

## 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 will be told again.

Translation suggests adherence to a single text. Transformation suggests, not ignorance of a text, but absorption with a tale's 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 reveling itself in the process of its narration - an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo - to its fullest plenitude.

-Herbert Mason

