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Translating Line Breaks: A View from Persian Poetics

"A SCORED PORTION OF shared sky" (Mullen 175). With these words, American poet Laura Mullen gives visual form to the line break in modern poetics. For Mullen, every line break is "a mode of inquiry" that ventures into "shared time" (173). Flashing white on the page, line breaks compel readers to rethink the thread that links words together. They discover, create, or provoke emotions in a poem. For many poets and readers, lineation is the difference between poetry and prose. Whereas in prose the sentence is the basic unit of thought, in poetry it is the line. Line breaks are tools to think with, ways of unmooring thought from its customary channels. They are a language unto themselves.

Although line breaks are most visible in modernist poetry, poetic lineation did not begin with modernity. Rather, it entered a different phase, one marked by a systematic break with meter, and a concomitant attempt to make the poetic line autonomous from the strictures of regulated sound. The role of the poetic line in shaping meaning has preoccupied literary scholarship for centuries (Paterson; Levertov; Hudgins; Longenbach; Rosko and Vander Zee), yet few have asked what lineation means for poetry translation. We first began reflecting on lineation as a translational challenge while translating the modernist Iranian poet Bijan Elahi (1945–2010) into English. We discovered that, although the influence of European poetry on Persian in bringing about new imagery, rhetoric, language, and poetic forms is well known (Shafiʿi Kadkani 139–328; Shams Langrudi 1: 29–31, 44; Baraheni 51–65, 85–109, 156–67), the new relationship to lineation that resulted from this encounter has yet to be fully probed. Responding to these silences in our literary practice, this essay addresses the impact of translation on formal changes in the Persian poetic line across space and time. We also consider the implications of line breaks for translating poetry across languages in general. While narrating the development of Iranian modernist poetry as a pattern of shifting line patterns, we do not aim to produce a new theory of Persian prose or verse. Instead, we address the challenge posed by poetry's lineated form to its translation.

As we show, the problem of translating line breaks is not independent of the language in which the poem is written. In this regard, contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's comments on enjambment as a building block of poetic

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discourse is foundational to the analysis that follows. "No definition of verse is perfectly satisfying," Agamben insists, "unless it asserts an identity for poetry against prose through the possibility of *enjambment*" (Agamben, *Idea* 39). The possibility of enjambment is best represented by the line as the key poetic unit: its ruptures, endings, and convergences are what distinguishes a poem from a piece of prose. Following this train of thought to its logical conclusion, a prose poem is distinct from a prose text. A prose poem is simply a poem that is constituted by an unusually long line or single-lined stanzas; consisting of a single line, the prose poem simply has no line breaks and therefore zero (rather than nonexistent) enjambment.

Agamben's stipulation is grounded in an understanding of the poetic as the noncoincidence of sound and sense, an "opposition between metrical segmentation and semantic segmentation" (Agamben, *End* 109), which he finds in the medieval Italian authors Nicolo Tibino and Dante (also see Cha). This thesis makes visible the contribution of lineation to the making of the poetic in many classical traditions—from Horace in Latin to al-Khalil in Arabic—that conceive of poetry as metered speech (*kalam-e mowzun*), to adopt the idiom of classical Persian poetics (Razi 147). While enjambment is a concern in premodern poetics, it gains in significance and follows a different trajectory in modernity. Modernist poetry is expected to lineate with deliberation: certain lines should end on certain words rather than on other adjacent words for specific reasons. Similarly, as will be shown, modern readers may interpret a poem differently, depending on the lineations into which it is rendered.

With reference to classical and modern Iranian and American poetry, these pages demonstrate the significance of line breaks for poetry translation. To this end, we investigate the issue of line breaks and enjambment from the point of view of the practicing translator. We trace the evolution of modernist Persian poetry through surface changes in the shape and function of lines that resulted from the approximation to the rhythms of colloquial speech as well as the translation of European poetry into Persian. Throughout, we examine Persian poetics as a microcosm of global poetics, at the intersection of classical and contemporary relationships with the poetic line.

Line Breaks from Classical to Modern Persian Poetics

In his seminal treatise on the prosody and poetic art of the Persians, thirteenth-century critic Shams-i Qays defines poetry as "a discourse which is [carefully] thought through (*andishideh*), meaningfully ordered (*morattab-e maʿnavi*), metered (*mowzun*), repeated (*motakarrer*), balanced (*motasavi*), with the final letters resembling each other" (Razi 147). Shams-i Qays's definition reflects all the criteria for the classical poetic line: a line (*bayt*) should form a sequence with other lines of the same rhythm, same length, and the same ending sound. This classical model dominated the production of poetry for around a millennium. In the twentieth century, Persian poets—most systematically Nima Yushij—broke down the established metrical line into constituent feet, and combined them in untraditional ways. Eventually, poetic meter was abandoned altogether by poets such as Ahmad Shamlu, who wrote poems in free verse that he termed (to translate literally) "white verse [*sheʿr-e sepid*]."[1] The term *sheʿr-e azad*, which can be translated as "free verse," labels many varied poetic practices in Persian, and should not be confused with *sheʿr-e sepid*. While Nima Yushij used the term *sheʿr-e azad* when referring to his poems, his understanding of this concept differs from "free verse" in English poetry as defined by T. E. Hulme and F. S. Flint in the first decades of the twentieth century as well as from *verse libre* in nineteenth-century French poetics (Hulme 59–67). The aural aspect of modernist development of Persian poetry emphasizes the diminishing role of the metric system.

However, the evolution of Persian poetic form has another history: a visual transformation, concurrent with the aural transformation. This history is concerned with the shape and function of lines and line breaks. Classical Persian poetic lineation has a bidirectional sequentiality (both horizontal and vertical) which is reduced in modernist poetry to a vertical extension. Poetic lines in classical Persian, arranged according to *ʿaruz*, the metric system first formulated for Arabic poetics by al-Khalil (d. 791), run on at two levels on the page. First, there is a horizontal extension from one hemistich (*mesraʿ*) to the other, necessarily of equal length. Together, these two hemistiches form a full *bayt* (a term that we render here in some contexts by "line" and in other contexts by "verse"). Second, there is a vertical extension from one *bayt* to the next. For Shams-i Qays, a *bayt* is the smallest semantic unit of poetry (*aqall-e sheʿr*) (Razi 22, 147), a formulation that implies that each line should make sense independently. The peculiarity of *bayt*s in comparison with poetic lines in classical and modern European literatures consists in the fact that each *bayt* is divided into two quantitatively equal halves (named *mesraʿ*), as shown in figure 1a. In fact, traditional verse when written down graphically lineates each metrical line (*bayt*). Even the two hemistiches in each line are separated graphically from one another, in two distinct columns. Likewise, when recited or sung, the lines of poems are also aurally punctuated and delineated by a pause or a change in pitch, as well as by the rhyme.

Shams-i Qays explains the function of the medial caesura between the two hemistiches that characterizes all classical poetic lines through recourse to etymology.[2] He offers an analogy to double doors: "In Arabic, *ahadu misraʿi al-bab* is a single diptych of a double door . . . as each of the two diptychs of a double door can be closed and opened independently of the other and when closed together make up a single door, so is each hemistich written and recited without the other. Joined together, they make up a *bayt*" (23). Qualitatively (in the pattern of short and long syllables) and quantitatively (in the number of syllables), the two hemistiches reflect the same rhythmic pattern (*bahr*), which dominates the whole poem and functions as an invisible—albeit audible—unifying thread running through the poem. In this way, the half lines generate an echoing effect at the heart of each *bayt* by intensifying the metric repetition. Although the classical line always internalizes a caesura as a law, this caesura reflects an exigency related to sound rather than to sense. This regulated break neither necessarily adds an emotional dimension to the halved phrase, nor necessarily represents a thoughtful arrest of sound in the poem.

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[1] We choose the phrase *white verse* to translate the Persian term *sheʿr-e sepid* in order to avoid confusing it with *blank verse*.

[2] Contemporary Syrian poet Adonis alludes to these architectural terms as rudiments of classical Arabic poetics (Adonis 18, 26).

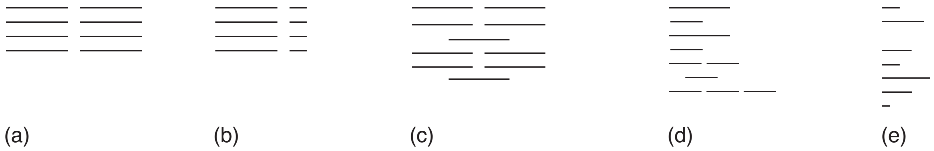

Figure 1. Comparative diagram of classical and modern Persian poetic lines: (a) Regular classical *bayt* comprising two *mesraʿ*s of equal length; (b) Line pattern of *mostazad* with an added shorter line to the end of each *mesraʿ*; (c) Line pattern of *mokhammas*; (d) a hypothetical *tasnif*; (e) Lines of unequal length in modern poetry.

Shams-i Qays develops an aesthetics of poetry as a discourse based on disjunction rather the conjunction that, according to him, characterizes prose. Prior to the twentieth century, neither the Persian nor the Arabic tradition recognized the possibility of a poem (*sheʿr*) that does not observe both end rhyme and established poetic meter. Every literary articulation that falls outside these rubrics is prose (*nathr*), including ornate, or artistic, prose and rhymed prose (*sajʿ*). Whereas "prosaic discourse is built upon gradation (*edraj*) and conjunction (*ettesal*)," Shams-i Qays argues that "poetic discourse is built upon disjoined, repeated values with rhymed endings." (23). He explains the medial caesura in the classical line with respect to this fundamental disjunctive principle:

> Ordered speech [*kalam-e manzum*] is founded on disjoined, repeated, end-rhymed parts. Each value is called a *bayt*, and the end-rhyme is called *qafiyat*. There must be a pause (*sokun*) as a caesura (*vaqf*) in the end letter of the rhyme in order to completely distinguish poetic from prosaic discourse. [The poets] halved each *bayt* so that this distinction is recognised well before the end of the *bayt* and due to the caesura that falls after the first half. In this way, the listener does not have to wait until the end of the *bayt* to perceive its order [*nazm*]. (23)

Anticipating American poet Charles Olson's discussions of poetry as "the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings" (Olson 51–52), Shams-i Qays adds that "an entire *bayt* cannot be recited in a single breath. An intake of breath is needed before ending the *bayt* so that the order of the poem is not interrupted and does not confuse the listener. Therefore, the middle of the *bayt* is marked by a caesura to make recitation easy and in order to clarify the order or organisation (*nazm*) of the poem" (23). While it determines the way in which words are arranged in lines and hemistiches, the established metric pattern also gives an emphatic positional value to the last word in a line by requiring the echoing effect of end-rhyme. From the perspective of our proposed visual modeling of poetic lineation, end rhyme (*qafiya*), which Shams-i Qays identifies as the necessary condition for poetic discourse (147), *could* be analyzed as a line break. We elaborate on the visual value of rhyme as line and half-line breaks and as the locus of enjambment in classical Persian poetry later in this essay.

As shown in figure 1, the intralinear caesura persisted throughout premodern Persian poetry, notwithstanding exceptional innovations that were introduced to the principle of the equality of every hemistich. For example, the tail-rhymed form *mostazad* (literally "extra" or "supplement") grafts an additional phrase onto the end of the line or half line (fig. 1b) and in the same meter. Subgenres of *mosammat*, such as *mosallas*, meaning "triangle," and the stanzaic *mokhammas*, meaning “quintet,” contain a single *mesraʿ*, which is not supplemented immediately by another hemistich (to form a full *bayt*) and which finds its corresponding *mesraʿ* of the same rhyme after two or four hemistiches, respectively (fig. 1c). The shared grounding of both classical and modern poetry in linear gradation provides more straightforward grounds for comparison than do aural poetics derived from metrical norms that have limited relevance for free verse.

Although these poetic forms appear in medieval Persian poetry, they only gained popularity with the advent of political and nationalist poetics during the Iranian Constitutional movement (1905–11) (Shamisa 293–94, 306). Poetic modernism in Iran inaugurated a new era of experimentation with the shape and function of poetic lines. In the wake of the demise of Qajar court patronage and the provisional if fleeting shift of authority to the Iranian people, Iranian poets turned to colloquial speech and the rhythms of everyday language in their poems. Freed from the task of representing the heavily regulated temporality of metrical rhythm, they now had to develop a poetics outside the classical system. This new poetics inaugurated a crisis of poetic lines. The modernist crisis of the poetic line was manifested visually, in two ways: first, in verses and hemistiches of unequal length; and second, in the internal caesura, which began either to disappear or to multiply. Folk ballads known as *tasnif*, such as those composed and sung by ʿAref Qazvini, multiply the internal caesura (fig. 1d) while in rhythmic prose poems (*bahr-e tavil*) the prosaic lengthening of the line dissolves the entire hemistich or line (*bayt*) altogether (Akhavan-e Sales 557).[3]

The crisis of poetic lines culminates in the so-called new poetry (*sheʿr-e now*) of the maverick poet of Iranian modernism, Nima Yushij, which began to appear during the 1920s. From Nima (as he is called in Persian) onward, poetic lines needed no further horizontal extension due to the lack of medial caesura (fig. 1e). The distinction between hemistich (*mesraʿ*) and line (*bayt*) was totally dissolved. Although classical rhythmic patterns were still aurally perceptible in the modernist poetic line, the principle of equal length between the two component parts (*mesraʿ*s) of a line was revoked. The so-called new poetry extended only vertically, with recognizably shortened and lengthened lines. Whereas the classical poetic line was marked by regulated temporality, Persian modernism represented time out of joint; it captured the ecstatic and untimely *contre-temp* of an aural experience that cannot foresee what is coming.

Nima emphasized that the “shortening and lengthening of poetic lines is neither whimsical nor arbitrary.” “I believe in order within disorder,” he added, “Each word in my poem joins other words by precise designation; for me free verse [*sheʿr-e azad*] is more difficult to compose than other [kinds of verse]” (Yushij 3).[4] Both in his theoretical writings and in his poetry, Nima was the first Iranian poet to treat lineation as more than a purely formal device and as the space of interplay between sound and sense. It is almost impossible to perceive the flourishing of thought in a poem without attending to the orchestration of words in lines on the page as modernist Iranian poetry evolves away from modes of new verse (*sheʿr-e now*) in which the line still bears the imprint of the poem’s musicality, toward more prosaic forms such as the white verse (*sheʿr-e sepid*) of Ahmad Shamlu, which lacks regular rhythm or rhyme patterns. In the absence of any sonorous pattern that determines the length of the poetic line, line breaks become as integral to structuring poetic thought as the syntactic combinations of individual words. Incomplete meaning at the end of the line creates a tension which is essential to poetic discourse. In the parallel yet sometimes intersecting world of European poetics, Agamben identifies the capacity for enjambment as "the only criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose" (*End* 109).

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[3] For an example of *tasnif*, “Az khun-e javanan-e vatan lala damida” (Tulips have grown from the blood of our youth; ʿAref Qazvini 14).

[4] This is quoted from Nima’s speech in the First Congress of Iranian Writers in 1946.

Whether in Persian, Arabic, or European literatures, the end of a half line or full line is the locus of enjambment. In classical Persian treatises on poetics (*balagha*), enjambment is discussed under the rubric of dependent meanings (*tawqif-e maʿani*) or succession (*tawator*) (Dad 173). *Mawquf al- maʿani* denotes the relation of two verses, one with incomplete meaning in the end and in need of the other to complete the meaning. *Tawator* refers to the sequencing involved in the course of dependent meanings across two or more verses. Shams-i Qays discusses run-on lines under the entry for *tazmin*, in which "the entire meaning of the first line [*bayt*] depends on and finishes at the second line [*bayt*]" (Razi 218). He identifies two types of *tazmin* in classical Persian: first, between two or more lines, as in the following verse by the tenth-century Central Asian poet Maʿrufi:

آواز تو خوشتر به همه رویی
نزدیک من ای لعبت فرخار
ز آواز نماز بامدادین
در گوش غمین مرد بیمار
(220)

Your voice is always sweeter
to me—O sweetheart from Farkhar—
than the sound of morning prayers
to the sick man's sad ear.

The second type of *tazmin* occurs from one hemistich to another, as well as from one *bayt* to another, and cuts the words in the middle. For Shams-i Qays, this type is only permitted because of its satirical effect (*hazl*), as in the poem of twelfth-century poet Suzani of Samarqand:

شاذمان باذ مجلس مستو
فی مشرق حمید دین الجو
هری آن صدر کز جواهر ال
فاظ او اهل دین و دانش و دو
(219)

May happiness shadow over the feast of the proc-
tor of the East, the protector of faith, al-Jaw
harī, the leader whose jewels of lan-
guage made the believers, scholars and states–

Shams-i Qays admits that enjambment (*tazmin*) is considered a fault (*ʿayb*) in classical poetry since "according to the masters of the craft . . . each *bayt* is self-sufficient and not dependent on others except in terms of the organization of meaning (*tartib-e maʿani*) and ordering of discourse (*tansiq-e sokhan*)" (218). Nevertheless, he disputes the traditional assessment of enjambment as a fault. Instead, he describes the device as one that is "wonderous and rare [*badiʿ va nader*]" (220).

Literary modernists approached the matter differently. Not only is enjambment not considered a poetic fault in modernist poetics, but for both European and Persian modernists, the ability of poetry to reshape speech through line breaks is the primary difference between poetry and prose. Consequently, the distinction between metered speech and lineation built around enjambment constitutes the major distinction between premodern and modern Persian poetics. Whereas in classical poetry, lines break once the poem's metrical pattern is realized, modernist poets break their lines at any point, whenever the interruption of everyday speech serves their poetic ends. Often, untimely and incomplete breakage is preferred. The untimeliness of the modernist poetic line makes versification subjective. No single theory can explain the function of line breaks in modern Persian poetics. However, this has not prevented poets from proposing comprehensive explanations.[5] Although in classical poetry line breaks are determined by fixed rhythmic patterns, modernist enjambment does not necessarily involve a disproportionate relation of sound and sense. By way of example, consider a didactic verse by thirteenth-century poet Saʿdi of Shiraz:

دو چیز طیره عقل است دم فرو بستن
به وقت گفتن و گفتن به وقت خاموشی
(Saʿdi 9)

Two things are shameful for the reasonable man: keeping the mouth shut
when one should speak, and speaking when one should be silent.

Modernist Iranian poet Akhavan-e Sales (1928–90) suggests that the line in the above verse is broken on the wrong word, since it leaves a phrase unfinished at the end of the first hemistich (140). He blames the fixed ʿ*aruzi* rhythm and proposes that to avoid breaking the line in the middle of a phrase, the two lines should either have been merged into one long line or preferably broken into three shorter lines, that is,

Two things are shameful for the reasonable man: keeping the
mouth shut when one should speak, and speaking when one
should be silent.

Or,

Two things are shameful for the reasonable man:
keeping the mouth shut when one should speak,
and speaking when one should be silent.

While Akhavan-e Sales's judgment contradicts his earlier insights regarding the possibility of breaking a line between the subject and predicate (137), Saʿdi's enjambment on "keeping the mouth shut [*dam foru bastan*]" seems semantically appropriate at the end of the line, given that this is when the speaker must pause. On this reading, the line break in Saʿdi's verse illustrates an ideal blending of sound and sense.

As the above example shows, the relation of sound and sense that enjambment brings about is no more arbitrary in classical poetry than in modernist poetry. Line breaks are constitutive of every poem, whether classical or modern. Having explored the functions of enjambment in classical Persian poetry, we now turn to the challenges it poses to the translation of classical and modern poetry for a global audience.

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[5] For example, Mehdi Akhavan-e Sales offers a catalog of different practice-based reasons for breaking the lines in modernist Iranian poetry (137–39), but these reasons lack theoretical consistency.

Line Breaks and Enjambment in Poetry Translation

Untranslatability haunts poetry translation, no matter how transparent the verses appear. Any attempt to assess the untranslatability of prose and poetry must first come to terms with the difficulty of defining poetry against prose, across different literary traditions. A century ago, in his seminal essay, “The Task of the Translator” (1923), Walter Benjamin asked, “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?” (253). With these words, Benjamin formulated the basic paradox of poetry translation: although poeticity is intrinsically incommunicable, the work of art’s incommunicability lends itself most readily to translation because it appeals to the widest cross-section of readers, bridging the divides fostered by language.

When a work of fiction is translated, the translation automatically becomes fiction in the target language: its fictional status does not depend on the form taken by the text in translation. The formal status of other genres, such as dramas and essays, is similarly automatically carried over in translation. Poetry is unique in that a translated poem does not automatically become a poem in the target language. Different horizons of expectations define poeticity in different ways, depending on the target language. As our examples have shown, fidelity to the words on the page cannot ensure fidelity to a poem in the process of its translation. In the case of poetry, the translator must find a way to inject poeticity into the translated words and their syntactic structures in order to manifest the “ghost of our own sensed breath” (Mullen 175) that is among the surest signs of the poetic.

The distinctiveness of poetry translation has to be sought in what exactly distinguishes it from prose. Neither multivalent words nor measured rhythms fully reflect the specific challenges that poetry poses to translation: a piece of prose can be as lexically and rhythmically crafted as a poem. Meanwhile, as William Carlos Williams shows us later in this section, a poem can be as devoid of metaphors and prosaic as a sticky note stuck to a refrigerator. The rhythmic patterns of a poem in its original language are a decisive factor in translation only insofar as they partake in the connotative modulations of the words, and are not merely decorative. The specific challenge that poetry poses to translation is its existence in lines. Lines in poetry segment the presentation of thought that would otherwise unfold like a piece of prose in consecutive sentences on the page.

Although it is assumed in classical poetics that the metric pattern determines the position of words including the decisive position of end rhyme (*qafiya*), the choice of *qafiya* in classical poetry is more than an effect of rhythmic arrangement. One example of this sense-making of end rhyme not as an echoing means but as a positional value is the first hemistich of twelfth-century Persian poet Khaqani’s famous ode on the ruins of a former Sassanian palace near Baghdad:

هان ای دل عبرت‌بین از دیده عبر کن هان
ایوان مدائن را آیینه عبرت دان
(Khaqani Shervani 358)

Beware [*han*]! O my lesson-taking heart. Take advice [ʿ*ebar kon*] of your eyes. Beware [*han*].[6]
Take the “Aivan-e Madaen” (“Ctesiphon Arch”) as a mirror of lessons.

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[6] This poem, called the “Aivan Qasida,” is further analyzed in Gould (183–98).

Although a translator of this verse might be perplexed by the wide range of connotations covered by the word *ʿebar* (“lesson,” “advice,” or “experience”) in the first hemistich—giving rise to heteronymic associations with “shedding tears,” “crossing the river,” and “glancing”—another translator might feel bound by the repetition of exclamation *han* at the beginning and the end of the first hemistich, not simply for more emphasis—which might be mistaken for redundancy—but out of fidelity to the poem’s chiastic structure.

Returning from his pilgrimage to Mecca, the poet is moved by the ruins of the Sassanian palace. The scene turns into a “mirror of lessons” in which he witnesses the decline of all earthly power, past and present. Appropriate to a poem that uses the mirror as a motif and which is suffused with reflective descriptions, chiastic structures abound in the poem. The warning *han*, which is mirrored at the end of the first hemistich, opens the poem, and the first two apostrophic interjections, *han ay*, could be read as a partial chiasmus of the Persian word for “mirror,” *ayneh*, reflected in the second hemistich. On yet another level, the initial apostrophic phrase *ay del* (O my heart) corresponds to the mirror motif. *Ay del* is a formulaic phrase that signals interior monologues in pre-modern Persian poetry. As if peering into the mirror, the speaker sees himself as an other and enters a conversation with himself. For a translator who aims to reconstruct the *qasida*’s delicate chiastic structure, the repetition of *han* (“beware”) exactly at the end of the first hemistich is a necessity.

Not all line arrangements in classical Persian poetry are as meticulously crafted as the above example, in which the positional value of *han* in the first hemistich becomes more relevant to the translator’s undertaking than its aural rhyme with *dan* in the next hemistich. Translating poetry always requires adjusting to the discordance between form and meaning. In most cases, it is logistically difficult, and practically impossible, to maintain fidelity to both sound and sense without regard for the languages from and to which translation takes place. As regards classical Persian poetry, the regulated temporality of the poetic line required the poet to fill in the line with redundant lexical items just in order to maintain the metrical pattern of the poem.

In the two examples below, which are taken from the verse narrative *ʿEshqnama* by fourteen-century Indo-Persian poet Hasan Dehlavi (Gould and Tahmasebian), the underlined words have no semantic function and are present in the poem only for the sake of rhythmic exigency:

بپرسیدش که چونی حال چون است
حساب پار رفت امسال چون است
به شوهر دید عزم راه کرده
بسیج کوچ منزلگاه کرده
(Dehlavi 572, 573)

She asked him, “How are you? How are you doing?
The old year is gone. How are you this year?”
She saw her husband preparing to depart,
ready to depart from home.

Reflecting their origins in oral storytelling traditions, these redundant signifiers introduce no new idea or information. In a literal translation of these verses, the tension between sound and meaning would be resolved in favor of sound, as the rhythmic supplement acquires semantic value. In other words, since the English

Table 1. The first stanza of Arthur Rimbaud in the original French, Honarmandi's translation into Persian, Sorrell's English translation, and a back translation of Honarmandi's version into English

Arthur Rimbaud in the original French	**Honarmandi's translation from French into Persian**
Comme je descendais des Fleuves impassibles, Je ne me sentis plus guidé par les haleurs: Des Peaux-Rouges criards les avaient pris pour cibles Les ayant cloués nus aux poteaux de couleurs. (Rimbaud 124)	از دام رودها چو گشودم ره گریز دیدم رها زمام خود از چنگ ناخدا بس ناخدا نشانه پیکان زنگیان بر میله‌های عرشه تبه شد جدا جدا (Honarmandi 323)
English translation by Martin Sorrell	**Back translation of Honarmandi's version**
I followed deadpan Rivers down and down, And knew my haulers had let go the ropes. Whooping redskins took my men as targets And nailed them nude to Technicolour posts. (Rimbaud 125)	When I escaped the rivers' traps, I saw the captain had let go of my ropes. Many captains are targeted by the Blacks' arrows, died on the deck's posts one by one.

version cannot justify the redundancy on metric grounds—which are lost in translation—the repeated greetings are capable of invoking surplus meanings for the English reader. On the contrary, the decision to avoid redundancy would end up with a single line which is not acceptable to the couplet form (*masnavi*) in which *ʿEshqnama* is composed. As in the example from Khaqani, poetry translation must attend to line arrangement and line breaks.

By contrast, when European poetry is translated into classical Persian verse, the semantic content is distorted in favor of regulated rhythmic patterns. The lines above from Arthur Rimbaud's "Le bateau ivre," in a Persian translation by Hasan Honarmandi, a well-known poet and translator of the French Romantics and Surrealists (table 1), show Rimbaud's words transformed during translation into metric patterns (following the *char-pareh* form, which was initiated in the twentieth century) with the rhyme pattern *abcb*, which approximates the original *abab* pattern. The addition of "rivers' traps," and the replacement of "Peaux-Rouges [redskins]" by "Blacks" accentuate the poem's musicality in Persian rather than conveying the literal meaning of Rimbaud's words.

Whereas the tension between sound and sense is manifested as repetition in classical verse, when it comes to translating free verse, this tension is reflected in line breaks. Contesting the view of poetry as the locus of concordance between sound and meaning, Agamben argues that poetry lives only in the "inner disagreement" between these two terms (*Idea* 40). In this view, the incomplete syntax of line breaks represents the interruption or delaying of meaning. More precisely, it represents another temporality, totally unrelated to the rhythms of classical poetry. "In the very moment that verse affirms its own identity by breaking a syntactic link," writes Agamben, "it is irresistibly drawn into bending over into the next line to lay hold of what it has thrown out of itself" (40).

In the absence of a rhythmic principle to guide the organization of lines in a modernist poem written in free verse, the sphere of translational decisions is expanded beyond word choice to encompass the words after which the lines should break. The task of the translator lies in determining whether to imitate or to transgress the original poem in the decisive point where the original creates a double movement, forward and backward. Agamben calls this point *versura*, which is the Latin term "indicating the point at which the plow turns around at the end of the furrow," as well as the origin of the English word for verse (*End* 111).

William Carlos Williams's famous poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" suggests how enjambment can become, in Agamben's words, "the core of verse" (*Idea* 41). In the process, Williams reveals the challenges that line breaks pose to translation. Here is the poem in full:

> so much depends
> upon
> a red wheel
> barrow
> glazed with rain
> water
> beside the white
> chickens
> (Williams 224)

The poem's visual architecture closely aligns with the theme of the poem, which invites the reader to see things that escape the eye. The whole poem is simply a short sixteen-word sentence, divided into four two-line stanzas, each consisting of a three-word line and a one-word line. The enjambment is highlighted by the unusual line breaks in the middle of certain words and phrases in each stanza, which separate the verb from the preposition in the phrasal verb "depends upon," the two nouns of the compound words "wheelbarrow" and "rainwater," and the modifier from the modified in "white chickens."

Another defamiliarizing strategy—which pertains to this visualist reading of the surface of the poem—is the ambiguous use of "so much," which can be both taken and not taken as the grammatical subject of the single sentence that comprises the entire poem. By unnaming what depends on such an apparently insignificant thing as "a red wheel / barrow glazed with rain / water beside the white / chickens," on the one hand, and by affirming the extent of this dependency through an adverbial "so much," on the other, the poem invites the reader to ask how this trivial object could be important in such a way that something—anything— can depend on it so much.

Thus, the surface architecture comes to reflect the topical relations in the text expressed at the semantic and syntactic levels. From a certain point of view, patterning the text in alternating three-word and one-word lines, which necessitates the cutting of words (such as "wheelbarrow" and "rainwater") in the middle, is guided less by an intended auditory cadence than by a visual rhythm. Fidelity to the original visual pattern of line breaks, which is integral to the poem's sense, makes the task of translating this poem, according to this interpretation, all the more challenging.

An Allegory of Enjambment in Translation

Having discussed line breaks in classical poetics as well as in the poetics of Iranian and American modernism, we now turn to our translation of “For Two Weeks I Have Been in This Palace. Nothing Has Happened” by modernist poet Bijan Elahi. This poem offers a poetic retelling of a story from the Arabic story cycle *A Thousand and One Nights*, “The House and the Belvedere” (nights 599–602). Elahi’s poem can be read as a metacommentary on the role of enjambment in differentiating between prose and poetry in the way that Agamben proposed around two decades later. Our examples from Saʿdi, Khaqani, and William Carlos Williams show that translating poetry consists of not merely translating words but translating words in lineated form. In this poem (given in full below), Elahi reproduces the phrasing of Tasuji’s Persian translation of *A Thousand and One Nights* (published in 1845),[7] as underlined below:

یکی دو هفته می‌شود که توی این قصرم و هیچ اتفاق نیافتاده
تاقهای ضربی بغداد و تاقهای ضربی دجله . . .

قصه اگر ناتمام می‌ماند
یحتمل که شعر می‌شد و شعر
در تمامیّتِ خود قصه می‌شود. به همین دلیل، شاعران
همیشه، جخت، تقطیع می‌کنند و من می‌خواهم
ازان گشتهای بی‌حوصله در بغداد
تقطیع کنم روی خانه‌یی در بازار
که، در الف لیل، زمینش را
گونه گونه رخام گسترده‌اند و سقفهای غرفه‌ها
به لاجورد و آب زر نقش کرده‌اند:
اجرتش ماهی ده دینار!
واقعاً راسته یا مسخره‌ام می‌کنید؟ دربان گفت:
واقعاً راسته امّا هر که توی خانه بیاید
یکی دو هفته بیشتر نمی‌کشد مریض می‌شود می‌میرد.
یکی دو هفته می‌شود
که توی قصرم و هیچ اتفاق نیافتاده است؛
فقط غروبها طلایی‌ست: می‌شود شنفت!
واقعاً چه غفلتی! پسرم! مگر هنوز
به بام قصر نرفته‌ای؟ زن دربان گفت.
مگر از بامِ قصر چیست
جز همین تاقهای ضربی بغداد و تاقهای ضَربی دجله . . .
(Elahi, *Vision* 118)

For Two Weeks I Have Been in This Palace. Nothing Has Happened

Baghdad’s vaulted ceilings and the vaulted ceilings of the Tigris—
A story left unfinished
may turn into a poem and a poem
finished can make a story. That’s why poets
always break the lines of their poems. And I want
from those pointless walks around Baghdad
to break my line on a house in the bazaar
carpeted with many marbled stones in the *Thousand and One*
Nights, where the ceilings
are painted turquoise and gold.

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[7] By the book *A Thousand and One Nights* throughout this article we mean ʿAbd al-Latif Tasuji’s Persian translation, from Arabic, of the Egyptian Bulaq Press edition of *Alf layla wa layla*.

> *Ten dinars a month for rent!*
> Are you kidding?
> *I'm not kidding*, the doorkeeper said, *but whoever enters the house*
> *gets sick and within two weeks dies.*
> For two weeks
> I've been in this palace and nothing has happened.
> I've only seen sunsets of gold: listen—
> *Hey, boy, what neglect!*
> *Haven't you seen the palace roof?* the doorkeeper's wife said.
> But what is on the roof
> but the same vaulted ceilings of Baghdad and the vaulted ceilings
> of the Tigris—
>
> (Elahi, *High* 44)

The original story in *A Thousand and One Nights* is situated within the narrative cycle "On the Malice and Craft of Women," which tells the tale of a young merchant who has just arrived in Baghdad and is looking for a house to rent. He finds a beautiful place which is unexpectedly cheap for its price. The price is low because the house has a bad reputation: "Whoever enters the house gets sick and within two weeks dies." He is informed by an elderly woman that he must seek the reason for this bad reputation by climbing to the roof and observing the view from the belvedere. The young man's curiosity is triggered. He goes up to the roof, looks out from the belvedere and sees a beautiful young woman in the adjoining house. His desire is aroused. The rest of the story revolves around the assistance he receives from the old woman (who is transformed in Elahi's poem into the doorkeeper's wife) to gain the favor of the beautiful young woman. She turns out to be a merchant's wife. They enjoy seven nights together before she returns to her husband, who does not suspect her infidelity. None of these events have significance in Elahi's poem. In fact, the poem ends at the very beginning of the whole adventure. The main intertext for Elahi's poem is displayed in table 2, which juxtaposes Tasuji's and Burton's translations of "The House and the Belvedere."

In his rewriting of *A Thousand and One Nights*, Elahi filters the poem through the vantage point of the merchant's son. From the entire story, the poem extracts the conversation between the merchant's son and the housekeeper. The story is left unfinished at the precise moment when the reader becomes curious about the spectacle taking place on the rooftop. However, Elahi's poem ends in the monotony of the fixed spectacle from the rooftop offering nothing beyond Baghdad's vaulted ceilings and the vaulted ceilings of the Tigris.

In the first five lines, the poem reveals its metapoetic core, declaring that poetry is distinguished from prose by virtue of its tendency to escape the closure of prose. This poetics entangles prose and poetry in a mobius strip formation, such that "A story left unfinished / may turn into a poem and a poem, / finished, can make a story." Applying this axiom to itself, the poem proves its status as a poem first, by refusing to finish the story it retells from *A Thousand and One Nights*, and second, by the looping effect of the last line, which perpetually repeats the first line. Both lines are left unfinished, as indicated by the ellipsis.

The speaker harnesses the poet's act of lineation to poetry's intrinsic incompleteness. Elahi uses the word *taqtiʿ*, originally meaning "scansion," when he states that poets "always break the lines of their poems." In a self-reflexive moment, the speaker confesses, "And I want / from those pointless walks around Baghdad / to break my line on a house in the bazaar." The "house in the bazaar" works like a

Table 2. Elahi's Persian intertext: Tasuji's translation

Tasuji's Translation of *A Thousand and One Nights* (1845)	Corresponding Passage in *A Thousand and One Nights* (1885, trans. Richard Francis Burton)
بازرگان‌زاده به بازار درآمد که خانه کرایه کند. در راه‌گذر خانه‌ای دید بزرگ و نیکو که زمین او را گونه‌گونه رخام گسترده و سقفهای غرفه‌ها را به لاجورد و آب زر نقش کرده‌اند. از دربانان مقدار اجرت خانه بازپرسید. گفتند اجرت خانه در هر ماهی ده دینار است. بازرگان‌زاده گفت: راست همی گویید یا مرا استهزا می‌کنید؟ گفتند: به خدا سوگند جز به راستی سخن نگفتیم، و لکن هر کس که در این خانه منزل کند یک هفته یا دو هفته بیشتر نخواهد کشید. آن پسر سبب را جویان گشت. دربانان گفتند: ای پسر، هر که در این خانه نشیند یا بیمار شود یا بمیرد. این خانه در نزد همه کس به این صفت معروف است و بدین سبب هیچ کس به نشستن این مکان اقدام نمی‌کند و این است که اجرت او بدین مقدار گشته. . . .	The merchant's son entered the market to hire a house. In a passageway, he saw a house so spacious and handsome, with floors of coloured marbles and ceilings inlaid with gold and lapis lazuli. He asked the door keepers what was its rent. They replied, "Ten dinars a month." "Speakest thou soothly or dost thou but jest with me?" asked the merchant's son. "By Allah, I speak naught but the truth, for none who taketh up his abode in this house lodgeth in it more than a week or two," they replied. The son asked why. The porters said: "O my son, who dwelleth in this house cometh not forth of it, except sick or dead, wherefore it is known amongst all so that none offereth to inhabit it, and thus cometh it that its rent is fallen so low." . . .
عجوز گفت: . . . و لکن مرا از این عجب آمد که جز تو هر کس در این خانه نشست یا بمرد و یا رنجور به در آمد. ای فرزند، مگر تو به فراز قصر نرفته و از منظره‌ای که در آنجاست نظر نکرده‌ای؟	The old woman said, ". . . But I marvelled for that none other than thou hath taken up his abode in this house but hath gone forth from it, dead or dying. O my son, I suppose thou hast not gone up to the upper story neither looked out from the belvedere there."

versura in two senses. First, it is the turning point at the end of the line where the phrase "to break my line on a house in the bazaar" is thrust forward, as if having reached the end of a furrow, and finds its completion in the next line. Second, it is the turning point in the prosaic monotony of the young man's life in Baghdad when he is introduced to the mysterious house. This monotony is objectively correlated to the poem's final scene ("Baghdad's vaulted ceilings and the vaulted ceilings of the Tigris") which evokes the spectacle of the dull repetition of ceilings reflected in the water: "the vaulted ceilings of the Tigris."

The statement "A story left unfinished may turn into a poem" attributes a poetic form to *A Thousand and One Nights*, a work well known for its labyrinthine structure. The structure that some premodern commentators consider monotonous is reproduced in the atmosphere of Elahi's poem, which transpires in a palace where "nothing has happened."[8] By interrupting her story each night and leaving it unfinished in order to take it up the next night, Scheherazade, the narrator of *A Thousand and One Nights*, accomplishes what a poet does with enjambment. By leaving her stories unfinished in order to avert execution, she awakens an expectation and desire in the king for the rest of her stories, the endings of which are deferred. When a story is finished, the next one is immediately taken up, only to be abandoned at some point and its ending to be postponed until the next night. Scheherazade's stitching together of unfinished stories—that is, leaving a sentence syntactically unfinished at the end of a line only to continue it on the next line—is analogous to the poet's use of enjambment, as in the lines below:

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[8] Ibn Nadim, in *al-Fihrist*, complains that he has found *A Thousand and One Nights* "repetitive" and calls it "a book with really blunt and very bad tales" (540).

> finished can make a story.* That is why poets
> always break the lines of their poems.* And I want

The sentence is finished in the middle of the line (marked by asterisk) and is immediately followed by the next sentence, which is in turn interrupted at the end of the first line, only to be completed in the next line (marked by asterisk).

Elahi's experiments with enjambment and line breaks occupy a central place in his poetry as well as in his translations. In the preface to his translation of Hölderlin's poems, he discusses the process of "breaking [*boresh*]" when line breaks are not generated out of "a definite regular rhythmic pattern" (Elahi, *Good* 18; Tahmasebian and Gould). Elahi compares the function of line breaks to a river's current. "By river," Elahi writes, "I wanted to give the image I get of the form of the poem which becomes clearer and clearer through each reading. I mean not, as with Apollinaire, the shape or outline of the poem on the leaf of paper but that of the poem that figures in mind. In a river, currents are separate as much as they are joined. They unify the river in such a way none repeats the other" (19). Elahi then further develops his analogy between the flow of a river and line breaks in a poem; line breaks "hurl you toward the beginning of the next line—broken like waves on invisible rocks" and "end sentences often in the middle of a line" (20).

With his image of poetry flowing through disjunctive line breaks, Elahi approximates Agamben's conception of enjambment as the basic measure against which poetry is distinguished from prose. Defining enjambment as "the opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit, of a prosodic pause to a semantic pause" (109), he locates the tension between sound and sense at the heart of poetic discourse. Agamben's distinction between poetry and prose is structured entirely around enjambment. "No definition of verse is perfectly satisfying unless it asserts an identity for poetry against prose through the possibility of *enjambment*," he writes, "Quantity, rhythm, and the number of syllables—all elements that can equally well occur in prose—do not, from this standpoint, provide sufficient criteria. But we shall call poetry the discourse in which it is possible to set a metrical limit against a syntactic one (verse in which *enjambment* is not actually present is to be seen as verse with zero *enjambment*)" (*Idea* 39). Prose for Agamben is the discourse in which such an opposition, of the metrical to the syntactical, is impossible. While Agamben's stipulation is made with reference to classical poetry (with its emphasis on metrical limits), it also has implications for modernist free verse. The difference is that the positional value of line breaks in modernist poetry is not usually determined by any metrical limits.

The significance of enjambment for defining poetry against prose is so tremendous for Agamben that he treats the "end of the poem" as a "poetic institution that has until now remained unidentified" (*End* 109). The end of the poem is problematic because it leaves no possibility for enjambment and the last line of the poem does not break onto the next. If the distinction between prose and poetry is premised on an irresolvable tension between sound and sense, then the question arises as to whether, in the end, all poems inevitably collapse into prose. The end of Elahi's poem, however, evades this challenge by repeating the first line in in the last line, and thereby wrapping the poem into a circular loop suspended between ending and not ending. Exactly at the moment when the tension is to be resolved, the last line refers to its beginning, leaving itself perpetually unfinished. In its turn, this suspended ending can be compared to the structure of *A Thousand and One Nights*, which frames Elahi's poem and which progresses by perpetually postponing the execution of the narrator Scheherazade, who leaves each story unfinished in order to extend both her life and her narrative.

With this understanding of lineation as a constructive element of poetry, as the point at which the convergence of sound and sense is orchestrated, it is impossible not to locate line breaks within the sphere of the translator's decisions. In both renderings below of Elahi's four lines (which in contemporary Persian would be called, in a direct calque from European poetics, *satr* or *khatt*) into English, different line breaks generate different poems, even though the prosaic content—that is, the words and the syntax—is absolutely identical:

Version 1

A story left unfinished
may turn into a poem and a poem
finished can make a story. That is why poets
always break the lines of their poems. And I want

Version 2

A story left unfinished may turn into a poem
and a poem finished can make a story.
That is why poets always break the lines of their poems.
And I want

Compared with version 1, which looks closer to the original, version 2, which renders the same words in another four-lined arrangement, may read as more prosaic. Version 2 loses the essential enjambment as well as the caesura in lines three and four. The caesura in lines 3 and 4 of version 1 stiches two sentences together in the middle of the lines that end without ending the sentence. The conjoined disjuncture which underlies the original poem is lost in version 2, despite the semantic identity of the two versions. This does not mean that fidelity to the original lineation always best recreates the poeticity of the original; rather, we are suggesting that neither words nor syntax alone can serve as an adequate guide to poetry translation.

Version 2 has lost sight of the enjambment of the original. Yet it offers another way of ordering thought in poetic lines independent of the original. Lines 1 and 2 of version 2 are organized according to a chiastic principle. "Story" and "poem" are placed in reverse order in the beginning and the end of lines. Through this chiastic effect, the contrast between prose and poetry—between "story" and "poem"—is brought into relation with the reflective elements in the poem, such as "Baghdad's vaulted ceilings," the contrast between the marbled floor and the painted ceilings, and the repetition of the same spectacle in the beginning and the end of the poem.

To highlight this foundational chiasmus, the phrase “Baghdad’s vaulted ceilings and the vaulted ceilings of the Tigris” retains a reverse word order which does not exist in the original. In fact, a rendering like “Baghdad’s vaulted ceilings and the Tigris’ vaulted ceilings” would more precisely reproduce the original word order.

The antimetabole (repeating a phrase in reverse order) between “A story left unfinished may turn into a poem,” and “and a poem finished can make a story” generates a mirror effect which likewise does not exist in the original. In terms of the Persian rhetoric (*badiʿ*), Elahi’s entire poem takes the form of the Arabo-Persian rhetorical device called “return of the end to the beginning” (*radd al- sadr-i ʿala al-ʿajz*), which describes the repetition of the first word of a line in the end of the next line. In Elahi’s poem, the last line mirrors the first, as if to intensify the “nothing has happened” in the title. This mirroring effect can also be observed in the allusive texture of the poem, which closely follows the original story in *A Thousand and One Nights*. Version 2 generates a completely different interpretation of the narrative structure in *A Thousand and One Nights*. While version 1 highlights the incompleteness of stories at the end of each night and identifies poeticity with suspension, version 2 emphasizes the vicious circle in which the narratives are trapped and creates a poetic effect through an eternal return of the same. Different lineation patterns create different poems.

The readings, renderings, and variations of Elahi and other Persian, American, and French poets presented in this essay illustrate why poetry translation requires an acute sense of lineation. However, as we have noted, fidelity is not imitation: it does not necessarily mean following the lineation of the original. New words in a new language with different syntactical rules require new enjambments as they move across languages. There are infinite ways in which poetry translation can regenerate the poetic text by slightly varying the line breaks. Equally, cleaving in a literalist fashion to the lineation of the original potentially modifies the meaning, tone, and emphasis in the translated poem.

Although poets have long understood these principles, scholarship to date has failed to fully register the importance of line breaks, particularly for modern and premodern Persian poetics for literary translation.[9] Contrary to what this scholarly silence might suggest, premodern classical Persian poets *did* resort to enjambment and recognized its poetic value, even though they did not treat enjambment as a structural principle of their poems. A fuller consideration of the topic of enjambment in premodern poetics would need to take account of the oral and performative context for much premodern poetry, which inevitably meant less emphasis on the printed text than we find in modernity. For the present, we hope to have shown here both that enjambment is not limited to modern poetics and that its conceptual implications for comparative poetics have to date been underestimated. While it is only in modernity that enjambment has come be seen as *constitutive* of poetry by literary critics and theorists such as, inter alia, Agamben, lineation has preoccupied poets from poetry’s earliest days of poetry, albeit under different guises as the relations among poetry, print, and performance has changed.

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[9] Although we have not found scholarship on enjambment in classical Persian poetics, there is a body of work on this topic for classical Arabic poetics. See, e.g., Sanni.

We have aimed with this analysis of line breaks and enjambment in modern and classical poetics to open new paths for poetry translators who aim to translate not just the words on the page but, most crucially, poems themselves, in all their lineated, enjambed, and formal richness. Among the infinity of ways in which poetry translation can take place, we have identified some strategies for rendering line breaks in order to regenerate the poeticity of the poem in translation. At the same time, we recognize that poetry translation involves more than theoretical speculation: it is also an art. As with any art, a great deal must be left to serendipity, and good fortune.

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