Approaching Bowles's Up Above the World

Greg Bevan
Fukuoka University

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**Abstract:** In his article "Approaching Bowles's *Up Above the World*" Greg Bevan discusses Paul Bowles's fourth and final novel which at the time of its publication was met with mixed reactions from reviewers and its creator alike and has seen relatively scanty critical attention in the years since. Gena Dagel Caponi perceives in the novel a reflection of Bowles's struggle for control, during the time of its writing, in the face of his wife Jane's terminal illness. Building on this insight, the current essay notes the same tension in the writings of the Beats -- a movement with which Bowles has been loosely associated, and one that both attracted and repelled him -- and argues for *Up Above the World* as not only a personal meditation on struggle, but also a broader statement of Bowles's ambivalence toward the Beat Generation.
Greg BEVAN

**Approaching Paul Bowles's Up Above the World**

When Jane Bowles suffered a stroke in 1957 it was the start of a long physical and mental decline, and in the writings of her husband began to appear an elegiac sense of good things slipping away. In a 1958 essay for *Holiday*, Paul Bowles mourned the loss of the Tangier that had first bewitched him nearly thirty years before: "The population has augmented at least threefold, and I'm afraid the city would never strike a casual visitor as either quiet or attractive" (*Travels* 224). An alarmed letter to his parents three years later gave that population boom the frightening face of a Beatnik invasion: "Every day one sees more beards and filthy blue jeans, and the girls look like escapes from lunatic asylums, with white lipstick and black smeared around their eyes, and matted hair hanging around their shoulders. The leaders of the movement have moved their headquarters here and direct their activities from here. Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Burroughs are all established in Tangier now, sending out their publications from here" (Sawyer-Lauçanno 356). "You kids get off my lawn," the letter seems to be shouting: at fifty-one Bowles was a generation older than all the Beat writers except William S. Burroughs. And while it may perhaps be true that "Paul Bowles opened up the world of Hip," as Norman Mailer wrote (468), he was cut from a different cloth than the hipsters. Jay McInerney writes that "Bowles is frequently lumped in with the Beats in surveys of American literature, but his relation to the movement is that of Manet to the Impressionists, a kinship to Beat thinking: an elder patron with an affinity for Beat ideals" (191). Gena Dagel Caponi similarly asserts that "in temperament and literary style Bowles was closer to Gide and his successors, the French existentialists, than to any of the American Beat generation who followed" (*Romantic* 196).

The most obvious contrast between Bowles and the Beats can be found in his apparent lack of interest in American social commentary: almost none of his fiction is even set in America. Yet the more closely one examines the membrane between Bowles and the Beat movement, the more permeable it appears. In the pages of their books set in Africa, Bowles's stories have struck many readers as an indictment of his native civilization; Hans Bertens writes in this vein that Bowles "very clearly sees Western culture as the cause of the nihilism he has made his major fictional concern" (8). Moreover, one cannot distinguish Bowles from the Beats by his affinities to a modernist like Gide without addressing the proclamation of Burroughs' own fealty to Gide in the prologue to his 1953 novel *Junky*. This is to say nothing of Burroughs' regard for Bowles's own work: it was Bowles's second novel, *Let It Come Down* (1959), which made a lasting impression on Ginsberg in particular. Moreover, one can see Burroughs as a kind of elder statesman. Burroughs remarked that "among the lesser beats, or miscellaneous beats, the general impression was that [Bowles] was kind of uptight and old maidish" (Sawyer-Lauçanno 356-57), but he and Ginsberg in particular struck up lasting friendships with the urbane and aloof Bowles. This is not so surprising when we note that *Let It Come Down* (1952) culminates in a hashish-fueled murder which, however dubious its existential justification, shows the same focus on drugs and the unconscious (and, it might be added, the same willingness to shock) that characterizes much Beat literature. For his part, after denying he was an existentialist in an interview with Lawrence Stewart, Bowles then backtracked, reframing the question in a way that shows a striking kinship to Beat thinking: "But what is an existentialist character, really? It's one who plays it by ear and experiences a fresh jolt from the given situation. He's infinitely adaptable, I would say. He thinks of everything in terms of the immediate situation—not according to credos and tradition" (Stewart 152). This comment and his alarmed letter to his parents, taken together, evince a mixture of identification and disdain that can also be found in a remark worth focusing on, which an elderly Bowles made in an interview in 1985: "I was never part of a group, but I felt sympathy for the Beats. I approved of their existence as a group. It seemed a new thing. I thought it was careless, though. There's a certain amount of carelessness in the writing of all those people" (Caponi, *Conversations* 191).

It has always been a commonplace to associate the Beats with undisciplined spontaneity, generally citing the scattered sheets of yellow paper that became *Naked Lunch* or the 120-foot taped-together roll on which Jack Kerouac dashed off *On the Road* (1957). But there is a discernible moral censure in Bowles's use of the word "careless," one that brings to mind this anecdote from Burroughs biographer Ted Morgan: "Burroughs had once borrowed from Paul a copy of [Tennessee Williams'] first collection of stories. Being on junk at the time, he dripped blood all over it while injecting himself, and Paul was annoyed" (539). Yet it would be too easy to call Bowles's objection to the Beats "uptight and old maidish," for in fact he shared with the movement a longstanding interest in the uninhibited, one that had driven him to explore surrealism early in his career and drug-powered "automatic writing" throughout it. In the Stewart interview he goes on to say, "The destruction of the ego has always seemed an important thing" (Stewart 152), an explicit affirmation of the surrealist idea--hugely influential on the Beats as well--that the individual consciousness and its received notions must be bypassed for true art to result. Moreover, Bowles was aware of the extent to which the freak-show quality of the Beats was the creation of the popular media, and in a 1959 essay he wrote of Burroughs: "When I got to know him I realized the legend existed despite of him and not because of him: he didn't give a damn about it" ("Burroughs" 15). Bowles therefore had an additional source of sympathy in his own sense of being unfairly pigeonholed as a purveyor of shock and gore. As he said in an interview, "Let's say there are sixty stories, and two of them have unprecedented violence. Therefore I write only about violence. That's really ridiculous" (Caponi, *Paul Bowles* 67). One finally senses that the Beats write large--their work, as well as the aura of spontaneity, drug abuse, and exhibitionism that surrounded them--struck both a...
nerve and a chord in Bowles.

It is this ambivalence is the key to understanding the one novel Bowles had not yet written when the Beats and their hangers-on invaded Tangier. Published in 1966, Up Above the World is the oddball of Bowles's oeuvre for a number of reasons. Of his four novels it has suffered the most critical neglect, generally being written off as a piece of escapism or a psychedelic Sixties curio. It offers Bowles's perspective on the cultural change he was witnessing in 1960s Tangier and yet is the only one of his novels not set in North Africa. In his own recorded views on the book he disparages it: "I didn't consider it a serious book like the others. It was like what Graham Greene calls an 'entertainment.' Actually I wanted to like it under another name. In fact, I didn't agree" (Caponi, Conversations 105). He deems it "the best written of the four novels" he produced (In Touch 513). But most interesting of all is a comment in a letter to his mother in advance of its publication: "It's a murder mystery about Beatniks, decidedly light, and probably will get awful notices. However, I was tired of writing about North Africa" (In Touch 376).

A murder mystery set in an unnamed country in the tropical Americas, the story portrays the entrapment of a traveling American couple, Taylor and Day Slade, by a wealthy young psychopath who has had his mother murdered and fears they have witnessed the deed. But who are the beatniks in question? In his 1957 essay "The White Negro," Mailer fixes the aim of the Beat (or Hip) movement as "the divorce of man from his values, the liberation of self from the Super-Ego of society. The only Hip morality ... is to do what one feels whenever and wherever it is possible" (354). In Bowles's novel, Day Slade objects in similar terms to being called a tourist—"We just move around where we please, when we please. It's the only way to do it. Group travel is a degradation. The whole point is to be free" (101)—but she is merely putting on airs; she and her physician husband are as bourgeois as they come. We recognize Mailer's figural as well as the young antihero Grover Soto, whose name later morphs to Vero Grove: "What he had had in mind when he had fitted together the various possibilities that would form and maintain his present life was an eternally empty schedule in which he would enjoy the maximum liberty to make sudden decisions" (82). When we take into account his avid interest in marijuana and jazz, Grove, along with his seedy henchman Thorny, becomes the only plausible Beat in the novel. Indeed, the idea of "liberation of self from the Super-Ego of society" helps illuminate one scene that otherwise seems an odd bit of Sixties techno-fantasy. Upon learning that his mother's murderer has been carried out, Grove lies in bed in his luxury penthouse in the capital and has a dream: enclosed face-down in a tiny cell of glass, he is peering into a huge auditorium through a high-tech viewer that gives him the sensation of being in the hall itself. Onscreen a famous actress playing "the pathetic role of the distraught matron" (87) suddenly morphs into Grove's own mother: "Underneath the jovial flesh was the supremely calculating consciousness, the dark destroying presence. No matter what part she was playing (for her role depended on her audience), to him the basic expression was always the same—cunning and omniscient" (88). Fleeing the auditorium in terror, he thinks, "She knows about the glass room upstairs. She's the one who had me committed" (89).

It is unclear from this dream evidence whether Grove has ever actually been institutionalized, although the book makes clear enough his psychopathy, metastasized by his divorced parents' materialistic tug-of-war for his affections. What the dream does show is that the omniscient, smothering mother is also society itself: just before awakening he senses that "by rising from his seat in the audience he had in some way interfered with institutional processes. He would be caught and punished" (89). Again one thinks of the Mailer essay: "The unstated essence of Hip, its psychopathic brilliance, quivers with the knowledge that new kinds of victories increase one's power for new kinds of perception; and defeats, the wrong kind of defeats, attack the body and imprison one's energy until one is jailed in the prison air of other people's habits, other people's defeats, boredom, quiet desperation, and muted icy stillness. . . . It is to escape this mainstream, 'Square' society—that Grove has come to live in his father's native country; his mother, whom we meet as Mrs. Rainmantle, is on her way to visit him when she meets the Slades on their cruise ship. In a port they all check in to a decrepit hotel where Mrs. Rainmantle finds that the lock on her room door is broken—one of Thorny's preparations for her murder, we later realize—and ends up rooming with Day Slade and her put-upon husband. Leaving with him for the capital early the next morning, Day sees Mrs. Rainmantle lying motionless with her eyes open but does not realize she has been given a fatal injection of curare. Still, even after Thorny burns the hotel down to cover his tracks, Grove fears the Slades may know too much. In the capital he befriends the unsuspecting Americans, drugs them, with Day Slade and her put-upon husband. Leaving with him for the capital early the next morning, Day sees Mrs. Rainmantle lying motionless with her eyes open but does not realize she has been given a fatal injection of curare. Still, even after Thorny burns the hotel down to cover his tracks, Grove fears the Slades may know too much. In the capital he befriends the unsuspecting Americans, drugs them, with Day Slade and her put-upon husband. Leaving with him for the capital early the next morning, Day sees Mrs. Rainmantle lying motionless with her eyes open but does not realize she has been given a fatal injection of curare. Still, even after Thorny burns the hotel down to cover his tracks, Grove fears the Slades may know too much. In the capital he befriends the unsuspecting Americans, drugs them, with Day Slade and her put-upon husband. Leaving with him for the capital early the next morning, Day sees Mrs. Rainmantle lying motionless with her eyes open but does not realize she has been given a fatal injection of curare. Still, even after Thorny burns the hotel down to cover his tracks, Grove fears the Slades may know too much. In the capital he befriends the unsuspecting Americans, drugs them, with Day Slade and her put-upon husband. Leaving with him for the capital early the next morning, Day sees Mrs. Rainmantle lying motionless with her eyes open but does not realize she has been given a fatal injection of curare. Still, even after Thorny burns the hotel down to cover his tracks, Grove fears the Slades may know too much. In the capital he befriends the unsuspecting Americans, drugs them, with Day Slade and her put-upon husband. Leaving with him for the capital early the next morning, Day sees Mrs. Rainmantle lying motionless with her eyes open but does not realize she has been given a fatal injection of curare. Still, even after Thorny burns the hotel down to cover his tracks, Grove fears the Slades may know too much. In the capital he befriends the unsuspecting Americans, drugs them, with Day Slade and her put-upon husband. Leaving with him for the capital early the next morning, Day sees Mrs. Rainmantle lying motionless with her eyes open but does not realize she has been given a fatal injection of curare. Still, even after Thorny burns the hotel down to cover his tracks, Grove fears the Slades may know too much. In the capital he befriends the unsuspecting Americans, drugs them, with Day Slade and her put-upon husband. Leaving with him for the capital early the next morning, Day sees Mrs. Rainmantle lying motionless with her eyes open but does not realize she has been given a fatal injection of curare. Still, even a
soulless penthouse, which seems to Dr. Slade "more like an overpoweringly elegant hotel than a home" (99-100), to say nothing of his vast mountain estate. It could be argued that Grove was meant as a reflection of the rich hippie—later era world, and dubbed them trustafarians—who had eclipsed the more authentic Beats of On the Road's cultural moment; taking into account Bowles's professed sympathies with the Beats, this could be seen as another reference to good things gone bad.

But I think Grove -- who shares his name with the publisher that made the Beats famous -- can be read as a comment on the movement itself, one rooted in the trying circumstances that surrounded the novel's composition. In exploring this idea, I am building on the biographical analysis of Caponi, who finds in an early novel an expression of Bowles's anxiety (17). In the face of Jane's repeated feeling that "everything was falling apart" (On the Road 70). Indeed, in a certain light Grove strikes us as an avatar of the compulsion Lee in Bowles' early novel Queer; he is both the oppressed, as we have seen, and the oppressor.

During the Slades' convalescence in the mountains, Day has a hunch that Grove was supposed to be an avatar of the compulsion Lee in Bowles' early novel Queer; he is both the oppressed, as we have seen, and the oppressor. The syntax is relatively straightforward, but the reader scans in vain for a stable structure. It could be argued that Grove was meant as a reflection of the rich hippie—later era world, and dubbed them trustafarians—who had eclipsed the more authentic Beats of On the Road's cultural moment; taking into account Bowles's professed sympathies with the Beats, this could be seen as another reference to good things gone bad. But I think Grove -- who shares his name with the publisher that made the Beats famous -- can be read as a comment on the movement itself, one rooted in the trying circumstances that surrounded the novel's composition. 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...
vantage point, recognizing only shards of folk songs and filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille chose film "The Squaw Man," the Burroughs excerpts references. Harris describes the novel's text as "a language that

the rhetorical and social repetitions are collected and collated and arranged into lists but that, finally, yield eerie surface effects of uncanny recognition, of disturbed memory, not deeper levels of meaning" (221; emphasis in the original).

Even champions of Naked Lunch have been driven by its disorienting language to describe it as a work one profits from having endured. Testifying at the book's notorious 1965 obscenity trial, Mailer said that America was "stronger as a nation for possessing an artist who can come back from Hell with a

portrait of its dimensions, 'Bostons' and "Acceptance or rejection are the defining alternatives, and Naked Lunch, as itself symptomatic of the diseases it would cure, is not acceptable" (231). By comparison with Naked Lunch, here is Dr. Slade's psychological collapse: "In front of him, not

three feet away, there was a face -- a muzzle, rather, for it surely belonged to an animal -- looking at him with terrible intensity. It was unmoving, fashioned from a nameless, constantly dripping substance. Unmoving, yet it must have moved, for now the mouth was much farther open; long twisted tendrils had appeared in each cheek. He watched, frozen and unbelieving, while the whole jaw swiftly melted and fell away, leaving the top part of the muzzle intact. The eyes glared more savagely than before; they were telling him that sooner or later he would have to pay for having witnessed that moment of its suffering" (106). The imagery is hallucinatory, but the narrative coherence and point-of-view clarity hold us at arm's length from the doctor's madness. Asked in an interview about his comparatively straightforward prose style, "What advantage does this voice have for you that such techniques as Bowles's 'cut-up' method or other attacks on the linear lack?"--Bowles replied, "Since the only way of expressing an idea is through language, it follows that language should be used in the most concise and lucid manner possible; the idea is entirely at the mercy of the words used to describe it" (Caponi, Conversations 140). Caponi suggests that despite Bowles's lifelong flirtation with unconscious writing, he had a temperamental aversion to its guiding principle: "To the fastidious, compulsive Bowles, the unconscious was messy, gushy and uncontrollable" (Romantic 211). While the cut-up method is not a variety of unconscious writing, its reliance on chaotic chance may have seemed similarly threatening to a reader finding himself in an alien land: the novel recalls Grove's long twisted tendons of the drugged doctor's escape attempt, when orderlies guide him back to his bed: "He has always known the world is like this. There is no way of escaping. They come and get you and quietly lead you away" (124).

For the Slades, unlike Grove, there is no coming back. Grove gives his handwritten notes for their brainwashing sessions to Thorny and tells him to burn the evidence, but later discovers that Day has found them incompletely inci-

sistency misrepresents Grove's mental condition: as mentioned earlier he is not insane but psychopathic (a more awful notices) he feared. But Bertens doubly misrepresents Grove's mental condition: as mentioned earlier he is not insane but psychopathic (a more

insidious and hence more frightening abnormality), and if we view the work as Bowles did through a Beat lens it is clear that the presentation of Grove's psyche -- indeed the novel as a whole -- does strive toward a statement of larger significance. A half-century on, there is no reason to confine the implications of Up Above the World to the Beats and their historical moment, and indeed some critics have rehabilitated the novel by finding it prescient of contemporary issues. Anabela Duarte writes, "Along with noise and violence, we find in Up Above the World a unique literary work amazingly tuned to today's concerns with the use of music as a weapon and as torture in the context of the new realities of the War on Terror" (239). But if Bowles's last novel represents a repudiation of his and a repudiation of the Beats' long-time fascination with unfettered mental states, it is perhaps most fruitful to ponder the connection of this shift to the years immediately following the book's 1966 publication.

The late 1960s brought upheavals for which the writings of the Beats were unprepared. Allan C. Johnston observes that, "Beat culture by its very nature lacked the theoretical and social underpinnings to develop the clarified economic or political oppositional stances that appeared in the 1960s counterculture" (104). Notwithstanding the reflected commentary on the West that Bertens and others have found in his work, Bowles professed less interest than the Beats did in sweeping social critique, and with the publication of Up Above the World and the story collection The Time of Friendship the following year he began to seem outmoded to many; one reviewer found in the latter book "a basic disharmony with the prevailing gothist" (Sawyer-Lauçanno 393). It hardly amounts to a defense of the
timeliness of *Up Above the World* whose title comes from the lullaby "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" to quote Bowles explaining that "what I had in mind were the words that come after: so high, which was a Sixties thing" (Patteson 135n7).

To focus on Vero Grove's transformation from hipster rebel to suffocating System is to begin to situate Bowles's most underappreciated novel as an intriguing link across American eras. Both fetishizing and fearing spontaneity, Grove hearkens back to the heyday of Burroughs and the Beats, while the destruction of the ego which the book documents was apparent at the time of its writing in the breakdown of people around Bowles, whether it be Jane or a drug casualty like Alfred Chester. In a few years, this collapse would be a hallmark of the era, with the unchaining of pure id witnessed in the Manson murders and the violence that took place during the Altamont Speedway Free Festival. Bowles's evocation of a soul-crushing System—itself a trope inherited from the Beats—would become part of a continuing current when novelists like Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut sharpened their focus on the dehumanizing aspects of American bureaucratic and institutional life in the 1970s. All of which is to suggest that the relative obscurity of *Up Above the World* may in part be due to the shortsightedness of some of its contemporary reviewers, too temporally close to the novel to perceive its broader historical connections.

**Works Cited**


