

International Journal of Francophone Studies

Volume 3 Number 1
ISSN 1368-2679



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Memory and Representation in the Novels of Fawzi Mellah

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Abstract

The article studies the works of one of the most promising Francophone Tunisian writers, the novelist and playwright Fawzi Mellah (born 1947). He has published two plays, *Néron ou les oiseaux de passage* (1974) and *Le palais du non-retour* (1976); an essay, *De l'Unité arabe* (1985) and two novels *Le Conclave des pleureuses* (1988) and *Elissa, la reine vagabonde* (1988). Mellah's novels constitute a tightly linked narrative project. They show a simultaneous questioning and reconstruction of memory as a form of communal and personal meaning in modern Tunisia.

Le Conclave des pleureuses and *Elissa, la reine vagabonde* are different in timeframe, narrative structure and narrative interest. Yet, a close comparative reading reveals that *Elissa* is embedded in *Le Conclave*. Numerous references to Elissa, the Phoenician founder of Carthage, prepare the reader for a full treatment of her story. Allusions to Western misrepresentations of this local foundational legend create the need for the story to be rewritten from a local perspective. Monsieur, a character in *Le Conclave*, enters into an argument with a person who went by the name of Virgil,

auquel il reprochait de défigurer la reine Elissa en l'appelant Didon et en lui prêtant des amours ridicules avec un marin grec: "Il faut appeler les reines par leur nom et s'abstenir de les vieillir de trois siècles!" répétait-il. Qui est cet Énée, sinon un vagabond indigne de notre Elissa qui, elle, savait d'où elle venait.¹

There is a hint that significant issues in Elissa's life have been neglected in existing biographies. Mellah writes: 'Il [Monsieur] relut cent fois l'histoire d'Elissa en pensant y déceler les traces d'un inceste qui aurait fait fuir la grande reine phénicienne, érigeant la mer comme un barrage entre elle et son frère Pygmalion' (p. 175). She is portrayed as worthy of a better representation: 'On ne dénature pas l'histoire d'une bâtisseuse d'empire, on l'accompagne dans sa glorieuse épopée' (p. 176). Elissa can be seen as this attempt to accompany the Queen during her epic journey by 'translating' her own account of the perilous flight from Tyre and the legendary creation of Carthage.² By giving her a voice, the novel extends *Le Conclave* in a significant direction. It provides immediate and extensive access to a myth, which persists in the collective memory of Elissa's modern heirs. As narrative, *Elissa* is, for the most part, a letter addressed by the Queen to her brother Pygmalion before she throws herself into the sacrificial pyre. In the letter, she recounts her journey and questions the possibility of representing her own motivations and ideas. *Le Conclave*, on the other hand, focuses on contemporary life in Tunisia (without ever mentioning the country by name); it involves a larger number of characters and points of view and debates the interface between journalism and literature. The following reading of the two novels focuses on personal and collective memory primarily in *Le Conclave* and analyses representation in *Elissa*. A comparative approach highlights the thread running through both. Other interpretive possibilities and directions for further research are suggested in the course of the paper.

Key Words

Tunisia
Identity
Memory
Myth
Postmodern Narrative
Politics of Representation

1 *Le Conclave des pleureuses* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 154.

2 *Elissa, la reine vagabonde* (Paris: Seuil, 1988) has been translated into English as *Elissa* by Howard Curtis (London: Quartet Books, 1990). In the present essay, all references are to the English version.

3 *Fabula* is defined as by Gerald Prince as 'The set of narrated situations and events in their chronological sequence; the basic story material'. *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 30.

4 The home address is a thinly veiled allusion to the family's connection with popular memory and mythology. The number 'seven,' Phoenicia, and fruitless patience (*Impasse de la Patience*) refer to the beliefs and the plight of the poor and set them against the rootless rich who live in the nameless streets of the 'New Quarter.'

Memory and space

Le Conclave is divided into five chapters (*Biographie d'un saint, L'Oeil-de-Moscou, La Montagne Rouge, Les Pleureuses, Les deux Statues*). Although the narrative does not follow a clear plot line, a *fabula* can be gleaned from the text.³ A journalist is sent to investigate alleged rapes in a city. The family suspected of masterminding the rapes is run by its matriarch, Aïcha-Dinar, and includes six brothers and one sister. Members of the family occupy odd, mostly underground, functions and represent various personalities reflected in their nicknames. Aïcha-Dinar manages the family's finances and occasionally works as a mourner. *Le saint-de-la-parole* is the central figure and the spokesperson for the community. *Tawfik-Grain-de-Sel* is famous for his capacity to melt away into the neighborhood like salt at the sight of a uniform. *Hamma-le-Rouge* is the red-headed brother who keeps German connections and runs underground traffic. *Moha-le-Fou* claims prophetic faculties while *Ali-Doigts-d'Argent* specialises in robbery. *Mustafa-Canari* is a bird trainer with links to the police. The city itself is never named. But those who are familiar with the Tunisian capital would easily recognize the desolate neighbourhood, *La Montagne Rouge (al-Jabal al-Ahmar)* and the two statues representing the former President Habib Bourguiba and the historian Ibn Khaldun, which stood in the main avenue of the city until the early 1990s. Numerous references to other places, events, and people point to the writer's home country.

As the journalist's investigation (*enquête*) progresses and additional potential witnesses and informants are brought in, versions of events and people proliferate. Interwoven with the investigation is the journalist's personal quest (*quête*), which yields sketchy autobiographical detail. We learn that he had personal knowledge of *Le saint-de-la-parole* and his family twenty years before the investigation and that the matriarch had expelled him from the saint's shrine for being too old to mix with women (p.40). Aïcha-Dinar appears to be responsible for what the journalist calls his 'exile masculin.' He says: 'C'est, peut-être, ce désir de remonter aux origines de la grande séparation (et des viols?) qui m'a propulsé au numéro sept de l'impasse de la Patience' (p.42). The saint himself is unable to help since he is not versed in the world of men. Yet he is able to predict the course of the narrative. The saint warns the journalist: 'Ton enquête sur les viols va se rétrécir tandis que ta propre quête va s'élargir' (p.44). The saint understands and foretells the narrative as a whole. *Le Conclave* is as much a personal quest as it is an inquiry into events of public interest. The parallel line of personal narrative continues throughout. While the journalist's role forces him to allow the others to speak, his own voice gradually emerges and expands. By the end of the book the investigation and the personal story have become one and the same. When the journalist meets his nemesis, Aïcha-Dinar, he finds her diminished. He says: 'Cette femme qui présidait aux oracles et qui prédisait les miracles n'est plus aujourd'hui que citoyenne hasardeuse d'une république de rumeurs! La cité l'a-t-elle vomie? Par crainte ou par mépris?' (p. 80). And while he finds himself still unable to express his personal grudge (except when he smokes *kif* and loses all inhibition (p. 124-5), a personal victory is achieved. He says: 'J'ai tu la rumeur intérieure; c'est ma modeste, mon humble victoire' (p. 198). However, the public rumour remains, however, unvanquished.

Acting upon instructions from the Chief Editor, referred to only by the derisory name *L'Oeil-de-Moscou*, the journalist focuses his investigation on the saint's family, who used to live at number seven, *Impasse of Patience* in the Phoenician quarter and who were forced to relocate to the *Montagne Rouge*.⁴ The family, however, leads him to look elsewhere for clues, namely in the 'quartier nouveau' where government employees and the new rich have taken up residence. He gradually discovers that rapes

are indicative of a deeper conflict in the community. The saint's sister, Fatma-la-Lampe, a former singer and beauty reduced to the position of housekeeper in the new quarter, accuses her employers. These, known only as Monsieur and Madame, are the central figures in this part of the story. When Madame's father dies, mourners are hired; and it is in their close conclave (hence the title of the book) that the rift comes to the open. We learn of a split between the proponents of memory, whose emblem is *Le saint-de-la-parole*, and those who support progress, whose mouthpiece is the Chief Editor of the newspaper. They represent opposite sides in the conflict between what the journalist calls 'historians' and 'geographers.' The investigation is designed as part of the attack mounted by the 'geographers' against the proponents of history. Yet the journalist's personal tale is closely related to the latter. He decides not to take part in the attack, opting instead for voluntary exile as the way out. The opposition between history and geography is among the most telling themes in the book. The two statues erected in the main avenue of the city express the relationship between historians and geographers and serve as an aesthetic condensation of their conflicting worldviews.⁵

Conceptions of the community, hopes for its future and political allegiances can be detected in the way the two statues are perceived and accessed. The journalist, the Chief Editor, and the crowd have different views on Ibn Khaldun and Bourguiba and see them from different spaces. The journalist examines them from the newspaper's office, overlooking the main avenue of the city (p. 55). They face each other and seem to go towards one another. But the leader (Bourguiba), who is riding a horse and waving his right arm, appears more confident and more dominant than the historian, portrayed walking while holding an open book. The journalist observes: 'La statue du chef est plus au fond; elle tourne le dos à la mer et fait face à celle de l'historien. Le chef regarde à l'ouest, le savant à l'est' (p. 69). The Chief Editor, who is a historian by training, is expected to side with Ibn Khaldun. We even learn that he was fired from a job for criticising the sculptor for failing to represent the historian on horseback (p. 62). Yet he expresses his kinship to Ibn Khaldun only in as far as the latter can be considered a fellow journalist. He notes that 'Le pouvoir et l'histoire sont fait pour s'ignorer, s'essouffler ou se détruire' (p. 69). The crowd has no direct access to the statues since they are not visible from the Montagne Rouge. But, when confrontation breaks out in the city, the statues appear to polarize the allegiance of the crowd. People are undecided, like a woman who cannot choose between her husband and her lover. Mellah says: 'L'époux lui offre les certitudes de la nation, l'amant les aventures du récit: comment opter sans craindre d'être orphelin?' (p.185).

The statues represent what the book refers to as the geographer and the historian and relate to one another in the way space relates to history, amnesia to memory, statement to narrative, fact to myth and legend. 'La république', the new quarter and L'Oeil-de-Moscou belong to the world of geography, which rules the day and dominates the proponents of history. The saint, the inhabitants of La Montagne Rouge, and the mourners all own time, history, and legend (p. 97). The art of the city, commissioned by the new state, reflects the divide and betrays two different statuses for the memory of the community and its future. The relationship between the statues reflects the advancing power of the statesman and the receding authority of the historian. During the riots, the statesman seems to go forward confidently while the historian appears to seek refuge for his book in the old city (p. 185).⁶

An additional focal point of the community's history and personal perceptions of that history is provided by the figure called *Le saint-de-la-parole*. There are four versions of his life, which reveal a number of appropriations of his story. The book

5 There are other issues, which cannot be treated here. The journalist's personal narrative is dominated by gender identity and male/female relations. Writing itself, in particular the differences and parallels between journalistic reporting and the writing of fiction, is often discussed. There is a continuous and progressive uncertainty about events as well as about the saint's biography.

6 Mellah expresses a concern shared by other compatriots. The poet Muhammad al-Saghayyir Awlad Ahmad writes in 'A Hymn to the Six Days':
Dear Ibn Khaldun! The city is too narrow for your stride.
How often I passed by your cloak of steel...and loathed my time!
Shed the new idol!
And write to the opposite idol what he is worth.
Say what you please:
'Your horse has stopped while your arm continues to welcome the stranger'
Say what you please.
For we are destined to last
And he is doomed to rust.

A Hymn to the Six Days (Tunis: Dimitir, 1988), p. 40. [author's translation].

The government, which took over from Bourguiba in November 1987, a date that coincides curiously with the publication of *Le conclave des pleureuse*, removed Bourguiba's statue and replaced it

with a giant clock. The poet Awlad Ahmad foretells the change in a satirical poem written three years before the event: 'My country is precise, like a clock/ A country where each person is an arm/ And where the individual elects the group' (p. 35). [author's translation]

- 7 A reference to popular resistance to French plans to convert Tunisians into French citizens. Protests included preventing the burial of those who took up French citizenship in Islamic cemeteries, especially in 1932-33. See Muhammad al-Hadi al-Sharif, *Tarikh Tunis [A History of Tunisia]* (Tunis: CERES, 1985), p. 119.

opens with the saint's autobiographical narrative. According to him, he was born in a place where the river meets the sea to a saint father and a mother who was a mourner. He was then immersed in the well of Sarah and Agar where he learned a special language, a mixture of Arabic and Yiddish (p. 14). At the age of fifteen he was circumcised and his family began what he calls 'commerce mystique' (p. 16). Women flocked to see him but when he flew across the ceiling out of fear, the family decided to chain him. Once chained, women began to touch him and tear off his clothes (p. 36). His mother chose to expose him naked to visitors but prevented them from touching him. At that stage, he entered a phase he called the 'abstract saint' whereby he developed the look as his means of communication (p. 26). It was up to his mother to interpret his look and set the appropriate charges. He says: 'D'étape en étape, de prédisposition en apprentissage, je suis devenu, à quarante ans, le saint parfait' (p. 30). Not long after that, the saint lost his sight, and the family's business collapsed. The saint claims that because the community is of Phoenician descent, it is cursed and doomed for mocking the gods. Only a select few keep the memory: 'Nous ne sommes plus que quelques-uns à remonter aux sources brûlantes de l'amnésie: des historiens silencieux, quelques pleureuses sincères (lorsqu'elles exigent un conclave) et certains saints en exil' (p. 47).

The saint's mother and his sister give two different versions of events. The mother calls her account, an authentic and beautiful story (p. 86). She claims that her son was neither blind nor dumb; he simply liked the company of women. When it was time for his circumcision he took refuge in a well. His father shunned him but was punished and died of hiccups. The mother was advised by a Jewish physician either to restrain the boy or to declare him a saint (p. 85). Theologians and healers gave her permission to claim sainthood for her son: 'Ils m'autorisèrent à déclarer mon fils voyant, à condition toutefois qu'ils fût circoncis' (p. 86). At the age of twenty she forced him to be circumcised and moved the family to a different neighborhood. The mother became aware of her son's healing powers and chained him up in order to prevent violence. In her story, she shows awareness that her son possesses a gift, which goes beyond the power to heal. He plays a key social role. She says: 'Mon fils faisait la communauté car il aidait à transformer la douleur qui se pensait unique en destinée commune' (p. 86). The sister, Fatma-la-Lampe, gives a version she describes as the simple and innocent story of her brother and his solitude (p. 119). According to her, he was a voracious reader and a solitary man. In particular, he read about Elissa, in particular ('Il lisait beaucoup de livres sur Elissa la fondatrice de Carthage et sur les guerres puniques.' (p. 118).) Girls liked his company because he knew Phoenician songs. But boys did not accept that. They even pushed him into a well where he caught pneumonia and a speech impediment. As a result, he gave up any hope of becoming a history teacher. As more and more women sought his answers to various queries and concerns, the mother feared trouble, made him undergo a vasectomy and chained him up.

The Chief Editor has, expectedly, a completely unrelated version of the story. He appears to have had direct experience with the saint during the colonial period. He claims that the saint wrote Punic poetry and dedicated it to Elissa, refusing to call her Dido (p. 172). During protests against the burial of Christians in cemeteries reserved for Moslems, the saint refused to collaborate with the Chief Editor.⁷ Their ways parted, and the Editor became convinced that the saint had since lost any claim to history. He says: 'Mais il se voulait historien; et il n'était que conteur' (p. 173).

The saint sees himself as the repository of the community's memory. For the mother, he embodies the sense of a social bonding in a country where the community

is breaking up and where individualism is gaining dominance. The sister, on the other hand, perceives him as the custodian of collective foundational myth and as a poet. The Editor-in-chief, however, denies the saint any tie to history and sees him as a storyteller. Yet the notion of history which emerges from the book does not side with that of the Chief Editor. It defines the historian as the figure who bonds the community together by offering the narrative, which preserves memory and propagates legend. The community finds anchor and voice in its founding myths, living memory and continuous story.

The depth of the rift between the two halves of the community, which manifests itself in an exchange of charges of rape, is reflected in the way both sides relate to their collective memory and how it touches the very basis of their identity. There is a clear and unbridgeable divide between the new quarter of the city and La Montagne Rouge, the saint and the Chief Editor, Aïcha-Dinar and Madame. Their identities stem from different origins and represent themselves in different ways. Aïcha-Dinar sees her identity engraved in her body in the form of tattoos. She rejects the identity card and all other ways of identification adopted by the new state to classify its citizens. She says: 'À l'époque du miel et de la confiance nous n'avions pas besoin de cartes d'identité; le nom du père et les tatouages suffisaient. On peut falsifier une carte d'identité, on ne peut pas déformer un tatouage' (p. 78). When the journalist points out that the citizens of the republic need to be identified in a different way, she replies: 'Ta ville et ta république ne sont que par hasard ... elles cherchent leurs racines et leurs origines. Pour nous, elles sont ici: inscrites sur nos peaux' (p. 78). She perceives such inscriptions as permanent, personal, and limited only by death. The state's inscription, however, is ephemeral, impersonal, and transitory.

The pitfalls of memory and the limits of representation

Even so, while the writer of necessity sides with historians, preservers of memory and creators of narrative, memory itself is often questioned through narrative technique. The juxtaposition of several versions of the same story results, inevitably, in a slipping away of meaning. The saint's biography becomes uncertain as each new version introduces elements of doubt. The variation in versions can of course be attributed to the subjectivity and selectivity of human memory. Yet one may suggest that in *Le Conclave* we not only have biographies or representations of the saint by other characters, but also an autobiography since the saint dictates his story to the narrator.⁸ The saint's own account of events is, however, marred by uncertainties and doubt. He describes the first miracle – flying across the ceiling – in these terms: 'Ce fut mon premier miracle; ou, du moins, c'est ainsi qu'aujourd'hui je me présente mon premier miracle. A moins que ce soit une pure vision, l'un de ces multiples pièges que nous tend la mémoire et que nous nous entêtons à nommer souvenir' (p. 17).⁹ In *Le Conclave*, we begin to realize that memory is unreliable; it plays tricks by blurring the distinction between vision and memory. In *Elissa*, the possibility of self-representation is explored in a more ample manner.

The novel is set in Phoenician times and retells the story of Carthage through a translation of Punic inscriptions. These were presumably found in the ruins of the city and are alleged to be a letter by Elissa herself. The letter reconstructs the Queen's journey in detail, exposes her ideas on leadership and government and dwells on her musings about her motives and dreams. The narrative of the journey combines vivid descriptions of events and places with reflections and ideas. Elissa sets out from Tyre with one hundred men including senators, priests, soldiers and rowers. The dynamics

8 Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as 'Récit retrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité.' *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 14. He adds that autobiographies seek not verisimilitude but resemblance to reality (p. 36). Peter Abbott thinks that the audience for the novel is creative; it takes part in the book while that for the autobiography is analytical. See Peter Abbott, 'Autobiographie, Autography, Fiction: Ground work for a Taxonomy of textual Categories,' *New Literary History*, 19, 3, 1988, p. 608. On the fictional autobiography, see Alain Robbe-Grillet's work, especially *Le miroir qui revient* (Paris: Minuit, 1985) and *Angélique ou l'enchantement* (Paris: Minuit, 1988).

9 In Robbe-Grillet's *Le miroir qui revient*, one character expresses a similar stance. He says: 'Qu'on me comprenne bien: il s'agit seulement ici de dire, d'essayer de dire, comment je voyais les choses autour de moi; ou même, de façon plus objective encore, comment je m'imagine aujourd'hui que je voyais alors les choses' (*Miroir*, p. 47). The relationship between Mellah's work and the Nouveau Roman is quite strong and requires further research. For more on the theory of the New

Novel, see Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Minuit, 1963).

- 10 Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. Charles J. Billson (New York: Dover publications, 1995). For an analysis of the treatment of Elissa's story by Virgil, see Ralph Hexter, 'Sidonian Dido,' in *Innovations of Antiquity*, Ralph Hexter and Daniel Selden, (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1992).

within the fleet change constantly as individuals gradually coalesce into a small community. Elissa uses her skill to keep the community together, dividing roles and practising how to govern. The group's first stop is Cyprus where they are not allowed to stay but are given twenty-seven virgins. The second stop is Sabratha in Libya, a city without music but with curious religious practices. Elissa makes special note of a cathartic communal evening where Gods are erected, pleaded to and abused, and then destroyed and buried. Sabratha is completely devoted to agriculture. An exchange of expertise takes place, navigation skills for agricultural knowledge. Of Elissa's community, two women who have become pregnant, one priest, and two soldiers remain behind in Sabratha.

The following stop is Hadrumet where Elissa is accused of barbarous sacrifice of children. Phoenicians already living in the city are expelled and join her convoy. The fleet then heads for Utica but due to a navigation error ends up at the foot of a 'perfumed hill.' The group likes the place, purchases by tricking Hiarbas, the African King of the region, Hiarbas, and builds Carthage. Hiarbas, keen on assimilating foreigners, asks Elissa for marriage. She accepts in public, but decides privately not to consummate the union out of respect for her dead husband. The marriage acceptance is part of her strategy to protect and preserve her community by creating a matrimonial alliance with the African inhabitants of the area. The architecture, the deity and the communal relations of the new city-state are debated at length and reflected upon at length.

Just as in *Le Conclave*, and running parallel to the main narrative, there is a story of personal anguish and an attempt to disentangle intimate motivations from a desire to serve the public interest. Throughout the account, we learn about Elissa's personal narrative. It seems that, in addition to the political circumstances, there is at the root of her flight a dream, in which she finds herself in a relationship of complicity with, and forbidden desire for, her brother, Pygmalion. In the dream she participates in the murder of her husband and uncle, Acherbas. Elissa also recalls how she and her brother play at dressing in each other's clothes, and reflects on her desire for him. Throughout the letter, the distinction between the two motives becomes blurred, since the journey is portrayed as much a flight for personal and secret reasons as a fleeing from the tyrannical rule of the brother.

Elissa is a multi-layered, complex narrative open to diverse interpretations from a number of theoretical angles. An allegorical reading of the book is conceivable. We can easily draw parallels between this story and events that are chronologically closer to us. One might think of the Arab conquest where the Koran supplanted the indigenous religious narrative in seventh-century Tunisia, or even the French colonial conquest of a country believed to be essentially illiterate and oral. The establishment of the contemporary nation-state offers another direction for interpretation. Elissa's letter can also be seen as a sort of 'mirror-for-princes' addressed to modern-day rulers. The book engages a number of issues including the interface between history and myth, national community and self, and femininity and masculinity. Most relevant here, however, is the reading of *Elissa* as a rewriting of Western representations of Dido, in particular in the Roman epic poem *The Aeneid*.¹⁰

The story of the founder of Carthage is included by Virgil (70-19 BC) among the encounters of Aeneas as he sets out from Troy to fulfill his destiny to build Rome. The story of Dido, who is also referred to as Sidonian Dido or Queen Dido, starts in Book I:

Carthage this realm, Agenor's Tyrian town,
 But Libyans bound it, tribes intractable.
 Here reigns, from Tyre and from her brother fled,
 Queen Dido. Long her sorrows, long and dark;
 But I will tread the surface of the tale. (p. 9)

In the epic she falls in love with Aeneas and adopts Roman culture and deity. Her role in the epic, however, has more to do with Rome than with Carthage or even with history altogether. In *Innovations of Antiquity*, Ralph Hexter, argues that Carthaginian history is made to fit the overall Roman view of the world. Dido in Virgil's poem is not Sidonian (historically speaking) but is part of the Roman imaginary. Her myth is 'buried' in the overall foundational myth of the Roman Empire. For instance, gods are seen in Roman terms: Baal Hammon is taken to be Saturn while Tanit is considered to be Juno (p. 347). Even Dido herself is portrayed as trying to incorporate Roman history and culture into her own city. Hexter concludes: 'Sidonian Dido is the one Dido that Virgil's foundation epic does not present' (p. 357). Mellah's attempt to extricate Elissa from Dido is an effort to represent her from the perspective of a descendant. It proposes the reconstruction of a history which does not fit into a Roman view of the world, one which predates, ignores and challenges any presumed tie. He is convinced that: '“Dido” can hardly be considered worthy of Elissa...' (p. 160). The Queen reflects on the treatment of her own name: 'There will even be poets who will distort it so that it sounds quite ridiculous' (p. 160). Elissa's story in Mellah's book is foundational in its own right: it founds a civilization and originates a myth. Roman civilization and mythology are seen as conquering, alien. In Mellah's version, Tanit is the creation of Elissa alone; and it is the African Hiarbas who devises a fitting symbol for the goddess. The original title Mellah gives his book captures and transforms the Roman meaning of the name. *Elissa, la reine vagabonde* keeps the meaning of Dido, 'wanderer,' but calls the Queen by her name, Elissa (Elisha in Phoenician) and title (Queen).

Yet Mellah's post-colonial aim of reclaiming his history and mythology through rewriting is not as straightforward as it seems. The style of representation makes reclaiming the myth a complex affair. The novel plays on the historical ambiguity surrounding the legendary founder of Carthage in order to create a narrative which operates through processes of doubt and uncertainty. In fact, doubt is embedded in the frame of the story and spreads within Elissa's self-narrative.

In what resembles a prologue called 'By Way of Introduction,' the narrator describes the origin of the story and the process of translating it. About 2200 stelae, believed to contain a letter addressed by Elissa to her brother Pygmalion, were discovered in 1874 by an amateur archaeologist, M. de Sainte-Marie, but were lost at sea. Fortunately, the narrator's grandfather happened to own 250 stelae. The grandfather was translating them into Arabic when he died. He urged his grandson to complete the task: 'Continue the work. Decipher these stelae. Classify them. Give them a voice. Do not give up... Promise me...' (p. 3). It is this promise that the narrator claims to have kept.¹¹ The narrator undermines his own translation by confessing to extensive intervention in the original text. He explains (notice his verbs): 'Here and there, I have had to fill a gap, to imagine a continuation, invent a transition, correct a turn of phrase, emphasize a point, tone down an epithet, qualify a verb, delete a sentence...' (p. 3). Once the translation/recreation is complete, the narrator is left with incomplete fragments. His dilemma is the following: 'As you can imagine, Dido's royal lack of concern threw yours truly into the deepest depression, and gave him his most sleepless nights' (p. 4).

11 The grandfather's intention was to translate the Punic inscriptions into Arabic. His grandson completed the transfer into French. The mediation of Arabic is at the heart of the project from the point of view of language. The relationship between what we might call Mellah's de-Romanisation of Elissa at the narrative level and his attempt to rewrite her story in a romance language, French, is simply too complex to pursue here. To point to what appears to be a contradiction is to ignore the fact that part of Mellah's implied audience is well versed in the Virgilian tradition. Otherwise, the argument that Mellah rewrites Virgil would lose its potency. For a narrative analysis of the novel as a message to Western readers, see Emma Kafalenos's unpublished conference paper, 'Mythmaking as Dialogue: Fawzi Mellah's *Elissa (Re)Tells the Founding of Carthage*.' Mellah, unlike for instance his compatriot Abdelwahad Meddeb, does not dwell on the language of his writing in any explicit way.

12 According to legend, Carthage was built thanks to a trick. Local chiefs allowed Elissa to buy a piece of land the size of an ox's hide. She accepted and then cut up the hide into small pieces, which were used to cover the Byrsa hill on which Carthage was to be built. See David Soren *et al*, *Carthage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990). See *Elissa* pp. 104-5 for Mellah's version of the ruse.

13 Soren writes about Elissa, 'Of course we can never be really sure if she ever lived at all, so romanticized and distorted her story has become over the centuries' (*Carthage*, p. 17).

14 According to McHale the postmodern novel is characterized by the change from the epistemological dominant to the ontological dominant. See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), p. 41. The interest is no longer in how to convey and handle the meaning of a complex situation (the project of the modernist novel) but instead in how radically different realities can coexist, mix up and interact. The subject is no longer treated as stable or fixed but as a moving and ambiguous construction.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

16 Postmodern literary creation is a mere play of signifiers, says Harvey (p. 53). On Postmodern representation, see Linda

He decides to classify the fragments according to his state of mind and his imagination 'on a particular day or night' (p. 5).

However, the striking feature of representation in the book is not so much this irreconcilable distance between the narrator's version and the original letter, as it is the gulf between Elissa's description and the object of her description. Let us read the description (or rather, the process of description) of her fiancé: 'Thin, slight, young, vigorous, beardless, courteous, gentle: seven adjectives intended to give an account of what Hiarbas is' (p. 110). She realizes that 'Hiarbas is not these adjectives' (p. 110). The description does not coincide with the described. It misses him. She explains: 'Inevitably so, for every description misses its object, the object is always either more or less than the words which have served to describe it' (p. 110). The sign does not represent the referent. Elissa says: 'Writing and description are only approximations, ruses and reductions' (p. 111). Convinced of the futility of her attempt, she gives up all description of Hiarbas. She does not want to kill him by describing him (p. 111). Elissa is aware of the limits of language. Yet she writes and she attempts to represent.

Moreover, confusion due to representation may be at the very origin of the city Elissa is credited with founding. The alphabet, mastered, if not invented by the Phoenicians, and completely unknown to the African king Hiarbas, serves Dido's trick well.¹² When she shows him the written document, which represents the borders of the plot on which Carthage is to be built, he reacts with disbelief and suspicion. Elissa writes: 'Between the real object and the written term that signified it, Hiarbas discerned a great deformation, a diabolical transformation which prefigured, perhaps, the day when the world would be drowned beneath a flood of fossilized words' (p. 105). For Hiarbas, writing bears no relation to what he understands and perceives through his senses. He may accept a pictographic representation of reality, but never the alphabet. Hiarbas gave in to writing and Carthage was born – an unreal city. The founding of Carthage designates the victory of the written over the oral, of the sign over the referent, of Phoenicia over Africa. As the name indicates, *Qart Hadasht* is a combination of city (*qart*) and new (*hadasht*). Elissa writes in this regard: 'The city being nothing but a series of signs, novelty will be our sign, our illusion and our paradoxical memory' (p. 124). *Qart Hadasht* would be therefore no more than a dream of newness, a name that is crumbling, deconstructing.

To the question 'what do we know about Elissa?' Mellah substitutes the more postmodern question 'What can we know about Elissa?'¹³ She is heterogeneous, contradictory and unstable. Throughout the book, she continually changes places (she travels from port to port), gender appearance ('The oldest of the priests cut my hair; it was the first time I had worn it short'), and identity (she is queen, city, nation, lover, and myth). Mellah's novel does not reveal hitherto hidden knowledge about Elissa but analyses instead the very ontology of knowledge.¹⁴ To capture the diversity of Elissa's myth would be an attempt to 'represent the unrepresentable.'¹⁵ To search for truth in the various historical versions of Dido and to document the foundation of Carthage in a translation of fragments attributed to Elissa betrays a naïve belief that one fiction is better or more truthful than another. In *Elissa*, description points the reader to writing or the signifier.¹⁶ Narration draws attention to its own ways of functioning as narrative.

Conclusion: a tale of two cities

Mellah maintains throughout *Le Conclave* and *Elissa* an attempt to construct a narrative of the loss of memory in a modern city, Tunis, and the redemptive power of memory in its ancient ancestor, Carthage. *Elissa* is the book of Carthage. It retraces the climactic

journey of its founder. *Le Conclave* is a narrative about contemporary Tunis. It investigates its anti-climatic existence. Carthage and Tunis reflect their founders and their times. Carthage is mysterious, labyrinthine, secretive, perfumed and anchored in water. It is an image of its founder, the 'Queen of the Seas,' who perfumes herself, and guards her secrets (her incestuous desire, her planned suicide, her dreams).¹⁷ Elissa defends her dreams and her secrets to death, offering her body to fire rather than to Hiarbas (p. 139). Carthage is protective of its purity, its ideal and its statues. Baal Hammon and Tanit, a god and a goddess, constitute the focal point of the city and the focus of its community of residents. The city's fortifications suggest openness. Yet its structure forbids conquest. Its conquerors will have to fight their way house-to-house and body-to-body (*corps-à-corps*).¹⁸

The modern counterpart could not be more different. Tunis is nameless, severed from the sea, open to the invader, flat and odourless. It is a bastard construction, with no anchor or roots. It segregates its citizens by means of an anonymous line (Route X), as if its geographers feared the meanings of history and memory and took refuge in meaningless abstract mathematics. And when it names its streets and neighbourhoods, it fails miserably to link memory to name. Its statues polarize loyalties and disfigure history. Tunis is a masculine city, devoid of mystery, temptation and dreams. It is plain, aggressive and practical. Like its arrogant and calculating chief, the city turns its back on the sea, and faces West. It forces its historians to hide in the old city and banishes its citizens to the outskirts (Montagne Rouge), severing their ties with history.¹⁹ The movement from past to present seems a passage from legendary fame to anonymity, from memory to amnesia, and from dream to a shortsighted vision. While Carthage protects its memory and claims it like a treasured child or a cherished dream, Tunis disowns its history and shuns it, like an unwanted child or a disturbing nightmare. While the letter in *Elissa* reconstructs a legendary chastity and a foundational vision the journalist's investigation in *Le Conclave* pieces together shattered dreams. The condemnation is complete: Tunis is a disappointment, a disfigured image of its ancestral past. Mellah attempts a double critique: a rehabilitation of Elissa from reductive and alienating Western representations and a parallel project to rescue her legend from the short-sighted contemporary history dominating the country which bears her legacy.

Notes continued

18 Elissa describes the aim behind the layout of the city: 'And if, by some misfortune, an enemy were to climb them [the walls], he would then quickly lose himself in the narrow, tortuous alleys, and have to ransack the very houses to find the inhabitants; he would need to burn the city to the ground in order to conquer and subjugate it' (p. 131). This is exactly what Romans were forced to do in order to subdue Carthage in the year 146 BC. (*History of Tunisia*, p. 22).

19 The saint's family is relocated from the Phoenician Quarter to Montagne Rouge across Route X. This essay is addressed to A., Impasse du Présent, Quartier de la Mémoire, Tunis.

Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989) and Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1990).

17 There is a significant feminist perspective in the book, which needs to be treated at a length not possible here. Elissa identifies with Carthage and perceives it as a woman's achievement. She says: 'My history is totally as one with my veneration for the community and my founding of Qart Hadasht' (p. 160). And adds: 'At any rate, it was thus that I imagined the new state. It was thus and not otherwise that I wished to dream Qart Hadasht before men built it and spoiled it' (p. 132). Here again, Mellah is in tune with his compatriots writing in Arabic. Jamila al-Majiri celebrates Elissa's role as a woman in Tunisian history in the poem 'Mistress of the Seas'. She writes:

The sea colour turns
more beautiful / when-
ever the Mistress of the
Seas / passes by and
throws a greeting. /
And history acquires a
scent / When it is built
by the dreams of
women. See Jamila al-
Majiri, *Diwan al-Nisa*
[*The Women's Diwan*]
(Tunis: SOTEPA,
1997), p. 92. [author's
translation]