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Hafiz and the Challenges of Translating Persian Poetry into English

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Marianne Moore, the renowned modernist American poet who lived most of her life in New York, described the Brooklyn Bridge as 'a caged Circe of steel and stone',[1] comparing this iconic structure, which connects the boroughs of Brooklyn and Manhattan, to the goddess of wizardry and enchantment. According to Greek legend Circe was skilled in the magic of transfiguration, and she possessed the ability to communicate with the dead to foretell the future.

Perhaps this is a good starting definition for a literary translator: an illusionist with a dual command of expressiveness and intuition who magically transforms the 'metaphysical conceits' of a poet writing in his or her own language, into the appropriate yet pleasing expressions and metaphors of a foreign language, all the while ferrying across as many aspects of the style, idiom and tone of the original as possible.

The metaphor of the translator as bridge is also an appropriate and fitting description, even if it has become something of a cliché. The translator is expected to establish vital connections between islands of culture, ideas and visceral emotions, regardless of the differences in topography and principles of literary composition, especially in the classical period. For such a metaphorical and practical lyrical bridge to withstand the passage of time and stylistic challenges while satisfying the evolving expectations of users, it must be supported by abutments – translators as well as copy-editors who are familiar with cultural idiosyncrasies and traditions of both the source and target languages – who can navigate the incongruous linguistic features on either side of the divide.

The finest and most treasured bridges are not only functional and

safe, but they enhance the aesthetics of the landscapes they connect. They entice those who travel back and forth from one bank to the other to linger mid-span, take in the characteristics of the scenery spread out before them, and marvel at the solidity and beauty of the connecting structure.

The translator – or, increasingly in the realm of poetry, the interpreter – arranges the bailment of the precious gift of the original poem, left with him or her on trust, to a new linguistic destination. A conscientious translator will reflect on the hazards and pitfalls of the process of transference but no matter how successful will not aim to steal the thunder of the poet nor place him or herself at the centre of the project. Even the most acclaimed poet-translators of classical Persian poetry into English, such as Edward Fitzgerald, Matthew Arnold, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Coleman Barks, who are of equal standing in fame and recognition to the poets they have translated, do not usually set out to eclipse the poetic twin whose original work has added another string to the poet-translator's bow, and in the case of Fitzgerald or Barks propelled them to international prominence.

The burden of responsibility weighs heavily on the shoulders of the translator when a much-admired writer such as José Saramago, the Portuguese novelist and winner of 1998 Nobel Prize in Literature, declares that 'writers create national literatures with their language, but world literature is written by translators'.[2]

However, in an effort to alleviate the enormity of the translator's burden, Susan Bassnett, one of the architects of translation theory, offers encouragement and a can-do attitude. Bassnett who endorses the image of the translator as a bridge has described this often invisible tribe as 'agents who facilitate the crossing over of a boundary'.[3] Moreover, she has taken issue with Robert Frost's oft quoted remark that 'poetry is what gets lost in translation,[4] calling this a 'silly' assumption, as if poetry were 'some intangible, ineffable thing or presence or spirit, which although constructed in language cannot be transposed across languages'.[5] This comment prompted David Bellos, the British born translator, and director of Princeton University's Program in Translation and Intercultural Communication, to his agreement and further comment that 'everything is *effable*, and the untranslatable does not exist'.[6]

While I would like to agree with the optimism and conviction of Bassnett and Bellos, my experience at the coalface of translating classical and modern Persian poetry, albeit as an amateur, tells a different story. Those of us who translate alone and time and again turn to our well-thumbed dictionaries and thesauruses, and increasingly a wealth of online treasure troves, searching for that elusive polysemous word, or the target equivalent of that apt aphorism in the source language, in the hope that our opaque, insipid, and clunky translation will magically be transformed into eloquent verse that makes the reader gasp in ecstatic appreciation, do not always agree with the assertive conclusions of the grand theorists – there are many poems that do indeed get lost in translation.

An impossible hyperbole in a thirteenth-century Persian mystical ode, for example, which will have native speakers swooning over its beauty and pithiness, more often than not will refuse to bend into a sonorous, lucid, and reflective gem in English translation, thrilling the hearts of those who read it or hear it recited.

The tried and true, centuries-old solution to this dilemma is to bring together a skilled, talented linguist – with bilingual proficiency in the source and target languages – with a poet, to work side by side to produce the best translation of a poem. It is this collaboration that will allow a distant and unfamiliar concept from one culture and language to be revealed from a fresh perspective in the recipient language.

It is worth remembering, as we mark and celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of the publication of the *West-östlicher Divan*, that Goethe was a great advocate of 'communicative translation',[7] which he discussed extensively in the 'Notes and Essays' that accompany the *Divan*. The imperative of translation as seen by Goethe is that the 'exact contextual meaning of the original is rendered in such a way that both content and language are readily acceptable and comprehensible to the new readership'.[8] For Goethe, known as much for his commentary as for his verse, the 'approximation of the foreign and the native'[9] would facilitate the understanding of the original poem and 'the whole circle is thereby closed upon itself'.[10] Furthermore, introducing the poetry of the 'other' via translation can revitalise and revolutionise the traditions of the host poetry culture, as demonstrated in the example of George Chapman's

early seventeenth-century translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into English and their influence on the poetry of John Keats. Similarly, the translations of the lyrical odes as well as the *Spiritual Couplets* of Rumi into so many languages since the 1980s has made his spirituality a fixture in the Western cultural sphere; every December, just a week before Christmas, the ancient city of Konya becomes a place of pilgrimage for tens of thousands of Rumi devotees from all over the world. Series such as the Penguin Modern European Poets; or initiatives like 'Words without Borders' and Stephen Watts's *Mother Tongues*; and the Poetry Translation Centre, the brainchild of the late Sarah Maguire, poet and translator, have made access to the poetry of eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East significantly more accessible.[11]

The first noteworthy English translation of a *ghazal* by Hafiz, entitled *A Persian Song,* published in 1771, was done by the orientalist-philologist William Jones. The format of this softly romantic and in parts titillating poem is stanzaic and in keeping with the poetic style of the time. Although this English version is charming, and the metrical rhymes are aurally pleasing, the liberties that Jones has taken with the original, such as altering historical tones and omitting significant names, including that of Hafiz himself, have riled many critics. The poem begins:

> Sweet maid, if thou wouldst charm my sight,
> And bid these arms thy neck infold;
> That rosy cheek, that lily hand,
> Would give thy poet more delight
> Than all Bocara's vaunted gold,
> Than all the gems of Samarcand.

A century after William Jones, Gertrude Bell's moving interpretations of a selection of *ghazals* of Hafiz set a new standard for Hafiz in English. Over the years others such as Walter Leaf, Ruben Levy, John Nott, Edward Palmer, Elizabeth Gray, Robert Bly, Peter Avery, Daniel Ladinsky and Dick Davis have taken up the gauntlet of reproducing in English what are by far some of the most difficult yet enchanting examples of strictly metrical, consonantal, rhyme-rich, sensual Persian poetry, thick with assonance, sibilance and alliteration.

In some translations every jot and tittle of the Persian lines are transferred into English, while a few are so slipshod that it is hard to identify the original version. Some of the translators named above are academically proficient in Persian, and some operate through collaboration with native or near native scholars of Persian, or 'informants' as labelled by Ladinsky. Some of their translations have left indelible impressions on readers; others have fallen short of critical expectations.

The roll-call of the English translators of Rumi and Hafiz, just two of the most revered classical poets of the Persian speaking world alone runs into hundreds of names. A quick glance at the list over a continuum of nearly three centuries shows a frenzy of activity in the years between 1771 and 1895. Yet, despite the quality and variety of the translations, interpretations and verses inspired by the original poems amassed over the centuries, a quintessential English translation of the *ghazals* of Hafiz that retains the sinuosity, freshness and poetic energy of the original without succumbing to acculturations and excessive use of florid registers and archaic vocabulary – one that will allow the reader to experience what Leonard Lewisohn, calls the '*erotico-mystical*' essence of Hafiz, and stand alone as an independent poem – remains conspicuous by its absence.

An imaginative new translation could have a similar impact on a new generation of Western poets and their perception of this enigmatic Persian master of mysteries as Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's 1812 German translation had on Goethe, and through him on Emerson, Tennyson, Keats, Byron, Eliot and Pound.

No one would ever claim that this would be an easy task. The linguistic and cultural challenges are immense. Non-Persian speakers, or those who do not dwell in the Persianate cultural domains, will always find the excessively emotive aspects of classical Persian poetry taxing. Winding their way through a multilayer love poem, they will need to work out whether the gender-neutral beloved's rosy, flushed cheeks, the curls of musk-scented hair, lips moist with drops of wine, amorous eyes personified as predators, intoxicated with expectation but ready to hunt with bow of brows and lethal arrows of lashes, are the appealing features of an immortal, divine beloved residing in celestial heaven, or the seductive and tantalising devices of a mortal muse taunting the poet in a tavern.

Below are several translations of the opening lines of the popular

Ghazal 22 of the *Divan* of Hafiz, which begins by describing the hurried arrival of a vexed and intoxicated beloved checking up on a lover who seems to be fast asleep in his bed. The poem is imbued with mystical signals while composed in a lasciviously seductive tone. Herman Bicknell sets the scene in 1872:

> With ruffled locks, with sweat drops dripping, beaming with smiles
> Near midnight, in disarray, you come . . .

Then, in 1898, Walter Leaf offers:

> Wild of mien, chanting a love-song, cup in hand, locks disarrayed,
> Cheek flushed, wine-overcome, vesture awry, breast displayed.
> With a challenge in that eye's glance, with a love-charm on the lip,
> Came my love, sat by my bedside in the dim midnight shade . . .

Moving by more than a hundred years to the early twenty-first century, Peter Avery quite accurately chooses the pronoun 'he' for the beloved and translates the lines as:

> Tress awry, sweating, laughing-lipped, drunk,
> Shirt in shreds, lyric-lisping, wine-cup in hand,
>
> His eyes spoiling for a fight, lips complaining,
> In the middle of last night, he came and sat by my pillow.

But, a decade later, Dick Davis changes the beloved back to a 'she':

> Her hair hung loose, her dress was torn, her face perspired
> She smiled and sang love, with mischief in her eyes,
> And whispering in my ear, she drunkenly inquired:
> 'My ancient lover, can it be that you're asleep?'

American poet Robert Bly, also prefers to retain the romantic conventions:

Her hair was still tangled, her mouth still drunk
And laughing, her shoulders sweaty, the blouse
Torn open, singing love songs, her hand holding a wine cup.
Her eyes were looking for a drunken brawl,
Her mouth full of jibes. She sat down
Last night at midnight on my bed.

It is quite clear that there will be as many interpretations and variations of the opening lines of this *ghazal* as there are translators.

Other practical challenges that the translator of Persian poetry will face are issues of prosody and scansion. If the translator decides to retain a metrical element of rhythm in the English version, he will need to reconcile the use of stress, a common tool in English composition, with the strict dominance of lengths and numbers of syllables that inform Persian metres.

Absence of gender in Persian will also force the translator to stumble and hesitate before labelling the beloved as a he or a she. The Persian language uses double negatives and employs two terms to denote the affirmative 'yes', *baleh* or *chera*, similar to the French *oui* or *si*, respectively, whereby one is used specifically for confirmation and the other for contention or contradiction. Classical Persian poetry relishes exaggerations and extravagant statements, and has access to more adages, verbs, and nouns than English when it comes to expressing nuances of romance, separation, longing and grief, and the process of death. The Persian poetic voice has a disposition toward ambiguity and the connotative use of words, while English poetry is more at home with transparency and candour.

While I have primarily focused in this essay on the importance of continuing to translate the best of classical Persian poetry and specifically the lyrics of Hafiz into English, my preference is for a shift of focus to the translation of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry of the Persian speaking world, from Tajikistan in Central Asia to Afghanistan and Iran.

The three poets selected for inclusion in the *New Divan* each represent a unique aspect of the nonlinear development of modern Persian poetry. Emerging from their different origins and preoccupied with

social or personal concerns that have in part been imposed on them by circumstances, they each hold up a mirror to the realities of twenty-first century urban life, which accepts exile, migration, reduction of the family into nuclear units, long-distance romance, nostalgia, victimhood, self-censorship, and all manner of rejection as par for the course.

The poems by Hafez Mousavi, Reza Mohammadi and Fatemeh Shams shine a light on the depth and breadth of a body of poetic discourse that can hold its own not just with the best of its classical predecessors but also with the finest modernist movements across the world. It is the job of the translator to convey the strength, complexity, and beauty of their poems.

The relative ease of travel between East and West, and the quickened pace of the teaching of modern European languages in Iran from the 1950s onward, on the one hand, and the increasing number of foreign visitors to Iran and Central Asia combined with the expansion of academic centres that prioritise the teaching of languages and comparative study of world literatures on the other, have all contributed to the greater familiarity of each side with the contemporary literary output of the other. While the works of celebrated twentieth-century Iranian poets such as Nima Yushij, Forough Farrokhzad, Ahmad Shamlou, Nader Naderpour, Sohrab Sepehri, Simin Behbahani and Qeysar Aminpour, to name but a few, are available in English translation and accessible either in print or digital formats, there are vast inconsistencies in the quality of the translations and only a small percentage do justice to the poignancy, sardonic humour or *angst* that overflows in line after line of many of these poems. Additionally, there are also gaps in the range of the poets represented, especially from Central Asia.

Travelling in the other direction, it is just as important that Persian-speakers have access to good translations of the new trends in heterogeneous poetry of the English-speaking world, composed by award-winning new voices who break the mould.

From amongst the established British and Irish poets Persian readers need to experience the brilliance of Seamus Heaney's poems in fresh translations, to experience his control of language and use of imagery as he narrates the pathos of mankind, and the way he composes — to borrow from one of his poems — 'the music of what happens'.[12] Would

that Persian readers could have access to good translations of Walt Whitman, Robert Frost and Dylan Thomas, too. I would also add to this list exciting contemporary voices such as those of Liz Lochhead, Benjamin Zephaniah, Kathleen Jamie, Imtiaz Dharker and Richard Blanco, who merge everyday vernaculars, astringent social and political observations, and snapshots of their natural environment to produce poems brimful of quirky lyricism, with brush strokes of irony alongside vibrant optimism.

The reignited conversation between the West and the East, through the collaboration of multilingual translators and poets, will bring to the fore each side's experimentation with descriptions of natural and urban settings, and the relationship between the citizen and authority, and will allow each a glimpse of how regional and multicultural aspects of the lives of poets from across the world are fused with the voices of their poetic personas.

In the fourteenth century, Hafiz of Shiraz wrote in a synaesthetic *ghazal*: 'I have seen no memento more enchanting than the echoes of discourse of love, enduring in this revolving Dome'[13] and just over two centuries later Shakespeare responded: 'And when love speaks, the voice of all the gods, makes heaven drowsy with harmony';[14] the remoteness of their respective periods of writing, the differences of their circumstances, simply vanish.

When Nick Laird was working collaboratively on translations of a selection of Reza Mohammadi's poems for the Poetry Translation Centre, he commented in a blog piece on the 'weird pleasure' of 'opening your mouth and finding someone else's voice coming out'[15] – proving that Circe's sorcery indeed does work.