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TANGIER, THE BIG MOUNTAIN, AND PAUL BOWLES

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Tangier is a privileged locus in art and literary history. It has been for many decades a mecca that has attracted hordes of artists and writers of all hues and persuasions, including, to name only those who come immediately to mind, Eugéne Delacroix, Henri Matisse, Walter Harris, Jean Genet, Tennessee Williams, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Samuel Beckett, Brion Gysin, Paul Bowles, and Alfred Chester –not to mention Tangier's own renowned sons: Mohamed Choukri, Mohamed Mrabet, and Tahar Ben Jelloun. No other city boasts of such rich artistic memory, except, perhaps, Tangier's rival sibling –Marrakech, which has also been host to many writers such as, to name only a few, George Orwell, Elias Canetti, Claude Ollier, Michel Tournier, Peter Maine, and Juan Goytisolo. But if all these people shared the same space, did they share the same aesthetic values that informed their representations? Or was there some sort of cultural frontier that stood between the visitors and the natives? The answer to these questions must be in the negative for the reasons that will be suggested below. Suffice it to note here that the reasons are multiple as well as complex, for they are at once economic (the Westerners versus the impoverished natives), historical (colonial hegemony) and, above all, personal (Bowles's monastic indifference contrasts sharply with Genet's sympathies, which made him a *captif amoureux* of the Arabs, or with Goytisolo's decision to adopt Morocco as his new *tierra*).

Tangier is the cosmopolitan city *par excellence*. It served as the International Zone for many decades while the rest of Morocco was prey to the scramble of France and Spain. The city, overlooking both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, is also a geographical, historical, and cultural link between the New and Old Worlds, the Orient and the Occident, Europe and Africa. Thus living in this "Interzone" (to use William Burroughs's word) is equivalent to living in the interregnum of a cultural frontier, permanently suspended between clashing winds and opposed loyalties. In this binary opposition of time and space, this

Bahktinian "chronotope", everything is permissible. Even the primal impulse for survival does not count anymore, for Tangier is not only the point of entry but also, for some, the final exit.

This is perhaps the reason that led Michelle Green, the biographer of what she calls the "Literary Renegades in Tangier", to choose for her chatty account the apocalyptic title *The Dream at the End of the World* (Green, 1991). For Tangier is the port of entry that leads not only to the African desert, to the "heart of darkness", where the only "shelter" –to borrow from another writer (Paul Bowles) who lived and died in Tangier– is the transparent dome of the sky, but leads also to the last frontier, the alternative 'home' for those who have left with no wish to return, like Paul and Jane Bowles, Jean Genet, and Juan Goytisolo (who has chosen Marrakech as his new Andalusia). Others never wanted to leave this haven of self- exile, like Burroughs, Alfred Chester, and Brion Gysin; and still others remained simply indifferent, like Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, and two of the so-called "Burroughs Bureau", Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Capote, for instance, wrote that it was "alarming, the number of travellers who have landed there on a brief holiday, then settled down and let the years roll by… Tangier is a basin that holds you…" (Quoted in Vaidon, 1997: 285).

One reason that attracted this motley throng of visitors and investors is undoubtedly Tangier's convenient proximity to Europe. After all, perhaps those who came to flirt with "the earth's sharp edge" (to use Bowles's phrase)[1], or to dream "at the end of the world" were, in a sense, cheating a little, as if they could never dare to venture too far (as Arthur Rimbaud and Michel Vieuchange tried to do in their own separate ways). So even in the "heart of darkness" Tangier remains some kind of exotica close at hand while Europe, only a short boat-ride away, remains the eternal "sheltering sky".

For the self-proclaimed prophets of the Beat Generation, however, Tangier is the Wicked City where anything goes, the place that guarantees plentiful supplies of kif, maajoun, books, beaches, bars, and boys. It is also the right place because it has lost its soul along with its 'body' (Ben Jelloun refers to the city in *Harrouda* as a "prostitute"). Paul Bowles, let it be recalled, first came to Tangier in 1931 at the instigation of Gertrude Stein, the guru of another "Lost Generation" in Paris. This is what Bowles says about the new cult he himself helped initiate:

[1] "The earth's sharp edge" is Bowles's name for the North African desert, used as the title as well as the setting for the second part in his *The Sheltering Sky* (1949).

> The new "lost generation" which America turned loose on the world after the recent war is so thoroughly lost that the generation which came before it seems undeserving of the epithet, (…) This new generation of nihilist mystics living on Veterans' Administration checks, Fulbright fellowships, gifts from casual acquaintances, and occasional scraps from home. And it is of particular interest to us here because invariably they arrive in Tangier, which I suppose is the perfect place for them. Here they can get on their various kicks publicly and no one will object in the least (…) for the equivalent of six cents they can buy enough maajoun in the calle Gzennaia to transport them to an all-night nirvana (Bowles, 1951: 654-5).

Tangier is "the perfect place" not only for its plentiful supplies of narcotics but also for its market of human flesh. As Edward Field, a former insider associated with this so-called lost generation, notes in a piece written after a visit to Tangier: "For most of [the rich expatriates] the Moroccans were merely picturesque background, servants, and/or purchasable sex partners (…) Paul [Bowles] himself has picked up the upper-class manner, dry and reserved, of a retired British colonial" (Field, 1993: 96). The point here is too evident to ignore: the unholy alliance between erotic desire and imperial adventure. Edward Said has stressed the point more forcefully in *Orientalism* and Goystisolo has also contributed in spelling out some of the connections between colonial domination and sexual exploitation:

> When English or French writers turn to the Near east or the Maghreb in search of liberating experiences, they do it somewhat like the vanguard or shadow of colonial armies representing imperial powers that have converted the Afro-Asiatic countries, as Said opportunely recalls, in the brothel and dépotoir of the poor, unemployed, delinquents and adventurers of the metropolis. The Oriental world then materializes the dream of sex, free and –to say it once and for all– cheap… Sensual revelation, whether that of a Flaubert or a Gide, objectively implies a relation of force, dominator–dominated in which the European not only possesses or enjoys the alien body but analyses and interprets it, speaks for and assumes its voice: a class relationship inasmuch as it is a racial relationship (Goytisolo, 1984: 117).

In the orientalist discourse, these erotic and exploitative overtones soon dissolve in celebrations of the exotic, the primeval, and the irrational, as well as the charms of an earthly paradise. Here is a testimony by Alfred Chester, in which the visitor/expatriate is described as helpless prey –a central theme in Bowles's own fiction:

> Not even Greece has this wild drunken sky and this sunlight falling like diamonds… Here these colours hypnotize. They stun you, catch you, hold you, refuse to let you go…
> (…) You sail into uncharted hills and deserts. There are no maps, no guidebooks, no how-to-do-it manuals for newlyweds. You can't even be sure the world isn't, after all, flat that you aren't sailing at the edges.
> The hills of Spain are there like civilized laughter across the narrow water; two ferries a day, or six, or ten –who can remember anymore? Spain is on the other, the inaccessible side of Styx. There is a terminal feeling here for the Nazarene: it feels like destiny… Friends, lovers, all of them are agents of another power. Only you are in the dark. They are all surgeons and Morocco is the table over which your helpless soul is spread (Chester, 1965: 55).

From the perspective of those who, like Bowles, wish to view Tangier as their private colony, as an "Oriental city of the mind", the plight of the place started when it lost its unique status with Morocco's independence in 1956. In *Tangiers: A Different Way* (1977), Lawdom Vaidon devotes a large section of his book to what he calls "A Painful Transition". In his characteristically anecdotal style Vaidon gives a sense of the seismic blow that affected the lives of almost everyone, "Tanjawis" and "Tangerinos" alike:

A Mrs. O. M. Fisher, who had lived in Tangier until she was 18, made a sentimental return journey at 78. She was almost tearful about the differences that 60 years and a Tanjawi [i.e., Moroccan] regime had made. She found the vulgar apartment buildings hideous replacements for the lovely villas and gardens that once abounded, and the Soco Grande, now paved and marketless, had lost even the slightest hint of romance… It remained for an anonymous poet in the Gazette to express the majority of old-timers' opinions when he paraphrased Kipling's "Requiem":

> Under a clear and cloudless sky, lies poor Tangier, high and dry.
> Gaily she lived, now watch her die, the city they vowed to kill.
> This is a curse as it ought to be. Dead is her commerce, once so free, gone the exporter, gone from the sea, and the money
> Gone from till (Vaidon, 1997: 327-8).

The fallacy inherent in such one-sided proclamations is that they conceal some kind of a "nostalgia for empire". They hark to the happy old days against the backdrop of the shantytowns of Beni Makada: the Tangier of excess, like that, for instance, of Barbara Hutton, the Woolworth-heiress who (literally) crowned herself queen at Sidi Hosni, or the extravagant birthday parties of Forbes and, on the other hand, the Tangier of Riffian- and Arab-Moslem; the

Tangier of Mohamed Choukri, whose poignant autobiography captures the crude realities of deprivation of a whole race and class, evident in its very title *Le Pain nu* –translated into French by Ben Jelloun, and into English by Bowles, under the appropriate title *For Bread Alone* (Choukri, 1980).

Choukri's novel is not about the "dream" but rather about the end of the dream –the reflection of a condition of utter hunger and nakedness in the most degrading forms imaginable. For this reason alone, Choukri's narrative is not only the foundational text of a new *écriture* in Moroccan letters (since it uses Arabic, the language of the *Qur'an*, to dwell upon the abject and the obscene), but also a politico-historical document which lays bare the contradictions and disparities that have existed and still exist between two disparate worlds, disparate in terms of language, class, religion, culture and property, and yet present within the boundaries of the same city. In an article that appeared in *The New Yorker* in April 1959 entitled "Anything Goes", Tangier is characterized as "one big roulette wheel", where "prosperity grows in direct ratio to the agonies and restrictions of the outside world" (Vaidon, 1997: 285).

Thus, the paradise sought by the wealthy and the Beats alike has a dark side to it that no one can hide. It is in the unbridgeable gulf that separates "tanjawis" from "tangerinos", or the poor natives from all the rest, though both groups occupy the same space –an irony which invests Tangier with the symbolic value that it shares with the rest of the country, in terms of their common history with colonial rule and economic exploitation. Perhaps it is worthwhile to quote again from Chester's 1965 piece, which is quite revealing in its juxtaposed descriptions of "this sunlight falling like diamonds" and the medina where "one worries about the plumbing and rheumatism" –which are, incidentally, the principal sources of anguish for the "sick man" in Ben Jelloun's account of Tangier in the 1990s in *A Silent Day in Tangier* (Ben Jelloun, 1991):

> The Casbah is very cute, of course, especially where the Nazarenes have bought and rebuilt the Arab houses, turning them into a miracle of confectioners sugar and milk fat: whipped cream on the outside, frozen custard on the inside (…) Downhill from the Casbah is Barbarahuttonville, some twenty or thirty houses turned into a low rambling ranchstyle palace…
> There is in Tangier a hill with a great many villas and mansions on it. It is called the Mountain by the Nazarenes, and the Big Mountain, Jbil Kbir, by the Moslems […] Most of the other great houses do not belong to natives. Lots of rich Nazarenes, some of whom have been here for decades (Chester, 1965: 55-6).

From the prism of the natives the mountain becomes the Big Mountain because they look at it from down below, crushed by its domineering shadow.

But in this natural barrier, so to speak, we can see a cultural frontier, the great divide in terms of class, religion, race and power. Within the same space of this Janus-faced city there are other bigger mountains between the City of Dreams and the City of For Bread Alone. The stark disparities between these two faces might lead one to speak of some kind of "urban apartheid", to use Janet Abu-Lughod's term, which she chose as a title for her study of Rabat, Morocco's capital (Abu-Lughod, 1980).

The image of *Jbel Kbir* (Big Mountain) is also useful in the sense that it deflates all the myths about "the sunlight falling like diamonds" and the peculiar colours that have attracted a motley assortment of artists, from Delacroix to Matisse, to the colony of light and odalisques. In *Harrouda*, in a section on Tangier that bears the title "Tanger-la-Trahison", Ben Jelloun quotes the following excerpt from a well-known letter by Eugène Delacroix, written in Tangier on February 29, 1832:

> Si vous avez quelques mois à perdre quelque jour, venez en barbarie, vous y verrez le naturel qui est toujours déguisé dans nos contrées, vous y sentirez de plus la précieuse et rare influence du soleil qui donne à toute chose une vie pénétrante… Ces gens-ci ne possèdent qu'une couverture dans laquelle ils marchent, dorment et sont enterrés, et ils ont l'air […] satisfaits (Ben Jelloun, 1973: 136-7).

It is quite startling that Delacroix seems to be blind to the ironies implicit in his statement about the simplicity of these people, and also in the ways in which he turns their dispossession into a virtue, as well as an aesthetic ideal. Ben Jelloun, by contrast, is acutely sensitive to these and similar ironies, as the following response makes all too clear:

> (Il n'y a) ni beauté spirituelle de la simplicité ni beauté objective et concrète de la simplicité ni la simplicité elle même mais derrière et plus loin (Antonin Artaud) la trahison qui sera toujours là n'est pas toujours visible (Ben Jelloun, 1973: 137).

In this context it is perhaps accidental but remarkably appropriate, to find an echo of the same angry protest of the same orientalist clichés in the poetry of a contemporary poet from Sri Lanka, Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, who uses as his illustrative painter none other than Matisse, whose revolutionary discovery of "pure" colours is often ascribed to the two visits he made to Tangier at the turn of the century:

> Don't talk to me about Matisse…
> The European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio
> Where the nude woman reclines forever
> On a sheet of blood
> Talk to me instead of the culture generally
> How the murderers were sustained by the beauty robbed of savages.
> ("Don't talk to me about Matisse", quoted in Ondaatje, 1984: 85-6).

The big divide, symbolized by the Big Mountain, is not only economic or historical, but also cultural. And the cultural divide is certainly the worst of all imperial hegemonies because it lingers on in the attitudes and psyche of certain people, even when the conditions of colonialism are removed or no longer visible. Paul Bowles is a living example of this incurable orientalism which insists on keeping the races, languages and cultures that live on the opposite sides of the Mountain eternally locked in their "natural" attributes (that is, depending on where you happen to be, either civilized or barbarian, superior or inferior, rational or anarchic, and so on). Even the fact of being exposed to the "alien" culture for a sufficiently long period of time, as in the case of Bowles, is no guarantee of eradicating those hard-to-die clichés and stereotypes[2].

The Big Mountain, however, can be as real as a perfectly cultural artefact. For, as the examples of writers like 'Saint' Genet, Juan Goytisolo, and Tony Ardizzone[3] instruct us, the gulf between races and cultures can be narrowed or partially eliminated. But the fact remains that the generation of expatriates who are most often associated with Tangier has sought refuge in this particular place because they took it for the promised land where they could shed their sicknesses. Thus, Tangier seems to promise, like the North African desert, a protective sky from its own dangers, as well as from the arid landscapes that these expatriates have discovered, with varying degrees of abhorrence, inside the frontiers of their souls.

In *The Sheltering Sky*, for instance, it is not simply a patch of desert land that serves as the setting for Bowles's *angst*, but the whole Sahara is reduced to an alien territory where the author's petty concerns are staged out as cosmic dramas. Reflecting on Bernardo Bertolucci's film version of Bowles's novel, Jody McAuliffe notes how "the omnipresent image of the red desert butted against a blue sky translates quite directly into the relationship between Kit and Port" (McAuliffe, 1992: 421). What concerns us here is not the way the land-

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[2] This is true not only of *The Sheltering Sky*, but of Bowles' work in general, and of *Let it Come Down* and *The Delicate Prey* in particular.

[3] For Jean Genet, see, in particular, *The Screens* and *Un Captif Amoureux*; for Juan Goytisolo, see *Juan sin tierra* and *Makbara*; as to Tony Ardizzone, see *Laarbi's Ox*.

scape is made to reflect the semiotics of our quarrels with ourselves and with others, (for this is a theme common to all cultures), but the orientalist tendency to eliminate, with a stroke of the pen, the presence of that whole landscape, no matter how real or vast it may be.

In the same manner, the people who populate these landscapes are also relegated to the status of stage props. As in the American movie *Casablanca*, the natives, when they are granted a chance to be visible, are ghost-shadows who add a touch of exoticism to this American drama, or, even worse, play the secondary roles of waiter, maid, prostitute, driver or porter. And when these natives become visible, as Gareth Stanton writes in his brilliant essay "The Oriental City" (1988: 33), they wear the fluffy robes of homogenizing Orientalism. The celebration of the environment (colour, light, shade) leads to a gradual effacement of the misery of the "swarming humanity" Orwell noted in his essay on Marrakech[4].

This 'swarming humanity", which lives on the other side of the Big Mountain, will remain for Bowles a shapeless mass and thus a source of enigmatic danger, a "heart of darkness" –to invoke Conrad's image in which the idea of evil is buried in the folds of blackness. Possible parallels between Conrad and Bowles are not just skin-deep but can be perceived in their representation of the various "swarming humanities" in terms of a parasitic sight. To take one example from *Lord Jim*, the pilgrims on the "Patna" are depicted not as individuals but rather as a nameless and tangled mass, a shipment of excess:

> They streamed aboard over three gangways… They streamed in with a continuous tramp and shuffle of bare feet, without a word, a murmur, or a look back; and when clear of confining rails, spread on all sides over the deck, forward and forward and aft, overflowed down the yawning hatchways, filled the inner recesses of the ship –like water filling a cistern, like water flowing into crevices and crannies, like water rising silently, even with the rim (Conrad, 1920: 14).

In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bowles treats the Arab travellers on the train to Boussif in almost the same way; some of the syntactic and lexical choices are strikingly similar to those employed in Conrad's novel:

> As [Kit] entered the car, her first impression was that she was not on the train at all. It was merely an oblong area, crowded to bursting with men in dun-coloured burnouses, squatting, sleeping, reclining, standing, and moving about

[4] George Orwell (1961: 24) writes in "Marrakech": "When you walk through a town like this (…) it is always difficult to believe that you are walking among human beings. All colonial empires are in reality founded upon that fact. The people all have brown faces: besides there are so many of them!".

> through a welter of amorphous bundles. She stood still an instant taking in the sight; for the first time she felt she was in a strange land (Bowles, 1949: 80).

Note how the natives are meant to be identified and even confused with their luggage, so that everything and everyone becomes part of an opaque "welter of amorphous bundles". In short, the natives can be visualized only as a group (perhaps of intruders), a fact that must account for the feeling of threat they induce in a terror-stricken prey like Kit.

The terror, however, is not in the desert but in the onlooker. As Abdullah Laroui, perhaps the first to openly denounce Bowles's folkloric writings about Morocco, says in *Contemporary Arab ideology*:

> (…) quand Bowles essaye de décrire l'incroyable, l'absolu silence du désert saharien, il oublie que ce silence n'existe que pour l'ancien habitant de New York ou de Londres: sinon le désert n'est ni silencieux, ni bruyant par nature (Laroui, 1973: 176).

From a different perspective we may need to remind Bowles that the same desert did inspire feelings of mystical awe in so many writers, from Isabelle Eberhardt to G. M. Le Clézio and from Albert Memmi to Mouloud Mammeri, not to mention Edmond Jabès, the poet of the desert *par excellence*. For Ben Jelloun, the other priest of nomad writing, the blue line of the desert horizon that scared Bowles so much stands not for a frontier between safety and loss, between Us and Them, but rather for a shimmering sheen of friendliness which invites the traveller to pierce it and go beyond it. As one of Ben Jelloun's memorable characters says in *The Sand Child*:

> Je ne cesse d'avancer sur les sables d'un désert où je ne vois pas d'issue, ou l'horizon est à la rigueur une ligne bleue toujours mobile, et je rêve de traverser cette ligne bleue pour marcher dans une steppe sans but (Ben Jelloun, 1985: 88).

Bowles remains, however, a prisoner of his deeply ingrained conceptions of the unbridgeable gaps between a New Yorker and a Mediterranean, a Westerner and an Oriental, a "civilized" aesthete and a "pre-modern" native. And even when he attempts, awkwardly, to narrow the gap, by translating some oral tales into English, he dons the robe of the Orientalist investigator and exporter of exoticism. So the best he can come up with is to turn his story-tellers (Charhadi, Mrabet, among others) into "writers" like himself, thus performing some kind of *mission civilisatrice* by way of "narrativizing" and "technologizing" the oral primitive world.

The other thing that belies Bowles' project is the implication that he alone is the giver of speech, the missionary of a civilization that is so much obsessed with its own image; Bowles thus affirms Marx's dictum that if "they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented". Such a civilizing mission, to which Ben Jelloun gives the name of *Technique de viol* (Ben Jelloun, 1972: 21), is objectionable on at least two grounds: the first is the way in which the western obsession with representation is imposed on a culture that might not share the same attitude toward representation, and the second is the implication that the native is incapable of representing himself/herself.

If we take Bowles at his word, he is the least reliable authority on this part of the world that "sheltered" him for so long but received from him nothing but contempt. In a 1975 interview he himself declared: "I've never yearned to be a member of another ethnic group" (Halpern, 1975: 164). And yet he attempted, through "translations", studies, documentaries, not to mention his own fiction, to introduce this "alien" culture to readers in New York or San Francisco. So we can sense some contradiction here: on the one hand Bowles admits that he has no wish to cross the cultural frontier that keeps the two sides of the mountain apart, in order to meet or at least get closer to the object of his observations; on the other hand he allows himself to issue the most sweeping generalizations imaginable, not only about the "swarming humanity" that lives on the other side of the Big Mountain, but about a whole country, or an entire culture. In fiction as well as in interviews, he tirelessly produces reams of Orientalist clichés about a billion Muslims, a millennium and a half of their history. And the uncompromising Bowles maintains his views, views that seem to be kept in a tightly closed shell that no mighty force, even the passage of time, will crack open.

In conclusion, I shall quote a passage from an interview with Harvey Breit, which appeared in *The New York Times* March 9, 1952 (quoted in Field, 1993), a passage which contains remarks that are couched in the same rhetoric of unyielding orientalism that one still can find in Bowles's most recent pronouncements:

> I don't think we are likely to get to know the Moslems very well, and I suspect that if we should we'd find them less sympathetic than we do at present. And I believe the same applies to their getting to know us. At the moment they admire us for our technique; I don't think they could find more than that compatible. Their culture is essentially barbarous, their mentality that of a purely predatory people. It seems to me that their political aspirations, while emotionally understandable, are absurd, and any realization of them will have a disastrous effect on the rest of the world.

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