



ENGLISH III. TRANSLATIONS OF CLASSICAL PERSIAN LITERATURE

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Translations from classical Persian into English fall initially into two categories. There is a group of texts whose purpose is to convey the information of the original in discrete units, most useful with prose or narrative poetry and not necessarily “literary.” There are other translations designed to carry over the formal elements of a literary text: its nuances, its rhythmic peculiarities and rhyme schemes, and the relations of part to part that build up complex structures of meaning.

The first category has historical priority. Information in the form of narrative themes and motifs from Persian literature reached English readers through the mediation of intervening languages for generations before the advent of direct translation in the modern sense. The Persian provenance of Chaucer’s “Squire’s Tale,” or two hundred years later the history fictionalized in Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587) passed through numerous intermediaries. Persian and Arabic tropes and atmospheric furniture which became popular in the 18th-century English press traced back to such widely



consulted French sources as Antoine Galland's version of the *Arabian Nights* (1704-1717; See ALF LAYLA WA LAYLA) and Barthélemy d'Herbelot's extensive reference *Bibliothèque orientale* (1697). Sir John Chardin's *Travels. . . into Persia and the East Indies* (1686) appeared simultaneously in English and French (See CHARDIN) and was influential in both countries. It includes translations from Persian which generated Joseph Addison's famous Persian fable of the raindrop absorbed by the ocean (from Sa'dī's *Būstān*; q.v.) in *The Spectator* (no. 293, 1712).

Translations from Persian literature in Latin versions preceded English ones: Ḥāfeẓ's first ode and now familiar quatrains of 'Omar Ḳayyām appeared in Latin as early as Sir Thomas Hyde's *Syntagma dissertationum* (1700). Both William Jones and Edward FitzGerald translated from Persian into Latin, but, even given the wide diffusion of the classics, a Latin version was still a variant of the first category, a more or less arbitrary mold into which information could be poured.

William Jones' most famous English translation was the *ḡazal* of Ḥāfeẓ which he entitled "A Persian Song" and published twice, first in his *Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771) in conjunction with a prose translation, and a year later in his *Poems Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Languages*. As a translation, it exemplifies the second category: It attempts insistently to resonate with nuances from English lyric tradition, following the esthetic of Dryden's 1697 preface to his translations from Virgil's *Aeneid*: "I have endeavour'd to make *Virgil* speak such *English*, as he wou'd himself have spoken, if he had been born in *England*, and in this present Age" (Dryden, p. 331). Jones' treatment of Ḥāfeẓ's concluding *bayt* makes this esthetic project particularly clear:

ḡazal goftī o dor softī, bīā vo koš bekʿān Ḥāfeẓ,

Ke bar nazm-e to afšānad falak 'eqd-e Torayyā-rā.

"Go boldly forth, my simple lay,/Whose accents flow with artless ease/Like orient pearls at random strung;/Thy notes are sweet, the damsels say,/But O! far sweeter, if they please/The nymph for whom these notes are sung."



The choice of a stanza form acknowledges that the stanza is traditionally associated with the lyric in English, although it requires considerable padding to fill the pattern. The imagined audience of nymphs is Jones' addition. The phrase "orient pearls at random strung" gained considerable notoriety in Arthur J. Arberry's 1946 article of that name. Arberry (like John Hindley in his *Persian Lyrics*) took it to imply that the sequence of the *bayts* is arbitrary, and it has been a matter of contention ever since (summarized in Pritchett). Arberry did not observe that nearly every isolatable element of the stanza is at odds with the original. The phrase "artless ease," which evokes a peculiarly European esthetic value, is dissonant with the implication that piercing the pearl is traditionally a difficult accomplishment. Jones knew what he was changing; the prose version in *Poems* makes no comparable adjustments. What he makes visible in this passage is the difference between the envoy (which in European poetry often apostrophizes the poem as if it were a character going forth on a mission) and the *maqta'*, where the poet addresses his own persona.

Jones continued to be a key figure in the study of Persian during his career as a judge in Calcutta. The consolidation and growth of colonial power in India established a framework, visible in such institutions as the Asiatic Society—founded by Jones in 1784, shortly after his arrival in India—which encouraged scholarship and translation from Persian. (Knowledge of Persian was of additional practical importance until 1835, when English rather than Persian became the official language of India.) Indeed, by the end of the century an English reader had access to a complete syllabus of major works of Persian in English versions, translated according to various standards. Versified passages from the *Šāh-nāma* appeared in versions by Joseph Champion (1790) and in selections by James Atkinson (q.v.; 1814 and 1832). Sa'dī's *Golestān* took a place of prominence as a key to "Eastern" culture: Frances Gladwin, a founding member of the Asiatic Society, produced the earliest one in 1806—in an American edition of 1865 it would be the occasion of Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous essay on Sa'dī. Versions followed by James Ross (1823), Edward Backhouse Eastwick (1852), and Edward Rehatsek (1888). "Throughout the nineteenth century," Yohannan points out, "each new generation of Englishmen was to provide a new translation of it for its own use" (1977, p. 12).

During the same period translation from Persian or imitation of Persian motifs, as a form of apprenticeship, became popular outside academic circles



(documented extensively in Yohannan and Javadi) in much the same way that translation from the Psalms in the 16th and 17th centuries served as a poetic exercise for Sir Philip Sidney, Thomas Campion, John Denham, or Richard Crashaw. There are numerous experiments which, like Jones', assimilate Persian to indigenous styles. George Borrow's *Targum* (1835), an anthology of translations from numerous languages, includes four very free translations of Ḥāfeẓ. Reverend William Barnes translated *ḡazal* forms into Dorset dialect. John Hindley, in his *Persian Lyrics* (1800), cites the authority of Jones that "modulated but unaffected prose" would be preferable to rhymed couplets and translates each poem twice, once in verse and once in a prose reminiscent of the rhythms of the psalms: "Thou hast composed thy Gazel, and strung thy pearls—come, sing them sweetly, O Hafiz!/ For, Heaven has sprinkled over thy poetry the clearness and beauty (shining circle) of the Pleiades."

It is as an elusive figure that Ḥāfeẓ attracts English poets. John Yohannan has traced the shifting roles which Ḥāfeẓ has played among his imitators, from the Anacreontic lyricist of Jones to the mystical voice of the next generation and to an often melancholy figure later in the century. Versions of Ḥāfeẓ, both academic and popular, continued to appear at an accelerated pace in collections by Edward Henry Palmer (1877); H. Wilberforce-Clarke, who translated the entire *Dīvān* into prose with a commentary arguing for a mystical interpretation (1891); Gertrude Bell (1897); Walter Leaf (1898); John Payne (1901); and Richard Le Gallienne (1905).

One of the most widely read 19th-century imitations of Persian literature was Matthew Arnold's versification of the most familiar passages from the *Šāh-nāma*, his blank verse "Sohrab and Rustum" (1853), based on extracts from the seven-volume French version of Jules Mohl (1838-78). It is a method of translation which spans both categories, as it attempts to reconstruct formal or "poetic" elements in the target language, but with access only to the bare information of the original. It was not an uncommon method among established poets, however. William Morris left unpublished a prose translation of passages from Mohl's version (Yohannan, 1977, p. 229). The Oriental tale, as practiced by popular poets such as Robert Southey in his *Thalaba* (1801) or Thomas Moore, in "Lalla Rookh" (1816), is not strictly speaking translation, but it rests on extensive research and may constitute a generic category bordering on the territory of Arnold's "Sohrab and Rustum." The line distinguishing such texts and the realm of translation is often difficult to determine, notably in the poetry of Alfred Tennyson, who studied Persian.



The sequence in part 22 of *Maud: A Monodrama* (1855) where the speaker speaks to garden flowers—“I said to the lily, ‘there is but one’ . . .” “I said to the rose . . .”— can be seen as strange as a symptom of the speaker’s disturbed state of mind, strange enough for Lewis Carroll to parody it in chapter two of *Through the Looking Glass*. As Yohannan argues (1977, pp. 91-92), it can be read as one in a series of imitations of Ḥāfeẓ. In “Locksley Hall” (1842), as Edward G. Browne (q.v.) points out (Lit. Hist. Persia II, p. 26), Tennyson reproduces a variant of *ramal* meter, the meter of “all long narrative and systematized didactic poems in Persian.” (“Comrades, leave me here a little, while as yet ‘t is early morn; / Leave me here, and when you want me, sound upon the bugle-horn.”)

In the afterword to his *West-östlicher Divan* (1819) Goethe suggested a third category of translation, in which the translator, instead of extracting the work as information or naturalizing it in the target language, aims at making the translation sound purposely strange or jarring, ultimately to change the taste of its readers. Edward FitzGerald may be the first translator to be said to have changed the possibilities of English verse in this way. Although he also translated passages from ‘Aṭṭār’s *Manteq al-ṭayr* and Jāmī’s *Salāmān wa Absāl*, it is his *Rubāyāt* of Omar Khayyām which became the most widely read and influential of all translations from Persian, the only one which has become a major work of the English canon, an influence on Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and the early Wallace Stevens. It has been pointed out that, though there are errors in FitzGerald’s version, most of them are purposeful variations, as can be traced through his letters to his friend and informant Edward Cowell, who left for India in 1856, shortly before FitzGerald began to work with the manuscripts (Davis, pp. 34-35). He had the collection published at his own expense in 1859, and the story of its gradual discovery in a bin in front of Bernard Quaritch’s bookshop has become famous. Once it found its readership, there were four further editions, the fifth (posthumous) one being the most extensively revised.

Although the rhythm and diction of his translations was traditional, the quatrain rhyming AAXA was new to English, and its self-contained vignettes have an innovative concision. (Critics have spoken of the visual effects produced by his suppression of connectives). For the traditional Persian order which alphabetizes poems by rhyming word he substituted a sequence connecting the quatrains by theme. The result is that it conveys the effect of a dramatic monologue, a quality one also sees comparing quatrain eighteen



(nineteen in the fifth edition) with an 1847 translation of the same poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson (q.v.). Emerson's tetrameter catches the feel of his source, a German translation by Joseph von Hammer: "Each spot where tulips prank their state / Has drunk the life-blood of the great; / The violets yon field which stain / Are moles of beauties Time hath slain" (Emerson, p. 301). Where Emerson (following von Hammer) strives for a folkloric, gnomic quality, semantically closer to the original in its specific imagery, FitzGerald's iambic pentameter slows down the sequence of images; his "I sometimes think," without counterpart in the Persian text, makes the narrator a reflective presence, "that" in the third line reinforcing the tentative feeling: "I sometimes think that never blows so red / The Rose as where some buried Caesar bled; / That every Hyacinth the Garden wears / Dropt in its Lap from some once lovely Head." His omission of the beauty spot (kāl) in the original, strictly speaking an error, produces a soft focus, an emphasis on the mood which characterizes all of the *Rubá'iyát*.

Two voices stand out as the most prolific among academic translators at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the modern period. Reynold Nicholson and Edward G. Browne. Substantial works of scholarship such as Browne's translation of the *Čahār maqāla* of Neẓāmī 'Arūzi or Nicholson's *Kašf al-maḥjūb* of 'Alī b. 'Oṭmān Hojvīrī are remarkable because they pass unnoticed next to the bulk of their writing. Both are unobtrusive, often very bland translators. Nicholson will be remembered particularly for his monumental edition and translation of the entire text of Rūmī's *Maṭnawī*, which Ehsan Yarshater has characterized as useful but "painfully accurate" (Yarshater, p. 266). Browne was an innovative translator only occasionally. Probably inspired by Tennyson's rhythmic tour de force in "Locksley Hall," he attempted two translations in his *Literary History of Persia*, which reproduce both the Persian metrics and the monorhyme: an elegy (q.v.; *marṭīa*) of Sa'dī in *ramal* meter (*Lit. Hist. Persia* II, pp. 29-30) and a version of the same much-translated "Agar ān Tork-e šīrāzi. . ." of Ḥāfeẓ in imitation of the *hazaj* meter. His version of the conclusion captures syntactic and semantic elements with the precision William Jones did not attempt: "Your ode you've sung, your pearls you've strung; come chant it sweetly, Hafidh [Ḥāfeẓ]r mine! / That as you sing the sky may fling the Pleiades' bejewelled band" (*Lit. Hist. Persia* II, pp. 27-28). Browne's echo of the interior rhyme ("sung"/"strung," *goftī/softī*) creates an effect comparable to the Persian, but the rhyme in the next line ("sing"/"fling") is added; it shows a will to phonological symmetry more characteristic of Victorian poetry than of Ḥāfeẓ. Two crucial nuances



disappear here as in Jones' version: the implication that threading pearls is a daunting task, and the striking image of celestial disruption in the untying of the Pleiades. Many readers would argue that it is precisely such nuances that make this a poem rather than just a collage of tropes.

The translations from Chinese in Ezra Pound's *Cathay* (1915) eventually redefined what readers would expect from poetry and from translation, but its influence would be evidenced only gradually in translation from Persian. Persian has continued to be associated for English and American readers with the Victorian lexicon and thematics of FitzGerald, as Chinese has been associated with the gnomic, modernist esthetics introduced by Pound. A group of six translations from Persian which Basil Bunting included in his *Collected Poems* (1968) indicate how Persian might have looked if a Poundian esthetic had introduced it. In an untitled version of *āḡazal* of Sa'dī (*Dūš bī-rū-ye to ātaš besar-am bar mišod*) which begins "Last night without sight of you my brain was ablaze" (Bunting, p. 145) he employs a series of strong internal caesuras in enjambed lines, substituting interior breaks for the breaks between *bayts* in the Persian. The effect disrupts English lyric tradition to suggest the feeling of Persian in the manner of Goethe's third category of translation. Bunting's translation of the last line (*Sa'diā 'eqd-e Torayyā magar emšab begosikt / Var-na har šab begarībān-e ofoq bar mišod*), with its abrupt, unmotivated rhetorical self-interrogation and its corporeal personification of the sky, despite a thematic similarity represents a stark opposition to the close of Jones' "Persian Song": ". . . Sa'dī! / Has then the chain of the Pleiades broken/tonight that every night is hung on the sky's neck?"

The translations of Omar Pound offer an example of another strategy, in which Dryden's dictum is applied to contemporary esthetics with contemporary allusions substituted for the originals (as in this verse drawn from Manūčehrī: "But now? / It's all Betjeman, Ginsberg and Ogden Nash—"Omar Pound, p. 56). It is a style particularly well suited to humor, as seen in his translation of a satire of 'Obayd Zākānī's *Mūš o gorba*.

The practice of contemporary translation acknowledges a wider split between the first and second types of translation. Editions like A. J. Arberry's *Fifty Poems of Hāfiz* (with versions by fifteen translators), or *Hafez. Dance of Life*, which includes Persian texts of each poem, transcriptions in Roman letters, Wilberforce-Clarke's prose translations, and a version by the poet Michael Boylan may signal a growing consensus that the esthetic experience is located somewhere between the various versions. The oeuvre of Arberry may mark



the last historical moment when verse translation is likely to be conceived as such a natural or transparent dialect that it can appear in the same context as his scholarly writing. Still, Arberry's most widely read translations may be the prose versions of Rūmī's *gāzals*, which he published near the end of his career (1968-79). They have since generated a whole series of inventive translations of Rūmī by the American poet Coleman Barks, who works from them when a Persian-speaking informant is unavailable.

The affinities and obstacles to translation from classical Persian into English have remained constant. The natural link which generations of translators have seen between the heroic couplet and the *matnawī* has persisted since Jones translated a couplet of Ferdowsī incorporated in Sa'dī's *Būstān* (*Mayāzār mūr-ī ke dānakaš ast/ke jān dārad o jān-e šīrīn koš ast*) in a letter to the Second Earl Spencer (Meisami, p. 64): "Crush not yon ant, who stores the golden grain: / He lives with pleasure, and will die with pain"). A particularly effective contemporary use of heroic couplets has been 'Aṭṭār's *Manteq al-ṭayr* in the version by Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi, although Davis has affirmed that the English and Persian couplet forms are by no means interchangeable, and has preferred blank verse for his selections from Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma* (1992; Clinton makes the same decision in his *Tragedy of Sohrāb and Rostam*).

The characteristic elements which resist English translation are monorhyme in the *gāzal*, the distinctive lexical play between Persian and Arabic vocabulary, and a highly standardized poetic diction, particularly the complex series of images tied to the philosophical system of Sufism (described in Lawrence). The example of Sufism as the origin of a culture-specific lexicon represents both an obstacle and a source of attraction, an appeal to universal experience which has served to draw readers since Joseph Addison's *Spectator* (no. 293).

In general, the norm in scholarly translation has never ceased to be the first category, an information-centered prose paraphrase or interlinear. In the translation of medieval prose, such as Hamid Algar's translation of Najm-al-Dīn Dāya's *Meršād al-'ebād* and Bruce Lawrence's translation of Neẓām-al-Dīn Awlīā's *Fawā'id al-fo'ād*, this can produce an English syntax with a very distinctive composite style, recognizable as contemporary English and yet marked by the stylized patterns of Persian diction and syntax. Other prominent translations can be styleless. In fact, two of the most widely read recent editions of famous Persian verse narratives have been translations of translations, stylistically neutral English versions of Rudolf Gelpke's German



Lejla und Medshnun (Zurich, 1963) and Garcin de Tassy's French *Manteq al-ṭayr*.

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