



Volume 7, No 1, Spring 2012

ISSN 1932-1066

An Unexpected Friendship

Herbert W. Mason
Boston University
herbertmason@mac.com

Abstract: Behind the friendship of the elder noted French Islamicist Louis Massignon, author of the magisterial *Passion d'al-Hallaj* and the young aspiring American author of *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative*, is a most unusual story that transcends boundaries of age, language, religion, and time. Mary and Paul Mellon's celebrated Bollingen Series, which published the entire works of Carl Jung and of numerous other seminal European thinkers of the early twentieth century, held the rights to the English translation of Massignon's magnum opus published in 1922. The scholarly and spiritual impact of Massignon himself on the young Mason between the years 1959-1962 and beyond is revealed most fully in this dramatic account. *An Unexpected Friendship* is an extension of Mason's *Memoir of a Friend, Louis Massignon* (Notre Dame UP, 1988), his edition of *The Passion of al-Hallaj* (4 vols, Princeton UP, 1983), *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative* (Houghton Mifflin, 1970—a finalist for the National Book Award 1971, Mentor, Penguin Putnam, 1972, Mariner Series, Houghton Mifflin, 2003 etc), and his recent novel, *This Never Happened!* (Amazon.com, 2010).

Copyrights reserved © 2012 Herbert W. Mason

In many ways my life with Louis Massignon began between my ages of five and seven in my country of the United States and not in his of France. At age five my private school teacher in Wilmington, Delaware noted with alarm that I was left handed and consulted my parents regarding her intention to make things literally right. They acceded to the school's custom of the 1930s and I was entered into a program of deliberate transformation. My lifelong concern with ambiguity and resistance unto confusion had begun. Two years later when an automobile accident resulted in the death of my father at age fifty-seven, my chief emblem of support and trust in my life, I was plunged into inconsolable grief. School learning was virtually impossible for me, especially when language and its articulation were being taught. I developed a preference for silence and my inability to speak when called upon led my teachers to pronounce by my seventh grade that I should never again be forced to study either literature

or foreign languages. My concentration like my heart was damaged and severely limited. I wrote in an awkwardly angled tiny and nearly unreadable script of my own configuration with my less agile right hand and became in most activities privately ambidextrous. It was my plan secretly to be shy and never to be called upon. My non-public life was determined before I was a teenager. In certain areas of my life such as sports, day dreaming, walking in woods, and running in our open fields with my Irish setter Ginger, I was free, spontaneous and unafraid. I even discovered in school that I had a predisposition for friendship. I think that's enough of my background for this memoir.

Louis Massignon spent the first seventeen years of his life in the previous century. His father unlike mine, who was by trade and inheritance a paper manufacturer and wealthy, was an artist, sculptor and licensed though not a practicing physician. He was exposed in his childhood and youth to his father's

artist and intellectual friends and was himself by his early facility with languages, both French and foreign, considered a prodigy. At age sixteen he was sent by his father to Germany, virtually on his own, and returned after two months having made a study of the Germanic roots of the English noun. His father was ideologically a Humanist and stressed for his son both respect for the integrity of all persons, native and foreign, and the liberty of curiosity and spirit necessary for acquiring knowledge of each. Though brief, this is sufficient background of Louis Massignon for this memoir.

Mention must be made of our respective mothers. Mine was my father's personal secretary in his paper mill and through divorce became his second wife and mother of the last two of his five children. At his death she was desolate and hospitalized for a month, leaving a live-in nanny to care for the children. After a long convalescence and eventual recovery in the dire years of the Depression she assumed the presidency of the company and, with the assistance of a bank assigned business consultant, she saw the company thrive financially after its conversion to manufacturing of materials beneficial to the war effort. She was a strong, shrewd, and passionate woman who in later years took to reading Buddhist wisdom texts for tranquility. After five years of near memory loss she died at age ninety-six.

Louis Massignon told me once that his mother was a devout Catholic who practiced her faith in secrecy due to her husband's disdain for all forms of authoritarianism, especially ecclesiastical ones. Her adventurous and prodigious son and shy and at times sickly daughter were always in her prayers to the God of hoped for intercessions.

* * *

We met in 1959, though I had seen his photograph and name linked with that of a desert hermit and martyr Charles de Foucauld at an exhibition in 1957 of the latter's life and writings in a side chapel of the Cathedral at Chartres. It was one of several chance discoveries made by a newly arrived young tourist in unfamiliar France. A Bretonne authoress named Yvonne Chauffin whom I would meet later that first year also by chance was a devotee of the distinguished Professeur of the College de France. After a sharing of interests she believed he was someone I should meet and made the introduction. In truth it wasn't as simple or quick as that, but this memoir has an urgency of its own. Before long I was invited by him upon her urging to his home at 21 rue Monsieur in Paris 7.

Books, books, books... I have at many times in my life had an aversion to bookstores, libraries, book reviews, second-hand bookstores, and bookish people. It is my recollection now that Louis Massignon was surrounded on all sides by books. There was a couch by the window to which this seventy-five year old white haired man in a black suit, white shirt and black tie pointed me to sit. He was standing upon my entering his study, but he then sat down at his desk, on which there was a small typewriter and sheets of paper scattered about along with a book open on which he had been making notes with a pen still held in his left hand. "Yvonne tells me you are interested in Gilgamesh," he said in English.

"Yes," I said shyly.

"He went on a long journey in search of the secret of immortality to bring his friend Enkidu back to life." I said nothing but stared at him and waited for him to say more.

"Eternal love is to be wrung from our inmost heart. I learned that fifty-one years ago when I lost a friend to death..."

I sat still staring at his parched lined face and sad eyes as he pointed slowly with his now empty left hand toward the window or to some place beyond.

"How long are you planning to be in Paris?"

I couldn't think suddenly and then almost stammered, "I don't know."

"Do you have anything in particular that you came here to find?"

"No."

"Good. In all my travels there was something I didn't know I was seeking that made all the difference in each visit. I sought nothing that belonged to my hosts, so I was a guest and just listened. Gradually they drew my voice out of me and we spoke together, and I learned things I didn't expect to hear, even from myself."

Hearing these words I was reminded of myself long before: losing to death... wrung from my heart... a guest among strangers... unable to speak. It was reassuring to be in this older man's presence. I wasn't a student, but he was a teacher. It was this person I had come to meet.

* * *

Briefly, I should insert here in this memoir of our long friendship that I had emerged as a teenager out of my long occultation of grief, shyness and silence, to attend a college preparatory school, where I studied both Latin and French, played competitive sports and had serious girl friends. I next attended my father's college

of Harvard, where I received a rigorous but general undergraduate education in English literature, History, Philosophy, Science for Poets, and Sociology; and most importantly I was exposed to the research of Albert Lord into ancient oral poetry, including the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the verse retellings and plays of William Alfred. Both of these men in different ways sent me abroad with texts and artistic yearnings in search of myself. Even with this emergence from my childhood past I found myself drawn back and inarticulate in the presence of Louis Massignon. Perhaps this is the way it is with certain people we meet when we're suddenly without any prearranged purpose, knowledge or desire to possess, we feel both reminded of and liberated from our past selves.

"You have come at a tragic time. My dear country is undergoing a terrible fratricidal war. I have spoken out in protest with Sartre and Mauriac, but our government refuses justice to our Muslim brothers who are citizens. Unlawful arrest and torture is committed against the innocent, and the truth is denied and is replaced with lies. We have the power, proud men of authority say. They shout the loudest when they lack the moral right." In my ignorance of the issues leading to the war in Algeria I had no idea what he was talking about but felt his moral intensity and barely contained rage.

"I have known this arrogance of men in power ever since the Sykes-Picot mission when the Arabs' hopes were betrayed by our two countries, their guests. Lawrence and I marched into Jerusalem in bitter triumph. I came home to my research, he returned in disgust to King Faisal."

Again, my ignorance kept me in silence.

"I've been adding notes on the margin of my study of the mystic al-Hallaj. I work on this every day when I'm not called to speak about the war. We can talk another time about this person whom I came unexpectedly to meet many years ago in Iraq. I have already talked too much and listened too little. I'm so glad that Yvonne met you. She wrote a very sensitive novel, *La Brulure*, about her son who died during the Occupation. She's like a second daughter to me. My wife and I have a son and daughter and lost our oldest son. When I became a tertiary Franciscan I took the name Abraham, but our God didn't give my son back to me."

His stream of unrelated references and recalls of persons overwhelmed me that first meeting. It was in fact a much longer occasion and was more bewildering than I recount selectively here. Despite my feelings of confusion and timidity I knew we would meet again.

* * *

People who knew Louis Massignon at the height of his teaching career at the College de France, between 1922 and 1954 his year of retirement, have recalled to me a carefully structured, disciplined, and spell-binding lecturer. Students actually enrolled in his courses or guided by him in their doctoral researches found him generous with his vast knowledge but inclined to instruct more than listen. He was an indefatigable researcher, narrator, and explainer of difficult texts. I was never to be a registered or in any way an official student of his, and thus he never treated me as such. For some reason I will never understand, he considered me a poet and a friend instantly, though he was nearly fifty years older than I and established academically and widely recognized in international academies of learning beyond any level or degree I could imagine either seeking or attaining. He was regarded as a truly original scholar and a genius by his peers. When we met I had published three short poems in little poetry journals in America and had experienced rejection of several more by other editors. I had a BA from Harvard based on an eclectic rather than a singular, focused selection of study. I brought with me only one passionate interest: to retell poetically and personally the story of Gilgamesh's protest against death. I believed after one meeting that this was also at the heart of Louis Massignon's passion for justice and compassion for humanity. It was enough of a hypothesis to keep me from dwelling on our obvious differences.

Among the many impressions I had of him at this first meeting, I choose one subject to concentrate on for the present memoir. I saw the open book in whose margins he was adding notes. The book was the first volume of the original edition of his magisterial *Passion d'al-Hallaj*. I would learn eventually that he had been critically amending old and adding new researches to its content almost daily since its publication in 1922. It was the work on which two of his great European Islamicist predecessors Ignace Goldziher and C. Snouck Hurgronje heaped their praise and on which his ascent to the distinguished chair in Islamic Sociology at the College de France was based. Though biographers and memorialists of Louis Massignon know his life had many strands and interweaving themes, he was foremost a dedicated and lifelong student. At least, this is my present choice of strand and theme as his eventual translator into English of the work to which he devoted his life.

After indicating previously in this memoir some of the unpromising facets of my early approach to learning, I must explain how I became the translator of this enormous and to me entirely foreign work. Perhaps in doing so it will give encouragement to those who encounter the unexpected and are challenged by the impossible.

* * *

The judgment that the *Passion d'al-Hallaj* was worthy of translation and by whom is a story in itself. William McGuire in his 1982 *Bollingen: An Adventure in Collecting the Past* (Princeton University Press) gave a detailed history of the philanthropic largess of Paul and Mary Mellon and the European intellectual luminaries whose seminal works they and their advisers judged worthy of being translated into English. Among the luminaries were Carl Gustav Jung, Károly Kerényi, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Paul Valéry, Mircea Eliade, Miguel de Unamuno, and Gershom Scholem, to mention only a few. Advisors included T.S. Eliot, Herbert Read, Joseph Campbell, and others. Among the many professional translators and textual editors were Willard Trask, Ralph Manheim, Jackson Matthews, and Kathleen Coburn. It was a remarkable undertaking with a rare convergence of patronage, imagination, talent, and dedication. Mary Mellon acquired the rights of translation for all of Jung's works and this initiated in the early 1940s their illustrious string of intellectual, artistic and scientific publishing offerings. The *Eranos* meetings at Ascona, Switzerland, provided occasions for the Mellons, with their friend Jack Barrett, the President of the New York based Bollingen Foundation, and their many authors to meet. Bollingen was the name of Jung's home on Lago Maggiore.

Louis Massignon presented several times at the Ascona meetings, and four of his papers were published in the *Eranos* Book Series. The Mellons had the exclusive rights to the *Passion d'al-Hallaj*, with publication dependent on his completion of the second edition. Paul Mellon once described Massignon to me as his "ideal of the truly learned man." His project was one of Jack Barrett's favorites in a list of a hundred, and it was the last one to be contracted and translated. In its first edition of two volumes it was over 1000 pages in length and was divided, as would be the new twice as long posthumous four volume French edition of 1975 and the 1982 English edition into *Life, Survival, Teaching, and Bibliography and Index*. Massignon expanded Volumes 1 and 2 considerably with nearly forty years of continuing

research as identified in the updated and exhaustive Volume 4. Volume 3 remained essentially unchanged. For the educated but general reader Volume 1 was the most accessible as a carefully constructed narrative and for being at times both highly dramatic and lyrically rich. It would eventually be presented in an abridged English edition without its vast scholarly apparatus. Volume 2 shows its author's painstaking and classical orientalist's training and skill at finding, editing and translating Arabic, Persian, Turkish and other primary and secondary sources in the manner of early and Mediaeval Muslim chains of authentication. In this volume Massignon exposed an entire historic tradition and cultural ethos that no Western scholar before had ever penetrated so deeply and seen so thoroughly as if from within. It is the primary research volume reflecting the extraordinary range of his meticulously acquired knowledge. For less philologically, more philosophically minded students Volume 3 is the most rewarding. Its divisions are into Mystical Theology and Dogmatic Theology, with concentrations on Cosmogony, The Creation of Human Acts, Theodicy, Eschatology, Polity, Sanctity and the Juridical Doctrine and Legal Consequences of al-Hallaj's teaching. A full translation of the martyr's *Tawasin* or Dialogue with Satan is included. Massignon's gifts of both literal and literary translation are evident throughout these volumes. I added a biographical *Foreword* of Massignon himself to the English edition.

Even now I look at this work and cannot imagine how anyone, including Jack Barrett and the Mellons or their advisers, ever thought it could be translated, let alone entrusted to one person, especially me, to do it.

* * *

At my present distance from the work and as Les Amis de l'Association de Louis Massignon in Paris begins to plan projects to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of his death, I understand that my older learned friend lured me into his world of first hand knowledge in order to translate it into a more widely read language. After knowing him for two years he told me one day in his summer home in Binic, Brittany, "We have a long way to go together." I pointed out, with complete honesty that I was not truly fluent in French, I knew no Arabic, and the Islamic world was not familiar to me in any way. He responded, "But you are a poet. You understand the inner, subtler structures and intentions of language." At that point I thought him desperately

hopeful and, though genuinely brotherly, deceived. He added, "You must finish your *Gilgamesh*, whose heart you have read as he has read yours long ago. I know you will. I have nearly finished my *al-Hallaj*, who has read my heart more than I have read his." He seemed to exist at least partly in different times at once, symbolically at least, though we were entirely present there at that time to each other's passion to understand, create, and if failing both, to protest. I knew, despite my reservations and timidity regarding expectations of myself, our friendship was to be strengthened by perseverance and longevity.

In brief, I returned to America, leaving him in his highly charged call for public opposition to the war in Algeria, as a demonstrator in the streets, and as a secret meetee with General DeGaulle, one occasion of which I had witnessed, whom he was trying to persuade to end the torture by police in Paris of wrongfully imprisoned Algerians and, as he finally did, grant the indigenous Algerians the right to choose their own destiny. This was the major activist theme of the last few years of his life; and as we know, he died October 31, 1962 exhausted; barely four months after the war had officially ended.

We corresponded by letter up to a few days before he died. The news of his death was sent to me by his family. A new contact I made in America, the Trappist monk and prolific author Thomas Merton, joined the correspondence with prayers to Louis for peace. Merton wanted me to visit him in Kentucky, which I did, and we talked about Louis for four days and made plans regarding his inter-religious ideas more than his Islamicist knowledge. I believe Merton was deeply influenced by him in terms of his turning him, if not toward Islam, toward a serious correspondence with Eastern faiths. Merton introduced me to the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement in New York, Dorothy Day, whom I met and spent two days with in her House of Hospitality on the impoverished and desolate Bowery not far ironically from Wall Street. She asked me to write about and translate a few short pieces by "Father Massignon." She knew of his being made a Melkite priest, though he was a married man. A Catholic convert and ideologically a communist, she was possibly the most fiercely radical woman I had ever met. I was in a different America than the one at Harvard I had left, though it would not be long before I would return to that university to begin my seven years of preparation to translate the *Passion d'al-Hallaj*.

My first introduction to the Bollingen Foundation was through the benign intervention of the old boy

connections of Harvard. Walter Muir Whitehill, Director of the Library of the Boston Athenaeum and Senior tutor of Lowell House, where I had lived as a sophomore and junior at the college, informed me that a Mr. Wallace Brockway from New York had come to his office about a Bollingen author whose works were being translated, Ananda Coomaraswami, who was also curator of the Indian Collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. I had sent Whitehill a copy of the *France Litteraire* Special Edition of hommages to Louis Massignon that appeared a week after his death. I wanted my old Senior Tutor to know what I had been up to for roughly five years. The convergence was maneuvered deftly by him, and I met Brockway in his office one afternoon.

The rather deferential member of the editorial team of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and adviser to Barrett at Bollingen was excited to meet and inform me of the foundation's rights to publish the *Passion d'al-Hallaj* at such time as the eagerly anticipated second edition was available from Gallimard publishers in Paris. He asked me if I would be interested in translating it, without knowing what my credentials if any were. I said shyly I wasn't ready, for I was just beginning doctoral studies in Arabic and Islamic History at Harvard. He insisted we keep in touch and that I inform him when I considered myself ready. I mentioned my interest also in writing a retelling of *Gilgamesh*. This also interested him. It so happened, projecting quickly ahead in time, that the year I received my doctorate in Near Eastern Languages and Literatures I was hired to translate Louis Massignon's magnum opus and Brockway also pressed an editor named Arabel Porter at Houghton Mifflin Company in Boston to publish my *Gilgamesh* version. It was a remarkable convergence of contrasting writings. The latter in 1971 became a finalist for the National Book Award.

Seven years of doctoral courses in history and languages, however, was for me an ordeal. In 1962 Louis wrote me several letters during that summer's intensive Arabic course at Harvard, sending me simple parables and Qur'anic quotes to memorize "like a child" rather than try to analyze. Of course, I was struggling with the alphabet and was entirely unable to read, understand or memorize what he sent. His letters included accounts of actions in which he was engaged that read like erratic streams of consciousness. I wondered if he was becoming irrational or just extremely tired. He signed each, "Brotherly, Louis" in his tiny scribbled handwriting. Enrolled in the course were several Peace Corps returnees from North Africa,

the Arab Middle East and Turkey, a few of whom had learned local dialects enough to converse on the street, so to say, but none could read, write or speak classical or even newspaper Arabic. One quite unexpected student in the course was a tall blond Austrian woman named Charlotte Teuber-Weckersdorff. Her appearance was aristocratic and tone was snob. In the class of fifteen we knew a little about each other, hence we knew she was an archaeologist, a member of the Austrian team that had dug in Luxor, where she learned enough colloquial Arabic to converse, and haughtily assumed the course would be easy for her. She at 35 and I at 30 were the oldest students in the class, and we were the only ones who in the end got failing grades.

Midway in the course we commiserated, recognizing our ineptitudes, and I told her about how I had gotten into this almost agonizing situation in which I seemed to have regressed to my childhood verbal and intellectual paralysis. I spoke of Louis Massignon and the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus pilgrimage I had attended with him in Brittany in 1959, which event had solidified my spiritual commitment to the studies I was presently failing. She responded, "I know the Seven Sleepers from the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus di Voragine." She told me that I mustn't be discouraged. She was sure of my "mission" and called me Malcius, the name of one of the Sleepers who upon being awakened after 309 years by God went into the Christianized town of Ephesus for bread with old coins as a witness of resurrection against the current Arian heresy. She had actually been to Ephesus and stood in the Cave in which the Seven had sequestered themselves and been entombed in witness against Emperor Decius (re. 249-251), who proclaimed himself god and persecuted Christians. I told her that it was in the Qur'an, too, which I knew from Louis, who had read the *Surah al-Kahf* at the Breton Pardon for peace. "Malcius, we will prevail together." We became close friends thereafter and in our different ways prevailed. She was completing her doctoral dissertation in Political Science, her prior doctorate degree having been attained at the University of Vienna. I credit her friendship as it developed between us as rescuing me in that summer from serious self-doubt.

My gradual ascent into Arabic and Islamic Studies as a professional field was benefited greatly by the teaching of Islamic History by Sir Hamilton A. R. Gibb, who had left Oxford to create a program of serious pedagogical and research training at Harvard. My success in his lecture course in History and seminar in Arabic Literature earned me his recommendation for a

scholarship and enabled me to enter a doctoral program. He was a fellow member of Louis Massignon's in the Egyptian Academy of Arabic Language in Cairo, though in our years of acquaintance at Harvard he said very little to me about him. Gibb, by contrast with Massignon, was reticent, and religiously a shy, inward Scottish Presbyterian. The most he said when he told me of my scholarship was, "It is only just." In Arabic language study itself George Makdisi, who had been a student of Massignon's at the College de France and had followed his methodological approach in his own research and published works, kept an eye on my progress through the courses, language and comprehensive exams, and dissertation to the end. His seminar in Arabic grammar was advanced and of critical importance. My graduate school colleague, and eventual distinguished expert in Sufism, Victor Danner and I were in that course his only two students. But an earlier small literary Arabic course taught by a visiting professor from Georgetown University with the improbable nom de plume of Irfan Shahid or Witness of Gnosis was the one that gave me the greatest pleasure and self-assurance to keep me moving ahead in Arabic. We read Taha Husayn's novel *Al-Ayyam* (The Days), and it was utterly enjoyable. Not incidentally this blind Egyptian novelist had attended Louis Massignon's lectures on Arabic Philosophy in the New Egyptian University and wrote about him.

Throughout those seven years of study, which yielded later my few published works in the Arabic Islamic Mediaeval period field and taught me how little I would actually ever know comparatively of Arabic or Islam, were spent in the continuing presence of Louis Massignon as if I had been enrolled in his program established especially for me. This is not to say I was in any respect a methodological protégé like George Makdisi. But even as I passed advanced examinations in Arabic and a variety of Islamic substantive fields, passed French, Persian and German (tutored by my friend Charlotte) as was required, and wrote a creditable dissertation, approved by Professors Richard Frye, Annemarie Schimmel, and Makdisi, I knew it was Massignon who got me through it all. If I had not known him as I did and trusted his belief in the importance of al-Hallaj and the entire Islamic world to human history, I would never have spent one day or a passing thought in pursuit of the degree I had just attained. None of the aforementioned or other professors despite their considerable knowledge and gifts aroused my imagination or interest enough to continue as I did. Having said that, once completed as a task, I looked

back to my earlier teachers, Albert Lord and William Alfred, to the work of my heart, to complete, as Louis Massignon had said I must, my retelling of *Gilgamesh*. A set of illustrations of the tale, including the book's original cover, by my closest friend in Paris, artist Dino Cavallari, supported me in numerous ways in this work.

It was while completing my Verse Narrative that Wallace Brockway returned to Boston to see me. I had just learned also that the proofs of the second edition of the *Passion d'al-Hallaj* were nearly ready to be corrected in Paris. My life with al-Hallaj was about to begin.

* * *

My first attempt to write about al-Hallaj resulted in a poem of about twenty lines, which reflected more of my life at the time than his. In the poem "teach-ins" by students and professors among al-Hallaj's many supporters were held to protest his imprisonment. In the mid-1960s I was participating in teach-ins and other demonstrations protesting the war in Vietnam. My fellow demonstrators included a Harvard graduate student writing on Joseph Conrad, Edward Said, whom Charlotte introduced me to, an MIT linguistics professor Noam Chomsky, a noted baby specialist Dr. Spock, among the growing thousands who were rising up against that unnecessary and catastrophic war. Thomas Merton participated by his writings and prayers. In 1967, after the Six Days War between Israel and Egypt, I solicited the participation of Said and Chomsky and nearly a hundred others to sign an "Open Letter" calling for Respect and Protection of all the Holy Shrines of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Jerusalem. It was published in *The New York Times* in a small notice for \$ 6,000 which we were able to raise. This effort on my part as a mere graduate student led to a book entitled *Reflections on the Middle East Crisis*, edited by me and including essays by Said, Chomsky, Abdullah Laroui, Samir N. Anabtawi, Yehoshua Bar-Hillel, Uri Avnery, Arnold Toynbee, and Jacques Berque among the fifteen participants. Accepted initially and then rejected under pressure by two New York publishers, I made contact through a Dutch friend and former student of Massignon's in the College de France, Jacobus Waardenburg, who got it published eventually in 1970 at Mouton & Company in Holland. It was attacked as being anti-Semitic and unfavorable to Israel in at least one American journal and *The Jerusalem Times*. It was Edward Said's first essay dedicated to the Middle East. The effort led to extended

correspondences and friendships especially with Laroui and Chomsky. My poem on al-Hallaj, together with three of my initial translations of his *qasida* poems, was published as a "Biographical Introduction" in a book by Ilse Lichtenstadter, one of Harvard's Arabic teachers, entitled *Introduction to Arabic Literature*. Later Annemarie Schimmel republished and translated it into German as the *Einleitung* to her one book in German of al-Hallaj's poetry and prose.

Schimmel, with whom I never studied but who became a close friend, was a one-semester professor on a chair endowed by a Pakistani millionaire and admirer of both Urdu poetry and Schimmel herself. She was the only professor at Harvard at the time who knew and cared about al-Hallaj. Makdisi followed Massignon's methodology but none of his many other interests or concerns. He did encourage my undertaking the translation of his *Passion* and in fact cut short my own dissertation research and time needed for completion of one section so that I could begin the translation. As a dogmatic Thomist and devotee of Jacques Maritain, he thought Massignon simply too radical spiritually and politically. Schimmel, on the other hand, had met Massignon only once, in Japan, and had never forgotten the encounter. He was through his works and spirit, almost mystically, one of her masters along with her two German mentors, Hans Heinrich Schaefer and Hellmut Ritter. Massignon was apart from all others, and as a poet translator and "rawi" or rhapsode of Massignon's, I was thus included among her spiritual friends in America. Charlotte and she met a few times and disliked each other. It may have been a German versus Austrian thing. Charlotte was a political activist with a strong opinion of others' dubious worldly involvements. Schimmel, a prodigy in languages like Massignon, had been as a young woman stationed in Turkey as a decoder of secret foreign messages for the Nazis, never seeming to be aware of any moral implications in her work. She memorized hundreds of poems by the Persian Rumi and the Urdu Ghalib among others. Her translation process was automatic and instantaneous, and she delivered her lectures and recitals with her eyes closed. She was tall but delicate of stature and ultra feminine who, together with her Swiss companion of many years Albert Teile, had created the aesthetically and eclectically dazzling and expensive periodical *Fikrun Wa Fann, Thought and Art*. I knew them both and considered us all close friends. I knew her strengths and weaknesses and she knew mine. She won a major German literary prize when she was approaching eighty. The award aroused opposition

from leading German writers because of her politics and in particular her statements against Salman Rushdie. I think she actually had no political savvy or sense of any moral implications in her taste for tyrannical traditions of patronage and power. She performed the role of Shaghab, the Caliph's mother and disciple of al-Hallaj in the play I wrote, *The Death of al-Hallaj*, which was presented first in the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard in 1974. She memorized her part and was exquisite, interacting easily with the American Equity actor Albert Duclos as Hallaj, in bringing the play to life.

* * *

The work of translating Massignon's magnum opus began full-time in the summer of 1969, though the Bollingen Foundation had contracted me a year previous. Jack Barrett believed, as did I that I needed to visit the Middle East and purchase a number of substantive texts and dictionaries essential to the needs of the work ahead as well as to familiarize myself with the Arab world of al-Hallaj known intimately by Massignon. I was sent first class on Pan American Airlines initially to Paris, where I met with Madame Massignon, her scholar daughter Genevieve, her physicist son Daniel, colleagues of Louis at the College de France, including Henri Laoust, his successor to his chair, Louis Gardet, an Islamicist and Brother in the Order of the Little Brothers of Jesus envisioned by Charles de Foucauld (Massignon, the latter's literary executor, had published his *Regle*), and several others with whom I would become associated over the years. Genevieve especially was the one engaged daily in the deciphering and inclusion of her father's handwritten notes into the body of the new edition. It was almost microscopic work and one of profound devotion requiring also critical discernment. The proofs were not yet in hand but were to arrive soon. I saw enough to know and panic momentarily at what was involved for me. The family was most hospitable and generous to me and hopeful of my being the right person for the task. I had of course met Madame Massignon and Genevieve several times in the old apartment, returning to which produced in me many memories and, given Louis' long absence, some sadness. Where had I been all those years, and had I justified his sharing of himself and his trust in me by what I had been doing? After Paris I flew Whisper Jet to Istanbul, where I was hosted by my old Harvard undergraduate chum Gene Higgins, a writer and then Dean of Studies and an

English Teacher at Robert Kolej; and by my Harvard graduate school chum Bill Hickman, who was a scholar of Turkish literature and Sufism and eventually a Professor of Turkish and Islamic Studies at the University of California in Berkeley. Both showed me generously around the city they knew well and loved. I spent time in the Sulaimaniyya mosque-library with its rich collection of classical Arabic and Islamic texts and manuscripts; and Bill and I took a side trip together to Izmir, where we hired a driver to take us northward to Ephesus and the Cave of the Seven Sleepers. For me, that made the trip a pilgrimage. We also visited the nearby House of Mary, where a French custodial priest told us there was an annual pilgrimage attended mostly by Muslims. Gene and I shared longstanding memories and dreams of literary success together; Bill entered with me spiritually, but from his own heritage as a Quaker and pacifist, also fellow anti-Vietnam war protester in Cambridge and Washington, into the Massignonian worldview.

In Beirut another graduate school friend and future colleague at Boston University Merlin Swartz, an Arabist and Islamicist and true "rawi" of George Makdisi, hosted me for several days with his son Daryl commissioned to be my special guide around the city. I was alone at times in the evenings and was able to venture briefly into Syria. I purchased important Arabic edited texts from a rather mysterious figure named Munajid, who wore dark glasses inside his large private library, warned me against both Syrians and Russians, asked whose side I would support if the Israelis invaded his beloved *Lubnane*, and assumed by my reticence to respond, that I was a CIA agent posing as a visiting American scholar. I gave him some doubt about this suspicion when I mentioned Louis Massignon. "Of course, I knew him. He was a collector of manuscripts by obscure Nusayri and other religious sects. How did you meet him?" I said I was to be the translator of his book on al-Hallaj. He tapped his head with his right forefinger and uttered some barely stifled curse. I assumed he was a Wahhabiesque Sunni who had no sympathy for the martyred mystic.

My visits to Egypt, Iraq, and Morocco would come several years later. For now, with my collection of what I considered essential Arabic books, I returned on Pan American Air Lines to Boston and the nitty-gritty of the work ahead.

It was on a balcony on the fifth floor of the Library of the Boston Athenaeum, courtesy of Walter Muir Whitehill, that I set my dictionaries, Arabic primary

and secondary sources, and the French page proofs as they arrived to me from Paris around me on a long refectory table and began my work of translation. It was the summer of 1969. I prayed for linguistic and focused intellectual intercession, took a deep breath, and plunged into the "Avant Propos" by Louis Massignon to his new edition. I realized after a few words that it was indeed going to be a long journey together.

* * *

As I reread now in 2012 large sections of the four bound volumes, out of print but occasionally discoverable for a high price through Amazon.com, or through Princeton University Press in a radically abridged version, I recognize both my devotion and my considerable achievement. I was given a special intervention from both Louis and al-Hallaj throughout those years of 1969-1982. From 1972 onward, however, until 2008, when I retired, I was also recruited by John R. Silber, a Kant scholar from the University of Texas at Austin devoted to pedagogical renewal, and the new president of Boston University, to teach as a University Professor of History and Religion at Boston University down the Charles River from Harvard. It was a full-time job. From 1969 to 1972 I finished translating Volume I and part of Volume 2. My Bollingen association, my doctoral attainment, and particularly the early success of my *Gilgamesh* led to my unexpected recruitment at a university that had a special interest in literary translations and its practitioners. My new colleagues included the classicist William Arrowsmith, the Mallarme and his circle specialist Roger Shattuck, and the expert on the Book of Job, Nahum Glatzer, among others. The initial part-time appointment evolved into tenure and teaching in three departments and was a considerable distraction from my commitment to completion of the *Passion d'al-Hallaj*. Few shared interest in the latter or in Islam in general, though Bill Arrowsmith, an innovative translator of Euripides and others, had been a supporter of my *Gilgamesh* for the National Book Award in the broad category of translation, which fell short by one vote to a translation of a work by Heidegger, and saw fit to include me in the group he had assembled at the university. He also got my *The Death of al-Hallaj* published as a special complete issue of the American Poetry Review, which brought it to the attention of a prolific author and priest of Notre Dame University, John Dunne, and its successful publication by that university's press. There was collegial support

in America, especially when it was able to rise above the grasp of institutional competition and jealousies. In other words, I had become institutionalized, and both my literary pursuits and my translations were restricted by limitations of time. I had a job. I would have had to have been personally wealthy to dedicate myself solely and swiftly to the works of Louis Massignon as well as to my own. I had some very pleasant colleagues in my field, Merlin Swartz in *Islamica* and the Pakistani Daud Rahbar, the expert on works by Ghalib, who told me "the Massignon-Mason connection was a major story rare in our contemporary world," and several others in various fields and in supporting positions of the administration. I enjoyed the students, both undergraduates and doctoral students, too many to mention, many of whom became published and prolific authors, including two who would later translate other works of Massignon. I mention all this "professional business" to explain as being part of the reason why it took so long to finish the major work of Massignon. Equally factored in, however, was the sheer difficulty of the text, the need of a professional indexer, David Partington, a librarian at Harvard's Widener Library, and the pressures from other projects put upon the copyeditors of Princeton University Press. I worked methodically, initially demanding of myself five pages of translation a day, which some days was less, sometimes considerably more. Massignon's writing style was very idiosyncratic, with sentences in some instances extending to two pages in length and needing to be broken into shorter sentences in order to make sense and still keep his intended meaning. His "meanings" were often implicit and required my intuition and remembrance of our conversations to understand. Some were oddly or rarely punctuated and always long and suggestive of more than was said. However, I was dealing now with a text. He wanted me to be accurate but also to understand the kind of content al-Hallaj himself was communicating through him to me. I'm sure that no one could fully understand the state I had gotten into in order to do this monumental work. Surprising to myself I had become more possessed by al-Hallaj than by Massignon and yet we were three persons involved almost in a mythic experience together. The principle Arab editor and student of al-Hallaj and his works, Professor Kamil M. ash-Shaibi in Iraq, wrote to me and questioned a few of my liberties taken with particular poems and questioned Massignon's numbering and arrangement of the poems and prose utterances in his editions, but always collegially and with awareness of

the importance of what had been done by Massignon and was being continued by me. It was an experience like no other that I had had before or after. I was able to read, understand and do things I never thought possible before. And all of this was from a contemporary French and American viewpoint across centuries of time and through language differences. I didn't have time to think about the implications of it all for phenomenological dialogues between cultures. But I knew that Louis, I and al-Hallaj were not discouraged by boundaries of time or faith.

My five pages a day made time pass and lifted the burden from me of thinking too far ahead. When Volume 3, which went the fastest, was completed and Partington was hired to share with me the task of creating thousands of 3x5 cards for multitudes of footnote verifications, I began to enter a more sobering state of mind in which I actually began to find fault with Massignon for leaving so much to still be done. Perhaps if he hadn't been "side-tracked" by the war in Algeria he would have completed his own multiple verifications of references to support his overall thesis about al-Hallaj. But if he ignored the war and his own instinctive compassion for suffering humanity he would have been somebody else, more concerned with mysticism and his own destiny than with the God of Truth and Compassion in whom he with al-Hallaj believed. Biographers of Massignon know from their research that he had been a soldier, officer and diplomat in World War I and diplomat after World War II had met Gandhi and had formed Les Amis de Gandhi group in Paris, had collected words and relics from Christian saints lives and shrines, and had become a Melkite priest clinging, as he had told me once, to the foot of the cross each day. He had known loss and suffering in his life, but had turned it through compassion outward to embrace others, young or old. It fell unexpectedly to me to move his vision a little further along in time.

* * *

Lawrence's statement to Massignon, "You like the Arabs more than I do," could have applied equally to Sir Hamilton Gibb or Jacques Berque in the twentieth century or Charles Doughty and Gertrude and Richard Bell in the nineteenth. Massignon considered himself a guest of the Arabs without any intention to "annex" something from them. He was a student of Arabic, a scholar with a "passion to understand" the Arab world, and a friend whose friendship included sacrifice and,

as he urged upon me once, a degree of "expatriation of mind." Gibb had told us one day in his small Arabic Literature seminar, "To appreciate al-Mutannabi you must forget Shakespeare." Years later when I met and became close friends with the Palestinian poet and novelist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, who was the Arab world's major translator into Arabic of Shakespeare's tragedies and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, I realized a certain troublesome aspect of the Massignonian and Gibb approaches. Jabra's literary skills and sophisticated knowledge of world literature had emerged out from under orientalist and Western patronizing absorption of "the other." His hosting my visit to Iraq in 1987 and his directing of the translation of my Gilgamesh into Arabic marked a humbling end to any illusion I may have had about "annexing" Arabic civilization for my career. Edward Said in his best selling *Orientalism* castigated effectively the classical intellectual annexers, though he later wrote of his admiration for Massignon and for *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* by his student George Makdisi. Arab intellectuals have long awakened from what too many Western experts considered the sleep of their civilization's decline, and now in our present time their populations are rising collectively against those archaic Western supported regimes that had capitalized on that sleep. Massignon's well-known action on behalf of Mohammed V's return from politically forced exile to the throne of Morocco, which led to a relatively peaceful independence from France, was both a characteristic act of friendship and an expression of an influential Frenchman's power to intervene. His first approach to the Algerian uprising was to demand on behalf of all Algerians their full rights as citizens of France. Only when he realized these rights would never be granted to Muslims by the controlling nationalist supporters of an *Algerie Francaise*, did he work assiduously to persuade DeGaulle to grant that country's right to determine its own destiny. He wanted to witness honor on behalf of his country in every action, and that honor was too often betrayed by his fellow French men. To some he was quixotic, touching and quaint. To me in those last years of his life he was heroic, fearless and nearly exhausted. On October 18, 1961 his "cry of Antigone" published in *Le Monde* for the right of proper burial to be given Algerian workers, shot by police whose bodies were thrown into the Seine, wasn't quaint. It was the continued expression of his belief in honor and sacrifice that characterized the sodality called *al-Badaliya* or The Substitutes that he and a Coptic friend Mary Kahil had founded in Cairo

in the 1930s about the time of his also founding in Paris of the Friends of Gandhi Society. He was indeed one of the classical orientalisks of Europe, but there were many themes and patterns woven into his life that were absent from those of his distinguished antecedents and colleagues.

In recent years when the threat to the world at large and to America and Europe in particular of radical Islamic terrorism continues to manifest itself and the West continues its military counter effort to rout it out of the shadows, destruction has been heaped on Iraq and Afghanistan in response "a thousand fold." The word *Islam* and its multiplicity of cultural practitioners, both secular and religious, collectively strikes terror in the hearts of those clinging to their possessions of power. Those Christian institutions with the greatest dependence on dogma and authority safeguarded by secular power and wealth are presently faced with serious moral contradictions within and pressures for dialogue with other religions without. Massignon's name has been mentioned in some circles as a possible guide for dialogue between Christianity and Islam. By some in high places within his own Catholicism he is considered too radical and too unabashedly critical of the authoritarian mindset of the Cardinals of the Vatican to be trusted. He was an iconoclast of all forms of political and religious arrogance. I was privy to numerous of his outbursts against both realms. Had Dante not preceded him in a period of at least comparable arrogances and corruptions, he might have devoted himself to the creation of a global *Commedia* rather than to *The Passion of al-Hallaj*, which, as I have read it, was about a major world tradition and a single witness who fell victim to a civilization swollen with material wealth, moral compromise and legalistic betrayal. He stood as a learned scholar with al-Hallaj in witness of his own as well as the other's morally, but not materially weakened civilization.

Spiritually he believed with al-Hallaj in the union with God through love. His faith, shared and heightened across time by and with his Muslim friend, was inseparable from his scholarship and was in a profound sense the basis for his phenomenal richness of research and insight. He believed, as he told me many times and about which he wrote in the 1955 short piece *Visitation of The Stranger* in intercessory acts of the Absolute One. In this he recounts the personal experience that halted his attempt at suicide, led to his convalescence from what he judged himself to be a decadent state, and redirected the curve of his life. Of course those who

would dialogue between religions faced with such an account can only feel incompetent to judge its truth. He was very persuasive in person and his exemplary life of devotion to learning about the civilization and its mystical tradition centered classically in the Iraq where his experience occurred is very impressive. Though he was not a theologian by profession, he showed his considerable philological and philosophical skills and grasp of the fundamental teachings of Islamic law, speculative theology, and mystical theology in Volume 3 of the *Passion*. As Gershom Scholem once told me, when he was a Visiting Mellon Professor at Boston University, "Louis Massignon created an entire approach to mysticism. He was a truly original scholar." His originality, I believe, was drawn by his exceptional linguistic gifts and his passion to understand from his kindredness with his subject. As a guide he is almost impossible to follow, all the more so when we know either personally or professionally of his uniqueness.

There have been those sincere religious dialoguers who have tried to come part way to Massignon, who was a Melkite priest and yet to some Muslims was a Muslim mystic simultaneously, by saying that the Qur'an has its own Christic if not Christological element, with its presentation of Jesus as a prophet, the birth by the Virgin Mary, and the central teaching of the Resurrection. I believe that Massignon, however, accepted the kinship of Islam to both Judaism and Christianity more simply, and lived it as a theme and interwoven pattern of his life. He was deeply moved by the practice of the so-called Pillars of Islam, especially the regulated prayer life, fasting, and pilgrimage, plus the obligatory poor tax that was so flagrantly betrayed by public officials and bankers in al-Hallaj's time as well as in his own. He recalled often aloud to me the lyrical utterances of the Arab poet Rab'ia al-Adawiya and the Persian poet Hafez. He also could recite French lines from his cousin St. John Perse and could tweak certain excesses of style in Valery. He never felt like Gibb that he had to forsake his own heritage altogether for the other's. In fact, that is a clue to his guidance. Some have said that he like al-Hallaj had a hidden yearning for martyrdom. "Your place in my heart is my entire heart, nothing else has any place" (al-Hallaj, *Diwan*. M.35,1.1). From my own experience, Louis Massignon was a devout believer, but his heart also had many places open to others.

* * *

Now, in the year 2012 and looking ahead within the Association des Amis de Louis Massignon to the fiftieth anniversary of his death, there are several ideas circulating about possible forms of commemoration. His granddaughter and scholar Berengere Massignon suggests a "bouquet of many kinds," thinking perhaps of his writings on the Islamic garden with a fountain of clear water in the middle surrounded by several kinds of flowers. It should not be overly pruned in the French style but left varied and wild, all blending together harmoniously within a quiet meditative enclosure without any opening to a grand avenue that looks outward at former conquests made in the world beyond. I believe we know enough about and from Louis to honor his gestures and intimacy in friendships and family and his discipline in inquiry into other worlds. In summary, though we recall that he was a public figure during the Algerian War, a military officer in World War I, and a diplomat after World War II, his *course de vie* was characterized by faith and scholarship as well as action. In terms of non-violent action he believed it was essential to recognize the humanity of both the victimizer and the victim. "Without that recognition," he wrote, "one risks denying the existence of a conscience to one which only enflames him to greater violence." One stands between two, in Dorothy Day's approach, facing the victimizer without fear, and with an absolute refusal to meet violence with violence. Both radical activists were disciplined persons. Their spirits and teachings confronted fully but are not limited to their times. How we embrace them in ourselves is part of the flowering bouquet.

In 1961, in a short essay on a legend drawn from classical Sanskrit literature, he concluded on the subject of "the milk of human kindness". "God allowed me, on a certain twenty-second of March 1956, that I shall never forget, to help Him show in some of the "camps" in Algeria this maternal milk of compassion, "raining" its sweetness on the just and the unjust impartially, on a lacerated humanity which dies when it is cut off from this milk."

When I imagine what Louis might write or say and do in our times, whether with regard to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim relations, the destruction and reparation of Iraq, the confrontation with terrorism, the arrogance and greed of powerful nations, the abuses of innocents, the cries for justice and an end to the causes of poverty and disease, I begin with March 22, 1956, as a day he would never forget.

His colleague and friend, the Dominican scholar Jean de Menasse told me once of Louis' fierce passion for justice, "he always pierces his own heart before he touches the other's."

His final essay, left uncompleted on the night of his death, was scholarly in nature. Entitled "Le Symbolisme Medieval de la Destinee de Bagdad", it was his solicited contribution to a Special Volume Bagdad, published by Brill in Holland in 1962, on the occasion of the twelve hundredth anniversary of its founding. It was handwritten and appeared as the lead essay. In it he cited the new Abbasid government's effort at a Shii/Sunni reconciliation by the founding of a city dedicated symbolically to the mysterious "Khadir Elyas," a figure of both Iranian and Qur'anic legend, and Bagdad was thus intended to be a City of Peace. The volume ranged in subject from Geography and History to Philosophy and Sciences, Jewish and Christian contributions, Language and Literature, Architecture and Art written by 17 distinguished French scholars. In a brief foreword note Massignon's colleague Regis Blachere stated the collection's purpose: "The study was conceived both as a synthesis and an attempt to inform a wider public of the scientific, philosophic and literary importance of that part of the Muslim world to the general history of humanity."

Massignon dedicated his life to this long-term collegial purpose. This would still be his passion as a scholar, and must be ours who have been led to our own levels of knowledge by him. His repeated call for justice and his acts of compassion and reverence ring deep in us still.