

Hédi Bouraoui. *Return to Thyna.* Trans. Elizabeth Sabiston. New York: Editions les Mains Secrètes, 2004. 167 p.

Hédi Bouraoui's novel, originally published as *Retour à Thyna* in 1995, is a poetic and symbolic portrayal of the process of decolonization in Tunisia. As translator Elizabeth Sabiston explains in her illuminating introduction, the central figure in the text, Zitouna, personifies the nation, and the other characters and the very structure of the text represent various forces at play as the land moves from colony to country.

The greatest of these forces is time, and Bouraoui shows us how both past and present define the land through his juxtaposition of ancient and modern versions of Sfax or Taparura, the two names by which the city has been known. The urban and national environments display elements of their ancient Roman roots and the contemporary events that shape the new Tunisia. Meanwhile, most of the chapters take the names of the seven gates of the walled Medina.

The narrative focus is the mysterious killing of Kateb, a friend of the novel's protagonist, the journalist Mansour. Kateb was a revolutionary who made numerous enemies; in addition, he raped Zitouna, his bride-to-be, and endures devastating guilt over his act. Was he murdered, or did he commit suicide? Through the course of the novel we trace the various possible circumstances of his death, and thus gain insights into the country's violent history and labyrinthine politics. All through the text, Zitouna stands as the symbol of the nation's soul, the object of others' love and, tragically, abuse.

It is usually easier to translate a novel than poetry, since the latter depends so heavily on language – on subtle shadings of meaning and untranslatable linguistic play. But a novel like Bouraoui's poses special challenges in its focus on symbol and image rather than dramatic action. Sabiston does a superb job of conveying the evocative atmosphere of the novel; as with the best translations, this one does not feel like a translation. Like so many other poet-novelists – Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Atwood, for example – Bouraoui is more interested in creating a symbolic space than a conventional narrative, and Sabiston is equal to the task of conveying that metaphoric richness in her English version. The novel gains meaning through multiple readings and the assistance of Sabiston's very full explication in her introduction. Indeed, *Return to Thyna* is itself an excellent introduction, for anglophone readers, to the work of one of the most important figures in Maghrebian literature.

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