

ON THE PLEASURES AND PERILS OF TRANSLATING POETRY

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Abstract

Translation, from one language to another, whether of fiction, or commercial or journalistic items, but especially of poetry, is an integral part of all literary production and dissemination. Virtually all poets and other writers of originality have also sought to translate poems that have attracted their attention by virtue of being immaculately crafted, eloquent as well as exquisite, poems that may virtually be described as receptacles of beautiful thoughts and expression. Like other creative arts, translation is an important occupation and makes serious demands on the translator. There are pitfalls in translation that cannot be avoided merely because the translator is fluent in the languages with which he or she is working. In the present article, attempts are made to investigate, or at least to study, suitable examples of poetic translation in several languages. Poets from whom examples have been chosen for translation include those from Ireland, Great Britain, France, Germany, Turkey and the Indian subcontinent spread over the last few centuries.

Keywords: Translation, Linguistic Communication, Poetry, Samuel Beckett, James Elroy Flecker, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Henri de Régnier, Heinrich Heine, Hermann Hesse, Alfred de Musset, Fatih Sultan Mehmed, Allama Iqbal.

The process of translation from one language to another goes back to the very origin and development of all living and dead languages. No doubt, each language is unique in character and power of expression, as well as in its level of charm. Translation from one language to another has been routine when commercial, political, or other prose documents need to be converted from one language to another. In such cases, the yardsticks used to assess translations are those of faithfulness, conciseness and, occasionally, elegance. One process used currently in the computer translation of technical documents, say from Japanese into English or English into Japanese, is to re-translate the translated version back into

original language and compare the results for accuracy.¹ In the early 20th century, when persons skilled in several foreign languages were few, translations from French to Hindi when necessary were sometimes conducted in India by translating first from French to English, and then producing a Hindi rendering of the English text. The final results of such 'double' translations were usually found to be less than satisfactory.

The operation of translation often moves into difficulties when novels, stories, histories and works of fiction need to be rendered from one language to another, because components of such works, whether simple sentences or dialogues, bear the full weight of their geographical background as well as their social milieu. When it comes to poetry and its translation, each word, whether in the original language or the language into which it is being translated, literally carries the accumulated baggage of centuries of cultural and even etymological values. Referring to a translation of Homer, Victor Hugo – acclaimed as the best French poet – has written:

Je déclare qu'une traduction en vers de n'importe qui, par
n'importe qui, me semble chose absurde, impossible et
chimérique.²

No wonder that 'Traduction, c'est trahison' [Translation is treason] is an accepted rule even today, especially when it applies to poetry. However, translation from one language to another is a task that may be criticized but cannot be stopped; as George Steiner³ has correctly said: 'Without translation, we would be living in provinces bordering on silence.'

¹ An example is given in one case of the English expression 'Out of sight, out of mind' which, when translated into Japanese and back again, resulted in 'Blind and silly'.

² Translation: I affirm that a translation in verse of it matters not who, by it matters not who, seems to me an absurd thing, impossible and chimerical. *Note: All translations in this article, unless otherwise stated, from German, French and Turkish, have been made by the author.*

³ George Steiner (born 1920), an American professor, born in Paris, who has written and published extensively on the relationship between language, literature and society.

In a chapter titled 'Conclusion' to a book on Late Ottoman Poetry,⁴ the present writer has mentioned several earlier authors⁵ who have also made translations of Ottoman Turkish poetry. Although his literary pursuits apparently did not extend to foreign languages, the 17th century writer James Howell's famous quotation on translation is:

Some hold translations not unlike to be
The wrong side of a Turkish tapestry⁶

Closer to our times, the celebrated American poet Robert Frost⁷ has stated: 'Poetry is what gets lost in translation'. While recognizing that such sage dicta point to fundamental realities, there is no shortage of writers and literary workers who feel that foreign literature needs to be introduced to monolingual readers.

As we tread a narrow path through the thorny fields of poetic translation, it is desirable to begin with a writer who was literally bilingual in English and French, though born in Ireland. This was Samuel Beckett,⁸ who first published the play 'En attendant Godot' in French in 1952. Beckett later rendered the play himself into English and the first performance in English was given as 'Waiting for Godot' in London on 3rd August 1955. Samuel Beckett was a very rare example of a creative writer who could write and publish the same original work in two major languages. It would be useful to learn a few things from his effortless switching between French and English, and his capacity for automatic mental translation. Reading both the French and English versions of part of Beckett's work, one conclusion is inescapable: the success of any translation is that it should *not* read like one.

⁴ Syed Tanvir Wasti, *An Introduction to Late Ottoman Turkish Poetry*, (Berkeley, CA: Computers and Structures, International, 2012), 288 pp. The book contains the Turkish original poems and their translations into English.

⁵ Among well-known names in this field are those of Nermin Menemencioğlu, Walter G. Andrews, Bernard Lewis and Talât S. Halman.

⁶ A similar statement is attributed to the Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes, author of *Don Quixote*.

⁷ Robert Lee Frost (1874 – 1963), especially famous for his depictions of rural New England.

⁸ Samuel Barclay Beckett (1906 – 1989), playwright, novelist and poet, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969.

As a simple example, compare the French and English versions of Vladimir's song in Act II of *Waiting for Godot*, both of which, of course, were written by Samuel Beckett:

Un chien vint dans l'office
Et prit une andouillette.
Alors à coups de louche
Le chef le mit en miettes.

A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread.
Then cook up with a ladle
And beat him till he was dead.

It may be observed that the translation of poetry is by no means a straightforward job. Beckett takes care to render 'andouillette' – a small French sausage, by 'crust of bread', partly, of course, to obtain the rhyme with 'dead'. The word for 'pantry' in French has been put into English as 'kitchen'. Again, the expression 'smash to pieces' in French has become 'beat him till he was dead'. Beckett's achievement lies in the fact that neither verse appears to be *just* a translation of the other. This indicates that such successful translation inevitably involves what might be termed a process of 'trans-creation'.

Another literary figure from the early 20th century, remembered both for his original writings as well as for his impeccable translations, is the poet James Elroy Flecker.⁹ Apart from his poetry and prose writings in English, Flecker, because of having studied Turkish at Cambridge and his later residence in the Ottoman Empire, translated several Turkish poems into English.¹⁰ However, Flecker was also highly proficient in both the classical

⁹ James Elroy Flecker (1884 – 1915) studied at Oxford and joined the British Consular service, being posted to the Ottoman capital Istanbul and other parts of the Ottoman empire. He suffered from tuberculosis and died in Switzerland at the young age of 31. See Sir John Squire [Ed.], *The Collected Poems of James Elroy Flecker*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1947), xxx pages of Introduction followed by 162 pages of text. Among poems steeped in Turkish culture and civilization in the book are 'Yasmin', 'Saadabad' 'The Hammam Name' and others.

¹⁰ For the Turkish texts of some of these poems as well as Flecker's translations, see Syed Tanvir Wasti, "Flecker's 'Turkish' Poems", article in Ed. Dr J A Khursheed & Dr K Amin, *History, Literature and Scholarly Perspectives, South and West Asian Context* [Festschrift

and modern European languages, and his works contain translations from the Latin poets Catullus and Virgil, as well as from French and German literature.

Only a couple of excerpts will be mentioned here, to indicate the facility with which Flecker has rendered poems into English. The first excerpt is the beginning of the well-known poem, titled *Mignon*, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *Mignon* is actually a young female character in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* [Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship]. She is like a wandering entertainer and sings songs to the accompaniment of music from a harp player, and meets with a sad end in the novel. She has been abducted from the warm and sunny landscape of Italy and brought over to the colder climes of Northern Europe.¹¹ Many musical composers have set *Mignon's* songs to music, including Ludwig van Beethoven and Franz Schubert. An interesting thesis on this subject has also been produced by Anne E. Albert.¹²

MIGNON

Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn,
Im dunkeln Laub die Gold-Orangen glühn,
Ein sanfter Wind vom blauen Himmel weht,
Die Myrte still und hoch der Lorbeer steht?
Kennst du es wohl?
Dahin! dahin
Möcht' ich mit dir, o mein Geliebter, ziehn.

Flecker's rendering of this first stanza is as follows:

Knowest thou the land where bloom the lemon trees,

presented in honor of Moinuddin Aqeel], Islamic Research Academy, Karachi, 2016, pp. 53 – 64.

¹¹ No attempt is made here to study this complicated novel in depth; reference may be made to Footnote No. 12 below.

¹² Anne E. Albert, *Fragments: A psychoanalytic reading of the character Mignon on her journey through nineteenth century Lieder*, a Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts, 2009, 58 pp. An earlier thesis on *Mignon's* songs is Paul Arthur Treanor, *Goethe's Mignon Poems: Their Interpretation and the Musical Illustration of their Poetic Devices* (Ph.D. Thesis, Princeton University, 1963), 96 pp.

And darkly gleam the golden oranges?
 A gentle wind blows down from that blue sky;
 Calm stands the myrtle and the laurel high.
 Knowest thou the land? So far and fair!
 Thou, whom I love, and I will wander there.

It is fair to state that Flecker has been able to capture the spirit of Mignon's song; 'the land where bloom the lemon trees' is Italy, 'the land of lost content' from where Mignon was taken away as a child.

Similarly, it is instructive to look at both the original and, next, Flecker's translation of a small part of a famous poem by Henri de Régnier.

POUR LA PORTE DES GUERRIERS

Porte haute! ne crains point l'ombre, laisse ouvert
 Ton battant d'airain dur et ton battant de fer!
 On a jeté tes clefs au fond de la citerne:
 Sois maudite à jamais si la peur te referme;
 Et coupe, comme au fil d'un double couperet,
 Le poing de toute main qui te refermerait.

THE GATE OF THE ARMIES

Swing out thy doors, high gate that dreadst not night,
 Bronze to the left and iron to the right,
 Deep in a cistern has been flung thy key;
 If dread thee close, anathema on thee;
 And like twin shears let thy twin portals cut
 The hand's fist through that would thee falsely shut.

Flecker's translation keeps to the rhyme scheme while remaining both elegant and accurate. It does not stray from the meaning and expression of de Régnier except in a couple of minor cases; e.g., the title of the poem may be rendered as '*For the Gate of the Warriors*', 'ombre' is generally translated as 'shadow' and 'sois maudite à jamais' literally means 'be cursed forever'. A comprehensive and insightful analysis of James Elroy Flecker, his world vision and his poetry forms the subject of a doctoral thesis by S Munir Wasti.¹³

¹³ Syed Munir Wasti, *The Writings of James Elroy Flecker with special reference to his treatment of the East*, PhD thesis, University of Karachi, 2006, 227 pp.

Next, a translation for a magical poem written by Heinrich Heine¹⁴ in 1822 shall be attempted. The title of the poem is Die Lorelei [The Lorelei], and it concerns the legend of a beautiful maiden named Lorelei who waited long and in vain on a rock for her lover at a narrow location on the River Rhine. In despair and anguish she finally jumped off the rock to her death. According to the story, her spirit assumes human form and haunts the rock [now also called Lorelei]. She sits on the rock, combing her golden hair and singing softly. Her revenge is to make sailors attracted by her beauty to neglect their ships and to smash into the rocks and sink in the water. The original text of Heine's poem will be given, followed by a rendering into English.

DIE LORELEI

Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten
Daß ich so traurig bin;
Ein Märchen aus alten Zeiten,
Das kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn.

Die Luft ist kühl, und es dunkelt,
Und ruhig fließt der Rhein;
Der Gipfel des Berges funkelt
Im Abendsonnenschein.

Die schönste Jungfrau sitzet
Dort oben wunderbar,
Ihr goldnes Geschmeide blitzet,
Sie kämmt ihr goldenes Haar.

Sie kämmt es mit goldenem Kamme,
Und singt ein Lied dabei;
Das hat eine wundersame,
Gewaltige Melodei.

Den Schiffer in kleinen Schiffe
Ergreift es mit wildem Weh;

¹⁴ Heinrich Heine (1797 – 1856), was born into a Jewish family in Düsseldorf. He was a German poet and writer especially well known for his romantic lyrics, which were set to music by leading composers of the day. Some of his works were banned by German authorities, and he spent the last 25 years of his life as an expatriate in Paris.

Er schaut nicht die Felsenriffe,
Er schaut nur hinauf in die Höh'.

Ich glaube, die Wellen verschlingen
Am Ende Schiffer und Kahn;
Und das hat mit ihrem Singen
Die Lorelei getan.

Translation

THE LORELEI

I know not what it signifies,
That I am so depressed;
A fairy tale from old, likewise,
Sets not my mind at rest.

Cool is the air and comes nightfall,
And calmly the Rhine flows –
Shine the tips of the mountains tall,
As the sun gently goes.

Sits a lovely maiden, behold!
Up on the hill-top there;
Glitters her jewellery of gold,
She combs her golden hair.
With gilded comb she combs her hair,
A song, as well, sings she;
A song with a wonderful air
And powerful melody.

The sailor in his vessel small,
With wild grief is laden;
He watches not the reefs at all,
Sees, on high, the maiden.

I think, the waves, to close headlong,
On sailor and boat have begun;
That is what with her magic song
The Lorelei has done.

As a final example from German poetry, consider the poem by Hermann Hesse¹⁵ given below, followed by its translation into English. One does not have to be a scholar of German to understand the message of the poet; however, it helps if the reader can attempt to walk for a while wearing the poet's shoes.

Im Nebel

Seltsam, im Nebel zu wandern!
Einsam ist jeder Busch und Stein,
Kein Baum sieht den andern,
Jeder ist allein.

Voll von Freunden war mir die Welt
Als noch mein Leben licht war;
Nun, da der Nebel fällt,
Ist keiner mehr sichtbar.

Wahrlich, keiner ist weise,
Der nicht das Dunkel kennt,
Das unentrinnbar und leise
Von allen ihn trennt.

Seltsam, im Nebel zu wandern!
Leben ist Einsamsein.
Kein Mensch kennt den andern,
Jeder ist allein.

Translation

In the Fog

Strangely, in the fog to be
Single is each bush and stone;
No tree sees another tree
Everyone is alone.

¹⁵ Hermann Hesse (1877 – 1962) was a German-born poet, writer and painter who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946.

Full the world, with friends for me
When my life was still so bright
Now the fog falls down on me
And there is no friend in sight.

Really one is never wise
What darkness is who knows not –
Which, quietly, in disguise
Takes him from all he's got.

Wander in the fog you can
Life is to be on one's own.
Man knows not his fellow man –
Everyone is alone.

An example of translation from French poetry, a part of a poem called *L'Élégie* [The Elegy] by Alfred de Musset¹⁶ shall be presented, in original and translation.

Mes chers amis, quand je mourrai,
Plantez un saule au cimetière.
J'aime son feuillage éploré;
La pâleur m'en est douce et chère
Et son ombre sera légère
A la terre où je dormirai.

My very dear friends, when I shall die,
Plant a weeping willow where I lie.
I love the foliage of this sad tree;
Soft and dear to me is its pallor to me
And the shade it gives shall lightly sweep
The domain of earth where I shall sleep.

To turn to Middle Eastern history: the 21-year-old Ottoman Turkish ruler, Fatih Sultan Mehmed conquered Constantinople from the Byzantines in

¹⁶ Alfred de Musset (1810 – 1857) was a French poet, writer and dramatist. Among the quotations for which he is famous is the following: 'L'homme est un apprenti, la douleur est son maître' translated as: Man is the pupil; Pain is his teacher'.

1453. He was not just a brilliant general, but also a poet and linguist who knew Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Serbian, Latin and Greek.

Before his death in 1483, he left behind, among his writings, a *Divan* of Turkish poetry.¹⁷ Fatih Sultan Mehmed used the *nom de plume* Avnî in his ghazals [*gazel* in Turkish]; one of his poems is presented below in the original and in translation. An attempt has been made to preserve the a-a, b-a, c-a rhyme scheme of the ghazal even in translation.¹⁸

Ghazal in Turkish written by Fatih Sultan Mehmed

Sâkiyâ mey sun ki bir gün lâlezâr elden gider
 Çûn irer fasl-ı hazân bâğ u bahâr elden gider
 Her nice zühd ü salâha mâil olur hâtırum
 Gördüğünce ol nigârı ihtiyâr elden gider
 Şöyle hâk oldum ki âh etmeğe havf eyler gönül
 Lâcerem bâd-ı sabâ ile gubâr elden gider
 Girre olma ey dilberâ hüs-ü cemâle kıl vefâ
 Bâki kalmaz kimseye nakş ü nigâr elden gider

Translation into English:

Serve the wine, Saki, one day the tulip garden will be lost
 and gone
 When autumn weather comes again, the flowers and
 spring will be lost and gone
 Howsoever much though my heart may lean towards piety
 and prayer
 I just have to see that beauty rare and all control is lost and
 gone
 Thus have I been reduced to dust that my own heart is
 afraid to sigh
 Lest blown away by the gentle breeze this dust of mine is
 lost and gone

¹⁷ Of the 38 Ottoman Turkish sultans who reigned between 1299 and 1922, almost half have left behind some poetical works, usually in more than one language.

¹⁸ For samples of more modern Turkish poetry, see Syed Tanvir Wasti, "Republican Turkish Poets: Representative Poems with Turkish Texts and their English Translations", *Tehseel*, Karachi, Vol. 1, No. 1, July – December 2017, pp. 17 – 42.

Be not proud of your beauty and grace, instead be true, o lovely one
Beauty tarries not with any one, and features fair will be lost and gone.

Next, here is part of a poem by Allama Iqbal, followed by its translation directly from Urdu into Turkish.

دیار مغرب کے رہنے والو! خدا کی بستی دکان نہیں ہے
کھرا جیسے تم سمجھ رہے ہو وہ اب زرِ کم عیار ہوگا
تمہاری تہذیب اپنے خنجر سے آپ ہی خود کشی کرے گی
جو شاخِ نازک پہ آشیانہ بنے گا، ناپائدار ہوگا

Translation

Ey Batı ülkelerinde oturan insanlar!
Tanrı'nın yarattığı dünya dükkân değildir!
Çok düşüktür güvendiğiniz altın'da ayar!
Çok övündüğünüz bu uygarlık, bu itibar,
Kendi hançerinizle bir gün eder intihar!
Zayıf dalda olan yuva güvenli değildir!

Iqbal has been given the title of the 'Poet of the East', not only because his poems have an Eastern spirit [with one of his books having the title 'Peyam-e Mashriq' or Message from the East] but because, in a subtle manner and in crystalline verse, he expressed the discontent and misery of many of the countries of the Old World exploited by the colonizing powers of Europe. He advised oppressed people to develop their inner selves in order to attain wisdom and, eventually, enlightenment, and his poems [especially those written in Persian] found echoes in many parts of the world.¹⁹ Iqbal's criticism in poetry of the shallowness and avarice that drives much of Western civilization 'where the Bank is much taller than the cathedral' is the basis of the quatrain given above.

In concluding, it may be said that if one can avoid the many pitfalls that render the translation of poetry irksome, the results can be, quite often, not only highly useful but also mentally enriching. In Dr Johnson's opinion,

¹⁹ One of the great poets of the 20th century in Turkey, Mehmed 'Akif, who also wrote the Turkish National Anthem, refers to Iqbal and his poetry in his works.

‘Language is the dress of thought’. All thoughts are created by mental impulses or movements, and they need language to express themselves and become manifest. Just as human beings wear different clothes from day to day, the same thoughts garbed in different languages may well improve their appearance and create better impressions. As Wittgenstein has put it more rigidly: ‘Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt.’²⁰

Lastly, it should not be forgotten that Pakistan not only possesses half a dozen major languages but also a score of minor languages, all of which are well-established and relatively ancient ‘national’ languages. To add to this, there is extensive knowledge and use in Pakistan of the classical languages of Islam, i.e. Arabic and Persian. Furthermore, English remains an official language of Pakistan – apart from its importance as the global commercial language. Translation, both as an art and a science, needs therefore to be studied and encouraged as an instrument of cultural transfer in a country abounding with so many languages.

²⁰ Translation: The limits of my language are the limits of my universe.