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Bangkok Blues :

Bourauoui's « Correspondances », or, « Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent »

Baudelaire and Dante

Hédi Bouraoui's *Bangkok Blues* (1994) bridges the gap between lyric poetry and poetic novel, a step already anticipated in the earlier *L'Iconaison*, which is more poetry than novel, but tends towards the latter. *Bangkok Blues* is composed of incantatory prose epiphanies, which make it at least in part a prose poem. Its subjects include language, past and present, the gap between rich and poor and between cultures. Bouraoui's title, *Bangkok Blues*, suggests at least one of his possible inspirations: Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, in particular the famous « Correspondances. » The blues is both a musical form derived from the African American tradition of dealing with pain, and a color suggestive of sea and sky. As Baudelaire wrote in « Correspondances », « Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent. » In *Bangkok Blues* Bouraoui invokes all the senses – sound, sight, smell, touch – to re-create the world of the unknown, curiously cosmopolitan Bangkok, Thailand.

The other master more obviously invoked is Dante: Bangkok is at times seen as the infernal city. The epigraph is from Dante: “Love which moves the sun and other stars” [L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle], and the novel is divided into fourteen cantos, derived from music. The novel also traces a quest for origins, and one of its paradigms is the Biblical book of Genesis, as well as a Jungian collective unconscious. But the origins it seeks are those of language. The hero/sometime narrator’s name is Virgilius, derived from the Roman poet Virgil, whom Dante evoked as his guide in the underworld. It is Virgil who wrote the epic poem about the founding of Rome, the *Aeneid*, and who describes man as a tree, rooted deeply in the earth but reaching upwards to the heavens. At one point, the questor Virgilius remarks that he personifies the tree of languages: « Je deviens l’arbre d’abondance, aux branches perlées de citrons dans lesquels on a mis des pièces d’or, des pierres de jade » (114). French, English, and Thai are all utilized, as well as Arabic, English-French, English-Thai. There are references to sub-Saharan African and Caribbean folk legends and myths, specifically Haitian, as well as language in general: « ... accompagné d’Erzuli, déesse de l’amour et de la beauté. À nos côtes Damballah-Ouédô, dieu des sources et des rivières. » And Haiti and Africa are fused: « À travers la magie d’Haïti, mon Afrique était ici entière dans la souffrance et dans la joie émaillant mon intermonde » (115).

Onomastics: What’s in a Name?

Virgilius’s Latin origins are referred to directly at one point: « Virgilius participe à l’aventure mot à mot. Parfois il perd son latin... » (99). It is evident that he is North African, a region conquered in ancient times by the Romans, one among a whole series of invaders, of whom the last were the French, leaving their mark on the indigenous population both genetically and linguistically. If Virgilius is a modern Virgil, however, it is Koï, the young Thai woman, who is the guide and mentor. She is compared to Dante’s Beatrice, the guide through the Paradiso, but if Bangkok is an ambiguous Inferno/Earthly Paradise, she is also the guide through the Underworld, Virgil. Virgilius’s rival for Koï is her dead father, and here the comparison to Petrarch’s Laura comes in: « L’un embrasse Laure comme un Pétrarque octogénaire balbutiant ses Canzoni... », while « L’autre reçoit d’en haut sa Béatrice. Elle fond sur lui dans une Divine Comédie... » (35). Virgilius, one assumes, like Dante, is “midway the journey of this life”

(thirty-five for Dante), and the experience of Bangkok and of Koï, who herself embodies Bangkok, « la femme-cité, » marks the turning point in his life.

Koï's name in Thai means « le petit doigt », or little finger, the fifth born in a family of ten, and the imagery of fingers and hands which pervades the text reinforces the notion that she is the mentor or guide. She is always referred to as “Koï thai.”

Virgilius's name has another source, as well as that of the Roman poet. It is a play upon « virgule », or the comma, which marks a pause in the sentence, as a period of contemplation in Virgilius's life: « Quand on aime, il faut fuir pour ne pas mourir. Vivre cet amour comme une virgule, le temps unique d'une pause sans poser de limite aux cœurs qui s'enlacent » (144). The word play suggests that Virgilius *pauses* over his love, without *imposing* a limit on it. Towards the end he describes the significance of his idealized love for Koï, who is in fact poetry, or a muse, like Beatrice and Laura, rather than a realistically conceived woman.

Shifting Narrative Voices

In the last three cantos, there is a shift in narrative voice. All three are titled, unlike the first eleven. Canto XII is entitled « Carnet du Pinceau Volant, » suggesting that Bouraoui is using a technique he described so well in his study of Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, that is, the incorporation of a notebook or journal within the text. But the « Pinceau volant » is a free-ranging artist's brush, emphasizing that Bouraoui is borrowing from all the arts, in a form of Baudelairean synesthesia, to transcend the verbal. Is it Virgilius transcending his own limits? Thus, Koï's silence is eloquent, contrasted to the meaningless garrulity of her sister Joy. The names rhyme, and the sisters are alter egos. Koï, « la polytechnicienne du simple, » expresses herself splendidly in sensual smiles and nods. Thus, synesthesia, or « correspondances », fill the gaps of verbal communication. A brief reference to « échos proustiens » to describe the allure of the Thai language – in this case selling flesh – reminds us of the unity of senses in Proust's image of the madeleine, which triggers memory.

Canto XIII also draws our attention to the central theme of communication, « Journal du Bambou », and the last, Canto XIV, « Transe des Doigts: Mahori du fleuve à cinq variations », draws in not only the dominant

finger/hand image, but specifically alludes to fingers playing on stringed instruments, a “Mahori” being a Thai string orchestra.

Virgilius’s Quest: The Origins of Language

The artist figure in the text appears to be Virgilius, though the narrator of Canto XII, « le Pinceau volant », apparently distances himself from Virgilius’s ambiguities and ambivalences: « Je ne prends pas le pouvoir de la bouche énigmatique de Virgilius » (135). Like Virgil’s Aeneas, Virgilius crosses the sea to a new, strange land, not to found a city, but to *find* a city, and to express it in a new language based on the elements – earth, air, water, and fire – and on correspondences. The dominant religion, Buddhism, embraces the earth and the heavens. Thus, the Buddha statue viewed by Virgilius has one foot in the air, representing the circle of life, « la perspective cyclique », « l’esprit » and « la lettre », « la droite et la courbe » (27). Virgilius is perplexed at the start about how to write of Thailand in French, « avec mes mots d’Occident » (20). He views Bangkok as a « coquille vide », a city of ruins which has haunted his dreams. He wants to penetrate an unknown which lies beyond human language, to « transmettre ce qui résiste aux mots » (20). What he sees is a country of extremes, of ancient and modern, of poverty and wealth, juxtaposing traditional Asian temples, pagodas, palaces, and abject poverty, with « arrogant » twentieth-century skyscrapers (22).

The very first line of the novel signals a return to origins: « Ce voyage remonte le temps... » (9). We realize that the quest hero has ties to “my prosperous America” as well as to “the deserts of my Africa.” He has flown from Roissy (Charles De Gaulle), so we know he is now living in France. Even in the plane he senses the « correspondances » of this complex city where, paraphrasing Baudelaire, « les couleurs et les sons font plus que se répondre; ils infusent tout mon être placé comme par miracle dans ce carrefour de civilisations, où l’Asiatique refuse de céder le pas au Gaulois ! » (21). Multicultural himself, but Occidental, he is nonetheless brought face to face with a country that is totally enigmatic, mysterious to him, with its extremes of poverty and wealth, of flesh and spirit, « nouveau pays de cocaïne et de chair après l’abandon honteux des colonies » (10). This statement is as cryptic as the country itself, as it was never literally colonized by the imperialist West. The term « postcolonial », in such wide use today, cannot be literally applied to Thailand: « Et Thaï, terre de liberté, n’a jamais

été colonisé » (46). The correct term hasn't been invented for Thailand, since "Third World" has been labeled politically incorrect. It is a land of liberty which sometimes crosses the frontier into licence, even licentiousness.

Yet it is also a land subject to another hidden form of colonization – by tourists who think they can capture the essence of a culture on film: « Le temple devient le souk des clichés à emporter sur pellicules » (31). Virgilius links their invasion of Thailand with that of his native North Africa by slipping in the Arabic word for marketplace, « souk ». Photography – the ultimate realism – is linked with violence, as we see a Korean « mitrailler le paysage, de son appareil photo » (96). And everywhere the English language (especially American) imposes itself as the « seule lingua franca ». Moreover, « Ici, tant de touristes français de troisième ordre se comportent en Américains, sillonnent les lieux de pensées avilies » (11). Bouraoui adds an epic/Whitmanian catalogue of languages constituting this « Tour de Babel » (82). This is supplemented by equally Virgilian/Whitmanian lists, such as the string of sentences beginning with « Que »:

Que d'années passées...
Que d'algues moroses...
Que de naïveté cultivée...
Que de remous écartés... (36)

And a few pages later we find Virgilius's self-examination, repeating « suis-je », and echoing Montaigne's « Qui suis-je? » as well as, obviously, Dante's *Divine Comedy*:

Suis-je au paradis perdu d'un amour qui veut être entendu?
Suis-je dans l'enfer où l'espoir piège les corps torturés?
Suis-je dans le purgatoire de l'attente qui veut bien
croire à la renaissance d'un nouveau siècle? (44)

Love becomes a text for Virgilius, but he prefers a triumph of the imagination to reading an already-in-print book on Thailand: « Je ne l'ouvrirai jamais. Je préfère vivre dans la foule et dans le corps de la femme orchidée » (101). So the woman, Koï, becomes the book.

Metaphors of turned pages fill the text. When her father died four months ago, Virgilius's comment is « Tournée, la page du sacrifice » (49). And a little later, Virgilius says, « Que la page soit tournée dans le sable de nos déserts terrestres et lunaires », linking Eastern deserts (including Desert Storm and all the succeeding desert wars) and lunar landscapes (56).

Virgilius finds that the Orient liberates both him and his language from shame.

Koï, la Femme-Cité

If Koï is literature – « Koï, ma belle étrangère, ma littérature qui bouge » – the French woman, Françoise, tries to bring Virgilius back to his quasi-French heritage. Bouraoui uses yet another form of narrative, the epistolary, of Western origin, to convey Françoise's rebukes: « Mais tu rêves et tu as tout inventé, ce pays, trésor de chair au crépuscule de ta destinée » (40). A modern, less subtle version of Laclos' scheming Madame de Merteuil in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), she tries to make Koï into a woman like herself: « Une femme habituée aux brasseries parisiennes à la mode et au parfum reconnu ». But, remarks Virgilius, « ce genre de vie est déjà révolu ».

For Virgilius, Koï is the ideal « femme-cité », the spirit of the old Bangkok, not the modern « femme-cité à la chevelure folle » (23). Modern Bangkok is « cette terre tierce ... [qui] marie le défaut du manque et l'exaltation du surcroît » (10). Its center resembles a mango resisting opening, while the rest of the city seems swallowed up by water – canals, streams, rivers, the sea: « Un tout mouvant, sans limites » (11). It teems with a population of six million, more than 10% of the total Thai population, with « un air si pollué qu'il étoufferait les bœufs les plus robustes » (12). The inhabitants are so fatalistic that even the beggars fail to beg. The meat is fly-covered in the open-air market, and everything, especially female flesh, is for sale, like the meat. As Virgilius's driver says, « Avec de l'argent on peut tout acheter, le plaisir, la chair, le sanuk, tout » (13). Virgilius, of African, European, American heritage, intrigued by the unknown, « cette Asie extrême-orientale » (14), defines thus the purpose of his art, to create an « inter-essai », « non pour excaver de l'intérieur une ... confession du genre nouveau roman, mais pour saisir l'étrangeté inconnue... ». He is impelled by « ce désir virulent et vertigineux de quitter notre peau ». As a Bulgarian has described the artistic impulse, it is « une blessure qui propulse vers un ailleurs toujours repoussé, inassouvi, inaccessible » (14).

The lure of the unattainable is embodied in Koï, this startled « gazelle » he has perceived in the midst of « cette cité infernale de la surenchère charnelle » (16). She guides Virgilius through hell, and, like Beatrice, towards a lost paradise. Virgilius realizes that she seems to arise from his

unconscious. She is a dream, a thought, « silence de lune qui émerveille les étoiles » (16), not coincidentally paraphrasing the epigraph from Dante.

The masseuses of the omnipresent massage parlors, or sex markets, skillfully manipulate their clients, in a perverse twist on Pascal, into a « vision ardente que la raison ne connaît pas ». Pascal, of course, was speaking of the heart, and love of God : « Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas ». But here we are looking at lust, not love, whether human or divine. Thus Bangkok is a « femme-cité » in more ways than one, for it is a city which offers its women to the highest (or even the lowest) bidder.

Koï is identified more with the spirit of the older capital, Ayutthayâ, built in 1350 and razed by the Burmese in 1769. It was surrounded by three rivers for defense, and resembled an elephant's hoof. The white elephant is a totemic figure that appears throughout the text, something that is a "hard sell" in English, but valuable and rare in Thailand. The ruins of Ayutthayâ are a « musée de l'imaginaire des jours de gloire et de faste ».

Koï has protected herself with a vow of chastity, resisting sexual enslavement. Virgilius is also a « célibataire qui refuse de jouer le jeu de la chair à n'importe quel prix » (23). He is not Prince Charming, but « le roturier émigré, passant comme un ouragan dans ce pays ... de cocaïne et de chair » (35). Koï is a modest heroine who combines Oriental fatalism with the serene smile of, not the Mona Lisa, but the Buddha. And the Thai Buddha is all too human: he is one who has « goûté la chair » (155). The Buddhists are in quest of Nirvana, not the Holy Grail. But Virgilius points out the essential unity of all religions, « nécessaire[s] à notre survie sur cette terre de damnés »: « ... nous sommes nés sous le nouvel arc-en-ciel des fois qui barattent dans nos veines, sans jamais hurler leur croix christique, leur étoile de David, leur croissant lunaire ou leur roue bouddhique » (20).

The finger/hand image suggests Koï's creative role, evoking the fingers of the writer or musician or painter. Thus we have a marriage of the arts. Koï breaks the Oriental stereotype; she is not submissive, but helps Virgilius cross frontiers (38). Her innocence is like a bird hidden beneath one's shirt. She is an « être de silence », « mon autobiographie plurielle », says Virgilius. He also refers to « nos corps textes », and calls her a collaborator: « Nous sommes deux d'avoir ouvert ton livre complice, Koï. Ce livre de délices qui reçoit la vie comme une lettre, sans l'ouvrir » (39). But she also creates him.

Virgilius associates her with the North African khamisa, a symbol in the form of a stylized hand pointing downward, intended to bring good fortune

to the wearer. The *khamisa* unifies the novel. If Virgilius is the migrating writer, the « forgeron des mots », Koï is « le petit doigt » who will always accompany him: « ... je serai toujours avec toi » (25). She is in a sense the ideal reader, or audience. He addresses her from the start as « tu », breaking with tradition to create intimacy. The hand carrying her seal becomes a « pendentif *khamisa* qui nous protège dans les coulisses de la haine et des mésétements » (60).

If the *khamisa* is a kind of hieroglyphic to be decoded, the Thai language itself is composed of ideograms, to be deciphered by the stranger Virgilius, a language that again brings to mind Baudelaire's « forêt de symboles »: « La nature est un temple où de vivants piliers... ».

Comparative Religions

Koï is also an Eve in the garden of Eden, and Bangkok itself is the serpent of temptation, cut up by rivers « comme un serpent coupé en rondelles » (26). Joy recounts a folk tale about the serpent: if a woman encounters it, she will meet her man. If it stings, the marriage will be soon. If it is killed by a relative, it means that she will be protected from a marriage that would not be good for her (55). The Thais themselves have been expelled from their original Eden, the capital Ayutthayâ, moving to the south to escape their enemies: « Les Thaïs ne peuvent aller plus loin » (27). The Buddhist cosmogony, *traibumi phra ruang*, is, like the modern Bangkok, a « monde d'amour et de souffrance, de jouissance et de douleur, du paradis et de l'enfer, de Brahma et de son esprit désincarné » (28). It is the “Siamese twin” of Virgilius, Pierre, who succumbs to the lure of Bangkok flesh, “Siamese twin” suggesting both that he accompanies Virgilius, and that he is an alter ego or *doppelgänger*, much as Joy is for her sister. It is Pierre who seeks to « se gorger du sexe à gogo dans ce pays réputé pour ses orgies inimaginables » (53). His name, « Pierre », or stone, links him with the « coquille vide » of corrupt modern-day Bangkok. Through the guide Koï, Virgilius finds Dante's « paradis perdu » after traversing the inferno and purgatory. It is through Koï that Virgilius « remonte le cours de mes origines » (37).

The word “main” is repeated several times in Canto VI, like a voice without vocalization, orange blossoms flying in the wind, or tasting a virginal spirit: « ... je savoure encore de Koï thaï la main... » (54). Koï becomes “Koï-livre, » with virginal pages (59). Thanks to her, Virgilius is

neither alienated nor fragmented. He is inscribed in the tradition of poets of the city: from Virgil's Aeneid to Baudelaire's *Spleen de Paris*, to Whitman's New York, T.S. Eliot's "Unreal City" (London), Sandburg's Chicago, Nikki Giovanni's Newark. Virgil's Rome, Baudelaire's Paris, Eliot's London are simultaneously real cities and poetic constructs; but, with the exception of Giovanni's Newark, these are masculine constructs, whereas Koï, in an important sense, creates herself in a purely female way, transcending the limits of the real, as opposed to the written, Bangkok. She is a lotus closed in on itself, after her frustrated marriage to Chowarit (93), but she also reminds Virgilius of his native olive tree. Looking at the tomb of Queen Suriyothai, who lost her life saving her husband's, as Koï saves Virgilius from futility and ambiguity, he finds himself in « cet éden perdu » (61).

Koï resists all national boundaries, just as she would have fascism or Hitler (109). If Voltaire's Candide retreats from the reality of war, torture, man's inhumanity, to « cultiver son jardin », Virgilius cultivates his « jardin intérieur » which is, in the final analysis, unlike Candide's, edenic, rather than escapist (39). Buddhism is implicitly compared to the other great religions of the world, with references to the Maghrebian/Islamic tradition conveyed by the voice of the griot, or official talespinner (57). A Bangkok tower resembles a minaret, complete with a muezzin calling worshippers to prayer (60). Virgilius refers to a black Buddha, moving the image to sub-Saharan Africa. A pagoda resembles the Tower of Pisa (61). Christianity is evoked when we are told to render unto Buddha that which belongs to Buddha (as to Caesar) (119), and in the phrase, « Que de chemins de Damas et de chemins de croix! » (93). The Marabout suggests the influence of Haiti and voodoo, and Bouraoui/Virgilius draws upon Arabic and Sanskrit to communicate (115). He finds « le sourire de nirvana dans le mektoub de Koï », fusing Buddhist and Islamic notions of paradise and fate. A global bonding manifests itself. Virgilius argues with himself, using the framework of the Thousand and One Nights (whose putative author is a woman, Scheherazade, the archetypal female artist) whether the poet is a liar, or speaks a higher poetic truth (86).

The first eleven cantos seem to lead to a form of birth in Eden. The little blonde girl Achara, whose Thai name in Arabic means "sign", adopts Virgilius and Koï as surrogate parents: « Elle nous a choisis, couple avant la lettre du baiser » (125). Not literally parents, perhaps not literally even a couple, she chooses them as spiritual and symbolic generators of her own sign language. She too is a budding artist, sketching « fraternité » and

« égalité » (126). « Égalité » depicts female twins (not the male Siamese twins Virgilius and Pierre). On the next page we read that Koï is also twinned, close and distant like a queen of life and death in Virgilius's garden. Koï recounts the folk legend told her by her mother Kannika: « Dans nos traditions, quand la personne vient de l'enfer la mère crie, quand elle vient du ciel, la mère rit, quand elle vient de la terre, la mère oublie. » Virgilius comments, « Mektoub avant l'écrit », again wedding two folk traditions, but also contrasting fate (Mektoub) to « l'écrit », the exercise of free will (128).

The birth is that of language, or perhaps communion, going « au-delà des mots » (129). Their quest is towards riches that transcend words, linking many myths and languages that call on universal values (130). Virgilius describes Koï as « la modeste paume de ma main libérée, complice de sa caresse » (131). He himself is a seismograph (like Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*), reflecting local quakes and turbulence, both natural and man-made..

Virgilius's narration actually ends with a bitter, cynical letter from Françoise, addressing him as « Mon cher Virzombi », “Vir” being “man” in Latin, but a zombie, in Haiti, is one of the living dead. She mocks the North African language: « J'aime beaucoup ces vents chauds, sirocco et harmattan (quels noms bizarres!) » (132). But her own command of languages is mocked by Virgilius: “You are eu peine in ze asse, dit-elle en son anglais de Queen qui reste lamentablement français » (91). She also refers to his calling her « la rose de sable qui frappe les esprits » (133). But the last word is his, an affirmation of his experience with Koï:

... ma nuit de mots est plus belle que le jour... Si je n'avais pas fait ce voyage intérieur avec Koï thaï, j'aurais perdu le contact avec mon être le plus profond. Je serais passé à côté de la vie. Mais non. Je suis dynamité du dedans. Cet accent de vérité virgulisé le silence de Koï qui semble me dire, *à chaque amour nouveau, l'on regagne son innocence.* (134)

The quotation is extremely rich and dense. Lyricism is the product of night – of dreams, some erotic, some not, of an oneiric state – rather than broad daylight and reality. Virgilius's important travels take place within his own soul, with Koï thaï as the enabler. He is vibrating like a seismograph, dynamited from within in an act of destruction which is also creative. From it a higher poetic truth emerges, from the fusion of Virgilius's pauses, reflections, and Koï's silences. But the passage ends on a cryptic, even

problematic note: granted that Koï is the “new love”, other than perhaps the waspish Françoise, we have no indication of any serious previous love. And we have just been told that Koï is an ideal, something special (whose own prior love was a failure). There seems, therefore, to be no question of another love, except on the imaginative, poetic level – unless Virgilius feels that every experience with Koï is a new beginning.

In Canto XII the « Pinceau volant » takes over the narration, describing a variant on the Last Supper, the « Banquet final » in « un restaurant cosmogonique », serving « la nourriture terrestre » (echo of Gide). The hand images take on a new level of meaning with the incense sticks which « ressemblent aux doigts emplâtrés de henne ». The thumb represents joy, also the name of Koï's sister; the index celebrates glory and power. The middle finger plays on its ambiguity. It is capped in green, which represents longevity to the Chinese, diabolism to the French, and is a sacred color to Moslems. The narrator comments that all are clearly defined, except the little finger, « citadelle de runes qui fait chatoyer le vent, la pluie, le ciel, les étoiles » – yet another echo of the epigraph from Dante. He continues, when an incense stick burns down, a work of art disappears forever, suggesting the ephemeral nature of art, the « pause » or « virgule » (137) – and perhaps the reclaimed innocence of the passage cited above, when the artist begins a new creation..

The « Pinceau volant » sees himself as the bodyguard « de ce couple de l'impossible » (138). Even the beds in their hotel room are textual rather than sexual: they are “twin” beds, the recurrent motif of twinning. The question is raised, is the relationship not consummated, or consummated like the incense sticks – that is, burned up, like a completed work of art? The beds « ont l'air de deux pages blanches géantes », suggesting that consummation is a false problematic, raised literally by Pierre Karch, who thinks that Françoise's « lettre de rupture, envoyée d'Afrique, précipite la « nuit blanche » (141) de Vir (l'homme) et de Koï (coït?) ... » Rather, the beds are an open book, foreshadowed by the « femme-livre » [libre?] whose symbols need to be read, « ce qui va réorienter l'ontologique du côté du transpoétique » (138). The « inter-dit » is both “the forbidden”, and what passes between the lines, or Virgilius's « inter-essai ».

In this Canto it becomes clear that Koï's role as Eve figure is emphasized: « Ève jardin, c'est Djezia qui psalmodie le cantique des cantiques » (139). Djezia is the heroine of *La Geste bilalienne*, translated and interpreted by Lucienne Saâda. *La Geste bilalienne* is the Odyssey or Aeneid of North

Africa. Moreover, Djezia is reciting the « cantique des cantiques », or the Song of Solomon from the Biblical Old Testament, which uses human sexuality as a metaphor for the love of God – in this case, for the dedication to creativity. The frame of reference is both Moslem and Judeo-Christian. The Song of Solomon gestures in the direction of inter-racial love relationships: the mistress is “black, but comely.” Moreover, Koï is not only twinned with Joy, but with Virgilius himself as a soulmate. The lover in Song of Solomon is running about the streets, as Virgilius does in Bangkok, in quest of the ideal union of flesh and spirit. Both lovers are as obsessively single-minded as Virgilius and Koï. Their relationship draws on all the senses, producing the « calme et volupté » of « Correspondances »: « Le toucher, la vue, l’ouïe, l’odorat, le goût se répondent » (141).

If Virgilius gives birth to poetry, Koï is an Eve who actually creates Virgilius, but on the spiritual level, not the biological: « Koï vient de créer en face de nous, et *in vitro*, un Virgilius sorti de ses entrailles silencieuses... Ton silence, Koï, a donné naissance à ce Vir, pierre angulaire de son dire » (143). Koï is a Magna Mater, or Earth Mother, the “Mother of us all.” Her silence creates Virgilius’s words. If “Vir” (man) rhymes with « dire » (speech) in French, it is implied that not only Virgilius, but Koï is the “Word Made Flesh.” Christ built his Church on the stone (« pierre »), which in this passage refers not only to the Siamese twin of Virgilius, but also to the Church. The « *pierre angulaire* » also refers to the sharp (phallic?) letter “V” itself.

Canto XIII, « Journal du Bambou, » continues to evoke his Eden, « ce paysage de rêve », of the Book of Genesis: « Nous sommes là dans le chaos de la jouissance, le big bang de tous les créateurs » (147).

In Canto XIV, orchestrated by the Mahori, the « convoyeur de bateaux » lifts his thumb (150), and « On nous montre du doigt ». Love itself becomes art, once expressed: « Une fois dit, notre amour ne nous appartient plus, comme le livre jeté bouteille à la mer se délivre de l’emprise de son auteur. It is as if the book itself were a newborn baby, “de-livered,” or “de-booked,” and thereby freed from its author’s conscious intention. To « dé-livre » is to free oneself, as well as to deliver the book. If the bottle thrown into the sea with its message reminds us of Edgar Allan Poe, the book set free from its author recalls Chaucer’s releasing his work from his control: “Go, little book!” The narrator refers to « ce livre de ma khamsa, » a complex symbol for Bouraoui. Not only a mythic protector from the evil eye, this schematized hand also suggests brother/sisterhood, freedom from

materialism, and above all creativity. Bouraoui's 1986 poem, « Khamsa Triomphante, » provides a gloss on the role of Koï:

Triomphante la Khamsa, cette main mauresque dérouté
Le sort, conjure l'œil mauvais du tort. L'Œil et la Nuit
Font écouler la somnolence des voix pour investir le bec du politique.

...

Et la démarche circulaire et la pensée en colimaçon

Et l'imaginaire qui tourne en rond...

Ma main, ma source.

...

Alors tu planteras dans tes sillons les haillons de ta pensée originelle

Ton sol imbibera l'encre de ta sagesse et les œilleux

De la tendresse orneront les fronts des gouverneurs-épouvantails.

« Entre pouce et index », Koï says, « Je n'oublierai jamais your excellent teach of touch » (151). Their bodies are described as « les corps alphabets. »

This Canto fuses birth and death, and dwells in paradox: « L'enfant est les parents couple, car la mémoire empêche la maternité ». The « revolutionary diva » proclaims, « Nul ne peut concevoir sans avoir goûté la mort » (153). The theme is identified elsewhere by Bouraoui as « amourir. »¹ Virgilius writes of having conjured up in the unconscious « l'obscur désir de naître et de mourir » (156).

The hand/khamsa image climaxes in this last Canto. Koï says to Virgilius, « Je suis toujours avec toi. Je suis ton petit doigt. I don't fly to Paris. » She is both presence and absence. The narrator describes her function and influence: « ... ce petit doigt, seul scribe à pénétrer dans l'oreille pour lui insuffler la parole auriculaire qui ne mutile pas de son amour. Lui ne revendique aucun droit puisqu'ils sont tous deux à posséder le petit doigt et la virgule » (154).

Koï is all women in one: wife, lover, sister, mother, aunt, grandmother (156). Perhaps this is too much weight, however, for one character to bear. If the novel has a fault, it resides with Koï thaï, who seems to be more symbol than reality, whereas we come to know Virgilius, with all his human failings, and even the foil Françoise, whom we grasp through her mean-spirited epistolary style. There is a problem with a character whose creativity is expressed only through silence which inspires a lover/narrator who, presumably, writes the book. Her function seems to bring her dangerously

¹ *La Pharaone* (Tunis: L'Or du Temps, 1998).

close to the Muse that was Beatrice or Laura. Nonetheless, she anticipates Bouraoui's later heroines, culminating in Francine/Hatshepsut of *La Pharaone* and Héloïse of *La Composée*, both of whom embody the recurrent theme, "The Muse Strikes Back." She is a beginning, a necessary first step in the evolution of Bouraoui's heroines. Nathaniel Hawthorne once said of his « romances » (novels, we would say) that they have one foot in Cloud Cuckooland, one in reality. Koï thaï often seems to exist more in fantasy than in psychological realism, unlike the other characters. Her role in the text seems most appropriate to a poetic fabliau.

The novel ends with a unity of the elements, as of the aspects of woman: the lovers are baptized in the sea, the incense earlier represented fire, the novel is of the earth, and at the end the adventurer-hero takes off into the air: « Le pouce et l'index s'arrondissent, se frôlent, s'embrassent, zéro heure! Les trois autres doigts prennent de l'aile, l'avion décolle » (157).²

The female, haloed with imagery of the protective, inspiring hand or khamisa, is therefore seen as a ministering angel, the unifying force. She accomplishes a fusion of the elements, of male and female, of cultures erasing national boundaries, of the five senses, as she herself is all women in one. Twinning many of the characters reinforces the theme of fusion.

Koï participates by silence and gestures; perhaps "Koï thaï" suggests a kind of aesthetic "coitus interruptus." Although Virgilius creates with words, he is most successful with the pause conveyed by one source of his name, « virgule. » Better than any word of love he utters or writes is the tender gesture of settling his jacket around her shoulders. The cross-fertilization of word and silence is reminiscent of the Symbolist poets, who all trace their origin back to Baudelaire.

Virgilius succeeds in communicating only when the « Pinceau volant » takes over, whose instrument is paint, not words. Moreover, he is a brush « volant » who is able to take flight, to soar, through visual elements. The

² Robert Elbaz notes that Bouraoui undermines the apparent circularity of the narrative, and the reader's expectations of a resolution: « À un premier niveau, il semblerait que la structure est circulaire, puisque le récit commence avec un atterrissage et finit avec un décollage; le narrateur aurait ainsi accompli sa mission et découvert sa vérité. Or nous savons par ailleurs, étant donné le travail du « pinceau volant » du canto XII, que tout est effacé, que ce monde fictionnel dans son intégrité bascule dans le néant et qu'il ne reste en fin de compte que le procès de la recherche » (150).

novel embodies a critique of words through painting and music. If Virgilius, or his alter ego the « Pinceau volant », produces a book, it exists not only in words, but in fragments, and pictures. The correspondence of Françoise is furthest from the truth, for it has no « correspondances »; it is self-serving to the point of solipsism, turning within rather than connecting with the Other.

This first of Bouraoui's works clearly recognizable as a novel is highly experimental, and as open-ended as Virgilius's flight. The succeeding novels all start anew, on different voyages, are all strikingly different, generating a new form each time. Yet together with the innovation there is continuity in the female presence, embodied first in the enigmatic, silent Koi, who will lead to more solid, expressive, active heroines who begin increasingly to interrogate a male narratology, and even to take over from it: Zitouna, Françoise/Hatshepsut, Twylla Blue, Héloïse.