CONVERSATIONS WITH TRANSLATORS: INTERVIEWS WITH JOHN HOLLANDER AND HERBERT MASON

BY EDWIN HONIG

Seeking to engage distinguished translators in spontaneous conversation about their work may partly answer the need for more direct and realistic information on a subject loaded down with prescriptions conveyed by a serenely impersonal ignorance of the practice. Whatever a translator thinks, it simply cannot proceed from a single theory about how to do it. His complex and irrational serving of exigency while calibrating word-by-word minutiae makes him uncomfortable with all theories. Nor do mottoes help unless they muffle the small, crushing voice he hears whispering, "What you're doing is ridiculous because it's absolutely impossible." To which, of course, he must agree immediately, but with a touch of Kafkan paradoxicality, as Willard Trask does, when replying, "Impossible, of course—that's why I do it." Edward Fitzgerald's nonpugnacious preference for "the live dog" over "the dead lion" is not an uncommon hope of translators; stated by one who turned the *Rubáiyát* into an immensely good English poem, the motto even glows a bit.

What is the relation of a man to his work, a work he does well? He must tirst believe that he can do it. But how the belief is sustained through all the self-abnegations of translation and mistranslation is a psychological mystery which translators themselves may be solely capable of revealing. And reveal it they will, if only after the work has been published, when they no longer feel haunted by the dark antagonist of the elusive and lovely text.

Because, evidently, love of the work and its creator, its theme and language, is a substantial sustaining force too. A translator's experience of personal loss and grief, supported by the affirming presence of another artist or friend, as Herbert Mason discovered in preparing his Gilgamesh version, can also keep one going. Crucial as such factors are to his perseverance over the years, they bring about a still more vital effect: that of influencing the special shape the work takes according to the degree of freedom he feels he needs in restoring the text. John Hollander shows how a working translator,

MLN 90 895-920 (1975)

in closely minding, mending, emending, and transcending a text, may learn to become a poet. The same activity enforces the conflation of spirit which makes Jonson or Campion a new Catullus and permits Dante Gabriel Rossetti to assume his namesake by doing the "Stony Sestina," that exceedingly close rendering of the earlier Dante's lines.

Such psycholinguistic and psycholiterary processes are of first importance to an understanding of what gets put into what, and how one literary work actually nurtures another into being. Equally significant now, at a time of extraordinary and prolific translation activity, is that an understanding of these processes may help to end the sterile old battle between the advocates of faithfulness and libertarianism. Nor is it simply true, as the opponents to all polemics on the subject like to say, that what counts in the end is not how the work happened but that it exists. To learn from translators what goes into their efforts reveals the wholly new terrain that lies between letter and spirit when it is truly mapped in the game we call literary creation.

Brown University

A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN HOLLANDER

EH You have done translations and written poems, and have perhaps even been translated. So, to begin, I'd like to have your views on how a translation is made, and if it's possible, to relate this to a theory of translation as I know you've written about it. The distinction is between thinking of translating as a prescriptive exercise and translating as something in the making, a live performance.

It might be best to talk first about your essay in the Brower book,[1] where it appears that you're trying to establish a way of looking at translation which would facilitate thinking of it realistically as a "version" rather than a faithful rendering.

JH Yes. I wrote that a long time ago and, I think, a little brashly. Certainly at too great a length. I was interested in trying to show that any particular literary translation will be a version based on the literary style of the translator. Even if he thinks he is surrendering everything to the meaning that he wants to embody, he will all the more be betraying stylistic conventions, so that the only thing to do is

[1] "Versions, Interpretations, and Performances," by John Hollander, in On *Translation,* ed. Reuben *A.* Brower (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 205-231.

consciously decide upon a stylistic analogue for that of the original and carry the meaning over to that.

EH Interesting, but I don't remember your saying that in your essay.

JH No. In the essay I brought up the difference between Latin prose composition, where there was a correct answer—where you were trying to approximate to Cicero in Latin and did your exercises—and the translating of a Ciceronian sentence into English, which had a great many possible solutions.

EH Yes, I thought that very valuable as a start.

JH In a larger sense, all literary translations are "versions" that way. And what I just said to you was perhaps an afterthought on that essay fifteen years or so later.

EH What's happened to your notion of a "version"?

JH I think it has implications for nontranslative writing as well. I think that a certain amount of self-awareness about style is absolutely necessary in learning how to write by learning ***how*** one is writing. What puts a lot of young poets off their true course is some sense that they're starting from scratch. And the relation of translation to original creative writing in any tradition is rather interesting. These questions have been raised in recent books on the subject. Robert Martin Adams[2] raises that notion. Frederic Will[3] does too.

EH In your essay when you bring in T. S. Eliot and the interpretive style and suggest that translation is interpretation, you evidently situate the whole drift of modernist poetry from Eliot and Pound as partly an active engagement with translation.

JH Well, I won't say that it was all ideological from modernism, although I know I did pick up that idea. No. Before having any real contact with modernism I simply felt obliged to do translations. That is, before I ever did poems of my own. The first undergraduate poems I published were translations of Baudelaire. I felt that translating Baudelaire was a necessary step in an apprenticeship. I don't know why and I don't know who told me.

EH I've often given my writing students exercises in translation or urged them to write versions of poems from other languages.

JH I had written humorous light verse in high school but never did anything I called a poem until after I'd translated Baudelaire.

[2] Robert M. Adams, *Proteus, His Lies, His Truth* (New York, 1973).

[3] Frederic Will, *The Knife in the Stone: Essays in Literary Theory* (The Hague, 1973).

EH I think I now see a relationship, and hope I'm right. As a poet-translator who is forced by practice and teaching the subject to take a theoretical position, I see a connection between what you just said about producing poetry via learning to translate and what you said before about deliberately choosing an analogue in order to make a translation, back of which is also your notion of translation as making versions of the original.

JH I think so, yes.

EH But then you said that you are no longer interested in doing translation.

JH I find myself no longer wanting to translate now.

EH Why is that?

JH I don't know. My last experiences with it were most fortunate. The last things I did were a lot of poems from the Yiddish for an anthology by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg. In the course of that work I discovered the poet Moishe-Leib Halpern, and my translations of him were lucky. More than that, they seemed to help me develop a certain tonal mode in my own poems. That is, what I had to do to translate certain poems of Halpern's, I've now retained as a vocal element. Doing Halpern provided a way of unlocking certain things. It was a most remarkable and fortunate experience. I translated a lot of Yiddish poems. My Yiddish isn't very good. It's learned, a secondary and artificial thing, since nobody spoke Yiddish in my family. But I knew some German and I'd been taught a little Hebrew, and I learned how Germanic Yiddish is transcribed in Hebrew letters. Also, I worked very closely with Irving Howe, who is a friend, and when there were difficulties he would discuss a word or two with me.

EH How well does he know Yiddish?

JH Very well. Perfectly, yes.

EH But it's not "learned" Yiddish.

JH No, it's native. He could point out the resonance of a particular Yiddish word, especially one with a Slavic origin or with a special use. I knew enough language to tell immediately whether it was a Yiddish word or a Hebrew word that had entered into Yiddish. This helped in separating out tone. I'd have to use a high diction, for example, to translate a resonant Hebrew abstraction, then shift to a very vibrant low diction sometimes, for other effects. I knew enough to see that immediately, although I cannot jabber the language. But I felt I didn't trust myself to translate that.

EH Isn't it true that Yiddish (incidentally, I contributed translations to the same Howe-Greenberg anthology) is more of an oral, colloquial language than a literary language? My question is prompted by the fact that I picked up what Yiddish I know in my grandmother's house as a child. I didn't learn it as a literary language though I studied Hebrew in the Talmud Torah.

JH Well, Yiddish has a short literary tradition, nineteenth-century mostly, and of course this foreshortens the poetic tradition in many strange ways.

EH So that in translating Yiddish, for example, one is aware of the vernacular more than if one were translating German. Well, let me go back to something else, and perhaps ahead at the same time. The business of your learning something about the writing of poetry from first translating, then the business latterly of your having given up translation after suddenly making a momentous discovery with Halpern indicate that you have assimilated a great deal. It makes me think again that in the work of other poets—Pound and Eliot, say—translation is a large assimilated element.

JH Oh, it's essential there, but Pound and Eliot are both poets with grave problems of originality and grave problems about confronting their lack of originality. It seems inevitable that they would propound. Like Longfellow they propound a corpus of poetry largely based on translation. Corpus in both cases. They are both, I think, much more like Longfellow than we've admitted.

EH But doing what they did with translation, they paved the way for others to write differently.

JH Well, yes, in one way. As far as I know, our greatest poet in the twentieth century, at least our greatest American poet, never did any translation: Wallace Stevens.

EH But I always felt Stevens had assimilated French.

JH He may intone a lot of French in his poems, but he doesn't sit down and do translations. I've stopped translating because it takes so much time. Also, I think there is so much indifferent verse translation going on now by people who don't have any particular skills in writing English verse but who proceed to translate from languages which they don't know. I am a little ashamed of some translating I have done from languages I don't know well enough. I have never translated from a language I didn't know at all: I won't do that. In the case of some translations of Voznesensky, I have worked from minimal Russian. I worked with Olga Carlisle on those. I did trans-

late from the Russian text except that my Russian text was annotated after hours of going over it with her.

EH But you hadn't studied Russian before?

JH Yes, I'd studied some Russian.

EH So you knew the grammar.

JH I knew the grammar. As I say, I worked from the Russian text, which I could read, and I knew the grammar, but I don't know very much Russian. I know even less now. But I still am a little ashamed of having done that. Except that the versions turned out rather well.

EH I was talking with Aleksis Rannit yesterday, and he illustrated rather pointedly the unexpected and unequal results of knowing and not knowing a language well. Yakobovich, a Russian poet jailed in Siberia for twenty-five years, spent his time there writing version after version after version of *Les Fleurs du Mal.* Aleksis reports that the final results were an abysmal failure. But another Russian poet, Fyodov Sologub, who knew much less French than Yakobovich, did a much quicker and vastly betterjob of translating Baudelaire. So. . .

JH There is another dimension to this matter. A very, very good poet can do a version of something from another language, even if he doesn't know the language. That is, he can write a poem based on somebody else's prose paraphrases of the thing. Out of the prose paraphrases he can make a good poem. But this is purely and simply a matter of the translator's having a certain kind of poetic skill, a very rare thing to find. By and large, I disapprove of my having done translations from a language I didn't know well enough, and want now not to do that any more. I also feel I have done my bit to a degree, that is, helped out in certain projects. That Borges book *(pointing* to *it)* you have there is a unique case. I don't really know Spanish well. I can read it with a dictionary, particularly when it is clear and simple and has as few syntactic problems as Borges's poetry, which I find relatively easy. I did a number of poems because Norman Thomas DiGiovanni approached me, and this all centered on one poem.

Did I tell you that anecdote? It's a little spooky. It's essentially a Borgesian anecdote. About '68 DiGiovanni said that he'd been thinking of various people to assign particular Borges poems to, and he thought that I might like to do the poem about the Golem. I was startled at this because my mother's family traditionally believes that my mother's father's family is descended from the Rabbi of Prague, about whom the Golem stories have circulated. Without telling Di-

Giovanni anything about this, I said, "Yes, all right, I will do the poem."[4] I did it and it came out rather well. I followed the original" meter and rhyme scheme, and the syntax of the poem made it quite easy to do. I could preserve the rhyme of Golem and Gershom Scholem, who is the great commentator on Cabbalism—that's a very Borgesian rhyme, rhyming a myth with its exegete, and I could hold those things over from the original, and it worked out rather well. When the work was over I did want Borges to know that there had been a kind of loop in time. In the same meter of the translation I wrote him a verse letter about having done this, and about the curious historical accident, and everything else.

EH When did you do this—in 1968?

JH Yes. I was in England at the time. This verse letter to Borges I remember starting, "I've never been to Prague, and the last time that I was there, its stones sang in the rain . . ."

EH That's interesting. Here's your translation of the Borges poem on the Golem *(indicating it in the anthology).* I've read it in Spanish but didn't look at your translation. You said you followed the original meter. I remember it as being almost prose. In Spanish there's usually only syllabic count. Did you find accentual meter?

JH Yes, in rhymed quatrains.

EH I mean linear meter.

JH It's a kind of pentameter.

EH *(quoting the first stanza) Si (como el griego afirma en el Cratilo)/El nombre es arquetipo de la cosa,/En la letras de* rosa *esta la rosa/Y todo el Nilo en la palabra Nilo.*

JH Would you say that's according to a syllabic count?

EH Well, it seems also like mixed meters. At any rate, it's rare to find pentameter in the Spanish. One of the things about Borges is that I think he wants to be an English poet.

JH Oh, without question. But he frequently does that in the sonnets. He moves toward a pentameter.

EH O.K. Another question I have for you is really three questions in one. Where or when does the translator, or the translation itself, begin? How does the translation develop? And where does it end? The implication is that the translation doesn't start when you put your pencil to paper, but before that. What do you think?

JH Well, I think we're talking about poetic translation.

[4] "The Golem," translated by John Hollander, in *Selected* Poems *1923-1967,* by Jorge Luis Borges, ed. N. T. DiGiovanni (New York, 1972), pp. 111-115.

EH Yes, we'll limit ourselves to that, because it's easier to talk about, maybe.

JH It would start with a sense of what shape, what form, the finished product is going to have. One of the confusing things about this matter in the modernist tradition is that the poem-format for English that Pound virtually invented looks as if it were a prose paragraph. That is, a kind of Poundian free verse in end-stopped lines he used for the Chinese poems, for example. Now that's become a format for poems. And so one has to be aware of that as an alternative and a possibility too. There has to be some notion of how the shape is to be carried over or what it is to be carried over into. That is, when you've finished, what it will be and what it will look like. I'm not saying a verse form necessarily precedes the translation, but something like it does—an overall sense of form which may have surfaced, with clear surface manifestations. Or it may be a deeper, more abstract sense of form. You could say, "Well, I know this is written in complicated stanza structures, but I'm going to do it in one blob because there is something that I want to get out of it that is best represented by that." That's a formal idea, just as with writing a poem something happens like that. By which I suppose I mean that doing a translation is very like doing a poem.

EH Right. I'd imagine you'd think so. I want to know about one particular area now. You spoke of translating sonnets, and you thought of the job as that of writing an equivalent or correspondent sonnet.

JH Well, that was because it was Borges, and because of what the form meant to him, I thought it important to get that relation to the English sonnet into my translation, although I could certainly conceive of translating some other poet's sonnet in another language and not trying to keep that form. On principle I don't think one should trash the poem. It's the problem of finding a viable analogue, and in so many traditions there are viable analogues. There's one of putting French into English, and that tradition involves substituting pentameters for the alexandrines. Now any translation of a contemporary French poem which doesn't have anything palpable to do with earlier French formal conventions, nevertheless still has to draw on the history of that relationship, and this is the difference between a good and a not-so-good translation. In some languages there are no traditions at all of bringing things over, in which case the problem is a very different one.

EH That's a good point.

JH Translating from some languages into English, even though they have a long literary tradition, might well be the same as translating from a textless language. And translating from a textless language is a totally different process, I would think. It now seems very popular among a lot of people who despise textuality and despise tradition.

EH You mean as from American Indian languages?

JH Yes.

EH A lot of that *is* being done nowadays.

JH Yes, it's being done—done by people who don't know the languages at all.

EH Mostly, yes.

JH And it's a very safe kind of hack work. Also its ideological content is sufficiently belligerent to give the piece an edge. There's something politically ideological about translating American Indian poetry, and that sort of thing. I don't mean the very careful versions done for the Department of the Interior or the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

EH I understand the Smithsonian Institution Reports or Transactions usually serve as a base for many of the translations of Indian poetry.

JH Yes, and I'm thinking of the whole idea of versifying them. They are versified into the flagrant gestures of what are called naked forms, I believe, by some of the practitioners, which simply means the received style of the moment. Professor Harold Bloom of Yale compares W. S. Merwin to Longfellow interestingly with respect to two notions. One is that both of them based a large part of their work on translations. And, secondly, that both wrote—that is, helped create and then wrote—in what was the received style of their time. If you look at magazine verse from the 1860's and '70's in America, in *Godey's Ladies' Book, Peterson's Magazine,* and that sort of thing, all of it will be imitation Longfellow. And, similarly, if you look at poetry magazines today, a lot of it is imitation Merwin. Now the relation of that to translation I think is very interesting. You see, I think Longfellow's *Hiawatha* is an example of just the thing we're talking about. It's taken to be "Indian" but based on the Kalevala. Yet the meter comes not from the Kalevala, which Longfellow couldn't read—he didn't know a word of Finnish; it comes from a German translation which converts the octosyllabics of the Finnish into

trochaic tetrameter, a pounding meter in German. You know the one that Heine used unrhymed for so many poems. That's where the heavy beat comes from, because in the Finnish you can't really say it's trochaics . . .

EH What kind of meter would you call it?

JH The Finnish?

EH No, *Hiawatha.*

JH *Hiawatha* is trochaic tetrameter unrhymed.

EH You know, it now occurs to me that you're also speaking of the meter of Pound's First Canto, "and then went down to the ships. . ."

JH Well, there, in the First Canto, Pound is playing. Originally a lot more of it was iambic pentameter. In the original draft of that canto it's almost pure Browning, going on page after page after page, all Browning. Then Pound jumped back and developed the notion, but just in the First Canto as we now have it — or particularly there — the notion that there was an analogue for him in the two parts of the possible hexameter line, separated by a caesura, and the two parts of the Germanic line, the Germanic four-stressed line, separated by the scholar's artificial line-break in the text. You know he'd been interested in the relation between visual format and a structural marker very early, which is why he takes Cavalcanti's *endecasillabo* line and writes it on the page in three successive lines, each one three successive line thirds — each one shoved over one step to the right so as to give you the three lifts.

EH It's a line divided into three distinct parts.

JH That's right. But descending. Written in three lines descending toward the right. For example, it would be like taking the first line . . .

EH It's what Williams does.

JH Well, Williams probably copied that variable-foot *format* from Pound's earlier use, except that what Williams says about the variable foot is sheer garbage. It doesn't make any sense. What Pound did was to see that relation. It would be a little bit like taking the first line of Dante's *Inferno* and writing it as three lines: *Nel mezzoldel camminldi nostra vita,* which would show the three lifts of the Italian hendecasyllabic line. He did that with a couple of Dante things, and so got interested in the original format. What he finally came to was a meter which is the six cut in half that way, stacked this way, sometimes echoing against the four-stressed line — and then every once in a while he'll have an absolutely pure hexameter come out. *Ear, ear for the sea surge. Murmur of old men's* voices — which is an accentual Homeric line.

EH I was thinking, there may be some connection between *Hiawatha* and Pound's early meter in the *Cantos.* O.K. Let me just go on to the psychological matter of where the translation begins and how it proceeds and ends. Obviously it's different each time. When you decide to do a poem, if you're not being commissioned to do one, out of love for a poem or poet, do you have anything to say about that experience?

JH That's interesting. In going on with you about translating, I've been talking about some rather formal, commissioned translating. In some of my recent poems I have embedded translations. But those are thefts, as it were, not formal translations. For example, I have a poem in my last book which is an expansion—I simply call it "After Callimachus." It's an expansion of an epigram of Callimachus but it's been changed—it's put into a different metrical frame. Some of the imagery is changed and expanded. It's an imitation, just the way a lot of seventeenth-century English poems are imitations of Catullus, not strict ones by any means. But that sort of thing started out naturally and differently because it wasn't done with the task of translating in mind. It was just preserving something. And I have done this with bits and passages of poetry in the past—just put them in. Well, for example, I once did a half-translation, half mistranslation-adaptation of a great little poem of Holderlin's.

EH How did that start?

JH That started simply by my wanting to get inside the Holderlin poem, which I've known a good part of my literate life.

EH But you'd never translated it?

JH No, I'd never translated it. And, to begin with, I found myself playing with a mistranslation of it. In my version, the third line is not a literal translation of the German, it's a mistranslation, which produces a new image. I'm interested in that. And so I translated some of it, then in the middle wrote about five lines, completely mine but just generated by the translation, then continued by closing off the translation. I used the piece as the dedicatory poem of my book, *The Night Mirror.* But when it was published in the *Partisan Review,* without any identification, an angry letter came in from somebody claiming that I had stolen it from Hölderlin, which amused me, because it's one of the most famous poems in German. I suppose I've done this sort of thing a few times.

EH We're talking in some way about the old idea that all writing is a kind of collaboration. And maybe now it's time the sterile polemics and argumentation induced by the question of being faithful to the

original is countered by showing that one form of faithfulness is a matter of doing a new work.

JH In some cases a great new work comes from a terribly faithful translation. I can think of one in English where a great English poem in translation is made of a great Italian poem. And that is Rossetti's translation of Dante's "Stony Sestina". Just a plain masterpiece. It's one of the greatest English poems of the nineteenth century, and very accurate as a translation.

EH Nineteenth-century translators of that stature — Rossetti, Longfellow, Fitzgerald — actually had a great deal more on the ball than most twentieth-century English and American translators.

JH Oh, I think so. Rossetti, particularly in that very very great poem. It's because of what the poem's about. I mean it's for all the right reasons — one of those sestinas in which the terminal words make up a poem in themselves-ombra, *colli,* erba, *verde, pietra,* donna ("shade," "hills," "grass," "green," "stone," "lady") — and really give you a distillation of the poem, and he could keep those and work with them. The Rossetti poem is not certainly the most allegorized reading of Dante, but an unallegorized reading of the poem would be the obsessive one for Rossetti in his own imaginative, erotic mythology, and it was an absolutely perfect thing for him to do and he did it magnificently. I have used some lines from that poem and some lines from Pound — and, mind you, the Rossetti was done in the 1850's or '60's. I gave both to students without identifying the poems and said one is by a pre-Raphaelite poet, the other is by Ezra Pound, who believed in precision.

EH That's a good trick!

JH And naturally they all assumed that Rossetti was the real poet, and the Pound manner limping, lumpy, fussy.

EH I want to ask you more about the question of a unified theory of translation, a theory which would accord with the practice of translators and present an imaginative confrontation of the possibilities. What you were telling me about your own practice is very close . . .

JH Well, the theory of translation would have to be a theory of literature in general.

EH Yes, all right.

JH And I think this is a point that Adams[5] gets to and a point that Steiner[6] doesn't get to in his, for me, disappointing book.

[5] Adams, op. cit.

[6] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York, *1975).*

EH Well, Steiner in his second chapter, I think, is more imaginative. At any rate, one of those early chapters goes into the question of the mystic notion of language having originated in the first word of God. The attractive thing there is that the idea allows for the work of translation to be considered as much an original as the primary text is, where both are striving to achieve something like the lost but reconstituted word.

JH Yes, but I much prefer to read Milton on that subject: the invocations to Books One or Three of Paradise Lost go into that.

EH You have a point.

JH I think all one can do in surveys of that kind is to look at what translations have actually been done by which people under what circumstances for what purposes, and generalize from that. I think that's very interesting. For example, I think you could give in fairly concrete linguistic terms some of the reasons why for an English speaker the Douai Bible in French sounds silly. One thing Steiner doesn't go into which is absolutely essential to literary translation, is the whole question of what the Germans call "Sprachgefiihl," the language sense you have. What is it about speaking English that makes you think . . . —well, put it this way: I say to a graduate student, "I want to give you some English monosyllables and I want you to tell me whether they're French or Germanic in origin," and I give him a list including the wordpush. Without thinking, he might say, "Well, that's German." But of course it isn't.

EH Push?

JH Yes. But he assumes it's German for good reason. It's part of the Sprachgefühl of English.

EH So Steiner does not . . .

JH Wait, just a second. So Sprachgefiihl is very important for things of this kind. Lichtenberg has a great aphorism: He says, "A donkey is a horse translated into Dutch." Now, that is funny if you're a speaker of (A) German or (B) English. Otherwise it isn't funny, because Dutch is for speakers of both English and German something like a recognizable but too highly distorted version of their language.

EH Yes.

JH Dutch is midway between German and English in that respect, so that the relation between correct horse and bungled donkey is like the relation: correct English or German, bungled Dutch. You see. Now matters of this sort are very interesting. They would lead one in English to say, "Oh, the Douai Bible, I'll just pick a passage from the Old Testament and read it in French and it sounds very funny. It

sounds as if it weren't serious." These are interesting linguistic questions, but ones that Steiner doesn't go into.

I think that certain canonical translations in the history of certain languages and literature, have a great shaping force. The English Bible has had effects on the structure of English poetry that have *nothing* to do with doctrine. For example, if I were trying to write a book on translation (and I would not attempt to do so) one thing I would comment on would be this — a simple tiny matter, but with vast consequences for English poetry. The King James translators handled a particular Hebrew syntactic problem in one way rather than another: the so-called Hebrew construct-state, which puts two nouns in a certain relation to each other. Hebrew is uninflected, but the two nouns are put together in a combinatorial way, and it's not a specifically genitive relationship, so that for example: literally in Hebrew you say "house of the book," for *school;* it should be translated in the German or Greek mode of English as "book-house," and it has that sense of book house. It does not have the genitive sense of "books' house," you see. Nevertheless, we have another option for combination in English from the Germanic or the Greek, which are the same, and that is the French, the romance tradition, which is to make a phrase out of it, "House of the book." Now that "of the" is very ambiguous in English. It could be a genitive construction or it could be a partitive one, and the King James translators, using that partitive construction throughout, thus generate implicit allegorizations and personifications. Take the phrase "the house of the book." It is a house in which the book dwells, it is the house that belongs to the book, it is the house infused with the book, it is the house which is itself a trope for the book. You see?

EH Right.

JH Whenever you have those constructions in the King James Bible, then you have a part allegorization. It's what gives the Bible its poetic richness all the time and is a basic building block of English poetic vocabulary; so that when you end up with a phrase, a resonant phrase in Wallace Stevens, say, like "the malady of the quotidian," you ask, "Well, what does that mean? Does it mean that the *fact* that there's a quotidian which is in itself a malady? Or, does it mean that the quotidian brings particular maladies of its own with it?" And of course it means both, and of course Stevens is playing on that resonant ambivalence of the construction which is traceable to the Bible.

EH Yes.

JH So now that's a . . .

EH But you're also saying by saying that, and going back now, it's an illustration of saying that to have a unified theory of translation means nothing more nor less than a theory of literature.

JH It "means nothing more nor less?" No. Put it this way: a theory of literature is a necessary, perhaps insufficient, condition for a theory of translation, but I think a theory of translation is part of the theory of literature.

EH But in the example from the King James Bible, you're also talking about the style, the literary style, of English verse and its products into our own time.

JH No. I would go on to talk about the literary style of English verse by saying that a construction, "house of the book," rather than "the book-house" lends itself more to accentual syllabic verse, to regular iambic verse, with few inversions, than does the Germanic-Greek recompounding, which gives you a lot more spondees.

EH All right.

JH And you'll notice that as new words come into English—say with the Industrial Revolution—you get a lot more words that will be spelled with hyphens and that will be spondaic, because they will be that kind of compound. Mr. Fulton invented a steamboat, which was stressed bunk-bunk, (like names, John Smith)—*steámbóat.* Those compounds tend to show the boundaries of the iambic alternation. One of the things that happens, of course, is that when steamboat eventually gets to be an accepted compound, the secondary stress is removed, and it becomes stressed on the first syllable. That's how you know the compound has become a thing, and say steamboat.

EH Do you think that for the theorist of translation there is something to be gained from a study of linguistics? I know you have been a student of linguistics.

JH No, I'm not, though I learned a little about it.

EH Well, I was thinking of transformational theories, like Chomsky's. Steiner thinks that he has to answer or contend with Chomsky. How do you feel about that?

JH I'd rather not talk about Steiner and Chomsky because Chomsky has made clear what he feels about Steiner's understanding of his work.

EH All right.

JH I think linguistics is very important. I don't necessarily mean

that one particular mode of analysis of one set of problems in one philosophical context is what linguistics is. Since I'm not a linguist, I'm free not to have to worry about what the boundaries of the subject are. I think historical grammar is very important: knowledge of the structures of language, knowledge of the relations between grammatical change and semantic change are very important, and the relations that those things have to trope are very important. I mean, I do think that we should know—because it's part of the life of poetry to deal with this—something about how, when the Indo-European languages began to be studied, one inevitable conclusion was that there had originally been a small stock of words, and that these had numerically expanded by processes of trope. That's certainly a very nineteenth-century theory; it looks most like biological recapitulation—that is, that in the ontogeny of a particular bit of synchronic metaphor, the phylogeny of the history of the language has been recapitulated, et cetera, et cetera. Well, I think that these matters are certainly important, yes.

EH So the thing . . .

JH Look, Milton uses a phenomenon of etymology as a very important figure throughout *Paradise Lost.* The relation between the primary quality of the meaning of a word that we ordinarily use and an antithetical kind of primary quality, that of its prior etymological meaning, and how these come up against each other, are for him a basic metaphor of the then and the now, of the fallen and the unfallen.

EH Right, exactly. So one can say with Milton, without being Milton, that there's a way of approaching the subject of translation in terms of an imaginative adaptation of theories of literature, in the general sense, and particular linguistic theories.

JH Yes, I think the truest poetry is the most feigning, and probably the most satisfactory and effective translations will have the virtue of being appropriate to their literary and historical milieus. A certain kind of accuracy—one of definition, one sense of what accuracy means—has been appropriate to certain aspects of modernism, but there are great loose, free, adaptative translations. Compare Ben Jonson's and Campion's versions of the Catullus poem, the *vivamus mea Lesbia atque amemus,* which do totally different things with it. I mean, Campion translates the first few lines, comes to the line, "the ever-during night" (the *nox est perpetua una dormienda),* "the one

ever-during night," has that as his line, and loves it so much that he takes it as a refrain, and builds a new poem in two successive strophes; using that as a refrain, he leaves Catullus and writes a wonderful little poem of his own that ends up with that fine image of "When I die I want people to be screwing all over my tomb, et cetera." He gets to it by starting from Catullus, and then taking off, having seen the resonance of one particular line. Ben Jonson moves right through it and does something else. However, you have these two great Catullan versions, and that's an age, of course, in which people dwelled so much with classical texts that they could do what they wanted with them. In one sense, to let somebody know what Martial is really like, I would send him not to any particular translations of Martial but to J. V. Cunningham's *Epigrams,* even ones that aren't direct. Cunningham has translated some of Martial, but some of his own original ones are absolutely *it.* They're the best ever, the best resuscitations of that kind of thing ever done.

EH Well, you seem to be saying again, or in another way, something that we started with: namely, that so much of the activity of translation is implicit in the learning of how to produce poems, and doing that is a completely self-educating process.

JH Oh, yes, absolutely.

EH There is something else that goes on, which has gone on—since when? You mentioned Campion and Jonson's reworkings of Catullus. That's one example.

JH Look in English the experimental aspect of the problem starts not with Chaucer getting French into English, but with Wyatt trying to get Petrarch into English and not knowing how. It really starts there with that kind of experiment, and then is repeated again and again in the history of English poetry. Sidney doing it, getting into Petrarch successfully . . .

EH You mean by getting into Petrarch, not only the sonnet but. . .

JH I'm talking about the sonnets.

EH The form?

JH I'm talking about the form and the diction.

EH What about the subject?

JH Well, the first getting of the subject into English occurs in *Troilus and Criseyde.* There is an inset bit, which is actually a translation of one of the Petrarch *rzme* there. But it didn't have consequences of that kind; it wasn't the same thing. It wasn't Petrarchan,

but the first Petrarchan attempt till Sidney, and then Surrey solves the problem immediately thereafter, and gets it right, and with his good ear manages to decide that the iambic pentameter line is the one to do the hendecasyllable in, although Wyatt tried every possible kind of thing as a way to do it. I mean, those poems are truly experimental and Wyatt possibly didn't know-what he was doing.

But this problem, whether it's one kind of technical problem at one level or another, is really at the heart of the matter and keeps going through. Tennyson has so much of the Greek and Latin poetry that it just keeps flowing out all the time, and so many poets as different as Dryden and Tennyson have in common, say, the Vergil in their heads. When Dryden writes that beautiful elegy to John Oldham and when he ends up with that beautiful line, "Then night and gloomy death encompass thee around," he is doing a free translation of a line in the Sixth Book of the Aeneid that he himself translates a little more accurately and tightly in another place when he actually does the Vergil. But he feels free simply to do that, whether it is—as the late Ben Brower said—whether in Pope it is a poetry of allusion, allusion as a kind of trope in itself, or whether it is simply there; it is built into the language. Now, does one call that formal translation, that kind of allusion, or not, or what?

EH Well, you're talking about the business of the poet, I suppose.

JH I think that's always there, and I think as Adams pointed out there is such a thing as translating from earlier phases of English into our own.

EH Yes.

JH And I don't mean just Pope's formal redoings of Donne's Satires, and things like that, you see. I mean simply keeping the continuity of the language going.

EH Yes. One common device is to ask students to translate Shakespeare into modern verse without knowing whether in the beginning they know anything about Shakespeare or much about modern verse. Assuming they knew a little about both, they would then begin to see that there's a problem, or what the problems are. Then, also, you feel that certain crucial texts to illustrate changes in style, or the inauguration of a new style, would be necessary to solidify the translation, as in the Bible?

JH Yes, I think the Bible is very interesting in that respect.

EH Well, we've reached noon. Thanks very much.

JH Right, my pleasure.

A CONVERSATION WITH HERBERT MASON

EH I'm going to begin by putting one or two questions to you about translation. My aim is to find out from people who have done distinguished work in translation what their particular motive to translate is. And so I ask first, What started you translating? What interests lay behind your doing what you did?

HM We're speaking of the *Gilgamesh,* a verse narrative that I wrote some years ago. In that book an autobiographical postscript tells how I learned about the story of Gilgamesh and how I approached it. I did *not* do it as a translator on first learning about the materials through Professor Albert Lord at Harvard. I thought of the work in a very personal sense. I had known the experience of grief through my father's death when I was very young and then, about the same time as I was learning the Gilgamesh, a very close friend at Harvard got Hodgkin's disease and was to die soon afterward. So that the poem for me became an inner tale that made sense of the confusion caused by loss, the metaphysical worry, in the face of these experiences. I really thought of it as an epic poem that I wanted to write. I didn't think of it, and still don't, as a translation.

As time went on I tried writing various versions of it, and these versions, which I still have, I don't want to ever go back to. But as I recall them they reflect the literary influences of that time. Gradually I sort of outran those influences, or my use or misuse of them, and simply came to terms with the story itself—less with my own subjective losses and so on, and more with the elements of the story and the desire to put them together in a unified way by concentrating on the themes of friendship and loss and quest. In other words, I lived with the fragments of the tale for many years. I think Pasternak talked about translators needing to live with a work for a long time before actually beginning to do something about it.

Then a series of convergences occurred at a certain point. One was a trip I took to the Near East during which I stopped in Paris and told this story to a painter friend of mine. I should say that all those years I always *told* the story like a sort of Ancient Mariner, his inner heart, as it were.

EH May I interrupt you a moment? The story you're now telling is about how you wanted to rewrite *Gilgamesh,* or is it about what you had decided, after reading it, that you could write? What I'm trying to get at is (and this concerns a question we might get to later about

what it is one actually translates): Was there such a thing for you as an absent text?

HM Right. Well, I had to do with this. As time went on, and as I saw *Gilgamesh* through the eyes of other people—particularly my painter friend—I got different ideas as to what was most effective in the retelling. It was not, I found out, a retelling in modern dress, or a rendering of it in clothes that would be contemporary and relevant, and so on. What affected other people was the sense of the story's originality, an oldness and yet timelessness, you see. So I began in the late sixties to get more and more concerned about the text, the original text, and more desirous of knowing it.

I don't know if this is a digression, but perhaps I need it to explain what happened. I had thought at one time of going back to Harvard as a graduate student in Akkadian, so that I could begin a scholarly study of Gilgamesh and have some sense of the original. However, through my years abroad, living in France and studying with Louis Massignon, I became very intrigued by the Near East but especially the medieval world and the world of Islam. And so when I did go back to Harvard, I went into Arabic and Persian, with some other projects in mind that ran parallel to the Gilgamesh. So the Gilgamesh became more of a personal story, combined with a reverence for the text, an increasing desire to know the text. I really had to come to terms with the text through translations in English, German, and French, but with some sense of its linguistic structure, although not thesounds, which are an important difference. Now the problem is really that we don't have a text for Gilgamesh and the most coherent and unified version of those tales is the Babylonian version which was discovered in the nineteenth century in Nineveh in temple ruins there. Over the years I have fastened on the Babylonian version, but I have concentrated my own thought on the same themes that I began with: loss and the confrontation with one's own mortality and the quest for immortality or, as in this poem, the acceptance of mortality. But I began to adhere more and more to what I could get hold of in the original and try to add to that, through metaphors and similes and epic devices that I had learned in my study of narrative and epic poetry.

EH Your case—which in some ways is very unusual because you came to the work indirectly and then learned what existed of the text afterwards—confirms what I have often felt is essential: that the translator have a very special relationship to his text, no matter

what that relationship is made of. And I now have a question related to that matter: Is the text a stable quantity, first of all, then a variable quality? This question is about what happens when you confront the text itself. Is it something physical when you begin, that makes you translate word by word, phrase by phrase, and then something that changes as you translate, so that in fact you begin to produce a version, in the way you speak of it, which becomes part and parcel of the original text, whatever the text turns out to be?

HM Well, it's hard for me in a sense. I don't see myself as a translator of *Gilgamesh;* that's the difficult thing. The text is with me, although I feel that I have a sense of the original text, but it's by way of identifying my own intuition and my own self, feeling, and experience with the originals of the text, the original figures of the text.

EH Well, you went back . . .

HM I went back into the world-view and into that symbolism and imagery and such, as one goes back into a cave, and is amazed at exploring all that is in the cave, to discover a sensation of timelessness there.

EH Yes, you've mentioned that. You said that in talking to people over the years you found that what interested them was the timeless and original quality of the epic, and I think your translation-adaptation succeeds so well because it brings that out in a very immediate, simple, and powerful way. Though you don't call it a translation, and though it's been called an adaptation, it isn't written in the language that you would normally use in writing your poetry, for example.

HM I think the storv overtook me somewhat and made me write with a greater simplicity and clarity than I would have, or than I did in earlier versions. At a certain point, as I say, some things converged that made *me* surrender to the text and the story or plot, as it were, and dictated a form and a language. What happened to me afterwards, you know, was that I *did* become a translator, but of other things. I had to earn my living at one point by translating a large work of scholarship in French and Arabic into English, and that had a similar effect on me in this sense. I became a translator, in the formal sense of that word—the job also required editing on my part, of a two-thousand-page work. But the materials, the substance of that work, began to overtake *me* and then I made another evocation, as I would call it, of the subject of this work.

EH What is the title of the work?

HM The title is *The Passion of Al-Hallaj* by Louis Massingnon. After doing two and a half volumes of the work, sponsored by the Bollingen Foundation Series, I began to be overwhelmed as I had been by Gilgamesh, and so I tried to find out what my voice was in this material—not just the translator's role, but my voice. I wanted to write my Hallaj, because I identified personally with him. So I wrote another dramatic narrative. In this instance I could control the original poems of Hallaj; I had also translated some of his odes from tenth-century Arabic, and I've since published those. And those are. . .

EH Where are they?

HM They're in the *Anthology of Arabic Literature,* published by Twayne. I wanted to dramatize Hallaj's life and death and his character—bring him out as a real person to me and to others—using some of his work or imitating some of the tone and character of his work, plus my own language, in the sense of structure, of a narrative poem. And I did this in one winter. It actually happened two winters ago, and again it was written in conjunction with another person, in part. Where in *Gilgamesh* the painter had affected me, here an actor affected me very much and as I wrote, he and I would read some of it, and so it became a play, as it were. We've given it a few times now in concert readings at universities. I don't consider that a translation but it is based on translation; it is my own process of translation. I feel that translation is a process of gaining intimacy with a work, or a person, or another mode of expression, or another time.

EH But your identifying the character of voice is also interesting, because good translations are works which make one believe in the authenticity of a voice, even if it's somewhat strange. Willard Trask said that his having been an actor was an aspect of his life that helped his work—perhaps the ability to project a voice, quite literally. You seem to be saying something of that sort.

HM I'm a more private person than Willard in that sense, so that I may have to work doubly hard to get out of myself and project a voice. What I have found is that I work very well with another person. I have to get a sense of the other person that I'm dealing with, be it Gilgamesh or Hallaj or . . . I've done some other things on some Alexander legends and such. I have to get a sense for the character, and very often it's a friend or somebody else coming from another discipline, another art, who can give me a handle on that art and project me, because my work is very . . . kind of inward and

meditative, perhaps to a fault. It's a little too narrative in that sense, and just now, where, as I told you before, I'm writing plays actually, I may end up where Willard began. It's been a process of dragging me out of myself into the open, into a sense of an audience, and I think that has happened now.

EH That's interesting. This summer I discovered through a friend that Martin Buber had been a theater buff in his youth and never missed a play; he haunted theaters from adolescence on. I was thinking of your interest in religion in this connection. One hears a voice or wants to hear a voice and that's just what leads one to go on.

HM I do believe in the Muse, the Daemon. I think that one is driven by that sense of something beyond oneself that is speaking. I thoroughly believe in that. Whether you call it religion or religious, I don't know. I suspend judgment on that for a while. Reality is plausible, you know, if not desirable. Let's say that there is a reality there because there is something other than the reality of one's self; and that there is another that draws it out, and my illustrating it through these other people who have drawn it out is part of the phenomenon and process. But then there's some sense of a calling, of something, and it is a voice, a voice that speaks unlike an echo, and uses the talents you've been preparing and so on. I will say another thing here—that I don't consider myself a lyric person, but a narrative person.

EM Narrative and epic.

HM Narrative and epic. For a number of years I misconstrued myself as a lyric person and I tried to work through short poems of my own, some of which I published, most of which are ghastly, because they're too strained. I couldn't use the sense of structure that I had in that particular way. So the discovery of Gilgamesh was for me a release in part to the *form* that I have. I consider myself basically a transmitter of stories—if I were defining what I am. I got that from a student who in one class where we were dealing with translation a lot, and myth and various things of the sort, said to me, "How do you define yourself?" And I said, "I don't know." And he said, "I know. You're a transmitter of stories."

EH When you say you believe in the Muse and you say you follow what you hear, then you are an intermediary in some way. I have a feeling that's true of all creative work. One hears something, one tries to listen to it, make it out, then in doing so one begins to speak in the voice one hears. Well, I seem to believe in the Muse too.

HM The Muse speaks to me or calls me to do sort of large works which are strange for our day perhaps, but I seem to be able to operate only in a large story-form, and use lyricism in that. In fact, the lyricism occurs for me only within the framework of a narrative epic poem or a drama. I have written some sonnets, but I'm letting them sit for a bit because they work only insofar as it's a sequence with an overall structure. I think individually they don't.

EH You wouldn't then be the sort of person to ask about the difference between translation involving a transformation of the text and the other, which is a sort of shadowing of the text, because it's clear that all you've done is a transformation.

HM Well, but there are stages in that process. I mean, I will speak to that in this way. I think that in the odes of Hallaj, which are longish poems, not just lyric poems, I had to go through various stages of a literal translation, in a sense an imitation—then an interpretive translation. I really think there are values in each of these stages, but the only one that makes sense in terms of a complete book to be presented to students, is that of an interpretive translation, one presumed to achieve some sense of the immediacy and reality of the voice while adding our other knowledge, you see. I mean, the knowledge of the times, the knowledge of sociology, the various things finding their way into the timbre of the voice. So we interpret it. We interpret meanings into our own language, and when a certain thing is said in a particular way we have to translate ourselves first into the world in which it was said while knowing that in our own world we say the same thing with different words. Then we have to create metaphors, where there weren't any sometimes, because only with a metaphor can we achieve the effect they do, let's say, with a theological statement, which is abstract. So anyone insisting on the purity of the text when looking at the translation wants something else than a living translation or evocation. I'm not happily disposed to doing just that sort of work, except as a part of the process of getting translated into the work.

EH Which makes sense, and goes back to what you said earlier about letting Gilgamesh mature with you and opening the idea to others, which brought in their persons, their characters, and then letting the world fill out through your experience what you were going to write. You quoted Pasternak about the length of time it takes to do a solid translation. So it also seems that you were stage-

managing, if it can be put that way, the act of eventually doing this work—which is to say that you were using a dramatic form.

HM You know when you invited me down to Brown last year to read—and yesterday I gave another reading of the Gilgamesh here in Boston—in going through it that way I sense where the original is. I have a sense of the spine of the story and a few of the formulas, the epic formulas, used in the original. Also, I note where I've added to it through metaphor and simile, and certain images used to make it a little more timeless, to set it for other people at any other place, at any time, but also particular places that they can respond to. So when I ***hear*** what I've done with the thing I know its limitations as a scholarly translation and its strengths as a poem. But something else has happened to me since the poem was published: that is, it's grown further with me beyond the printed stage. I used to tell the story orally, without a text of my own or anybody else's, to classes and one or two audiences before it was published, and I found the variations in that telling to be very revealing. I had begun to use certain formulas myself in order to station it, along through its structure, but would embellish it in various ways. Now *that's* the problem right there, with an ancient text: that there isn't a text. There's an inherited structure we get—and I regarded myself simply as one of the tellers of the Gilgamesh. It has variations in each telling, and I have told it many times. Now some of the tellings, as in the case of Homer, have come down to us and we have those particular tellings, but to pretend to have a true text is to miss the point of the whole process of oral narration. What I published was simply one set of variations on the telling that I had done over the years. Maybe I should have said that in the beginning, to clarify this whole matter.

EH Well, your explanation makes a lot of sense now. It lights up what you were saying earlier. The poem exists off the page as an oral presentation, or epic, and that's just what an epic is—a story that's spoken.

HM Right—and as I read it (I take the book with me and read it), as I do even now, I have further variations, because I sort of digress. I come to a point and then add something that isn't on the printed page.

EH Do these amount to substantial additions?

HM Well, I'm really looking ahead to a new edition of that book, and I've written, and I've written down marginally some of the

additions I remember. I'd also like some of the paintings by my friend to illustrate the new edition. Because a new process has occurred. As it were, I have been fighting the text that I've printed, so as not to be confined by it. That's another dimension to the whole thing. I really think this story is with me forever, for better or worse.

EH It's appropriated you.

HM It has appropriated me and I simply retell it many ways and many times, but I always come back to its inherent structure and not to a text. I don't think the text is the crucial thing. I think once you have learned, almost memorized the building blocks, the progress of the poem, you can go off without anything in hand—pen and pencil—and I can see why then you could be a blind poet. All you need then is the inner imagery, the imagination at work, the structures basically set in place, and a certain number of formulas that you use yourself. Sometimes, of course, in our age, we use themes as the ancients did, sometimes just in a line that captures a thing and recurs throughout the poem. I think an epic poem, particularly one like *Gilgamesh,* has a very small vocabulary, a very small set of themes which recur in variations over and over so that there are patterns and sinews that run through and intertwine and tighten the whole work.

EH A constant reinforcement of things.

HM A reinforcement.

EH And then one can see how that would be close to the condition of music, the song accompanying epic telling.

HM Yes.

EH Are we getting close to the time when you must leave?

HM Yes, I'm afraid so.

EH Then perhaps we'll come back. Goodbye for now, and thanks.