

UP ABOVE THE WORLD : A PEOPLED LAND?

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Up Above The World, written in 1966, is the fourth novel by the American expatriate writer Paul Bowles and the only one in his long fiction output considered a murder novel or a thriller (Hibbard, 1993: 84). Most readers' experience of the novel would bear out this claim concerning its genre : in *Up Above The World* the world itself takes on a most menacing aspect . Beguiled into the assumed safety of a private home, two American travellers (not tourists) in Central America, find themselves ensnared in an incomprehensive and delusive web . The travellers, Taylor and Day Slade, become physically ill and suffer from lapses of memory. The reason is that all the while, their host, a wealthy and young man named Grove Soto, is feeding them LSD and injecting them with morphine and scopolamine. He has just had his mother murdered by his friend Thorny, and he fears that the Slades, who have made her acquaintance en route to the city where Soto lives, might harbour suspicions about the true nature of Mrs Rainmantle's death.

Our concern in this paper will be to explore the manner in which background, understood as nature, landscape and people, contributes to creating that ominous atmosphere and all-pervading sense of unease in *Up Above The World*. To elaborate on this, we will draw on the term 'contact zone' coined by Mary Louise Pratt (Pratt, 1997). To further expatiate on the role played by background we will concentrate on a motif which is recurrently used in the novel: the *motif* of the mask. We will therefore attempt, by critically weaving around the term "contact zone" and the *motif* of the mask, to set the tenor of some pivotal passages within the larger frame of the novel and show how so much of the terror unleashed turns on this depiction of background.

This reading we propose owes much to the insightful interpretative work done by the American critic Richard F. Patteson in his book *A World Out-side. The Fiction of Paul Bowles* (1987). In a broadly consistent reference to *Up Above The World* he rightly argues that 'the terror and uneasiness conveyed are to be put down to the bewildering web of shifts in sequence and point of view' (Patteson, 1987: 92).

By making Grove Soto a malevolent centre of consciousness, Patteson argues, Bowles makes the reader privy to the perspective of the source of danger. It is often Soto

himself who manipulates the various denouements- his mother's murder, the Slades' visit to his house, Taylor's illness, the prolongation of the visit, Taylor's death and Day's death. Those manipulations strategically build up tension and boost the sense of danger. It is incontrovertible then that that point of view is crucial to convey the ominous atmosphere which constitutes the reader's experience of the novel.

When it comes to the role played by background in the economy of the novel Patteson argues that 'the cultural background in *Up Above The World is just that - background*' (ibid: 44; emphasis added). Patteson expounds his view on the subject and says:

Unlike Bowles' North African novels, in which the cultural texture is an integral part of the story and has much to do with its outcome, Up Above the World could take place almost anywhere. Bowles clearly does not attempt to involve whole cultures or societies in the action of this novel. (ibid:44)

It is precisely in this connection then that Patteson's assessment concerning the role of cultural background in the novel becomes deeply problematic.

A perfunctory reading of the novel would in all likelihood confirm Patteson's viewpoint. At the beginning of the novel, in Chapter 5, Mrs Rainmantle, Soto's mother, calls the place pinned to the map somewhere near Trinidad and Georgetown 'a republic' (Bowles, 1982: 25). Notwithstanding the loose geographical reference, the inference we can draw is that the country is Venezuela. Moreover, despite the fact that the itinerary of Dr Slade and Day Slade's journey into the country is clearly marked and easy to trace: from La Resaca to Puerto Farol and from there uphill to the Capital with a stop at Tolosa and tierra caliente the last stage of the journey, the glimpses we get of the towns they stop at are as devoid of people as places on a map. La Resaca, the first stop on the Slades' coastwise journey is a 'deserted town' (ibid: 11). Puerto Farol, as seen through the eyes of Dr. Slade is but 'A town of corrugated iron, raw concrete and barbed wire' (ibid:25). Not unlike La Resaca and Puerto Farol, the 'shabby and provincial' capital is 'deserted after midnight' (ibid:44). Despite the fact that they are on unfamiliar territory, the Slades claim authoritativeness for their vision: what they see is what there is. On some occasions, as during Day's ride with Soto, we get people but only in bulk:

The car moved up a long steep ramp lined with palms and azaleas. At the top there was a park with a railing that ran along the edge of a cliff, where crowds of people leaned, looking down at the city in the haze below. (ibid: 51)

The gesture of endowing them with more definite anthropomorphic features comes short of a portrayal. Admittedly, they are depicted as mere backdrop to the main action:

In the center of the room a black woman on her knees scrubbed the already spotless board floor. There was no one else in evidence, although faint sounds came from the region of the kitchen. Someone, they assumed, was making the coffee that would finally persuade them they were alive. (ibid: 11)

On the face of it, one ought to conclude after Patteson that we only get a string of geographical names and anthropomorphized human sketches serving as a foil to the action of the main characters. Social interactions between them and the local inhabitants are either not fully dramatized or at most tangentially mentioned. The textual rendering would thus efface the dynamic and conclusive role of cultural background from *Up Above The World*.

However, the analysis of what Patteson calls the 'figure in Paul Bowles' carpet' (Patteson: 2) will enable us to take the point of cultural background further:

The open window, the exposed, vulnerable individual, and the encroachment of a cold outside on a not very safe interior together constitute something like a figure in Paul Bowles' carpet. (ibid: 2)

That this *motif* of interiors and exteriors with its play of transpositions and shifts is everywhere present in *Up Above The World* is beyond denial; what remains to be determined is how this figure of interiors and exteriors and background interlock in this

‘contact zone’ which Mary Louise Pratt defines as ‘the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations’ (Pratt:6).

That the novel hinges on a ‘figure’ of interiors and exteriors (Patteson: 3) is made plain from the beginning. There is above all a blurring of the limits between inside and outside and the exterior’s encroachment of the trespassable interior. On the very first page of the novel we are told the Slades are in a hotel somewhere in Latin America waiting anxiously to get aboard a ship. While waiting for his breakfast, Dr. Slade looks out of the window and what he sees is this: ‘Outside the window the morning mist dripped from banana leaf to banana leaf’ (Bowles,1966:11). Inside ‘The clock over the sideboard ticked fast and loud. Time bomb, Dr. Slade thought as he looked out over the wet greenness of the hotel gardens’ (ibid:11). These two sentences represent the way things impinge on his mind. Outside, he can see the mist; inside, he can hear the clock ticking. One could claim there is a world of a difference between the two things. But the dripping has a certain rhythm and so does the clock. The proximity of the sentences is then far from gratuitous. Where is the time bomb? Outside, over the ‘wet greenness of the hotel garden’ (ibid:11) or inside?

This minatory and menacing tone is further developed and elaborated on at different points in the novel. In Chapter 7 we are told that once at Puerto Farol Dr. Slade and his wife go out for a walk and that they venture too far. They walk along an alley and then along a boardwalk on a swamp. The strangeness of the place together with the croaking of the frogs and the menace of bats overwhelms them and fills them with fear.

This is the picture of nature we get as we are told of Grove and Thorny’s murderous trip to Puerto Farol:

When they got into the lowlands the giant sky turned gray. There were stretches where the road was narrow and curving, and the vegetation, reaching out from both sides, hit the car and scraped along its body... The hot filthy villages went past, the forest between them black and rotting. (ibid: 84)

The account of Dr. Slade and Soto’s trip to Los Hermanos also abounds in suchlike descriptions of nature:

Only a moment before he had made the discovery that the frogs were aware of being a chorus; they sang together in rhythm. Then, for the fraction of a second, looking up at the chaos of vegetation overhead, he had very clearly seen each bough and leaf pulsating with the frogs, in exactly the same rhythmic patterns.
(ibid:105,106)

At the hotel at Puerto Farol where the Slades and Mrs Rainmantle are staying the vegetation is rampant:

The single window, next to the door, gave directly onto the veranda that encircled the whole second story..... Over the years a great collection of potted tropical flowers had been set on the floor along its railings; these had flourished , pushed forth fronds and spikes, extended creepers and branches, with the result that in places they constituted a veritable forest to be got through as one made one's way along the gallery. (ibid. p.26)

In all these excerpts what we find is not only a sort of nature anchored in the visible, but also an endless expansion and contraction of invisible forces. Nature in these depictions is dramatic and extraordinary, conforming a spectacle capable of overwhelming human knowledge and understanding. It is not a kind of nature that sits waiting to be known and possessed, but it is nature visible and in motion, powered by life forces many of which are indeed invisible to the human eye. This nature informing the fabula is 'animist', always threatening to trespass and encroach.

So far, we would again have to agree with Patteson on the fact that , cultural background being absent, *Up Above The World* 'could take place almost anywhere' (Patteson: 44). A cursory reading would no doubt confirm this view. The 'essential Bowles format' (Hibbard, 1993:242), as Stephen Koch describes it, consisting of 'a westerner -i.e., a rationalist, therefore a naif- disoriented in some seductive , alien elsewhere' appears to be lacking.

The point we want to make is that, even if cultural background, understood as the representation of the close tie that is forged between a people and its land, seems obliterated from the plot of *Up Above The World*, it is in fact looming large on the surface of the story and, thus, becomes even weightier. Reaching out into alien territory is indeed so often couched in cultural terms that it would be a mistake to treat the cultural dimension in *Up Above The World* as tangential to its economy and texture. ‘*Tierra caliente*’ is undoubtedly ‘a social space where disparate cultures meet clash, and grapple with each other often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination- like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today.’ (Pratt: 4) The complexities of life in this ‘contact zone’ show up in *Up Above The World* in glimpses.

The passage quoted below, in which Day’s stay with Luchita after Soto and Dr Slade’s departure for Los Hermanos is recounted, exposes to view that complexity :

...A vast novel was unfolding; she recognized the backdrop as a sinister distortion of the actual landscape outside the apartment. The countryside was peopled, but she could not see the faces. Now and then, with the regularity of a nerve aching, the conviction swept over her that the faces belonged to an unknown monstrous race. (Bowles,1982: 117)

By this swift and cunning turn, the backdrop of the apartment comes to be identified as a distortion of the landscape outside. The word countryside is ambiguous in this context: it can refer both to the actual outside or to the apartment. The people inside have taken on that feature which singles out the unknown race that people that landscape: its monstrosity. Dr. Slade experiences much the same sensations when at Los Hermanos: ‘This was a red jungle. There were floor lamps and rugs in the clearings, and rows of books back in the shadows. The wilderness was peopled, but the men were all strangers’ (ibid:107). Attributing this perception to the effect the drug Soto feeds Dr Slade has on him would be downplaying the effectiveness of the procedure. More to the point, we can already see it at work during the Slades’ visit to Soto’s apartment:

The air in there had seemed stuffy; there had been a faint animal smell in it, or, if not exactly animal, something he connected with 'native' life. He could not identify it, but he knew it was surprising to find the smell here in this apartment. (ibid:99)

The wilderness associated with native life has also trespassed on this place. The same unnerving feeling is present as a misgiving when Dr Slade first meets Soto:

Dr. Slade watched the young man as he walked away across the terrace. He frowned. the all-enveloping charm of his young host made him uneasy; without hesitation he rejected it. There was no chance of its being real. (ibid:100)

The same uneasiness and ill foreboding overtakes Day on her first visit to Soto's place: 'On Day's first visit to Soto's place, she found herself in an apartment perched high above the city and furnished with glass and metals, rocks and plants' (ibid: 52). The place, an apartment perched high above the city, fills her with apprehension. This feeling stems from the disturbing presence of rampant foliage indoors: 'The wall in front of her was entirely hidden by a barrage of trees and vines that reached to the ceiling; illuminated dimly from within, it gave her the feeling of being at the edge of a forest' (ibid: 53). It is the permeation of the boundaries that Day finds most threatening.

Repeatedly throughout the story we hear one distinct note: seeing/not seeing and this in connection with masking. Dr Slade finds himself at home at night when neither land nor people can be seen. For him the cityscapes are constructed around ugliness, grotesquery, and decay: 'This is the good hour, when the stars are still shining and it's finally cool, and you can't see anything of the town' (ibid: 37). His accounts not only complain of an esthetic and semantic underdevelopment of the places visited but also, in an act of denial, dehumanize the land: 'He had seen enough of it on his way from the dock to the hotel' (ibid: 25). For him the urban landscape lacks shape, finiteness, pattern, history. Not least, it also lacks people. Slade seems to construct the place out of an act of rejection. His are the eyes of what Mary Louise Pratt calls 'the seeing-man' (Pratt:220). Despite the fact that they are on unfamiliar territory, the seeing men 'claim

authoritativeness for their vision. What they see is what there is. No sense of limitation on their interpretative powers is suggested' (ibid: 117).

This issue of seeing/not seeing surfaces again as Day Slade and Thorny leave the Fiesta behind and come across a group of Indians sitting quietly in the dust: '... burning candles and carbide lamps, arranging their herbs and copal in small designs on the ground in front of them, their *empty* eyes fixed upon a point beyond the town' (Bowles, 1966: 191; emphasis added). This account clearly hinges on the aforementioned distinction. The Indians cannot see- their eyes are hollow. Theirs are the eyes on masks because they are empty.

However, this view seems to be called into question by Day's previous experience while she was having to shove her way through the plaza:

"Do we have to get into the middle of it?" she shouted. He seemed not to hear her, and only shoved her ahead. She felt the bodies pushing and twisting against her on all sides, saw the shiny painted masks: skulls, monkeys, demons- and the purpose of the fiesta came to her. She was sure that beneath the masks the faces were unfriendly. (ibid: 190)

The question to posit is: are those eyes actually hollow? Interestingly enough, those wearing masks seem to lend them a spark of vitality with the light flashing from their own eyes and, at the same time, seem to take on the identity of the masks they are cloaked in.

This *motif* of the mask is recurrently used in the novel. While under the effect of drugs at Soto's apartment Day faces somebody donning a mask and is overtaken by a feeling of ill-will: 'A strange woman stood over her; she had a face of luminous white wax. Her eyes were staring down at the bed with an expression of hatred' (ibid: 119). Ascribing Day's state of mind and consequent misgivings to intoxication would not seem reason enough to regard them as groundless. That this is not so is proved by the change brought about by the reversal of point of view: 'Paloma eyed the foreign lady mistrustfully; she had seen enough gringas to decide straightaway that this one was drunk' (ibid: 118). It is not just Day's fancy; the mistrust is there, in Paloma's eyes. More telling is Paloma's impassive and unresponsive attitude to Day's ineffectual efforts to cover herself:

Mrs. Slade's palsied hands clawed frantically at the sheet; she was trying to cover herself. Paloma only looked. She did not lean over to help her. The gringa was not a person. That's what they come to, she told herself. (ibid: 119).

In *Up Above The World* masks are ubiquitous; not only are they being donned by people but they also fulfil a decorative function: 'The dining room was a small museum of pre-Columbian art; its walls were peppered with niches that held masks and sculptures' (ibid:160). The uneasiness and foreboding those presences set off reveal far more than an aversion to some specific outward form of the mask. The terror they unleash is closely tied with their being Indian:

"I think Luchita and I see it the same way," she finally said.

"These Indian things down here give me the shudders."

"Don't you think it's a beauty?" Grove demanded.

"It's magnificent. But I wouldn't want to live anywhere near it. I don't even like to touch these things"

Her tone had become one of apology; then it resumed its natural sound.

"I think these were pretty terrible civilizations, don't you?" (ibid: 162)

Masking is associated with dilemmas of identity and in '*tierra caliente*',¹ we will hold, it certainly always has dimensions of race and ethnicity. 'Contact zone,' says Mary Louise Pratt 'is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historic disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect'

¹ '*...tierra caliente...*' (Bowles: 1982,137) Luchita and Vero use that name to refer to San Felipe, the ranch. La Tierra Caliente is also the translated title of *Up Above The World* in the Spanish version by Rodrigo Rey Rosa (Bowles, P. (1966) *La Tierra Caliente*, trad. Rodrigo Rey Rosa. Madrid: Alfaguara, 1997).

(Pratt: 6). This “contact”² perspective, she claims, enables to treat the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travellers and “travelees”,³ not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power (Pratt: 7). It is then in this ‘contact zone’ as crystallized *Up Above The World*, a scene invariably ominous with secret terrors, that the sense of evil springs.

By way of conclusion and to recap the argument, let us say that the cultural background is positively an integral part of the novel. In *Up Above the World* Bowles depicts a land that is far from empty. At most, it seems so. This “native” life’ (Bowles: 99), as Dr Slade calls it, does not inhabit a separate textual homeland; its/their ghostly presence is lurking, on masks, behind masks, on empty eyes. Masking as mystery, uncertainty, pain, masking as endless and always imbricated in colonial and post-colonial histories and contexts is ever present in *Up Above the World*. Masking, as we said above, is associated with dilemmas of identity and, in that part of the world with its centuries-long history of invasion, dispossession, colonisation and slavery, it unarguably bears dimensions of race and ethnicity. The ‘contact zone’ Pratt refers to is in *Up Above the World* a space peopled by a monstrous race.

But theirs is too powerful a force to be kept at bay and it surreptitiously comes onto the scene. ... Then terror is unleashed.

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² The term ‘contact’ is used in the original between double inverted commas.

³ The term ‘travelees’ is used in the original between double inverted commas.

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