

From the Editor

“Here’s a secret,” wrote novelist Michael Cunningham last year, in a meditation cited by MESA President Roger Allen in this issue’s 2010 Presidential Address.

Many novelists...will admit that the finished book is a rather rough translation of the book they’d intended to write. It’s one of the heartbreaks of writing fiction. You have, for months or years, been walking around with the idea of a novel in your mind, and in your mind it’s transcendent, it’s brilliantly comic and howlingly tragic, it contains everything you know, and everything you can imagine, about human life on the planet earth. It is vast and mysterious and awe-inspiring. It is a cathedral made of fire.

But even if the book in question turns out fairly well, it’s never the book that you’d hoped to write. It’s smaller than the book you’d hoped to write. It is an object, a collection of sentences, and it does not remotely resemble a cathedral made of fire. It feels, in short, like a rather inept translation of a mythical great work (*New York Times*, 2 October 2010).

This issue of the *Review of Middle East Studies* revolves around translation in its broadest sense. Allen’s reflections on the vicissitudes of Arabic literature in its winding journey through European languages is followed by Ronen Zeidel’s analysis of the circulation of national identities around the image of the Kurd in Iraqi Arabic literature, and then by a special section on the Algerian work of Alexis de Tocqueville. Here, the authors question the accuracy of our usual readings of Tocqueville’s understanding of democracy, cultural difference, and imperialism. Confronting his influential thinking about the necessity of French colonialism upsets our confidence that we know Tocqueville; it challenges our understanding of his role as a theorist of democracy; and it deepens our sense that concepts such as equality, pluralism, and justice are unstable notions, not merely when they cross national or historical boundaries, but even as they are translated by unique

individuals into the conceptual groundwork of political projects in which they hold disparate interests. This section, based on a panel presented at MESA in 2009, was organized and chaired by Barbara Nimri Aziz, a New York-based anthropologist and writer, and (for the papers originally written in French), translated by Simone Fattal, a sculptor and publisher who works in Paris and in California. In this context, both are amateurs in the double sense that Roger Allen discusses in his address: people who act out of commitment, deploying their skills as a service to knowledge and to the community of scholarship.

Projects of translation both literal and figurative surround us. On the ground, that mythical great work, that cathedral of fire that was to be Arab Spring, has yielded manifold and wildly uneven translations from the Gulf to the Mediterranean. The enormous proportion of the Tunisian public who voted in October 2011's elections is balanced by continued state-sponsored sectarian violence in Egypt. A Saudi military incursion across the causeway to Bahrain saved the al-Khalifa regime in Manama, while a NATO incursion in North Africa explained as a mission to protect the lives of "Libyans"—the word was consistently used in the media and in political discourse to connote only those who did not actively support Muammar Qadhafi, so that the victims of NATO's own aerial assaults did not count either as true Libyans or as lives to be protected—slowly toppled his regime in Tripoli.

Interpreting these events will be the business of the next decades of Middle East studies and the next generation of scholars, who bring ever more sophisticated research skills and insight to bear on the region, and will continue to do so despite reconfigurations of research funding, including its shift toward military sources and away from the civilian agencies that have most recently supported such scholarly work. Keeping in mind the traditional humanistic goal of understanding ourselves and other human beings may help slow the growing gap between the dream of that mythical great work and its inevitably smaller, flawed results in a world of economic crisis, various sorts of populist fury on both the left and right, and the continued growth of a military-corporate-academic complex in which all knowledge is ideally translated, at multiple scales, into the encompassing joint project of financial profit and social control.✧

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