

trine, il est purement et simplement *intraduisible*—*untranslatable*. What adds some comedy to this particular instance is that Jacques Derrida was doing a seminar with this particular text in Paris, using the French—Derrida's German is pretty good, but he prefers to use the French, and when you are a philosopher in France you take Gandillac more or less seriously. So Derrida was basing part of his reading on the "intraduisible," on the untranslatability, until somebody in his seminar (so I'm told) pointed out to him that the correct word was "translatable." I'm sure Derrida could explain that it was the same . . . and I mean that in a positive sense, it *is* the same, but still, it is not the same without some additional explanation.⁵⁴

That "explanation" for how translatability and untranslatability are both the same and not the same thing—an explanation for which we are still waiting—forms part of the tantalizing legacy of deconstructive pedagogy in comparative literature. In 2009, let us propose a seminar topic: "The Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical Problems of Translation (Continued)."

Translation Is/As Play

J. T. Barbarese

In the mid-1990s I was invited to join a group of poets who had been invited to render the corpus of Greek drama into English "versions," or "translations," or "adaptations," to be published by the University of Pennsylvania Press. By the time I got involved (1996), many of the books were out. Among the participants were writers with backgrounds in Greek like me, but I was in the minority, and my Greek was rusty. Many had no background in the Greek language at all, and a couple had little (or faded) interest in classical culture. Some had classical educations like mine—going to high schools where we memorized the first ten lines of *The Odyssey* and sang it back to the tune of *The Stars and Stripes Forever*. None of this, however, mattered. In every case, the participants were encouraged to ignore precedent, since that would discourage the range of talents and hands who had been invited to work on the project.

The unifying element was that each of us was a poet who came to the project with a poet's needs and expectations. When I first spoke to the series editor, I asked if I'd need anything beyond my copy of Liddell and Scott's *Greek Lexicon* and my old copy of *Tutti I Verbi Graeci*. I was told no,

54. De Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" 79–80; italics and ellipses in the original.

that I would not even need those books. Would I be paired with a classicist the way Oxford had married a classicist and a poet back in the seventies, to ensure accountability? No, because this would not be a translation project in the traditional sense. We were poets charged with responding as poets to earlier poetry. The result would be work of critical interpretation as much as anything else. We were urged to build our own translations out of ambient versions still in print. Nobody would be reading over my shoulder and checking for literal or historical accuracy. *Make it new*, in other words, and so we mostly did. Soon after its appearance, the whole series was torpedoed, by a professional classicist in a major review. By the time my *Children of Herakles* appeared in the late summer of 1999, sales were dead.

Since then I have been turning over, again and again, the whole point of literary translation. Later I got emails from another writer, a poet, who said the series was shot down because classicists, now occupying one-person departments where they teach the classics in translation, were obstructionists with agenda. Well, okay, I thought, but their agenda aren't the point but are merely political applications of disciplinary goals. But what were those goals? The point had suddenly shifted from *why translate* to *how translate*, in the traditional sense of the term. Many of us were dealing with "problem plays" like mine, where the lacunae were both ample and critical, and blocked or compounded two very traditional goals: fidelity to an esteemed original and to the audience—in this case, a theater audience. So everyone took a slightly different route: for reasons I spelled out in the introduction to the play, I decided to work in rhymed couplets. Why "translate" when the traditional curricular rationale is no longer supported even by the institutions where well-trained translators seek harbor?

Translation has always been a means of self-preservation. It is not a problem in or of philology so much as psychology—a personal, not a public, service. For writers with no direct "training" as creative writers—I am speaking of myself—credentialing can come through friendships and intimacies with the models that appealed to one after the first encounter in a foreign language. My own "workshop" was a circle of empathies I found pretty much by accident by haunting bookstores and paging through anthologies: Thomas Hardy, A. E. Housman, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman. These went along with high school enthusiasms I learned in the original—Catullus and Homer and that imposed enthusiasm, Virgil, and after a year of sophomore French there followed François Villon, Paul-Marie Verlaine, and Guillaume Apollinaire. The poets I translated were my first writing teachers, and some (Villon especially)

taught me what it meant to be untranslatable. There is such a thing as selfless, artful translation; the contribution of the artist's self to the act of translating, however, has always seemed to me paramount.

Translation in the traditional sense seeks to be a form of psychic or spiritual migration. An attractive idea: the translator is a mere point of departure, and the original is the destination. While there is reciprocity in the exchange, it is always somehow unequal, as if cargo were being handed laterally across the banks of a river, or like double-entry bookkeeping, where all the debts are on the side of the translator, who always owes something to the original. The translator's engagement is with a difference of which his native language is the measure, and that difference is the original itself, reconceived as a historical entity to which the present work owes not only respect but its life. Translation in that older sense, then, is the ultimate application of Eliot's argument in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and of the whole of New Criticism. Translation is basically about literary conventions understood as the coalescence of the literary, the historical, and the social, or, as William Arrowsmith said, "from the original's conventions into a different but analogous convention of your own language."¹ Except for the term *conventions*, which is French structuralist jargon that would have driven off the essentialist Eliot, Arrowsmith's formulation of translation is implicit in the modernist/New Critical idiom.

There are also the obvious and time-honored distinctions among translators, adapters, and writers of imitations (or the adaptation, the translation, and the imitation). Translation attempts to "migrate" into the body of the original by tracing its literal shapes back to some significant meaning. It is work that merges the historical and aesthetic at once: its fidelity is to an originality the translator recognizes as simultaneously prior to and insistently greater than his own; that priority belongs to what came chronologically *before* the translator, who embraces his lack of originality with gusto. It is the Voice that supersedes his voice. The exemplary, if unintended, description of this paradigm is the eleventh chapter of Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, where he describes trying to cobble together from memory Dante's Canto XXVI as he and a young Frenchman named Jean are carrying the morning ration across the camp. Levi himself says he doesn't know why it sprung to his mind, but it did; and as they labor to carry the big cauldron of soup between them without spilling it, it becomes of some

1. William Arrowsmith, "The Lively Conventions of Translation," in *The Craft and Context of Translation*, ed. William Arrowsmith (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1964), 188.

importance for Levi to remember it all and translate it into French for Jean. But he can remember only pieces, and as he remembers, he translates the fragment into French. At length he comes to a triplet that he remembers completely:

“Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance
Your mettle was not made; you were made men,
To follow after knowledge and excellence.”

It was like “hearing it for the first time,” Levi says, “like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am.”² The recollection illuminates his own situation and reminds him of the reach of great poetry. He can go on to feel that day “unhappy in the manner of free men.”³

This is as accurate if accidental a description as you can find of what the translator does: the translator is the servant who humbles himself before the (exalted) original, and the great original chastens and reminds him not quite of who he is as much as of where he comes from. It is the grand imperative that reaches providentially into the word of ordinary language, a transcendence alienated by any attempt to bring it closer. The original gives substance and body to the isolated, meaningless self. The arc of Levi’s chapter (“The Canto of Ulysses”) rises to and falls upon the same point: the concentration camps represented perfected brutality, a perfection worse than Dante’s Hell because Dante’s—where pain is perfected—is only poetry. What irony: the camps existed to eradicate the individual will—that of the troops and the prisoners—and in the process exposed the individual will to its critical role in human survival. So if there is something greater than the self—call it culture or civilization—it must be reconstituted as *art* and out of the savagery and selfishness that are also bases of human expression. Levi’s account suspends subjectivity over history and lets it swing there, perhaps for pedagogical reasons (though it is always easy and sentimentally appealing to assume that pain always comes with a compensating pedagogy). Yet is this not what any translator as such will inevitably do? Surrender the self and personal vision to the tradition embodied in a greater originality than one’s own?

Modernist enterprise, for all its enthusiasm for the past and its

2. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Scribner, 1961), 113. Dante’s original Italian is as follows: “Considerate la vostra semenza / fatti non foste a viver com bruti / ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.”

3. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 76.

“pastness,” altered the traditional role of the translator and seduced the translator into regarding the original as an engine with a certain amount of “play” in it—to use the word the way my father used it when he was winding motors in the basement and installing brakes in his umpteenth used car. The degree of “play” seems to have grown between 1917 and Pound’s *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, when it was discovered or announced, and Louis Zukofsky’s gruesomely unfunny and unentertaining experiments with Catullus in the late 1960s. No need to take a position on the perils of experimentation or the cultural inquests conducted into the success or failure of modernist experiments. Experimentation is as it does. Poets have always “played” with the text until it came out their way. But how surprising that modernism itself shifted the emphasis from translation as a disinterested act of cultural appropriation and of Arnoldian critical disinterestedness—seeing the object as in itself it really is—to something quite different. Why was this? Modernism was really a neo-neoclassicism, an aesthetic neoconservatism cultivated by an almost uniformly well-heeled and well-educated (indeed, Ivy League) elite.⁴ Yet it was also modernism that was behind the “creative adaptation,” or whatever it is called, and that exposed the “play” in the translator’s machine. What is more, as a subgenre of twentieth-century art, playful translation, or creative adaptation, comprehends a lot of poetry, beginning with Pound (from his Canto I to *Cathay* through the “Seafarer”) through William Carlos Williams’s *Kora in Hell* to Pierre Louÿs’s *Songs of Bilitis* right up to and including Robert Lowell’s *Imitations* and, I would argue, wilder formal spin-offs like Gerald Stern’s *American Sonnets*. Creative adaptation takes a fascinating stance toward authority: on the one hand, it respects the past as a repository of works of genius; on the other, its respect is that of a parasite for its host. The adaptor is struggling in a highly conscious and obnoxious way with the meaning of authenticity. He or she is always a poet, which is to say that originality and authenticity are the primary goals, and every visit to the past is a raid.

The translator (in the old sense of the term) undertakes the same struggle but settles out of court: the translator compromises originality in the service of an aboriginal beauty. This compromise is reflected in traditional descriptions of the translator, where translation is described as a kind of treasure hunt, or a salvage or rescue operation (with culture as the buried gold that “gathers the light against it”), or where the translator

4. Cummings, Eliot, Stevens: Harvard; Pound and Williams: Penn; H.D. and Marianne Moore: Bryn Mawr. Hilton Kramer’s *New Criterion*, politically far to the Right, inherits the name of Eliot’s magazine.

admits to his status as willing captive to the past. So Abraham Cowley, in the mid-seventeenth century, said that translators should seek “to supply the lost Excellencies of another Language with the new ones in their own.”⁵ John Dryden, like Caesar, divided the translator’s activity into three parts: *metaphrase* (word-by-word rendition), *paraphrase* (“translation with latitude”), and *imitation*. Dryden’s claim that translators are “bound to” the sense of the original is couched in a powerful metaphor: “But slaves we are, and labour on another man’s plantation; we dress the vineyard, but the wine is the owner’s: if the soil be sometimes barren, then we are sure of being scourged; if it be fruitful, and our care succeeds, we are not thanked; for the proud reader will say, the poor drudge has done his duty . . .”⁶ The point is not that Dryden needs correcting, but that we are past the point where correction is possible. A translator is a drudge. Dryden’s whole approach is relentlessly submissive, implicitly theologized, and as lost to the present as the ancients were to him.

How does it come to be that so savagely conservative an aesthetic movement as modernism stimulated such violent departures from “traditional” practice? Isn’t this kind of snubbing of tradition what got under Irving Babbitt’s skin in *Rousseau and Romanticism*—Babbitt, who taught at Harvard and was Eliot’s teacher—and which still chaps the insoles of the once-contemporary neoformalists? Yet the “break,” if that’s what it was, is one I associate with Pound, and historical ground zero is Pound’s *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, section 1:

My cellar does not date from Numa Pompilius,
Nor bristle with wine jars,
Nor is it equipped with a Frigidaire patent . . .⁷

This is even more delicious in the era of the spell check, which refuses to allow the word *Frigidaire* to appear as Pound wrote it, with a lower-case *f*. The exuberance and panache of Pound’s *Propertius* was so extreme when it appeared that some conservative critics were left anxious, confused, or irritated. Of course, Pound provoked this. When he smuggled the adjective

5. Abraham Cowley, “Pindarique Odes” (1656), in *Poetry and Prose*, Folcroft Library Editions (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 75.

6. John Dryden, “Preface to Ovid’s Epistles Translated by Several Hands (1680),” in *John Dryden, Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, ed. George Watson, vol. 1 (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1962), 268–73.

7. Ezra Pound, *Homage to Sextus Propertius, Personae: The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), 206.

Wordsworthian into one of these poems as a replacement for some Latin pejorative, one critic asserted that Pound was a fool for thinking he had actually found a reference to William Wordsworth in the original. In a letter written to A. R. Orage in 1919, Pound says, “As a Prof. of Latin and example of why Latin poets are not read, as example of why one would like to deliver poets of philologists, [Professor] Hale should be impeccable and without error. He has no claim to refrain from suicide if he errs in any point.”⁸

Along with Propertius there was, for me and others, *Cathay*, that masterwork of creative adaptation and the source of at least two permanent contributions to our poetry (“The River Merchant’s Wife” and “Exile’s Letter”). The motive behind *Propertius* and *Cathay* is itself lost in the admiration for what both works, experiments or not, finally predicted. *Propertius* was silent preparation for *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, a work of extended social satire and literary parody that is Propertian in diction and tone (though its prosody is an imitation of Théophile Gautier’s *Émaux et Camées*). Pound looked opportunistically at Propertius’s situation, which was that of a writer surrounded by literary hotshots growing fat off literary politics and writing about war instead of women (the “new *Iliads*” of poets like Virgil). That’s just the content, however. Some of Pound’s later technical discoveries were stimulated by his playing with Propertius. Take, for instance, the famous quatrain in part 1, section 3, of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, where a series of ironic pairings leads to the astonishing

O bright Apollo,
τιν’ ἀνδρα, τιν’ ἡροα, τινα θεον,
What god, man, or hero
Shall I place a tin wreath upon!⁹

The pun combines a superlative bilingual rhyme (εον / *upon*) with translation, pastiche, and creative adaptation all at once, and without Eliotic footnotes or hand-waving from the author. Who had ever seen anything like this before? Without Propertius there would probably have been no *Mauberley*,

8. Pound to A. R. Orage, London, [April ?], 1919, in *The Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907–1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1950), #160, p. 211. Pound would continue to scold and remind one and all that “I have not done a translation of Propertius. That fool in Chicago took the *Homage* for a translation, despite the mention of Wordsworth and the parodied line from Yeats” (Pound to Felix E. Schelling, Paris, July 8, 1922, in *Letters*, #190, p. 245).

9. Ezra Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, Personae: The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), part 1, section 3, p. 187.

and without *Mauberley*—whether or not anybody still reads it—there would likely not have been *The Waste Land* as we presently have it.

What Pound supplied, then, is not Propertius for readers of Propertius but Propertius for readers of Pound. Not even the Pound of 1917 but the Pound-in-progress. The example is so decisive that I have always wondered whether Pound—obsessed as he claimed to be by the thought of a classically educated America—realized exactly how revolutionary and meta-classical it was. To be clear, there are significant dissenting voices from my position, such as Joseph Brodsky's claim that the "real" Propertius had "a singular disservice done him by Ezra Pound's 'Homage to Sextus Propertius,'" which Brodsky described as "the moronic pastiche of our eternal sophomore enamored of foreign name-dropping." But Pound could only get away with this "because, as regards the literature of antiquity, we are the true barbarians."¹⁰

If Pound did realize the barbaric energy of his *Propertius*, did he care? Probably not, given the evidence of the poetry that he wrote and published from around 1920 on. Not only *Mauberley* but his Canto I, which is mostly an adaptation of a Latin translation of *Odyssey XI*. His example was followed by others, most far more conservative. Eliot's translation of Saint-John Perse's *Anabasis* is formal practice for the *Four Quartets*, even though its energies came from Eliot's religious anxieties. Marianne Moore's *La Fontaine* came later and is a more modest example of professional narcissism; she takes no real liberties because she doesn't have to, her tone and the original's are so oddly harmonized, courtly, coquettish. Her embrace of rhyme and meter (predicted by her youthful practice) suggests that years of counting syllables and laying out rigorous syllabic grids earned her a kind of coming out. The habitual exception to this, or the anomalous example among the modernists, is William Butler Yeats—anomalous because he was indifferent to all music other than his own, and an example in only one poem I can think of, "When you are old and grey."

This list of the liberated includes many others. Robert Bly's versions of Thomas Tranströmer, which came out in the seventies, caused a small furor when it was revealed that Bly had apparently used a Fulbright to do the work without knowing a word of the original, becoming the Jack Gladney of the PoBiz. Yet Bly's translations, however good or bad as such, were more valuable for the original poetry they elicited from Bly. Zukofsky's transliterated or "homophonic" translations of Catullus, which made a huge splash in the mid-sixties, are examples of a translator truly at "play," yet it

10. Joseph Brodsky, "Sextus Propertius," *Wilson Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (Autumn 1993): 87.

is joyless play, or, rather, it changes the rules in order to straddle the divide between "straight" translation and improvisation based purely on phonic elements:

Much a man you are, Naso, and that you much a man it is who comes down: Naso, much you are and pathetic/lascivious.

Multos home es, Naso neque tecum multus homost qui descendit: Naso, multus es et pathicus"¹¹

Homophonic translation, the contemporary name for this, steps back from the subjective brink (pure adaptation) only to fall into the waiting arms of tradition as a kind of rote tracery, the retreat of the individual talent as it surrenders its subjectivity to cultural autism. Zukofsky began as an objectivist and did manage to produce some small fine lovely domestic lyrics as well as his long poem, *A*. The general complaint against his contemporary variants or progeny of Zukofsky and the objectivist experiment such as L*A*N*G*U*A*G*E poetry is that it replaces self-consciousness with language-consciousness and makes a virtue of the very act (or *fact*) of writing as a kind of gleeful unintelligibility. Graphomania is the forced play of the joyless.

Because the obsession of the poet is originality, it makes sense to poets who translate to translate the original into their own idiom, and not the reverse. It is hardly possible to find in the history of aesthetics—certainly not in the body of Victorian-Georgian-modernist criticism—a theoretical sanction for such a view or for the approach that emerges from it. In the red-light district of Freudian criticism, maybe, or in Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, which will always be more useful for poets than for critics and ought to be required reading in all MFA programs. But the contemporary MFA is the institutionalization of careerism, and all theory is moreover parenthetical to the obvious truth: creative intelligences have always translated and often have equated translation with theft—stealing from a parent's wallet and not from the poor box. Wyatt lifted Petrarch into English (and helped to create the English sonnet); Sidney looked in his heart and found an English version of the French alexandrine. Pope's Homer sounds like Homer had read Pope. Of the first-generation English Romantics, William Blake was no polyglot, Wordsworth didn't translate, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge didn't have to because he plagiarized. The second-generation

11. Louis and Celia Zukofsky, trans., *Catullus (Gai Valeri Catulli Veronensis Liber)*, by Gaius Valerius Catullus (London: Cape Goliard Press, 1969).

English Romantics produced at least one great creative linguist in Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose versions of Plato and Sophocles still hold up—his translation of *Symposium* is permanent—but more importantly helped him write *Prometheus Unbound* and his “Defence of Poetry.” If there ever was a line separating an original whose priority was established and unshakable from a “translation” that was the inferior product, that line has been abolished or is at least a good deal more smudged than it was before.

The change is beneficial. I mentioned Shelley’s “overt” translations; Shelley spent many of his last two living (and Italian) years reading *The Comedia* and instead of a translation produced the closest we have to an English terza rima in *Ode to the West Wind* and *The Triumph of Life* (poems that in turn engendered Wallace Stevens and A. R. Ammons). One also wonders whether the view of the translator as a cultural straight man has not become meré cultural nostalgia. Those famous lines from Pound’s *Mauberley*, for instance, depend entirely on the ability of the reader to get the Greek, but before he can the Greek must be spelled correctly. The point of Pound’s serious joke depends on the rhyming of the Greek particle *τιν’* with the English homophone *tin*. This creates an obvious problem, the one that has always dogged modernism and its infatuation with the classics. Thus, in the second edition of Ellman and O’Clair’s *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, which was published in 1988 and hung around for several years, the letter *nu* (*ν*) in *τιν’* was thrice miscomposed into an *upsilon* (*υ*), nullifying the rhyme, botching the joke, and introducing a Greek word that never existed. I was at a convention a couple of years ago and witnessed a panel discussion where two well-meaning academics who had just coedited a new anthology of modernist poetry were circulating copies of their book. Their way of getting around the “problem” of reproducing Greek letters was to transliterate (they claimed) all the Greek into English. This, they said in reply to a question, was their uniform practice throughout the volume. When the sample copy got to me, for the hell of it I went right to the endlessly problematic Pound entries, *The Cantos* and *Mauberley*, which contained transliterated Greek texts, and, lo and behold, the quotations from the Greek in the selections from *The Cantos* were still Greek. The anthologist, challenged on this, confessed that he had no answer. Human indifference may not just rise in proportion to the scale of difficulty but apparently includes proofreading your own work. On the other hand, a product rollout is a product rollout.

Of Hart Crane, whom Lowell called “The Shelley of Our Age,” Kenneth Rexroth wrote, “Hart Crane never learned to speak French and

at the time he wrote . . . *Voyages* he could not read it at all,” and yet “*Voyages*,” Rexroth says, “is by far the best transmission of Rimbaud into English that exists—the purest distillation of the boyish hallucinations of [*Le*] *Bateau Ivre*.”¹² Crane lacked fluency in French, but he had enough of it in high school to follow the Eliot craze right to Jules Laforgue, whom he translated when he was in his early twenties. The result was his three “Locutions des Pierrots,” a tidy, faithful blue book exercise, but one that gets only half of the Laforgian irony—the lower half, the self-deprecating sarcasm. Still, Rexroth’s intuition of a Rimbaud-Crane crypto-connection looks sound to me. Arthur Rimbaud’s poem is a vision of judgment thick with scriptural echoes—*I saw this, I saw that*, each vision surmounting the next—a teenager’s version of John’s Apocalypse. Crane in his own way was a religious poet—like Shelley, like Rimbaud—without the institutional chevrons. Moreover, we know he read Rimbaud, and in a sense his *Voyages II* is the best American version of Rimbaud we may ever have:

—And yet this great wink of eternity,
Of rimless floods, unfettered leewardings,
Samite sheeted and processioned where
Her undinal vast belly moonward bends,
Laughing the wrapt inflections of our love;

Take this Sea, whose diapason knells
On scrolls of silver snowy sentences,
The sceptred terror of whose sessions rends
As her demeanors motion well or ill,
All but the pieties of lovers’ hands.¹³

In his appendix to *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane* (1957), Waldo Frank wrote that Crane was reading Rimbaud along with Christopher Marlowe, John Donne, and Laforgue, all authors on the imagists’ summer reading list, as well as those proscribed by modernism and Ivor Winters—Whitman, Sherwood Anderson, and Herman Melville. “When Rilke became convinced that Valéry was the greatest living poet,” wrote Smith Palmer Bovie, “he dropped everything else and proceeded to translate [Valéry]”¹⁴—and,

12. Kenneth Rexroth, “The Poet as Translator,” in *The Craft and Context of Translation*, 48.

13. *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*, Centennial edition, ed. Marc Simon, with a new introduction by Harold Bloom (New York: Liveright, 2000), 35.

14. Smith Palmer Bovie, “Translation as a Form of Criticism,” in *The Craft and Context of Translation*, 49.

I assume, in the process became Rainer Maria Rilke. Crane had a similar sensibility: thoroughly syncretic, incapacitated by analysis, instinctively elliptical in expression. His work therefore instantly “translates” his influences into something too rich and strange to be called anything but his, yet occasionally a sharp eye (like Rexroth’s, another poet’s) can see fingerprints.

That the personal stake is the decisive one—more so than accuracy or fidelity to the original—is true of all the work that profoundly influences all writers, but poets especially. Nothing is more compelling than your own work; the work you read, you read in order to find the element in it that liberates or illuminates what you’re doing at the time. As Seamus Heaney says, from his experience of having translated *Beowulf*, “The translation should have some accountability. On the other hand, there are occasions when you see something in the jeweler’s window of the other language and say, By God, I’d love to get my hands on that—the smash and grab approach where you rip off the original.”¹⁵ The question is one of fidelity. Fidelity to what? To the original text of the author composing in a different language? To the conventions of usage governing the language into which something is translated? To the formal elements that can be more or less easily described? To a public that nowadays can get its translations through Google? Again, there are dozens of translations of Homer available to readers these days, yet has anybody produced anything as wild—and as darkly Homeric—as Christopher Logue’s *War Music*? Has anyone made Gilgamesh more accessible than Stephen Mitchell?

Writers misconceive their pasts in order to reconceive themselves and translate to find or lose themselves in an original better than what they are but not better than what they hope to be. Maybe it’s going too far to say that translation for poets comes down to half-remembered originals and to the possibility that you must have forgotten the other half for a good reason; nature is your teacher, and your memory is nature. To poets, translation is dining with ghosts who no longer scare you. It is digging the pit and filling it with the barley, wine, and honey of instinct. It is finding your destiny, getting directions home—but rarely a way of determining the direction of the culture to which you happen to belong. For that we have politicians.

15. Seamus Heaney, “Como Conversazione: On Translation,” *Paris Review*, no. 155 (Summer 2000): 259.

Islam and the Myth of Literalism

M. A. R. Habib

At present, much of the so-called Islamic world is engaged in an urgent struggle to define itself. While the Western media is replete with images that link Islam with terrorism and violence, and while Islamic thought and practice in some countries have been dominated by various groups claiming to be “fundamentalist,” there are serious scholars and theologians—in both Eastern and Western countries—who are attempting to combat the clouded portrayals of Islam issuing from both ignorance and blind obedience to fanatical leaders. One of the central concerns of these scholars is the need to engage in a rereading of the various “texts” that form the core of Islamic doctrine and practice: the Qur’an; the Sunnah, or example of the prophet Muhammad; the *hadith*, or sayings of the prophet; the tradition of Shari’ah, or Islamic law; and other crucial concepts such as *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning; and *ijma’*, or consensus.

This essay seeks to contribute to a very lively and fruitful debate on these issues that took shape in the pages of the *Boston Review* (April/