



Hama Hanachi in Tunis (Maria Elena Morató).

Interview with Hamma Hanachi. A Neo-Romantic in the Era of the Virtual

Maria Elena Morató. Journalist and art critic

A journalist and writer with the soul of a poet, Hamma Hanachi is part of that generation of intellectuals who began their professional career in the 1970s, when Tunisia was experiencing a cultural expansion driven by Bourguiba's openness that looked towards the West and, at the same time, still honoured its own roots. The crossroads of cultures that the small North African country has historically been, that *Ifriqiya* that gave its name to an entire continent, made poetics (literary, theatrical, musical and artistic) the starting point for a consolidation of what characterises this country, of the personality that proudly brought together its different pasts to project them towards a future that sought to be at the forefront, in a Mediterranean space that was bringing its shores closer as the culture between them became more interactive... out of respect.

To better understand the complexity of the cultural panorama in Tunisia, straddling North and South, between tradition and contemporaneity, between local and foreign conceptualities and materialities, we examine Hamma Hanachi (Tunis, 1948), a character as discreet as he is enormously active that seems to us like an old-fashioned, broad-spectrum intellectual. Through his profession as a writer, journalist and critic, he has addressed the entire cultural repertoire since the 1980s, whether as an editor in the Tunisian capital or as a European correspondent for newspapers such as *La Presse* or *Le Progrès*. His background as

an unconditional activist at the service of culture and the country, rational as well as passionate, provides us with some guidelines to understand the state of literary creation in Tunisia.

Reflecting personally, Hanachi undertakes an exercise in personal memory, a memory shared by a whole generation who grew up with the stimulating energy of the Société Tunisienne de Diffusion,¹ also fundamental for we foreigners who explore the history and art of the country. The same iconic building that housed it, which closed in 1976, was considered by many as a place of poetic resistance against the oblivion and

1. The role of the main bookstores (many have now gone) was, in this sense, key.

apathy that had been established in the last decade of the 20th-century and, especially, after the failed revolutions of the 21st.²

A Matter of Languages, a Matter of Souls

Maria Elena Morató: You are part of a generation that looked towards Europe and adopted the French language as its own. Why did you choose that language?

Hama Hanachi: Since the appearance of my anthology entitled *elle*, (Contraste Éditions, 2022), there is a question that the local media constantly asks me, and I suppose will continue to ask me, regarding my relationship with the French language and why I have chosen French when in Arabic my poetry could have reached more readers.

It must be said that this fundamental issue did not concern me, in the sense that, being a language that I use a lot, French seems natural to me when I write, less constrained than Arabic, a language in which I almost no longer write. This question, asked innocently without reference to the concept of Arabness as an Arab nation or

supposedly as such,³ gives me, however, the opportunity to return and retrace my first steps, my first encounter with the French language; it opportunely takes me back to the heart of my childhood, to my personal history. My memory, or rather what it has preserved, is responsible for tracing a part of this history. It was in the distant past, I was five or six years old and I was hospitalised in the Pulmonology Department of the Charles Nicolle Hospital, in Tunis, for bronchial dilation, a painless congenital disease that disrupts and makes breathing difficult. Some of the service staff at the hospital were French. I have some remaining memories like a palimpsest. An image came back when I thought about my early childhood, and I would think about it often. It was winter, a season this disease is fond of, and I have the image of a tall, slender nurse, with a dark blue cape over a white apron, white skin with blue eyes – there were very few like that in my neighbourhood in Tunis, the city of my childhood –, a white cap over light hair, two or three words in Arabic, and a generous smile on her mouth. Louise, I think her name was, was affectionate, patient. As soon as she heard the whistle of my insistent cough, she came to sit on the bed and told me short

2. Emna Ben Hamida, "Résonance lumineuse: la réincarnation de la Société Tunisienne de Diffusion", Université de Carthage, *Mémoire d'Architecture*, December 2020.

3. The issue of language has been, for more than a century, one of the controversial and omnipresent issues among the country's intelligentsia. As an example, we could cite the Tunisian poet par excellence and innovator of modern Arabic poetry Abou El Kacem Chebbi (1909-1934), who, despite being familiar with the current of European literary romanticism and critical of the Arab tradition, never wrote in French. His work, misunderstood at first, has been celebrated by different generations since the 1940s.

In the French-Arab dichotomy, the former was considered by many to be a privileged space where the forbidden was tolerated, although other writers think that the issue should focus not on language, but on freedom of expression and self-censorship. Other authors, such as Salah Garmandi, would write their works in both French and Arabic, and even in the Tunisian dialect, thus freeing the language from questions of identity. See: Ridha Mami, "Antología de poesía tunecina contemporánea", *Sial/Contrapunto*, 2019; Leonor Merino, "La escritura de la literatura magrebí de expresión francesa. Territorio de herida", *Estudios humanísticos. Filología*, no. 14, Universidad de León, 1992; and Noureddine Sraieb, "Poésie populaire et résistance en Tunisie", *Les prédicateurs profanes au Maghreb. Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 51, Édisud, 1989.

phrases that, by dint of being repeated and expressed in gestures, I ended up understanding, absorbing in small gulps: “Drink the syrup, little one, this will calm you; the sheet is clean; the towel is wet; the bowl of milk, the pyjamas, the pillow, mum will be here tomorrow...” Her words sounded like refrains of soothing music, until I ended up putting words to things, understanding entire sentences and responding with: “Thank you, madam; the syringe doesn’t hurt me; yes, the milk is hot; I have slept well; time to eat; good night, etc.”

So I gave in, I submitted to that language that became natural, vibrating in Louise’s mouth. I wanted to conquer that continent that is French; how could I do so without the sweetness of Louise’s looks, the cooing of her phrases, her gestures when she carefully tucked me into bed, the use of words that healed and kept company? I told this story to a lover or two, to a couple of close friends, so this is the first time I have glorified the nurse who kept step with my irregular breathing.

M. E. M.: Is that how you came to poetry?

H. H.: Regular or agitated breathing, whistling breath, soothing music... This baggage is not far from what poetry carries with it; so, inevitably, there would be an encounter with it. Later, a maternal uncle, a long-distance sailor, gave me an illustrated Larousse. Ah!, its pink pages darkened by time, its Latin expressions, its long and short terms, its characters, its black and white portraits... I made my morning breakfast and my evening meals with them. I like to believe that my poetic genealogy, my adherence to poetry, my love for reading, the decoding of verses, comes from this illness, its source being a

woman, an anonymous nurse about whom I know little, even about her past in colonial Tunisia. What happened to her? I like to think that I bring her to life in her own language through my poetry.

Projecting the light of those who are absent would become a major theme of my writing. Later, in adolescence, frequenting the sacred monsters of poetry was entirely natural for me: Rimbaud, of course; Hugo; Nerval; Mallarmé; Apollinaire... The essentials, basically.

M. E. M.: What role did school play in the appropriation of a language that was actually the language of “the Other”?

H. H.: And it continues to be the language of the Other, but one adapts without problems. Language is also a rhythm, and rhythm is something we carry in our hearts. My French teachers then were French, attentive to their mission and heirs of the Third Republic, who quoted stanzas from memory with the appropriate energy, fervour and encouragement. They gave me a taste for words, language and poetry.

Europe, that North of Discovery and Adventure

H. H.: Then came the seventies and travel, another time, as if it were a golden age of liberation of thought, of the body, of the sorrows and brokenness of the spirit; the Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels, the wind of freedom of ‘68, the prodigious encounters in Paris, Amsterdam or Istanbul... characters notable for their erudition and modesty. I will cite my compatriot, the novelist, poet

and Islamologist Abdelwahab Meddeb; the Spanish novelist Juan Goytisolo, whom I saw often in Paris thanks to another novelist, the Cuban Severo Sarduy, a specialist in baroque art who appears in one of the poems in my anthology; the discovery of great contemporary artists, prestigious exhibitions, the Pompidou Centre, American painting (Sam Francis, Pollock, Newman), the avant-garde art and literary journals (*Art Vivant*, *Art Press*, *Tel Quel*); visits to the temples of art in Paris, Amsterdam, London, Vienna, etc.; the new American poetry, the Beat generation, the years of militancy – on the left and on the margin of the left – ... I was a sponge who drank water, wine, nectar and all kinds of spiritual liquids in relation with literature and art.

M. E. M.: How was the return to Tunisia after the European adventure?

H. H.: Returning to Tunisia, there were disappointments and a loss of cultural references, years of journalism linked to current cultural events, to artists (some emerging, others conceited). I felt as if I were on a slope of intellectual erosion, a life without reins, with ephemeral and lasting friendships... I lost many of the friends I saw when I was in Belgium; friends with whom I shared reflections on art and poetry and inevitably an ideology. In Tunisia, my new friends came through journalism, a profession that demands urgency in the treatment of current events, particularly artistic ones.

On 12 September 2019 there was a break, a dual departure: that of my mother and that of the writing of my first anthology. These two departures are closely linked, each in its own way; both in their form and in their

spirit they represent the movement of a life. And I feel satisfied, convinced as I am that poetry is movement.

The Poet, Today

M. E. M.: You have said on some occasions that poetry is a text, a writing of extended time, contrasting it with the exercise of journalism, which, by prioritising information, distances us from what is essential. What, then, is the role of the poet? What is the role of a poet like you, whose writings are still mostly unpublished?

H. H.: I am like “an old Indian will never march in single file,” to quote the Belgian Achille Chavée, someone who prefers to sunbathe in the shade. I am where I am not expected, somewhere else, doing what?: “Putting ties around the alphabet,” as Léo Ferré would say.

As the world moves towards its end, towards its ruin, it finds men who want to read and others who push enthusiasts to write. From this point of view, there is certainly nothing ominous about the future of poetry.

Writing about oneself, the work environment, the use of time, the style and the subtleties of one’s own poetry: that is the topic that was proposed to me, a generous gift, quasi-celestial manna that invites me to congratulate myself and encourages me to apply ointments to give shine and splendour to the flesh of my poems. The spirit of the times is in search of celebrity: to be recognised, each artist or writer seeks his or her moment of glory. Social media, television broadcasts and reviews are there, omnipresent, to increase the ego of some and ruin that of others.

Ambitious young people put all their energy and passion into achieving the Grail; with some exceptions, they are the *Rubempré*,⁴ who, glorified by critics and recognised by public opinion reach, the “upper echelon” of society; the not so young, people of my age, have lost their ardour, often their soul, crossing to the essential side of life.

For my part, deep down, I believe that age has equipped me to avoid – as far as possible – fatuity and its conceit; the weight of the years, with its good and especially bad experiences, I believe, densifies the idea that one has of oneself. I am no longer twenty years old, I have no great ambitions to cultivate, no need, therefore, to maintain a pose. I am fine as I am, I would even say that I am perfectly aware that I walk on the margins of life.

M. E. M.: So what is the role of poetry today?

H. H.: Its usefulness is becoming weaker; it is part of the past or, in any case, it is on the way to it. It has been like this since Mallarmé. It continues to live, barely getting by, on the margins of the social movement. It is, more than ever, a tributary of the media, a prisoner of the internet and other social networks. I say clearly: images, visual arts, computers and other current communication tools have conquered the entire space of exchange between humans. The transfer of knowledge – poetic in this case – has yielded to the shock force of communication. The time when a poet like Mahmoud Darwich – how we miss Darwich in these times of war, desolation and death in the Middle East! – filled halls

and even stadiums has definitely ended. It remains to be seen how and where poets are going to reap a portion of glory outside the media. The future, seen from this angle, looks alarming. As they are few in number, increasingly less visible, these vulnerable beings with light in their voices have less chance of being read and known and, above all, they have less chance of being recognised in life. Many of them do not even think about it anymore.

But, let’s say it without pain, this is perhaps where their best fortune is found, their lifeline: the determination to continue writing for themselves; that is, to seek pleasure and delight without measure, in the midst of lament. Their vocation is to suffer; their task is to choose the best word packaging to show the material of the text.

M. E. M.: You have said there is no love without words...

H. H.: Or without literature, and even without poetry. Whatever its form, it carries love within it; deep down, all poets, good or bad, write to satisfy a desire. I think that what must be guessed or discovered in the good poet is the energy provided by his or her spirit to knead the dough – the writing –, to weigh it, let it rise and rest, prepare it, bake it and take it out of the oven and, in short, enjoy the pleasure it provides. I like to share my bread with the “unknown” reader, who I imagine is an educated fan, demanding and complicit at the same time. The poet is not only a baker, I conceive him also taking other roles; he would be an orchestra conductor like

4. Reference to the character Lucien de Rubempré in *The Human Comedy* by Honoré de Balzac.

Claudio Abbado, for example, holding his baton between his fingers, directing Schubert's *Piano Trio No. 2*, that sad and lonely young Viennese man with round iron glasses who thinks of Beethoven, his deaf teacher, with a domed forehead and abundant hair, searching in the rain for his fallen score in the mud.

Listening to that piercing fragment, trying to grasp the right note, is how I wrote the acrostic "Schubertiade". The poet would also be a painter, Tintoretto – father of all Western painting – before his canvas painting Charles V, his protector and the most powerful of the emperors, as a weak soldier on his mount, an ageing mortal. The poet would also be... a poet who carries the weight of pains and joys on his shoulders.

M. E. M.: In your poetry, you cite many musicians, artists and unknown people. What do they mean to you?

H. H.: They are my sources; they have made me, in part, through their poetry, their painted works, their compositions or their friendships and loves. They have all transmitted the beauty of life to me, they have given me moments of happiness, pleasure, joy and also inspiration. The poet is, in my opinion, the product of the people he knows, of his readings, of his experiences – it is banal, but always useful to remember. Everyone contemplates nature, appreciates the temperature of the sea water, observes the flowers in the mountains, admires the light of the sky; poets are not poets until they convert the things seen, their sensations, emotions and

words into phrases, new images, articulated expressions. All these elements pass through them, through the state of their body, spirit and knowledge, through their poetic culture, and they are judged by the result of what they write.

Regarding the characters that have made me who I am, take, for example, the poem in my anthology entitled "Kallima 2", dedicated to Severo Sarduy, who died in 1993, a poet, novelist, Cuban artist, aesthete nourished by art. In an issue of *Art Press* magazine, Sarduy wrote a text about an androgynous Indonesian butterfly with large colourful wings called Kallima – androgyny occupied the author's spirit and writing. I wrote that poem to pay tribute to him and bring him back among us. This is how, as a result of movement, the text passes the baton to the poem. The same happens with the other people cited: the singer Barbara Hendricks in the amphitheatre of El Jem; the poet Salah Stétie in a restaurant in Tunis; the cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton in the Acropolium in Carthage – the old cathedral of Saint Louis –... The poem would seem, therefore, like a piece of bread or a fragment of music, and the reader must appreciate its taste, its roots and its declensions. For example, in recent days, browsing through the anthology *Le marteau sans maître* by René Char, I stopped to savour the short poem "Robustes météores". In the first two verses, he says: "*Dans le bois on écoute bouillir le ver / La chrysalide tournant au clair visage*".⁵ Char had it very easy to attract readers by restating the second verse with *clair*, which rhymes with *ver*, which would have followed the

5. In the wood we listen to the worm boiling / The chrysalis turning toward a clear face.

path of consensus in poetry. But no, Char is rebellious to all conformity and does not take the apparently easy path: he twists the poem and inverts the proposition to invite us to search for the beauty and alteration of music, not only through the rhythm like a shining colour, but through disorder as a nuance that dims that shine. “Not colour, nuance,” said Paul Verlaine.

elle, and the Romanticism that Beats

M. E. M.: Let’s talk a little about the book you have recently published: *elle*. Why that title, why not capitalised?

H. H.: The title is brief, seemingly banal; I realise, in light of the first reactions, that it leaves no one indifferent, which, incidentally, pleases me; I hope it provokes more questions and sparks discussion. The ideal image is a reader who says to the writer: “Wait for him to reflect: a comma is a short breath, how can it be that he stops the sentence underway?... And then *elle*, alone, without him, without the others, who is she?” When you open the anthology you will discover that it is the poet’s mother; you will even see a full-page portrait of her drawn by the writer; you will discover poems that reflect the spirit of the title. As provocation and the search for success are strangers to me, my title is intended to be a declaration of love for three: me (poetry lover), my mother (absent inspiration) and the reader (obviously unknown).

In my old life as a journalist, I was not good on choosing titles – I delegated this task to a colleague, a friend who has now gone. I don’t know why – perhaps it was fate – the title in this case seemed obvious and original

to me. It did not pass through the editorial sieve or the proof-reader; it arose naturally, it emerged from a dream into reality, and here it presents itself modestly, inviting discussion, participation, dialogue, and waiting for exchange.

M. E. M.: Can we talk about concepts such as romantic or lyrical in terms of your poems?

H. H.: As romanticism is outdated, although always protected by its imposing figures, we will say *neo-romantic* to place ourselves in modernity, in the spirit of the evolution of things. Nature evolves, changes, renews itself, and what is not renewed dies. Poetry is no exception. As I am a music lover – which is easy to see in my poems – I listen to fragments of the romantic period every day, without pigeonholing myself into them: Schubert, Brahms, Schuman and the 19th-century French impressionists such as Massenet, Fauré, Debussy, Ravel, etc. Lyrical, certainly, but without adornments or flourishes. There is containment in my poetry, it is visible; there is even a style of short, agitated breathing, that famous breathing that took me back to my hospital stays, to the sanatorium where the pit of eternity awaited.

M. E. M.: And what is the place of pain and nostalgia, always latent in your work?

H. H.: The poet suffers, pain is inevitable. Because of that pain, I started writing the anthology. However, apart from the first chapter dedicated to the absent one – my mother – there are five more chapters in this volume. One of them includes the song of the arpeggiated wind in tender or hurtful forms; another uses acrostics to highlight

admired or loved characters, artists and musicians at their best; a third evokes the fascinating and inspiring island of Djerba; another describes the periods that come and go, leaving traces in memory.

Regarding nostalgia, I want to share Erri de Luca's beautiful definition: "When nostalgia touches you, it is not a lack, it is a presence, it is a visit; people and countries come from far away and keep you company for a while." It is, then, a happy nostalgia that the Neapolitan novelist carries with him, and that I nourish with the help of memories. It gives us feelings of lightness and relieves us of the brevity and fragility of life. This nostalgia is the opposite of that which currently reigns in Tunisia and even in other parts of the world, which is not connected to either the present or the future and through which people as young as twenty evoke and build on a past that they have not known. Not to mention adults who, lacking energy, active life, turn their backs on the present and vomit up the future; an unfortunate nostalgia that I disapprove of and to which I contrast another, light nostalgia, that softens life and reconciles me with death.

Poetry as an Offering

M. E. M.: Your presence is common on social media, where you often present stories or poems as a ritual of offering to your friends and readers. Is that right?

H. H.: Social media, despite its negative aspects, helps... to maintain literary discussions with friends, exchange intellectual information, "interests", with the group. The observations, the encouraging appreciations,

strengthen the hope of believing in poetry. For me, posts are an exercise. I write – almost every day –, I discover the opinions of "friends"; it is an innocent and sometimes useful exercise for people who do not read poetry much... In this respect, the spirit of the tribe must be safeguarded.

M. E. M.: You maintain a constant relationship with your favourite writers and poets. How does this relationship develop? Who are those poets in your pantheon, as you call it?

H. H.: There are many, and they are not enough. They are my fictional and real companions. The beauty of their poetry overwhelms me... It allows me to move forward. I can't name them all because I would never finish. They tell me that my poetry has similarities with Yves Bonnefoy's, but deep down I believe that, for convenience, the reader needs a well-known poet to compare and identify the poetry of another who is not so familiar. The poetry of Bonnefoy – just thinking about it makes me shudder –, that magician we recently lost, fills and intoxicates me. Sometimes I hear his voice, because I was lucky enough to meet him during a concert in the cathedral of Carthage, which was followed by an exquisite discussion about music and poetry, a moment of great joy.

I try to preserve my absorbent nature that retains what I hold in my hands; those poets come to me, numerous and different, as if on a pilgrimage. I read Philippe Jaccottet, whose poetry whispers to me; René Char, who revives me with his energy; the flows of images and theatrical effects of Saint John Perse, which transport me to unknown territories; the fascinating universe of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Éluard or Reverdy, without

overlooking the poets who emerge as soon as poetry is evoked, from Rilke to Holderlin, from Pavese to Rumi, from Akhmatova to García Lorca, from Pessoa to Borges and Ungaretti and others geniuses who tend to be forgotten and many more scandalously dismissed like Georges Perros, to whom I dedicate an acrostic. All this, of course, without mentioning Jean Follain, Adonis, Jacques Dupin, Philippe Delaveau and the current young poets. As I've said, the list is long, endless.

Hamma Hanachi, the journalist who conceives his words with his heart and has taken upon himself the enormous responsibility of honouring not only the meticulous craft of poetry but each and every one of its representatives, overwhelms us with the immensity of his baggage, of his commitment to art and to the safeguarding of an expression that must always fight against pigeonholing.

Hanachi seems to us to be an example of a universalist stance; all the more universal the closer we find him to the global spirit. Hanachi mythologises, exalts, directs us and accompanies us to the Parnassus of words, pampered and adorned with pieces of soul.

If at the beginning we talked about poetics as a starting point for strengthening the nature of Tunisian art, the encounter

with Hamma Hanachi has changed the framework and has taken us along the paths of sensitive experience without time or place. We will have to return to the path of searching for cultural roots through theatre, another of the great pillars of contemporary Tunisian expression... but that will be for another time.

Ton souffle à toi

*Et ton chagrin évanoui, se retourne encore
Contre moi
Sur les quais de nuit, quand, sans rire les
amants choient
Qu'est-il advenu de nos filiations attendues?
Dis
L'erreur du vent, remarque est de finir
toujours mort
Ou encore contre un mur du silence, il s'écrase
Ensuite
Brisé contre les branches, soulevant la terre
Nue. Vois.
Ne t'ais-je pas couvert de poussière de ce vent
Lent? et de lumière
Alors que nul bruit ne troublât la soif d'une
bouche et des lèvres.⁶*

(Poem by Hamma Hanachi from his anthology *elle*,)

6. "Your breath". And your faded sorrow turns again / against me / on the docks of the night when, without laughter, the / lovers pamper each other / What has become of our long-awaited bonds? / Tell me / The mistake of the wind is to end up / always dead / or against a wall of crashed silence / then / broken against the branches, lifting the / naked earth. Look. / Have I not covered you with dust from this / slow wind? And with light / While no rumour disturbed the thirst of a / mouth and lips.