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THE INTERACTION WITH ALTERITY IN PAUL BOWLES'S "A DISTANT EPISODE"

Fernando Gomes, University of Évora, Portugal

ABSTRACT: *"A Distant Episode" expresses some fundamental aspects of Bowles's fiction, particularly the futility of racial interaction and Western vanity in its dialogue with the "other." In this story, Bowles exposes the tragic effects of confrontation with alterity and the ensuing disintegration of identity. In discussing "A Distant Episode," this article highlights Western presumption in its relationship with the "other," who hides his identity and refuses to be assimilated. The presence of stereotypes from colonialist discourse that interfere with cultural communication and the ineffectiveness of dialogue between races are also discussed.*

KEYWORDS: *Paul Bowles, North Africa, alterity, identity, Orientalism, colonialist discourse, cultural transposition*

PAUL BOWLES'S BACKGROUND

An inveterate traveler—always by sea or land because he found the plane gave insufficient time to enjoy the journey—Paul Bowles (1910–99) journeyed to Paris and to most of the European countries during the thirties, forties, and fifties. He also traveled to North Africa and into the depths of its deserts, to Latin America and its tropical forests, and also to Asia, especially to Taprobane, a small island off the coast of Sri Lanka that he bought and owned for many years. These exotic places became the backdrops of his fictional work, giving it its peculiarity. In his autobiography, *Without Stopping*—which is more a review of mainstream arts and letters from the twentieth-century intelligentsia than a genuine life story—Bowles explains his fascination for certain places: "Like any Romantic, I had always been vaguely certain that sometime during my life I should come into a magic place,

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which, in disclosing its secrets, would give me wisdom and ecstasy—perhaps even death" (Bowles 1972: 125). Bowles felt this fascination from the very first time he saw the Algerian coast, and it would define his connection with North Africa:

> On the second day at dawn I went on deck and saw the rugged line of the mountains of Algeria ahead. Straightway I felt a great excitement; much excited; it was as if some interior mechanism had been set in motion by the sight of the approaching land. Always without formulating the concept, I had based my sense of being in the world partly on an unreasoned conviction that certain areas of the earth's surface contained more magic than the others. (1972: 125)

Paul Bowles fell in love with North Africa, and this was the reason why, after his first stay in Tangier in the summer of 1931, he came back in 1947, following the Second World War. The city eventually became his home, both physically and spiritually, until his death in 1999. Bowles lived for fifty-two of his eighty-eight years in Tangier. He became strongly identified with the city and came to symbolize the many American expatriates who lived there. For this reason, obituary writers frequently relate his life to his residency in that city. If Bowles succumbed to the charms of Tangier, he was also not indifferent to the ease with which everything could be acquired. In an interview with Stephen Davis he recalls: "In the beginning everybody came here because you could live for nothing and get whatever you wanted. Right after the war Tangier was extremely cheap; you never asked the price of anything, you just took what you saw. It was amazing. . . . And also it was a very beautiful place to live" (Davis 1993a: 108). In this exotic paradise of delights and corruption, the embodiment of an Oriental ideal, Paul Bowles, both by his popularity as a writer and by his modus vivendi (his use of *kif* and *majoun*[1] and his homosexual practices), became a kind of mythical figure for the "Literary Renegades,"[2] who came to Tangier in search of freedom and a bohemian lifestyle. He has also been considered to be a mentor for several members of the American Beat movement, such as Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, who flocked to Tangier in the fifties (Davis 1993b: 228).

Bowles's fascination with Morocco is manifest in the attention he gave to Moroccan ethnology. In addition to being a writer, Bowles was a well-known composer. He studied music composition with Aaron Copland, and he composed both orchestral works and incidental music to accompany plays. Because of this background in music, Bowles also became interested in native Moroccan music and folklore.

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Bowles is also known as a translator of Moroccan folk tales. He began to transcribe oral stories during the fifties with Ahmed Yacoubi, a Moroccan painter he met in Fez, and with Larbi Layachi. During the late sixties and early seventies, after his wife's death, and when his own production was waning, Bowles devoted more time to recording, transcribing, and translating Maghrebi stories into English. Between 1967 and 1986 his collaboration with Mohamed Mrabet, his constant companion at the time, resulted in a dozen books. He also translated from Arabic into English and wrote an introduction to Mohamed Choukri's first book, *For Bread Alone.*

The magnetism of North Africa and particularly the desert finds its utmost expression in Bowles's fiction. In fact, right from the beginning of his career as a novelist, North African landscapes became the setting for most of Bowles's Western characters' experiences. In his novels and short stories, Bowles depicts a very real world, which, due to its violence, can make his writing difficult to read. Some of his stories have been considered by some critics to be excessively violent, because they depict gratuitous aggression. While it is true that his stories are imbued with a profound pessimism and nihilism concerning human nature, they indubitably present an insightful vision of human life. Hans Bertens considers "The Delicate Prey" and "A Distant Episode" as well as "Tapiama" to be the works that best portray Bowles's universe of terror and violence, a universe where nobody is safe, since good fortune is an inconstant phenomenon (Bertens 1979: 199). Bertens admits, however, that Bowles's fiction can be seen as part of the gothic tradition, and states that "the stories which do not make use of violence or insanity at all, are far superior" (Bertens 1979: 252).

Bowles first earned critical acclaim with his 1949 novel, *The Sheltering Sky.* This story centers on a married couple, who, seeking a deeper meaning for their lives, take a spiritual journey through North Africa and the desert. What they find, however, is not spiritual fulfillment, but the disintegration of their identity, and, eventually, death. The disintegration of one's identity is a recurrent theme in Bowles's fiction. In 1990, Bowles benefitted from a resurrection of interest in his writing, as well as his music, when Bernardo Bertolucci turned this novel into a movie, starring the American actors Debra Winger and John Malkovich. Interest in Bowles naturally intensified again after his death in 1999.

Bowles's other novels, which also deal with Tangier and his journeys around the world, include *Let It Come Down,* 1981; *The Spider's House,* 1982; *Points in Time,* 1984; *Too Far from Home: The Selected Writings of Paul Bowles,* 1995; and *Up Above the World* (reprint ed.), 1996. Among his numerous short stories are

"The Delicate Prey," "A Hundred Camels in the Courtyard," "Call at Corazon," and "A Thousand Days for Mokhtar."

SUMMARY OF "A DISTANT EPISODE"

The short story "A Distant Episode," first published in the *Partisan Review* (January–February 1947) and republished in *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* in 1948, was included in the collection *The Delicate Prey and Other Stories*, published in 1950. It is the first of Bowles's many stories about the effects of North Africa and its deserts on people of American and European culture. It is the story of a French linguistics professor who returns to a fictional village, Aïn Tadouirt, in southern Morocco, that he had last visited ten years earlier. During the late 1940s (when the story apparently takes place), the region was under French colonial rule. Aïn Tadouirt is located in an area referred to as the "warm country." This term probably refers to a buffer zone between the northern and southern parts of Morocco, since parts of southern Morocco, due to the region's lack of economic development and to the resistance of the population to colonial assimilation, were under military rule, the so-called "el siba" that escaped colonial control.[3]

The Professor believes that he has made "a fairly firm friendship with [Hassan Ramani], a café-keeper, who had written him several times during the first year after his visit, if never since" (1995b: 290).[4] In reality, however, he had been in the village for only three days during his first visit and had not heard from his friend in a decade. At the café, the Professor is informed by the *qaouaji*[5] that his friend is dead. Acting condescendingly to this man—he refuses the seat the waiter prepares for him—and speaking condescendingly to him as well, the Professor (for no apparent reason) insists on obtaining boxes made from camel udders, and offers to pay the man for each box that he can procure. The episode becomes ominous as the waiter, who first seems offended by the Professor's demand, eventually accepts. He lures the Professor into taking a nighttime journey through the desert with the promise to obtain the boxes. They travel down into the empty desert, and then through dark pathways with the omnipresent threat of dangerous, barking dogs. When they arrive at a steep rock quarry, the *qaouaji*, after demanding to be paid for his services, tells the Professor to go down into the pit and abandons him. After a perilous descent in the darkness, the Professor is savagely attacked by dogs and beaten to the point of unconsciousness with the guns and fists of the Reguibat, the nomadic tribesmen to whom the dogs belong. When he comes round, a man

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forces the Professor's mouth wide open, yanks out his tongue, and cuts it off with a knife. Later he is dressed from head to toe in belts, upon which pieces of tin have been affixed, ironically portrayed as "armor."[6] The Professor is soon reduced to a mere plaything, a joke at the hands of the Reguibat tribe. At this point, he loses his identity, his understanding of language, and even his self-consciousness as a human being. The Reguibat eventually decide to sell him to another tribe, whose representative speaks in classical Arabic. The Professor, confined in a room, eavesdrops on this conversation, which awakens in him memories of language. Being now conscious of his state, the Professor refuses to perform for his new owner, who then rushes off to settle accounts with the tribe who sold him defective merchandise. The new owner nearly decapitates one of the Reguibat, leading to his arrest by the French soldiers. Hungry, and left alone in captivity, the Professor breaks out of the room and flees, jumping up and down and bellowing as he runs toward the desert. The French soldiers, seeing him fleeing, decide that he is a "holy maniac." One of them takes a shot at him, but he continues running toward the setting sun.

INTERACTION WITH ALTERITY IN "A DISTANT EPISODE"

In this short story and, with some variations, in a great part of his fiction (e.g., *The Sheltering Sky*), Bowles places his characters in a harsh and savage setting, mainly in North Africa and its desert, in order to create a confrontation between a Western rationality and a strange "other"[7] whose alterity is beyond his understanding and eventually engulfs his identity. In *Paul Bowles: Romantic Savage*, Gena Dagel Caponi asserts that "in his own way, Bowles transported the classic American confrontation between 'civilization' and 'savagery' across the globe, replacing a geographical frontier with a nomadic intersection of Western and Eastern cultures" (Caponi 1994: 125). This confrontation is also noticed by Allen Hibbard, who states that the short stories from the collection *The Delicate Prey and Other Stories* share a nearly gothic concern with violence, classifying in particular "The Delicate Prey" and "A Distant Episode" as "Tales of Gothic Horror" (Hibbard 1993: 12). But Hibbard also notes: "An important difference between the two stories is that while 'The Delicate Prey' was populated wholly by indigenous characters, the protagonist of 'A Distant Episode' is a Western linguist anthropologist" (Hibbard 1993: 16).

Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno also discusses the terror and violence in these two stories, stating that "The Delicate Prey" is the work that most reveals Bowles's

mastery in writing fiction, particularly in portraying pure terror: "Again, as in 'A Distant Episode,' the horror builds through attention to detail, through the powerfully vivid ability on Bowles's part to make us feel each moment as if we ourselves were experiencing it. Again, as in his earlier macabre tale of the professor, he is a master of conjuring up pure terror through narrative detachment" (Sawyer-Lauçanno 1989: 279). In fact, I would argue that Bowles's originality in fifties fiction resides in this depiction of the disintegration of a person's identity through an experience that involves terror and horror.

Bowles believes that the natural impulse of a human being is the destruction of what he repudiates—a possible or probable, yet not necessary, attitude. In an interview with Daniel Halpern, when Halpern asks whether Bowles views writing about horror as a method to help destroy the world (Halpern 1993: 96)—Bowles answers negatively, while admitting that horror does play a role in his fiction:

> I don't write "about horror." But there's a sort of metaphysical malaise in the world today, as if people sense that things are going to be bad. They could be expected to respond to any fictional situation which evoked the same amalgam of repulsion and terror that they already vaguely feel. . . . A good jolt of vicarious horror can cause a certain amount of questioning of values afterward. (Halpern 1993: 96–97)

Oliver Evans, in an interview with Bowles, notes that one of Bowles's purposes is to shock his readers. He then asks: "What about 'A Distant Episode,' which I think shocks at the same time it teaches?" Bowles answers: "Precisely. If there's anything to teach in 'A Distant Episode,' it can only be taught through shock. Shock is a *sine qua non* to the story. You don't teach a thing like that unless you are able, in some way, to make the reader understand what the situation would be like to *him*. And that involves shock." But Bowles also agrees with Evans that "the writer who *merely* shocks doesn't give his reader a vision of life" (Evans 1993: 49).

To force the reader to question the values of a society that considers itself civilized and humane through the depiction of physical and psychological violence perpetrated on a supposedly innocent victim is, without doubt, the compelling force behind the writing of "A Distant Episode." The violence derives from the Western confrontation with the strange Oriental world, and the victim is a professor, a linguist who studies the variations of the Moghrebi[8] dialect (291). This researcher[9] travels to Aïn Tadouirt, an imaginary town in the south of Morocco, in the "warm country" (290), the Sahara, which would later become a favorite scene of Bowles's fiction. The Professor travels light—"two small overnight bags

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full of maps, sun lotions and medicines" (290), reminiscences of his culture and of his vulnerability as a white Westerner, and feels contented at the expectation of finding the Moroccan café keeper with whom he fraternized ten years ago. Such contentment is noticeable in the Proustian pleasure of the city odors: "[The] air . . . began to smell of other things besides the endless ozone of the heights: orange blossoms, pepper, sun-baked excrement, burning olive oil, rotten fruit. He closed his eyes happily and lived for an instant in a purely olfactory world. The distant past returned—what part of it, he could not decide" (290–91). The transition from the pleasant odors, such as the orange blossoms and pepper, evocative of the Orientalist exoticism imagery, to the disagreeable smells of excrement, burning olive oil, and rotten fruit functions as a metaphor for the story's development and for the protagonist's transformation, that is, his dissolution as a human being. This dissolution is foreshadowed in the first sentence of the story, when Bowles refers to the red color of the sunset, signifying blood, war, and danger. This reading is supported by the feelings of danger and fear that are foreshadowed later in the story by the disagreeable odors of raw meat and human excrement (294). The odorous world in Bowles's fiction is in total opposition to the Western imagery of an East full of sweet and exciting smells, and thus contributes to the representation of a violent and inhospitable universe.

The Professor's status as foreign in a distant and adverse landscape dominates the relationship between the native and the protagonist, who is far from the protection of the familiar universe of his civilization and culture. This distance provokes a loneliness so great that the Professor confesses childishly, "I wish everyone knew me" (293), to the café employee, the *qaouaji*. Confronted by the *qaouaji's* familiarity, the weight of the Westerner's loneliness and alienation is further exacerbated as they begin their journey; he feels he is a stranger in a strange land. This is the status abruptly given to him by his guide, in a rather enigmatic answer: "*No* one knows you" (293), with the emphasis on the "no." The implication reveals the loneliness and the great vulnerability of the white man. Because he is unknown and is socially anonymous, he can disappear without a trace, which is eventually what happens. The Professor's feelings of loneliness and alienation, as well as his determination to establish contact with the "other," mixed with some presumption, help to create his ambivalent relationship to the natives and to his own reality.

In the journey through dark paths—dangerous because of dog attacks[10] and because of the no less obscure presence of the *qaouaji*—some stereotypical images of the Orient about the barbarous potential of the "other" come to the Professor's mind. As Edward Said has noted: "The Orient at large, therefore, vacillates between

the West's contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in—or fear of—novelty" (Said 1979: 59). Homi Bhabha explains that the Westerner's conscious behavior does not show fear when faced with alterity and the presence of the "other," but rather ambivalence; a mix of attraction and repulsion in the relationship between the races (Bhabha 1994: 95).[11] The Professor in "A Distant Episode" also experiences ambivalence toward the *qaouaji*: "'These people are not primitives,' the Professor found himself saying" (297). Later, when they arrive at the stone quarry, he experiences some feelings difficult to identify concerning the "other":

> Standing there at the edge of the abyss which at each moment looked deeper, with the dark face of the *qaouaji* framed in its moonlit burnous close to his own face, the Professor asked himself exactly what he felt. Indignation, curiosity, fear, perhaps, but most of all relief and the hope that this was not a trick, the hope that the *qaouaji* would really leave him alone and turn back without him. (296)

Confused in his feelings, including those toward the *qaouaji*'s behavior, he actually hopes that his guide will leave him alone in the desert.

The Moroccan, however, frustrated by the Westerner's refusal to pay a high enough price for his services, does not leave right away, but asks for a cigarette. Now that the two men are physically close to each other, the danger becomes real and the Professor sees something disturbing on the face of "the other": "His face was not pleasant to see" (296). The Professor asks himself, "'What is it?'" This question signifies the Professor's attempt to unveil what disturbs him in the expression on the other's face. Far from seeing the hospitality of a Levinasian "face,"[12] the Professor is confronted with the impenetrability of the "other" who momentarily lets him glimpse the dysphoric aspects of his alterity: "The man's eyes were almost closed. It was the most obvious registering of concentrated scheming the Professor had ever seen" (296). These observations recall the stereotypes of the colonial discourse about the Western identification of the colonized as "other," that is, his "essential duplicity" (Bhabha 1994: 95). However, characteristic of his ethical stance toward the "other," the Professor represses his fears and risks the question, "What are you thinking about? (297). This is a misguided attempt to understand the essential impulses of the "other." The Professor tries to understand the "other" as a "non primitive," despite seeing the falseness on the *qaouaji*'s face. After the Professor asks him for his thoughts, the Moroccan's "expression changed to one of satisfaction, but he did not speak" (297). The Professor, attempting to ignore his own racial prejudice, is not sure about what he should fear in the

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"other," and so decides that his fears are ridiculous (297), neglecting and even denying them, favoring instead the ambivalent position exposed by Bhabha.

In truth, the Bowlesian hero does not fully ignore the status of *qaouaji* and his captors, the Reguibat,[13] as culturally different foreigners. However, except for some basic reactions, such as hiding his wallet, his interaction with alterity shows that the Professor does not have the reactions of a typical colonizing "Other"; in fact, the Professor fights against the use of stereotypes commonly used in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The confrontation with his aggressors is particularly illustrative of this attitude. He recognizes them as Reguibat and remembers the sayings that he had heard so many times: "'The Reguiba is a cloud across the face of the sun.' 'When the Reguiba appears the righteous man turns away'" (299). Despite these warnings, his attitude is one of scientific curiosity, which is rather inappropriate considering the circumstances: "'An opportunity,' he thought quickly, 'of testing the accuracy of such statements.' He did not doubt for a moment that the adventure would prove to be a kind of warning against such foolishness on his part—a warning which in retrospect would be half sinister, half farcical" (299–300). A second dog attack[14] contradicts these assumptions, but the Westerner's thinking is still anchored to civilized values. When the dogs attacked his legs, "he was scandalized to note that no one paid any attention to this breach of etiquette" (300). The Professor's inappropriate reactions are a sign of his naïveté; his full awareness of the danger is not actually achieved. Savagely ill-treated—the excision of his tongue being the culmination of his misfortune—he loses the notion of pain and even of his existence.

Somewhat sarcastically, Bowles punishes his character for his excessive self-confidence, an attitude noticeable during the Professor's frightening descent into the stone pit: "It occurred to him that he ought to ask himself why he was doing this irrational thing, but he was intelligent enough to know that since he was doing it, it was not so important to probe for explanations at that moment" (298). Does this condemnation signify that, in extreme conditions, knowledge is useless to man? Part of the answer is to be found in the contrast between the solemnity of the protagonist's status—a professor—and his misfortunes, hinting that this kind of solemnity is ineffective in such a landscape. In this short story, Bowles depicts a character who, while he is not actually an innocent victim, does not seem to deserve the calamity that engulfs him. In fact, his behavior regarding the "other" reveals not the typicality of the colonial interaction, but an ambivalent love/hate relationship that, from his perspective, is rationally thought out. He is a linguist who has spent the last four years learning the Moghrebi dialect (292). Ironically, his ambivalence prevents him from truly understanding the "other."

The first sign that his research as a linguist will fall short of his expectations emerges from the bus driver who brings the Professor to the town. When he learns that the Professor is a dialectologist, the bus driver is upset: "'Keep on going south.' . . . 'You'll find some languages you never heard before'" (291). The bus driver is insinuating that in the south there are unknown regions, potentially dangerous, beyond comprehension and assimilation. The bus driver's resentment might indicate a critical attitude on the part of the natives who see, in the studies carried out by foreigners, a colonialist mind-set that aims to show to the outside world the image of a retrograde country. A similar attitude is depicted in one of Bowles's travel essays, "Africa Minor." In this essay, the younger Muslims, particularly those in the city, reject the Berber ancestral rituals as heretic practices (Bowles 1957/2006: 23–24). These young men feel that such rituals and the dialects that convey them would expose a cultural backwardness that they are trying to forget: "The younger generation of French-educated Moslems is infuriated when this sort of story is told to foreigners. And that the latter are interested in such things upsets them even more. 'Are all the people in your country Holy Rollers?' they demand. 'Why don't you write about the civilized people here instead of the most backward?'" (Bowles 1957/2006: 27). Bowles condemns, although he understands, such a position, which he views as a consequence of inferiority feelings: "They have a feeling that their own culture is very inferior to European culture. That they haven't invented anything. So they feel slightly defensive. I suppose that's natural" (Alenier 1993: 161).

Confident in his Western status, and in his knowledge of Moghrebi (though he has only studied it for four years), the Professor, educated but not wise, is incapable of deciphering the danger signs that surround him. Language, for this linguist, is an aspect of culture that can be studied, and consequently it is a means to enter and understand the "other's" culture. As a sign of his attempt to approach the "other," although he does not speak fluent Moghrebi, he tries to talk with the *qaouaji*. He asks him first about his friend Ramani, the former owner of the café, but the *qaouaji* answers in bad French that he died and he does not know when. The *qaouaji*'s brusque "I don't know," followed by a question—"One tea?" (292)—closes the dialogue. The *qaouaji* then walks out of the room leaving the Professor in the middle of his reflections. The communication is not effective since there is, on the native's part, a clear refusal to establish contact in his own language, thus denying the Westerner access to the new culture. For his part, the Professor, blind because of his excessive confidence in his knowledge, forgets that a language, although it may facilitate, does not necessarily give direct access to the "other's" culture.

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The Professor's determination to overcome the cultural barriers and thus to participate in a different culture, as well as the "other's" subsequent refusal to allow him in, are primordial factors in the process that will eventually lead the Professor to a critical destiny. This double process is foreshadowed by the harshness of the first dialogue between the two men. In fact, when the Professor asks the *qaouaji* about the possibility of obtaining small boxes made of camel-udder, the *qaouaji* answers, with some disdain, that they do not acquire such objects sold by the savage tribe the Reguibat. Then, with some insolence, and this time in Arabic, the waiter asks: "And why a camel-udder box?" (292). Bowles does not furnish any hint that would explain the impetuousness of this reaction, but we can surmise that it is due to some disrespect toward an object belonging to the traditional native culture. Laurence Stewart's comment on this passage is insightful:

> Nor is he [the Professor] concerned with the source or significance of the camel udder boxes. To him they are merely souvenirs without memories. Evidently he does not know that they are traditionally used by women for keeping kohl, the native cosmetic. But those who do not react appropriately to the world and its rituals are, according to Bowles, undone by what they disregard. So the Professor who lives by language loses his tongue; and he who would collect the box of a woman's make-up does himself become an ornament and a diversion in a primitive culture. (Stewart 1974: 31)

Already unwilling to establish contact with the Westerner—the Professor's refusal to sit in the suggested place, choosing instead the back room[15] (292), might have contributed to this position—the *qaouaji* is infuriated by this invasion of his culture, which further contributes to his growing antagonism toward the Westerner. The Professor, in accordance with a typically Western attitude that money affords power and protection in the interaction with the "other," gives him a good tip and offers ten francs for each camel-udder box he finds. The Professor's Western attitude is also noticeable when, acting in response to a strong desire to go back to the comfort of the hotel, the contact of his wallet against his chest reassures him and so he decides to continue his expedition (298). When the *qaouaji* asks for fifteen francs per box instead of ten—"'*Khamstache*,' said the *qaouaji*, opening his left hand rapidly three times in succession"—the Professor promptly refuses (293), thus initiating his terrible fate.

Hibbard observes that this plot fits into a consistent pattern in Bowlesian fiction: "This leads to one of those terrifying trips, characteristic of Bowles, where

the character in an unknown landscape is escorted by (that is, at the mercy of) a stranger whose intentions are unclear" (Hibbard 1993: 17). In fact, after rejecting the Westerner's request for the boxes as unacceptable, the *qaouaji* suddenly changes his mind: "But wait until later and come with me. You can give me what you like. And you will get camel-udder boxes if there are any" (293). This sudden disinterest in money does not make the protagonist suspicious. Obsessed by the boxes, he remains unaware of the danger signs that are intensified by the increased barking and howling of dogs (293). It is only on the way out of the town to a small oasis in the desert that his suspicions gradually grow. The landscape and the company awaken his feeling of vulnerability, which he tries to overcome. The Professor first rationalizes the situation: "'He may cut my throat. But his café—he would surely be found out'" (294). He then seeks a dialogue with his guide who continues to be laconic. The *qaouaji*'s refusal to converse with the Professor contributes to his growing insecurity, but he ignores such feelings, maintaining the ambivalent attitude observed above.

The rejection of the "other's" request for money is repeated, near to the place where he supposedly will find the boxes, when the Professor gives him fifty francs: "He . . . fumbled in his pocket for a loose note, because he did not want to show his wallet. Fortunately there was a fifty-franc bill there, which he took out and handed to the man. He knew the *qaouaji* was pleased, and so he paid no attention when he heard him saying: 'It is not enough. I have to walk a long way home and there are dogs . . .'" (296). Certain of having paid more than the fair price for the guide's work, he does not bother with the arguments he is given and answers dryly, without any margin for negotiation: "'Thank you and good night'" (296). This second refusal definitively seals his fate. The guide is fully aware of the danger represented by the Reguibat but conceals it and knowingly encourages his descent into the abyss, so condemning him to a probable death. Ironically, he returns to French, the language of colonization: "'Ti n'as qu'à discendre, to' droit'" ("You just go straight down"; 297).

The dialogue between the two men does not communicate anything. In fact, it is the denial of the "Other," the Westerner, and his "othering"[16] that are at play here, processes that are equally central in Bowles's short story "Pastor Dowe at Tacaté." In this story, a Western missionary faces the refusal of evangelization from a Central American tribe and experiences the inefficiency of verbal communication: "'You don't understand anything! . . . I can't talk to you! I don't want to talk to you!'" (Bowles 1995c: 58). This is the missionary's yell of anger, despair and frustration, before he leaves the tribe.

The ethical, religious, and cultural values that compose the identity of this Pastor are seriously tested, but, contrary to the protagonist in "A Distant Episode,"

the Pastor is lucid enough to leave the mission. And, although shaken in his certainties, he is physically safe. Both short stories end in silence, as do many of Bowles's works. As Patteson notes: "Few of Bowles's stories (and none of his novels) end in the midst of conversation. Indeed, it is remarkable how many conclude like 'A Distant Episode,' with a commanding silence, a cessation of talking, with language itself standing as the last structure thrown up by the human in defence against the grim other" (Patteson 1987: 64).

In "A Distant Episode," the dialogue between the two men is not effective also due to the cultural differences that separate them. When the Professor asks his guide whether or not he is going to work the following day, the *qaouaji*'s answer, "'That is impossible to say'" (294), is particularly significant. The answer is as much enigmatic as it is frightening for the Professor. Already upset by the fact that the café does not belong to his guide, the Professor now concludes that, after all, the *qaouaji* "may cut my throat" (294) and disappear. For the native, however, the answer relates to the fundamental Islamic precept, according to which God commands men's destiny. In this answer, Bowles shows the instability of language as a repository of truth and its inefficiency as a means of communication between cultures. In this exchange, the Westerner's presumption to domesticate the "other" through the knowledge of his culture is confronted by the "other's" refusal to be assimilated. Thus, Bowles hints that language, being a characteristic of identity and difference, can communicate, but can also become a barrier between people and cultures. He also implies that because language facilitates interaction, but does not give full access to the "other's" culture, it can ultimately create the illusion of communication. The breakdown of communication is symbolically expressed by the excision of the Westerner's tongue, the last step in losing all notion of his identity.[17]

But while the dialogue between the *qaouaji* and the Professor is inefficient, communication becomes truly impossible with the Reguibat. When arriving at the stone pit, the Westerner hears the sound of a flute that repeats later on: a "swan song" that is misperceived as a sign of civilization (297).[18] The Professor's misperception here signifies that stereotyped judgments should be avoided. After following the Moroccan's directions, "down the path into the abyss" (298), the Professor is savagely attacked by dogs and becomes fully immersed in a "confusion of sensations and a pain somewhere" (299). With his eyes closed, he hears voices that he does not understand, feeling at the same time something cold and metallic against his spine, which he recognizes as being a gun. He raises his arms and makes use of the Moghrebi dialect to shout in vain—"Take away the dog" (299) and again: "The dogs! Take them away!" (300)—while he is brutally

attacked and beaten by the men. His knowledge of the dialect, the basis of his self-confidence, is useless. Ironically, semiconscious he still hears voices that he does not understand. Taken prisoner, mutilated and transformed into an object of entertainment, he loses the awareness of his humanity during the time spent with the tribe. He only recovers this consciousness after he is sold to another tribe, when he hears a native speaking in classic Arabic, that is, when he is put in contact with the civilization he once knew through language: "And the Professor in his stall beside them listened, too. That is, he was *conscious* of the sound of the old man's Arabic. The words penetrated for the first time in many months" (305). These words almost immediately bring to the Professor's mind the *qaouaji*, and the last words he heard before the attack and his descent into unconsciousness: "'It is an honor. Fifty francs is enough. Keep your money. Good.' And [the Professor recalled] the *qaouaji* squatting near him at the edge of the precipice" (305). Like thorns in his brain, these words stimulate the pain and the slow awakening of his consciousness, of his recovering lucidity: "But the pain had begun. It operated in a kind of delirium, because he had begun to enter into consciousness again. When the man opened the door and prodded him with his cane, he cried out in a rage, and everyone laughed" (305). Although this is the angry reaction of a captive and an ill-treated animal against its owner, it is also symptomatic of the Professor's new status, that is, his recovering consciousness. In fact, it is his hunger that completes this process. His hunger makes him wander around the house—his new owner has been arrested for killing the Reguibat who had sold him—and he comes across a calendar fixed to a wall: "The Professor watched nervously, like a dog watching a fly in front of his nose. On the white paper were black objects that made sounds in his head. He heard them: "*Grande Epicerie du Sahel. Juin. Lundi, Mardi, Mercredi . . .* " (306). These are small marks forming the words that, internalized, definitively awaken his consciousness. Bowles compares this awakening to a symphony: "The tiny inkmarks of which a symphony consists may have been made long ago, but when they are fulfilled in sound they become imminent and mighty. So a kind of music of feeling began to play in the Professor's head, increasing in volume as he looked at the mud wall, and he had the feeling that he was performing what had been written for him long ago" (306).

Bowles condemns his character to the worst punishment one could apply to a professor, especially a linguist, that is, to be aware of his loss. The pain caused by the awakening of consciousness of being transformed into a savage, as well as the realization of his presumptuousness as a Westerner and linguist in attempting to control the world, if not by force, then by knowledge, precipitates his loss of mental sanity. What could be considered as an act of revolt against his aggressors

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and of despair considering his mental condition is, in truth, the first step toward an awareness of his loss:

> He felt like weeping; he felt like roaring through the little house, upsetting and smashing the few breakable objects. His emotion got no further than this one overwhelming desire. So, bellowing as loud as he could, he attacked the house and its belongings. Then he attacked the door into the street . . . and still bellowing and shaking his arms in the air to make as loud a jangling as possible, he began to gallop along the quiet street toward the gateway of the town. (306–7)

Equally symptomatic of this loss is the fact that, instead of searching for protection from the French military as representatives of his civilization, yelling as loudly as possible, he runs away into the desert, toward his final destiny. However, Bowles maintains the sense of doubt about his protagonist's future, suggesting that his death, whether seen as his final misfortune or his release, might not come soon. His yells, exteriorizing his terror and madness, are his last form of verbal communication with humanity. Nevertheless, they do not communicate any better than his words did, since they cause only surprise from a French soldier who judges him a mad man—"a holy maniac" (307)—and fires on him for fun. Condemned to be definitively separated from civilization by his presumption, he is ultimately estranged from the world due to the loss of his mental sanity. Ironically, his quest finishes as it started: he is unable to communicate or, more precisely, inept at communication, a trait common to many of Bowles's future characters. In truth, in this ending, Bowles exposes his conviction that man is condemned to solitude and to suffer from his awareness of being nothing when face-to-face with the forces of the universe.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, in his first short story about the impact of the desert and its inhabitants—both are inseparable in his fiction—on the Westerner, Bowles exposes his doubts about the possibility of cultural exchange. Because the Professor incorrectly assumed that the desert and its population would tolerate being an object of study, his intention to investigate the variations of the Moghrebi dialect (291) was condemned to failure. In this sense, we could also question whether all Western studies of the East are not merely pretexts to objectify the "other," to make him an exotic object that can be possessed, like a camel-udder box.

The misfortune of Bowles's hero illustrates the failure of the West to assimilate the "other" as is commonly depicted in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century "colonialist novels." In these novels, of which *Robinson Crusoe* is the prototype, the European hero travels and explores savage territories. While there, he becomes a benevolent and civilizing influence on the native population. At the end of the adventure, he either returns home safely or re-creates in the conquered territory a social and political order similar to the one he left behind. Bowles's story exposes the shallowness and presumption of such narratives. A portrayal of life in its extremes, a pessimistic depiction of the relationship between cultures, between the rational West and the sensual East, "A Distant Episode" is the depiction of a confrontation that, right from the start, seems to be doomed for the overly self-confident Westerner.

Paul Bowles certainly understood such an experience. Despite his twenty years of contact with native North Africans, mainly with Moroccans, when asked about the Muslim culture as well as the political situation in Morocco, Bowles expressed his doubts on the possibility of knowing the Muslims in depth:

> I don't think we're likely to get to know the Moslems very well, and I suspect that if we should we'd find them less sympathetic than we do at present. And I believe the same applies to their getting to know us. . . . Their culture is essentially barbarous, their mentality that of a purely predatory people. It seems to me that their political aspirations, while emotionally understandable, are absurd, and any realization of them will have a disastrous effect on the rest of the world. (Breit 1993: 4)

In fact, Bowles acknowledged feeling like an outsider in Morocco—". . . apart, at one remove from the people here"—that he was living among a population with whom, he recognized, it was impossible to have a "Western-style relationship in terms of depth and reciprocity" (Bailey 1993: 129–30). Moreover, while acknowledging that he was deeply affected by Muslim beliefs, he refused to adopt this religion, believing that it inhibited rational thought (Alenier 1993: 171). Although he admired the "quality of impenetrability in the Moroccans" (Bailey 1993: 129), by the end of the eighties, he recognized that his "understanding of the Moroccan people always seems backward. . . . They are so difficult to understand, so illogical, so contradictory. There is always a part of Morocco that goes against the part that we have understood. A Europeanized part, a part that remains Moroccan. . . . Whatever a Moroccan does, I accept" (Briatte 1989: 18).[19] In the final analysis, this short story testifies to the insurmountable obstacles that Bowles believed would always sabotage any real communication between these culturally and religiously divergent races.

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NOTES

1. *Kif* or *kief* is a highly potent form of cannabis similar to hashish. *Majoun* is a type of Moroccan candy in which cannabis is mixed with dried fruits, nuts, honey, and spices.

2. Green (1992) uses this term to describe the disparate group of expatriate artists, writers, aristocrats, disaffected rich, lovers, criminals, and addicts who lived in Tangier, who were attracted by the inexpensive living and permissive atmosphere.

3. This name derives from the classical Arab *sabe*, which means wild animal, predator, lion. As a toponym, it means the place where these animals abound. *El siba*, by derivation, evokes the wildness of the native inhabitants and their insubordination to colonial control. In the interview given to Bailey, Bowles talks of this region: "Until 1956 the country was divided officially into two sectors: *bled el maghzen* and *bled es 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 *bled es siba*, 'La zone d'insécurité'" (Bailey 1993: 131–32).

4. Subsequent quotations from this story are cited simply with page numbers in parentheses.

5. In the Maghrebi dialect of Arabic, *qaouaji* means literally "the man who serves the tea."

6. This "armor" could be an ironic reference to Western soldiers and therefore to colonization.

7. The word "Other" with a capital "O" is used to refer to the colonizer, while "other" with a lowercase "o" refers to the colonized, following Ashcroft et al. (2000: 169–71).

8. When discussing "A Distant Episode," this article uses the term "Moghrebi," and not the more usual spelling, "Maghrebi," as it is the spelling used by Bowles. Maghrebi is primarily used as a spoken language. It is a cover term for the varieties of Arabic spoken in the Maghreb—Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Malta. Speakers of Maghrebi call their language Derija or Darija, which means "dialect" in Modern Standard Arabic.

9. Similar to the fictional technique used in "Tea on the Mountain," the protagonist of this short story is solely known by his profession. Not individualizing the characters gives them a universal dimension. For an analysis of the interaction with alterity in "Tea on the Mountain," see Gomes (2012).

10. In Bowles's fiction, the presence of this animal is recurrent at the critical moments of his characters' journeys in unknown landscapes. Significantly, in many mythologies, the dog is associated with death and with Hell. The dog's "first mythic function [is] to guide the man in the night of the death after being his companion in the day of the life" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1982: 239). According to this dictionary and also to Chebel (2001: 242–43), Islam sees in this animal one of creation's vilest forms, and its barking is seen as a presage of death.

11. Ambivalence is a psychoanalytical term adopted in the postcolonial discourse by Bhabha to describe the complex mixture of attraction and repulsion in the relation between the colonizer and the colonized.

12. For Emmanuel Levinas, otherness is intangible, elusive, and distant. The source of the desire of the "I" in the encounter with the other is precisely this intangibility. This expression of otherness is "face"; the free outpouring of strangeness where form and content merge in the warmth of hospitality. The notion of Levinas's "face" focuses on a purely ethical attitude that respects and supports the other in its entirety. Acknowledging the other as "face" opens up the possibility of looking at the world differently.

13. The Reguibat (also Rguibat, R'gaybat, R'gibat, Erguibat, Ergaybat, as well as other spellings) is a Sahrawi tribe of Sanhaja origins, established on Western Sahara, Morocco (south of Oued Noun), Mauritania (north), and Algeria (Tindouf). However, a number of other Arab tribes have merged with the Reguibat during the past two centuries.

14. In this case, the dogs have a defensive function, that of Hell's guardians. Significantly, the Professor is entering this infernal universe where, according to Muslim belief, the angels do not go because of the dogs' presence (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1982: 243).

15. Note that, a few lines before, the first description of the café is of this room: "[The] back room hung hazardously out above the river" (291). Setting his protagonist in this space foreshadows his position toward the danger that he will face and his final destiny.

16. The processes of identifying people considered different from us, which can reinforce or reproduce positions of domination and subordination, are identified as "Orientalism" by Edward Said or as "othering," a term coined by Spivak (Ashcroft et al. 2000: 171). In this case, we are confronted by the "othering" of the Westerner, a process that is also known as "Occidentalism."

17. Albert Camus, in *Le Renégat ou un esprit confus*, also develops this symbolism.

18. Bowles frequently uses music in his fiction as a lure to a fatal destiny. Familiar with Arab music and musical instruments, he was certainly aware of the symbolism of the flute, the bamboo "ney" that charms men and animals, but also symbolizes the suffering of the soul in its separation from the divine sphere (see Chebel 2001: 173–74).

19. My translation of the French: "Ma compréhension du peuple marocain me semble toujours reculer. . . . Ils sont si difficiles à comprendre, si illogiques, si contradictoires. Il y a sans cesse une partie du marocain qui va contre la partie qu'on a comprise. Une partie européanisée, une partie qui reste marocaine. . . . Quoi que fasse un Marocain, je l'accepte."

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ırst description of the café is of this room: "[The] back
'er" (291). Setting his protagonist in this space foreshad-
ıe will face and his final destiny.

ε considered different from us, which can reinforce or
ıbordination, are identified as "Orientalism" by Edward
Spivak (Ashcroft et al. 2000: 171). In this case, we are
:erner, a process that is also known as "Occidentalism."
esprit confus, also develops this symbolism.

s fiction as a lure to a fatal destiny. Familiar with Arab
:ertainly aware of the symbolism of the flute, the bam-
ls, but also symbolizes the suffering of the soul in its
hebel 2001: 173–74).

ı compréhension du peuple marocain me semble tou-
omprendre, si illogiques, si contradictoires. Il y a sans
:re la partie qu'on a comprise. Une partie européanisée,
que fasse un Marocain, je l'accepte."

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