

INTRODUCTION

By way of brief preface to this text, I should explain how I arrived at this particular thesis as a means of tying together the very dense, highly figurative, “exploding” novels of Hédi Bouraoui, which are loaded with neologisms, borrowings from other languages, linguistic experiments.

In the past I have written numerous articles and chapters of books on Hédi Bouraoui’s poetry, as well as his academic books and essays. When he began to experiment with the novel form – first with *L’Icônaison: roman-poème* (1985) and *Rose des Sables: conte* (1997) – he became more and more concerned with narratology. Having the advantage of reading each novel as it appeared, I began to perceive the “Ariadne’s thread” that would guide readers through the Bouraoui labyrinth. The heroine of *Rose des Sables* points the way from mythic elements drawn from the Thousand and One Nights and the oral folk tradition of the Maghreb to female protagonists who, while retaining symbolic dimensions, are nonetheless conceived with a dose of psychological realism: these are women with minds of their own and their own tales to tell.

While teaching *Retour à Thyna* (1995,1997) at York University to my undergraduate Women in Literature course, the enthusiasm of my students, many of them multicultural, encouraged my efforts to highlight the all-important female dimension of Bouraoui’s texts. In particular, I have focused on the rebellion of his heroines against the traditional role of Muse

(Dante's Beatrice, Petrarch's Laura, Shakespeare's Dark Lady), and their appropriation of the supposedly "male" role of artist or writer.

As Bouraoui's boundless energy has been directed more and more towards strong narrative flow, with which he plays in a postmodernist vein, he also associates these narratives increasingly with the female voice, as historically the latter has been associated with the rise of the novel. This voice emerges with growing clarity and assertiveness as we move from Koi in *Bangkok Blues* (1994) to Héloïse, aptly named for the medieval scholar and rebel in love more than for Rousseau's heroine, in *La Composée* (2001), and, in a different way, to the first submissive, then resistant Lisa/Palimpseste in *La Femme d'entre les lignes* (2002). I felt that I was discovering the role of female narratology in Bouraoui's texts in the same measure as the author was discovering it. In fact, ironically, because of his first name, unfamiliar outside the Maghreb, and often taken for the female name "Heidi," Bouraoui is frequently mistaken for a female academic, a mistake reinforced by his emphasis on female aspirations.

The novelist-critic Reynolds Price argues chauvinistically that male writers provide "many successful entries into female consciousness... Tolstoy's Natasha and Anna, Flaubert's Emma, Hardy's Tess and Sue, Dreiser's Carrie and Joyce's Molly" (16), but that women writers – George Eliot, Willa Cather, Toni Morrison – cannot make the same gender leap because they are excluded from male psychosexual experience. Thus, for instance, none of George Eliot's heroes "is revealed in the core of his erotic nature" (18) – a questionable assumption at best, when one considers Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, whose sexuality traps him in a soul-destroying marriage.

Bouraoui's excursions into the female consciousness escape any presumption of male superiority, for his heroines are constantly surprising, rounding upon the men who would make them into passive muses or inspirations. They are intent on stepping "up from the pedestal," to echo the title of Aileen Kraditor's 1960's book, or, more vigorously, on "striking back" against conformity, passivity, subjugation. Much like Willa Cather's muse for a male narrator in *My Antonia* (1918), the heroine's strong point of view is suggested "*entre les lignes*," between the lines, by her dialogue, her actions, her own storytelling, letters and documents. As Cather warns us about the unreliability of her male narrator, Jim Burden, Bouraoui's male narrators and central consciousnesses are interrogated, often belied, by their chosen muse. There is, moreover, a progression in this figure from

the silent Koï in *Bangkok Blues* to the autonomous artist Héloïse in *La Composée* and the archetypal “woman between the lines,” Lisa/Palimpseste, who emerges from between the lines of the male narrator’s text with her own agenda and her own art. Lisa, in fact, debunks the narrator’s text and his idealization of her by creating her own text and remaking him into the fictional figure of Virebaroud. Yes, Bouraoui’s are heroines created by a male consciousness, but one which respects “the otherness of the other,” as he puts it, reflecting in art the attempts to create dialogue in life.

It is noteworthy that as far back as 1983, in *The Critical Strategy*, Bouraoui was using Simone de Beauvoir’s attack against the traditional role of woman as muse to bolster his own theory of the critical dialectic. As Beauvoir wrote, “Man feminizes the ideal he sets up before him as the essential Other, because woman is the material representation of alterity... Woman is Soul and Idea, but she also is a mediatrix between them...” (Beauvoir 202; quoted by Bouraoui 9). As Bouraoui summarizes the conventional view, “She is muse or inspiration, but not herself a creator save in the biological sense” (9). If the critic mediates between text and reader, as woman is supposed to mediate between man and nature, Bouraoui stresses that the eroticism generated by the critical act does not imply a female critic and a male text, or the converse, but “the passion and power generated by the critical ‘mediatrix’ between work and reader” (10). The ideal, although unattainable, is one of fusion of the critical and creative acts.

To situate the first six novels – they won’t be the last – in the broader spectrum of his career, Hédi Bouraoui coined the term “Transculturalism” and made it a dominant concept in the establishment of the Canadian identity. University Professor Emeritus of French Studies at York University, as scholar, cultural critic, poet and novelist, he has done, and continues to do, pioneering work in creating dialogue both within Canada, and between and among Canada and the United States, the Maghreb, Subsaharan Africa, France, the Caribbean, Italy, the Mediterranean basin (north and south), eastern Europe, and the Far East. In French Studies, for some time as its Chair, Hédi Bouraoui designed curriculum in Maghrebian and Franco-Ontarian literature, the first in Canada, as well as promoting Francophone studies in general. As Master of Stong College he initiated cross-cultural studies through the College Curriculum, and forged links to the Ontario and federal Ministries of Multiculturalism. The *Tales of Heritage I* and *II* publications, based on legends of the various ethnic groups composing the Canadian mosaic, including the First Nations, grew out of

the Stong Transcultural identity. Consisting of imaginative recreations of the legends in the original language, and in French and English, by Professor Bouraoui, with illustrations by renowned Canadian artists Saul Field and Jean Townsend, the project was funded by a Wintario grant from the Ontario Ministry of Multiculturalism. Outside the University, Hédi Bouraoui was one of the founders of the African Literature Association (ALA), particularly of Maghreb Studies within it. He subsequently served as President of the ALA. Thus Hédi Bouraoui's projects as academic and creative writer reflect the same concerns with *Transculturalism*, but also with *Transpoïétique*, the breaking of genres and formal experimentation with poetry and poetic prose. The progression of his career from the 1960's to the present shows a varied body of work drawing upon diverse cultural dialogues, demonstrating that he fulfilled his early promise as a Fulbright Exchange Scholar in North America.

In October 2002 the Canada-Maghreb Centre opened at Stong, the result of a generous gift of books and documents and an endowment to York University from Hédi Bouraoui. The Centre houses a collection of Francophone literatures, principally from the Maghreb and Francophone Ontario, but also from Subsaharan Africa, the Caribbean, Québec, and the Maritimes. It is the first research center in the field in Canada, and one of only three in North America. Its role is to foster research in the two principal areas of the Maghreb – an important postcolonial discourse little understood in North America – and Francophone Ontario – which includes not only the “*écrivains de souche*,” but also new Canadians writing in French.

Based in Toronto, Hédi Bouraoui was born in Sfax, Tunisia, educated in France and the United States, and has lived and taught for many years in Canada, where he appreciates and celebrates the Canadian mosaic, cultural diversity, and tolerance. As he has written, “La Culture est le chemin de la tolérance/Et l’ignorance ne peut être que source de violence” (“Poésie,” *Vers et l’Envers*, 1982). He frequently draws parallels between his mother country, Tunisia, the “*plaque tournante de l’Afrique méditerranéenne*,” and Canada, since both have been colonized at one time, and both are the products of successive waves of immigrants added to the founding populations, the Berbers in the Maghreb, the First Nations in Canada. A member of the Royal Society of Canada, and first Chevalier, then Officier des Palmes académiques, he has served in several administrative capacities at York University. He has organized several international conferences on

Creativity and Criticism, on Francophone literatures, on Maghrebian literature, on the Canadian Alternative.

Hédi Bouraoui is the author of a formidable body of both creative and scholarly works. Although rooted in Toronto, he is a latter-day Ulysses traveling throughout the world, “Wandering Forever.” His twenty volumes of poetry, like his novels, reflect this eternal pilgrimage: space exploration (*Éclate Module*, 1972); transcending boundaries, geographical and linguistic (*Sans Frontières/Without Boundaries*, in French and English); the Caribbean (*Haitinois, suivi de Antillades*, 1980); Macedonia (*Struga, suivi de Margelle d’un festival*, 2003); and in another vein, *Illuminations autistes* (2003), filling the gap of silence for autistic children.

He is the author of a poetic drama, *Immensément Croisés*, short stories, a tale, *Rose des Sables*, which won the Prix du Salon du Livre de Toronto in 1998, one novel-poem, *L’Icônaison*, and six novels to date: *Bangkok Blues* (1994); *Retour à Thyna* (1995, new edition 1997), which has been awarded the Grand Prix littéraire de la Ville de Sfax (1995) and the Prix spécial du jury des Plumes d’or Comar (1997); *La Pharaone* (1998), which was also awarded the Grand Prix du jury des Plumes d’or Comar (1998); *Ainsi parle la Tour CN* (1999), nominated for the Ontario Trillium Award, and awarded the Prix du Salon du Livre de Toronto (2000); *La Composée* (2001), and *La Femme d’entre les lignes* (2002). He has also been awarded the Prix France-Maghreb de L’ADELF.

As an academic, he has from the beginning been interested in experiments with genre, as in his first book of criticism, *Structure intentionnelle du “Grand Meaulnes”: vers le poème romancé* (1976), which views the 1913 novel of Alain-Fournier as a “poème romancé.” In *The Critical Strategy* (1983) he developed his own critical theory by analyzing other postmodern schools, but transcending them through his notion of creative criticism, again breaking boundaries between the creative and critical acts. His current criticism applies this experimental critical theory to Francophone literatures around the world, particularly from the Maghreb, but also Franco-Ontario, the Caribbean, and Subsaharan Africa. Among his other critical and scholarly works are: *Créaculture I* and *Créaculture II* (1971), on French culture and civilization set against a North American background; *La Francophonie à l’estomac* (1995), developing and applying critical theory to francophone literature, as well as countless articles in learned journals. He has edited a number of texts, notably *La Littérature franco-ontarienne: État des lieux* (2000). As both creator and critic, his major concern has been with transculturalism

(his term), the building of bridges between cultures, as well as between people, and notably between male and female, gender and genre.¹

As I have said elsewhere:

Bourauoui is a one-man example of Transculturalism in that he has lived and worked on three continents [Africa, Europe, and North America]. [...] He has said in an interview with Édouard Maunick that his patrie is “la Patrie de l’Homme,” that he is “un homme de partout.” [...] His desire to make connections between and among his native and adopted cultures, and the cultures he has visited, has also driven him to break traditional boundaries of language and poetry. (Sabiston in *Échosmos* 14)

Thus he has attempted to build bridges between literary genres as well as between people, breaking down barriers between and among drama, fiction, and poetry. “Drame poétique” and “roman-poème” are frequent generic rubrics which subvert the reader’s traditional responses.

My own approach to his creative work could be best described as phenomenological, under the influence of the critics of consciousness, Georges Poulet, Paul De Man, *et al.* I have been especially privileged as a phenomenologist to witness the creative process as each novel appears (and even to have read them in manuscript). As a feminist critic, as well as a phenomenologist, I am sensitive to the plurality of criticisms, and tolerant of any which illuminate the work. As Bourauoui emphasizes in *The Critical Strategy*, each work dictates its own critical methodology: “... I have allowed each text to generate its own critical method, to reveal its own code, without imposing a grid on it, whether it be semiotics, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, Marxism, etc.” (7). I have undergone some of the same influences as Bourauoui, who was attracted to the phenomenology of Poulet and De Man “because of its emphasis on, empathy with, and attempted re-creation of, an author’s original creative process ” (115). Bourauoui paraphrases De Man’s stress, in *Blindness and Insight* (1971) on critical empathy, or fusion with the work: “... the critic’s greatest insights occur at moments of blindness to theory; yet the theory is a necessary precondition to these privileged moments ” (131). I give due recognition to Bourauoui’s stress on a criticism generated by each individual work, and to the creative-critical process. As Geoffrey Hartman said, “I am text-bound.” The other theory relevant to Bourauoui, and dating farther back, is Sartrean existentialism: Bourauoui’s

¹ Bourauoui defines transculturalism in his texts, *Créaculture I* and *II* (throughout) and *The Canadian Alternative* 104-10.

work shows a profound *engagement*, a humanistic commitment, to openness, tolerance between genders, genres, cultures, young and old. As we have seen, his re-visioning of the muse owes a debt to Beauvoir's groundbreaking existential critique of socially programmed gender definitions.

In 1999 Bouraoui was awarded the Prix du Nouvel-Ontario for "his contributions in the field of poetry, fiction and interculturalism." The prize is given to an artist who has had a significant impact on francophone Ontario, and Bouraoui is called a "voyageur inlassable à travers le monde, engagé sereinement dans tous les domaines de la Francophonie" (*Communiqué de "La Nuit sur l'Étang"*, Université Laurentienne, 6 mars 1999).

Although Bouraoui considers *L'Iconaison* (1985) to be his first step towards a novel, marking the transition from poetry to fiction, I have chosen to begin with the second novel, *Bangkok Blues*. While *L'Iconaison* is a *poème romancé à la Alain-Fournier*, and therefore somewhat problematic as a narrative, in *Bangkok Blues* we have the fully developed characterization I consider to be the hallmark of the novel. Moreover, in *Koï* we have for the first time (outside of his poetry) Bouraoui's radical re-visioning of the traditional Muse figure. In addition, we are transported to Thailand, a country that is completely strange to both author and reader. Bouraoui creates a Francophone novel about a country whose culture and language he studies intently and empathetically. The novel thus becomes a testing ground for his theory of Transculturalism. *Bangkok Blues* leaps to the Far East from the Occident, and to a Thai woman who inspires a male protagonist. We will join them on that journey.