed sections of a novel, *Out in the World*, which was to be a “Balzacian” work detailing at length the lives of a gay soldier, a lesbian working-class couple, and a middle-class wife coming to consciousness about her lesbian sexuality late in life. Fragments of the novel have been edited and published as very short stories in the volume of Bowles’s complete works. Two of these, “Emmy Moore’s Journal” and “The Iron Table,” suggest a quasi-autobiographical writing that highlights the rhetorical necessity of joining writing to picturing as the conscious thematic content of plot.

“Let there be no mistake. My journal is intended for publication. I want to publish for glory, but also in order to aid other women.” “Emmy Moore’s Journal” is a first-person narrative written by Mrs. Moore for the purpose of “justifying” her withdrawal from marriage and her desire to transform herself from the dependent and excessively feminine woman that she is. “I must justify myself every day. On some days the need to write lodges itself in my throat like a cry that must be uttered” (MS, 445). Into the journal Emmy Moore copies a letter addressed to her husband, a man she describes as “sympathetic towards me, and kindly. He wants very much for me to be happy, and worries because I am not. He knows everything about me, including how much I deplore being the feminine kind of woman that I am. In fact, I am unusually feminine for an American of Anglo stock. (Born in Boston.) I am almost a ‘Turkish’ type’” (MS, 444). The text wanders from grandiose declarations of her desire to publish to pathetic attempts to describe and justify feminine failure. Combining a very shabby discourse on “Turkish” femininity with a dogged attempt to convey in analytic language her “secret picture of the world,” these efforts at clarification and communication fall short of their aim, and in the final lines of the story Emmy Moore despairingly registers her failure to speak. “She
had been so happy copying this letter into her journal, but now her heart was faint as she scanned its scattered pages. ‘I have said nothing,’ she muttered to herself in alarm. ‘I have said nothing at all. I have not clarified my reasons for being at the Hotel Henry. I have not justified myself’ (MS, 449).

“Sometimes I feel certain that I exude an atmosphere very similar to theirs (the Turkish women’s) and then I despise myself. I find the women in my country so extraordinarily manly and independent, capable of leading regiments. . . . If possible before I die, I should like to become a little more independent, and a little less Turkish” (MS, 444). This explanation of her emotional predicament explodes in the letter into a full-blown theory of Turkish dependence that identifies the Orient as the place of abjection and conveys this in a parody of political discourse.

As for the Turkish problem, I am coming to it. You must understand that I am an admiring of Western civilization; that is, of the women who are members of this group. I feel myself that I fall short of being a member, that by some curious accident I was not born in Turkey but should have been. Because of my usual imprecision I cannot even tell how many countries belong to what we call Western Civilization, but I believe Turkey is the place where East meets West, isn’t it? I can just about imagine the women there, from what I have heard about the country and the pictures I have seen of it. As for being troubled or obsessed by real Oriental women, I am not. (I refer to the Chinese, Japanese, Hindus, and so on.) Naturally I am less concerned with the Far Eastern women because there is no danger of my being like them. (The Turkish women are just near enough.) (MS, 446)

Striving to represent her views in all their minute detail, Emmy Moore rambles from thought to thought, incoherently but persistently drawing the contour of her vision. Her admiration of Western women can only be stated through the detours of sight and distance; she admires from afar because she is not of their kind, but a misplaced person. The “real” Orientals are so far away and so “different from the way [she] looks” that only the middle ground of an Orient “just near enough” can serve as the territory of her dependent femininity. Her treatise on her Turkish nature is offered as a map of “my secret picture of the world” that will explain why she fails to be a member of “Western Civilization”; this secret picture derives from other pictures and vague murmurings about Turkey. The mania for the visible in the passages from this letter comes through as the word picture appears again and again, culminat-
The Bar Was Not Very Gay”

ing finally in the statement that “I know full well that you will consider the above discourse a kind of joke . . . yet I assure you that I see things this way, if I relax even a little and look through my own eyes into what is really inside my head” (MS, 446). The spatial distortion of this remark has Emmy Moore entering her head from the exterior via the eyes in search of her own property, her own “discourse.” Oddly resonant with Wilde’s map of his soul, this picturing discourse is Emmy’s figure of the self and must substitute an unseen geographic fantasy for the bodily image that dissolves as she approaches it. No mirror reflects an appealing form of self-mastery for Emmy; instead, she must use the materials of her own insufficiency—her dependence, her soft, flabby body, her lack of drive—to construct a phantasmatic materializing origin. Discourse, here heard only as a joke, will construct an argument for identity where the pictures have failed; thus the absurd geometries and literalization of insight into the self become the discursive terms of a self-description. The world picture she holds, a secret because her “vision” cannot be “seen,” is not accountable to a logical or comprehensive argument, for “the fact of having forgotten utterly to consider them [logical arguments] has not altered the way I visualize the division of the world’s women” (MS, 447).

Though the story echoes Toklas’s fantasies about women of the “Orient,” and though it dramatizes the abject speech of a hyperfeminine woman despairing of her own nature, the tone of the text smacks not of distant irony but of a struggle to communicate—just as Emmy Moore’s effort to “justify” herself exhibits a genuine and painful longing to say something rather than nothing. Bowles’s text prefigures a key tenet of feminist thinking when she dramatizes the inability to speak from within the terms of abjection. That Emmy Moore cannot speak is proved by the failure of her writing to do more than mimic the discourses of feminism and politics or the essay/memoir genre. “Because of my talent for mimicry I am able to simulate looking through the eyes of an educated person when I wish to” (MS, 446). Such an awkward aside dismisses her from consideration as a theorist of woman’s condition. Her letter, addressed to the husband but grandiose in its aims and its pretensions, attempts to reach beyond the local audience to a wider one, for glory “and to aid other women.” Bowles does not relish Emmy’s failure but depicts it to throw light on the inexorable law of failure and exclusion. Like her own letters to the superego, this fictional journal and letter mark out the scene of failure as the very materialization of the law. Emmy’s inability to confront her desire for
“American women” as desire dooms her writing to perpetuate the generality of “saying nothing,” and thus the specifically lesbian character of her longing remains inexpressible and out of reach.

Emmy Moore’s raw and ridiculous inarticulations are more than matched by those of the wife in “The Iron Table,” a story confected from a fragment of Bowles’s last and never to be finished novel. The scene is a patio at a Moroccan hotel frequented by Spaniards rather than “Anglos.” The husband, whose conventional orientalist fixation leaves little room for his wife’s opinions, holds forth on a familiar theme: “the whole civilization is going to pieces.” The dialogue sums up a key feature of the tourist’s drive to seal the Orient in its moment of death while preserving a claim to authenticity as the tourist’s private possession. If the “whole civilization is going to pieces,” that collapse will be rancorously recorded by a touristic delectation in loss, disguised by a ressentimental hatred of the West.

Her voice was sorrowful. “I know it.” Her answers to his ceaseless complaining about the West’s contamination of Moslem culture had become increasingly unpredictable. He knew she had no desire to go to the desert, and that she believed it was not possible to continue trying to escape from the Industrial Revolution. (MS, 465)

She plays along, intent on avoiding argument or outburst, when finally, with savage condescension, the husband says, “You’d go to an oasis because you wanted to escape from Western civilization.”

“My friends and I don’t feel there’s any way of escaping it. It’s not interesting to sit around talking about industrialization.”

“What friends?” He liked her to feel isolated.

“Our friends.” Most of them she had not seen in many years. She turned to him with a certain violence. “I think you come to these countries so you can complain. I’m tired of hearing the word civilization. It has no meaning. Or I’ve forgotten what it meant, anyway.”

The moment when they might have felt tenderness had passed, and secretly they both rejoiced. Since he did not answer her, she went on.

“I think it’s uninteresting. To sit and watch costumes disappear, one by one. It’s uninteresting even to mention it.” (MS, 467)

What the wife remarks in her husband is his pleasure in the uninteresting prospect of cultural decline. He does come to these countries to complain because his complaint must have as its literal ground the matter of a “past” civilization enacting its own death before him. The wife more than knows his deepest pleasure and counters it, saying that civilization itself is meaningless and that traveling to relish loss is a very
expensive form of disavowal. “My friends and I don’t feel there’s any way of escaping it” tells us again that the West is everywhere but not in the form of civilization and only as a mode of industrialization. If the word civilization is meaningless, this is in part because she cannot see it demonstrated; if the West is everywhere, it is because it follows them everywhere they go, especially in his complaints.

Piercing the self-inflated discourse of the husband’s tired orientalism by insisting on the language and conclusions of her experience, corroborated by the fragility of friendship, this wife does not dispute in conceptual terms; she rebukes. That it is uninteresting to “sit and watch costumes disappear one by one” only implies that travel ought to be interesting, even pleasurable, but she is unable to mount her argument or argue for her own pleasures. Like the prose of Emmy Moore’s letter, the language of this fragment from the unfinished novel insists a series of images and dramatic exchanges in the place of an analytic discourse that is shown, through the vague posturing of the husband, to be but a conventional mask for a very particular desire. The husband’s obsession with contamination obscures the fact that even in the remotest region, the thing he tries to escape has come within him because he travels only to witness his own lack of desire disguised and projected again and again. Where the husband beholds failure and corruption as a tableau before him, the wife’s remarks attest to an insight that the putative concreteness of a decaying culture is a kind of wish fulfillment constructed on site and in the moment of vision. Childish and self-indulgent, the wife is nevertheless enabled by the incompleteness of her rhetoric to deliver up a deflating barb to unmask the ploys of mastery without herself taking on the master’s voice. Each of these fragmentary works links this yielding but thorny femininity to a figure of the Orient, either bluntly, as in “Emmy Moore’s Journal,” or through the more circuitous route of a resistance to the paternalistic orientalism of the husband’s tirade. In each case writing constitutes a third pole of investment around which the feminine and the primitive are composed.

The weak speeches of these thwarted characters represent a femininity that cannot rise to heroism; instead, a species of compulsion comes to stand for the resolutions of a final, heroic instance, and this repetitive, persistent quality keeps everything, even the author, afloat. “I started to ‘write’ when I was about fifteen and was obliged to do composition in school. I always thought it the most loathsome of all activities, and still do. At the same time I felt even then that I had to do it.”47 Called to writing, Bowles was able in these early days to defer the duty by writing
in another language. Her first efforts culminated in a French novel; later she left it in a taxi as if it were just another incidental possession. Despite this substantial ambivalence toward her own texts and her avowed hatred of the process, the duty to write remains unchanged for the entire period of her writing block. Although she arrives in Morocco already blocked and sending off interminable letters of lamentation, the early years of her life there witness the creative energy of writing, its ability to invent myth, as it is fostered by her relationship with Cherifa. Yet, increasingly, her erotic arrangements take on the frustrated character of her writing process and seem to compete with writing.

Her isolation in Morocco makes letters more than fiction the perfect staging ground of an offensive address to the law, for it is the first feature of such speech that it is addressed to an absent other who is nevertheless bound there in his most “abstract” form. The oscillations of the rhetorical question can be felt here as we engage with the difficulty of deciding what is figural and what is literal in the epistolary form. In the specificity of their addresses, the letters would seem to correspond more closely to the “metaphoric relation” uncovered in Freud’s analysis of the mother-in-law. For Freud it is the figural representative that inspires hatred, not the abstract law of the incest taboo. In the generality of their similitude, the figural singularity of each letter is blurred, for each does little more than paint the picture of Jane’s symptoms and her relation to that abstract law. Compelled to go further, to the furthest reaches to send for the law, she sends forth her own scattered light on things. Repetitively alternating between assurances that she is working and meditations on her own isolation, the letters of the early period of her writing impasse chronicle the noisy self-hindering of someone whose “experience is probably of no interest at this point to anyone.” One accomplishment of the letters, however, is their ability to transmute her complaint from a kind of “natural” state, that of femininity, to a serious and engaged investigation of what writing requires.

It has been hard enough for me to get on with my novel here (italics) because of four or five tremendous stumbling blocks—none of them however due to the circumstance of my environment. (My novel is entirely in this laborious style.)

The more I get into it, which isn’t very far in pages but quite a bit further in thinking and consecutive work the more frightened I become at the isolated position I feel myself in vis-à-vis of all the writers whom I consider to be of any serious mind. because I think there is no point in using the word talent any longer. Certainly Carson McCullers is as talented (italics) as Sartre or Simone de Beauvoir but she is not really a serious
writer. I am serious but I am isolated and my experience is probably of no interest at this point to anyone. I am enclosing this article entitled “new heroes” by Simone de Beauvoir, which I have cut out of town and country, at least a section of it... It is what I have been thinking at the bottom of my mind all this time and God knows it is difficult to write the way I do and yet think their way. This problem you will never have to face because you have always been a truly isolated person so that whatever you write will be good because it will be true which is not so in my case because my kind of isolation I think is an accident, and not inevitable... not only is your isolation a positive and true one but when you do write from it you immediately receive recognition because what you write is in true relation to yourself which is always recognizable to the world outside. With me who knows? 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. This is far more important than feeling ‘out’ of it and ‘isolated’ I suppose, but it also accentuates that guilt a thousand times... I am working and I am diligent and faithful about it but I feel it’s such a Herculean task that I shall not finish for years! On the other hand it may, if I can just get over having myself in a book, it may go quickly.48

This letter was written to her husband in 1947 during the period that marks both the onset of the writing block and the completion of her two most important short stories, “Camp Cataract” and “A Stick of Green Candy.” The citation above is less than one quarter of a letter that moves in and out of the anxious mood seen here. Diligent and faithful to writing, she is nonetheless isolated in a way that reflects neither choice nor character. Her isolation, she tells us, is “accidental,” and like Emmy Moore’s mistaken birth, it lays her open to an all-consuming doubt about the validity, interest, and worthiness of her experience. The terror she feels upon realizing her isolation is no exaggeration, for she continues to feel it whenever she approaches the threshold of writing. This doubt never ceases to open her to the trauma of her position—in the world, as a writer, as a woman. Whatever she may have understood or identified as important in the article she clips to send along with this letter, the division expressed by “God knows it is difficult to write the way I do and yet think their way” suggesting again the accidental and misplaced character of her project and her means. Solemnity, faith, and diligence are the only proofs she has against an overriding guilt that attends her doubt, and she offers them up to the addressee as feeble proofs. The question “With me who knows?” reveals that to be isolated in this misbegotten way is to live
and write without witnesses, and so the letters call up an audience for what would otherwise remain unheard.

The combined effects of a seriousness pressed to the point of inexpressibility and a lack of recognition by the literary establishment result in a writing melancholia that Jane tries to contain in letters. As her writing finally devolves into guilty remonstration, proffering evidence of her obedient attempt to write, we can see that it takes up the place of a systematic anti-cathexis, which, as Freud says, keeps her revolving in the pleading position. Always confessing her failure and a groundless faith in continued effort, she becomes the writer who cannot write, whose “experience” will then be the only point of consistency within her writing. If the ceremonial ordeal of the prohibition on writing becomes writing itself, she does manage to preserve the world from falling under what Freud calls the “embargo of ‘impossibility.’” Jane will “save” the world by sacrificing writing to the rituals of painful effort and incompletion. It is writing, not life, that becomes impossible.

Jane Bowles presents a writing self that writes itself into the impos-
sibility of being “had.” “If I can just get over having myself in a book” names the having linked to the self of writing. The loss of self that marks the “serious writer” as one who must always lose herself to writing colonizes the writing vocation as the place of her self’s destruction, a public exposure that she seeks to overcome in the ranting letters that fill up the void opened by the failure to write. “I have got back on my work again with unbelievable difficulty and continue crawling alone. I am so slow it is almost as though I were going backwards. . . . I keep forgetting what writing is supposed to be anyway . . . Perhaps you can write me what I mean” (OW, 39).

The pleas to her husband to find the key to her impasse accumulate and vary their form over the next three years as she carves out a life for herself in Tangier. Increasingly she comes to resent his success and to identify her blockage with her isolation.

08/47 I am enjoying my Sickness unto Death throughout the summer . . . .
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. (OW, 41)

09/47 I am desperate however at all this time passing and have done little more on my novel than you have in spite of not moving around. I am ter-
ribly discouraged and of course the fact that you get these letters from publishers complimenting you on stories is no help to my morale as far as a career is concerned . . . this does not concern me deeply but I realize that I have no career really whether I work or not and never have had one. You
have more of one after writing a few short stories than I have after writing an entire novel. (OW, 46)

10/47 no distinguished magazine has ever written me and complimented me on a story, or asked for a contribution, nor have I certainly ever won an O. Henry award. I seem to be completely ignored by the whole literary world just as much as by the commercial one. (OW, 59)

12/48 it was a terrible strain and just last week I thought maybe this time I really was going to crack, but I made a very big effort and I’m working again. (OW, 128)

01/17/50 my work went well last week. I had got into a routine, but this week it’s all shot to hell again . . . I have decided not to become hysterical, however. If I cannot write my book, then I shall give up writing, that’s all. Then either suicide or another life . . . I mean, to continue as I am, but not as a writer. As the wife of a writer? I don’t think you’d like that, and could I do it well? I think I’d nag and be mean, and then I would be ashamed. (OW, 144)

01/50 Yesterday the whole thing dried up on me again . . . It happens too often really and I’m afraid that it is the physical expression of sterility. I go on trying though it is a terrible fight . . . . I do feel very strongly that I should I give up writing if I can’t get further into it than I have. I cannot keep losing it the way I do, much longer. (OW, 149)

As this sampling shows, the writerly collaboration between Jane and her husband, which had transformed him into an author and helped her complete the novel, slowly degenerates as his career takes off. The realization that she is ignored by the literary world increases her dependence upon him at precisely the moment when he no longer seems to need her writing companionship. The marriage, which from the outset had been imagined in terms of writing, was now transformed into a relationship of financial dependence as she ceased to earn royalties from her published works. Her anxiety and guilt over money push the writing block to a pitch of shame and forces her to the choice of “either suicide or another life.” As the writing impasse and dependence converge to make her say, “I don’t exist independently,” she finds another solution to her insecurity, directly related to the sense of being shunned by the literary world.

“I MUST CLOSE MY FIST TO SEDUCE HER”

For Bowles, the accusation of primitive uselessness, coupled with her superfluity in the literary world, becomes the ground of a new set of preoccupations as she attempts to “find another life,” one that will not
consign her to obscurity and poverty. Though she will maintain her economic dependence on her husband for the rest of her life, she finds a way to consolidate that dependence as power by displacing it within her relationship with Cherifa. As her self-construction and the aesthetic are fused in her vocation, it comes as no surprise that her erotic adventures take on the same frustrated character as her writing block; she passes from one obstacle to the next until she manages to find a steady state just as her writing settles into letter writing. Seduction on every level becomes the new object: a woman, a way of life, a country, a people, a language, a novel—it is all the same to her. Each is a potential conquest, each an impossibility. All those lures and provocations add up to a kind of sexual tourism and prostitution, which she transforms into stable family life. These alternative affiliations represent efforts to alter kinship nominations in ways that simply prevent the ordinary uses of the words *wife, husband, lover, lesbian,* or *straight* from operating at all. It is not as if Bowles were empowered to subvert and transcend the categories that she puts into play. Rather, she brings them to a halt by bringing them up short against the multiple forms of their mutual exclusions. Whereas her marriage to Paul Bowles was enabled by a mutual comprehension of gay and lesbian identity—there is ample evidence of this, not the least of which is the fact that she spent her wedding night with a girlfriend, to Paul’s dismay, and if he had not understood the terms of their engagement, he soon learned what it meant to be married to this lesbian writer—her courtship and eventual domestic arrangements with Cherifa depended on a mutual incomprehension of their desire.

“I wish to hell I could find some woman still so that I wouldn’t always be alone at night. I’m sure Arab night life would interest me not in the slightest. As you know I don’t consider those races voluptuous or exciting in any way, as I have said—being a part of them almost” (OW, 55). Jane’s conquest of North Africa begins inauspiciously with an indifference to “Oriental” women that she marks as a “racial” indifference. Her tastes tended toward “Scotch-Irish” women of decidedly independent demeanor, and to complicate matters, Paul left Tangier soon after she arrived, leaving her to fend for herself. She was to spend most of the next three years apart from him, and it is during this time that she met Cherifa. Adding to all the complications was the continual problem of the language. Eventually she came to speak the Moroccan Arabic dialect, but her facility with the language has been much exaggerated in the accounts of her life there.49 The early letters written while Paul was still there are sprinkled with resentment of the place,
the people, the language. “I don’t of course know about the Arab town of Tangier (I refuse to use that Arabic word)” (OW, 962). It is only after her husband leaves and she is thrown back upon her own resources that her attitude changes. This change comes about through her growing preoccupation with the local grain market.

“There seems too much really to write about—I mean Fez and money and Africa altogether and my failure to like in it what you do and to like what you do at all anywhere. I love Tangier—the market and the Arab language, the Casbah” (OW, 78). A rare feeling for her anywhere at any time, this optimism about Tangier and the hope that it will continue to give her something, even too much, to write persists as she penetrates more deeply into the market where she first meets Cherifa and an early rival, Tetum. For once her sense of place, writing and romance coalesce into a hoped-for synthesis that might become a genuine alternative to the frustrating stalemate of her literary exploits. And yet the sense of optimism derives from an experience of exclusion and difference that has taken on a very material form.

I continue to love Tangier—maybe because I have the feeling of being on the edge of something that I will some day enter. This I don’t think I could feel if I didn’t know Cherifa and the “Mountain Dyke” that yellow ugly one [?!]. It is hard for me to separate the place from the romantic possibilities that I have found in it. I cannot separate the two for the first time in my life. Perhaps I shall be perpetually on the edge of this civilization of theirs. When I am in Cherifa’s house I am still on the edge of it, and when I come out I can’t believe I was really in it—seeing her afterwards, neither more nor less friendly, like those tunes that go on and on or seem to, is enough to make me convinced that I was never there. (OW, 85)

The place abides in its romantic possibilities, which, though static, are enough to refresh her interest continually. Quite suddenly she has moved from the petulance of her initial racial indifference into a phase of perpetually heightened awareness. Sadly, these are the happiest passages in her epistolary career. Being on the edge of something she may someday enter is, for her, the most exciting place of her romantic imagination. Tellingly, too, she prefers the stasis of the interminable, here figured as a tune that anyone else might find monotonous or maddening. Having or not having hardly seems to matter in these early accounts, because living at the frontier of hospitality holds the promise of continuation. But not for long:

I wrote to you how exciting it was to feel on the edge of something. Well, it’s beginning to make me very nervous. I don’t see any way of getting
any further into it, since what I want is so particular [as usual]; and as for forgetting them altogether, it’s too late. For me Africa right now is the grain market and being obsessive . . . it is not any personal taste that I’m obliged to fight but a whole social structure, so different from the one you know—for certainly there are two distinct worlds here [the men’s world and the women’s], as you’ve often said yourself. (OW, 93)

The very fact that so entrances her, that there are two distinct worlds structured along a gender divide, is turned into the annoying source of obscurity. In this letter to Paul as in others she explains carefully that the techniques of lesbian seduction in Morocco do not follow the simpler rules of sex between men. Because she has no Moroccan friends outside the peasant class, and because her Western friends are either short-term residents of Tangier or not lesbians, Jane has no map of how it is done. Between the nervousness of the continual stasis of her seductions and the seemingly infinite possibility implied by working and traveling without a map, she can experience her particularity—as both anxiety and titillation—and her own freedom to invent what she wants.

The differences that she finds simultaneously so frustrating and titillating extend from class and sexuality to ethnic identity. The erotic charge she gets from penetrating into Moroccan rooms is always a curiously general one. For quite some time, her letters reflect only the charms that Moroccan women display as a group. They are always “them” in her descriptions, whether gushing or grudging. This faceless generality stands in contrast to her own mobility of identity. Though American and Jewish, she is in Tangier a “Nazarene” and usually taken for European. Her foreign identity is both absolutely fixed there at the “edge” and malleable. This allows her access to a range of experiences, which her letters never show before her arrival in Tangier. The difficulties she faces in her attempts to enter into Moroccan life expose her to a morphological shifting that dislocates her identity as she seeks ways of characterizing her experience. So consumed by the feeling of being outside, she seems unable to confront the class character of her difference from the urban workers she pursues, and instead she glosses that dislocation as a racial one. The racial scene of the fantasy she proffers to explain her failure to seduce is a heterosexualized one. Here she becomes a “Negro man”:

The average American woman would be revolted I suppose by a Negro man, and I think I suffer from the disadvantage of being “different”—all of which made your success years ago. Naturally, I admire the women
for being this way, so much more dignified than the men, or are they just more conventional? I don’t know. I suppose I could banish all hope from my heart and get it over with but I hate to and I never regret being with them. I can’t quite explain to you or anyone what it is like to be in one of those rooms—I mean how I feel about it. . . . the women look wonderful in their homes. (OW, 108)

“The disadvantage of being ‘different,’” which she imagines to be a lure for men, only works against her in the “world of women.” She refuses to consider that class differences also play an enormous role in separating her from the women she wants to possess, despite the fact that the only women who manage to capture her attention are drawn from a suburban merchant class. “What it is like to be in one of those rooms” suggests that the object of fascination is not a woman but that spatial frontier itself. Being on the edge has given way to being in the room, in the private realm of a life to which she does not belong. The women are represented as decor completing a tableau rather than as active inhabitants of their homes. Everything is designed to be pleasing to the eye in an interior world capacious enough to exclude “the Negro man.” At no point do her letters register the inadequacy of such a comparison between Morocco and America, nor do the letters take on the more likely equation of her presence and her dollars to the colonial presence and the persisting legacy of that colonial moment. Rather, content to ignore this historical context, she registers resistance to her attempted conquests only by complaining in her letters. The final and most lasting impression she has of her own shifting identity and sensibilities suggests that the indecision and “nervousness” native to her is all too easily discarded under the authority of money and the residue of colonial rule. “If I live in a house here I insist on a harem. There is no other way of doing it. They cope with all the details and keep one company [I am quite happy with them without any kind of romance]” (OW, 125). Though she complains that her entry into Moroccan life is not as easy as was Paul’s, she clearly imagines her future domestic and erotic successes on the model of the foreign man of means.

Jane’s delight at being on the frontier of a world so separate from her finds its limit in her courtship of Cherifa, who begins to signify Jane’s contestation of this border. At first Cherifa presents only the more attractive choice of two different and, to Jane’s eyes, available women, despite the former’s obvious efforts to avoid Jane.

Cherifa, I’m afraid, is never going to work out. I think she’s very much in love with Boussif. She’s in a rage because she expected that once his wife
left he would marry her, and instead he’s taken some woman to cook for him whom he also sleeps with. . . . They are definitely confusing people. I think Cherifa is afraid of me. I saw her sneak behind a stall yesterday when I appeared so that I wouldn’t see her. Nonetheless I am determined now to learn Arabic. It is good exercise for the mind in any case and there are more chances that I will get pleasure out of it than not. . . . I said my first words yesterday after Cherifa sneaked behind the stall and I suppose I said them in desperation. The older dyke was there, thank God [she comes to the market irregularly], so I walked over to her and somehow spoke. Just a few words actually, but immediately some old men gathered around me and everyone nodded happily. (OW, 81)

She enters into the life of the market to some extent, and for a time this satisfies her. Her resolve to content herself with mental exercise and apply herself to her Arabic lessons is, however, short-lived. She is enormously frustrated with the language barrier, for it deprives her of her most winning charms of seduction. She simply cannot make her way into Cherifa’s heart by wit, and this deficiency in their courtship outlines her increasing impatience with the whole process. Her former hope that she might traverse the edge of Moroccan life to actually enter into it is now flagging and no longer figured as an opening threshold, but as a violent rejection.

Either she is ashamed to be seen with me alone or, quite sensibly, doesn’t see the point because I cannot really speak to her. I don’t know. I am merely trying to know her better socially [having given up hope as far as anything else is concerned]. I can’t bear to be continually hurled out of the Arab world. . . . Perhaps you have never been in this inferior position vis-à-vis the Arabs. I can understand how if one could get all one wanted here and were admired, courted, and feted, that one would never never leave. Even so, without all that—and you’ve had it—I have never felt so strongly about a place in my life, and it is just maddening not to be able to get more of it, (OW, 93)

Goaded beyond her limit, she cannot endure the repetition of inferiority that she knows all too well at home. Having entered into the marketplace with a completely self-serving conception of her role there—that she is the “Negro man” and Cherifa is the American woman—she balks at the obvious conclusion to which her (non-) reception would lead her. Her desire to possess a “harem” but her unwillingness to pay for it presents her with the conundrum of stalemate and avoidance. The substitute pleasures of language and small accomplishments are brief, and as the relationship progresses or stalls, her understanding of “their” expectations becomes more calculating and even desperate. Jane finally
breaks down to confront the economic framework of desire that she has entered. If it is sex that she wants, she is going to have to pay for it, but this payment causes her no end of guilty rationalization and constant reevaluation. She learns quickly how and when to pay: “By offering a present at the right time I keep my oar in” (OW, 103). This discovery reveals that there is, in fact, a map and set of rules to be learned; Jane is not particularly happy about this, as it tends to erode her own sense of romance and uniqueness, but the new life enabled by the dollar raises her up from the “inferior position vis-à-vis the Arabs,” which had cast her as a purposeless hanger-on. Now she has capital enough to override her foreignness. She begins to give bribes of all kinds.

I do see and I refuse to all at once. Still socially I am making some headway, particularly in a new role that started last week—that is of a procurer for Cherifa. I procure Boussif for her when he disappears, which he does for days at a time. . . . She’s trying to get one [a sheep] out of me already. . . . I expect to have to invest a little money in the Arab part of my life—the only reason for being here, at least the most important one. I have to buy Cherifa a djellaba and shoes eventually. Also I am taking her to the doctor’s right now which is ruining me. She has a skin disease from grain. (OW, 104)

Seeing and refusing to see that the source of her sudden and considerable attraction for Tetum and Cherifa lies in Paul’s pockets, Jane embarks on a path of seduction in which she pays for the attentions of her two favorites. She coyly portrays herself as the procurer when the facts are quite otherwise. What she buys with Paul’s money she thinks of as an investment that verges on plain gambling, as she cannot foresee the outcome of so much expenditure. Soon she begins to feel the limits of her latest strategy, but by now it is too late to withdraw her funds without losing face and possibly losing all contact with Cherifa.

They have all my scarves, most of my money, my watch, and I am now taking Cherifa to the doctor’s twice a week. . . . I don’t mind being liked for my money one bit. Being the richest woman in the world has certain disadvantages but I accept them. I feel that I have done everything absolutely everything wrong, but perhaps something nice will happen anyway. . . . Cherifa wants me to buy her a taxi. . . . She is getting quite plump because of my affluence and every now and then instead of looking like a boy she looks like a complete Oriental woman. (OW, 131)

As the demand for goods in exchange for services rises to the level of a taxi, Jane risks destitution but manages to transform Cherifa from the cute boyish figure in “dungarees and haymaker shirts” to a “complete
Oriental woman.” Effectively, she has acquired the harem she thought would confer power, comfort, and freedom from care, but, in fact, her own existence is more harried than ever as she is constantly attending to the ladies she has “created.” Still, she complains about the rate of progress even in this new economy: “Our relationship is completely static; just as I think that at least it’s going backwards [on the days when she sneaks behind the stall] I find that it is right back where it was the next day. Nothing seems to move” (OW, 88). The stasis of her advance upon Cherifa’s virtue is stated in language identical to an earlier description of her writing, “I am so slow it is almost as though I were going backwards . . . I keep forgetting what writing is supposed to be anyway.” Whereas pleading for writing would tend to show up the language and structure of a symbolic foreclosure upon writing specifically and upon speech more generally—at least upon the position of “speaking out”—here she pleads for sex and comes up against an incomprehension to which she cannot quite admit. Perhaps Cherifa is willing to “give all” if adequately compensated, but if she cannot imagine what that “all” might actually be, then Jane’s hope for a harem that would exceed the exchange of money is a forlorn hope. Jane runs up against what she calls “that awful, hard-to-get virgin block,” which she has trouble imagining as sincere despite her continual frustration with the “sleeping,” the euphemism that she and Cherifa share for sex. The progress of her seduction stalls on the question of knowing and not knowing, authentic and inauthentic desires, where the possibility that “they do not know” what lesbian sex is amounts to a resolution of the moral challenge to her self-image. Caught up in a tangle of autoerotic motivations and unwilling to content herself with prostitution, she holds out a hope that love, desire, and affection might emerge given time.

I love this life and I’m terrified of the day when my money runs out. The sex thing aside, it is as if I had dreamed this life before I was born. Perhaps I will work hard to keep it. I cannot keep Cherifa without money, or even myself, after all. Paul told Cherifa that without working I would never have any money so she is constantly sending me up into my little work room. A good thing. Naturally I think of her in terms of a long long time. How one can do this and at the same time fully realize the fact that money is of paramount importance to one’s friend and etc., etc.—that if there is to be much sleeping it will most likely be against their will or something they will do to please one, I simply don’t know. Possibly, if it came to that, I might lose interest in the sleeping part, possibly why I keep putting off the bargaining—but the money I know is paramount. Yet they are not like we are. Someone behaving in the same way who was not an Arab I couldn’t bear. (OW, 180)
Jane hesitates to bargain because the knowledge that “it will most likely be against their will” disrupts her own erotic investments. She clings to the belief that “they are not like we are,” and it is on the basis of a reified conception of Arab womanhood that she will persist in the relationship. Out of the contradiction of knowing and not-knowing, Jane plans for the long term as if the problem posed by Cherifa’s motivation were something that might be resolved in a mode other than servitude. “Someone behaving in the same way who was not an Arab I couldn’t bear” tellingly situates the limit of her tolerance for “being had,” as she finds it just as aggravating to pay for sex that she is not having as she would to pay for sex at all. More disturbing, her desire to portray Cherifa as utterly ignorant of sex by dint of her culture situates culture as the tantalizing obstacle to consummation; and this need to produce their mutual incomprehension and tentative movement toward one another as the primitivism of the one frustrating the pocket of the other will resurface as the dominant theme of their association.

For Jane it would be devastating to admit that “they” are like “us” inasmuch as this admission would force her to confess that her desire abides in, even thrives on, a scene of purchase—she is always eager to show that the constant demand for money is either taxing or comic rather than invigorating. She can cast the economic exchange as a comedy as long as “their” behavior marks them as other, foreign and ignorant of the ultimate object of her desire and, further, as long as their wants mark them with the sign of their class status. What do they demand? Food, medical care, clothes. These demands are easily assimilated by the comfortably comic tone of Jane’s condescension: that they ask for the material means of city life brands their desires and values as more primitive than their benefactor’s. Jane shifts between a candid assessment of her role as “the richest woman in the world” and her desire for something more romantic; her letters evince a strange juxtaposition of knowledge and disavowal on this point. When she finally runs out of money, she writes, “Now I do have an upper hand that I never had when I spent more money. What is it? I suppose one must close one’s fist and allow them just the right amount of money to make it worthwhile and not shameful in the eyes of the neighbors” (OW, 185). Cherifa, too, learns that the source of her newfound wealth lies in Jane’s “work,” and she has no trouble taking up a commanding role as Jane’s taskmaster. Between them they establish a domestic routine that accommodates both their needs, but Jane, still at a loss to characterize the relationship, chafes at the bluntness of their modes of exchange.
Having struck a balance between “having” and being had, Jane and Cherifa move into a different phase that leaves Jane wondering what the limits of her own power to force the issue or “clamp down” might be.

I waited and waited before writing because foolishly I hoped that I could write you: “I have or have not—Cherifa.” The awful thing is that I don’t even know. I don’t know what they do. I don’t know how much they feel. Sometimes I think that I am just up against that awful hard to get virgin block. Sometimes I think they just don’t know. I—it is difficult to explain. So hard to know what is clever maneuvering on her part, what is a lack of passion, and what is fear—just plain fear of losing all her marketable value and that I won’t care once I’ve had her. She is terribly affectionate at times and kissing is heaven. However I don’t know quite how soon or if I should clamp down. I simply don’t know. All the rules for the playing the game are given me by Paul or else Temsamany. Both are men. T. Says if you don’t get them the first two times you never will. A frightening thought. But then he is a man. I told Paul one couldn’t buy desire, and he said desire can come but only with habit. And never does it mean what it means to us—rather less than holding hands supposedly. Everything is very preliminary and pleasant like the beginning of a love affair between a virgin and her boy friend in some automobile. Then when we are finally in bed she says: “Now sleep.” Then comes either “Goodbye” or a little Arabic blessing which I repeat after her. There we lie like two logs—one log with open eyes. I take sleeping pill after sleeping pill. Yet I’m afraid to strike the bargain. “If you do this, I will give you all of the money, if not—” it is very difficult for me. Particularly as her affection and tenderness seem so terribly real. I’m not even sure that this isn’t the most romantic experience in a sense that I have ever had—and it is all so miraculous compared to what little went on before. (OW, 177)

These letters shift unstably from disavowal to frank assessment of the economic basis of their relation. Jane’s disavowal of Cherifa’s status as her employee or even as a prostitute—and it is the specter of prostitution that she finds so disquieting, for what does that make of her own desire?—complexly works to veil the trajectory of money. The letters continue to work through the contradiction of the “rules” and her own experience, and each effort to contain the ambiguity of her relationship with Cherifa brings with it a consistent thread of reification that culminates in the suspicion that Arabs do not mix love with sex.

I hesitate to rush it, to be brutal in my own eyes, even if she would understand it perfectly. I think love and sex, that is tenderness and sex, beyond kissing and les caresses, may be forever separate in their minds, so that one might be going toward something less rather than more than what one had in the beginning. According to the few people I have spoken to—
among them P.M. (the Englishman who wrote the book)—I hate mentioning names—they have absolutely no aftermath. Lying back, relaxing, all that which is more pleasant than the thing itself, if one is in love (and only then) is non-existent. Just quickly “O.K. Now we sleep,” or a rush for six water bowls to wash the sin away. I’m not even sure I haven’t in a way slept with C. because I did get “Safi-naasu.”51 (“O.K. Now we sleep.”) but it does not mean always the same thing . . . since I cannot seem to bring myself to the point of striking a verbal bargain (cowardice? delicacy? love?) I don’t know—but I simply can’t—not yet. I shall have to wait until I find the situation more impossible than pleasant, until my nerves are shot and I am screaming with exasperation. It will come. But I don’t believe I can say anything before I feel that way. It would only sound fake. My hunch is she would go away saying “Never.” . . . last night . . . I kissed her just a little. Later downstairs she said . . . she wondered whether or not God had seen us. I wonder. (OW, 178–79)

To maintain a confusion over whether the Arab women she pursues are capable of feeling love or capable of connecting tenderness to sex would secure her own machinations in a suspended state of indecision. In this way Jane can continue to shield herself from the obvious fact that her wealth is the essential link between herself and her lover. In a work exploring colonial and touristic queer sexuality, Michael Lucey analyzes this problematic in terms of disavowal and naming, writing, “This problem of naming is one of the main supports of the repressed fantasmatic content of this scene for a European who would like to be convinced that sex paid for with money in North Africa might be called something different than it would be called in Europe.”52 The difficulty of naming her desire a desire for “prostitution” is not so much a matter of repression in Jane’s case. Rather, she is fully capable of an extended discourse on the means of exchange and the modes of sex while maintaining the suspense of “seeing and refusing to see.” Jane profits from this “indecision,” which admits fully of the knowledge that she pays for sex but confounds that knowledge with a simultaneous insistence on the “romance” of frustration. The “problem of naming” resurfaces in Jane’s sexual adventurism already resolved by the Arabness of the women whom she pays for sex. Thus, it is in her interest to propose a complete disconnection between the two registers of feeling, sex and love, and to project that disconnection onto the unruly object of her affections. This disconnection is, in fact, a greater feature of Jane’s approach to Cherifa, who by Jane’s own account is in love with Boussif, for it is Jane who cannot decide anything, least of all whether the aftermath of sated desire is worth risking the foreplay of frustration, a form
of desire familiar from its elaboration in other areas of her life. The possibility that love and sex are inherently split, divisible, threatens her, and as she recoils from this shadowed image of her own disconnection she projects it outward on the lover. The more disturbing fact revealed in the letter above is that within her milieu of expatriates in Tangier, the commonplaces of sexual lore are so rigorously, racially abjecting. This belief that Moroccan women and men (for it is only on the basis of an analogy from the experience of men that she comes to bed armed with a theory) cannot derive love from or attach it to the sex act becomes the ground of her elaboration of Cherifa’s primitiveness.

Without a common language and in the absence of a common expectation of the form that their relationship can take—whereas marriage is always a possibility with a man—neither woman has any sense of security. Cherifa has only her value in “not being had” to guarantee Jane’s interest; Jane has only the warrant of her money to ensure Cherifa’s presence. Without a socially prescribed form for their coupling they are both exposed to a host of haunting and fearsome possibilities; each is potentially the humiliated and the subjected, and these effects are heightened by the differences of language, class, and cultural experience. That Cherifa wonders “whether or not God had seen” them is not to be taken as evidence of the inherence of sacred law or the fundamental literalism of her symbolic; it is a fragment verifying the presence of a dematerialized law, here God-the-father, between them. Cherifa’s uncertainty, her invocation of God, these add up to a way of speaking the presence of the law, suddenly and so easily run aground by their own unnamed desire: can he see the unspeakable? Are we invisible or very exposed? “She wondered whether or not God had seen us” is evidence that Cherifa knows something of what Jane wants from her and, equally, that there are dangerous consequences to this knowledge. As a result, they move toward each other through progressive scenes of stalemate where each can test and measure the terrain. Unlike the marriage bond, the symbols of which confer a ceremonial mystification upon the traffic in women while simultaneously celebrating that exchange, the bond between Cherifa and Jane has to be built up from the exposed facts of exchange. There is no way to disguise the element of prostitution so troubling to Jane and so disruptive of the affection she fears to trust. Jane’s efforts to create a livable social world by replicating the bonds of kinship otherwise are constantly strained by the lack or absence of a culturally sanctioned disavowal of kinship’s constructed nature; when marriage can appear as a natural
destiny of love, disavowal has prepared the ground of love in advance. No such sanction of forgetting welcomes these lovers, and as a result their domestic arrangement can never shield itself from the suggestion of prostitution, colonial appropriation, or domestic servitude. As she writes in a different context, “One is never quite totally in the world: It is intolerable to be in this world without a myth” (AL, 299). In the case of her courtship of Cherifa, the bones of the structure are too bare, so bare that each has reason to distrust the other. When Jane writes of her power to bargain and “clamp down,” a power she holds in check, she toys at the edge of the overexposure lurking between them. Like the characters of her unfinished novel, she is dangerously destitute of myth and desires one, especially a myth that might authorize her sexual encounter with Cherifa as love. At the same time, Jane is so habituated to high degrees of frustration that she finds herself in the contrary position of saying, “I’m not even sure that this isn’t the most romantic experience in a sense that I have ever had.” Knowing and not knowing, seeing and refusing to see are the oscillating terms of an excitement that she will draw out until the final moment of “exasperation,” yet one cannot help wondering if that ultimate exasperation describes not a limit but the pinnacle of excitement.

If the colonial setting enables Bowles to reinscribe her own resistance to the law of gender and to the rule of lesbian “invisibility” along the lines of a faltering but original affiliation with Cherifa, it also sanctions a form of contempt for her lover that would be, perhaps, more difficult to express as such anywhere else. She reproaches Cherifa for her primitiveness and constantly writes to far-flung friends about her childish and ridiculous ways. These tales have the same value as the incessant doings of the cats, Berred and Dubtz, and Paul’s parrot. Cherifa “looks like a child,” lives in a “bordello,” eats “like a monkey.” Her efforts to secure the important meals from Jane during the holidays of Ramadan are constant fodder for Jane’s epistolary amusements, and it is by extension of this ridicule that Jane criticizes the rituals attending the holiday. At one point Jane writes to Paul, “I get hysterical about Cherifa the way one does about a child” (196). These signs of contempt betray the working of difference within the relationship. The “hysteria” she feels about Cherifa’s safety and her health and the pleasure that she takes in little differences of their habits always secures the adult and the sensible as properties of Jane’s “parenting.” Cherifa is made a child by Jane’s intense scrutiny, and this stable edge of an absolute difference becomes the basis of Jane’s commitment to the relationship.
Such a web of disavowal and derogation extends the problem of naming to the stasis of fetishism, which resolves the initial disquiet through a detour of belief.54 “I do see and I refuse to all at once” speaks the structure of her desire as a disavowal echoing Mannoni’s formulation, “je sais bien, mais quand même.” In the essay of the same name, Mannoni argues that the fetishist suffers from a crisis of belief in the very matter of his desire. He knows full well that, say, women do not have penises, but even so he will persist in the belief. The fetishist, however, does not present his desiring scenario in quite these terms. “He knows that women do not have a phallus, but he cannot add any ‘even so’ because for him the ‘even so’ is the fetish.”55 The fetishist says instead, “I know full well that women do not have a penis, but, oh, the shoe.” Thus, the fetish is announced as the practice and object that excites the preserved desire, saved from repression by the detour of the fetish. As Mannoni notes, the fetish is the cause of the circuitous statement, “I know full well”; it is not appended as a justification. It precedes the statement of which it is the extralinguistic cause. This sequencing of fetishistic cause and effect secures a realm of belief apart from the domain of facts that might challenge the fetish with repression or demystification. Neither unconscious nor simply conscious, the fetishistic statement defies logical contradiction by securing something outside the mode of facticity. The shoe, to take up a common example, cannot be contradicted or demystified. Its invincible strength lies precisely in its dumbness. To be as dumb as a shoe is to endure as a monument of something saved from change, time and pernicious attacks of knowledge; it is to be preserved as belief.

In Jane’s path to and from Cherifa, this belief structure will invent the cultural differences between them as the literal fact of the fetish. Cherifa’s Arabness will become the childishness necessary to sustain the disavowal of prostitution so troubling to Jane’s fantasy of romance. That “they do not know” the ways of loving between women serves to support the imagination of an absolute difference in the place of a fairly ordinary economic exchange of money for sex. This invented and absolute difference, so rigorously policed in the bravado of the letters, will come to play a decisive role, guaranteeing the uniqueness of Cherifa in Jane’s erotic landscape. Urged by Paul to leave Morocco for Mexico, Jane will refuse by saying simply, “There will be no Cherifas there.” It is essential that Cherifa be unique and that she be legible to Jane according to a mobile thematic of primitiveness: Cherifa is alternately the infant, boy, thief, premodern, tribal, Muslim, pagan, Arab. Jane can later
anguish over her leave-taking and claim that it is a shame and a fault to abandon Cherifa, who, had she not known Jane, “would not have become used to European ways.” Jane positions herself as European, having European ways in contrast to the primitiveness of Cherifa’s Arab ways—odd, considering that an upper-class Moroccan woman might be more European than Jane. Jane jettisons the primitiveness of an American identity by displacing deficiency and lack onto Cherifa—now doubly lacking for having become a hybrid of Europe and Morocco, child and whore. The substance of Jane’s disavowal might be translated as “I know full well that this is prostitution, but, Cherifa, Tangier . . .”

Significantly, Mannoni also notes that the figure of the child is key to an understanding of the fetishistic structure of institutions of belief and to an extension of the fetish structure beyond the preliminary analysis of fetishism as perversion outlined in Freud’s brief essay “Fetishism.” Tracing an analogy between the belief structure of a religious institution and that of a demystified secular culture, Mannoni argues that the child underpins the peculiar pairing of disavowal and fixation in relationships of mentoring or initiation.

We have yet to adequately investigate what goes on exactly when an adult feels the need to mystify a child—about Santa Claus or the stork, etc.—to the point, in certain cases, of fearing that throne and altar, such are Freud’s words, would be in peril if one were to demystify the victim. . . . From a synchronic perspective, the child, as an exterior and present figure, can play a significant role in assuming our beliefs after repudiation. . . . He does not know the secrets of adults, which seems to go without saying, but we know that for certain perverts, it is the normal adult who becomes the believer and who does not know the child’s secrets. In other words the situation is not so natural, and if psychoanalysis has rid us of the myth of infantile innocence and purity it has not gone very far in the analysis of the function of this myth. . . . If we acknowledge that to invoke this innocence of children is but a way to show their credulity, the picture changes considerably. As among the Hopi, but less clearly, infantile credulity helps us to repudiate our beliefs—even if we are not dealing directly with children, of course, their image is enough. Many adults would admit—sometimes the absurdity of the thing holds them back—that they are not religious for themselves but for the children. And the important place children hold in the organization of beliefs cannot be explained by the rational concern for their spiritual development alone.56

The child shores up an adult realm of belief and fetishistic disavowal by functioning for that ephemeral adult world of ideas as if childhood were the literal ground from which it sprang. The burden of belief is carried by the child, making childhood a cultural fetish. In fact, as Mannoni
shows, the concerted effort to fill up childhood with mythic characters and theological rituals—from secularized myths like Santa Claus to the elaborate childhood rituals of organized religion or even the commercial incitements to believe in a natural heterosexuality embodied in toys—serves as the material support for a staged transmogrification as the child who believes in the fetish becomes the adult who believes in ideas and understands the difference between the literal and the figurative. The adult life of the mind requires a ritualized alibi in the lies told to children. This fetish culture of ritual and discipline sets a standard for childhood—a standard of belief as of practice—quite apart from the dematerialized faith of the adult realm. Such a normative fetishism is to be distinguished, in Mannoni’s argument, from that of the “pervert” who departs from normativity but whose trajectory is still shaped by that point of departure. If we take our distance from the pejorative language of this so-called “perversion,” we can still acknowledge with Mannoni that there is a shade of difference between a fetish, which must be privately held and refreshed by a particular psychic history, and the structure of disavowed fetishism that inheres in initiation and parenting. Like the muteness of the shoe, a fetish, once established, sets apart the one who adores it.

The fetishist does not seek a believer. For him, others are in the dark, and he leaves them there. No longer a question of making believe, at the same time, it is no longer a question of believing. . . . We see that the place of the believer, that of the other, is now occupied by the fetish itself. . . .

After instituting fetish, the domain of belief is lost to sight. . . . If with disavowal the whole world has entered the field of belief, those who become fetishists leave the field in that which concerns their perversion.57

The burden of Bowles’s fetishism is twofold. It must establish Cherifa as the irreplaceable beloved by signifying her the absolutely other, the complete child. Once the link is established and Jane can believe in Cherifa’s affectionate dependence, so different from the ruses of prostitution, Jane no longer needs to invest her energies to force the issue. She creates a myth to live by and then exits the scene herself. This structure of exiting the field of belief once the fetish is secured to perform that task for one is borne out by the letters following the consummation of their relationship. The tone is set and Cherifa pops in and out of the letters for comic relief—she ceases to develop in any way at all. Jane’s life with Cherifa is a fetish culture securing belief: the house, the chickens, the medical appointments. Cherifa, arrested in a state of perpetual presexual adolescence not unlike the household pets, remains fixed as
The Bar Was Not Very Gay"
The stable pole of Jane’s domestic life for years to come. In this way Jane rids herself of the sting of primitivism and childishness that clouded her rapport to Toklas, but she must remain always near the object of her fetishistic devotions for the ploy to work its magic.

Cherifa is notorious for practicing a Moroccan form of medicine and magic. Do her fetishes absorb desire, her own, or do they absorb her ambivalence? Charms for warding off evil and granting wishes invade the house. These signs of “primitive” ambivalence are not so different from Jane’s relation to writing and domesticity. As Jane’s writing suggests, to perform a regression is one way to manifest the structure of the law as a mythic one. The self-perpetuating fetish culture carries the burden of creation because the structure must become the “natural” ground of desire. Cherifa’s charms provide the same service in a different mode as they absorb hope and anxiety. That Jane understands her own life in Tangier, as well as the life of those around her, on the model of a magical, fetish culture of faith rather than “planning” is evident in her attempts to explain how the “dream world” of Arab life manages to function.

Somehow in this peculiar world where nothing is arranged there is a sudden miraculous junctioning, a moment of unraveling when terribly complicated plans—at least what would be a complicated plan anywhere else—work out somehow as if in a dream, where one has only to think of something for it actually to appear [your novel]. It would take years to believe in this and not to see it merely as an amusing mirage—I meant to believe that such things do work out for the Arabs when they do, not because there is a law of chance but because such a lack of concentration on even the immediate future would allow all sorts of mysterious rhythms to flower, which we are no longer in possession of. (OW, 185)

Familiar as an orientalist trope—the phantasm of a passive and fatalistic East—this “lack of concentration” on the future is a reflection of Jane’s exclusion and incomprehension. That she must “give in” and learn to live there becomes in her own eyes a kind of magic, once possessed by the West, now lost everywhere but Morocco. Living there, a living that must be learned, enables living at all, for the fetish embodied in the place, the woman, and the culture materializes a world. Her home life with Cherifa provides her also with the time to “believe” that her own complications can find a resolution. Here we see her confusing her own psychic blockages with Moroccan “time” but the profit to her is a way of life.

Life with Cherifa will guarantee for Jane a playmate, one who vali-
dates and verifies the materializing character of her obsessional wants. If the primitive, in Freud, possesses the power to manifest his ambivalence in the material world, this will be a lost art that Jane Bowles recovers at her own expense; hence the inconclusive yet repeated symptom of her contrariness. The reversals of fantasy—turning prostitution into family life, turning a writing block into an enormous corpus of letters, turning “out” to “in” as in the title of her never-to-be-finished novel *Out in the World*—expose the norm that constitutes her as outside by refusing that foreclosure and the death sentence that goes with it. Fantasy will also provide the necessary element of “belief” that can allow her to regain a measure of “mystification.” “It is impossible to live without a myth”: evidence that she wants more than to demystify the law of her abjection. She wants another myth, and the way to get it is to establish a firmament of ritual, a fetish. The exchanges with Cherifa that guarantee Jane’s power do so in the mode of helplessness, much like the animist imbues his environment with energy and intention.

According to Mannoni, the literal realm of the festival is but a prop for the metaphysical realm of invisible realities. Children are required as the alibi for adult belief in the ideal as that which cannot be “shown” and thus cannot be demystified. The adult passes through his demystification to arrive where? The adult “real” world of true faith in the guise of nonbelief in the fetish. The fetish is the place of childish things, for children must have things “proved” to them. To revert, then, to childish things is: 1) to demand that the imaginary yield up its magic; 2) to fight the symbolic function with the symbols of its transferability; 3) to demystify an appearance of systematic totality without ceding the myth-making function. If one’s world of adult belief has totally denigrated the imaginary only to deny its own foundation, there is much value in regression, for it returns belief to the imaginary and wreaks havoc on the static order of the symbolic. If one must believe it is only by virtue of having made something visible, legible, and audible.

Bowles’s writing escapes to the place of her “real” practices for, when she writes, she travels to the most traumatically imbricated place of her psychic gaming. If she always turns her addressee into the law, she always steals away from that law by sending it postcards and letters. Magical thinking, like the primitive rituals of the shaman, has the power of materializing a “here” and a “there” to anchor her psychologically on a map. Bowles’s deviations around the laws of kinship enable her to establish her own little province of domesticity with its rules of order and laws of exchange and thus, in the “language” of class
and ethnic difference, to establish an island of privilege that mimes by reworking the notion of difference. These same deviations around the law of kinship and the rule of the economic order, however, cannot sustain her. Every effort to thwart the terms of her abjection seems to leave a residue of guilt in her “new order.” While she constructs the law of her own exclusion and then rebukes it in her letters, something prevents her from finding in her writing or in her domestic arrangements with Cherifa true respite from her anxiety and manic self-doubt. More attached, it seems, to the scene of her own abjection than to any dream of “being out in the world,” her novel of the same name remains unfinished, because being-out-in-the-world would mean for Bowles being without pain and, finally, being-before-the-law as a final and irrefutably material instance; there can be no being sufficiently material before the laws. Thus she continues to circle around the guilty failure to be out-in-the-world and the equally guilty failure to be-before-the-law. Instructively, the case of Bowles contaminates the clean division between empty and full just as she undoes the hoped-for clarity of “in” and “out” in the world. Bowles is most full in her speech when she chatters and most empty when she tells the “truth.”

“TORTURED LETTERS ABOUT TINY DECISIONS”

I don’t expect to earn money on my book, but anything to forestall a bad reception . . . I could go on forever about all this, the pros and cons of going or staying here but I fear that the letter would turn into a fifteen page ganze magilla of “if’s and but’s” which I shall never send and then more months will go by and I will never write; but the letter could be used as a document for some doctor who specializes in states of anxiety

I shall certainly write you again now that I’ve started but you may come to dread these tortured letters about tiny decisions. I am famous for them or I was when I was famous, with a few friends (most of whom are dead) . . .

Jane Bowles, in Out in the World: Selected Letters of Jane Bowles 1935–70

In 1957 and after squabbling with Cherifa over the cost of the Ramadan feast, Jane Bowles at the age of forty suffered a debilitating stroke from
which she never fully recovered. Some blame a lethal combination of drugs and alcohol, others accuse Cherifa of poisoning Jane, and at least one close associate suspects an untreated epileptic fit as cause of the attack. After the stroke her physical handicaps provide yet another source of meditation on her writing condition. The brain damage caused by the stroke does not alter the way that she speaks about her writing block, despite the fact that now the body mirrors the psychic conflict that so reliably brought her to impasse in the past. Blind in the right field of vision, suffering the linguistic side effects of a brain lesion that consigns her to say the opposite of what she thinks, she continues to imagine herself in and through the terms of writing. In their harsh reality, these complaints of the body cruelly parody the elaborations of disorderliness evident in her life leading up to the stroke. She has no control over her own speech, yet the disability becomes the site of extreme effort as she musters all her mental resources to overcome the massive obstacle in its most minute forms. Substituting “hot” for “cold,” “blue” for “yellow,” she regains some control over her linguistic failures by organizing the symptom into another way of meaning what she says; it is the task of those around her to learn to comprehend her exertions. Her doctor said of her shortly after the stroke and during the early days of her rehabilitation that “She was aware of her power within her head, particularly in terms of language, but she was unable to exert that power. She was a hand-wringer, I remember. She seemed to know what she wanted to say, but she couldn’t get it out.” As an added irony he prescribed for her linguistic malady a kind of writing and set her the task of writing compositions. In these brief texts, of which only one tattered and much-handled example survives among her papers, we find the clearest articulation of the writing dilemma that frustrated her, perhaps to the point of mixing drink with epilepsy medication, and that posed the choice of life or suicide every day.

I don’t know whether or not I understood you corectly —But is seems if I am corect -you asked me to write compositions for you. I can not. Please try to find some other way. I cannot write a composition. If I could I would. I don’t think I have been able to for years anyway-and a this time it is completely impossible. If it is a failure of the will-then my will is sick-it is not lazyness. I am trying to read and I must say that I am doing well in that. If I could write a composition I would find my way out. But there is such a thing as a failure of the will which is agony for the person who suffers from it. I did not suffer a stroke for nothing at my age at age-and I have gone far away down the path of no return. I must have started down that path when I was very young. I know that you want me
to write something different—but I can’t. I know that there are years of suffering ahead and that nobody can look into my brain. I know that they keep basket cases alive and that you don’t choose to express your opinion on this—because as you said it a unresolved—a religious or philosophic unresolved—problem—Are we to take our lives or anyone else—to save ourselves or anyone else from unendurable pain. Is torment pain—the final the purest offering we have to make to a supreme being because if it is not them why is it considered a sin to relieve one is alone finally and there is no doctor for the soul. I one can find the strength to bow to the soul and accept it as existing beyond the ego—and beyond pain—perhaps the torment would cease.

She does not explain her inability to write in physical terms but in spiritual ones. The reasons she gives predate the stroke, as she clearly states with the phrase, “I did not suffer a stroke for nothing at my age.” The body, signified by “brain” and “looking” inside the brain, occupies the enigmatic interior of her self, whereas her soul has become a harsh master beyond the pain and torments of the body and strangely exterior to the spatial metaphor she seizes upon to describe it. “I cannot write a composition. If I could I would . . . there is such a thing as a failure of the will which is agony for the person who suffers from it.” These attempts to justify what for us would seem to be physical obstacles to writing—at this point she can neither see the text she has written nor can she be certain that she is hitting the right keys on the keyboard because of the visual disruption on the left side of her brain—are conveyed as failures of the will. She takes pains to distinguish the will from the ego’s body, and further the soul from the pathetic self hiding in her brain. Still arguing with her doctor over the prognosis and her right to die, she catches him in a commonplace sophism as if to say that his own belief is both cruel and unreflective. She seems to have argued him into a corner by saying that his demand that she get well is contradicted by the very reason he offers against suicide. “Is torment, pain, the final the purest offering we have to make to a supreme being?” If not, then why would it be a sin to relieve the pain of someone who cannot be well, through a sickness that attacks the will and the soul? Does the last sentence read, “I, one, can find the strength to bow to the soul and accept it as existing beyond the ego and beyond pain,” or does it read, “if one can find the strength to bow to the soul”? How has the soul become the exterior judge of her body separate from her inner being, the suffering in her brain? “I read. . . . I can in no way tell whether I have really read the sentence or not. If I could really describe this to you I would be alright—because then I could write.”
This writing would save her, but she cannot read the sentence that she is to describe. And so she writes, but only that she cannot read her sentence. Thus she manifests what was always for her the death sentence of writing, from and through the writing of that place. Writing is the place she manifests her death, and always only through an address to another particular person—not the abstract other of writing but the local other of the address. If there is a “politics of address” here it is the politics of a standstill or demonstration of how she is the one caught, arrested in the development of her writing. There is a kind of genius in this stubborn refusal to pass on to “life” where life is understood as the other’s myth, not your own invention. “It is impossible to live without a myth”; for Bowles this means that it is possible to die for lack of one. And die she does, indestructibly, until the end.


94. Cited in Vincent Cheng, Joyce, Race and Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7. Also in Banton, Racial Theories, 57. Neither of these critics explains how Knox’s murderous racism toward the “Celts” can coexist with a relatively enlightened critique of empire, although Stocking understands this as an artifact of a very dark worldview (Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, 64). Banton cites this passage from The Races of Man: “[The Anglo-Saxons in South Africa] so debase the coloured races as to deprive them for ever of all chance of recovering that inestimable treasure beyond all price or value, freedom of speech, thought and action; in a word, the rights of man. How has this antagonism of race arisen? The truth is, it has always existed, but it never appeared in its terrible form until the Saxon race began to migrate over the earth, to establish free colonies as they are called—free to the white man and their own race—dens of horror and cruelty to the coloured” (59).

95. Banton, Racial Theories, 57, and Cheng, Joyce, Race and Empire, 30.


97. Curtis, Apes and Angels, 2.

98. Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, 234.

CHAPTER 2

1. Jane Bowles, Two Serious Ladies, in My Sister’s Hand in Mine (New York: Ecco Press, 1978), 194–201. References to this volume of Bowles’s collected works will hereafter appear as MS.

2. The horizon of a modernist sacred, always hovering in the background, affords the perspective of judgment and failure, futility and incomprehension, by which character is judged in her fiction. My reading of these moments in Bowles differs from that offered by other critics who interpret this tendency of her prose either as an undoing of gender through the mobilization of queerness understood as indeterminacy or as an exploration of the alienation of existence. Cf. the essays by Carolyn Allen and Robert Loughy in Jennie Skerl, ed., A Tawdry Place of Salvation: The Art of Jane Bowles (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997).


4. Ibid., 71.
5. The superego is credited in *The Ego and the Id* with the power of reproachful speech that I am here identifying as directed toward that psychic agency.


She was very different from me. Especially because she was a woman, she cared more about her character, she felt close to them. And I only cared about how they behaved in my situation, about their words and their actions. About them, no, of course not! . . . One of her characters, some woman, said . . . she made her say: I’ve never dabbled in people. (Laughs) so wonderful: “. . . dabbled in people!” Just the opposite of the way Jane thought. She did dabble in people. People fascinated her. It was a different relationship with reality. She always wrote that she had to see in order to be able to write. . . . Not only did she have to see it, but she also had to know how it was made—which is often impossible. That only requires a little imagination, an image; but for her, the image wasn’t enough!

The statement that an image is never enough for Jane seems consistent with the kind of work she does with gender. The image fails to gratify because so much is occluded in the forms granted to vision. The symbolic matrix of feminine abjection is not a fact given to sight but the making-see within a constrained angle of view, and for this reason the boundary of intelligibility, so rigorously policed, cuts across any vision Jane might have. Paul’s unwillingness to “see” the work she does imagine authorizes his assumption that she lacks imagination; this imagined lack echoes the accusation of artless projection leveled at Jane by Toklas. In the same interview he claims that Jane was not capable of love, did not feel it for Cherifa, and substituted “obsession” for the romance of love. The evidence of her letters leads me to quite different conclusions. On this basis I tend to view him as an unreliable but telling interpreter of her motives, desires, and writerly aspirations.

7. For another consideration of the undecidability of the rhetorical “how?” see Paul de Man, “Semiology and Rhetoric,” in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979). De Man uses the example of Yeats’s “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” to demonstrate the indecision between literal and figural meaning produced by rhetorical uses of systematic grammatical forms. His argument stresses the difference between the effects of a rhetorization of grammar exemplified by the rhetorical question and a grammatization of rhetoric held to promise a demystificatory and critical reading of figures. “The former end[s] up in indetermination, in a suspended uncertainty
that was unable to choose between two modes of reading, whereas the latter seems to reach a truth, albeit by the negative road of exposing an error, a false pretense” (16). De Man’s valorization of the latter promises for him a practice of critical truth “invisible to the reader caught in naive metaphorical mystification” (16), but this promised resting place for the critical subject undergoes a further twist as de Man points out that the voice of critical demystification is itself subject to the formal undoing it enacts elsewhere. Thus, he deduces an “anxiety of ignorance” that “becomes thematically clear . . . not as an emotive reaction to what language does, but as an emotive reaction to the impossibility of knowing what it might be up to” (19). Bowles responds to this anxiety of ignorance by believing in it so wholeheartedly that she brings it to a standstill, a strategy that in its aggressive demand to be told how would seem to condense the series of points of view and turns on the text—in short, the narrative of error and truth described by de Man—into a single scene or, even less, a single point, a particle of speech. The author, who writes obsessively in the margins of her unfinished novel, “It is impossible to live without a myth,” cannot seem to find the zero point of blindness or insight to begin her fabulations, to sustain them, and certainly not to finish them.

8. Primitivist style had already been the subject of an issue of View, the New York surrealism journal produced by Charles Henry Ford and Parker Tyler. Paul Bowles contributed to the October 1943 issue and again to the October 1944 issue. He edited the “Tropical Americana” issue, View 5, no. 2 (May 1945), in which he wrote in praise of “primitive” art and advocated an aesthetic practice exploring so-called “naive,” grotesque, or impoverished forms. Jane Bowles’s style accords with the revaluation of “ordinary” forms of speech and the coupling of naive forms with fantasy. The reveries in Two Serious Ladies, as well as the unmotivated shifts in action, plot, and dialogue, suggest that she is working in modes advocated by the journal.


10. See AL. Reviewed by the New York Times and the Saturday Review, Bowles’s work did attract notice in major publications. What she did not receive is serious consideration by other writers sufficient to placate her violent internal critic. Carolyn Allen’s “The Narrative Erotics of Two Serious Ladies” in Tawdry Place cites from the reviews, some of which are also cited in Dillon. Jennie Skerl’s introduction to the volume Tawdry Place discusses the mixed reviews that greeted all of Bowles’s publications.

11. Scenes of seduction and pursuit proliferate in the fiction, but the most explicit version of her signature narrative occurs in “Going to Massachusetts,” a fragment of the unfinished novel. There we are introduced to Janet, a clumsy butch (reminiscent of Beryl in Camp Cataract) who is owner of a mechanic’s garage, attempting to seduce the attractive, “bad” Sis Mcavoy. The latter, getting drunk on Janet’s scotch, thinks to herself, “She was enjoying the compliments, although it was disturbing that they should be coming from a woman. She was very proud of never having been depraved or abnormal, and pleased to be merely mean and discontented to the extent of not having been able to stay with any man for longer than the three months she had spent with her hus-
Bowles’s butches are always awkward, dowdy, and slightly ridiculous; unlike her femmes, they are working-class, but no gender performance escapes the suggestion of failure in her fiction. Bowles consistently pursues the association between freedom from labor in her feminine characters and capability crossed with economic need in characters who perform a working-class masculinity that is sexually nonthreatening. For instance, prostitutes or other women willing to exchange sex for support are the only women represented as desirable. Note, for example, Pacifica in Two Serious, Harriet in Camp Cataract, and Sis Mcavoy. The precarious economy of a prostitute or homeless woman’s life seems sufficient cause to extract her from the norms of kinship, while destitution makes her irresistible. Within this fantasyscape, a woman of no means attracts like no other whereas the butch-femme distinction seems less operative than destitution itself. Lillian Faderman, in “Butches, Femmes and Kiki’s,” in Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America (New York: Penguin, 1991), describes the tensions in the postwar period between American middle- and working-class lesbians, for whom butch-femme roles provided a structured subculture. In the upper-middle-class lesbian circles that Jane Bowles frequented, butchness, according to Faderman, was an object of disdain. This claim is supported by John D’Emilio’s work on American lesbian bar culture from the 1940s through the ’60s, also cited in Faderman. Bowles seems at times to recapitulate this prejudice uncritically, while texts like “Emmy Moore’s Journal” suggest the potency and necessity of female masculinity for the articulation of desire from the position of a destitute femme. Bowles’s own desires are harder to gauge. Her long-term relationship with Helvetia Perkins was wrenching and came to a rancorous end; she seems to have turned toward very feminine women after that, until meeting Cherifa. I believe that Bowles’s efforts to view Cherifa as primitive substitute that primitiveness for the masculinity she had desired in Helvetia. Other scholars working on the history and theory of butch women in America come to different conclusions than Faderman about class attitudes toward gender performance. See Sue-Ellen Case, “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” in The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993); Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” in Hidden From History: Reclaiming Gay and Lesbian Past, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chancery Jr. (New York: NAL Books, 1989); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The New Woman as Androgyn: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870–1936,” in Disorderly Conduct (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

12. Sigmund Freud, Character and Culture (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 45. Thanks to Celeste Langan for drawing my attention to this essay.

13. Ibid., 47.

14. AL, 27.

17. Ibid., 191.
19. Given that it is perfectly ordinary for a playwright or director or leading man to become involved with the leading lady, the statement makes even less sense. Apparently, for Jane to behave with the same abandon and theatrical disregard for conventional morality as a man elicits only ire from the older woman. Toklas's responses to Jane's freedom set the standard for one consistent thread of censorious dismissal of her.
23. Truman Capote, introduction to *My Sister's Hand in Mine*.
24. There can be no doubt that Jane was intimidated and insulted by Toklas. Unfortunately, Toklas represented a real entry into literary society, and this worked to Paul's advantage, as Toklas approved of his writing and let her opinions be known. She disapproved of Truman Capote, as borne out by a long, despairing letter of 1950 from Jane to Paul: “Alice T. was delighted that you didn’t really care for him [Capote] very much. [I told her.] She said it was the one thing that really worried her. She could not understand how an intelligent person like you etc. She disapproved of Truman Capote, as borne out by a long, despairing letter of 1950 from Jane to Paul: “Alice T. was delighted that you didn’t really care for him [Capote] very much. [I told her.] She said it was the one thing that really worried her. She could not understand how an intelligent person like you etc. She doesn't seem to worry in the least, however, about my liking him. So I'm insulted . . . again” (OW, 148).
25. Shari Benstock, “Paris Lesbianism and the Politics of Reaction, 1900–1940,” in Hidden from History. See also Benstock’s *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986). The Parisian modernism of expatriate and French lesbian women would seem to challenge the model of butch-femme role-playing developed by scholars of American lesbian history in the period from the 1920s to the ’50s. For the modernist lesbian, butch-femme identities were still legible and accessible as a glamorous feminine dandyism. That these women were either wealthy enough to feel themselves above the law or foreign enough to be excluded from the rigors of gender policing are significant facts. Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, covers this question. Recent work on queer and lesbian modernism complicates this picture of polymorphous dandyism abroad and gender parody at home. See Susan Raitt, “Lesbian Modernism,” *GLQ* 10, no. 1 (2003).
27. Ibid., 342.
29. Ibid., 35.
30. Ibid., 59.
31. Ibid., 61.
32. The overlap of queer unconscious preoccupation with primitivism and childhood and Lewis's censure is no accident. Lewis's constant harping on the alleged effeminacy of his contemporaries and glorying in the virility of still others would tend to suggest that his homosexual panic heightens his scrutiny of the very things that queer modernists are also reacting to—even as Lewis...
may have been reinforcing a cultural preoccupation with the conflation of primitiveness and queerness. Many of his novels, most notably *Snooty Baronet*, model their heroes on Lewis’s buddy Roy Campbell. That a thick strain of an unsteadily maintained homosociality circumscribed their relation cannot be doubted. They even exchanged thinly veiled erotic love poetry—larded through and through with images of phalli ascending the heavens—though the dedications read, respectably enough, “from Mr. and Mrs. Campbell to Mr. and Mrs. Lewis,” and vice versa.


34. Even as it crosses and is crossed by other discourses, the “context” of modernism extends to various other domains, yet we find the same kinds of judgments against Jane. In theatrical circles of New York, Jane’s play *In the Summer House* mainly drew fire, though there were a few good reviews. Jane’s letters of this period trace the ups and downs of this reception; not surprisingly, the negative reviews seem like echoes of Toklas’s judgments. “Laurence Olivier’s head reader saw my play and wrote that it was *morbid and depressing* and though not something to be dismissed, certainly *nothing they could think of doing*” (OW, 148). Sklar takes issue with Bowles’s account of her reception and notes mainly good reviews.

35. Ibid., 147.

36. Ibid., 146.


38. Jane Bowles’s attachment to food as a signifier of self is consistent throughout her best work. “A Quarreling Pair,” “Camp Cataract,” and “A Stick of Green Candy” all work out a poetics of food preparation, consumption, and taboo suggesting an entire cartography of desire and identification. In 1947 she had been reading Kierkegaard, Sartre, and de Beauvoir; during the protracted period of her convalescence and after her conversion to Catholicism she said to Sister Mercedes, at the Clinica de Los Angeles in Málaga, that she was very sorry for having been in a “field of existentialists.” The comment reveals Bowles’s own account of her “faith” during the years that concern us, while the complex link between faith, myth, and the gendering of food cannot be underestimated in Bowles’s fiction. This seminal passage from *Being and Nothingness*, a text that there is reason to suspect she read in French well before the 1943 translation, may be an intertext for “A Stick of Green Candy.”

The synthetic intuition of food is in itself an assimilative destruction. *It reveals to me the being, which I am going to make my flesh. Henceforth, what I accept or what I reject with disgust is the very being of that existent, or if you prefer, the totality of the food proposes to me a certain mode of being of the being which I accept or refuse. . . . It is not a matter of indifference whether we like oysters or clams, snails or shrimp, if only we know how to unravel the existential significance of these foods. . . . Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being. . . . Man is a useless passion.*

On Sartre’s vaginophobia in these passages from *Being and Nothingness*, see Marjorie Collins and Christine Pierce, “Holes and Slime: Sexism in Sartre’s Psychoanalysis,” in *Women and Philosophy: Toward a Theory of Liberation*, ed. C.


40. Ibid., 21.

41. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), for the analysis of gender melancholia. There it is argued that a template of abandoned object choices, which come to model for subsequent identification, establishes the modality of gender as the gender lost and unrecoverable through mourning. “Gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition” (63). The force of such a taboo lies in the prohibition of non-normative desires and identifications.


43. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 23

44. Ibid., 91.

45. Ibid., 81.

46. Ibid.

47. AL, 397.

48. Letter of August 1957, in *OW*, 32. All errors have been retained.

49. Nearly every biographical and critical discussion of Jane Bowles makes the claim that she spoke Arabic, the Moroccan dialect or “Moghrebi,” a coinage found on the covers of Mohammed Mrabet’s work as transcribed and “translated” by Paul Bowles. In an interview with Simon Bischoff in *Paul Bowles: Photographs*, Paul claims not to speak the Arabic dialect of Morocco; he and Mrabet converse in Spanish, a language that Paul knew well and from which he translated works of Latin American fiction into English. When pressed on this point, Paul Bowles replies, “I never had the desire. Then, I never had the time to devote to studying Arabic. I was busy working, writing, writing music. I wasn’t interested in learning it because there wasn’t anything I wanted to read in Arabic” (*Paul Bowles: Photographs*, 214). He adds that Jane studied Arabic dialect “everyday.” This means that she studied the oral dialect of Tangier but never learned to read, because dialect is unwritten. Her notebooks, located at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center Collection, contain a few pages devoted to copying out Arabic letters and sentences in transliteration, but there is no archival evidence of an extensive or sustained effort to learn to read and write. We must conclude that although Jane was capable of communicating, her command of the language was nothing like what the critical references suggest. Her letters contain short transliterations of phrases, and the translations that accompany these mentions are often either incorrect or inexact. In a notebook entitled “History” and which contains the manuscript of “Camp Cataract,” we find a single page on which someone has copied the first seven letters of the Arabic alphabet in a large, childish hand along with a French pronunciation guide (Jane Auer Bowles, Series 1.11, HRHC). Another notebook contains a lesson in oral dialect. On one side of the page is a story in French using *passé simple*, and on the other is the story transliterated in the oral dialect of Tangiers. Interspersed are pages of the Andrew section of “Out
in the World,” her unfinished novel, and the Gertrude and Lionel play (Jane Auer Bowles, Series 2.3, HRHC). Thus the myth of Jane’s prowess appears to be greatly exaggerated, while the specific erotic basis of her language study is often displaced by the critical reception into a fantasy of prowess. To my mind, her motivation to learn to talk to the people among whom she sought to live—and the women especially—sets her apart from the casual sexual tourist.

50. It is an oddity of their eventual domestic life that Cherifa went to the trouble to acquire from the Moroccan government a certificate of “permanent virginity,” which she is reputed to have brandished whenever they quarreled.

51. Although the word safi could be translated as “okay,” it might just as easily be the French suffit, “enough,” which, in this multileveled context of knowledge and incomprehension, may mean much more than Jane is able to understand. Her statement “It does not mean always the same thing” indicates a degree of understanding about the limits of her own comprehension. Given the uncertainty and imprecision of their communication, it is striking that both of them seem to forestall the “bargaining moment.” In their negotiations around the bargain Jane and Cherifa lay the ground for an erotic and a domestic relation. Their ways of declining—to act, to force the issue, to refuse—establish the paths to each other by constructing for them a form of civility.


53. This commonplace racism is characteristic of at least some of the English-speaking queer expatriates in Tangier in the period following the war. Such hostilities and worse form the basis of the oft-cited Arno Schmitt and Jehoeda Sofers, eds., Sexuality and Eroticism among Males in Moslem Societies (New York: Harrington Park, 1992). For works touching on homosexuality in the Maghreb by Maghrébin scholars, see Abdelwahab Bouhidi, Sexuality in Islam (London: Routledge, 1985); and Malek Chebel, L’esprit de sérail (Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 1995). For examples of the view of Moroccan sexuality described above, see Alfred Chester, “Glory Hole: Nickel Views of the Infidel in Tangiers,” in Head of a Sad Angel: Stories, 1953–1966 (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Black Sparrow, 1990), and the interview in Paul Bowles: Photographs in which Paul Bowles asserts that Moroccans have no concept of love, only sex, avarice, and obsession. Greg Mullins’s Colonial Affairs engages the complexities of male-male relations between queer American expatriate writers and the Moroccan writers they dated.

54. Explicitly linked to lesbian desire, especially in scenes of lesbian childhood, belief is a key issue in Bowles’s fiction. This narrative obsession with belief suggests that the construction of desire against the grain of heteronormativity is imagined by Bowles to be a negotiation with the symbolic as a matrix of fetishistic belief.


56. Mannoni, Clefs pour l’Imaginaire, 18. Mannoni uses the term repudiation to translate Verleugnung, whereas in English disavowal is the more common translation. He makes the point of equating the two, but not in a way that necessarily implies an equation of disavowal with foreclosure.

57. Ibid., 32.

58. Dillon’s biography of Jane, Paul’s autobiography, and his letters and scores of interviews circulate the story that Cherifa may have poisoned Jane and caused her stroke. Sometimes Paul dismisses this as fantasy, claiming that the many charms—especially one buried in a potted plant—were, most likely, love potions designed to secure Jane’s devotion. Others are not so scrupulous and continue to repeat the racist accusations and characterizations of Cherifa as a “witch.” Stephen Bischoff goes so far as to describe her as “the black demon of death.”

59. Edouard Roditi recalls frustrating discussions with Jane about her epilepsy, which she refused to treat.

60. Brain damage resulting from the stroke left her with a kind of aphasia that in its worst phases would not only blind her but made her substitute opposites for words she really meant to speak. For example, when Paul, seeing her blind for the first time, was greeted with the phrase “You smell good,” he understood this to mean “I see bad,” or “I am blind.”

61. AL, 312.

62. Ibid. The errors and spacing appear as in Dillon’s faithful reproduction of the original. This self-justification is written on a heavily creased piece of paper folded into quarters. From sources, Dillon corroborates what is evident upon physical examination of the document housed at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. Jane Bowles carried it in her pocket for an extended period of time as if it were a final, most valuable testament to the diminished but interminable writing she lived (Jane Auer Bowles, Series I, Composition written during her illness—1.1, HRHC).

CHAPTER 3

1. Elisabeth Roudinesco, Jacques Lacan and Co.: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925–1985, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 703. The Arabic text is a translation of the passage in The Interpretation of Dreams (chap. V, B) that relates Freud’s childhood disappointment in his father’s lack of heroism when an anti-Semite accosted Freud senior on a public byway, knocking his new fur hat into the mud and shouting, “Hey you, Jew, get off the sidewalk” (my translation from Arabic). This story is retold to the little boy Freud, who asks his father, “What did you do?” “I picked up my hat,” is the reply that the son recounts in his own analytic text to support the theory that his subsequent childhood fantasies around the figure of Hannibal are related to this slight against his own father. The passage clearly links the development of the “martial ideal” to a national ideal