Aesthetics of Invisibility and Giving Voice

by Hassan Bourara

Largely known as one of the last "classic travelers", an observer of foreign cultures, and an un-intrusive fiction writer, Paul Bowles is first of all a music composer and critic.[1] The renewed interest in his music reminds us that the persona he consciously adopted--his self-portrait as an "invisible spectator"--was cultivated during his earliest North African excursions. The ensuing detached attitude eventually became a trademark during his assignments recording samples of Moroccan music for the Library of Congress as well as for his general view of Moroccans and their culture(s). Those assignments involved self-distancing on his part, the better to avoid intrusions while recording the musicians, an aesthetic decision generally construed as a desire for objective representation: to have the natives play as they normally do during local gatherings and celebrations.[2] More concretely, what Bowles actually did was an ethnography of sorts: recording (the sounds) and taking notes for music "reviews" which involved descriptions clarifying the cultural context. Out of the dialectic of the visible (product) and the invisible (agent) emerges the broader context informing the production of Bowles' sound recordings, whence the relevance of the work done by Gilles Aubry and Zouheir Atbane.

I have already addressed Paul Bowles' "preservationist zeal" in more details elsewhere. Suffice it here to say that there is more to it than a genuine interest in an "endangered" artistic cultural expression. One would need to analyze how objective the claims concerning the alleged threat to "Berber" traditional music were. This is not the place for such an analysis though there are indeed cases of popular singers lost forever, ones the public will never get a chance to know directly. However, an argument for the loss of traditional ritual communal performances, transmitted over generations, is hardly sustainable. This is not to undermine the relevance of Bowles' work but to show how over-determined such contexts are. He seems to have been more motivated by his resentment of the Nationalists than by defending the Amazigh cause. In a number of travelogues tracing the musical trips, he reports that government officials constantly tried to hinder his project, and that assistance never came without comments denigrating "Berber" music. Focusing on the Arab-Islamic "conquest" of Morocco, those travelogues tell us more about his own qualms about Moroccan independence at the time. Writing for *The Nation* in an effort to secure a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to sponsor his collection of traditional music, he built his case on an alleged hostility to Berber culture, a zealous "Europeanization" of the country, and a "planned 'deculturizing' campaign" whose first consequence will be the "cultural

1 See Timothy Mangan & Irene editors, Herrmann Paul Bowles on Music. (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University Of California Press, 2003).

2 For a more detailed treatment of the ideological implications of such a posture, see: Hassan Bourara, *Paul Bowles: An Invisible Spectator?*

liquidation" of the "Berber" musical heritage. It is therefore fair to question the legitimacy of his claims and genuineness of his preservationist interest the better to contextualize it.[3] Aubry and Atbane's project offers just such an opportunity.

The reflection on the "politics of invisibility", the politics of the audible and on sound as an alternative representation implies the possibility to explore wider contextual issues regarding the nature, and the ideological implications, of Bowles' recordings so far read as part of an ideology-free act of observation. The two artists also raise questions regarding the nature of the cultural representations selected for recording: What cultural aspects have been silenced or simply ignored and why? What do the recordings say about their author? Are there any possible alternatives to these forms of cultural "preservation"?

Seeing as a privileged medium for knowledge transmission poses problems that undermine the reliability of that knowledge and the assumed objectivity that goes with it. In fact, the musicians' reactions in the movie express some of the problems inherent in Bowles' aesthetics of invisibility and thus uncover the ideological implications of Bowles' (visual) assignments. By giving voice to the musicians Aubry and Atbane uncover the conditions informing Bowles' "cultural encounters". The result is that, rather than the benevolent preserver of authentic traditions, a "new", revised/revisited, portrait of Bowles emerges: i.e., of a man oblivious of the musicians themselves, not interested in them as individuals, unconcerned about establishing any personal contacts with them, a "foreigner" using the authorities to "force"/"oblige" the locals to perform for him. We sense in the surviving male performer's voiced revelations a feeling of having been cheated out of something vital to one's sense of self: performing almost under coercion, unaware that they are being recorded, alienated from their own sounds ….

"Et qui voit le mystère" acquires thus the status of a political statement. The subaltern are given a form of agency, a chance to "talk back", not out of sheer desire for revenge, but to draw our attention to the complex nature of cultural and artistic expressions, to the symbolic violence inherent in apparently "objective"/innocent (?) forms of representation. Here the roles are reversed and thereby reveal, not just the "mystery" of Bowles' Othering, but an-Other mystery. The haunting voice/sound of the Other—the musician explaining, among "Other" things, the significance of the veiled Addal female performers—comes to disturb Bowles' Othering/authoring/uttering voice, to make it speak what it would not: to the power to represent, it responds with the resistance to power. As such, Aubry and Atbane's approach offers the possibility for alternative exercises in writing culture; its mode is not monologic but participational; the amount of geared conversation notwithstanding, the experiment creates a situation and documents it *in reciprocity.*

3 In this context, Virgil Thomson once described Bowles as a man who typically "did" things for money only. In a letter to Peggy Glanville-Hicks from his self-exile in Portugal, he wrote: "I have been wondering if the project to record Moroccan music could be shifted to a project to record the music of some other part of Africa".