

An American in Morocco: Talking to Paul Bowles

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After leaving the United States in 1929, Paul Bowles, aged only sixteen, sojourned for a lapse of time in Paris which was a real cultural hub for the intelligentsia from all over the Western world. During his stay there, he frequented Gertrude Stein's permanent dwelling place and literary «Salon» in Rue de Fleurus which was a magnet and a sanctuary to original intellectuals and artists alike. Learning about his wish to visit Villefranche-sur-Mer, a much-loved destination for many expatriate writers at that time, Stein objected to that and recommended Tangier instead. Following Stein's guidance, Paul Bowles visited North Africa with his music instructor, Aaron Copland, during the early 1930s. Stein's judicious advice stems from her knowledge of Bowles's particular character, his unstable financial situation and his artistic ambitions. Immediately, Bowles was so engrossed by Tangier's pleasant weather and its natural beauty that his stay in North Africa lasted longer than everybody, including Stein, had anticipated. He was instantaneously fascinated by the peaceful atmosphere of Tangier which was literally an ocean away from the bustling world of New York.

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Prior to 1947, the year he decided to settle in Tangier, Bowles's reputation as an inveterate traveler had already been established through the travel accounts of his globetrotting adventures he had written and dispatched to various magazines. After that date, however, Bowles led a life of self-imposed expatriation and a reclusive style of living which attracted so many people from different walks of life and interests to his apartment.

I was one of those. Ever since I heard of Paul Bowles for the first time, his uncommon life story and his outstanding career as an author intrigued me. There were hundreds of questions I wanted to ask him about his earlier roving existence, his career as an author, his philosophy of life, his direct and blunt attitudes towards his country of origin and his views regarding Moroccan culture, among many other questions.

Seeking answers through reading Bowles's autobiography, without *Stopping*, neither allayed my curiosity nor quenched my thirst for knowing more about his non-mainstream life and his aspirations as an author. Neither did my reading of his novels and short stories satisfy my curiosity about the quest of Bowles's protagonists. I wanted to ask their creator about their existentialist and nihilist penchant. Their struggle in North Africa — it seemed to me — was not against the alien and exotic culture they encountered, but versus their particular awareness of their existential status that wreaked havoc with their social stability and that tore asunder their personal and social lives. The main question for me was whether Bowles and his protagonists, apparently united in their skepticism about the supremacy of Western ideas of progress, were intent on escaping what they deemed to be a destructive modern civilization, or they were merely rejecting their culture because they could not adapt to it toward a place they hardly knew about.

In addition, many of Bowles's unmitigated views, expressed in a number of his writings, with regards to the Moroccan culture, irritated me by their lack of perspicacity and offensiveness, a view that I shared with many intellectuals inside Morocco who wrote and spoke disparagingly about Bowles. In other writings of Bowles, however, I found his descriptions realistic, insightful and sagacious. Morocco, for the author, was far from being a mere abstract destination that functions merely as an exotic backdrop to the predicament of his characters; it occupied an important place in the author's life and literary career. More questions arose in my mind about the extent to which a non native writer is able to understand an alien culture and fathom its depth. And even if he was able to

become familiar with some aspects of that culture, how objective could he be, especially that he was writing about the other in a different language, addressing an audience who would be more attracted to the exotic touch than willing to verify the faithfulness of the depiction.

But there was another reason that was not less pertinent for my willingness to pay Bowles a visit in his apartment in Tangier. I was writing an MA thesis on his North African novels. Having no precise idea how to proceed, I wrote him a letter requesting him to accept meeting me for an interview and sent it to the address in the title of Robert Briatte's biographic study. His response surprised me by its celerity; it did not take as long as I expected. Bowles's letter was neatly typed on a fine and almost transparent bluish sheet of paper. Though its content was not lengthy, the letter included all I wanted. Bowles accepted my visit to his flat for an interview and set a date and a time for the visit. I felt grateful because I could not have asked more from him at this point when I was looking for something that would motivate me to go forward with my project. Having prepared a portable tape recorder and many questions I set out towards Tangier with only a vague address and a picture taken of the five floors building where he lived.

When I reached his apartment in the mid-afternoon, I shyly knocked at his door and waited. After a long while the door opened just enough to allow the head of someone I immediately recognized as Mohammed Mrabet. He gravely asked me who I was and what I wanted. I showed him Bowles's letter and told him that he was expecting me for an interview. The door closed again. I did not wait long this time before Bowles, dressed in a long white shirt, widely opened the door, shook my hand and invited me to follow him inside.

I entered the apartment amid a muffled clatter of utensils coming from what appeared to be a tiny kitchen on my right. The noise seems to break the hushed nature of the place. As I crossed the short hallway and walked into the tiny living room, what attracted my attention was a pile of differently sized old fashioned suitcases looming in the dark by the entrance. The overwhelming smell inside was a combination of mint and kif. Bowles invited me to sit on a lounge; differently-sized cushions were lying here and there. The inbuilt bookshelves above my head were stuffed with books. I asked the author jokingly if he had read all of them. He smiled and explained to me that most of these were the different editions and translations of his published works. Bowles appeared amiable and in good mood. When I explained to him that my request for an interview with him was related to the research project I was conducting, he retorted by telling

me about an American student he had just received in his apartment who wanted to write a dissertation about him as an Orientalist. He brushed the idea aside as funny and farfetched. I was a bit confused because I felt that his remark was ostensibly addressed to me to channel our conversation away from the subject of Orientalism. Throughout our discussion, Bowles was less reserved and more courteous than I had expected him to be. He frequently paused to make some remarks in Spanish to Mrabet, who lurked in the darkest and most distant corner of the room, puffing out smoke from his kif pipe.

The following interview was tape recorded during my visit to Paul Bowles' apartment in Tangier, Morocco in 1989.

Kandoussi: Can you describe to me the way Morocco appeared to you when you first arrived to it during the 1930's?

Bowles: Of course, Morocco was completely different. In the first place, analphabetism was the rule. I think only about five percent of Moroccans were literate and ninety-five percent were not. So, of course, their references were all in the past. Everything they thought or said was traditional. They did not think as individuals. They thought as a part of a community: each one thought that he was a part of his family and his community. It seems to me they still do. Of course, that's not finished. They were, of course, more absorbed by Islamic beliefs than they are today, far less Europeanized.

Kandoussi: You said in one of your interviews that Moroccans did not have a unified psyche because, "for there to be a Moroccan psyche, there'd have to be a national consciousness, which [you] don't think has yet come into being." Does this view still apply to the situation today?

Bowles: I don't know where I could have said that.

Kandoussi: It's in your interview with Jeffery Bailey, published in *The Paris Review* under the title "The Art of Fiction."

Bowles: Ah! I didn't write it. I said it. One must never believe what someone said. Only believe what's written and signed because I don't know if I said it. He may have said I said it. I have no idea.... Well, of course, there is no one language. There are so many languages in Morocco. It's rather like India-- not as bad, but still.... You can say that the *darija* is the language of Morocco, and yet, there is an awful lot of people who do not understand it and don't use it. I remember we stopped in the countryside when we

were travelling in the south. I think we were trying to find Azilal. I had a Moroccan driver from Tangier who spoke to the locals in *darja*. He could not communicate with them. That had impressed me very much. This is not one country, but many countries inside a boundary.

Kandoussi: How long have you been away from the United States?

Bowles: I haven't been there in twenty one years — it's a long time — and nothing that happens there is of any interest to me at all. I don't care who the president is. I don't care what happens there. It doesn't interest me. I was born there and brought up there, and I am American and I don't pretend to be anything else, but I feel very sad about America because I think it's gone down the drain. I don't see any hope for it. It's in the act of disintegrating, decaying....

Kandoussi: Who do you think is to blame for this state things have come to?

Bowles: Well, ... I think, far too many non-Americans come and settle there, millions. What are they doing there? They only came because they want to make money. That's no reason. It's incredible. Now they are there, they are not going to leave, and they have lowered the standards of culture incredibly. But they'll never go back, I'm afraid, because they have lowered it also for the native born Americans and WASPs and all the rest, and the education is going down the drain. There is no more education, so the future is black for the United States. Well, of course, for the world: the United States leads the world into the darkness.

Kandoussi: Are there any specific reasons why, like many protagonists of your stories, you seem to shy away from going back to New York, in particular?

Bowles: There are many, many reasons. It's dirty, crowded—too many people, uncomfortable, I don't see any sign of—I never did see sign of friendliness on the faces in the street. People, if they see someone drop dead, they walk straight ahead... anything to do with him, so it's inhuman, in a sense. And then, the crime is terrible because of the drugs. People want immediate gratification for their drug hung-ups. That is to say, if they're taking heroin, they want another shot right away, but they have no money, so they have to mug somebody to get the money. That's no good. That is not society. That is not civilization and is certainly not culture. It's degradation.

Kandoussi: How deeply, do you estimate, you have been able to integrate Moroccan society?

Bowles: Moroccan society is, let us say, impenetrable for non-Muslim foreigners. It is not as impenetrable if an Egyptian comes or an Iraqi, but it is impenetrable for a non Muslim.

Kandoussi: Is it religion that it at fault here for forestalling integration between different cultures and societies?

Bowles: Well, I think it is part of it. People are influenced and fashioned traditionally by Muslim thought. For the son of a practicing Muslim, I won't say for a practicing Muslim, there are certain traditional ways of thinking which, even though he may not even be a Muslim any more, he will go on thinking in the same way. This isn't about religion at all. It is a cultural reaction. There is such a thing as Islamic culture whether you are practicing Islam or not. Muslim thought does exist apart from the religion as Christian thought exists apart from the religion. There are millions of atheists in Europe, but they are still Christians in the way they think.

Kandoussi: Can an alien culture offer the possibility of escaping one's own culture if one is not comfortable in it?

Bowles: Escapism? I don't know what that means. Is there such a thing?

Kandoussi: In *The Sheltering Sky*, for example, doesn't Port seek in the Sahara desert an alternative place or reality that can help him come to terms with his existential dilemma.

Bowles: If it had been about escaping, there would have to be some sort of reference to what he was escaping, that is, to the world that this couple had left; but there is nothing about that. One does not know how they lived back in America or what they were doing or really who they are. So, they are not really escaping anything or trying to escape anything.

Kandoussi: There are, however, various explicit references in *Let it Come Down* to Dyar's wish or even determination not to go back to that world he had left behind him when he moved to Tangier. Don't you think that his act is a kind of rejection of his own identity?

Bowles: Ah yes! Rejection, yes; but I don't know if that's escapism. I don't really know what the term escapism means. There is no such thing as escape, except death— that is an escape from everything, but as long as one is alive and breathing and conscious one has not escaped anything.

Kandoussi: The protagonists of your novels often leave behind their past life and head toward a destination that is foreign to feel free. What kind of freedom is that?

Bowles: I suppose emotional, perhaps, irresponsibility. They are free from responsibility. The characters want to be irresponsible and are not always able to be. Responsibility is something that is imposed on everyone. I think they (the characters) act compulsively. They don't really know what they are doing -- most of them. They act in the way they feel they should act, but they couldn't explain why. It's impossible.

Kandoussi: Looking for critical studies on your writings, I found only two: *The Inner Geography* and *The World Outside* and some articles from *The Twentieth Century Literature*. Can you think of any reason behind this reticence from the part of critics to get into your fictional world, and write about it?

Bowles: Well, I assume they don't like what I write. I don't know. I can't find a reason, naturally. Those would be all right, the two (books) that you found. There are others that are not very good. That one called *The Illuminations of North Africa* which is not very good, and there was another one—I don't know what it was called—by some woman...

Kandoussi: There is also a biography that has just come out by Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno

Bowles: Oh! Very bad! The man wanted me to help him. He wanted me to answer questions, and I said: no, I won't answer any question because I don't want you to write the book. I've already written my autobiography. I don't need a biography. I don't know you—I don't know him—but if you do, just go ahead and write it, but it will be unauthorised, not with my permission. And he kept coming back to Tangier, trying to get me to agree and to answer questions and I refused, refused, refused, and he became what I would say unhappy with me, and he became malicious and his malice shows in various places of the book. It's all right he wants to be nasty, it's his privilege. I couldn't stop it.

Kandoussi: I have read that you were influenced by André Breton.

Bowles: The surrealists, in general.

Kandoussi: I have also learned that you tried to imitate their way of writing directly from the unconscious. How self-conscious are you when you are writing?

Bowles: In novels, I am completely aware; otherwise, there wouldn't be any novel. It would just be words. In short stories, no...

Kandoussi: Why is it so, is it a question of form or length or what?

Bowles: Well because the short story to me is rather more like a poem and a poem can be written completely from the unconscious. It doesn't need to be consciously structured. One doesn't need to know what one has written when writing a short story or why one wrote it or what—It's not necessary. For me, while writing obviously a novel, one does have to know; otherwise, it's not valid. Certainly, anything like a novel or novelette must be worked out.

Kandoussi: Does «working out» a novel mean writing up to a certain predefined form, concretizing a pre-established pattern?

Bowles: No, simply carrying out the structure. Yes, structure is never automatic, except in the case of crystals and snowdrops and things like that; yes, but never in the creation of a novel, obviously not, or even a letter. One must know what he was saying and say it in the clearest way possible and it's what I was trying to do.

Kandoussi: I have also noticed the use of some regular symbols in your writings like the sea and the desert.

Bowles: Symbolism is something I never think of at all. I don't say one thing stands for another. No, it's all perfectly straightforward and I would say realistic.

Kandoussi: At times the language in your novels becomes poetic.

Bowles: *Malgré moi*

Kandoussi: Did your interest in music influence your writing of novels?

Bowles: Unconsciously, but not consciously. I wouldn't try to mix the two media. It wouldn't make sense.

Kandoussi: To what extent does your style reflect the identity of the characters in dialogues, for example?

Bowles: The style? I'm not conscious of style. The thing is to write a clear image, that's as clear as possible.