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Abrupt Mutilations

COLLECTED STORIES 1939-1976 by Paul Bowles. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1979. Pp. 417. \$14.00, hb.; \$6.00, pb.

These remarkable stories are set in North America and North Africa; although the meticulously described landscape changes, the situation of Bowles' heroes remains the same.

The hero is usually a displaced person; he is suddenly, often brutally compelled to see the "heart of darkness." He is abused, violated, transformed. But Bowles refuses to allow him more than a few seconds of understanding; his broken hero disappears under "the sheltering sky."

Although we expect some final clarification of the disturbing mysteries—some "sense of an ending" (to use Frank Kermode's phrase)—we merely discover more shadows. There is no ultimate, rational solution—even after abrupt mutilations of self. It is, indeed, the sustaining axiom of these stories that the self—or the outside world—is tentative, fragile, and obscure. Bowles disdains any psychological explanation (except indirectly); he offers *moments* of ecstasy and fright—these are oddly married—and not the causes, preconceptions, or origins of the moments.

"Allal," one of the most brilliant stories in this collection of thirty-nine stories, introduces us to a youngster in North Africa. He plays alone; he works for slave wages; he enjoys little time for self-analysis. (Nor does he believe in such rationalism.) He is possessed, "primitive," dream-filled: he prefers "the sound of the wind in the trees." We are unable to understand in our "civilized," Western manner any of Allal's apparent choices. We are simply thrust into his *situation*.

Allal develops another pattern. He falls in love with snakes. He admires their delicate markings, "markings so delicate and perfect that they seemed to have been designed and painted by an artist." He decides—probably the wrong word!—to become a snake. He moves like one; he sleeps like one. Eventually he loses whatever human identity he had. He sheds his skin of self and achieves his unlimited "freedom." Before an axe severs his head, he has the pleasure of "pushing" his fangs into the bad men who pursue him.

Obviously, Bowles dislikes Allal's pursuers—civilized men who cannot recognize the beauty of madness. In "Pages from Cold Point" he gives us a narrator who is a complete, cynical rationalist. This hero, unlike Allal, refuses to submit his will. By writing his journal, he

believes that he can control himself, the reader, and the “process of decay.” He is, however, a divided personality—again the clinical words have little meaning in a Bowles story—because he loves chaos *even more* than the semblance of stability.

At first he devotes himself to his son, Racky, in a “normal,” earnest way. But Racky is his snake—the other side. Soon it becomes impossible for father and son to act in conventional roles. They merge identities—such fluidity of reversal obsesses Bowles—and they assume mad parts in a romance.

It is, indeed, unclear whether father seduces son or vice versa. The shock, of course, is that homosexual incest occurs at Cold Point, the wonderfully named location. Here the “love” exchanged is frigid and spooky. We are chilled by the deliberate understatement of an outrageous situation. And when we read that the narrator is so insane as to believe “nothing very drastic” *has happened or will happen* to his island of contentment, we are even more astounded. The tonal coldness—which covers the emotional underground—is perfectly appropriate.

In both stories there is the sense of a spirit hovering over the landscape. And we are not surprised to see the spirit *appear as hero* in “The Circular Valley.” The spirit moves in a restless way. It becomes a deer, a bee, a serpent. It overhears the love-and-struggle words of human beings. But it refuses to settle for a mere *self*. It is, if you will, an eternal, circular being—more powerful and beautiful and unpredictable than mankind.

I do not think that Bowles is a sensationalist in these stories—or, for that matter, in any of the others I have omitted from my discussion. He does not glory in his painstaking depiction of madness or destruction or mysticism. He believes firmly that life is unpredictably cruel—even to cruel heroes!—and that his accurate, intense art must *contain* the cruelty.

His style is thus stripped of prettiness. It is clear, direct, bold. Here, for example, is the last paragraph of “Allal” (and the collection): “The rage always had been in his heart; now it burst forth. As if his body were a whip, he sprang out into the room. The men nearest him were on their hands and knees, and Allal had the joy of pushing his fangs into two of them before a third severed his head with an axe.” The words are almost distant; their *coolness* merely heightens the anxieties we feel because we know that without it things would really get out of hand. I am dazzled by the paragraph’s complexity. (The rhythms are carefully modulated to convey the snake-like movements of Allal; the last sentence brutally severs his movements as the axe falls.) And I am

convinced that the details are as “delicately marked” as snake skin.

When we read Bowles, we enter a new land. We recognize that our daily lives—our usual words—are shields against the unknowable universe. In a strange way we resemble his unwilling (?) victims. I do not mean to imply that we are Allal; I merely suggest that we suddenly appreciate how gratuitously “normality” and “abnormality” can change roles.

These stories bite and poison us—and they give us disturbing nourishment at the same time. They, like the circular spirit, will last “a long, long time—perhaps forever.”

IRVING MALIN