Perception and the Postwar in Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky*

Greg Bevan *

The Sheltering Sky (1949) was an unquestionable triumph for its author Paul Bowles, making possible a writing career for a man known then—if at all—as an avant-garde music composer. In his review Tennessee Williams wrote that the novel "alone of the books that I have read recently by American authors appears to bear the spiritual impact of recent history in the western world" (qtd. in Sawyer-Lauçanno 286). The reference is to World War II, which serves as an indictment of Western civilization in the eyes of the novel's main characters, a young American couple and their friend who seek escape and renewal in the postwar Sahara. Nor was Bowles' novel destined to fade away with its historical moment: the doomed journey of Port Moresby, his wife Kit, and their friend Tunner found a wider audience in a 1990 film, and in 2011 Tobias Wolff called *The Sheltering Sky* "one of the most original, even visionary, works of fiction to appear in the twentieth century."

Yet along with his debut story collection *The Delicate Prey* (1950)—which exhibits the same bleakness of tone—*The Sheltering Sky* was

* 福岡大学教務部共通教育センター教授

something of a curse for its author as well. He was never able, by any measure, to repeat the impact of his first two books. After the September 11 terrorist attacks some critics (myself among them) began to argue for Bowles—whose enduring subject was his adopted North Africa—as an indispensable literary interpreter of the Muslim world. But by 2001 Bowles was two years dead, and to the wider reading public he is still doggedly associated with the existential themes of his early work: indeed, the dimming in the public eye of existentialism and Bowles were roughly concurrent.

One of the more interesting and ambitious efforts to resituate Bowles as a sociopolitically important writer can be found in Brian Edwards' multidisciplinary study *Morocco Bound* (2005). I say ambitious because Edwards, rather than marshaling more explicitly political work like Bowles' third novel *The Spider's House* (1955), focuses mainly on *The Sheltering Sky*. He finds in the book a nuanced and heterodox understanding of North Africa, and of America's place in the emerging postwar order there—yet also finds the existentialism of the book counterproductively distancing its insights from its American audience:

> This distancing emerges from the novel's existentialist frame, with which the novel [...] suggests that what might be called the "truth of surfaces" offers a lesson about the proper relationship of individuals to existence (sheltered by a two-dimensional sky) and between individuals (who are granted recognition as masks). (103)

The symbolic machinery of the novel, in other words—coupled perhaps with Bowles' countercultural reputation as a marijuana-using artist—worked to sabotage its sociopolitical import.

Indeed, most readers who followed Bowles to North Africa ended

> up following the "wrong" message [...] Even those American hippies who evaded the U.S. draft by traveling to Morocco more often took a kif-fueled "Marrakech express" than engaged the local population or political climate. (104)

While it is certainly true that Bowles' work is widely misperceived, and while Edwards' subtle study of *The Sheltering Sky* does a great deal to refigure Bowles as a politically important writer, I will begin my own reading with a dissent from his view of the "truth of surfaces" in the novel.

Surfaces do indeed pervade the book metaphorically, but I think it is unjustified to argue in this case that depiction is the same as advocacy: that Bowles, as Edwards writes, sees "'truth of the surface' as the proper existential relationship between individuals" (106). For one thing, it seems unlikely that a man dedicated to writing would champion the unexamined life; indeed, Port Moresby himself is a failed writer who has found that "[a]s long as he was living his life, he could not write about it" (194). It is further worth noting that Port and Kit, the two characters who by turns embrace this unreflective stance, wind up dead and insane respectively. Hans Bertens argues that they cannot even be called properly existential characters:

> Kit especially suffers from fears that are close to the so-called existential anguish, but her fears and her husband's unhappiness are hopelessly unproductive and never lead to a truly existential approach to the business of living. Instead, they lead only to a total denial of responsibility, to death and insanity. (20-21)

One could argue—as Bertens does—that this amounts to a failure on Bowles' part. But in arguing for the novel's enduring relevance, Wolff—though he does not explicitly mention existentialism—shows how its central tragedy is

rooted in a misinterpretation of that philosophy: "The power of this novel lies precisely in the reality of what it makes us fear—the sweetness of that voice in each of us that sings the delight of not being responsible, of refusing the labor of choice by which we create ourselves."

We can concur with Wolff without rejecting Edwards' argument that *The Sheltering Sky* contains unacknowledged sociopolitical depth. Indeed, the trajectories of Port and Kit show two dark possible fates awaiting the Westerner who knows and cares for only the beguiling surface of a foreign culture.

It must be pointed out that the Moresbys are no ethnocentric "ugly Americans": as mentioned earlier they reject their own cultural roots, and in one of the omniscient narrator's more judgmental moments we find their attitude toward life presented as a kind of Oriental fatalism: "Because neither [Kit] nor Port had ever lived a life of any kind of regularity, they both had made the fatal error of coming hazily to regard time as non-existent. One year was like another year. Eventually everything would happen." (127) Organizing her life around a personal system of omens, Kit seems to prefigure the sort of post-religious New Age devotee who imbibes Eastern religions uncomprehendingly. Both of them strike us as the sort of dangerously empty vessel for whom a journey into the unknown holds special dangers.

The famous opening sequence of *The Sheltering Sky*, in which Port gradually awakens from sleep in a hotel room on the Algerian coast, is generally read as a statement of the novel's existentialism. Yet amid the focus on Port's angst-heavy consciousness we find this piece of concrete description: "But how difficult it was to accept the high, narrow room with

its beamed ceiling, the huge apathetic designs stenciled in indifferent colors around the walls, the closed window of red and orange glass." (4) These painted arabesques are the first appearance of the novel's preoccupation with surfaces, perhaps too early for the reader to locate the apathy and indifference not in the designs—which are a product of devout adherence to the Islamic prohibition of figurative art—but in their viewer.

Yet for all his passivity, Port is the catalyst of the couple's quest into the desert. He seeks "solitude and the the proximity to infinite things" (93), while Kit, terrified of these intimations of the void, follows along in hopes of rekindling their now-loveless marriage. Port's titular cosmology, in which the sky is a solid barrier protecting us from the void beyond, makes several appearances outside of the much-quoted passage in which he explains it to Kit. "Port raised his eyes to the sky: the powdery course of the Milky Way was like a giant rift across the heavens that let the faint white light through." (17) "He stood still a moment looking upward, almost expecting to hear the sky crack as the nocturnal chill pressed against it from outside." (166) When Port does expound his theory to a terrified Kit on a hillside outside Boussif, Bowles notably places "a venerable Arab" (93) in the scene, oblivious to them in silent prayer. Lawrence Stewart notes in this context the Koranic passage which "affirms that Allah 'holds the sky from falling down: this it shall not do except by His own will.'" (66) Though the novel's central image came to Bowles not from the Koran but elsewhere (Caponi *Paul Bowles* 20-21), and is properly viewed existentially, the presence of the praying Arab in this scene is significant. Like a painter of arabesques, his faith is in a truth beyond the two-dimensional surface, in opposition to the "nothing" (94) which Port believes to be there.

Port's belief—or lack thereof—leads to a mistaken overemphasis on surfaces in his admiration for Algerian culture. In Aïn Krorfa, on the edge of the Sahara, a tea-party with a local gentleman ends abruptly when Kit complains of being cold. When she defends herself to Port by calling Algerian conversation "superficial," he says:

> "I disagree. You don't say a frieze is superficial just because it has only two dimensions."
>
> "You do if you're accustomed to having conversation that's something more than decoration. I don't think of conversation as a frieze, myself."
>
> "Oh, nonsense! It's just another way of living they have, a completely different philosophy." (123)

That it may be, but Port is ill-equipped to understand it. His belief in the truth of surfaces blinds him to the depths of the culture all around him. In a striking scene the following night we sense that his conviction that there is nothing underneath—and nothing beyond the sheltering sky—arises from an understanding of his own essential emptiness.

Watching a beautiful dancer in the outpost of Aïn Krorfa, Port realizes she is blind, and is seized with a sudden desire for her. Edwards' detailed reading of this scene delves into its existential and postcolonial dimensions, including this observation of Port's desire for invisibility: "Port's brief moment of ecstasy, the 'electric shock' of desire, announces itself when he realizes that she cannot see him; he is freed, momentarily, from his own visibility as an American—a freedom that usually eludes him." (110) I want to put this interpretation in the context of Port's immediate circumstances in the novel. His passport is about to be stolen, a setback that will leave him

feeling "only half alive" (154), and on this night he also feels the first chills of the typhus that will kill him. In a metaphorical sense the loss of his defined national identity will lead to his death—because, one senses, he is an "American abroad" and nothing more—and thus his desire for freedom from his Americanness, one dependent on the unseeing consciousness of the dancer, can be seen as a kind of deathwish.

Indeed, Caponi writes that "Port is headed toward death from the moment he is introduced in the novel." (*Romantic* 132) The wish is finally fulfilled in the remote Saharan outpost of Sbâ, where Kit takes him in desperate search for help. Here the two-dimensional scrim which he has been self-destructively trying to pierce begins to fragment: "He was at the edge of a realm where each thought, each image, had an arbitrary existence, where the connection between each thing and the next had been cut." (221) The dying Port reverts to the state of pure consciousness in which we met him, complete with echoes of the arabesques on the ceiling of his hotel room: "It seemed to him that here was an untried variety of thinking, in which there was no necessity for a relationship with life. 'The thought in itself,' he said—a gratuitous fact, like a painting of pure design." (221)

Port has seen his quest as Kit's too, telling her earlier, "We've never managed, either one of us, to get all the way into life. We're hanging on the outside for all we're worth, convinced we're going to fall off at the next bump." (94) Yet Kit's predicament in the novel does not mirror his. As we have seen, she recoils from the idea of life as a flat surface concealing the void. Bertens writes, in regard to the sense of nothingness that Port seeks in the Sahara, "She does not even understand what these silences and emptinesses mean—they are just a source of terror." (34)

More intuitive than her husband—as evidenced by her personal system of omens—she is also even more passive than he, and indeed the omens can be seen as a means of absolving herself of all responsibility. In the first leg of the trip inland from Oran, Port hitches a ride by car with the Lyles, an odious mother-son duo who crop up repeatedly in the novel, while Kit takes the train with Tunner—the rails suggestive of her surrender to fate, which on this trip includes a pivotal champagne-fueled seduction at Tunner's hands.

Sensing her looming infidelity, Kit gets off the train at a stop and climbs on the fourth-class carriage with the native Arabs and Berbers, and the lurching train confronts her with a shocking tableau: people munching on locusts, a man holding a severed sheep's head that bloodies her clothes as she squeezes past, and finally a noseless face, "the most hideous human face she had ever seen" (77). But it is Kit's consciousness—pricked by the knowledge of her imminent betrayal of Port—that sees below the surface that would otherwise make this scene one of lurid cultural voyeurism:

> As she stared she found herself wondering why it was that a diseased face, which basically means nothing, should be so much more horrible to look at than a face whose tissues are healthy but whose expression reveals an interior corruption. Port would say that in a non-materialistic age it would not be thus. And he would probably be right. (78)

The open-minded willingness to plumb the depths of character that Kit evinces here will desert her as the novel goes on. Initially a reluctant companion in Port's Africa quest—one moment finds her wishing "they had gone to Italy, or any other small country with boundaries, where the villages had churches" (171)—Kit cannot bear to follow Port to a vast Sahara that

stands for the void.

But unable to see in its depths anything else, she retreats to a focus on surfaces, nursing a growing fascination for the natives that strikes us as pure Orientalism. Riding a bus with the ailing Port toward the promise of medical help in El Ga'a, she listens to a young Arab describe their destination, with

> its high walls with their gates that shut at sunset, its quiet dark streets where men sold many things that came from Soudan and from even farther away: salt bars, ostrich plumes, gold dust, leopard skins [...] She listened with complete fascination, hypnotized by the extraordinary charm of his voice, and fascinated as well by the strangeness of what he was talking about, the odd way he was saying it. (180)

As they head south, the abstract patterns of Port's hotel-ceiling arabesques find increasing echoes in Kit's perceptions. The market at Sbâ is "enclosed on all four sides by whitewashed arcades whose innumerable arches made a monotonous pattern whichever way she turned her head" (205). In the wake of Port's death she wanders at night into a courtyard "full of little channels and aqueducts running paradoxically in all directions" while hearing drums and "voices repeating a rhythmical refrain, always the same" (239).

But these details are not, as we might expect, signs of Kit's panicked disorientation. Discovering a moonlit pool, she strips naked without knowing why— "She felt a vague surprise that her actions should go on so far ahead of her consciousness of them" (240)—and undertakes a kind of baptism, not into a new life but one previously lost:

> She felt a strange intensity being born within her. As she looked

> about the quiet garden she had the impression that for the first time since her childhood she was seeing objects clearly. Life was suddenly there, she was in it, not looking through the window at it. (240-41)

It is crucial to see this apparent liberation, an embrace of the unexamined life, in its proper context. Stewart provides some from contemporary psychoanalysis:

> Jung had found that among desert people, "consciousness takes care of their orientation in space and transmits impressions from outside, and is also stirred by inner impulses and affects. But it is not given to reflection; the ego has almost no autonomy. The situation is not so different with the European; but we are, after all, somewhat more complicated." (51)

In Romantic strains of thought this view has been used not to belittle but to valorize the Other, but as Caponi writes, "*The Sheltering Sky* repudiates primitivism, wherein the 'noble' characteristics of non-Western characters becomes an implicit criticism of the West" (*Paul Bowles* 33). This becomes clear when the purportedly liberated Kit wanders into the desert and has herself made a concubine to a nomadic Touareg chieftain. Reduced to her animal urges, most of them sexual, she is eventually betrothed to him, before regaining just enough of her senses to be rescued and flown back to Oran where the novel began. Yet she has clearly lost her mind; before Tunner can recover her there she disappears, possibly into the city's casbah, and presumably forever.

Kit's solo journey, which occupies the final third of the novel, has prompted much critical disagreement. Stewart approvingly writes, "The

adventures that conclude *The Sheltering Sky* almost parody sentimental novels about white ladies wickedly trapped in a harem; it is Bowles' adroit handling of such preposterousness that gives the incidents validity." (70-71) But preposterousness adroitly handled is still preposterous, and one is tempted to agree with Bertens that "Bowles could have ended the novel [after Kit's bathing scene] without straining his themes or the logic of the novel. The scenes that follow do not really contribute much and even damage the novel by their sensationalism and their improbability." (44)

But Book Three of *The Sheltering Sky*, though it could have been better executed, is nonetheless vital to the logic of the novel, showing as it does that Kit's unthinking immersion in the surface of life can scarcely end better than Port's nihilistic tearing away of that surface in search of the underlying void. At roughly the midpoint of the novel Bowles quietly presents us with a third way, in the point of view of a minor character named Lieutenant d'Armagnac, the "commander of the military post of Bou Noura" (141).

This colonial administrator's story seems at first a tangential anecdote, but Edwards notes that "*The Sheltering Sky* is as deeply engaged by the French presence as it is the Algerian" (101), and the fact that the episode opens Book Two of the novel is a sign of its significance. Edwards writes, "Within the context of French Orientalism, Bowles interjects a narrative of American mobility through a French space. Bowles thereby interrupts the French vision of the Maghreb [...] in which the colonial administration was naturalized in its location." (105)

Lieutenant d'Armagnac has recently detained a local girl for killing her newborn baby and disposing of its body outside Bou Noura's walls. While imprisoned she was fatally stung by a scorpion, but some of the townspeople

believe that her death was at the hands of the lieutenant and his men, leading to a multifarious and veiled hostility from his colonial subjects: no-shows at the renovation of his house, averted glances in the street, and an ongoing low-level poisoning at the hands of his cook.

But most painful to the lieutenant is the official French report on the incident, which questions "his fitness to deal with the 'native psychology'" (146). For he shows a cultural inquisitiveness the Moresbys lack:

> The lieutenant was intelligent enough to insist on allowing himself the luxury of not being snobbish about the indigenous population. His overt attitude toward the people of Bou Noura was that they were an accessible part of a great, mysterious tribe from whom the French could learn a great deal if only they would take the trouble. (141)

This is not to say the lieutenant is without his paternalistic prejudices. Indeed, one of the purposes his story serves in the novel is to suggest a complexity of local circumstances of which passing travelers know nothing. Finding his passport stolen, Port suspects the proprietor of his inn of the crime, and comes to the lieutenant with his accusation. But the innkeeper is one of the most well-respected men in Bou Noura, giving the Frenchman the opportunity to mend fences with his subjects by dissuading Port from pressing charges.

His argument to Port is culturally infantilizing: "The native here [...] takes only money or an object he wants for himself. He would never take anything so complicated as a passport." (152) But it is significant that he is correct about the innkeeper's innocence; it turns out that the culprit was a fellow Westerner, Eric Lyle.

To the suggestion that Lieutenant d'Armagnac's role in the novel is to offer insight into North Africa and its people that the American travelers do not possess, one could naturally object that providing the thoughts of a native African would be more enlightening still, and with a few trivial exceptions like the wives of the Touareg chieftain Bowles does not oblige us. But if he was a newcomer to the region like Port and Kit, his narrative eye shows more interest in Algeria than they do, giving intimations to the reader of the remarkable trajectory of his subsequent career—in which he gradually moved native characters to the center of his fiction, and undertook a long series of translations from the Moghrebi of Moroccan storytellers.

What seems clearest is that Port and Kit Moresby's focus on surfaces cannot be read as an advertisement for existentialism, a philosophy about which Bowles always showed ambivalence, declaring his affinity in some interviews (Caponi *Paul Bowles* 18) and denying it in others (Stewart 152). When one interviewer asked if the restless movement of Port and Kit was not "prompted by an obsessive fear of self-confrontation," Bowles agreed: "Moving around a lot is a good way of postponing the day of reckoning." (qtd. in Caponi *Conversations* 123)

There is another day of reckoning to be described in Bowles' oeuvre: the convulsive end of North African colonialism, which would be the subject of his most overtly political novel *The Spider's House* (1955). Bowles knew that in the end the people of his adopted Morocco would need to forge their own future, one in which Americans would only be bystanders. There is a small scene early in *The Sheltering Sky*, with Port walking alone through the dark lanes of Oran, that perfectly captures the self-absorption of the young traveler, as well as the creeping awareness that he has entered a world that

is entirely heedless of him:

> A small stone suddenly hit him in the back. He wheeled about, but it was too dark to see where it had come from. A few seconds later another stone, coming from in front of him, landed against his knee. In the dim light, he saw a group of small children scattering before him. More stones came from the other direction, this time without hitting him. When he got beyond, to a point where there was a light, he stopped and tried to watch the two groups in battle, but they all ran off into the dark [...] A wind that was dry and warm, coming up the street out of the blackness before him, met him head on. He sniffed at the fragments of mystery in it, and again he felt an unaccustomed exaltation. (17)

If Port seems destined to believe there is nothing below the surface of this mystery, it is equally clear that Bowles, throughout the long career inaugurated by *The Sheltering Sky*, means to seek the depths.

Works Cited

Bertens, Hans. *The Fiction of Paul Bowles: The Soul is the Weariest Part of the Body*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1979.

Bowles, Paul. *The Delicate Prey and Other Stories*. New York: Random House, 1950.

---. *The Sheltering Sky*. 1949. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005.

---. *The Spider's House*. 1955. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.

Caponi, Gena Dagel, ed. *Conversations with Paul Bowles*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993.

---. *Paul Bowles*. New York: Twayne, 1998.

---. *Paul Bowles: Romantic Savage*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1994.

Edwards, Brian T. *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.

Sawyer-Lauçanno, Christopher. *An Invisible Spectator: A Biography of Paul Bowles*. New York: Grove P, 1989.

Stewart, Lawrence D. *Paul Bowles: The Illumination of North Africa*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1974.

Wolff, Tobias. "Reconsidering Paul Bowles." *Narrativemagazine.com*. Narrative. Winter 2011, https://www.narrativemagazine.com/issues/winter-2011/nonfiction/reconsidering-paul-bowles-tobias-wolff. Accessed 30 August 2019.