

Tangier 1999

In search of authenticity.

Paul Bowles longs for something and insists on its existence

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When Dieter Ganske stepped on Moroccan soil, the flags were still flying at half-mast. King Hassan II had already been dead for two months. On the same day in July, Mohammed VI had ascended the throne and immediately addressed the people with a television speech. A turning point was imminent: he wanted to fight poverty and strengthen human rights. This was well received here in Tangier, because Hassan had deliberately allowed the city to deteriorate for decades. It had been repugnant to him, the once international zone with its knights of fortune, drug freaks and poets. His successor now seemed to take an interest in the poor fate of the dazzling port city.

»Tangier, c'est magique«, called out a toothless old man on the quay when Dieter was still walking down the jetty. He didn't have to be an anthropologist to recognise the service he was about to receive. Dieter decided to face the situation openly and pressed his suitcase into the man's hand. »Rue de la plage 106?« That was not far. Right next to the promenade was a four-lane boulevard with formerly white hotels behind long, arid palm trees. The sidewalk was lined with merchants who had spread their goods out on blankets, in between adolescent boys with glue bags and glassy eyes. Dieter caught himself thinking that Marseille would look like this after a civil war, a Mediterranean disaster in glistening light. As they turned into the narrow alleys of the harbour district, he noticed a stern smell of spices, fresh blood and car exhaust fumes. He would remember this mixture.

His suitcase carrier pointed to a four-storey corner house, splendid in its layout, but heavily damaged, as if an aristocratic ensemble had come under diffuse fire. Dieter thanked him, gave him a few coins and rang Antonio Pena Orellana's bell, the former owner of this property. He was greeted by a lady in her fifties, with steel-blue eyes and a blow-dry hairstyle. Marty de Kooning, a Dutch documentary filmmaker. A colleague at Bochum University had put them in touch with one another. »Dear Dieter, welcome, that's exactly how I imagined you«, she said, laughing. A little embarrassed, he followed her through the wooden door, at least three meters high and decorated with inlays, and up an imposing staircase into the apartment on the first floor. A long hallway lined with large etchings: Canals, merchants' houses, depicting Amsterdam.

»How long have you resided here?« the old-fashioned verb slipped out of Dieter, but it didn't fit badly. She was only on site irregularly, she said, that depended entirely on her respective film projects. The apartment used to belong to a Spanish noble family who built and ran the theatre around the corner, the famous *Gran Teatro Cervantes*. In fact, this apartment with its gullwing doors and spacious salons could have just as well been in Madrid. And Marty fit well into its ambience. For Dieter, she was the typical representative of an expatriate class of educated citizens. He moved into his room with a balcony and a view of the bay and made himself ready for a first walk through the city. A grey shirt with cloth trousers and leather sandals seemed appropriate to him, so as not to attract too much attention in the swarm of locals. He then strolled towards Medina.

Dieter loved to let the scenes have an undisturbed effect on him, although he always wanted to make his own perspective his subject. That was the core of his anthropological method: no statement without reflection on the speaker's position. His second leitmotif was the search for the essence of a culture. In which places, in which actions and in which phenomena does the constant emerge unadulterated? For Dieter, it was as clear as day that the spirit of a city never revealed itself at the hotspots. With a lot of luck, its contours could be seen in side scenes. It was impossible to focus on this spirit, but at best it could only be photographed by those who pressed the shutter button indiscriminately. Just as, for a moment, he could hear a voice wandering aimlessly through the noise between the stations on the radio. It was a fleeting, transcendent happiness.

»This way, brother!« He had caught the attention of a dealer who wanted to talk to him about carpets or blankets. That was ok, but the English irritated him: the man apparently thought he was a day tourist, who had taken the ferry from Andalusia. Dieter was offended. He hadn't crammed twelve semesters of standard ethnological works to pass through the bazaar and be taken as a holidaymaker in Spain. He rejected the trader harshly, whereupon three more showed up and pressed him. Beginner's mistake. In the Maghreb, the encounter had to be celebrated, because all socially relevant processes followed the principle of saving face. The sales talk was thus not a purely capitalist process, but an authentic aspect of living together. In the given situation, however, hops and malt had been lost. The three men didn't let him speak and held candlesticks and hash pipes in front of his nose, and a little boy fiddled around with his trousers. Dieter panicked, wriggled free and ran away amid the laughter of the bystanders. Still running, someone at the next corner called out to him: »*Where do you go, my friend, this road is closed.*« Which is the cheapest trick to make naive visitors to the old town streets pause for a moment. Dieter remained on course and stood a moment later in front of the meat market. As an enthusiastic hobby chef, he was interested in special ingredients and cooking methods. He could not guess, however, to which animal the rind and intestines directly in front of him had belonged. In stately bundles they hung on hooks on both sides of the alleyway and left only a narrow trellis. The smell and the puddles of blood on the floor told the anthropologist that the usual western division

of labour into slaughtering, refining and selling had not been introduced here yet. Everything happened on the spot. Dieter would have liked to turn around, but behind him the henchmen were still lurking. He felt watched, as if a spotlight was resting on him and moving with him. So he held his breath and ran through the middle of the battle corridor. He went on and on, with an approximate idea of danger, until he finally stood sweaty and half powerless again in front of the door plaque with the Spanish name. He leaned his forehead against the wooden inlays. For dinner, Marty prepared him a really good pasta, with olives that a friend from Bologna had recently brought her.

The next morning Dieter set off on his journey. Because he wasn't here for anthropological research (such a short stay wouldn't have been suitable for that), but to visit the legendary writer Paul Bowles – at least as long as that was still possible, for he was now in his eighties. That Tangier was absurdly located on his way back from Romania for him had to do with Dieter's main thematic concern: he was interested in indigenous music styles, much to the annoyance of the full-time music ethnologists who denied him any competence in this field. However, Dieter was of the opinion that music reflected the entire culture and thus fell within his sphere of responsibility. In this sense, he had examined certain tendencies in Eastern Europe and, to put it mildly, had encountered inconsistencies. Now Dieter was not quite sure himself: Did he need Paul Bowles' expert advice, or did he rather want to confront him? Anyway, he had to speak to him.

Bowles, the legend: As a musical prodigy, he had been an idolised member of the New York cultural chic set in the 1930s. A Debussy-style composer, with a distinguished three-piece and straight hair, at his side the no-less famous writer Jane Bowles, both of them surrounded by an aura of bisexual allure. In 1947, on one of their extended trips around the world, they had gotten stuck in Tangier and succumbed to the charm of the international zone. Under the influence of his wife, Paul transformed himself from a composer to a writer, in whose books European intellectuals went to the dogs in the desert. Jane and Paul mutated into a mythical force, made for projection. Beyond Moroccan independence in 1956, they acted as a North African bridgehead for artists and writers from the predominantly Anglophone world. Half the beat generation fulfilled their dream of freedom of movement and intoxication through the mediation of the spouses. Bowles' reputation as a charismatic nerd had lasted to the present day, even if the signs of the times were different today. Tangier had long since ceased to be an international hangout and had become a state province.

*Under a clear and cloudless sky, lies poor Tangier, high and dry.
Gaily she lived, now watch her die, the city they vowed to kill.*

Bowles had nevertheless remained a lone advocate of post-colonial anti-modernism. From 1959, he had spent months travelling Morocco to document regional musical practices. After Jane's death in 1973, the promotion of Moroccan authors took the

place of dialogue with his wife. It was precisely for these »translations« that Bowles had to take harsh criticism time and again. Just recently, the respected author Mohamed Choukri had described him in a newspaper article as a vampire who feeds on the blood of young illiterates.

Bowles' apartment was in the modern building *Immeuble Itesa*, Apartment 33, overlooking the Spanish Embassy. Open daily to all who get past his servant, Abdelouahid Boulaich. Dieter had written to register himself while in Bucharest, but was not sure whether the news had reached Bowles at such short notice. But Abdelouahid opened up and asked him in. In Dieter's imagination, the poet-prince's apartment had been inviting and feudal, but the mail, books and medicine were already piled up in the entrance area. One door further he was already standing in the living room – and entered a strange scene: Bowles, a little man in a traditional robe, leaned on his bed in the middle of a cushion landscape. At the foot end, sat a Moroccan man of about 60, his head buried in his hands. Another local stood at the window and smoked a pipe. There was an icy silence, apparently Dieter had broken into a break in conversation. No one noticed him until Bowles threw a defensive hand movement at his butler. Dieter was asked out, but Abdelouahid told him to come back the next day. So far, so good, he could not have expected more from a halfway spontaneous visit. But the situation he had found worried him. He hadn't recognised the man's face on the bed, and yet intuitively guessed that it had to be Mohammed Mrabet, now a prominent author himself, who didn't know how to read or write. Bowles had written down and published his stories, allegedly whispered to him by a magical fish, for decades, with both names on the book titles. Had there been another dispute over rights, who was entitled to how much money? Dieter decided he would ask carefully the next day.

In this area, Tangier had a completely different character than in the medieval Kasbah. The streets resembled rather those of a French city. In fact, the *Rue de la Liberté*, on which he was currently standing, led to a roundabout with the French Embassy and the *Gran Café de Paris* on its sides. Dieter opted for a peppermint tea in a protected environment. Because that was the advantage of all cafés in the world: one bought one's eyes by buying a drink. In the comforting awareness of being able to stare at the environment from here, Dieter sat down on a deep leather armchair, in front of him a table with a brown, glass top and ashtray. Marble floor, mirrored rear wall, wood panelling, high stucco ceiling with fan. This was a time capsule from the 1950s, and he would not have been surprised if Jean-Paul Sartre had suddenly sat down at the next table. The café was mainly occupied by decently dressed older Moroccans. In the street scene in front of the panorama window, there were hardly any expats to be seen, instead Berbers with pointed hoods, Sub-Saharan refugees, young dealers in demolished hip-hop clothes and some Arab investors with women in burkas. It was really not easy to see something like a red thread or common theme in this maze of signs, let alone the essence of a culture. In other words: Dieter came from the frying pan into the fire, because he had had a similar fate in Romania last week.

He had followed the tip of his friend Merle Barnes, who had told him about invented folklore traditions under Ceaușescu. The documents would still be stored today in the archives of the state radio station. Dieter was so electrified by the fake folk story that he didn't even go after his university for money, but paid for the trip out of his own pocket. He had to go where it hurts. Of course, he had a certain idea of Eastern European folk music, which would presumably shatter on the spot. Yes, Merle said, it was the same for him back then. He had fled as a drummer from the academic jazz of the North American universities in order to play ›the real stuff‹. And then he was disappointed several times. But one after the other.

The radio archive was a real treasure trove. Dieter found countless recordings from the 1950s and 1960s, including detailed descriptions of how these were made. Among them were real gold pieces like the album »Bijuterii muzicale pentru toate varstele«, fervently performed by an emeritus Securitate officer named Dimitri Podasca. The couple Ceaușescu had tackled the matter on a grand scale: whole styles were designed on the drawing board and filled with commissioned compositions. Suddenly, there were harmonica orchestras and ensembles with singing saws. Actually quite funny, if it hadn't been for the nationalistic strategy of the dictatorship. At any rate, the intention was clear to see: The ultimately unpredictable music of the people was to be replaced by a cleaned-up version with content conforming to the regime. Dieter stumbled from one surprise to the next: Some of the ensembles apparently still existed a decade after the fall of the Despot. In the meantime, they toured all over Europe with their fantasy costumes. How could that be? When Dieter left the archive after a few days, he was dizzy. He went to the next phone booth and called Merle, who laughed out loud at the other end of the line. Of course the ensembles still exist, but today they no longer serve the regime – they satisfy the longings of the world music freaks. It was therefore a matter of retort music in two ways. The reality, of course, looks quite different once again, he learned that as a drummer of a Romanian wedding band. He had signed on to play authentic gypsy music, but the audience had always wished for current hits. And because folk is always what's going to go down well, he played Madonna and Duran Duran with his toothless boys on their violins and accordions. »Relax, my dear«, Merle said, »I want to tell you one last story: On my first trip to Romania I met a beautiful woman. She took me to her village and I was introduced to her relatives. The next Sunday, we had to go to church. So that I wouldn't stand out too much, they lent me traditional clothes and we trudged through the glistening snow towards the church. Halfway along the way an old VW bus stopped next to us. A photographer got off and said, ›Please, you look so beautiful... may I take a picture of you?‹ Then he got in again and drove out of the scene. Two years later, I was standing with my next girlfriend in a bookstore in Gdansk when she gave me a Polish travel guide about Romania in her hand. The photo was printed on the back.«

After the phone call, Dieter decided that he had to go one step further, even if it was another step into the heart of darkness.

That's why he went to Tangier, another place of constant shifting, filled to the brim with historical material that gave no security – with an old protagonist at the centre, who always raised new questions. It was just like that. Why do we have to write meanings down at all? Dieter thought about how rich the fleeting makes us: the memory and the internalisation of sound, gaze, taste and touch. The so-called safe values were more transient, they were subject to the daily rate. This visit to the café, for example, would remain with him, the much too sweet mint tea, the anachronistic interior.

But where was he himself in this ensemble, what made him tick, which voice was his own? At the bottom, at the back, he suspected it at all times, but it was distracted by other voices, mixed with them, covered by them. In complex situations, he heard a hysterical chattering that consisted to a lesser extent of real voices. He was sure that the greater part came from himself, for he was speaking his perceived impressions to himself. The image, the situation became the polyphonic text, the Babylonian talk that spread within him. By the way, not only metaphysical messages sounded: the body also spoke, for instance about a sudden throbbing or whistling in the ear. For example, right now. He also wanted to listen to these signs and draw the right conclusions from them. He still had a score to settle, he had to go back to the old town again.

Once again past the merchants, along the wrong branches, after the smells, up to a completely different kind of café, with seats on the carpet, with water pipes and a small group of musicians next to the bar, who immediately asked for and received a donation. Some of the instruments he knew, the plucked *ganbri* and drums in the shape of hourglasses, called *gwal*. Dieter had hardly placed himself in a corner when a man around 40 stepped into the middle of the room. He was dressed in black and red cloths. The music began with a repetitive rhythm, the man closed his eyes and began to slowly turn around his own axis. After a few minutes, he lay down on the floor. The music stopped for a moment and then resumed, this time with a much faster beat. The man stood up and danced, pulled a long knife out of his pocket and began to inflict injuries to himself in the rhythm of the music, at regular intervals and in a formalised way, first on his arms, then on his legs. In between, he wiped his face with the cuts until he sunk and remained lying, covered in blood. The *ganbri* player stood up and spread a blanket over the dancer, who now stopped moving. The musicians took a break, drank tea and smoked a pipe. Dieter was in a state of shock. He knew such rituals from hearsay, but had not expected them here, in the middle of the city on an early evening.

He tried to get his bearings and asked the man next to him, who, like all other café visitors, had been interested in the performance, but had looked at what had just happened with almost no reaction. He was told that the dancer was possessed by Aisha Qandisha, as can be seen from his red and black clothes. Dieter had already heard of the female spirit, to whom several thousand Northern Moroccans were supposedly married. He inquired about the details. Aisha Qandisha slipped into men and drove them crazy. The victims walked alone, sat silently in the café and talked to themselves. One could not get rid of the demon, but one could reconcile with her. In the bloody ritual, Aisha Qandisha would be satisfied and from then on would be a helper against

the diseases she otherwise causes. So we had just experienced something very beautiful. The man smiled at Dieter. At this moment the music started a third time, now a little slower again. There was a small movement under the blanket. The dancer moaned, slowly stood up and moved through the room for a while. Then he walked radiantly towards the musicians, kissed them one after the other on the forehead, gave them money and left the café. No questions asked.

Dieter had experienced what he had longed for. And now that he had seen it, he no longer knew if he liked it. This had undoubtedly been an authentic process. It was even a moment of salvation in play, someone had fought the inner voice before his eyes, and perhaps even successfully. He would tell Bowles about it, but for once it was good for today.

After a restless sleep, Dieter made his way to the American Consulate the next morning. A truly magnificent Moorish-style building, in gratitude for Morocco's recognition of the United States as the first country in the world. At the time of the International Zone, the American Legation was part of the High Society network. Today, it had largely lost its political function and served purely representative purposes. This also seemed to apply to the older consul Dieter met at the spot and whose field of activity was not quite clear to him. He was somehow left behind, just as the whole building was a remnant. Besides an ancestral gallery of former ambassadors, the main attraction was the toy collection of the multi-billionaire Malcolm Forbes, who had spent some nice years in the city together with *Woolworth* heiress Barbara Hutton. More interesting was the meeting with Yassine, who was in charge of the house's small scientific library. A likeable guy, perhaps 30 years old, who had returned to his hometown after studying in Paris, like some of his old friends. Asked about Bowles' role in Tangier, he just waved it off. Bowles had always avoided the educated Moroccans, they did not fit into his concept. Here in the Legation, however, everything that somehow had to do with Bowles had been collected for years in order to build him a kind of shrine after his death. Yassine said that this seemed a little scary to him. But that Dieter should give Bowles his best regards and tell him that he could ignore the local intelligentsia if he likes, but that it would still unfold splendidly.

When Dieter rang Apartment 33 for the second time, his feelings and thoughts were even more ambivalent than yesterday. But then a smiling Abdelouahid opened the door for him and told him that he was the only guest today. Mr. Bowles had received the mail from Bucharest and was looking forward to the conversation. Again or still, Bowles sat on his throne of pillows. When Dieter entered the room, he smiled and pointed to a bamboo chair opposite the bed. His servant immediately brought tea, Bowles was an experienced host. If Dieter liked it in Tangier, and what did he think about the brand new *Art Nouveau*-style street lamps? Bowles giggled, but didn't seem to expect an answer. »Well, young man, what are you bringing me and what do we want to talk about? Frankly, you seem a little disoriented.« The master's eyes sparkled

attentively. Dieter pulled his doctoral thesis out of his pocket, a study on the relationship between fact and fiction in German documentary films of the 1960s. Bowles raised his eyebrows, nodded approvingly and placed the book on one of the piles next to his bed.

»Mister Bowles, please forgive the ambush, but I'm on an odyssey and need your advice.« The poet seemed amused, so Dieter came straight to the point:

I'm interested in the audio recordings of traditional Moroccan music you made between 1959 and 1961. These are fantastic documents, but I have a few questions about them. I have read your accompanying notes. Sometimes you had strange ways to get to the footage.

I wanted to preserve the music before it disappeared. I traveled all over the country for that. That's all, actually.

Let me give you two examples. There's the Gnaoui solo song that you...

The gogo, a kind of shoe box with a single string. And with a horribly rattling steel nib.

You asked the gogo player to remove the nib, which is an integral part of the instrument, for the recordings.

I didn't actually ask him, I coerced him. But the recording is one of my best. Listen, the Gnaoua music in Marrakech was already the result of various blendings at the time. I see my intervention more as a natural development of the instrument.

Another example: Reh dial Beni Bouhiya...

I can imagine what comes next.

In Segangan you wanted to record a small ensemble of vocals, flute and a kind of snare drum. You didn't appreciate the drum, but you liked the qsbah flute very much. The qsbah player, however, refused to play solo because this element did not occur in his music. You threatened him with the American government.

That's right. But at least I didn't make a secret of it.

You recorded the flute solo against the will of the musicians and then wrote a text for it. May I read it out loud?

Don't, I know it by heart: In a landscape of immensity and desolation, it is a moving thing to come upon a lone camel driver, sitting beside his fire at night while the camels sleep, and listen for a long time to the querulous, hesitant cadences of the qsbah. The music, more than any other I know, most completely expresses the essence of solitude.

But according to your notes, it was neither night nor lonely, nor were there camels in the area. You simply used the power of the government you despised to document something that didn't exist.

But this recording has also become very beautiful. You know, back then I wasn't just a microphone, but a living person with my own musical aesthetic.

May I ask another question? Would you have thought that your texts would one day be translated into Arabic, that they would also have Moroccan readers?

No, I would also not advise any Moroccan to read my books.

I ask this because you once wrote that you could easily confuse the locals with their luggage.

Really? Where did you find that?

In »The Sheltering Sky« the protagonist enters a train compartment and describes her impression of chaos.

So what, have you ever taken a train in Morocco? Why don't you give it a try?

Why do cultivated Europeans always meet uneducated Moroccans in your books?

Because that's realistic. As an unsuspecting visitor of Morocco, one does not meet an educated person, and if one did, one would not notice it, because educated people do not talk to tourists. Besides, this is the only way to get the action going. I need disparate elements that collide. I am a writer, you know, not a documentary filmmaker.

You ignore the local high culture.

Because it doesn't interest me. I'm interested in what's different here than in the Western world. Those who have studied abroad do not appear in my books.

You do not grant this country any progress.

I don't want any progress. How can you want progress when the world is about to collapse? Just one step further and it's over.

You claim that Moroccan culture has suffered greatly since independence in 1956.

Since independence? No, since the 9th century. Since the Arabs ruined the country. That has nothing to do with 1956.

Can you explain the criticism of your joint texts with Mohammed Mrabet?

No, I have always paid him his shares, often even more. I gave him a voice with which he could also criticize me. That is what he has now done.

Was he here yesterday when I came in?

I no longer remember who was here yesterday.

Why are these texts always about violence, about the raw, the uncivilised?

Because the boy knows which stories I like. Visit him, he lives in Souani. But do not ask for the famous author, because nobody knows him here. Ask for Mrabet, who prays in the Emsallah Mosque. And let them tell you the story about the writer, who is also a liar. It sounds almost the same in Arabic, and that is no coincidence, ka-da-ba means lie, ka-ta-ba means write.

You draw a picture of Morocco that is wild, original and romantic at the same time. How you describe the medieval Fez...

I represent Fez romantically? I don't really know what you mean by romance. I have always enjoyed being in Fez because there is a very good hotel there, the Palais Jamai, which I can recommend.

I ask again differently: Is your representation of North Africa balanced and correct?

And I tell you once again: I am not responsible for correct and balanced representations. I am a writer, I write what I want. That is my only privilege. Now calm down and drink your tea. I received mail today.

Dieter had been aroused in a way during the conversation that he rarely experienced. Bowles, on the other hand, had remained provocatively calm, he knew all these accusations, he didn't care about them. Now he picked up a cassette, one of his old compositions from the 1930s, which had recently been recorded in France. He instructed Dieter to put it in the recorder, then they listened. Sounds like from a bygone era, a kind of American late Romanticism with cautiously modern elements. After the last note Dieter inquired when he had heard this piece for the last time. Bowles said it was the first time. But how could it be, when there were so many famous composers and musicians among his friends? Bowles replied: »What friends?«

During the interview, the old man had giggled and twisted almost youthfully, but listening to the music, he had got tired and leaned his head back. He waved at Dieter, shook his hand and whispered something to him. Dieter wasn't sure if he had understood it correctly, but Abdelouahid took care of his master now. He kissed Bowles on the forehead and closed his eyes. The visit was over. Dieter had understood: »I surrounded myself with silent figures.«

Back on the street, he thought of all the failed encounters in Bowles' books. The fact that the work with Mrabet had to end in a scandal was actually preordained. Strange that they wanted to set up a room of honour for this man in the consulate, as if he were a mediator for the host country. He was not. On the other hand, he did occasionally act as if he were. What was the writer's freedom in his novels, became a problem in the so-called documents. Dieter didn't help that.

The following noon he stood at the railing and looked back at the port, which was slowly fading. How would it go on with this city, with its old poet and the new king? Bowles staged himself continually, he permanently represented his version of the story. It was said about Stockholm's Strindberg that schizophrenia had forced him to make permanent statements about himself. With regard to his own person, Dieter thought that Copenhagen's Kierkegaard fit much better, who wrote: »Praying does not mean speaking, but listening.« That's right, the supermundane only came to light when one was silent. Transcendent impulses (or those he thought were) gave him peace and confidence. Those that brought him to hectic acts of fulfillment sprang only from the consciousness of guilt. Orders were always suspicious.

A slightly longer German version of this chapter was published as part of the novel *Die schwache Stimme* (Textem, 2018).