

**AROUND THE WORLD IN FIFTY YEARS:
A ULYSSEAN VOYAGE THROUGH HÉDI BOURAOUI'S POETRY
(1966-2016)**

Mario Selvaggio has performed a most welcome and long overdue service: he has assembled an anthology, *Transpoétiquement vôtre / Transpoeticamente vostro*,¹ of Hédi Bouraoui's poetry from his beginnings as a young Cornell University Ph.D. in 1966 to the present, and has translated the French poems into Italian. The selection of poems is judicious and comprehensive, and affords an overview of the poet's evolution. As the title highlights, this poetry is not focused on the "je" of Romanticism, but the "Vôtre" of the readers. The intended audience includes not only the francophone, and French reading public, but expands to include the Italian. It is widely Héknown that Hédi Bouraoui's Mediterranean soul has long been drawn to Italy, a fraternal culture to his own geographically close native Tunisian. For several years he has been spending two weeks each summer in Tuscany, refreshing his knowledge of the Italian language, which was also his minor field at Cornell. This collection is beautifully illustrated with art works by artist-friends of Bouraoui, confirming the bridges he signals between verbal and visual expression: "*Passerelles entre / Écriture et Peinture / Et vice-versa // Chaque Art maintient sa spécificité / Dialogue... et interpelle le Différent / En toute dignité!*" ("*Passerelles*" 190).

The author has provided an "*Avant-Propos*" to the anthology, at the request of his editor and translator Mario Selvaggio, who then offers his own Introduction. Hédi Bouraoui's "*Avant-Propos*" utilizes the language of flowers to describe the selection, "*Cueillir des fleurs poétiques.*" The floral metaphor evokes Hédi Bouraoui's exploitation of this pattern of imagery in his "*narratoème,*" *La Réfugiée (Lotus au pays du Lys)* (2012), but also Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Bouraoui stresses the major importance for him of the Mediterranean oral tradition. He particularly welcomes Selvaggio's work, since to date the Italians have translated many of his novels, but not his poetry. His "*Avant-Propos*" emphasizes especially the internal coherence of his poetry, which is derived principally from its self-reflexivity, from the interface of creativity and criticism also found in his recent collection of critical-creative pieces, *NomadiVivance* (2016). He sees himself above all as a storyteller, or *conteur*, whether in poetry, poetic prose, or

¹ Hédi Bouraoui, *Transpoétiquement vôtre : Anthologie (1966-2016) / Transpoeticamente vostro : Antologia (1966-2016). Avant-propos de l'Auteur / Selezione, introduzione, traduzione e cura* Mario Selvaggio. Roma : Edizioni Universitarie Romane, 2016. 222 pp.

in his “*narratoèmes*,” one of what he calls his “*mots-concepts*.” As he concludes, “*Le conteur revient à ses conteries!*” (8).

In his Introduction, “*Le Poète de la Résistance*,” Mario Selvaggio lays special emphasis on the rebellious aspect of Bouraoui’s poetry, “*l’ardeur du poème*.” This is clearly a major facet of his work, as witness the poem “*Le ‘Non’ à Voiles Toutes*” (2010), which repeats in the first line of each stanza the poet’s refusal to play the game. He refuses to renounce, in turn, “*Le Nif*” (or pride) of his Maghrebi ancestors, the French language, his *Canaduitude*: “*Je laisserai voguer mes « Non » / À voiles toutes / Pour me frayer les routes de la candeur. . .*” (182). Rather, he balances all these to affirm his « *identité millefeuille* “ (180). The imagery of lifting the anchor and setting sail for the unknown is also that of the last novel of the trilogy, *Méditerranée à Voile Toute* (2010).

Mario Selvaggio is astute in recognizing that for Hédi Bouraoui poetry is “*un acte corporel*,” that he practices an “*engagement résistant*” which, it is worth remarking, harks back to the dominant influence of Sartrean existentialism on the young Bouraoui. Selvaggio paraphrases Mallarmé, that only poets have the right to speak (17). He is perceptive in recognizing that Bouraoui’s are also love poems, but a love directed to all creation: “. . . *le poète est le plus grand amant de la terre et du cosmos*” (17). He also notes the reinvention of language (see Bouraoui’s “*mots-concepts*”). If there is a note missing in this deeply felt introduction, it is Bouraoui’s rich sense of humor, and strong satirical edginess. Selvaggio quotes Bouraoui: “*Le poème est avant tout ordre*” (15), but the « *nouvel ordre global* » he envisages will be one wrought by the power of language and imagination, not by the “action” at which Selvaggio seems at times to hint. George Orwell’s distinction between art and propaganda remains relevant here: “All art is propaganda. . . . On the other hand, not all propaganda is art” (“Charles Dickens” 97). Bouraoui writes committed poetry, but his art takes precedence over propaganda. More to the point, Selvaggio recognizes that Bouraoui’s is a poetry of “*ouverture*,” “*sans fermeture*” (19).

The poems themselves are the most cogent illustration of Bouraoui’s Ulyssean voyage through the often bewildering social, cultural, political changes of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The poet offers the reader a Baudelairean “*Invitation au Voyage*.”

From the earliest poems to the most recent, there is both continuity and evolution, often in response to dramatic shifts in culture, politics, technology and communication that have occurred from the last third of the 20th century to the opening of the 21st, the new millennium.

The earliest published poems date from 1966 (*Musocktail*), 1969 (*Tremblé*), and the early to mid-'70s (*Éclate Module*, 1972; *Vésuviade*, 1976). There is no doubt that they look back to the young Bouraoui's graduate student experiences at Cornell, the period of space exploration, the Vietnam War protests, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement. The intellectual and social ferment is reflected in the explosiveness of titles like *Tremblé*, *Éclate Module*, *Vésuviade*.

Even in these early works, the poet's dominant themes, metaphors, language experiments are evident. If they are self-reflexive, they are also self-deprecating, expressing a certain resistance to self-revelation, and often humorous in tone. In "Création," the first poem of *Musocktail*, he is "annulé par l'Écriture": "J'ai atteint ce degré Zéro / Écrire, c'est se trahir," and he concludes that he has been the author "D'un certain malentendu"(24), as if at times language possesses him, rather than the other way around.

"Cocktail Poétique" expands on the title of *Musocktail*: "La Poésie est partout / et Nulle part, / Agiter son flocon / Avant de la servir" (26). The metaphor of poetic « ivresse » evokes the « Bateau ivre » of Rimbaud and the Symbolists, perhaps Edgar Allan Poe. But this writer is drunk on poetry, not wine, like Emerson, Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, the American Transcendentalists whom Hédi Bouraoui was studying. Rather than Rimbaud, one might compare Emily Dickinson's "Inebriate of Air -- am I -- / And Debauchee of Dew -- / Reeling -- thro endless summer days -- / From inns of Molten Blue --" (*Complete Poems* 98-99). If poetry can be intoxicating, it can also be misleading, even betray you: "Elle vous enivre / toute une vie / Et souvent / Elle vous dérouté" (26).

The image of the "bateau" for which poetry "sert de voile" (28) recurs throughout his work. And the archetypal sailor / voyager is Ulysses, the mythic figure who dominates much of Bouraoui's work, his novels and *narratoèmes* as well as his poetry. In the later *Vers et l'Envers* (1982), for instance, we find a poem evocative of Du Bellay, "Heureux Qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un Beau Voyage, » dedicated to the mother and the myth of eternal return to the lost paradise of childhood: "Salut, mère, doux courant de mes élans aigus / Sous tes talons je retrouve mon paradis perdu" (92).

If the poet sets sail, the destination is unknown: "La poésie n'a point d'école, / C'est une question / ÉNIGMATIQUE" (« Cocktail Poétique » 28). It translates the unconscious, touches on automatic writing, but above all transgresses frontiers (30), including the boundaries of

language, which is transformed into Bouraoui's famous "*mots-concepts*" of "*Créaculture*," "*Transculture*," "*Transpoésie*." Another frequently quoted early poem, "*Crucifié*," reinforces this drive to "make it new," to not only cross frontiers, but to transgress them: "*Je rêve... Être un simple mortel / qui passe sa vie / dans les Motels / du Monde / Sans identité* » (36). If we hear in this poem the defiance of youth, we also perceive the intrinsic humor of the "*Motels*" stanza. And if the poet is "crucified," it is in the way a Sherwood Anderson character once described: ". . . everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified" (*Winesburg* 48).

Some readers feel that not only *Tremblé*, but especially *Éclate Module* and *Vésuviade*, embody an explosive or violent reaction to events of the late '60s and early '70s. But in fact *Éclate Module* references the space module, which becomes the vessel of the new Ulysses who is born in "*Un monde nouveau / [qui] vole / sur l'aile du silence / D'un accord*" ("*Peintulire*" 46). This resurrected Ulysses, the poet, voyages through words: "*Je m'élastique dans les mots*" ("*Peintulire* » 48).

Vésuviade references an actual volcano – in Italy, one of Bouraoui's favorite countries where he feels a kinship. But the real volcano becomes a metaphor for the new "*technologie de pointe*," so that the poet's head becomes a screen, his hair antennae. If he is transmogrified into technology, however, it is so that he can seize control of it. If the technology (floppy disks, cassettes, etc.) has changed since the publication of *Vésuviade*, the message remains if anything more relevant today, as we are seduced by the "*Hymne international du système abondant*" ("*Sotto Voce*" 52). If the individual runs the risk of becoming lost in technology, the poet offers some kind of antidote, as in "*Balançoire Vocale*," another of Bouraoui's self-reflexive poems about poetry: "*Mon mot est un trou / Où le monde peut gazouiller // La métaphore serre et vise / Un plaisir*" (54).

There is a real turning point in Bouraoui's poetry as he begins the new decade in 1980 with *Haïtuois*. This collection marks his discovery of a fraternity and sorority of fellow artists, francophone like himself, of African blood, but colonized. "*Les Globules de Ton Île*" uses the metaphor of blood to suggest that under the skin we are all the same color, or "*sang fraternal*." "I've got you under my skin" puts a new spin on the old popular song: "I've got you under my skin / I've got you deep in the heart of me / So deep in my heart you're really a part of me / I've got you under my skin." This is an angry poem, if you will, but the anger is on behalf of others, as the poet increasingly reaches out. In "*Lèvres femellées de la liberté*," he pays a special tribute

to Haiti's female artists, who are both victims and, through their words, victors: "*Ô Femme riche et pauvre du Tiers-Monde / Ta parole est un oracle remuant / La matrice effervescente des brûlures* » (66).

Ignescent (1982) continues the « *traversée* » towards other nations and cultures. In « *Pétrolifiez vos Lardos Gauches,* » the poet excoriates the ruthless quest for the almighty petrodollar. His trenchant wit mocks the wars fought over what is not worth having: "*Priser sa guerre pour une poignée de sable*" ("*Oecuménique*" 74). Images of the desert haunt this collection, as the poet strives to move from the earth to the universe: "*Comme un laboureur qui féconde la terre // Pour séduire un jour le firmament*" ("*Ouverture*" 78).

It is no accident that the reaching out to others often takes the form of love poems, but the love is directed to children, to refugees, to "*les damnés de la terre*" ("*Pétrolifiez . . .*" 72). *Vers et l'Envers*, also published in 1982, was inspired by the International Year of the Child, and by Bouraoui's visit to another culture, this time Bulgaria, in Eastern Europe. "*Enfance d'aujourd'hui*" laments the world into which today's children are born: "*À ton réveil, tu verras ton écorce endurcie / Et ton innocence aura pris la forme d'un bouclier // D'angoisse et de soucis, ton monde est déjà rempli* » (84). This collection contains the deeply moving paean of praise to the Mother ("*Heureux qui comme Ulysse . . .*"), but also a series of epigraphs about otherness and peace, such as, "*La Paix, c'est la véritable rencontre de l'Autre dans sa vérité; c'est l'acceptation totale de la différence* » (86), a motto that is applicable to the work as a whole. It is also evident that the poet is "transgressing" boundaries of poetry, including prose poems within his text to match the otherness of others with the otherness of language.

Two 1986 volumes, *Échosmos* and *Reflét Pluriel*, awaken memories of North Africa. "*Carthage mon New York oublié,*" lives on ironically in a Bouraouian pun on "*Cartage,*" the sign on North American moving vans (98). "*Baobab Archive de Ma Pensée*" describes an Africa marching backwards, where "*les loups à la tête continuent à croquer / les roses de sable* » (100). Yet the poet continues to dream of his « *arc-en-ciel,* » a rainbow composed of all colors of the earth which becomes yet another dominant image in his work, alongside the vessel setting sail towards the unknown, the Other. *Reflét Pluriel* adds another dimension to his work, combining visual art and poetry in a collaboration with distinguished French artist Gérard Sendrey. "*Khamsa Triomphante*" conjures up another North African image, to come to the rescue and forestall the evil eye: "*Triomphante la Khamsa, cette main mauresque dérouté / Le sort, conjure*

l'oeil mauvais du tort" (110). There are also references elsewhere, in later works, to the devastation of Africa by Sida (AIDS) in "*Miracle Vain*" (184), and again the appeal to the mother / mother country / Mediterranean (*mer=mère*) in "*Mame-di-Terra-née*" (*Poésies*, 1991). *Nomadaime* (1995) and *Sfaxitude* (2005) continue to celebrate his North African origins, "*Sur le désert des mots qui nous fuit*" ("*Se Balance le Chameau*, » *Nomadaime* 138). *Sfaxitude* contrasts lyrically the paradise of childhood memories – replete with local references to food, flowers, Tunisian dialect -- with the 21st century realities of industrialization and globalization, but remains hopeful for the future: "*La Sfaxitude et ses atours / Chantournent les grands et les petits / Encore et de plus en plus / Plus besoin d'évoquer son charme!*" (*Sfaxitude* 29).

Arc-en-Terre, in 1991, imagines a rainbow on earth, no longer in the sky. "*Inspirangulaire*" uses sexual metaphors to accomplish the "penetration" of the other: "*Ton éclatement se veut pénétration*" (116). "*Cimetière Juif à Prague*" is an indictment of the Shoa, the Holocaust, in an incredibly painful penetration of the suffering of others, which becomes that of the poet himself. He reads the Hebrew grave inscriptions "*non pour capter les ressorts historiques / d'une vie de défunt mais pour / pénétrer la mort d'une vie, pour me plonger, corps et âme, dans une culture forcée de / grignoter Terre et Temps dans ces lieux de prières souterraines* » (118). The lesson of history which continues to haunt mankind is etched in the past: "*Et les vivants comme des morts tentent / de saisir leur avenir qui n'est qu'un passé* » (120).

If there is an overriding theme in Hédi Bouraoui's poetry, it is the compulsion to make human contact with the Other, coupled with the search for the instrument of language which will enable that contact. "*J'ai choisi de vivre dans les mots*," writes Bouraoui in *Émigrance* (134), which is as close to autobiography as he gets – but it is an artistic autobiography. He has earlier written in a prose poem of seeking a "*méta-langage*," "*le tire-bouchon qui capte les axes perplexes du spontané*" (*Poésies* 124), the corkscrew image once again reminding us of the inebriation of poetry. There are the "*pages blanches* » which remain virginal, "*Plus personne pour les noircir!*" in "*Miner le Mot Mime*" (*Reflet Pluriel* 106). In *In-Side Faces / Visages du Dedans* (2008) we meet « *L'Écrivain* » -- « *je fais l'Ange pour séduire la Bête* » (148) -- as well as « *Le Penseur*, » not Rodin's statue but a sentient being in constant movement like the Nomad who is Bouraoui himself (152). He sees himself as a "*Nomade dans la toundra de la pensée*, » in « *L'Interligne en Mouvement* » (*Traversées* 160). Words themselves « *émigrent* » (*Traversées*

166) ; they « dance » ; they are « *aimantés de musique* » (“*Danse des Mots*” 168), continuing the alliance of music and poetry from the early *Musocktail*.

This Nomad of language, of cultures, of Otherness, affirms constantly his “*identité millefeuille*.” Perhaps there is no better way to conclude this voyage through the works of a Ulyssean poet than with a new beginning, “*Indiquant peut-être un chemin / Vers l’infini de l’inconnu!*” (“*La Vie...*”, *Passerelles* 192).

Mario Selvaggio has accomplished a masterful and representative selection of Bouraoui’s poetry. More than that, he has made painstaking and sensitive translations of these poems into Italian. I regret that I do not read Italian, so cannot comment on them, but I understand that they convey skillfully the spirit of the French originals. If there is a minor quibble with the text, it is that it would have been desirable to see the end materials (bibliographical and biographical) in French as well as Italian. Also, the illustrations by a number of artists could perhaps have been connected more closely (where possible) with particular poems or collections, as is done, for instance, with the drawing of a boat by Gérard Sendrey which illustrates “*Peintulire*,” one of the Ulysses poems, or the Micheline Montgomery drawing for *Inside-Faces*, on which she was the collaborator. But these are small suggestions. The entire book is an invaluable asset for readers of Hédi Bouraoui, not only for making his work accessible to a wider audience in two languages, but especially for enabling the reader to set the whole poetic *oeuvre* in context, chronological and historical, and accept the invitation to the entire voyage.

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