



# HAFEZ X. TRANSLATIONS OF HAFEZ IN ENGLISH

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## HAFEZ

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The first poem by Hafez to appear in English was the work of Sir William Jones (q.v.; 1746-94). His translation of the “Tork-e šīrāzī” ghazal(q.v.), both in prose and verse, as a “Persian Song” (Jones 1771, pp. 135-40), set a precedent for later translators. The rest of the 18th century produced very little, though the translation by John Nott (1751-1825) is worthy of note. Since the beginning of the 19th century, however, Hafez has become the most translated of the Persian poets.

Translations of Hafez are varied and numerous but generally they can be divided into three categories. A number of translators have found prose the most suitable medium in which to present Hafez to the English reader. Some of these translators provide word-for-word translations, sacrificing idiomatic English for “fidelity.” Their aim is no more than to provide a crib for the student of Persian. The complete translation of the *Dīvān* by Lieut.-Col. H. Wilberforce Clarke (1840-1905) stands as an exemplum of the particularly graceless and dogmatic. A highly Sufistic interpretation, heavily interpolated with notes within the body of the literally-translated text, it offers a mass of



unassimilated information, which obfuscates all the poetic qualities of its original.

Almost all the translators of Hafez in this category have argued that the sense of the poem can be more accurately represented in prose. There is however a more subtle argument, which is that to translate into English *verse* form would be to impose an alien and inappropriate set of conventions. Edward Byles Cowell (1826-1903), whose best translations of Hafez are in prose (though he also translated in verse) explains: “We have not put them into rhymed dress, preferring to leave them in a nebulous shape . . . without impressing an arbitrary form on the translation. Our translation is strictly literal as we wished to give the reader an idea of Hafiz as he really is” (Cowell, p. 290). Cowell’s translations, though literal, are written in smooth idiomatic English and are amongst the best of Victorian translations. Among the prose translations, and perhaps deserving more attention than they have generally received, are those in what Jones calls “modulated, but unaffected prose” (quoted by Clarke, p. viii). Here the translator is not restricted by rhyme and meter, but offers readability and euphony. Some of Jones’s translations, as well as those by S. R. (Samuel Robinson, 1794-1884) and Justin Huntly McCarthy (1860-1936), are examples of this kind. Their rhythmical prose aspires to a kind of prose-poetry, with affinities to the prose of the Authorized Version of the Bible. Unfortunately too many of these translators have taken excessive liberties with the imagery of the original, resulting in a sometimes confusing texture of irrelevant associations of word and image.

Most translations from Hafez are in verse. Within this category, three different kinds of translations are distinguishable. The first is made up of versions that try to imitate the rhyme and meter of the original. This kind of translation has been described as “literary acrobatics” (Farzaad, p. 15). Only three translators of Hafez have attempted this method: Walter Leaf (1852-1927), John Payne (1842-1916), and Paul Smith (b. 1945). In performing their “literary acrobatics,” the first has just managed to avoid a fall, but the second and third have, unfortunately, taken very heavy tumbles. Leaf’s, indeed, is an impressively intelligent piece of work which reproduces many of the formal features of the original, while managing to be as faithful as most translations in far freer verse forms. Payne’s version, on the other hand, offers a grim warning against this kind of translation. It is extremely unmellifluous and, at times, well-nigh incomprehensible in its use of archaic and coyly poetic diction. Smith, like Payne, has attempted to translate the whole *Dīvān*. His version is very much



indebted to his predecessors. As Smith (like Payne) tortures Hafez into English ghazal forms, the results are as unattractive and as unsuccessful (and indeed as unreadable) as Payne's version.

Many more translators have chosen to present Hafez in a more familiar English verse form. The main objection here is the one expressed by Cowell, which is forcefully expressed again by Peter Avery (b. 1923) and John Francis Alexander Heath-Stubbs (b. 1918), who argue that "the employment of rhymed stanza-forms of traditional English verse inevitably leads to the imposition of formal conceptions which are . . . alien to Oriental poetry" (Avery, p. 15). It is true that behind the two literary traditions lie fundamentally different aesthetic principles, even contradictory 'formal conceptions' of poetic unity and design. Far too many translators in this category have tried to judge the Persian poet according to their own understanding of western classical literary theory and thus have felt obliged to "improve" upon his work. Alexander Rogers (1825-1911) thinks the poems "give an appearance of patchwork that greatly detracts from their value as literary compositions," (p. 127). Herman Bicknell (q.v., 1830-75) is certain that there is a "want of unity in many of the Odes" (Bicknell, p. xix). The most outspoken expression of such opinions comes from Richard Le Gallienne (1866-1947), who was not, in fact, familiar with the originals, and was reliant on the versions by Clarke and Payne. Le Gallienne is confident of the superiority of classical poetry and thus declares, "the difficulty of inconsequence I have endeavoured to overcome, partly by choosing those poems that were least inconsequent, partly supplying links of my own, and partly by selecting and developing the most important motive out of the two or three different motives which one frequently finds in the same ode." (Le Gallienne, p. xviii).

Le Gallienne's translations are in stanzaic form with varied meter and rhyme. The translators who chose to employ English stanza form had Jones's "A Persian Song" as a model. Jones translates each *bayt* into a six-line stanza. His own prose translation of the poem changes the original drastically by both omission and addition, trivializing and muddying the clarity of the original's imagery. Unfortunately, almost all the translators who have chosen this way of working have followed in Jones's footsteps in this regard; one honorable exception is offered by the translations of Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell (q.v.; 1868-1926). Her versions are still the most lucid, musical and accurate of the verse translations.

Another English verse form that has been frequently employed (e.g., by A. J.



Arberry) is that of the quatrain of octosyllabic iambic lines. Amongst translations in this form, those of Colonel Frank Montague Rundall (1851-1930) successfully imitate the monorhyme of the original. A reluctance to impose a foreign form upon the classical Persian ghazal has encouraged some modern translators to employ free verse. Some of the earlier translations in free verse fail to give even a glimpse of Hafez's greatness. Among the more recent translations those of Avery and Heath-Stubbs are probably the best of the free verse translations. They present each *bayt* in an unrhymed couplet of loose six-stress lines, which preserves something of the essentially symmetrical form of the original.

The third category of translations, though one hesitates to call them translations at all, are those in which the author exercises the liberty not only of changing the words and sense of the original but also abandoning them as he or she pleases. This kind of version has been called both "imitation" and "creative translation" in recent times. Several translators have tried to follow in the footsteps of that supreme imitator, Edward FitzGerald (q.v.), and have presented Hafez in the form of *robā'i*. One such translator writes, "I have occasionally contracted into one *roba'i* ideas expressed in a whole *ghazal*, or in several couplets . . ." (Streit, p. 90). Among the imitators of Hafez there are three eminent figures, Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (1868-1945), Elizabeth Bridges (1887-1977), and Basil Bunting (1900-85); the Sonnets of Bridges, and the 'Overdrafts' of Bunting, are both highly accomplished, and they communicate much more of the nature of Hafez's greatness than is communicated by the more "faithfully" literal translations.

The twentieth century has seen the emergence of yet another type of translator, the scholar-translator. Such translators have generally rendered Hafez into English so as to support their own line of argument or interpretation. Among them, Iraj Bashiri, Michael C. Hillmann, Julie Scott Meisami, and Robert M. Rehder are notable examples. Their work is as diverse as that of the earlier translators, but their translations are generally presented in simple idiomatic English; Rehder's translations are in free verse.

Beyond the choice of form and the problem of communicating within one literary structure and tradition the aesthetic principles of a different tradition, the translators of Hafez have had to confront the presence—or otherwise—of Sufism in the poems. Some, like Payne and Le Gallienne, have found Hafez to be no Sufi, but the majority of translators have tried to present him as a mystical poet. The recent renewal of western interest in Sufism has resulted in



a number of recent translations in this vein, such as those of Michael Boylan, Elizabeth T. Gray, Jr., and Reza Saberi. The multi-facetedness of Hafez has baffled almost all translators and the results of their efforts, unfortunately, have not generally been very successful. With only a few exceptions, the English translations generally lack any great poetic merit, and they have rarely managed to allow the English reader even a glimpse of the rich clarity and vigorous beauty of a great medieval Persian poet.

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