

# HEDI BOURAOUI'S QUEST

## *Poetry as Cultural Bridge*

*Elizabeth Sabiston*

**H**ÉDI BOURAOUI IS A TORONTO POET born in Tunisia, raised and educated in France, with a doctorate from Cornell University in the United States. He is now Master of Stong College, York University, Toronto, where he is a Professor of French and Comparative Literature. From the very beginning of his poetic and academic careers, he has perceived himself as being astride three cultures: North African, French, and North American. This cultural mix has proven fertile ground for experiments in poetry, creative criticism, and the breaking of genres. It has also challenged his critics to illuminate the reasons underlying his refusal to stay within the linguistic and generic conventions generally accepted by each culture.

Bouraooui's ambition to build bridges between and among his native and adopted cultures has generated most of his scholarly publications, as well as his poetry. His academic interests have ranged from language studies to cultural criticism, evidenced in his *Créaculture* texts (Philadelphia: CCD and Montréal: Marcel Didier Canada, 1971) which analyze French culture against a North American backdrop: from experimental theatre (French, Polish) to contemporary trends in literary criticism (structuralism and post-structuralism, phenomenology, etc.), from American literature to the modern French novel and Francophone North African and Caribbean literature. His 1976 book of literary criticism, *Structure intentionnelle du 'Grand Meaulnes': vers le poème romancé* (Paris: Nizet) melds several of these concerns. Bouraooui attempts to infuse the critical act with a strongly creative element by wedding the contours of the novelist's own process, showing that the intention of the novel in some ways transcends the conscious intention of its author. He has deliberately chosen to break genres and to stress the nature of the creative-critical act. As Abdallah Bensmaïñ has written, "Le critique ainsi n'existe pas: il sera produit par l'oeuvre. . . ."<sup>21</sup>

Bouraooui has published seven volumes of poetry: *Musocktail* (Chicago: Tower Associates, 1966); *Tremblé* (Paris: Éditions Saint-Germain-des-Prés, 1969); *Éclate Module* (Montréal: Éditions Cosmos, 1972); *Vésuviade* (Paris: Saint-

Germain-des-Prés, 1976); *Sans Frontières* (Saint Louis: Francité, 1980); *Haitu-vois, suivi de Antillades* (Québec: Éditions Nouvelle Optique, 1980); and *Vers et L'Envers* (Toronto: ECW, 1982). For the most part, the five earliest volumes have received more sensitive critical attention in North America than in France or North Africa, probably because the poet refuses to stay on well-beaten paths of national pride and cultural identity. His humanism is both local and universal, and for that reason the North American audience, whether part of the American "melting pot" or the Canadian "mosaic," seems to seize his intention better. As he suggests in *Créaculture*, he is firmly convinced that man shapes his culture as much as it shapes him. As Bouraoui stated in an interview with Édouard Mau-nick, he is "un homme de partout," who has only one mother country, the "patrie de l'homme."<sup>2</sup>

Even in his first volume of poetry, *Musocktail*, Bouraoui seems to shake a musical cocktail composed of diverse elements and influences — Michaux's surrealism, Ponge's concentration on the object, Mallarmé's stress on poetry as a game, Alfred Jarry's literary jokes. But these were all blended to evoke a new inebriation, the rainbow's end of the poet's quest for his "muse," "music," and poetry.

By the time of the second volume, *Tremblé*, the playfulness, still there in the ironic distance he maintains, is yet muted in favour of an existential poetry of social commitment in a world that has "trembled," exploded, about him. In a review of *Tremblé*, Marc Alyn, in *Le Figaro littéraire*, praises the "force de frappe de ces textes bourrés de calembours, de sonorités volontairement grinçantes et d'éléments populaires."<sup>3</sup> He admires its denunciation of our modern "pasteurized society," but somehow fails to see that homogeneity is not unique to North America but is an attribute of the "global village" we all inhabit. As early as "Crucifié," the first poem in *Tremblé*, Bouraoui refuses to play the game of nationalism or to accept cultural labels of any sort. He wants to call himself "oui," but "un oui neutre, / Sans rime ni Maison," "Un oui qui nie." It is this dream of remaining free, "un simple Mortel / qui passe sa vie / dans les Motels / du Monde / Sans identité," which will make the poet as much at home in Haiti as he is in Ithaca, New York, Sofia, Bulgaria, and Warsaw, Poland. His "Soif de communication" in the earlier volume translates into the "Articulation" of *Haitu-vois*, with the difference that "Soif" builds on a metaphor of love between man and woman, whereas "Articulation" takes on an almost cosmic consciousness. Many poems in *Tremblé* — "In God We Trust" and "Au Secours," for example — denounce the exploitation of underdeveloped countries by the superpowers and hence predict the perceptions of *Haitu-vois*, told from *within* the point of view of the exploited land, not as a detached observer.

*Éclate Module*, the third volume, separates itself even more drastically from any existing French literary tradition. The shock waves of *Tremblé* become a veritable *éclatement* or explosion whose metaphor is located in the "Lem" of the space age.

It should be remarked that the poet uses the French language as a weapon against itself and accomplishes a linguistic revolution which is also political in its repercussions. As I have said elsewhere about this volume:

*Éclate Module*, en faisant appel à la sensibilité actuelle, traduit l'égarément et la désorientation caractéristique de notre époque et nous donne l'impression de vivre dans le monde du "choc du futur" de 2001. Le recueil expose la vision d'un monde en pleine révolution, révolution qui se révèle jusque dans la facture des poèmes, asyndètes, ellipses, brisures stylistiques, acrobaties verbales, rimes qui s'entrecroisent et s'entrechoquent par "l'étonnement immense du désordre." Cependant, un ordre esthétique et éthique parfait surgit des négations didactiques, des malentendus linguistiques, des cacophonies sémantiques. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Among contemporary writers, one can name only one other, the novelist Thomas Pynchon, who seems willing to poetize technology, and not merely to retreat into romantic nostalgia for a dead past. Bouraoui's fusion of disparate elements, science, technology, and poetry, could be seen as a twentieth-century parallel to the Renaissance metaphysical poetry of John Donne. From *Musocktail* to *Tremblé* to *Éclate Module* the poet seems to undergo a kind of rite of passage, moving from self-exploration to a global vision.

*Vésuviade* moves beyond the critical view of the modern world taken in *Éclate Module* to the creation of the poet's own universe. No longer just a Columbus exploring new worlds, he insists on creating a poetic cosmos triggered by the metaphor of a volcanic eruption or explosion. Hence the book is divided into seven parts, corresponding to the seven days of creation in Genesis, starting with "Volcanigramme," passing by "Projectologos" — "In the beginning was the Word" — and ending in "Phénixode" as the new Phoenix arises from the volcanic ash. There is a dialectic of creation-destruction, and before the explosion of Mount Saint Helens, Bouraoui draws on the natural metaphor of volcanic eruption to suggest the paradoxical creation of a new world out of the destruction of the old.

**W**HY DESTRUCTION? For one thing, the poem "Intellectuellement" is characteristic, for Bouraoui has an acute distaste for the abuses of arbitrary power in any situation, including among intellectuals who should know better:

La ménagerie de l'intellect se pavane  
 Dans son couloir urinuversitaire  
 Une noirceur inégalée. . . .

*Vésuviade* sees destruction emanating from many of the ikons of today. In a superfluity of means of communication — tape recorders, video cassettes — people stop listening to people, and human contacts are blocked:

Hymne international du système abondant  
En bobines à conditionner le refus des ans  
Le graffiti de mes combines prend la relève  
Mais les ondes brouillées sillonnent seules  
Mon singulier traqué  
Orchidée qui s'achève.

(“Sotto Voce”)

The “décodeur” is “atone,” and communication never passes over to communion :

Tu refuses de parler toi le prêtre  
De la communion  
Que fait ton téléphone occupé.

(“Vidanges communicationnelles”)

The technology of the global village has produced only global mediocrity, short-circuited communication. As Nathaniel Hawthorne once commented, he would have been more impressed with the invention of the telegraph if he had felt its use would not be confined to stock market analysis and investment counsellors. It would perhaps require not too great a stretch of the imagination to guess that Bouraoui has turned to the creative, imaginative, untechnologized, rich-in-its-poverty culture of Haiti to counteract the opportunistic, mechanistic Western world depicted in *Vésuviade*, where “l’ordinateur fait le reste.” In one sense the transition is shocking; in another it is predicted in the earlier work. Both volumes are unified by the poet’s quest for expression as a means of human contact: “Je ne saurais jamais dire / Je n’aurai jamais le mot” (“A Perdre Haleine”).

Le monde entier ergotte ses flots verbaux un Vésuve  
Irruption qui calcine l’étuve de l’inspiration.

By our worship of technology, we have sold out our spontaneity to an infernal machine:

L’invulnérable machine courtcircuitée  
L’intuition et son éclair  
Galvanise l’angoisse du livre-situation.

(“Occupations Barbelées”)

Human beings are reduced to expressing their anguish anonymously, on walls: “Le graffiti sert l’individu de son cri pollué.” There are no dialogues but “dialogues de sourds,” and we witness “un monde sur le déclin”; love itself is mechanized and reduced to a science.

To the “technologie récidive / Orgie qui crée un monde / Architriqué de signaux,” Bouraoui opposes his “Force du Désordre”: “Ma révolte se sacralise.” His sympathy for the “analphabète” is already evident. By the third section, “Acoustiquerie,” he is already predicting “Éruptions volcaniques / Suçant de la

nuit l'amère plénitude." He tries to restore the power of the Verb, drowned by computer programmers: "Je n'ai que des mots / Pour tout dire" ("Vocables engorgés").

"Lave Lévrose," the fourth section, predicts the vision of "Lèvres Femellées de la Liberté" in *Haitivois*. The emphasis is always on human speech as the highest of the art forms, because issued by the breath of life itself. "Pessimistologie" and "Transfusion" use a metaphor of circulation to convey the poet's passion for visceral contact, an image that will be reprised to powerful effect in *Haitivois*.

Part VI, "Génératuerie," is also close to the paradox of *Haitivois*. We have compressed in one word both the theme of the generations (of fertility) and the threat of death — "Tuerie": as in the later book we have love-hate, perception-destruction. "Balançoire Vocale" articulates the relationship between poetry and revolution:

Le verbe  
Suit sans cesse des déviations  
Révolution constante  
Au seuil de l'approbation.

This whole last section culminates with the exhilaration and effervescence of "Tour de Force" and "Acrobaties artistiquées," seeking the "équilibre" of the "Balançoire." The poet seeks a new creation, the Word made flesh, not the neon surrealism of our daily lives:

Où est donc la sombre image  
D'une naissance  
De chair à morsures amidonnées  
De caresses  
Je les veux recréer.

Yet this ambition is what renders the creation vulnerable. As Bouraoui writes in "Entre la Pierre et la Statue une Agonie," there is a real physical struggle between inspiration and execution, between destruction of the old ikons and creation of a new order, and such is the greatness and weakness of art:

Les mots venimeux s'agglutinent et se déchaînent. Hurlement qui arrête le battement du coeur. Le pays de l'esprit aride se peuple de suppositions bannissantes malgré et en dépit du corps-statue, oeuvre d'art à jamais condamnée à être vulnérable.

*Sans Frontières*, the very brief book of poetry immediately preceding *Haitivois*, can be viewed as a transitional work. Published bilingually with translations by Keith Harrison, the work suggests by its very title the author's insistence on freedom and rupture. It is also an attempt to reach a wider Anglophone audience. His dense, clotted style, with its rapid gear shifts and juggling of protean images, invites the reader to participate as an equal in his modern odyssey.

*Haituvois* is a taut, muscular, controlled book of lyric poems, prose poems, and poetic essays that marks a new departure for Bouraoui. Somewhat more accessible, less hermetic, than his earlier work, it seeks to build bridges of understanding between the peoples of Francophone Haiti, the poet's mother land, North Africa, and Canada, specifically. It has broader implications, as well, for countries of the West and of the Third World generally as the latter move from colonial status into the modern, technologized, industrialized universe.

The title, as usual in Bouraoui's works, is a new word forged of disparate elements. Never a mere neologism, his titles invariably explode the text and the reader's perceptions of it. "Haiti," of course, is imbedded in the title, as is the theme of the reader's reaction: "tu vois." In her Preface, Jacqueline Leiner points out that the "calembour-titre, grinçant, populaire" also is a cry, "aïe, tu vois!" There is a possibly more crucial pun, however, in the "haï," literally the love-hate relationship the Haitian artists and people have with their land under the Duvalier dictatorship which rules it. By extension, the hatred is extended to all forms of cultural colonization and domination practiced throughout the world. In this context it is no accident that a Québec publisher should have detected the implications of an acerbic cultural criticism directed at the remains of nineteenth-century imperialism.

The "tu vois" becomes almost a command to the reader to open his mind as well as his eyes and to sense fraternity with the aspirations of people both like and unlike himself. In fact, throughout the work Bouraoui plays with pronouns, shifting, for instance, from "I" to "we" at crucial moments to indicate his empathy with exploited peoples. Finally, "tu vois" is also a pun on "tuer," to kill, and "voix," or voices, a pun which we recollect later in the title of the poem, "Vois les Voies éparpillées des Voix," in which the homonyms underline the connections between perception ("Vois"), the blazing of new paths to diverse peoples ("Voies"), and articulation ("Voix"). The entire work, in fact, becomes an attempt to articulate that refuses all linguistic, as well as social, geographical, religious, and cultural barriers.

"Vois les voies éparpillées des Voix" enriches and enhances the puns in the book title, addressing itself to the "brain drain" from a "terre inachevée" which desperately needs native talent. There are cries of pain from the people; often they take the form of loud radio music which is not an intrusion on privacy, but "Un moyen facile de partager / Le chant et le rêve." Only the poet can articulate these cries, but often there is no constructive response: "Les cris abondent mais l'écho s'absente." These voices finally burst through the eternal plaint of the guitar and throb of the drums. This poem, with its sketches of prisons and soldiers, is more overtly political than any of the others. "Souviens-toi que tu es poussière" is the constant Biblical refrain presented to Haitians. A perfectly lovely, but loaded, image caps the poem:

L'éplucheur d'oranges offre  
 Deux quartiers de soleil  
 A étancher la crainte du passant  
 Remonté par la mécanique  
 Du jugement dernier.

Thus the tactile, erotic, sensual fruit image encapsulates the tropical sun, but at the same time shades over to the "clockwork orange" of modern mechanism, which could bring us all a merciless last judgment. Instead, the poet hopes for "Un poème d'espérance éjaculé / L'amour dans l'orgasme."

**A**LTHOUGH THE EMPHASIS OF THIS COLLECTION is new, as is the more evident social commitment likely to engage a whole new audience, it should present no startling shift to followers of Bouraoui's career. In *Haituvoir, suivi de Antillades*, Bouraoui creates a poem-essay, a new form, in which he dialogues with another people, in particular with their "Voices," their poets or artists. The poet's "I" is somehow less evident than in the other volumes, as he seeks to work his way into the skin and the heart of these people so like and yet so unlike him. The dominant motif is a fraternity which weds Caribbean culture but, at the same time, by cultural comparisons and contrasts, transcends it.

*Haituvoir*, the first and more substantial part of the book, establishes links between such aspects of society in North Africa, Haiti, and Canada as the role of women, superstition and religion, local dialect, and the arts. The poems are grouped thematically and linguistically. The first two, "Vaccine Tam-Tam et Nada Qu'a," and "Les Globules de ton Ile," provide hooks on which the North American reader can hang his perceptions. They set the tone and provide culture shocks to initiate us into a culture for which apparently nothing in our background prepares us. Immersed in this tropical bath, we are invited to perceive with our eyes, skins, and hearts, not with rational, sequential logic. For this reason, the "I" of the poem adopts the persona of a naive North American, probably Canadian, tourist, eventually horrified to discover that he is himself implicated in all this wealth, all this poverty.

The title of "Vaccine Tam-Tam et Nada Qu'a" provides an initial linguistic, as well as cultural, shock. It could be chanted to the beat of African drums or tomtoms. "Pas d'poèblème a Haiti" is the constant message they beat, conditioning the populace. The noise of the drum blocks instead of facilitates communication. The poet reminds us that Canada, so accustomed to see itself as the colonized and not the colonizer (Québec by Anglophones, English Canada by the Americans), is itself an instrument of imperialism in the Third World. "Nada Qu'a" is simply Canada pronounced backwards, with an additional pun on the Spanish

“Nada,” or “Nothing,” a favourite philosophic stance of Ernest Hemingway, that old frequenter of Caribbean islands. The harsh sound of “Nada Qu’a” contrasts the Western world of the “haves” to the ex-colonial “have-nots.” The new colonizers are the tourists housed in luxury hotels blinding them to the tar-paper shacks outside the gates:

On ne meurt pas de faim disent les impérialistes  
On meurt d’abondance de nourriture . . . de  
sur-alimentation.

Bouraoui denounces the tunnel vision of tourists who refuse to look into their own hearts. The humour of the Haitian, the philosophic tolerance and stoicism of “Pas de problème,” is seen as a defence mechanism, a kind of voodoo chant “Servant lieu de religion / Tout est pris à la légère: / seul moyen d’éviter le suicide.” Tropical sunshine, engendering mindless fertility like that of North Africa, will not fill empty bellies, and there is indeed trouble in paradise, which for all its lushness is not far from a Dantesque inferno.

Paradoxically it is all this poverty that also helps engender art; and that thesis is the centre of gravity of this book: “c’est quand les estomacs sont vides que / fleurissent les oeuvres d’art.” There is no art without tension and conflict, as we see in the English Renaissance, the Irish Renaissance, American black literature. Bouraoui could well be describing his own writing, as well as that of the Haitian writers whom he introduces later. African himself in origin, like them, he is at home with “Des couleurs / éclatantes africaines.” Even the “marchandage” of these Haitians is implicitly compared to that in a North African souk, as a means of communication: “Le marchandage est le seul moyen / de s’entre-pénétrer émotionnellement, tactilement, intellectuellement. . . .” It, too, becomes an art, and art is smilingly for sale on every street corner. Bouraoui makes it clear that the new tourist industry is built upon a kind of slave trade — “L’esclavage continue.” There is a subtle shading over, from the “Je” observing to the “nous” of identification with the Haitians, through a shared heritage of language, art, and colonization: “ceux qui nous exploitent.” It is through poetry that he hopes to achieve a “HIATUS” (the all-useful pun on HAITI), to hang as a slave collar around the neck of the tourist industry. The vaccine drum provides a rolling, hypnotic overture and mood piece for the rest of *Haitivois*.

“Les Globules de ton Ile” shows the metamorphosis of world traveller to Haitian, prepared by the pronoun shift in the previous poem: “Je t’ai dans la peau HAITI” — which translates into English as the old Cole Porter lyric, “I’ve got you under my skin.” That the skin is another colour makes the act of penetration beneath the surface essential:

Je t’ai dans la peau  
Parce que je ne peux pas changer de couleur  
Et ma colère est ta colère.



The almost-rhyme of "couleur" and "colère" exacerbates the poet's sense of frustration at the barriers dividing people. Like them, he is bursting with hunger and love, and he draws a parallel with the creative volcanic eruption of *Vésuviade*: "Éruption qui ne dévide jamais le volcan / De mon estomac." In particular, his own memory of colonization makes him identify with "La haine de tes poètes." The metaphor shifts from the appearance, the skin, to the circulation of the blood; from "Je t'ai dans la peau" we move to "Je t'ai dans les veines." Blood is the fitting emblem of equality and democracy, the same colour in all men, the underlying reality and life force.

"Had'ra-Vaudou" is an amalgam of North African superstitions and Haitian voodoo rites; it takes us back to the roots of both cultures and to their folkloristic expression which today continues to serve as a weapon against the oppression of imperialism. The uninitiated could use some notes in the form of vocabulary helps, since the poem utilizes both local dialects and the names of local priests, gods, and presiding spirits. Its language is dense, loaded, rich. The word becomes a totem, an "open sesame," an incantation, permitting transcendence, through the poetic voice, for the fantasies of the two popular imaginations. The poem reverberates to the deep, rich sound of the voodoo drums and the African tomtoms, and we are reminded that Haitian religion represents a local variant on a theme inherited from Africa. As Bouraoui has said, if he travels, "c'est pour comprendre les 'chocs culturels' qui en dérivent, capter la dimension essentiellement humaine de ces pays, bref, me tremper dans de nouveaux bains de valeurs, en espérant projeter par la même occasion la mienne."<sup>5</sup> He underlines his cultural nomadity and plurivocity.

The "démons vivants et visibles" exorcised in this poem are the invaders in paradise, colonized countries being pre-industrial but a kind of playpen for the industrialized nations. Their tropical climate and lush beauty do not feed the inhabitants, but are for sale to the exploiters. Superstition, far from being primitive, has its own logic, giving the individual some sense of control over his own destiny. The magician, the sorcerer walking on coals, sucking blood, eating broken glass, is escaping the reality of daily poverty and sublimating pain itself into "un rêve flamboyant" in the space between life and death; between yesterday and today. (Bouraoui's reference to "le bel Hier" and "L'Aujourd'hui" reminds us of an *engagé* Mallarmé.) Destruction and love, male and female, Haiti and North Africa are fused in the prayers of two peoples to "Auguferaï Dieu du feu / Erzulie Déesse de l'amour." We seem to witness a nightmare, an oneiric vision, in which the dreams of the poor are acted out, even to extracting green bills from a mouth that cannot speak. The T'BAL, talking drum, of Kherkhennah in Tunisia answers to the sounds of the Haitian Mama drums. By the end we have a procession of spirits and gods from the Arabian Nights, Africa, and voodoo

joining hands in a mad dance of “aggressive transcendence”: “Des Djinns Damb-Allah Marabout Papa Legba.”

After the first three poems, which serve as bridges between the *idées forces* of the North American, North African, and Haitian peoples, there is a group of poems about, and dedicated to, individual brother and sister artists who have helped articulate the aspirations of the masses. “Lèvres Femellées de la Liberté” joins the theme of the artist to that of the role of women in the Third World, and is dedicated to four gifted Haitian literary women. The “lèvres,” this time, articulate clearly — they do not swallow swords or broken glass as in a voodoo ceremony. The poet senses a double slavery in the women, political on the one hand, sexual on the other: “Toujours le Mâle-obstacle dresse l’écran / Où tu tisses les mots écorchés de l’étreinte.” Nevertheless the poem begins with the liberating command: “Parle Femme douée du verbe rare délie / Ta Terre par derrière l’esclavage et la mort.” The entire poem turns on the metaphor and reality of the woman’s breath giving voice to her concerns. Imprisoned by the “colossale arrogance du sacré passé,” this “Femme du Tiers-Monde” is invited to join hands with the “I” of the poem and establish a liberating dialogue through the fusion of woman and artist. The revolution may be a “tranquil” one, but it will extirpate the root causes of this double exploitation. Caribbean and African women are sisters in their past and present, and in their quest for liberation. Thus each is addressed as “O Femme riche et pauvre du Tiers-Monde” — poor in the material sense, but rich in perception and the oracular gift of words. Her smile becomes the new, regenerating because intelligent, sun:

Sur les lèvres-ailes du logos  
De nos nations.

The next four poems, to balance “Lèvres Femellées,” are addressed to four male artists. “Génie à Humaniser” is dedicated to Frankétienne, a painter-poet and the author of *Ultravocal*. For Bouraoui, Frankétienne represents a human and literary contact with a kindred soul, between the “rue des esclaves” and the green book (*Ultravocal*), between submission and artistic revolt. Ultra-vocality, it could be said, is at the end of both writers’ quests, though Bouraoui’s has a “modulation africaine” and Frankétienne is “le fils légitime des Caraïbes.” The bearlike Frankétienne, unlike the women poets, gives rein to a “violence sanguine” (confined to the verbal level, to be sure), pushing vocality to the ultra-extreme. He is compared to a bull and a giant, as well as a bear, capable of liberating the “Perles d’Haïti.” Bouraoui urges him to decolonize Haitian literature, which, like North African and to a certain extent Québécois, exalts classical French at the expense of a local tradition. Bouraoui wishes that “l’ivrogne du Tap-Tap me dise / Aimer ton oeuvre au lieu de celle / d’Hugo et de Zola.” He recognizes in the Haitian

poet his own syntactic disruptions and those of the fraternity of Third World poets.

“Projets Fraternels,” addressed to René Philoctète, again underlines the quest for fraternity of a voice trying to make itself heard. Philoctète’s mode is to mythologize and demythologize, to create symbols “pour exorciser la misère du monde,” as opposed to the violent imagery of Frankétienne. Philcotète’s “Iles qui marchent” are heading towards liberation and may point the way for the Third World generally. They become “des flèches libératrices / De ta terre, de nos terres.” Michaux’s opium-induced hallucinations are as nothing compared to the oneiric visions of “NOUS, fils de Dahomey des / Caraïbes, d’Afrique” in our “crises de possession,” a pun encompassing both the poetic divine afflatus and social status as ex-colonial possession. The poet is also a *houngan*, or priest, in the voodoo tradition.

“Partagé” is addressed to René Belance, like Bouraoui himself a poet at the time living in voluntary exile from the mother country, and who is tempted to return like the prodigal son, living a kind of “délire bordant sur la folie.”

“Articulation” (to Rassoul Labuchin) is in many ways a crucial poem, at the end of the first section of the book. All of *Häituvouis* is, after all, about articulation, and this one about communication “dans ma langue sevrée / Violée par ‘nos pères les Gaulois’ ” — in other words, it is about communication in the language of the colonizer. North Africans and sub-Saharan Africans also use the language of the colonizer imposed by force and now become second nature. By implication, the mother country, like the mother language, has been raped. It is a further ironic note that even in Black Africa children are taught that their fathers are the Gauls. Labuchin is viewed as a prophet who returns to Creole in his works, the language of the people and of folk tales; his first name, “Rassoul,” signifies prophet in Arabic. His proper name, in fact, is Yves Médard, so even his artistic identity is a kind of fictional creation, or call to arms. The “chants de la liberté” include then “Chants créoles / Chants Wolof / Chants Arabes / Chants Berbères.” A people returning to its roots depends heavily on an oral tradition and on minority languages. The latter also exercise an influence on literary French or classical Arabic as writers make daring experiments in a mixture of languages, as, for instance, Michel Tremblay does with joul in Québec, Kateb Yacine with Berber and local dialects in North Africa, and Médard-Labuchin with Creole in Haiti. Bouraoui and Labuchin speak for “Des peuples sur le point d’alphabatiser,” so the language of literacy and that of folklore and the oral tradition are found on minarets and crosses, as well as in voodoo and folklore, “En serrant Pierre Loa / Legba et Baron Samedi.” Labuchin, using ancestral Creole as a literary language, rebaptizes and immerses his people in a new-old tongue, in much the same manner as Bouraoui has spoken of “bathing” in different cultures on his travels.

THE COLLECTION INCORPORATES ESSAYS on two of the poets to whom Bouraoui has dedicated his own poems: "L'art de saturer pour raturer" on Frankétienne and "Le Chant glorieux de l'homme total" on Philoctète. It should be noted, however, that Bouraoui's poems dedicated to Frankétienne and Philoctète are also creative-critical efforts and quite consistent with the essays in their insights.

In the first of the two poem-essays, on Frankétienne's *Ultravocal*, the author is seen as the type of resistance to the emasculation of colonized people. Bouraoui perceives Frankétienne's "roman-poème" as somewhat didactic; its nightmarish vision virtually abolishes characterization. The protagonist is mythic, the "medieval shade" of Mac Abre, a devil figure, who reappears from time to time, and mystically makes his first entrance, Bouraoui notes, on page 111, three unities, implying a new trinity. He is a sort of Mac the Knife, who is dangerous sexually as well as physically menacing. There is, according to Bouraoui, a "cohérence interne" in Frankétienne's work in spite of hallucination. Frankétienne attacks the consumer society and technology, in the person of the President of the United States. The role of the poet is perceived as "éclatement," a description that fits Bouraoui at least as well as Frankétienne. Animal totems of an ancient African agrarian or hunting tradition are transformed into the slum rats of a modern urban one. But "plus il y a . . . d'éclatement, plus il y a possibilité de création." In a world overwhelmed by things, communication is possible only in the "intermittences," the empty spaces between. In both his paintings and literary work Frankétienne declares war against naked power based on authority and technology, and war is the road to liberty. Because of its avant-garde quality, Frankétienne's audience is likely limited, but this is generally true of literature rooted in revolutionary ideas, including Bouraoui's own. So closely does Bouraoui identify with Frankétienne's vision that he at times, instead of analyzing his work, assumes his character and weds the contours and poetic rhythms of his work. The poetry is cleverly interspersed with the straightforward academic essay, liberally sprinkled with quotations from Frankétienne's text, and it is the reader, finally, who must fill up the literary space left to him. The latter is challenged to assess his own role, whether as cultural colonizer or colonized.

In the piece on *Ces Iles qui marchent*, Bouraoui views Philoctète's drama of exile. This essay should be of interest to Québécois readers as well, since Philoctète's chosen place of temporary exile was Québec, of which he gives the reader his impressions. His preoccupation with death and destruction is dramatized in Philoctète's four illustrations as well as his poetry. He sees history as "un perpétuel recommencement" from which, unfortunately, we learn little. We are reminded of the Joycean definition of history as a nightmare from which we are trying to awaken. The native land, on the other hand, is not susceptible to rational

thought; it is imaged as a mother country in the guise of a Haitian peasant woman, the whole bathed in an "atmosphère de joie, de fête et de flottement." Philoctète has created a modern epic in which he plays the role of a Haitian Roland who, unlike his predecessor, sounds the horn of poetry to open the eyes of the world to social injustice. We can see why Bouraoui is attracted by his work, for he forges bonds of sympathy with the peoples of Africa, from which the Haitians originally came, and with the Vietnamese.

Philoctète views Canada ambivalently as the "terre des exilés, ses frères, mais aussi terre industrialisée effrayante dans son isolement et son aliénation." He defines this ambivalence beautifully: he is "un enfant terrible des traditions de ma race." A similar ambivalence is highlighted in Bouraoui's attacks on the North American tourists (of whom he is one) in "Vaccine Tam-Tam," in favour of the formerly colonized (of whom he is also one).

*Antillades* is a little book inside a longer book, but its purpose is to expand the Haitian vision to the Caribbean in general and, by extension, to the entire Third World. If the first section seems to take the "microscopic" (that is personal) view for the most part — to be a kind of "novel as history," to borrow Norman Mailer's terms — the second is the telescopic, long, or bird's-eye view — "history as a novel." The "je" seems distanced here, rather than absorbed "under the skins" of his subjects, although the difference is merely a matter of degree or emphasis, not of kind.

"Ces Airs Qu'on Chante Partout" is a tribute to the Martiniquais poet Aimé Césaire ("Ces Airs") who, along with Senghor, pioneered a national consciousness in the Third World. Like Bouraoui's native Tunisia, Martinique is a *plaque tournante*, a "carrefour" of different cultures: "L'Afrique, l'Europe, l'Amérique s'ajustent poliment." The "exubérance verbale" of Césaire is compared to that of the Breton. A political figure as well, Césaire is compared to Senghor and Bourguiba who have both moved from attitudes of revolt to stasis as cultural monuments. Bouraoui's view of Césaire is somewhat sardonic: he is an artist who has been co-opted, consciously or unconsciously, by the establishment. It is the same story on both sides of the Atlantic. As Bouraoui writes of Césaire, "On votera pour lui jusqu'à sa mort."

Parallels are drawn between France's influence over North Africa and its influence over Martinique; both lands are inscribed in a history of slave markets. Césaire, frozen into Buddha-like monumental status, is no longer able to promote social change. There is an ambiguity in the treatment of this man who put Martinique on the artistic map and who was committed to the betterment of his people. For increasingly, Césaire suffered from a cleavage between his role as artist and his political role as man-of-action. It is as if fame and power almost inevitably separate the leader from his people. Martiniquais children, questioned about him today, say, "Césaire connais pas." It is not his fault, but when the

artist or spokesman becomes a monument in his own lifetime, he cannot feel the pulse of his people, because he is surrounded by political aides and buffers who keep the real world at bay.

Even the Martiniquais topography is inscribed in Bouraoui's veins because of its resemblance to his native Maghreb. But the tourist side of the persona is also an exploiter. The "I" appears as a guilt-ridden tourist aware of his own complicity: "Mon tourisme me fait honte moi. . . . Moi le transplanté sur trois vagues." The Frantel and Méridien Hotels stand as visible manifestations of cultural colonization, "Où règnent l'ennui américain / Et le vertige européen de l'arrogance," where food is thrown out while the people outside the gates starve. Ironically, Bouraoui notes, watching pigs rooting in the débris as they have to all eternity, "Rien ne change même chez les innocents." Great men, heroes of the day, may change, but it is always the same for the poor man. In this virtually stagnant society, any hope is deferred to an ever-receding future. As the taxi-driver says (in "Testament de Minuit"), "Il faut des siècles. . . ." Meanwhile, the world belongs to the "péto-nullards," since everything is for sale in the Third World. Only the flora, which one cannot eat, is luxuriant, and the political comment is more explicit in the *Antillades* series. The sole refuge for the masses, in the face of starvation and death, is the imagination:

Et l'imagination se régale  
En dépit des fossoyeurs.

In "Les Dévoreurs," the metaphor of the cannibalization of the turtle (an image of the people helpless on its back) is aimed at both the exploiting tourists and the wealthy Martiniquais who have forgotten their past. The people cringe, fearful, and only the "walls have words" of protest:

Parfois les graffiti crient:  
"Halte au chômage et à l'émigration"  
Reprenant  
Comme un refrain  
le soutien moral d'une hantise.

The torpor and helplessness of the Martiniquais are, by implication, sharply contrasted to the militancy of the Haitians, even though the latter is translated harmlessly (for the moment) into the violence of words and voodoo.

"Excès de Silence," on Martinique, is at the opposite pole from "Vois les Voies," on Haiti. The victim here addressed is even unable to "découvrir [sa] castration." His condition goes beyond alienation to a kind of fugue state of passive acceptance and rule by a reactionary and imitative middle class: "On importera toujours son camembert outre Atlantique / Juste pour dorer son cantique / dans les sourires bourgeois." The poet also exclaims "Inch-Allah!" at

one point, reminding us that more than the Caribbean has been lulled into passive receptivity and victimization:

Inch-Allah! Espagnol ou mauresque  
On le dit à qui veut l'entendre . . . prédire et redire  
Son paradoxe de vouloir naître  
Dans le présent labyrinthe des nuits.

In “Yo Pas Ka Tiré Boyau / Pour Metté Paille” (“Don’t pull out your vitals to replace them with straw”), the mother country sucks the blood of its colony like a leech or vampire: “La France mère patrie s’incruste comme une limace douloureuse / Dans la chair laiteuse des noix / De Coco.” Meanwhile, the library, source of literacy, is hidden among huts while the police proliferate in luxury. And the blind sky looks down on the fertile sugar cane. We are reminded that this is an economy once built on slavery, and that the slavery continues under another name and other exploiters.

Madame Rosette is the type and symbol of the descendant of slaves now become herself a bourgeois colonizer. From her luxurious nest, Madame Rosette explains “La splendeur et la misère des goûts” in an echo of Balzac’s novel, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*. Bouraoui suggests that we are witnessing a form of prostitution on the part of the native bourgeoisie, and that perhaps Madame Rosette is a “madame” in more ways than one. Black herself, she calls her servants “Negroes” and treats them like slaves. Bouraoui establishes an exact parallel with the North African bourgeois who, an Arab himself, scorns his servant as an Arab, “l’Arbi”:

Mais le frère bourgeois appelle Félix  
Son nègre comme le cheikh son l’Arbi.

White exploiters of black slave labour in the nineteenth century, such as Napoleon and Josephine, have been replaced by black exploiters like Madame Rosette — who, ironically, lives in a museum dedicated to the colonial past.

“Salut à Toi Mère Caraïbe” is a reprise of country-as-woman which dominates the book. As in “Je t’ai dans la peau Haïti,” the poet feels her corals circulating through his veins, such is the extent to which he has internalized this alien but similar culture. The people’s pockets cannot be filled with tourists’ smiles. If tourism is the only industry, the people have nothing to sell but themselves and their services — no material productivity in the Marxist sense — and that is another form of slavery. They are thus prevented from coming to grips with their own problems. The poet discovers “Une forêt d’idées / Sur les murs de tes villes avilies” in creole. Hope resides in the future:

Planter et récolter en toute saison  
Dans le champ de l’entente.

It is evident that Bouraoui feels Third World countries will only achieve true independence by breaking out of their isolation and comparing their plights with those of others like themselves. The ikons of French and North African high and popular culture mingle readily with the local in this last outpost of the old French empire. North African couscous supplements Caribbean cooking, and even a local fishing boat bears the name "Monastir," referring to Bourguiba's palatial dwelling. It is, to be sure, difficult to determine whether these ikons derive from a French or North African physical presence, or whether they indicate, as one would hope, an empathy with other cultures in travail.

The diptych of *Haitivois*, followed by *Antillades*, invites the reader to compare and contrast the similar, and yet dissimilar, plights of the Haitian and Martiniquais peoples. Bouraoui offers a poetic fusion, through memory, of their conditions with those of the North Africans (indeed of Africans generally) and the Québécois, presenting at least four facets of colonialism and its aftermath. In Québec, we have a people of French origin who often see themselves as having been conquered by the English, but who strongly maintain their own culture. In North Africa we have a native people who have been conquered and colonized *sur place*, as it were, but who have a clearly defined culture of their own on which the culture of the colonizer has been superimposed to create a new and original blend.

In Haiti and Martinique, by contrast, we have peoples first transplanted from Africa under slavery, who then had an alien French culture imposed on them. But even between the two Caribbean countries there are striking differences. Haiti has been independent since the slave rebellion of Toussaint l'Ouverture in 1804, during the Napoleonic era. The Haitians are a historically rebellious and independent people. Under slavery, the wildest and proudest slaves destined for the American South were first landed and seasoned in Haiti. These were the slaves who sparked the l'Ouverture rebellion. Their descendants have had a lid kept over them by the Duvalier dictatorship. Rebellion, which can be said to be in their blood, can now express itself primarily through the poets and artists, while the people have channelled their expression into local colour and voodoo. In Haiti, Canada (especially Québec because of its proximity and shared language) has also had an important influence.

Martinique and Guadeloupe have been longer under the French hegemony, since 1635, and in 1946 became a *département* of France. In a sense, they have remained *too* French for any form of overt rebellion. Aimé Césaire, who was a revolutionary at the beginning, has had success rebound against him, since his classic status has tended to discourage younger artistic voices.

Poetry is the nearly ideal instrument by which we can move from "attente" to "entente." As Bouraoui said in an interview, "Le poète est toujours constructeur."



... La poésie, la littérature, les arts, bref, les idées forces culturelles métamorphosent subrepticement le monde.”<sup>6</sup>

What he says about René Philoctète’s contribution defines beautifully the goal he is setting himself to achieve, a “prise de conscience.” When the world becomes poetic, we will have a literature of silence, or “the Word made Flesh”:

C’est seulement à ce moment que le poète, et l’homme en général, sera ébloui par tant de beauté et de majesté que la poésie s’effacera pour laisser place à une entente parfaite, à une fête globale, à une résurgence universelle qui ancrera toutes les îles du monde à la racine fugace de la plénitude.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Hédi Bouraoui: *Le Grand Meaulnes*; autobiographie romantique ou nouvelle forme romanesque?” *L’Opinion*, lundi 2 mai 1977, p. 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Radio France, Émission Bibliothèque, 12 avril 1977 à 19 h.
- <sup>3</sup> Marc Alyn, “Un Français en Amérique,” *Le Figaro littéraire*, n° 1241 (2-8 mars 1970), p. 27.
- <sup>4</sup> E. J. Sabiston, “Éclate Module,” *Présence Francophone*, 8 (Printemps 1974), 157.
- <sup>5</sup> “Hédi Bouraoui, citoyen du ‘Village Global’,” *Propos* recueillis par Ridha Kéfi, *Le Temps* (Tunis), samedi 7 mars 1981, pp. 1-2.
- <sup>6</sup> Kéfi interview, p. 3.

**CANADIAN AUTHORS  
PAPERBACKS  
TEXTS**

available at

**the bookstore**

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
2075 WESBROOK PLACE  
VANCOUVER, B.C. V6T 1W5 /228-4741

