

Elizabeth Sabiston. *The Muse Strikes Back: Female Narratology in the Novels of Hédi Bouraoui*. Human Sciences Monograph Series 9. Sudbury: Laurentian University, 2005. 167 pp. \$25.00.

Hédi Bouraoui, Tunisian-born poet and novelist who has taught at York University in Toronto since 1972, invites his readers to seek meaning between the lines and to read with the heart in search of the essence of the text rather than with the eye of a "critique savant" (*La Femme d'entre les lignes* [Toronto: Les Éditions du Gref, 2002], 50). If we believe the author, this creates an inherent problem for the literary critic who, after all, is expected to look at texts with a critical eye. The task of making logical sense of richly poetic, intense, postmodern prose is particularly challenging. Elizabeth Sabiston, associate professor of English at York and director of the Canada-Maghreb Centre founded by Bouraoui in 2002, rises to the challenge, managing to combine a close reading of Bouraoui's novels with a more spacious understanding of his complex thematic.

Sabiston provides an introduction and conclusion composed with a refreshing tone, creating stable methodological bookends for six, more pointed chapters whose close exegesis leaves the reader reaching for the novels under discussion for a quick review. The result of this somewhat time-consuming approach to reading what is, by itself, a relatively brief, critical text, is rewarding and creates the feeling of an ongoing dialogue with the author. Sabiston's expressed aim is "to highlight the all-important female dimension of Bouraoui's texts," in particular "the rebellion of his heroines against the traditional role of Muse ... and their appropriation of the supposedly 'male' role of artist or writer" (9-10). The importance of the female in Bouraoui's fictional/poetic world cannot be denied, but just how the female voice should be heard is one of those areas open to debate. The second chapter asks if *Retour à Thyna* is a female epic and offers that Zitouna and Mansour may actually be "an androgynous couple, whose 'feminine' and 'masculine' traits complement each other" (43). Indeed, they do, and Sabiston clearly understands how female Zitouna and male Mansour are each bending their gender by adopting traits of the "opposite" sex. The female Pharaoh Hatchepsut of *La Pharaone* is androgynous, or at least ambiguously sexual, as is clear from her hermaphroditic depiction on the novel's cover and the assertion that she was the one who abolished the frontier between the sexes (*La Pharaone* [Tunis: Les Éditions L'Or du Temps, 1998], 92). Just as cultures are changing phenomena that interact and transmogrify over time and distance, male and female sexual principles are not immutable and, as with the ancient Sphinx, are subject to confusion. If the word "transsexual" wasn't already pre-empted, it would make a nice counterpart to Bouraoui's concept of the transcultural. (Sabiston claims he coined the term "transculturalism" [11].) One senses in Bouraoui a deliberate desire to disturb the boundaries defining both culture and sexuality. As different cultures have the potential for transforming each other by contact between their solitudes, the sexes do as well. They mix and become harder to distinguish as principles of existence and creative forces—and, importantly, as human voices. Twylla Blue's medicine man in *Ainsi parle la Tour CN* speaks with a half-male half-female voice and the CN Tower is a phallus with attributes of the female reproductive system, speaking with a female voice. There are images elsewhere of similarly bisexual phallic objects (like the obelisk in *La Pharaone* that gives birth to a goddess through a slit at the top), symbolizing reorganization of the creative principle (detailed in *La Femme d'entre les lignes* and *Bangkok Blues*) in which the muse is traditionally female and the creator traditionally male. None of this is news to Professor Sabiston on the level of detail in each chapter, but it does force one to struggle with the

somewhat martial metaphor of the muse "striking back" in the title, which seems a bit out of place for Bouraoui. In the chapter on *La Composée*, subtitled "The Muse Strikes Back; Sabiston acknowledges that, for Bouraoui, "the binary opposition between male and female ... has ended in our time" (133). It is then hard to know who was striking back at whom and to what purpose, and, in such a context, the distinction between male and female narratology becomes less clear. Nonetheless, this is more of a semantic quibble than anything else, as this chapter is actually rather nuanced in this regard.

The breakdown of the borders between people and cultures involves the nature of the space between them. Sabiston does well to see this space as the equivalent of a textual comma for Bouraoui and demonstrates an excellent understanding of the confusion of the lived and the written (or spoken) in the non-linear world of these novels. She is adept at picking up on Bouraoui's deliberate confusion of word and concept, spoken sound and silence. In *Bangkok Blues*, Virgilius and Koï are, in turn, the comma that separates ever so briefly and the coitus that unites. In speech as in life, male and female are meaningless without reference to each other. And the spoken word has no meaning without the silence that surrounds it. Sabiston could add reference to the *hamza*, the Arabic glottal stop that, like the comma for the written word, is at once the sign of separation and the promise of union in speech, an important concept in Bouraoui's work. She does refer to the *khamsa*, the familiar hand worn as a charm of good fortune; a familiar trope of Bouraoui's related both phonically and significantly to the *hamza* as a symbol of unity and singularity.

Both Sabiston and Bouraoui are academically prepared in English and world literatures. Bouraoui makes liberal use of literary allusions and Sabiston does a convincing job of pointing them out, which is very helpful for a richer understanding of the texts. One allusion that is notable by its absence, however, is to Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes*. In what might be considered Bouraoui's "great Canadian novel," *Ainsi parle la Tour CN*, the two solitudes more contemporaneously become four (francophone, anglophone, allophone, and First Nation). Sabiston is currently translating this novel into English and has already published *Return to Thyna* in English. Her careful attention to the details of Bouraoui's novels and her solid understanding of Bouraoui's French texts have created a critical work that is very helpful for understanding and promoting the work of a fascinating author deserving of broader recognition.

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