Orientalist on Trial: The Evidence of Paul Bowles’ *Travels*

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Introduction

When Paul Bowles (1910-1999) settled in Morocco and began making waves as a fiction writer—with his debut novel *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) and first story collection *The Delicate Prey* (1950)—critics in his native United States were in agreement on the hallmarks of his work: the chilling violence, the bleak existentialism, the shades of Poe. That postcolonialism had not yet arrived as a critical force is evident in what reviewers generally ignored: Bowles’ portrayal of the native people in his North African and Central American tales. Assessing *The Delicate Prey*, the *New Yorker* did perfunctorily remark, “His non-Americans, all olive-skinned residents of hot climates, need not be considered, since they are merely ambulating extensions of a general atmosphere of ominous mystery, and not really people” (qtd. in Hibbard 212).

But that consideration was on its way. As Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire and later Edward Said assembled their critique—most influentially expounded in Said’s *Orientalism* (1978)—Bowles doggedly kept his focus on the North Africa where he would spend the rest of his life; indeed, he increasingly relegated his Western characters to the margins. The charges of racism were inevitable, especially once Bowles’ work was translated into Arabic. That he had never anticipated a Moroccan readership was one of the revelations of a fascinating and contentious “interview / debate” with the Moroccan intellectual Abdelhak Elghandor five years before Bowles’ death.

In the published interview Elghandor is unsparing, labeling Bowles an Orientalist, declaring him obsessed with the primitive and atavistic, and finding in his work “a biased, incomplete, sometimes even a lopsided and erroneous view of Arabo-Islamic culture” (12). But he inadvertently does his opponent a favor when he points out the glaring contrast between the primitivism in much of that work and Bowles’ own rarefied expatriate life. It is a tempting jab: Bowles was renowned not just for his work but for his persona, that of a dandified man of leisure who first arrived in Morocco, as he recalled in his autobiography, “with so much luggage that we needed a small detachment of porters to carry it” (*Without Stopping* 126). But the charge enables Bowles to mount his favorite counterattack:

> In other words, you connect the writer with what he writes. But for me, there is no connection at all. I have always tried to keep my life absolutely separate. But I have always become annoyed when people say: “But is this all autobiographical?” And I always say: “Absolutely not; I am not in it; I don’t exist.” (14-15)

“No writer exists,” Bowles has maintained elsewhere (qtd. in Caponi *Conversations* 217), echoing the argument made prominent by Roland Barthes’ 1968 essay “The Death of the Author.”

Of course, viewing Bowles’ fiction in isolation from its creator does not render us incapable of assessing its alleged Orientalism. But it is not hard to understand why an author subjected to an interrogation like Elghandor’s would wish to fake his own death. I say “fake” to suggest that the critical commonplace of Bowles’ icy detachment from his subject matter (one of his biographies, for example, is entitled *An Invisible Spectator*) ought not to be seen as axiomatic.

It is true that his aforementioned autobiography *Without Stopping* (1972) was widely criticized for offering little insight into his life; Beat author William S. Burroughs, who appears in the book, reportedly dubbed it “Without Telling” (Sawyer-Lauçanno 407). Of Bowles’ fiction, many critics have shared Wendy Lesser’s opinion that “[i]n all of the stories Bowles has written, [the] voice is shaped by one particular effort—the strenuous withholding of judgment” (qtd. in Hibbard 247).

Elghandor, to put it mildly, is not among them. When among numerous other charges he claims that Bowles disapproves of the “Westernization and the drive for progress” (19) of Morocco, Bowles is driven
to counter, “I don’t care about Moroccan society...Since I am not a sociologist, and I am only a fiction writer, that’s all that interests me while I write.” (20)

But the recent publication of *Travels: Collected Writings 1950-1993* (2010) reminds us that Bowles was not only a fiction writer: he was a longtime and rather prolific travel writer as well. The critical charge of narrative aloofness has adhered as readily to his travel writing as to his novels and stories. The explorer and memoirist Freya Stark, for example, criticized Bowles’ contributions to the genre for combining “a superb gift for observation with an almost complete lack of the capacity to deal with it once it is made” (qtd. in Caponi *Romantic Savage* 179). Stark failed to understand, counters Gena Dagel Caponi, that “[p]hilosophically, Bowles remains opposed to active intervention on the part of the writer,” whose role was “not to convince or analyze but merely to select and describe” (*Romantic Savage* 179).

But in the one essay in *Travels* in which Bowles comments on his own craft, he says something intriguingly different. “The Challenge to Identity,” first published in *The Nation* in 1958, is a sort of travel-writing *ars poetica*, and in we find Bowles’ answer to his own question, “What is a travel book?”

For me it is the story of what happened to one person in a particular place, and nothing more than that; it does not contain hotel and highway information, lists of useful phrases, statistics, or hints as to what kind of clothing is needed by the intending visitor. (240)

At a glance this may seem a simple lament of the effect of mass tourism on the genre, and Bowles does approach travel writing from a historical perspective. But not only that:

A reader can get an idea of what a place is really like only if he knows what its effects were upon someone of whose character he has some idea, of whose preferences he is aware. Thus it seems essential that the writer place a certain insistence upon the objective presentation of his own personality; it provides an interpretive gauge with which the reader can measure for himself the relative importance of each detail, like the scale of miles in the corner of a map. (242)

We can view this quote as a rebuke to critiques like Stark’s: the analysis she calls for is superfluous if the writer is sufficiently present in the travel narrative. But to foreground the writer in this way is to exclude these travel writings from the death-of-the-author denials with which Bowles deflects postcolonial criticisms of his fiction. Thus he inadvertently argues for his travel essays as a test case for the claims of those like Elghandor who would deem him a “latter-day Orientalist” (7), and I will use *Travels* in taking up this question for two further reasons. The first is that, while many of the most incisive observations in the book are indeed implicit, the overt editorializing Stark calls for is by no means absent; indeed, the essays are much more explicit in their pronouncements on the non-Western world than Bowles’ novels and stories. Secondly, while Bowles was indeed not a sociologist or ethnographer by training, the increasing convergence of the techniques of travel writing and ethnography (Clifford 66-67) gives testament to the elucidative potential of the best travel literature, and the highlights of *Travels* are first-rate indeed. “The Rif, to Music,” for example, recounts Bowles’ effort (for which he received a Guggenheim fellowship) to tape-record for posterity the vanishing folk music of the Rif mountains in Morocco. Caponi writes, “Rarely does one encounter travel writing of this caliber: part ethnography by a writer deeply versed in the culture, part ethnomusicology, part literature.” (Paul Bowles 113)

On the other hand, one may anticipate these essays providing grist for Elghandor’s charge when noting that Bowles’ first collection in the genre, *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue* (1963)——from which “The Rif, to Music” and seven other pieces are collected in *Travels*—takes its title from a nonsense poem by Edward Lear: “Far and few, far and few, / Are the lands where the Jumbies live; / Their heads are green, and their hands are blue, / And they went to sea in a Sieve.”

Said sets forth a number of definitions of Orientalism in his landmark study, so we had better pause here to posit which of them Elghandor had in mind in the interview, and then deal with each in turn. I see three facets of Orientalism in his critique. The first is, in Said’s words, “the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” (7). The second is the inability of the Orientalist to recognize the diversity of the East, summed up in Said’s paraphrases of the attitudes of American and British commentators that “on the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals” (49) and “Orientals were almost everywhere nearly the same” (38). The use of Lear’s Jumbies is an example of the third: a focus on exotic Otherness, or what Said calls “the distillation of essential ideas about the Orient—its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its
habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness—into a separate and unchallenged coherence” (205). The Orientalist, it must be added, has an investment in preserving this backwardness; commenting for example on the Arabic scholar H.A.R. Gibb, Said claims that “If Islam is flawed form the start by virtue of its permanent disabilities, the Orientalist will find himself opposing any Islamic attempts to reform Islam, because, according to his views, reform is a betrayal of Islam” (106). The Jumblies, in other words, must not be allowed to improve on their ocean-going sieve.

Cultural Superiority

One must acknowledge that Bowles’ writing can at times be condescending toward its Moroccan subjects (and note as well that his most objectionable sketch, “Mustapha and His Friends,” is the one essay from Their Heads Are Green that is conspicuously absent from Travels). In “Fez,” for example, when an old Moroccan gentleman rejects the idea of the automobile—

“What good is it? The wheels go round fast, yes. The horn is loud, yes. You arrive sooner than on a mule, yes. But why should you want to arrive sooner? What do you do when you get there that you couldn’t do if you got there later? Perhaps the French think if they go fast enough death won’t catch up with them.” And he laughs, because he thinks that Western civilization is attempting to escape from a fate which is predetermined, “written” as they put it in Arabic; any such effort is naturally doomed to failure. (40)

—Bowles seems to be inviting us in turn to chuckle at the quaintness of Islamic fatalism. In “Casablanca,” he notes that Moroccan businessmen blame their own ineptitude on a “lack of initiative,” and then gives his own historical perspective:

Under French rule the area left for exploitation by Moroccans was extremely limited, consisting solely of textiles, sugar, tea and real estate, none of which necessitated a departure from the traditional business methods. It is hard to see how blame can be attached to such a group, which by its very nature was one to resist evolution and remain militantly unequipped to function in twentieth-century terms. (389)

But as patronizing as they may appear in isolation, passages like these need to be considered in light of their author’s far more strident anti-Westernism. A disaffected modern, Bowles saw Western civilization as a threat to all that was inherently noble in man. In his commentary on the Sahara photo-essay Yallah, a collaboration with photographer Peter Haeberlin (of which only the introduction is included in Travels) he laments,

How greatly the West needs to study the religions, the music, and the dances of doomed African cultures! How much, if we wished, we could learn from them about man’s relationship to the cosmos...Where we could learn why, we try to teach them our all-important how, so that they may become as rootless and futile and materialistic as we are. (Yallah 17)

Elghandor seems to realize that Bowles is no Kipling, and rather than a superiority complex, he levels at his interlocutor a somewhat lesser charge of hypocrisy:

Well, you have always written about the mythical, the mystic, cults, magic, and so on, about Moroccan culture, and you have given the idea that this is preferable and desirable to any rational, logical systems of thoughts of Western culture. Yet, you have lived here, and you have sometimes been bothered by what you see as the “inconsistencies and illogic” of the Moroccan mind. When the air conditioner in a hotel room didn’t work, you didn’t like it. If the service at a restaurant was not good, you were bothered by it. When you heard a Moroccan say than an airplane works by magic, you didn’t like that either. (15)

One might ask in turn whether a guest ought to be pleased by a broken air conditioner or bad restaurant service, or note that Bowles’ written reactions to Moroccan eccentricity tend more toward bemusement than irritation, but what is most germane to the present discussion is the premium Elghandor places on the judgments of Bowles the individual traveler. While any book of forty-one essays is bound to contradict itself somewhere, it is worth asking whether on balance Bowles comes across as an entitled and condescending Westerner in the pages of Travels.

The two essays that seem to hint at an unacknowledged colonialism, “How to Live on a Part-Time Island” and “An Island of My Own,” are set not in Morocco but in Ceylon, where Bowles bought a tiny island called Taprobane in 1952. These essays are striking for the reitme of Ceylonese domestics whom Bowles retains without any evident self-consciousness:

“We now had six servants, including the lavatory coolie.” (174) Bowles’ evocative descriptions of his island paradise inspire in us both longing and vague
discomfort:
The voluptuous breeze and the sounds of the sea made an after-lunch siesta inevitable. I missed two or three hours of the afternoon, but how fine it was when the cook’s assistant arrived from behind the curtains at five o’clock saying, “tea, Master,” and put the tray down on the bed, and I drank the tea still listening to the pounding waves. (457)

But the same editorial reticence marks what is one of the most incisively anti-colonial essays in the book, “Fish Traps and Private Business,” also set in Ceylon during Bowles’ travels there in 1950. One has to remind oneself that Ceylon was no longer a colony (it had declared independence from the British two years before) in reading of the tea-and-rubber plantation where Bowles stays, and where the Ceylonese servants are known to steal the dog’s dinner not out of hunger, Bowles is told, but because “they like the dog’s food better than their own” (51). His hosts regard themselves as Europeans, claiming Burgher descent from the Dutch settlers of two centuries before, though Bowles remarks, “I have yet to see a Burgher who looks Caucasian, the admixture of Singhalese being always perfectly discernible” (51). A Burgher whom Bowles met on arrival encounters him several weeks later and remarks, “You’re losing your color.”

“What?” I cried incredulously. “After all this time in the sun? I’m five shades darker than I was.” He looked confused, but continued patiently, “That’s what I say. You’re losing your color.” (54)

Succinctly insinuating in such manners and turns of phrase the eclipse of colonialism and the folly of its hangers-on, the essay makes a good case that critics of Bowles’ minimalist travel narratives have missed the point.

Blindness to Diversity

In the mixed-race appearance of the avowedly white Burghers we find the other great insight of “Fish Traps and Private Business”: that by the time of Said’s own increasingly multicultural era, the racial essentialism of Orientalist thinking had become something of a relic. This brings us to the second charge against Bowles, which Elghandor puts as follows:

When you talk about culture, you generalise and say this is the Moroccan culture, or this is the Arabo-Islamic one; whereas, there are many trends, tribes, and cultural constructs within Morocco. (21)

Is not this cultural whitewashing, Elghandor asks, “the same mistake that nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and French Orientalists have made?” (21)

It is a puzzling charge, for earlier in the interview Bowles has already turned it around on him, suggesting that it is Elghandor who is blind to diversity—indeed, that in North Africa the Arabs have their own unacknowledged imperialist past. Accused of insufficient interest in “Arabo-Islamic institutional, written culture,” Bowles replies, “Yes, but Morocco is not part of Islam. Morocco is not Arab, is it? It’s Berber. It’s a Berber country invaded by the Arabs, ruined by the Arabs, I think.” (12)

As a provocation this remark pales beside Bowles’ editorializing in “No More Djinns,” written a few years before Morocco’s independence uprising:

Unfortunately there is an increasing tendency, led by the Nationalists here in Morocco, to suppress, both by law and propaganda, all aspects of the native life which make the country picturesque to the visitor. It looks as if they hope to discourage tourists from coming, and, indeed, when one talks with them, one finds that this is perfectly true. For these Arab fanatics are firmly convinced that Westerners visit Morocco only to scoff at the customs and behavior of a backward people. It happens that the things which are of particular interest in Morocco are not of Arab importation, but indigenous to the country—that is, Berber. From the Nationalist point of view the Berbers are little better than animals, improperly Islamized and stubborn in their insistence on clinging to their ancient rituals. Thus a great puritanical purge has been in progress for the past fifteen years or so, and will probably continue to go on, until every vestige of spontaneous pleasure in religious observances has been destroyed. (71)

In this essay, as well as “Africa Minor” and “The Rif, to Music,” Bowles shows a supple understanding of ethnic diversity; in “Yallah” this grasp extends to the tribes of the deepest Sahara. It is Elghandor who seems the more intolerant—indeed seems cut from the cloth of the Nationalists of “No More Djinns”—when asked to acknowledge the place of indigenous tradition in his country’s culture. He counters—his later comment about many trends and tribes notwithstanding—“Isn’t culture defined by the rules and dictates of the majority? In other words, aren’t the dominant ideologies and cultural constructs what give a country its cultural identity?” (13) Stripped of its academic gloss and its rhetorical questions, this could be the sentiment of the officious Moroccan bureaucrat Bowles encounters in “The Rif, to Music”:

I detest all folk music, and particularly ours here
in Morocco. It sounds like the noises made by savages. Why should I help you to export a thing which we are trying to destroy? You are looking for tribal music. There are no more tribes. We have dissolved them. And there was never any tribal music anyway—only noise. (304)

What seems undeniable is that Bowles has touched a sensitive spot in the psyche of the urbanized, modernizing Moroccan—the same one Elghandor betrays in his introduction, describing his interview as “the first of its kind between a latter-day American Orientalist and an ‘educated Moroccan,’ the representative of a class that Bowles, in his cultural bias for atavism and primitivism, avoids and even despises” (7).

This is defensive, certainly, but not without its kernel of truth. In a discussion of Their Heads Are Green, Caponi writes, “Bowles’ interest in ethnography was a clear extension of his romanticism, which led him to pity and nearly despise the Western-educated Moroccans who were changing what he first loved about the country.” (Romantic Savage 177). In “Africa Minor” we find what could be fairly called a psychological sketch of Moroccans like Elghandor.

The North African knows that when it comes to appreciating his culture, the average tourist cannot go much closer toward understanding it than a certain condescending curiosity. He realizes that, at best, to the European he is merely picturesque. Therefore, he reasons, to be taken seriously he must cease being picturesque. Traditional customs, clothing and behavior must be replaced by something unequivocally European. In this he is fanatical. It does not occur to him that what he is rejecting is authentic and valid, and that what he is taking on is meaningless imitation. (264-265)

**Fixation on the Exotic**

The passage above presents us with the third face of Bowles’ putative Orientalism: the notion that he fetishizes the exotic and primitive elements in other cultures, and would deny those cultures the benefits of modernization to for the sake of his own aesthetic sensibilities. Of the three charges this is the most interesting, and also the most challenging to refute. When Elghandor, noting that Bowles frequently exhorts Westerners to learn from traditional North African culture, asks him if the inverse is not true—if Moroccans ought not learn from Western civilization and technology—Bowles replies, “Well, if Moroccans learn all that, if all Moroccans learn all that, they won’t be Moroccans anymore, will they?” (22)

This itself is offensively paternalistic, but even his subsequent assurance that “I don’t want to say that I hope Moroccans will live in poverty, squalor, disease, suffering” (22) is undercut when we turn to “Notes Mailed at Nagercoil,” the one essay in Travels set in India. Bowles laments the Europeanization of the country’s small towns, with their proliferating floodlights and loudspeakers, and later adds, “The younger generation in India is intent on forgetting a good many things, including some that it might do better to remember. There would seem to be no good reason for getting rid of the country’s most ancient heritage, the religion of Hinduism” (217). Ending the essay with a reference to a plague outbreak in the local paper, he writes,

> I keep thinking about it, and I wonder if the almost certain eventual victory over such 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. (220)

Although it is intriguing that the atheist Bowles would assert the value of religious belief, there is much to protest in this passage, aside from the clear underestimation of the resilience of Indian tradition. For an outsider to question the value of the elimination of plague from India is striking, especially since—in one of the drollest examples of “the objective presentation of his own personality” which for him is central to the travel writer’s task—Bowles places amid his shoestring account an episode involving eighteen suitcases of his own clothes, and a customs officer who cannot comprehend that Bowles does not plan to sell them.

The note of self-caricature—often overlooked in Bowles’ writing by critics like Elghandor—is the only thing that redeems Bowles here. We find it again, and put to a more thought-provoking purpose, in his foreword to Their Heads Are Green:

> The concept of the status quo is a purely theoretical one; modifications occur hourly. It would be an absurdity to expect any group of people to maintain its present characteristics or manner of living. But a visitor to a place whose charm is a result of its backwardness is inclined to hope it will remain that way, regardless of how its inhabitants may feel. The seeker of the picturesque sees the spread of technology as an unalloyed abomination. Still, there are much worse things. (xxii)
Here Bowles confesses to a hope that he admits is both perverse and unattainable. And yet what curious traveler to today’s far-flung places, finding everywhere the same cellphones and Starbucks, can deny feeling something akin to it?

Moreover, the opposition to the very portrayal of the exotic Other, which Elghandor and other postcolonial critics seem to represent, is its own kind of extremism. Said’s argument is at its weakest when he impugns Flaubert for recounting his tryst with an Egyptian courtesan—“she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her” (6)—as if forgetting that only one of the two wrote for a living. Similarly, when Elghandor demands where Bowles would place himself in the tradition of Orientalism, the author replies,

[My] interest mainly is to describe what I thought was interesting here and what’s interesting here is that which does not exist elsewhere. It’s of no interest to describe a bus line, an apartment house, or a modern city...My interest was not in explaining Moroccan culture; it’s just in writing stories, writing novels which would be realistic but which would also contain material which would not be found in another country—that which is strictly Moroccan. (8)

The hazard of overemphasizing the picturesque in such a strategy is apparent. Yet special interest in what does not exist in his own country is so understandable in an expatriate fiction writer as to make us wonder why he is being called upon to defend it.

One of the pleasures of Travels is its collection under one cover of seven different essays, written between 1954 and 1991, on Bowles’ adopted city of Tangier. If indeed the best travel writing concerns the effect of place on recognizable character, then where else than Tangier—the city with which Bowles is so indelibly identified—should we look for his perspective on the Other, and his stance on its cultural and technological evolution?

In doing so, we must deal with the previously noted fact that Bowles’ image as a public figure looms as large in popular perception as his work. Greg Mullins writes,

Paul Bowles’ authorial persona continues to be associated with a bygone era of colonial privilege enjoyed in the midst of Islamic calls to prayer, ancient whitewashed buildings, and narrow, dark, mysterious streets. Bowles’ enduring popularity owes a great deal not only to his association with this idealized world but also to the loss of this world in the postcolonial era. In short, Paul Bowles is widely associated with nostalgia for colonialism. (20)

Mullins goes on to explore the sexual aspects of this “colonial nostalgia” in Bowles’ fiction, where erotic tension and generally unconsummated desire are taken to reflect his own politically-freighted liaisons with various Moroccan men. While this line of inquiry has its merit, the Tangier essays in Travels are virtually devoid of carnal references—which is not to say that personal reminiscence of another variety does not infuse them all. In the first essay, “Letter from Tangier,” Bowles writes,

It would be hard to find a city the size of Tangier where the inhabitants have less civic pride, or where there is such an utter dearth of cultural life. An important reason for this is that very few of those who came here during the great influx had any intention of remaining. Tangier was the new El Dorado; one would arrive, find a way to make one’s killing, and get out as fast as possible. But as in Hollywood, where the soda-jerkers and shop girls all seem to be vedettes manquées who can’t bear to go back to their farms and factories, the people have somehow not made that quick million, and have stayed on anyway, loath to abandon hope or to admit defeat. Besides, life for the unsuccessful prospector is no more unpleasant here than it would be anywhere else. (93)

Could Bowles—who made a splash if not a killing with The Sheltering Sky but was never able to parlay North Africa into first-rank literary fame—be talking here about himself? To Elghandor forty years later he said, “Unfortunately, I don’t want to live here, but I’m here, and I haven’t the energy to go somewhere else. Besides, I wouldn’t know where to go. I think life here is just as good, much better than Europe, infinitely better than America. What else is there?” (15)

What must not be missed here is that, as a longtime resident of Tangier, Bowles views its history and its relentless change as inextricable from his own. In “Worlds of Tangier,” the most touching tribute to his adopted home, he is frank about both the exoticism that first attracted him to the city and its Proustian hold on him:

...a blank wall at the end of a blind alley suggests mystery, just as being in the tiny closet-like rooms of a Moslem house in the Medina evokes the magic of early childhood games, or as the sudden call to
He does bemoan the gradual loss of this exoticism in the face of Americanization:

...the Moslems have discarded their frogged Oriental jackets and enormous trousers of turquoise, orange, pistachio or shocking pink, to don Levis, and second-hand raincoats imported by the bale from America; the population has augmented at least threefold, and I’m afraid the city would never strike a casual visitor as either quiet or attractive. (224)

Yet at this point (in 1958) the city is still alive for him, though in terms shot through with nostalgia:

...I am now convinced that Tangier is a place where the past and the present exist simultaneously in proportionate degree, where a very much alive today is given an added depth of reality by the presence of an equally alive yesterday. (226)

Thirty-two years later, in a final essay on the city simply entitled “Tangier,” Bowles has grown elegiac:

The old Tangier I had known in 1931 did not last. When I returned after the war in 1947 it was scarcely recognizable. Apartment houses had gone up, trees had been done away with, streets had been cut through the outlying countryside. In the Medina, new façades had been given to the houses—in every case destroying the Moorish arch over the entrance door, thus depriving the streets of visual charm...Compared to most cities, it is still a pleasant place to live—but the Tangier I know exits only in memory. (461-462)

One can term all of this colonial nostalgia if one chooses, and censure Bowles for bemoaning the availability of the affordable American raincoats he finds insufficiently picturesque. But by the time “Tangier” was published, Bowles had lived in the city for more than forty years, and one is struck by how many of these sentiments could have come from a Tangier native of the same generation. Even those that are clearly of the inspiration-seeking expatriate writer express a conservatism that is, I think, less Orientalist than universally human: the melancholy yearning for the loss of something one has always loved.

The further Bowles goes from places in which he has this sort of longtime investment, the more full-throated his anti-colonialism becomes: this is one final revelation provided by the geographic sweep of Travels. Said maintains that Orientalism transforms the Orient into “less a place than a topos, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone’s work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these.” (177) But for Bowles, North Africa is a place and a long-familiar one, and that experience produces the guilt that colors his support for independence in “Africa Minor”:

No part of North Africa will again be the same sort of paradise for Europeans that it has been for them these past fifty years...We now come here as paying guests of the inhabitants themselves rather than of their exploiters. Travel here is certain not to be so easy or so comfortable as before, and prices are many times higher than they were, but at least we meet the people on terms of equality, which is a healthier situation. (269-270)

In stark contrast with this is the most scathingly anti-colonial essay in Travels, a dispatch published in The Nation in 1957, just after the Mau Mau Uprising against the British colonial administration of Kenya. “Letter from Kenya” begins by pointing out how little Bowles knew of the country before visiting in the wake of “the trouble”: a little from Isak Dinesen’s Out of Africa (1937) and a little from its reputation among English revelers. But he is a quick study, drawing a deft tribal distinction between the traditional Masai and the rebelling Kikuyu “who are impressionable and desirous of assimilating a maximum of European culture” (188), vividly reporting the squalid living conditions of the natives and the doublespeak propaganda of the British, and using his contrastingly deep knowledge of Morocco to give insight on the Mau Mau killings:

Infinitely greater numbers of French colonists, for instance, died equally horrible deaths at the hands of Moroccan terrorists during the War of Independence in 1954 and 1955, but because there was no way of camouflaging the openly anti-colonial nature of the struggle, relatively little was made of it in the world press. The inference in most of the material written on the conflict in Kenya is that Mau Mau is (the British like to say: was) an irrational outbreak of bloodthirstiness on the part of a group of fanatical savages. This unrealistic conception is a natural one to expect on the part of the local European population; further afield it
becomes pure colonialist propaganda. (195)
The end of the essay provides a counterexample to Said’s procession of Western pilgrims (Lamartine, Nerval, Flaubert) whose preconceptions allegedly blinded them the Orient right before their eyes:

Today there is a news story of a mass escape of Mau Mau convicts on their way back to a camp from the quarry where they had been working. Twenty prisoners are still at large. Before going up to Nairobi I should have hoped vaguely for their capture as a part of the necessary process of reestablishing order in the land. Now I find it difficult to wish them anything but the best of luck. (196)

An endorsement of the Kikuyu, in their quest for independence (and Westernization): in a country whose past does not overlap with his own, the Orientalism of which Elghandor accuses him is nowhere in evidence.

But such, we must conclude from the evidence of Travels, is the tenor of Bowles’ travel writing as a whole. As Caponi writes,

His travel essays are a form of cultural interpretation, and he makes it clear from the outset that a world in which the majority of inhabitants (non-Westerners) have been colonized and made to feel like aliens in their own land is a world gone seriously wrong. (Paul Bowles 104)

Conclusion

Travel literature can succeed, Bowles contends, only through showing the effects of a place on someone with an understandable character and preferences. Yet one might grant the anti-Orientalism of the Paul Bowles we find in Travels—his repudiation of Western superiority, his grasp of the diversity within the societies he portrays, and his love of an exotic and vanishing Tangier that cannot be disentangled from his own ever-receding past—and still question the significance of these essays, since much the same worldview is evident in the novels and stories for which Bowles is deservedly more famous.

What this objection overlooks is the indebtedness of Bowles’ most culturally perceptive fiction—in particular his third and finest novel, The Spider’s House (1955)—to the travel essays themselves, as he confided to Lawrence Stewart:

[W]hen Bowles came to write his third novel, he had gained confidence about his insight into Moroccan life. “The fact that I’ve done all these pieces for Holiday has been one of the brakes on my writing fiction, all through the fifties. I wrote some, of course. I would have written more, I think, had I not had to do all those articles.” But the journalistic assignments, forcing him to explain Morocco and its inhabitants to a curious America, crystallized some of his otherwise unstructured impressions. (100)

Finally, there is an ironic rightness to be found in the fact that travel literature was not just a proving ground for Bowles’ ideas but a genre in which he himself, near the end of his life, had become a sort of landmark. As Brian Edwards writes, this was the inevitable consequence of Bowles’ renown not only for his work but for his gentleman-expatriate persona:

As a result [of his enduring association with Morocco in the American consciousness], he became not only the conduit to the purportedly “liberating environment,” its translator, but also a tourist site himself. By the 1990s, Bowles entered the travel guidebooks as something like required reading and as a part of the scenery. (83)

Having once counted himself among the seekers of the picturesque, Bowles—by all accounts still a dandy in his very old age, receiving visitors in a bathrobe among pillows and Moorish tapestries—had become that which they sought.

Notes

1. The question of Orientalism in Bowles’ fiction has been the subject of occasional examination, centering generally where it seems most germane: the short stories and the first three novels. Though no one has painted Bowles’ work as a standard-bearer for empire as Said (1993) does of Kipling and others, an ambivalence in the face of colonial independence—rooted in a fascination with the primitive and a rejection of the modern West that Bowles saw Moroccans rushing to emulate—is unmistakable in his fiction. Of the short stories Allen Hibbard writes, “His is a longing for past that is not his own, and his representations of Morocco, fictional though they may be, have always seemed to validate the traditional, at the same time containing faint mockery of superstitious habits” (100).

But in a nuanced postcolonial study of Bowles’ debut novel The Sheltering Sky (1949), Brian Edwards highlights the International Zone of Tangier in which Bowles lived to argue that his early work “refuses the neocolonialist / anti-imperialist polarity that has
emerged as the choice critics must make about his writing and exhibits a potentiality for an alternative engagement across national boundaries, literatures, and subjectivities” (80). Gena Dagel Caponi points out that the Arabs in the novel “are not a monolithic group used as a backdrop for the central characters” but “represent a range of personalities and are not simply the observed; they are also the observers” (Paul Bowles 34). In “A Twenty-First Century View of Bowles’ Let It Come Down” (Fukuoka University Review of Literature and Humanities, 37: 3 (2005): 907-920), I come to a similar conclusion about Bowles’ second novel, which is too often subjected to narrowly existentalist readings.

Finally, with its nakedly autobiographical character John Stenham and its setting amid the Moroccan independence uprising, The Spider’s House (1955) makes promising ground for the study of race and empire in Bowles’ fiction. While labeling Stenham an Orientalist, Greg Mullins notes that he “yearns for a time before colonialism and wishes to witness a medieval Fez that—he imagines—has no contact with Europe” (34). Caponi, who significantly notes that Stenham is “practically a caricature” of his creator (Paul Bowles 51), finds in the book Bowles’ “preoccupation with capturing the essence […] of an entire culture on the verge of collapse” (Paul Bowles 50). The moral complexity of this novel—established in part by its use of the local boy Amar as a point-of-view character—makes the best case for John Maier’s assessment that Bowles’ “serious preoccupation with Moroccan thinking in his fiction […] goes far beyond the Orientalist fascination with the exotic East” (144).

Works Cited


