THE ART OF FICTION NO. 67

PAUL BOWLES

The Tangier that once greeted Bowles in 1931, promising "wisdom and ecstasy," bears little resemblance to the Tangier of the 1970s. The frenetic medina, with its souks, its endless array of tourist boutiques, its perennial hawkers and hustlers is still there, of course, though fifty years ago it had already been dwarfed by the European city and its monuments to colonialism: the imperious French Consulate, the Café de Paris, luxury hotels in the grand style (the Minzah, the Velasquez, the Villa de France), the now forlornly abandoned Teatro Cervantes, and the English church with its cemetery filled with the remains of knight commanders, baronets, and the prodigal sons of former empires. The days of Tangier as the wide-open international city of intrigue are gone forever. Today it is simply one city of a third-world country in flux, slowly but steadily coming to grips with the twentieth century.

For those of a romantic bent, however, the power of Tangier to evoke images of the inscrutable East remains potent, despite the ravages of modernity. It still seems an appropriate place to find Paul Bowles. Any American who comes to Tangier bearing more than a casual curiosity about Morocco and a vague concern for music and literature considers a visit with Bowles an absolute must; for some, it even assumes the reverential character of a pilgrimage. In no way, however, does Bowles see himself as an object of special interest. Indeed, such an attitude strikes him as being amusingly naive, if not downright silly.

He lives in a three-room apartment in a quiet residential section of Tangier. His flat, located in a fifties-futuristic building in sight of the American consulate, is comfortably unimposing, though it does testify to his days as a world traveler: souvenirs from Asia, Mexico, black Africa; a bookcase lined with personally inscribed volumes by Burroughs, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Vidal; an entryway in which vintage trunks and suitcases are stacked shoulder high, as if a voyage of indefinite length were perpetually in the offing.

Our first meeting took place in the summer of 1976. I arrived at his door in the early afternoon. I found him newly awakened, his thick white hair tousled and pale blue eyes slightly bleary; he was obviously surprised that anyone would come to call at that hour of the day. As he finished his breakfast and lighted up his first cigarette, his thin, somewhat wiry frame relaxed noticeably. He became increasingly jovial.

Evidently, however, my timing hadn't been particularly good. The tape recorder had just begun to roll when a series of visitors announced themselves with persistent rings of the doorbell: his chauffeur, his maid, a woman friend from New York, an American boy who'd taken the apartment downstairs, and, eventually, Mohammed Mrabet. Handsome in a rugged and brooding way, Mrabet asked me to bring him, on my return to Tangier, a pistol with nine chambers as there were apparently nine people upon whose elimination he was intent at that time.

As it turned out, I had reason to be grateful for his and the other interruptions. They enabled me to return and talk at length with Bowles that evening, the next day, and two more times over the following year and a half.

—Jeffrey Bailey, 1981

INTERVIEWER

For many people, the mention of your name evokes romantic images of the artist's life in exotic, faraway places. Do you see yourself as a kind of consummate expatriate?

PAUL BOWLES

I'm afraid not. I don't see myself as a consummate anything. I don't see myself, really, I have no ego. I didn't find the United States particularly interesting and once I found places that were more interesting I chose to live in them, which I think makes sense.

INTERVIEWER

Was this decision to leave the United States an early one?

BOWLES

I made it at seventeen, so I guess you'd say it was an early decision. Some people absorb things more quickly than others, and I think I had a fairly good idea of what life would be like for me in the States, and I didn't want it.

INTERVIEWER

What would it have been like?

BOWLES

Boring. There was nothing I wanted there, and once I'd moved away I saw that all I needed from the States was money. I went back there for that. I've never yet gone there without the definite guarantee of making money. Just going for the pleasure of it, I've never done.

INTERVIEWER

Since your contact with foreign places has so obviously nurtured your writing, perhaps you would never have been a writer if you had stayed in the States.

BOWLES

Quite possibly not. I might have gone on as a composer. I cut the composing cord in 1947, when I moved here, although, as I say, I went back several times to write scores for Broadway.

INTERVIEWER

Did you cut the composing cord because writing and music were getting in each other's way?

BOWLES

No, not at all. You do them with separate parts of the brain, I think. And you derive different kinds of pleasure from them. It's like saying, "Is it more fun to drink a glass of water when you're thirsty or eat a good meal when you're hungry?" I gave up composing professionally simply because I wanted to leave New York. I wanted to get out of the States.

INTERVIEWER

Did giving up an entire career because you disliked life in America leave you feeling hostile toward the place?

BOWLES

No, no. But when you say "America" to me, all I think of is New York City where I was born and brought up. I know that New York isn't America; still, my image of America *is* New York. But there's no hostility. I just think it's a great shame, what has happened there. I don't think it will ever be put right; but then again, I never expect anything to be put right. Nothing ever is. Things go on and become other things. The whole character of the country has changed beyond recognition since my childhood. One always thinks everything's got worse—and in most respects it has—but that's meaningless. What does one mean when one says that things are getting worse? It's becoming more like the future, that's all. It's just moving ahead. The future will be infinitely "worse" than the present; and in *that* future, the future will be immeasurably "worse" than the future that we can see. Naturally.

INTERVIEWER

You're a pessimist.

BOWLES

Well, look for yourself. You don't have to be a pessimist to see it. There's always the chance of a universal holocaust in which a few billion people will be burned. I don't hope for that, but it's what I see as a probability.

INTERVIEWER

Can't one also hope for things like a cure for cancer, an effective ban on nuclear arms, an upsurge of concern for the environment, and a deeper consciousness of being?

BOWLES

You can hope for anything, of course. I expect enormous things to happen in the future, but I don't think they'll be things that people born in my generation will think are great and wonderful. Perhaps people born in 1975 will think otherwise. I mean, people born in 1950 think television is great.

INTERVIEWER

Because American technology has already contributed so much to making what you regard as an inevitably undesirable future, I guess it's understandable that living outside your indigenous culture became almost a compulsion with you.

BOWLES

Not almost; it was a *real* compulsion. Even as a small child, I was always eager to get away. I remember when I was six years old, I was sent off to spend two weeks with someone—I don't know who it was or why I was sent—and I begged to stay longer.

I didn't want to go home. Again, when I was nine and my father had pneumonia, I was sent off for a month or two and I kept writing letters asking, "Please, let me stay longer." I didn't want to see my parents again. I didn't want to go back into all that.

INTERVIEWER

In *Without Stopping*, you were quite frank about your feelings toward your parents in describing the fondness you had for your mother and your estrangement from your father.

BOWLES

I think most boys are fond of their mothers. The hostility involved with my father was very real. It started on his side and became reciprocated, naturally, at an early age. I don't know what the matter was. Maybe he didn't want any children. I never knew the real story of why he was so angry with me, although my maternal grandmother told me it was simply because he was jealous. She said he couldn't bear to have my mother pay attention to this third person, me. It's probably true.

INTERVIEWER

Did this negative relationship with your father affect your becoming a traveler and an artist?

BOWLES

Probably, I don't know. I've never really gone over it in my mind to see what caused what. I probably couldn't. It's obvious that a shut-in childhood is likely to make an introverted child and that an introverted child is more likely to be "artistic."

INTERVIEWER

Your parents weren't enthusiastic about your going off to Europe when you were only eighteen?

BOWLES

It wasn't a matter of their being enthusiastic or not, inasmuch as they knew nothing about my going. I had the money for my passage to France, plus about twenty-five dollars.

INTERVIEWER

Were you running away from something?

BOWLES

No, I was running toward something, although I didn't know what at the time.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever find it?

BOWLES

Yes, I found it over the years. What I was ultimately running toward was my grave, of course: "The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

INTERVIEWER

You began studying with Aaron Copland not long after your return from that first trip abroad. How would you describe your experience with Copland?

BOWLES

It couldn't have been better. He was a wonderful teacher.

INTERVIEWER

Apparently Copland was able to compose professionally outside of New York, yet you say that you weren't.

BOWLES

No, because I had to make a living at writing music. If I'd had a private income I could have composed anywhere, as long as I'd had a keyboard. A few composers don't even need that, but I do. Aaron and I had a very hard time the first summer here in Tangier, in 1931. Gertrude Stein had told us that it would be easy to get a piano, but it wasn't. Nowadays it's impossible, but in those days you still could if you really looked. We finally found one. It wasn't very good, and the problem of getting it up the mountain to the house we'd rented was horrendous. The road wasn't paved so it had to come up on a donkey. Just as it was going through the gate the piano fell off with a WHAM!!! and I thought, That's the end of our summer. It worked out all right, eventually. Aaron was writing a short symphony and although he couldn't finish it, he was able to do some work on it. Of course, he worked constantly.

INTERVIEWER

Weren't you as diligent a worker as Copland?

BOWLES

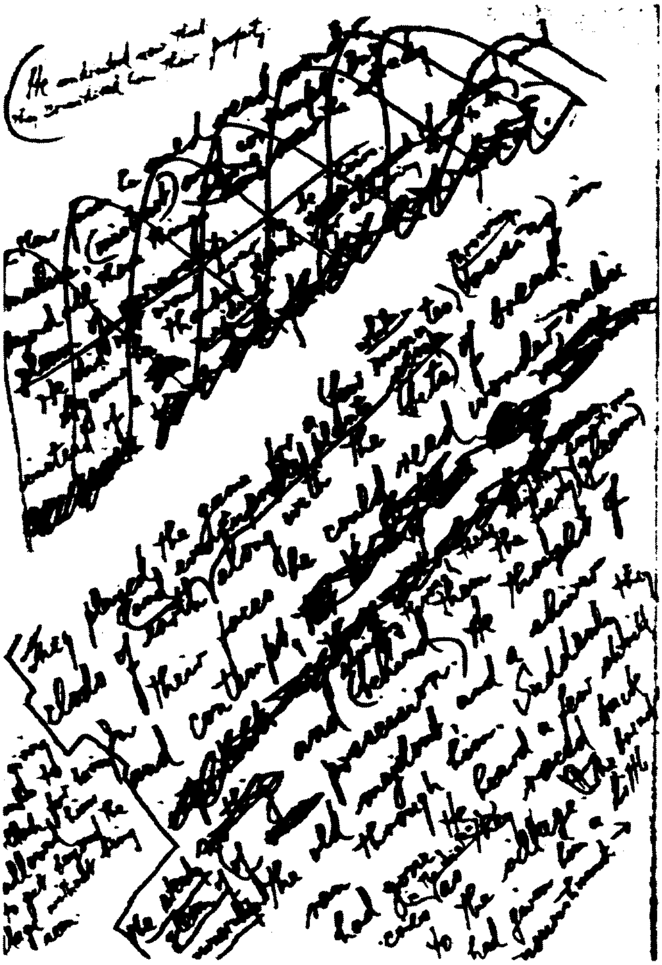
I wouldn't say so, no. When we were in Berlin, it seemed that I was always going somewhere else. Aaron was rather annoyed by that. I was supposed to be studying, but instead I would set out for Austria or Bavaria.

INTERVIEWER

What was your impression of Berlin back then?

BOWLES

Well, I wasn't there for very long, only four months; one whole spring. But it was crazy. Really crazy. It was like a film of Fritz Lang's. You had the feeling that all of life was being directed by Lang. It was sinister because of the discrepancy between those who had and those who didn't, and you felt it all very intensely. The "haves" were going hog-wild while the "have-nots" seethed with hatred. There was a black cloud of hatred over the whole east end of the city. It was that summer that the Disconto-Gesellschaft failed. You felt the catastrophe coming, which gave an uncomfort-



A Paul Bowles manuscript page.

able tinge to everything that happened. Christopher Isherwood was living it rather than writing about it then.

INTERVIEWER

How did you react when Isherwood gave your name to his best-known character creation?

BOWLES

Sally Bowles? I thought it was quite natural, really. We'd all been there together through the whole season and we used to eat lunch together every day. He didn't want to use her real name, Jean Ross, so he used mine. Where he got "Sally," I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

From your recollection, did the real Jean Ross much resemble the character she had inspired?

BOWLES

I'd say so. Yes. She was very attractive, and also very amusing. Christopher was always with her. They lived in the same rooming house on the Nollendorfplatz. I lived on Güntzelstrasse, in a room with a balcony, I remember. Aaron took a flat that belonged to an American poet named Alfred Kreymborg on the Steinplatz, so I would go there for my lessons every day. We'd have lunch with Stephen Spender, Christopher, and Jean. We always had that nucleus. We generally ate at the Café des Westens opposite the Kaiser Gedächtnis Kirche.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know that you were observing the genesis of *Goodbye to Berlin*?

BOWLES

How would I? I had no idea that he was going to write a book. One was just concerned with living each day as it came. I met some of the people in *The Berlin Stories*, but I never suspected they were going to be "immortalized."

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever felt any professional antagonism toward other artists?

BOWLES

No, I've never been like that at all. I refuse to play. I told you I don't have much of an ego. I meant it. To take part in such games, you have to believe in the existence of your personality in a way that I don't. And I couldn't do it. I could pretend, but it wouldn't get me very far.

INTERVIEWER

When you were a young man making the acquaintance not only of other young writers such as Isherwood and Auden but also getting to know more established writers, like Stein and Cocteau, were you consciously attempting to become part of an artistic community? Were you looking to be nurtured by contact with other artists?

BOWLES

I was never aware of wanting to become part of a community, no. I wanted to meet them. I suppose I simply felt that I was taking potshots at clay pipes. Pop! Down goes Gertrude, down goes Jean Cocteau, down goes André Gide. I made a point of those things—meeting Manuel de Falla, for example—for no reason at all. I went to Granada, found his door, knocked, went in, and spent the afternoon. He had no idea who I was. Why I did that, I don't know. Apparently I thought such encounters were important or I wouldn't have bothered, because it involved a lot of work and sometimes a sacrifice of something I cared about. But exactly how I felt I can't remember, because it wasn't an intellectual thing. It was "unthought," and it's hard for me to recall the reason for it.

Of course, I've never been a thinking person. A lot seems to happen without my conscious knowledge.

INTERVIEWER

Has it always been that way, or has it developed over the years?

BOWLES

It was always like that. All through my late teens, from sixteen on, I was writing surrealist poetry. I read André [Breton], who explained how to do it, and so I learned how to write without being conscious of what I was doing. I learned how to make it grammatically correct and even to have a certain style without the slightest idea of what I was writing. One part of my mind was doing the writing, and God knows what the other part was doing. I suppose it was bulldozing the subconscious, dredging up ooze. I don't know how those things work, and I don't want to know.

INTERVIEWER

It sounds as though Breton served to inspire your early writing. Did you have many "inspiration" writers?

BOWLES

Not really. During my early years in Europe, I was very much taken with Lautréamont. I carried him with me wherever I went, but I got over that and didn't supplant him with anyone else. You may have such enthusiasms when you're very young, but you don't usually have them when you get older, even a few years older. There were many writers whom I admired, and if they were living I tended to seek them out: Stein, Gide, Cocteau, many others.

INTERVIEWER

Your autobiography, *Without Stopping*, seemed to overflow with the names of artists, writers, famous people in general, whom you'd met.

BOWLES

And yet I cut many of them out. I saw when I was finished that it was nothing but names, so I cut out fifty or sixty. The reason for all that was that Putnam wanted the book to be a roster of names; they stressed that at the beginning, before I signed the contract. If they'd just left me alone without all the stipulations, I think I could have done something more personal. Actually, I think the first half was personal enough, but the last half was hurried. Time was coming to an end and I had to meet the deadline. They'd already allowed an extra year in the contract, so I just rushed it off. I'd never do another book like that, under contract. A full year after I'd signed the contract I still hadn't begun to write. It took me that length of time to recall events and sequences. I had no diaries or letters to consult, so I had to go back over my entire life, month by month, charting every meaningless meander of its course. And as I say, that took more than a year.

INTERVIEWER

You've never been a diarist?

BOWLES

No. I had no letters or documents to go on at all.

INTERVIEWER

Was that intentional? Would a diary have hindered your spontaneity?

BOWLES

I don't know about that. It was just the facts of life. I never bothered. I felt that life itself was important, each day. I didn't see any reason to keep a diary. Then again, I never thought I'd be writing an autobiography.

INTERVIEWER

How do you write?

BOWLES

I don't use a typewriter. It's too heavy, too much trouble. I use a notebook, and I write in bed. Ninety-five percent of everything I've written has been done in bed.

INTERVIEWER

And the typing?

BOWLES

The typing of a manuscript to send out is another thing. That's just drudgery, not work. By work I mean the invention of something, the putting down, the creation of a page with words on it.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write any of your novels under a deadline?

BOWLES

No. When I finished them, I sent them in and they were published. I couldn't write fiction under pressure. The books wouldn't have been any good; they'd have been even less good than they were.

INTERVIEWER

You don't seem to have a particularly high regard for your talent as a writer.

BOWLES

No, no. I haven't.

INTERVIEWER

Why not?

BOWLES

I don't know. It doesn't seem very relevant.

INTERVIEWER

Haven't people encouraged you along the way, telling you that you were good?

BOWLES

Oh, yes. Of course.

INTERVIEWER

You just didn't believe them?

BOWLES

I believed that they believed it, and I wanted to hear them say they liked this or disliked that, and why. But I was never sure of their viewpoint, so it was hard to know whether they understood what they were liking or disliking.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say that it was easier for a serious young writer to get published twenty or thirty years ago?

BOWLES

I doubt that getting "serious" writing published was ever easy. But judging from the quantity of nonwriting that gets into print today, I'd deduce that today there are fewer young authors writing with the intention of producing serious work. To quote Susan Sontag: "Seriousness has less prestige now."

INTERVIEWER

In reading your work, one doesn't expect to be led to some conclusion through a simple progression of events. One has the sense of participating in a spontaneous growth of events, one on top of another.

BOWLES

Yes? Well, they grow that way. That's the point, you see. I don't feel that I wrote these books. I feel as though they had been written by my arm, by my brain, my organism, but that they're not necessarily mine. The difficulty is that I've never thought anything belonged to me. At one time, I bought an island off Ceylon and I thought that when I had my two feet planted on it I'd be able to say, "This island is mine." I couldn't; it was meaningless. I felt nothing at all, so I sold it.

INTERVIEWER

How big an island was it?

BOWLES

About two acres. A beautiful tropical forest on an island. Originally it had been owned by a French landscape gardener. Sixty or seventy years ago he'd brought back trees, shrubs, vines, and flowers from all over Southeast Asia and the East Indies. It was a wonderful botanical display. But as I say, I never felt I owned it.

INTERVIEWER

Was writing, for you, a means of alleviating a sense of aloneness by communicating intimately with other people?

BOWLES

No. I look on it simply as a natural function. As far as I'm concerned it's fun, and it just happens. If I don't feel like doing it, I don't do it.

INTERVIEWER

One is struck by the violence in your work. Almost all the characters in *The Delicate Prey*, for example, were victimized by either physical or psychological violence.

BOWLES

Yes, I suppose. The violence served a therapeutic purpose. It's unsettling to think that at any moment life can flare up into sense-less violence. But it can and does, and people need to be ready for it. What you make for others is first of all what you make for yourself. If I'm persuaded that our life is predicated upon violence, that the entire structure of what we call civilization, the scaffolding that we've built up over the millennia, can collapse at any moment, then whatever I write is going to be affected by that assumption. The process of life presupposes violence, in the plant world the same as the animal world. But among the animals only man can conceptualize violence. Only man can *enjoy* the *idea* of destruction.

INTERVIEWER

In many of your characterizations, there's a strange combination of fatalism and naïveté. I'm thinking in particular of Kit and Port Moresby in *The Sheltering Sky*. It seemed to me that their frenetic movement was prompted by an obsessive fear of self-confrontation.

BOWLES

Moving around a lot is a good way of postponing the day of reckoning. I'm happiest when I'm moving. When you've cut yourself off from the life you've been living and you haven't yet established another life, you're free. That's a very pleasant sensation, I've always thought. If you don't know where you're going, you're even freer.

INTERVIEWER

Your characters seem to be psychologically alienated from each other and from themselves, and though their isolation may be accentuated by the fact that you've set them as foreigners in exotic places, one feels that they'd be no different at home, that their problems are deeper than the matter of locale.

BOWLES

Of course. Everyone is isolated from everyone else. The concept of society is like a cushion to protect us from the knowledge of that isolation. A fiction that serves as an anesthetic.

INTERVIEWER

And the exotic settings are secondary?

BOWLES

The transportation of characters to such settings often acts as a catalyst or a detonator, without which there'd be no action, so I shouldn't call the settings secondary. Probably if I hadn't had some contact with what you call "exotic" places, it wouldn't have occurred to me to write at all.

INTERVIEWER

To what degree did the character of Kit resemble your wife, Jane Bowles?

BOWLES

The book was conceived in New York in 1947, and eighty percent of it was written before Jane ever set foot in North Africa in 1948, so there's no question of its being related to experience. The tale is entirely imaginary. Kit is not Jane, although I used some of Jane's characteristics in determining Kit's reactions to such a voyage. Obviously I thought of Port as a fictional extension of myself. But Port is certainly not Paul Bowles, any more than Kit is Jane.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever written a character who was supposed to be Jane Bowles, or a character who was directly modeled after her?

BOWLES

No, never.

INTERVIEWER

Yet couldn't one say that you both exerted a definite influence on each other's work?

BOWLES

Of course! We showed each other every page we wrote. I never thought of sending a story off without discussing it with her first. Neither of us had ever had a literary confidant before. I went over *Two Serious Ladies* with her again and again, until each detail was as we both thought it should be. Not that I put anything into it that she hadn't written. We simply analyzed sentences and rhetoric. It was this being present at the making of a novel that excited me and made me want to write my own fiction. Remember, this was in 1942.

INTERVIEWER

You hadn't had that strong an interest before?

BOWLES

Oh, I'd written before, of course, although of the fiction I saved only one short story. All during my childhood I was writing, and that means from the age of four on. Even at four it gave me a very special kind of pleasure to make up my own stories and print them on paper. They were always about animals and barnyard fowl. My memory doesn't go back to a time when I couldn't read. I remember being ridiculed by my grandfather because I couldn't pronounce the word *clock*. I said, "Tlot," but I indignantly spelled it out for him to prove that I knew the word. I must have spelled it c-l-o-c-tay.

INTERVIEWER

You learned to read at an unusually early age?

BOWLES

Three, I guess. I learned from wooden blocks that had letters of the alphabet carved on them. Toys weren't encouraged. They gave me "constructive things"—drawing paper, pencils, notebooks, maps, and books. Besides, I was always alone then, never with other children.

INTERVIEWER

Tell me, would you please, about Jane Bowles.

BOWLES

That's an all-inclusive command! What can I possibly tell you about her that isn't implicit in her writing?

INTERVIEWER

She obviously had an extraordinary imagination. She was always coherent, but one had the feeling that she could go off the edge at any time. Almost every page of *Two Serious Ladies*, for example, evoked a sense of madness although it all flowed together very naturally.

BOWLES

I feel that it flows naturally, yes. But I don't find any sense of madness. Unlikely turns of thought, lack of predictability in the characters' behavior, but no suggestion of "madness." I love *Two Serious Ladies*. The action is often like the unfolding of a dream, and the background, with its realistic details, somehow emphasizes the sensation of dreaming.

INTERVIEWER

Does this dreamlike quality reflect her personality?

BOWLES

I don't think anyone ever thought of Jane as a "dreamy" person; she was far too lively and articulate for that. She did have a way of making herself absent suddenly, when one could see that she was a thousand miles away. If you addressed her sharply, she returned with a start. And if you asked her about it, she would simply say: “I don’t know. I was somewhere else.”

INTERVIEWER

Can you read her books and see Jane Bowles in them?

BOWLES

Not at all; not the Jane Bowles that I knew. Her work contained no reports on her outside life. Two Serious Ladies was wholly nonautobiographical. The same goes for her stories.

INTERVIEWER

She wasn’t by any means a prolific writer, was she?

BOWLES

No, very unprolific. She wrote very slowly. It cost her blood to write. Everything had to be transmuted into fiction before she could accept it. Sometimes it took her a week to write a page. This exaggerated slowness seemed to me a terrible waste of time, but any mention of it to her was likely to make her stop writing entirely for several days or even weeks. She would say: “All right. It’s easy for you, but it’s hell for me, and you know it. I’m not you. I know you wish I were, but I’m not. So stop it.”

INTERVIEWER

The relationships between her women characters are fascinating. They read like psychological portraits, reminiscent of Djuna Barnes.

BOWLES

In fact, though, she refused to read Djuna Barnes. She never read *Nightwood*. She felt great hostility toward American women writers. Usually she refused even to look at their books.

INTERVIEWER

Why was that?

BOWLES

When *Two Serious Ladies* was first reviewed in 1943, Jane was depressed by the lack of understanding shown in the unfavorable reviews. She paid no attention to the enthusiastic notices. But from then on, she became very much aware of the existence of other women writers whom she'd met and who were receiving laudatory reviews for works that she thought didn't deserve such high praise: Jean Stafford, Mary McCarthy, Carson McCullers, Anaïs Nin. There were others I can't remember now. She didn't want to see them personally or see their books.

INTERVIEWER

In the introduction that Truman Capote wrote for the collected works, he emphasized how young she'd been when she wrote *Two Serious Ladies*.

BOWLES

That's true. She began it when she was twenty-one. We were married the day before her twenty-first birthday.

INTERVIEWER

Was there something symbolic about the date?

BOWLES

No, nothing "symbolic." Her mother wanted to remarry and she had got it into her head that Jane should marry first, so we chose the day before Jane's birthday.

INTERVIEWER

Did your careers ever conflict, yours and your wife's?

BOWLES

No, there was no conflict of any kind. We never thought of ourselves as having careers. The only career I ever had was as a composer, and I destroyed that when I left the States. It's hard to build up a career again. Work is something else, but a career is a living thing and when you break it, that's it.

INTERVIEWER

Did you and Jane Bowles ever collaborate?

BOWLES

On a few songs. Words and music. Any other sort of collaboration would have been unthinkable. Collaborative works of fiction are rare, and they're generally parlor tricks, like *Karezza* of George Sand and who was it—Alfred de Musset?

INTERVIEWER

How did she feel about herself as an artist—about her work?

BOWLES

She liked it. She enjoyed it. She used to read it and laugh shamefacedly. But she'd never change a word in order to make it more easily understood. She was very, very stubborn about phrasing things the way she wanted them phrased. Sometimes understanding would really be difficult and I'd suggest a change to make it simpler. She'd say, "No. It can't be done that way." She wouldn't budge an inch from saying something the way she felt the character would say it.

INTERVIEWER

What was her objective in writing?

BOWLES

Well, she was always trying to get at people's hidden motivations. She was interested in people, not in the writing. I don't think she was at all conscious of trying to create any particular style. She was only interested in the things she was writing about: the complicated juxtapositions of motivations in neurotic people's heads. That was what fascinated her.

INTERVIEWER

Was she "neurotic"?

BOWLES

Oh, probably. If one's interested in neuroses, generally one has some sympathetic vibration.

INTERVIEWER

Was she self-destructive?

BOWLES

I don't think she meant to be, no. I think she overestimated her physical strength. She was always saying, "I'm as strong as an ox," or "I'm made of iron." That sort of thing.

INTERVIEWER

Considering how independently the two of you lived your lives, your marriage couldn't really be described as being "conventional." Was this lack of "conventionalism" the result of planning, or did it just work out that way?

BOWLES

We never thought in those terms. We played everything by ear. Each one did what he pleased—went out, came back—although I must say that I tried to get her in early. She liked going out much more than I did, and I never stopped her. She had a perfect right to go to any party she wanted. Sometimes we had recriminations when she drank too much, but the idea of sitting down and discussing what constitutes a conventional or an unconventional marriage would have been unthinkable.

INTERVIEWER

She has been quoted as saying, "From the first day, Morocco seemed more dreamlike than real. I felt cut off from what I knew. In the twenty years I've lived here, I've written two short stories and nothing else. It's good for Paul, but not for me." All things considered, do you think that's an accurate representation of her feelings?

BOWLES

But you speak of feelings as though they were monolithic, as though they never shifted and altered through the years. I know Jane expressed the idea frequently toward the end of her life, when she was bedridden and regretted not being within reach of her friends. Most of them lived in New York, of course. But for the first decade she loved Morocco as much as I did.

INTERVIEWER

Did you live with her here in this apartment?

BOWLES

No. Her initial stroke was in 1957, while I was in Kenya. When I got back to Morocco about two months later, I heard about it in Casablanca. I came here and found her quite well. We took two apartments in this building. From then on, she was very ill, and we spent our time rushing from one hospital to another, in London and New York. During the early sixties she was somewhat better, but then she began to suffer from nervous depression. She spent most of the last seven years of her life in hospitals. But she was an invalid for sixteen years.

INTERVIEWER

That's a long time to be an invalid.

BOWLES

Yes. It was terrible.

INTERVIEWER

Before that, though, your life together had been as you wanted it?

BOWLES

Oh, yes. We enjoyed it. We were always busy helping each other. And we had lots of friends. Many, many friends.

INTERVIEWER

What is life like for you in Tangier these days?

BOWLES

Well, it's my home. I'm settled here and I'm reasonably content with things as they are. I see enough people. I suppose if I had been living in the States all this time I'd probably have many more intimate friends whom I'd see regularly. But I haven't lived there in many years, and most of the people I knew are no longer there. I can't go back and make new acquaintances at this late date.

INTERVIEWER

All those trunks you've got stacked in your entryway bear testament to your globe-trotting days. Don't you miss traveling?

BOWLES

Not really, surprisingly enough. And Tangier is as good a place for me to be as any other, I think. If travel still consisted of taking ships, I'd continue moving around. Flying to me isn't travel. It's just getting from one place to another as fast as possible. I like to have plenty of luggage with me when I start out on a voyage. You never know how many months or years you'll be gone or where you'll go eventually. But flying is like television: you have to take what they give you because there's nothing else. It's impossible.

INTERVIEWER

Tangier is nothing like the booming international city it once was, is it?

BOWLES

No, of course not. It's a very dull city now.

INTERVIEWER

Things were still happening here in the sixties when Ginsberg, Burroughs, and that group were here. To what degree were you involved with them?

BOWLES

I knew them well, but I wasn't involved with their work. I think Bill Burroughs came to live in the medina in 1952. I didn't meet him until 1954. Allen Ginsberg came in '57 and began to supervise the retrieving of the endangered manuscript of *Naked Lunch*, which was scattered all over the floor of Bill's room at the Muniriya. The pages had been lying there for many months, covered with grime, heelmarks, mouse-droppings. It was Alan Ansen who financed the expedition, and between them they salvaged the book.

INTERVIEWER

Was Gregory Corso here then?

BOWLES

No. He came when Ginsberg returned in 1961.

INTERVIEWER

What was Tangier like back then?

BOWLES

By the sixties, it had calmed down considerably, although it was still a good deal livelier than it is these days. Everyone had much more money, for one thing. Now only members of the European jet set have enough to lead amusing lives, and everyone else is poor. In general, Moroccans have a slightly higher standard of living than they did, by European criteria. That is, they have television, cars, and a certain amount of plumbing in their houses, although they all claim they don't eat as well as they did thirty years ago. But nobody does, anywhere.

INTERVIEWER

Moroccan life seems to be so incongruously divided between Eastern and Western influences—the medinas and *nouvelles villes*, djellabas and blue jeans, donkey-carts and Mercedes—that it sometimes seems downright schizophrenic. I wonder where the Moroccan psyche really is.

BOWLES

For there to be a Moroccan psyche there'd have to be a national consciousness, which I don't think has yet come into being. The people are much more likely to think of themselves as members of a subdivision: I'm a Sousse, I'm a Riffi, I'm a Filali. Then there are those lost souls who privately think of themselves as Europeans because they've studied in Europe. But the vast majority of Moroccans have their minds on getting together enough money for tomorrow's meal.

INTERVIEWER

Through the years that you've been here, have you ever had feelings of cultural estrangement, or even superiority?

BOWLES

That wouldn't be very productive, would it? Of course I feel apart, at one remove from the people here. But since they expect that in any case, there's no difficulty. The difficulties are in the United States, where there's no convention for maintaining apartness. The foreigners who try to "be Moroccan" never succeed and manage to look ridiculous while they're trying. It seems likely that it's this very quality of impenetrability in the Moroccans that makes the country fascinating to outsiders.

INTERVIEWER

But isn't there a special psychological dimension to the situation of a foreigner living in Morocco? It seems to me that a foreigner here is often looked upon automatically as a kind of victim.

BOWLES

Well, he *is* a victim. The Moroccans wouldn't use the word. They'd say "a useful object." They believe that they, as Muslims, are the master group in the world, and that God allows other religious groups to exist principally for them to manipulate. That seems to be the average man's attitude. Since it's not expressed as a personal opinion but is tacitly accepted by all, I don't find it objectionable. Once a thing like that is formulated you don't have to worry about the character of the person who professes it. It's no longer a question of whether or not he agrees with it as part of his personal credo.

INTERVIEWER

Doesn't this rather limit the nature of a relationship between a Moroccan and a non-Muslim?

BOWLES

It completely determines the nature of a relationship, of course, but I wouldn't say that it limits it, necessarily.

INTERVIEWER

You've never met a Moroccan with whom you felt you could have a Western-style relationship in terms of depth and reciprocity?

BOWLES

No, no. That's an absurd concept. Like expecting a boulder to spread its wings and fly away.

INTERVIEWER

Coming to this realization must have been a frustrating experience.

BOWLES

No, because right away when I got here I said to myself, Ah, this is the way people used to be, the way my own ancestors were thousands of years ago. The Natural Man. Basic Humanity. Let's see how they are. It all seemed quite natural to me. They haven't evolved the same way, so far, as we have, and I wasn't surprised to find that there were whole sections missing in their "psyche," if you like.

INTERVIEWER

Can Morocco be described as a homosexual culture?

BOWLES

Certainly not. I think that's one thing that doesn't exist here. It may be putting in an appearance now in the larger cities, what with the frustrations of today's urban life. I would expect it to, since that's the world pattern. They're undifferentiated, if you like, but they don't have a preference for the same sex. On the contrary.

INTERVIEWER

I suppose there are advantages to living in a sexually "undifferentiated" society.

BOWLES

There must be, or they wouldn't have made it that way. The French colons found it an unfailing source of amusement, of course.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't it paradoxical, though, because of the restrictions of Islam?

BOWLES

But religion always does its utmost to restrain human behavior. The discrepancy between religious dogma and individual behavior is no greater here than anywhere else.

INTERVIEWER

What do you know about Moroccan witchcraft?

BOWLES

Witchcraft is a loaded word. To use it evokes something sinister, a regression to archaic behavior. Here it's an accepted facet of daily life, as much as the existence of bacteria is in ours. And their attitude toward it is very much the same as ours is toward infection. The possibility is always there, and one must take precautions. But in Morocco only what you'd call offensive magic is considered "witchcraft." Defensive magic, which plays the same game from the other side of the net, is holy, and can only be efficacious if it's practiced under the aegis of the Koran. If the *fqih* uses the magician's tricks to annul the spell cast by the magician, it doesn't necessarily follow that the *fqih* believes implicitly in the existence of the spell. He's there to cure the people who visit him. He acts as confessor, psychiatrist, and father image. Obviously some of the *fouqqiyane* must be charlatans, out to get hold of all the money they can. But the people get onto the quacks fairly fast.

INTERVIEWER

One hears a lot about the legend of Aicha Qandicha. Who is she?

BOWLES

You mean who do I think she really is? I'd say she's a vestigial

Tanit. You know when a new faith takes over, the gods of the previous faith are made the personification of evil. Since she was still here in some force when Islam arrived, she had to be reckoned with. So she became this beautiful but dreaded spirit who still frequented running water and hunted men in order to ruin them. It's strange; she has a Mexican counterpart, La Llorona, who also lives along the banks of streams where there's vegetation, and who wanders at night calling to men. She's also of great beauty, and also has long tresses. The difference is that in Mexico she weeps. That's an Indian addition. In Morocco she calls out your name, often in your mother's voice, and the danger is that you'll turn and see her face, in which case you're lost. Unless, unless. There are lots of unlesses. A series of formulas from the Koran, a knife with a steel blade, or even a magnet can save you if you're quick. Not all Moroccans consider Aicha Qandicha a purely destructive spirit. Sacrifices are still made to her, just as they are to the saints. The Hamadcha leave chickens at her sacred grotto. But in general she inspires terror.

INTERVIEWER

The Moroccans have had an extremely violent history, and even now it seems that there's an innate belligerence in their character, a constant undercurrent of violence. Do you think that's true?

BOWLES

As far as I can see, people from all corners of the earth have an unlimited potential for violence. The Moroccans are highly emotional individuals. So naturally in concerted action they're formidable. There's always been intertribal violence here, as well as the age-old rustic resentment of the city dwellers. Until 1956 the country was divided officially into two sectors: *blad l-makhzen* and *blad s-siba*, or, in other words, territory under governmental control and territories where such control couldn't be implanted. That is, where anarchy reigned. Obviously violence is the daily bread of people living under such conditions. The French called *blad s-siba* “La Zone d’Insécurité.” As an American you were just as safe there as anywhere else in Morocco, but it wasn’t the security of Americans that the French were thinking of.

INTERVIEWER

One also feels, don’t you think, that the concept of time is completely different here?

BOWLES

Well, yes, but it’s partially because one lives a very different life. In America or Europe the day is divided into hours and one has appointments. Here the day isn’t measured; it simply goes by. If you see people, it’s generally by accident. Time is merely more or less, and everything is perhaps. It’s upsetting if you take it seriously. Otherwise it’s relaxing, because there’s no need to hurry. Plenty of time for everything.

INTERVIEWER

How did your association with Mohammed Mrabet come about?

BOWLES

I began to translate from Moghrebi Arabic twenty-five years ago, when I’d notate stories Ahmed Yacoubi told me. Shortly afterward, tape recorders arrived in Morocco and I went on translating, but from tapes. I did the novel *A Life Full of Holes*, by Layachi, and some things by Boulaich. When I met Mrabet I knew that there was an enormous amount of material there, and fortunately he wasn’t averse to exploiting it. On the contrary, he’s been telling tales into a microphone now for thirteen years, all from Arabic. The only difficulty with Mrabet is getting everything onto tape. I’ve lost some wonderful tales merely because at the moment he told them there was no way of recording them.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't Mrabet continuing an oral tradition that is well established here?

BOWLES

He's very much aware of it. From his early childhood he preferred to sit with elderly men, because of the stories they told. He's impregnated with the oral tradition of his region. In a story of his it's hard to find the borderline between unconscious memory and sheer invention.

INTERVIEWER

Why isn't he more popular within Morocco?

BOWLES

It's not a question of being popular or not being popular. He's practically unknown in Morocco. His books are all in English, though there are a few things in French, Italian, and Portuguese. What little notice he's received here has been adverse. There have been a few unpleasant articles about him in the newspapers, but probably only because it was I who translated him. But since, at the moment, I'm the sole possible bridge between him and the publishers, I go on doing these books, even though the local critics may take a dim view of them. They feel that a foreigner can present a Moroccan only as a performing seal. They scent neocolonialism in a book translated directly from *darija*. At first they wrote that he didn't exist, that I'd invented him. Then they accused me of literary ventriloquy. I'd found some fisherman and photographed him so I could present my own ideas under the cover of his name, thinking that would give them authenticity. What they seem to resent most of all is not that the texts were taped, but that they were taped in the language of the country that, by common consent, no one ever uses for literary purposes. One must use either classical Arabic or French. Moghrebi is only for conversational purposes. Then they object to the subject matter. For them contemporary prose must be political in one way or another. They don't conceive of literature as such, only as ammunition to implement their theories about economics and government. Most Moroccan intellectuals are confirmed Marxists, naturally. The same pattern as in other third-world countries. I can see clearly why they'd execrate the very concept of such a phenomenon as Mrabet. His books could as easily have been written under the colonial regime as during independence, and this strikes the local critics as tantamount to intellectual treason.

INTERVIEWER

Are you still taping storytellers whom you meet in cafés?

BOWLES

There aren't any more. All that's completely changed. There's a big difference just between the sixties and seventies. For instance, in the sixties people still sat in cafés with a *sebsi* [pipe] and told stories and occasionally plucked an oud or a *guimbri*. Now practically every café has television. The seats are arranged differently and no one tells any stories. They can't because the television is going. No one thinks of stories. If the eye is going to be occupied by a flickering image, the brain doesn't feel a lack. It's a great cultural loss. It's done away with both the oral tradition of storytelling and whatever café music there was.

INTERVIEWER

The music here is supposed to have a mesmerizing effect on its listeners. Is this true?

BOWLES

That's one of its functions, but not the only one. If you're an initiate of certain religious groups, it can induce trancelike conditions. In less evolved cultures music is always used for that. But something similar exists in many parts of the world, perhaps even in our own. Strobe lights, acid rock, and so on, I think all that's meant to alter consciousness.

INTERVIEWER

Has your involvement with Moroccan music been a means of maintaining your contact with the music world at large?

BOWLES

How could it be? It's just a natural interest which I've had since I first came.

INTERVIEWER

What are your future plans, as regards writing?

BOWLES

I don't think much about the future. I've got no plans for future books. The book of stories I'm writing at present takes up all my attention. More tales about Morocco. If an idea were to come to me which required the novel form, I'd write a novel. If it happens, it happens. I'm not ambitious, as you know. If I had been, I'd have stayed in New York.

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