Creating Meaning from the Meaningless: Existentialism and the Function of Language in Paul Bowles' "The Sheltering Sky"

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CREATING MEANING FROM THE MEANINGLESS:
EXISTENTIALISM AND THE FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE IN PAUL BOWLES'S

THE SHELTERING SKY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the dual function of language as a potentially protective structure and as a vehicle of nihilistic destruction in Paul Bowles's existential novel, *The Sheltering Sky*.

The philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger serve as the foundation for the reading of the novel. The paper locates the stifling inauthenticity of Western civilization as the motivating force that drives the main characters, Port and Kit Moresby, into the Sahara Desert in search of genuine experience. One possibility of the search is the re-establishment of authentic contact between Port and Kit through language. The paper contends that the characters' inability to achieve this connection leaves them vulnerable to nihilistic destruction. Port is consumed by the nihilistic abyss to which his isolation and anxiety give rise.

After Port's death, Kit's unsuccessful attempt to suppress language entirely and exist in a state of pure sensuality demonstrates both the pervasiveness of language and its potentially threatening nature. For those who are unable to establish authentic contact, language becomes the vehicle whereby the nihilistic abyss can arise and destroy.

The paper concludes that, within the novel, Bowles does not present a viable prescription for survival in an existential universe; the characters that seek an authentic existence are destroyed. However, Bowles's act of composition is itself an authentic gesture of communication with his readers. Thus, Bowles's creation of a universe in which the characters are fundamentally isolated and unable to establish contact is, ironically, an example of the contact that universe denies.
CREATING MEANING FROM THE MEANINGLESS:
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THE SHELTERING SKY
Paul Bowles, who has lived in Tangier, Morocco since the early fifties, is one of the United States' most steadfastly expatriate authors. Perhaps partly because of his distance from the U.S., Bowles's fiction has received relatively little critical attention. However, in recent years his work has generated increased interest in the form of three full-length studies, a number of articles, special editions of *Twentieth Century Literature* and *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* devoted to him, a new collection of his work entitled *Too Far from Home*, and Bernardo Bertolucci's major film version of Bowles's first novel, *The Sheltering Sky*. This novel, published in 1949, is the best example of the powerful clarity with which Bowles conveys the uncertainties and complexities of contemporary existence and helps explain his revived popularity with a critical audience increasingly open to the questioning of received systems of belief.

*The Sheltering Sky* reveals Bowles's belief in an existential vision of the universe as well as the threat such a vision poses to those who move outside the comfort and safety of the familiar. The tale of three Americans' travels in the Sahara Desert chronicles the physical deterioration and annihilation of Port Moresby and the mental destruction of his wife, Kit. Port struggles to escape the stifling banality of modern existence, with its prescribed social, economic, and linguistic structures. In Africa, Port hopes to achieve an authentic relationship with Kit; in the process, he undergoes a Heideggerian quest for Being, resulting in his own annihilation. Kit, who is in the desert because she hopes, through their adventure, that Port will be able to find his way back to her, provides the only viable means of salvation for her husband. Port's inability to engage in authentic and mutual contact with Kit leaves him vulnerable to the destructive force of the void.

Port's troubled, desperate searching and Kit's terrific fear of the unknown are offset by the extreme ordinarieness of their traveling companion, Tunner, and of other Americans and Europeans they encounter on their way. These minor characters' inauthentic, unexamined lives contrast sharply with Port's and Kit's despair. However, if Tunner escapes the desert unscathed, it is only to an empty world of dead language and
unquestioned conventionality. In contrast to Tunner's banality, Bowles explores, through Port and Kit, both the possibilities and the dangers of what Martin Heidegger would view as "authentic" communication; through these characters, Bowles reveals an existential--and particularly Heideggerian--notion of language in order to point his readers toward a more authentic vision of contemporary existence.

Several critics have noted Bowles's existential perspective, and a few have observed the connection between *The Sheltering Sky* and Heidegger's writings, particularly those writings which describe angst and the Nothing. Johannes Bertens writes in *The Fiction of Paul Bowles: The Soul Is the Weariest Part of the Body* that "Kit especially suffers fears that are close to the so-called existential anguish, but her anguish and her husband's unhappiness are hopelessly unproductive and never lead to a truly existential approach to the business of living" (20-21).1 He goes on to say that "Most of Moresby's [Port's] actions--and of course his death...--must be seen in the light of this unbearable unhappiness and his attempts to find relief from it" (26). Bertens also recognizes the important theme of connection--"human relationships, love, as a counter force to the nihil" (54)-- that runs through the novel. Bertens's perception of the utter failure of Port and Kit to connect leads him to conclude that the novel is thoroughly nihilistic in the most negative sense; the lives of Port and Kit are characterized by isolation from each other and, consequently, by unalleviated, nihilistic despair. However, other critics recognize an existentially affirmative component in the novel: "Port and Kit find new depths of being in an elemental contact with the desert before they are eventually consumed by the vital but destructive forces that sustain life" (Lehan, 184).2

Both Lawrence B. Stewart, in *Paul Bowles: The Illumination of North Africa*, and O.B. Hardison, in "Reconsideration: *The Sheltering Sky* by Paul Bowles," recognize the stifling nature of "civilization" and the Heideggerian notion of the necessity of moving away from the superficiality of the marketplace in order to discover an authentic existence. They also recognize the importance of language in the novel. Hardison explicitly connects
the Sartrian idea that language functions as a vehicle whereby thoughts or images are conceptualized in the mind to the Heideggerian idea of the oppressive inauthenticity of the marketplace when he writes: "Civilization is the most obvious villain of the novel... The problem, Bowles seems to be saying, goes deeper than the discontents of city life or technology or class conflict. Its roots are consciousness itself and the vehicle of consciousness, language" (64). Stewart expresses a similar sentiment when he writes of Port: "one's 'bottom nature' will be tracked down not through the inevitable repetitions of speech and behavior but in the recesses of the imaginative memory" (62). Like Hardison, Stewart also recognizes language's psychological function as a vehicle for thought, and he connects it to Kit's atavistic struggle against consciousness. She must regress into languageless sensuality in order to protect herself from self destruction—the consequence of the conceptualization of the Nothing: "when...she begins to hear words as words, she...is brought back from sensual entity to identity, into the pain of consciousness" (Stewart, 71-72). Heidegger's concept of an authentic existence based on the quest for one's Being, and the pervasive anxiety that is prerequisite for the unfolding of one's Being, is certainly the philosophical background against which the plot of the novel unfolds, and Sartre's ideas on language illuminate the actions of the characters (particularly Kit). *The Sheltering Sky* is, in fact, largely a novel about language, but the criticism to date does not adequately represent the essential and dual function it performs in the novel. For Port and Kit, language is both a potential vehicle for creating meaning, through contact, in an ultimately meaningless universe and, once contact fails and they are profoundly isolated, the medium through which the Nothing is conceptualized.

Language, in addition to its two functional manifestations in *The Sheltering Sky*, can also be divided into two qualitative manifestations: inauthentic and authentic. Inauthentic language, which is steeped in the tropes and superficialities of society and the marketplace, protects those like Tunner who lead banal, unquestioning lives. Kit and especially Port, because they are plagued by a sense of pervasive existential anxiety, move beyond the
unquestioning comfort of conventional life and the language which characterizes it. Authentic language, grounded in, and focused on, the recognition of the precariousness of one's existence, promises to establish genuine contact and, at the same time, threatens to reveal the nothingness underlying human existence.³

Like the writings of Heidegger and Sartre, Bowles's novel assumes that humans exist in a world without God, an indifferent world in which we are fundamentally helpless. Although we must accept this condition, we need not capitulate to it. In an interview with Daniel Halpern, Bowles describes the themes that most concern him: "Continuing consciousness, infinite adaptability of human consciousness to outside circumstances, the absurdity of it all, the hopelessness of this whole business of living" (176-7). The everyday business of life, the engagement of being human on this earth, need not be an extended moment of despair. We possess, as a counter to despair, the freedom to act within the parameters of our universe, and through those actions we assume responsibility for our lives: we create our own meaning. Bowles enacts this Sartrian idea of freedom through creating compositions that express a well defined philosophical perspective on existence to a multitude of readers.⁴ Ironically, the fictional universes in which Bowles expresses his philosophy often describe "the hopelessness of this whole business of living." But even within the bleak universe of The Sheltering Sky, hopelessness is not an excuse to live an inauthentic life; shunning the existential question because it is painful or dangerous to pursue and instead offering oneself up to the comfortable banality of conventional life eliminates any possibility of achieving a meaningful existence.

Martin Heidegger's notion of an internal quest with the revelation of Nothing/Being as its end finds embodiment in the characters of Kit and, especially, Port, and is the principle force which moves the characters progressively deeper into the Sahara. Being, according to Heidegger, is both easy and difficult to understand for one and the same reason--its closeness to us. We are entirely contained within Being and, as a consequence of this containment, possess an intuitive, "average and vague understanding" of it (BT, 46).⁵
However, when we try conceptually to formulate the question of the meaning of Being, its very closeness prevents us from observing it: "Being is not an empty abstraction but something in which all of us are immersed up to our necks, and indeed over our heads" (Barret, 190). It is not something that can be pigeonholed into a certain pre-established ontological framework but must reveal itself to the individual at an intensely personal level.

In "What is Metaphysics?" Heidegger argues that Being is intimately tied to the experience of the Nothing. Profound and unlocated anxiety precipitates the occurrence of the Nothing-ihilation: the receding of humanity as a whole, the supreme isolation of the individual, and the emergence of the abyss of non-Being—the Nothing. At these moments, when one is utterly isolated, clinging to the abyss of non-Being, one receives a glimpse of Being, the essence of the questioning self. Thus, the discovery of Being is only possible through the revelation of the Nothing.

The revelation of the Nothing, however, is a rare event because humans in general exist in a kind of anaesthetized haze: "Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and men and oneself along with it into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals beings as a whole" (WM, 101). Significantly, one of the constituent elements of this "muffling fog" is other people: "The more we turn towards beings in our preoccupations the less we beings as a whole slip away as such and the more we turn away from the Nothing. Just as surely do we hasten into the public superficies of existence" (WM, 106). The interactions with others we undertake in our everyday lives, then, act as a shield from the knowledge of the Nothing. This idea of banal interaction has specific consequences for Heidegger's perception of language; it is authentic when it exists as an integral part of an individual's discovery of Being, but when language is used merely as a tool, as a means to an end within the public domain, it is inauthentic because it contributes to the futility of a society-bound, conventional life.
In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bowles uses an array of secondary characters—the ways they communicate and interact—to illustrate the total unacceptability of leading an inauthentic existence. Characters, such as Lieutenant d'Armagnac, Tunner, and the Lyles, who "have in common...confidence, trust in themselves, their own kind—thinking or unselfconscious" (Mottram, 7) do survive in the desert, but they pay a high price for their preservation. They sacrifice the possibility of an authentic existence and capitulate to the banality and superficiality which insulates them and reinforces their confidence in themselves and in an ordered world. This is a capitulation from which Port and Kit flee—one which, because it is a kind of death-in-life, is even more tragic than annihilation through existential revelation.

Whereas the Moresbys leave the West for Africa in an attempt to discover some significance in their lives, their traveling companion, Tunner, accompanies them simply because he has nothing better to do (and because he entertains hopes of seducing Kit). Far from being plagued by angst or possessing a need for self-discovery, he is a "simple, naive, traditionally dominating, vain male," who "relies on a continuity and stability which he accepts as a social stasis without questioning its validity" (Mottram, 10). Tunner is, in fact, a stereotypical American tourist and stands in direct opposition to Port, a traveler in search of a meaningful life. Though Tunner emerges from the Sahara intact, his survival is the product of a shallowness and insincerity that precludes the possibility of discovering anything profound about his existence.

Tunner's superficiality is reflected in his physical appearance. As Kit observes, Tunner is conventionally handsome "in his late Paramount way," and his "features were formed in such a manner that in repose they suggested a general bland contentment" (15). The most telling indication of his shallowness occurs as he is considering the possibility of seducing Kit: "He caught a glimpse of himself as he stood bent over a suitcase, and smiled inscrutably at his image; it was the same smile that Kit thought so false" (68). Tunner is his "image," and the inscrutableness of his smile suggests that his character is
impenetrable, even to himself. The incident demonstrates the central characteristic that protects Tunner in the desert: he cannot conceive even the possibility of questioning himself or his existence. As a purely social creature, Tunner can only conceptualize himself as a member of a larger social collectivity, a characteristic he expresses during a mild altercation with Kit: "Yes, you're a real American, I know." She turned her head to look at him, and he felt she was making fun of him. His face grew red," and he replied, "You're damned right." (112). He is enmeshed in the "superficies of existence"—such as national identity—to the degree that he cannot picture himself in any light other than that which society provides.

Bowles furthers the contrast between Port and Tunner in that the latter establishes congenial, though merely superficial, contact with representatives of other cultures. Bowles writes that Lieutenant d'Armagnac, a member of the French occupying force, "felt warmly toward this American, whom he found much more to his liking than the first [Port]...In any case, in spite of Tunner's obvious haste to leave Bou Noura, he found him a sympathetic companion, and he hoped to persuade him to stay a while" (220-221). He also becomes close with an Arab who owns the hostel in which he is staying: "In the evenings he sat in the salon playing chess with Abdelkader...The two had become firm friends as a result of these nightly sessions" (257). Abdelkader, a Muslim, even breaks one of his fundamental religious taboos in the interest of sociality: "When...they were the only two left awake, they would sometimes have a Pernod together, Abdelkader smiling like a conspirator afterward as he got up to wash the glasses himself and put them away; it would never do for anyone to know he had taken a drink of something alcoholic" (257).

Ironically, Tunner achieves this kind of intimacy because he is trapped within his American identity. He does not, like Port, feel any need to penetrate into another's cultural mind set but is simply interested in being social. When cultural barriers are not overtly challenged, they permit a degree of intimacy while, at the same time, keeping the foreigner at a reasonable distance.
Bowles clearly suggests the negativity and inauthenticity inherent in Tunner's shallowness, despite his ability to establish superficial contacts, through his relationship with the Moresbys, particularly Kit. One would expect Tunner's feelings towards his friends to expand beyond the realm of friendly sociability, but this is clearly not the case. Though he genuinely reveres Port and Kit, he does so not because of their individual qualities and complexities as people but because they represent a certain type of intellectualism that he is at a loss to understand. Port and Kit deal "almost exclusively with ideas, sacred things" (67), which Tunner is incapable of understanding: "Contenting himself with not quite being able to seize an idea was a habit he had acquired in adolescence, and it operated in him now with still greater force" (67). Tunner's interest in the Moresbys stems solely from his desire to be within an atmosphere of intellectualism, of abstract thinking, despite a personal inability to actively partake of such thought.

Even more important than the source of Tunner's reverence is his desire for self-gratification. Through his reflections on the necessity of waiting for Kit to return from the desert, Bowles offers a damning portrayal of Tunner's motivations for seducing her earlier on the train ride to Boussif:

And he asked himself why he was being so stubborn about it, why Kit's return obsessed him so utterly. Assuredly he was not in love with the poor girl. His overtures to her had been made out of pity (because she was a woman) and out of vanity (because he was a man), and the two feelings together had awakened the acquisitive desire of the trophy collector, nothing more. (254)

The reason why he insists on waiting for her is presented a few moments later. In response to d'Armagnac's assertion, "You can't very well go back to New York and have all your friends ask: 'What have you done with Mrs. Moresby?' That would be very embarrassing" (254), Bowles writes:

Inwardly Tunner winced. He definitely could not...Even Port's death by itself would be difficult enough to account for...he would have to admit that he had
left them and gone off by himself, that he hadn't been able to "take" the desert. Still, he could envisage all that without too much misery; Port had neglected to be immunized against any sort of disease before leaving. But to go back leaving Kit lost was unthinkable from every point of view. (255)

The combination of Tunner's egotistical chauvinism regarding Kit's seduction and the primacy of his concern for what other people will think if he returns without her illustrates that he considers other people important primarily insofar as they bolster his ego or threaten his social standing. The same inauthenticity that makes him incapable of establishing genuine friendships, even with those he perceives himself closest to, makes it impossible for him to question his existence and through that questioning achieve a meaningful life.

The Lyles are perhaps the most interesting secondary characters in *The Sheltering Sky* because they are a "couple" and thus doubles of the Moresbys. Though critics, and even Bowles, have identified their caricaturish presentation as a flaw in the work, the Lyles are extremely important because they function as a nightmarish contrast to Port and Kit. Bertens views Bowles's portrayal of the Lyles' absurdity as an insurmountable flaw, asserting that "they are caricatured to a point where their effectiveness is hopelessly undermined" (54). Admittedly, Bowles's presentation of the Lyles is extreme. However, they should not be disregarded, for they provide a bizarre example of the kind of inauthentic contact Port and Kit are fleeing. As with a caricature sketch which highlights prominent characteristics to a comical end, Bowles portrays the absurdity of the Lyles' relationship with each other and those who cross their path in a darkly comedic fashion. While the extremity of their presentation detracts from any sense of realism they might have possessed, as a parody of potentially authentic contact--husband/wife, author/reader,--the Lyles' presence in the novel is essential to the theme of the opposition between authentic and inauthentic contact.

Eric and, to a far greater extent, his mother maintain a stable sense of self through
defining themselves as antagonists, both toward each other and to the world at large. Port recognizes, while riding with the pair to Boussif, the central role argumentation and conflict play in the Lyles' relationship: "He was determined to remain wholly on the periphery of this family pattern...It was likely that this ludicrous wrangling was the only form of conversation these two had ever managed to devise for themselves" (70). Later, after listening to Mrs. Lyle rail against Spain, Jews and Arabs, Port begins to glean the source of her spite: "As she spoke, her character took shape before him, although already he was far less inclined to be interested in it. Her life had been devoid of personal contacts, and she needed them. Thus she manufactured them as best she could; each fight was an abortive attempt at establishing some kind of human relationship" (73). The irony of Port's observation is that he too suffers from a difficulty in establishing personal contact, particularly with Kit, but Port also recognizes his isolated condition and senses that relief is to be found in reestablishing a genuine relationship with his wife. Mrs. Lyle, however, does not hurl her vitriol at people but deals purely in stereotypes; she peoples her universe with images of her own creation, and therefore cannot engage in dialogue at all but only in an isolating monologue of hate.

Mrs. Lyle and her son communicate not only through bizarre and continual arguing but also on a perversely physical level, as Mottram recognizes: "Eric Lyle sleeps with his mother 'for money': a practical necessity which breaks social taboos but at least has the advantage of not breaking the node of sociality" (11). If the Lyle's incestuous relationship was mutually desirable, then their interaction would contain an element of "sociality," but their physical relationship is no more than a business transaction. As Mrs. Lyle creates the stereotypes against which she defines herself, so too does she create a lover out of a son through cash exchange. The connotations of the name "Lyle" define them as characters: they "lie" together as a husband and wife (or legitimate lovers) would, but their relationship is fundamentally a "lie." They survive in the desert through protection provided by a corrupt relationship founded on the imagination of Mrs. Lyle and the
financial need of her son whereas the Moresbys, despite their spiritual malaise and the incredible frustration of their communicative impasse, possess a desire to recapture a meaningful existence together. The first relationship is possible only if both of the Lyles agree to propagate the illusion that they are a "couple" while the latter, though difficult to achieve, promises a durability and authenticity derived from the existential dis-ease within which it is formed.

Heidegger attempts to facilitate the process whereby humans can reveal their own Being and obtain the potential for an authentic life by moving them closer to the essence of their earth-bound existence. In his view, the Being of humankind is to be found in the field of life properly viewed and not obstructed by those, such as the Lyles and Tunner, who shelter themselves within the language and social hierarchies of the marketplace. However, for one who is supremely concerned with a return to fundamentals, Heidegger does not provide a fundamental prescription for how to live with the knowledge of Being and, specifically, with the Nothing-nihilation inherent in its corresponding non-Being. As William Barrett states, "Man is for Heidegger merely a means of access, a gateway to the problem of Being; and such a project of thought is not likely to do justice to all the concrete facets of man's existence, psychological and social" (230). The experience of ultimate anxiety and, as a result, the Nothing-nihilation are such extreme states that one cannot help but ask how one is to live with the terrific power of such revelations.

In many ways, Sartre takes up where Heidegger leaves off. He accepts the Nothing, and even adds the stipulation that humans are inherently isolated from one another, but he clarifies the point that language is the instrument through which humans can construct meaning in an existential universe. For Sartre language is, in fact, not only a tool for establishing contact but also the medium through which we present the world to ourselves. Whereas Heidegger grounds human existence in a pre-established realm of Being, a realm discernible by man, Sartre completely severs the objective world of things from the subjective realm of consciousness. The assumption that we exist in a state of unbridgeable
separateness from the objective world fundamentally changes the direction and ends of
Sartre's philosophy from those of Heidegger. The goal, in works such as *The Psychology
of Imagination* and *What Is Literature?*, is not to describe how one penetrates the realm
of Being but to explore the way in which man's subjectivity operates and how he can
construct a meaningful existence within the isolation this subjectivity necessarily creates.

In *The Psychology of Imagination* Sartre argues that an image appears to an
individual only as how one presents it to oneself. In imagining an object, we never see the
object "as it is" but present its image to ourselves, through consciousness, with a certain
set of traits with which we infuse it, and this event comes under the heading of the
"imaginative consciousness." The imaginative consciousness can be despotic if one
confuses it with objective reality; when an individual does not realize that an image has
been affected by the imaginative consciousness, one commits a fallacy termed the "illusion
of immanence," in which one incorrectly supposes that "the image [is] in consciousness
and the object of the image [is] in the image" (PI, 5). The difference implied in the two
positions is that in the latter we make the mistake of assuming that we view the world "as
it is" while in the former we recognize that we are cut off from the real and that the image
is nothing more than a consciousness that presents itself to ourselves. Both Tunner and
Mrs. Lyle are trapped by the despotism of their imaginative consciousnesses. Tunner is
too simple to question his perception of reality, and so he views his life solely through the
lens of his social identity--that which enhances his social standing is positive and that
which detracts from it is negative. Mrs. Lyle's imaginings center around an elaborately
constructed, paranoid antagonism towards nearly everyone, and she too is incapable of
questioning her perception of the world.

Language plays an essential role in the imaginary consciousness; words act as
emissaries forming "the articulation of...knowledge" (PI, 122), and then present that
knowledge to the imaginary consciousness. In addition to its psychological role within an
individual, Sartre also recognizes the significance of language's communicative function.
Like Heidegger, he emphasizes language's importance: "We are within language as within our body" (WIL, 14). However, as the grounding in "body" suggests, Sartre views language as a kind of tool used between individuals: "We feel it... as we feel our hands and our feet; we perceive it when it is the other who is using it, as we perceive the limbs of others... in the course of an undertaking, either of me acting upon others, or the other upon me" (WIL, 14-15). As human beings possessing consciousness, we can never see things as they are but only how we posit them to ourselves; this condition extends to our understanding of other people and creates a psychological chasm between individuals. However, language can provide a vehicle of contact through signification, and by utilizing (offering or receiving) it one can bridge this chasm and alleviate isolation by revealing one's own or glimpsing an other's essential freedom.

Port and Kit, because they move away from the language of the marketplace— the anterior (pre-existing) fabric into which most conversation is woven— are left in a precarious position. The removal of the tropes of banal communication, which anaesthetize the majority of humans, permits feelings of angst to well up and calls forth the Nothing. At the same time, language unhinged from inauthentic communication creates an environment in which Port and Kit can establish a connection in the midst of this anxiety—a connection which would be authentic exactly because it arose out of a sense of angst and a recognition of the absurdity of existence and the nothingness upon which it rests. Bowles accomplishes, through composition, what Port and Kit fail to do: by engaging in the creation of the universe of The Sheltering Sky, Bowles, through his characters, vicariously encounters and survives the void he describes in the novel. Furthermore, by establishing an authentic contact with his readers, Bowles fashions a meaningful existence beneath the same sky the Moresbys find so unbearable.

The characters in The Sheltering Sky are dislocated and placed within an environment which is at complete variance from their normal state of existence. Bowles describes his motivations for writing the novel as wanting "to tell... the story of what the desert can do
to us. That was all. The desert is the protagonist" (Evans, 12). The harsh realities of the Sahara—the glaring sun and the open, parched terrain, which are physically threatening—have a correlative psychic impact. Thousands of miles away from the banalities of conventional, Western social interaction, in a land where sky and earth seem to rest one atop the other and the sun's intense clarity both reveals and distorts, the travelers, like the foreigners who make the Sahara their home, are isolated and precariously poised on the edge of the Nothing that lies behind the sheltering sky. The extent to which they are able to fashion contacts, either through language or non-verbal means, out of what is available to them within this universe determines their survival or annihilation.

Not surprisingly, Bowles believes that the conditions surrounding the characters in his compositions are as important as the characters themselves:

The characters, the landscape, the climatic conditions, the human situation, the formal structure of the story or the novel, all these elements are one—the characters are made of the same material as the rest of the work. Since they are activated by the other elements of the synthetic cosmos, their own motivations are relatively unimportant. (Bowles, "Interview," [Halpern] 165)

Bowles's statements recall Heidegger's idea of "buan," or dwelling, which views man not as separated from his condition of life on earth but inexorably grounded in it. Accordingly, one must view the characters in his fiction solely as integral players in a larger cosmos of established conditions and as acting within the contingent possibilities, physical or mental, such conditions provide. Bowles's stance on the interconnection between situation, environment and existence extends to his own life; as he writes in his autobiography, "I had always been vaguely certain that sometime during my life I should come into a magic place which in disclosing its secrets would give me wisdom and ecstasy—perhaps even death" (WS, 125). Bowles's desire to leave the West for a new environment, a new situation, in pursuit of enlightenment explains his characters' decision to go to Africa. But where the Moresbys fail to reach each other, Bowles, through
establishing contact with his readers, thrives in the same environment that mentally destroys Kit and utterly annihilates Port.

Port is a deracinated intellectual who perceives himself as existing fundamentally outside of humanity. The compulsion to avoid establishing roots in any one place demonstrates Port's mentality. He makes his life as nomadic as possible, constantly consulting maps and planning excursions: "he had only to see a map to begin studying it passionately, and then, often as not, he would begin to plan some new, impossible trip which sometimes eventually became a reality" (13). The resistance to the comforts of a familiar culture, its pre-established lines of communication and mores, helps Port avoid what Bowles recognizes as the anaesthetizing effect of unquestioned communality; he attempts to remain free from "the superficies of existence."

Port's general view of humanity suggests the Heideggerian recession of humanity, and consequent isolation, in the revelation of the nihil. When arguing with Tunner, who claims that "humanity is you, and that's just what makes it interesting," Port replies, "You're never humanity; you're only your own poor hopelessly isolated self" (95). Humanity, in Port's view, is not the pre-existent condition into which man is born but a construct used to justify his existence, and for which he has no need: "I don't have to justify my existence by any such primitive means...I'm not going to carry a passport to existence around with me, to prove I have the right to be here! I'm here! I'm in the world! But my world's not humanity's world. It's the world as I see it" (95). Port's restlessness and the isolation of the self he perceives indicates that he is experiencing angst. However, it is not until Port begins to move deep into the Sahara, far away from vestiges of the West (and far away from Tunner) that he begins to truly feel the isolation of which he speaks.

Bowles suggests language's central role in the inauthenticity of Western, "civilized" society through Port's perspectives on it within the "less civilized" Arab culture. Port views language with discomfort when it is yet one more example of Western encroachment upon a more "primitive" people. During his walk through the streets of the
Casbah, he hears "all three of the town's tongues: Arabic, Spanish and French" (24), and later is surprised to find, with the help of a guide, a cafe in which only Arabs gather: "I thought all the cafes were like the ones in the street, all mixed up; Jews, French, Spanish, Arabs together. I thought the war had changed everything" (29). The presence of the languages of "advanced" (Western) civilization are, to Port, an example of "the sadness inherent in all deracinated things," in a country where "each invocation of Europe was merely one more squalid touch, one more visible proof of isolation" (57-58). To physically move away from the stifling influence of the West is not enough; Port feels he must also be as far removed from its vestiges as possible. Each reminder of his Western identity impedes his ability to immerse himself in the foreign, to slough off the inauthenticity of Western civilization, and to discover something genuine in the desert.

However, in addition to the negative association he makes between language and the corrupting intrusiveness of the West, Port also retains a vague hope that language may move beyond its mundane, everyday function and become a vehicle of authentic expression. In a passage suggestive of a disappointed Marxist, Bowles writes of Port:

> For years it had been one of his superstitions that reality and true perception were to be found in the conversation of the laboring classes. Even though now he saw clearly that their formulas of thought and speech are as strict and as patterned, and thus as far removed from any profound expression of truth as those of any other class, often he found himself still in the act of waiting, with the unreasoning belief that gems of wisdom might yet issue from their mouths.

(23)

This passage highlights the two basic sides of Moresby's personality. By far the most prominent side is the one that views the self as entirely isolated and considers language to be primarily the vehicle of inauthentic, superficial contact. However, there exists despite his intellectually jaundiced persona another side which continues to wait for a moment of true contact when language will be used to its full potential.
Port does not merely wait, as an outside observer, for language to be used in an expression of profound truth; he, at times, feels a desire to attempt contact himself. His desire focuses on two audiences, Kit and potential readers. Kit is presented as the primary possible contact for Port, but he also considers, and then rejects, the idea of writing a journal, in which he would develop the theorem that "the difference between something and nothing is nothing" (199). Port, in fact, was a writer by profession, though he has not written for some time, much to the chagrin of Kit who "constantly held the hope that he would begin again to write—to write no matter what, so long as he worked at it. 'He's a little less insupportable when he's working,' she explained to others, and by no means totally in jest" (199). The novel does not suggest what Port wrote before he arrived in the Sahara, but the utter nihilism of the proposed journal's topic suggests his angst plays a major role in his current inability to write; it is as if the only legitimate topic left for composition is "nada is nada is nada." Ironically, it is Port's isolation and anxiety—his uncertainty over the very grounds of his existence—which both provides a potential topic for the expression of an authentic, absolute philosophical vision of existence and squelches his ability to express that vision. He decides not to write because "even if what he might have written had been good, how many people would have known it?" (200). Port is so profoundly alone, so removed from Western society—both physically and psychologically—that he cannot conceive of anyone understanding his view of existence.

Mrs. Lyle provides an interesting contrast to Port in that, like him, she is a writer. However, unlike Port, she writes "All the time. Every day" (60). Furthermore, she writes travelogues for which she also takes photographs. She is, therefore, engaged in a communicative act with those who will read her books. However, her writing does not reveal anything profound but is merely an exercise in commercialized communication in which the foreign is denied vitality by its domestication through words and images. Travelogues bring the exotic into the comforts of one's home and provide a way for individuals to view the foreign on a purely superficial level without ever leaving their living
room. The author of such works supplies a false sense of adventure by commodifying the likeness of that which is alien and offering it as a non-threatening substitute for the real thing. Mrs. Lyle protects herself by transforming a potentially threatening reality into a tame surrogate, thereby constructing an illusory cosmos which she appears to control. However, like her relationship with Eric, this protection is founded upon a "lie" that cheapens the existence of the genuine article. Thus, her kind of composition is not a solution to the impasse Port experiences because, unlike Mrs. Lyle, he at least desires to express what he considers to be an absolute truth.

Linda Wagner points out in her essay "Paul Bowles and the Characterization of Women" that for Port the tension between establishing or not establishing contact "results from a possible male-female relationship, not only a male-male or male-group nexus" (16). Johannes Bertens takes this idea even further:

Moresby does understand his predicament, and his understanding points to what Bowles sees as a solution to the loss of meaning that his Americans so often suffer from. Before he dies, Moresby finally finds the energy and the courage to try and re-establish an intimate relationship with his wife, from whom he is completely estranged. (11)

"It is this love or companionship," Bertens continues, "that in Bowles's fiction forms the only valid antidote to meaninglessness" (12). Port's inability to establish contact with a reading audience leaves Kit as his only potential source of meaningful connection. Only through the re-establishment of an avenue of communication within the Moresbys' relationship that will enable Port to share, and thus to alleviate, the dread he is experiencing as he drifts towards nihilistic revelation, can he stave off annihilation. Though Port is ultimately unable to accomplish this task, his turning away from Kit is not a clear-cut decision to isolate himself and face the abyss alone; their relationship is characterized by a tension between attempting to make contact with each other and repeatedly frustrated communication.
Bertens recognizes an important element in the interaction between Port and Kit when he states that, despite the apparent lack of a relationship between the Moresbys in the first part of the novel, "there are faint signs that underneath the surface of unfaithfulness, neglect and bickering there is still an emotional tie, however tenuous" (27). In fact, there is, from Port's perspective, quite a strong unspoken bond between him and Kit. As Port strolls through the streets of the Casbah, he imagines Kit watching him from their hotel window:

unconsciously he felt himself the protagonist, Kit the spectator. The validity of his existence at that moment was predicated on the assumption that she had not moved, but was still sitting there. (24)

Bowles clearly illustrates the sense of connection Port feels with Kit through her prominence in his imagination and the significance her image possesses as a validation, albeit just for that moment, of his existence. Port again conjures Kit's image when he is about to consummate a sexual exchange with the prostitute, Marhnia. As Marhnia begins to caress him, Port finds himself "imagining that Kit was a silent onlooker. The fantasy stimulated him" (40). Marhnia exists as a sexual substitute for Kit and has the advantage of not requiring any degree of emotional commitment on Port's part. Port's introversion and recognition of the nihil create a gulf between him and Kit that prevents emotional and physical intimacy. Because, as Kit realizes, "love for Port meant loving her" (100), the emotional tie one may assume existed previously between the Moresbys must be reestablished before physical intimacy can occur. However, the emotional bond can only come about if Port can persuade Kit to recognize the Nothing and thereby incorporate her into his view of existence. In contrast, Port has no feelings towards Marhnia beyond his recognition of her physical beauty. Thus, the purchasing of sex from her fulfills only a purely physical need, and Port must once again place himself in the role of protagonist with Kit as the spectator in order to become aroused. Kit, thus, permeates Port's existence and at times serves as a grounding for the actions he commits in his life, even
when these actions seem to draw him further away from her.

Though there is always a tension between connection and separation in the Moresbys' relationship, and though both tendencies exert considerable influence, Port's pulling away from his wife and withdrawal into himself points to the far more apparent trend in the novel, the repeated frustration of communication. Nowhere is the theme of communicative impasse developed more thoroughly and poignantly than in chapter thirteen. In an attempt to get closer to his wife, Port plans a bike excursion into the mountains on the outskirts of Boussif. For her part, Kit is reticent about the trip because she is riddled by guilt over sleeping with their traveling companion, Tunner. As they sit "on the rocks side by side, facing the vastness below" (100), Port tries to bring Kit closer to him, to include her in the view of life that makes it so difficult for him to exist alone. However, the connection, as Kit's reflections suggest, appears fundamentally impossible:

It was such places as this, such moments that he loved above all else in life; she knew that, and she also knew that he loved them more if she could be there to experience them with him. And although he was aware that the very silences and emptinesses that touched his soul terrified her, he could not bear to be reminded of that. It was as if always he held the fresh hope that she, too, would be touched in the same way as he by solitude and the proximity to infinite things. He had often told her: "It is your only hope," and she was never sure what he meant. Sometimes she thought he meant that it was his only hope, that only if she were able to become as he was, could he find his way back to love, since love for Port meant loving her--there was no question of anyone else.

(100)

Kit is essentially correct in supposing that her inclusion in her husband's world is Port's only hope, for it is only through contact with her that he can survive. She is, however, unable to offer herself, and Port is left to face the abyss alone.

And yet, despite this unbridgeable philosophical gulf, both Port and Kit recognize that
they suffer from similar feelings of angst and isolation, though their methods of dealing with them are different: "You know what?" he said with great earnestness. 'I think we're both afraid of the same thing. And for the same reason. We've never managed, either one of us, to get all the way into life. We're hanging on to the outside for all we're worth, convinced we're going to fall off at the next bump. Isn't that true?" (101). Port's assessment of their situation is correct, and the only possible solution to surviving in such a tenuous position is for the Moresbys to cling to one another. His statement is a veiled appeal to Kit for mutual help, but she is unable to connect with him because the kisses and caresses he offers remind her of Tunner and awaken "the sense of guilt, and it swept over her now in a great wave that made her dizzy and ill" (101). The passage demonstrates an important contrast between how Port and Kit relate to their world: he is fundamentally language-oriented and must convey his anxieties verbally in order to alleviate them while she is tactile-oriented, a trait which later assumes its full manifestation in her atavistic, sexual relationship with Belqassim.

In the end, Port gives in to the fear of emotional obligation reconciliation with Kit would necessitate: "he would temporarily abandon the idea of getting back together with Kit. In his present state of disquiet he would be certain to take all the wrong turnings, and would perhaps lose her for good. Later, when he least expected it, the thing might come to pass of its own accord" (132). Undoubtedly, Port still desires rapprochement with Kit, but he tragically misses the facts that the only way to ease his "disquiet" is through her and that emotional contact does not simply come about but is the result of a conscious effort. Thus, Port opts for isolation, symbolically represented by the theft of his passport and his decision to leave before its return by the authorities. He embarks on the last leg of the "strict, undeviating course inland to the desert," reflecting his journey into a spiritual desert of which "he was very nearly at the center" (198).

Once again, Mrs. Lyle provides an illuminating contrast to Port in that Bowles clearly suggests that the two characters suffer from similar psychic ailments, though with
drastically different reactions to them. After a conversation in which Mrs. Lyle describes the sickly nature of Eric and reveals that he has contracted a sexual disease, perhaps from a man, Port reflects that "her deportment was a roundabout means of communicating an idea she dared not express directly. In her own confused mind the procedure was apparently logical. All he could be certain of was that her basic motivation was fear" (91). The characterization of Mrs. Lyle as one who needs to interact with an other, and the placing of Port's observation immediately after she speaks of Eric being ill as the result of physical intimacy with someone, suggests that Mrs. Lyle fears the possibility of losing contact with her son. Whether it be death, which would take him entirely, or the perceived threat of an other compromising her monopoly on Eric's attention, Mrs. Lyle cannot stand the possibility of being left alone; isolation breeds anxiety through which the Nothing can arise. Thus, whether she is conscious of what she is keeping at bay or not, Mrs. Lyle's fear is natural and fundamentally sets her apart from Port. Her solution to assuaging dread is, however, unacceptable because her attempts at contact are not genuine. Port, unlike Mrs. Lyle, is in search of an authentic existence. However, he does not fear the Nothing because through most of the novel he does not feel its presence; instead, he observes it through detached intellectualism. Thus, rather than making concerted attempts to establish contact with Kit, he proceeds headlong into complete isolation and eventual annihilation.

The culmination of Port's illness is the point at which two competing forces within him, introverted pursuance of the nihil and the need for renewed contact with Kit, come to a mutual climax, and it reveals that the two tendencies are, paradoxically, interdependent. In the throws of a typhoid fever, Port comes to feel first hand what he had recognized intellectually throughout the journey, the Nothing:

He opened his eyes, shut his eyes, saw only the thin sky stretched across to protect him. Slowly the split would occur, the sky draw back, and he would see what he never had doubted lay behind advance upon him with the speed of a
million winds. His cry was a separate thing beside him in the desert. It went on and on. (233)

Furthermore, Port's failure to be immunized before going to Africa reflects at least a subconscious, and perhaps even a semi-conscious, desire to attain the extreme state in which he finds himself. Thus, Port appears to fulfill the end towards which he had been driven throughout the novel, total isolation and consequent annihilation:

His cry went on through the final image: the spots of raw bright blood on the earth. Blood on excrement. The supreme moment, high above the desert, when the two elements, blood and excrement, long kept apart, merge. A black star appears, a point of darkness in the night sky's clarity. Point of darkness and gateway to repose. Reach out, pierce the fine fabric of the sheltering sky, take repose. (235)

Bowles's choice of blood and excrement may seem grotesque, but their relationship as symbols is perfectly logical: blood equals life and generation and excrement is equivalent to waste and decomposition. The unification of these opposites suggests a chaotic realm in which the normal demarcations of meaning no longer apply, a realm where, in fact, no meaning is possible. Because Port is too physically and psychically weakened at this point, he is unable to look into the void and return, but instead reaches for the solace, the "repose" of annihilation behind the sheltering sky.

Before Port is consumed by the void, he realizes, through discovering the Nothing, that he is completely and inextricably connected to Kit. Bowles suggests the relationship between these two discoveries by juxtaposing passages that portray them. In a brief moment of lucidity, Port describes the isolation of the Nothing to his wife:

So alone I can't even remember the idea of not being alone...I can't even think what it would be like for there to be someone else in the world. When I'm there I can't remember being here...But here I can remember being there. I wish I could stop remembering it. It's awful to be two things at once. (216)
A minute later, he says to her, "Kit, Kit. I'm afraid, but it's not only that. Kit! All these years I've been living for you. I didn't know it, and now I do. I do know it! But now you're going away" (217). Port experiences the void and is then able to return briefly to Kit. He knows he is going to die, but he also discovers, through his encounter with the abyss, a connection with Kit that the misery and self-imposed isolation of his life concealed. A more authentic existence, centering around Kit, could have arisen from this recognition, but, ironically, Port is too far gone to implement the knowledge he acquires.

Undeniably, Port fails to establish sufficient contact with Kit and thereby protect himself from the abyss that ultimately destroys him. However, when one considers the last few days of his life as a variation of Sartre's extreme circumstance--a situation in which one is pushed to the limits of human endurance and is given the opportunity to discover a profound truth about oneself--then his death is not an unsatisfactory end to an unsatisfactory life but a moment of genuine existential revelation. Port invokes the Sartrian "No"--the ultimate expression of freedom and the only one left open to Port--shortly after his declaration to Kit:

He closed his eyes again, and for a moment had the illusion of holding the world in his arms--a warm world all tropics, lashed by storm. "No, no, no, no, no, no" he said. It was all he had the strength to say. But even if he had been able to say more, still he would have said only: "No, no, no, no." (217-218)

In saying "no" Port exercises the only freedom he has left, and this last act of freedom is a denial, albeit futile, of the illness which is consuming him, a denial bolstered by the recognized possibility of a different kind of existence and a different relationship with Kit and the world. Having encountered the void and perceived his own mortality, Port feels the possibility of a different kind of existence than the one that led him toward annihilation. The "world" Port envisions is himself. Its warmth contrasts the cold intellectualism of his actual life. Its tempestuousness is a symbol of passion as opposed to the lens of detached objectivity through which he previously viewed his existence. At the
center of this new existence is, of course, Kit. Granted, the price of this knowledge is incredibly high, but if one is willing to accept that the wisdom gained has an intrinsic value, then Port's life acquires substantial meaning, ironically, during the very moments it approaches its end.

Significantly, Kit is absent when Port dies because she cannot face his death and her consequent isolation but instead must find a way to submerge her fear. Shortly before Kit abandons Port, Bowles writes that "She had passed the day sitting on the edge of her pallet in an attitude of despair, looking at Port from time to time, hearing his labored breathing and seeing him twist in the throes of an inner torment" (223). The choice of the term "inner torment" as opposed to "fever" or some other physiological designation clearly suggests that Kit recognizes Port's illness has far greater implications than the mere physical aspects of the typhoid infection. Port's "inner torment" is the utter isolation he experiences in the void; he is in limbo between annihilation and existence (though he is rapidly moving closer to the abyss), and this is the nature of his "illness." Furthermore, he has already diagnosed the same affliction in Kit: "It's awful to be two things at once. You know that, don't you?...You do know that? You understand how awful it is? You've got to" (216). Port's condition and his suggestion that Kit is suffering from the same spiritual illness are too much for her to bear. Through Port, Kit perceives the possibility of falling victim to a similar fate, and the terror of that possibility forces her to flee from him and into the arms of Tunner, with whom she spends the final moments of Port's life.

Whereas Port represents a terror which Kit feels she cannot face, she perceives Tunner as a potential safety zone in which she can cede any sense of control over her own existence:

she saw nothing ahead of her but Tunner's will awaiting her signal to take command. And she would give the signal. Even as she knew this she was aware of a pervading sense of relief, to struggle against which would have been unthinkable. What delight, not to be responsible--not to have to decide
anything of what was to happen...She realized the absurdity of still hoping to
attain such a state permanently, but the hope would not leave her. (230)

On one level, Kit's thoughts apply to specific feelings of regret and guilt over not
establishing contact with Port and having slept with Tunner. However, her flight has a
larger significance in that Tunner's inanity, his embedment in the commonness and
inauthenticity of the marketplace, is to Kit a potential antidote to the authentic and terrible
experience Port's suffering represents and portends.

Kit not only runs to Tunner out of fear of what Port represents; her flight is also an
attempt to move away from the power of language. Some of the last coherent words Port
utters to his wife proclaim his love and connection to her and exemplify a moment when
language is used to its full potential. However, this revelation, and the ability to express
its results, occurs because he exposes himself to the Nothing and therefore discovers
Being. In order for Kit to recognize the truth inherent in her husband's words, she must
also recognize what led him to that truth and, consequently, what destroyed him. Kit
cannot bear to face the terror of the abyss, so she runs away from the authenticity of Port's
sentiments and into the trite, superficial discourse of Tunner. Tunner's reassurances, such
as, "He's going to be all right, Kit," and, "Just be sensible...Try and get a little rest" (234),
shift the focus from the profundity of what Port is experiencing to the management of a
momentary crisis. Even Kit's proclamation, "'Oh, Tunner! I love him so much!' she
sobbed, clinging ever more tightly. 'I love him! I love him!'" (234-235), rings somewhat
hollow, and Tunner's satisfied reaction to Kit's outburst--"In the moonlight he smiled"
(235)--clearly suggests that she is no longer in the realm of intense experience represented
by Port but enmeshed within Tunner's superficiality.

Before Kit abandons Port and ends up in the arms of Tunner's vapidity, Bowles
portrays her as skeptical of her husband's profession of intimacy:

And as he lay still for a while, breathing violently, she began to think: "He says
it's more than just being afraid. But it isn't. He's never lived for me. Never.
Never." She held to the thought with an intensity that drove it from her mind, so that presently she found herself lying taut in every muscle without an idea in her head, listening to the wind's senseless monologue. (217)

There is, however, good reason to question Kit's disbelief. The very intensity with which she clings to the rejection suggests that she is trying to convince herself of the mendacity of Port's statement. By convincing herself that Port's life was purely egocentric, she makes it easier to deny the connection that she feels for him and lessen the impact of his impending death. Most importantly, the senselessness which follows the accusation strongly prefigures the regression into atavism which becomes Kit's central trait in the third section of the novel. If intellectual objectivity, cognitive understanding without actual feeling, is Port's ultimately unsustainable way of living with the Nothing, then Kit's is atavism. The benumbed state she achieves by forcing Port's confession from her mind is the same kind of condition she later invokes to protect herself from the void.

Bowles describes Kit as a woman in whom raged a "war between reason and atavism," and although "In intellectual discussions she was always the proponent of scientific method," she is also deeply influenced by the interpretation of omens (44). In addition to Kit's predisposition towards atavism, she is also highly dependent on other people: "'Other people rule my life,' and it was true. But she allowed them to do it only because her superstitious fancy had invested them with magical importance regarding her own destiny" (45). These two tendencies reflect a desire to exist outside of responsibility, to cede it to fate or to another individual, and by doing so to avoid the anxiety inherent in an authentic existence. When Kit exhibits both characteristics, the latter diminishes the former--her atavism is subordinate to her dependence on other people--but when she can no longer hand over control of her life to another's will her atavism emerges.

Though Kit relinquishes herself to Tunner twice--when she allows him to seduce her on the train ride to Boussif and when she flees from Port in Sbâ--Port is her primary defense against responsibility:
In normal situations she felt that Port was inclined to lack understanding, but in extremities no one else could take his place...not because he was an infallible guide under such circumstances, but because a section of her consciousness annexed him as a buttress, so that in part she identified herself with him. (83)

The entire trip into the Sahara, with both its harsh physical realities and the deracination of the Western identity, is in itself an "extremity." Once Port's illness consumes him to the point of incapacitation, Kit is left without a viable outside will into which she can submerge her own. Consequently, she begins to move towards her only available escape, mindless atavism, a state which she can achieve and sustain only through the suppression of language--the vehicle of conscious thought.

As Kit proceeds into the Sahara and away from "civilization," Port recedes from her and into his delirium, and she becomes cognizant of her growing isolation. Disturbing thoughts begin forming within her mind, and during the trip to Sbâ the crystallizing function language will have for Kit is delineated. Alone with her unconscious husband, Kit finds brief solace in reflecting upon the Western articles in her purse:

It gave her momentary pleasure to think of that dark little world, the handbag smelling of leather and cosmetics, that lay between the hostile air and her body. Nothing was changed in there; the same objects fell against each other in the same limited chaos, and the names were still there, still represented the same things. Mark Cross, Caron, Helena Rubinstein. (195)

Kit needs to recite the names of her articles in order to recall the familiarity and comfort of her own culture. The momentary relief, acquired through her identification with a Western culture a world away is, however, insufficient, and even absurd: "'Helena Rubinstein,' she said aloud, and it made her laugh. 'I'm going to be hysterical in one minute'" (195). Commodity labels can only possess meaning within the culture and language of the marketplace where they denote (extrinsic) value and prestige and are used to convey a certain image of oneself. In the social arena, it is easy to fall under the
despotism of such images—to succumb to the illusion of immanence—and confuse the symbolic connotations of the labels with the individual who possesses them. Thus, they can serve a protective function, guarding their possessor against judgment, either by others or oneself, that is founded upon an essential quality and, instead, promulgating the impression that one is the image one creates. In the Sahara, such labels signify nothing for Kit except, ironically, how far she is from the comforts of the West and the debased language of the marketplace.

In place of inauthentic language and images, the more powerful and threatening idea that presents itself to Kit is the severity of Port's illness: "It was natural, now her mind was clear, that there should be a horror... She looked away with all her power as she felt her mind being swept into contact with the idea. In a split second it would no longer be possible not to know what it was... There! Meningitis!" (195). An idea cannot exist until it is presented to the self through words: they "form the articulation of the knowledge, it is due to them that the knowledge emerges from its first vagueness" (PI, 122). Kit resists the presentation of the "horrific" knowledge of Port's condition, but the words come to her anyway carrying the idea within them. Her resistance prefigures the conflict that characterizes Kit after Port's death: she attempts to exist outside of language because only through it can the articulation of the knowledge of the Nothing occur. Thus, she regresses into the comfortable anaesthetization of atavism, exhibited primarily through sexual contact. Throughout the third book, language threatens to reassert itself, destroy Kit's atavism, and force her to acknowledge the abyss.

Immediately after Kit discovers Port has died, she flees from the fortress and the body that represents to her both profound guilt and the terror of the nihilistic abyss. However, she cannot accomplish her flight by merely distancing herself from the object of her fear; it can only come about through the annihilation of her identity, and Bowles symbolically suggests this when Kit looks into a mirror at Daoud Zoeph's but can "see nothing at all" (243). In order to eliminate her sense of identity, Kit must also move further away from
language. Just as her desertion of Port was motivated largely by a need to escape from
the power of the sentiments he articulated to her and into the banality of language
exemplified by Tunner, so too is her flight away from Tunner motivated by a need to sever
herself from language entirely: the inauthentic language of the marketplace he represents
is ultimately incapable of protecting her from the nihil. Consequently, Kit's flight
culminates in the symbolic baptism in a garden pool where she regresses into pure atavism,
surrenders her self-consciousness and believes she "shall never be hysterical again." That
kind of tension, that degree of caring about herself, she felt she would never attain them
any more in her life" (247).

Having submerged her identity under a shield of animalistic sensuality, Kit connects
herself with a caravan of Arab merchants who do not speak any French or English. Thus,
Kit isolates herself completely from not only Western culture, but also the languages
which threaten to call forth her identity and subsequently the pain and terror which lie
waiting inside her. Communication and contact, for Kit, are reduced to a fundamental
level but do not cease to exist. In fact, as Kit progressively sheds her Western identity,
symbolically represented by her assumption of Arab garb, she demonstrates a keen ability
to understand her companions through gestures. As the group approaches its destination,
Kit observes the two leaders of the caravan arguing:

although she could not understand a word they said, it seemed to her that the
older man was warning Belqassim against a course of action upon which the
latter was stubbornly determined. In a perfect orgy of excitement he would go
through a lengthy mimicry in which a group of people successively registered
astonishment, indignant disapproval and rage. Belqassim would smile
indulgently and shake his head with patient disagreement; there was something
both intransigent and self-assured about his attitude in the matter that infuriated
the other, who, each time it seemed that further expostulation would be useless,
got up and took a few steps away, only to turn a moment later and renew the
attack. But it was quite clear that Belqassim had made up his mind, that no threat or prophecy of which his companion was capable would succeed in altering the decision he had made. (275)

In the passage, Kit demonstrates an ability not only to glean the general text of the conversation, but also the nuances and attitudes the gestures of the men suggest. She is, therefore, both outside of the threat of her own language and comfortably within a realm of rudimentary understanding which, nonetheless, can be quite perceptive.

After Belqassim installs Kit in a locked room within his home, Bowles describes the raging conflict within her and foreshadows the climax which occurs later in the third section; she sits

listening to the silence that swarmed around her, profoundly troubled without knowing why, vaguely terrified, but for no reason she could identify. It was more as though she had been listening to herself, waiting for something to happen in a place she had somehow forgotten, yet dimly felt was still there with her. (281)

Kit's forgotten "place" is the consciousness of her Western identity, and it is latently waiting to surface, carrying knowledge that can destroy her. Despite the languageless construct Kit erects to protect herself from herself, the reader receives clues that she will not succeed: "When the little flame had given its final gasp, she pulled up the blanket and lay down, feeling that something was wrong. Soon, in the darkness, far and near, the cocks began to crow and the sound made her shiver" (281). The cocks are symbols of awakening, and it is the re-awakening of her self-consciousness which Kit desperately attempts to stem.

The fundamental instrument Kit uses to prevent the encroachment of identity upon the languageless vacuity into which she regresses as a means of self-preservation is contact with Belqassim. Some critics deride the role Kit assumes in the third book as gratuitously sexual, even nymphomaniacal. Such attacks overlook Bowles's propensity for portraying
women as representatives of the natural in his fiction. Regardless of one's personal feelings about linking the feminine with the sensual, when one considers this association and that sex is the most natural and intimate form of sensual contact with an other, Kit's sexual persona is perfectly in keeping with the atavistic defenses she employs. The more frequently she gives herself and receives an other in this fashion, the easier it is to prolong the submersion of her identity. O.B. Hardison recognizes the nature of Kit's sexual relationship with Belqassim when he writes: "Only when she becomes an animal so traumatized that she cannot think, enslaved by the sexuality of a man whose language she cannot understand, is Kit at peace with herself. This is fulfillment as annihilation" (64).

Bowles succinctly expresses the interplay of sex, language, and the submersion of identity in a central passage which describes Kit's state of mind:

At this point, apart from a gnawing desire to be close to Belqassim all the time, it would have been hard for her to know what she did feel. It was so long since she had canalized her thought by speaking aloud, and she had grown accustomed to acting without the consciousness of being in the act. She did only the things she found herself already doing. (276)

Thought is connected to speech, and both are submerged beneath the physical contact and pleasure Kit receives from Belqassim, and which enables her to exist safely within her atavistic shell.

Sex is not, however, the only means of contact Kit shares with Belqassim; she is also able to engage in elementary conversation with him: "She had not yet learned his language; indeed, she did not consider making the effort. But she had grown used to the inflection of his speech and to the sound of certain words, so that with patience he could make her understand any idea that was not too complicated" (283). Complicated ideas are exactly what Kit is hiding from; therefore, the kind of simple contact established through verbalization between her and Belqassim is all she desires. One would never expect Kit to learn his language because to do so would force her to tap into the feelings which the
abandonment of her own language helps her to suppress. As long as Kit is able to exist outside of language, as long as she is able to remain a creature of sensuality, she is safe from the knowledge and feelings which reside within her.

As the sexual interludes with Belqassim become less frequent, Kit realizes the nature of her own protective existence. While longing for her lover, who has not visited for six evenings, she spins a sexual fantasy and is "astonished to find that it was not Belqassim at all who climbed the four steps to join her, but a young man with a composite, anonymous face. Only then she realized that any creature even remotely resembling Belqassim would please her quite as much as Belqassim himself" (293). In fact, Kit's relationship with Belqassim had taken on an unacceptable, even threatening, connotation after his marriage to her. As a consequence of the marriage, she could no longer view herself as a kind of empty vessel satisfying basic needs through uncomplicated contact but was forced to perceive herself as a wife—a label that recalled her former life as the wife of Port Moresby. Even the sexual interludes themselves lost their protective power: "Why, at the height of the storm, did two drowning hands press themselves tighter and tighter about her throat? Tighter, until even the huge gray music of the sea was covered by a greater, darker noise—the roar of nothingness the spirit hears as it approaches the abyss and leans over" (290). Sex, the "huge gray music of the sea," was no longer an impenetrable defense because Belqassim possessed the same identifying label, "husband," as the catalyst of her fear. In order for sex to provide Kit the illusion that she exists in an intimate, unencroachable world populated only by her and her lover, it must be with a "creature" which will not physically or implicitly remind her of her identity.

At the same time Kit recognizes sexual contact itself as salvation, she also discovers that Belqassim's wives are poisoning her. The assault, the culmination of a series of hostilities, defines, in drastic terms, Kit as a threatening outsider. The illusion of intimate communality with Belqassim is destroyed, and this destruction has significant implications for her perception of the possibility of this kind of union in general. Her disillusionment
forces her into an unresolvable conflict: she still desperately desires to exist within the safety of a one-on-one, noncommittal world, but, at the same time, she subconsciously realizes that such an existence may very well be impossible because cultural reality relentlessly imposes upon her attempts to maintain an interpersonal ideality. Though Kit is able to shelter herself, temporarily, within the image of the purely sensual creature she creates by refusing to recognize it as an image, the people around her have no reason to subscribe to her fancy. Instead, Belqassim's wives are understandably incensed at the presence of a female interloper receiving the majority of their husband's amorous attentions. Kit's need to deny her own culture and to inhabit one that is entirely alien in order to maintain her atavism is, ironically, thwarted exactly because her foreignness draws attention to her status as an outsider. The irrationality of Kit's actions following the poisoning scheme testifies to her untenable position and represents the climax of the conflict between a self-conscious identity and atavistic impulses.

The most important marker of the emergence of Kit's Western identity is that, for the first time since joining up with Belqassim, she begins thinking, and even speaking, to herself in a way that identifies her as an outsider in Belqassim's household. The simple, almost humorous reflection, "Thank God I have good teeth" (288), which occurs as Kit is defending herself against a physical assault by Belqassim's wives, is the first overt instance of conscious thought, represented through first person narration, and prefigures the full-blown narration that occurs after the more threatening poisoning episode. As she is attempting to find her way out of Belqassim's labyrinthine house, Kit says to herself, "I must send a telegram...It's the quickest way of reaching them. There must be a telegraph office here" (294). Soon thereafter Kit thinks of Belqassim, "He's your husband, she whispered to herself, and stood still a second in horror" (295). Her following thoughts, though they are presented in third person, indicate the assumption of full awareness of her identity as a Westerner engaged in simple self-deception: "it was only a part of this ridiculous game she had been playing. But until she sent the telegram she would still be
playing it" (295).

The emergence of consciousness and the self-assessment that consciousness provides, indicated by first person narration and the awareness of what the label "husband" connotes, naturally leads one to believe that Kit has permanently regained a sense of self and is ready to deal with the problems of guilt and angst that confront her. This impression is, however, illusory and founded solely upon the existence of an immediate crisis: escaping the dangers of Belqassim's house. Soon after she gets out of the house, and is free from immediate threat, she falls asleep and has a dream in which the nihil once again appears:

The blinding sea was there below, and it glistened in the silver morning light. She lay on the narrow shelf of rock, face down, head hanging over, watching the slow waves moving inward from far out there where the curving horizon rose toward the sky. Her fingernails grated on the rock; she was certain she would fall unless she hung on with every muscle. (299)

She awakes just as she is about to plunge into the abyss and her sense of self is, once again, gone: "she had no feeling of being anywhere, of being anyone" (300). Kit's earlier reacquisition of language, which enabled her to assess her situation, also enables--indeed forces--her to conceptualize the nihil which has manifested itself inside her. Thus, her atavistic defenses once again surface, and she attempts to repress her identity and move outside the realm of language.

Neither here nor there, unable to construct an impermeable one-on-one relationship through sexual contact and equally unable to confront the horrors assumption of her Western identity would summon, Kit engages in frenetic, panicked attempts to achieve both languageless, interpersonal union and contact with the West. Her isolation is heightened by the irony that she looks very much like an Arab. When Amar, a Europeanized Arab, comes to her assistance as she is attempting to pay for milk with useless francs, one of his first comments to her is "Toi pas Arabe" (301), and, in fact, he is
the only person in the market who recognizes her as a Westerner. Kit is again mistaken for an Arab by the proprietress of a hotel: "Amar! What's that saloperie you're bringing in here? You know very well I don't allow native women in my hotel. Are you drunk? Allez! Fous-moi le camp!" She advanced upon them frowning" (302). Here the irony extends to the use of language itself. The proprietress, believing Kit to be an Arab woman, speaks in French so that she will not understand her. Though the recognition process in these passages is not self-reflexive, language is still the sole vehicle of identification: as Kit does not recognize herself until language surfaces, so too must language identify her to others.

Kit, having again been identified as a Westerner, moves further into the realm of language, thereby exposing herself to the dangers inherent in conscious thought. Bowles explicitly lays out the connection between language and thought in the description of Kit's mental emergence which occurs shortly after she exchanges words with Amar. As he is leading her through the streets of the city, Kit realizes that, "In another minute life would be painful. The words were coming back, and inside the wrappings of the words there would be thoughts lying there. The hot sun would shrivel them; they must be kept inside in the dark" (302). As the intense clarity of the Saharan sun both reveals and scorches the land below, language reveals self-consciousness and exposes Kit to the extreme guilt and nihilistic angst which started growing in her after Port's death.

After Kit recognizes that her identity is emerging, and with it the terror she has buried inside herself, her personality effectively splits. One side pushes her ever closer to revelation of her identity while the other desperately attempts to regain the comfortable vacuousness of her atavism. She determines to send a telegram with the message "CANNOT GET BACK" (304) written on it but cannot, or perhaps will not, give the destination to which it should be sent. She also wishes to add something to the message but "she could not think of the words she needed to add, and she wanted the message to leave immediately" (304). The inability to express herself suggests the assertion of
atavism and, not surprisingly, Kit tries to make physical contact with the telegram clerk who quickly moves out of her reach. Her advances rebuked, Kit then "ran out into the street and Amar, the black man, was standing there" (304). The designation "the black man" would seem gratuitous except that Amar, like Belqassim, represents the opposite of the Westerner, stereotypically characterized by the white, blue eyed telegraph operator, and that Kit's self-preservation is founded on the ability to suppress her Western identity.

Kit's message, "CANNOT GET BACK," aside from its literal meaning, expresses her central dilemma: she cannot get back to an atavistic state nor can she allow her identity to emerge without irreparably damaging herself. She attempts to establish purely physical contact with Amar, saying, in between kisses, "You must save me" (306), but Amar is not Belqassim. He is at least partially Europeanized and can communicate verbally with Kit. His advice to her--"You should not think. Ca c'est mauvais. The head is like the sky. Always turning around and around inside. But very slowly. When you think, you make it go too fast. Then it aches" (307)--is ironic in that the cessation of thought is exactly what Kit desires, but in order to attain that state she must exist outside of language. Thus, by verbalizing what Kit desires, by communicating with her, Amar denies her the very relief of which he speaks.

In the hands of Western agents, and finally denied any possibility of an atavistic relationship, Kit seeks solace in the only place left open to her, herself. She retreats inside her mind, symbolized by the closing of her eyes, and struggles feebly and unsuccessfully to resist being sent back to "civilization." Amid the clang of a church bell and crowing of a cock, once again suggesting awakening, Kit's escorts place her on a plane bound for the Mediterranean coast. As she opens her eyes for the first time, she peers out the window at the sky and, once again, the nihilistic abyss rises to meet her:

Before her eyes was the violent blue sky--nothing else. For an endless moment she looked into it. Like a great overpowering sound it destroyed everything in her mind, paralyzed her. Someone once had said to her that the sky hides the
night behind it, shelters the person beneath from the horror that lies above. Unblinking, she fixed the solid emptiness, and the anguish began to move in her. At any moment the rip can occur, the edges fly back, and the giant maw will be revealed. (312)

Kit knows that if she continues to drift towards self-recognition, then it is only a matter of time before she, like her husband, will be propelled into the maw of the nihil. The movement of the plane towards the sky symbolizes Kit's nearing of the void. As the plane appears to approach the physical sky, so too does Kit approach the symbolic shelter stretched between herself and the abyss—a capricious shelter which, at any moment, can swallow those who test its strength into the horror beyond.

On the surface, the techniques Kit employs in the interest of self-preservation fail. However, Bowles provides no evidence for an easy evaluation of Kit's ultimate fate. It is impossible to determine what finally happens to her because Bowles extends her existence, and, consequently, her dilemma, beyond the pages of the novel. However, if one considers the usual movement of the cyclical journey, then some suppositions pertaining to Kit are possible. Her journey is a potentially cyclic event: she returns to the city from whence her adventure began, and is even slated to stay at the Majestic Hotel, the first establishment she, Port and Tunner stopped in. Conventionally, the adventure motif begins with the protagonist or protagonists moving outward, away from safety, and then returning to the comforts of home. However, both Port and Kit are so profoundly and ineluctably affected by their journeys that they cannot return to the West. Port dies and Kit takes flight into the Casbah where, as Kit's escort, Miss Ferry, notes, it is much easier to disappear than in the Sahara (317).

Though Bowles does not provide an overt indication of Kit's potential for survival, his portrayal of the West in the final chapter suggests her "escape" may be a positive action. Miss Ferry, as her name implies, is the vehicle for Kit's final transport back to the West, and she is significant in that she embodies many of the negative characteristics of Western
culture. She despises her assignment in Africa and, as she tells Kit, has been "trying to get sent to Copenhagen now for almost a year" (315). Furthermore, such comments as, "There's something repulsive about an American without money in his pocket" (313) and, "She's damn lucky to have all this fuss made about her...They don't all get put up at the Majestic" (316), distinguish her character as that of a stereotypically insensitive bureaucrat. Finally, the realization that she will be returned to the care of Tunner, who shares some of Miss Ferry's characteristics though to a far less offensive degree, serves as a catalyst for her flight. Thus, the contrast to primitivism provided by Tunner and, more significantly, Miss Ferry paints the Western persona in a fundamentally negative light and heightens the perceived necessity of Kit's final departure. Atavism is not an acceptable alternative to accepting responsibility for one's life in all its existential uncertainty, and Kit's flight into the Casbah may simply be a cyclical repetition of her flight into the desert. However, Bowles also suggests that Kit has at least shed the insularity and pettiness of the Western identity. If the loss of such identity is the first step in a different, better and more endurable existence, then Kit--provided she eventually faces her existential anxieties--certainly achieves something positive through her travail in the desert.

Paul Bowles describes The Sheltering Sky as a "story of what the desert can do to us"; the desert is not a malevolent force but simply "Not caring" and "Unaware" (Bowles, "Interview" [Evans], 12). The setting is entirely neutral; what the desert does to the individual characters depends upon what those characters bring with them into its environment. Those, such as Port and Kit, who suffer intense unhappiness as well as personal and/or societal estrangement are profoundly affected by the further dislocation of being in the Sahara and are left vulnerable to nihilistic destruction. But Port and Kit are not abnormalities; Bowles perceives unhappiness as the fundamental state of man:

If I stress the various facets of unhappiness, it is because I believe unhappiness should be studied very carefully; this is certainly no time for anyone to pretend to be happy, or to put his unhappiness away in the dark. (And anyone who is
not unhappy now must be a monster, a saint or an idiot.) You must watch your universe as it cracks above your head. (Bowles, "Talk," p.9)

The characters who survive in Bowles's desert, the Lyles (who are certainly monstrous in their depiction) and Tunner, do so because they lead unquestioning lives and therefore cannot represent an alternative to the angst of Port and Kit. Bowles's novel, in fact, does not offer any examples of reconciliation between the possibility of attaining a deeper understanding of life by asking (or being forced to confront) the existential question and the ability to survive within an existential universe. The novel presents the nihilistic or existential quest as essentially alienating and presents contact as a palliative which prevents one from discovering the nature of one's existence. Bowles explicitly states this view in an interview with Jeffrey Bailey: "Everyone is isolated from everyone else. The concept of society is like a cushion to protect us from the knowledge of that isolation. A fiction that serves as an anaesthetic" (81).

Both Port and Kit exemplify alienation, and language plays a basic role in their expression of that isolation. Port is profoundly alienated, even from the one person with whom he desires to establish contact, his wife. Bowles portrays him primarily in a Heideggerian fashion in that, as humanity recedes from his perspective, he is held out over the abyss and he discovers his Being. Though he theoretically recognizes the potential inherent in language, Port is jaundiced to the degree that he does not truly believe in the possibility of using it effectively to communicate what he considers to be essential truths about existence and to make contact with an other until, unfortunately, it is too late to save himself. The nihil also threatens to well up and destroy Kit. However, rather than recognizing the power of language and communication as a vehicle to a meaningful existence, she attempts to survive in a language-less environment. Kit's alienation is, then, a self-imposed state of mental annihilation enabled by the submersion of language and self-consciousness beneath a shell of complete sensuality. In Port and Kit, language is the fulcrum over which Bowles presents the tension between both contact and introversion
(Port) and self-consciousness and atavism (Kit).

The ways in which the Moresbys attempt to exist in the universe of *The Sheltering Sky* are ultimately insufficient, but, ironically, there is a viable solution to the question of existential existence expressed, not within the text, but in the author's construction of it. Sartre describes literature as a mutual interaction between author and reader—as an exercise of freedom:

To write is to make an appeal to the reader that he lead into objective existence the revelation which I have undertaken by means of language. And if it should be asked to what the writer is appealing, the answer is simple....the appearance of the work of art is a new event which cannot be explained by anterior data. And since this directed creation is an absolute beginning, it is therefore brought about by the freedom of the reader, and by what is purest in that freedom. Thus, the writer appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work. (WIL, 45)

Because the written work of art is absolute in its creation, because there is nothing anterior to it, it springs from nothing. Writing, thus, permits an author to confront the void and have an authentic nihilistic experience without consequent destruction. This is possible because the act of composition is antithetical to the isolation which leaves one vulnerable to annihilation: at the same time the author is creating a text, he or she is appealing to a reader to complete that creation. Bowles's act of expressing his nihilistic vision through authorship is, then, inherently anti-nihilistic, and it enables him to construct an authentic existence through creating compositions that recognize and confront existential questions.

There is an additional dimension to Bowles's compositional activities: his writing extends beyond the creation of his own works. He was responsible for the standard English translation of Sartre's play, *Huis Clos*, and a number of stories related orally to him by Moroccan story tellers such as Ahmed Yacoubi. Engagement in the latter activity
adds additional significance to the enterprise of communication through the written word. The act of translation implies a bridging of cultural perspectives in which one attempts to express the uniqueness of one culture's vision to that of another. The very thought that such a bridging is possible suggests the potential for a communicative field that transcends boundaries. It denies the stifling and isolating nature of unyielding cultural identification and promotes the communication of ideas, questions, and problems that are universal in appeal while, at the same time, creating the potential for greater understanding between dissimilar cultures. Furthermore, if the translator is engaged in personal collaboration with the author of that which is translated, as Bowles is, then the bridging element also exists on a personal level. Bowles survives in the environment that destroys his characters because he engages in a meaningful existence that centers around the authentic use of language, both in the conveyance of his own vision of philosophical absoluteness and in the translation of the vision of other storytellers; he exists, through composition, beneath "the fine fabric" of the sheltering sky.
Notes

1 Perhaps the most condemnatory criticism of *The Sheltering Sky*’s nihilism comes from John Aldridge's *After the Lost Generation*: "Bowles tries from the beginning to transform the meaningless lives of his people into drama by surrounding them with all the bizarre props of an African setting...But in spite of all his tricks...the clear evidence of his failure to write a truly meaningful book still shows through" (192). Chester Eisinger, in *Fiction of the Forties*, also views the novel as a proclamation of hopelessness: "The meaning of the novel is conveyed in the fate of its two leading characters. The West can satisfy neither the intellectual nor the physical needs of human beings. And such people, in a state of fatal imbalance when they come to Africa, will be destroyed there" (286). A more recent study by Sanford Pinsker, "Post-War Civilization and its Existential Discontents: Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky,*" states that the novel is an example of post-war existentialism expressing the belief "that anguish's grip wears a death head, that nada is nada is nada" (10), and is trapped in its own milieu because "the weariness existentialism values cannot move beyond itself, cannot become a post-existentialism in the ways we have become accustomed to, say, post-structuralism" (13).

2 Lehan's statement is as "optimistic" a comment as one will find concerning *The Sheltering Sky*. However, Stephen Patteson, in *A World Outside: The Fiction of Paul Bowles*, recognizes the positive implications of Bowles's characters' existential struggle to create protective meaning in a meaningless environment:
order tends to slip into disorder, calm into violence, form into formlessness, and
safe interiors into the vast, unprotected outside. But the effort to fashion
shelters goes doggedly on in Bowles. His characters are nothing if not
persistent in their determination to make a strange, nonhuman world seem more
like home, and their project, though never entirely successful, invests them with
a dignity sometimes approaching heroism (xi).

3 Bertens's study and Linda Wagner's "Paul Bowles and the Characterization of
Women" both emphasize the theme of frustrated contact, and its disastrous consequences,
between Port and Kit.

4 Stephen Patteson and Sanford Pinsker both recognize the significance of Bowles's
act of writing. The latter writes that "Bowles--unlike Port--has been able to sustain
himself as a writer in the hot, searing light of this desert land" (12), and Patteson suggests
that Bowles, through writing *The Sheltering Sky*, attempts to "enclose that openness," the
emptiness of the existential universe, "within the structure of narrative" (129). Wayne
Pounds's studies, "The Subject of Paul Bowles," "Paul Bowles and Edgar Allan Poe: The
Disintegration of the Personality" and *Paul Bowles: The Inner Geography* present a
somewhat different perspective on the author's writing. His studies have in common the
premise that the novel is a reflection of Bowles's psyche, and, thus, the narrative possesses
"a therapeutic function for the author" (SPB, 302).

5 Heidegger names the being concerned about its own Being "Dasein"; he equates
Being with "existenz," or, "the very Being to which Dasein can relate in one way or
another, and somehow always does relate" (BT 54). In existenz, Dasein is always
choosing or neglecting possibilities of its being; Heidegger terms this continual process of our lives, "existentiell." One of the options of existentiell is the conscious exploration of Dasein's structure and possibilities; Heidegger terms this "existential." Existentiell, then, refers to Being as we experience it, to the intuitive understanding of it, whereas existential is more properly concerned with the intentional exploration of the structures that constitute Being, or the conceptual pursuit of the question of the "meaning of Being."

6 Bowles writes in his autobiography, *Without Stopping*: "I met a highly implausible couple, a mother and son whose behavior was strange enough to interest me....By this time they were firmly implanted in the narrative of my book as subsidiary characters [the Lyles]. Their inclusion now seems unfortunate, not because I had used them, but because they turned out to be caricatures (277).

7 Nearly all criticism recognizes the movement away from the familiar and into the foreign as a major component of *The Sheltering Sky*, and in Bowles's fiction in general. Wendy Lesser's "Murder as Social Impropriety: Paul Bowles's 'Evil Heroes'" and Oliver Evans's "Paul Bowles and the Natural Man" focus particularly on this theme. Lesser writes: "most of his fiction deals with the meeting between...untamed parts of the world and the rigid expectations of Europeans and Americans," and "the touchstone he uses to distinguish the attitudes of the two cultures...is violence" (402). Evans expresses a similar sentiment: "And in nearly all of his work...tension arises from a contrast between alien cultures: in a typical Bowles story, a civilized individual comes in contact with an alien environment and is defeated by it" (44).
8 Both Eric Mottram, "Paul Bowles: Staticity and Terror," and Linda Wagner recognize the link between the natural and the feminine that runs through Bowles's work, and they rightfully point to his short story, "The Circular Valley," as the most concise development of this theme.


VITA

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