

PEER

The deliverance and The patience
essay by Richard Grayson



"Covered streets like corridors with doors opening into rooms on either side, hidden terraces high above the sea, streets consisting only of steps, dark impasses, small squares built on sloping terrain so they looked like ballet sets designed in false perspective" is how Paul Bowles described Tangiers, the city in which he chose to live. In the cadences of tentative fascination we can identify the push and pull of emotion that the geographies - as much mental as physical - of the place engendered in him. Things are no longer entirely themselves: boundaries and state have become slippery, contingent, fluxing between forms: streets are 'like' corridors, squares 'like' ballet sets: it becomes a setting for a mysterious and unknowable theatre.

In Tangiers being 'between states' was literal as well as metaphorical. It was an international zone: a place where no one legislation held sway and so it became a magnet for western 'outsiders' criminals and bohemians both, people fleeing the law and/or seeking the luxury of living on the outside of the law with the concomitant freedom of behaviours granted, be they sexual or chemical, as well as the liberation that being partially outside of western economic and financial structures provided in cheapness. Bowles, Ginsburg, Orton, Gysin and Burroughs as well as gunrunners, confidence men and crooks all spend time there: For Burroughs the International Zone became his 'Interzone': a place of potentiality, of licence, of terrifying protean possibility where dialectics of freedom and domination are in constant flux. It is a place where, as Prospero says of his Island in the *Tempest*, " all that is solid melts into air".

Law ceases to be absolute or monolithic in ports, and at sea it becomes atomised, contained within the limits of the ship, it threatens constantly to evaporate and is maintained only through force and the acceptance of the captain's command. In case of mutiny the equations shift, in case of piracy the lawful can co-exist with the lawless, subjugation with freedom in a state of suspended animation. In the 17th and 18th century the heroes of the British Navy were involved in piracy: the career of Drake was paid for with gold taken by force from Spanish ships, and much of his crew was press-ganged: a term that time has made romantic, but which masks the bleak reality that they had been kidnapped and enslaved. The difference between Drake and a buccaneer, between upholder of the law and outlaw, becomes hallucinatory, a statement rather than a state. It is no surprise then that sailors became prime movers in rebellion, not only with in the microcosm - the ship, the mutiny - but in the macrocosm - in North America sailors helped secure numerous victories for the forces against Great Britain between 1765 and 1776, leading Thomas Jefferson to list impressment as a major grievance in the Declaration Of Independence. In ports they manifested 'a militant attitude toward arbitrary and excessive authority, an empathy for the troubles of others, and a willingness to co-operate for the sake of self-defense" (Linebaugh and Rediker' *The Many Headed Hydra*. Beacon Press, Boston, 2000): attitudes and activities that were viewed as indubitably criminal.

On July the 25th 1609 The Sea-Venture, a ship carrying sailors and settlers to the new colony of Virginia was shipwrecked on the coast of Bermuda. At the time a large proportion of 'settlers' were in fact forced labour, slaves essentially, made up of Irish rebels, Gypsies, religious protesters, the dispossessed and the criminal. These people were drawn from prisons and moved to the new colonies and plantations as the possessions of merchants, where they were then sold on. A half century later in Barbados a worker fetched 'one thousand five hundred and fifty pound weight of sugar a piece, more or less, according to their working facilities" (from the petition of Rivers and Foyle against slavery to the House of Commons 1659). Virginia, their destination was represented at the time as a paradise - 'And cheerfully at sea/success you still entice / To get the pearl and gold/ And ours to hold, Virginia/ Earth's only Paradise" ('The Alchemist' Ben Johnston). In fact it was wrecked with disease and starvation and run ruthlessly as a capital venture by the Virginia Company - a private enterprise dedicated to maximising return to its shareholders. It was a settlement where people were reduced to cannibalism, one man killing his wife, chopping her up and salting her for food. Bermuda conversely was regarded as a terrifying place full of savages, an 'Isle of Devils' . This description turned out to be as at odds with reality as was the description of Virginia, Bermuda was an edenic land 'the richest. healthfullest and pleasantest they ever saw" (Silvester Jourdain: A Discovery of the Bermudas, Otherwise Called The Island of Devils. London 1610). Seeing this, many of the castaways decided to do nothing that would take them from this island, and vowed to try and set up an autonomous community, outside of previous structure and law, a new society for this new land. Accounts of this event, and this island, form the basis of Prosperos Island in the Tempest which Shakespeare wrote in 1610. (Shakespeare was also an investor in the Virginia Company). In turn it is transmuted again in the Science fiction film 'Fantastic Planet'.

Gonzalo and Sebastian survey this land, imagining how they might live : 'the commonwealth I would by contraries / execute all things; for no kind of traffic / would I admit; no name of magistrate; /letters would not be known; riches, poverty, / And use of service, none; contract, succession, / Bourne, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;'...says Gonzalo. the world is to be reformed, recombined reinvented: The World Turned Upside Down as was proclaimed during the English Revolution

In real life however, the community failed after ten months, and the authorities eventually prevailed on the settlers, and they built two ships called The Deliverance and The Patience to continue the voyage to the plantations of Virginia - vessels that Nelson has memorialised in the title of this work.

We move through the wooden door into spaces that shift us between sweatshop and workshop, travel agents and gambling den, from rooms for pedagogy to rooms for pleasure. Spaces where we can slip from one state and condition into another. The immediately startling thing about this is that these spaces and architectures are unpeopled - we have entered some Marie Celeste, and we are perhaps the first person to step there since...well, whatever happened... and first off it is ourselves that we find being shaped

and articulated by the spaces as we are cast in the role of part trespasser, part archaeologist and part detective: a person moving through the traces of other's existences trying to understand what catastrophe may have caused this emptiness and what condition may have shaped the inhabitants lives. This is a role we know well from films and other fictions, walking through the ship and into the hatchery in *Aliens*, pushing open the door of the empty shack in *Evil Dead*. In this progress there remains always the unnerving possibility that the rooms are not as deserted as they seem - a pile of cigarette butts in the corner suggests recent occupation, and we become trepidatious, acutely aware of moving into rooms and spaces that are not our own. Will they return to this biker's bar? - if indeed it is a biker's bar, for if it is, it must be the hang-out for the Brechtbanditos - will we be caught in the act?

After a while it becomes clear that there is no single unitary narrative nor a single mystery, but that there are many, branching out from each room and door, suggesting an infinity of readings and of occupations. At the same time, commonalities reveal themselves: there is something contingent and ad hoc about each location. Spaces have been occupied and changed - an attic warehouse has been settled, squatted, things have been made to make do: with the inventiveness that the need for survival brings. Many rooms suggest the possibility of transformation, or resistance, of a hard won habitation against difficult odds, others of a vague, half hinted means of escape, - a seedy travel agents, a bar and the liberation that alcohol brings. Like moving through the Interzone, Nelson has us constantly between states, between readings, a spiralling complexity that multiplies binaries: for every hinted liberation there is an oppression: the sweatshop, the collections of objects that may have an occult significance, for every claimed space the fact of the ultimate desertion. It is in this flicker between states that the dark power of the work ultimately lies, suggesting the constant moment-by-moment negotiation with the world and its forces that our existence demands - the series of momentary, grasped, freedoms, groupings, and organisations by which we empower or comfort ourselves, the strategies of survival. These utopian moments can occupy a criminal space - the sailors actions being seen as seditious, the pirate democracies that existed on Privateer ships, or in the Pirate settlements described (and fantasised) in William Burrough's' *Cities of the Red Night* are all defacto criminal or criminalised.

These are brief flarings in an encroaching darkness and so cannot claim ontological nor eschatological functions or outcome: The people travelling on the previous manifestation of the *Deliverance* and the *Patience* were leaving the utopian space of their castaway republic, their Prospero's Island, and travelling to the far more brutal shores of a colonised Virginia.