

## SWIMMING UPSTREAM : HÉDI BOURAOUÏ'S *EN AMONT DE L'INTUITION*

Hédi Bouraoui's most recent collection, *En Amont de l'Intuition* (Toronto : CMC Éditions, Collection « Nomadanse » (2013), is a pithy, pungent, short group of poems suggested by the notion of "Intuition" and "Intuitist" poetics. It is a bilingual collection (French/ Italian) with Italian translations by Mario Selvaggi, and illustrations by a number of noteworthy contemporary artists. The poems were originally published in the book, *Au-delà de l'instant: Anthologie des poètes intuitistes*, edited by Giovanni Dotoli, Mario Selvaggio, and Éric Sivry (Fasano, Italy: Schena Editore, 2012).

Be it said from the outset that Bouraoui's take on the subject of "Intuition" is critical, and often ironic. "Intuition" tends to be a free-floating, amorphous source of poetry which, by definition, is impossible to define. Without sticking pins in the butterfly, Bouraoui's project, both in his Introduction and in the poems themselves, is to delimit the parameters of the impulse to poetry. His title itself ironizes that of the Dotoli-Selvaggio-Sivry text ("Beyond the Instant: Anthology of Intuitist Poets") into *En Amont de l'Intuition*, which means *above* intuition, not "beyond," but which also implies swimming upstream, like the salmon, or struggling against the tide.

While Bouraoui seems to be defining this ephemeral concept, this will o'the wisp, he is really defining the creative process, while debunking intuition. The dictionary definition of "intuition" is truth perceived without the reasoning process, ergo, without language. It can also be a presentiment, a sixth sense. As such, it is most often associated with the female mind, and, one would suspect, with the so-called maternal instinct. A recent program on the U.S. educational channel, PBS, called "Unleash the Power of the Female Brain," with Dr. Daniel Amen, associated the female brain with "intuition, multi-

tasking, collaboration, empathy, self control and a little worry,” as well as their negatives, “anxiety, depression, taking on too much . . . “ (9). It may be that the sensitive poet or artist also operates with the “female” side of his brain. But female intuition is linked to animal instinct.

“Intuitism” is also a philosophic school based on the belief that a moral truth is instantly perceived without any thought process. But again this school is rooted in ethics, not aesthetics; it is non-verbal, and therefore not related to poetry.

A valid critique is that the intuitist poets really mean “inspiration,” or the Platonic divine afflatus which descends unbidden and unexpected upon the waiting mind. As Ralph Waldo Emerson describes it (again describes, not defines) in his essay on “Self-Reliance,” “If a man lives with God, his voice will be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn” (158). Neo-Platonism was particularly significant to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantics, including the American Transcendentalists. It presumes no need for conscious technique, as that will come automatically. Emerson as poet, for instance, was often contrasted to Edgar Allan Poe, the “jingle man” or technician. But Emerson *was* a technician, despite his disclaimers: he experimented, for instance, with Old English alliterative scansion in “Hamatreya” – “fled like the flood’s foam” (439). And his theory had a tremendous impact on the two greatest experimenters of his age: Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

Inspiration is verbal, while intuition and instinct are not. But the two latter can promote and lead to verbalization and lyrical language. Bouraoui’s exploration of the creative process moves from inception/ perception to the invention of language. Two of his poems, “Intuitire” and “Barbarituitif,” shed a particular light on this process.

“Intuitire” is itself not a word, but one of the famous Bouraoui neologisms. It rhymes with “déduire” – “C’est déduire/ Avant la lettre” – and “traduire » -- as in « traduire/ L’intraduisible» (10). But the first, deduction, is logical, sequential reasoning, which cannot occur “avant la lettre.” And to “traduire/ L’intraduisible” is a contradiction in terms. “—tire” also suggests overreach, as in “tiré par les quatre cheveux,” or in the poem itself, “c’est quand on tire les vers du nez.” The poem warns against “labels,” and tells us not to worry about wordlessness, the “manque de mots,” or “le Sens/ Qui se cache fermement/ Alors qu’il perle Rosée/ À la senteur du printemps! » This is a description that allies poetry with « l’Art Brut » : it is composed of feelings, surprises, not knowledge. It can lead to « complétude, » Bouraoui’s term for completeness, a Joycean epiphany, perhaps, to be compared to Derrida’s “plenitude,” a sense of fullness. Bouraoui compares composition to a game of hopscotch, though I noted in the dictionary illustration a game that can lead to Paradise, or to Hell. This “complétude,” however, is an earthly Paradise without religious sanctions. There is no need for a divine presence, or a “Marabout” (a North African holy man).

In the other definitive poem, “Barbarituitif” (20), Bouraoui uses natural imagery drawn from his native Maghreb to describe the poetic process, always without pinning it down. The poem is compared to a Barbary fig. It is “barbaric,” a European characterization of North Africa, not cultivated: “Il pousse libre et spontané en moi/ Tel le figuier de barbarie/ Sur les *Tabia* de mon enfance ! » (20). It grows out of childlike openness, if you will -- one thinks of Wordsworth’s romantic “The child is father to the man” – like a fruit or a flower. Protected by cactus on the outside, the cactus juice has healing powers, “l’apport médical.” And beneath the prickly skin, there is “Un délice des

Dieux” (20). The seeds may cleanse the body, but in a humorous note, Bouraoui adds, they may also have trouble exiting the body, like a poem blocking and seizing the mind.

“Se Décortique... l’Intuition” (22) also sees the poem as a kernel at the heart of nature, like the Barbary fig hidden beneath a prickly exterior. The shell needs to be peeled away. The poem is hidden between dawn (the aubade, a love poem), and dusk (“vespéraux,” which could be “vespers,” or evening song, as well as the adjective denoting evening). The word is born from sunrise, fired up by emotion and dawning light, and the world shrinks at dusk, bringing absence, not presence. Songs (or Cantiques) swarm over Provence, the home of the medieval troubadours, and reach the sea. But intuition is the seed, or kernel, at the center (22).

Bouraoui twists “Intuition” into various parts of speech, and sometimes neologisms (a non-existent verb in “Intuitire,” an invented adjective in “Barbarituitif,” a noun in “Se Décortique... l’Intuition”). In “Intuité le Poème” it becomes a past participle, and in “Intuitionner” an infinitive. Bouraoui seems to mock the Intuitionists’ stress on a non-verbal impulse by his own linguistic experiments.

The very short (seven-line) “Intuité le Poème” replicates a moment of inspiration, and compares the poem implicitly to music, to a “sonata.” The icon dances without a country, eyes wide open (18).

“Intuitionner” (24) introduces the image of a talking tree, again drawn from nature, but also symbolic of the Biblical tree of knowledge, with its forbidden fruit, the apple: “Suspendu le fruit résiste.../ Ne se laisse ni cueillir... ni goûter...”. The autumn leaves resemble roses blown by the wind, “Tout en laissant des traces/ Que seul un

sixième sens/ Peut engranger ! »(24). The « sixth sense » implies a presentiment, an omen, open only to the unconscious, not the conscious mind.

In “Passants” (14) two passersby have a fleeting encounter, and an epiphany. One is self-confident and certain, the other more reluctant, hesitant, stepping towards the undefined, seeking good through adversity. The encounter results in a silent intuition.

“Aux Sillons du Lire” (16) seems to pay tribute to a fellow artist. The italicized “*la Semence de l’eau*” seems to be the title of a work. One can only guess from the context, including the words “lire,” “la parole risquée,” “Ton verbe,” “Le Poème,” that it concerns a writer rather than a visual artist. There seems, however, to be an analogy to sculpture in the reference to a “*pierre errante*” which is “chiseled” in a childlike sky. Art seems to be born of risk, of harvesting lightning and storms. It is engraved between sea and desert, two privileged spaces for Bouraoui, on which writing is inscribed, leading to clairvoyance.

Four other poems belie the inward gaze of much intuitist poetry: they focus on global issues, while at the same time suggesting that poetry can open the gates of tolerance.

In his Introduction, “L’Intuition à l’Oeuvre,” Bouraoui implies, as he has throughout his career, that the work has an “intention” of its own, surpassing the conscious intention of the author. This *gestalt* of the work embodies a sixth sense, a whiff of oxygen, a “source d’énergie émotionnelle” (6). Bouraoui compares it to his concept of “Béance,” discussed in his book of essays, *Transpoétique: Éloge du Nomadisme* (Montréal: Éditions Mémoire d’Encrier, 2005). “Béance” is “un état de disponibilité et de dynamisme potentiel qui sollicite une complétude créatrice » (6). It invites « cette force

créatrice qui peaufine l'espace, le vide, le silence, la page blanche... [think the sea and the desert] « (8). Bouraoui asserts in the strongest possible terms that « l'Intuition » cannot and should not be theorized. He tries, instead, to describe, or to present it metaphorically, to “délimiter un tant soit peu le champ intuitif de peur de l'enfermer dans un cadre rigide et théorique » (8). It is fixed on the future, not the past (unlike the Romantics in this respect). Bouraoui compares the project to that of the Surrealists, the Dadaists, to the Joycean epiphany (though the Joycean epiphany is mystical, rather than random). Bouraoui places this form of inspiration under the aegis of Athena, goddess of wisdom, daughter of Zeus. Baudelaire's “Correspondances,” the open metaphors and ambiguities of the French Symbolists, could also be linked to Intuition. But Intuition without technical mastery could be likened to what Robert Frost called “playing tennis with the net down.”

The four poems reflecting on global issues remind us that Bouraoui is led to embrace more than self-reflection, to move away from navel-gazing, so their very existence in the collection has an ironic edge.

“Le Corps Liban” uses the medical metaphor of pancreatic cancer, almost always fatal, to suggest a disease spreading beyond Lebanon to “ses voisins sudistes.” In place of “une opération en douceur d'intuition” (26), we have violence, and particularly religious intolerance: “Le venin porté à son extrême/ Incandescence/ Renforce en chacun sa vérité:/ La justesse de son droit de tuer » (28). As Dos Passos wrote, “We have only words against . . . “ (523).

« Devant l'Hécatombe » (30) is an angry poem on the misuse of words to cover mass murder. George Orwell once pointed out that genocide, in political discourse,

becomes “rectification of frontiers,” a linguistic criticism that is equally valid in today’s world. Murder is committed every day, every minute, “Alors que les États parlent/ À en perdre leurs billes. » They waste their breath blowing on dying coals, « Sans ranimer la moindre flamme/ Qui nous ferait sortir de l’enfer ! » And « les cordes vocales ne font que/ Déplacer un vent fétide. »

« Apoé(li)tic au Tac » “(32) continues in the same vein of a parody of political discourse. In it Bouraoui compares the Roman Empire of old, and the American Empire of today. Both, coincidentally, use the same symbol of the eagle: “L’arrogance de l’Aigle/ Signe sa décadence.” The “hécatombe,” or mass murder of the preceding poem, reappears, and “tous attendant que le Bec de l’Aigle/ Se plume du parfum de modestie/ Seule apte à dévier les enjeux/ Vers d’autres jeux de massacre ! » Political words are mere tools in the eagle’s claws : « Qui parle et déparle/ Pour sarcler le moral/ Des envolées prises/ Dans les griffes des mots ! »

« Du Métissage » (34) attacks another *bête noire* of the 20th and 21st centuries, the myth of racial purity promoted by whites, “Ignorant que tous les sangs ont la même couleur/ Peu importe la hantise de filiation! » I am reminded of Melville’s 19th-century novella « Benito Cereno » which depicts the aftermath of a rebellion on a slave ship. The skeleton of the former captain is strapped to the prow of the ship as a figurehead, and the leader of the slave rebellion points out ironically that we are all the same color under the skin. Margin is opposed to center, traditionally (bell hooks’ terminology). The poet points out that “le monde entier est métissé,” but some just refuse to admit it. Bouraoui advocates using intuition as a means of leveling: “que les portes des ghettos s’ouvrent... / À l’intuitif... seul à égaliser.... »

These poems constitute a remarkable tribute to an initial impulse – call it intuition, inspiration, instinct, perception, or what you will. But they also ironize a total dependency on that source, for they appear neatly on the printed page, exhibiting linguistic proficiency, versatility, daring, calculation, and often a satirical edge. The reader’s visceral response enables him/ her to share this voyage upstream, against the tide, towards the abolition of barriers and the promotion of tolerance among peoples.

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