Jane Bowles

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Early in *Two Serious Ladies*, Jane Bowles's first and only novel, the reader learns that Christina Goering "was in the habit of going through mental struggles—generally of a religious nature—and she preferred to be with other people and organize games" (4). Jane Bowles, too, organizes games. Bowles, like her character Goering, does not employ established rules; she makes up her own to suit her imagination, an imagination that explores and exposes new territories. In his introduction to *My Sister's Hand in Mine: The Collected Works of Jane Bowles*, Truman Capote points out that Bowles speaks "with the greatest precision" (xiv), and hers is an original precision. Each piece presses past genre constraints to break established conventions. While the discourse offered by Adrienne Rich is useful for understanding her work, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari also provide an intriguing conceptual framework for considering her oeuvre, because Jane Bowles confronts conventions. In fact, Bowles creates new forms so that she does not languish in creative repetition. Once Bowles solves a puzzle, she refuses to recycle solutions. With each new project, with each new puzzle, she creates an original solution.

In the first section of *Two Serious Ladies*, which lasts only six pages, Christina Goering, as a child, plays a game with her sister's friend, Mary. The game is called "I'll forgive you for all your sins" (6). For the game, Mary is forced to wear a burlap sack, and after Mary is packed with mud, Christina washes away her sins in a stream. Yet, before the game begins, Mary understandably asks: "Is it fun?" (6). Christina's answer: "It's not for fun that we play it, but because it's necessary to play it" (6). Bowles writes for the same reason: because it is necessary to write. Writing for Bowles is not a matter of choice; it is a calling. Even at a very young age, Bowles knew that she had to be a writer.

In 1934, at 17, Bowles met Céline during a transatlantic voyage. On arriving in New York, Bowles told her mother, Claire: "I am a writer, and I want to write" (Dillon, *Sin* 27). Once in New York, according to Millicent Dillon's superb biography on Jane Bowles, *A Little Original Sin: The Life and Work of Jane Bowles*, Bowles started to write a novel in French, *Le Phaéton Hypocrite*. According to Dillon, "though she made herself write, there was something about writing that she hated. She wanted to be out in the world doing, with her wildness, finding her own new way" (28). This finding her "own new way"
is as applicable to her life as it is to her writing. In the new 2005 edition of *My Sister's Hand in Mine*, Joy Williams, in her preface, recounts her impression when reading *Two Serious Ladies* for the first time. "Voyaging for the first time into *Two Serious Ladies*, I was immediately disoriented. I did not know what to make of this object at all" (vii). This disorientation is intentional, as Jane Bowles wants the reader to (re)orient to a new literature, a literature that maneuvers in a new space beyond accepted norms.

After the game with Mary, the novel picks up with Goering as a grown woman. The narrator tells the reader that Goering "was no better liked than she had been as a child" (8). Goering, the first of the two serious ladies, is financially independent, and she is alone until her governess's cousin, Miss Gamelon, moves in with her. When they first meet, Gamelon asks Goering about traveling, supposing that since Goering is wealthy she naturally travels. "I never thought of traveling," Goering answers, "I don't require travel" (9). The quest is not of the body but of the mind. When writing *Two Serious Ladies*, Bowles sent a letter to her dear friend Miriam Levy. In the letter, dated six years before the novel's publication, Bowles briefly refers to the novel. "I am in the middle of a novel—and Big dramas all around me. I'm not sure whether I'll come out on top there are so many things against me" (Dillon, *Letters* 19). For Bowles, there is little difference between imagining the novel and imagining life, and Bowles invents a new writing to resolve the dramas. Like with the initial brief section where Goering plays a moral game with Mary, the stakes are enormous.

At a party, Goering meets her friend, Mrs. Copperfield, the second serious lady. Copperfield tells Goering that she is "going away" (15). Goering, a literalist, asks: "Do you mean that you are leaving this party?" (15). Copperfield answers that she is going on a trip; her trip becomes the mesmerizing second chapter of the novel. Before the scene ends, Copperfield identifies one of Goering's dominant traits: "You are gloriously unpredictable and you are afraid of no one but yourself" (15). The third and final chapter of the novel pursues Goering as she tests the boundaries of her fears. During the party, Goering advises Copperfield to confront her fears, particularly after Copperfield admits that she does not believe she will be able to "bear" her trip. Goering tells her: "I would go anyway" (18). For Goering, the only course of action that is acceptable is to confront one's fears. Nothing is worse than turning and running away. Jane Bowles, too, tested herself. During an interview with Dillon, Paul Bowles recounted an evening when Jane spent the night wandering around the docks of New York. When Paul asked Jane why she had been walking, she responded: "Because that was the one place I didn't want to be. I'm terrified of it" (Dillon, *Sin* 74). When Paul asked
Jane why she went, Jane answered: "Don't ask me. You ought to know why. I had to or I couldn't face myself in the mirror tomorrow if I hadn't gone because that was the one thing I was afraid of" (74). To confront fears is the essence of Jane Bowles, and the only way to really confront those fears is realizing them in the imagination. To opt out is not an option.

Goering, while still at the party, has an opportunity to face her fears. Arnold, a hanger-on at the party, asks Goering to accompany him home. She accepts because she "did not quite know how to get out of accepting his invitation" (18). Even though Goering is anxious, she continues on the journey. Once they are in a cab, she admits: "I always think that the driver is only waiting for the passengers to become absorbed in conversation in order to shoot down some street, to an inaccessible and lonely place where he will either torture or murder them" (19). Importantly, she realizes that though people feel the same as she does, they do not express it: "I am certain that most people feel the same way about it that I do, but they have the good taste not to mention it" (19). Bowles's originality stems from her desire to mention it. To keep silent is problematic, and too often silence is the typical course.

Instead of returning home, Goering agrees to spend the night. It turns out that Arnold lives with his parents. Arnold's father appears in the kitchen, and once Goering is in the guestroom, he visits her. They share a doctrine that values experience and action. Arnold's father says, "I'm a great believer in personal experience, aren't you?" (25). Goering readily agrees. Arnold's father then dismisses his son who believes that he is an artist. "He hasn't got the brawn nor the nerve nor the perseverance to be a good artist. An artist must have brawn and pluck and character" (26). Dillon's biography makes clear that Bowles had brawn, pluck, and character, and Truman Capote in his introduction recognizes the exertion necessary to write: "Actually, writing is never easy: in case anyone doesn't know, it's the hardest work around; and for Jane I think it is difficult to the point of true pain" (xvi). The true pain stems from her desire to write something new. As Carol Shloss argues in her essay, "Jane Bowles in Uninhabitable Places," Goering wants to "go into uncharted spiritual territory" (113). The same can be said of Jane Bowles; she ventures into uncharted spiritual territory, like Franz Kafka.

Dillon in her biography argues that in Two Serious Ladies, "There are ellipses of thought and feeling but before we can catch them something else preoccupies the characters. Feelings come and go and overlie each other like polyphonic music" (104). Dillon, of course, aligns Jane Bowles to her husband Paul, a composer as well as writer. Dillon's notion of ellipses is insightful, particularly when using the
framework established by Deleuze and Guattari. In A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari assemble a meaning for majority: "Majority implies a constant, of expression and content, serving as a standard measure by which to evaluate it" (105). Jane Bowles is not a writer writing a customary text for the majority. Like Kafka, Bowles writes minor literature, literature where "We witness a transformation of substances and a dissolution of forms, a passage to the limit or flight from contours in favor of fluid forces, flows, air, light, and matter, such that a body or a word does not end at a precise point" (109). The mixed reviews for Two Serious Ladies make obvious this continuum. Reviewers entrenched in accepted standards tended to be confused by Two Serious Ladies. Those reviewers, however, who valued the fluidity of Bowles's text perceived its brilliance.

In Two Serious Ladies, Arnold’s mother affirms the status quo; she confronts her husband and Goering in the guest room, accusing Goering of being a harlot. Defending Goering, Arnold’s father says: “How dare you call anyone that is staying in our house a harlot! You are violating the laws of hospitality to the hundredth degree and I’m not going to stand for it” (27-8). Goering leaves after Arnold’s father follows his wife back to their bedroom. The following day, Goering tells Gamelon that “in order to work out my own little idea of salvation I really believe that it is necessary for me to live in some more tawdry place and particularly in some place where I was not born” (28). Goering, with both Arnold and Gamelon in tow, affects the move to a little house on an island after selling her childhood home. The house is “not far from the city by ferryboat” (33), and the house is modeled after the house Jane and Paul Bowles rented on Woodrow Road, Staten Island.

Goering’s movement from comfort, from a stable lexicon, aligns with Bowles’s creative impulse. Bowles does not want to construct a novel using a standardized rubric; she wants to create her own rules. This, of course, is the same impulse that drives Bowles’s desire to create each piece anew.

This originality, however, caused anxiety. After the mixed reception to Two Serious Ladies, in addition to starting on a play, In the Summer House, she also started working on a new novel. In a letter to Paul, Jane writes: “The more I get into it [the novel], 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” (Dillon, Letters 22). Originality isolates, and her isolation causes her to question whether anyone is interested in her stories. “I am serious but I am isolated and my experience is probably of no interest at this point to anyone” (Dillon, Letters 33). This doubt would linger, and it would impede her writing.
Two Serious Ladies was originally conceived as Three Serious Ladies, until Paul suggested cutting a chapter set in Guatemala. The extracted section became the seed for a short story, “A Guatemalan Idyll,” which was published in 1944. This picturesque short story follows a traveler who stays in Guatemala for a vacation after completing some business. He remains simply “because he had always heard that a vacation in a foreign country was a desirable thing” (327). Though he immediately regrets his decision, he has no choice since there is “no boat out before the following Monday” (327). The story, however, is less about the traveler than the milieu of the pension, Pension Espinoza, where he is staying. And, the milieu empowers Bowles, as she is able to offer up variation on the style of Two Serious Ladies while putting pressure on the protagonist’s ethos: “The world is the world, after all is said and done, and a patch of grass in one place is green the way it is in any other” (321). By the end of the story, the nameless traveler has slept with a Señora Ramirez. He, though, quickly dismisses the event as lacking any importance. As he packs “with the vivacity of one who is in the habit of making little excursions away from the charmed fold,” he says to himself: “I sure have been giddy in this place, but the bad dream is now over” (357). The traveler is certain that he will never return. Señora Ramirez, though, recognizes that actions do not always follow masculine logic. After his niceties, she says: “Adios, señor, and may God protect you on your trip. You will be coming back maybe. You don’t know” (358). The certainty offered up by the traveler is undercut with the more knowing statement—“You don’t know.” This acceptance of the unknown is one of the strengths of Bowles’s narratives. She does not allow certainty in an uncertain world.

The story ends with Señora Ramirez looking around the patio. “She saw Señorita Córdoba move away from the half-open bedroom door where she had been standing” (358). In an unpublished excerpt from the story, Señorita Córdoba surrenders herself to Señor Ramirez in order to get money to set up a dress shop. With bravado, he says: “There are no disappointments in my life” (qtd. in Dillon, Sin 105), continuing later to suggest that Córdoba simply has “not had the right kind of love” (qtd. in Dillon, Sin 106). As he unbuttons his pants, “Señorita Córdoba remembered that many men were not interested in ladies nearly as much after they had made love to them as they were beforehand, so she decided that she had better make sure that she received a check first” (qtd. in Dillon, Sin 106). Continuing his boasting, Ramirez tells her that she’ll be able to open fifty dress shops. Like most bravado, his boasting misses the point; he is oblivious to her true desires. “I would not ask for fifty. Only for one” (qtd. in Dillon, Sin 106). A disconnect exists here and is absolute; Ramirez, like the traveler, is clueless.
Here as in her other works, Jane Bowles places tremendous pressure too on relationships, particularly the relationship between mothers and daughters. In “A Guatemalan Idyll,” after telling her daughter, Consuelo, that she has “no merriment in [her] heart,” Señora Ramirez says: “Sometimes I feel that I am walking along with an assassin” (333). The notion of menace appears again after Señora Ramirez finds out that one of her daughters has thrown her corset in the fountain. “I have no more strength than a sparrow. I would like to send my children to the four winds and sleep and sleep and sleep” (335). This troubles Señora Espinoza, a witness, who, following convention, says: “They are flowers that brighten your life” (335). The juxtaposition is telling, as is the truthfulness of both utterances. Answers are never clearly delineated in the writing of Jane Bowles. Mikhail Bakhtin would approve of the dialogic quality of her work, since he values the “living utterance.” “The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consequences around the given object of the utterance” (276). Bowles writes this way when she crashes two varying utterances together in order to demonstrate the constructedness of both. The reader is forced into uncertain territory, oscillating back and forth between competing structures.

Interestingly enough, the material of “A Guatemalan Idyll” was also worked into a play. A typed version, Once by Fire, can be viewed at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. While the play is largely the same as the story, the dialogic quality of the play places even more pressure on the conversations between and among the characters. One interesting omission from the short story occurs during the love scene between the traveler and Señora Ramirez. “‘Dear God!’ she said. ‘Dear God!’ They were in the very act of making love. ‘I have lived twenty years for this moment and I cannot think that heaven itself could be more wonderful’” (340). While this could simply be a euphoric cry during lovemaking, it seems more likely that the reader is supposed to feel a particular discomfort, because—like Señorita Córdoba—Señora Ramirez will eventually be left behind at the pension, in the company of her little assassins.

Like in “A Guatemalan Idyll,” where Bowles constructs a story that deals simultaneously with a number of characters, Two Serious Ladies in its second chapter shifts its focus from Christina Goering to Mrs. Copperfield. Initially, Copperfield appears only as a secondary character Goering meets at a party, and thus, except for the title, the first chapter does little to prepare the reader for this shift. It seems likely that Paul Bowles’s reservation about the Guatemalan section
being included in “Three Serious Ladies” was structural. Dillon agrees with his criticism, arguing: “The work has a unity and tightness it would not have had otherwise” (107). Yet, using the lexicon developed by Deleuze and Guattari, it can be said that Bowles wrote “rhizomatically”—“by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” (Plateaus 21): “unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature” (21). Paradoxically, she is also, at the same time, always trying—through experimentation, through variation, through exploration of the topsy-turvy—to come to a legitimate understanding of society. As such, to judge the novel by its greater “unity” and “tightness” after the excision may be to bring an overly conventional, and finally inappropriate, standard of success to bear on a work that, however subtly, was never intended to be conventional.

Two years after Two Serious Ladies was published, Bowles published another fragment from the missing chapter, “A Day in the Open,” in Partisan Review. It is the story of a prostitute named Julia. Señor Ramirez, the husband of Señora Ramirez from “A Guatemalan Idyll,” also plays an integral part. Yet, even though the stories are linked, they are distinct. In “A Day in the Open,” Julia is “a great favorite with the men,” not because of her appearance but because the men felt that they were “endangering her very life by going to bed with her” (403). Early in the story, Julia admits to Inez, another prostitute: “I am so weak and ill that I am becoming more like my grandmother everyday. She had a feeling that she was not wanted here on this earth, either by God or by other people, so she never felt that she could refuse anyone anything” (404). Even though she is exhausted, Julia prepares with Inez to spend an afternoon with Señor Ramirez and his friend, Alfredo, an accountant who is more interested in ledgers than playing with prostitutes. En route to their picnic, Ramirez, a man with tremendous bravado, brags about his success and the success of the community, pointing out for instance a new museum that is being built.

After seeing some Indians on the road, Julia is troubled. “‘Walk, walk, walk . . .’ said Julia mournfully. ‘Oh, how tired it makes me feel to watch them!’” (406). Inez, the second prostitute, quickly reprimands Julia, saying: “You are not in your room. You daren’t say things like that. You must not speak of being tired. It’s no fun for them. They wouldn’t like it” (406). Importantly, it is not Ramirez who chastises Julia; it is Inez; the reification of social structures strikes Julia from all fronts. Not surprisingly, the church also provides moral boundaries. At one point, Ramirez tells Alfredo that he does “not understand why in the eyes of God they should be condemned to the fires of hell for what they are” (408). Shortly after this conversation, they devise a game where they throw acorns into a hat, though in order to avoid
the game being “just a foolish children’s game,” Ramirez suggests that the “two women should be naked while we are playing” (409). As the game continues, Julia inappropriately asks Ramirez about his wife and kids. Inez bites her lip and shakes her head. Ramirez answers: “They are well taken care of. I have sent them to a little town where they are staying in a pension. Quiet women—all three of them—the little girls and the mother” (410). In “A Guatemalan Idyll,” we see the characters through a different prism. And, this difference informs much of Jane Bowles’s writing; perceptions are often skewed, not always aligning with reality.

In the end, the fragility of Julia and the precariousness of her situation, comes to the fore. Ramirez, who has carried Julia into a fast moving current, tells her that if he lets her go “[it] would carry you along like a leaf over the falls, and then one of those big rocks would make a hole in your head” (412). Like the baptism in Two Serious Ladies, the scene is fraught with vaguely concealed violence, and the horror is eventually realized when Ramirez “grew increasingly careless as the current slackened, with the result that he miscalculated and his foot slipped between two stones. This threw him off balance and he fell” (412). While the narrated event is a head wound suffered when Julia is dropped by Ramirez, as a metaphor, it is clearly applicable to her life as a whole. Ramirez, rather than being concerned, makes an excuse: “Those damn rocks were slippery” (412). When they return to the picnic site, Ramirez wants to leave immediately without even cleaning up. Before Inez quickly collects their things, intending to keep them to give as gifts to her family, she says that “Terrible things always happen to Julia. She is the daughter of misfortune” (412). There is no resolution at the end of the story; Julia remains as Inez describes her.

A similar disconnect is seen at the start of the second chapter of Two Serious Ladies. The Copperfields are on the foredeck of a boat as it approaches Panama. Mrs. Copperfield is glad to see land not because she is excited about landing but rather because “She herself had a great fear of drowning” (35). As Mr. Copperfield admires the emerging shoreline and its bustle of activity, Mrs. Copperfield is warned by a woman to take care of herself and to avoid Colon: “The American quarter is called Cristobal. It’s separated from Colon. Colon is full of nothing but half-breeds and monkeys” (36). The woman believes that Mrs. Copperfield is safe because Mrs. Copperfield is traveling with her husband. Mrs. Copperfield becomes horrified with herself after responding: “That doesn’t help” (36). The woman, though, believes that a tussle must have precipitated Mrs. Copperfield’s peculiar answer. Mrs. Copperfield does not give a satisfactory response, so the woman becomes distraught, telling Mrs. Copperfield that “you’re a terrible little woman talking that
way about your husband” (37). It becomes clear rather quickly that the Copperfields live in different worlds.

Mr. Copperfield is consumed with getting into the town and wandering about without concern for his wife. During their initial foray together, they run into a prostitute who says to Mrs. Copperfield: “You come along with me, darling, and you’ll have the happiest time you’ve ever had before. I’ll be your type” (41). The eroticism that had been simmering comes to full view. Mr. Copperfield takes control, saying: “I don’t believe that she wants to go to a bar just now . . . We’d like to explore the town awhile first” (41). He speaks only for himself; Mrs. Copperfield is flushed with excitement. This homoeroticism caused Jane Bowles’s family and Helvetia Perkins, Jane Bowles’s lover, to dislike the novel. Yet, for Bowles, the relationship between Mrs. and Mr. Copperfield allows her a path of flight to re-imagine the relationships in her own life. Though Jane and Paul were both bisexual, Paul’s relationships were predominantly with men and Jane’s were generally with women, specifically Helvetia, and a Moroccan named Cherifa. Paul and Jane, however, remained committed to each other, even after they were no longer physically intimate. The fact that they were married ironically enough provided them with license to manage their extra-marital relationships. When Mrs. Copperfield runs across another prostitute who offers to do “Both of you for a dollar” (43), Mr. Copperfield walks away after telling Mrs. Copperfield that he is “restless” (43) and giving her enough money to visit the prostitute’s “little room” (43). To the prostitute, Mrs. Copperfield says: “I love to be free” (43). Mrs. Copperfield is now free from patriarchal constraints.

John Ashbery rightly identifies Bowles’s creative force in his review of Two Serious Ladies for the New York Times Book Review. He writes: “No other contemporary writer can consistently produce surprise of this quality, the surprise that is the one essential ingredient of great art. Jane Bowles deals almost exclusively in this rare commodity” (qtd. in Sker 12). A wonderful example of this appears in the third chapter of Two Serious Ladies. When Arnold’s father appears at Goering’s cottage, shortly before announcing that he intends to stay, he answers Goering’s question about his wife: “She’s at home, I gather,” said Arnold’s father, ‘and as sour as a pickle and just as bitter to taste”’ (120). Goering, not unexpectedly, “giggled at his remark” (120). The surprise comes from Arnold’s reaction. Arnold responds not to his father’s comment but to Goering’s giggles. He is glad that she is “brightening up a bit” (120). The narrative does not explicitly reference this strange juxtaposition. It simply continues. Arnold’s father asks Goering to go out with him “into the wind and the sunshine” (120). The narrative follows them out of the room, allowing Arnold’s father to proclaim that he’s “decided to go back to a
number of [his] boyish tastes” (120). When discussing expression in
Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, Deleuze and Guattari argue that
expression “must break forms, encourage rupture and new sprout-
ings” (28). Jane Bowles’s fiction certainly allows for both rupture and
sprouting—as even the dedication of her only novel makes clear.

Two Serious Ladies was dedicated to “Paul, Mother, and Hel-
vetia,” and of the three only Paul approved of the book. According
to Paul, Helvetia did not approve of the book because it was “too
obviously lesbian” (Dillon, Sin 111). And, Claire, Bowles’s mother,
hoped that she would “do better next time” (Dillon, Sin 111). In the
end, however, what bothered Jane the most, according to Paul, “was
that the reviews were so beside the point” (Dillon, Sin 111). Though
Jane Bowles hoped for popular success, the reception likely did not
surprise her, even as it disappointed her. After all, the novel thrusts
up against conventions, both social and literary. Using the novel as
a contextual framework, the reviewers were simply scolding her as
a ferry conductor scolds Goering for conversing with a stranger, en
route to the mainland. Goering switches seats to sit across from the
woman and proceeds to ask her a series of personal questions. Before
going up to get the conductor, the woman says: “I won’t stand this
for another moment . . . I have enough real grief in my life without
having to encounter lunatics” (128). When the woman returns with
the conductor, he tells Goering to “stay in [her] seat and don’t molest
anybody.” By rote, he continues with other mandates: “Remember also
that there are no dogs allowed on this train or people in masquerade
costume unless they’re all covered up with a big heavy coat” (129). He
closes with a final injunction against noisy turmoil—“no more hub-
bubs” (129). Turmoil, either vocalized or written—as both Goering
and Bowles find out—will not be tolerated by society’s keepers.

Yet, for both Goering and Copperfield, turmoil is the way of life.
During one excursion, Goering—who is partnered with a shady
character, Ben—ends up at a bar watching Ben discuss business.
She remembers that Copperfield is back from her trip, so she calls
Copperfield to invite her to the bar. Copperfield readily accepts.
It turns out that Pacifica, Copperfield’s Panamanian lover, has
returned with her to New York. “I can’t live without her, not for
a minute,” Copperfield admits. “I’d go completely to pieces” (197).
Pacifica, though, has found a boyfriend, and it is likely that she
will leave Copperfield. Goering, though, has found reconciliation,
as in the opening scene with Mary. In the last paragraph of the
story, Goering reflects that she is “nearer to becoming a saint” (201).
She quickly dismisses the thought that she may be “piling sin upon
sin as fast as Mrs. Copperfield” (201). The ending of Two Serious
Ladies does not anchor the reader; the ending leaves open an endless
stream of possibilities.
Like Capote, Peter Christensen, in his essay on Jane Bowles's play *In the Summer House*, recognizes Bowles's "originality in both subject matter and style," arguing that "Bowles relays a great deal on unresolved ambiguity in both character and action, challenging the audience to create a narrative logic that avoids reduction to common clichés" (49). Even though the shift to drama can be explained by her familiarity with the theatre and her relationship with Paul Bowles and Oliver Smith, a noteworthy set designer in New York, it is more useful to think of the shift as requisite to pursue originality. Like Goering who travels to the city to confront her fears, Jane Bowles too moves into new and unfamiliar territory in order to expand language.

And, like in *Two Serious Ladies*, Jane Bowles is not afraid to put pressure on social structures. Gertrude, Molly's mother and one of the primary characters of *In the Summer House*, commands the first part of the play. While Molly confines herself to the summer house, a small vine-covered enclave at the back of the stage, Gertrude speaks to her, admitting that she feels that Molly is "plotting something" (210). Gertrude continues: "Whenever I think of a woman going wild, I always picture her with black hair" (210). Molly has black hair. Molly answers Gertrude, telling her that she has never "pictured women going wild" (210). Gertrude continues the exchange, admitting that she pictures "little scenes where they [women] turn evil like wolves" (210).

Because of financial concerns, Gertrude is forced to consider marrying Mr. Solares and to take in borders. Vivian, a frenetic fifteen year old, arrives on a vacation. Her mother, by agreement, allows her to stay where she wishes, and Vivian chastises her mother when she has the audacity to get out of the car to announce that she is staying at a local hotel. "You promised at the hotel that you wouldn't get out if I allowed you to ride over with me. You promised me once in the room and then again on the porch. Now you've gotten out. You're dying to spoil the magic" (224). Vivian's mother, Mrs. Constable, is left to explain their situation to Mrs. Lopez, Mr. Solares's sister. "My daughter likes her freedom, so we have a little system worked out when we go on vacations. I stay somewhere nearby but not in the same place" (225). Mrs. Lopez does not understand English very well, so her response to Mrs. Constable is a non sequitur.

The power, both between Vivian and Mrs. Constable and between Molly and Gertrude, rests with the daughters. Regarding Molly and Gertrude, early in the first scene, Molly, who remains secluded in the summer house, tells her mother: "The honeysuckle's beginning to smell real good. I can never remember when you planted this vine, but it's sure getting thick. It makes the summer house so nice and shady inside" (212-13). This sets Gertrude off—the vine was already
there when they bought the house. "You love to call my attention to that wretched vine because it's the only thing that grows well in the garden and you know it was planted by the people who came here before us and not by me at all" (213).

Molly, though, becomes jealous of Vivian's vivacity, particularly after Vivian starts talking with Lionel, Molly's boyfriend. During the exchange with Lionel, Vivian admits that she always knows exactly what she wants to do, after telling him that she's "for freedom and a full exciting life" (231). As the scene continues, after Vivian has gone off for a swim, Molly tells Lionel that "I'm all right as long as I can keep from getting mad. It's hard to keep from getting mad when you see through people" (235). Vivian, Molly recognizes, is trying to "push her out" (238); from Molly's perspective, Vivian is trying to take her place as Gertrude's daughter. Once Molly tells Vivian that "My mother hates you," Vivian replies with "That's a lie . . . She doesn't hate me . . . She's ashamed of you" (239). Yet, even as the "daughters" are doing battle, Gertrude is oblivious, since she is focused on Mr. Solares, hoping he will give her financial freedom. In the end, of course, though she gains financial freedom, she is still confined, as his family simply overwhelms her. Mrs. Constable is the mother, though, who has truly lost her daughter is. While the murder is offstage, there is little doubt that Molly murders Vivian by pushing her off a cliff. Molly becomes Mrs. Constable's shadow daughter. Again, like the focus afforded to Gertrude, Mrs. Constable, as mother, becomes the focal point. Charlotte Goodman, in her essay "Mothers and Daughters in Jane Bowles's In the Summer House and Other Plays by Contemporary Women Writers," recognizes that mothers and daughters are "alternately seeking to maintain the vital emotional bonds between them and to separate from one another" (65). This from Dillon's perspective serves as a leitmotif for Bowles's relationship with her mother, Claire.

Regardless of the biographical impulse, the philosophical impulse has profound implications. In Totality and Infinity, the continental philosopher Emmanuel Levinas posits two notions that are applicable to Bowles's rendering of relationships. The first deals with language. "Speaking implies a possibility of breaking off and beginning" (88). While Bowles fully accepts the possibility, the practice of language is something entirely different. She is acutely concerned with whether or not her language will be understood, whether or not her utterance will be heard. So, from Bowles's perspective nothing could be more damaging than a reader (or a critic) missing the point. And, of course, originality is often daunting for critics to accept. Louis Kronenberger did recognize the play's originality, including it in The Best Plays of 1953-54. In his introduction, Kronenberger writes: "In the Summer House seems on the contrary no play at all,
and a far better half than whole; it just happens, at its best, to boast the most individual and expressive writing of the season” (qtd. in Skerl 9). The formal concerns become less relevant than its original expression. That was Bowles’s gift.

This relationship with the other comes to the fore in Levinas, who writes: “The shame for oneself, the presence of and desire for the other are not the negation of knowing: knowing is their very articulation. The essence of reason consists not in securing for man a foundation and powers, but in calling him in question and inviting him to justice” (88). Bowles wants to shift the dialogue to a place that invites justice. With each new project, Bowles paradoxically gets closer and farther from this goal until her stroke in 1957. After her stroke, Bowles was no longer able to manipulate language. When David Herbert brought Bowles a copy of The Collected Works and a collection of positive reviews in 1967, Bowles was horrified. According to Herbert, Bowles said: “You see . . . it makes me realize what I was and what I have become” (Dillon, Sin 391). “With a trembling hand she picked up a pencil and added, ‘of Dead Jane Bowles’” (Dillon, Sin 392). Her greatest fear was realized when she lost the ability to write.

After publishing “A Day in the Open” in 1944, Jane Bowles’s puppet play, “A Quarreling Pair,” was performed. In the short, six-page play, two sisters in their fifties sit in adjacent rooms, speaking to each other through a curtain. Harriet, the stronger sister, chastises Rhoda for Rhoda’s dependence on Harriet after Rhoda says: “I’m so tired of being sad. I’d like to change” (415). Harriet knows that Rhoda won’t change. In fact, Harriet berates Rhoda: “It’s because you have no self-sufficiency. If I wasn’t around, you wouldn’t have the leisure to worry. You’re a lost soul, when I’m not around” (415). This dependency on Harriet complicates Rhoda’s identity, and is much like Goering’s relationship with Gamelon in Two Serious Ladies. Goering’s quest is independent from Gamelon, though strangely dependent on her; because Gamelon sits home, Goering is able to venture forth into the tawdry world.

While the puppet play’s scenario seems reminiscent of Jane’s relationship with Helvetia, a similar dynamic existed between Jane and Paul. Where Jane’s relationship with Helvetia was always in flux, her relationship with Paul was secure and stable. With Paul, who was Jane’s “rock” according to Dione Lewis (qtd. in Dillon, Sin 117), Jane felt secure both because of their marriage itself, but also because, like Jane, Paul lived outside of social conventions. Rhoda, like her author, seems unable to make a home. “My heart’s too big to make a home” (415). When Harriet discusses established social protocols, specifically enjoying beverages together rather than in separate rooms, Rhoda balks: “I’m sure that’s the sort of thing that
never happens” (416). Not surprisingly, Harriet points out that it “happens in a million homes, seven days a week. I’m the type that’s in the majority” (417). Rhoda is recalcitrant, repeating, over and over, “Never, never, never . . .” (417). Yet, Harriet too is trapped; as she enters, carrying two glasses of milk, she says: “Oh, why do I bring milk to a person who is dead-set on making my life a real hell?” (417).

Prior to spilling the milk, Harriet seems to accept her existence: “I’m trying to explain that I’m behaving the way I was molded to behave. I happen to be appreciative of the mold I was cast in, and neither heaven, nor earth is going to make me damage it” (418). Yet, Harriet’s identity is not without fissures. Once Rhoda leaves, she sings a song about a girl who dreams of climbing a cliff with her sister. Only one girl returns, leaving the song’s narrator wondering: “If the name she bore was my sister’s name / Or if it was my own” (418). Harriet expresses her vulnerability: “I know I should get some terrible disease and die if I thought I did not live in the right. It would break my heart” (419). Rhoda now comforts Harriet, telling her: “You do live in the right, sweetie, so don’t think about it” (419). The puppet play ends with Harriet expressing gratitude for making it through another day. “Oh, I’m so glad the evening has come! I’m nervously exhausted” (419).

This same nervous exhaustion appears in “Plain Pleasures,” a story, originally published in Harper’s Bazaar in 1946. It concerns, Alva Perry, “a dignified woman of Scotch and Spanish decent, in her early forties” (299), and John Drake, “an equally reserved person” (299), who both live in a tenement. His apartment is below hers, and one day he helps Alva carry potatoes to the backyard for a potato bake. During the bake, Perry asks Drake whether he likes “plain ordinary pleasures” (301). Before answering, Drake asks her to clarify what she means. Alva explains that plain pleasures are “like this potato bake instead of dancing and whisky and bands” (301). Once Drake agrees, Perry asks whether Drake thinks that “plain pleasures are closer to the heart of God” (301). Drake is unable to answer, which is fine by Perry: “Perry, who was ordinarily shut-mouthed, felt a stream of words swelling in her throat” (301).

Perry quickly starts a monologue about her sister, Dorothy Alvarez, returning to the theme of godliness and redemption. “I warn Dorothy every time I see her that if she doesn’t watch out her life is going to be left aching and starving on the side of the road and she’s going to get to her grave without it” (302). Perry finds troubling the pursuit of the rainbow: “The farther a man follows the rainbow, the harder it is for him to get back to the life which he left starving like an old dog” (302). The choice seems rather like a lose-lose scenario, particularly as her sister is concerned, because her sister’s only
corrective is periodically buying, a candle at a church, using spare change. The afterthought is hardly sufficient to cover the spiritual deficiencies of her life. Once the potato bake is over, Drake asks Perry to “have supper with me at a restaurant tomorrow night” (304). Perry, however, is uncertain whether she should accept or not. She asks Drake what she should do, and of course he tells her that she should accept.

Perry though has not been out for a while, probably since her husband’s death, so she calls on her sister to help her alter a lavender dress. Perry even offers to pay her sister. Not surprisingly, Dorothy responds: “Why do you offer to pay me for it when I’m your sister?” (305). Perry, who has clearly given much consideration to plain pleasures, has not given as much consideration to other more pedestrian concerns of life. Dorothy is pleased to help because she would love to see Perry married again, though she does imply that her first marriage was not a good one. “You’d be jollier too if you had a husband who was dear to you. Not like the last one” (305).

At the restaurant, Perry arrives before Drake, and after fifteen minutes she decides to order. She seems to resent that he is late, and “she did not seem to have any impulse to communicate with him” (306). Of course, part of her reservation can certainly be attributed to her affirmation of plain pleasures, particularly after Drake admits that you pay a premium at restaurants “to be among the crowd” (306). The evening quickly disintegrates as Drake brags about knowing “all the roadside restaurants and dance houses” (307). Perry’s resentment grows as she drinks more and more wine, and it is revealed that Perry has already been to the restaurant with her former husband.

When it becomes apparent that Drake is positioning a proposal, Perry reacts. “‘I suppose,’ she said, smiling joylessly, ‘that you would like a lady to mash your potatoes for you three times a day. But I am not a mashed-potato masher and I never have been’” (309). Yet, even with this outburst, the menacing nature of the story comes from the proprietor who grins and winks at her after she tells Drake that she wants him, the proprietor, to be her potato masher. Perry leaves the table and walks up the staircase at the end of the restaurant. Instead of going to the lady’s bathroom, as both Drake and the proprietor suspect, she is in search of a quiet place; she finds a bedroom, the proprietor’s.

Before Perry returns, the proprietor, who still believes she’s in the bathroom, “had come quietly upstairs, hoping that he would bump into her as she came out of the ladies’ toilet” (310). He realizes that she’s in his bedroom, and once everyone has left the restaurant he tells Drake that Perry has passed out. He tells Drake not to worry, as he knew Perry’s former husband and that his daughter will be
Serious Evelyn involved in a rape, saying: “John Drake, she whispered, ‘My sweet John Drake’” (312).

“Plain Pleasures” is a delicately disturbing story. At every moment quiet rage is tempered by a calm acceptance. Even after being raped, Perry’s response is one of tenderness toward Drake—a man whom she could hardly tolerate the evening before. This pattern is repeated over and again in the fiction of Jane Bowles. Paul Bowles, in an interview with Oliver Evans in 1971, described Jane’s ability to view society. Jane, Paul believed, had an acute ability “to see the drama that is really in front of one every minute—the drama that follows living” (43). And, from Paul’s perspective it impacted her work because it “has an emotional effect on her, and she gets too involved in the actuality of it and can’t transform it into material” (43). Jane struggled with forming creative pieces, and like in Two Serious Ladies or “Camp Cataract,” the plot has less relevance than the interaction between characters. It is her uniqueness of vision, her uniqueness of seeing—and the way that this is communicated through the subtle, inimitable strangeness of her language—that makes her a great writer.

In “Camp Cataract” Bowles’s superb short story, first published in Harper’s Bazaar in 1949, Bowles’s creative tendencies come to spectacular fruition. Like with Two Serious Ladies, “Camp Cataract” is acutely concerned with social constructions. Harriet visits Camp Cataract every summer on doctor’s orders because she has a nervous condition. Though the doctor has given an injunction against visiting Harriet, Harriet’s spinster sister, Sadie, decides to stop by, ostensibly in order to bring her home, but as the story progresses, it is obvious she wants to use Camp Cataract as a springboard to venture back into the world.

The story begins with Harriet reading a recent letter from Sadie to Beryl, a waitress at Camp Cataract who spends time sitting with Harriet, though she does not sit in attention; she often seems disinterested: “She [Beryl] rarely spoke in Harriet’s presence, nor was she an attentive listener” (359). In the letter, after the initial salutation, Sadie brings up the camp’s falls: “You are still at Camp Cataract visiting the falls and enjoying them . . . I suppose you go on standing behind the falls with much enjoyment like you told me all the guests did” (360). Sadie continues by wondering “how you feel about the apartment once you are by the waterfall” (360). Sadie is usually confined to the apartment that she shares with her sister, Evelyn, and Evy’s husband, Bert Hoffer.
The letter also suggests that for Harriet the experience of Camp Cataract is tempered by the fact that she has both family and an apartment to return to. Sadie is acutely concerned with those individuals at Camp Cataract who do not have any refuge other than the camp. Sadie calls them lost souls. "If you see them, be sure to give them loving because they are the lost souls of the earth. I fear nomads. I am afraid of them and afraid for them too. I don't know what I would do if any of my dear ones were seized with the wanderlust. We are meant to cherish those who through God's will are given into our hands" (360). Yet, once the reader finds out more about the situation of the apartment, it becomes clear that this refuge offers little comfort. Harriet by her own admission does little in the apartment, purposefully keeping herself distinct. And, during the initial exchange with Beryl, Harriet admits to admiring nomads. "I tip my hat to them; the old prophets roamed the world for that matter too, and most of the visionaries" (361). Yet, Harriet is no visionary; it is Sadie who is the visionary; it is Sadie who affirms the imagination and gives credence to her imaginings even as she remains in the apartment.

Sadie's letter becomes the hub of the story. Once Sadie decides to venture forth to Camp Cataract, she sheds her constraints; yet, the voyage from security is fraught with peril. The deluge overwhelms her. Harriet, in her own way, understands her predicament. She tells Beryl her plan: "I mean to imitate the natural family roots of childhood . . . long enough so that I myself will feel: 'Camp Cataract is habit, Camp Cataract is life, Camp Cataract is not escape.' Escape is unladylike, habit isn't" (363). Once Harriet establishes Camp Cataract as habit, she intends on making "sallies into the outside world almost unnoticed" (363). This of course excludes Sadie, and to this point, it is clear that Sadie has used Harriet and the apartment to define her existence. She does not, for instance, allow anyone else to cook, nor does she allow anyone to clean, even though she is both a mediocre cook and an imprecise cleaner. The domestic space is brutal. "A moment later her brother-in-law walked across the room and settled in one of the easy chairs. He sat frowning at her for quite a little while without uttering a word in greeting, but Sadie had long ago grown accustomed to his unfriendly manner" (366). The only thing that saves Sadie is that "she was such an obsessive that she was not very concerned with outside details" (366). This obsession affects the mind. The obsession seems to be bifurcate. On the one hand, Sadie lives "in constant fear that Harriet would go away" (368). Her other fear, though less particular, is more daunting. She believes that she lives in a state of "perpetual narrow escape" (369). The world is collapsing in against her; she needs Harriet in order to restore order, and as she works through the process of traveling
to Camp Cataract she discovers that “the idea of returning with Harriet had been at the root of her plan all along” (375). Once she arrives at the Camp, however, everything changes; she desires a different path of flight.

At the camp, Sadie first runs into a lone, unnamed woman who is sitting in the communal room, and when Sadie finally speaks to her she is shocked because the woman does not spend her life concerned about her existence. “Most likely I was born to such a vigorous happy nature I don’t feel the need to worry about what’s up there over my head” (378). For Sadie, of course, there is no other way to spend time than worrying about “what’s up there over my head” and making narrow escapes. Yet, now that she has left the apartment, her strategies for escape are no longer effective; she is forced to discern new ones. Beryl, who visits briefly with Sadie, returns to Harriet’s cabin to announce to Harriet that her sister is at Camp Cataract.

Harriet’s perspective of Sadie and her situation become clear during a diatribe she delivers on hearing the news. In a Kafkaesque moment, Harriet complains that “Anyone only meeting Sadie would think the family raised potatoes for a living,” and “If they met her [Evy] they’d decide we were all clerks” (381). And, while Harriet admits to being afraid of “being considered a bum” (381), she does nothing to dispel this notion other than to recognize how she could be perceived by others. Marriage is also vile. “I think the whole system of going through life with a partner is repulsive in every way” (382). Her frenetic breakdown is only mitigated when Beryl offers up a plan to keep Sadie quartered in the lodge rather than the untenable alternative of staying in Harriet’s cabin. When Beryl does make it back to the lodge, Sadie is in bad shape. “A deep chill had settled into her bones, and she was like a person benumbed . . . a feeling of dread now lay like a stone in her breast where before there had been stirring such powerful sensations of excitement and suspense” (383). In fact, she says to herself, “I feel like I was sitting at my own funeral.” Clearly this dread is not what Sadie was after; her quest to retrieve her sister and to return with her has gone astray. Just before Harriet enters, Sadie fears that “something dreadful might happen” (384). Though momentarily bolstered by Harriet’s improved appearance, “her feeling of estrangement became more defined” as they embrace because of “Harriet’s wet rubber coat.” Harriet though seems suddenly empowered. They sit in wicker chairs, Sadie opposite Harriet and Beryl.

The story then provides narrative prescience. Harriet, right before saying goodnight, tells Sadie: “In the morning I always practice imagination for an hour or two” (390). Though, she tells Sadie that tomorrow she will “cut it short.” The next morning
Sadie wakes with “a feeling of dread.” In the scene, Sadie implores Harriet to not return to the apartment. Instead, Sadie wants “to out in the world” (396). Yet, when the scene ends, as Harriet is walking away from Sadie, her footsteps do “not grow any fainter as Harriet penetrated farther into the grove.” This preternatural experience is explained when the reader realizes that it’s all in Sadie’s imagination.

In the next section, Sadie stands at the souvenir booth, waiting for her sister. The booth is tended by a pretend Indian, poorly concealed by an inadequate costume. After waiting for an hour or so because she arrived early so as not to miss her sister, Sadie suddenly walks across the bridge to stand behind the cataract. The section ends: “The foaming waters were beautiful to see. Sadie stepped forward, holding her hand out to the Indian” (399). The story does not end here, however. The narrative picks up with Harriet’s awakening. Harriet is in a panic because Sadie has invaded Camp Cataract. Beryl offers her solace by suggesting that sisters need a “good swift kick in the pants” (400). When Harriet does arrive at the souvenir booth, she finds out that Sadie has come and gone. The Indian recollects seeing her cross the bridge to the falls. Harriet instructs Beryl to run and have a look. “When Beryl returned her face was dead white; she stared at Harriet in silence, and even when Harriet finally grabbed hold of her shoulders and shook her hard, she would not say anything” (401). In her biography, Dillon, who is apt to conceptualize Bowles’s work in biographical terms, notes that “the waterfall and surrounding landscape of Camp Cataract are taken from the landscape of Watkins Glen, near Holden Hall, where in 1942 Jane attempted suicide after a fight with Helvetia” (170).

The final two pieces that Bowles completed prior to her stroke were “A Stick of Green Candy,” which she finished in 1949 and “East Side: North Africa” which was published in 1951. “East Side: North Africa” was subsequently revised by Paul Bowles and included in The Collected Works as “Everything is Nice.” The nonfiction piece was originally written for Mademoiselle; in it Jane Bowles (called “Jeanie” in the collected version) recounts visits with Cherifa, Cherifa’s sister Betzoul, and a woman named Zodelia. In the story, set in Tangier, Zodelia puts on a skit where she becomes “Jeanie” as well. Zodelia’s burlesque of the foreigner focuses attention on Jeanie’s mother. Zodelia, pretending to be Jeanie, says: “My mother is in her country in her own house” (315). The implication is, of course, that Zodelia does not comprehend why a daughter would leave her mother. And, later in the piece, when sitting beside an old lady, the question is answered. The answer is quite simply—“That’s nice” (317). It is nice to spend time “Half with Moslem friends and half with Nazarenes.” The old lady though does not accept it, asking: “Is
she crazy?” Zodelia defends Jeanie, saying that she is not, although “There were shrieks of laughter from the mattress” (318). As Jeanie leaves, she is given a couple of Spanish cakes; Zodelia begs her to take them back to the hotel and share them.

The story ends with Jeanie leaning up against a wall, remembering a childhood experience. “And she remembered how once she had reached out to touch the face of a clown because it had awakened some longing. It had happened at a little circus, but not when she was a child” (320). This potent ending is even more striking as originally written: “I remember that once I reached out to touch the beautiful and powdery face of a clown because his face had awakened some longing; it happened at a little circus but not when I was a child” (qtd. in Dillon 211). As adults, we are no longer children; as adults, we reach out, possibly for salvation; Bowles gives us permission to venture forth into the indeterminacy of our imaginations. In fact, this is Bowles’s greatest strength: she unlocks our imaginations.

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A Jane Bowles Checklist
