The Life and Deaths of Jane Bowles (or, Reputation)

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Jane Bowles was born on February 22, 1917, a short, usually harsh month — it seems right for her. Bowles’s unique writing and life were cut short, derailed by neuroses, alcoholism, physical illness. Her friends remember her sharp wit, agile mind, gaiety, humor, outrageousness. While she lived, stories about wild Jane Bowles circulated in Tangier where she resided from 1948. Back then she was a living legend, but the flux of reputation — here today, gone tomorrow — sends her body of work into and out of print (OP).

Among certain contemporary writers, including Lydia Davis, Deborah Eisenberg, Michael Cunningham, Jane Bowles is celebrated and revered for her work, notably her sole, singular novel *Two Serious Ladies* (1943).¹ It has also been praised exuberantly by Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, and John Ashbery. Bowles finished six stories, and a play, *In The Summer House*, which ran on Broadway in 1954, with incidental music by Paul Bowles.

Jane Bowles didn’t subscribe to what life held in store for her, an upper-middle-class Jewish-American girl from Woodmere,

Long Island, New York. Willfully, it seems, she undid her putative future; the unexpected — accidents of fate — also changed it: the death of her adored father, when she was 13, and, then, as an adolescent, she developed tuberculosis in her knee. The teenager recovered in a Swiss hospital, her leg in traction for months, when, it is said, she discovered her love of reading and literature. Ever after, she walked with a limp. Paul Bowles’ hated, anti-Semitic father called her ‘that crippled kike’.

Out of her mother’s house, according to Millicent Dillon in her definitive biography, *A Little Original Sin*, Bowles rebelled hard and fast. She led a super-fueled young adulthood, hanging out with writers and artists, bar-hopping in Greenwich Village, pursuing love and sex with other women. She was adamant in her desire for thrill, a Bohemian when the term meant something. Composer Paul Bowles and she met in 1937, and, surprising everyone, they married in 1938.

Bowles rejected comfort and complacency; she disdained middle-class values. Ease never befriended her: She questioned everything. ‘I had met nervous girls before’, Tennessee Williams wrote in his preface to *Feminine Wiles*, ‘but her quicksilver animation, her continual cries to me and herself: ‘Shall we do this or that? What shall we do?’ showed such an extreme kind of excited indecision…’

Reading her work, I can feel that anxiety in slight shifts of tone, in her unusual juxtapositions, both jarring and productive. I read her phrases again and again, adjectives abutting nouns in unlikely relationships, an innovativeness with language that she shared with Jean Rhys. I might become melancholy, reading her, though her writing also makes me laugh out loud, the way Kafka’s does. But Kafka’s work is cooler. He’s observing his writing and himself writing it. His work, in a sense, depends on distance — between psyche and society. He writes about and

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3 Tennessee Williams, ‘Introduction’ to Jane Bowles, *Feminine Wiles* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1976), 7–8. This is a collection of Bowles’ unfinished stories.
with detachment. Bowles is not detached, not in any way; her irony might even have boomeranged on her.

The way she lived differed starkly from her middle-class beginnings, but more the way she wrote veered from conventional literary modernisms. In writing, she didn’t pursue a self; I can’t imagine she believed one existed. She didn’t write to discover an identity. She denied identifications and worked toward disidentifications. While a sense of the fragmented underlay her order of things, she didn’t strive for it. Her metier was seams and fissures.

A Jane Bowles character, like its author, will have trouble making up her or his mind. I take ‘making up one’s mind’ literally: minds are made, not born. Bowles was exceedingly conscious of this and stymied by it. She was kept in doubt, undone by right and wrong, by what she didn’t know, and what could be in her mind without her wanting it. Bowles’ characters play in this absurdity, having choice and no choice simultaneously. Irrationality ineluctably figures into action and inaction, causing contradictions, and sometimes paralysis.

Any sentence from Two Serious Ladies displays Jane Bowles’ disorienting, elegant style — in fact, any sentence from all of her writing:

Arnold had just taken quite a large bite of his sandwich so that he was unable to answer her [Miss Gamelon]. But he did roll his eyes in her direction. It was impossible to tell with his cheeks so full whether or not he was angry. Miss Gamelon was terribly annoyed at this, but Miss Goering sat smiling at them because she was glad to have them both with her again.4

The movement from Arnold’s cheeks, to Miss Gamelon’s reaction to him, to Miss Goering’s feelings about them, makes a sketch of each — I want to say, they’re line drawings. Arnold’s full cheeks can’t be read as angry or not, which annoys Miss Gamelon, while

Miss Goering smiles, happy to be with them. A reader can see the composition at the table, these three curious beings.

(I wonder: What troubled Jane Bowles when she wrote those sentences, which words worried her, what made her anxious.)

All choice — in life, writing — pained her. Making a choice, which writing allows and supposedly encourages — be as free as you can be! — created perpetual havoc. Working on the exceptional short story, ‘Camp Cataract’, Jane got stuck. She told Paul Bowles that she couldn’t name a kind of bridge, cantilevered, unless she knew exactly how it was built. She made no assumptions even about her mother tongue, and said No to the first thing that came to mind. Her mind saw fit to unmake even plain words and phrases, to unveil home truths’ hidden messages. Writing turned into a representation of her intensity and fierce integrity, she wanted honesty in language and syntax.

Like everyone else, Jane Bowles’s volition was regularly compromised, and she moved to dictates she couldn’t know. Psychoanalytically, home is always where you go, and, though Jane Bowles left hers to be herself, let’s say, or to figure out her own way of life, or to write, she appears to have been unsatisfied, always restless. She and Paul Bowles, dedicated to difference, to being strangers in a strange land, chose their new home, but no place was home, I think, for her, and she didn’t find it in her writing, either.

Paul Bowles found an odd comfort in estrangement; it suited his disposition, his dry humor. His story ‘You Are Not I’ is a tale of psychological horror, of a young girl’s ‘madness’, and sent proverbial chills down this reader’s spine. Jane Bowles’ stories weren’t horrifying or cold-blooded. Nothing she wrote is like Paul’s ‘Pages from Cold Point’, a father/son incest story in which the son is the predator. The kind of horror she understood seeped into ordinary events and daily obligations that had to be faced, couldn’t ever be avoided, and where deception lay in wait.

Jane Bowles portrayed all societies as unforgiving and alienating. Her writing oxymoronically sustains a condition of permanent disorientation.

The short story ‘Everything Is Nice’ begins:
The highest street in the Blue Moslem town skirted the edge of a cliff. She walked over to the thick protecting wall and looked down. The tide was out, and the flat dirty rocks below were swarming with skinny boys. A Moslem woman came up to the blue wall and stood next to her, grazing her hip with the basket she was carrying.5

In this ‘blue Moslem town’, everything is nice and strange, for Jeanie. The Muslim woman, Zodelia, calls her a Nazarene.

‘Where is your mother?’ Zodelia said at length.
‘My mother is in the country in her own house,’ she said automatically; she had answered the question a hundred times.
‘Why don’t you write her a letter and tell her to come here?’6

To Zodelia, Jeanie’s mother living so far away is weird, maybe unthinkable, certainly not nice. Later, Zodelia pointedly inquires about Jeanie’s aunt: ‘Where is she?’ (The italic ‘is’ is Bowles.’)

Her fictional characters often track homeward. Bowles’s own sense of exclusion, of being on the outside, was powerful. She wanted to belong, somewhere, and ‘home’ is a problem and question in most of her work.

But home or away, life was very strange, and it was also frightening. That is ever-present in Bowles’ writing. She seems to say, ‘This is how it goes.’ Life is incomprehensible, existence is bizarre, unaccountable, mean. There may be beauty or joy, momentary as a parting glance, so her characters will hope for even momentary happiness, as does Jeanie — genie — when she rushes out into the unknown to feel it before it goes.

Goering strikes out, wanting bold adventures, while Mrs. Copperfield trails after her husband, an unwilling traveler/tourist, full of fear. At the end of this seminal, tragi-comic, picaresque novel, they both return home, something their author never did.

Jane Bowles died, in a Spanish hospital, Clinica de Reposa de Los Angeles, run by Catholic nuns, not knowing her name. She lived there—existed—for over five years. The year she died, 1973, the copyright for *Two Serious Ladies* should have been renewed: The law then was to renew copyright 28 years after the date of first copyright. But it wasn’t. Jane Bowles died, and the same year her only novel, forgotten by its publisher, was sent into Public Domain.

Tennessee Williams proclaimed, ‘I consider her the most important writer of prose fiction in modern American letters.’ This most important writer’s body of work summarily disappeared, and, ironically, sadly, absurdly, her corpse did, too. Upon her death, Paul Bowles had her body interred in a cemetery in San Miguel, Malaga, but leased the plot for only ten years, then let it lapse. The location of her grave became a mystery, and, without a renewed lease, ‘[b]ecause no one had claimed Jane’s remains in response to official notification, her body would [have been] thrown into a common grave.’ Let’s say, the public domain for corpses.

Paul Bowles built his own shrine to Jane Bowles in his apartment in Tangier. He dedicated a wooden shelf to her books in all their editions and translations. (I visited his home in 1987.) Ultimately, though he had no truck with graves or an after-life, he permitted a young student, enamored of Jane Bowles, to move her body to another cemetery (the cemetery where JB had been buried might itself be buried under a highway). The young woman was rebuffed by Malaga officials, who suddenly decided Jane Bowles’ grave was important to the city’s cultural history.

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9 Ibid.
Bowles’ skull and bones have had a very peculiar trajectory, if I can call it that, and to say her corpse has been homeless is too cute. It’s a long, complicated saga about which both Millicent Dillon and Jon Carlson have given full accounts.\textsuperscript{10} To cut to the quick, Bowles’s final resting place has depended upon what Tennessee Williams called ‘the kindness of strangers’.

Searching for her grave, Jon Carlson found a kindly priest, maybe saintly, called Padre Jose. He had become the keeper of Jane Bowles’ flame.

Padre José said that Jane’s new grave, established through the efforts of the municipality of Málaga and the Association of Friends of San Miguel Cemetery, had been unveiled mid-October, 1999. Afterwards, he added secretively, ‘But in the evening she moves all over the cemetery, and I am here to watch over her.’\textsuperscript{11}

Mentioning her work in conversations; assigning her novel and stories to students, and writing about her, those who treasure Jane Bowles’ body of work try to watch over it. Though I’m not completely pessimistic, I regularly observe the literary drift, the burials and un-earthings of writers’ reputations. They come and go, ‘talking of Michaelangelo’, T.S. Eliot put it, and Eliot also, like Chaucer for 200 years after his death, will likely come and go. Here today, gone tomorrow.

Any writer who believes in her or his literary immortality is delusional. Writers, especially females — Clarice Lispector, for example, who is enjoying a rebirth of interest — writers whose work is mordant, elegant, even grim, their books will disappear. And maybe they’ll return from the OP cemetery, rise from the dead, but only if a living person or two feels a great debt to that great writer. And, if that writer’s books are reissued, smartly

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
repackaged, it will have resulted only from vigilance, devotion, and love.