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Paul Bowles as Orientalist: Toward a Nomad Discourse

Timothy Weiss

To use the rubric "orientalist" in reference to the 20th-century American composer-writer Paul Bowles is to suggest not one but potentially many things, some of them obvious and others much less so. The one thing that I do *not* mean by calling Bowles an orientalist is the one thing that Orientalism for the past twenty years has become a code for: racism and imperialist sentiment. In his landmark study *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said sets up the equation that still remains in place, at least to a certain degree, twenty years later: given that 19th-century Europeans tended to reduce the "Orient" to a set of essentializations,*idées reçues*, and stereotypes, he contends,

> It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric. Some of the immediate sting will be taken out of these labels if we recall additionally that human societies, at least the more advanced cultures, have rarely offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism for dealing with "other" cultures. (203-204)

In *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (1995), John M. MacKenzie examines the transformation of the term "orientalism," which, in the wake of Said's publication, has become, according to him, "one of the most ideologically charged words in modern scholarship" (4). MacKenzie's own work, as well as those of others—Dennis Porter's *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing* (1991); Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992); Billie Melman's *Women's Orients* (1992); Lisa Lowe's *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (1991)—have broken apart the monolith of Orientalism and shown its complicated contours and contradictions. Porter, for example, in his analysis of orientalist travel writing, has focused on the complexity of human encounters, the mixture of emotions bound up in travel, and the traveler's incertitude and estrangement. Such travel writing may be interpreted as "a form of experimentation at and beyond established limits"; rather than "obliteration of otherness." A "self-transformation" of the traveler inevitably begins to take place "through a dialogic engagement with alien modes of life" (qtd. in MacKenzie 22). Similarly, Pratt, Melman and Lowe have demonstrated the diversity within orientalist discourse as well as the modifying effect of cultural encounters. Scholars have pointed out the hybridity of Orient

and Occident and the two-way nature of their dialogue and exchange. One need only consider, for example, the contributions of Arabo-Islamic culture and civilization to European civilization during the Middle Ages (see, for example, Fuentes). MacKenzie notes that Said acknowledges this interaction but fails to draw out its consequences:

> [He] recognizes that the traffic cannot all be one way, that Orientalism was forming the West as well as the Orient. The East "has helped to define Europe" . . . [and] has been an "integral part of European material civilization and culture," a "sort of surrogate and even underground self," at times (as for the Romantics) even a means of regenerating the West. Thus the discourse of Orientalism seems to go further than merely highlighting the alleged superiorities of Europe. It can modify and therefore surely even challenge the West. Said never follows through the logic of this, that the example of the Orient can become the means for a counter-western discourse, that it can offer opportunities for literary extension, spiritual renewal and artistic development. Thus the Orient, or at least its discourse, has the capacity to become the tool of cultural revolution, a legitimizing source of resistance to those who challenge western conventions, introspection and complacency. (10)

In short, MacKenzie maintains that there is "a complexity of western approaches to the East" that Said's analysis does not take into account (xviii). Given these kinds of scholarly objections and qualifications, in this article I use the terms "Orientalist" and "Orientalism" to refer to western literary treatments of North African and Euro-Asian cultures and societies which are demonstrably racist or imperialist, and the terms "orientalist" and "orientalism" to refer to treatments which can not be readily classified and may, in fact, be quite mixed in their effects or have little or nothing to do with racist sentiment and imperialist attitudes.

I aim to show in this article different meanings and functions of the Maghreb and oriental materials in Paul Bowles's works, among which we certainly find the following. First, an artistic, inspirational aspect: Bowles drew inspiration from the terrains (cityscapes, landscapes), the cultural juxtapositions and interactions of North Africa, and other "eastern" or hybrid east-west places. They were to him a muse of sorts. Secondly, the fact that he found in the latter a fertile ground in which to cultivate his particular existentialist and nihilist sensibilities. Third, an alterity: for Bowles the orient is *not* an occasion for composing fictions that demonstrate or are imbued by a sense of western superiority; quite the contrary, he was rebelling against and escaping from things North American and European. The orient was the entry-way into an "underground self" and a means by which the expatriate living in Tangier set himself apart from things western. The orient is thus a means to a chosen alterity and a counter-western discourse. Fourth, a nomadic aspect: although cultural binarisms like East and West never disappear completely in Bowles's writings, there is another sense in which he goes beneath and beyond them to touch his most profound subject matter, the terror and wonder of existence. For him the orient leads to a deepening of an existentialist reflection. His attitude toward the Maghreb is neither one of superiority nor unqualified embrace; it was

for him a place where he felt a necessity. It was a "magical" place precisely because he believed that there he had met his destiny. But for Bowles the Maghreb is also a place of transience. It is a place of sojourn: it is a means to another end beyond itself, that is, an independence of mind and a *nomadisme*. In this respect Bowles's autobiography *Without Stopping* (1972) could not be better entitled: his life journey moves from West to East, but the East, no matter how much it might be valued, is not the final destination. The orient is a vehicle to something else, call it a nihilism or a *nomadisme*, that transcends binarisms of cultural difference but for which non-European places (such as the Maghreb) serve as the inspiration, the detonator, and the sustaining environment of existentialist questioning and wandering. Bowles, better than any other western writer, has evoked in his writings an end of modernity for which oriental terrains are not only the setting but the vital inspiration.

In the following pages, I first set Bowles's fiction in its historical and intellectual context and briefly discuss a few representative works that illustrate a movement from a counter-western to a nomad discourse; and second, engage in the implied question with which this article began, that is, Bowles's writings in relation to Said's concept of Orientalism, especially in the collection of travel writings, *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue* (1984).

Counter-Western to Nomad Discourse

Bowles's fascination with things oriental, or with the non-western and non-patterned consciousness in general, must be set in the context of his rejection of the American way—at least the America in which he grew up and from which, while a freshman at the University of Virginia, he staged his first escape. (Note 1) Paris was the destination, although France and Europe came to serve as stops along the way to a more distant, culturally more complicated terminus: North Africa. In his autobiography, *Without Stopping*, Bowles writes engagingly of his fascination with the Maghreb and his preoccupation, in dreams, with the Strait of Gibraltar, at the entrance of which lies Tangier, where he has now lived for much of his life. "Since my early childhood it had been a fantasy of mine to dream a thing in such detail that it would be possible to bring it across the frontier in fact," he confesses (165-166). The dream becomes reality. Drawn to Morocco by the hidden springs of his unconscious, the place is "magical" for that, among other reasons. It was a landscape in which he could move back and forth between east and west, and between the everyday and its existential essence of terror and wonder. He was skeptical that a westerner could penetrate the thought and experience of eastern cultures, however, and his fiction is often about misunderstanding and victimization as much as it is about the realization of any alternative, non-western way of living. In his sojourn in North Africa and in his skepticism for the western project of progress, Bowles found disturbing perspectives from which to observe and write about the post-World War II world: one in which everything had become

implicated in everything else—the International Zone of *Let It Come Down* (1952) is a prescient metaphor of this—and in which Europe and America could never again be confident of the supremacy of their values. At a time of American hegemony in the decades following World War II, Bowles exposed American and western arrogance as a cultural debility, and showed the weakness of the western viewpoint when confronted by an alien environment where the cultural and social props on which it depends vanish. It was "Bowles's genius," Gore Vidal comments in the Introduction to the author's *Collected Stories*, "to suggest the horrors that lie beneath [the] floor [of our ramshackle civilization], as fragile, in its way, as the sky that shelters us from a devouring vastness" (iv). Ahead of his time, Bowles scrutinized the kind of American vulnerabilities (i.e., an action orientation) that Fredric Jameson singles out in his Foreword to Karatani Kojin's *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*: "[Americans] need to cultivate a new kind of 'national' inferiority complex of the superstate. We need to train ourselves to be vulnerable in some new and original sense, to be passive-receptive, weak, un-American, susceptible to boundless influence by currents from foreign countries and distant cultures . . ." (xx). In Bowles's fiction any discussion of the "orient as alternative way" must be connected with a scrutiny of western values in the aftermath of World War II and in the advent of US hegemony. In as much as American confidence rested at that time on a reliance on action and a casting of cultural others in familiar American images, so Bowles's fiction of this period shows the inefficacy of action and evokes the strangeness of others. The result is breakdown. The oriental acts as a detonator that sets off a collapse whose cause is a structural weakness in Americans abroad, like the professor of "A Distant Episode" (*Collected Stories*), originally written in 1945, Kit in *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) and Dyar in*Let It Come Down* (1952).

Bowles's critique of modernity goes hand-in-hand with his exploration of other, non-western ways of apprehending and living in the world. As a sojourner, someone in-between, Bowles can be passive, un-Americanly passive—as Jameson might say, adopting the attitude of the observer, a kind of "invisible spectator" (to use Bowles's own turn of phrase and the title of Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno's biography about him) of the multicultural world about him. Exploring boundaries and debilities, Bowles simultaneously undermines "white mythologies" of America and Europe and writes an end-of-modernity fiction (see Young). By way of various techniques, his stories upset and overturn, questioning our beliefs in reason and the utility of action to resolve problems: the use of unusual and disorienting points of view, sinister atmospheres that bespeak a malevolence, landscapes that dwarf human presence and pretentions, the simulation of drug experiences and alternative states of consciousness, shocking turns of events and unexpected violence of a cruelty that snaps the imagination. "I believe unhappiness should be studied very carefully," Bowles has remarked, "this is certainly no time for anyone to pretend to be happy, or to put his unhappiness away in the dark" (qtd. in Sawyer-Lauçanno 299). Bowles often reverses western perspectives, seeing the world not from a position of security and comfort but from insecurity and distress. "How the

inhabitants of alien cultures regard the creatures of our civilized world" is a key theme of his works, Vidal observes (in Bowles, Introduction to *Collected Stories* iv). We have here the suggestion of the inside and outside of Bowles's orientalism: the inside is a movement toward transformation, a movement toward a deepening recognition of others (i.e., non-western cultures); the outside is a movement away from the values of modernity, of North America and the West, toward a nomad discourse.

Even a cursory consideration of a few of Bowles's best-known stories reveals features of this discourse. "A Distant Episode" (*Collected Stories*) recounts the archetypal tale of "the interloping westerner who confronts an alien culture and inevitably comes up short, realizing too late that his 'civilization' cannot protect him" (Sawyer-Lauçanno 249). In a desert town of North Africa an American professor starts on a walk that leads him far out of town into unfamiliar terrain. He descends a long, narrow path into a deep gorge and is suddenly attacked by dogs, bound and gagged by members of a notorious desert tribe of the region, the Reguiba. The next morning his tongue is cut out, a sack is put over his head and he is led away, a rope around his neck. Days turn into weeks into months, by the end of which he has become the trained buffoon who performs antics of idiocy and madness at the *caravansérail*. In this story the tables are completely turned: rationality becomes irrationality, power becomes powerlessness, the master becomes the slave. A masterpiece of defamiliarization and horror, "A Distant Episode" has the resonance of a parable about western vulnerability and incomprehension; the orient is here a world beyond, distant from western ways of knowing and being.

"By the Water" (*Collected Stories*), originally written in 1945, combines the oriental with the surreal, incorporating aspects of Kafka, Maghreb folk tales, and *The Arabian Nights*. Arriving after dark in an "unfriendly town," Amar trudges through deep snow and "utter blackness" in search of a *fondouk* (Ed's Note i) where he might spend the night. He enters a steamy *hammam* with an attached pool, which turns out to be the "grotto" of a bullying crustacean-man called Lazrag: "The creature's head was large; its body was small and it had no legs or arms. The lower part of the trunk ended in two flipper-like pieces of flesh. From the shoulders grew short pincers" (Bowles, *Collected Stories* 33). Amar makes the fatal mistake of kicking this strange creature, who pursues him beyond the *hammam* and along the highway leading out of town. Amar is befriended by a boy who warns him of Lazrag's powers. They hitchhike and obtain a ride on a truck, during the course of which they apparently change into birds and then back again to humans. The next morning, while bathing in the ocean, the boy saves Amar from Lazrag's wrath when the latter scuttles forth from a crevice. "By the Water" is about unpredictability, fear, nightmares, delight and magical transformations. The traditional and the industrial, the oriental and the surreal blend together perfectly, creating in the reader a feeling of wonder, but a wonder infused with the uneasiness and terror that Bowles posits at the heart of being and consciousness.

Although “The Circular Valley” (*Collected Stories*), originally written in 1948, has a Central American rather than Maghreb setting, it works with the basic equation of Bowles’s North African fiction: that is, a flight across frontiers and an exploration of different states of existence and consciousness. In “The Circular Valley” borderlines do not have to do with east-west cultural differences, as in many of Bowles’s stories, but with difference of gender and being. Atlájala, the central presence of the short story, is an animus, or spirit of place, who during the course of millennia has entered into creatures and human beings who happen upon his haunt, the circular valley. From birds, to Amerindians, to colonizing soldier, to monks, to modern-day trysting lovers, he has entered their being and experienced their desires and ways of living in the world. This seems to me an apt metaphor of Bowles’s project as a writer. Whereas the first orientalists (explorers, colonizers, scholars, i.e., those who constructed an Orient based on a combination of received ideas about things oriental and personal experiences which tended to confirm those ideas), viewed themselves as superior to those exotic others whom they encountered, later orientalists such as Bowles tended to identify, at least partly, with the oriental other (see Behdad). This identification, which for Bowles takes the form of transformation and translation, a kind of inhabiting the consciousness of another person while at the same time remaining outside of it, is explored across a range of situations and ladder of existence. I think of Bowles’s animal tales, for example, inspired by Moroccan folk tales and Amerindian stories, in which the author explores what it might be like to have the consciousness of a snake or a hyena; as well as stories about altered states of consciousness brought on by the smoking of *kif* (Ed's Note ii), ingestion of *majoun* (Ed'sNote iii), or drinking of alcohol (e.g., *One Hundred Camels in the Courtyard*; Let It Come Down; “Tapiama” [*Collected Stories*], originally written in 1957). This is also the basic equation in stories where individuals from different cultures, western as opposed to eastern, make a brief foray into each other’s separate worlds (e.g., “Tea on the Mountain” [*Collected Stories*], originally written in 1939; *The Sheltering Sky*).

In *The Sheltering Sky* and *Let It Come Down*, Bowles’s best known novels, North Africa is not only the setting of a search, but also a state of being which the main characters of these books enter. They attempt to escape the cage of modernity, and the orient becomes the alternative, their line of flight and hoped-for transformation. In *The Sheltering Sky*, a variation on André Gide’s *L’Immoraliste*, Kit and Porter travel from Manhattan to the Sahara. They want to break away from urban routines, to change their lives in some fundamental way. At first the oriental setting serves chiefly as a backdrop for their existentialist agonizing, but as they trek farther south into the desert, discarding little by little the trappings of western civilization, they become increasingly drawn into a nomadic life. In a sense, the unspoken purpose of their trip has been to lay aside the sedentary, domestic life style of the west for a nomadic existence. When Porter suddenly dies of cholera, Kit is further released from old ties and confronts an emptiness. Her desire leads her beyond the walls of the French colonial fort which has sheltered her during Kit’s agony, where she encounters and joins a Touareg caravan. She becomes oriental, so to speak, but her

joy of abandoning the west is eventually offset by her diminishment and imprisonment as a concubine. The final section of the novel—in which she escapes, returns to the city, but now as someone without identity—shows quite clearly the nomadism that Bowles's fiction moves toward. The citation from Kafka that serves as epigraph for the concluding section of the novel suggests this direction: "From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning back. That is the point that must be reached" (qtd. in Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky* 277).

Although a very different book from its predecessor, *Let It Come Down* also features as a central character an American who travels to North Africa to make a new beginning and the series of transformations which then take place. A bank teller, Dyar wants desperately to get out of the cage that he daily stands within, yet in Tangier he is lost and ends up exchanging one prison for another. "He still felt coreless—he was no one, and he was standing here in the middle of no country. The place was counterfeit, a waiting room between connections, a transition from one way of being to another, which for the moment was neither way, no way" (143). What makes *Let It Come Down* different is its focus on the uniqueness of one North African context, post-World War II Tangier. In one sense, there is no place like the International Zone, with its mix of cultures and nationalities and its intrigues and get-rich-quick schemes. As Daisy De Valverde points out, "life [there] revolves wholly about the making of money" (121). The Zone has many identities and no identity; it is an in-between place where anything becomes possible. In another sense Tangier is like other late 20th-century cities. There are no morals there, Dyar suspects; everything is for sale if the price is right. The International Zone is a place where today's "Age of Monsters," to use Daisy's phrase, can beget its common horrors. At least for the westerners who are there, self-interest is the only rule. While containing descriptions of the urban landscape, with its labyrinth of medinas and its richness of sights and sounds, the novel explores alternative states of consciousness: Dyar's existentialist musings; his experiences under the influence of hashish and *majoun*; his encounter with the dancers of the Berber brotherhood, with their trances and mutilations; his abandonment of western law and social convention and his transformation from naive bank teller to drugged, paranoiac murderer. The orient, then, serves as a passage, a road along which Dyar, stumbling and nudged by circumstance, gradually discards the trappings of his former, bank teller's identity, moving from non-western (different from), to counter-western (against), to nihilistic action. When he drives a nail into Thami's head—an accomplice asleep in a secluded mountain cabin—he confirms not so much an underlying racism but his arrival in the "age of monsters." It goes almost without saying that this novel portrays the soul-lessness and monstrosity of western modernity after World War II. However, neither does it take solace in any oriental alternatives, whose values it also moves beyond as it enters the space of nihilism.

Travel Writings

What makes Bowles's travel essays especially interesting is their conjunction of oriental and colonial subject matter and the relatively ideologically unaligned treatment that he brings to this subject matter at a crucial historical moment, the break-up of the European colonial empire in Africa and Asia. When reading Bowles's travel essays we must consider not only the historical, sociocultural contexts, but also the rhetorical contexts, as well as stylistic nuances, and personal accents that the individual writer injects into a discourse, making it idiolectal and resistant to facile classification. Although Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that the theme of a literary work is "the theme of the whole utterance as a definite sociohistorical act" (Bakhtin and Medvedev 132), he also insists on the individuality of that utterance, which "always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable" (*Speech Genres* 119). In *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*, Porter picks up this line of thought: "the human subject's relation to language is such that he or she is never merely a passive reflector of collective speech. We leave our individual mark in our written and spoken utterances in ways of which we are frequently unaware, if at all, only after the fact" (4). Even Said, whose critical approach is founded on the principle that literary works "begin from a political, social [and] cultural situation," unhesitatingly acknowledges that "it would be insane to argue that individual writers and works do not exist" (*Culture and Imperialism* 315-316). I see no contradiction, therefore, in reading Bowles's travel writings as situated within and affected by various sociohistorical contexts but certainly not determined by them to be Orientalist in a pejorative sense of that word.

Before turning to particular essays in Bowles's travel writing collection, *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue: Scenes from the Non-Christian World*, I would like to situate his work in relation to the works of two other 20th-century voyagers, Isabelle Eberhardt, who traveled and lived in Tunisia and Algeria in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and Roland Barthes, who recounted his brief sojourns in Japan and China in the 1960s and 1970s in *L'empire des signes* (The Empire of Signs) and *Alors la Chine?* (What, Then, Is China?). All three writers—Bowles, Eberhardt, and Barthes—seek to take the reader out of the sway of western ways of seeing and doing things and to de-center, explicitly or implicitly, the reader's attitudes and expectations. In their works they seek to create alternative worlds in which western values, although not banished, do not reign supreme. Eberhardt's Saharan *vagabondage*, Bowles's choice to live permanently in Tangier, and Barthes's fascination with the Orient as an empire of signs in which the logic of signifier/signified is broken show a desire to decenter things western.

In the late 19th century, Eberhardt, a Swiss national born of Russian *émigré* parents, crisscrossed the deserts of French Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. To better observe and participate in this Arabic-Berber world, she converted to Islam, dressed as a male in traditional Maghreb garb, and later married an Algerian officer in the colonial army. Her diaries, short stories and novellas record her adventures, poetically describe Sahara's landscapes, observe its cultures,

ponder her life and fate, and cry out her alienation. Bowles felt a certain affinity with her writings, translating some of her tales and journal reflections as *The Oblivion Seekers and Other Writings* (1972). A "soul eager for the constantly changing aspects of a life far from civilization," (Bowles in Eberhart, *Oblivion Seekers* 87). Bowles shares with Eberhardt a love of North African spaces, especially the Sahara, and an interest in Islamic culture and Maghreb folk cultures. Like her, he feels the tug of conversion/transformation, or the appeal of shedding one's old self and becoming something other. But whereas Eberhardt became a Sufi and a nomad, Bowles's tendency to convert is limited to living the life of the expatriate writer-composer; experiencing aspects of Maghreb cultures, learning languages, and collaborating with and translating local writers. Unlike Eberhardt, Bowles does not dress like a traditional North African as a manner of identifying with and blending into an exotic human milieu. Nor does his existentialism or his acquired sense of cultural limitations allow him to embrace Islam, whose mysticism and sense of fate he can appreciate but whose fundamental ideas remain foreign to his western sensibility. Whereas Eberhardt wants to be inside the culture—to live the life of the other—Bowles wants to be simultaneously inside *and* outside of it. He wants to approach other cultures but to stop at a remove from any allegiance that would define him narrowly. (Note 2)

It is also illuminating to contrast Bowles with Barthes. Both are initially fascinated with the Orient as an antithesis of the Occident, a fascination that turns into a quest for an autonomous cultural space that would not need to define itself in opposition to something else. Of Barthes's ambition vis-à-vis the Orient, Lisa Lowe writes that *L'empire des signes* and *Alors la Chine?* represent a "desire to invent 'atopia,' to devise new writing practices in order to escape the reactive formation of ideology and counterideology" (158). Both Bowles and Barthes seek a "third space," that is neither wholly of orient nor occident, but somewhere apart. Thus, Barthes can write ironically of the special pleasure of being in a place where one cannot understand the language: "How relaxing it is to be in a foreign country. There I am protected against stupidity, vulgarity, vanity, worldliness, nationality, and normality. The unfamiliar language, of which I capture the respiration, the emotive ventilation, in a word, the pure significance, envelops me in a slight dizziness as I move about, pulling me into its artificial emptiness ... I live in the interstice, relieved of all complete sense" (Barthes, *L'empire des signes* 18. Translation mine). (Note 3) Bowles would more likely focus on the uneasiness of the traveler and the sinister ambiance, but like Barthes he also seeks the pleasure of a free space where identity is not anchored to all that is familiar. His exile in international Tangier afforded it to him to a degree, and the "absolute" of the Sahara, perhaps even more.

Yet in their approach and choice of oriental terrain, Bowles and Barthes do differ significantly. The brevity of the latter's sojourns in Japan and China and his unfamiliarity with their languages assure that the orient of his writings, as brilliantly insightful as they are, will resemble a collection of snapshots and

interpretive commentary. It is the empire of signs, not Japan, about which he writes. The continuous experience of living in a place inevitably changes the way that one can write about it. Thus, in Bowles's works, experience at once gives solidity and impedes certain categorizations. Barthes's writing resembles a game, and it is this sense of systematic game that defines its qualities and pleasures. In Bowles's work, on the other hand, there is a sense of systemlessness and consequently there are more possibilities for a range of personas and rhetorical positions. Whereas Barthes insists on the emptiness behind the "empire of signs" ("La forme est vide," he writes, the cabinet is empty, there is no god [*L'empire des signes*90]), Bowles moves variously toward a sense of magic or horror or incomprehension, but not toward the same kind of nihilism. In Bowles, the desert sky is blue, mystically blue, and to be alone in the Sahara one may experience, as the title of one of his essays intimates, an emptiness that is also a "baptism of solitude" (Bowles, *Their Heads Are Green and Their Heads Are Blue*). Bowles's and Barthes's orients are fundamentally different, then, in the feelings out of which they were composed and which they sustain in the reader.

Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue contains essays written during the 1940s and 1950s, a period when European colonies in Africa and Asia were gaining their political independence or were experiencing their first decade of political autonomy. These essays treat the consequent changes and readjustments of cultural and social identity in several countries, including Morocco, Algeria, Ceylon, India, and Turkey. In the "Foreword," Bowles places the essay collection within the context of a new, postcolonial world and indicates his own *points de repère* within it. Although the subject matter of the essay collection is cultural difference in the "non-Christian world," he immediately dismisses certain western idealizations of traditional societies. He agrees with Lévi-Strauss that what travel often discloses to westerners is their "own garbage, flung in the face of humanity," but he suggests that it would be a form of naive, cultural primitivism to condemn change and brand 20th-century technology as evil (viii). Change, even in traditional cultures, is constant, Bowles reiterates, and western travelers should not expect the exotic to remain so solely for their personal pleasure (vii-viii). He views rapid assimilation of European ways and politically dictated change as the primary threats to the integrity of traditional cultures, which, in his words, "are being ravaged not so much by the by-products of our civilization, as by the irrational longing on the part of members of their own educated minorities to cease being themselves and become Westerners" (vii-viii). Here Bowles sounds a bit like V. S. Naipaul; his remarks are not intended to be about any particular people, but rather, about the traps that post-colonial governments have fallen victim to. Continuing with his most direct and politically charged statement of the essay collection, he asserts:

Many post-colonial regimes attempt to hasten the process of Europeanization by means of campaigns and decrees. Coercion can destroy the traditional patterns of thought, it is true; but what is needed is that they be transformed into viable substitute patterns, and this can be done only empirically and by the people

themselves. A cultural vacuum is not even productive of nationalism, which at least involves a certain consciousness of identity. (ix)

Cultures and societies must be allowed to evolve, he argues; identity is not something that can be programmed or imposed upon a population. *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue*, then, is about an incipient cultural vacuum and cultural conflicts at the advent of a postcolonial world.

I discuss below seven essays from the book, "Africa Minor," "Notes Mailed at Nagercoil," "A Man Must Not Be Very Muslim," "The Rif, To Music," "Baptism of Solitude," "All Parrots Speak," and "The Route to Tassemist," which illustrate well issues of representation, problematic material, rhetorical stances, and the dialogic, multi-voiced quality of Bowles's travel writing.

Written in the context of the colonial-independence debate of the 1950s and the discovery of Morocco by the North American tourist industry, the first essay, "Africa Minor," renders Bowles's sense of the essence of North Africa such as the region might be perceived by western travelers if they look and listen with openness and imagination. "What do you expect to find here?" Bowles queries the stream of Americans who in the 1950s have begun to pass regularly through Tangier. Their response is characteristically orientalist: "a sense of mystery." To which Bowles replies poetically, though in a style vulnerable to *carte postale* vulgarization: "They find it in the patterns of sunlight filtering through the latticework that covers the *souk*s (Ed's Note iv), in the unexpected turnings and tunnels of the narrows streets, in the women whose features still go hidden beneath the *litham* (Ed's Note v), in the secretiveness of the architecture." And if the travelers listen—as Bowles does with his composer's and ethnomusicologist's ear—they find mystery in the calls of the muezzins, the beat of the *darbouka* (Ed's Note vi), and in other eastern sounds of the city (24-25).

"Africa Minor," whose title echoes the French phrase "l'Afrique mineure" employed by one of the colonial administrators who hounds Bowles during his travels in Tunisia, gives the reader—specifically the American reader—not only a sense of the political and social issues at stake in the 1950s Maghreb, but also an *aperçu* into its people's life, diversity, and cultural richness. Bowles is clearly not a traveler whose goal is to seek out "architectural wonders"; people are the point of his travels. "North Africa, without its tribes, inhabited by, let us say, Swiss, would be merely a rather more barren California," he explains to those who would view the inhabitants merely as part of the décor and spectacle (vii). The Maghreb fascinates him, and the salient question in this particular essay is an unlikely one indeed: does Bowles orientalize, not by demeaning others, but rather by idealizing Morocco and the Maghreb?

Without Stopping, which recounts the Bowles's first voyage to North Africa, throws some light on this question:

> Always without formulating the concept, I had based my sense of being in the world partly on an unreasoned conviction that certain areas of the earth's surface contained more magic than others. Had anyone asked me what I meant by magic, I should probably have defined the word by calling it a secret connection between the world of nature and the consciousness of man, a hidden but direct passage which bypassed the mind. ... And now, as I stood in the wind looking at the mountains ahead, I felt the stirring of the engine within, and it was as if I were drawing close to the solution of an as-yet-unposed problem. I was incredibly happy as I watched the wall of mountains slowly take on substance, but I let the happiness wash over and asked no questions. (125)

Even though Bowles's attitude sours in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. in *Days: Tangier Journal, 1987-1989*), the sense of magic and fate that he feels for the Maghreb never completely dissipates. "For long hours I sat in the patio listening to the sounds of [Fez]," he writes in "Africa Minor,"

> sometimes hearing faint strains of music ... watching the square of deep-blue sky above my head slowly become a softer and lighter blue as twilight approached, waiting for the swallows that wheeled above the patio when the day was finally over and the muezzins began their calls to evening prayer ... (*Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue* 34-35)

If Bowles idealizes Morocco, it is not in the manner of an *Arabian Nights* fantasy of pop orientalism nor in any of the senses of the term "idealization" that David Spurr employs in *The Rhetoric of Empire*. Bowles does not, for example, attempt to fit Morocco into "the fabric of Western values" (128). He has already abandoned many of them. Nor can the sense of magic and fate that he finds there be linked either with an idealization that rationalizes a colonial mission (as in T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*) or an idealization that compensates for guilt, transgression, and loss (as in Dominique Lapierre's *The City of Joy*) (Spurr 129, 132). Bowles's intent is to differentiate the Maghreb from other places in the world, and to explain the spell it has cast on him—which he clearly acknowledges and takes control of by acknowledging it. In other essays he describes unpleasant and even disgusting aspects of daily life there, but in this particular essay he allows himself to dwell on scenic beauty, cultural richness, the people's enormous hospitality, and their manner of living life with pragmatism yet mysticism and dignity. Bowles is acutely aware that the issue of how he is representing the Maghreb is very touchy, if not, finally, the issue with which he must contend vis-à-vis his readers. He often incorporates statements by Moroccans and others which challenge his own dominant viewpoint, and often modifies his generalizations with counterexamples. Thus the essay accrues a dialogic, multivoiced texture, as in a discussion of positions from different perspectives. In this way Bowles gets beyond a superficial level of social communication and discovers attitudes that reveal the cultural difference between Moroccans and Westerners. To illustrate, a Moroccan interlocutor objecting to Bowles's depiction of illiteracy in the country

complains that “Truth is not what you perceive with your senses, but what you feel in your heart.” When Bowles defends his representations as “objective truth,” a Moroccan lawyer friend smiles bemusedly and adds, as one might explain something to a Westerner who doesn’t know any better: “That is statistical truth. We are interested in that, yes, but only as a means. ... For us, there is very little visible truth in the world these days” (32). In the Maghreb, the most important things are often hidden and some are too sensitive to be written about.

In making a different, unique cultural space for Morocco and for the Maghreb, does Bowles sensationalize the subject matter, as Sir Richard Francis Burton does in *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* or his footnotes of *The Arabian Nights*? A case in point is Bowles’s defence of controversial aspects of Brotherhood gatherings such as mutilation, trances, and the eating of scorpions and broken glass. “To me these spectacles are filled with great beauty,” he explains, “because their obvious purpose is to prove the power of the spirit over the flesh” (27-28). Is this sensationalism? A Moroccan interlocutor pointedly asks Bowles: “Are all the people in your country Holy Rollers?” adding, “Why don’t you write about the civilized people here instead of the most backward?” (31-32). But one of Bowles’s rhetorical purposes, in this essay and in his work generally, is to write against the grain of readers’ habits of perception and thought, and to interrupt them, to lay open the possibility that there are other ways of being in the world. Moreover, he wishes to address the larger question of postcolonial cultural identity: in their eagerness to prove themselves equal to Europeans, educated Moroccans of the late 1950s may not want for personal and political reasons to think about certain elements of their identity. “One reason . . . the city folk are so violent in their denunciation of the cults,” Bowles surmises, “is that most of them are only one generation removed from them themselves; knowing the official attitude toward such things, they feel a certain guilt at being even that much involved” (28-29). I read “Africa Minor,” then, as neither idealist nor sensationalist, but rather, as an essay that shows, through its choice of examples and multivoiced commentary, a complexity of analysis, an open-mindedness, and a courage to tackle controversial issues where there is no position that is “correct” or “safe.”

A second essay, “Notes Mailed at Nagercoil,” recounts Bowles’s sojourn at Cape Comorin and treats a subject by which many a travel writer has been intimidated: India. When one reads Bowles on India, one cannot help but think of Naipaul’s essays and books on that vast sub-continent. There are some similarities and differences between their rhetorical approach and position: although Naipaul is more systematic, both writers construct a narrative in which they observe and allow themselves to be carried along by seemingly minor events and happenstance that they encounter. These small, unimportant events are then turned into signs of a larger social phenomenon or social order that they wish to interpret. Thus, when the

ceiling fan goes off and on in the hotel room where Bowles is staying he tracks down the explanation not to an electrical outage but to the comings and goings of government officials at the hotel: only they have a key to the switch box. “Powerful men all rascals,” one of his interlocutors tells him, and the incident with the fan and the generator switch box seems a perfect illustration of power and corruption in early 1950s India (41-42, 46). Both Bowles and Naipaul have an eye for the incongruous, for the uneasy mixing of an old, traditional India and a new India westernizing itself as rapidly as its population and resources will allow. Thus, deference for cows (“should she feel like reclining in front of the ticket window [of the railway station], no one will disturb her”) is juxtaposed with loudspeakers blaring Indian film music and other semblances of modernity. Unlike Naipaul, though, Bowles has few preconceptions about India nor special attachment to any group or region of the country. He is neither Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, nor Hindu, nor does he expect that India will give him any new sense of his own identity (as does Naipaul in *An Area of Darkness*, for example). As in other essays, Bowles positions himself *outside* allegiance to any cultural community or political agenda. He writes for a particular audience (i.e., North American), chooses incidents and analogies comprehensible to that audience, and readily acknowledges his own limitations of understanding in the face of India’s vastness and human plurality:

> The first time I ... saw India I entered it through Dhanushkodi. An analogous procedure in America would be for a foreigner to get his first glimpse of the United States by crossing the Mexican border illegally and coming out into a remote Arizona town. ... But I’m glad that my first trip did not bring me in contact with any cities. It is better to go to the villages of a strange land before trying to understand its towns, above all in a complex place like India. Now, after traveling some eight thousand miles around the country, I know approximately as little as I did on my first arrival. However, I’ve seen a lot of people and places, and at least I have a somewhat more detailed and precise idea of my ignorance than I did in the beginning. (43)

This passage illustrates one aspect of Bowles’s travel writing that distances it from Orientalism: in a word, he is modest—at least rhetorically speaking. He does not attempt to universalize his audience or his impressions. “The Orientalist is principally a kind of agent of ... comprehensive visions,” Said writes (Orientalism 239). Cautious and skeptical, Bowles does not engage in grand philosophizing.

But because he does seek to put into words the defining characteristics of a people or land, he does not escape from essentializations. If it is Orientalist to resort to categorizations such as “the Moslem mind” and “Hindu,” then Bowles occasionally uses them when he reaches for a generalization in service of a larger point. Among the believers, he has no allegiance; he can thus show his appreciation of various cultural and religious viewpoints, which he incorporates in the essay through dialogues with Indians. Of Islam in India he observes: “If even Christianity has retained too much of its pagan décor to be acceptable to the puritanical Moslem mind, one can imagine the loathing inspired in them [sic] by the endless

proliferations of Hindu religious art with its gods, demons, metamorphoses and avatars" (47). The depth of Hindu cultural and religious feeling is no less strong, which he illustrates in a roundabout way by including at the end of his essay an examination script entitled "The Cow," written by a candidate for an Indian public service post. Because this seven-paragraph script contains numerous grammatical mistakes and shifts of focus, the question becomes, Why cite it and highlight it in this way? Are Bowles and his readers just having a laugh at Indian English and quaint Hindu religious beliefs? The script begins like this:

> The cow is one wonderful animal, also he is quadruped and because he is female he gives milk—but he will do so only when he has got child. He is same like God, sacred to Hindu and useful to man. But he has got four legs together. Two are foreward and two are afterwards.
>
> His whole body can be utilized for use. (57)

And so the script continues for four more short paragraphs, concluding:

> The palms of his feet are so soft unto the touch so that the grasses he eats would not get crushed. At night he reposes by going down on the ground and then he shuts his eyes like his relative the horse which does not do so. This is the cow. (58)

Bowles finds an entertainment value in the script "The Cow," which I suspect persists even in our "enlightened age" of political correctness. Perhaps it is the privilege of native speakers to politely chuckle at the mistakes that outsiders to the club invariably make, given that all of us are outsiders in all but a few of the estimated 6000 languages spoken in the world today (Wheeler). Bowles quotes the script for still yet another reason: to praise Indian diversity and to subvert a certain idea of modernity. Indirectly the entire essay has pointed out many little absurdities in modern Indian life, but the conclusion that Bowles reaches is not so much that India is badly mimicking the western world but that its diversity is its richness and that its religious beliefs do indeed give meaning to the lives of its people. Incorporating "The Cow" as a contrapuntal theme enables Bowles to make more persuasively a key point of the essay: India is a plurality of languages and cultures, and the project of nationhood should not result in the creation of something like "The Cow," with its fractured English. Postcolonial Indians should not give up their linguistic and cultural identities in order to become modern at any price. Bowles wonders whether "any sort of unifying project [of India] can ever be undertaken, or, indeed, whether it is even desirable" (50). Nationhood and technological progress are not without their destructive effects; beliefs, no matter how inconsequential they may seem to the outsider, give identity and value. And it is with this line of thought that Bowles closes the essay in a surprising manner: "I keep thinking about it, and I wonder if the almost certain eventual

victory over [certain] diseases will prove to have been worth its price: the extinction of the beliefs and rituals which gave a satisfactory meaning to the period of consciousness that goes between birth and death. I doubt it. Security is a false god; begin making sacrifices to it and you are lost" (59). Perhaps Bowles succumbs here to an idealization of traditional cultures, but at the same time, through the essay's mixture of voices and perspectives, he opens a space for thinking differently about the world, challenging as he does a modernist belief in progress and the inevitable superiority of western ways.

Writers of travel literature run the risk of stereotyping groups, societies, and nations, and in this collection Bowles likewise has recourse to categorical terms such as "Moslems," "Jews," "Moroccans," "Turks," "Egyptians," and so forth. A third essay, "A Man Must Not Be Very Moslem," measures gradations of religious belief and social change and addresses indirectly the issue of stereotyping and biased representation. The dialogic character of the essay, which records the author's and a Moroccan travel-companion's (Abdeslam's) differing impressions of 1950s Turkey, enables it to overcome tendencies toward Orientalist portraiture, of which this excerpt from the opening paragraph is a burlesque:

> [Abdeslam] knows how to deal with Moslems, and he has the Moslem sense of seemliness and protocol. He has also an intuitive gift for the immediate understanding of a situation and at the same time is completely lacking in reticence or inhibitions. He can lie so well that he convinces himself straightway, and he is a master of bargaining; it is a black day for him when he has to pay the asking price for anything. He never knows what is printed on a sign because he is totally illiterate; besides, even if he did know he would pay no attention, for he is wholly deficient in respect for law. ... Obviously he is better equipped than I to squeeze the last drop of adventure out of any occasion am. I, unfortunately, *can* read signs but can't lie or bargain effectively, and will forgo any joy rather than risk unpleasantness or reprimand from whatever quarter. (60-61)

Bowles is exaggerating for comic effect, though I must say that I do find this essay less appealing than others partly because the rhetorical touches seem thickly laid on. But that is a matter of preference for one style of writing as opposed to others. In any case, it is, finally, the author's ambivalence toward the subject matter and the counterpointed dialogues that assure that divergent viewpoints will enrich the essay's treatment of Islam and modernism in 1950s Turkey.

Turkey is determined to be modern; it "has turned its back on the East and Eastern concepts," the author observes, "not with the simple yearning of other Islamic countries to be European or to acquire American techniques, but with a conscious will to transform itself from the core outward—even to destroy itself culturally, if need be" (61-62). The conservative Abdeslam—today we would call him fundamentalist—is shocked and irate at the scope of secular revision seemingly taking place in this Mediterranean neighbor. When he asks two Turks how many times they pray each day, they respond with a muffled laugh. Abdeslam is told that,

in ?stanbul, unlike Morocco, people sleep in mosques, which even western tourists may visit, that pork is eaten, that tobacco has replaced kif in the pipes smoked in cafés, and that Ramadan has been reduced to a day—all this he believes, whether true or not, and views with disgust. He causes a scene at a local restaurant when he demands that the check be written in Arabic; the baffled waiters call the restaurant's manager, who points out to Abdeslam that in Turkey, which has officially committed itself to modernization, a man can go to jail for insisting that his wife wear a veil, or even for writing in Arabic (66). (Ed's Note vii) "A man must not be *very* Moslem," the manager politely cautions.

Whereas Abdeslam considers Turkey's modernization and modification of certain aspects of Islam as apostasy, for his part Bowles notes some advantageous changes that have occurred:

The Turks are the only Moslems I have seen who seem to have got rid of that curious sentiment ... that there is an inevitable and hopeless difference between themselves and non-Moslems. Subjectively, at least, they have managed to bridge the gulf created by their religion, that abyss which isolates Islam from the rest of the world. As a result the [western] visitor feels a specific connection with them which is not the mere one-sided sympathy the well-disposed traveler has for the more basic members of other cultures, but is something desired and felt by them as well. (74)

Interpreting Turkey from a modern viewpoint, he distances himself from Abdeslam's radical disgust with the country's secularization, yet Bowles admits that he is "not exactly sure" where he stands in this "philosophical dispute" (66). The combination of the two differing viewpoints makes for an ambivalence that Bowles draws out at the end of the essay, where he at once acknowledges secular Turkey's achievement while implying its default. For him, Turkey's cultural transformation has been imposed rather than arrived at through an evolution of people's attitudes: "The old helplessness in the face of a mektoub (it is written) is gone, and in its place is a passionate belief in man's ability to alter his destiny. That is the greatest step of all; once it has been made, anything, unfortunately, can happen" (81-82). Like Borges drawing out a paradox, Bowles intimates a wisdom that his companion's zeal may distort but cannot negate:

Abdeslam is not a happy person. He sees his world, which he knows is a good world, being assailed on all sides, slowly crumbling before his eyes. He has no means of understanding me should I try to explain to him that in this age what he considers to be religion is called superstition. ... Something will have to be found to replace the basic wisdom which has been destroyed, but the discovery will not be soon; neither Abdeslam nor I will ever know it. (82)

Although this essay begins with what might be interpreted as a kind of orientalist classification, its overall treatment of Islamic diversity and the conflict between traditionalism and modernization in countries such as Turkey and Morocco is ahead of its time. Decades before the advent of late 20th-century fundamentalism

in the Islamic diaspora, Bowles dramatizes something of the inner turmoil that must certainly be at least one of its principal underlying causes. What a distance separates this essay about secularization from, for example, Salman Rushdie's short story of faith gone beserk, "The Prophet's Hair" (*East, West*); yet "A Man Must Not Be Very Moslem" shows how the road was already being paved to another kind of fanaticism.

Viewed from the perspective of Orientalism, a fourth essay, "The Rif, to Music," is of interest because of its uncomplimentary descriptions of Morocco. Orientalist writing may idealize the exotic—as Bowles, perhaps, idealizes traditional cultures. More often, though, it debases or negates by focusing on the least attractive aspects of a place and culture. (Note 4) Is "The Rif, to Music" Orientalist in this latter sense of debasement and negation? The answer lies not in an isolated phrase or paragraph, but in the essay's overall treatment, which is subtly yet unmistakably anti-colonial, and in the meanings it constructs.

"The Rif, to Music" records an unusual journey. On behalf of the Rockefeller Foundation, Bowles spends six months crisscrossing Morocco collecting "every musical genre to be found" there (84). The project seeks to plumb the country's rich folk culture, which, he notes, has expressed itself primarily in music: "the very illiteracy which through the centuries has precluded the possibility of literature has abetted the development of music; the entire history and mythology of the people is clothed in song" (83). Bowles and his Moroccan and Canadian companions journey by car to the northwest of the country where a Berber culture mixes with the remnants of a Spanish colonial presence, the region having been a Spanish Protectorate until 1955. Although they manage to arrange several recording sessions, their efforts are often frustrated by bureaucratic delays and technical difficulties. In the towns, there is a scarcity of electrical generators, the Spanish having packed them up and taken them away at the protectorate's end. To complicate matters further, there are bad hotels along the way. The *parador* (Note 5) at Bab Berrett with its bedrooms without doorknobs and its single out-of-order bathroom, provides one memorable experience:

> ... the place was so filthy that you didn't go into it. ... The toilet bowl had been filled up and so people had begun using the floor. In 1950 I had spent a night in that one bathroom. They put a cot beside the tub and hung a scribbled sign on the door saying the bathroom was out of order, but that didn't prevent a steady stream of French tourists from pounding indignantly on the door throughout the long night. Some of them tried to break the door in, but the bolt was strong. Now that I stuck my head into the stinking room, I remembered that endless night and the noise of the unloading bus beneath my window at five in the morning, the bugle calls from the barracks back in the cedar forest and gobbling of the turkeys in crates out on the terrace. (89-90)

How should we read this passage and the essay with its numerous references to filth and excrement? For a passage to merit the Orientalist (or imperialist) tag, there must be a judgmental element, explicit or implied, that surpasses the

commentary appropriate to the particular occasion and context. Although the description of filth is an important element of Bowles's description of Bab Berrett, the focus is on a particular experience, itself unpleasant but also comic and ridiculous, which serves neither for generalization nor for broad judgment. Rhetorically the description does not function to demean Morocco; rather, it paints a picture of a certain absurdity.

Similarly, Bowles's description of squalor in Nador, a Riffian town near the Mediterranean coast, serves not to demean but to detail a degrading situation whose cause becomes clear only later. The author and his companions check in at the only possible town lodging, Hotel Mokhtar (its name "printed in crooked letters" above the door), which is even less inviting than the parador at Bab Berrett: "we [were] so used to inhaling the stench of the latrines at each breath, but that first night it bothered us considerably. I flung my window open and discovered that the air outside was worse. The interior odor was of ancient urine, but the breeze that entered through the window brought a heavy scent of fresh human excrement" (105-06). The air smells so bad because the hotel stands next to the town's lavatories, and as Bowles explains, "at any moment during the day you can always see a dozen or more men, women, and children squatting in the trenches" (107). Nador and the Hotel Mokhtar are described as disgusting places, but Bowles keeps his focus on the immediate experience and neither generalizes from it nor makes judgments based on it. Later in the passage, he introduces the primary cause of the town's difficulties, which lie less in the nature of a Moroccan town than in the political tensions and infrastructural pressures that the Spanish colonial presence has brought to the region. Bowles explains that the stationing of thousands of Spanish troops—the Mediterranean Spanish colonial port of Melilla is not far away—and the retaliatory stationing of thousands of Moroccan troops has overburdened Nador's resources:

> There are many more people here than there should be. Water has to be got in pails and oil tins from pumps in the street; food is at a premium and all commodities are scarce. Dust hangs over the town and refuse surrounds it, except on the east, where the shallow waters of the Mar Chica lap against the mud, disturbing the dead fish that unaccountably float there in large numbers. … Nador is a prison. … When the beaches are full of the hundreds of desperate-looking Spanish and Moroccan soldiers who roam the streets, the only place for new arrivals to sit is in the chairs put out under the palms by the café-keepers. They sit there, but they stare down the boulevard and order nothing. At night it's a little less depressing because the thoroughfare is not at all well lighted and the intense shabbiness doesn't show. Besides, after dark the two military populations are shut into their respective barracks. (107-108)

The passage continues in this vein, not with the purpose of diminishing a Moroccan town but of graphically depicting the effects of the Spanish colonial presence in the Rif and the retaliatory response of the new postcolonial Moroccan government. The essay moves not toward an Orientalization, but an insight into a political, socioeconomic situation.

What emerges, then, in this essay on the Rif and music, with its many passages that express disgust, is a link between colonialism and an absence of 20th-century development and progress in the region. The essay establishes this link without ideological posturing or propagandizing. I think of one passage in particular which seems to me especially ripe with symbolism. Caked to the bottom of a bucket of murky drinking water with which the hotel management has provided Bowles and his travel companions, the author wearily spies a dirty rag: the memory of having drunk the water creates a nausea that conveys perfectly the essay's essential mood. It is perhaps not by chance that in the essay's final pages, the travelers are biding their time in the border town of Oujda, close to which the struggle for independence in French Algeria rages. Colonialism is *not* the subject of this essay—music is, yet the consequences of colonialism intrude and speak by default. The colonized Moroccan countryside has not been developed, i.e., provided with electricity, drinking water, sanitation, etc.; therefore, recording folk music in the various towns and villages of the Rif presents insurmountable difficulties. In Oujda, Bowles and his companions are restricted in their movements by the bombardments in neighboring Algeria. All these complications, which are linked to colonialism or which cannot be disassociated from it, play a part in the recording project's dismal outcome: "The Rif is finished, and I managed to record only in two places," Bowles concludes resignedly (127). What would be the impact of the essay if the uncomplimentary passages pertaining to the Moroccan Rif, with their descriptions of squalor and excrement, were censoriously deleted? Without a doubt it would lose its power to evoke the predicament of rural, postcolonial Morocco and to be an anti-colonial statement in the guise of an essay about a car trip and folk music.

In some ways "Baptism of Solitude" is the most satisfying essay in the collection because Bowles is obviously writing about a subject that inspired and fascinated him and that only the Algerian war, with its lasting effects on the Sahara, could sunder the physical, if not spiritual, connection. "Before the war ... under the rule of the French military, there was a remarkable feeling of friendly sympathy among Europeans in the Sahara," he explains. "It is unnecessary to stress the fact that the corollary to this pleasant state of affairs was the exercise of the strictest control over the Algerians themselves, a regime which amounted to a reign of terror" (129). Bowles goes on to note that from the European point of view "the place was ideal. The whole vast region was like a small unspoiled rural community where everyone respected the rights of everyone else. Each time you lived there for a while, and left it, you were struck with the indifference and the impersonality of the world outside" (129). (Note 6) In Orientalist discourse the desert is a place of intrigue, adventure, and sexual abandon, but in this essay it is viewed more in the tradition of the anthropologist such as Théodore Monod, or rather, the anthropologist, poet, and spiritual searcher all rolled into one (see Monod). Bowles's intense poetic interest in the landscape and his interest in North Africa folk cultures enable him to touch realities that stereotypes oversimplify and blur. "[T]here is a popular misconception of the Sahara as a vast region of sand across which Arabs travel in orderly caravans from one white-domed city to another"

(133). His essay reveals the variety of the desert, both its landscapes and its peoples, many of whom, of course, are not Arabic.

Because the time-frame of the essay is colonial, two of these non-Arabic, European groups are the French military and the *Pères Blancs*. The commandants of the former were often gracious hosts to the desert traveler, while the latter, Bowles notes, were even more "extraordinary." They embody an ideal not totally different from Bowles's own exile as an artist in Morocco: "There was no element of resignation in their eagerness to spend the remainder of their lives in distant outposts, dressed as Moslems, speaking Arabic, living in the rigorous, comfortless manner of the desert inhabitants. They made no converts and expected to make none" (131). Their life in the desert modifies their sense of Christian spirituality, making it something hybrid. They acquired, according to Bowles, a "certain healthy and unorthodox fatalism," which complements their basic beliefs and helps them comprehend the people among whom they live. Other desert groups of which Bowles takes note are the inhabitants of M'Zab, a community of five towns following rituals that include pre-Islamic elements, and the *imochagh*, or Touareg. The latter are the so-called veiled men, their veils serving a practical as well as identifying function: to conserve the breath's moisture and thus prevent nose bleeds produced by the desert's dryness.

The Sahara is uncompromising. "Man is hated in the Sahara," Bowles explains; "one feels it in the sky, in the stones, in the air. ... But of course that can be exciting. Where life is prohibited, it becomes delectable forbidden fruit, and that is the feeling that one gets here: each instant is begrudged one by an implacable tyrant" (*In Touch: The Letters* 189). Although Occidental voyagers have typically viewed the Orient as something forbidden, to be penetrated, conquered, and possessed, what matters to Bowles is the desert's transformative effect on individuals, especially those who suffer from the spiritual maladies of 20th-century civilization. His attitude toward the desert exemplifies aspects of a counter-western and nomad discourse:

> There are probably few accessible places on the face of the globe where one can get less comfort for his money than the Sahara. ... Everything disappears eventually—coffee, tea, sugar, cigarettes—and the traveller settles down to a life devoid of these superfluities.
>
> ...
>
> Perhaps the logical question to ask ... [is]: Why Go? The answer is that when a man has been there and undergone the baptism of solitude he can't help himself. Once he has been under the spell of the vast, luminous, silent country, no other place is quite strong enough for him, no other surroundings can provide the supremely satisfying sensation of existing in the midst of something that is absolute. He will go back, whatever the cost in comfort and money, for the absolute has no price. (144)

Another spiritual vagabond in the Algerian desert, Eberhardt, echoes Bowles, writing of the appeal of "*le grand Silence du Désert*" (the majestic Silence of the Desert). For her, as for Bowles, the desert is both harsh and beautiful: "*O Sahara,*

Sahara menaçant, cachant ta belle âme sombre en tes solitudes inhospitalières et mornes!" (Oh Sahara, menacing Sahara, hiding your beautiful dark soul in your inhospitable and sad isolation) (Eberhardt, *Oeuvres complètes I: Écrits sur le sable* 319, 338). Their descriptions of the desert can be termed oriental—Eberhardt seeks, as she herself says, a "*vie tout orientale*"—but this orientalism is hardly the ethnocentrist, racist Orientalism that Said analyzes. Rather it is a response against and a critique of modern western civilization, with its endlessly diminishing returns of distractions, gadgets, comforts and luxuries for those who can afford them. Their sentiment is not one of superiority in the face of the less developed, but of respect for people who manage not only to survive but also to create unique cultural identities within the desert's harsh space. Finally, then, the Orient is a baptism, an initiation into another way of being in the world: it is something that Bowles is restlessly going beyond. Perhaps only the nomad can know the "absolute" with its everything and nothing.

"All Parrots Speak" is a light-hearted departure from the meditations of "Baptism of Solitude." Its subject, Bowles's affection for parrots, would seem to have nothing to do with scenes from "the non-Christian world," and yet, when read from a certain perspective, this essay fits perfectly. Often having both green and blue heads, parrots are just as exotically other as the "jumblies" of the travel book's epigraph, whose title alludes to the creatures of an Edward Lear poem. Among essays about cultural difference, why not an essay about the difference between humans and animals? And besides, in the Orient of the imagination, things are never quite as they seem. In The Arabian Nights, for example, metamorphosis and magic are the rule: humans transform into animals and animals become human. Although these literary references do not occur in Bowles's essay, they fit its final paragraph, where the author-composer explains a deeper reason for his affinity with parrots:

> The spoken word, even if devoid of reason, means a great deal to a lonely human being.
>
> I think that my susceptibility to parrots may have been partly determined by a story I heard when I was a child. One of the collection of parrots from the New World presented to King Ferdinand by Columbus escaped from the palace into the forest. A peasant saw it, and never having encountered such a bird before, picked up a stone to hit it, so he could have its brilliant feathers as a trophy. As he was taking aim, the parrot cocked its head and cried "Ay, Dios!" Horrified, the man dropped the stone, prostrated himself, and said, "A thousand pardons, senora! I thought you were a green bird." (157)

We should not try to extract a moral from this delightfully light piece, but to become "parrot-conscious," as the author says, is a bit like being initiated to another culture (146).

In “The Route to Tassemist,” the collection’s final essay, Bowles and his Canadian companion journey southwest of Marrakesh to Tiznit and then to Tassemist, a remote feudal town where, he is told, political power belongs nominally to a nineteen-year-old girl, the town’s reigning “hereditary saint,” but in reality to her family’s chauffeur. “*C’est trés délicat*,” a colonial French pharmacist cautions Bowles: “One false move, and the story of Tassemist can be finished forever” (177-178). Bowles and his companion tread lightly, but so much of this essay collection has been about false moves, so to speak. Unexpected happenings and travel accidents can be revealing, and Bowles, with the instincts of those who believe that chance is part of art, prefers to show these sorts of things rather than cover them up. When something goes wrong, he does not put the blame for failures, as imperialist discourse often does, on some inadequacy of the colonized people. About his overly ambitious plans he confesses: “During the next few days I discovered how unrealistic my recording project had been. We visited at least two dozen villages in the region, and made no progress toward uncovering an occasion where there might prove to be music” (170). Oddly enough, the errors and misjudgments reinforce the narrator’s credibility, working to convince the reader of his integrity and balanced observation and interpretation. As in other essays he positions himself outside the vested interests and viewpoints of the various persons or groups that he describes: he is neither like Monsieur Rousselot, the French colonialist, nor like the different groups of traditional to modernist Moroccans. The essays, then, maintain a certain rhetorical position from which Bowles conveys a lack of bias and a sympathetic rapport with his subject matter. The final episode in the essay well illustrates this point. Bowles is treated to an extraordinary evening of music and dancing, which his host, Monsieur Omar, insists on tape-recording, but in a technically flawed manner: “As the shrill voices and the drumming grew in force and excitement, I became convinced that what was going on was indeed extraordinarily good, something I would have given a good deal to record and listen to later at my leisure. Watching my host in the act of idly ruining what might have been a valuable tape was scarcely a pleasure” (186). The “final irony,” he continues, is that “the spoiled tape has to be given to me, so that I can know in detail what I failed to get” (187). Bowles is sure that the tape has been botched, but when he listens to it he is astonished to discover that it is perfect. He accepts the “joyful mystery”: “It is always satisfying to succeed in a quest, even when success is due entirely to outside factors” (188). Here, and elsewhere in the collection, a narrating self exposes the bias and misjudgment of a narrated self; the split between the two selves is one of several rhetorical techniques used to achieve a discourse that is finally non-Orientalizing in its treatment of its often controversial subject matter.

This finesse derives, however, from something more than mere technical prowess. What enables Bowles to skirt much of the prejudice of his age—the difference between his sensibility and that of the average American of his generation is immense—is his long sojourn in North Africa, coupled with his keen interest in its folk culture and especially its music. Perhaps it was this musical appreciation of Morocco that enabled him to appreciate other aspects of the country’s cultural

heritage. He records his observations with a musician's ear, and just as the theme of difference and variety is a principal one of the Foreword and the essay collection as a whole, so too difference and variety as they apply to sound and music have been recurring motifs in Bowles's writings. In a letter, of spring 1935 to William Treat Upton, he writes of folk music's importance to the reinvigoration of the western art-song:

Art-music will get what it needs not from new subjects to sing about ... nor from technical devices ... but from new ways to sing, which means that it will be increasingly conscious of folk-musics of all corners of the globe, particularly the now unfamiliar corners. The Italian idea will be one among scores of others. Singers will have to master the cante Flamenco, the difficult Chleuh songs, the Annamite lyrics, the Mexican, Cuban, and other Latin-Indian tricks, as well as the Central African declamation and the myriad of Arab innuendoes (to mention a few of the more important styles), in order to sing what should be written in the near future if the solo art-song is to be expected to remain in existence. (*In Touch: The Letters* 158-159)

Decades before "world music," Bowles shows an attitude ahead of his epoch. And the reader wonders whether, without this musical interest, Bowles the writer would have been as open or potentially comprehending of cultural differences. In a letter, of December 1947 to Peggy Glanville-Hicks, he describes, with a composer's ear, the emanating sounds from a morning in Fez:

the city ... lies below, very slowly disengaging itself from the ... mist and smoke, while a million cocks crow at once, constantly. There is also the faint sound of water in the fountains of the palace gardens. ... I'm a great lover of natural sounds, and they have been present to fill the spaces which otherwise would have been only silence. Wind, water, birds and animals, and (here) human voices, make a fine auditory backdrop. The human voices make the most beautiful sound of all, when the muezzin calls during the night, especially the one for dawn. ... They preface the actual *mouddin* with religious remarks, sung in freely embroidered florid style, each man inventing his own key, mode, appogiature and expressive devices. And when you have a hundred or more of those incredibly high, piercing, birdlike voices doing flamenco-like runs in different keys, from different minarets, against a background of cocks crowing, you have a very special and strange sound. (*Letters* 181)

When one listens to a place, as Bowles does here in Fez, one is less likely to impose on it the attitude or stereotype that one's own culture has prepared. To hear sound and music, one must listen, and as soon as one begins to listen, one begins to enter a town, a city, its people, and to allow them a valued identity.

Whether or not a text merits the label "Orientalist" in the pejorative sense of the term depends on its overall orientation, manner of presentation, and relationship with other texts in the discourse formation of which it is part. Does the text challenge the patterns of the discourse formation or does it accept them? Bowles wrote against the grain, and he often wrote counter-western discourses. Orientalism should not be simplified into a litmus test of whether or not interspersed phrases, sentences, or even paragraphs appropriate or classify or debase or idealize or negate—to mention a few of the strategies on which Spurr elaborates in *The Rhetoric of Empire*. Indeed, we can ferret out sentences or brief passages of this

sort in Bowles's travel writing; in "The Rif, To Music," for instance, he opines: "Some Moroccans can work themselves into a state of emotional imbalance with astonishing speed" (96). Today this sentence makes us uncomfortable; depending on who we are, forty years ago it might not have. In any case, its impact on the overall meaning of the essay is negligible; it does not detract from the statement that Bowles makes, quite indirectly, about colonialism. But the larger point, I think, is that Bowles found in the Maghreb *not* an occasion for textualizing American (or European) cultural superiority—this is the Orientalist agenda—but one for exposing their decadence (e.g., the Age of Monsters of *Let It Come Down*) and their debility (e.g., the American professor of "A Distant Episode"). The orient fascinates Bowles, yet he fits that fascination into a wider existentialist viewpoint. By way of the orient, he progresses along a spectrum of different emphases, two prominent of which are a counter-western and a nomad discourse. By way of the orient, he goes beyond the orient toward absolutes of terror and beauty (e.g., "Baptism of Solitude"), of nihilism and a transcendence like the perfect blue of a Saharan sky.

Bowles gives us particulars. Unlike Said's Orientalist, he writes with subtlety and modesty, with a finely tuned awareness of cultural limitations, from a rhetorical position that cannot be easily located ideologically, on a subject matter that he obviously knows very much about. Of Morocco and North Africa alone, he knows more than fifty years' worth of experiences and reflections and collaborations with local artists. In Bowles's work, then, the possibilities of the travel writer as sojourner, as outsider and nomad, and as self-effacing expert are realized perhaps better than in any other western author.

Notes

1

In *Without Stopping* Bowles recounts his fateful decision in this way:

I got back to my room one afternoon at dusk and, upon opening the door, knew at once, although I had no ideas of what it was going to be, that I was about to do something explosive and irrevocable. It occurred to me that this meant that I was not the I I thought I was or, rather, that there was a second I in me who had suddenly assumed command. I shut the door and gave a running leap up on the bed, where I stood, my heart pounding. I took out a quarter and tossed it spinning into the air, so that it landed on my palm. Heads. I cried out with relief and jumped up and down on the mattress several times before landing on the floor. Tails would have meant that I would have had to take a bottle of Allonal that night and leave no note. But heads meant I would leave for Europe as soon as possible. (77-78)

2

In *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*, Ali Behdad views Eberhardt less sympathetically than does Bowles, focusing on the political ambivalence of her discourse, which "does not

exoticize the Orient but articulates its difference in the subjective profile of an orientalist encounter." For Behdad, Eberhardt's discourse "imposes a 'failure of distinction,' a way of representing that constantly blurs, while simultaneously reaffirming, the representational boundaries of the Orientalist and the Oriental, the colonizer and the colonized" (114). Behdad makes much of Eberhardt's collaboration with the colonial French, noting that her ambivalence opened the way to her becoming an instrument and agent of the colonizing enterprise. What is interesting in Behdad's analysis of Eberhardt, and potentially for an analysis of Bowles as well, is the focus on discourse ambivalence and discontinuities. "The discursive practices of belated orientalists are ... split, for they are inscribed within the economies of colonial power and the exoticist desire for a disappearing Other," Behdad writes, adding that "Orientalist consciousness in the age of colonial dissolution ambivalently interpellates its subjects in a decentered system of opposition and domination, a system that, as Bhabha suggests, can play the role of both supporter and adversary" (14).

3 In French, the passage reads:

à l'étranger, quel repos! J'y suis protégé contre la bêtise, la vulgarité, la vanité, la mondanité, la nationalité, la normalité. La langue inconnue, dont je saisis pourtant la respiration, l'aération émotive, en un mot la pure significance, forme autour de moi, au fur et à mesure que je me déplace, un léger vertige, m'entraine dans son vide artificiel ... je vis dans l'interstice, débarrassé de tout sens plein. (Barthes, *L'empire des signes* 18)

4

As Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon have insisted, the colonialist perspective enacts a systematic degradation of the colony. "This pattern of devaluation and negation extends ... to everything that touches the colony and the colonized: to his country, which is ugly, too hot, ... smelly; to the vicious climate, to the geography so hopeless that it condemns him to contempt and poverty, to dependence for eternity" (Memmi 105).

In *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Fanon made similar observations:

La dévaluation du colonisé s'étend ainsi à tout ce qui le touche: À son pays, qui est laid, trop chaud ... malodorant, au climat vicieux, à la géographie si désespérée qu'elle le condamne au mépris et à la pauvreté, à la dépendance pour l'éternité.

Cet abaissement du colonisé, qui doit expliquer son dénuement, sert en même temps de repousser à la positivité du colonialiste. Ces accusations, ces jugements irrémédiablement négatifs sont toujours portés *par référence à la métropole*, c'est-à-dire ... par référence au colonialiste lui-même. (18)

5

Calling up images of the castle-hotels of Spain, the term today takes on ironic connotations.

6

In his letters to friends during the late 1940s and early 1950s, Bowles writes of his desire to build a house in Timimoun, in western Algeria: "The Captain there is going to choose an oasis for me. It's my favorite spot." At Taghit he writes in astonishment of the grandeur of dunes: "five and six hundred feet high . . . and below Kerzaz they are a thousand [feet] . . . quite the most astonishingly beautiful place I have ever seen" (Bowles, *In Touch: The Letters* 192, 201).

Editor's Notes

i

A shelter for voyagers.

ii

A smoking material that produces pleasure.

iii

A kind of jam made of figs and powdered cannabis; sometimes mixed with hashish oil.

iv

Market place or stand in a market place in Africa and in the Middle East.

v

A veil.

vi

A hand drum.

vii

What Bowles should have really meant is Turkish, written in Arabic script. The law requires in Turkey that communication in the public sphere be carried out in the Latin alphabet. However, the statement about the veil misrepresents the current practice in Turkey; no one is sentenced to prison for wearing a veil. Finally the duration of Ramadan is the same for every Islamic country: one lunar month.

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