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Paul Bowles

(1910-1999)

“Born in New York, after studying with Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson became a composer himself, writing scores for many ballets and motion pictures, as well as an opera, *The Wind Remains* (1943). His later career has been that of an author and his setting Morocco, where he has long been expatriated. His works include *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), *Let It Come Down* (1952), and *The Spider's House* (1955), novels about Occidentals in the Arab world, having as themes isolation, lovelessness, and the loss of tradition. He issued *Collected Stories* (1979), and *The Thicket of Spring* (1972) collects poems. *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue* (1963) chronicles his journeys through Hindu, Mohammedan, Buddhist, and Central American lands. *A Life Full of Holes* (1964) is a novel by an illiterate house servant in Morocco, tape recorded and translated from an Arabic dialect by Bowles. *Without Stopping* (1972) is his autobiography.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“There is a curiously double level to this novel. The surface is enthralling as narrative. It is impressive as writing.... In its interior aspect, *The Sheltering Sky* is an allegory of the spiritual adventure of the fully conscious person into modern experience.... Actually this superior motive does not intrude in explicit form upon the story, certainly not in any form that will need to distract you from the great pleasure of being told a first-rate story of adventure by a really first-rate writer.”

Tennessee Williams

New York Times (4 December 1949) 7, 38

“*The Sheltering Sky* is a remarkable job of writing, with a craftsmanship that makes it the most interesting first novel to come from a U.S. writer this year...[a] mixture of emotional nausea, intellectual despair and desert primitivism... Yet for so able a writer, Bowles fails to give his story much significance. Both Port and Kit are neurotic intellectual play children so short on real character and appeal that they seem hardly worth saving... Above all, *The Sheltering Sky* is drenched with a fine sense of place, and it sketches Arab towns and the Sahara itself with sharp sureness.”

Time (5 December 1949)

“It has been a number of years since a first novel by an American has contained as much literary persuasion and original interest as *The Sheltering Sky*.... It is also the first time to my knowledge that an American novelist has met the French Existentialists on their ground and held them to a draw.... His characters are profoundly contemporary, out of a world that has neither God nor ethics.... Unlike other records of the same moral dilemma, this is not history, nor argument, nor description of moral paralysis. The cataclysm has occurred; the land is waste yet there are mirages; the water holes beckon. This is a carefully devised piece of fiction of unfaltering interest about some of those ‘ridiculous’ mirages.”

Florence Codman

Commonweal (30 December 1949) 346

“Much of this almost Gothic violence arises from the clash of the civilized with the primitive, but more basically it stems from the fact that Mr. Bowles’s characters (both enlightened and native) are warped and morbid beings. They are all, if not mad, severely neurotic, hugging to themselves some quietly terrible frustration, some taint, some malevolent perverseness that finally can be no longer controlled and explodes with twisted fury.”

John J. Maloney

New York Herald Tribune (3 December 1950) 4

“Paul Bowles is a man and author of exceptional latitude but he has, like nearly all serious artists, a dominant theme. That theme is the fearful isolation of the individual being. He is as preoccupied with this isolation as the collectivist writers of ten years ago were concerned with group membership and purposes.... Bowles is apparently the only American writer whose work reflects the extreme spiritual dislocation (and a philosophical adjustment to it) of our immediate times. He has an ‘organic continuity’ with the present in a way that is commensurate with the great French trio of Camus, Genet, and Sartre.”

Tennessee Williams
Saturday Review (23 December 1950) 19

“Such novels as Saul Bellow’s *The Victim* (1947) and Paul Bowles’s *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) are extensions of Naturalism in that their authors provide a Naturalistic surface but offer in addition a complex order of inference and meaning.... Bellow’s novel is...superior also to *The Sheltering Sky*, whose value lies chiefly in its precise rendering of Sahara sand, sky, and heat. It is perhaps proper to say that such a world dwarfs its people, who adjust to it in various strange ways, and this statement is most successfully made by Bowles. The weakness of the novel is not that the dramatic problems created by the Sahara towns and cities are not real, but rather that the persons suffering from them lose definition and precision--their integrity as persons is lost. The strangeness and the extremes of natural terror do not contribute to their meaning but rather extinguish it. It is possible to draw an inference from all of this concerning the universal extinction of human significance, a peculiarly modern tragedy. But this is certainly going beyond Bowles’s intention--or at least beyond his achievement.”

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern Novel in America
(Regnery 1951-63) 207-08

“Paul Bowles takes his people to Africa in search of sensation and spiritual emptiness and finally sacrifices his theme to melodrama and violence.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 453

“Mr. Bowles is one of the very few writers to depict the part Arab, part colonial-cosmopolitan life of North Africa without any trace of romanticization. He has a remarkable gift for evoking its atmosphere with graphic authenticity; and, at the same time, he externalizes in that atmosphere the inner drama he is unfolding--the drama of the Hollow Man, the man things are done to.... The weakness of both Bowles’s novels is that a man as hollow as Nelson Dyar (and previously Port Moresby)--a man without purpose or will; a cipher--is not a hero whose fate can stir us deeply. If fiction is to have life it must see something more in life than a dreamlike drift from nullity to nothingness.”

Charles J. Rolo
Atlantic Monthly (March 1952) 84-5

“The metaphysical and imaginative dimensions of the pathological visions are impressive as created by Paul Bowles. They are quite unaccountable in the lay figure Dyar to whom they are attributed and who is totally uninteresting when he is not under narcosis. Yet it is clear that the action of the novel is intended to be taken as a philosophical and even spiritual quest for ‘reality’ on Dyar’s part. There is an uncomfortable suggestion that Dyar’s murderous hashish dreams are the only possible equivalents in our time for the Platonic delight in beauty, even for the beatific vision, and that a masochistic torture dance is the only equivalent for the redeeming sacrifice of love.... The evidence is insufficient, especially when we have only the blank eyes of a Dyar to see it through. What *Let It Come Down* does demonstrate is Paul Bowles’s talent for dealing with the macabre, the dreamlike, the cruel and the perverse in a genuinely imaginative way.”

Robert Gorham Davis
New York Times (2 March 1952) 1, 17

“Paul Bowles stages his impressive novels in a climate of violence and pervading sentient awareness. The atmosphere in which his characters move and have their being is arid and parched, nourished by no springs of feeling or sentiment, relentless and neutral as the shifting yet ineluctable sands always just

beyond the city.... The fruit of which Paul Bowles has eaten is, unfortunately, that which confers knowledge only of evil, not of good. But a writer with no awareness of this essential duality can never fully explore the country of horror into which he has ventured.”

Richard Hayes
Commonweal (7 March 1952) 547

“Once again, Mr. Bowles has written a frightening book. Only now there is an important difference. The shock is present, but is no longer a device. It is a conclusion justified by the hashish delirium that is the one possible resolution of Dyar’s existential pilgrimage into the unknown interior of himself. If Mr. Bowles takes the chance of losing the voyeurs in his audience by this new discipline, he asks of others that he be judged more specifically on his merits. These merits are considerable, but of a technical and exterior sort. Mr. Bowles, who is an accomplished composer, presents his characters contrapuntally. What each is doing at a particular moment is artfully disclosed. The theme of one is offered at first and then followed by his antiphonal response to another whose theme has already been given. But only sensibility joins them, and a terrible rootlessness.”

Leonard Amster
Saturday Review (15 March 1952) 21

“Mr. Bowles’s stories and novels are the work of an exposed nerve. The pain is felt before the experience. There is a perennial dryness and irony in American literature of which Bowles is the latest and most sophisticated exponent; it has the air of premature cynicism, prolongs the moment when civilization itself becomes entirely anxiety and disgust.... Bowles has been properly compared with D. H. Lawrence, for he has a marvelous eye for the foreign scene as it comes to the eye of the rich, rootless wanderer. He is also a brilliant collector of items of human isolation in its varying degrees of madness, and he is intellectually disapproving of both the isolated man and the man who has merely the apparent solidarity and gregariousness of the urban creature.... Where Bowles fails is that in reducing the Lawrence situations...to a kind of Existentialist dimension, he has made them merely chic. The moral passion has vanished; even passion has gone.”

V.S. Pritchett
New Statesman and Nation (12 July 1952) 44

“The world and the people created by Mr. Bowles are completely convincing. *The Spider’s House* is not a pleasant book, and its uncompromising portrayal of individual, group, and national wrongdoing will disturb the romantic or the squeamish reader. But this is the story of a mature writer who has freed himself from the excesses and eccentricities of his earlier fiction, who has something significant to say and who says it with authority, power, and frequently with beauty.”

William Peden
Saturday Review (5 November 1955) 18

“*The Spider’s House* is richer than *The Sheltering Sky*, full of compassion and perceptive both intellectually and intuitively. As writing, it is powerful and moving. As reporting, it goes far beyond what the correspondents see or write. Few Americans have understood the forces at conflict in Morocco as well as Paul Bowles has done...or conveyed the spirit of the Arab world with such delicate nuance.”

Ralph de Toledano
New York Herald Tribune (6 November 1955) 4

“His early interest was music and for a brief time he studied with Aaron Copland. He has written both orchestral and ballet music; his opera, *The Wind Remains*, for which Garcia Lorca wrote the libretto, was presented in 1943 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. At one time Gertrude Stein discouraged him from writing, but later she changed her mind about him. By this time he had already embarked on a literary career. His writing was allied to that of other spokesmen for an ever-renewing ‘lost generation.’ Much of his work is set in Morocco, where he lived for many years. Among his books: *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), *The Delicate Prey* (1950), *Let It Come Down* (1952), *The Spider’s House* (1955), *Yallah* (1956), *The Hours After Noon* (1959)... His wife, Jane Bowles, wrote a play, *The Summer House*, which was produced in New York City in 1954 and starred Judith Anderson.”

"*The Sheltering Sky*...was an impressive performance...followed by a collection of short stories...and two more novels... This is his complete production to date, yet it has been sufficient to place him in the very first rank of American prose artists: playwright Tennessee Williams even goes so far as to place him above Hemingway and Faulkner.... Bowles is an obsessionist, and his obsession may be simply stated: that psychological well-being is in inverse ratio to what is commonly known as progress, and that a highly evolved culture enjoys less peace of mind than one which is less highly evolved. This is of course a Romantic attitude, going back at least as far as Rousseau by way of...D. H. Lawrence, and E. M. Forster. Lawrence is probably Bowles's strongest single influence...

In nearly all of his work the tension arises from a contrast between alien cultures: in a typical Bowles story, a civilized individual comes in contact with an alien environment and is defeated by it.... It is important for the purpose that the language, beliefs, and psychology of his natives be as different as possible from those of his travelers, the victims of modern civilization. There is still another reason for Bowles's choice of remote locales. Deserts and jungles are places in which people can easily get lost, and Bowles believes that modern man, if not already lost in a spiritual and moral sense, is in serious danger of becoming so.... Eliot's 'Waste Land' has only a negative relation to Nature. Bowles's desert on the other hand, is neutral--malevolent only insofar as it is prepared to destroy those who are out of tune with nature itself, of which it is the real as well as the merely formal symbol. There is nearly always a symbolic level present in Bowles's work, and he has suffered considerable injustice at the hands of popular reviewers who have insisted upon reading him at a single level...

The action of Bowles's first novel *The Sheltering Sky*, is relatively simple. The protagonists, Port and Kit Moresby, are members of New York's intelligentsia, and they have come to North Africa accompanied by a friend, or rather a hanger-on, named Tunner, a young man whose intellectual endowments, while inferior to those of the Moresbys, are in some degree compensated for by his good looks: he is handsome, we are told, in a 'late Paramount way.' There is tension in Port's relationship with his wife, and it is partly in the hope of redefining this relationship that the two of them have come to Africa. They are out of tune with each other, the result, Port suspects, of being out of tune with their metropolitan environment, which never really satisfied either of them. In the Sahara, he feels, they have a chance of rediscovering their love, and themselves in the process.

Port and Kit have fallen out of love, but they have preserved their respect for each other. In rebellion against this state of affairs, Kit allows herself to be loved briefly by Tunner, for whom she has no respect, and Port has an occasional commercial contact with native women. At Ain Krorfa, a remote village in the Sahara, the Moresbys part with Tunner, who plans to rejoin them in a few days. They proceed deeper into the desert, where Port contracts typhoid and dies.

Kit joins a caravan of merchants whose two leaders rape her and share her as their mistress until they reach their destination, where the younger of the two installs her in his harem. She succeeds at last in escaping, but the strain has been too much for her and she breaks down mentally. In the meantime, at Tunner's instigation, a search for her has been organized. French authorities finally locate her and return her to Oran, where she is met by an official from whom she breaks away and disappears once more, into the Casbah. That, on a literal level, is all there is to the story, but this is not the level with which Mr. Bowles is primarily concerned.

Port and Kit have been carefully chosen for their role, the role of the doomed and civilized traveler. The highly evolved representatives of a modern urban society, it is significant, to begin with, that they are unhappy at home. Intuition tells them that their chances for happiness lie in a less complex environment and they come to the Sahara--he with his maps, for which...he has a passion, she with her...fitted case and her cosmetics. But Port's maps only lead him to his death, and Kit's case is stolen from her in the desert. He suffers physical destruction; she, mental.

Tunner is a more important character than he at first appears. Less intelligent than the Moresbys, he is also closer to Bowles's type of 'natural' man (who, incidentally, is frequently handsome, which is of course symbolically appropriate). The desert does not destroy him as it does the other two. Subtlety not being his strong point, he possesses instead a healthy egotism: he is unaware of the real reason for Kit's yielding to his advances, and it never occurs to him that in retrospect she should find the experience distasteful. She, for her part, can neither love a man she cannot respect nor, as it happens, love the man she does respect--a dilemma peculiar, perhaps, to a civilized individual. Port's is a similar predicament; his encounters with the native women are ill-fated, and of the three only Tunner is untroubled where such matters are concerned. Tunner is also untroubled by any feeling of guilt at having seduced his friend's wife, but Kit's conscience does not let her off so lightly.

Kit stands midway between Port, who is completely civilized, and Tunner, who is half animal. We are told in so many words that she is torn by 'the war between reason and atavism.' She has a profound regard for omens, and a large part of her consciousness is devoted to the classification and interpretation of them; nevertheless, 'in intellectual discussions she was always the proponent of scientific method.' One somehow feels that the fault for their estrangement lies with Port, who is entirely a rational being (he understands his wife so well that he can even predict the effect certain omens will produce upon her), and it is part of the peculiar justice of the situation that Port's destruction comes first and is the more complete and final.

There is a strongly sensual side to Kit's character which Tunner, who is only half a primitive, touches but fails to release when he makes love to her. The real primitive in the story, of course, is Belqassim, the young Arab who imprisons her in his harem. Belqassim is everything that Port is not, and this relationship is more satisfactory than the one she has had with Tunner because it is not complicated by the element of respect, which (so different are she and Belqassim culturally) simply does not enter into the picture--or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she respects him because he is so very different from all the men she has ever known, like a being from another planet.

Paradoxical though it may appear, Kit's series of amorous adventures with Belqassim and other natives in the latter part of the book offers her an opportunity of spiritual salvation: intuitively she realizes this, which is why she accepts these adventures with a willingness which would otherwise appear rather motiveless, since obviously she is not a nymphomaniacal type. The love of a civilized man had never been able to satisfy her (Bowles's implication is that civilized man has lost the art of making love); perhaps another kind of love can. And it does satisfy, at the same time that it destroys her. Kit's tragedy is that her experience has unfitted her for a primitive type of love, for love on a 'natural' plane; her civilized background revolts, and she explodes mentally. Looked at in this light, Book III is far from being merely erotic exercise: the protagonist (and there is no question but what Kit and not Port is the main character) is undergoing an ordeal by fire, as it were, and the ordeal, painful though it is, is very much worth watching.

The book is in effect a moral tragedy, presented in terms of allegory--and it is tragedy rather than pathos, for Kit does put up a struggle. Nor is the tragedy merely personal: the allegory includes all of civilized humanity, incapable of leading a purely rational existence (Port's way, the way of death) or of returning atavistically to a merely intuitive way of life, as Kit does with such heart-rending consequences."

Oliver Evans
"Paul Bowles and the 'Natural' Man"
Critique III, 1 (Spring-Fall 1959) 43-59
reprinted in *Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views*
ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir
(Houghton 1963) 139-152

"If the word 'Gothic' still has any meaning when applied to fiction then Bowles's--*The Sheltering Sky* (1949), *Let It Come Down* (1952), *The Spider's House* (1955)--are Gothic novels and as such are related to horror comics. In a sense, they are indeed highbrow horror comics, and the isolation of the horrific or the beastly or the vilely incongruous is an essential part of Bowles's method. [As when] Kit Moresby is deserting her husband, who is dying of typhoid...

As a Gothic novelist, Bowles is a modern version of Poe. Like Poe's, his theme is the disintegration of the psyche; and his novels are works of symbolism in which the world described is really the interior world of his characters. It is projected with great brilliance: In his ability to suggest tropical heat and squalor, the seediness of the exotic, Bowles is not surpassed by Graham Greene.

Bowles's scene is North Africa, and his first novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, may be taken as typical of his work. The central characters are Port and Kit Moresby, husband and wife, rich American expatriates, each bearing a burden of undefined guilt. Port is a man who, 'in order to avoid having to deal with relative values,' had long since come to deny all purpose to the phenomena of existence--it was more expedient and 'comforting.' He is a man whose soul only 'silences and emptinesses' can touch; his soul aspires to the blankness of the desert and of the cloudless African sky. His attempts to make some sort of living contact with his wife are fumbling and abortive, tentative gestures only; and Kit's life is ruled by omens that she cannot decipher. Their wanderings in the interior of Algeria are described in every vivid detail of physical discomfort and dirt. Port dies meaninglessly of typhoid at a French military post...and Kit disappears alone into the desert to bum a lift on a camel caravan into the interior. She is raped repeatedly by the two Arabs whose caravan it is, and with one of them, who installs her in his harem, she sinks into a state of frantic sensual bliss and craving, a mindless abandonment to sexual subjugation, from which she escapes only to return to Algiers little better than an imbecile.

In these novels Bowles expresses the ultimate horror of nothingness. Yet, though the books affect one while reading almost as a series of physical assaults, one is scarcely moved by them, because Bowles scarcely tries to persuade us that his characters have value as human beings."

Walter Allen
The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States
(Dutton 1965) 300-01

"Although a more traditional writer, Paul Bowles, in *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) and *Let It Come Down* (1952), like Burroughs, uses the journey as a form of discovery even when it leads to self-destruction. Only the 'ultimate' expression of self can jar the self from exhaustion. In this respect, however different literarily, both are recreating a war situation, using drugs, sexual experimentation, forms of sadism and masochism, to convey a form of combat.

In *The Sheltering Sky*, Port and Kit Moresby must make the journey to North Africa, or else watch their lives waste away in inconsequential acts. They are driven not by social or political needs, but by inner pressures. The journey is their final effort to stay alive. Once it is started, Port's illness gives Kit her freedom, and then the desert provides opportunity for further choice--and as it turns out, what she desires most, bondage. Her deepest needs are met by an Arab on a caravan, who by degrees turns her into his slave, finally adding her to his harem. Kit feels most intensely at her greatest moments of servitude; this is the 'female condition,' presented as a form of liberation for her....

In *The Benefactor* [by Susan Sontag] Hippolyte...sells his mistress, Frau Anders, into captivity to an Arab merchant...because she is dissatisfied with her life--she enters a world in which women are property, are humiliated, branded, and tortured if they resist. That is the way of Islam and Paul Bowles."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper 1983) 123, 206n, 402-03

Michael Hollister (2015)