

---

# *Thresholds & Testimonies*

Recovering Order in  
Literature and Criticism

---

FREDERIC WILL

Volume One of *The Fall and the Gods*

*Thresholds*  
&  
*Testimonies*

Recovering Order in  
Literature and Criticism  
Volume one of The Fall and the Gods

FREDERIC WILL



WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS    DETROIT    1988

### Author Acknowledgments

University House, at the University of Iowa, has supported the work with every courtesy; for which I warmly thank Jay Semel and Lorna Olson. I am indebted to Fred van der Zee of Editions Rodopi in Amsterdam, for permission to reprint, in altered form, "The Argument of Water," which first appeared in *Belphagor* in 1977. "The Quanta of Imagination" appeared, in wholly different form, in *The Fact of Literature* (Rodopi, 1973).

Copyright © 1988 by Wayne State University Press,

Detroit, Michigan 48202. All rights are reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced without formal permission.

92 91 90 89 88

5 4 3 2 1

---

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Will, Frederic.

Thresholds and testimonies.

(The fall and the gods ; v. 1)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Literature—Philosophy. 2. Literature—Translations into foreign languages—History and criticism.

3. Poetry—Philosophy. 4. Poetry—Translations into foreign languages—History and criticism. I. Title.

II. Title: Thresholds and testimonies. III. Series: Will, Frederic. Fall and the gods ; v. 1.

PN49.W55 1988 801 88-145

ISBN 0-8143-1943-2 (alk. paper)

---

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the publishers of the following poems for permission to quote in full. Gary Snyder, "A Walk." From *The Back Country*. Copyright © 1968 by Gary Snyder. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation. Wallace Stevens, "The Glass of Water." From *The Collected Works of Wallace Stevens*. Copyright © 1957 by Wallace Stevens. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the University of Iowa for financial assistance in the publication of this volume.

The inmost identity of I and God, underlying everything, is simply an expression of the proposition: like is conceivable only by like.

Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*

The gift is not merely the witness or guardian to new life, but the creator.

Hyde, *The Gift*

Ne cherche pas les limites de la mer. Tu les détiens. Elles te sont offertes au même instant que ta vie évaporée.

René Char, *Le Rempart de Brindilles*

Liminality has been likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.

Turner, *The Ritual Process*

## Preface



In the following volume—the first in a trilogy—I lean to that order of things the great religions affirm. I see such order where junctions form between adjacent and yet nonidentical planes of experience, at thresholds between, say, texts in different languages, seemingly discrepant scientific and poetic ways of accounting for experience, or between the recoverable and the seemingly lost portions of our cultural heritage. At junctures between such discrepant zones we signal our recuperative pleasure—do so in testimonies or in the widest sense translations; we testify to our discovery in writing or thought or silent awareness.

The first and last essays—on translation and testifying, respectively—indicate the argument of *Thresholds and Testimonies*. The first essay—on untranslatability—makes a simply logical claim; that untranslatability can never be proven—between texts no matter how alien to one another—and could only be claimed in the process of translation. (The formula of wider application is that unintelligibility can never be proven because only the intelligible could prove it.) The last essay deals with testimony to such translation process, and to examples of it taken from the aesthetic, moral, and cognitive spheres. The dynamic here is of convergence, and the stress is on normative values. The realm of the beautiful is brought into existence by perceiving acts, in which we cross over into the formerly unfamiliar text or sculpture or sonata, disclosing it and ourselves simultaneously. The ethical norm is generated by loving awareness of continuity among our kind, while at some

points we have been *its* to one another. Threshold crossings provoke those works or acts or realizations in which we find the existence of value confirmed.

The perspectives of the first and last essay reoccur elsewhere here, but against very different backgrounds.

The second essay deals with the ontological background inside which beauty finds its actuality. My concern is with the genesis of sculptural works from nature's raw state—at the touch of the human artist. I take as my understanding-grid, through which to watch the birth of a Phidian head, a universe that is by nature one and made of spirit. (The historical model is a Plotinian monism, and the conduct of my argument like that of Plotinus in the *Enneads*.) I see the beautiful emerging in sculpture from a desire in nature—to be more self-identically the spirit potential to it—a desire which meets, in the maieutic of the higher-spirit sculptor, with the beauty of the sculptured head. Continuity in being is the field for a series of threshold transitions—of matter upward through itself into its own expressiveness, of sculptor down into matter and upward with matter across its threshold into art—which resemble those effected by the translator. Essay three—prose poems in illustration—smears actuality across the argument.

The essays (two and three) in question just now are concerned with synchronic events, with the way consciousness works. At the center of the book lie two long essays dealing with separate languages which converge into one another through their common statements—thus in effect translating themselves into one another across thresholds.

"The Argument of Water" examines texts concerning water taken from religious, poetic, and scientific discourse. (I turn to ancient Buddhist and Christian texts, some work from Eliot and René Char, and some early modern science—Newton, Gassendi, Boyle—and in each case hunt for the distinctive language applied to an account of water.) My conclusion is that all these types of discourse are different—but only as different ways of doing the same work; that they cross thresholds into one another at the point where their common themes substantiate them.

"The Quanta of Imagination" juxtaposes two differently accented accounts of what the imagination is and does. Here there

is no single theme like water to anchor the displays. I follow Coleridge (on the one hand) and certain recent language analysts (on the other) into different thought-lines, concluding that the latter group amassed a huge anthology of Romantic-Coleridgean views of the way imagination works. My stress here is on intersecting aesthetics, which find each other from different languages and premises about language, and constitute mutual thresholds for one another.

Essay seven, "Limits in the Time of Consciousness," points similar thoughts into a diachronic zone, yet even so—as my lone historical essay—it evokes the antitemporal element in the experience of history. I am concerned with the limitations of our consciousness, in its odyssey of recovering the cultural past within it. The perspective is that of a contemporary Western Psyche, but I cast present consciousness backward—through confrontation with ancient sites like Kuaua (in New Mexico) or Effigy Mounds (in Iowa) and through texts from Gary Snyder, Alfred de Vigny, Angelus Silesius, François Villon, Horace, and Sappho. I find the farther past increasingly resistant, yet my point is that nothing emerges from within the reading of that past which is able to disprove or even cast doubt on its readability. Again we face the first essay's logical conundrum and mystery. The cultural past refuses to refuse itself to its archaeologists, though the continuity it guarantees them is only as rich as the detail and accuracy with which they have opened it. Each threshold, before each deeper interior room, is a door of testimony across which we march, reaching through it with our eyes and minds.

Essay six, the essay on the essay, surveys the development of the genre through excerpts from Montaigne, Addison and Steele, Lamb, Pater, Tom Wolfe, and others. This quasi history displays the timeless physiognomy of the essay's work. The genre's stance is on the one hand immediacy to the world to be described, and on the other art, craft, and form. This intermediate position is the essay's openness to other forms which circumscribe it and which it in turn helps to define. The essay lives as testimony to the thresholds which are its opening out, and the remaining genre-world's opening in toward it.

This essay is the threshold from which I cross into all the

remaining pieces—on thresholds among the continuous domains of experience. The essay itself is the microcosmic instance of such continuity, the cross-over point at which art forms and colloquial utterance meet.

First volume in a trilogy, *Thresholds and Testimonies* establishes leitmotifs for its succession: *A Portrait of John* and *Founding the Lasting*. Both those works reflect a world in which order is implicit—even in disorder. Both relate order to continuity, and continuity to details of sequence. The second volume, *A Portrait of John*, traces these motifs through an individual life—that of a close friend of the author. Thus it shows rather than argues the point of the trilogy. The third volume, *Founding the Lasting*, carries the larger argument into two fresh channels: looking at man's fallen condition and the imaginative curiosity of return it has bred in us; and seeing how that curiosity works itself out into the ontology and history of literary art. All three volumes rest under the larger title, *The Fall and the Gods*; for all three model the freshness that marks our endless rejuvenation in the face of death.



# *Contents*



Preface	ix
Untranslatability	i
Beauty As the Threshold of Nature with Art	17
From the Author's Undercabinet	39
The Argument of Water	43
The Quanta of Imagination	93
The Essay As Threshold	127
Limits in the Time of Consciousness	143
Testimony and Threshold	177
Notes	183

## Untranslatability

All things are an equal exchange for fire and fire for all things.

Heraclitus



I found my way into translation through Kostas Palamas' long lyric *The Palm Tree*: American School of Classical Studies, Speusippou Street, Athens, 1952.

Sun on a text—itself an unpromising pathetic fallacy in early twentieth century *demotike*—about an oasis palm tree and the jubilant flowers that one spring morning wake to life at its feet. The flowers address the tree, shamelessly blessing their life and that of the lord above them. Reading this poem I was overwhelmed by sadness, happiness, and intricate interest and started to try to make English of these lines, which were as profoundly un-English as was the conduct of their argument. An electric shock crossed me that was the inception of a several-year project, ultimately of translating and remaking two epics by Palamas; and this shock was before all a seizure by the chemistry of testifying, of raising a hand in my own language—in the presence of a potent voice in another language. I take it—but am guessing—that translators would often give similar accounts of their discovery of affinity. The chemistry would vary in each instance, but something in the language of testifying should be there.

What about the negative aspect? Some texts are uncongenial to some translators. Personally, I could translate *Les liaisons dan-*

*gereuses* by Choderlos de Laclos but not *Les misérables*, because the former is—for me—a rich aesthetic surface with a lot of self-interested fascinations, while the latter is talky and inefficient. I feel myself at stake in the Laclos. Another person—with an eye to the build of narrative—might prefer taking on Victor Hugo. He or she might find Laclos untranslatable. Gregory Rabassa finds himself drawn to translate the grand Latin American novel, but who wants him to translate Herondas? He couldn't do it. Or imagine Pope translating Sappho. There is obviously a kind of translatability deriving from individual traits and differences. We can only go so far beyond what we are.

Are some texts—above and beyond the matter of individual affinity, of testifying and chemistry—absolutely over the brink, unreachable? Can some texts not be brought back into sight by any translator, even by the well-intentioned feeler of affinity? Or is untranslatability in this absolute sense nonexistent? Can everything be translated?

I don't think there is such a thing as absolute untranslatability. Proving, or at least arguing, that interests me for reasons that extend beyond the purpose of this first essay, though it is this essay's main point. I will later be going from discussion of translation to discussion of other threshold-meeting situations, passages into new forms like perception (after sensation), self-awareness (after mere coexistence with oneself), or life (after death). I will be going into liminal issues, posing the questions of whether a variety of meaning-code barriers can be interpreted, penetrated, and transcended—yielding the unexpected and new. Translation will serve as an introductory model for remarks on these situations.

First, I will take a little poem by Heine, then a snatch attributed to the young Plato, then a Copper Eskimo dance-song, then a piece of Manx. Of each of these (difficult to translate) pieces I will be asking, Can it be translated? Or is it, in the difficulties it will obviously occasion, an example of the untranslatable?

Das Fräulein stand am Meere  
und seufzte lang und bang.  
Es rührte sie so sehr  
Der Sonnenuntergang.

Mein Fräulein, sein Sie munter,  
Das ist ein altes Stück;  
Hier vorne geht sie unter  
Und kehrt von hinten zurück.<sup>1</sup>

*Specimen 1*

Upon this shore, a maiden  
sighs with a troubled frown;  
she seems so sorrow-laden  
to see the sun go down.

Don't let the old thing grieve you,  
look up and smile, my dear;  
for though in front he may leave you,  
he'll rise again in the rear.

(Translated by Untermeyer, 1917)

*Specimen 2*

The maid looked over the ocean  
and sighed with a worried frown;  
she sighed with deep emotion  
because the sun went down.

Dear girl, don't let it grieve you,  
it's an old trick, you will find;  
In front he sinks, to leave you  
and come again from behind.

(Translated by Draper, 1982)

*Specimen 3*

Ocean lies like a frown on her face, sunset falling into the gulf below her.  
She sighs. Passages of old texts move her. Can she not grow lighter, can  
she not remember: fiery balls return from the rear?

(Translated by F. Will, 1985)

By conventional perspective—of time, place, and circumstance—  
this Heine text might seem the most accessible of my examples.

The world condition from which he writes is continuous with ours. It is 1832. The author has just returned from a first trip to Paris—has seen the new bourgeoisie, us, in action; he has found a political ideology, Saint-Simonisme—characterized in section 7 of *Sera-phine*; he is sharpening his teeth in and against a Romantic mode that we still know intimately, if often in self-hatred. What should be unavailable to us in a Western European perspective of this recent vintage? And so forth. Yet some of the barriers to translation in the present instance are high and glass-spiked. Romantic irony—what we call Heine's strategy here—tortures us today with a closeness we cannot quite reach. (We can be bitter, black humorous, Romantic—as was e e cummings; but we falter at Heine's bumptiously dark tone. Even Roethke falters there. Yet the awareness of that faltering is evidence of closeness, of a near miss. For how else would we know that we did not know the Heine mode?) Furthermore, we are stumped by the prosody, the form-expression that fits the poem's teasing irony, its self-mocking jocularly. How can we make contemporary English of it?

Untermeyer and Draper move heavily from formal hints, with predictably archaic results. (Even Untermeyer's old effort in the second decade of the century was contemporary with the revolution in modern U.S. poetry—with *Poetry*, with Pound. But he pays no attention. Translation against one's time-grain almost never works.) Both translators overcompensate with sexual references at the end, for their only teetering sense of Heine's balance—poised as it is between cosmology and the off-color. Will—offering himself as his own victim—substitutes new risks of extrinsic form loss, of gross tone-change, in order to testify (as he temporarily sees it) honestly. (Honesty is a complex criterion here, yet the first one Will wants to rehabilitate. Rawly put, honesty in Will's translation means to him writing what he could say without feeling denatured, without blushing aloud. But this formulation is simplistically private, for the translator's language-nature, that to which his honesty must be true, is formed by his whole milieu. It is an artificial nature in which he has come to feel perfectly natural, as a writer feels in his style.) What Will hopes to achieve is a slice of approximation, an angle. (Long ago, he thinks, he considered such approximations efforts to express an idea-nexus that lay equally beyond and outside

them and the original. For his thinking at that stage, the original had no privileged claim on expressing its nexus, its point, which was equally expressible by translations of that original. Now he sees it a little differently. The original seems to him to be its idea, or point, more indissolubly than he had figured. Translations appear to him handicapped in their effort to emulate originals, to include their argument in their form. Handicapped but not gelded.) Will's slice of approximation, like Untermeyer's, raises the question of the moment.

Is Heine's poem translatable? Do these three failure-examples suggest that a fourth, a right fourth, might succeed, might be it? Or do they start toward proof that Heine's fragment could never be put into English? I have already said that I do not believe in untranslatability—in letters or in life. Let me illustrate in terms of an attitude toward culture. It seems to me that culture exists as repeated approximations of the natural—the natural spontaneous, the cosmic element that shades off into it—and that nature exists itself as the possibility of culture. I would even go further and see evidence that the inorganic-organic relationships set a precedent for the nature-culture relation. From the inorganic to culture there is a mutually sensitive continuum. Heine's text and translations of it seem to me to exist in some such kind of mutual interimplication. Or rather, what Heine's text means stands in mutually approximating sets of relationships to Heine's text itself and to the translations of it. In such mutuality zones, texts and their translations refuse any intermittent barrier that is not a way of keeping them more conscious of one another, more aware of ways of stating one another.

Another way to look at it: the central way. The only proof of untranslatability would have to be amassed by working and thinking through sets of translations, by translating. But nothing in that thinking could prove the ultimate impotence of that thinking and working. The dilemma would be like the effort to establish unintelligibility. I can go up to it—to the undecodable hieroglyph, the Easter Island giant—with unintelligibility, but I cannot know it except as the intelligible. I cannot know that I cannot know Cambodian or quantum physics, except in terms of what I am able to know of them.

Ancient Hellenic tradition attributed to Plato the following fragment of longing:

astér prín men clámpes  
ení zooísín heóos  
núñ de, thanón,  
lámpéis Hésperos  
én phthimenoís

From the first—chapter 10, Chase and Phillips, *Introduction to Greek*—this fragment stunned me and sent a prep school brat away eery. I still repeat it when life is trying to demystify itself.

Star formerly you used to shine  
among the living as a dawn star  
But now, having died,  
you shine like Hesperos among the worn away

Transliterated, literalized, the text suffers from more than usual blood loss. The original art is all in the suppression of artifice, the making itself so natural that no part of it catches, while all belongs to itself. The literal . . . well. Others, like Willis Barnstone, have tried lifting it:

You were the morning star among the living.  
In death, O Evening Star, you light the dead.

(Translated by Barnstone, 1962)

But anybody could do that. All you need is a dictionary and a free half hour. And then to your amazement you remember the kind of translation at which at first you think, Perfect: it had to be. Shelley's prefatory emblem to *Adonais* (1812):

Thou wert the morning-star among the living,  
Ere thy fair light had fled;  
Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving  
New splendour to the dead.

Time alone hacks at such greatness and forces Will—like other fools—to add,

System-immune you caught on the sun,  
 life in your face,  
 then died like deer,  
 fetlock tufts felty,  
 beauty's wind your words.

The heart of my argument is that untranslatability is a nonconcept, can never be proven; yet now I hear the hard corollary: even seemingly perfect translation cannot exist, must yield to time. Stasis is not allowed. All things flow. Shelley went close to the fire. In some sense this (alleged) Plato fragment yielded to him, and proved itself more accessible to people like us than Heine's quatrains. In this Plato lyric there is a less local mode-tone than in Heine, none of Heine's complex compacting of what Schiller called the naive and sentimental modes (spontaneity plus innocence on the one hand; on the other, sophisticated nostalgia). Yet this Platonic fragment—like the best Hellenic lyrics, in Archilochos and Bacchylides—proves purer and simpler than Shelley's naming equipment. (Ancient Greek lyric at its finest is like that purest water from the center of the spring, to which Winckelmann compared the ideal beauty of Apolline statuary.) Shelley's additions of *fair* and *splendour* mar what, in its perfect sound valence, became in Plato total freedom from excess. Plato's "light" is not "fair," nor need it be, so named as it is with beauty for its aureole. Plato's beloved gives no "new splendours" to the dead; for his mere existence there, without statement, includes its splendor. Shelley's minima betray him, at work overlarding the ancient.

Neither Heine nor Plato is untranslatable, nor perfectly—that is, genuinely—translatable. I am sharpening the former point—the emptiness of the class *untranslatable*—because in the end I want that point to penetrate a variety of limina up to the doors of death. I am sharpening the point with two different arguments: that translating, our only legitimate way of querying whether untranslatability exists, by its nature precludes the discovery of what it seeks; and that translations and the originals they approximate coexist as mutually interflowing circuits of expression, approaching each other but never joining, leaning toward one another yet never quite symmetrically—since the original is privilegedly implicit to the points it wants to make. These two arguments derive from



different perspectives—the first from that of the translator searching, and the second from that of an observer outside the translation work, who can see the pull of the Idea—what every original wants to be perfused by—as it draws translations up toward the force-zone of their original. Neither argument admits any absolute impediment to the achievement of translation, any factor of mere untranslatability; though both posit, as the ground for discovering this lack of impediment, endless work in the fields of quantity, *gradus*—slow *gradus*—*ad Parnassum*. Heine and Plato—my fragment was from the homoerotic grace of young Plato—belong to what we used to consider our *Kulturgebiet*, our culture-zone. What about translations from mind-zones farther from us in place or time or both? Has untranslatability a foothold there?

The Copper Eskimos—of Dolphin and Union Strait, Central Canadian Arctic—live their higher culture through dance-songs and incantations; group presentations to which individuals bring hope (for abundant seal harvests, for decent weather) and recent experience (a vast trek just completed, a hunt just observed). No experience is complete before it has been sung and danced in a public forum. These intricate, drum-accompanied seances strain our powers of understanding, force up from the TV set some gobot shaman enchanting the living room (see music score).<sup>2</sup> Translation? How is it possible? What will it have to take into consideration? Ciniciaq was a nonliterate Puivliq, deep in his *Gesamtkunstwerk* and miming a bear's mind. His F-major chant works through phrases of fairly regular measures, with cunningly varied numbers of beats. All that will have to be dealt with. And more. As translators we will have to deal with a refrain—e ye yi yai ye ye yi yai / ye yi yai ye ye yi yai—that repeats itself *after* the first and second (of the three) verses and then interweaves with the music of the third verse, which receives no refrain. Among other local conditions contributing to the virtually untranslatable, are frequent crowd interjections—*ho he ho he* cries. (The Copper Eskimos, excited at the first phonograph recordings of their songs in 1916, whooped it up in the background, as the cold wax testifies.) Inseparable from