The Twain Met: Paul Bowles's Western and Arab Critics

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Despite the fact that the critique of Orientalism has had a major impact within Middle Eastern and Islamic studies and within other areas of Western and American intellectual life, I would argue that traditional Orientalist representations of the Arab and Islamic maintain a striking virulence. Many of these representations remain deeply marked by imperialist and racist legacies, and many scholars are currently recouping and rehabilitating them even when they seem to be challenging such legacies.

I would like to illustrate these observations through a consideration of the work of the American author Paul Bowles, and of the treatment his work has received by American and Arab critics. Bowles is America's most prominent expatriate author, and is also the only American whose fiction and nonfiction have dealt largely with Morocco and North Africa. It is natural to assume that Bowles's work and its treatment can provide special insight into the fate and fortune of the critique of Orientalism, especially in the present context of a Bowles revival that is becoming a veritable flood. My remarks are divided into two sections: an overview of Bowles's Orientalism, including a discussion of the treatment he has received by American and Western critics; and an analysis of the attitude of a new generation of Arab critics.

Bowles's Orientalism and Western and American Critics

Bowles reflects many of the standard features that have characterized the representation of the Arab/Muslim since the nineteenth century. This is especially apparent in the interviews, nonfiction essays, and travel pieces, but also in the short stories and novels that have appeared for nearly fifty years, from the 1940s into the 1990s. In 1952, for example, Bowles told Harry Breit in an interview in the *New York Times*:

I don't think we're likely to get to know the Moslems very well, and I suspect that if we should we would 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.¹

Bowles's boldest and most negative statement appears in 1955 in a Holiday Magazine essay entitled "The Incredible Arab," which was later published as "Mustapha and His Friends" in the first edition of a collection of travel pieces entitled Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue. "Mustapha and His Friends" is a collective portrait of a group of typical lower middle class or working class Moroccan Muslims, but it is also clear that Bowles believes that their most salient traits are one with all their coreligionists and compatriots. It is obvious that Bowles finds Mustapha and his friends repulsive in many ways. Mustapha "does not believe in the same good or evil as we do" and he cares little for "continence" and "honesty" or the social virtues of "democracy" and "civic responsibility." Adroit at combining "force and ruse," he tries "to get the better of others" in friendship, love, marriage and family relationships. Possessing "constant suspicion" and "openly expressed hostility to everyone," he is nevertheless "relatively unrepressed" inasmuch as he sees no particular virtue in self-control. More affected by emotional factors than Westerners, there is a great latitude in his possible reactions to a set of circumstances. Actions do not entail results, each action "is separate," having "been determined at the beginning of time when the inexorable design of destiny was laid out." Mustapha has "unlimited patience and faith, not in Allah's mercy but in his might." One might think him illogical but "logic is the last thing to look for in Mustapha's behavior." Living in Mustapha's world sometimes gives the fleeting impression that "one is living among children playing at being grown ups." At the "very heart" of Mustapha's civilization, "conditioning every aspect of it," is the attitude towards women, who are looked upon as "wild beasts" who "must be kept caged."2

When we turn to the novels and short stories we find these and other Orientalist elements expressed through the explicit statements of various protagonists, or by an authorial voice, or through plot, description or the portrayal of character. One of the most frequent themes is the destruction of a character's consciousness through traumatic experiences. In many of Bowles's stories those undergoing this transformation are Westerners travelling or living in North Africa. In The Sheltering Sky, Bowles's best known novel, Port and Kit Moresby, a New York intellectual and his wife, take off with a friend across the Sahara. In an alien desert environment under an immense sky, they discover a terrible separateness from each other and from the reality to which they are accustomed. After Port's death by typhoid Kit flees into the desert where she is raped by a young bedouin and his older companion. She becomes the young bedouin's wife in a secret ceremony and is sexually enslaved in his harem. She originally enters this harem disguised as a man but when the other wives discover her true identity they try to poison her. She is ultimately driven away by the wives and makes her escape. After this escape Europeans bring her back to Oran but by then she has descended into a kind of madness.3

Many American and other Western critics have traditionally responded in three ways to the Orientalist elements of Bowles's fiction and to the fact that much of it is set in Morocco. One response is simply to accept Bowles's depiction of Moroccan life as an objective reality that he accurately portrays. In a 1989 review of books by and about Bowles, Robert Craft speaks matter-of-factly of *Points in Time*, a sadomasochistic series of vignettes stretched across the entire history of Morocco, as revealing how barbarous much of Moroccan history must have been and still is. Craft mentions, without a touch of humor or puzzlement, what he calls an incident of Ramadan violence in which a merchant in a market place stabs another, as if this were a common feature of Ramadan, part of the piety of the month as such.⁴

A second reaction is to understand Bowles's depiction of Western and Arab/Muslim interactions as anti-imperialist parables. In A World Outside: The Fiction of Paul Bowles, Richard Patteson recognizes that Bowles's fiction is heir to the imperialist romance that chronicles the adventures of European explorers who travel into uncharted territory and establish their good influence among dark-skinned natives. But Patteson argues that Bowles inverts the cozy colonial formulas inasmuch as his heroes do not go home and cannot domesticate the alien.⁵ And Wayne Pounds, sounding a similar theme, sees Bowles as seeking to destroy the Western bourgeois imperial ego.⁶

A third response is to play down Bowles's depiction of Arab/Muslim mentality and culture and to transmit his work into a parable of the vulnerability of the human condition facing cosmic indifference. Thus, Tennessee Williams' review of *The Sheltering Sky* in 1949 speaks of the novel as an allegory of man and his Sahara.⁷ And, in a review of Bowles's *Collected Stories* in 1973, Joyce Carol Oates speaks of Bowles as revealing "a natural world predating and excluding consciousness." To Oates, whether Bowles writes of Morocco or elsewhere, his landscape is always sublunar. Manhattan, when he writes of Manhattan, is not our Manhattan.⁸

In contrast to Patteson and many other critics, I would argue that Bowles's choice of Morocco and the Arab/Islamic is not incidental, and that the theme of the destruction of the Western bourgeois ego is neither revolutionary nor anti-imperialist.

First, in respect to my contention that Bowles's choice of Morocco and the Arab/ Islamic is not incidental: It is not simply that emotionalism, violence and deviant sexuality, which Bowles associates with the Arab/Islamic, play an important role in his work. The fact is that Bowles's understanding of the Arab/Islamic lends itself to the depiction of a breakdown of coherence that is one of the principal aspirations of his art. This is true because Bowles seems to believe that a lack of coherence is of the essence of Arab/Islamic civilization. In *The Spider's House*, Stenham, who is in many ways Bowles himself, tells his American girlfriend, in an echo of Bowles's description of Mustapha and his friends, "You must always remember that it is a culture of 'and then' rather than of 'because' like ours. What I mean is that in their minds one thing doesn't come from another thing. Nothing is the result of anything... Even the language they speak is constructed around that. Each fact is separate and one never depends on the other."⁹ As H. C. Ricks has noted, in an Arab/Muslim culture of such inherent incoherence, surrealism, of which Bowles was fond as a young man, is no longer needed.¹⁰

Bowles and his critics other than Hicks have, to be sure, had some insight into the way in which Morocco has provided an objective correlative to Bowles's vision of the disorientation or destruction of the Western ego. It is here relevant to note that Bowles's personal and sexual relationships with a number of working class and illiterate Moroccans provided him with the opportunity to create personal dramas that served as real life if timid counterparts to the psychodramas of his fiction. Bowles could flirt with, and even experience, various forms of self-abnegation, betrayal, incoherence, and alienation, while enjoying the ultimate security provided by his foreignness, wealth and prestige, and the ultimate innocence provided by his conviction that his unhappiness could be blamed on essential divisions between the East and West.

What Bowles and his critics have neglected or not understood is the link between Bowles's understanding of the Arab/Islamic and the history of Orientalism, and of the way in which Bowles's confinement to the friendship and culture of the Arab poor and illiterate has reinforced his Orientalist assumptions. Belief in an Arab/Islamic atomism, incapable of thinking in causal terms, returns us to nineteenth century Orientalists such as Ernest Renan, who noted the linguistic, intellectual, mythological, and symbolical incapacities not only of the Arabs but of all Semites.¹¹ And, surely, it is among the poor and illiterate that one is more likely to find, or imagine that one has found, such traits as voracious greed (especially if one is a rich, prestigious American), or the emphasis upon the immediate and tangible, or the belief in patience and fatalism, that can then be posited as inherently Arab and Islamic.

Second, in respect to my contention that the destruction of the Western bourgeois ego is neither revolutionary nor anti-imperialist: If we speak of a political unconscious we can see Bowles's fantasies of the destruction of Westerners as a reflection of the anxiety and titillation generated by the return of the repressed in the shape of the non-European colonial and neo-colonial who threatens to destroy Western capitalist domination. In fact, elements of Bowles's psychodrama regularly reappear in bourgeois ideological constructions of the low and other, whether we are speaking of representations of the working classes, or of the slums and domestic servants of the nineteenth century, or of the carnival festivities of popular culture.¹² As Stallybrass and White have pointed out in their The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, the Western ruling classes have been marked by a "mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity." The "low/other" is despised and denied at the level of political organization, while it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoire of the dominant culture,¹³ To be sure, Bowles and other representatives of the Western bourgeoisie have perpetually rediscovered the grotesque, the carnivalesque, and the primitive as radical sources of transcendence. But, as Stallybrass and White also note, the projection of bourgeois desire and fantasy, including the fantasy of the selfdestruction of the bourgeois ego, is not synonymous with the critique or destruction of class or neo-imperialist domination. It is easy to confuse the projection of bourgeois desire with the destruction of its class identity. Only a challenge to the sites of discourse controlled by dominant groups and classes promises the hope of real political change.¹⁴ The most cursory reading of Bowles's work, including the eminently political novel *The Spider's House*, in which the Moroccan nationalist party the *Istiqlal* is mocked for its allegedly senseless violence and alienation from its own people, shows that Bowles has contempt for group movements that have achieved, or sought to achieve, emancipatory transcendence.

I want to conclude this section by speaking of the persistence and rehabilitation of the Orientalist discourse that Bowles's popularity reflects. To be sure, some persistently admiring critics show little or no knowledge of the challenge posed by the critique of Orientalism. However, there are two strategies that are often informed by an awareness of this critique that appear to be gaining ground as Bowles's popularity increases.

The first strategy emphasizes the high esteem that Bowles has expressed for Arab/ Islamic culture, an esteem which allegedly sets him apart from writers of an Orientalist cast. In the recent *Paul Bowles: Romantic Savage* (1994), for example, Gena Dagel Caponi quotes a passage from "Mustapha and His Friends" as an example of Bowles's belief that "the secret of the indigenous person, the treasure possessed 'without knowing,' is to enjoy the act of existing,"¹⁵ and that this is achieved through the indigenous person's lack of self-awareness. And Gerald Nicosia, in a review of several works about Bowles in the *Book World of the Washington Post* (1990), has written, "Bowles' distinction was to write of Moslem society, and the bleak landscape it inhabited, without any of the usual pretentious condescension; quite the contrary, he wrote of this 'vast, luminous, silent country' and its stoic people with deep appreciation and admiration, and found in their ability to survive the hardships and cruelties of this place, 'something that is absolute'—a fortitude both physical and spiritual, against which the Western world repeatedly came up short."¹⁶

The second strategy, and this is closely linked to post-modernist perspectives, emphasizes the ambiguous, contradictory and self-interrogatory nature of Bowles's work, but also the idea that Bowles has made, for all the skepticism as to whether the other can be known, one of the most profound efforts to represent the inner and outer realities of an alien world. Thus John Maier, in the recently published *Desert Songs:* Western Images of Morocco and Moroccan Images of the West (1992), celebrates the surrender of a "single right reading" in favor of "readings that construct a critical community," and he explains the revival of interest in Jane and Paul Bowles, looked upon as "eccentric in the 1940's and 1950's,"¹⁷ as having a particular resonance for such criticism: "Without recourse to literary theorizing that is so important today Jane and Paul Bowles subverted the domesticated novel... By calling into question the concept of self that had developed in the West—the concept that allowed for the domestication of the

novel after the pain [of separation from the oral], Paul Bowles's works explored alternative concepts...If he does not actually accept the notion of a negotiated, contextualized self [an allegedly Moroccan sense of the self which Maier contrasts with that of the "Western," autonomous individual], Paul Bowles certainly plays with the teller/audience/literary convention/hero/word in a way that depends upon his empathic leap to an understanding of the cultural other."¹⁸

Maier may believe that there are no right readings but he nevertheless cannot abandon the idea that Bowles has been more right than others and that he has tried harder.

Paul Bowles and Jane Bowles — and the Moroccans they described and let speak — are hardly innocent witnesses, but their fascination with the East is a quantum leap beyond the stereotypes that fill not only James Bond and Indiana Jones stories set in exotic locations, but quite serious fiction as well.¹⁹

I would like to respond to these two critical strategies, and to ask why they seem to be gaining ground.

First, in respect to the high esteem Bowles has allegedly shown toward Arab/Islamic culture: Bowles has certainly made explicitly positive generalizations about Arab/ Islamic culture in interviews and essays, and has, in his fiction, presented what he often takes to be key features of this culture in a favorable way. However, if we recognize that Orientalism does not merely define the essence of the Arab/Islamic in explicitly negative terms, then we can see why Bowles's positive understandings of the Arab/Islamic can also be regarded as Orientalist. When Bowles has made generalizations in positive terms he has invariably spoken of an essential Arab/Islamic religiosity that allows the Arab/Muslim to endure life's hardships through fatalism and mysticism. Or, to a lesser degree, as we have seen in the works to which Caponi and Nicosia make reference, Bowles has spoken in terms of stoicism or of a lack of self-awareness that allows for enjoyment. The response given by Bowles to interviewers in 1985 when asked if Moroccan culture has anything to teach the West is typical: "Oh, a great deal, of course. Oh, yes, patience for one thing, and acceptance of life as it comes, which I think is important. They never say that I am going to do this next week, next month, next year, because they are never sure that they are going to be alive. They are always ready to die."20

If Orientalism involves the positing of ontological difference between West and East, then one might point out that such a positive idealization of Arab/Islamic fatalism works to define Arabs and Muslims as being outside the human world of the speaking Western subject just as effectively as the denigration of the same trait.²¹ Moreover, the validation of a mysticism or fatalism taken to be inherently Arab/Islamic cannot be achieved without appropriating, even if only implicitly, logic, reason and activism to the culture of the West. What is implicit can, of course, easily become explicit, as is revealed by the fact that Bowles has represented Arab-Islamic fatalism in negative terms, as is quite clear from the example of "Mustapha and His Friends" to which I have already referred.

Second, in respect to the emphasis that is placed on the ambiguous, contradictory, and self-interrogatory nature of Bowles's work: Bowles's work is certainly heterogeneous, and it has expressed contradictory and ambiguous views. This does not mean, however, that the Orientalism of much of his work is necessarily undermined by selfinterrogation or by the airing of tensions and contradictions that would not be found in popular genres. If Orientalism is often more layered in Bowles, I would argue that it is often still dominant, and that it is able to recuperate itself even when it appears to be challenged. It is often able to do so because of the strong presence of an Orientalist atmosphere and Orientalist tropes (the harems, the sinister labyrinthine streets, the mutilating, marauding bedouin, the desert wilderness that drives the white man mad, the de rigueur sexual encounters, the savage Arab dances), and, more generally, and more importantly, because of the assumption of ontological difference between West and East that provides an important textual unity. A critique of Orientalism does not, of course, deny that any differences exist, but it rejects the tendency to draw upon select fragments of cultures and to transform these into an inhering, constitutive essence, apart from the interplay of multiple realities.

What can be said of Bowles's assumption of radical difference can be extended to the assumptions of many of his critics. The John Maier of whom I have already spoken believes (following Ihab Hassan) that the Westerner's "quest," in contrast to the self-satisfaction of non-Westerners, is "the motive of the Westerner's history and its deep wound,"²² that Moroccans (following Geertz) "are defined by contexts" but that Westerners are defined as "isolates,"²³ and that Bowles's greatest achievement lies "in portraying non-literate villagers who are less burdened with the sort of 'depth' that is celebrated in the characters of modern fiction, a psychological complexity that derives from the Judeo-Christian confidence in the individual soul."²⁴

What is extraordinary about these assumptions is that they are adopted so readily and uncritically in a work that purports to value multiple readings and multiple voices and that is keen to let the other speak for him or herself, including, presumably, the Third World other who has played so large a role in developing the critique of Orientalism. For all of Maier's references to Said, he often writes as if he had never read him or any of the other critics who have sought to render problematic, if not simply to destroy, the notions (of Judeo-Christian depth in contrast to Arab/Islamic depthlessness, etc.) that are here taken for granted.

What explanation can be offered for the emergence of these new strategies, apart from the fact that critics naturally wish to defend an author they admire? The idea that the primitive can provide a key to sexual or other forms of liberation, or that it can provide the warmth and security of community, or that it can teach us to be satisfied with a life of material austerity, has had a long history in the romanticism of the Western bourgeoisie. But one can argue that a number of elements of Bowles's Orientalism, and especially his assault on the ego and coherence, are particularly appealing to what Peter Gran calls contemporary intellectuals of a neo-anarchist frame of mind who evince concern for "primitive peoples" endangered by states, and for a new approach to knowledge independent of the old rationality. In Clifford Geertz's work on Morocco, Gran notes, external reality existed. In Paul Raboniow's work on Morocco, mental subjectivity or mind is the bedrock of reality.²⁵

This neo-anarchist primitivism cannot be fully understood apart from the influences of various strands of post-modernism. Certain tendencies within post-modernism have sung the praises of the playful, the hybrid, the nomadic, the migratory, the contingent, and of the multiple, diffuse, decentered self. As Terry Eagleton has recently noted, these features of post-modernism are, at one and the same time, a reflection of the (temporary) success of late capitalism, and of the political displacement and defeat that can be associated with this "success." The subject as producer — coherent, disciplined, selfdetermining — has yielded to the subject as consumer-mobile, ephemeral and constituted by insatiable desire. Moreover, in a world in which many progressive, centralized, mass, and creative political movements have collapsed, is it not natural, Eagleton asks, to make a virtue of necessity and to demonize the mass, the dominant and the consensual?²⁶

Bowles's Orientalism and Arab Critics

Eagleton's observations have remarkable resonance when I think of how a number of contemporary Arab critics have abandoned the Arab hostility towards Bowles of the past to climb upon the Bowles bandwagon. American critics and biographers of Bowles have scarcely touched upon Arab attitudes, and when they have, they have tended to reproduce Bowles's own understanding of traditional Arab negativity. "A fiction writer is looked upon askance, as telling a bunch of lies," Sawyer-Lauçanno, one of the most recent and lengthy biographers, quotes Bowles as saying, and he leaves it at that.²⁷

In fact, Arab critics developed a sophisticated critique of Orientalism, including Bowles's Orientalism, long before the critique of Orientalism gained currency in the West. In *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine* (1972), Abdallah Laroui places Bowles within the context of a revived "folklore" generated within a world imperial system.

According to Laroui, Moroccan bourgeois culture reanimates and enriches the significance of folklore as a product of its confrontation with the West, and as a result each art takes on a folkloric level. "All folklore entails a center and a periphery," he writes. "Paul Bowles makes a Moroccan [Muhammad Mr'abet whose tales Bowles translates from Moroccan dialect] speak for long hours into a tape recorder and believes that he is capturing a most authentic way of life that a Moroccan lives but what he is capturing is nothing but his own fantasy. The empty time, the zero degree of existence that he imagines he detects in his subject are in reality his own. At the same time that he attempts to describe the incredible, the absolute silence of the desert [in *Their Heads Are Green*], he forgets that this silence only exists for the old inhabitant of New York or London: the desert is neither silent nor noisy by nature. In fact, neither the Moroccan nor the inhabitants of the desert would be able to recognize themselves in this false image, since the two are reduced to their folkloric level, i.e. to their position in respect to a center that they do not know. Bowles never leaves, and will never leave, his bourgeois culture which alone gives value and sense to this old humanity that he strives to save from oblivion."²⁸

It would be wrong to speak as if the generally uniform Arab hostility or neglect of Bowles in the past has given way to uniform adultation in the present. Abdelkébir Khatibi recently shrugged his shoulders contemptuously when asked his view of Bowles;²⁹ Tahar Ben Jelloun, negative in the 70s, remains dismissive in the 90s, and attributes European and American interest to a long-lived thirst for the exotic;³⁰ and Mohamed Choukri, still a close friend and thankful for the profound services Bowles has rendered his career,³¹ can nevertheless laugh and say that Bowles likes Morocco but dislikes Moroccans.³² Such gestural and oral judgments by prominent writers have their parallel in critical writings that remain loyal to the perspectives of the past.³³ Nevertheless, the emergence of a body of Arab criticism favorable to Bowles marks a sharp break with the past, and one that is revelatory of a profound intellectual shift. What is the substance of that shift and what are its causes?

If one looks at a number of recent Arab essays celebratory of Bowles, including a significant cluster published quite recently in an American anthology,³⁴ one is struck by the extent to which traditional and more recent American and Western responses, deflecting the critique of Orientalism, and including post modernist strategies, are reproduced.

According to these Arab critics, Bowles's picture of Morocco and Tangier is "realistic and characterized by exactitude;"³⁵ Bowles's "judgments about Moroccans," either in fiction, travel narratives or autobiography, are all characterized by a "linguistic first hand experience, above and beyond whatever he may have visually observed or internalized through readings;"³⁶ the reader "is never in doubt about the authenticity of the interpretation"³⁷ and the critic feels "awe in respect to the degree of [Bowles's] precision and the authentic grasp of foreign settings."³⁸

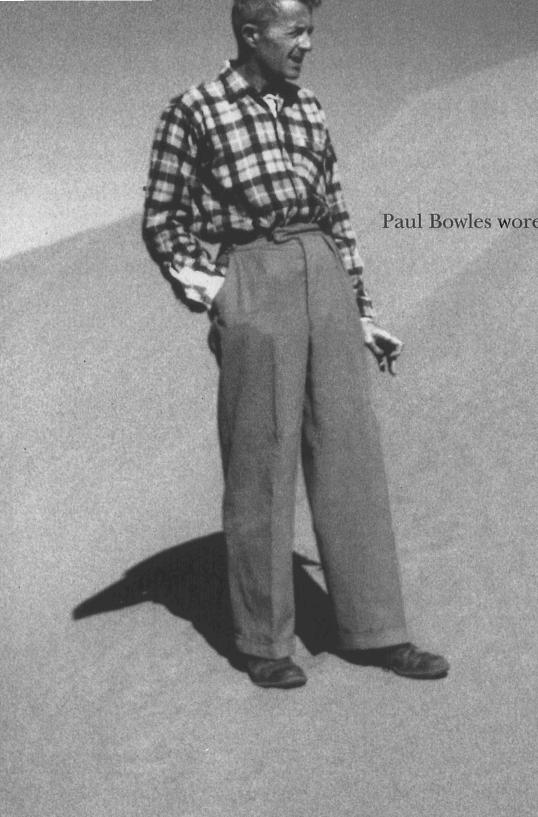
In all of this, the radical and essential difference between Arab/Moroccan and Western societies is taken for granted. Bowles is "able to convey the conceptual frames of reference of societies with which the reader would not normally be brought into meaningful or truly intimate contact;"³⁹ Bowles is representative of "a contrastive literature," in which "the protagonists themselves, while perhaps sharing the same destinies, or simply made to participate in the same events, belong to remarkably unrelated societies."⁴⁰

Nevertheless, Bowles's assumption of the existence of radical difference does not serve as a pretext for a civilizing, imperial mission. Bowles "loathes the colonizer for having drained the place of its happiness;"⁴¹ Let It Come Down is an ironic opposition to colonial narration, "resting on three traditional colonial plots – smuggling, spying, and sex, which Bowles converts into a parody, invalidating the myth right at its very base, and transforming the three plots into small farces."⁴² Bowles is "anti-conformist" and "anti-colonialist" before the letter, as is made clear by his frictions with the French colonial administration for having kept close to the indigenous peoples;⁴³ Bowles is "a radical expatriot" who "has refused to reconcile with his past and Motherland."⁴⁴

And yet, and sometimes for the self-same critic, Bowles the chronicler of radical difference, and the narrator of anti-colonial parables, is also the Bowles of universal existential angst, understood as the product of the rootlessness of every modern man and every modern city, or of the human condition in and of itself. In *Let It Come Down*, the narrative "is governed by the impossibility of the realization of any meaningful project, and Dyar [the American adventurer] discovers the vacuousness of the cosmopolitan life in the city, which rests basically on money that one must get quickly and through any means whatsoever."⁴⁵ Tangier is an international zone, the creation of colonialism, but Bowles "is correct to compare it to, and describe it as, another New York City."⁴⁶ The Dyar of *Let It Come Down*, who discovers the vacuousness of the modern cosmopolitan materialistic city, is also the Dyar who experiences a vacuousness that transcends the urban—he enters the "labyrinth from which there is no exit, the labyrinth of the night that is the soul, interminably dark."⁴⁷

That such views appear to have been elaborated in response to an unnamed or scarcely named interlocutor poised to argue the Orientalist charge à la Laroui is nowhere more evident than in these Arab critics' fulsome celebration of Bowles's alleged love for Tangier and Morocco.48 Bowles has "never been able to escape" from his "love" of Tangier, a love than leaves "one thunderstruck."49 "A guest of Allah,"50 a "neighbor,"⁵¹ a "refined and discreet humanist,"⁵² he has a "passion" for, and "unfailing curiosity" about, the Tangerines and the Moroccans, but being this "man of discretion" he does not say it.53 His works "give evidence of obvious affection, particularly for traditional Maghribi society and its social components;"54 His picture of Tangier, taken "from the storehouses of his memory and his warm, daily interactions in the city," is presented in sympathetic fashion.55 The "all knowing eve witness" of Bowles's fiction "draws and preserves a destiny" for "each and everyone of his characters," but "without forgetting the duty of imparting his compassion to them."⁵⁶ Bowles's involvement has not been a "routine journey" in a "cultural museum" but an "engaged assent," a "commitment,"57 and a defense of ancestral culture against the savage attack of colonialism and the post-colonial Moroccan state.58

For these Arab critics, Bowles's capacity to give life to multiple mentalities and realities, a capacity celebrated again and again in terms of the interplay of reflecting



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Paul Bowles wore khakis.



mirrors, lies at the heart of his greatness and accounts for his ability to portray the Moroccan and, more particularly, the "primitive," subaltern Moroccan (the word "primitive" is actually used, and not in a negative sense, by Ibrahim al-Khatib, albeit initially in quotation marks), whose "consciousness" is assumed scarcely to exist in a European sense.⁵⁹ The "discourse of Bowles on Tangier is protean and complex." Place of "choice and residence," Tangier is also "space." Bowles regards and observes Tangier from within. "His [vision] is not, then, that of a tourist/traveller/voyeur who wishes to safeguard a congealed folklorism in the Orientalist typography. It is a mirror-look in which man reveals and involves himself." One has "to know Bowles well to understand that he has given voice to the ones without voice."⁶⁰ The Tangier of shattered hopes and of the abandoned "by those who keep score," the Tangier of the small petty hooligans and petty drug dealers — "nobody has been better than Bowles in knowing how to describe it in its force and veracity." Bowles "brings it beyond the ethnocentrism characteristic of the writers of his generation ... so that it includes indigenous voices."⁶¹

These critics recognize the negativities in Bowles's portrayal of the Moroccans, or depictions in which Moroccans will not recognize themselves, but tend to suggest that these proceed from the honesty of a friend who does not patronize or retreat from the unpleasant,⁶² or from a love for the authentic that mocks those seeking to be Westernized,⁶³ or from the necessary distortions of an imaginative literature that produces contradictory, and perhaps distorting, reflections, including that of the author reflected. As is true of the traveller Calvino in *Invisible Cities*, "We quickly leave off certitudes: What, under this thick encrustation of signs, is the city in truth? What does it contain or hide? The man leaves Samarra without knowing."⁶⁴

If emphasis upon inevitable subjectivity can be invoked as a defense, or as a plea for the suspension or impossibility of judgment, this does not stop these Arab critics, anymore than it does the John Maier to whom I have already referred, from awarding Bowles the highest praise for trying to bridge the gap between two worlds. "The contact with the Other has been easier where there has been lack of 'logo' and 'ethnocentrism'... This may well be the fleece that one travels so far to acquire; the hand that Bowles reaches out with to bring the people together."⁶⁵ Paul Bowles is "an extremely precious medium. How fortunate we Moroccans are that he is a gift to us resulting from the chain of coincidences that led his footsteps to our society more than fifty years ago. In a way, he is a 'heaven-sent' chronicler of one important span in the life of Moroccan society."⁶⁶ He "is, for many reasons, the conscience of his generation and his epoch. He shall remain the megaphone, the translator of those without voice, one of the rare intellectuals to demystify the civilizing mission of the West."⁶⁷

These contemporary Arab views are, as I have said, far removed from those predominating in the past, and they can be sustained, to put it crudely, only on the basis of ignorance, evasion and misreading. How is one to reconcile the Bowles who has "obvious affection for Moroccan life" with the Bowles who spoke, in 1952, of this culture as "essentially barbarous," and of the mentality of the Moroccan people as "purely predatory."68 Or the Bowles who has a "passion for the Tangerines and Moroccans" with the Bowles who wrote, in 1961, that "they are far less sympathetic than they used to be, but you [Charles-Henri Ford] mustn't quote me because we would like to go on living here if possible, simply because it's too much trouble to pull up stakes and move."⁶⁹ Or the Bowles whose picture of Tangier is taken from the "warm, daily interactions in the city" with the Bowles who asserted, in 1981, that Moroccans had a quality of "inpenetrability," that "they haven't evolved in the same way, so far, as we have," and that he "wasn't surprised to find that there were whole sections missing in their 'psyche,"70 and with the Bowles who observed, ten years later, in 1991, that he always anticipated "betrayal" from Moroccans, that he didn't expect them to think of him as a person, and that he found it easier to have "the most cynical approach to them," thinking that "all their interest is for whatever they can get in the way of objects, of money from anybody."71 Or the Bowles who has "unfailing curiosity about Morocco" with the Bowles who noted, again in 1991, that he had "neither the time or desire to learn" literary Arabic, and who believed, in any case, "that there's nothing to read" in it.⁷² Or the Bowles who is not a "voyeur seeking to safeguard a congealed folklorism" with the Bowles who wrote, in 1961, that his only interest in Morocco had been in the "exotic," the loss of which makes Moroccans "no more amusing than anyone living in Jersey City or Brooklyn,"73 and who told me, in 1993, that "he had studied nothing" in Morocco except to "look at people," that he had not come to Morocco "to learn about the place or the culture," that he had "loved music, processions, celebrations, the picturesque," but that he had "not approached the culture in a serious manner," and that when the picturesque had lost its capacity to engage, he "wasn't to learn the culture," and that what he did learn was "very superficial."74 Or the "anti-imperialist before the letter" Bowles, with the Bowles who, in 1952, spoke of Muslim political aspirations as being "absurd," and "any realization of them as having a disastrous effect on the rest of the world,"75 and with the Bowles who, in 1993, expressed, again in an interview with the author, his fear of Islamic politics because of the Muslims' inherent desire for world domination through the "sword and bomb."76

Although these telling statements are drawn from interviews and letters, the assumptions expressed in much fiction and non-fiction, including published essays and travel pieces, parallel and reinforce one another. Again, how is one to reconcile the Bowles who turns traditional colonial plots into "farces" with the Bowles of *The Sheltering Sky* whose primary Western characters are robbed, raped and die horrible deaths in a merciless desert, and in which only a Jew displays sympathy to the hapless American heroine Kit Moresby, reminding her of "how cruelly lacking in that sentiment was the landscape here, and of how acutely she had been missing it without realizing she was missing it."⁷⁷

Even if one were to accept the notion that this and other tales challenge the Westerner's capacity to impose civilization, it is difficult to regard them as challenging the idea of a fundamental gap between the "civilized" and "uncivilized." And, even here, in the realm of fiction, the anti-colonial meaning of what are taken to be inversions of colonial formulas should not be taken for granted, and not simply because, as I have pointed out, fantasies of the destruction of the Western bourgeois ego do not challenge structures of inequality. A novel such as *The Spider's House*, which "deplores the attitudes of both French and Moroccans,"⁷⁸ the French for wishing to hold on to Morocco by force, and the Moroccan elite for resorting to force to free Morocco, and for seeking to make its country more European through coercion and manipulation, can be read as contributing to the evolution of a more particular neo-colonialist discourse that corresponds to the United States' emergence as the new hegemonic power of the Middle East and North Africa at the very moment, the mid 50s, of the novel's appearance.

The concern expressed in the travel collection *Their Heads Are Green*, written a few years later, for the people of "an alien culture" ravaged by "the irrational longing on the part of members of their own educated minority to cease being themselves and become Westerners,"⁷⁹ is intimately linked, can be regarded as a code for, Bowles's striking animosity to the radical Arab nationalism that threatened this very American hegemony and the pleasant Tangerine life to which it was linked.⁸⁰ When push comes to shove, when forced to speak more forthrightly in clearly political terms, Bowles "the romantic savage," allegedly fleeing from the depredations of modern civilization, becomes "an enlightened travelling salesman,"⁸¹ urging caution and restraint, and the "natural" evolution of societies, upon a Third World whose post-colonial regimes wrongly seek to bring rapid progress by "campaigns" and "decrees."⁸²

There is, however, little to be gained from rehashing or further elaborating upon the critique of an Orientalism, or of the acceptance of an Orientalism, that does not differ greatly in its Western or Arab garb. The fact remains that some contemporary Arab critics, in contrast to those of the past, now recognize themselves in the "Bowlesian mirror." How is this to be explained?

I return once more to the post-modernist strands to which I referred above. As I have already pointed out, the features of post-modernism, its emphasis upon difference, hybridity, heterogeneity, and restless mobility, and its tendencies to demonize the mass, the dominant, and the consensual, can be linked not only to the bourgeois imagination of late capitalism, in which the coherent, disciplined and self-determining subject as producer has yielded to the mobile, ephemeral, insatiable self as consumer, but also to the collapse of many progressive, centralized, mass, and creative political movements.

One of the most compelling elucidations of what this post-modernism has meant for the thought of Third World critics has been provided by Aijaz Ahmad. As the stagnation of the national bourgeois state has become more obvious, he points out, and as transnational projects such as that of Arab nationalism have collapsed, many Third World critics have taken refuge in a post-structuralism that debunks all "collective historical agents."⁸³

Such critics' thought is marked by three elements — an emphasis upon hybridity, ambivalence and contingency, the collapse of the nation state as a horizon of politics, and the celebration of a globalized, post-modern electronic culture.⁸⁴ For many of them, the true post-colonial critics will be those who believe that colonialism has ended, but who also subscribe to the idea that Marxism, nationalism and revolutionary possibilities are also finished.⁸⁵

One of the principal vehicles in the ascendancy of this Third World post-structuralism has been the large community of metropolitan academics from various ex-colonial countries, whose bourgeois origin, professional ambition, and lack of prior political grounding in a stable socialist praxis, has predisposed them towards a mode of politics and discourse already authorized by the prevailing fashions in the metropolitan universities.⁸⁶ They have pressed for diversity, multiculturalism, and the construction of a counter-canonicity, or they have retreated into their own private deconstructed realities.⁸⁷ Indeed, many of these intellectuals believe that their intellectual "migrancy" represents a universal utopian condition of hybridity in which belonging nowhere, without class, gender or nation, will be tantamount to belonging everywhere.⁸⁸

It would be difficult to find a better example of the transformation that Ahmad analyzes than the rehabilitation of Bowles that seems to be developing among Arab critics today. "Nationalistic cultural politics are out, difference and pluralism are in," writes Abdel-Jaouad (a Tunisian professor of French literature at Skidmore, and one of the celebrants of Bowles upon whom I have drawn), and "North Africa has emerged," in the context of "a post modern era," and of "a global village," as "a new horizon of dynamic, cultural, racial, and religious interplay."⁸⁹ For Abdel-Jaouad, the embodiment of "cultural syncretism and cosmopolitan idealism" within such a context is the Moroccan Tahar Ben Jelloun, whose *The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night* epitomize the increasing popularity and success of North African literature written in French.⁹⁰ It is clear that Abdel-Jaouad, whom I have quoted as praising Bowles for "his complex discourse on Tangier," and for his being one of the "first and rare intellectuals to demystify the West's civilizing mission," would regard the American as Ben Jelloun's cosmopolitan Western counterpart.

What a scholar such as Abdel-Jaouad does not consider is the extent to which such interpretations are determined by the condition of their production, the class location of their agents, and the ideological function that they serve.⁹¹ To speak as he does Abdel-Jaouad must bypass the criticism of Arabs or others who believe that both the work of Bowles and Ben Jelloun satisfy, and/or that they have been written to measure for, a Western audience that has need of the bizarre and outré in a specifically Orientalist garb.⁹²

Of course, and apart from the specificities of the cases of Bowles and Ben Jelloun, Abdel-Jaouad and others can speak of the global village in which confrontation has no place only by concentrating on the interplay of an increasingly consolidated international bourgeoisie, and by disregarding the great gaps of power and wealth that continue to exist within and between the nations of the globe. In the so-called Gulf War, which could have been prevented if the United States had not decided to destroy Iraq's military and economic infrastructure, the allied coalition had about 350 military casualties and Iraq between 70,000 and 150,000.⁹³ The OECD North, including, to be sure, Japan, still accounts for 85% of world production and trade and that proportion is increasing. For the last twenty years, the world economy, East Asia apart, has been in near stagnation. Since basic commodity prices have fallen greatly, many countries in the South have experienced absolute economic decline. The contrast between Southern reality and the aspirations of all ideologies of development could hardly be starker.⁹⁴ Twenty million men, women and children are dying every year of hunger and curable diseases. Some wealthy nations have an eighty year life expectancy while others have hardly forty.⁹⁵

There is nothing hybrid, ambiguous or playful about these facts. They can be explained, to a significant degree, by binary concepts that distinguish between the imperial and the imperialized. To pretend that imperialism never existed, or that it has ceased to exist, or that little can be done about it, or to reinterpret the literature that has been profoundly marked by this imperialism as progressive and anti-imperialist, cannot pass the test of reality. The same can be said of the effort to understand inequality of power in terms of the essential and eternally inhering and mutually exclusive worldliness and other-worldliness of one side or the other. Above all, we must understand that even when we appear to be coming down on the side of other-worldliness and the deconstruction of "Western rationality" (as Bowles does when he asks if the almost certain victory over the bubonic plague in India is worth its price in the extinction of beliefs and rituals that give life meaning),⁹⁶ we may be contributing to an ideological project that promotes the domination, self-complacency, and good conscience of the healthy and full-bellied.

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Notes

1 Gena Dagel Caponi (ed.), Conversations with Paul Bowles (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 4.

2 Quotes and paraphrases are taken from Paul Bowles, "Mustapha and His Friends," *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue* (London: John Lehmann, Ltd., 1963), 82–94.
3 Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*, 3rd ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1990).

4 Robert Craft, "Pipe Dreams," *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 23, 1989, 6-12.

5 Richard Patterson, A World Outside: The Fiction of Paul Bowles (Austin: University of Texas Press,), 54-83.

6 See Wayne Pounds, "Paul Bowles and Edgar Allan Poe: The Disintegration of the Personality," *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 32., nos. 3–4, Fall/Winter, 1986, pp. 424–439, and "The Subject of Paul Bowles, *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 32, nos. 3–4, Fall/Winter, 1986, 301–313.

7 Tennessee Williams, "An Allegory of Man and His Sahara," *New York Times Book Review*, Dec. 4, 1949.

8 Joyce Carol Oates, "Collected Stories of Paul Bowles," *New York Times Book Review*, September 30, 1979.

9 Paul Bowles, *The Spiders House*, 3rd ed. (Santa Rosa: Black Sun Press, 1991), 187.

10 H.C. Ricks, "Another Country," Chicago Review, vol. 31, no. 15, 1980, 85.

11 Ernst Renan, Histoire genérale et système composée des langues sémitiques, Paris, 1855, cited in Martin Bernal, Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, vol. 1, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 345–346.

12 See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 5–6.
13 Ibid., 5–6.

14 Ibid., 201.

15 Gena Dagel Caponi, *Paul Bowles: Romantic Savage* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 177.

16 Gerald Nicosia, "Tangier's Sheltering Sky," Book World of the Washington Post, August 4, 1991.

17 John Maier, Desert Songs: Western Images of Morocco and Moroccan Images of the West (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 283–285.

18 Ibid., 283.

19 Ibid., 287.

20 Caponi, Conversation with Paul Bowles, 171-172.

21 For a brilliant exposition of how such idealization works to reify the other, see David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

22 Maier, op. cit., 271.

23 Ibid., 271-272.

24 Ibid., 153.

25 Peter Gran, "Studies of Anglo-American Political Economy: Democracy, Orientalism and the Left," in Hisham Sharabi (ed.), *Theory, Politics* and the Arab World: Critical Responses (New York: Routledge Press, 1990), 239.

26 Terry Eagleton, "Where Do Postmodernísts Come From?," *Monthly Review*, July/August, 1995, 59–70.

27 See Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno, An Invisible Spectator (New York, 1989), 416–417.
28 Ibid, 176.

29 Hedi Abdel-Jaouad, "Tangier dans l'imaginaire de Paul Bowles," in *Cahiers d'études maghrébines*, University of Cologne, Germany (forthcoming), 10. I thank Abdel-Jaouad for providing me with a copy of the manuscript.
30 Interview with Tahar Ben Jelloun, Tangier, August 23, 1993.

31 Bowles translated Choukri's first work, *For Bread Alone*, into English.

32 Interview with Mohamed Choukri, Tangier, August 11, 1993.

33 An unpublished paper, "Distorted Images of Islam: North Africa in Paul Bowles's Work," given by Professor Lahoucine Ouzgane at the conference, "English and Islam: Creative Encounters," December 20–22, 1996, at the International Islamic University Malaysia, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, provides a quite recent example.
34 R. Kevin Lacey and Francis Poole, editors, Mirrors on the Maghrib: Critical Reflections on Paul and Jane Bowles and Other American Writiers in Morocco (Delmar: Caravan Press,

1996).35 Abdelaziz Jadir, "The Image of Tangier in

Several of Paul Bowles's Works," translated from the Arabic by R. Kevin Lacey, in Lacey, op. cit., 39.

36 Abderrahim Youssi, "The Literary Text as a Looking Glass: Paul Bowles and Contrastive Literature in the Moroccan Curriculum," in Lacey, op. cit., 91.

37 Ibid., 91.

38 Youssi, "The Literary Text," 89.

39 Ibid., 80.

40 Ibid., 84.

41 Mohamed Dellal,"Tangier: An Exotic Haven or Achille's Heel?," Lacey, op. cit., 26.

42 Ibrahim al-Khatib,"Paul Bowles's Portrait of Tangier in his Novel Let It Come Down: (The Labyrinth or Night of the Soul)," in Lacey, op.cit.,
46.

43 Abdel-Jaouad, op. cit., 2.

44 Ibid., 5.

45 al-Khatib, op. cit., 48.

46 Jadir, op. cit., 34.

47 al-Khatib, op. cit., 49.

48 Ibrahim al-Khatib, for example, attributes the Arab reader's ignorance of Bowles to the attacks

of the Arab "cultural left" in the sixties but he does not grapple with these attacks directly. See Ibrahim al-Khatib, introduction to Bowles, Paul, *al-Bustan*, Casablanca, 1992, 80. *al-Bustan* is a collection of short stories by Bowles translated into Arabic and introduced by al-Khatib. As far as I know this is the first translation of Bowles into Arabic.

49 Jadir, op. cit., 32.

50 Found in the title of the article—"Paul Bowles ou l'invité d'Allah"—to which I herein make many references.

51 Youssi, "Paul Bowles ou l'invité d'Allah," 67.

52 Ibid., 67.

53 Ibid., 70.

54 Jadir, op. cit., 39.

55 Ibid., 39.

56 Youssi, "Paul Bowles ou l'invité d'Allah," 67.

57 al-Khatib, al-Bustan, 8.

58 Abdel-Jaouad, op. cit., 3.

59 See al-Khatib, al-Bustan, 8.

60 Abdel-Jaouad, op. cit., 9.

61 Ibid., 9.

62 See Youssi, "Paul Bowles ou l'invité d'Allah," 76 and al-Khatib, *al-Bustan*, 5. Youssi writes "In any case, would you better appreciate the companion who points out the splinter you have in your eye to the one who turns away from you without speaking of it?"

63 Jadir, op. cit., 39.

64 Abdel-Jaouad, op. cit., 13.

65 Dellal, op. cit., 27.

66 Youssi, "The Literary Text," 91.

67 Abdel-Jaouad, op. cit., 12.

68 Caponi, Conversations with Paul Bowles, 4.

69 Paul Bowles, In Touch: the Letters of Paul

Bowles, edited by Jeffrey Miller (New York:

Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1994, 317. A letter to

Charles-Henri Ford, February 7, 1961.

70 Caponi, Conversations with Paul Bowles, 130.

71 Quoted from Bischoff, op. cit., pp. 226-227.

72 Ibid., p. 214.

73 Paul Bowles, In Touch, 317. A letter to Charles-Henri Ford sent from Tangier on February 7, 1961.

74 Interview with the author, Tangier, August 12, 1993.

75 Caponi, Conversations with Paul Bowles, 4.

76 Interview with the author, Tangier, August 13, 1993.

77 Paul Bowles, The Sheltering Sky, p. 220.

78 The words are Bowles's from the introduction.
See Paul Bowles, *The Spider's House*, 5th printing (Santa Rosa: Black Sun Press, 1955), n.p. [preface]
79 Paul Bowles, *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue*, 3rd printing, (New York, 1987), VIII–IX.

80 Bowles's dislike of Egypt, expressed on a number of contexts, is linked, in part, to its radical nationalism: "Expect fireworks when Nasser arrives. The people are getting excited at the prospect. I wish they'd have their revolution and get it over with." In a letter to his mother, Rena Bowles, Tangier, December 29, 1960.

81 The term is used for another Orientalist, the Victorian Alexander William Kinglake, by Elio DiPiazza in his "Narrating the Arab in Kinglake's Travel-Diary," 7, an unpublished paper presented at the conference, "English and Islam: Creative Encounters," December 20–22, 1996, at the International Islamic University Malaysia, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. I thank Dr. DiPiazza for letting me quote from the manuscript.

82 Bowles, *Their Heads Are Green*, ix. Restraint and "good sense" were recommended for both former colonists and rebels. In 1956, Bowles writes that France in Algeria is "cutting off her nose to spite her face," that she would be able to retain her economic relations, her most important concern, if she maintained her friendship with the Algerian people. Instead, she is "driving not only Algeria but also Morocco and Tunisia straight into the Arab League, which is notoriously anti-Western." In a letter to his mother, Rena Bowles, Tangier, March 23, 1956.
83 Aijaz Ahmad, In Theory: Classes, Nations and Literatures, (London: Verso Press, 1992), 38.
84 Ahmad, Aijaz, "The Politics of Literary Post-Coloniality," Race and Class, vol. 36, January-March, 1995, no. 3, 10.
85 Ibid., 10.
86 Ahmad, In Theory, 86.
87 Ibid., 17.
88 Ibid., 113.
89 Hedi Abdel-Jaouad, "Sacriligious Discourse," Middle East Report, March-April, 1990, 34–35.

90 Ibid., 34.

91 See Ahmad, In Theory, 6.

92 Tahar Ben Jelloun might object to the claim, made by some Arab critics, that his work (such as The Sand Child, involving a father who insists on bringing up his daughter as a boy) has been fashioned, consciously or unconsciously, to meet Western Orientalist cravings. Nevertheless, he has himself complained to the author, in an interview in 1993, that The New Yorker refused to publish a story he had written on the Mafia in Italy, informing him that they wanted something on traditional Moroccan life, and thereby confirming his suspicion that the editors' interest in literature was secondary to their interest in exoticism. Interview with Tahar Ben Jelloun, Tangier, August 13, 1993. 93 See Finkelstein, Norman G. "Middle East Watch and The Gulf War," Z Magazine, September, 1992, 15-19.

94 See Manning, Michael, "As the Twentieth Century Ages," *New Left Review*, no. 214, November/December, 1995, 116–120.
95 Fidel Castro, Speech to the UN General

Assembly, October 22, 1995, reproduced in Covert Action Quarterly, Winter, 1995–1996, no. 55, 40.

96 Bowles, Their Heads Are Green, 58-59.