

V

La Composée :

Or, The Muse Strikes Back

In *La Composée* (2001), we move from a talking Tower to a heroine of flesh and blood who is, nonetheless, like the CN Tower, on a quest for identity. There is no double heroine this time, but a singular being viewed from the outside (until the end) and interpreted by a series of males. Though the novel begins in Paris, « La Ville-Lumière », her identity quest focuses on a city by the sea, Marseille. But the mystery deepens, and is finally resolved, on a historic Tunisian island. As in the previous novels, space and time are closely linked, for on this island steeped in the past, she finds her own roots.

At the beginning, one expects *La Composée* to be another romantic novel focusing on male perspectives on an enigmatic Muse. Even the cover illustration suggests a jigsaw puzzle to be pieced together by the male gaze. She wears a Mona Lisa smile, or perhaps the archaic smile of ancient Greek and Etruscan statues. The smile, however, hints at hidden knowledge which the supposed “Muse” possesses, mocking the obtuseness of her male admirers.

By the end, the “Muse” turns the tables, and proves to be herself the authentic artist. Taking pen in hand, she tells her own story, demolishing the other hypothetical versions of “truth” the male point of view characters

present. It is interesting too that she moves back to the epistolary form, typical of the eighteenth century and the beginnings of the novel, a new form in which women began to gain the confidence to move from private sphere (journals and letters) to publication (the novel)¹. She is thus in many ways the culmination of Bouraoui's previous female protagonists. If Koi represents the gaps, the silences in which the male artist finds his voice, Zitouna adopts the male role of talespinner. Hatchepsut composes her fourteen tablets without publicly acknowledging her authorship, and Francine pieces together the fragments of Barka Bousiris's writings, probably adding her own creative vision, but giving all the credit to him. Twylla Blue expresses herself mystically and through soapstone sculptures, while the CN Tower, in adopting a female voice, becomes « Anti-Babel » and tries to set in order the postmodern chaos of telecommunications. Héloïse, « la Composée », subverts male observers/narrators, and becomes herself the narrator of her life.

This tight, compressed little novel is a real tour de force with surprises around every corner. In the final analysis, the composition becomes herself the composer, multicultural, of unknown parentage on the father's side, embodying three major religions, and who effects a personal quest for her cultural, national, religious roots.

The structure is triadic, focusing on three principal characters: Samir Arhab, the young Tunisian restaurateur with literary pretensions; Jean-Marc Léger, the aged Don Juan/poet; and Héloïse Orsini-Uzan, the object of both their male gazes, who has more than a few ideas of her own. There is also Ali Ben Mokhtar, another aged writer, but Arabo-musulman, on the island of Djerba. He seems to function as another version of Jean-Marc, from another culture and religion. The inscrutable Héloïse doesn't make her dramatic entrance until page 55, chapter 5, more than midway through the text, but she is present by her absence throughout the earlier portion when she is the object of speculation (and composition) on the part of Jean-Marc and Samir.

Jean-Marc Léger: The Sly Old Fox

To begin at the beginning, Héloïse is first presented from the point of view of Jean-Marc Léger. He is the narrator, Samir Arhab the *narrataire*, or

¹ See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929). As the philosopher Alain Touraine has also remarked, the history of the novel corresponds to the history of women.

listener. Samir falls in love (or so he thinks) with the fantasy figure of Héloïse as constructed by Jean-Marc, who at least knows her. This figure is deconstructed by Samir who doubts the older man's veracity, and then reconstructed by Samir to fit his own fantasies.

Jean-Marc Léger is an aged poet of considerable charm but less talent, as his last name, "lightweight", suggests. He takes pride in « son moi charmeur et donjuanesque » (9), and he courts women, including, supposedly, Héloïse, with his poems, conveyed effectively by « le timbre sensuel de sa voix » (40). Héloïse is « la nouvelle Nouvelle Héloïse », a postmodernist version of Rousseau's eighteenth-century heroine Julie, the quintessential Romantic heroine, virtuous but sensual; however, she is also the archetypal medieval Héloïse. Jean-Marc sees himself as her « Abélard des temps nouveaux » (11). Samir thinks to himself, who's he kidding? an old man, probably impotent, putting himself in the position of the medieval Héloïse's learned mentor and lover. Héloïse does, in fact, resemble more the medieval prototype than Rousseau's Julie in that she rejects dependency on a man and carves her own niche, as the medieval Héloïse became an abbess, a scholar, and an early feminist heroine.

Samir sees that Jean-Marc has built castles in Spain. Together they are a kind of Bouvard and Pécuchet à la Flaubert, representing young and old (15). Jean-Marc, the first narrator of the text, introduces the theme of Héloïse's love for the *mère-patrie*, Tunisia, and the island of Djerba in particular. He sees that she has cut the umbilical cord tying her to her mother, the Corsican Marie Orsini, but not the link to her native land. Jean-Marc compares her suggestively to Samir, who is also tied to his mother, whom, nevertheless, he hasn't seen in ten years, and the motherland which, however, he visits only rarely and reluctantly. For Héloïse's parents, a Corsican and a Tunisian Jew, « ce pays ... n'était pas le leur, mais ... les a marqués jusqu'à la moëlle épinière » (14).

Jean-Marc's balcony, which overlooks Paris and « les splendeurs de la Ville Lumière » (19), prefigures the balcony of Room 305 at the hotel "Elmansiya" at Taguermess on the isle of Djerba which Héloïse visits again and again in quest of her origins, and which overlooks the blue Mediterranean.

In effect, by chapter 2 Héloïse has "dumped" Jean-Marc, whatever their real relationship is, because he becomes possessive: « Elle dit que je suis exigeant » (20). We learn her side to this story only later in the tale. Jean-Marc falls into a decline or depression, no longer reads poems, and says, « je n'ai plus rien à dire » (25). Three days later – again the mystic number – he falls victim to gastroenteritis, and three days after that he is dead, shuffled

quickly off this mortal coil by the author. He is buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery, and Samir begins to wonder if Héloïse has killed him (31). He also begins to wonder, did Jean-Marc fabricate « son dernier amour en bordure de mort » (31)?, and refers to it as « l'amour crépusculaire » (32).

Samir Arhab: Prince Charming and the Sleeping Beauty

Samir Arhab's last name creates all sorts of problems for him in his adopted country, France, but in Arabic it means not "Arab", but « Bienvenue », "Welcome". His "welcome" in France, however, is problematical. The French Jean-Marc translates Samir's first name into Sam, which would be Samuel, and therefore Jewish, symbolically suggesting the wedding of cultures at the heart of this text.

Samir's fantasy seems drawn from the world of fairy tales (Occidental), or the Thousand and One Nights (Oriental). The Western fairy tale frame, à la Charles Perrault, however, prevails, as he values France over Tunisia. He sees himself as Prince Charming waiting in the wings to awaken with a kiss Sleeping Beauty, the Belle of the Woods.

Samir is very skeptical about the tale of the Belle as filtered through his aging friend. He thinks unflatteringly, « Arrête tes effusions lyriques » (12), and doubts this exaggerated story. He helps the old man make dinner, preparing the tomato salad to give a little respite to Jean-Marc's prolix discourse. He suspects that Héloïse could only be Jean-Marc's mistress out of self-interest (15). Above all, he wants direct access to the Belle's own discourse. As the old saying goes, beware lest you get what you wish for. He finally accesses her language with a vengeance! Her direct discourse comes in the form of a long letter in which she rejects him, just as she has rejected Jean-Marc.

He identifies with her in part because they were both born on the island of Djerba, *l'Île des lotophages* in Homer's *Odyssey*, or the Island of Forgetfulness where Ulysses nearly forgets his mission, is deflected from it. The hotel Elmansiya means literally « L'Oubliée », and Samir's project becomes a reconstitution of Héloïse's past, thereby leading to a measure of control over her and over himself: « En réalité, ne sommes-nous pas tous en train de vivre dans l'illusion suprême de contrôler plus ou moins notre sort ? » (32).

Samir thinks of himself accordingly as a self-made man, « Créé de toutes pièces ! » But in effect we are all the products of our history, even when we least suspect it. A would-be poet himself, he has earned by hard work a Bac

de Lettres Modernes in Tunis. But he becomes an entrepreneur, moving from tour guide to restaurant dishwasher, to cook, to waiter, to co-owner. He perfects his knowledge of the language of Molière and Racine while neglecting his own. If he tries to forget his culture, Héloïse tries to remember hers. He thinks he has "composed" himself, whereas he has allowed himself to be shaped by the Occident, while repudiating his own culture. He writes a « poésie de mauvais aloi », even dedicating a long poem to Paris, ironically praising her welcoming qualities and her cultural riches (33).

He completes his cultural assimilation by forming a liaison with a Frenchwoman, Véronique Fournier from Normandy, « Française de France » (evoking Françoise and Francine, but we never get to know her). After living together for five years more or less amicably, they finally marry, but her parents insist she keep her maiden name because to call herself Madame Arhab would be to « s'attirer tous les ennuis du monde » (33). Living together was fine, but the marriage lasts only two years: « les deux années de vie conjugale furent un enfer de querelles et de contestations » (34). The trade-off is that he helps her buy a partnership in a law firm, while she helps him obtain French citizenship. She takes another lover, « un Juif électricien au chômage, tout en se jurant de ne plus commettre l'erreur fatale du mariage ».

Samir is torn between two cultures. On the one hand, he thinks that in his adoptive country, he was swimming better than a fish in water. On the other hand, his immersion is compared to a bath « dans son huile d'olive importée de Tunisie sous un prestigieux label italien... » (34). He refuses to change his name to Jean-Marie Dupont (pont = bridge), because he was proud of « ses origines africaine, maghrébine, tunisienne... » (35). He recalls the anecdote of little Mohamed whose teacher advises him to change his name to Lucien, at which point his Maghrebien parents hit the roof – and him. His explanation to his teacher shows an extreme dissociation from his own roots: « ... j'ai été agressé par deux Arabes ! » (36). Samir accepts at the most the abridgment of his first name to "Sam" « pour l'alléger de son ire ! » (37).

His ties to his mother – and *mère-patrie* – are equally ambivalent. He spoils his father until his death, loves his mother, but doesn't see her for ten years. He sends her money and phones her twice a month, when she always repeats the same litany – return home and marry a Tunisian woman: « Ma mère est une véritable poétesse sans le savoir... Le soleil, le ciel et la

mer éparpillent ses vers au gré des vents de la prière ! » (37). She tries to matchmake and he bends the truth slightly by telling her he is already interested in « une femme née dans notre pays », without mentioning her mixed ethnic background (38). At times, when he thinks of the supposedly bizarre couple of Jean-Marc and Héloïse, he senses his imbalance, « un déséquilibre existentiel pareil à celui de ce couple étrange » (29). Why “existential”? Perhaps in the sense of his precarious self-determination, self-composition.

Samir consciously rejects his native land: « ... il cultive un détachement forcené pour ne pas succomber à l'amertume et aux récriminations ». He claims that he will never return after his mother dies: « Je n'y ai plus rien à branler ... ni soleil, ni mer, ni ciel bleu, ni jasmin, ni thé à la menthe ! » His reductive mockery of Maghrebian life is contrasted sharply to his paradisiac vision of France, as fantastic as his dream vision of Héloïse: « ... vivre à l'étranger, c'est jouir d'un paradis terrestre de son vivant, sans attendre celui de l'au-delà » (33). Even his sister, in Tunisia, prefers French candy to the native delicacies! Samir – and Bouraoui – seem to think, however, things are changing.

But Samir does return to Tunisia, and Djerba, in search of the mysterious Héloïse. He returns in the off-season, the winter, to reconnoiter. Does he rediscover his own country through her? Even in his dreams, however, all scenarios « finissent toujours par les dérobades de la femme désirée » (39) – and the reader is left to wonder if he really wants consummation, since the real never corresponds to the ideal. On his return, he finds Djerba in a complete state of touristic expansion, with its Cafétéria Lotus, its Laboratory Control, and palatial Royal Beach Hotel. He is proud that the island « a quintuplé en expansion féroce » (42), but he is also relieved to see that the modest old hotel Elmansiya has retained its intimate air. He considers Djerba the most beautiful island in the world, and the sea is always present, « triomphante par son éternelle présence » (43). He imagines Héloïse as a mermaid, « une daurade-sirène », or as Botticelli's Venus rising from the waves on her shell. On the balcony of the very room 305 which she usually reserves, « ... il s' imagine en train de dialoguer avec celle qui a surgi toute ruisselante de la mer pour l'êtreindre dans ses bras » (45). Like the most famous visitor to the island, Ulysses, he feels that he is on the road to discovery. His quest also evokes memories of the mother and the Turkish bath, the *hammam*, which became a kind of childhood initiation into sensuality. He admits that « Seules les femmes tunisiennes savent exhiber

cette lascivité débridée » (39), and he wonders if a *hammam* was also responsible for Héloïse’s supposed voluptuousness, a ritual « d’où Héloïse émergeait, peu à peu, chair irisée, née des effluves et de la rosée » (44).

Samir plays the role of detective at the hotel, questioning the proprietor, the maid, the housekeeper, the old writer, until his family comes to absorb him: « ... l’enquête l’attend ! » (45). He spends three days there, again the mystic number, but his detective work in search of « la princesse Héloïse » is somewhat haphazard, fatalistic: « ... il décide de laisser le hasard faire les choses, comme tout bon fataliste du coin » (45).

The proprietor, who is, typically, rarely on site, alleges confidentiality when questioned, and asks Samir who he is in any case. Samir replies philosophically, quoting Montaigne, as though there is unconscious truth in jest: « Qui suis-je ? Éternelle question dont personne ne peut faire le tour même jusqu’à la mort » (46). The proprietor accuses him of falling in love with a dream, a woman he doesn’t know from Adam or Eve. He is more acute than he realizes, for Samir wants to see Héloïse as the princess, the « Belle au bois veillant » (48). But he denies to the proprietor that she is only a dream, for « ... Héloïse existe bel et bien. Elle a mon âge, s’occupe d’architecture, revient dans son pays natal » (47). The proprietor at this point slips up, falls into the trap, and admits that she is « engagée dans le projet du Musée des Arts et des Civilisations à Paris ».

From his various sources Samir “composes” a picture of Héloïse. He learns that her name in Tunisian is Khaoukha (a peach), and that her surname is Uzan. Her father was a Tunisian Jew, David Uzan, whose name in Tunisian translates as Ouazzane (peseur). « Peseur » is opposed to « Léger », the other father-figure, Jean-Marc. Her mother was a Corsican Catholic, Marie Orsini, and thus Héloïse was the product of two minority groups within a largely Islamic country. Her birthdate is not given, but Jean-Marc (who should know) says on the very first page of the novel that she is about forty at that time, but appears thirty. Twylla Blue becomes a mature woman in the course of the novel, but Héloïse is mature and self-aware from the start. Samir summarizes his findings on her identity: « La « Pêche qui pèse » lui va comme le gant: elle est assez belle, juteuse comme le fruit, ne prend les décisions qu’après avoir bien pesé le pour et contre. Son signe du zodiaque doit être Balance » (or Libra, the scales) (48).

The hotel staff all see in her a half-mystical devotion to her mother country (50). It seems to have become a kind of substitute religion in this woman, who is « *Djerbiya* de père en fille » (49): « ... la nostalgie... brûlait en

elle comme un cierge dans une cathédrale bien fréquentée » (48-9). If the “cathedral” image evokes Christianity, however, we are reminded that Tunisia consists of « les diverses communautés religieuses, ethniques, culturelles [qui] ont vécu dans une harmonie et une tolérance exemplaires » (49)². And Héloïse empathizes with all these communities. The aged writer who frequents the hotel and its surroundings, identified later as Ali Ben Mokhtar, the Arabo-musulman version of Jean-Marc Léger, hints that Héloïse may have « des liens cachés » with Djerba – and, as it turns out at the end, he should know.

An illiterate housekeeper provides Héloïse’s business card which, of course, she cannot read:

Héloïse Orsini
Architecte-Peintre
12, Rue Louis Salvador
13006-Marseille. (51)

We learn only later why she seems to have taken her Corsican mother’s name, Orsini, rejecting her father’s Uzan or Ouazzane. “Mission accomplished”, says Samir – but the hardest part of the mission, the encounter, is yet to come, and at Marseille.

Why has Héloïse chosen Marseille over Paris? Among many reasons, it is the port of entry for new immigrants to France from the South, particularly North Africa. It is situated on her beloved Mediterranean Sea, and celebrates twenty-six centuries of existence as « une métropole euroméditerranéenne ». Its vistas are virtually limitless, « cette cité tentaculaire [like Thyna/Sfax] à perte de vue. Seuls le port et la mer en marquent la limite ». The old port is the « cœur-joyau de la cité phocéenne où débute la fameuse Cannebière ». But Marseille is also the birthplace of the French Revolution, where Rouget de l’Isle composed « La Marseillaise » during the people’s march on Paris.

Samir, in turn, hopes to accomplish his own « révolution tranquille » in Marseille, midway between the North (Paris) and the South (Tunisia). His choice of Marseille is thus in part geographical and political, and in part personal. He has two reasons to settle there: « ... y établir un commerce, et essayer de dénicher l’Héloïse de ses rêves » (53), thus combining love and

² Bouraoui has noted in a radio interview that Tunisia is « un carrefour de races et de religions », and that there were never any pogroms in Tunisia, nor violence stemming from religion.

economics (an unlikely marriage suggesting much of what is wrong with Samir's vision). He opens a restaurant called Le Caméléon in the quarter of Notre-Dame-du-Mont. Both names can be applied to Héloïse, a chameleon par excellence, who is also our lady on a pedestal for Samir.

He begins to put foot in mouth from the very beginning of his arranged first meeting with Héloïse in Marseille. Why, the reader wonders, does he need two other men (always a threesome) to meet her, instead of having the courage to make the overtures himself? It seems as if he needs a buffer zone, in the form of André, who scouted out a place for him in Marseille, and Mabrouk, his new associate, both of whom, we learn later, assume that she is an easy mark, and try to win her from their supposed "friend". Samir orders red wine with fish, and toasts « À nos amours et à notre amitié », ironic on both counts (59). We wonder, as well, whether she is more annoyed by his drinking wine in violation of his supposed religion, or by his poor taste in ordering the wrong wine!

Her letter setting forth all the obstacles to a relationship between them, her disappointment at his conduct and that of his friends, « *les deux mousquetaires* », traumatizes him – for all of three days (again!) which he spends in his room eating nothing but bread and oil and olives. He feels as if he were in a desert inundated by a sudden flood. The image conjured up is of the Biblical forty days' flood, and now he perceives « une Héloïse nouvelle sur les rivages » (76). After three sleepless nights, however, he says, « Demain, il fera jour ! » And we have the sense that Héloïse has taken the entire *malentendu* more seriously than he has.

On his return to Tunisia, Ali Ben Mokhtar (Mokhtar means "the chosen one") fills in more of the outlines of Héloïse's history. Known as « la conque de Djerba », he is a well of knowledge and anecdotes (76). He does not make a living from his writing, but from the courses he teaches. He writes everything down to settle every question, and clearly echoes Jean-Marc Léger, whom he nonetheless describes as « ce croulant ». Samir has to remind him, as he did Jean-Marc, « pas de poésie, s'il vous plaît ! » (80). Samir and Ali Ben Mokhtar discuss the French influence – « leur camembert culturel » (79), their « monologue à sens unique » (80). Ali Ben Mokhtar admits, however, that « le litige colon-colonisé [see Memmi, Fanon, *et al.*] est mort et enterré ! Il reste l'Histoire avec un grand H » (80).

Ali Ben Mokhtar claims that Héloïse's semitic roots, on the father's side if not the mother's, created a daughter who is « ultra-sensible, super-susceptible, d'humeur si changeante que le moindre mot peut l'expédier au

septième ciel ou en enfer » (80). Her father could be Jewish or Arab, he says cryptically – later we guess the truth. If Héloïse began with « un attachement presque maladif au père », that father soon became a God of wrath, and she sided with the mother instead. David Uzan, though Tunisian, opposed independence from France, and fought the Arabs in Palestine. His motto was « L'année prochaine à Jérusalem », adapting the title of « L'Année dernière à Marienbad », a film based on illusion and interlocking narratives, like the dream of a singular Jerusalem. He fought in the Six Days War in 1967, but as a Sephardic Jew was given no respect or honors but military by Israel. In October 1973 he died fighting against the Arabs. Marie Orsini, on the other hand, though Corsican, sided with the Tunisians in their fight for independence³. Héloïse, like Marie and like Ali Ben Mokhtar, recognizes that truth is not the exclusive property of any individual, or any religion. Her mother believed in « la plénitude divine » (echo of Derrida?). Ali Ben Mokhtar admits, « Je connaissais bien Marie Orsini » (83), and we begin to wonder how well he knew her. Samir becomes jealous of Ali Ben Mokhtar, as he had been of Jean-Marc, and begins to suspect he could be Héloïse's real father (84).

The watercolor, a seascape, in the famous Room 305 suggests to Samir a projected exhibition of Héloïse's work at the hotel, which would reestablish contact with her. He looks towards « un nouvel art-poème », linking visual and verbal art. His mother, with her typical Tunisian *dictons*, warns him to open his ears to the *sea*, and to watch where he steps (87; emphasis mine).

There follow three years of complete silence on the part of Héloïse. He tries to trace her through the Rabbi of the synagogue where she painted a fresco. The rabbi not only denigrates her art, which is abstract (Arabic), but also sees her as a woman with problems who foments discord everywhere (90). He calls her the *Belle du Seigneur*, reinforcing Samir's own idea of her, but the Rabbi apparently means a kind of *Belle Dame sans Merci*. He quotes her disapprovingly, without understanding her thirst for lived experience: « Je ne mourrai pas de nostalgie pour quelque chose que je ne vivrai pas dans cette vie » (90). At Djerba « Toutes les portes demeurent closes », like the door of Jerusalem in her fresco. Thus on both the

³ Bouraoui has remarked on the apparent timeliness of the novel, with its linkage of terrorism, war, and religion. But it was composed years before September 11, 2001, and the aftermath (radio interview).

personal and political levels – and the personal is the political – there is no outlet, or “no exit » in the Sartrean sense..

Samir memorizes the letter of rupture she has written to him after the frustrating meeting in Marseille: « Il ne la lit plus. Il la connaît par cœur » (90). He learns her marital history from her shoe salesman: she married a soldier when she was not yet twenty years old. He lived in a bunker designed to safeguard state secrets, and heads of state in the event of war. It is a banal story: he was unfaithful to her, and she attempted suicide (like Francine in the earlier novel), thus repeating her negative experience with the father (s).

Samir eventually receives a cryptic prose poem from Stavanger, Norway, presumably from Héloïse, giving the title of the novel in its masculine form, for it refers to Samir as « *le Composé* »: « Cherche, ô toi, le Composé de terre, d’huile et de bouchées d’oublis !/ ... /Ne se cristallise l’amour que sur le dos d’éclairs et de tonnerres » (92). Unable to decrypt it, he begins to forget her and to seek his sexual pleasures « auprès de conquêtes plus faciles », remembering that he has « un charme fou pour attirer à lui toutes les femmes qu’il désirait » (92). Thus, he sleeps around to forget his ideal love, and she is once again betrayed by a man. The novel ends with his mother’s display of a picture, seemingly of a sunset, given to her by Samir’s sister, and which she hangs despite the fact that the only other decorations she has are verses of the Koran. Samir discovers Héloïse’s new signature on it, Héra Ben Mokhtar, identifying the true father (factual, spiritual, or both)? In the last line of the book, he says to himself, « Voici enfin ma Boîte noire », the record discovered after the crash of an airplane, as opposed to Virgilius’s hopeful takeoff at the end of *Bangkok Blues*. If he has finally broken the code, metaphorically, it is only through his own self-destruction (or implosion). As Bouraoui puts it, “he crashes and burns ».

La Nouvelle Nouvelle Héloïse: The Female Quest

When we finally “meet” Héloïse in person, we are faced with a choice between the tragic medieval Héloïse and the romantic eighteenth-century Julie of Rousseau. Jean-Marc, who introduces her character, somewhat misses the point by evoking « tous les échos littéraires autour de l’héroïne de Rousseau » (11). His reading focuses on « la tendresse partagée », and certainly René Girard’s concept of “triangular desire” comes into play in

this text, as in most of Bouraoui's novels, with Jean-Marc, Samir, and Héloïse (as well as her mother's supposed love affairs). But "triangular desire" defines male desire in this novel, not the essence of Héloïse, who veritably has a program of her own.

Jean-Marc provides Samir with a bare outline of her life: born in Djerba, the only daughter of parents in business, she moved to Rouen at a young age. She lost her father in 1973, her mother in 1975. She was married once, at Saint-Mandé. We learn two unusual facts about her: she studied architecture, a profession and training notoriously exclusive of women, and she is on a quest, by way of the hotel Elmansiya at Taguermess, on the fertile plains of the island of Djerba. While Elmansiya means « L'Oubliée », the forgotten one, in Arabic, she is trying to remember: « ... c'est tout à fait logique de revenir sur les traces de sa naissance » (16). On Djerba, the Isle of the Lotus-eaters, Héloïse paradoxically cultivates her memory. Samir sees her, according to her representation by Jean-Marc, as a new Eve losing her innocence to a Maghrebian culture he considers alien to her: « ... la belle créature a de bons sentiments pour la culture étrangère infiltrée en elle comme le Serpent ravissant à Ève sa pudeur virginale » (17).⁴

Her father was Jewish, but « plus français que les Français », while her mother, « catholique, soutenait les Arabes contre les colons » (20-1). Her family left Tunisia when she was ten, but no one forced them to leave. Her mother was one of those Mediterranean women who seem submissive, but are actually in control behind the scenes. She could say, « Je fais tourner mon *hommelette* autour de mon petit doigt » (22; emphasis mine). « *Hommelette* » is, of course, a pun on "little man", and « omelette ». In other words, she handles her man as deftly as she does her cooking. Jean-Marc reminds her of her father, and may in fact be her real father: « Elle ne pouvait que l'aimer et le haïr intensément » (22). In other words, her relations with the patriarchy are, at best, ambivalent.

Samir and Jean-Marc wonder exactly what she hopes to find on her balcony facing the sea in her hotel in Djerba, a site from which she has been absent since the age of ten. Is she « à la recherche du temps perdu »? Does she await « la bouteille jetée de l'autre côté de la Méditerranée »? (25).

⁴ The philosopher Alain Touraine suggests an analogy between the struggle for cultural rights and the women's movement, an analogy which dominates Bouraoui's text.

Is she returning to the scene of the crime? If so, what crime? As Samir thinks, « Quelque chose de son pays natal doit la hanter » (25).

After Jean-Marc's death, she becomes mute for Samir, and thus even more enigmatic: « ... elle se mue en degré zéro de l'oralité [echo of Barthes], ne rapportant plus les faits et gestes d'une *charmante héroïne* de rêves » (31). *L'Inconnue/L'Oubliée* becomes a ghost for him: « Spectre récalcitrant à prendre forme. Se manifestera-t-elle en chair et en os en revenant à ce lieu dit *L'Oubliée* ? » (41). One can see Samir falling in love with a product of his own narcissism. He sees her as a new Penelope awaiting passionately the return of Ulysses (41). Elsewhere he calls her *la Fileuse*: « Tricote-t-elle dans le loisir des vacances, avec nonchalance, un destin qu'elle laisserait entrevoir à quelques privilégiés de son île natale ? » (41). Penelope, of course, was never on Djerba; it was Ulysses who was detained there, at risk of forgetting his quest, Penelope, and all else. Penelope was sitting at home awaiting his return, holding off suitors by successively knitting and unraveling her handiwork. In *La Composée*, it seems as if Héloïse is a female Ulysses on a female quest on *l'Île des lotophages*, but seeking remembrance instead of oblivion. It is revealing of his limitations that Samir's reference to Penelope reduces her to an image of passive submission and waiting.⁵

Finally Héloïse enters in person in Chapter 5, more than halfway through the book. She is described, but vaguely: mid-height, dressed in black, chestnut slacks, sunglasses. It is a cold winter day in Marseille: « Le mistral souffle un air glacial » (55). Samir, accompanied by his buffer of two friends, gets dizzy on meeting her: « Débordante affection qui l'étonne et le comble » (56). They cover each other with kisses in « la nudité d'un non-dit », while the two friends, amazed, are struck speechless. They think they are witnessing a « liaison dangereuse interrompue depuis quelque temps » (56). The *trois mousquetaires* echo the three principal characters. The passion of Samir and Héloïse is described as « écumes du jour qui

⁵ Bouraoui suggests that the binary opposition between male and female (paradigmatic of other binary oppositions like nature/culture, childhood/adulthood, civilization/barbarism) has ended in our time. The traditional woman who remains at home and raises her children is rapidly becoming, or has become, a thing of the past. Alain Touraine quotes Lacan, contrasting the traditional view of man – « L'homme a le salut » – to that of woman – « La femme est le salut ». According to that view, both are subordinated to the phallic order, but that order has been overturned. Man no longer represents possession and reason, woman being and passion, for women (and many men) have disengaged themselves from that determinism, or binary opposition.

construisent la strophe d'un poème à jamais inachevé» (55). Samir alludes to Dumas, Laclos, Flaubert,⁶ Boris Vian. It sounds as if the would-be poet, Samir, a latter-day Léon Dupuis if ever there was one, is looking at life through the filter of literature, instead of drawing upon life to create literature. As Flaubert remarked of Léon Dupuis, « Chaque petit notaire porte en lui les débris d'un poète ».

Héloïse speaks of Soufi music, « une sorte d'écriture invisible entre ciel et mer », a bridge Samir and Héloïse also try to create. The three friends and Héloïse dine at « La Calanque Blanche » – a « calanque » is a kind of boat, reinforcing the maritime imagery – a seafood restaurant, facing a glacial Mediterranean. Again, Samir fantasizes that she is the Belle of fairy tales: « Les trois mousquetaires et la Belle à la Mer Voyant » (59). Food imagery, like sea imagery, reinforces our sense of character. Héloïse orders an « île flottante » for dessert, symbolizing her fate on Djerba. After the *deux mousquetaires* leave, alone with Samir she becomes « une statue de marbre ». Samir wonders if she needs an audience to show love, if it is a performance, « sa *performance* amantine » (emphasis mine). Héloïse withdraws into her shell « une fois le message passé » (60).

There follow the two most important examples of Héloïse's own discourse, as the torch passes to her. One is visual, the fresco she has been commissioned to paint in the synagogue, whose Rabbi is a wealthy Tunisian. The second is verbal, the long letter in italics in which she explains her reasons for breaking off with Samir. In both cases, the apparently passive Muse, object of the gaze of others, strikes back – or faithful Penelope is transformed into a female Ulysses.

First, Héloïse takes Samir to the synagogue to view her fresco; it is a kind of test which he fails. We are reminded that in the synagogue women are separated from men by curtains (61), a cleavage true of Semitic societies in general. Héloïse lights up the place both physically and spiritually. As the fresco is described, « Héloïse donnait dans l'abstrait. Aucune représentation figurative » (62). This abstraction belongs to the Arabic tradition, with its non-representational art, its arabesques and stylized geometrical constructs. So just as she has tried to bring three religions to the table at « La Calanque Blanche », she tries to bring at least

⁶ Héloïse remarks, like Madame Bovary, « La mer est belle, n'est-ce pas ? ». But Madame Bovary never gets to see the sea which so captivates her imagination.

two to the synagogue. The fresco has three levels: (1) « la vie quotidienne », daily life, (2) stars « couleur sable du désert », and (3) Genesis, a « souffle inaugural du *proème* de l’univers » (62; emphasis mine). The fresco offers « Toute une Cosmogonie inspirée du Premier Livre de l’Ancien Testament ». The Book of Genesis appears in all three religions, and is here viewed as a prose poem. The birth of the world, of man, is also the birth of language: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”. The Bible anticipates the Word Made Flesh (as *Ainsi Parle la Tour CN* ends with “the Word made Stone”). Héloïse seems to have chosen the abstract in place of the literally figurative, in the hope the viewer (in this case Samir) will be sufficiently engaged to complete the work: « Le figuratif est banni par une Genèse des traits et des couleurs qui ... enfante nos lucides consciences » (62). Even a « mandala bouddhique » (from the world of *Bangkok Blues*) is included, and the fresco takes advantage of the warm colors of the Mediterranean, where all three religions were born. Héloïse has painted « La Porte de Jérusalem » which does not seem to open, suggesting the political impasse in the region. In a synagogue she has even dared to use the colors of the dome of the mosque of Al-Aqsa.

Samir once again experiences vertigo at the « Envol d’Ange », « cet univers débordant d’espoir et de poèmes printaniers » (63), in contrast to wintry Marseille. The fresco visually illustrates Héloïse’s quest for origins, including the birth of the human creative imagination. She quotes Ezekiel on “the grapes of wrath” (John Steinbeck’s interpretation): « Les pères ont mangé les raisins verts et les dents des fils ont été agacés » (63). Samir thinks only that Héloïse may be alluding to suffering caused by her ancestors, a wound she has never managed to assuage. As usual, he misses the allusion to himself.

No wonder, then, that a disappointed, distracted Héloïse becomes lost in Marseille: « Elle se perd dans sa propre cité, ne retrouvant même pas l’artère principale » (64). She begins, moreover, to address Samir as « vous », thereby distancing him. His house of cards collapses because of the « vouvoiement », and because he realizes finally that Héloïse was never Jean-Marc’s mistress, and that the latter lied to him. He finds himself « éjecté dans un univers incompréhensible », and the reader can only wonder why (64). Would he really prefer it had she been an old man’s

kept woman, rather than pure and chaste, and dealing only with « un père naturel »?⁷

There follow eight months of silence from Héloïse towards Samir, from December to July. In the ninth month she gives birth, but to a letter of rupture (or an abortion?). He has tried to call her three times, and again has occupied her room 305 at the Elmansiya, like a voyeur, only to discover she had checked out the day before.

The letter is her verbal form of expression following upon the fresco as her visual. There is a progression from abstract art to language. The epistolary form is very female, as women always excelled at writing letters and keeping journals. It is also courageous and confrontational. She accuses Samir of seeing her as « *Une détraquée !* » (66). She imagines him repeating this label a thousand and one times, day and night, evoking Scheherazade, the archetypal female artist. She knows that he sees her out of control, out of order, as even a Swiss bank or watch can be, a curious comparison calling up the clichéd image of the Swiss as neutral, passionless, misogynistic, materialistic⁸. She sets the rules, referring to « *notre première et unique rencontre* », indicating flatly that she has no intention of seeing him again (66).

She then proceeds to elaborate on her reasons for distancing herself. Of Tunisia, she says, « ... *je suis faite d'une seule pièce. Pour moi, le retour au pays est une source intarissable de bonheur* » (as it is for Bouraoui himself and the characters of *Retour à Thyna*), while Samir has tried to deny his origins. She repeats to him the *dicton*, « *Fais-lui du couscous, il retrouvera ses origines* ». She continues by criticizing his two “buffers”, the *deux mousquetaires*, and reveals what he has not suspected. André is no true artist because he did not accept her « *invitation au voyage* [echo of Baudelaire] *dans le royaume mystique des arts* », refusing to view her fresco (67). Mabrouk, to top it all off, played “footsies” with her under the table, and was « *plus donjuanesque que toi* ». Both of them tried to « *tirer les marrons du feu de la passion* ». Again, she

⁷ I could not help thinking of Henry James's Frederick Winterbourne in *Daisy Miller* (1878), who is very ambivalent about Daisy. He cannot seem to make up his mind whether he would prefer her as a fallen woman, therefore accessible to his own lust, or a chaste young girl on the marriage market, whom he would have to court in due form.

⁸ D. H. Lawrence comments on this notion of Swiss mind- and soul-numbing boredom in *Twilight in Italy* (1916).

repeats a proverb, defining his guilt by association: « *Dis-moi qui tu hantes et je te dirai qui tu es !* »

She is glad that Samir, at least, went to the synagogue with her, but he did not pass the test because he lacked her artistic spirit, and could not collaborate « *dans toute passion qui transfère beauté et vérité en Dieu vers l'homme* ». She seems to conjure up John Keats's "Beauty is truth, truth beauty", – that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" – a religion of art that is totally beyond Samir, that would-be poet seduced by French literature, a literature not his own. Samir failed to participate in the movement from Chaos to Cosmos signified by the fresco, her composition. He has failed to compose, for one needs words, as God created the Word: « Mais un amour, aussi minime soit-il, peut-il être pris au sérieux s'il n'est pas mis en paroles... » (68). She admits that, with Jean-Marc, she was simply trapped in the spider web of origins. His supposed affair with her mother occurred with « *sa légitime épouse abandonnée à sa marmaille et mon père cloué à son commerce* » (68).

According to the letter, the old writer at the hotel Elmansiya fills in the gaps for Héloïse on her parentage, but is also playing his own game, and offers a paradoxical « *éclaircissement en clair-obscur* », which is a contradiction in terms. He calls her supposed parents « *un couple bizarre, mal assorti* », which, not coincidentally, is also the way Samir originally saw Jean-Marc and Héloïse. He uses a marine image to describe Marie the Corsican's mastery of the situation: « *Marie menait sa barque émotionnelle avec le doigté et la discrétion d'une véritable Djerbiya* » (70). He knows that gossip (comparing French and Tunisian) attributed two lovers to Marie, a French Catholic and an Arabo-musulman. As we have suspected for long enough, Ali Ben Mokhtar could equally be her father, especially if he is "the Chosen One".

Héloïse recounts how she met Jean-Marc just when she had lost all hope of motherhood, having been divorced for ten years. He was like the black tide, she says: « *La nature sait se venger des hommes qui l'ont saccagée* ». She attributes this phenomenon to Mektoub, or fate. She identifies a quasi-incestuous wish on the part of this « Don Juan décrépît », this « *écrivain moribond* »: « *...il s'est épris d'amour pour sa propre fille* » (71). She throws him out when he becomes too possessive, the only point of contact between their stories. She also reveals his racist attitude towards "Sam". In the final analysis, she feels certain that Jean-Marc was not really her natural

father,⁹ that he was merely using « *les ruses d'un renard roublard* », or, to mix metaphors, trying to keep his sinking ship afloat (72-3). He never took any interest in her art, because he was « *complètement enfermé en lui-même* » (73). Thus Samir becomes her sole hope of finding empathy, understanding: « *L'Inconnu, l'Étranger, le Nomade dans le pays de tes anciens colons* ». Thus she tries to identify with him, composing not only herself but Samir. She composed him « *de toutes pièces* » (as Francine does Barka's notes), while she is all of one piece (74). She admits she is « *une mer houleuse aux vagues chamarrées* », unlike her mother who navigated skillfully! She refuses to found a cult of Samir's personality, and concludes with a saying of the Tunisian St. Augustine: « *Donne de l'affection et fais ce que tu veux* » (75). Is she telling Samir to stop sitting on the fence, to commit, to take risks?

There are probably three more verbal compositions from her, the first, the mysterious prose poem from Stavanger Fjord in Norway (we don't know why her quest takes her there, except it is the extreme North, the polar opposite to Tunisia), in which she refers to Samir as « *ô toi [tutoiement again], le Composé de terre, d'huile et de bouchées d'oublis !* » (92). Again, she seems to push him towards risk, towards commitment.

We learn as well that her quest incorporates an acquisition of language, even though in her letter she has said that « *l'écriture n'est pas mon genre. Mais j'aime la poésie comme les arts visuels* » (73). She learns not only Tunisian dialect, but « *l'Arabe classique pour saisir les subtilités des versets coraniques* » (92). Without language she cannot plant her roots. Not only does she construct her house at Chott El-Nador near Houmt-Souk, the largest city on Djerba – she is after all a trained architect – but she also decorates the interior, and increasingly turns to painting as her means of expression.

On Christmas Day, her birthday, she writes in her agenda of a dream in which Ali Ben Mokhtar appears as an unlikely St. Nicholas, and she awakens terrified after imagining herself in the arms of the wretched Mabrouk. After creating her ancestral home, « *Le Heurte-Vent* » [sounds like the French translation of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, *Les Hauts de Hurle-Vent*], she has « *Plus de nostalgie de la mer. Elle la contemple chaque matin dans une quiétude du bien vivre et du bien se sentir dans sa peau* » (93). Evidently, she has found peace at last.

⁹ Though the critic Nicola D'Ambrosio seems to accept that he is, and the whole matter is left ambiguous.

After the dream, her last *written* communication to Samir [beginning « *Cher Vous* »] is unsent. All of the letters are hers, in the female voice. She speaks of the limits of language, of the frustrated « *bonheur des mots* », yet of its necessity, of the constant tension between silence and language, quoting a famous writer: « *Tout ce qui est important doit rester discret, voire confidentiel. D'autre part, tout le monde a besoin de langue...* » (97). She compares identity, or one's "truth", to a faithful dog always following in your footsteps, and called "Love" (in English). She lives on silence and solitude, « *cette éternelle solitude* » (98). Her "maternal" instinct [does there not also exist a "paternal"?] is for continuation, duration: « *...la seule justification de la vie est de donner la vie, que notre raison d'exister réside fondamentalement dans la transmission. On ne peut exister sans vouloir durer...* » (99). Like Édith Piaf, she says, « *Je ne regrette rien...* », but she adds, « *sauf la perte de mon enfant ...* » (93). We never know if this is a child to her husband lost during her suicide attempt, or simply the child she has never had. It is difficult to see how to take this remark, because she is manifestly a woman who has not wanted to have a child by the wrong man – and she has never met the right one (although presumably when she was twenty her dashing husband may have seemed perfect). She does regret having produced only abstract art: « *Et toute la mère en moi pleure de ce grand devoir qu'elle éprouve de ne plus procréer que l'art abstrait* » (99). She is not satisfied with her means of continuation, and Samir never marries or commits. But she ends the unsent letter, « *Je demeure près de vous* », in spirit, presumably.

Héloïse is underestimating her achievement, does not realize that she has progressed beyond abstract art to language, and to painting that seems impressionistic, if not representational. Architecture itself, the first of her arts, breaks the usual feminine bounds of achievement, and has been recognized, by Emerson and Thoreau, among others, as second of the arts after literature, because it meets human needs, is functional and organic. As Bouraoui's description of her on the cover suggests, she has found a kind of serenity: « *...elle sortira armée d'une sérénité qui fera l'envie de tous* »¹⁰. It seems that in a sense she and Samir have changed places. She no longer has a death wish, as her painting helps her to « *voir clair...* Elle

¹⁰ Bouraoui has said that « *Il faut composer avec la différence, avec l'altérité* », which is exactly the lesson Héloïse has learned. The novel, and its heroine, find their resolution not in dogma, but in the artistic aspects of life. Héloïse, he adds, is going to emerge from her dilemma by means of a certain « *repli sur soi* ».

sait que l'art ne peut sauver la vie, mais qu'il peut accompagner les maladresses du vivre » (99). This is an existential resolution, at least, and one that is responsible for her last message to Samir, in the form of a painting not totally abstract that seems to suggest « un grand rond orange et jaune, un coucher de soleil, peut-être ». It reaches Samir, significantly, through his mother, a traditional woman who seems herself to be evolving. The signature, « Héra Ben Mokhtar », indicates that Héloïse has totally assimilated with her chosen land, the land of origin, and that Ali Ben Mokhtar is probably her real (or “Chosen”?) father. For Samir, on the other hand, the failed artist, the painting, transported back to Marseille, is his Black Box, reminding him forever of what *could* have been.