

Playing a Part: Imru' al-Qays in English

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Before the delightful and occasionally dispiriting work of actual translation – the fussing over word choices, the tuning of voice, the arranging and rearranging of syntax – there is a more basic dilemma: not *how shall I translate* but *whom shall I translate?* There are few good rules for making this decision, but in ‘An Essay on Translated Verse’ (1684) the Earl of Roscommon offers some handy maxims:

Examine how your humor is inclined,
And which the ruling passion of your mind;
Then seek a poet who your way does bend,
And choose an author as you choose a friend:
United by this sympathetic bond,
You grow familiar, intimate, and fond;
Your thoughts, your words, your styles, your souls agree,
No longer his interpreter, but he.¹

Goethe found such a friend in Hafiz, whose *ghazals* inspired the late verse of the *West-Östlicher Diwan*. Goethe did not translate Hafiz in any normal sense of the word, but he did claim an elective affinity with the fourteenth-century poet, whose antinomian cast of mind and worldly sensibility Goethe shared. In ‘Unbegrenzt’ [Unbounded], Goethe names Hafiz as both relation and rival, in lines any translator will recognise: Hafiz, mit dir, mit dir allein / Will ich wetteifern! Lust und Pein / Sei uns, den Zwillingen, gemein!’ (And, Hafiz, with you, with you alone, will I strive to compete! Let pleasure and pain be held in common for us, twins that we are!)²

The mystical union or spiritual sympathy evoked by Roscommon and Goethe is an ideal. In practice, translation is more like playing a part – both in the theatrical sense of role-playing, but also in the musical sense of playing only one piece (or part) of a larger whole. The elements of Hafiz that Goethe found sympathetic are not the same as those played up, for example, by Emerson, a serious translator of Hafiz who like Goethe first encountered the Persian poet in the German versions of Hammer-Purgstall. In ‘Persian Poets,’ an essay published some forty years after the *West-Östlicher Divan*, Emerson praised Hafiz as a poet of epigraphic density and sudden, even jarring turns of thought – characteristic qualities of Emerson’s own poems – and as a fellow disciple of ‘that hardihood and self-equality of every sound nature.’³ To somewhat overstate matters, Goethe’s Hafiz is a soulmate and enlightened interlocutor, while for Emerson he is an epitome of flinty self-reliance.

If there is one classical Arab poet who has enjoyed something like a sympathetic bond with English language poets and translators, it is Imru’ al-Qays, the pre-Islamic prince and author of one of the canonical *mu’allaqat*, or suspended odes. Imru’ al-Qays’s ode has been translated many times into English, but the most consequential version was arguably the first, by the philologist Sir William Jones, who published *The Mo’allaqât, or Seven Arabian Poems* in 1783.⁴ In ‘An Essay on the Poetry of Eastern Nations,’ published a decade before these translations, Jones made a remarkable plea for the benefits, to scholars and poets alike, of a comparative literary education: ‘If the principal writings of the Asiatics, which are repositied in our publick libraries, were printed with the usual advantage of notes and illustrations, and if the languages of the Eastern nations were studied in our places of education . . . we should have a more extensive insight into the history of the human mind, we should be furnished with a new set of images and similitudes, and a number of excellent compositions would be brought to light, which future scholars might explain, and future poets might imitate.’⁵

Although the larger program of public education never happened, and although – Hafiz, Rumi, and Omar Khayyam aside – ‘Eastern’ poetry remains the terrain of specialists, Jones’s English versions did solicit at least one important ‘imitation.’ For it was Jones’s translations of the *mu’allaqat*, and his version of Imru’ al-Qays in particular, which Alfred Lord

Tennyson used as a source for 'Locksley Hall' (1842), the long dramatic monologue that one contemporary judged to have 'had most influence on the minds of the young men of our day'.⁶ 'Locksley Hall' is not a translation *sensu stricto* of Imru' al-Qays's poem, any more than Goethe's lyrics are translations of Hafiz, but the monologue can be read and heard as Tennyson's experiment in *playing the part* of the Arabic poet – a Victorian *mu'allaqa* that is fascinating precisely for those elements of the original it works up and those it sets aside.

Tennyson's poem begins with a couplet that evokes the famous incipit ('*Qifa nabki*') of the Arabic poem: 'Comrades, leave me here a little, while as yet 'tis early morn: / Leave me here, and when you want me, sound upon the bugle-horn.' Rather than the abandoned campsite of the Bedouin poet, Tennyson's speaker has returned to his ancestral hall, where he recalls a romance with his cousin Amy. The body of 'Locksley Hall' is a bitter reminiscence of this failed relation (echoing Tennyson's own disillusionment with Rosa Baring), in which the speaker laments Amy's choice to marry another man, bewails his own lack of station, and imagines a series of substitute satisfactions – whether a life of action, or a colonial fantasy of sensual abundance. At the end of the poem, the speaker's 'comrades' – presumably fellow soldiers, about to sail abroad – sound the bugle-horn, and the poet calls a storm down upon his former abode:

Comes a vapour from the margin, blackening over heath and holt,
Cramming all the blast before it, in its breast a thunderbolt.

Let it fall on Locksley Hall, with rain or hail, or fire or snow;
For the mighty wind arises, roaring seaward, and I go.

Critics have shown how much 'Locksley Hall' owes to Imru' al-Qays's *qasida*. It is likely that its long eight-stress trochaic lines, most of them falling naturally into tetrameter hemistiches, are Tennyson's version of an 'oriental' metre, with its origins in August Tholuck's German translations of Persian poetry (mediated by the 'Eastern' poems of Tennyson's friend, Richard Chenevix Trench). The lament over the ruined manor, the night vigil spent staring at constellations and the final storm scene, are clear reminiscences of the Arabic poem, which also ends with a

vividly described lightning storm. Another shared element is the turn or sonnet-like *volta* by which the poet attempts to dispel memories of Amy and face the future squarely: 'Wherefore should I care? / I myself must mix with action, lest I wither by despair.' Tennyson's poem is full of such moments of self-admonishment, which mimic the Arabic convention of the poet vowing to break his bonds with the beloved, renounce his passions, and regain his manly composure (*hilm*).

Reading Imru' al-Qays in Jones's translation, Tennyson would have encountered not only a new repertoire of figures and themes, but also a novel theory of poetry. Along with his prose versions of the poems, Jones wrote a pair of essays in which he argued against an Aristotelian, mimetic understanding of poetry and claimed that verse was 'originally no more than a strong and animated expression of the human passions.' (This emphasis on expression rather than representation was, according to the scholar M. H. Abrams, the first systematic explication of the lyric poetics we now associate with English Romanticism.⁷) Furthermore, Jones claimed that no poetry exhibited this passionate utterance in purer form than the ancient 'Oriental' traditions. In 'An Essay on the Poetry of Eastern Nations,' Jones writes, 'As the *Arabians* are such admirers of *beauty*, and as they enjoy such ease and leisure, they must naturally be susceptible of *that passion*, which is the true spring and source of agreeable poetry; and we find, indeed, that *love* has a greater share in their poems than any other passion.'⁸

Whether or not Jones's generalisation is true, Imru' al-Qays's *mu'allaqa* is notable for the length of its amatory prelude – ancient critics credited him with being the inventor of the *nasib* – and for being a poem in which the speaker never renounces his ruling passion. Instead of cutting the bonds of love, he exclaims (in A. J. Arberry's version), 'Let the follies of other men forswear fond passion / my heart forswears not, nor will forget the love I bear you.'⁹ The Arab poet is a figure of *amour fou*, a persona of unrepentant excess. Tennyson's speaker, by contrast, is one who turns away from the passions of youth – 'I am shamed through all my nature to have loved so slight a thing' – toward the sterner duties of Victorian manhood. There is some echo of this resolute maturity in other pre-Islamic poems, but it is arguably the very antithesis of Imru' al-Qays's ode.

Frederick Seidel has shown the most consistent as well as idiosyncratic interest in the old Arabic poems of any American writer. In ‘The Stars above the Empty Quarter’ (1998), he pays homage to Labid, the seventh-century poet and author of another *mu‘allaqa*, for his praise of a camel. Seidel’s own poetry is full of odes to the motorcycle, and here the objects of praise are characteristically mixed up:

A pre-Islamic Golden Ode lists
The hundred qualities of a camel.
Suavity, power, the beauty of its eyes.
Its horn, its tires, its perfect bumpers, its perfect fenders.
The way it turns left, the way it turns right.
The great poet Labid sings
His Song of Songs about the one he loves.
How long it can go without water and without God.¹⁰

In another poem, “Sii Romantico, Seidel, Tanto Per Cambiare”, Seidel borrowed the Arabic monorhyme to write a truly frightening, if also antic portrait of sexual decline:

Easy to deride
The way he stayed alive to stay inside
His women with his puffed-up pride.
The pharmacy supplied
The rising fire truck ladder that the fire did not provide.
The toothless carnivore devoured Viagra and Finasteride.¹¹

This is a grotesque, fin-de-siècle version of amorous excess – Gustav von Aschenbach wolfing down rotten strawberries. Remarking on the poem during an interview published in *The Paris Review*, Seidel describes his formal choices in theatrical terms: ‘By using monorhyme I’ve forced the formal elements to become a character. They are insisting that you pay attention to them. They are onstage with the other elements of the poem.’¹² But the most fully realised of Seidel’s pre-Islamic ‘translations’ is called ‘Mu‘allaqa’ (2008), a poem he dedicates to Imru’ al-Qays.

Seidel’s *mu‘allaqa* begins at the end, with a storm scene that combines

a baroque metaphor from the ancient odes, the apocalyptic trumpets of Revelations, and a mighty wind out of *The Wizard of Oz*:

The elephant's trunk uncurling
From the lightening flashes
In the clouds was Marie Antoinette,
As usual trumpeting.
The greedy suction
Was her tornado vacuuming across the golden Kansas flatness.¹³

The rest of the poem deliriously juggles the themes announced in this opening stanza, while constantly slipping new objects into the mix. The French aristocracy on the eve of Revolution are conflated with Gulf royals, who dream of purchasing Versailles and 'pay payola to Al Qaeda to stay away from Doha' (are the repetitions and internal rhymes a tribute to the Arabic monorhyme?). The jihadis become accomplices of the approaching storm, contemplating the end of the world from their 'bitter *banlieus*'. Meanwhile, the poet – who cheerfully affiliates himself with the doomed aristocrats – takes centre stage, a Parisian aesthete mixed with the hunter-poet of the Arabic *tardiyya*: 'I kept a rainbow as a pet and grandly / walked the rainbow on a leash. / I exercised it evenings with the cheetah.' Like the ancient tribal poets, Seidel's poet remembers his debauched days of yore ('I left my liver in the Cher. / I ate my heart out *en Berry*'), but the excesses of the past pale in comparison to those of the present. In his own version of the *rahil* – the middle portion of a conventional polythematic ode, in which the poet mounts his camel for a difficult trip through desert – Seidel's poet travels through a nightmarish version of the UAE ('I see a desert filled with derricks / Pumping up and down but never satisfied') and the new France of 'north African hipsters' whose *ennui* leads to imagined apocalypse. In the final lines of the poem, the poet enacts a high-camp condensation of the *qasida*'s argument:

I stomp the campfire out and saddle up my loyal *Mayflower* –
Who is swifter than a life is brief under the stars!
My prize four-wheel-drive with liquid wraparound eyes!

We ski the roller-coaster ocean's up and down dunes.
We reach land at last and step on Plymouth Rock.

This is not a poem of the passions. To stomp on the campfire is gleefully to reject the pathos of the *nasib* in favor of an eternal American present, in which Plymouth Rock, Dorothy and Toto's Kansas, and the speaker's *now* are all contemporaneous – as are, in a familiar paradox of translation, Imru' al-Qays and Frederick Seidel, the Old world and the New. Whereas Tennyson's rewrite of the *qasida* emphasises the pivot between then and now, between erotic melancholy and nineteenth-century optimism ('Forward, forward, let us range, / Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change'), Seidel's lyric exists in a depthless here and now. While Tennyson's speaker is a 'character', who works through his feelings and changes his mind over the course of the poem, Seidel's speaker is a dandy or performance artist, who never grows up (even if he does grow old) and skips from excess to excess.

In their respective *mu'allaqat*, Tennyson and Seidel play up different parts of the Arab poet's persona and discover different potentials within the ancient ode. There are, of course, many other parts still unexplored, and not only in Imru' al-Qays. Angie Mlinko's translations of al-Shanfara and Labid, which take a page from Ezra Pound, find an equivalent antiquity for the Arabic poems in Old English hemistiches and their own rhetoric of ruin and waste. James E. Montgomery's translations of 'Antarah ibn Shaddad, which borrow some of their archaic atmospheres from Mlinko, have made 'the Lord of War' into a recognisably (Scottish) English poet. It is through the work of translation that Persianate forms like the *ghazal* and *ruba'i* have become nearly as native to English language poetry as the *sestina* and *sonnet* (which were once upon a time translated from the Italian); in this way, 'formal' English verse is kept in a healthy state of self-estrangement. But as the poems of Tennyson and Seidel suggest, the translation and transformation of ancient 'Eastern' poetry can also help 'Western' poets think through and clarify the questions of what it means to be a Victorian British, or a fin-de-siècle American, often with surprising results. William Jones's contention that a general education including 'the principal writings of the Asiaticks' would provide 'a more extensive insight into the history of the human

mind', as well as 'a new set of images and similitudes', still carries conviction and force – perhaps even more force now, when knowledge of 'Asiatik' poetry remains slight even as our worlds are drawn closer and closer together. Future readers and poets will uncover further novelties in these old verses. The ancient Arabic poems are like the glance of the beloved as evoked by Abu Nuwas, *Wahid fi-l-lafz, shatt al-ma'ani*: 'Singular in expression, multiple in meanings.'