A Neoimperial Discourse on the Middle East

Ralph Coury

The critique of orientalism has had a major impact upon Middle Eastern and Islamic studies and in other areas of western and American intellectual life. However, despite this impact, there is no question that traditional orientalist representations of the Arab and Islamic maintain a striking virulence, that they remain deeply marked by imperialist and racist legacies, and that scholars often recoup and rehabilitate such perspectives even when they seem to be challenging them. 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 critics. It is, of course, customary for scholars to justify their work by stating that their topic has not received the attention that it deserves. However, if I say that Bowels's representation of the Arab/Muslim has been neglected strikingly, I am being honest as well as self-serving. 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 his 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 flux.

Bowles has reflected, variously and throughout his literary career, many of the standard features that have characterized the representation of the Arab/Muslim since the nineteenth century. This is apparent in his 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, he told Harvey Breit in an interview in the *New York Times*:

Ralph Coury is associated with Fairfield University, Fairfield, Connecticut. Some of this material will appear in an article entitled "Paul Bowles and Orientalism," to be published in *Mirrors on the Maghrib: Critical Reflections on Paul and Jane Bowles and Other American Writers in Morocco*, edited by R. Kevin Lacey and Francis Poole (Delmar, NY: Caravan Press, forthcoming).

> I don't think we are likely to get to know the Muslims 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 and I don't think they would find more than that compatible. Their culture is essentially barbarous, their mentality is that of a purely predatory people.[1]

Bowles's boldest and most negative statement appeared in 1955 in a *Holiday Magazine* essay entitled "The Incredible Arab," which was published later 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 what Bowles understands to be a group of typical Moroccan Muslims. It is clear that they are of working class or lower-middle-class origin but it is also clear that their most salient traits are taken to be fundamentally the same as all of 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. Such personal concepts as continence and honesty, such social virtues as the taste for the democratic way of life and a sense of civic responsibility, mean very little to him. In Mustapha's eyes, peace is that boring interlude between wars, and the best ruler is a benevolent despot. Although Mustapha's religion tells him that virtue is rewarded and evil is punished, he is a task master at juggling the two concepts in order to befuddle himself and ease his not-too-active conscience. He is interested primarily in the spoils and he must be the victor. He is adroit in combining force and ruse, and even in friendship, love, marriage, and family relationships he will, at one time or another, try in some way to get the better of others. He is always distrustful, constantly suspicious, and ultimately hostile to everyone.

Although such qualities at first might appear unworthy of a civilized people, they provide a healthy outlet to the emotions. Premeditated murder and sex maniacs are rare or unknown, and this is because Mustapha, not being well-versed in the art of self-control, not even, doubtless, able to see any particular virtue in it, is inclined to do what he feels like doing at any given moment and thus remains relatively unrepressed. Since Mustapha's behavior, at any given moment, is considerably more affected by the emotional factors involved than would be thought entirely normal among us, there is a good deal of latitude in the list of his possible reactions to a set of circumstances. He refuses to believe that action entails results. Each action is separate, everything having been determined at the beginning of time when the inexorable design of destiny was laid out. He has unlimited patience and faith, not in God's mercy but in His might. One might think him illogical, but logic is the last thing to look for in Mustapha's behavior. Sometimes, Bowles concludes at the end of one passage, one has the fleeting impression that living in Mustapha's world is like living among children

playing at being grown-ups. Bowles does not refrain from the traditional reference to Muslim misogyny. The very heart of Mustapha's civilization, conditioning every aspect of it, is the attitude toward women for whom he has very little of what we would call respect. Mustapha shares the widespread conviction that females are wild beasts and must be kept caged.[2]

When we turn to the novels and short stories we find these or other orientalist themes expressed through the explicit statements of various protagonists, by an authorial voice, or through plot, description, and the portrayal of character. A central theme is the transformation or the destruction of a character's consciousness through disorienting or traumatic experience. In most of Bowles's stories, those undergoing this transformation are westerners living or traveling in North Africa. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bowles's best-known novel, which Bernardo Bertolucci made into a movie in 1989, 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 from 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 enslaved sexually in the harem. She originally enters this harem disguised as a man, but when the other wives discover her true identity, they try to poison her. Ultimately, she is driven away by the wives and escapes. After this escape, Europeans bring her back to Oran, but by then she has descended into a kind of madness.[3]

Critics have tended to respond 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 portrays and illuminates accurately. In a 1989 review of several 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 marketplace stabs another, as if this were a common feature of Ramadan, part and parcel 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] A third response is to play down Bowles's depiction of Arab/Muslim mentality and culture and to transmute his work into a parable of the vulnerability of the human condition facing cosmic indifference. Thus, Tennessee Williams's review

of *The Sheltering Sky* in 1949 speaks of the novel as an allegory of the individual and his/her Sahara.[6]

In contrast to Patteson and many other critics, I do not believe that Bowles's concentration upon the Arab/Islamic is incidental or that his representations, either in his fiction or otherwise, should be taken simply and matter-of-factly as the reporting of a neutral observer. It is not simply that emotionalism, violence, and deviant sexuality, which he associates with the Arab/Islamic, play an important role in his work and particularly in his fiction. There is a more important and quite specific element in Bowles's understanding of the Arab/Islamic that lends itself to a central aspiration of his art. Bowles tells us that as a child he wrote to escape and combat the repressive world of which his father was representative.[7] One could argue that his fascination with surrealism as represented by his first writings in the journal *transition* was a way to deny the rules, a way in which to substitute simple sequence for predetermined causality. Although Bowles's work as an adult has been naturalistic and not surreal, an aspiration to escape and break down coherence and meaning has been at work. Again and again, we find moments in his fiction in which drugs, or madness, or the hallucinations of illness, or the trances of the Muslim mystical brotherhoods, become the occasion for the loss of rational consciousness, the collapse of the centered self, and the end of linguistic capacity. When Kit Moresby is rescued by Europeans from her sexual slavery, she refuses to open her eyes or speak and she cannot endure to hear French.

It is not, however, simply in extreme situations that meaning, coherence, and linguistic capacity collapse. Bowles seems to have believed, as I have already indicated through my reference to "Mustapha and His Friends," that a lack of coherence is inherent in Arab/Islamic civilization. In *The Spider's House*, Stenham, who is in many ways Bowles himself, tells his American girlfriend, as he teachers her about Morocco:

> You must always remember it's 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.[8]

As H. C. Ricks has noted, in an Arab/Muslim culture of such inherent incoherence, surrealism is no longer needed.[9]

To be sure, other critics have also made observations on the way in which Morocco has provided an objective correlative to Bowles's vision of the psychic. In addition to Ricks, one might also mention Jay MacInerny, Wayne Pounds, and Steven Olson.[10] What these critics neglect, however, or what they scarcely emphasize, is the link between Bowles's artistic vision and aspirations and the history of orientalism. Belief in an Arab/Islamic atomism, incapable of thinking in causal terms, returns us, of course, to nineteenth-century orientalists such as Ernest Renan who noted the lin-

guistic, intellectual, mythological, and symbolical incapacity of not only the Arabs but of all Semites.

There is, one should add, not a little ambiguity in Bowles's attraction to the emancipatory world of the breakdown of coherence, meaning, and logical sequence. In "Mustapha and His Friends," Bowles is hostile and contemptuous, but in much of the fiction the possibility of breakdown remains simultaneously frightening and fulfilling. It is a kind of death, but a death in which one passes beyond distinctions of being and nonbeing. If we speak of Bowles's personal psychology, one can argue that the plunge into the surreal world of death, madness, drugs, hallucinations, and violence, or, more generally, into the everyday culture of the Arab/Muslim, represents a kind of therapy, a sort of psychodrama in which Bowles's damaged or arrested ego can rebel and kill the father he hates. And yet, the fear of this father may result in his rage and hatred being unleashed against the source of his rebellion, that is, against the psychic id that is himself but which is represented by the other. The freedom from coherence that Bowles finds among the Arabs and Muslims represents a projection of his own desires, which he also fears deeply.

Bowles himself has provided insight into some of the personal psychological needs that have informed his life and art, including what has been called the desire to "feast with panthers" and to "always conjure up the bogeyman," that is, to enter into personal relationships in which he is predator and preyed upon.[11] In a letter to Charles Henri Ford, written from Tangier in 1947, he speaks fully and explicitly of some rationalizing strategies:

> But naturally, the fewer people there are in a place and the less that is happening, the less conscious I am of missing what is going on under my nose, which is why I like difficult places. In fact, if there is no one at all, I can say that the reason I am ill at ease is that the place is such that no one should live in it. Therefore, it can't be surprising that I should too be unable to stay there. In other words, it's a question of finding uncomfortable situations and putting up with them as long as possible before escaping. The desire for escape then can be called perfectly natural.[12]

He has also spoken of his work as a romantic fantasy providing for self-negation. His stories are emotional outbursts, a desire to bring about destruction, he told Daniel Halpern in 1975.[13]

What Bowles does not appear to have understood is the orientalist nature of the assumptions that have colored his construction of the Arab/Islamic and of how such orientalism has been reinforced by his self-imposed confinement to the friendship and culture of the Arab illiterate. For, surely, it is among the poor and illiterate that one is more likely to find, or at least believe that one has found, such traits as the emphasis upon the immediate and tangible, the uncritical adherence to religious faith, the

belief in patience and fatalism, that can then be posited as inherently Arab and Islamic.

If we speak in terms of a political unconscious, we can see Bowles's work as an articulation of the lonely incoherence of late capitalism. But, also, and at the same time, we can see it as a reflection of the anxiety generated by the return of the repressed in the shape of the non-European colonial and neocolonial who threatens to destroy western domination. In fact, elements of Bowles's psychodrama reappear regularly in ideological constructions of the low/other, apart from colonial and neocolonial representations. We find the same constitutive elements toward the working classes, the slums and domestic servants of the nineteenth century, the dispersal of waste products in the post-Renaissance city, the carnival festivities of popular culture, and symbolically base and abject animals like the pig and rat. As Stallybrass and White have pointed out in writing of these elements 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 and social being while it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared, imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture.[14]

Bowles's work has certainly not been revolutionary, in spite of Patteson's emphasis upon his writing as an inversion of the imperial romance and as a testimony to the alien's stubborn refusal to be domesticated. Although Bowles maintained begrudging support of Morocco's formal independence, he has had only horror for its future, or, for that matter, for the future of other postcolonial societies. He told Breit in 1952 that Muslim political aspirations are absurd and that if there were any realization of them they would have a disastrous effect on the rest of the world.[15] When I met him in the summer of 1993, forty years after the Breit interview, he reiterated this fear of Islamic politics because of the "Muslim's inherent desire for world domination" through the sword and bomb.[16] He has told several interviewers that Tangier, after the departure of the Europeans, has become a huge slum,[17] a phrase he has also used for Egypt, the quintessential developing Arab Muslim country whose modern culture and music he has delighted in mocking in his fiction and nonfiction.

To be sure, Bowles and other representatives of the western bourgeoisie have rediscovered perpetually the grotesque, the carnivalesque, and the primitive as radical sources of transcendence. Americans have only to think of the New York avant-garde in the 1920s discovering the wonders of African art and the pleasures of slumming in Harlem. But, as Stallybrass and White also note, the projection of bourgeois desire and fantasy, including the fantasy of the self-destruction of the bourgeois ego, is not synonymous with the critique or destruction of class or neoimperialist domination. It is easy to confuse the projection of bourgeois desire with the destruction of its class identity. Only a challenge to the sights of discourse controlled by dominant groups and classes promises the hope of real political

change.[18] The most superficial reading of Bowles's work, including *The Spider's House,* in which the Moroccan *istiqlāl* is condemned for its senseless violence and its alienation from its own people, shows that Bowles has no faith in group movements that will bring emancipatory transcendence.

I want to end briefly by talking about some critics who are now active in the Bowles revival. It seems to me that they have developed two strategies to deal with the kind of critique that I have made. The first strategy is to argue that a critique of Bowles's orientalism disregards the high esteem that he has expressed for Arab/Islamic culture.[19] And the second strategy, and this strategy is linked closely to postmodernist perspectives, is to argue that the critique of orientalism disregards the ambiguous, contradictory, and self-interrogatory nature of Bowles's work.

I would make two responses. First, in respect to the high esteem that Bowles has allegedly shown toward Arab/Islamic culture, I would begin by admitting that he has certainly made explicitly positive generalizations about this culture. However, I would go on to point out that orientalism does not necessarily define the essence of the Arab/Islamic other in explicitly negative terms. If we remember this fact, we can see why Bowles's explicitly positive observations about Arab/Islamic culture are still orientalist. This is true because when Bowles has made broad generalizations about Arabs and Muslims, either in interviews or other contexts, he has spoken invariably of an essential Arab/Islamic religiosity that provides for a marvelous kind of freedom through mysticism or through fatalism and resignation that allow the individual to bear life's hardships. 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]

I would point out that such a positive idealization, or what might be taken as a positive idealization, works to define Arabs and Muslims as being outside the human world of the western subject just as effectively as explicit denigration.

As regards the second strategy, that the critique of orientalism disregards the ambiguous, the contradictory, and the self-interrogatory nature of Bowles's work, I would admit that his work is heterogeneous but I would also argue that this does not mean that its orientalist nature is undermined. If orientalism is more layered in Bowles, it is still dominant and recuperates imperial perspectives even when it seems to challenge them. It is able to do so because of the strong presence of an orientalist atmosphere and orientalist tropes and, more particularly, because of a sense of ontological difference that provides, even when questioned, an important textual unity.

I see what some critics are doing in respect to Bowles as having its counterpart in the contemporary world of real politics and the way that real politics is interpreted. Postmodernists and deconstructionists, and those influenced by them, have sought to emphasize the playful, the hybrid, the nomadic, the migratory, the contingent, the self-questioning, the ambiguous and contradictory.[21] They have tended to challenge not only the essentialism and reification of which orientalism is an example, but also the very idea of grand narratives and identities, including the grand narratives of imperialism and the struggle for human liberation. It is true that the independence of the nation-state in the imperialized world is becoming greatly circumscribed by the global offenses of capital, that the imperial formations are marked by the increasing interpenetration of national capitals, and that this provides contradictory effects in the realm of culture and ideology. Nevertheless, at the apex of the world system, the nation-state is still strong, and particularly in the form of the United States, Japan, and Germany.[22] It is American power that contributes to maintain the profound inequalities engendered by imperialism. In the so-called Gulf War, which could have been prevented if the American government had not decided to destroy Iraq's military and economic infrastructure, the allied coalition had about 350 military casualties and Iraq had between 70,000 and 150,000.[23] There is nothing hybrid and ambiguous about this reality. It can be explained by binary concepts of the imperial and the imperialized, to which, I believe, we should remain loyal. Just as we should remain loyal to binary distinctions made between a literature profoundly marked by imperialism and a literature that does not fit that category.

Endnotes

1. Gena Dagel Caponi, ed., *Conversations with Paul Bowles* (Jackson, MS: 1993), 4.

2. Quotes and references are taken from Paul Bowles, "Mustapha and His Friends," *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue* (London: 1963), 82-94.

3. Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*, 3d ed (New York: 1990).

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

5. Richard Patteson, *A World Outside: The Fiction of Paul Bowles* (Austin, TX), 54-83.

6. Tennessee Williams, "An Allegory of Man and His Sahara," *New York Times Book Review* (4 December 1949).

7. Paul Bowles, *Without Stopping*, 2d ed. (New York: 1984), 1-47.

8. Paul Bowles, *The Spider's House*, 3d ed. (Santa Rosa, CA: 1991), 187.

9. H. C. Ricks, "Another Country," *Chicago Review* 31, no. 15 (1980): 85.

10. See Jay McInerny, "Paul Bowles in Exile," *Vanity Fair*, no. 48 (September 1985): 69-76; Wayne Pounds, "Let It Come Down and Inner Geography," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1982): 42-50; Wayne Pounds, "Paul Bowles and Edgar Allan Poe: The Disintegration of the Personality," *Twentieth Century Literature* 32, nos. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 1986):424-39; Wayne Pounds, "The Subject of Paul Bowles," *Twentieth Century Literature* 32, nos. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 1986): 301-13; Steven E. Olson, "Alien Terrain: Paul Bowles's Filial Landscapes," *Twentieth Century Literature* 32, nos. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 1986): 324-39.

11. Millicent Dillon's notes on an interview with Lawrence Stewart, 28 July 1977. The Millicent Dillon Collection, Box 2, file no. 5, The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin (henceforth referred to as HRHRC).

12. Paul Bowles to Charles Henri Ford in a letter from Tangier dated 19 November 1947, HRHRC.

13. Caponi, *Conversations*, 93-94.

14. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: 1993), 5-6.

15. Caponi, *Conversations*, 4.

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

17. Caponi, *Conversations*, 108.

18. Stallybrass and White, *Politics*, 201.

19. Gerald Nicosia, for example, has written recently: "Bowles's 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." See Gerald Nicosia, "Tangier's Sheltering Sky," *Book World of the Washington Post* (4 August 1991).

20. Caponi, *Conversations*, 171-72.

21. Hedi Abdel-Jaouad, a Tunisian critic who has celebrated 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," writes unabashedly of a "post-modern eraa" in which "nationalistic cultural politics are out, difference and pluralism are in," and in which the Maghrib "has emerged as a new horizon of dynamic cultural, racial and religious interplay." See Hedi Abdel-Jaouad, "Sacrilegious Discourse," *Middle East Report* (March/April 1990): 34-35, and "Tanger dans l'Imaginarie de Paul Bowles," an unpublished manuscript lent to the author.

22. For an excellent statement of this argument, see Aijaz Ahmad, "Politics, Literature and Post-Coloniality," *Race and Class*, no. 36 (January-March 1995): 1-20.

23. See Norman G. Finkelstein, "Middle East Watch and the Gulf War," *Z Magazine* (September 1992): 15-19.