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Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

An American in Tangier: Interview with Paul Bowles

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6nj7q64f>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 8(1)

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Publication Date

2017

DOI

10.5070/T881036676

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**MOROCCAN
CULTURAL
STUDIES
JOURNAL**

Journal of Transnational American Studies (JTAS) 8.1 (2017)

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VOLUME 1 NUMBER 1 SPRING 1999

MCSJ

Published by

The Moroccan Cultural Studies Centre

Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdallah University

Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences Dhar al Mahraz, Fez

An American in Tangier: Interview with Paul Bowles

The growing, renewed academic and media interest in Paul Bowles as a figure of a rare complexion and a remarkable literary talent owes perhaps more than anything else to the release in the early 1990s of Bernardo Bertolucci's film, *The Sheltering Sky* and Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno's *An Invisible Spectator* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992). The first is a major film based on Bowles first novel set in Algeria; the second is a voluminous and resourceful biography which attempted with great success to reintroduce Paul Bowles to his American readers. Similar testimonies to the richness and complexity of Bowles' writing appeared in the form of reviews of his books in their new editions, *Abacus*. Academic criticism, however, is far too scarce. Recent publications include Michelle Green's *The Dream at the End of the World: Paul Bowles and the Literary Renegades in Tangier* (1992), Allen Hibbard's *Paul Bowles: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1993), and Gena Dagal Caponi's edition of *Conversations with Paul Bowles* (1994). None of these is strictly a critical study of his work. Even so, Bowles' books remain far more compelling than the biographical or literary histories produced on him have allowed. The list includes four novels, several collections of short stories, an autobiography, a collection of poems, a travel narrative, a diary and a number of miscellaneous publications, not to mention the series of interviews he has given during his life.

It may not be enough to characterise him as a prolific writer with diverse intellectual occupations, though this alone should guarantee him an eminent position among modern writers. His location as an American expatriate has never failed to raise questions as to what makes a writer of his calibre forsake all the luxuries of European and American cities to live permanently in Tangier. This voluntary exile has largely concealed his work from academic recognition. The pleasures of exile, however, cannot be underestimated. For a freelance writer, sceptical of tradition as he was, only one road had to be taken, and that road involved constant travel and a relentless search for exotic sights, sounds and satisfactions.

If such has been his own personal disposition, his literary work has appealed to readers of various backgrounds and expectations. Bowles' books stand at the crossroads of several cultures and histories which are defined, among other things, by a long tradition of

exclusion and opposition. They are statements about the postcolonial condition encompassing geographies as distant as Latin America and the Far East, or the USA and North Africa. It may not be worthwhile to try to press his books for a definite political moral, although his own voice emanates from the 'interstitial space' often associated with individuals of distanced and passive nationalistic sentiment. Gore Vidal noted once that the absence of a full-hearted reception of Bowles' fiction in the United States was due largely to the type of characters and situations he portrayed in his novels. Modelled on himself, his characters lead lives far removed from American day-to-day experience. While they embark on long journeys that promise adventure and self-fulfilment away from the routine of metropolitan cities, they retain their racial prejudices and fail to adapt their foreign identities to the local rhythms. The ultimate impact of these journeys is portrayed as tremendous and everlasting, the revelations as shattering.

This interview took place in Paul Bowles' flat in Tangier during a visit I paid him in June 1996. I must acknowledge Alfred Yeager's generous help in securing the meeting and, more still, in taking pains to convince Bowles to grant this interview. Upon realising the reason for our visit Bowles confronted me by saying that nothing was more detestable to him than giving interviews. While consenting to answer my questions, he desired them to be as short as possible.

Karim Bejjit: Tangier has been for many years your permanent home, and the locale of several of your short stories, what is it exactly that attracted you to this city?

Paul Bowles: Well, I had never heard of it, to tell the truth, until Gertrude Stein in Paris told me that she had come here a few times. She thought I would like it. So I said all right I would go

KB: When did you first come here?

PB: In the summer of 1931.

KB: Did you settle then?

PB: I rented a house up on the mountains and bought furniture for it, which was absurd, because I knew I wouldn't stay long. Well, I ended by selling it off. Then I went to Fez, I went to Marrakesh, I went over the High Atlas, then to Ouarzazate...

KB: How did you perceive the difference between Tangier and Fez, for example, at the time you experienced them?

PB: Well, Tangier was an amusing place to live in, and Fez was fascinating, not to live in, but to explore, I spent very much time wandering in the Medina...

KB: You said Tangier was amusing, can you elaborate on that?

PB: It was full of ridiculous foreigners. If you wanted to be entertained, you simply went to the so-called tea-pot, and sat in a café and watched the circus. Right, that was amusing. I had also stayed in Fez. Fez was much more serious, and it was so full of foreigners who did not seem to know anything about Morocco at all. It was full of people who drank a lot, which I didn't do, so that amused me. I enjoyed watching people make fools of themselves, which I thought they did. I think I had made a fool of myself by watching them, but I didn't know then.

KB: In your preface to *The Spider's House*, you expressed your regret of the speed at which traditional aspects of Moroccan life had been disappearing in the aftermath of the colonial era. Why did you think it was regrettable?

PB: You mean change? The Europeanisation of Morocco. Well, I knew that if it were Europeanised, it would be a kind of bastard culture (laughs).

KB: No homogeneity?

PB: No, how could there be homogeneity?

KB: And was that discomfoting for you?

PB: No, no, I regretted to see that Morocco would no longer be medieval, that it would share certain things with Europe.

KB: That was your personal feeling?

PB: Of course, I couldn't have an impersonal feeling though.

KB: Your work cannot be charged with complicity with colonialism, although you were writing long before the Moroccans had their independence. Yet, neither did you ally yourself with the local politics as it was unfolding in Morocco. How did you perceive your position as an American writer?

PB: No, I never had anything to do with local politics. I wasn't French, I wasn't Moroccan of course.

KB: *The Sheltering Sky* was your first novel. I know I am taking you many years back, but what particular circumstances had suggested to you the writing of that novel?

PB: None, I mean, I had no idea. I just started to write it. I wasn't conscious of what I was doing, really. I understood what I wanted though.

KB: Did you feel you were writing within a particular literary tradition? I mean who is the writer that influenced you most?

PB: Well, I suppose Jean Paul Sartre. I appreciated his philosophy. What would you say, he was an atheist-existentialist, which I liked.

KB: This reminds me of an incident in *The Sheltering Sky* when Kit ventures from her comfortable first-class carriage in the train. Frightened and disgusted by the natives, she ultimately withdraws to change her clothes for fear she catches pneumonia.

PB: No, she is forced to do so by Tunner.

KB: Right. I wonder if this failure to communicate with the natives is cultural or ontological.

PB: Certainly not cultural, seeing nothing whatever by the culture and the land she was travelling through. I don't think she was interested in it really. But, she was obviously repelled by the sheep's head, by the crowds of natives in the train. So she felt she was in an environment that wasn't hers, and where she couldn't be.

KB: I wonder to what extent you are using autobiographical details in your fiction. I mean, how much of your personal experience is reflected in *The Sheltering Sky*?

PB: I don't know. In many places I set down what I remembered seeing. There was more invented though. But the inventions there were often based on memories. I suppose that's what you do anyway with all novels.

KB: Several scenes in *The Spider's House* display more intimacy with the Moroccan life than *The Sheltering Sky* could allow about Algeria. There is an entire narrative in the novel that is dominated by Moroccan characters. Adjacent to that narrative runs another dominated by Westerners. Only at the end do the two distinct narratives converge. But the encounter is once more a defeating one. Why such pessimism, Paul?

PB: Well, it was inevitable. What else could have happened? You are saying the final pages of *The Spider's House* are pessimistic, well, the whole novel is pessimistic of course.

KB: But at one time, it seemed there was a chance for some mutual understanding. It didn't survive till the end of the novel where everybody had to go their own way.

PB: Of course, there was no other organization possible. Roads and cultures can merge and blend, but I don't believe it. I think one destroys the other. It's a battle and one wins, and the inevitable winner in this case will be European culture; in this case not, always.

KB: From mid 1960's till mid 1970's you worked with several Moroccan writers as editor and translator. Can you comment on that experience?

PB: Well I decided to do translation because Mrs. Bowles was very ill, and I had to see her every minute, and so I had no privacy nor solitude which were very necessary to me. It was then that I found I didn't need to do that for translating, because I could stop it at any moment and return and pick it up where I left it off. But I couldn't do that for writing fiction. So that's why I was doing translating for several years, until Mrs. Bowles died. This was in 1973.

KB: The books were published in the United States.

PB: Yes. They were translated into several languages, well reviewed accepted, enjoyed, I think, by readers. But you have to remember that the only one that wrote was Choukri.¹ The others were oral. In other words, the others couldn't use Arabic; they used *darija*.² I couldn't translate in Arabic. Well, I don't know, I never learnt it. But I enjoyed doing translation. I thought it would perhaps shed light on the culture that was much despised. I thought it probably did.

KB: Do you think your own work has generally received its fair share of academic criticism?

PB: I've no idea!

KB: Well I remember Gore Vidal once saying that your work wasn't very much known in the U.S. mainly because you wrote about individuals and situations that Americans would find very difficult to identify with.

PB: Hmm, that's true, he did write that.

KB: Would you agree?

PB: I don't know. I don't think it interests me any more. I don't like academic criticism, or academic thinking. I'd certainly be happy not to have academic recognition. But now it has begun for several years and goes on.

KB: Besides your creative writing, you also write music. How do you see the connection between literature and music?

PB: I don't think there is a connection. I think one effaces the other. That is to say, if I'm writing prose and I become restless I can go into the other room of my mind and write music, and vice versa. One more or less cleans off the blackboard for the other in my mind.

KB: Looking back is there something in your life you regret not having done?

PB: Not having done? No. Well, I wasn't able to convince Mrs. Bowles that she shouldn't drink so much. I regret having allowed her to go ahead till it killed her. It's not really a regret nor remorse, no, no. I suppose I wasn't strong enough to stop her. Well, I don't think it would have helped. One can't convince someone else to be other than what he is. You can't change people. I can't, I mean. I don't know.

KB: That's a power no one has.

PB: I suppose so.

¹ Mohamed Choukri, Moroccan novelist best known for his *For Bread Alone*.

² Moroccan dialect.