

The Herbert Warren Mason Fellowship

The Herbert Warren Mason Fellowship, *Retelling of Ancient and Medieval Myths and Legends of the Near East and Wider Mediterranean (including oral transmissions)* was established in 2017 in memory of Herbert W. Mason (1932 - 2017), University Professor, Professor of History and Religion and Aurelio Professor of History and Religious Thought at Boston University. He was Founding Director of the Institute for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations,* Boston University and President of the L'Association of des Amis de Louis Massignon** Paris, France.

The Mason Fellowship under the auspices of the American Schools of Oriental Research carries a monetary value of \$5000.00. It will be awarded biennially to a scholar/poet/writer whose project proposal comes closest in scope to those of Herbert Mason. The project manuscript must be transmitted into English. The monetary award may be used to support travel expenditures to special collections, acquire access to rare or hard to find research materials, and further scholarly studies.

Herbert W. Mason

Herbert Mason was a distinguished and prolific scholar of extraordinary and wide-ranging erudition. He moved gracefully between ancient and medieval Near Eastern texts and contemporary literatures. An eminent scholar and translator, writer and poet, his dramatic retelling of the ancient Sumerian Epic Poem *Gilgamesh* transcends boundaries of age, language, religion and time. He was the translator into English and editor of Louis Massignon's *magnum opus*, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam* in Four Volumes. Mason's dramatic narrative *The Death of al-Hallaj* has been adopted in college courses in the US and performed publicly bringing us closer to the 10th Century Muslim Mystic. His *A Legend of Alexander* and *The Merchant and the Parrot*, retellings of two classic Persian tales, capture the essence of traditional Islamic storytelling and make it live again in modern idiom. The stories themselves are concerned with universal themes such as quest, enslavement and loss, transcendent love and freedom. Mason's books, including poetry and fiction in addition to scholarly works have been translated into numerous foreign languages, including German, Spanish, Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Japanese.

Supporting the American Schools of Oriental Research Mission

This award supports the American Schools of Oriental Research Mission by encouraging scholarship in the Near East and Mediterranean region's language, texts, traditions and histories and protecting and preserving the cultural heritage of the Near East and the wider Mediterranean.

Considering the Scope of Mason's Oeuvre

Mason's reflections, in his own words, on the poet's art of retelling of a myth, on myth, mysticism, union with God, and various preparations for such experience.

On Retelling

A retelling is not a translation but a transformation of an old tale that was told many times in many ways before and that wills to be told again.

Translation suggests adherence to a single text. Transformation suggests, not ignorance of a text, but absorption with tales' inherent life.

In the instance of Layla and Majnun, one of the best known tales of the Muslim Persian and Arab past, the poet Nizami's retelling, dating from the 12th century, is an admirable text worthy of translation into any language and thus exceedingly risky to try to imitate and presumptive to try to improve upon. Still, his was a retelling of a much older tale and as such reflected the supposedly advanced culture and wisdom of his age and his mind to the loss, as some in his time no doubt felt, of authentic folk beduin atmospheres and flavors. The source as he knew it was hardly part of his own personal experience - something that has been a criticism for serious modern fiction for example, but rather was of the "fiction of echo" or a mirror held up to reality whose glass - and, who knows whose reality itself were of different ages, tints, and natural settings.

Aiming for a distance from apparent reality was and remains a criterion of Near Eastern Literature, desiring to evoke suggestions of the transcendent reality of life hidden in its infinite immanent forms.

A transformation undertaken now is an attempt, no less than was Nizami's, to see in the mirror of the tale or, rather, to hear in its echo the suggestion of realities, both immanent and transcendent, known incompletely in one's soul yet evoked by the retelling of this tale of two lovers who never consummate their love, a love which is itself transformed by their devotion and fidelity and is transforming of them beyond the discontinuous state of their human selves to mystic states of soul in gradual union with their mysterious source of love.

Life becomes painfully but ecstatically unfixed by their love and clarified by the retelling of their tale. The retelling is itself an echo of life's transformations, of its secret revealing itself in the process of its narration - an echo of an echo of an echo - to its fullest plenitude.

On Myth

I believe myth is a plot with an evident beginning, middle, and end. It is least understood by rational discourse, best by simple narration.

It attracts its narrators itself by its correspondence with their main points of experience.

In other words myth is an informing story of one's life the original nature of which one could no more invent than one could invent oneself.

The myth of Gilgamesh, for instance, tells of loss and defiant quest and final acceptance of mortality, and it urges its correspondents to go on a similar journey, one that will end in understanding.

It is a tale told and retold over time because of its power to realize experience.

The quality of such a myth living as it were apart from one's contemporary (and beyond its own original) time, is what gives it its strangeness, its elusiveness, its aura of transcendent wisdom. But, in truth, it is simply a plot residing in its own clear, self-contained time and pattern of inevitability.

Myth, some say, teaches us what we already know but failed to believe. Its connection with religion is in this matter of belief, in our practical acceptance of the truth about ourselves; but religion institutes truth by redirecting our memory into ritual devotion, obedience, and piety; myth ends its work with us in understanding of story whose conclusions it leaves to religion to draw.

Those in the liberating grips of myth delight in the infusion of a sense of irony about themselves and their presumption of wisdom. So much so that, like the old sage of the Gilgamesh story, Utnapishtim, they tap their heads mockery at their own achievements.

Myth reveals to us our spring of inner madness that guides us to poetry and self-surrender.

On Mystic Love

Our love is a kind of feverish pressure from within our hearts overpowering our more reticent minds that we aim towards the God whom those who are lovers believe is personal and responsive.

In our zeal we may examine holy texts feverishly to verify the personal. Love we believe, is our only means for overcoming both God's and life's apparent contradictions. And in our fear of surrender to the world's cynicism and despair we surrender ourselves wholly to love as our only means of knowing God and of enduring the world.

Love's mysticism is credulous, naive, oddly balanced, not merely rational. But lovers, of course, are rarely expected to be models of normalcy, since love is seldom concerned only with balance or practical approaches to reality.

Love is concerned with nothing at all but the union of lover and beloved. That is its only work, its passion, its way of life.

And love's consequences are rarely considered beforehand or studied for improvement afterwards.

There is a point reached in love's mysticism, among the most disciplined of believers and ritual adherents in whom the asceticism of the heart is

absolutely verified by their moral deportment and by the fruits of their life, when the lover is simply overwhelmed by love itself and rendered senseless by ecstasy that is induced by God alone.

The Muslim martyr al-Hallaj said of direct union, “between the two of us, who can say which is the lover and which the beloved?”

Words echoed centuries later by St. John of the Cross.

“Rejoice, my love, with me
And in your beauty see us both reflected...”
and
“As the loved-one in the lover
Each in the other’s heart resided.”

In the ecstatic union with God there is a substitution that moves one beyond all hint of distance, of vicariousness, of identification of oneself and one’s beloved as separate to the point, as al-Hallaj said, of “no longer knowing my name.”

In such union, love attains its only bearable, only possible, solution to loss. And, as with all journeys, the journey of love has an ending. And the ending is not the martyrdom of al-Hallaj, any more than it is the crucifixion and death of Jesus.

The ending for the mystic lover is the affirmation and hope of the truth of resurrection behind the fact of mortality.

The mystic lover returns home, so to speak, with the invisible friendship of God’s substitution.

Substitution is the gift of love aspired to initially by irrational desire, by prodding of love itself, but only realized by its gift not by one’s mere desire for it. And with it comes removal of aspects of oneself that are impediments to love.

*The Institute for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations Boston University (SMSC)

SMSC acts as an interdisciplinary meeting point for scholars and researchers in diverse fields - ranging from anthropology, history, religion, politics, literature, language, and the arts - across the regions in which Muslims live - from the Americas to Europe, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia. Through this scholarship the institute seeks to protect and preserve the heritage of the Muslim world. (www.bu.edu/smscinst.com)

“We will be dedicated to primary source material and experience in the field. We want to understand the Muslim peoples’ sense of history and what’s precious to them. Now, applying that kind of knowledge really takes time, and I think one thing that would characterize us, as opposed to more politically or development-oriented institutes, is a sense of the longevity of the Islamic world.” – Herbert W. Mason

**L’Association des Amis de Louis Massignon (established in 1965)

Louis Massignon (July 1883 - October 1962) was a scholar, specialist in Islam and an expert on Arabic cultures and languages, Professor of the Sociology of Islam at the College de France, Paris and member of numerous international institutions including The Academy of Arabic Language in Cairo, Egypt. He was a Christian and a mystic, a man of dialogue and understanding between cultures and religions.

The objectives of the Association of the Friends of Louis Massignon

- . To further the thought and works of Louis Massignon
- . To promote publication and translations of his work and correspondences
- . To develop further research on Louis Massignon
- . To increase exchanges and dialogue between cultures and religions.

Massignon said of his way that he sought nothing but to be a guest, not someone trying to annex another’s goods or thoughts unto himself. “I have learned that creativity in thinking and building something together is possible when there is no desire for annexation on anyone’s part.”