

## REVIEW ARTICLE

Rafik Darragi. *Hédi Bouraoui : La parole autre : L'homme et l'œuvre*. Paris :

L'Harmattan, 2015. 194 pp.

Rafik Darragi, who is Professor Emeritus at the University of Tunis and former Director of the *Institut Bourguiba des Langues Vivantes*, has written a thoughtful, perceptive, detailed book about the work of Tunisian-born Franco-Ontarian poet, novelist, and critic Hédi Bouraoui, Professor Emeritus of French, York University, Toronto. As the subtitle, "*L'homme et l'œuvre*," indicates, Darragi focuses on both the life and the work. Accordingly, the book is divided into four chapters treating different aspects of both, in addition to the Avant-Propos and Conclusion. It also includes a useful biobibliography, and testimonials from friends, colleagues, and former students.

Chapter I, "*L'Homme*," summarizes the movements of the world citizen Hédi Bouraoui from his birthplace in Sfax, Tunisia, to his *baccalauréat* and *licence ès lettres* in France, to his M.A. and doctoral studies at, respectively, Indiana University and Cornell University, and finally to his choice of adoptive home, Toronto, Canada, that most diverse and pluricultural of cities in the world, where he has made his home and career for almost fifty years.

Chapter II, "*La Parole Autre*," takes its title (which is also the title of the book) from a remark of Bouraoui's to a former editor, A. Ayoub, concerning the need for a new language in the explosive world we all inhabit: "*Il est donc nécessaire de trouver une parole autre qui essaie de prendre en charge toute cette force de haine et de destruction*" (88-9). This section should be of the most interest to readers of Bouraoui, and to a potential audience. We will return to this chapter later for the greater part of this review.

Chapter III, "*Hédi Bouraoui le Fraternel*," sheds light on an aspect of Bouraoui well known to his friends, colleagues, and students: his affability, spontaneity, generosity, sense of humor, and constant willingness to reach out to "the Other." To that end, Darragi lets him speak for himself in a selection of his "*lettres américaines*," as a friend calls them, his annual New Year's letters to distant friends. These are followed by brief sketches of his relations with other writers from around the world: Albert Memmi

(Tunisia), Rachid Boudjedra (Algeria), Driss Chraïbi (Morocco), Paul Dakeyo (Cameroon), Frankétienne (Haiti), etc.

Chapter III, “*Hédi Bouraoui et la Francophonie*, » would perhaps have been better placed after Chapter II, since Bouraoui’s lifelong quest for a new language, his promotion of the French spoken around the world, not just in metropolitan France, has been part and parcel of his creativity.

To return to Chapter II, “*La Parole Autre*,” Darragi, interestingly, begins with a study of the verbal portraiture in *In-Side Faces*, *Visages du Dedans*, which are paired with visual portraits by Franco-Ontarian artist Micheline Montgomery. Darragi asserts that the human condition is reflected in “*le visage*,” the face, and that the experimentation of modern painting is paralleled by Bouraoui’s verbal experimentation: “*Pas un art hybride mais un art polymorphe*”(qtd. in Darragi 56; *In-Side Faces* ix).

Darragi stresses the poet’s *engagement*, his humanism, and chooses quotations well to illustrate Bouraoui’s commitment to what he calls “functional poetry”: “*Pour moi, la poésie est fonctionnelle. Elle peut rectifier le tir, corriger les injustices et les avatars de l’histoire* » (qtd. In Darragi 57 ; *Préface de Struga* 7). In both poems and novels Bouraoui stresses the quest for identity, and its corollary, the quest for “*l’Autre*,” which become one, the connection with “*le monde éclaté d’aujourd’hui*” (qtd. in Darragi 59; Bouraoui, *Traversées*). Darragi compares this connectedness to the romantic poet Keats’s “negative capability.” He aligns “*le je bouraouiën*” with the *cogito* of Descartes (with the difference that in Bouraoui the “*je*” becomes “*nôtre*), or to Nietzsche. Bouraoui’s concerns lead him to a compassionate understanding of the plight of the immigrant, a compelling issue for the 21st century, and one not easy to resolve. He rejects forcefully the “*binarité infernale*” wherever he finds it, whether in the treatment of the Amazigh in North Africa, or the First Nations in Canada, as second-class citizens; or the compartmentalization of francophone writers, or francophonie in general, as somehow inferior to classical French.

This desire to break down barriers, to cross frontiers, is borne out in Bouraoui’s mixture of genres and of languages, including the famous “*mots-concepts*.” As Darragi remarks, in his works “*Mythe, histoire et sociologie s’y mêlent et s’y télescopent* » (76-7). To translate this vision, with its strongly prophetic element, is to search for the

Flaubertian “*mot juste*” (79), but if he cannot find it, to invent his own. While his Mediterranean youth pervades his works, so does his valorization of Canadian culture and myth, including the all-important symbol of the moose, incarnation of diversity, but which is also linked to the North African camel.

Darragi goes on, in a subsection, to discuss Bouraoui’s treatment of the issues of violence and religion in our time. He sees Bouraoui as a Hellenist, a worshipper of love and beauty. In Canada, Bouraoui finds one of the world’s most democratic societies, in opposition to the dictatorships that have often followed independence in postcolonial North Africa. Darragi concludes that Bouraoui’s perspective “*offre une clé d’interprétation opérante, susceptible de reconfigurer d’une manière plus positive les relations humaines si distendues aujourd’hui*” (105).

If there is one reservation about this critical section, it is that the reader may find the transitions between Bouraoui’s texts rather difficult to follow. The choice of quotations is excellent, but it would also help to know the chronology, reminding us of the dates and the evolution of the poet’s thought, from the very early “*Crucifié*” to the late *Traversées*. But this is a minor quibble.

Chapter IV, on Francophonie, illuminates in its own way both the poet’s and the teacher’s struggles with editors and academic administrators to give voice to global francophone writers. These efforts range, on the international level, from the collaborative creation of the A.L.A. (African Literature Association) within the M.L.A. (Modern Language Association), and on the local, to Bouraoui’s introduction of courses in Maghrebian and Franco-Ontarian literatures at York University, and his promotion of Transculturalism during his ten-year term as Master of Stong College, York.

Chapter I, “*L’Homme*,” is mainly biographical. While it is in accord with Darrage’s thesis, that Bouraoui’s fiction, particularly in the Mediterranean trilogy, belongs to a subgenre he calls “*l’autobiographie oblique*” or “*le paratexte*” (108), he admits that Bouraoui himself strenuously resists autobiographical interpretations, and refuses to write his own memoirs. It seems that the first chapter might have come later, and been more clearly subordinated to criticism of the work. That being said, this section offers interesting background, particularly on Bouraoui’s youth in his native Tunisia, an experience Darragi shares with him. But it might have been more effective to trace the

evolution of his *literary* career in the several countries he called home at one time or another. His professional writing career actually began when he was a doctoral student at Cornell, and published his first book of poetry, *Musocktail*. At the same time his scholarly career was launched by his dissertation on Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, under the tutelage of Paul de Man, who pioneered critical theory from phenomenology to deconstruction. It seems quite fitting that this Ulyssean writer's launching pad was the modern Ithaca, the site of Cornell University in upstate New York.

Darragi's book includes lively samples of Bouraoui's own writing, especially the New Year's letters, summaries of anecdotes about writers with whom he has, or has had significant connections, and tributes from colleagues and former students that underline Bouraoui's strengths. The late Jacqueline Leiner wrote of his ability to "*Faire l'amour avec les mots*," and noted that for all his experimentation, he reveals that he is also a master of classical French: she might be prophesying his recent novel, *Paris Berbère*, with its Paris torn between classical and Amazigh (Berber) cultures and languages. Abderrahman Beggar eloquently describes his bridging of two cultures, calling him an "*Olivier planté en Ontario, Tunisien épris d'original, d'érable, de desert et de toundra*" (174).

Darragi's text is rich with insights, quotations, anecdotes, that place the complex man and writer that is Hédi Bouraoui within a global, transcultural context of a humanism as ancient as Tunisia and as new as Canada. It is must reading for those attuned to "*la parole autre*" of Hédi Bouraoui. Rafik Darragi deserves our thanks for undertaking this formidable task.

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