EMERGENCY!
Acknowledgements

Mohamed Hmoudane, Bouchaïb Maoual, Rachid Khaless and Bill Lavender have worked together to make this a beautiful book. I’m indebted to the first three for permission, and to the last for elements of design—both for the present publication and for the future of American publishing. A sabbatical leave from Roger Williams University was also instrumental.
Mohamed Hmoudane is a prominent Moroccan poet (principally), novelist and translator, and is among those—like the widely-known Abdellatif Laâbi—who live in France. With this book, there is some question of Hmoudane’s precarious “destiny,” as one of his characters calls it in *French Dream*—that is, if he still lived in Morocco. If that is overstating the “emergency” (after all, the book was published without incident in Morocco), still we must recognize its assault not only on violent and purblind religious fundamentalism but also on the state (the French title of this book translates as *State of Emergency*) of Moroccan civil society: suspenseful, polemically charged, tilting between expressive and repressive.

So much in Morocco is starkly binary: Muslim and Christian, urban and *montagnard*, revolutionary (from the 1956 push for independence and the Istiqlal party) and ultra-traditional, Berber and Arab, arabophone and francophone, the reading populace and the 47% illiterate, men’s roles and the position of women. The contemporary Mohamed Loakira, a bit older than Hmoudane, has sharpened this dualism in looking at Arab Spring (*et se voile le printemps...*; English title *and the spring is veiled over...*, Diálogos, 2017). Drawing on folklore, Islamic legend and history, much as Hmoudane does, he looks at spring, 2011 as a two-faced God, one of both hope and eventual betrayal. Another rich
contrast: Loakira’s texts often reveal him to be a devout Muslim, while *Emergency!* (whatever Hmoudane’s personal spiritualism) is a frontal attack on Islamic sectarianism and fanaticism.

Even under a monarchy—one that has recently grown somewhat less tolerant—and amid police surveillance and sometimes harsh repression, there are pockets of strength in the Moroccan publishing scene. Newspapers debate issues openly and sometimes criticize the government (not the same thing as criticizing the royals). Exposés of the previous king’s regime pile up in bookstores. And, while Hmoudane could have published this book in France (he publishes with Seuil, L’Harmattan and the recently folded but important La Différence), he published it in Morocco with a bold upstart editor. This house, Virgule Editions, bears watching. Along with Loakira’s work, and major writers such as Abdelaziz Mansouri, it has brought out provocative story collections such as Essam-Eddine Tbeur’s *Rires et insignifiance à Casablanca* and (founding editor of Virgule) Rachid Khaless’s *Absolut hob*. Loakira’s *La Nuit des disgraciés* also shines a harsh light on religious fanaticism, and was published in Morocco (by Marsam).

Another positive sidelight is that English-language publishers are finally open to working with translations beyond those of the best-selling novelist Tahar ben Jelloun. Several of Laâbi’s works are available in English, Ghita El Khayat is in five languages, and the dazzling novelists Ahmed Buonani and Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine (almost completely unknown in the West) are just this year appearing in English.

I do not know. In the end, when I re-read the word destiny that slipped onto the page (above) without my really
thinking the word, if I should melt in tears or laugh out loud, leaping idiotically and banging my head against the wall—it would be best to alternate laughter and tears while wincing—because this word is so associated in my mind with greatness, glory, immortality. It is inappropriate to call “destiny” a bitch of a life led unleashed from day to stumbling day, much of which evaporates in squalid bars—“rat holes,” “delinquent havens,” “places of moral disease”—in shit jobs, when I manage to find one, writhing in a void, in a void…

(French Dream, Editions de La Différence, 2005; my translation; though the title is English, the book is in French).

Here Hmoudane’s novelistic persona describes his “destiny” as “a dog’s life.” And what the poet suggests as the grand connotation of “destiny” is, for writers of his generation, the large picture of post-colonial life: sometimes an exile, sometimes a chosen struggle in France or Spain. This is also Morocco’s destiny, and the present incarnation of colonialism, that is, the unwholesome miasma of neo-colonialist connections to France. Hundreds of North African writers have touched on this subject, with Ben Jelloun specifically describing the destiny of immigrant workers in France (Les Yeux baissés, Seuil, 1991), and Nabile Farès evoking (with linked poems) women “boat-people” trying to reach Europe (Exile: Women’s Turn, Diálogos, 2017). The following is addressed to both France and to the king of “the Years of Lead,” Hassan II: “Alas, a thousand times alas, I’m weak, fallible, and above all very little inclined to be thankful—as I ought—to my benefactors” (Le Ciel, Hassan II et Maman France, Editions de La Différence, 2010). What we take from this is that Hmoudane is a contemporary who
turns a hard eye on the post-colonial world, and spares none of its deceptions, splits in consciousness, demographic divisions. Not all North African writers choose this focus, nor do the majority simultaneously find their targets in Africa and in the grittiest neighborhoods of Europe.

And then there is this book, *Emergency!*, whose poetry is ethereal, rising above the substantives of squalor while still engaging the touch-stones of polemic:

I see
[...]
Blood neighing and
Stirred by dissonance
And I dance
Wallowing in it
With today’s cadavers

The book maintains a tone that is scriptural, prophetic, the tone of a Jeremiad. What Laâbi calls Hmoudane’s “strange ceremony of the word.” This is not simply the elevated tone of poetry generally, but a voice lifted in censure. And it reminds us that Arabic (though this book was written in French) has several registers, including a tone and syntax in classical Arabic that is appropriate for scripture and myth. And at the same time:

With ink weighed like anchor
Distilled
Drunk to the dregs
You’ll see me wander
In impossible cities
You’ll see me adrift
On a heaving sea
With dreams aflame
Hmoudane wants to inveigh against religious fanatics in a language that is airy and often abstract, somewhat like the intangible imagery of Ahmed Barakat (a Moroccan, roughly contemporary with Hmoudane but deceased, who wrote in Arabic; cf. *A Body That Must Rest On Air*, Mindmade Books, 2008). It is as if he wants either to sustain himself above the fray, or to elevate himself to a hieratic or prophetic position—a power position that invokes and catalyzes change.

In this way Hmoudane assumes the burden and the debility of all poets: to be in the right, to know Platonic truth, to see further than others do, and yet to do so only with words, with evanescent imagery. And still it is this phanopoeia, these apparitions, that have beguiling and lasting power. They are the poetic art that interests this translator.

Blood, crystal, and cadavers surge among the less concrete dreams, shadows, tribes. Hard symbols dissolve to emblems, themes dissolve to tropes. As with much modern poetry, the abstract does an unresolved dance with the concrete, rather than complementing it in a logical construction. And this is how, with Hmoudane, ancient sectarianism and swordsmanship in the Middle East become transcendent. The poems achieve a suspended time between the past and the Arab world’s problematic future. The mix of proper names, invective and polemic (through obvious logical jumps and anachronism) become a message no less assertive than the piety of Bilal or Othman: we are overwhelmed by the fragility and absurdity of history’s message, and by the spoof of its overlay on modern society. A good part of poetry’s essence—transformational, metaphorical—
is this dissolving of one message into another, one mode of speech into another, one stark noun into another. So that “message”—or hypotactic “meaning”—as a finality crumbles and its parts (here fundamentalist, historical, revolutionary) are liberated and vital.

And a giant share of the pleasure of translating such work is dropping the English nouns into their places—both on the concrete side and on the abstract—and seeing them enlist themselves in this process.

—Peter Thompson

Note: A Glossary of less familiar terms follows the text, pp. 108-9.
Mohamed Hmoudane

EMERGENCY!

État d’urgence

Translated by
Peter Thompson

Gravures by
Bouchaïb Maoual

DIÁLOGOS
BOOKS
New Orleans
No more words. I inter the dead in my belly. Shouts, drum, dance, dance, dance, dance!

*Rimbaud*

As for the poets, only the wayward follow them. Don’t you see them, wandering in the valleys and speaking those things they do not do?

*Koran*

Ignorance leads to fear, fear leads to hate and hate promotes violence. Such is the equation.

*Averroès*

When it comes to money, the whole world has the same religion.

*Voltaire*
I dance sheathed in wounds
And with corpses and from
My mouth sounds dribbling
The dead are like words
They spread smoke and ash
Over a roadway padded
With bullet shells and shreds
Of severed flesh
I dance bumping my shadows
On windows spattered
By blood and flashing lights
Shivering in the blast of sirens
I dance like a throat-slit leaping
On the night I call forth and enlist
The stars
At the glint of the imminent
Dawn
Over sculpted steps
In no matter what
Evanescent idea
Of granite or of marble
I descend back through
The centuries toward buried cities
Under an alphabet of sand
Sown by the winds
Puffing to my throat’s desire
With ink weighed like anchor
Distilled
Drunk to the dregs
You’ll see me wander
In impossible cities
You’ll see me adrift
On a heaving sea
With dreams aflame
You’ll see me speak
Those things I’ve never really done
You’ll see me lead further astray
The wayward
Who follow me everywhere
Through all eternity