



## Translating Persian Poetry and its Discontents

**Abstract:** Poetry is widely considered to be untranslatable. Notwithstanding the preponderance of theories which insist on the impossibility of poetry translation, poetry has been translated for millennia around the world. In this article, I discuss the untranslatability of poetry by drawing upon my experience as a translator of Persian poetry into English. By considering how the concept and experience of the poetic varies across different cultures, I discuss the development of global poetry in the translational interstices between languages and cultures. In this conception, the poetic belongs to the world and is not confined to any single language. In the end, I argue, untranslatability should not be seen to constitute interdiction against translation.

Keywords: poetry translation; untranslatability; world literature; Persian

Every once in a while, poetry translation arouses controversy among Iranian readers, especially when the work of great masters is involved. This sensitivity applies alike to classical poets like Ḥāfīz Shirāzī (d. 1390) and Šā’ib Tabrīzī (d. 1592) and modernists like Nima Yushij (d. 1960) and Bijan Elahi (d. 2010). Because of the damage they inflict on the original poems, translations are occasionally regarded as acts of profanation: The translator is accused of clumsiness, of going astray, of wasting the poem. Readers with varying degrees of mastery of the source language and the language into which the poem in question has been translated complain about the absence of certain features which they consider essential to the poem in Persian. “But this is not Ḥāfīz,” “this is not Šā’ib,” “this is not Nima,” “this is not Elahi,” they say. They lament the transformation that the poem, and the poet, undergoes through an “inappropriate” translation. More adequate and “appropriate” translations are rarely suggested by the complainants. Of course, this negativity toward poetry translation does not eclipse other readers’ sympathy with the translator’s hazardous undertaking.

I have been profaning poetry for around two decades now: I have published my translations of Friedrich Hölderlin, Stéphane Mallarmé, Francis Ponge, Alejandra Pizarnik, and Arthur Rimbaud in Iranian literary magazines (2004-2014). Since 2017, I have turned to translating Persian poetry into English. With Rebecca Ruth Gould, I have co-translated modernist poets, Bijan Elahi, Nima Yushij, and Hasan Alizadeh (b. 1947), as well as classical poets, Ṣā'ib Tabrīzī, Khāqānī Shirvānī (d. 1199), and Jahān Malik Khātūn (d. circa 1393). Throughout the years I lectured at the University of Isfahan (2008-2017), I witnessed the students' wry smiles and grim frowns at the translations from classical Persian by Edward Fitzgerald, Gertrude Bell, R. A. Nicholson, A. J. Arberry, and other eminent scholars of Persian literature.

Classical Persian poetry has been read in English translation since the late eighteenth century. Apparently, native English translators of Persian poetry have been less bothered by concerns about untranslatability than their Persian readers. William Jones's versified translation of Ḥāfīz's ghazal ("Agar ān turk-i shirāzī") was published first in his *Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771), in conjunction with a prose translation evidently for language learning reasons. By adding the prose translation, Jones intended less to highlight the lost information in the versified version than to show learners why the poem's images and allusions "cannot be translated *literally* into any European language."<sup>1</sup> Far from dooming the poem to untranslatability, Jones admits that he attempted to translate it into verse because he was pleased by "the wildness and simplicity of this Persian song."<sup>2</sup>

The subsequent versifications of Persian poetry, such as Joseph Champion's selected passages from Firdawsī's *Shāhnāma* (1790) or George Barrow's free translations of Ḥāfīz (1835), were Orientalist poetry exercises rather than faithful

renderings of these poets in English.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, prose translations, which were usually produced for scholarly purposes, showed a different appreciation of insurmountable difficulties of translation. H. Wilberforce Clarke, for instance, acknowledges in the preface to his prose translation of the entire *Dīvān* of Ḥāfīz that in rendering Ḥāfīz in verse, “it would well nigh impossible to clothe Persian verse with such an English dress as would truly convey its beauties.”<sup>4</sup> However, not all English translators of classical Persian poetry were as humble as Clarke. His contemporary, Edward FitzGerald, the renowned translator of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (in five editions, 1859, 1868, 1872, 1879, and 1889), adopted a radically free approach in his translation because he believed Persians “are *not* Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really *do* want a little *Art* to shape them.”<sup>5</sup> FitzGerald’s use of free translation reflected an Orientalist racism that meant to correct or improve on the dominated culture.<sup>6</sup>

Around one hundred years later, American poet Coleman Barks used the method of free translation in his translations of Rūmī’s ghazals in the hope that they remain “true to the essence.”<sup>7</sup> Barks’ inventive approach to Rūmī’s poems stands in sharp contrast to the scholarly prose translation of Rūmī’s *Maṭnawī* by R. A. Nicholson (1925–40) and to A. J. Arberry’s prose versions of Rūmī’s ghazals (*Mystical Poems of Rūmī*, 1968–79). Nicholson did not doubt the possibility of translating poetry; he also hoped to transfer the sense of the original words into his own language like captives submitting to the power of a conqueror. In a footnote to his preface, after explaining his fidelity to the outer rather than to the inner meaning of Rūmī’s verses, Nicholson declares: “Some day I hope to try in a volume of selected passages whether a translator of the *Mathnawi* may not merit the praise which Jerome bestowed on Hilary: ‘quasi captivos sensus in suam linguam victoris jure transposuit.’”<sup>8</sup>

The Iranian students at the workshop “Persian Literature in Translation,” convened at the University of Isfahan from 2008 to 2017, did not like what they read as English versions of their celebrated poets, Khayyām, Rūmī, or Ḥāfīz. Comparing the translations to the original texts, they scorned the losses and distortions, and underscored the poem’s resistance to translation. Their general reaction resonated with what Dick Davis called “romantic, quasi-racial canonization of such poets,” referring to the conviction that certain poets “cannot be translated because what they express draws so deeply on the culture’s specific ethnic that it is not communicable in other terms.”<sup>9</sup> In their cynicism about the translatability of the classical Persian poetry, these students echoed the double standard held by well-established Iranian poets and literary critics, Mohammad Reza Shafī‘ī Kadkani (b. 1939) and Ahmad Shamlu (d. 2000): While they were ready to deny the possibility of translating Persian poetry into European languages, they barely questioned the plentiful translations made, and continuing to be made, from European poetry, classical and modern, into Persian.

Modernist Iranian poet Shamlu, himself a translator of European poetry, was harshly criticized for his controversial edition of *Dīvān-i Ḥāfīz*. Yet he ridiculed an American friend of his who believed there should be a “key [*kilīd*]” to unlock the mysteries of Ḥāfīz’s ghazals in translation. Shamlu insisted to the contrary that in the English language “the lock has no key.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly Shafī‘ī Kadkani, who contends “whatever beauty is witnessed in Persian poetry today is the result of grafting the tree of European culture onto that of Iranian culture,”<sup>11</sup> makes recourse to cultural incommensurability to rule out any possibility of adequately translating Persian classics into European languages. Propounding the shared cultural background between European languages, Shafī‘ī Kadkani surmises that “translating from French to German is easier than translating from French to Arabic or from Persian to English.”<sup>12</sup>

During the translation workshop, we read Ḥāfīz’s ghazal in different English translations:

بهبوی نافع‌ای کاخر صبا زان طره بگشاید  
ز تاب زلف مشکینش چه خون افتاد در دلها

This is the second verse of Ḥāfīz’s ghazal at the opening of his *Dīvān* (Collected Poems).<sup>13</sup> Known by its first hemistich in Arabic, “Alā yā ayyuha as-sāqī [Behold, O cupbearer!],” it is the first ever ghazal by Ḥāfīz translated into a European language. (This was done into Latin, by Franciscus Meninski, in *Linguarium Orientalium*, 1680.)<sup>14</sup> No literal rendering is capable of conveying the complex ambiguity that is woven into the verse but in general the poet suggests the great pains the unidentified lover has to go through to win the unidentified beloved’s favour. The ambiguities are summarized in Table 1.

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
بگشاید	طره	آن	ز	صبا	آخر	ک	نافع‌ای	بوی	به
<i>bogshāyad</i>	<i>torra</i>	<i>ān</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>sabā</i>	<i>ākher</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>nāfa-i</i>	<i>bu-ye</i>	<i>ba</i>
opens/ releases	lock of hair	that	from	Saba (morning wind that blows from the East)	finally/ ultimately	that	musk/ musk- pod/ navel	smell/ fragrance/ perfume (of)	to/ with/ at
								in the hope of	

20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12
دلها	در	افتاد	خون	چه	مشکینش	زلف	تاب	ز
<i>del-hā</i>	<i>dar</i>	<i>ofīād</i>	<i>khun</i>	<i>cha</i>	<i>moshkinash</i>	<i>zolf-e</i>	<i>tāb-e</i>	<i>ze</i>
hearts	into	fell	blood	so much	dark/ musky	hair/ curly hair	shining/ patience/ curves	from
suffering								

**Table 1.** The interlinear rendering of Ḥāfīz’s verse with emphasis on ambiguous words. Persian is written and read from right to left.

The verse delicately interweaves multiple images: the lover making every effort to win the beloved's heart all night long; the beloved's consent at dawn; the beloved's loosening their curly shiny black hair (as a symbol of their consent) in the morning breeze; and the male deer killed by greedy hunters who tear the deer's abdomen for the pricey fragrant musk contained in a curly musk pod. This verse has been the subject of several retranslations into English, some of which are given below.

By reason of the perfume (hope) of the musk-pod, that, at the end (of night), the breeze displayeth from that (knotted) fore-lock,—

From the twist of its musky (dark, fragrant) curl, what blood (of grief) befell the hearts (of the lovers of God)!<sup>15</sup>

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Flooded with their heart's blood are those who wait for the scent that the dawn wind may spill from her dark, musky curls.<sup>16</sup>

\*

I have prayed the wind o'er my heart to fling  
The fragrance of musk in her hair that sleeps—  
In the night of her hair—yet no fragrance stays  
The tears of my heart's blood my sad heart weeps.<sup>17</sup>

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So sweet perfume the morning air  
Did lately from her tresses bear,  
Her twisted, musk-diffusing hair—  
What heart's calamity was there!<sup>18</sup>

\*

How many hearts lie bleeding, waiting the wind-loosed musk  
Out of those tresses—the bright twist of black curls?<sup>19</sup>

Unsurprisingly, no single translation was found adequate. The images Ḥāfīz’s verse evoked in Persian underwent a prismatic dispersion in each translation. Each translation was able to capture only some fragments of that lost original intertwined unity of form and content. The ambiguity of Ḥāfīz’s verse, which evokes multiple entangled images, is sustained by the use of polysemy: *ba bū-yi* with references to both “hope” and “fragrance”; *nāfa*, referring to “navel” and “musk”; *tāb* signifying “patience,” “dazzle,” and “curls” at the same time; *mushkīn* meaning both “musky” and “dark”; and *khūn uftād dar dil-hā* (blood fell into the hearts) evoking literally a “bleeding heart” and figuratively a “suffering soul”—the polysemy, and therefore the fundamental ambiguity of Ḥāfīz’s verse, is lost or only partially represented in the English versions. Add to the list of the missing, the beloved’s ambiguous gender which is a natural outcome of the gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun in Persian but that which has to be resolved in favour of an either male or female pronoun in English. And let’s forget about equating the gentle morning wind in premodern Persian poetry, *ṣabā*, with the light west wind, zephyr, in European tradition.

Readers complained about the lost aura of Ḥāfīz’s poem once displaced from its original Persian. “Whereas content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds. For it signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien.”<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin thus points to the disjunction between form and content that afflicts all translation. The different levels of translatability with which a poetry translator is engaged inevitably transform



the poem under translation into an uneven text. To borrow Gilles Deleuze's terms, translation deterritorializes the original. And if I can be pardoned for further metaphorizing of the relation between the original and the translated poems, translation does not and cannot "mirror" the original due to this unevenness, just as a mirror never reflects back a neutral image of oneself to the spectator. In order to be able to see oneself in the mirror, one has to stare at one's own eyes in the mirror. My mirror image is produced by my focus on my eyes in the same way that a translator has to focus on aspects of the original poem that better yield themselves to translation.

In the course of our workshops, I began to detect an aesthetic fallacy in the judgements that we, as Persian readers, passed on the translations of Persian poems into a language which was not our own. By "aesthetic fallacy" I mean evaluating an English translation of a Ḥāfīz's ghazal according to the Persian poetic criteria whereas Ḥāfīz's poem is, first and foremost, translated and meant for pleasing the English reader.

But what is called a poem in English is not necessarily perceived as poetic by Persian readers, and vice versa. "Do we not generally regard that which lies beyond communication in a literary work—and even a poor translator will admit that this is its essential substance—as the unfathomable, the mysterious, the "poetic"?"<sup>21</sup> asks Walter Benjamin. Languages differ in the ways in which they demarcate the poetic from the non-poetic. For example, ambiguity, as a significant element of Persian poetry (and culture), is less highly valued in English poetry and culture. The classical Persian conception of the poetic line as essentially constituted by two half-lines with a caesura in between gives a weight to end-rhymes in Persian poetics that contrasts with the unpopularity of end-rhymes in English poetry. Classical Persian poetic forms are classified according to their end-rhyme patterns. In the absence of objective measures to identify a text as prose or poetry, the distinction is generated largely by canon or by

intuition.<sup>22</sup> I have come to the general conclusion from my experience that to make a translated text feel like a poem to the Persian reader can be more difficult than doing the same in English. Persian poetry seems to have been distinguished from prose with more scrupulous borders. During my “English Poetry” courses, I realized how difficult it was to sell William Carlos Williams’s “This is Just to Say” as a poem to my Persian-speaking students. This difference is reflected also in the practices of poetry recitation across the two traditions. Native recitations of English poems sound too prosaic to Iranian listeners, who are accustomed to dramatic declamations common in classical and modern Persian poetry readings. Meanwhile, Persian customs for reciting Persian poetry tends to sound bombastic, exaggerated, and even pretentious to the Anglophone ear.<sup>23</sup>

Centuries before Benjamin, the Shāfi‘ī jurist and translator of the Qur’ān into Persian, Shāhfūr Isfarāyinī (d. circa. 1078) argued that the Qur’ān and poetry are similarly untranslatable because “the order of the [words in the] Qur’ān is a miracle [*mu‘jiz*], but the order of the [words in the] translated Qur’ān is not a miracle. If the translated Qur’ān were the Qur’ān, then it would follow that translated poetry is poetry in any language. This is impossible.”<sup>24</sup> In Isfarāyinī’s account, translation inflicts a generic transformation upon poetry. When translated, prose ends up as prose, drama ends up as drama, but the most faithful rendering of the words in a poem cannot guarantee the poetic-ness of the end result: A poem is not necessarily read as a poem in the language into which it is translated.

The generic transformation that happens in the process of translating poetry does not, however, necessarily create prose; the distinction between prose and poetry cannot be determined once and for all. Prose and poetry are tied to each other as though on a Möbius Strip. The philosophy master in Moliere’s play, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*

(1671), oversimplifies the distinction when he teaches Jourdain that “All that is not prose is verse; all that is not verse is prose” (Act ii, Scene vi).<sup>25</sup> As poetry translators, we cannot even share in Jourdain’s childish happiness at the discovery that “Goodness! then I’ve been talking prose these forty years without ever knowing it.” Paraphrasing a poem—straightening its figurative folds and normalizing the syntactic order of words—does not necessarily suppress the poetic intention that has assembled such and such ideas into a poetic configuration.

It is difficult to name what makes the poetic which is lost in the course of translating poetry. Different readers in the same language have different perceptions of the poeticity of a poem. What makes a poem a poem is something volatile, relative, and immeasurable. Benjamin compares the elusive, inexpressible points of contact that a translation makes with the poetic in the original poem to a tangent that “touches a circle lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity.”<sup>26</sup> The tactile metaphor for translation also appears in his description of Hölderlin’s translations of Sophocles’ tragedies: “In them the harmony of the languages is so profound that sense is touched by language only the way an aeolian harp is touch by the wind.”<sup>27</sup>

The volatility of the poetic is itself relative. For instance, with its rigid prosodic rules (*‘arūz*), well-defined poetic forms, and classified figurative devices, premodern Persian poetics (*balāgha*) offered more fixed criteria for the poetic than the modernist free verse. During the earliest translational encounters with European poetry, Iranian translators domesticated and adapted European poems into familiar classical Persian poetic meters and forms in order to sugar-coat the translated poem which sounded too prosaic to Persian readers. In these early verse translations, translators preferred to remain faithful to received forms in the target language rather than to literal words in

the original. The translation in 1923 of Victor Hugo's "Sur une barricade" (On the barricade, 1871) by the Iranian-born poet Abolqasem Lahuti (who later settled in the Soviet Union) is among the first examples of a Persian translation that uses the method of verse translation (*tarjuma-ye manzūm*).<sup>28</sup> Three years later, the poet-satirist Iraj Mirza published "Zohreh va Manuchehr" (Zohreh and Manuchehr, 1926), a work loosely based on Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593). This was an adaptation of Shakespeare's poem to the predominant verse narrative form of classical Persian—known as *maṭnavī*. Iraj Mirza also composed a work based on Friedrich Schiller's *Der Taucher* (The Diver, 1797) called "Shāh va jām" (The King and the Cup, 1918), and a translation of Jean de la Fontaine's seventeenth-century reworking of the fable "Le Corbeau et le Renard" (The Crow and the Fox).<sup>29</sup>

None of these translations aimed to reproduce the original in literal terms; they were concerned with fitting the original poem within a recognizably classical poetic line pattern. In the 1920s and 1930s, several Iranian literary magazines developed the practice of paraphrasing European—mainly French—poems in Persian prose and commissioning poets to reconfigure these paraphrases into classical Persian poetry. This form of appropriation, known as *iqtirāḥ* (test of literary talent) facilitated the transition from canonical premodern forms to the free verse of Iranian modernism under the influence of European models.<sup>30</sup>

In the absence of prosodic measures to create the illusion of poetry, what makes a poem? Heidegger has an answer for this question. He refers to the poem's fundamental mood, tone, or disposition (*Grundstimmung*): "The poet speaks by virtue of a tone [*Stimmung*] which sets [*bestimmt*] the ground and base and stakes out [*durchstimmt*] the space from and in which the poetic saying establishes a mode of being. This tone we name the fundamental tone of the poetry. By fundamental tone,

however, we do not mean an undulating state of emotion merely accompanying the language: rather, the fundamental tone opens the world which receives the imprint of its being in poetic speech.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, polysemy (*īhām*) is not just a rhetorical ornamentation in Ḥāfīz’s *ghazals* among other figurative devices. It is a fundamental mood of Ḥāfīz’s poetry reflecting his ethos of *rindī*, an ambiguous ethical gesture in contrast to religious hypocrisy. Like hypocrisy, *rindī* names a discrepancy between the outward appearance and inward reality. Unlike hypocrisy, in *rindī* the outward appearance is immoral while the inward reality is decent. This ambiguity protected Ḥāfīz against the political instability of his times. Take this amphibian being from Ḥāfīz’s language, and the whole exegetic flexibility which grounds Ḥāfīz’s *ghazal* upon groundlessness is gone. Khāqānī’s materialistic approach to language reflected in this verse from his Christian *qaṣīda*, cannot be rendered in English because of the verse’s overdependence on the formal aspects of the Perso-Arabic script.

چنان استاده‌ام پیش و پس طعن  
که استاده‌ست الف‌های اطعنا

[I have stood to the front and back of blame as firm as  
the *alifs* stand in the word *aṭī ‘nā*]

English alphabet lacks an *alif* letter to be placed on the two sides of a word like “blame” or “sarcasm” (for the word *ṭa ‘n* in the original) in order to form an English word that means “we obey [*aṭī ‘nā*],” as in Khāqānī’s poem. The poet’s inflexible disobedience to the Sultan’s power becomes ironic when it is evoked through self-reflexive reference to the morphology of a word that sends an unambiguous message of obedience, *aṭī ‘nā*.

I admit I’m unable to perform the delicate self-reflexivity of Khāqānī’s Persian verse in my translation. Many aspects of Khāqānī’s poems do not yield themselves to translation adequately or at all. But I don’t understand untranslatability as an

interdiction against translation; to the contrary, untranslatability calls for translation and retranslation. Translation definitely exiles a poem to oceans away from its original mode of being. Verbal fidelity is least capable in generating “a” poem—let alone “the” poem—in another language. The original poem is lost for sure, but I translate in the hope that a different poem is born through my experimentation. The loss of the original, which should be presupposed in any translation, since it determines translation per se—is not a good reason to deprive myself of the pleasures of *poiesis*, that is “making.” Instead of giving up on poetry translation for what it can’t do, let’s embrace what it can do. The idea that “now that the poem will be lost in translation, let’s not translate poetry at all” is infinitely more damaging than “let’s translate poetry, though it will be lost in translation, possibly giving birth to something new.”

I’m well aware of the damages I have inflicted to the poems I have subjected to my translation. But I do not know what is achieved by not translating. Not translating does not make poems more translatable. And for those who insist that not translating Ḥāfīz Shīrāzī, Ṣā’ib Tabrīzī, Nima Yushij, and Bijan Elahi better serves these poets and their international readers, then until when must we stop translating them? When is the ideal time to translate a poem, with better linguistic capacities and competencies, which are built up slowly within a language and its speakers? The question of the appropriate time is important because it determines our position regarding the relation of translation and poetry. “For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life,”<sup>32</sup> thus Benjamin accounts for the temporality of the relation between untranslatability and poetry. Whereas for Benjamin, untranslatability is an evanescent feature of literary works which separates their life

from their afterlife, untranslatability can remain a permanent condition. The untranslatability of the poem conditions its poetic existence.

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For the past five years, I have doomed myself to linguistic exile. I stopped writing in Persian and turned to English, a language which was not my own, a language in which I was not raised. Much remains to be told about my training in English as student of *Zabān va adabiyyāt-i Ingilīsī* (English Language and Literature), from BA to PhD, in the so-called “post-Islamic-revolutionary” Iranian academy. Until 2015, my most serious experience of writing in English were the MA and PhD theses I had written up on the late works of my favourite writer Samuel Beckett.

It was a late August day in Isfahan in 2016 when I had the wonderful chance of walking to Saeb’s tomb with Rebecca Ruth Gould, from Charbagh, along the Niasarm brook (*mādī* as is called by the locals). Rebecca Ruth Gould is an American-born writer and translator based in the UK. She translates poetry from Persian, Georgian, and Russian. Her translations include *The Prose of the Mountains: Three Tales of the Caucasus* (Budapest: Central European University, 2015), *After Tomorrow the Days Disappear: Ghazals and Other Poems of Hasan Sijzi of Delhi* (Northwestern University Press, 2016), and *The Death of Bagrat Zakharych and other Stories* by Vazha-Pshavela (Paper & Ink, 2019).

During the very first hours of our meeting, we talked about poetry and its translation. We agreed that poetry translation logistically requires collaboration between native speakers of both languages involved.<sup>33</sup> We did not think that translating poetry is “on a platter/ a poet’s pale and glaring head,/ a parrot’s screech, a monkey’s chatter, and profanation of the dead” (Vladimir Nabokov. 1955. “On Translating Eugene Onegin.” *The New Yorker*, January 8). Or as Zbigniew Herbert metaphorized, the poetry

translator is not the clumsy humblebee with a nose yellow with pollen from the flower it cannot not taste or smell because it has a cold.<sup>34</sup> We believed poetry has to be translated, and on a global scale. Thus began our co-explorations into the contact points between Persian and English poetry. Throughout our work together, we learned most from each other's blank stares at the choices each of us made based on what was taken for granted in one language and made explicit in the other's. We marveled at the discovery of huge chasms of untranslatability that separated *vaşl* from "union" and *firāq* from "separation" in classical Persian ghazals, as when we discussed this verse by Ḥasan Dihlavī (d. circa 1338):

کمان وصل تو را خواستم کشید ولی  
فراق تو بکمین بود من ندانستم

I was drawing the bow of your union but  
your separation was lurking. I didn't know.

or:

At your love in my life I aimed my bow.

Abandonment was lying in ambush for me. I couldn't see.

And we wondered if it is worth the energy at all to show, at any cost, to the English reader, the delicate nuance between *kamān* (bow) and *kamīn* (ambush). Was it significant for English readers to know, through our translation, what subtle surgeries Nima Yushij has performed on Persian syntax? Were we, as translators, even able to show this in English with different grammatical structures and functions? Would it impact English readers in the same way as Persian readers if, after spending oceans of time and energy, we succeeded in devising different linguistic registers to reflect the versatility of Elahi's poetic voice across his different poems? And if we succeeded in



doing so, wouldn't we have to confront reasonable doubts about whether the registers we devised in English correspond to those in which Elahi had created his Persian poem?

This piece should not be read as an apology for the poetry translator's shortcomings or incompetence. We make no claim to having achieved perfection in our translations. We are aware that we have not managed in fully, or at times partially, to convey the delicate ways in which Ḥāfiẓ Shirazī, Ṣā'ib Tabrīzī, Nima Yushij, and Bijan Elahi create pleasure and wonder in the Persian language. But we also know that not translating is no solution. Not translating makes nothing, and nothing gives birth to nothing. The idea of untranslatability can easily be manipulated to highlight and justify the barriers in mutual understanding and empathy. Untranslatability generates the sacred, and the sacred, in its absolutism, cuts off dialogue. To avoid this, poetry translation can get rid of the tautological task of exactly saying and doing what a poet has said, and open up a dialogical space through the conjunction of a poem and its translation(s) exactly in what is not adequately transferred through translation.

From a Persian literary historical perspective, translation has played a revitalizing role with respect to Persian poetry. Poetry translation made a tremendous impact on the transformation of classical prosody into free experimental forms. With the shift of translation methods, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, to more literal renderings, translators increasingly felt free to give voice to the spoken Persian idiom. Moreover, fidelity to the wording of the foreign poem rather than to pre-existing metric patterns generated more irregular and prosaic lines in the translated poems. Translations of European poets featured heavily in Iranian literary magazines and periodicals. Major literary journals such as *Sukhan* (1943-1979) and *Andīsha va hunar* (1954-1974) included influential sections on "foreign poetry" that circulated widely among the Iranian literati. The emergence of outstanding poet-translators such as Ahmad Shamlu

and Bijan Elahi is a phenomenon of modernist Persian poetry.<sup>35</sup> Whereas modernist poets established and legitimized their poetic voices through their translations of mainstream and marginalized European poets, pre-modern poets were less interested in translating poems than in composing poems originally in a language other than Persian.

Translation has been at the centre of debates between Iranian modernists and traditionalists, and has always had its opponents among not only traditionalists but also modernists themselves. It is not only these days and from the most antimodernist tribunes of Islamist cultural policy-makers in Iran that “translation-struck-ness [*tarjuma-zadigī*]” is equated with the more classical “West-struck-ness [*gharb-zadigī*].”<sup>36</sup> Coined by Iranian philosophy teacher Ahmad Fardid, and popularized by Iranian writer, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, who used it in the title of his 1962 book, the term *gharb-zadigī* refers to Iranians’ loss of identity as a consequence of absolute submission to European values and lifestyle. The danger of superficial, inadequate, and erratic translations in undermining any cultural renovation is debated among contemporary modernists, and the importance of direct contact with the original sources of European culture is strongly advised.

On the other hand, the indispensability of translation to modern Iranian thought has been emphasized by other writers such as Morad Farhadpour, who argues that “translation in its broadest sense is the *only* true form of thought for Iranians.”<sup>37</sup> Farhadpour proposes that a mode of self-translation is necessary for any modernization project in Iran. “If any kind of thought can be considered a kind of translation,” Farhadpour writes, “then we need to translate, not only in order to know Kant and Hegel, but also to know our own past. We need to translate Mullā Ṣadrā and Ibn Sīnā, and more importantly, Sa‘dī, Ḥāfiẓ and Firdawsī for ourselves.”<sup>38</sup> Iranian writer Omid Mehrgan takes Farhadpour’s argument further and proposes “double translation

[*tarjuma-yi muḏā‘af*]” as a means of self-translation by which he means “translating, say Ibn Sīnā’s *Dānishnāma-yi ‘Alā‘i* into English and then translating it back into Persian by someone else and as a text originally belonging to the English language.”<sup>39</sup> Mehrigan argues that uprooting the text and severing its relation to the original context in this way involves a shock effect which is necessary for redeeming the so-called literary heritage from its “false significance and their formalized and aestheticized deception.”<sup>40</sup> From this perspective, translation de-rhetorizes; by translating classical Persian literary texts into, and letting them speak through a foreign language, their true content is released from the dazzling rhetorical ornamentation that is traditionally considered a criterion of excellence in Persian literature.

For me, the most interesting part of my translational experiments (*études*, or *marshq* as they are called in Persian) was the self-estrangement the Persian text, and the transformation that I—as the translator—underwent when the text was deprived of its dazzling rhetorical ornaments. I was fascinated by the de-aestheticized matter that remained from the Persian poems in translation. I translated the word “دلا” in Ḥasan Dihlavī’s hemistich, “دلا تا چند ازین آلايش خاک,” literally as “O my heart.” The full translation of this sentence—“O my heart! Stop this dust contamination”—sounded strange in English. The interjection “O my heart,” used for self-reference and as an indicator of interior monologue in premodern Persian poetry, does not serve the same function in English. Persian metaphors that I used to take for granted—“heart” as “self” and “dust” as “worldly bonds”—were suddenly made to appear uncanny through the process of translating them into English. I discovered a lot about my culture through the cross-cultural dialogues that took shape in the course of my co-translations with Rebecca. The untranslatability of the basic lexicon of the classical Persian romance—

*vaşl* (literally, “union”) and *firāq* (literally, “separation”)—opened up a dialogic space in which I discovered the bimodal existence of love (‘*ishq*) in Persian, defined by the presence or absence of lovers to each other as in a game of attainment/deprivation.

A considerable part of classical Persian literary canon has been translated and retranslated by native English translators for scholarly and popular English audiences for around two hundred years. The translation of modernist Persian poetry has only recently become popular in Anglo-American and European venues.<sup>41</sup> In recent decades more native speakers of Persian have undertaken the translation of Persian poetry and fiction, occasionally—and ideally—in collaboration with native speakers of English. The practice has its own value despite the backlash against translations by non-native speakers—e.g. these translations are largely uninformed by aesthetic criteria and intuitive conventions shared by common English readers—and despite the fact that few English readers read poetry in general, particularly poetry in translation. These translations might fail to introduce English readers of poetry to the great masters of classical and modern Persian poetry.

However, for Persian translators, translation—even when it fails to capture the sense of the original—provides a valuable exercise in self-expression in a foreign language. They confront the questions: “Do I understand myself in another language? How?” Instead of fostering the dangerous illusion of being able to express almost anything in our language, translation lets us learn from our failures in making ourselves understood to others. From the perspective of world literature, which calls for reading literary works outside of their languages of origin, these translations bring us closer to that sense of “the literary” which is not particularly involved with the *parole* in which a literary work is produced.

“Modernity Has Stagnated Behind the Barrier of Translation”: This is the title of a blogpost on BBC Persian website, dated 29 May 2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-52834548>). The author concludes that “although translation [*tarjuma*] is sufficient cause for interacting with the world, it is original writing [*ta’līf*] provides the necessary cause for active contribution to the world.” In most cases, the binary *tarjuma* and *ta’līf* translates the classical contrast between “the translated” and “the original” in Persian translation studies. The attitude involves a classical hierarchy in which translation is treated as lacking originality and passive. I don’t deny the value of contributing to the world literature by writing original poetry, fiction, and non-fiction—in which language then?— but I learned from poetry translation that we, Persian poets and writers, have not translated enough: After a first phase of translating “from” other languages, there comes a phase of translating “into” other languages. Whereas the first phase aimed at linguistic *études* in one’s language in order to bring about new poetic expressions, the second phase expands one’s capacity to express oneself in another language. Active contribution to world poetry still demands translation and retranslation despite the widespread arguments against the translatability of poetry. Although the poem inevitably gets lost in translation, world literature will always need poetry translation. If poetry is a discourse which cannot be “transferred” through translation, let’s “translate” poetry in a sense that has nothing to do with “transfer” or “transposition.” A poem dies in translation. And it is in translation that a new poem is born.

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### Notes

1. Jones, *A Grammar of the Persian*, 133 (my italics).
2. Ibid., 137.
3. Beard, "English iii. Translations"; Yohannan, "The Persian Poetry Fad," 144–145.
4. Clarke, *The Divan-i Hafiz*, viii.
5. FitzGerald, *The Letters*, vol. 2, 335.
6. See Drury, "Accident, Orientalism."
7. Barks, *The Essential Rumi*, 292.
8. Nicholson, *The Mathnawî*, vol.2, xv.
9. Davis, "On Not Translating Hafez," 317.
10. Shamlu, *Hāykū, Shi'r-i zhāpunī*, 13. Also see Tahmasebian and Gould, "The Translational Horizons," 38 and 42–43.
11. Shafi'i Kadkani, *Bā chirāq va āyina*, 139.
12. Shafi'i Kadkani, "Dar tarjoma-nāpazīrī," 746; for a translation see Shafi'i-Kadkani, "On Poetic Untranslatability."
13. For a continued debate on the translatability of Ḥāfiz's ghazals, see Davis, "On Not Translating Hafez"; Gould, "Hard Translation"; and Fani, "The Allure of Untranslatability."
14. Inan, "Writing a Grammatical Commentary," 38.
15. Clarke, *The Divan-i Hafiz*, 2.
16. Bell, *Poems from the Divan*, 67.
17. Arberry, *Hafiz: Fifty Poems*, 83.
18. Avery and Heath-Stubbs, *Hafiz of Shiraz*, 19.
19. Gray, *The Green Sea of Heaven*, 1.
20. Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 258.
21. Ibid., 253.
22. For more about how Anglo/English poetry operates in many ways that are incongruous with Persian poetry, see Dick Davis, "On Not Translating Hafez."
23. I owe this perspective from Anglophone poetry to Rebecca Ruth Gould.
24. Isfarāyinī, *Tāj al-tarājim*, 10.

25. Molière, *The Plays of Molière*, 200.
26. Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” 261.
27. *Ibid.*, 262.
28. Lahuti, “Sangar-i khūnīn,” 689–690.
29. Iraj Mirza, *Dīvān*, 128-132 and 153.
30. See Karimi-Hakkak, “From Translation to Appropriation.”
31. Cited in Clark, *Martin Heidegger*, 112; For the original, see Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, 79.
32. Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” 254.
33. For an account of the poetics of our co-translation, see Gould and Tahmasebian, “Inspired and Multiple.” For our two book-length translations, see Elahi, *High Tide of the Eyes*, and Alizadeh, *House Arrest*.
34. Herbert, “On Translating Poetry,” 98.
35. See Tahmasebian and Gould, “The Translational Horizons,” and Tahmasebian and Gould, “Translation as Alienation.”
36. Member of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, Hasan Rahimpour Azghadi has popularized the term *tarjuma-zadigī* among the Islamic Republic’s cultural policy-makers (<https://tinyurl.com/bdzxrj22>).
37. Farhadpour, “Thought/translation,” 54.
38. *Ibid.*, 57.
39. Mehrgan, *Ilāhiyāt-i tarjuma*, 50.
40. *Ibid.*, 50.
41. See Beard, “English: iv. Translations of Modern,” for a history of modernist Persian literature translated into English. Also see Ali Araghi’s project, “Persian Translated” (<http://www.ataraghi.com/persian-translated.html>), for an online database (in progress) of modernist Persian literary works that have been translated into English.

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