

Thomas McGuire

**Friends from Other Wars:
Four Transcreative Translations**

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: these four liberal translations were produced between March 2003 and June 2004; my adaptation of Weil's "The Poem of Force" was begun on 19 March 2003. My version of Seferis's poem was intentionally completed on June 30, 2004.

I

Translate: probably from [L] *translat-us*, pa. pple. of *transferre* to Transfer.

1. trans., to bear, convey, or remove from one person, place or condition to another; to transfer, transport; also (*obs*), to remove the dead body or remains of a saint, or, by extension, a hero or great [wo]man, from one place to another.
2. to unsettle the primacy of origin; to recast both source and target as donors and devourers of forms; and to advance the act of transcreative anthropophagy, a kind of parricidal dis-memory. 1981 Haroldo de Campos, "Da razao antropofagia": "Translation as transfusion. Of blood. Ironically, we could talk of vampirization, thinking now of the translator's nourishment."

II The Poem of Force

—adapted from the essay “*L’Iliad, ou Le Poem de la Force*” by “Emile Novis”
(pseudonym of Simone Weil), written in Paris, Summer-Fall 1940

Force the hero. Force, both subject and predicate at the heart of every sentence
in *The Iliad*. Force of men and arms. Force forcing man—and woman. Force
of no words, just deeds: here the human subject bends and, as if by surge or swell,
is swept away (oh, bitter salt-blinding wave),
swept away by the force we believed
could be controlled;
but now we lie
deformed, deranged
by that force of gravity
to which we have succumbed.

Force defined: that faceless x which turns anybody subjected to it into a
shattered bone-house. Exercised at its limits, force severs soul and body. See
force making mockery of souls. Now you see souls, now you don't. Voila,
corpses. A feast for magpies. A show *The Iliad* never wearies of . . .

And the poet sang:

*...horses rattled empty chariots through battle lines seeking
their noble drivers. But on the ground they lie dearer to
vultures than to their wives.*

Chariots drag once-human-heroes-now-made-meat like rakes furrowing
bloodied mud.

And the blind singer sang:

...spread all around his black hair; in the soaked clay his whole head lies; once-lovely head; now Zeus lets demon-others defile it on this native soil.

See the spectacle undiluted. No comforting artifice assuages. Here in the dirt there is no place for supreme fictions—of beauty, glory, immortality. No whited, vaterland-loving halo descends on this once-human head:

And the memory-keeper sang:

...limbs pass to Hades, soul flees, laments its fate, forsakes its youth and vigor.

Some things seem still more painful, poignant:
Now the Force of *The Iliad* cuts to another world
just as quickly shattered;
a world far away, precious,
that necessary dream,
that never-never-land of peace,
of the family,
that first world where each soul should count more than anything to those it loves.

He still sings today:

...ordering shining-haired palace maids to place the tripods on the hearth, she tells them to prepare Hector's after-battle bath. What fondness. Oh, fond woman. Already, he lies cold far from hot baths, slain by grey-eyed Athena, she who aimed Achilles arms.

Far from hot baths. Hector's not alone. *The Iliad*, almost all of it, occurs far from hot baths. Hosts of souls, the great part of the great host, both then and now, live and perish in aching flesh far from hot baths.

III**dig**

a verse adaptation of unpublished French prose
by Gustave Thibon, Le Peguy, France, 1941

you feel trapped,
dream escapes—
but beware mirages;

run not nor fly
like blackbird who
longs to be free;

dig in the narrow
elderberry place
given unto you:

there find God
despite darkness,
spring and all—

He floats not
beyond horizons;
God sleeps in

your (de)basement;
pride runs always
but love digs;

flee your solitude
& your prison runs
with you only

to collapse in the
slipstream of its
ravenous flight;

dig down so
it will dis-
appear in Dieu

IV
battleground

a version of Gerrit Achterberg's
"Slagveld," Lowlands, 1946

the curtain falls upon the ground;
in Holland lopes a hungry hound;
a cocksure beast that's long of tooth,
he churns and chews this bloodied earth:

we lie in stillness all around
not far from others on this earth—
whatever once it was that bound
us in our love lies cold
and sheaved between our teeth—
the curtain falls upon the ground.

V

From Salamis in Cyprus to Babylon

adapted fragments of a George Seferis
poem written in response to the Greek-
Turkish conflict, signed and dated:
“Salamis, Cyprus, November ’53”

... and Salamis, whose mother-city is now
the cause of our troubles.

Aeschylus, *The Persians*

Sometimes the meridian sun
 sometimes fistfuls
of light
 rain
and the strand strewn with shards
 of ancient jars.
The columns meaningless;
only the church of St Epiphanius
[and the chapel on the hill]
manifest—dark, sunken—
 the power of the golden Empire.

Young bodies, loved and loving,
 have been here;
throbbing breasts, salmon-colored shells
 ...and arms extended
for the commingling of desire.

Then I heard footfall on shore stones.
I [the magpie] saw no faces;
 they’d gone before I turned.

But the voice,
gravid like the tread of oxen,
hanged there in the heaven's veins
 in the steady
 klick-klack
 klick-klack
of tide-wracked cobbled shore stones:

“... And those supple bone-houses,
made from a kind of clay they do not know,
possess souls.
... Wheat ripens rapidly;
it takes but a moment
for the leaven of bitterness to rise,
it doesn't take much time
for evil to lift its head
 ... there is an island.”

Friends from other wars
[Simone, Gustave, Gerrit, Georgios]
on this lonesome, cloudy shore
[in magpiety I remember]
I remember you as day verges—
you and those felled by fighting
and those who fell
 years after the siege,
those who saw morning rise
through the mist of death
or, caught in savage solitude
 below the stars,
felt the big dark eyes
 of complete disaster upon them . . .

“*Kyrie*, make us see
the causes of this slaughter:
love of mammon, lies, selfishness,

the drying up of caritas, [terror];
Kyrie, help us weed these out.”

...is forgetfulness best,
 does speech do no good?
 Who can change the consciousness of the powerful?
 Who can make his voice heard?
 Each dreams alone
 never hearing the other's
 nightmare.

... [still twenty-five centuries later] the runner runs swiftly
 and, however long his path, he'll carry
 to those who tried to manacle the Hellespont
 the awful news from Salamis and beyond.

Voice of the Lord upon the waters,
 [waters where we lay down and wept]
 there is an island.

THOMAS MCGUIRE teaches in the English and Fine Arts Department at the United States Air Force Academy. In addition to serving as a Contributing Editor for WLA, his research and teaching interests include 20th-century Irish Literature, Contemporary Poetry, the Literature of War and Violence, and the work of the novelist Paul West. His essay “Violence, Vernacular and Transcreative Translation in Seamus Heaney’s *Beowulf*” will appear in the Winter 2005 issue of *New Hibernia Review*, a journal of Irish Studies.