

VI

The Man Behind *La Femme d'entre les lignes*

A sudden blow : the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower,
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power,
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

(William Butler Yeats, 1923)

A terse little novel, like its predecessor *La Composée* (2001), *La Femme d'entre les lignes* (2002) yet leaves fewer handholds for the wary climber. Most critics

seem determined to find the man behind the woman between the lines, but in the process they lose sight of the *aspect ludique*, the playfulness and irony. The reader seems to stick at each new twist of the plot.

The cover painting, by Lionel Tona, gestures at the Baroque, the Italian Renaissance. But, more importantly, its subject, the rape of Leda by Jupiter in the guise of a swan, suggests its reduplication in the text, and instantly brings to mind the most famous verbal version of “Leda and the Swan”, that of William Butler Yeats. Leda is to be the mother of those dangerous twins, Helen, wife of King Menelaus, the beauty of the ancient world, whose supposed kidnapping, or seduction, by the Trojan Paris started the Trojan War, and Clytemnestra, who conspired with her lover Aegisthus at the murder of her husband Agamemnon. Another version of the story has Leda giving birth to twin boys, Castor and Polydeuces, the Dioscuri, but Yeats certainly highlighted the twin girls. Yeats asks the crucial question of Leda, as history has of her daughters:

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

Bouraoui has thus evoked twinning, which can be viewed as replication in art. At the end he defines the *dédoublement* of his narrative voice: «Je viens donc de me détacher d’un moi pour narrer à la troisième personne, l’histoire de mon autre en moi qui est attelé au couple créé pour l’amour de percer l’énigme d’un *migramourir* à l’aube d’un siècle nouveau » (133). Art shares love’s brutality, its violence and ruthlessness. In *Mensonge poétique et vérité romanesque*, René Girard proposes that it takes a third element, in the form of sexual jealousy, to create love. Bouraoui seems to have squared the equation, since each of the protagonists has a double.

The Book of the Swan is, in French, a pun, the Book of the Cygne/Signe. The Swan is Jupiter, the Father of us all, and Bouraoui explores the Oedipus Complex – or perhaps the Electra Complex – throughout the novel. Lisa, by abandoning him, metaphorically kills the father-figure the narrator has become to her, as Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon, and her sister Helen became “the face that launched a thousand ships”, sending men to the Trojan War, a primordial setting for poets. As G. M. Kirkwood remarks, “The figures and stories concerned in it have provided material for poets, painters, playwrights, and sculptors from the time of Homer to the present moment” (99). The epic goes back to the “Egg” of Leda,

"beginning *ab ovo*, from the egg" (Kirkwood 99). We are looking, then, at the gestation of art, at sexuality as a metaphor for the creative process. The narrator recognizes that « l'œuvre contient une partie de réflexion sur son proper processus créateur » (137). That it is metaphor, rather than life, is underlined by the fact that, in reality (*pace* Jupiter), swans are not promiscuous, mate for life, and die when their mate dies.

Bouraoui's novel reflects this permeable bipolarity of art and life. The first part, « Parchemin de la Mémoire », seems realistic : it gives the family background of both principals, Marguarita Felice/aka Lisa, and the unnamed male narrator. The second part, on the other hand, « Migramour », veers towards Symbolism, perhaps even allegory. Lisa is presented as "real", as we are enticed into the requisite "suspension of disbelief" in Part One, whereas Palimpseste is "created" (the narrator's creation), like Virebaroud, Lisa's creation, and these two fictive characters take over at the end of the novel.

Part One, « Parchemin de la Mémoire », and Part Two, « Migramour », are themselves already twinned, as mirror images of the so-called "real" and "fictive". « Lisa s'éclipse » partway through « Migramour ». As a reader she lives only for and in the narrator's work, and later, fittingly, becomes a fictional character. At first she is in the position of ideal reader, perhaps critic – though the latter possibility is undermined by her apparent lack of critical sense or judgment, her contribution to his work being essentially that of a conscientious proofreader and editor of his style and language. By Part Two Lisa becomes Palimpseste, the narrator's fictional creation. But by the end, the tables are turned, and Virebaroud becomes *her* fictional creation (but again not original, and derived from traits of heroes he has created in his novels). The name "Vire/baroud" suggests the Latin "vir", man, and "baroud" would mean a man in conflict, in battle, like the heroes of the Trojan War. It may also echo Virgilius, the protagonist of *Bangkok Blues*, Bouraoui's earlier novel, whose name also evoked Virgil, creator of the epic poem about the founding of Rome in the aftermath of the Trojan War, the Aeneid. Towards the end of the novel we also meet a failed (but popular), comical poet named Virgilio Scapin, whose last name suggests Molière's comic rogue in *Les Fourberies de Scapin*.

Bouraoui's first title, *Migramour*, now the title of the second part, also calls up the wanderings of warriors, including Odysseus and Aeneas, during the Trojan War, and the eventual founding of Rome, Italy being his chosen setting for this novel.

We encounter both male twins, the narrator and Virebaroud, Lisa's name for him, as well as Lisa herself who disappears abruptly / metamorphoses into Palimpseste. Palimpseste, presumably, has had many texts written upon her. Is she all women in one, as Virebaroud is all men in one? Or a work in progress, perhaps *le livre absolu* the narrator dreams of? Elizabeth Ermarth has said that Identity "is in processes. It is in a state of 'palimpsestuousness' [a term borrowed from Michael Alexander]" (412) – perhaps implying incest as well: which is the creator, which the creation?

The final title chosen, however, is more nuanced, sexier, if you will, because it puns; it can be the woman between the lines of paper, or between the « draps », the sheets.

I. « Le Parchemin de la Mémoire » : The Encounter

The first part is the shortest of the novel, but the narrator is immediately introduced as a poet, as his writing material, « par/chemin », could be translated as "the road of memory", the product of wanderings, as well as the product on which he writes. The "road" motif creates a parallel with « Migr/a/mour ». « Migr/a/mourir » is also implied, but by omitting the final « ir » Bouraoui suggests the triumph of love/art over death. Love itself becomes *more* real in its artistic expression, is carried to another level in which memory, or re-creation, triumphs over a somewhat banal reality. The titles of both parts convey the sense that this is a journey or quest novel, modeled on epic poems, the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Aeneid. The narrator calls himself « L'Errant », the Wanderer (title of an Old English poem, as well as the English translation of Alain-Fournier's 1913 novel (in French *Le Grand Meaulnes*), on which Bouraoui began his early scholarship. But « L'Errant » could also be the Mistaken One, he who "errs", or wanders astray. It is left to the reader to resolve the ambiguity if s/he can.

La Femme d'entre les lignes is, in the final analysis, a book about art, and the love of art. Only in that sense is it a love story. In any fictional account of the gestation of the novel as genre, gender plays a part: we have "mothers of the novel" and "fathers of the novel" – mothers and fathers, parents against whom one rebels but whose influence remains strong, loom large in this work.

We find ourselves, in Part One, in medias res on a cross-cultural note. The « Je » is not identified, but he finds himself in a cold country with "a

thick layer of ice buried under fresh snow" (9). But the first place actually mentioned is Verona, in a warm Mediterranean land, where, we learn later, Lisa was born, « loin, très loin dans ce pays du soleil, si différent de celui de mon enfance, et pourtant si semblable » (9). His "burning desire" clashes sharply with the ice and snow. In a metaphor for perception he must clear his car windshield of ice, « pour voir clair dans les images embrouillées de mon esprit fatigué » (9). What is fatiguing, in fact, is his *imaginaire*. One thinks of Willa Cather's stated desire "to freeze the world in the grip of form". But there is both stasis and movement here, like the Buddhist wheel. « Loin » and « lointain » are constantly repeated like a mantra – far from the one he loves, perhaps, but far by choice, firing the imagination and the road of memory.

When these two would-be lovers meet, he who writes compulsively, and she who has devoured his books for ten years without knowing him, the scene has comic overtones, for they can converse fumblingly only in English, which is equally foreign to both. This is a book about language, but also about blocked communication: « Il [English] ne traduit pas au cheveu près ce qui se trouve à l'intérieur de nous » (13). Nor does he hesitate to mock the hegemony of English, « cette maudite langue qui fait frissonner le monde entier » (one thinks of the fractured, possibly dyslexic language of George W. Bush).

There is even instant conflict between these two, from southern Europe and North Africa. She tosses his stuffed dates, prepared with loving care by his sister, in her handbag. They are joined by the Mediterranean, but also separated by it: « Mais ne suis-je pas plus sudiste qu'elle ? » (15). He has, moreover, roots in three diametrically opposed places: « Et moi dont le sud va plus loin que les confins de son Italie méridionale, jusqu'à la terre africaine d'où il a été ballotté, jusqu'au nord le plus nordique des arpents de neige, de glas, et de verglas ! » (16).

His friend Roberto shows a portrait of his children that, to the narrator's eyes, looks like a valentine inspired by Lisa. But Roberto also indulges in a philosophic discussion about the link between love and politics: « ... on est toujours rongé par son proper intérêt » even when it is an *égoïsme à deux*. The narrator tries to feel without phrases or metaphors: « C'est la rencontre fortuite qui déclenche en nous les plus sublimes amours... » (17). Later, however, he is to admit that he has to *write* it in order to feel pain: « Il m'a fallu écrire la disparition de Lisa pour me rendre compte de l'effet à la fois dévastateur et bénéfique d'une telle épreuve » (131).

Suddenly we are transported to Québec Air, and to another woman reminiscent of Lisa (aren't they all?). *Québécoise* that she is, however, she looks more Italian than Lisa. He imagines himself making love to her "with *silent* words" (emphasis mine), and finds being called a poet "monstrously pompous" (22). Yet he is word-obsessed: there are the constant echoes of Baudelaire – « mes forêts de symboles » (23), of Laclos – « ... cette liaison qui, loin d'être dangereuse, n'en demeure pas moins exceptionnelle » (23). He boasts, « Nous sommes, en avion archiplein, le seul couple à faire l'amour en privé » (21). He enjoys an unspoken/unpublished? « jouissance charnelle inédite » (22) with his brunette, as Lisa is blonde: « Blonde Lisa n'a d'italien que l'amplification des gestes » (19).

He imagines Lisa slipping between the sheets, « pour bien être dans tes pages » (22). He seems mainly concerned with choosing « les mots justes », words to capture her essence. The reader is often tempted to say to her, "Get a life", but we soon learn she has one – an aged mother stricken with Alzheimer's who never lets her out of her sight. He understands because his mother, even when young and healthy, also clung tenderly to him, even though he was for the most part in distant lands. Lisa takes the male role, ordering for him in the restaurant where they begin their flesh-and-blood acquaintance. She hangs on his every word, his ideal audience, and he wonders how to satisfy her, for he may give her poison instead of elixir (25). She is also jealous of his reading public, and she seeks to swallow him up: « Je disparus en elle! Mon sexe vogue dans sa lune en feu d'un soleil couchant » (27). Is he the sun god (« couchant », sleeping with her), she the moon goddess?

There are subtle hints from the start that all is not well with this relationship, that each is trying to create the other in his/her own image. Even her name, Lisa, is his creation, perhaps for Élisabeth, which means "dedicated to God". One cannot resist asking if he, the artist, considers himself a God of creation (like Jupiter). Her real name, Marguarita Felice, translates as the marguerite, or daisy, a flower sacred to the Court of Love tradition, a symbol which still survives today in the form of plucking its petals to discover true love. In case we miss the reference, the lines pass through the narrator's mind: « *Je t'aime un peu, beaucoup, passionnément, pas du tout...* » (10). Her last name, "Felice", or happiness, may be valorized by the consummation of their love in erotic, yet verbal rather than animalistic, terms. It may also be ironic in that his true happiness resides in memory. One thinks of Flaubert's hero Frédéric Moreau in *L'Éducation sentimentale*

who avers that the best experience he ever had was turning away on the steps of a bordello, and therefore never soiling the dream of love. The narrator speaks of the climax of their lovemaking as a « Plénitude inattendue », but the very Derridean frame of reference underlines that this is not copulation, but a « double promenade dans notre imaginaire » (27). We wonder, is any of this really happening?

She hangs breathlessly on his every word as he describes his literary award of the Fleur de Lys in his own province, « la Fleur de Lys, ce célèbre symbole de la province francophone que j'ai effeuillé en triade identitaire: Nord-Américains, Européens, Africains » (28). This man of three continents (like his creator Hédi Bouraoui) learns, as Lisa says, that it is always a pleasure to be recognized in one's own province and country. It was Virgil who wrote, not of his epic the Aeneid, but of the Georgics, his book about farming near the Mincio where he was born, "For I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my own country", or *patria*, meaning not Rome, or even Italy, but "the little rural neighbourhood on the Mincio where the poet was born" (Cather 171).¹

The narrator feels a conflict between Lisa's recognition of his art, and pleasure at his prize, and her bitterness at having been excluded from the event. He wonders if he has missed the time for her to open herself to his most burning words, and he describes how he might have mistreated, misshaped her, borrowing the words of a critical establishment he despises: « Je l'aurais défaite, déformée comme un critique qui dissèque un corps-texte de mots empruntés, de panoplies d'acrobaties linguistiques, de subterfuges stylistiques » (28).

Does Lisa really read him « entre les lignes »? (88). Or does he read her? He expresses admiration for her impressionistic, subjective criticism, and hatred for academic critics: « ... tu ne lis pas mes vers comme un critique *savant* qui applique stupidement une certaine grille méthodologique, mais pour extraire l'essence de l'œuvre, tu lis ma poésie avec le cœur : car l'amour qui s'approprie les amours de l'autre et les fait siennes... C'est ça l'Amour ! Quel plaisir ! » (50). The phrasing makes us suspicious about both of them, but not in the sense Didier Leclair suggests when he summarizes his reaction:

¹ Willa Cather has one of her characters in *My Antonia* (1918), Gaston Cleric, Jim Burden's teacher, quote Virgil to this effect: "*Primus ego in patriam mecum ... deducam Musas*", Cather's own *patria* being the Nebraska prairies where she was raised from the age of ten, and *My Antonia* being her modernist version of the Georgics.

« Ce livre m'a plu. Il vous enseignera que badiner avec l'amour, ce n'est pas aimer. Même si un poète tente de vous prouver le contraire » (68)². Leclair ignores the deliberate ironic deflation of the narrative voice, who is to be displaced in any event by the end of the novel.

We are never given any concrete examples of her critical perspicacity. She writes brief book reviews for an Italian newspaper, *La Repubblica*. One wonders if they really capture « la substantifique moelle de mon écriture » (96), or, indeed, if there is any « substantifique moelle » to begin with. In a reversal of the biological order, it is he who gives birth – to poetry, or the Word made Flesh. Her contributions seem to be fairly minor: « Dès que le corps-texte sort de mes entrailles, elle se met à chasser les coquilles ; javelliser les anglicismes, mailloter les dérives... Mais elle n'ose jamais toucher à mes africanismes du Nord ou ceux du sud du Sahara » (127). Indeed, we can only guess what she is correcting, if their only common languages are Italian and English !Metaphorically speaking, she seems to be washing the diapers!

Lisa, we learn later, aspires herself to be a creative writer. One wonders if her final withdrawal signals an increase in self-confidence, the adoption of a writing career. The narrator speculates that she has become a Judas, betraying him (or his ego?). Certainly Palimpseste, « l'autre vérité de Lisa » (141), takes over all the correspondence at the end of the novel, and the “narrator” himself withdraws, as the novel moves to third person, and to the epistolary form which marked the very beginnings of the novel in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The epistolary novel was the subgenre that proved empowering both to women writers and to heroines created by male authors, such as Richardson's Pamela (174) and Clarissa (1749) in England, Marivaux's Marianne in *La Vie de Marianne* (1731-41), and Laclos' Madame de Merteuil in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) in France. Lisa and the narrator first meet through a ten-year correspondence, evoking

² Leclair seems to blur the distinction between author and fictional creation: « Sa liberté est toute personnelle... Ce libertin jouit, sans plus. Si l'amante y trouve son compte, tant mieux. Du moment que Lisa se pâme devant ses textes et (peut-être) dans son lit, il y a eu échange de bons procédés amoureux. Mais est-ce cela, l'amour ?... Lisa n'a droit qu'à sa fougue de coq insatiable du mot et à la version subjective de sa rupture avec Rose » (68). If Leclair only hints at an autobiographical reading, Mireille Desjarlais-Heyneman has no such reservations and traces point by point the correlation of author and protagonist, thereby missing all the irony.

Baudelaire's fusion of the senses in « Correspondances »: « Les mots, les couleurs et les sons se répondent ». The narrator writes of this « forme de correspondance soutenue qui a établi entre nous une fidélité matrimoniale sans acte de mariage... » (93). We wonder if Lisa moves finally from Muse/Qasîd (poem) to poet, and in fact reverses the narrator's expectations by inventing him, thereby becoming not only the twin of Palimpseste, but that of the narrator/Virebaroud.³

This eventual role reversal is foreshadowed in Part One by the umbrella Lisa carries to their meeting at a café-bistro: he begins to think that this "phallic" object represents « la tierce personne du triangle eternal des amoureux » (46), whom Girard sees as the spur to love. To the protagonist, it seems for a time a weapon, similar to the famous Bulgarian umbrella which allowed a spy from the Eastern Bloc to kill an important personage in the middle of London during the Cold War between the Americans and the Communists (48). It reinforces his sense of her occasionally adopting the male, aggressive role, in that he associates her with an assassin. But she freely offers him shelter under it, « *Un p'tit coin d'parapluie* » (53).

The equation of love, violence, and death has already been planted in the narrator's mind by a parallel love/hate story to their own within Lisa's family, that of her beloved niece Anna and the unemployed would-be artist, the Moroccan Ali who also, not coincidentally, works on parchment, but badly, practicing his crude art that no one wants to exhibit, or even to buy (31). These two are descending to the last circle of a Dantesque hell – will Lisa and the narrator escape their fate?

During their walk by the sea, Lisa and the narrator exchange sexual/gender identity: « ... nous avons changé nos corps. Le mien transsexue en elle. Le sien transsexue en moi » (38); thus they are twinned. But it is clear that this love is composed more of words than of physicality, « de mots qui font le sens de ce que nous sommes » (38).

Their dialogue always focuses on his art, not on the mutual sharing of a love relationship. We wonder whether she is overestimating him. She knows, rightly, that he is not a romantic poet: « Tu ne vas pas dans l'au-delà pour ramener des visions extraordinaires au commun des mortels » (47). She sees his thematic originality as the destruction of the traditional couple,

³ Éric Gauthier assumes that the narrator is Virebaroud, « un poète maghrébin habitant au Québec » (27), but in fact it is the collective name Lisa/Palimpseste attaches to all his heroes.

providing a new way to love, to make love, and to speak about it (48) – but again, we are given no examples in his writing (or indeed of his writing) apart from this book in the form of a memoir.

He seems obsessed with the idea that she has had earlier lovers, that he does not possess her utterly. But he himself has had one noteworthy mistress, and this affair becomes a tale within a tale, which casts doubt on his supposedly new constitution of the couple. The mistress's name is Rose, a symbolic name attached to the Virgin, and therefore a flower appropriated by the secular Court of Love Tradition based on Marian Worship. The Rose, according to the Court of Love, is a symbol of virginity in an enclosed garden, the *hortus clusus*, to be attained by the lover. Most importantly to Bouraoui, Rose is the desert rose, the « Rose des Sables », blooming fresh and pure in the midst of arid sands. The narrator's recounting of this sad affair ironizes him totally. This supposedly free-spirited poet has made a living – because « la poésie ne nourrit personne » (50) – selling the notoriously unpoetic, information-packed (and English) Encyclopedia Britannica [British], which aspires to universal *objective* knowledge. He thinks he is appeasing Lisa when he asserts that « celle que j'ai aimée te ressemble beaucoup... Je suis convaincu que nous tombons toujours amoureux du même type de femme ou d'homme » (51) – surely a misstep and a warning, implying that any woman of a single “type” has appealed, and will continue to appeal, to him. The only difference he sees is that Rose had chestnut (reddish) hair, and a voluptuous figure, while Lisa is blonde and (presumably) slim. Intelligent, sensitive, and a voracious reader, Rose was director of a large bookstore/publishing house (51). Her sole defect was that she could not tolerate his continual absences, and saw him as a tomcat: « ... j'étais toujours parti, comme un chat de gouttière aux moments où elle avait le plus besoin de moi » (51). Most readers would perceive Rose as likeable, arguably much more so than the mercurial Lisa, who seems to be a literary “groupie”. But the narrator calls Rose's recriminations “unjustified” and self-righteously claims that « Je l'avertissais de l'imminente catastrophe où elle nous menait » (52). But it takes two to create a catastrophe in a love relationship, and he seems to disclaim all personal responsibility. He complains that « Elle n'a jamais accepté les règles du jeu » despite knowing them in advance, and that his work required frequent departures and long absences (52). These are scarcely the « règles du jeu » of an egalitarian, poetic, free love relationship. Moreover, his

absences are not in aid of poetic expression, but of the mundane selling of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

It would be easy to assume (as Leclair and Desjarlais-Heynneman seem to) that author and narrator are one, but this tale can also be read as an exercise in unconscious self-revelation on the part of the narrator, who is subtly undermined by his creator, and finally displaced. We do not learn Lisa's reaction to this tale, except in her subsequent act of withdrawal; she may have identified all too closely with Rose. The narrative technique leaves it to the reader (and Lisa) to piece together the clues, fill in the gaps.

Lisa's religious background is also given at the end of the first part, but the information leads from the personal to an expansion into comparative religions and the overweening theme of tolerance. Lisa is a nominal Catholic, and the narrator evidently comes from an Islamic background. But the most attention is paid to his remembered Seder supper with the Eisens during the Jewish Passover. While on one level this minutely detailed account seems intrusive in the narrative, it opens it out from the rather claustrophobic "smother-love" story. This love affair – imaginary or "real" – becomes a paradigm for global, universal communion. The lamb is not a blood sacrifice, as it is in traditional monotheisms; rather, it is sacrificed on the altar of love, « Un amour qui unit » (64). Love itself thus becomes a religion, signifying an escape from the ego: « ... nous nous essayons à tuer la partie nombriliste de nous-mêmes afin que nos corps-textes prennent la revanche sur nos corps tout court! » (64).

Part One ends, however, not with the lamb of peace and eternal life, but with the tale of the cat trying to trap a mouse by barking like a dog to reassure its intended victim. Licking its chops, the cat says, « Voilà ce que c'est que d'être bilingue! » (65). This tale/tail (?) leads to the cat-and-mouse game of both lovers in Part Two, « Migramour ». Moreover, it suggests that Lisa may be transmogrifying into Rose, the first to call the narrator an alley cat.

II. « Migramour » : Love, Death, and Words

« Migramour » permits puns in French which simply do not work in English: a/mour/mour/ir/mort/maux/mots. Both parts begin and end with language. The narrator, like Dante at thirty-five, is "midway the journey of this life" and descends into an Inferno of his own making. He first perceives Lisa as his guide, therefore his Virgil, this despite the fact that

she comes to see him as *Virebaroud*, whose name also suggests Virgil (as does Virgilio Scapin).

The title of this part ostensibly comes from a boat Lisa sometimes takes, *Le Migramour de Troie*, underlining the Trojan framework “palimpsestuously” inscribed on the parchment of memory beneath the present tense of the tale. The reference to the Mediterranean Sea, ancient and modern, is prefigured by the lovers’ earlier walk by the sea. The sea also evokes the mother, symbolically in both French and English, but linguistically as well in French, as « mer » and « mère » are homonyms. Expanding the water imagery, the narrator calls his poems “a river where Lisa slakes her thirst” (71). Ironically, she gathers « les roses de sable aux petales intrigants », calling up memories of her predecessor Rose.

It is significant that the role of the mother is highlighted in this section. There is first a reference to an older woman friend, Anita, with whom he had a fraternal relationship; when she dies, he feels as if a part of his being had been amputated (78). Anita, and the flagrantly unpoetic Claudette Charbonneau, a radio interviewer, are two more of the women who appear on his palimpsestuous parchment of memory.

Groping in the darkness of memory, he visits the land of his birth, and returns to origins in the person of his mother Ibtisem (« Sourire ») (82). She does not pose a threat, unlike Lisa’s mother. Proud of her son’s authorship, she organizes a party in his honor, as a North African mother who rules not only her family, but also the world surrounding her. She displays his latest book on a table, but no one opens it, and the conversation turns on the weather, the plague of scorpions, the future of a young woman following her baccalaureate: « La soirée se passa sans qu’aucun mot n’ait été dit, ni du livre, ni de la musique » (Ibtisem hired a lute player). Ibtisem’s comment is: « ... que l’on ne peut amener les brebis galeuses brouter une herbe autre hors des champs pollués de l’amour de soi ! » (82). His book took its title from the Du Bellay poem, but feminized: « *Heureuse qui comme la Mère a fait un beau voyage* » (83). But his mother travels by never leaving home, and she is never more present to her wandering son than during his absences. The mother, moreover, is substituted in the title for Ulysses in the poem, the archetypal quest hero/wanderer – though it is the narrator who wanders, and frequently wanders astray. When he goes back to Africa, back to Canada, Lisa, too, is more present to him in her absence: « L’absence de Lisa n’arrête pas de me séduire ... , elle plonge dans mes écrits » (63). The mother, and Lisa (at least for a time) play the role of faithful Penelope

awaiting the return of Ulysses, following him only in their imaginations. The narrator parallels his work as a writer and Lisa's as a reader, her « lecture amantive » (81). Not only does she follow « les chemins [parchemin?] tortueux de mes écrits », but she is « en quête d'une vision initiatique... » (81). But will it be a female quest, a female initiation ?

Except for the subtitles, « Parchemin de la Mémoire » and « Migramour, » the words that appear most often in the text are « loin » and « lointain ». It seems clear that the narrator actually prefers absence to presence, so that he can re-create love of mother, of mistress(es) in his « *imaginaire* ». (The bordello you never enter is better than the one you do). There is an « amour nomade » (69), his art « une migration vibrante » (70). Their correspondence is « une bouteille jetée à la mer » (98), and Lisa's absence, if anything, inspires his art.

In « Migramour, » the *imaginaire* eventually takes over completely, as was predicted earlier in the narrator's reference to the dichotomy of art and life: « ... entre l'écrit et le vécu, il y a des espaces infinis qui m'effraient », a paraphrase of Pascal's « Le silence des espaces infinis m'effraie ». Pascal is talking about silence (God's), the narrator about words.

From time to time he begins to suspect that the "real" Lisa may be very different from the one he creates in his mind: « Je continue à la façonner à ma guise, à l'image que je me fais d'elle » (89). She becomes, in fact, his creation, Palimpseste. But he also begins to speculate whether she is creating him: « N'est-ce pas qu'à son tour elle me crée, elle-même de mes propres mots... » (89). As I have described elsewhere, often in Bouraoui's texts "The Muse Strikes Back", assumes herself the role of poet or artist. The narrator notes that the constant interchange between lived experience and its artistic recreation is analogous to sexual exchange: « ... il existe et existera toujours un décalage croissant entre l'expérience vécue et la transcription, entre la parole parfaite ... et les chemins tortueux, labyrinthiques, qu'elle doit suivre... » (95; emphasis mine).

From time to time, it occurs to the narrator to wonder if Lisa is in love with him, or with his writing (which she knew long before she met the author): « Cette demande d'amour, est-elle pour mes mots ou pour ma personne? » (61). At the end, he comments with some degree of bitterness, « Lisa me bannit de son cercle de lecture. Je me demande si elle m'aime pour moi-même ou pour mes écrits, pour la lutte que je mène avec les mots ou pour la trophée des jours de gloire, pour l'étincelle de vérité dans les silences entre les lignes ou pour la voix solitaire en incessantes demandes

d'amour ? » (140). But she herself invents Virebaroud in the first sample we have of her own writing, the letter sent to North Africa (the « bouteille jetée de l'autre côté de la Méditerranée »): « Séduite par le pouvoir des mots, je suis tentée de voguer à ma guise, recréant le héros que je nomme Virebaroud, et qui incarne la synthèse de tous ses personnages » (103). Her creativity could be viewed as essentially false, however, or at least at a second remove, governed and inspired solely by his text(s). She paraphrases Pascal's « Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas » when she claims that « Mon cœur suit ses inclinations même s'il ne les comprend pas » (104). But Pascal is talking about faith, Lisa about her supposed "love" for this « personnage fictif et réel à la fois » (104). In effect, she sees herself as an infant born from *his* labors: « ... je nais tour à tour de mes lectures, ... à la manière d'une fille qui fait naître sa mère en même temps que cette dernière la met au monde » (103). We have already learned that Lisa's mother, unlike Ibtisem, suffers from Alzheimer's, and that Lisa, as caregiver, is virtually a prisoner in her own home. She may aspire to be herself the mother of the text, as the narrator is the father. A weak mother rules her, while a strong mother supported the narrator.

Lisa, perhaps thinking of Rose, is a stern judge of feminine love:

*Tout le dilemme est là : les femmes adorent
se perdre dans l'homme, et une fois qu'elles l'ont
trouvé, elles s'échinent à ne plus le lâcher. Paradoxe,
diras-tu ? Et l'amour ne vit-il pas d'ambiguïté et de
malentendu ? Et ne meurt-il pas par excès de lucidité
ou de clairvoyance ?* (101)

This is a self-fulfilling prophecy, as she seems to become possessive, herself creating the creation, addressing him as « toi *mon* écrivain » (104; emphasis mine).

The text is replete with allusions to great lovers of the past, real and fictive – Romeo and Juliet, the triangle of Aïda, Radames, Amneris, and the negative role of the patriarchy which tries to destroy such relationships. The tragedy of the House of Atreus lurks “palimpsestuously” behind the tangled relations of the present.

Lisa is also compared to Bellini's portrait of the Madonna and Child, which is, not coincidentally, a triptych, with monks (or Fathers of the Church) depicted on the surrounding two panels. The narrator, revealingly, falls in love with this image not only for her divine beauty and perfection,

but for the four readers surrounding her. In the right-hand panel, one monk holds a closed book, while the others are engaged in communal reading. In the left-hand panel, one monk faces the viewers, and holds an open book in his left hand: « Quelle belle invitation à la lecture! » comments our ever-avid author. The literal books reflect the Being the Madonna holds, who is the Word made Flesh. And we return to the concept of art as religion encountered first in Part One. As the narrator comments of the characters in the triptych, « Le Livre est au Cœur de leur vie. C'est du Livre que partent et reviennent les destins après les périples et les pérégrinations, les aventures et les sédentarismes, tous vécus entre les lignes » (110). A few pages later, however, an inscription on a Gothic Venetian house reminds him, "There are no Roses without thorns" (114) – and the Virgin's emblem is the Rose, also the name of his earlier love.

On his return from Africa, he expects to find Lisa reading him « à cœur ouvert » (106). But she has offered hints of her coming defection in the letter where she claims, « ... je sais tout de l'écrivain qui se cache derrière ces femmes qui peuplent son monde » (102). She seems to prefer the palimpsest of his work to that of his tangled life.

Palimpseste the female character is first introduced by name on page 87 by Pia (who is anything but pious), Lisa's drunken friend who momentarily sees herself as Beatrice to the narrator's Dante: « Tu n'es pas Dante, mais je t'adore ». Suddenly, the narrator finds himself confronted with Palimpseste, « Lisa ou plutôt l'Image-Lisa », as the "real" Lisa becomes the fictional Palimpseste. It is Pia who leaves a phone message on behalf of Palimpseste, requesting his phone number.

While Lisa is a journalistic critic who works with words, Palimpseste, as her name suggests, is an artisan who makes books physically, « tout le côté artisanal »: « ... j'aime le livre bien fait » (120). His relationship with her begins when, on page 120, « Lisa s'éclipse ». Between the two women, he has his ideal critic, and his means of production. We slowly begin to glean the motivation behind Lisa's disappearance. The narrator, as Palimpseste notes, creates an equation between art and love. Their boundaries disappear, and he stresses that only they will save us from the apocalypse. Lisa has said he is not a romantic poet, but he echoes Keats when he says that only « l'amour du beau, ou la beauté de l'amour » can save us. He wants to create « le livre absolu » (123). His liaison with Lisa – for he identifies her with her country – is a symbolic union of the ancient enemies Carthage and Rome.

If we are curious about what happens to the old Lisa in this new relationship, she breathes, « Je t'ai créé ... des limbes de mes mots » (123). Virebaroud, the male, promptly responds with sexual violence, « la poignarde de son arbitraire, et la dépossède violemment de toutes ses clefs de lecture » (123). She wants to die « dans les feuillages des chants du cygne [signe] », but the swan only sings when dying, in order to follow his/her mate. Lisa, who wants to write her own story, would have to kill him, like Clytemnestra, to survive herself, become the swan: « Pour ce faire, il lui faut tuer Virebaroud, s'en débarrasser en l'étouffant de baisers, en lui avalant sa langue pour lui ôter, une fois pour toutes, la voix » (124). Or she would have to betray him, like Helen. And indeed he accuses her of the latter, with a character of her own creation, but constructed out of his own fictional protagonists: « Et avec qui me trahit-elle ? Avec un personnage qu'elle a créé de toutes pièces » (135).

In the closing pages, he too transfers to Virebaroud, and is no longer the narrator, but a character in a third-person narration (133). The cosmos is perceived as « Mère universelle » (134), but the fathers will either kill or be killed, as Amonasro asks his daughter Aïda to betray her lover Radames to save her own country from the Egyptians. Aïda exclaims, « Ô patrie, combien tu me coûtes ! » (136). And the narrator asks, « Et Lisa, que trahit-elle ? » The answer is, « L'auteur qui a inspiré son amour ... et encore avec un homme de papier, un personnage tiré des vertèbres du poète ... ce n'est pas une trahison, mais un transfert » (136). As Palimpseste says, Lisa « tue le père qui féconde ses fantasmes, comme tu le fais, toi, avec les figures du père dans tes écrits » (137). And Palimpseste's response is that « comme toi, elle tue le père du livre, puis elle le ressuscite en Virebaroud... » (137). [The dead, or dying, father, or patriarch, also goes back to the murdered Agamemnon, and to Anchises, Aeneas's father, who perish in the classical epics]. Lisa, as a journalistic critic, says he, was at first distanced from the work, gathering a rose here, a daisy there. But she wanted more: « ... elle ne se contente pas de ce rôle de critique ; plutôt elle décide de s'attacher au personnage pour *migramourir* ... plus librement avec lui. Au fait, elle se débarrasse ainsi de l'auteur, et s'y substituant, elle devient, elle-même, l'auteur » (137). But the consequences are far more ambiguous than in Bouraoui's other novels where "The Muse Strikes Back". The novel grows out of love, death: « ... il faut bien détruire, pour reconstruire » (139). The narrator wonders if his mistake was to set the inner life in *real* time. The judge San Antonio

(cartoon character? the businessman in *The Merchant of Venice*?) thinks that the narrator should have remained in the *oral* tradition from which he comes, not expose their relationship in written form.

The novel ends, however, with written words, in the form of correspondence between the two fictive characters, Palimpseste and Virebaroud. Their geographical distance is emphasized. The narrator feels at home in Toronto, « *le carrefour du monde* » (146), with all its faults of materialism: « *Tout est neuf et sans histoire* », « *tout le monde est immigré* », and he enjoys « *les feuilles mortes de l'été indien* » (150). [The description simply does not fit Montréal, though he seems to indicate earlier that his home is « *La Belle ... Province* ».] The ending thus resembles that of *La Composée*, though hero and heroine have equally the right to speak, whereas in the preceding novel Héloïse, in her final letter, undermines all of the hero's prior assumptions. Palimpseste is now not only producing, but distributing his books, again from a distance.

The novel, typically, ends with a P. S. on art, referring to the « *poème inachevé que j'ai du mal à parfaire* », which she is helping him to see clearly. And finally, the last word is a P. P. S. moving from art to life, from the personal to the universal. Virebaroud quotes a friend who declared that the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century is the systematic uprooting of people, leaving everything behind them – « *des mémoires saccagées, des tonnes de sentiments bafoués, violés, des charniers par milliers! Et des mots!* » (152).

Thus the novel ends, as it began, with words, and the pun on *maux/mots* is intentional, and was foreshadowed. Significantly, also, the ending leaves us with neither *amour* nor *mort*, but with *mots*, words, our only weapon against the darkness, a weapon which, as Sartre's *Les Mots* reminds us, must further existential *engagement*, commitment, eschew the merely lyrical as long as there is a child starving in the world. The novel thus denounces its own fictivity, but by the same token celebrates it. I was tempted to call this essay "The Man Behind the Man Behind *La Femme d'entre les lignes*" in order to draw a clear line of demarcation between creator and protagonist/artist, a line crossed by many critics. If fiction grows out of "lived experience", as Henry James put it, it is nevertheless distanced, often ironized, by form and art. James was careful to define experience as "impression", "the very air we breathe" (13). He adds to his hypothetical advice to a novice, "Write from experience and experience only", the crucial refinement, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" (13). Or, as critic R. P. Blackmur once wrote,

“Art is life at the remove of form and meaning”. *La Femme d’entre les lignes* constitutes a reflection on art, denounces and at the same time celebrates its own fictivity by framing its love story in a postmodern world in quest of order while coping with chaos, like the ancient Greeks, Trojans, Romans, and Carthaginians.