

### III

#### *La Pharaone :*

#### **A Female Visionary**

If *Retour à Thyna* could end « à continuer », Hédi Bouraoui's third novel, *La Pharaone* (1998), is in a sense a continuation, but also a backwards movement, beyond the Roman period to the very origins of civilization in ancient Egypt. Like *Bangkok Blues*, the novel explores both a distant past and a distant place, where the protagonist/sometime narrator finds himself in an alien setting and, especially in *La Pharaone*, in a strange and unfamiliar time. As in the two previous novels, there are double heroines, but one is present, one past, one Occidental, one Oriental. If they are related in any sense, unlike Kôï/Joy and Zitouna/Ahlem, it is as "sisters under the skin".

*La Pharaone*, like *Retour à Thyna*, is an ambiguous quest, involving five or six people, whose end is inevitable yet, at the same time, completely enigmatic. The title character, La Pharaone, pervades the text, but tells her own story only at the end. It is a striking example of Bouraoui's narratological shifts into the female mind. Here a dead woman speaks – or does she? In the earlier *Retour à Thyna* (1996; second edition 1997), the heroine, Zitouna, who embodies, as her name suggests, both the ancient Roman town of Thyna and the mother country, post-independence Tunisia, finds

her own voice and speaks not only for the liberation of her country, but also of all women.

But why Hatchepsut? The ancient Queen of Egypt, the only female Pharaoh (unless one counts the much later Cleopatra) was perhaps the first modern woman – though there were doubtless other contenders, notably the mythical Biblical Eve. A recent television documentary on Hatchepsut calls her “The Queen Who Would be King”, a title borrowed from Kipling’s novel and the Michael Caine-Sean Connery film, “The Man Who Would be King”. Not bisexual except in a spiritual sense, but rather androgynous (like Zitouna who usurps the male role of talespinner or Fdaoui, and like the CN Tower, later), she donned the Pharaoh’s garb, bare-breasted and all, after the death of her useless husband Thutmose II. While she had to wear the garb of a warrior king to validate her claim to supremacy, she was a wife and mother and, evidently, later the passionate mate of her scribe (or architect, as some historians would have it) Senmut. Bouraoui explains the ambiguity: the two Senmuts were brothers, and adopted the ruse to protect the Queen’s reputation – and their own heads. The television documentary suggests evidence that Hatchepsut’s body, which has never with any certainty been identified, is buried in a tomb adjacent to that of her commoner lover with whom, of course, she could not be buried.

But this is to get ahead of the story, always a temptation considering Bouraoui’s deliberately tangled narrative structures, analogous to a detective story (as is *Retour à Thyra*). The characters are the linchpins, but their narratives overflow like the Nile itself, spilling its banks and inundating them with fertility, but also bringing mysterious deaths, including those of one of the contemporary characters, Rahmane, and we learn later – or do we? – of Barka, the leading male contemporary character, and of Senmut himself. The language has the lushness and exuberance of the Nile valley, surrounded by harsh desert sands, but also by *les roses des sables* (another Bouraoui title). At times the characters, ancient and modern, sound alike, in contrast to the shifts from classical storytelling to contemporary slang in *Retour à Thyra*. But both work towards a fusion of ancient and modern, of time and space.

*La Pharaone* is, above all, a love story, of the ancient world, the modern, and the future. This scaffolding enhances the curious overlapping of the three principal pairs of lovers, who become confused one with the other. It is best to subsume the discussion of female narratology, for the moment, to that of the love patterning. And finally we end with perhaps two, or even three, female narrators, not one. The three couples are, of course,

- the long-dead but still vital Hatchepsut and Senmut;
- the young lovers Ayman the Copt, and Imane the Moslem student. It is no accident that their names sound alike, almost rhyme. They are a Romeo and Juliet separated by the culture and tradition of the Moslem patriarchy, yet bound together as Copts and Moslems are by their land. Their child will embody the hope of the future, though that future is apparently fertilized by his grandfather Rahmane's apparently ritualistic, sacrificial death. Imane metamorphoses constantly into a new Hatchepsut, from the point of view of the central consciousness, Barka Bousiris. But is she also Imeni, the Pount princess who triggers Hatchepsut's jealousy and the eventual murder of Senmut/Kabar, the scribe's real name?
- Barka Bousiris ("Barka" is an anagram for "Kabar") and Francine, the French mistress of both his youth and present, form the third, more mature couple of the present day, but there are *glissements*, *intermittances du cœur* between Imane and Barka, and finally an elision of Francine and Hatchepsut. Is it Francine who simply edits the words of the dead Barka, or does she also interpret and create, in fact become Hatchepsut?

## Ayman and Imane: « L'Amour Continue »

Imane and Ayman, the first of the couples we encounter in the text, are also the youngest and "purest", in the sense of inexperienced. It is their love which is destined to continue on this earth, through their son Nisir.

But it is important to remember that they are, at least in part, the constructs of Barka Bousiris, the « scribe-voyageur », or modern version of the wandering minstrel, or troubadour. He serves as a go-between for the young lovers, which advances the plot, even playing the role of Ayman's father at their wedding. If Barka is the principal narrator/observer in the Ayman-Imane plot, he is the principal actor in the other two love stories, between himself and Francine, and between himself as the resurrected Senmut/Kabar and Hatchepsut.

The young couple, « au coude du Nil », also introduce the river as timebinder, culture-binder, gender-bender. Ayman is a hotel keeper beside the Nile, the center of civilization. He is a Copt whose name, Ayman, literally means faith, and we are told « Ayman c'est la foi du Nil » (17). Imane's name is the feminine version of her husband's, and also means

faith, but her faith is Islam. Her father, representative of the patriarchy, is named Rahmane, or “one who gives grace”, one of the attributes of God. Despite the spiritual conflicts between and among them, the common denominator is faith, but one which is shaken to its root, and probably destroyed in Rahmane. All three names seem to echo also the German “man”, “one”, and the English “man”, “humankind”. There is perhaps also an echo of “manna” from heaven, which descends on the young, while the older men are destroyed.

As the Nile divides the land of Egypt in half while also uniting it, the lovers are both divided and joined by two faiths which have one root. The word “copti” itself is a « forme arabisée qui désigne à la fois l’habitant et le pays » (15). The Nile « partage le pays en deux, saignée aqueuse », a “no man’s land”, which could be an echo of Gilbert and Gubar’s book, *No Man’s Land*. If so, is what we are witnessing a “woman’s land”, a space inhabited by women? The Nile is a « fleuve magique et divin » (15) with which Hatchepsut is identified, « la Déesse-Pharaone, Hatchepsout, qui a capté l’imaginaire de ce monde » (16; emphasis mine), infusing it with her own artistic spirit. It is also the cradle of the « *nourritures terrestres*,<sup>1</sup> mentales, artistiques et scientifiques de tout un continent ». It resembles « un Dieu dérouté qui ne reconnaît jamais la limite de ses forces » (16). If the river is “a strong brown god” (T. S. Eliot’s *The Dry Salvages*), it is equally a goddess, the « mère de l’Univers », or “Oum Kalthoum” (102; 162): « Mère de l’Univers où tout doit aboutir et repartir dans une rythmique sans cesse à révéler... » (21). Her caves shelter the lovers when Imane leaves her father’s home. Barka recognizes in Imane’s cave that of the ancient Egyptian Senmut/Kabar (157). The Nile also represents measureless time, or history.

Ayman is a peasant’s son, adaptable, willing to change and accept everyone: « ... il semble épouser l’efficacité même de l’Occident rêvé ». He meets, in the course of his work, to paraphrase Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), a kind of “Anacharsis Klostz deputation from all the nations of the world”, coming from the river. This couple finds itself « face à l’Histoire et la Modernité », divided and yet united by the river, which separates the two banks, yet « l’amour coule entre » (22).

Despite its superficial resemblance to the classic story of fated young lovers trapped between warring families, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, these lovers are destined not only to survive, but, in the words of William

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<sup>1</sup> The reference is to the work of André Gide.

Faulkner, to prevail. It is the older lovers who fit into the love-death theme, definitively described by Denis de Rougemont in *L'Amour à l'Occident* (*Love in the Western World*) (1940), where the only total fusion occurs through death.

Imane physically resembles the female Pharaoh, « cette beauté-écho de la Pharaone », but is capable of accepting a new love. Ayman is struck by her likeness to Hatchepsut, « son profil finement ciselé, ... ses yeux en amande, larges océans ténébreux et mystérieux, imprégnés de la densité d'un passé prestigieux... » (20). Imane is a scholar, possibly in search of herself; after her early commitment to studying feminist writers, she ultimately becomes rector of l'Université El-Azhar (196), a secular and intellectual “ruler” as Hatchepsut was a religious and national one.

Towards the end of the first chapter the « scribe-voyageur » (or presumed narrator) finally introduces himself: « Et me voici, moi Barka Bousiris, maître de cette tache d'huile longitudinale qui s'étale, fertile et nourricière, dans un désert infini et angoissant » (22). Anchored to his own hieroglyphic origins, he invents his quest as the camel carries its own hump (157). His simile inevitably recalls the old saying, « Le chameau ne voit pas sa bosse », perhaps indicating Barka's vain attempts to reject his fate. Barka seems to be the outside narrator but, like Lockwood in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* – the great-grandmother of all convoluted narratives, before Henry James, before Joseph Conrad and James Joyce – the story doesn't end with him. His narrative is framed by the “tale” of Francine, as well as by a letter from Imane, followed by the writings of the Pharaoh herself. Hence the secret at the heart of the text is a transformation from a seemingly male to a female narrative.

Barka traces the condition of women in a Moslem patriarchy back through Imane to her mother Amira and her grandmother. Amira rebelled against her grandmother's way of life and chose her own husband. But she in turn is jealous of her daughter Imane's greater freedom: « ... elle reste cloîtrée dans son mutisme sans promesses et sans pleurs. Imane la croit tranquille, rassurée » (42). Yet, like the dry Egyptian clouds, she is capable of the rain that brings fertility, or destruction. The Nile delta is a familiar symbol of fertility, specifically of the female genitalia, the “delta de haute sensualité » (43). Amira's jealousy and anger at her husband may be transposed to her furious, obsessive son Béchir. Imane's virginity is compared to textuality; she is a blank page which life will inscribe (46), in contrast to her mother, who is bitter about the way in which life has inscribed her.

Before union can be accomplished, the father must be sacrificed. Imane must enact in a sense a female version of the Oedipus complex: to liberate oneself by killing the father. Not that Imane, consciously or unconsciously, wills her father's death, but her rebellion against the patriarchy, her escape from the paternal home, signal her father's decline and ultimate demise. The instrument may be her brother Béchir, but she provides the catalyst.

Rahmane, or "he who gives grace", an apparently godlike figure, is ultimately the one who loses, first grace, then his life. He opposes Ayman's courtship of his daughter because, supposedly, he prefers a more suitable match, but the young man's Christianity is clearly an issue. Rahmane is a free thinker, « libre-penseur », up to a point, but both father and daughter have internalized their faith, while rejecting the fanatical « Frères musulmans » (38).

When Imane leaves her family, she tells her new confidante, the French Francine, that she fears she has lost both lover (to Margaret Lee, the facile Canadian) and parents. She hides in the pyramids of Giza where her father is the caretaker, in a kind of Ali Baba's cave linking Arabic with ancient Egyptian mythology (62). As Barka asks, « qui possède le courage de cohabiter avec les morts ? » (63). The answer, of course, is not only Imane but himself, as he proceeds to an italicized flashback to Hatchepsut's world, « à l'image d'Isis ou d'Imane » (63). The ancient buried woman comments on the modern: « *Je suis le Verbe ... Je rends la chair à la mort pour indéfinir la vie !* » (63). Is it Barka or Hatchepsut who speaks? Or both? Thutmose III, her nephew/successor, seized his own power by writing over the female Pharaoh's history on the Sphinx, which is falling into ruins, ambiguously male or female, and missing its nose which scents reality. Thutmose, a warrior where Hatchepsut was a peacemaker, knew that « *s'il le désensable ... il sera Roi* » (64). Barka's mission is to « *Rétablir la vérité de cette sribaturie imposée par le furieux Toutmosis III sur le poitrail de ma Princesse... Pourquoi violer l'exemple unique de puissance féminine ? Quels sont les traîtres qui ont subverti ou tué son impact ?* » (64). But in the final analysis it is the women surrounding Barka who rewrite *male* history.

The enigmatic Sphinx poses two riddles focusing on a cobra. Ayman answers the first two as « la belle turquoise de la vie qui reprend ses droits » (67). The Sphinx then poses a third riddle, « galet qui jalonne le cours du fleuve-écriture », reminding us again that the river symbolizes writing, or hieroglyphics to be deciphered. Barka sees the "first truth" of the Sphinx as a return to original innocence, so that to understand death is to understand life, and come full circle.

Imane in turn drifts among the living dead (65), among « des lambeaux de momies, des fragments de sculptures, des bijoux rouillés, des déchets indéfinissables, bref, une caverne... » (77). All this must remain hidden lest Rahmane be fired for professional incompetence. The rumor spreads that Ayman has kidnapped Imane. Rahmane's plans for vengeance are as ill-conceived as the response of the nations surprised by the Six Day War. Hatchepsut creates this new love of « le couple aux religions inversées »; it is they who will “make love, not war” (unlike their religions) (79). Barka makes it clear that love, or a kind of communion, equals writing. Rahmane's death echoes that of the sick Fisher King in T.S. Eliot's “The Waste Land”: “The Fisher King is dead”. It reenacts the age-old ritual of the death of the father which empowers the son. But first he disappears, like his daughter, « sans laisser de traces » (99). At first Imane fears he has been dismissed from his position. She also remembers that he had said, « Je ne donnerai ta main qu'à celui qui t'aimera comme moi ! » (99). Imane cannot mourn him, not knowing his fate: « Ce n'est pas lui qui est mort, c'est son nom ! » (101). The emphasis is always on text, and the Poet is the Namer. Rahmane is absent, like an ancient Pharaoh, and his name becomes « Wala Haga, *M. Personne* [Mr. Nobody], un rien de rien ».

Barka draws an analogy between Imane's quest for the father's name and that of the goddess Isis for the name of the father of all the gods, « le père lumière ». By magical means she creates a serpent from the god Râ's own saliva – shades of DNA! He fails to recognize it as himself because it is the only animal he has not created. When it stings him, Isis conjures him to reveal his “Secret Name” in order to cure him, and he answers: « Je suis Khepri au matin, Râ à midi, Atoun le soir » (101). But she insists on the secret name, not the known ones, and in desperation he divulges it to her in a whisper. The first syllable of Rah/mane's name sounds like Râ, and Barka tries to help Imane « déchiffrer un seul mot qui ressemble à: ‘foi’..., ‘à la fois’..., ‘foi’... » (102). Imane has simultaneously lost her father and found her future husband. If the secret name is “faith”, in losing his name, the implication is that Rahmane loses his faith.

Rahmane wanders in a « *no man's land* des oubliettes » that Imane refuses, but she nonetheless feels partly responsible for the fate of this now child-like father, fallen from his pedestal, wandering in rags in the wilderness, like a latter-day King Lear on the heath. According to this scenario, Imane plays the role of the blunt-spoken but true-hearted Cordelia. But he tries to chase her from his dead man's city. Rahmane's Lear-like soliloquy reveals truth in madness:

*Qui m'a volé ma fille ?... Qui ? Ayman, ce vaurien ou Barka, ce revenant ? Moi, le condamné ? Le Pharaon moribond des âmes ? Farouk, Nasser, Sadat ? ... La perle de mes yeux ? ... Ô, vent, féconde ce Nil qui coule dans mon sang... Je suis Wala Haga ... Serpents me piquent... Sang et désert... On va chercher la mort... Viens... (117-18)*

In this soliloquy, recorded by Barka, possibly edited by Francine, Rahmane metamorphoses into Barka/Kabar, lover of Hatchepsut, and past and present merge. The serpent's sting evokes the race memory of the serpent that stung Râ, in a kind of Jungian collective unconscious, and that tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, as well as the cobra of the Sphinx's riddles. As the ancient Egyptian myth reveals, the serpent is blood of our blood, flesh of our flesh, and evil is within mankind.

Oddly enough, only Betty, Margaret's rebellious daughter, is able to reach Rahmane. His wife Amira asks jealously, « Pourquoi a-t-il fallu une étrangère pour le ramener au sein de ma propre famille ? » Barka compares her question to Hatchepsut's: « Pourquoi un homme de famille modeste peut-il me servir mieux qu'un pharaon ? » (118). If Imane represents tradition, Betty represents « aisance ». Rahmane rediscovered is described as a « revenant », an epithet he himself applied to Barka (118).

Rahmane is found only to be lost again, this time to literal death when he intervenes as a mediator between political rioters and the police. He becomes thus a kind of "sacrificial goat", but his death is a mere statistic, outside of his own family. Barka, significantly, learns of Rahmane's death when he leaves the Cairo Museum, where he has been marvelling at Hatchepsut's statue with the missing nose, « tellement distinct de celui de Toutmosis III empâté, étalant ses narines comme une tente du désert » (120). Hatchepsut's mummy has never been retrieved, or at least identified, so the statue is the closest Barka can get to her. If, in the museum, Barka inspects piles of archaeological relics, Rahmane's death is reduced to « une trouvaille archéologique sans note explicative » (122) – but Barka is to supply, in imagination, that note. Rahmane's death prefigures Barka's, with whom he is in many ways identified: « Une partie de moi vient de mourir. Je me revois dans l'aura de cet homme loyal... » (123).

Barka's earlier dialogue with Rahmane, in fact, gave him the impression of a soliloquy (123). Barka warns him, as the Fool warns Lear, « Chercher un sens à tout, c'est de la folie ! » Rahmane admits, « Je suis peut-être fou ... J'ai toujours voulu poursuivre l'Éternité ». Barka warns him that « L'éternité ... n'est à posséder par personne », but his obsession with Hatchepsut manifests his own drive to possess eternal love – that of Tristan and Isolde,

of Romeo and Juliet. Barka admits he seeks eternity himself through writing, « juste pour sentir son frisson, le temps d'un éclair ... et puis, c'est la mort ! » He adds, « Tu vois, c'est toujours cet obélisque sacré qu'il faut bander pour scribe-voyager l'amour au Ciel... » (124). He thus prophesies the manner of his own death.

Barka admits that Rahmane's was a difficult, dark personality, perverse like still water. His body is rendered, torn apart, thrown into the Nile, like Kabar's, perhaps like Barka's, Kabar's reincarnation – though in the latter case the body itself seems to vanish into thin air. As in the French New Novel, such as Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages*, everything is called into question. The reader, trying to put in order his impressions, is constantly *dérouté*, put off guard by the narrative surprises Barka (or Francine?) has in store. Rahmane's death, like Barka's, also recapitulates the haunting image of Kateb the writer, executed and thrown from the battlements in the earlier novel, *Retour à Thyna*.

The mystery is not solved, but intensified, by the autopsy, which discovers that Rahmane was killed by a policeman's bullet, then torn apart, perhaps by a mob (139). His body is not like the mummy of Ramses II, that other exponent of male dominance, but must be pieced together, and cannot enter the underground kingdom of Osiris. During the course of the reconstitution, they discover that he has been castrated, deprived of the ultimate male symbol of power. The death of the Father seems to Barka to explain the castration (146). His death has permitted others to flourish: it has « donné naissance à l'amour de Béchir pour Betty, semé l'espoir d'un retour à la source du pays dans le cœur d'Ayman, et d'un mariage possible avec Imane » (147).

It is Béchir, not Imane, who, like Oedipus, displaces the father, to the point of going mad. He assumes his father's authority with his elder sister: « ... je suis le mâle de la famille » (152). The two young people with almost identical names represent the “yin and yang”, the animus and anima in psychological terms.

Barka compares the impact of the death of the father on Imane and, aeons ago, on his love, Hatchepsut, who lost Amon and Thutmose (159). Appropriately, for their wedding, the young couple choose a historic setting, Sidi Abdel Kader north of Aswan. They are carried to the site by the feluccas which seem to cleave the Nile, in a sexual image of penetration. The surrounding islands display « leur corporalité amoureuse, ... comme une peinture impressionniste ... » (162). The description evokes the Song of Solomon, with its heady scent of tropical flowers, and bird song. Although

the marriage, at Imane's behest, follows Islamic ritual, there is also an echo of Christ on Palm Sunday in the figure of a « pèlerin perdu » on a donkey, pursued by the music. In the person of the Nubian boatman, the text prefigures the expedition to Pount ordered by Hatchepsut, and described at the end of the novel in her journal. The wedding is not only that of the young couple, and of past and present, but also of three major world religions. It cuts across all boundaries of class, time, and religion, as Hatchepsut tried to do.

Ayman's and Imane's wedding night takes place on board the Seti Ier. The consummation of their love is signaled by the completion of the statue of Hatchepsut: Ayman's father found the sculpted nose in his field, gives it to Ayman as a wedding present, and Ayman gives it to Barka, permitting his « réunion inattendue avec ma Déesse » (168). The modern-day wedding leads to their recovery of their heritage. Throughout the wedding night Barka evokes the legend of Osiris, the god torn to bits and then made whole again by the goddess Isis. Passion itself becomes a religion, as « leurs chairs ... finalement se miraculent... ».

The second part of the novel, much briefer than the first, begins with the birth of Ayman's and Imane's first child, born (by their choice) near Philaé, another site of origins, sacred to Isis who avenged her father, Osiris. Philaé was also the place of strongest resistance to Christianity, where the cult of Isis rules, a cult of words, and therefore of female authorship:

Le temple fut d'abord érigé pendant la trentième dynastie pour célébrer le culte d'Isis. Ses longs portiques et sa silhouette gracieuse offrent aujourd'hui son visage *livresque* au soleil et aux étoiles. Voyage ouvert comme une épitaphe au passage du Nil, *flots de mots* [note the internal rhyme] qui naviguent dans *le chapitre* du fleuve... (186; emphasis mine)

The firstborn is a son, but they show no gender bias; they decide on a cognate name if it is a daughter, Nisra or Nisr. Chapter XV, in which Nisr is born, is entitled « Nilomètre du naître ... disparaître ... » (185), suggesting Sartrean existentialism: Being and Nothingness, « L'Être et le Néant ». The pun is on « naître » – « n'être », or, as Hamlet put it, "To be or not to be, that is the question".

Imane is Isis giving birth to Horus the Falcon. She is also the Mother of the Universe (194). She and Ayman want to go beyond words, to the Word made Flesh, beyond the « cartes perforées du tendre » of the twentieth century (as opposed to the « Carte du Tendre » of the seventeenth-century romance). Imane's reflections on Nisr predict his

future leadership: « ... *Il ira à l'école de Luxor, pour être Ras el Omma ! [Tête de la Nation]* » (194). Thus Imane is seen as a female poet who creates in the verbal sense as well as the biological. Her song is validated by a fakir's horoscope: « Votre fils sera souple, prévoyant, susceptible et très déterminé. Il connaîtra ses buts et s'y dirigera avec force et discipline... Sans difficulté, il vaincra les autres qui accepteront volontiers ses idées » (194-5). Nisr is presented, in fact, as a kind of Messiah, reinforcing the Madonna symbolism attached to Imane, who is both a Mary and an Isis. The Marian worship of the Middle Ages came close to making the Virgin into a mother goddess of the ancient cults (from which the idea of the Virgin does descend). God speaks to Imane about Nisr: « *L'héritier légitime de la foi, ce fils-espoir des destins de la cité et des lois, saura embrasser toutes les croyances* » (195).

Imane creates the name “Nisr” as she has created the baby (195). This chapter of birth climaxes with Imane's prayer: « *O Dieu, regardez et protégez Nisr !* » (196). The name is a cognate of “Misr”, the country, Egypt, but also Cairo.

Béchir, thinking Ayman a false convert, is blinded by violence and shoots him in the right shoulder at the very moment that Ayman was coming to tell Barka of the imminent return of the Hatchepsut Sphinx to the Cairo Museum, so the destinies of Ayman and Barka remain intertwined (198-9). As Ayman puts it, « À mon avis, il a voulu nous punir, Barka et moi » (199). It is Betty, once again, who leads the lost sheep back to the fold, the son Béchir as she has already led the father Rahmane.

### **Barka: « Le Scribe en écrivoyance »**

We are somewhat startled when Barka first introduces himself on page 22, well into the first chapter. Up to this point we have assumed an omniscient author recounting the tale of the young couple « au coude du Nil ». Barka's assertion of the « moi » sends us back to the epigraph Francine includes at the beginning of the text, where Barka tries to repudiate the previous epigraph from François Jacob's *La Statue intérieure*, an image recalling Henry Moore's dictum that the statue already exists within the block of stone, waiting only to be freed from it: « *Pas un geste là, pas un mot qui ne soit imposé par la statue intérieure* ». Trying to distance himself from this determinism, Barka claims that his technique is shaped by the oral tradition of the Maghreb, and that he uses the “T” only to impose a kind of continuity on his fragmented narrative, while repudiating its egoism. He tries to create himself in transit, to escape from « ma Statue scribaillante pour mieux

scruter le présent et préparer l'avenir ». Yet Barka seems unconsciously to live out a destiny he cannot evade as the ancient Kabbar.

Barka admits, in fact, that he is « en mission commandée par un génie intérieur dont j'ignore encore les intentions » (23) – in other words, « La Statue intérieure », which turns out to be the Statue of Hatchepsut, transformed finally into a living, breathing woman. If Nisr is the Word made Flesh, so is Hatchepsut. She is also Galatea brought to life by the sculptor-creator Pygmalion, but in this case she is at least as much the creator of Barka as he is of her. He calls at once upon the “*Om-ed-Dunya*”, or Mother of the Universe, who soon becomes identified with Hatchepsut.

In the second chapter, « Scribe en écrivoyance », Barka describes himself as a citizen of the world: « Barka Bousiris de Carthage,<sup>2</sup> de la ‘Ville Lumière’ [Paris] et de celle que les Iroquois nomment ‘Ah, ce qu’il y en a !’ [Toronto] » (25). He wishes to sate his « soif du transculturel », defined by the novelist Hédi Bouraoui, Barka’s creator and alter ego.

Like Edward Saïd, Barka feels marginalized by the Occident, by the Greco-Roman tradition. The Mother of the Universe, however, is far more ancient, and he wants to translate the Jungian collective unconscious of the whole world, « remonter aux sources de ce que nous sommes » (28). He calls his love “existential”, in the sense of man and woman creating his/her own world; « Créaculture » is the central concern in Bouraoui’s thinking. In the process, his (Bouraoui’s? Barka’s?) text breaks the boundaries between epic and novel: « Je suis le Transversant épisodique qui ne cherche pas à meubler sa vie, ... mais à ranimer les pierres et les murs où s’inscrivent les gestes épiques. Là, l’image se fait roman... » (26). Thus, the stone is made flesh and spirit by the power of words.<sup>3</sup>

His narrative begins with a dream of his own mother, who metamorphoses into Hatchepsut, and the Nile itself. Hatchepsut’s dying husband, Thutmose II, appears, and Barka dances with the Queen, murmuring « je t’aime » (27). The dream has a Freudian ending, a fall into a well: « Tout se dissipe » (28). The recovery in memory of this ancient love is counterpointed with that of the modern. Barka begins to feel he is leaving his skin « dans ce pays des origines », foreshadowing his fate, when his body is never found, but seems to vanish.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Guillery remarks that Barka’s first name evokes the son of Hamilcar Barka, Hannibal, who in turn evokes Carthage battling against imperial Rome.

<sup>3</sup> ... as later in *Ainsi parle la Tour CN*.

Curiously, his first encounter with Hatchepsut occurs in the Occident, in Italy, which – along with London and Paris – has appropriated the ancient treasures of Egypt. This particular treasure is a Sphinx of Hatchepsut, androgynous as was the “Queen Who Would Be King”. Barka introduces her in the words of the Italian guide:

C’est la première femme dirigeante de toute l’humanité.  
D’habitude, elle se fait représenter avec des traits masculins pour convaincre son peuple de sa toute puissance sur le pays. Mais dans cette statue que vous voyez là, c’est la féminité, la finesse, l’élégance, la femme dans toute sa gloire... (29)

But the name on the chest is that of Thutmose III, the nephew. It seems, at any rate, to have been sculpted before she declared herself the Pharaoh.

When Imane accidentally tumbles into the river Nile, Barka sees in her « la statuaire de Hatchepsout, en granit noir, trouvé à Thèbes, mais aujourd’hui propriété du Musée de Rome » (30). The Nile itself (like the river in *Huckleberry Finn*), is a source of myths and legends, hence of language. Ayman initiates Barka with a taste of Nile water, saying, « Tu reviendras en Égypte puisque tu as bu l’eau de son Nil ». In fact, he never leaves Egypt. Barka interprets thus Ayman’s prophecy: « *Nil-syntaxe* qui me *transcrit* dans le *lexique* bariolé des croyances et des traditions. Ayman est convaincu de cette *sentence* gravée dans sa mémoire comme les *hiéroglyphes* sur les murs des temples » (30; emphasis mine). Hieroglyphics becomes the archetypal writing that must be decrypted, decoded. And the river presides over it, « malgré sa pollution et ses détritits » (30).

Ayman is a young Barka, as « Imane et Hatchepsout ne seraient peut-être qu’une seule et même personne » (31). At this point we are also introduced to three other principal characters, Francine Castel, « directrice du Centre Culturel du Caire », who will eventually offer Barka’s vision to the world; Margaret Lee, his promiscuous traveling companion from Toronto who for a time threatens Imane’s relationship with Ayman; and Ibrahim, the mysterious taxi driver who doubles as guide, and is the sole witness to (or is he the perpetrator of?) Barka’s death.

Barka’s mother was unknowingly responsible for sending him to Egypt to solve the riddle (the Sphinx’s?) of the *Omma* (Nation, or Mother Country). Barka explains the omnipresence of the mother:

Si j’implique ici ma mère, c’est que je sens derrière elle l’invocation présente de Hatchepsout dans cette histoire de couples séparés et

unis par un destin secret et incompréhensible qui creuse les fossés des oubliettes. (34)

Barka in turn becomes a mentor to Imane, urging her to seek « la liberté qui unit, non celle qui sépare ! » (35), as opposed to having her memory « tatouée par un Islam exacerbé » – an echo of Abdelkébir Khatibi's *La Mémoire tatouée*. Barka has an out-of-body experience: « Je suis le scribe et l'amant réincarné... Imane et Ayman, Hatchepsout et moi » (36). Their « mers émotionnelles » equate the « Mer » and the « Mère ».

Two themes emerge from the permutations and combinations of the three principal couples, ancient and modern: the resurrection, and art, or writing, as the source of that resurrection. It is the artist who, in a Whitmanian sense, serves as timebinder. As a visiting scholar at the University of Cairo, Barka longs for the Renaissance of Egypt, a country which is both fertile and deadly. Like Thyna, or Sfax, of the earlier novel, Cairo resembles an octopus with its « banlieue tentaculaire » (5). Barka explicitly compares the Maghreb, his mother land, the land of the setting sun, to the Machreq, or the East, including Egypt, seen ultimately as the land of the rising sun, or resurrection. He refers to « La Ballade du Ressuscité », hawked by camel drivers, and mentions that even the tourists have the sensation « de naître dans le néant du néant » (57). In the necropolis Ayman and Ibrahim guide students who see a tomb open on two sides « [qui] laisse sortir l'âme et fait ressusciter le corps ». Barka implies the resurrection of Christ, whose « pierre tombale » is rolled away, and whose body, like Barka's, disappears. But this invocation fuses with the existential *L'Être et le Néant*, and William Blake's essentialist "Songs of Innocence": "To see the universe in a grain of sand/and heaven in a wild flower": « L'éternité ne s'inscrit pas seulement dans la pierre tombale qui défie le temps, mais aussi dans les grains de sable qui expose à vue d'œil la néante condition de naître » (58). Both existential and essential, Barka himself becomes « en même temps grain de sable et univers, rejetant derrière moi ... ma société de consommation » (58). Barka puns verbally on the Pharaonic obsession « que Mort s'im[mort]alise ! ... Le refus de mourir définit l'espace pharaonique... » (55).

If Imane cohabits literally with the dead in her hiding place, Barka seeks to cohabit, first figuratively/spiritually, then literally, with the dead Hatchepsut. The Word will be his instrument of resurrection: « Je viens de renaître Scribe... Je suis le Verbe ... Je rends la chair à la mort pour indéfinir la vie ! » / / – « Je suis ressuscité par l'amour de la Déesse » (63). The quest for origins is really for a « vérité première » (68).

If his mother lies behind his passion for Egypt, his father launched him on his quest. A businessman, he urged his son to subordinate the material universe (as Kateb and Mansour also try to in modern-day Tunisia), and sent him to the « École des livres »:

– Vois-tu mon fils, en te faisant scribe, tu ne posséderas pas les biens de ce monde, ni la richesse de Carthage, et il n’y aura personne pour commander ou gouverner ta pensée ... sauf l’inspiration. Dans ce domaine tu seras libre car le scribe est toujours son propre chef. (69)

The quest for origins becomes a « quête du Paradis de l’enfance, ce jardin total de l’épanouir » (70). Is it his « Statue intérieure » speaking when he says, « Je ne sais pas que je sais »? (71). His internal voyage resembles the Nile « qui méandre partout » (71). All the characters come together at the Sphinx. In a dream Barka sees a triangular bronze plaque engraved with hieroglyphics. The triangle is the delta, the archetypal female symbol of fertility, but it also suggests René Girard’s concept of “triangular desire » (which played so large a part in *Retour à Thyna*), in which love only manifests itself in the face of a third, a rival – which also triggers art. This novel is filled with triangles: Barka-Hatchepsut-Francine, Ayman-Imane-Margaret Lee, Rahmane-Ayman-Imane, Hatchepsut-Senmut-Imeni (princess of Pount). Francine and Hatchepsut, Barka admits, are the « deux femmes de ma vie ». Imane, the Egyptian, is described as « mon Croissant fertile ». Thus the three principal couples are intertwined, « emprisonnés dans des cercles en ellipse » (84).

From Chapter VII we would infer that the childhood paradise was Barka’s and Francine’s, « notre paradis d’enfance à Bagatelle, premier jardin des enchantements » (87). But Francine also attempted suicide, and, like Hatchepsut, tries to lure Barka into following her in death. Her action is that of Dido, Queen of Carthage, whose lover, Aeneas, abandons her to found the city of Rome. Barka, like Aeneas, refuses to follow, because « Je voudrais encore scribe-voyager libre et dans la joie » (87).

Francine, inviting him to explore the history of Egypt, to go back to « l’Égypte osirienne » (88), both competes and collaborates with Hatchepsut. So he is specifically seeking the origins of art. Born in Carthage, Barka becomes a celebrated international scholar who, like Senmut/Kabar, « dirige les activités de tout le monde » (91). His is « la mémoire transculturelle ». But he never loses his sense of fun, of self-deprecation. Humorously, like a circus ringmaster, he invites his audience: « Venez nombreux écouter la voix royale du passé » (91). Often accused of egotism, he is, in

fact, like his father, modest and humble. He distances himself « pour me critiquer et m'ouvrir aux autres » (92).

Barka's worship of the Goddess goes beyond any consequences Francine had anticipated. Describing Hatchepsut in Chapter VI, the narrative « moi » suddenly becomes Kabar, not Barka – the “ká” in Egypt signifies the life force – and the past becomes present:

Hatchepsout m'appelle *scribe-speculum*, à l'instar de Senmout, le maître des écrits, son « porte-parole » et, en même temps, majordome de la famille royale:

– Déroule tes papyrus. Lis le livre des secrets. (79)

As Senmut/Kabar/Barka says, « Écouter, c'est aimer ». Love leads to death, and death to life, to « un amourir toujours ressuscité » (83).

Francine, sensing a rival, but mistaking her first for the living Imane, not the dead Hatchepsut, reassures herself, « Il me revient toujours ! » (85). In a very important sense, she is right, for it is Francine finally who translates and transmits the voices not only of Barka/Kabar, but also of Hatchepsut. Francine eventually realizes that her rival is art, not another woman. Paraphrasing Sartre's « L'enfer, c'est les Autres », she says, « L'artiste, c'est l'enfer des autres ! » (95). Barka's retort is in his paradisiac vein: « Au contraire, l'œuvre d'art fait briller le paradis des autres » (96). At one point Francine has cried out in the grip of passion, « Aime-moi pour t'aimer toi-même, mon mal-aimé ! » (82). Her love finally mediates « entre cet univers et celui de l'au-delà ».

The Sphinx is a product of art, but also a self-portrait of the artist. The Sphinx is androgynous, animus and anima in one being, as Ayman and Imane, that prophesied apocalyptic couple, are in two beings. Imane is the third woman in Barka's life, who closely resembles the Sphinx and Hatchepsut: « Et voilà que je viens de rencontrer la Troisième qui va m'ouvrir la porte étroite, Imane, venue là sous le regard parlant du Sphinx ... » (82). « La porte étroite » refers to André Gide's novel of the same name, translated *Strait Is the Gate*, but also to the path to Christendom, so that Barka bridges cultures and religions. And the religion of the Pharaohs was neither Islam nor Christianity.

Barka describes the « Dieu-Nil » as a « source niagarante », thus linking Canada and Egypt (and anticipating *Ainsi Parle la Tour CN*). He further draws an analogy between the Dieu-Nil and Hatchepsut: « En parfait androgyne, il (ou elle ?) arrondit ses seins fermes dans l'arrogance... Se précise ainsi le profil de Hatchepsout... » (83).

Aboul'Hol is the « Sphinx en désagrégation constante... » (64). It is fragmented, like the narrative, or the tangled interrelations of the couples. Barka identifies it with the “Queen Who Would Be King”: « Sa tête colossale, d'homme ou de femme ?, dégagée des torrents de sable, étouffe son corps de lion, au beau visage énigmatique dont le nez, décapité par mégarde d'un coup de canon d'un Sultan mamelouk, est allé se faire voir ailleurs... » (64).

If Thutmose III commits sacrilege by erasing her name from the statue now in Bologna, his successor Ramses II committed an even worse desecration. Not content to erase her name, he replaced it with his own, as he did Akhnaton's, her fellow heretic<sup>4</sup>. The treasures found in the arrogant Ramses II's tomb are the richest that have been found. In fact, Barka exonerates Thutmose III of any wrongdoing towards the statue of Hatchepsut, and places the blame squarely on Ramses II, the « Pharaon qui domine l'univers » (94): then, in 1817, « Belzoni triomphe des sables et rend au monde le beau visage de Ramsès et sa gloire, hautement proclamés à Abou Simbel, et que l'adversité des vents a savamment enfouis » (93). Thus an Egyptian Pharaoh has appropriated the work devoted to a female Pharaoh, and European culture in turn has appropriated ancient Egyptian. Ramses, an enemy to all religions but his own, is also the Pharaoh who enslaved the Israelites in Egypt, until Moses was able to lead them forth. It was undoubtedly also the Sphinx of Ramses II that Shelley was thinking of when he wrote his heavily ironic epitaph to worldly glory, “Ozymandias”. Two trunks of stone, buried in the desert and crumbling to dust, bear an inscription which concludes, “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair”.

Barka realizes he is treading on dangerous ground, in judging harshly both the all-powerful Pharaoh, and the West, destroyer, colonizer, appropriator of Eastern values. Moreover, he has presumptuously placed the blame on them for the disappearance of the female Pharaoh's nose, and even gives a lecture on « Le nez du Sphinx, et le dilemme de son impact » (90). He knows he can be accused of sacrilege. Even the veiled women will pursue him vengefully for taking the part of a woman who rebelled against orthodoxy. The representatives of orthodoxy in his audience feel he is claiming, perhaps advocating, that « le féminin devient masculin, et le

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, Akhnaton may have really been androgynous or bisexual, as Hatchepsut only pretended to be.

masculin féminin ». After Hatchepsut, the next feminist movement in Egypt did not occur until the revolution of 1919, at the entrance to the University of Cairo: « Là où Hoda Charawi ... immortalise le premier mouvement féministe après la Pharaone ». The sculpture, *L'Éveil de l'Égypte*, by Moukhtar, commemorates this rebellion by creating a stone Isis, who speaks through lips of stone<sup>5</sup> to the Sphinx:

– Lève-toi. Libère-nous de l'esclavage des harems et du joug des gouverneurs.  
Ouvre tes pattes majestueuses, tes yeux de lynx ... Fais-nous découvrir l'au-delà  
des deltas engloutis dans le marasme des horizons ... (54)

Barka links the stone Pyramids, as well as the sculpture, with language. He notes that Al-Ahram, the name for the pyramid, is also the title of the greatest newspaper in Cairo. As Isis protects the Sphinx/Hatchepsut, Barka is protected « par le pouvoir magique du scribe » (94).

But one must still ask, why is Barka so fixated on the nose of Hatchepsut's Sphinx? Several clues are given. If it had been transported to England, he fantasizes that it would have scented the Industrial Revolution: « Le nez d'Aboul'Hol a disparu. Il s'en est allé flairer la révolution industrielle au British Museum à Londres » (75). Or, Barka speculates, it could be likened to an accusing finger pointing to the vast culture lag between the Orient and the Occident since the late nineteenth century. The nose by itself is not marketable, but rejects pragmatic materialism. It can be linked to the theme of immigration, the journey undertaken by many compatriots, and their forcible integration into Western culture: « Et qu'est devenu le nez de la statuette de la reine dans sa migration européenne ? » (75). Importantly, it is also compared to the near rupture of Ayman's and Imane's relationship. Ayman and Imane are divided, but united, by a common ancestry: « Tant d'échos millénaires ont poussé Ayman dans la triade christique, et Imane dans le croissant islamique ! Deux branches du même arbre pharaonique... » (76). Barka himself, on the aesthetic level, like the couples on the emotional, seeks an integral vision, a kind of Derridean « plénitude », « *la complétude de mon univers fragmenté* ! » (33). As with the narrative registers, the text is both deliberately fragmented, chaotic, and, on another level, transcendent and unified.

Hatchepsut is haloed by Western as well as Eastern mythology. She is the Sleeping Beauty of Charles Perrault's archetypal French fairy tale, awakened by the magician of words, Champollion, who decodes the

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<sup>5</sup> ... as will, later, the CN Tower.

hieroglyphics on the Rosetta Stone: Champollion « a réveillé la belle au bois dormant de l'archéologie » (95). As Barka affirms, art translates the incomprehensible – a contradiction in terms. An angry Francine, however, accuses Senmut/Kabar, and, by extension, her own lover Barka of sucking the life out of the loved object: « C'est un amant aveugle, et elle lui a fait confiance ? Il s'en est servi pour sa réussite sociale. Il l'a donc vampirisé, non ? » (95). Francine is obviously here projecting her own victimization onto Hatchepsut, but there is a more than partial truth in what she says: one reading of the Gothic tradition is that the artist battens on others, sucks their life, rather than living to the fullest himself.

Shortly after Barka's controversial lecture on Hatchepsut's nose, Ayman offers Barka the gift of a "Charme Vili", a tiny ebony columnar sculpture with three birds perched on it pecking at a grape. They seem to be looking at the top where a man is seated, cross-legged like a tailor, resembling Rodin's "The Thinker": « C'est un scribe africain perdu, comme moi... » (98). The amulette, which Barka is still wearing at the end, seems to predict his death, and the three birds echo the three couples, the three women, the trinity.

This prophetic Chapter VIII, "Charme Vili: Magie ou Mektoub ? », reflects the dangers incurred by the artist, who must balance the sacred and the profane (98). As Edward Saïd also emphasizes in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, « le sacré est indubitablement lié au politique et à l'économique » (98). In the midst of all this, sacrificial goats are chosen, and Barka is to be one of these. But, he asks, « Pourquoi et qui veut me tuer ? » (111). The country itself, composed of the delta, seems to be heading towards « une mer dévorante » (111).

Barka projects himself into a picture of Nout, the mother of us all, « femme arquée sensuelle et maternelle » (111). This image of the overarching sky is female, and Barka/Senmut/Kabar relives the ancient expedition to Pount with Hatchepsut. The Vili amulette proves that the expedition was to the African coast, not the Arabian. Hatchepsut and Senmut called the terraces of Deir el-Bahari, « 'Myrrhe de Pount', pays originel des Dieux » (112). From Pount, probably, came the Three Wise Men of the Christian tradition: « L'usage de l'encens dans la tradition judéo-chrétienne remonte aux ancêtres de la reine de Pount » (112). Barka/Kabar speaks of the animosity and gossip generated by his relationship with Hatchepsut. He also built three chapels, again the mystic number, dedicated to the queen, which aroused resentment. « Pourtant », says Barka/Senmut/Kabar, « j'ai bel et bien fait cette expédition à Pount avec

Hatchepsout » (112), an expedition recreated in detail with murals and sound by the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

## Kabar's Transmigration into Barka

The end of Barka's quest, his ultimate resting place, is the womb/tomb (164). On the stages of his journey he meets those – like Ayman and Imane – whose race memory helps him piece together the mystery, as well as the Nubian whose ancestors constituted the kingdom of Pount.

Ayman's and Imane's marriage brings forth the missing nose of the Hatchepsut Sphinx, leading to « complétude ». The nose seems to suggest the breath of life, and is connected with images of marriage, birth, and death. In a sense both couples, ancient and modern, consummate their relationships on the wedding night of Ayman and Imane.

At Aswan, the inscrutable Ibrahim leaves Barka near the obelisk, compared to a uterus, the « lieu de rassemblement de culte et de foi » (175). It reflects the sunlight « pour glorifier le Dieu Amon Ra » (175). It also has a « tête explosée », an exploding, teeming womb? – in any event an image of fragmentation. When Barka's goddess appears, he conjures up his « amourir naissant » (176) and addresses her thus: « O toi révolutionnaire aurale qui a su imposer et confirmer l'amour que tu avais pour ton scribe ».

If the womb equals the tomb, we are looking at the myth of eternal return (177). The caves and tombs where Imane hides give birth to new life, but the stone cavern also suggests the philosopher's stone. Barka proceeds to resume Hatchepsut's life story:

Toutmosis III, ton beau-fils, se met à te haïr, t'accusant d'être  
« l'usurpatrice » d'un trône qu'il estime sien ! Hatchepsout, tu  
instaures ta nouvelle façon de gouverner: tu te fais couronner roi,  
sans renier la barbiche. Masculinité revendiquée, tu prouves que tu  
es capable de sophisme politique et de subtilités mythiques afin de  
légitimer le pouvoir des deux couronnes hautement posées sur ta tête  
théocratique. (177)

The trait he most admires is her chosen, not natural, androgyny. The two crowns of Egypt reflect this doubleness.

I am reminded of Willa Cather's "Stone Lips" passage in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), the mysterious murmuring cave/womb/tomb in which the celibate Archbishop is forced to take refuge from a storm, and where he becomes terrified – by the sexual suggestiveness? The obelisk is

not only magical and a womb, but specifically the inventor of languages (180); Barka is doubtless thinking of Champollion. Language arises not from birth alone, but from the simultaneity of birth and death (181). Barka writes, « Mes doigts donnent naissance au texte qui balbutie, enfant de ma langue... » (181-2), while Ayman and Imane will have a flesh-and-blood child. Barka recognizes the vocalization of the women, Francine and Imane, who will finally tell *his* story: « Cette verbalisation ... nous relie à la communauté de Hatchepsout... ».

By this point in the novel Barka's identity is increasingly subsumed by that of Senmut/Kabar the scribe, and Francine can only watch her lover being lost to a woman long dead. The climax of the ancient love story occurs on the expedition to Pount, when Hatchepsut was accused of being ambitious and unscrupulous, wanting to make money in an entrepreneurial, capitalist sense. In fact, what she really wanted to do was give away her money for incense of the land of Pount. According to Hatchepsut, her father Amon ordered her to undertake this quest to install « un Pount dans sa demeure céleste » (113). She and Senmut/Kabar wandered together for twenty years without incurring scandal, his devotion to his goddess being unquestioned (114). Francine notes the transformation each time Barka opens his mouth, revealing his « altérité ambiguë » as man of both past and present (114).

Hatchepsut's only daughter Néférouré died in the eleventh year of her mother's reign (115); Senmut/Kabar had been charged with her education. But the queen does not abandon him until the nineteenth year, three years before her own death. The reason for this abandonment does not become clear until Hatchepsut herself, the female voice, takes over in the journals that form the conclusion. The mystery is read through « les érections d'écriture », a trope connecting sexuality, hieroglyphics, and the art of writing. Increasingly, the novel looks towards death, Barka's being prefigured by Rahmane's. Barka researches the life of his goddess before the final crossing, foreseen like death without knowing the exact moment it will strike (119). As for Hatchepsut's death, she too has effectively disappeared into thin air, as no identifiable mummy has been found – only her Sphinx with the long-missing nose. But we do know what she looked like from the sculpture in room 43 of the Cairo Museum.

The Nile is the source of vitality and creativity, « le fleuve de son encre » (126). We are told that if man is the river, woman is the bridge. But Hatchepsut sought to be both in one. Traditional male and female power are compared, for instance, at Abu Simbel, where the dominant male

Ramses II controls his queen Nefertari: « Au Nord, se faisant plus petite, à l'échelle humaine, Nefertari, l'épouse du pharaon, ose à peine lever le doigt », although she, like Hatchepsut, was nursed by the goddess Hator (127). But Hatchepsut, like Zitouna, refuses to be contained and controlled, and exemplifies female rebellion and creativity. Ramses, the warrior king who silences women, is contrasted to Hatchepsut, the queen of peace who enables men: « C'est le triomphe de la paix sans guerre qui galvanisa Hatchepsout... Que la paix soit ! » (129). Moreover, in death, there is no major distinction between the female Pharaoh's tomb and her lover Kabar's. Barka describes his lifelong quest to safeguard « le patrimoine des sources langagières et culturelles de ma Pharaone » (148).

Written in stone, « inscrit sur la pierre », like the mosaics of Thyna, Barka pursues « une scribe » irrigating the desert, giving birth to a new alphabet (148). Hatchepsut, in choosing androgyny, fuses male and female creativity, as the androgynous couple, Zitouna and Mansour, have done in the earlier novel. Francine tries to bring Barka back to present-day reality: « Vraiment Barka, tu es pitoyablement amoureux de mythes » (144). But he denies the charge, claiming that he is obsessed not with Hatchepsut as myth, but « parce qu'elle a bouleversé l'ordre des choses » (144). Francine protests, « Je t'ai porté en moi statue de sel frustrée et révoltée, et tu m'as éclaté au visage comme une bombe ! » (145), a reference to Albert Memmi's novel of alienation. But as the novel progresses, Francine increasingly becomes one with the material. When Barka implicitly compares her to Dido of Carthage, and the Egyptian Imane, he addresses « le pays natal et le pays d'accueil, le libéré et le colonisé » (148). All these bipolarities are fused in the bearded, breastplated Hatchepsut and in Barka, that son of Osiris [Bou = son of], destined to be torn apart only to give new life.

If one couple in the present becomes conjoined, another in the past ruptures. And the reasons for that rupture can only be disclosed by Hatchepsut at the very end. Barka can merely repeat her confession to him: « — Je te quitte, à regret malgré le mal que tu m'as fait ... mais je te rappellerai un jour par delà les frontières de la vie » (203). Eventually, two theories are offered for the rupture: the first, offered here, is that Kabar favored the suit of Thutmose III, Hatchepsut's rival, for her daughter's hand. The second, sexual jealousy on a more obvious level, is not offered until Hatchepsut's journals at the end.

In any event, the ultimate end to the birth/death imagery is a hope of resurrection or reincarnation. Thus, Barka evokes Biblical images of the lion lying down with the lamb, when the Middle East will find peace? In

any case, there is an amalgam of Christian, Jewish and Islamic imagery. In Egyptology, the couple of Thot and Horus conceive and execute the Word: « Ces deux agents ‘rendent effective la résurrection’ » (205).

If the body is a temple, the Nile is its heart, its two ventricles being Luxor and Karnac. The body represents transcultural history, but also transtextuality. All the womb/tomb imagery prepares us for Barka's sudden death and the complete disappearance of his body, but not of his texts. It is Ibrahim who suggests he prostrate himself before the statue of Hatchepsut, now complete, nose and all (207). According to Barka, « Les pierres invincibles m'entourent... » (206). He has an epiphany: « ... je reconnais l'instabilité et l'inconstance du savoir proposée à travers mes langues. Je sais que je ne connais rien et je reconnais ce que je sais » (207). He is in the passive state of mysticism, while Nisr is « sur le chemin des choix », crossing between Islam and Christianity – *il a le choix*. Barka is on a tightrope between past and present – he will soon make the choice, or the choice will be made for him.

The novel proper concludes with some exposition of the confusion (deliberately contrived) between the architect and his brother the scribe, who are alike as two drops of water. The presence of both brothers ensures that Senmut is omnipresent in the personal and professional life of Hatchepsut (210). That there are two brothers, moreover, reflects the doubleness of the text, as do the androgyny of Hatchepsut and the two crowns of Egypt. Barka finds his (Senmut the scribe's) real name, as he does « Ma langue substance du Nil » (211).

Barka draws an analogy between the love of peace and sexual love, both incarnated by Hatchepsut, and the « aïeux égyptiens qui ont sacrifié leur vie, en tous temps, pour une paix précaire à entretenir comme une amante capricieuse » (214). To recreate this past, « ... nous n'avons que des mots pour le faire » (214)<sup>6</sup>. Barka is a guilty lover, « pris en flagrant délit par mes propres mots » (215). Barka names the new form he creates a « narrato-ème », or a « Geste d'origines diverses » (215).

The tension between creation and fragmentation culminates here. Barka's being is destabilized, caught in a Baudelairean « forêt de symboles ». Barka affirms the joy of giving birth to words, « la seule activité essentielle de ma vie », just before dying. Historically, he is creating in the « Après

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<sup>6</sup> As John Dos Passos once wrote, in the *U.S.A.* trilogy, “We have only words against ...”.

Babel<sup>7</sup>. He has travelled « dans les avalanches des langues », courting self-destruction. Is he suicidal, on the edge? He feels “decentered”, and begins to wonder, in the name of Saint Augustine, whether it is indeed possible to resist the « Statue intérieure ».

Finally, the ground opens at the Hatchepsut statue and evidently swallows up the Barka we know. He feels a « mal au cœur atroce », then « un état second et me sens béni par les Dieux » (218). The ending is completely open, like the gaping cavern. Seeing himself as god of the underworld, the last words we have from him are: « *Je suis Horus, l'initiateur de ton œuvre à accomplir. Approche ... je t'offre mon Verbe ... regarde-le pulser ... dans sa vie éter...* ». In a similar stratagem to the story of Zitouna and Mansour, Barka's memoir could end, like Gide's *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, « À continuer... ». Do words make the earth tremble? The trembling is also sexual, possibly signaling a final union with Hatchepsut.

## Of Female Narratology

When Barka disappears, the women's voices take over<sup>8</sup>. Or rather, we realize that they have been in charge all along. The most important of the women is Francine Castel [Castle?], a world traveller herself. Despite her jealousy of Imane and Hatchepsut, she has the best of Barka, for she understands him completely, « le premier amour de sa vie qui le hante encore aujourd'hui » (49). Egypt was the dream of *their* youth, as it was that of Hatchepsut and Kabar. The first and last words of the novel are Francine's. Of the two prefatory remarks, seemingly from the dead Barka, the first consists of Francine's supposedly citing Barka, the second, the note “d. E.”, is apparently also Francine's, for she is the editor, explaining the apparently disconnected, fragmented, sometimes lyrical, sometimes anecdotal form of the narrative. Ostensibly – and really – a carefully researched work, it follows the oral tradition of Orientalism; it is also stuffed with « notes, anecdotes », dreams, myths, and bits of information. But it is set in order by Francine, who is a Westerner and a female. And it

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<sup>7</sup> The Tour CN will be the « Anti-Babel » in the novel to follow.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Fleurant notes that two female characters convey Bouraoui's themes: “Seeing the world as a mosaic helps us discover that contradiction and dissemblance are part of life and can be reconciled with the help of tolerance and justice. This is the lesson of humanists as old as Hatshepsut, as young as Imane” (1307).

is finally Francine who communicates (and interprets?) the words of Hatchepsut.

Margaret Lee is essentially a red herring, a stereotypical blonde Canadian tourist of sex as well as of foreign lands. Her brief affair with the frustrated Ayman is insignificant. Perhaps her primary function is to introduce her daughter Betty, the modern liberated woman, who will become Béchir's lover, but will also lead his father Rahmane back to a semblance of sanity – « c'est l'étrangère qui va ramener la brebis égarée au bercail » (199). Barka reminds us of the origins of Canada, resistant to revolution, with its echo of Hatchepsut's slogan: « Transformer la guerre en paix » (49). It is Francine who chooses Barka's hotel, the Hilwane, which is not luxurious, « mais tu auras le Nil à tes pieds » (50). Even her suicide attempt twenty-two years earlier seems to recognize Barka's fixation on death (86).

It is Francine as well who mentors Imane, advising her to study Senmut and the Maghrebian authors, rather than the Eurocentric Beauvoir and Duras. Her passion is described as “racinian”; she is a kind of Phèdre, as well as a passionate, suicidal Dido, Queen of Carthage. She knows she cannot do without Barka, but she criticizes his project acerbically. She mocks even his language: « ... celle que tu malmènes à la sauce Hatchepsout pour te faire un Nom dans la postérité... » ! (108).

She knows Barka as if she made him: « Je sais que ta capacité d'aimer est illimitée, comme d'ailleurs ta curiosité intellectuelle et ta voyance du marabout... Mais quand même ! Ma compréhension a des limites. Au fond, tu es comme l'eau du Nil... » (108). She constantly tries to anchor him to reality, and it is through her, the Frenchwoman and her French culture, that he discovers archaeology: « ... la France a mis au monde l'archéologie » (109). But she also warns him, « ... ne prends pas tes rêves pour de piètres réalités ». The resurrection of Hatchepsut may occur, « mais à quel prix ? » (110). Francine is the truth-teller: « Tu connais mon franc-parler ». She warns him not to bite off more than he can chew. Finally, Francine is unable to put together the fragmented body of her lover, but she is able to reconstitute his fragmented words.

Barka at times recognizes Francine's identification with Hatchepsut: « Je m'imprégnais progressivement de Hatchepsout à travers la chair de Francine » (134). Francine is also equated with Diana the Huntress, goddess of chastity, or Diane de Poitiers. Finally Francine, in an act of possession, refers to « son Barka », analogous to his possessiveness with Hatchepsut. In an important sense he is Francine's Barka, for it is entirely through her – well, partly through Imane – that we see him.

Ibrahim's part in all this is an insoluble mystery. Is he Senmut the architect, the killer of his own brother according to Hatchepsut's tablets? Is he hero or villain? He is the common man who first tells the tale of the woman who kills her husband, unveiling the dark elements of the dream. The Osiris story is also that of Cain and Abel, or fratricide. In what sense is Ibrahim Barka's brother? All this is related to the vegetation mysteries T. S. Eliot borrowed in *The Waste Land* from Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. Isis presents the image of the ideal mother.

Ibrahim is a misogynist, warning Barka against women. Barka attributes his bias to class, lack of education, ambition and resentment – but is that all? As Barka says, « Mais jamais, je ne doutais de cet homme serviable » (200). Among other things, Ibrahim, like Béchir, is jealous of Ayman. Finally, it is he who suggests to Barka entering the forbidden zone, and, fatally, prostrating himself before the statue of Hatchepsut.

The Third Part begins with another female voice, in the form of Imane's letter to Francine which only partly fills the gap left at the end of Part Two. She gives the account of the only eye-witness, Ibrahim, who reports stones raining down on both their heads. « C'est un signe d'Allah », he says. Is it Judgment Day? An apocalyptic vision? Imane assumes that love equals knowledge (226). Thus, she affirms her beloved son Nisr, who is imbued with Barka's morality, as the dawn of the new social order. Imane recognizes without question that Barka's sole heir is Francine. She frames a bitter tale: « ... j'encadre à jamais le 'corrosif de sa narra-nativité' » (227). With respect to Barka's story, she is reporter rather than creator, though she creates in another sense, both biological and verbal, with her son.

Francine's three months of grief (mystic number) are one long, painful soliloquy: « Mon Barka m'a quittée à jamais ». She also establishes the parallel between the two women who seek to arrest Barka in time: « ... j'ai tenté de l'emmenner avec moi dans le trépas mais sans succès. Hatchepsout, elle a réussi » (229). Barka's arrival in Egypt marks « le retour magnifié du scribe » who was Hatchepsut's lover.

Francine traces little by little the ties between the ancient Queen and the modern scholar.

Barka's « refus de religiosité dans ce monde » was less a rejection of religion than an affirmation of humanism emerging from cultural universality. Barka was nothing if not ecumenical. In her own time, Hatchepsut was a radical in religion, a monotheist before her time, and even before Akhnaton's: « Bien avant Akhénaton, la Pharaone était monothéiste, elle s'est réclamée descendant du Dieu Amon » (230). Like Barka, Hatchepsut

was a humanist, integrating multiple diverse cultures: Hatchepsut « a créé les valeurs de la société ‘occidentale’, bien avant les Grecs et les Romains qui se prennent encore pour les premiers inventeurs de l’humanisme » (230).

For these reasons Francine and Barka share a common interest in Egyptology. Francine has confronted Barka with his apparent obsession with the unattainable, which makes him overlook the love close at hand: « ... notre amour est mort. Trop simple, trop terrestre n’est-ce pas ? Il te fallait pour le moins celui d’une princesse ? » (231). « Je l’ai trouvé », he replies, and admits, « ... même celui que j’ai ressenti pour toi n’en était qu’un pâle reflet ». He adds insultingly, « Toi, tu es trop charnelle » (232).

But in this penultimate section Francine comes into her own, transcends sexual jealousy, and arrives at a complex synthesis of ancient and modern, of love that overcomes the obstacle of time. Perhaps, in fact, she herself, by an act of imagination and love, becomes Hatchepsut:

... J’étais devenue déesse moi-même (peut-être plus encore que cette femme mythique sur laquelle les avis étaient si partagés), parce que j’avais réussi un tour de force, celui d’accepter qu’il soit enfin lui-même et non ce que je désirais qu’il soit. (232-3)

She shows a certain “heroicism” (to borrow Ellen Moers’ term for the heroic in female protagonists): « Je saute quel que soit l’obstacle », though Barka does continue to live in her in his intimate objects still « tout imprégnés de son odeur » (233). She becomes a kind of detective, decoder, uncovering the clues and interpreting their language like a female Champollion.

She now begins to understand what he told her when they first met in a Humanities class at the Lycée Louis le Grand. He mentioned an earlier love, a first love, in the école, who had Oriental coloring: a little girl with black hair and charcoal eyes. At the same time, he had a crush on the teacher, who was blonde, like Francine, so Barka seems to have been torn between two passions all his life. If Francine works in Egypt, it is because it is the only way to destroy the ghostly object of her jealousy (233).

Imane, whose letter informs her of Barka’s death, becomes a kind of partner: she passes on to Francine what they have found of Barka’s writings. Francine, in turn, finds most of this narrative in his journal, or « cahier » (reminiscent of the « cahier de Meaulnes » in Alain-Fournier’s *Le Grand Meaulnes*, subject of an earlier critical book by Bouraoui). Barka, or rather his writing, undergoes another reincarnation at the hands of Francine, who edits his text and notes to « faire bouger le cadavre de son roman ! » (235). In this she resembles the goddess Isis who brings her

father back to life, and is kin to Hatchepsut. Francine is also an Ariadne finding her thread through « cette sorte de labyrinthe ‘scriptural’ » (234-5)<sup>9</sup>. Thus, in a spiritual and imaginative sense, she weds him at last:

Dans ce sens, Barka m'appartient depuis toujours. Ses écrits forment le contrat de notre mariage, nous unissant, par la création, au-delà des temps... Suis-je alors heureuse qu'il soit rendu à Hatchepsout par sa mort ? Fallait-il le sacrifier pour que fusion se fasse ? (235)

It is Francine who gives « un certain ordre » to this fragmentary manuscript, joining the bits and pieces into sections.

If Barka has been chosen as a kind of sacrificial goat, Francine wonders why Ibrahim, who has been sent to prison for three years for leading Barka into a forbidden, dangerous zone, killed him, if he did, and whether Hatchepsut inspired the crime in order to reclaim her scribe. None of this, however, explains the complete disappearance of the body.

Francine herself has found other writings in Barka's Samsonite case at the Hilwane, which turn out to be the « scriberies » of Hatchepsut herself. Ayman had found them in the hollow at the foot of the Sphinx, and had passed them on to Barka. These hieroglyphics are also left to Francine to decrypt. He kept his own writings separate from those of his muse or inspiration, hers in his right-hand pocket, his in the left (possibly signifying his illicit love).

Francine discovers yet another clue to the identification of Barka with the ancient scribe/lover of Hatchepsut: Barka always slept with the bedclothes wrapped around him like a turban, only his nose uncovered: « ... impression de coucher avec un revenant enturbanné qui ne me faisait l'amour qu'avec son *nez* ! » (237; emphasis mine). This habit of Barka's is linked with the missing nose from the Sphinx of Hatchepsut, but also with the scribe whose habit Hatchepsut mentions, « preuve irréfutable que Barka était bien l'incarnation du Scribe de la Reine ». Francine adds resentfully, but probably accurately, that Hatchepsut brought him back to earth, « mais elle n'a pas voulu me le laisser, à moi l'étrangère dont il était quand même amoureux, quoiqu'il en dise ! » (237).

Francine now embarks on her « projet d'en faire un livre » which will include Imane's letter, just as Barka recorded Francine's. Barka had even invented a pretended marriage with Francine whose details he recounted to a Nubian vendor (238), a sign of his vivid imagination. Francine

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<sup>9</sup> Samia Harar compares Zitouna's guidance in the earlier novel to « le fil d'Ariane ».

reproduces some fragments, prose poems, written by Barka under the inspiration of a spectacular sunset on the Nile, a « Kaléidoscope vivant des inédits », from the « Nil des Mille et une Nuits », such as: *Les pêcheurs jettent d'immenses filets dans ce Nil en crépuscule. Je les vois tirer et retirer l'infini ... Labeur digne qui aura le dernier mot.* (239) The Nile is « *Un Au-delà qui est ici à nos pieds* » (239). The paradox of Barka's life, says Francine, was to lead us back in time in order to prepare the future. Did he poison himself with his own words? Francine doesn't think so.

We are left finally with a feminine narratology, Francine, Imane, and, with the last word, Hatchepsut herself: « Si j'ai donné à Imane la parole pour nous révéler sa version des faits, il me faut à présent déchiffrer les hiéroglyphes de la Reine et les mettre bout à bout... » (240). Francine concludes that she can only hold on to the reality of his writing. In *Retour à Thyna*, as well, it is the woman, Zitouna, who is left to complete the work of the dead Kateb by diffusing it throughout the country, and by adopting the male role of talespinner. She not only takes Barka's place, but becomes the voice of Hatchepsut herself: « Je lui prête ma main et mon âme pour me faire moi-même le nouveau scribe, en ce monde, de l'imbattable Déesse » (240). The ending does indeed suggest that history repeats itself, and that Francine does in fact, through a creative leap of faith, become Hatchepsut.

### **Hatchepsut's Narrative: The Voice of the Queen**

In the end is the beginning. In a return to origins, the novel concludes, or rather comes full circle, with the « Journal intime » of Hatchepsut, in the form of « tablettes » inscribed with hieroglyphics which Francine has had transcribed, decoded, and translated into French. As Francine writes, « L'essentiel, c'est de donner la parole à la Reine. Peut-être le dernier mot de la fin qui est, en fin de compte, le commencement de l'histoire » (241). She also notes that Hatchepsut's style closely resembles the poetry of Barka, who may be the reincarnation of her lover/scribe. Does this mean the scribe influenced Hatchepsut's writing, or the other way around? The question is unanswerable because of the “silencing” of female writers throughout most of human history; thus « Hatchepsout écrivait en cachette sans se déclarer au jour comme ‘scribe’ elle-même » (241). So it seems that even queens and goddesses were silenced by a male hegemony. In any case, Hatchepsut wrote « poèmes en prose », anticipating Baudelaire – and Barka.

In the first tablet Hatchepsut suggests the Egyptian fascination with death, and a paradisiac after-life: « Je passe ma vie à bâtir le temple de ma mort » (242). Death is seen as a beginning, not an end – as is art. Hatchepsut introduces us to Senmut the architect and his brother Kabar, soon to be her scribe/lover, who also takes the name of Senmut when their love is consummated, to put the court off the scent. For the first time, as well, Pount, the modern African state of Somalia, is mentioned. A deliberate anachronism makes the Queen a foreseeing prophetess of the peace movement of the 1960s with the modern slogan, “Make love, not war” (242). Hatchepsut sees herself as the mother goddess Hator (possible source of her own name?): « J’allaite, Hator du Double pays, tous les enfants qui m’appartiennent ».

The second tablet introduces the theme of monotheism, confirming in her own words that the Queen is not only a political rebel, but also a religious iconoclast: « Il n’est de Dieu que Dieu » (242). And her God is Amun-Ra, the sun god, who was also later the Pharaoh Akhnaton’s: « Moi, je me suis vouée à Amon, seul Dieu que je connaisse » (243). Her full name is “Khememet-Imen<sup>10</sup>-Hatchepsout”, meaning « Lumineuse semence qui s’unit à Dieu » (243). She sees herself as « la protectrice de la perfection de Dieu », and denies the false rumor that she poisoned her father and her husband out of naked ambition to rule. Turning the tables on the men who accuse her, she says that it is their arrogance, their obsession with becoming God themselves, that lies behind all wars, a charge as relevant today as in ancient Egypt.

Tablet Three hints at the Queen’s motivations in taking on some male attributes in order to assert her own vision of a world order steeped in peace and harmony. “Gender-bending”, as we would call it today, becomes necessary to make credible any female empowerment. Hatchepsut is also coming very close to Virginia Woolf’s definition of the “androgyny” that empowers the artist (in *A Room of One’s Own*, 1929): « Changer de sexe... Mâle et femelle vivent en moi... Double vérité pour le Double pays ... nouveau né ... comme Rê ! » (244). The very structure of Bouraoui’s text, in fact of most of his texts, is based on *dédoublément*, a doubling of characters who become alter egos, doppelgängers, even reincarnations of each other. This doubling is reinforced, in the fourth tablet, when she takes

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<sup>10</sup> Is this the same stem as Imeni, Princess of Pount? And Imane?

the scribe as her lover, for Kabar « est l'autre moitié de mon être, celle que je garde dans mon *Kâ* ».

The fifth tablet concerns the fateful expedition to Pount, where the Queen is greeted warmly: « Bienvenue ô fille d'Amon, tu restaures tout ce qui est en ruines » (245). To the contrary of warlike [male] conquerors, she does not seek to impose « la surenchère des pouvoirs, dans leurs machines infernales [an echo of Jean Cocteau and the theater of « l'entre-deux guerres »] au nom de l'exclusif ! » (245). She is addressed as a fertile mother goddess, « Semeuse de lumière ! ».

The sixth tablet informs us that Hatchepsut has spent eleven years « de pure félicité » with her scribe (246). Three years before the end of her reign, she tells us, she decided to elevate him to the rank of Pharaoh by marrying him, although a commoner, but here sexual jealousy intervenes: « ... mais voilà que l'ingrat tombe amoureux d'une étrangère, la princesse de Pount qu'il a rencontrée en ma compagnie » (246). Could Hatchepsut have really raised a commoner to the status of Pharaoh? Were there any precedents? In any case, Hatchepsut herself introduces Girard's theme of "triangular desire", structural and thematic center of most of French, if not generally Western, literature. Certainly, Bouraoui's text is structured around the eternal triangle, of which the pyramid is the three-dimensional equivalent, where desire is inspired only by the presence of an obstacle, in the shape of a third party. The present-day triangles correspond strikingly to that of the ancient forerunners; thus we have Francine-Barka-Imane reflecting Hatchepsut-Kabar/Senmut-Imeni (princess of Pount). But also we have Ayman-Imane-Margaret Lee, and, crossing over the centuries, Francine-Barka-Hatchepsut – though it seems that Francine finally becomes Hatchepsut.

The sexual jealousy theme is, however, the one disturbing aspect of this novel. That Francine should be jealous of Hatchepsut is only natural and motivated – for how can one compete with a ghost, frozen in her perfection? But if we are to accept Hatchepsut as a truly liberated, generous, compassionate "modern" woman, it is difficult to view her also as not only jealous and vengeful, but capable of wanting to murder her rival, and of having her lover murdered, assassinated by his own brother – surely actions more characteristic of a warlike male Pharaoh like Ramses II.

The seventh tablet shows a Hatchepsut even jealous of her own daughter, whom she suspects of being at least infatuated with Kabar. Or does Hatchepsut see him as so desirable that no woman can resist him? At any rate, Hatchepsut arranges the marriage of her daughter to Thutmose

III. Hatchepsut finds herself in a cleft stick about Imeni, for she cannot expel her from her visit to Egypt without revealing her own illicit love for Kabar. But the previous tablet suggests that she was ready to reveal the secret anyhow, by making Kabar her consort (Pharaoh?).

Tablet Eight reveals a Hatchepsut seriously out of control, going mad from love and jealousy like any ordinary woman, and willing to sacrifice everything she has created – peace, prosperity, order – to avenge herself. She finds herself in the « Affres de la jalousie et de l'angoisse » (247). Now she feels that Imeni suspects her relationship with Kabar, who was formerly one with her, like the Word made Flesh. Hatchepsut soon lives the nightmare: « Je ne sais plus qui je suis ... ni ce que mon cœur désire... » (247). The statement echoes (prefigures?) Barka's own « décentrement » towards the end. At last she asks, negating everything we have been told about her as a radical force for good: « À quoi sert le pouvoir ? » (247).

The ninth tablet reveals the secret of the novel, which is to have its impact on the present-day lives of Barka, Ibrahim, Francine, Ayman and Imane. Hatchepsut confesses, « J'ordonne à Senmout de me venger », offering her heart and her crown to him in exchange for his brother's life – an old story of Seth, and, by implication, the Biblical Cain and Abel. She boasts, « Ma magie puissante triomphera de tous les obstacles » (248).

But by the tenth tablet she regrets Kabar's death, and we are invited to compare the deaths of Rahmane and Barka in the present tense of the novel. Kabar's body disappears, like those of both modern victims, and, like Rahmane's, it disappears into Mother Nile. It is also the story of Osiris repeated, torn to bits. Senmut the architect goes mad, and spends the rest of his life in « l'enfer de la folie » (248), for the brothers are alter egos. Hatchepsut forgets her supposed rival Imeni and is totally consumed by love. She wishes now only for death: « Je ne tarderai pas à rejoindre mon Kabar » (248).

Indeed, modern archaeologists have located a tomb thought to be Kabar's, and another reputed to be that of his royal mistress, the "Queen Who Would Be King", Hatchepsut. If they are correct, Hatchepsut ordered a tunnel to be dug between her tomb and her non-royal lover's, so that they might be together in the next world if not in this. Emily Dickinson's poem similarly invokes reunion with a dead lover: "I'd tunnel till my groove pushed sudden through to his...". The cave as a womb-tomb image is a familiar trope for the love-death theme, the « Nil'amourir » or « Amourir royal » theme which is central to the text.

In Tablet Eleven, Kabar speaks, as it were, from beyond the grave, for he has left a note on her pillow, explaining the apparent attraction to Imeni: « Jusqu'à ma mort, je ne saurais te trahir ! ... c'est pour nous protéger des mauvaises langues et du mauvais œil » (249).

In Tablet Twelve writing freezes life, and she imagines herself sleeping with him once more, his nose barely emerging from the bed covers: « Je revois encore son nez émerger de cette couverture naturelle ... Sans doute, aimait-il flairer dans son sommeil l'inspiration nécessaire à sa vie ? » The nose as an instrument of creativity? as a phallic symbol? Kabar had said, « Nous ne saurons jamais qui nous sommes jusqu'au moment où quelqu'un raconte notre histoire » (249). She had counted on him to be the tale-teller of their « aventure exceptionnelle ». But we find in the tablets that she herself becomes the tale-spinner in his absence, as Francine is for Barka. At the same time, she sees him resisting imprisonment in his words: « Comment peut-il en être autrement, puisque l'écrit fige ce qu'il dit ? Voilà sa tragédie » (250). Life cannot be captured in so many words, but perhaps it can be shadowed forth in fragments and symbolically.

The thirteenth tablet (mystic number?) foresees Kabar's reincarnation as Barka Bousiris:

Puisque j'en ai le pouvoir, je dois faire revenir Kabar sur terre, accepter de lui rendre sa liberté, et lui donner la possibilité d'assumer la tendre réconciliation qui nous unit, lui et moi, le monde et ses écrits ... J'ai mis entre nous des millénaires qui retarderont le moment de nos retrouvailles dans l'au-delà... Jusqu'à son retour à l'Origine, sa vie dans la modernité sera nourrie d'un destin qui lui restera inconnu et qu'il suivra avec d'autant plus de joie qu'il saura, cette fois, prendre pour amants le mystère de la force vitale et la liberté de la nommer à sa guise: envers de l'endroit qu'il façonnera et définira dans la sérénité de son *Ba*. (250)

“Ba” is defined in the Glossary as linking « les deux faces de l'être, le réel et l'imaginaire, le visible et l'invisible, le passé et l'avenir, la nuit et le jour » (253) – in other words, all the « doubles » of the novel, especially Bar/ka and Ka/bar – and it's all done with mirrors.

In Tablet Fourteen she recognizes that she will encounter her other half, « cette moitié de moi-même », only in « un monde sans limite » (250). She prophesies a perfect fusion in the distant future, « Un accédant du Tout céleste, je surgirai dans mon Unicité parfaite pour l'accueillir lorsque le temps sera venu » (250-1). We are invited to speculate whether it is Hatchepsut who caused the « tremblement de terre » felt by Barka just

before his death. In that case, is the simple Ibrahim an unwitting reincarnation of the murderous brother Senmut?

The conclusion of the « Journal intime » of Hatchepsut is also the conclusion of the novel, and the last words consist of Hatchepsut's prophecy of Barka's achievements:

Déjà la Paix me vient de ma certitude de son retour après qu'il ait  
semé l'espoir dans les cœurs endoloris, vidé les masques de leurs  
illusions, et rétabli la lumière dans l'univers de nos mains. (251)

Thus we end with a kind of envelope structure: a female editor (Francine, who admits that « j'ai opté pour un ordre arbitraire selon la façon dont je les ai trouvées dans le sac à dos de Barka » [241]), a female narrator (Hatchepsut), and a letter from Imane, all in praise of a *male* writer (Barka/Kabar) who seems to have passed the torch to the women. In the final analysis, all we know of Barka is his notes and research. Francine becomes more than a narrator/editor; she is the creative consciousness of the novel. In functioning as a creator, she accomplishes a similar gender crossover to Hatchepsut's. But she also arguably transcends her predecessor's achievements by overcoming, or mastering, sexual jealousy, destroying no one, but giving new life. Francine (aided by Imane) pieces the text together as if it were Barka's (or Kabar's) body. In so doing she surpasses, even replaces, Hatchepsut as female visionary. The novel on a whole, therefore, crosses genders and genres (lyric poetry, journal, narration filtered through multiple central consciousnesses), presenting a « double » vision, multicultural, multi-religious, multi-layered, abolishing time and space, and above all, androgynous.