To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves. [..] We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.


Since we met in Isfahan in 2016 and discovered our shared interest in poetry and literary translation, we have co-translated many Persian works, both classical and modern. Most of our translations have been carried out across continents, through email exchanges and text messages, but we have also had the chance to refine our method in person, in Armenia, Lebanon and the UK. Two volumes have been the result thus far, one of Iranian modernist Bijan Elahi (1945–2010) and one of his friend Hasan Alizadeh (1947–). Our collaborations have led us to

ON POETRY AND CO-TRANSLATION

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INSPIRED AND MULTIPLE
discover a unique modality of interpretation that has also inspired our poetic praxis and our thinking about literary language beyond the act of translation itself.

Here we want to share some of what we have learnt and reflect on what makes the experience of co-translating poetry unique. We hope these reflections highlight the relevance of poetry co-translation to all literary genres, and perhaps also to translation outside a literary framework.

The annals of translation history know of many collaborative pairs. The practice has a long tradition in Iran, starting in the early nineteenth century with biblical translation. Henry Martyn and Mirza Sayyed ‘Ali Khan’s translation of the New Testament from Greek in 1812 and William Glen and Mirza Mohammad-Ja’far’s translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew in 1845 are the earliest example of such projects. These translations’ literalism and archaism (typical of scriptural translation) have generated an alienated Persian literary effect that is known today as the ‘Biblical tone’ (lahn-i kitab muqaddasi).

Literary co-translation has also played a role in the development of Iranian culture. For example, Abulhasan Najafi and Mustafa Rahimi’s collaborative translation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1948 essay ‘Qu’est-ce Que la Littérature?’ (published as Adabiyat Chist) significantly influenced modern Iranian literary criticism. A few decades later, Najafi also translated André Malraux’s Antimémoires in collaboration with Reza Seyed-Hosseini.

In 1983, Hasan Fayad and the famous modernist poet Ahmad Shamlu collaborated on translating the African-American poet Langston Hughes into Persian through a method combining translation (tarjuma) and rewriting (baznivisi). Tarjuma for this collaborative pair involved a literal translation of the poem; baznivisi involved rewriting it into a recognisably Persian poetic diction.

Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Mahmud Houman practised a similar method in translating Ernst Jünger’s Über die Linie. Al-e Ahmad called this work ‘taqīr va tahīr’ (dictation and writing), meaning that the text was first orally translated and dictated by Houman and subsequently rewritten into literary Persian by Al-e Ahmad.

In recent years, co-translations in Iran have involved couples with different linguistic expertise, wherein one translator supplements and complements the other. One of the most influential examples is the collaboration by Afshin Jahandideh (working from original French) and Niku Sarkhosh (working from English translation) on their many translations of Michel Foucault. A second example is the translation of Saint-John Perse’s Anabase by Mohammad Mehryar (working from the French original) and Mahmoud Nikbakht (from TS Eliot’s English translation), published in 2001.

In nineteenth-century England, the best-known co-translators, Louise and Aylmer Maude, dedicated themselves to rendering Tolstoy’s entire corpus of writings into English for the first time. Interestingly, the pair rarely translated the same text: Louise focused on Tolstoy’s fiction, while Aylmer concentrated on his critical prose. Although they collaborated in the business of translation, there is less evidence of dialogue between this translator pair in relation to specific texts.

In the twentieth century, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky translated Russian classics with even greater depth and range, and are regarded by many as having revolutionised the Russian literary canon in English. The couple have exclusively translated prose, and their reflections on the process are suggestive of a method that is distinctly non-dialogic, relative to our own experience of co-translating poetry. According to Pevear, a native English speaker with limited
conversational Russian, the translation process begins with a rough, literal translation that is then handed over to his wife:

Larissa goes over [the draft], raising questions. And then we go over it again. I produce another version, which she reads against the original. We go over it one more time, and then we read it twice more in proof.

What is striking for us is the absence of the word-by-word friction that develops between two translators working on poetry.

This absence is also present in Volokhonsky's description of the same process: 'Richard is a native speaker of English. I'm a native speaker of Russian. My task is to explain to Richard what is happening in the Russian text. Then it is up to him to do what he can. The final word is always his.'

While it makes sense for the aesthetic sensibilities of the native speaker of the target language to take precedence over those of the native speaker of the source language, such misbalances limit the dialogic dimension of translation.

Given the lack of dialogue that characterises the method of the most successful co-translators of prose, it seems all the more strange that most renowned poetry translation pairs have been limited to a single volume. In the translation of Chinese classics into English, both Kenneth Rexroth and Witter Byner made a mark, collaborating with Ling Chung and Kiang Kang-Hu, respectively, but these collaborations did not extend beyond a single volume. Similarly, Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi co-translated Attar's twelfth-century Persian masterpiece *The Conference of the Birds*, but their collaboration seems limited to this one project.

The distinction between poetry and prose made by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben may help in conceptualising the difference between translating poetry and translating prose. For Agamben, enjambment is what distinguishes the former from the latter: 'We shall call poetry the discourse in which it is possible to set a metrical limit against a syntactic one. ... Prose is the discourse in which this is impossible.'

For Agamben, the art of translating poetry has to do with the identification of line breaks. It requires a decision on the part of translators regarding where to set the metrical limit against the syntactic one in the target text. Such decisions require translators who can decode and recode the poem from the original to the translation. In other words, they must possess a poetic sensibility.

The poeticality of the translated poem is found in the surplus dimension of its text, where it becomes a supplement to itself. It is neither the same as its original, nor is it a new thing in and of itself; it is more than what the reader experiences in the moment of reading. The poeticality lies in its internal self-differentiation, in its scope for incorporating the voice of the other/translator. Unlike prose, which remains prose when translated into another language, a translated poem doesn't automatically become a poem in the target language. For this to happen, a poet (not just a translator) needs to inject poeticality into the translated text. Creating line breaks is part of poetry creation, and this – in our experience – is an art that is done differently when done together.

We were both widely published translators before we began working together (Kayvan had translated a range of modernist poets and theorists into Persian, including Friedrich Hölderlin, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Francis Ponge, Alejandra Pizarnik, Samuel Beckett, Donald Barthelme, Giorgio Agamben and Roland Barthes; Rebecca had translated numerous writers from Persian, Georgian, and Russian into English, most
notably the stories of Georgian writer Alexandre Qazbegi and Indo-Persian poet Hasan Dehlavi). We both found the process of co-translating poetry opened up new horizons in our experience and praxis.

Whether in Persian, English or any other language, the art of poetry is in seeking words beneath the surfaces of meanings. It is one thing to feel, but one must also be able to name the feeling in order to produce a poem. As with original poems, so too with translated ones: there is no difference in the imperative to name a feeling or thought in order for it to exist within the space of the text. We use the term ‘name’ here not only in the English sense of attributing a noun, but also in Arab-Persian sense of ism, a term that refers to the grammatical class of objects that function as the subject in a sentence. The noun determines not only the meaning of the term in question, but also the remaining structure or image.

Where original poetry and translated poetry differ is in the process through which the noun – the ism – is discovered by the poem. In an original poem, the surface on which the poet begins to write is at least nominally empty, although it may be crusted over with sentiments, memories and knowledge. Heidegger reflected on creation in these terms in his commentary on Hölderlin, while formulating his concept of Grundstimmung, or the fundamental tone of the poem:

The poet speaks from out of an attunement ... that determines and attunes the ground and soil and that permeates the space upon which and within which the poetic telling founds a way of being ... Rather, the fundamental attunement opens up the world that in the poetic telling receives the stamp of being.

Heidegger’s Grundstimmung mediates between the blankness of poetic composition and the pre-signified nature of poetry translation. Whereas the blankness of the original causes the poet to seek attunement to a new way of being, the translator works within an existing structure imposed by the naming of the noun. The thing that must be named in a translated poem has already been named in the source language.

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When we translate together, trading notes and in conversation, the search for the name – the ism – inevitably becomes a dialogue in verse. Before the formal translation process begins, we know the words that each of us prefers. We are familiar with the other translator’s knowledge of historical, cultural and literary references, although invariably one of us knows more about a given subject than the other. We understand the other translator’s aesthetic predilections, and know how beauty is constituted in their eyes. This knowledge shapes and inspires our search for nouns. The translation process thereby enters into an ongoing conversation about the meaning of language, the relation between words and what they signify, and the process through which beautiful forms are made.

This dialogue obviously involves much more than supplementing each other’s native linguistic expertise, although this too is an element. Our dialogue through the medium
of verse is also different from the translation processes described by Pevear and Volokhonsky, whereby the two translators are locked in their original tongues, inevitably leading to the target language silencing the source text. The translated prose text moves only in one medium, rather than, as with poetry, perpetually oscillating between source and target, even after the translation is complete.

Giving form to the translated text means imposing limits on each other’s imaginations, for in poetry no translation has a claim to absolute legitimacy. As with poetic form, whereby genre and shape prevent the addition of a gratuitous syllable or an ill-suited sound, the presence of the translator-other within our creative process (rather than external to it, at the opposite end of the source/target continuum) prevents us from violating the pact between language and its signification that obtains in the original. Or, rather, this relationship requires us to reproduce this pact in a new medium.

The limitations imposed by the translator-other on our imaginations are generative. When an imperfect rendering is rejected, new possibilities and meanings are born. This has happened to us on numerous occasions, but a single example will suffice here. It is from ‘Ulysses 2’ (2015), by contemporary Iranian poet Hasan Alizadeh, one of a series of poems on Greek mythology:

هیله یک همچون به جز دوستی دوم ندارد:

زیبایی هن، نرها، نور چشم‌های جوانی.

کالایی کشتی گرفت می‌گر چیست؟

عطرش

جزیره را

برداشت.

Passer-by! Nothing endures but friendship:

Helen’s beauty, Troy, the light of young eyes.

What goods does your ship carry?

Its fragrance perfumes the island.

Alizadeh condenses many layers of meanings in this remarkable poem. Deliberately or not, his poem echoes Osip Mandelstam’s famous declaration in ‘Insomnia’ (1915), written while the poet was residing on the Black Sea and observing in his imagination the Achaean soldiers setting forth to war, as if in a scene from Homer’s Odyssey. ‘Everything is moved by love’ (vso dvizhetsia lyubovi) Mandelstam declares at the end of his soliloquy, echoing the final line in Dante’s Paradiso: ‘The love that moves the sun and the other stars’ (L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stele).

In Alizadeh’s poem, we face a different kind of epiphany: it is not love that moves the passer-by, or Ulysses, or his dog Argos, who are the subjects of this poem – at least not love in the precise Russian sense of the term (lyubov) – but dusti, a term that can mean love in certain specific contexts, but which here means friendship, affection, a harmony of souls, in contrast to more lust-driven passions.

The difference between Mandelstam’s ‘love’ and Alizadeh’s ‘friendship’ is made lucid when we see what is excluded from the category of friendship (dusti) in the list that follows: Helen’s beauty, Troy and the light of young eyes. Although the ‘young eyes’ (chashmaha-yi javani) that lose their vision as they grow are implicitly opposed to Helen’s immobile beauty, their status vis-à-vis the concept of friendship is the same: neither have friendship’s power to endure.

Just as subjects and objects shift when we move from Mandelstam to Alizadeh, so too does the verb structuring this idea undergo an internal transformation. In Alizadeh, the
stress is not on what moves or is animated by love (or friendship), but rather what endures. As with many Persian poets, Alizadeh's emphasis is on perpetuity and permanence rather than motion and change.

The answer to the question that immediately follows provided another translation challenge. In the first draft, Kayvan proposed the verb 'pervades'. His version read: 'its fragrance / pervades / the island.' On reading this version, Rebecca objected that 'pervade' is a static and generic verb, which suppressed the emergence of a more vibrant and necessary image. So she changed the verb to 'fumigate' in order to capture the all-encompassing nature of the scent, and to identify a verb specifically linked to smelling, so that the image concluding this stanza would stay with the reader beyond the text. Kayvan agreed that 'fumigates' was preferable to 'pervades' but pointed to the element of surprise and pleasantness that is implied in the Persian when the islanders receive an unexpected answer to the question: 'What goods does your ship carry?'

In the next draft, Rebecca reflected further on the need to retain the element of surprise and to convey the pleasantness of the scent, which is already implied by the use of 'fragrance' for 'atr (perfume) but which was depleted by the proposed generic verb 'pervade'.

While we debated these nuances, Kayvan proposed the even more generic verb 'fills'. While this was clearly not the solution, it did lead to a much better suited verb: perfume.

'Perfume' is used in our translation as a verb instead of a noun, as is common in contemporary English, even if this usage may be unfamiliar to the non-native speaker. Kayvan's choice of 'fragrance' led Rebecca to the verb 'perfume'; she would not have alighted on this verb without Kayvan's prompting, even though she had already translated the words 'atr (fragrance/perfume) and the verb bardasht (to carry) in her head without a gloss, and Kayvan would not have thought to use a noun as a verb, even though he had already selected 'perfume' earlier.

It is through such dialogic processes - comprised of word associations, constant questioning of each other's aesthetic impulses, and unrelenting attention to and appreciation of the ambiguity of every verse we translate - that Alizadeh's poems have been brought to life in our renderings. It is also through this process that we, as co-translators of the same poems, have learned to complete each other through our varied linguistic resources and divergent aesthetic tendencies. The choice that one of us makes imposes limits on the other, while also opening up new semiotic and aural vistas in the target language. To adapt a metaphor used by the first poet we ever translated together, Bijan Elahi: translation, as we collectively practise it, is a dance in chains, a celebration of the genre-breaking freedom of the imagination and, simultaneously, of the limits on this freedom imposed by its linguistic medium.

The dynamics described here recapitulate processes intrinsic to all translational acts. Yet our experience has shown that translating poetry presents these processes in acute form. When co-translators sharing similar generic affiliations and aesthetic sensibilities work together in close proximity, documenting and reflecting on every direction in which the text moves them, when they listen to the tensions that emerge from their divergent readings of the same text, they manifest the dialogicity of poetry, intuited long ago by Walter Benjamin.

Apart from its contributions to world literature, the genre-crossing entailed in poetry translation also brings us closer to the condition described by Deleuze and Guattari: 'We are no longer ourselves ... We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.'