

## Translating European Poetry into Arabic Culture

KADHIM J. HASSAN

*Translated from the French by Lulu Norman*

Ever since the founding of the famous *Bayt al-Hikma* (House of Wisdom) – an institution that specialised in the translation of Greek philosophical and medicinal texts into Arabic – in around 832, during the Al-Mamun caliphate, Arabic culture has been home to extensive translation activity, and at the centre of ethical and technical reflections on translation. Any relation to the text, style and thought of the Other has traditionally been characterised by great anxiety, in practice as much as in theory. After faltering beginnings, the desire of translators, philosophers and scholarly commentators not to distort or domesticate the text-as-object-of-translation, developed into concern and then into method.

On the threshold of the modern age, *Nahda*<sup>1</sup> translators were able to translate many more literary texts, whereas medieval Arabic culture had privileged scientific and philosophical translation. Little by little, as real translators appeared, as well as authors who made space in their practice for the critique of translations, good procedures were also being established. At the same time, there were cries of alarm, protesting the offences of some translators. Such cries reached a peak in the writing that Taha Hussein (1889–1973) – one of the fathers of modern Arabic literature, and himself the translator of Sophocles and Gide – devoted to criticising some of his contemporaries' methods. Condemning the excessive use of a 'sordid' and 'melodramatic' literary language on the one hand, and adaptive or truncated translations on the other, he called on translators to ensure they were reproducing what he called 'the exact image of the text'.<sup>2</sup> By exact image, he meant respect for the text's completeness, but also the safeguarding of the specificity of its language and its proper tone.

*Translating poetry: the contributions of the Apollo group and Shi'r journal*

We would have to wait until the end of the nineteenth century to witness the translation of any European poetry – or foreign poetry generally – into Arabic. For medieval Arabs, as for the *Nahda* pioneers, this was due to the rarity if not total absence of bilingual poets capable of translating what they read in other languages into an Arabic poetic form. One of the historians of literary translation in the Arabic language, Al-Munsif al-Jazzar, (who makes no mention of Suleiman al-Bustani and his verse translation of *The Iliad*, completed in 1900) saw the author of an Arabic version of Khayyam's Persian *Quatrains* (1912), Wadi al-Bustani, as the precursor of poetry translation into Arabic in the modern age.<sup>3</sup> But what was significant was that the chief method employed by the first Arabic translators of poetry was translation into verse. Al-Bustani's version of *The Iliad*, Lamartine's *The Lake*, translated by Nicholas Fayyad, and several translations of Khayyam's *Quatrains* are the best-known and most commonly cited examples. These verse translations, whose difficulties we will come back to, were surely motivated by their precocity: indeed it would be hard to imagine an immediate shift to free-verse or non-metric translation in a culture just beginning to discover poetry translation, which considered metre essential to poetry and still confused rhythm and metre, poetic writing and versification.

It would take the emergence of the *Apollo* group and the journal that bore its name to see poems in non-metric translations. Between September 1932 and December 1934, this journal would publish twenty-eight issues.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by Zaki Abu Shadi, who had established the *Apollo* school and edited the journal, a few poets and critics initiated a diverse approach. Their literary manifestos and theoretical contributions, as well as the new writing practices they preached, of which they themselves were exemplars, attest to an openness to different western literary trends and especially to the legacy of the Romantics. This creative and critical activity was complemented by non-metric translations that were the first of their kind. In the latter half of the twentieth century, other journals such as the Lebanese *Al-Adib* would pick up the baton. But it was the Lebanese journal *Shi'r* (Poetry), founded by Syrian-Lebanese poet Yusuf

al-Khal, which would elevate poetry translation to previously unimagined heights.

This review's translators for the most part employed innovative methods and techniques that were liberated from the yoke of metre:

- 1) They attempted modulation in order to generate a rhythmic tension within the line to match that of the original as closely as possible;
- 2) They made bold choices of vocabulary and syntax in an effort to coincide with the original, even at the cost of a few linguistic deviations or dispensations that would gradually become new writing procedures;
- 3) They used different registers of poetic speech and varied the tone, thus freeing the poem from a certain tonal solemnity that had attached to the majority of classical and even modern Arabic poetry.

With a few exceptions, the translation of poetry into Arabic would thereafter follow the example of *Shi'r* journal. Translators of all generations, the majority themselves poets, now abandoned all concern for metre and began to translate in rhythmic phrases similar to those of European free verse with differing degrees of success. This has resulted in a sizeable body of translations of European poetry. But truly successful translations are extremely rare. When placed next to the original, even translations that have become very popular, often by poets of repute, are revealed to have major flaws and, sometimes, obvious errors. This proves that further preparation is still required. But what is clearly lacking, too, is any real theory of translation in general and of poetry in particular, as well as a serious and methodological criticism of translations.

### *Problematic flaws and methods*

Before commenting on what Arabic translations of foreign and particularly European poetry have contributed, and their impact on the writing of Arabic poetry, let us dwell briefly on their flaws, or the problems they pose.

*Versification:* we have seen that the first translations of poetry respected the laws of Arabic metre. More recent translations have followed

suit. Rhyme is often a priority, as if rhyming itself constituted poetry. On the one hand this is to forget that the metres and rhyming systems of different poetic traditions do not overlap, even within sister languages, as in Romance languages (does the Alexandrine, for example, have the same history, configuration and resonances in all Romance languages?) And, on the other, that in translating metre, the conscious striving for verse and rhyme – which is flagrant folly, according to Borges<sup>5</sup> – attempts to reproduce what the poet had written in his metre instinctively. In this regard, a translation can be an over-translation, a rewriting of the text in another language rather than translation-as-writing.

*Aestheticising the text:* we must also note the suppression of elements considered ugly or shocking and the softening of obscenities or vulgar language, a diminution that Antoine Berman rightly condemns in his famous list of translators' inopportune interventions.<sup>6</sup> Like the 'anal ulcer' Rimbaud bestows on the consecrated, if not sacred, face of the Greek goddess in his poem *Venus anadyomene*, watered down by his Syrian translator Khalil Al-Khuri as a 'back ulcer'!<sup>7</sup> Or this image from Ungaretti, '*La notte piu chiusa /lugubre tartaruga . . .*' ('The night more closed/ lugubrious tortoise . . .'<sup>8</sup>), prettified to the point of absurdity by Iraqi Saadi Yousef in '*Qamariyyatan, asyanatan*' ('Night . . . lunar, saddened).<sup>9</sup>

*If we are missing the barely-concealed irony of a text, can we call it translating?* Yet time and again in Palestinian Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's translation of *Hamlet*, this is what we encounter. To quote just one example, it is not clear why the translator distorts and dilutes the deliberately harsh words Hamlet addresses to his mother, believing she and his uncle have conspired to murder his father: 'Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed, / Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse.' Jabra Ibrahim Jabra translates the second part of this sentence as '*wa-yad'uki 'usfuratahu*' (and calls you his little bird<sup>10</sup>)!

*Removing repetition,* the most egregious example of which occurs in translations of the Homeric epics. Homer was famously fond of repeating epithets in particular. In *The Odyssey*, Ulysses is 'the inventive', 'the divine', 'the cunning', 'the patient', 'the enduring', etc. These are not simply markers of meaning, helping us to establish characters, things and phenomena. They also, and more importantly, mark rhythm. According

to the poet Philippe Jaccottet, author of a remarkable French translation of *The Odyssey*,<sup>11</sup> this repetition was a formal necessity, which is to say important for ritual elements. Jaccottet concludes: 'If we eliminate even some these formulas because their monotony no longer suits our taste, it is the very regularity of the epic that must be modified . . .'<sup>12</sup>

*Archaicising poetic language.* The most well-known examples can be found in the translation of Dante's *La Divina Commedia* by the Egyptian Hassan Uthman and Saint-John Perse's 'Étroits sont les vaisseaux' from *Amers* (1957) by Moroccan Mustapha al-Kasri.<sup>13</sup> The late lamented Jacqueline Risset, poet and author of a French translation of Dante's work, is very clear:<sup>14</sup> Dante's Italian was not old; it had just been born. To imagine that to translate it we must go back to ancient constructions in the target language is to confuse classicism with old-fashioned usage. The same is true for Perse, whose use of lofty language should not obscure its outright modernity.

*Dismantling the rhythm (or rhythms) of the work.* The most striking examples are again provided by Hassan Uthman in his translation of Dante and by Tunisian Mohsin bin-Hmida in his translation of Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer*.<sup>15</sup> Bin-Hmida divides Rimbaud's prose poems arbitrarily into pseudo-verses and Uthman amalgamates Dante's famous *terza rima* into one long unbroken line, thus making this poetic song lose its essential surges and surprises.

*The worst flaws, however, are represented by misunderstandings of language and culture.* They appear in the work of translators who are not sufficiently versed in the source language or the work they are translating. Instructive examples can be found in Fuad Rifqa's translations. But even the celebrated Syrian-Lebanese poet, Adonis is not immune. The Tunisian critic Ali al-Luati<sup>16</sup> has identified a number of misinterpretations in Adonis' translation of Saint-John Perse's poetic works. For example, in ' . . . monnaies jaunes, timbre pur . . . ', the word *timbre* is understood not in the sense of *sound* ('... the clear tinkle /of yellow coins...'), but of image or *postal stamp* (*damgha*). In 'Relations faites à l'Édile': 'relations' is translated as "'alaqat' ('relations' in the sense of *relationships*, not things related or said).

And we find a striking example of the lack of poetic culture and 'documentation' or 'erudition' relating to translated works – what Antoine

Berman in his above-mentioned work *La Traduction et la Lettre* calls 'translation scaffolding' – in the translation of Hölderlin's selected poems<sup>17</sup> by the Syrian poet Fuad Rifqa. In his translation notes, he defines Hyperion as being 'the name of the sun god' and Diotima as the 'symbol of love in Plato's *Symposium*'. Now every good reader of the German poet – elsewhere known as the author of a novel entitled *Hyperion or the Hermit in Greece* – knows that Hyperion is the pseudonym Hölderlin gave himself in some of his poems, just as he gave the name Diotima to his beloved Susette Gontard. Equally, Rifqa defines *Hesperien* as the 'symbol of the arrival of future gods'! But here Hölderlin is simply referring to Western land, which Germans call *Abendland* (Land of the sunset), an appellation the poet preferred in ancient Greek: *Hesperien*.

### *The impact of translation on Arabic poetry*

The twentieth century saw poets' and Arabic readers' knowledge of European poetry deepening more rapidly from the 1940s on. Several factors came together to make this possible: the growing numbers of universities in the Arab world (the first, the University of Cairo, was founded in Egypt in 1908) and of European study trips; also greater access to foreign languages and the circulation of good literary journals which made space in their pages for translations of poetry. All these elements had the combined effect of advancing the art of translating poetry into Arabic and of increasing the impact of translations on the writing of Arab poets themselves.

In more recent years, some of the great occidental poetic oeuvres have found the right translators in Arabic. In the majority of cases, the translator demonstrates richness of vocabulary, powerful syntax, suppleness of rhythm and a profound grasp of the work's meanings, evident in their critical commentaries and explanatory notes which involve both interpretation and critical appreciation, over and above the work of translation. Translations by the Iraqi Sargon Boulus of Allen Ginsberg and W. S. Merwin, of Yves Bonnefoy by the Tunisian Mohamed Ben Salah, of Octavio Paz by another Tunisian, Mohamed Ali Al-Yousufi, or of various North American poets by the Palestinian Samer Abu Hawwash, provide good examples here.

To knowledge of the source language, good translations (of individual poems rather than complete oeuvres) will of course add to the Arabic language's capacity to offer refuge – *Un auberge du lointain* (An inn for the stranger), as the subtitle of Antoine Berman's excellent study, *La traduction et la lettre*, has it. In *After Babel*,<sup>18</sup> George Steiner lists the ways in which Hölderlin, in his translations of Pindar and Sophocles, has laboured to enlarge the expressive capacities of the German language, at the risk of scandalising many of his contemporaries. And we see similar creative daring in Pierre Klossowski's French translation of the *Aeneid*. Delaying meaning, anticipation, inversion, ellipses, neologisms, word contractions, etc., are operations that, like other great literary languages, Arabic – elaborated over fifteen centuries, bearer of a dizzying range of literature – is more than capable of performing. So the language has been able, with obvious success, to embrace the poetry of Eliot, Lorca, Char, Bonnefoy and many others.

The success of translations can be measured by their impact on poetry writing itself, and the influence of European poetry on Arabic poetry is clear. Of course, a misreading of Saint-John Perse's poetic work has led to a tendency towards list-making among some Arab poets, as well as a glorification of the poet's personality and world. But this is not always the case. Translations of surrealist poems, especially those of Jacques Prévert, have given us a more nuanced perception of reality as well as the option of using everyday language. Translations of Eliot's poetry have created a blend of poetry and philosophy, or meditative language. Translations of Lorca, Eluard and Neruda have given rise to a new lyricism, elaborated very differently, as well as a scathing irony, driven by Michaux, and the taste for aphorisms has gained enormously from translations of René Char. These are some of the fruits of translators' work, their contribution to the contemporary Arabic poem.

#### *New poetic genres initiated by translation*

From 1947 on, two Iraqi poets, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and Nazik al-Malaika, soon followed by another, Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati, in common with many poets from all over the Arab world, broke with the *qasida*, the classical Arabic poem subject to the dual law of two hemistiches and a

single rhyme. They did this by proposing a new poetic form based on one verse of unequal length, a varying number of feet and varied rhymes, which they called 'free verse' (literally, *sh'ir hurr* or 'free poetry'). By radically altering Arabic verse in this way, these new poets were in fact calling for a total revision and complete overhaul. They have to some extent succeeded in prompting an entire culture (which had formed them) to change the way it conceived of the world, language and the writing of poetry.

That said, we should not forget the significant differences between Western and Arabic metres. Verses written in a Romance language tend to be syllabic. Arabic poetic metre is based on *feet* (*tafa'il* or *taf'ilat*), and is often compared to Greek and Latin metres. Free verse in the Romance languages uses variable *metres* and *lengths*. Despite bold experiments mixing different metres, by Sayyab in particular, Arabic free verse remains faithful to one metre, so his sole innovation was to vary the number of feet in a line.

A few years later, this free verse with a variable number of feet found itself alongside another kind of verse in Arabic, no longer haunted by feet and rhyming, and thus similar to European free verse. This verse largely owes its invention to translations of European poetry. Other poets, like the Lebanese Pierre Adib, had certainly taken tentative steps in that direction from the 1940s on, but it was Syrian Muhammad al-Maghut more than anyone who, in the pages of the *Shi'r* review, popularised the form and became its most famous practitioner. We now know that this autodidact poet's only language was Arabic and in many interviews he referred to adopting free or non-metric verse because of the influence of European poetry translations that were not in verse and did not rhyme. And it was almost at the same time, also prompted by European and especially French poetry and its translation that the Arabic prose poem emerged, written in a single block, following models of the form extant in other world poetry.

Of course there is no need to underline here the power and variety that modern Arabic poetry has accrued from the emergence of these three new poetic forms: Arabic free verse with a varying number of feet, non-metric Arabic free verse and finally the Arabic prose poem. But we do need to be aware and make clear that Arabic poetry has been enriched



with new poetic forms and genres through an openness to European poetry, read in the original but also in translation; to this it owes the imaginative freedom and verbal strength that we find in its best examples.