

1770 the chiefs of Easter Island were persuaded to “sign” their agreement to the annexation of their land by the King of Spain. Their pathetic scratches on the annexation document are an outlandish anthropological monument to the European cult of scriptism. One wonders how many more unrecorded examples history conceals of people who “signed away” what was theirs, not only in ignorance of what they were agreeing to, but also in ignorance of what “signing” meant. (Given the fuss we make about signatures, it is quite remarkable how long it took Western philosophy of language to recognise the “performative” as a linguistic art *sui generis*.)

Derrida’s question about the translation of signatures brings into the picture matters which it would take more than

one article and perhaps more than one book to survey. Allusion to that question can here serve only as a timely reminder.

Proclaiming that what counts as correct translation has already been settled once and for all, at least for European literature, by Europe’s great lexicographers may sound like a reassuring reaffirmation of traditional academic standards. Unfortunately, it bears the stamp of an academia whose only hope for the future is that it will be as much as possible like the past. There have always been brands of scholarship which managed to confuse intellectual inquiry with the perpetuation of pedagogic exercises.

It takes scholarship of this kind to fail to see why, in any academic community worth having at all, translatability must rank among the permanently open questions.

The Tunnel

In the half-light the pavement is a tunnel
Flanked by hanging beech trees and a bruised wall,
Leaves keeping passage against the rain which
Rattles the sides like a sea.

A woman without coat or umbrella
Glances behind and, without panic, starts
To jog, her heels clapping through the tunnel
As if it were a real tunnel.

Breathless, she slows to a walk, not looking back
But listening for the distance between
Herself and the man, who is wearing plimsolls
And the rain is deafening.

A gutter spews water like the gargoyle
In the park, its tongue flat out towards her;
Water is seeping through the tunnel roof
Soaking her hair and neck and face.

Beyond the tunnel-end her porch-lamp shines:
In the dark place where she lives, furniture
Sits with stiff arms in silence, waiting like
A father for a daughter.

She cannot understand why the light keeps
Disappearing and will come no closer;
She quickens her step, not now daring
To run or turn her head.

When she falls it is the sudden, rapid
Descent at the moment before waking
With a shout, dry-mouthed, clutching the sheets,
Eyes groping into darkness.

Adrian Blackledge

MEDIA

Reporting Islam

By Elie Kedourie



REPORTING ISLAM for the media came to be increasingly in demand with development both of newspapers and of contacts, political and commercial, between the West and the non-Western world of which Islamic regions form such an extensive and important part. An inspection of, say, the London *Times* in the decades between the Crimean War and World War I yields the impression that this newspaper—and there were a few others like it in Europe—enabled its readers to keep up with, on a regular basis, conditions in Muslim countries. A network of local correspondents sent detailed and frequent despatches and bulletins, not only from the capital city but also from provincial towns and even remote and out-of-the-way places.

Conditions have now quite obviously altered. Even though means of transport have become immeasurably speedier and means of communication instantaneous, information about events in most of the world is much more difficult to obtain. There are many reasons for what can only be called a decline or a regression in the ability of journalists to keep their readers adequately and regularly informed about happenings in the non-Western world, the world of Islam included.

In the first place, political conditions in a great many countries in Asia and Africa, where the great majority of Muslims are to be found, have with the advent of Independence put progressively greater obstacles in the path of newspapermen. Information about current events has become a matter of state, to be manipulated or suppressed in the interest of the rulers. UNESCO's attempt to bring about what is laughably called a "new world information order" indicates the attitude towards journalists and the flow of news from those who now constitute the majority in the United Nations.

In the second place, with the coming of mass literacy, newspaper readership has changed greatly. It is, of course, the case that newspapers depend on literacy. But when literacy was the affair of a minority, it generally went hand-in-hand with a high level of education, and the newspaper audience was one which followed with a great deal of interest—of informed interest—the affairs of foreign countries. Today, a mass readership naturally shows a much narrower and less informed interest in public affairs. Again, the new world-wide electronic media have narrowed horizons even further, since

these media do not even require the preliminary discipline of literacy on the part of their audiences.

In a recently published book by a television journalist who covered events in the Iranian Revolution during 1979 and 1980 for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (*The Man in the Mirror*, 1987), Carole Jerome describes the difficulties of reporting the events then taking place in Iran:

"Each day reporters attempted to simplify and communicate the complex developments to their faraway public. But no simplification could suffice. We felt we were madly flinging pieces of a jigsaw puzzle into the void with every news transmission. But since we didn't have all the pieces in the first place, we could never assemble the picture. . . ."

Why, then, was the picture so fragmentary and chaotic? Of course, no single direct observer of something as complicated as a political upheaval can hope to give more than a cursory idea of what is going on; but, as Miss Jerome shows, the problem was greatly aggravated by the relative unfamiliarity with the Iranian scene of a great many journalists.

"Only one correspondent [she writes] spoke Persian, and few in the press corps were experienced in the internal workings of the Iranian Shi'a mosque. . . . Among the press, even the old Iranian hands were freshmen. The press tends to follow world events in deciding priorities, and Shi'a fundamentalism had not even been on the list when the crisis took shape. Moreover, foreign correspondents can scarcely be expected to speak the language of all the countries they wake up in. There is a basic arrogant assumption that we of the West can quickly grasp the essentials of these exotic boondocks. . . ."

One conclusion which may be drawn from these observations is that the very speed of the modern means of transport has actually impaired the ability of journalists—who can be moved swiftly at the behest of their editors from one spot of the globe to another—to acquire the familiarity with distant and exotic scenes (a familiarity which can come only with time) which will enable them to report authoritatively.

Miss Jerome's account illustrates the well-known modern phenomenon of the medium itself being the message. The media, she remarks, had an insatiable appetite for action:

"If the day had been dull and insufficiently photogenic, television in particular was up a creek—but never without a paddle. 'Well', said one network producer over the phone to the New York desk one night, 'there was only the usual little dust-up at the embassy, but don't worry. We'll make it look like a war.' And with judicious editing, he did.

Television crews and satellite transmissions cost each network upwards of \$100,000 a month from locations like Teheran. And for that kind of money, New York and London want to see something every day. Pressed from all sides, journalists in the field go numb. Typically, this is the way it went as one field producer directed his videotape editor in a hotel suite: 'Okay. Give me ten seconds of Beheshti, a bit of the embassy wallpaper, some of the mobs there, then fifteen seconds of the slaughtering of the camel