

Michigan Quarterly Review

Volume L, Number 2

Spring 2011

MICHIGAN QUARTERLY REVIEW (ISSN 0026-2420) is published quarterly (January, April, July, and October) by The University of Michigan, 0576 Rackham Bldg., 915 E. Washington St., Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1070. Subscription prices, \$25.00 a year, \$45.00 for two years; Institutional subscriptions obtained through agencies \$30.00 a year; \$7.00 a copy; back issues, \$4.00. Claims for missing numbers can be honored only within two months after publication.

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Editorial and business office, 0576 Rackham Bldg., 915 E. Washington St., Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109. Unsolicited manuscripts are returned to authors only when accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes or by international postal orders. No responsibility assumed for loss or injury.

Periodical postage paid at Ann Arbor, Michigan. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 0576 Rackham Bldg., 915 E. Washington St., Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1070.

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ISSN 0026-2420

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THE MOROCCAN PAUL BOWLES

1

One day in February 1996, I returned to the Inmeuble Itesa, the nondescript modern apartment building in Tangier where Paul Bowles had lived since the 1960s, to deliver a box of Triscuits. I had first met Bowles in 1994, when I had conducted a series of interviews with him for the dissertation I was writing on American representations of North Africa. This time, I had no particular research agenda. I just wanted to return to speak with one of the most interesting people I had ever met. I was also hoping to run into Moroccan author Mohammed Mrabet, whom I had met there a year and a half earlier.

I was always careful to make sure I was welcome at Bowles's home. The first time I visited him in July 1994, I wrote first, not wanting to be one of the legion who, I had been told, just showed up at his door with books and cameras in hand. I was living then in Fez, and I wrote him from there, not knowing that he was in Atlanta recovering from surgery. But I was spending the whole summer in Morocco studying Arabic, and a few weeks later I was still in Fez when I received a letter from Bowles inviting me to visit. I took the train up to Tangier that weekend. I found Bowles kind and welcoming, if only politely interested in my questions. In my letter, I had mentioned that I admired the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, as I knew he did, and that I was a dedicated reader of his late wife Jane Bowles's fiction. If my questions ended up boring him, I thought we might be able to talk about other writers.

My first meeting with Bowles went well enough, and when I returned to my hotel I looked to see what he had inscribed in

the book of his stories I had brought with me. I found what seemed a return invitation in his inscription. "The conversation can be resumed at a later date," he had written. So I felt comfortable returning the next day to finish my questions. There were two other men in Paul Bowles's bedroom on that afternoon, both Moroccan. One of them was sitting in the corner smoking *kif* out of a long *sebsi*. The other, who was not smoking, sat at the foot of the bed, where Paul lay in a blue-and white-striped cotton robe. Paul didn't present either to me, and the men did not present themselves either. I was twenty-five and a bit intimidated, and without the self-confidence in the face of the master to introduce myself to the Moroccans, I tried to carry on.

Paul and I spoke about Poe and other subjects for a while. All the while, the man sitting on the bed had his head in his hand, occasionally chuckling to himself, whether derisively or amazed at the lack of social graces, I was not sure. Occasionally he gestured to the man in the corner to stop smoking. Otherwise, he was evidently bored and apparently impatient for me to stop talking. Surely I was saying nothing original. Perhaps he didn't follow the conversation well. Paul and I were speaking English. As I retell this story I cringe. I was rude, I should have introduced myself right away and asked which language we had in common. That is what I would do today, of course. Like Paul, I speak French and Spanish comfortably, and I could have had a conversation in Moroccan Arabic.

As Paul and I continued our small talk, it began to dawn on me that the man on the bed might be Mohammed Mrabet, whose work—twelve books published in Paul's English translation, the most recent, *Chocolate Creams and Dollars*—I admired greatly. I stole a glance at him to see if he matched the photos in my head, most of which had been taken decades earlier. Emboldened, I switched into Moroccan Arabic and asked the man if he was Mr. Mrabet. The man's expression instantly changed. He was pleased. He became animated.

Sí, he said.

Following his lead, I continued in Spanish. I told him I admired his writing, and that it was an honor to meet him. A broad smile came across his face. Some small talk.

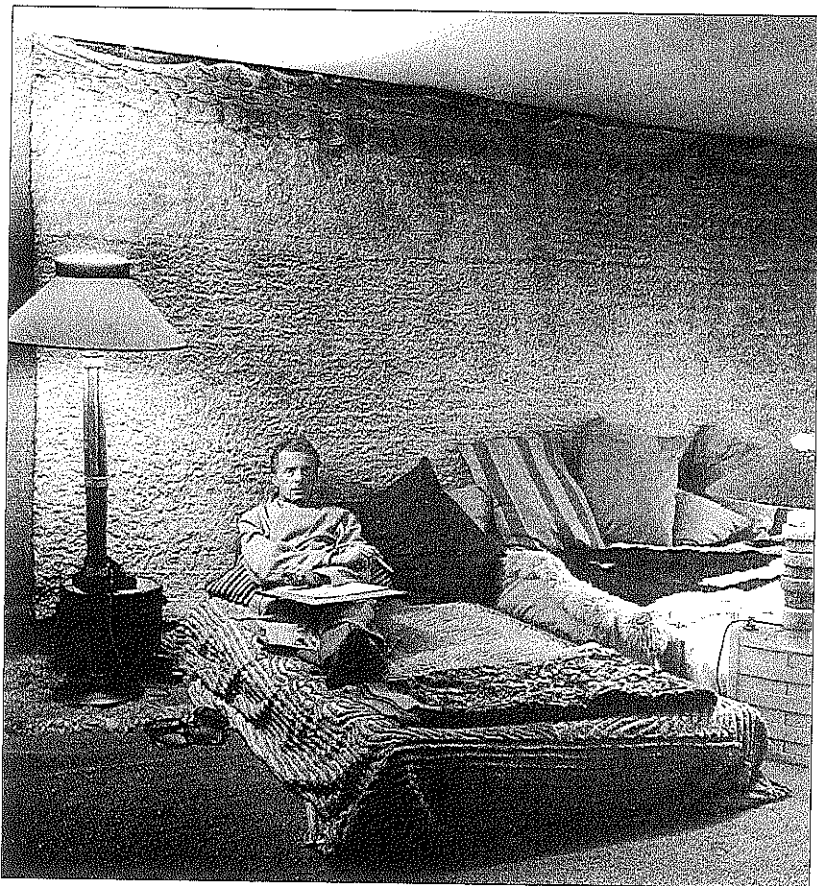
Mrabet looked at me and said, now in English with a pro-

nounced accent, "I love Paul very, very much." He paused for effect. "Some day, I am going to kill him." He turned to Paul and gave a menacing look. Paul looked at me, feigned horror, then laughed, a pleased chuckle deep in his chest with a high overtone.

Now it was the winter of 1996, and I was based in Morocco for a year on a Fulbright grant, split between Fez and Tangier. Before flying back to Morocco, I wrote Paul to say I would be returning. What could I bring from the United States? He wrote back and in his spindly handwriting suggested that a box of Triscuits would be perfect, since they were impossible to find in Tangier. He underlined the trademark name of the famous crackers, which made me realize with a start that Triscuits were after all derived from a French expression, *très cuit*s, which is of course what they are: very cooked. That subtle precision with language was characteristic. I was always highly conscious of my grammar and vocabulary with Paul. In his presence, I learned to speak and write English more precisely. One day, I made the mistake of mentioning that Marrakech had become "touristy." He asked me several times what I meant by the word, which apparently was new to his vocabulary.

Armed with my box of Triscuits, I knocked and was let in by Abdelouahid Boulaich, who luckily appeared to register a vague recollection of who I was. Boulaich was Bowles's cook, valet, and driver. Perhaps most importantly, he was the doorman, screening the elderly Bowles from uninvited intruders. Boulaich was also the man who would eventually inherit a fortune from the man he cared for, everything save the literary estate (which went to the Guatemalan writer Rodrigo Rey Rosa) and the musical estate (which went to the Santa Cruz-based pianist Irene Herrmann). Boulaich got everything else, including the contents of Bowles's apartment, which included many treasures, such as signed first editions from acquaintances of Bowles like Samuel Beckett.

Abdelouahid sent me back to the bedroom, which was where Paul received visitors in the mid-1990s, propped up on pillows and wearing a robe. Paul smiled warmly, if a bit weakly, on my entry to the room. He inquired about Fez, associating me with that city. He had not visited in years, though he said it



Composer and writer Paul Bowles, lying in bed with his paper and pen. (Photo by Jerry Cooke/Pix Inc./Time Life Pictures/Getty Images)

was his favorite city in Morocco. I gave him an update on the medina. I handed him the Triscuits, and he asked me to put them on the table. I struggled to find a space amidst the clutter of books, mail, and medications.

Mrabet was not in evidence, neither that day or any time that winter, spring, and summer while I lived in Tangier. Meanwhile Mohamed Choukri, another of Bowles's former collaborators, was publicly criticizing Bowles for his work with Moroccans, including Mrabet.

I asked about Choukri. "He's still living in Tangier, correct?"

"Yes," Paul said simply.

"Do you ever see him? Talk to him anymore?"

"He's turned against me," Paul said. "Not personally, but in print."

I'd heard Choukri was writing a book about Bowles.

Paul said: "Maybe he is, but I hate to think what it would be. I don't know. I have an article, a clipping. I think it was from, I'm not sure, I think the *Berner Zeitung*, and there's a picture of him and there's quite a big headline above the article which says 'Paul Bowles Is an Exploiter.' That was something that Tahar Ben Jelloun had dreamed up."¹

From Tahar Ben Jelloun's public character attack in the early 1970s to Mohamed Choukri's in the late 1990s, Bowles was continually made aware that Moroccans read his work, were free to criticize it in print, and had an audience for their comments. Far from the mainstream American version of Bowles's life—*An Invisible Spectator*, is the title of one biography, *Romantic Savage*, the subtitle of another—which had him choosing life in an exotic port, cut off from civilization, with no telephone or TV, Bowles in fact lived in a contemporary Moroccan city, and received Moroccan friends, students, and interviewers. And in the 1990s when I visited him frequently, he had a television, a phone, and—behind a door, cut off from view—a fax machine.

2

By 1996, Paul Bowles's friendship with Mohammed Mrabet seemed to have come to an end. I still don't know what they were discussing that day in 1994 when I arrived, and I fear I

interrupted something important, which too may have explained Mrabet's exasperation with me until I addressed him. Their friendship devolved, as far as I can tell, over disputes about money, and Mrabet would for his part claim that Bowles had not delivered royalties for the works they published together. (I have since been shown canceled checks in sizeable amounts written by Bowles to Mrabet, which are now held in the University of Delaware's Paul Bowles collection.) Though Bowles himself never made any public counter accusations, he did aver that he had paid Mrabet his share of the royalties, even beyond what their works had earned.² I have no idea; ultimately it doesn't interest me. A thirty-year friendship had run its course. "Oh, my friends, I have no friend," Jacques Derrida quotes Aristotle in his study *The Politics of Friendship*. It is a line I can imagine Paul Bowles saying.³

What intrigues me, instead, is the rich literary product of their long relationship. The meeting of Paul Bowles and Mohammed Mrabet led to one of the most interesting collaborations in the annals of twentieth-century literature, and one which I have been reflecting on for the sixteen years since I met Mrabet that day in Paul's apartment. Those works have been controversial in Morocco, as was the relationship between the two men, tinged with innuendo. In the United States, Mrabet's work with Bowles was once noted—in the 1970s, both *Harper's Magazine* and *Rolling Stone* published his stories—but now is mostly forgotten. But it was, I believe, a key moment in American literary representations of the Arab world, and of Arab representations of Americans. For if Bowles was the conduit that allowed Mrabet to reach an American audience—Bowles's role exceeded that of mere translator, since the books that bear Mrabet's name as author exist only in translation, and their title pages list a variety of roles for Bowles, including editor, translator, and the person who tape-recorded Mrabet—Mrabet too portrayed Bowles and other Americans in Tangier. And Mrabet's portraits of Paul were not always flattering, even though we read them in Paul's English translation.

All this took on a greater importance in the years that followed Bowles's death. Indeed, events that occurred after he died in Tangier in 1999—in particular the cultural obsession of Americans with the Arab world that followed in the wake of

September 11, 2001—put Bowles in a more central position in thinking about American perceptions of North Africa and the Middle East than his peripheral location in Tangier might ever have promised. In moving to Tangier in 1947, Bowles thought he was retreating to the margins, and Tangier was certainly on the periphery of the worlds of American literature and publishing. Within the Arab world, Tangier—like Morocco itself—was yet more marginal, the most northern city of the Arab nation to the farthest west. Even the name of Morocco in Arabic, *al-Maghreb*, means "west," and also "sunset" and is closely related to the word for "strange." And yet the story of this collaboration between an aging American novelist and composer and a young, illiterate Moroccan fisherman is, I argue, crucial for rethinking the fraught encounter of America with the Arab world.

What started out as something of a lark—recording the entertaining tales of his friend Ahmed Yacoubi and translating them into English—would become the most productive aspect of Bowles's late period, which corresponded with the post-colonial period in Morocco. The published interviews conducted by American scholars and journalists with Bowles over the decades are distracting when it comes to this work. Whenever he was asked about his translation projects with Mrabet and the other putatively illiterate Moroccans with whom he collaborated (Yacoubi and also Larbi Layachi), Bowles tended to dismiss the work as secondary, something to do in between the demands of caring for his wife, Jane, whose physical and psychological health was in rapid decline.

It was more than that, however, and the relationship of Jane's decline to Paul's work with Moroccan artists is hardly incidental. In my 2005 book, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*, I wrote about the shift to his extended collaboration with Mrabet from Paul's intense literary engagement with Jane (whose novel *Two Serious Ladies*, which is all about love triangles resolving themselves into binaries, had served as a major inspiration for Paul when he turned from musical composition to literary work.) *Two Serious Ladies* was entitled "Three Serious Ladies" before Paul edited it for Jane. Paul too, well before meeting Mrabet, had featured triangular relationships prominently in his fiction (most famously Port, Kit

and Tunner, in his first novel, *The Sheltering Sky*). Always, Bowles was interested in the ways in which language served, like the sky in his canonical debut, to shield, to protect, and also to occlude comprehension—individuals in Bowles's fiction never understand one another. They are always seeking a connection between language and meaning that they cannot find. In his third novel, *The Spider's House*, published by Random House in 1955 with the words "A novel of Morocco today" on the cover, Paul revealed the influence of Ahmed Yacoubi (whom he had met in 1947 while writing *The Sheltering Sky*) on his shifting ideas of the love triangle. Here the intermediary between John Stenham (a self-portrait of sorts) and the American woman Lee Burroughs is a young Moroccan boy named Amar. By several accounts, Yacoubi was, after Jane, the second love of his life.

Though Paul obsessed less over words than Jane did when he composed prose, he did repeat a story about Jane's famous difficulty writing. It is a story that many have referred to in order to understand her notorious writer's block.

At one point she had a terrible time with a bridge she was trying to build over a gorge. She would call out: "Bupple! What's a cantilever, exactly?" or "Can you say a bridge has buttresses?" I, immersed in the writing of my final chapters [of *The Sheltering Sky*], would answer anything that occurred to me, without coming out of my voluntary state of obsession. . . . After three or four mornings I became aware that something was wrong: she was still at the bridge. I got up and went into her room. We talked for a while about the problem, and I confessed my mystification. "Why do you have to *construct* the damned thing?" I demanded. "Why can't you just say it was there and let it go at that?" She shook her head. "If I don't know how it was built, I can't see it."

If Jane was stuck on the cantilever—the story she was working on was her masterpiece "Camp Cataract," in which a bridge figures prominently—Paul had found another way to bridge the gap between the languages of Tangier: Arabic and English, but also French and Spanish. And by so doing, by means of his unique translations, he bridged too the distance

between the Moroccans he was increasingly surrounded by and the American readers he still addressed.

It was Jane Bowles who introduced Mrabet to Paul in 1964. Paul had already translated Larbi Layachi's memoir, *Life with a Few Holes*—under a pen name, which did not adequately protect the author, who emigrated to California and died miserable—and several stories by Yacoubi. Bowles later explained his interest in translating Moroccan tales in the 1979 collection *Five Eyes*, which collected work by Mrabet, Layachi, Yacoubi, Choukri, and Abdeslam Boulaich. In his prefatory "Notes on the Work of the Translator," Bowles wrote:

With the exception of the material by Choukri, all these tales were made from spoken texts. The work is simple but time-consuming. It is a matter first of listening to what is being said, and then of turning it quickly into its nearest equivalent in English. Only after there is a complete literal translation does the hard work begin, that of finding the elements which will reconstitute the "voice." Style is provided solely by the consistent attempt to reproduce in English prose the idiosyncrasies and inflections of speech found in the original Arabic delivery.

The work was controversial from the start in Morocco. Tahar Ben Jelloun, Morocco's most famous novelist, one who like Bowles was an expatriate (Ben Jelloun had moved to France in 1971 at the age of twenty-six), launched his own career as a Paris *homme de lettres* with a 1972 column in *Le Monde* in which he declared Bowles's translations a "bastard literature." For Ben Jelloun, Bowles practiced a "technique of rape" (the column ran under the headline "Une technique de viol"), and though Ben Jelloun did not explicitly accuse Bowles of sexual relations with his Moroccan interlocutors, he certainly suggested that the violation was more than literary. And many in Morocco got the hint.

Two decades later, in Bowles's last years, another prominent Moroccan author, Mohamed Choukri, launched a public critique of the elderly American. Bowles and Choukri had worked together as well, when Bowles published his translation of Choukri's first novel, *Al-Khubz al-Hafi*, an autobiographical novel that has become a classic of modern Arabic prose. Bowles's poetic 1973 translation of Choukri's title,

which might have been rendered “dry bread,” suggesting through a well-known Moroccan expression someone so poor they had no stew to dip their bread in, was *For Bread Alone*. In the case of Choukri’s book, Bowles—who did not read Arabic, even Choukri’s straightforward prose—had Choukri retell him the book, mostly in Spanish and French, and then translated Choukri’s now oral narrative into English. (Tahar Ben Jelloun would work from Chourki’s written text in his 1980 translation of the same novel, *Le pain nu*.) In this manner, Bowles also translated Choukri’s nonfiction books *Jean Genet in Tangier* and *Tennessee Williams in Tangier*, publishing both in the 1970s with Ecco and the California-based Cadmus Editions, respectively. But Choukri and Bowles had split too, and in 1996 Choukri published *Paul Bowles wa ‘uzla Tanja* (Paul Bowles and the Solitude of Tangier), the book I had asked Paul about shortly before its release. The book appeared in French translation (as *Paul Bowles: Le reclus de Tanger*) in 1997, and, translated by Gretchen Head and John Garrett, appeared for the first time in English in 2009 in *In Tangier*, which collects all three of Choukri’s accounts of expatriate writers he knew. In his book, Choukri launched a full-scale attack of Bowles, criticizing him as a homosexual, as much worse in Arabic than he pretended, and as someone who may have loved Morocco but surely hated Moroccans. For Choukri, Bowles had worn out his welcome in Tangier. Seizing on Choukri’s venomous critique, a Tangier weekly asked Bowles for a response. But Bowles sidestepped a major confrontation and wrote off Choukri’s attack as insane, intimating that he might be exhibiting the effects of his well-known drinking problem.⁴ Choukri was not appeased.

When Bowles died in 1999, however, there was a fuller reckoning of his meaning to Morocco. The translations with Choukri, Layachi, Yacoubi, and especially Mrabet figured largely in the Moroccan assessment of Bowles’s career in Tangier. For some Moroccan critics, Bowles’s importance was due precisely to identifying and publicizing the works of these authors. A couple went so far as to suggest that he had thereby created a new literary form—*al-adab at-Tanji* (Tangierian literature). Others were less persuaded, and suggested that Bowles’s passing represented the end of an era of colonial and neocolonial literary portrayals of the Maghreb. But it was

a vibrant debate in Morocco, and Bowles’s death was front-page news.⁵

Bowles’s passing received an outpouring of media attention in the United States as well. But his work with Mrabet, Yacoubi, Layachi, and Choukri did not figure in the obituaries, which relegated his departure to Morocco in much the same way Charles Jackson had reviewed Bowles’s second book, *The Delicate Prey*, in 1950:

I, for one, look forward to the day when such a forthright and honest writer as Paul Bowles returns to his native scene and gives us personal, intimate, and, shall we say, down-to-earth stories or glimpses of the small town in which he was brought up. For it is the native, and the personal, reflections or refractions of everyday living—particularly American adolescence, never a tired theme when well done—that are universal that will prove to be the stuff of our literature, and that Paul Bowles could do so well.⁶

Bowles of course never moved back to his “native scene,” or rather he took up another such setting. Fifty-one years later, however, in the aftermath of September 11, Bowles’s choice not to return was seen as portentous. John Sutherland, reviewing a posthumous collection of Bowles’s short fiction, finally revised the *New York Times*’s previous reluctance to grant Bowles his expatriation.

I received the review copy of this collection in late August and was rereading it in the second week of September. Events transformed what was in my hands. . . . Paul Bowles had an enviably long life, but one could have wished it at least two years longer. He would, one feels, have had informed things to say about his country’s recent agony. Who knows, he might even have dredged up some sympathy.⁷

A younger generation of Moroccan writers react differently to Bowles’s writing, as it recedes into the background, along with the debates of the twentieth century wherein Mrabet’s illiteracy in standard written Arabic posed a greater problem to celebrating his authorship than it does today. The crises posed to young Morocco by globalization—within which Morocco struggles to keep up—have led many young Moroccans to learn English, putting pressure on the French-Arabic

bilingualism that preoccupied intellectuals and writers for the first decades of Moroccan independence.

Yet Tahar Ben Jelloun has not given up the critique of Bowles. In Ben Jelloun's 2005 novel *Partir*, translated by Linda Coverdale as *Leaving Tangier* (Penguin, 2009), he includes a passage that seems a continuation of his 1972 column for *Le Monde*. Ben Jelloun's narrator makes reference to "an American writer" who came to Tangier decades earlier to take advantage of the local talent:

The old concierge in an apartment building where an American writer and his wife lived had said it best.

"That type, they want everything, men and women from the common people, young ones, healthy, preferably from the countryside, who can't read or write, serving them all day, then servicing them at night. A package deal, and between two pokes, tokes on a nicely packed pipe of kif to help the American write! Tell me your story, he says to them, I'll make a novel out of it, you'll even have your name on the cover: you won't be able to read it but no matter, you're a writer like me, except that you're an illiterate writer, that's exotic—what I mean is, unusual, my friend! That's what he tells them, without ever mentioning money, because you don't talk about that, not when you're working for a writer, after all! They aren't obliged to accept, but I know that poverty—our friend poverty—can lead us to some very sad places."⁸

Returning to his obsession with Bowles's perfidy, Ben Jelloun's reference to Bowles could seem a throwback to the politicized debates over literary representation of the late twentieth century. Now more explicit than he was in "Une technique de viol," Ben Jelloun accuses Bowles of "poking" Moroccans in between "toking" on their *sebsi* pipes.

But of course it's also a nasty put down of Mohammed Mrabet. I recall Bowles telling me about Mrabet's reaction to Ben Jelloun's original criticism of Bowles's translations.

PB: People expected Moroccans—first place they had to know how to read and write: Arabic. Darija didn't count. That wasn't literary at all. I don't think he objected to Mrabet's subject matter. Well, he didn't believe Mrabet existed. He said, "There's no such person. This is an invention of

Paul Bowles. So, he wrote everything." Mrabet didn't like that at all.

BE: I don't think he would.

PB: [Mrabet] got Sanche de Gramont.

BE: Ted Morgan, right?⁹

PB: Ted Morgan. To write a letter of protest to *Le Monde*, saying that it was unheard of for any paper to say that someone didn't exist. What does that mean? He said, "I do exist." That didn't convince Tahar Ben Jelloun. Finally, [Ben Jelloun] said, "Well, even if Bowles doesn't write all this crap—these books signed by Mohammed Mrabet—Mohammed Mrabet is analphabetic and—he'd been inquiring around—and doesn't know *tu* from *toi*. Clearly Paul Bowles is simply exploiting the name in order to put his ideas across, to give Americans—above all in English—an idea of Morocco which is completely uncivilized." It was in my interest to make anything that had to do with Morocco as primitive and as uncivilized as possible.

BE: Other than proclaiming his own existence, what was Mrabet's response to that?

PB: Mrabet? He didn't change. He was still violently angry with Tahar Ben Jelloun. He never mentioned him without saying: "I'll smash his face," and so on. And it was embarrassing once to be at Claude Thomas's party one year, a big party. And of course Mrabet was there, I was there, and Tahar Ben Jelloun was there. But we didn't know each other. I didn't recognize him, and fortunately no one told Mrabet that he was he. So nothing happened. [Mrabet] was dying to get at him. Mrabet was rather violent in that.¹⁰

3

While I lived in Tangier in 1996, I visited Paul often. I was researching my dissertation in the archives of the Tangier American Legation Museum during the day, and in the late afternoon, about 4:00 P.M., I would often head to his apartment. In the winter, there were few visitors. We were usually alone. Sometimes, other Moroccan acquaintances of Bowles would be there too. One day Paul gave me a copy of a new book he had received, a republication of his 1962 story "The Time of Friendship," now republished in 1995 by a small

Zurich press with photographs by Vittorio Santoro. In the story, a parable of the colonial period, a Swiss woman in her fifties develops an odd sort of friendship with a young Algerian boy named Slimane. While she convinces herself that an intimacy has developed between herself and Slimane, it comes crashing down by the end of the story. She chastises herself for imagining that she might ever understand the boy and berates herself for the "dangerous vanity at the core of that fantasy."

When I got back to my house in the Tangier medina, I looked at the inscription. Paul had written: "I think this is a better story to anthologize than 'The Delicate Prey.'" I was surprised by the note. I was a graduate student, with no plans to create an anthology. And though I was working on my Ph.D., our conversations had moved far from questions of scholarship and publication.

Of course, if Bowles was sending me a message, it was surely that "The Time of Friendship" was, in retrospect, closer to his vision of life in Morocco than the violent and distant tale "The Delicate Prey," the story that made Bowles famous in the 1940s. There are no Europeans or Americans in "The Delicate Prey," which is all violence and intertribal conflict.

This time capsule message, left in an inscription in a book in my library, is but one more entry into the literary mystery of Paul Bowles's collaboration with Mohammed Mrabet. Perhaps in 1996, having broken with Mrabet and accused by Choukri in the international press of exploiting Moroccans, he thought back to the miserable ending of "The Time of Friendship," and berated himself.

4

In the summer of 1999, a few months before Bowles died, I returned to Tangier to take up the questions that I had not previously found a way to ask him—about his translations, about his understanding of Arabic, about just what had happened in Tangier at the scene of literary creation. I was eager to speak with Mohammed Mrabet, too, and to do so in Arabic outside of Bowles's presence.

Shortly after Bowles died, I wrote an essay, which I was

going to call "Des Tours de Tanger." I never completed it. Here is the opening:

The address I had for Mohammed Mrabet wasn't getting me where I wanted to be—Avenue Haroun er Rachid, Calle 9, no. 23, Souani.¹¹ The problem was that the numbered calles that break off from Haroun er Rachid Avenue are not arranged in numerical order. Souani is one of several lower-middle class neighborhoods in Tangier that were built without much planning during the period of massive urbanization after WWII (the city's population in 1999—estimated at about a million—was roughly ten times what it was in 1947).¹² From Souani, which sprawls across a valley on the south side of town, the Mediterranean is not visible, nor is Spain, nor the white buildings of Tangier's picturesque parts. Calle 9, when I found it, was unpaved and dusty, the number of the street spray-painted on the side of a wall. I could locate buildings numbered only up to 7 before the street ended abruptly. I assumed there must be a continuation, but across the intersection Calle 14 continued where Calle 9 should have been. Up a block, Calle 34. Then Calle 169. I tried not to get frustrated.

This was the second day I had been looking for Mrabet's house knocking on doors and asking, "*Wash ktârif mohammed el-mrabet, al katib, houa li kayâmel mâ pol boules?*" (Do you know Mohammed Mrabet, the writer who works with Paul Bowles?) The phone number I had been given—by Bowles himself—was wrong. Tangier has no directory assistance, no phone book. This time I brought an old friend of mine, Fayssel, who had grown up in Souani. We asked around—in one of the *téléboutiques* on Haroun er Rachid, in the neighborhood café, a passing *chiffour et-taxi*—but after an hour we ended up on the same street I had been on the day before. One man in his thirties raised our hopes, "*Eyyeh, kayen wahid rajul kabir ismou mrabet mohammed*" (yeah, there's an old guy by that name). "A writer?" Fayssel asked. The man shook his head no.

"It might still be the same," I said. Mrabet (the writer) can't read or write. A liar, I could have said, but I didn't yet know the pun in Moroccan Arabic.

Fayssal asked me if there were any other defining characteristics about the man. From my perspective, having published a dozen books in the United States, having those books translated into an additional six languages, and all with the most famous American living in Morocco would have distinguished Mrabet in the eyes of his neighbors in impoverished Souani. No, Fayssal said, something that will matter to these people, something they will know. Fayssal, who had been unemployed for years despite his fluency in four languages (his last job was as an extra on an American made-for-TV movie about Cleopatra shot in the Sahara, but lately he was sleeping in a friend's van), was himself very interested in what I had told him about Mrabet's stories. "We never hear the truth about life here," Fayssal said, referring not to American movies about Morocco (which don't play in Moroccan cinemas), but to life in the final years of the regime of King Hassan II.¹³

When I finally found Mrabet, on the third day with the aid of the Moroccan owner of the Librairie des Colonnes, he told me I should have asked his neighbors for the guy called "puntee," referring to the cigarette butts (puntee in Tanjawi dialect) he used to pick off the ground and smoke. On a subsequent visit, after I had gotten lost again, Mrabet said that I could have asked for the Mrabet that prays at Emsallah mosque.

Mrabet was brilliant at turning the tables on me. On the first day of our conversations in June 1999, he complained that he had none of his own books. On the second, he told me he didn't care about books anyway, with the exception of the holy Qur'an. On that second day, Mrabet told me that he had a story to tell me, and it was about me. Mrabet said his story was called "The Wind," and I wasn't going to like it. It was going to make me cry.

The next day, I returned to Bowles's apartment, to continue my interview with him. I told Bowles about "The Wind," and he acted as interpreter. Bowles told me that Mrabet said I wouldn't like the story so that I would know it wasn't to please me that he told it. In other words, Bowles implied, Mrabet wanted me to know that he was an author on his own volition. But the following day, Bowles had rethought the story a bit, and suggested that by associating me with "the

wind," Mrabet was contrasting me with "the truth" (*al-haq*). That is, the Qur'an is the truth, but the wind is something immaterial, without significance.

What I remember most vividly about my several days with Mrabet in 1999—and I have since visited him multiple times in Tangier, and I used a drawing of his on the cover of *Morocco Bound*—is the way he would say "*ma kadibshee alik*." (I'm not lying to you.) I came to see his use of the verb *ka-da-ba* (to lie, in its Moroccan colloquial spelling) as a pun on the verb *ka-ta-ba* (to write). They sound almost identical in spoken Moroccan Arabic. In our interviews, Mrabet railed against Bowles as a writer, whom he mocked for jotting down notes, which he clearly saw as a secondary pursuit. His own inspiration as a writer—as a liar—came from a magical fish, Mrabet told me. Bowles was merely a scribe. Their time of friendship was over.

5

What did happen in Tangier? This is as much a critical mystery as it is a biographical one. In *Morocco Bound*, I argued that the collaboration between Bowles and Mrabet, asymmetrical though it might have been, was more nuanced than Ben Jelloun (and American critics influenced by postcolonial studies) had it. Reading Mrabet's work with Bowles carefully, for what was in the text, I noted that Mrabet found ways to critique the very process by which he entered the American literary marketplace. I found their collaborations disruptive to the prevalent idea that Bowles was a simple Orientalist, recolonizing Moroccan culture the way colonial anthropologists had been accused of doing decades earlier. By giving Mrabet a voice—a voice that was illegible to Moroccan literary norms at the time because the Moroccan *darija*, or colloquial Moroccan Arabic, was not valued as a literary language—he provided the conditions by which Mrabet himself could utter a critique of his own society and of those Westerners (including Bowles himself) who lived there impervious to the strictures on middle and lower class Moroccans.

But there is more to say, and six years after publishing that argument, sixteen years after meeting Mrabet and Bowles

together, I am still thinking about the collaboration, the thirty-year friendship between the two men.

As I think back on Mohammed Mrabet's ominous yet funny comment when we first met, that he loved Paul very much, and some day he was going to kill him, I hear it differently now than I did in 1994. The fascinating and productive friendship of Paul Bowles and Mohammed Mrabet produced more than the dozen books they published together, both names on the title pages. It produced an account of the survival—the living on, in Jacques Derrida's sense of the word *survivre*—of Bowles's literary depiction of Morocco. That which Bowles had discovered in his own movement from *The Sheltering Sky* to *The Spider's House*—namely the discovery of a Moroccan voice that would overtake his own—now ran to its limit in his collaborative works with Mrabet including *Love with a Few Hairs*, *The Lemon*, and Mrabet's accounts of Paul Bowles himself in *Look and Move On* and *The Boy Set the Fire*. Mrabet did not kill Paul Bowles in the literary sense of overtaking a precursor (the reference is to Harold Bloom, whose mode of reading such agonistic struggles is surely lacking for situations such as those I am describing). Rather he killed him, and Bowles survived, lived on, in Mrabet's fictions. And now both of their work survives for yet another Moroccan generation of writers, who kill it again, as it makes its way forward in time, circulating in new Moroccan contexts.

NOTES

¹ Bowles later repeated this story in his contribution to "A Symposium on Translation," *Threepenny Review*, no. 70 (summer 1997), p. 11. There he said that the article appeared in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

² In the *Threepenny Review* contribution, Bowles claimed that he paid Mrabet an additional \$1,000 for each of their twelve books together.

³ Once, in the winter of 1996, Bowles told me he had received a new recording of one of his musical compositions from the 1930s. We sat together and listened to the cassette. After it was over, I asked him when he had last heard the piece performed. He told me he had never heard it performed. Trying to hide my shock, I asked him why he had never asked any of his talented musician friends to play it for him (this is a man who shared a house with Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, was longtime friends with Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, and Ned Rorem, and who in his last years was often in the company of composers Phillip Ramey, the pianist Irene Herrmann, and many others with remarkable musical talent). Bowles shrugged his shoulders and said: "What friends?"

⁴ Paul Bowles, "Bowles et Choukri: Le Temps de la polémique," *Les Nouvelles du Nord* (Tangier), February 28, 1997.

⁵ I discuss this in much greater depth in chapter 2 of *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁶ Charles Jackson, "On the Seamier Side" (Review of *The Delicate Prey, and Other Stories*), *New York Times Book Review*, 3 December 1950.

⁷ John Sutherland, "Distant Episodes" (Review of *The Stories of Paul Bowles*), *New York Times Book Review*, 21 October 2001.

⁸ Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Leaving Tangier*, trans. Linda Coverdale (NY: Penguin, 2009), 41.

⁹ Ted Morgan is a French-American writer and biographer who lived in Tangier in the 1970s. Born Sanche de Gramont, he changed his name to Ted Morgan (an anagram of "de Gramont") in 1977, when he became an American citizen. Among many books, he is the author of *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (1988).

¹⁰ Personal interview, 2 February 1996. Bowles retold this story to me in an interview on 5 June 1999, with the same details.

¹¹ I've changed the numbers of the street and house.

¹² That year, 1947, was when Paul Bowles moved to Tangier, armed with a contract and an advance for *The Sheltering Sky*. For statistics on Tangier's population from 1927–82, including breakdown of Muslim, Jewish, and foreign populations, and projections through 2001, see R.T. Dalton et al., "The Urban Morphology of Tangier," in *Tanger: Espace, économie et société*, ed. Mohamed Refass (Rabat: Université Mohammed V, 1993), 99.

¹³ Hassan died the next month, July 23, 1999, after nearly four decades of rule. Bowles died a few months later, on November 18, 1999.