

# The Trials of Translation: Psychoanalysis and Islam

A L E S S A N D R A C A P P E R D O N I

Fethi Benslama. *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*. Trans. Robert Bononno. University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 272 pp.

Robert Bononno's English translation of Fethi Benslama's *La psychoanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam* is a welcome contribution to debates about the role of religion in the contemporary world at a time when divisions and polarizations occupy a central stage in public rhetoric. A sophisticated psychoanalytic reading of Islamic texts and culture to unravel the "primal fictions of Islam and the workings of its symbolic systems" (vii), the book bears witness to Benslama's reputation as an established psychoanalyst in Paris, where he practices and teaches at the University of Paris VII, and proves to be a refreshing departure from academic studies not grounded in clinical experience and caught up in self-referential academic discourse. The dialogic intent of the book is evident not only in Benslama's courageous engagement with sacred and exegetical texts of the Islamic tradition, as well as its relation to Judaism and Christianity, but also cultural texts and events which symptomatically re-enact unresolved tensions in Islam's symbolic and institutional structures. Freud's theory of the unconscious and his key work on culture, institutions, and the genesis of the law is the primary terrain of Benslama's research, though his approach is markedly Lacanian (his reading of Freud is grounded in Jacques Lacan's key seminars *The Four Fundamental Concepts in Psychoanalysis*, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, *Le séminaire du nom du père*, and the essays from *Écrits*), and owes much to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. Benslama addresses the role of psychoanalysis in attending to questions that are not limited to the psyche of the individual but thoroughly engage with the social and the cultural. This is also evident in the cultural work, with which the book is in conversation, on "the interrelations between Europe and Islam through psychoanalysis," whose primary avenue is the journal *Cahiers Inter-signes* Benslama founded in 1990, and to which many psychoanalysts and writers from the Groupe de recherches maghrébines de l'université Paris VII belong.

As the author points out in his preface, the book differs from the body of knowledge of political sociology which, in the last decade, has attempted, without much success, to explain the role of Islam within the modern condition. Benslama's choice of a psychoanalytic approach reflects his belief—as a practicing psychoanalyst as well as

a Muslim—that a deconstructive approach of Islam’s mythotheologic structures can best shed light on the mechanisms of repression on which institutions are based and explain the dynamics of the unleashing of violence that has increasingly characterized Islamists’ movements since the 1980s. The importance of the contribution of psychoanalysis’ deconstructive action to the production of “the necessary work of culture” (45), in the sense of Freud’s *Kulturarbeit*, to address the unresolved tensions of the present is made clear by the author at several moments of his discussion.

In the first chapter, “The Torment of Origins,” Benslama begins his intellectual investigation of the signifying structures of Islam by unravelling the question of origins as a central question in “the relationship between psyche and civilization” (viii). Reopening the question of origins at a time when Islamist movements reassert the necessary return to an idealized, archaic, and originary temporality, from which Islam has supposedly departed in the course of its history, is essential to understand the role of culture in the symbolization of experience. “The language of Islamist speech,” Benslama notes, “is haunted by the question of origins” (7). This impulse has been misunderstood by most critics as a return of tradition or literal interpretation of the text, rather than “a delusional *appeal* to origin” (26) foreclosing interpretation and the alternative possibilities that a reading of origins opens. This reappropriation of essence, of the “proper” that had been, has convincingly “subjugated many members of the working and middle classes” (10) that the ills of the present are explained through a separation from the “proper” source. The question is one of temporality between sacred and historical time, which cannot be explained through a simple ‘going back to tradition,’ as many Western observers assume. In fact, unlike Muslim fundamentalism (with which it is often conflated), Islamist speech condemns the Muslim world for having regressed to pre-Islamic barbarism, and demands it passes through its origin again—a process the author calls “a point of invagination” (27). In its most radicalized form, “the urge to return to one’s origins is accompanied by a terrifying wish for vengeance in the present” (10), to the point that many are resentful of the fact of being born into modernity.

The “torment of origins” is explained by Benslama as a failure of translation at the moment of Muslim cultures’ sudden entry into modernity. This time of radical transgression suspended between the end of colonialism, the establishment of national governments, and the end of religion as a form of organization of political life is caught between different forces. On one side, a social and cultural elite for whom “the irreverence of the modern world” entertained “the desire to be an other” (2). On the other side, the masses register the failure to translate the sudden advances of technology and the discourse of modernity into the lived experience of the people. Between the promises of modernization of the postcolonial nation and the growth of Islamist fanaticism in the 1980s, therefore, lies a failed symbolization whereby people were

“unable to live out their present experience through an accessible language” (4) and change was not made available to individual and collective representation. With the “failure to implement *Kulturarbeit*” (52), the older order of primary identification is destroyed, only to be replaced by a simulacra of modernity (a Lacanian instance of empty speech). As “the immediacy of tradition to itself is broken and uncoupled from its awareness” (62), a traumatic caesura is experienced in the Muslim subject, a loss of individual and collective anchorage. A sign of this caesura is a new phenomenon that marks a historic mutation in Islam: the entry of science in Islamist discourse—often in the form of pseudoscientific arguments or populist readings of scientific knowledge—to substantiate theological truth. The claim that science has “realized sacred writing” (49) is new to Islam’s history and proves to be a mechanism of autoimmunization against the terrifying feeling that religion, perhaps, no longer holds the finality of meaning. Religion, therefore, is no longer the only referent and proves to be unable to ensure the order of truth. The traditional mode of subjectification of the Muslim subject has been disturbed, thus producing not only the loss of a former coherence (which was not cohesion) but “the undoing of an entire economy of *jouissance*” (51). It is in this context of the radical alienation of the masses that fiercer forces of repression (repression being, in Freud’s analysis, always coupled with civilization) replace the older ones, which Benslama identifies as totalitarian ideology.

Benslama’s revisitation of the Rushdie affair following the publication of *Satanic Verses*, with the discussion of the novel’s subversion of the metaphor of origins and the “reworking of the textual body of the father” (49) leads him to investigate the central role of the father in the theory of religion and the notion of origin not in relation to “truth” but “the impossible” that is the fundamental loss which is part of human experience and which religion, and the illusionary shield it provides, cannot hope to seal. The second chapter, “The Repudiation of Origin,” is indebted to Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, where Freud seems to argue for the incompleteness of origin, or “infinite origin,” through the double figure of Moses (the patriarch of the Hebrew people is also an Egyptian foreigner to his own people and thus never “proper”), the theory of the primal father in *Totem and Taboo*, and the theory of religion in *The Future of an Illusion*. Benslama’s close reading of the Book of Genesis highlights the tension between the primal father (following Freud’s use of Meyer’s thesis for whom the Jewish tribes “borrowed their god from the Arabs,” 70) and the Father-of-Genesis as different deployments of *jouissance*. The primal father, Benslama argues, establishes a symbolic order based on the acceptance of “unlimited *jouissance* and recognition of the radical alterity of the Other” (73); and Abraham, the Father-of-Genesis (a central figure to the formation of Islam), represents the site of “imaginary omnipotence” (73), whose renunciation will be concluded through the pact of circumcision and the covenant. The genesis of the father is particularly relevant to Islam’s tradition, for which the staging and restaging of father-son relation is central to its symbolic system

and establishes the monotheistic relation of the national to filiation. In Benslama's reading, this logic of paternity is a necessary translation of god's originary "withdrawal" as non-place and outside paternal relations, and is inscribed in language and lack. It links Abraham, the father of the monotheism, and Ishmael, the father of the Arab nation ("but solely because the Prophet said it," 75), to the orphan status of the Father of Islam ("orphan" is also the god of Islam's call to Muhammad). The lack of the father is transformed into phallic jouissance through linguistic inscription in the name and the flesh. Yet, it ultimately needs the gift of the child to establish his position.

Here the author's discussion turns to a central question within Islamic religion for contemporary Muslim societies: the role of the feminine in the genealogical construction, and subversion, of the father and the position of women in society. Two figures of the maternal play a significant role within the phallic economy of monotheism: Sara and Hagar. Their apparent oppositionality, which, in fact, is necessary to establish man as father ("between-two-women," 97), is reread by Benslama as a differential position toward jouissance in relation to the gift, rather than the question of mastery and jealousy often commented upon. In this narrative which foregrounds the mother as fiction, the womb of the slave is used to restore patriarchy. But if Sara represents the Other woman through her relationship to phallic jouissance (she "lacks" in god), Hagar (Ishmael's mother) is the radical alterity of flesh, the seer and "other woman" whose clairvoyant power is close to Lacan's description of female access to radical jouissance in *Seminar XX*, and whose disruptive power is a threat to the house of the father. The question of the other woman haunts Islamic representations of origins. Not only is Hagar absent from the Koranic text, but the question of the feminine is restaged "on a path between two women" (112) in the biographical narrative of the Prophet. The textual containment of the feminine is the attempt to control the other woman—the excess of her radical otherness. It is this containment that Benslama reads in contemporary debates about the veil. Within Islamic theology, the author notes, the veil is not a sign. Instead, it is the response to the threat of the eye: "woman becomes an irradiating sexual eye that had to be shut"; at the same time, she is "the obscure object of desire" and "the promise of infinite unveiling" (132). Here Benslama's argument is not fully convincing as it does not seem to take into account the dynamic nature of the veil. The veil may not be a sign within Islamic theology, but it is taken up as such in the social, for example by Muslim immigrant women or Muslim women fighting colonial rule. This dynamic has been explored by many feminist critics, and perhaps most convincingly by Winifred Woodhull's rereading of Franz Fanon. Yet feminist engagements remain marginal to Benslama's discussion. Finally, the repression of female alterity, and its textual subversion, is attended to in the last chapter of the book, "Within Himself," in relation to a central text of literature, *The Arabian Nights*, which also provides an opportunity to discuss the question of mas-

culine narcissism that the narrative structure of repetition both enacts and disrupts.

Benslama's effort to reread the primal fictions of Islam within the framework of psychoanalysis is commendable. The book is the result of many years of research in light of a close observation of the drastic changes, and continuing challenges, the Muslim world is undergoing. While it sometimes suffers from a lack of cohesion between its chapters, it provides readers with an important alternative to the impasse of political sociology. The notion of "trial" of the title (*épreuve*), borrowed from Antoine Berman's seminal essay on translation, is well chosen for a text that not only discusses the failed translation of modernity within the symbolic order of the Muslim world and the translation of the father in Islamic texts, but also highlights the ethical import of productively placing psychoanalysis and Islam in dialogue.

### Works Cited

Berman, Antoine. *L'épreuve de l'étranger*. Paris: Gallimard, 1984. (Trans. Lawrence Venuti, "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign." *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. L. Venuti. London: Routledge, 2000). Print.

Fanon, Franz. "Algeria Unveiled." *A Dying Colonialism*. Trans. Haakon Chevalier and Adolfo Gilly. New York: Grove, 2007. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey et al. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1974. Print.

Haddawy, Husain, trans. *The Arabian Nights*. New York: Everyman's Library, 1992. Print.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.

---. *Le séminaire du nom du père* (1963). Partially reprinted in *L'Excommunication*, a supplement to *Ornicar ?* 8 (1977): 110-11.

---. *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 1999. Print.

---. *The Four Fundamental Concepts in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New

York: Norton, 1998. Print.

Rushdie, Salman. *Satanic Verses*. New York: Viking, 1989. Print.

Woodhull, Winifred. "Unveiling Algeria." *Genders* 10 (1991): 112-131. Print.

---

Alessandra Capperdoni holds a Ph.D. in English from Simon Fraser University, B.C. (2006). Her research focuses on Canadian and Anglophone literatures, feminist poetics and translation, women's writings, postcolonial studies, modernism and psychoanalysis. She has published on Canadian feminist poetics, experimental writings, feminist translation, transgenderism and transsexuality, Black diaspora and postcoloniality. She is preparing a monograph entitled *Shifting Geographies: Poetics of Citizenship in the Age of Global Modernity*. She teaches in the Departments of English, Humanities, and World Literature at Simon Fraser University.