

French Islam

"The Spider's House," by Paul Bowles (Random House. 406 pp. \$3.95), is primarily a novel of characters and ideas set in the centuries-old city of Fez, French Morocco. With it Mr. Bowles, who has received wide critical attention in the past, publishes his fourth work of fiction.

By William Peden

RECENT spectacular news stories have dramatically underscored the fact that of all the trouble spots which plague the world today none has a greater potentiality for danger than the North African protectorate of French Morocco. During half a century of uneasy French rule it has become a cauldron of conflicting interests frequently boiling into full-fledged warfare, and of all the individual powder kegs in this vast arsenal none is said to be a greater center of resistance to the French than the centuries-old city of Fez, in French Morocco, which is the scene of Paul Bowles's new novel, "The Spider's House."

An indefatigable traveler and long-time resident of North Africa and the Near East, Paul Bowles knows the Arab world and seemingly understands it as very few "foreigners" have. "The Spider's House" is his fourth work of fiction and unquestionably his best. It is alive with the drama of a few tension-filled days in present-day Fez, its action culminating in open warfare between the French and the Moslems.

The novel is primarily one of character and idea. It is a delineation of good and evil, centering on the contrasting personalities of a fortyish American novelist named John Stenham and a Moslem boy named Amar. Stenham is a New Englander who for years has lived in Morocco. A one-time Communist who had joined the party "just for the hell of it," he has turned his back on politics in particular and on the active world in general. He is a symbol of paralyzing intellectuality.

IN INDIVIDUAL Moslems Stenham eventually begins to see the embodiment of what he himself has striven to attain—the "mystery of man at peace with himself." Morocco, when he first knew it, was a "pure" country. Now, it is a house divided against itself. The Moslems fear and hate all Nazarenes and in

particular the French. ("The great ambition of every Frenchman in Morocco was to kill as many Moslems as possible," says Amar). In this house also the medieval and the modern are in violent juxtaposition, and the individual is ground to powder between the maneuverings of the French colonial secret police, the national terrorists, and the professional revolutionaries.

Within this web of espionage, subversion, and nationalistic intrigue Stenham's path finally crosses that of the boy Amar, who is the son of a Moslem holy man. Amar is a masterly creation. Although he hates and fears savagely and violently, he is the only character in the novel who is above and beyond corruption. A lonely, abused figure, he is alone in his integrity as he threads his way, untarnished, through a quagmire of deceit, intrigue, and hypocrisy. His subsequent involvement in the personal affairs of Stenham and in the larger conflicts of opposing political movements are the high points of a novel that is engrossing, suspenseful, and meaningful.

The world and the people created by Mr. Bowles are completely convincing. "The Spider's House" is not a pleasant book, and its uncompromising portrayal of individual, group, and national wrongdoing will disturb the romantic or the squeamish reader. But this is the work of a mature writer who has freed himself from the excesses and eccentricities of his earlier fiction, who has something significant to say, and who says it with authority, power, and frequently with beauty.



—Ahmed el Yacoubi.

Paul Bowles—"power . . . beauty."

Life of Isaiah-II

"The Prophet," by Sholem Asch (translated by Arthur Saul Super. G. P. Putnam's. 343 pp. \$4), is the fifth and final novel by which that writer has interpreted in modern terms the Messianic tradition which permeates both Judaism and Christianity. In this book he tells the story of the little-known prophet named Deutero-Isaiah.

By Bradford Smith

ON HIS seventy-fifth birthday Sholom Asch, in the final volume of his own Pentateuch, presents the second Isaiah whose lyric utterances—"Every valley shall be exalted," "O thou that tellest good tidings," "How beautiful upon the mountains," "Surely he hath borne our griefs"—are known to millions by way of Handel's "Messiah." Only Biblical scholars would know—and Mr. Asch does not make it sufficiently plain—that the book of Isaiah consists of writings from two or more hands. Of these Mr. Asch's hero is the second, the "Deutero-Isaiah" whose words foretell the redeemer who shall be "wounded for our transgressions." Mr. Asch has liberally spread the noble poetry of this inspired prophet throughout his book, imagining the conditions and then setting the scenes in which it may have been spoken, and since little or nothing is actually known about this particular prophet Mr. Asch has a clear field.

The book opens—after a rather long and heavy description of Babylon—in the hall of King Nabonidus where Belshazzar, the prince regent, has arranged a great feast in honor of Gimil, chief harlot votary of the goddess Ishtar. At the height of the pagan revels, when the sacred vessels of the Jews are being profaned, the famous handwriting appears on the wall and the aged Daniel is called to interpret it.

Babylon at this time is full of Jews, from the poor and humble up to the princes of Judah and the high priests whom Nebuchadnezzar had forced out of Jerusalem when he conquered it. Among these exiles comes a young man who has taken the name of the revered prophet Isaiah. He prophesies that the Persian king Cyrus will conquer Babylon and will thus be doing the work of the Lord. But Cyrus, victorious, disappoints the prophet by declaring the pagan god Bel Mero-dach rather than Jehovah to be the

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A Great Hero of Letters

"The Achievement of Samuel Johnson," by Walter Jackson Bate (Oxford University Press, 248 pp. \$4.50), attempts to prove that the well-known eighteenth-century literary figure was as good a writer as he was a talker. Joseph Wood Krutch, our reviewer, is the author of a widely read and highly regarded biography of Johnson.

By Joseph Wood Krutch

WHEN Samuel Johnson died he was regarded in England as the perfect example of what Carlyle was to call "The Hero as Man of Letters." By Carlyle's own time Johnson had shrunk to a mere eccentric personality and by the beginning of our own century there were those who regarded both him and Boswell's "Life" of him as high on the list of the world's great bores. Now the curve of his rehabilitation has followed precisely the curve of his decline. Johnson "came back" as an amusing talker in the pages of Boswell; in certain circles at least he is now being referred to again as a great writer as well. Professor Bate's book is the first modern work to treat him primarily as the profound thinker he was. It almost looks as though we were about to get the whole great man back again.

Professor Bate is no popularizer. His book is closely written and cannot possibly find the audience which easier books have won. But it can hardly fail to impress those who will take the trouble to read it, and it has two very great virtues. It deals primarily with Johnson's thought rather than with his personality or his eccentricity and it digs deep into those periodical essays which his contemporaries so much admired but which modern readers have almost completely neglected. There is, I think, no other way in which Johnson the thinker can be recovered.

Many who ought to know better still sometimes speak as though Johnson's own literary works were merely elephantine pomposities occasionally illuminated by flashes of the witty intransigence which enlivened his conversation. If they were not put off by his now unfashionable vocabulary and his tendency to operate often on a higher level of abstraction than

modern writing tends to favor they would perceive that few men have ever pondered more persistently upon the human predicament or ever traced more perceptively the labyrinthine ways of the human mind. He was one of the greatest of descriptive psychologists and he knew as well as anyone has ever known the truth of Pope's description of man: "Chaos of thought and passion, all confused;/Still by himself abused or disabused;/Created half to rise and half to fall/Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all."

Everybody knows, for instance, that Johnson called remarriage "the triumph of hope over experience." Too few realize that this is not only witty and cynical but that it is also solidly founded upon an inclusive understanding of the general fact more compendiously stated in one of those abstractions which for some curious reason a hundred years have found repellent: "The natural flights of the human mind are not from pleasure to pleasure but from hope to hope." Scattered through the essays and, of course, through the only somewhat neglected "Rasselas" are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of equally succinct generalizations and an equal number of shrewd comments on specific be-

havior. What did Thorstein Veblen ever say which is not summarized in Johnson's remark that we "fill our houses with useless ornaments, only to show that we can buy them"? Do not the Freudians claim originality for having discovered "a kind of anxious cleanliness—the superfluous scrupulosity of guilt, dreading discovery, shunning suspicion"?

The core of Professor Bate's book is the three chapters which take as titles three of Johnson's phrases: "The Hunger of Imagination," "The Treachery of the Human Heart," and "The Stability of Truth." No one else, I think, has ever more successfully attempted to codify the profoundest of Johnson's convictions in such a way as to illuminate and unify his thinking. Perhaps the most significant difference between what is called Johnson's pessimism or his sense of the unsatisfactoriness of human life and the more familiar "disillusion" of more recent writers is this: To him the unsatisfied "hunger of imagination" is not for something which does not exist but for something which has not been found. "Few of the hours of life are filled up with objects adequate to the mind of man," he has written. Wisdom consists in filling as many of them as possible with objects which are as little inadequate as one can find. The Christian hope, to which Johnson somewhat desperately clung, is simply this: since man, unlike the beasts, is never satisfied in this life the fact that he is not satisfied may imply another in which his capacities will find full employment.



"Son, this is the third fatted calf we've had to slay for you! When are you going to settle down?"