

VANITY FAIR

SEPTEMBER 1985

Paul Bowles in Exile

Paul Bowles has kept himself aloof from all the hipsters and hypesters of American letters. Living in self-imposed exile in Tangier, he has cast a spell over such talents as Tennessee Williams, Libby Holman, Truman Capote, and Allen Ginsberg. Today, on the eve of the republication of his autobiography, his dark vision retains his power.

BY JAY McINERNEY



Paul Bowles with Moroccan storyteller Mohammed Mrabet on a recent visit in Tangier.

Paul Bowles opened the world of Hip. He let in the murder, the drugs, the incest, the death of the Square... the call of the orgy, the end of civilization.

-Norman Mailer

As the faithful poured into the mosque for prayer, I searched for the door to a restaurant reputedly just across the street and tried to seem inconspicuous. It was my second night in Tangier. Men in dark robes huddled on the street corners, lowering their voices as I approached. The few women in evidence were upholstered in black from head to foot and

looked like bandit nuns. I came upon an entrance gate at which two men in djellabas were either lounging or standing guard. I tentatively pronounced the name of my destination. They looked at each other, nodded, and ushered me inside. Even as I stepped forward I was thinking that they were too unkempt and uninviting to be doormen, and that the building before me was too dark and sinister for a public place. But I was committed. Advancing into the murky courtyard I heard the two men, both very large for Moroccans, hissing behind me. I recognized the situation immediately. It had all the ingredients of a Paul Bowles story.

I never found out what the hissing was about. The older of the two men caught up with me and led the way to the restaurant. I was relieved but vaguely disappointed, and later recalled something Bowles had said during the day: What can go wrong is always much more interesting than what goes right.

Paul Bowles's sense of what can go wrong is as acute as that of any American writer since Poe. In "A Distant Episode," one of his best known stories, a professor of linguistics in search of new dialects ventures beyond the walls of a desert town one night and descends into a valley settlement - "an abyss" - realizing as he does that "he ought to ask himself why he was doing this irrational thing." He proceeds nonetheless, only to be set upon by nomadic tribesmen who beat him, cut out his tongue, and dress him up in strings of flattened tin cans to serve as a jester, an object of amusement.

In his first and most famous novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, a husband and wife travel deeper and deeper into the Sahara, their flirtation with danger and their betrayals of each other finally consummated in madness and death. It's not simply the subject matter but the pitiless clarity, the unblinking regard in the face of human frailty and cruelty, that is so disquieting in Bowles's work. Whereas the terror in Poe seems to arise from an overheated romantic imagination suffering the torments it bodies forth, Bowles's sensibility is classical in its aloofness, his prose as hard edged and dazzling as a desert landscape at noon.

If Paul Bowles, now seventy-four, were Japanese, he would probably be designated a Living National Treasure; if he were French, he would no doubt be besieged by television crews from the literary talk show *Apostrophes*. Given that he is American, we might expect him to be a part of the university curriculum, but his name rarely appears in a course syllabus. Perhaps because he is not representative of a particular period or school of writing, he remains something of a trade secret among writers. Of course, Bowles hasn't exerted himself in the matter of greasing the machinery of celebrity. He has never been in this country when a book of his was published, and much of his life has been spent several days' travel beyond a *poste restante* address. More significantly, his dark view of the species, as well as his rejection of the *Zeitgeist* of his age, may be too categorical and severe for most tastes. His estimation of human nature is like that of Calvinism without the prospect of salvation.

This month, Ecco Press is reissuing Bowles's autobiography, *Without Stopping*, which quietly disappeared shortly after its publication, in 1972, and has long been out of print. Once again available, the book should spark renewed interest in Bowles's work and a reappraisal of his career.

Lying just southwest of Gibraltar, within sight of Spain, across the famous strait, Tangier was, when Bowles first saw it, in 1931, an internationally administered city consisting of a crowded and labyrinthine native quarter the medina surrounded by a European community. There were only a handful of taxicabs then, Bowles recalls, and many more eucalyptus trees than there are now, but the latter day tourist who enters the medina will feel much like the protagonist in Bowles's 1952 novel, *Let It Come Down*.

The places through which he was passing were like the tortuous corridors in dreams. It was impossible to think of them as streets, or even as alleys. There were spaces here and there among the buildings, that was all, and some of them opened into other spaces and some did not. If he found the right series of connections he could get from one place to the next, but only by going through the buildings themselves. And the buildings seem to have come into existence like plants, chaotic, facing no way, top heavy, one growing out of the other.

Outside the medina, however, the vistas open up: the sky is brilliant; the Atlantic, mottled blue and green, about to encounter the Mediterranean, is suddenly visible as one turns the corner on a block of white stucco houses.

The day of my first visit to Bowles's apartment, a three room flat on the top floor of a concrete edifice across from the American Consulate, a flock of sheep are grazing in the side yard. The living room has a permanent twilight aspect, and a fire always burns in the grate, regardless of the temperature outside. The sweet aroma of kif pervades the air. Although Bowles has inhabited the apartment for more than twenty five years, it has the provisional look of a temporary encampment -the foyer is crowded with a large stack of suitcases, and framed paintings by Bowles's friend Brion Gysin lean against a wall. On a small end table lies a shiny new volume of Kafka's collected stories, one of the few objects that appear to belong exactly where they are.

"Would you like some tea?" Bowles asks after apologizing for the weather.

He rises to greet his visitors, of whom there is a steady influx, extending a hand and addressing them in whatever language is appropriate French, Spanish, Arabic, or English. He is extremely polite and courtly in manner, giving the impression of someone who does not take social occasions for granted. His dress is rather formal for relaxing at home: a tie, a cardigan, and a tweed jacket. The black cigarette holder seems quite natural and unaffected. My first impression, of extreme delicacy, is modified over the course of the afternoon by evidence of a sinewy vigor. A friend of his wrote, "He has the beauty of a fallow deer"; my feeling is that a predator who tried to make a meal of Bowles would find his digestion unpleasantly disrupted. The craggy demeanor and laconic air seem to betray his New Hampshire roots.

On the sofa are two Moroccans: Mohammed Mrabet, one of several illiterate storytellers whose oral tales and novels Bowles has translated into English, and a young musician, who is oiling and polishing a wooden flute. "It's like cleaning a shotgun," Bowles remarks of the process, a whistle in his s's, as he settles onto a cushion. The musician begins to play, filling the room with a breathy, haunting sound. Bowles nods appreciatively. When the music ends, Mrabet is eager to take center stage. He is a handsome man who appears to be in his thirties,

although he claims to be fifty-four; Bowles thinks he is in his late forties. Mrabet has the sad sack aspect of Buster Keaton. He begins to complain about the difficulties of his life, speaking of several of his children who have died. "Paul, yo he sufrido mas que tu'. Tu no has sufrido. Yo, yo he sufrido." He has suffered, Paul has not. Bowles smiles. The litany is apparently familiar. But when I express my sympathy, Mrabet becomes almost indignant. "Todo es perfecto" everything is perfect he says, expressing the Islamic belief that all is as Allah wills it. It is clear that Mrabet relishes attention, that he is a born performer, and that Bowles relishes the performances, not least perhaps because he finds in Mrabet something of an alter ego. Mrabet's tales of woe are in keeping with Bowles's somewhat morbid tastes.

The conversation -about Tangier, about music and writing- proceeds in English and Spanish. Rodrigo Rey Rosa, a young Guatemalan writer whose work Bowles is translating, arrives with his girlfriend. Cigarettes are emptied and refilled with kif. Bowles listens to the talk with an intensity that reminds me of a robin poised, head cocked, on a wet lawn; he dips forward suddenly to clarify a point or to dispute an opinion. Asked if he particularly admires any living American writers, Bowles taps his cigarette holder thoughtfully against the lip of an ashtray, then sits back and looks earnestly at the ceiling. Finally he asks, "Is Flannery O'Connor still alive?" When the field is expanded to include South America, he is able to endorse Jorge Luis Borges without hesitation.

When Bowles's friends wish to talk to him, they come to visit, for he has not had a phone in sixteen years. "Who can be bothered?" he says. "You'll be working, or else you're in the bathtub, and the phone rings. You answer and a voice says, 'Allo, Mohammed?' " One quickly gets the sense that Bowles, having spent most of his life in undeveloped parts of the world - North Africa, Sri Lanka, Central America- does not have much use for high technology. He hates air travel, which is one of the reasons he has not been to the United States since 1968, when he taught college for a semester in California. The suitcases in the foyer bear the yellowing tags of dry docked steamers.

"I don't particularly like mechanization, pollution, noise -all the things the twentieth century has brought and scattered over the world," he says, his voice soft, his accent patrician. "Who does, except those who have made money by it? I can't imagine anyone embracing it."

Bowles's fiction often presents Americans in flight from civilization, looking for escape from the bourgeois ideals of industrial progress and teleological rationality. This is not a unique theme in Western literature, but what makes Bowles's work so different is his tough mindedness, his refusal to romanticize the exotic -something that the hippies who showed up at his door in the sixties failed to notice. "They would appear here," he remembers, "and say, 'Hey, man, can I crash with you?' I gather I was supposed to be a guru. But I never went in for acting."

Westerners who don djellabas and climb on camels in the hope of a quick spiritual boost are, in Bowles's view, as native as Arabs who borrow European customs wholesale.

Bowles's protagonists, seeking the unknown, often discover the chaos that underlies the civilized mind. Ultimately his fiction is concerned not so much with the meeting of cultures as with the peeling away of layers of acculturation, the stripping of character and humanity to

essential elements. He has more in common with Samuel Beckett than with T. E. Lawrence.

Bowles cautions against taking his fiction to represent the actual landscape of North Africa, and he sometimes speaks of his long residence in Morocco as if it were purely accidental, a matter of washing up on that shore rather than another. But one cannot help feeling the symbiosis between the writer and his adopted environment. Though *Without Stopping* is in general one of the most unrevealing American autobiographies since Benjamin Franklin's, Bowles writes frankly in it of his attachment to Tangier:

"If I am here now, it is only because I was still here when I realized to what an extent the world had worsened, and that I no longer wanted to travel. In defense of the city I can say that so far it has been touched by fewer of the negative aspects of contemporary civilization than most cities of its size. More important than that, I relish the idea that in the night, all around me in my sleep, sorcery is burrowing its invisible tunnels in every direction, from thousands of senders to thousands of unsuspecting recipients. Spells are being cast, poison is running its course; souls are being dispossessed of parasitic pseudo consciousness that lurk in the unguarded recesses of the mind.

There is drumming out there most nights. It never awakens me; I hear the drums and incorporate them into my dream, like the nightly cries of the muezzins. Even if in the dream I am in New York, the first Allah akbar! effaces the backdrop and carries whatever comes next to North Africa, and the dream goes on."

Bowles, a surrealist sympathizer, seems to have associated Morocco with the anarchic forces of the unconscious. As an artist, he discovered in North Africa a landscape and culture which are the objective correlatives of his vision of the psyche.

The population of Tangier represents several cultures and centuries: women in gray djellabas, only their eyes visible between wimple and kerchief, men in business suits; country Berbers driving donkeys along the sidewalk; cabdrivers in neo Italian fashions piloting twenty year old Mercedes grands taxis. It is still possible to get lost in the medina for quite some time, and if one is obviously confused, obviously a tourist, he will soon be set upon by "guides," hustlers, hashish dealers, and predatory carpet sellers. For the visitor, the combination of the almost subterranean landscape and the alien culture of the place can be very menacing, although Bowles dismisses the likelihood of any real danger.

Paul Bowles makes his way around town in a bronze 1967 Mustang. The day after I arrived, he picked me up at my hotel for a trip into the hills outside of town. His driver, a tall Moroccan named Abdulwahaid, held the door for me. Life in Tangier, for an expatriate author living largely on modest royalties, is a blend of luxury and deprivation: the equivalent of a month's rent on a studio apartment in Manhattan pays the annual salary of a chauffeur or cook -or buys two months' supply of scarce firewood for heating, Bowles's biggest expense.

Abdulwahaid, whose name means "slave of the unique," stops at the post office and picks up several airmail letters and a small package. Bowles complains about the few stray clouds in the sky and then instructs Abdulwahaid to drive us up the Montana Vieja, which winds along a ridge

overlooking Tangier and the Atlantic. Cobbles from an old Roman highway are still visible in the roadbed. Bowles and Abdulwahaid converse in Spanish, both using the familiar form of address.

Most of the houses we pass are secluded behind white walls overhung with bougainvillea and other flowering vines. "This is my favorite part of town," Bowles says, leaning forward in his seat to take in the scenery and the memories, pointing out the villa Tennessee Williams once rented, and then the gate of the house where he and his wife, Jane, lived in '54, and then the place he stayed in '31, when he first arrived in Tangier.

The son of a Long Island dentist, Bowles is descended from old New England stock. Of his odd and isolated childhood he writes in his autobiography: "At the age of five I had never yet even spoken to another child or seen children playing together. My idea of the world was still that of a place inhabited exclusively by adults."

When he was eighteen and already a published poet, he went, like Poe, to the University of Virginia, but he left within a year and ran away briefly to Paris, where he sought out the community of artists and writers living abroad.

Bowles was twenty years old when he again traveled to Paris, this time as Aaron Copland's student. Having established a correspondence with Gertrude Stein, he one day appeared at her door with a sheaf of poems. Stein, never reticent with her opinions, told him he was no poet and suggested he stick to music. When she also suggested Tangier as a good place to spend the summer, he and Copland decided to go. Bowles contracted typhoid fever on his second visit, that winter, but North Africa continued to draw him back. He spent the following winter in the M'Zab region of the Sahara; almost fifteen years later this landscape was to become the setting, and ultimately the protagonist, of *The Sheltering Sky*.

Though he continued to travel in Europe and Latin America, Bowles resided mainly in New York during the thirties and forties, becoming a regular at Kirk and Constance Askew's legendary salon, and briefly joining the Communist Party. He supported himself as a composer of theater music, in which capacity he collaborated with Orson Welles, Elia Kazan, William Saroyan, and Tennessee Williams. Bowles was acclaimed by such peers as Virgil Thomson for his original compositions, including *The Wind Remains*, an opera that in 1943 was conducted by Leonard Bernstein and danced by Merce Cunningham at the Museum of Modern Art. In 1937 he met Jane Auer, a young aspiring writer. They barely knew each other when they decided to take a trip together to Mexico, and within a year they were married.

The marriage was an eccentric one, punctuated by long separations, dual residences, and other partners on both sides at one point their mutual friend Libby Holman proposed to Paul but those who knew them both agree that it was a remarkable romance. Bowles's stoicism flickers somewhat when he mentions his deceased wife, whom he usually refers to as Mrs. Bowles. As for Jane, an old friend of hers says, "She used to call him Fluffy and Bubbles. Can you imagine? Paul? That prickly man? It was the most extraordinary thing." That the austere Mr. Bowles would answer to these appellations says much about the intimacy of their relationship. "She was his muse," adds the friend. "You have to understand that. "

Bowles had set writing aside when he discovered his talent for music. He credits his wife with inspiring him to return to the typewriter. "I never would have known that I wanted to start writing again if I hadn't been with her when she was writing her first novel," Bowles acknowledges of the time Jane was at work on *Two Serious Ladies*. "I got really interested in the whole process, and thought, I wish I had written this book. I started writing stories about two years after she published her novel. "

The urge to write seemed inextricable from the urge to return to North Africa. On the strength of several short stories, Bowles found an agent. Doubleday gave him an advance against a novel, and in the summer of 1947 he sailed to Casablanca. He had only a vague outline in mind of the book he wanted to write, something about three Americans moving across the Sahara. "My idea was that the people would keep moving into the desert," he says, "that one would get ill and die, and at that point it would write itself."

Bowles traveled alone into the Algerian Sahara to work on the novel. "I wrote in bed in hotels in the desert," he says. When he reached the point where Port, the central character in the first half of the novel, becomes sick, Bowles realized that he had come to his crucial juncture. He wanted to describe Port's death from the interior of Port's mind, and to do so he decided to take *majoun*, a potent cannabis confection. "It gave me everything," he says. "Not that day. The day I took it I couldn't have written anything. I was lying flat on my back. I was lying on my back, dying. Not unhappy. Port's death became my death. That more or less broke the ice. I didn't need to take it after that."

The immense domed sky of the Sahara dominates the book. Early on, Port muses, "I often have the sensation when I look at it that it's a solid thing up there, protecting us from what's behind." As he is dying in the desert he sees the sky crack open, and in one of the most convincing and harrowing evocations of death since Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich he looks into the void beyond. From there the novel follows Port's wife, Kit (who people in Tangier will assure you is a ringer for Jane), as she moves into the Sahara, fleeing the memory of her adultery with Port's friend Tunner, pursuing the primitive and the unknown, surrendering herself to a Bedouin who rapes her, finally leaving her reason behind. Bowles's desert becomes -like Conrad's jungle and Eliot's wasteland- a symbolic landscape, emblematic of a world in which individuals are radically isolated from one another.

Bowles finished *The Sheltering Sky* in nine months. "I sent it out to Doubleday," he says, "and they refused it. They said, 'We asked for a novel.' They didn't consider it a novel. I had to give back my advance. My agent told me later they called the editor on the carpet for having refused the book only after they saw that it was selling fast. It only had to do with sales. They didn't bother to read it."

Eventually another house, *New Directions*, accepted the book; in the meantime Bowles sailed to New York to do the score for *Summer and Smoke*. Before he left again for Tangier, he persuaded Tennessee Williams to accompany him. "As always on a ship, I stayed in the cabin and generally in my berth, writing," he says of the journey. "It's a perfect place to write. I wrote this story and took it around to Tennessee's cabin, and he read it and said, 'Oh, I think it's wonderful, Paul, but you mustn't publish that story -people will think you're a monster.' "

Bowles laughs and adds, "I was very flattered."

The piece he showed to Williams was to become "The Delicate Prey," the title story of his first collection. In it, a Mougari tribesman who commits an extremely gruesome murder is discovered by kinsmen of the victim, who take the murderer out into the desert and bury him up to his neck. The tale ends with one of the most striking images in contemporary fiction: "When they had gone the Mougari fell silent, to wait through the cold hours for the sun that would bring first warmth, then heat, thirst, fire, visions. The next night he did not know where he was, did not feel the cold. The wind blew dust along the ground into his mouth as he sang."

Bowles expresses sympathy for the surrealist notion of shocking the bourgeoisie out of its complacency by dredging up the raw material of the unconscious and exposing it to daylight. Norman Mailer's apocalyptic assessment of Bowles's work places it in this current of literary terrorism. But like one of his characters, Bowles claims that for him writing is merely a form of personal therapy. "I don't like the things I write about," he protests when asked why so much of his work deals with the dark side of human nature. "It's a kind of exorcism. It doesn't mean that I approve of what goes on in the pages of my book God forbid."

After Tennessee Williams left Tangier, Truman Capote arrived and moved into the hotel in which Paul and Jane were staying. Of Capote, Bowles says dryly, "We did not lack for entertainment at mealtimes. "

At this point, in the early fifties, Tangier was assuming the aspect of an international literary salon. The presence of Jane and Paul Bowles served as a magnetic force; then again, like the Americans who had moved to Paris in the twenties, the fashionable refugees landing in Tangier were attracted by cheap living and the atmosphere of duty free morality. Male homosexuality was openly tolerated in Morocco. The second sons of English lords and even first sons facing the burden of steep inheritance taxes found that their pounds, if they could smuggle them into Tangier, went far. With life back in the States becoming increasingly puritan, Barbara Hutton, the Woolworth heiress, bought a palace in the Casbah and threw lavish parties. The Honorable David Herbert, son of the Earl of Pembroke, presided over the city's social life, as he still does today. A close friend of the Bowleses', Herbert once promised to marry Jane if anything ever happened to Paul.

Bowles, neither a joiner nor an avid partygoer, continued to travel, write, and compose. In 1955 he completed *The Spider's House*, which presciently depicted the Moroccan struggle for independence, and which remains invaluable, aside from its novelistic virtues, for its sympathetic insights into Islamic culture and postcolonial politics.



Far from the crowded medina: Bowles in a forest outside Tangier.

In the mid-fifties Bowles began to encounter members of the Beat movement. He first met William S. Burroughs in the spring of 1954. "He was living down in the medina, in a brothel," says Bowles. "He lay in bed all day, shot heroin, and practiced sharp shooting with a pistol against the wall of his room. I saw the wall, all pockmarked with bullet holes. I said to him, 'Why are you shooting your wall, Bill?' He said, 'It's good practice.' I didn't get to know him until '55, '56. He was writing *Naked Lunch*."

I ask Bowles about Burroughs's claim that he did not remember writing *Naked Lunch*, that he came out of a junk coma one day and it was simply there. "He ought to remember it," Bowles answers. "It was all over the floor. There were hundreds of pages of yellow foolscap all over the floor, month after month, with heelprints on them, rat droppings, bits of old sandwiches, sardines. It was filthy. I said, 'What is all that, Bill?' He said, 'That's what I'm working on.' 'Do you have a copy of it?' I asked. 'No,' he said. " Bowles manages a convincing imitation of Burroughs's harsh midwestern growl. "I couldn't help myself from saying, 'Why don't you pick it up?' Candy bar in hand, he said, 'Oh, it'll get picked up someday.' As he finished a page, he'd just throw it on the floor."

Jack Kerouac was in Tangier in 1956, but Bowles, who was in Portugal at the time, did not meet him. When Allen Ginsberg arrived, Bowles was again away, this time in Sri Lanka. "Jane wrote a wonderful letter," he remembers, "telling me that Ginsberg had called up. She'd never heard of him. He said, in his brash fashion, 'Hello, this is Allen Ginsberg, the bop poet.' She said, 'The what?' He said, 'The bop poet.' And she said, 'I got the poet, but the what poet?' He said, 'Bop, bop, bop.' And she said, 'All right.' Then he said, 'Do you believe in God, Jane?' And she said, 'I'm certainly not going to discuss it on the telephone. You'd better wait until Paul gets home.' "

Ginsberg was traveling with Alan Ansen and Peter Orlovsky. Soon after they arrived, Ginsberg and Ansen began sorting through the papers on Burroughs's floor. "I used to go over to Bill's apartment," says Bowles, "and they would all be sitting there, and Allen, who hasn't got a good reading voice, would be reading out loud. Bill wouldn't read it out loud. Hearing Allen Ginsberg read it, it wasn't very impressive. Have you heard him?" Bowles begins to drone a nasal Buddhist raga. "Anyway, Bill is wonderful reading his own stuff, but he wouldn't I don't know why. He didn't think it existed yet. It was on the floor. So they put it together, and it spelled *mother*. Once it was published and I was able to read it cover to cover, I liked it. I read it three times. I think Bill's the greatest American humorist. I wish he'd concentrate on humor. "

Bowles is frequently lumped in with the Beats in surveys of American literature, but his relation to the movement is a little like that of Manet to the Impressionists; Bowles stood between the European modernist and the Beats, an elder patron with an affinity for Beat ideals. "I was never part of a group," Bowles says, "but I felt sympathy for the Beats. I approved of their existence as a group. It seemed a new thing. I thought it was careless, though. There's a certain amount of carelessness in the writing of all those people. " The fastidious craftsman shakes his head and smiles ruefully. "Jane said, 'I think they've all just read Celine.

When asked if he and others in the Tangier literary community ever discussed their work together, Bowles replies emphatically, "No. Bill and I talked about the dollar and what it was worth, or who had invaded whom with what justification. Nobody ever talks about his work except a few maniac writers, some that shouldn't even write. They're generally the ones who talk about their writing." Clearly, Bowles has not spent much time on campus recently, and I don't want to be the one to tell him that talking about writing is the growth industry of publishing and the humanities.

I ask Bowles if he and Jane ever talked about their work with each other. "When it was finished we did," he says. " Sometimes Jane discussed it in the middle of writing. It wasn't really a discussion she would call me from the next room and say, 'What genus is the canary?' or 'Exactly how do you build a cantilever bridge?' I said, 'Does it matter how it was built? The word cantilever tells the whole story.' She said, 'I've got to know how it was made.' In the end she simply spoke of a bridge going across the gorge. She had to build the bridge before she could talk about it.

"We would work in hotels when we were traveling. We would have adjoining rooms. She'd be in her bed working, and I'd be in my bed working. She'd call out, 'Is it i-e or e-i?' Bowles smiles at the memory.

In 1957 Jane Bowles suffered a stroke from which she was never to recover. Until her death, in 1973 at a clinic in Spain, she was afflicted with impaired vision, aphasia, seizures, and depression. In the sixties Paul Bowles turned increasingly to translation, virtually inventing a new genre when he began to transcribe and translate the tales of Moroccan storytellers, among them in addition to Mrabet Larbi Layachi and Ahmed Yacoubi. "The real reason I started translating," Bowles explains, "was that Mrs. Bowles was ill and I couldn't write, because I would only have twenty minutes and then I would be called downstairs. One needs solitude and

privacy and more or less unlimited time to write novels."

Solitude seems an unlikely prospect for Bowles these days. In the morning he works on his translations, his correspondence, and his own short stories, but in the afternoon the visitors -a Danish architect, a French journalist, a British novelist, the semi resident Mrabet- come and stay to chat, drink tea, and smoke kif. Though Bowles no longer goes out at night, he is a vivid presence in the English speaking community, which gathers at Guita's, the restaurant across from the mosque. They argue about his work, which has for better or worse put a version of their experience on the map, and about his marriage, as if Jane and Paul had just left the room. But Bowles is a private man, with a reserved, almost impersonal interest in his neighbors. As the titles of his novels -The Sheltering Sky, Let It Come Down, Up Above the World- suggest, his is an aerial, cosmic point of view, that of an observer looking down from a great height.

When asked if there is a specific message in his fiction, Bowles snorts derisively and examines his cigarette holder as if reading an inscription. Three days later, on an expedition some thirty miles south of Tangier, he surveys the new cinder block suburbs of a fishing village in which he once lived. "Here's my message," he says, then pauses and smiles. "Everything gets worse."

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