

Thought/translation

Morad Farhadpour

Farhadpour, prismatically translated: philosophical prose and the activist agenda

by Kayvan Tahmasebian and Rebecca Ruth Gould

When we first began to conceptualise the shape and structure of *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Activism*, Morad Farhadpour was among the first theorists of translation to occur to us. This is in part because of the respect he commands among leftist Iranian activists, and also, just as importantly, the author's conceptual originality, and his ability to think translation far beyond the borders into which it is traditionally circumscribed. We chose a text that directly addressed the intersection between thought and translation and which merges these processes into a single cognitive act. Our engagement with Farhadpour's text proved enlightening, as much as for the meanings we were able to convey in English as for those which did not cross the translational divide. The translation of dense philosophical prose presents challenges that have not received the same attention as has poetry and other genres.

The text included below is a translation in the broadest sense of the term, which includes adaptation (*eqtebās*), abridgement (*ekhtesār*), summary (*talkhis*), and rewriting (*bāznevīsi*). The version presented here can be compared to the more literal version presented on our companion website.¹ Both versions have been approved by Farhadpour; both serve radically different ends. The version included in this volume is intended for the non-specialist reader who may be encountering not only Farhadpour, but Iranian intellectual thought, for the first time, alongside an array of other voices from across the world. The rendering in the online supplement aspires to a more precise rendering of the original. In adopting this dualistic approach, we reproduce the translational method of the poet-translator Bijan Elahi, who chose to render the German Romantic poet Hölderlin through a precise literalism and the Sufi mystic al-Hallaj according to a broader understanding of translation.² Elahi chose this approach because he recognised that, just as no original text can be entirely reproduced in any other context, so too, no translation will serve all times, places, and functions.

The translation offered here abridges the Persian text, reducing passages that in English might come across as repetitive and rebarbative, erasing certain irresolvable contradictions

which appear like distractions in the English text, and removing characteristic Persian rhetorical features. In general, we seek to meet the aesthetic ideals of English in terms of concision and precision, while removing aesthetic features, such as ornate and abstract language, that only have traction in Persian. Were Farhadpour's text intended to be read alongside the philosophers he draws from, such as Gadamer and Hegel, it goes without saying that our translation would have been different as well. We are presenting Farhadpour's work as a standalone text, that must be accepted (or rejected) alongside other works of different genres and outlooks. Our aims in including this text are more rudimentary than those that animate the dense hermeneutical tradition to which Farhadpour is so clearly indebted.

Although he writes as a theorist rather than as an activist, the relevance of Farhadpour's understanding of translation to activist praxis is clear. In making translation cognate with thought, Farhadpour suggests that every thinker is potentially a translator, and every act of communication and adaptation is an act of translation. When Farhadpour broadens the meaning of translation beyond its conventional boundaries, he thereby opens it to activist agendas. At the same time, he also narrows the concept of translation so that readers unfamiliar with the Iranian context will better be able to understand its transformative political capacity. Farhadpour parts ways with the intellectuals who paved the way for the Iranian revolution such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shari'ati in advocating for the necessary mediation of Iran's past and of Islamic learning by European philosophy. While Farhadpour embraces the European legacy without reservation, he also recognises that exclusive absorption in European traditions can inhibit Iranians' access to their own past. Within this framework, Farhadpour rethinks translation as a means of reconciling contemporary Iranians with their pasts.

We can distinguish two conceptions of translation in Farhadpour's essay: hermeneutic and Lacanian. Farhadpour reports how he shifted from a hermeneutic approach to translation to a Lacanian one. He also explains how these two conceptions arise from his own 'situatedness' within two different socio-political conditions. Farhadpour's use of the concept of 'situation [*vaz'iyat*],' resonates with the notion of philosophical situation adopted by the French philosopher Alain Badiou, whom Farhadpour has translated into Persian.

The hermeneutic conception of translation—entailing translating one's own tradition—does not distinguish between the original (*ta'lif*) and translation (*tarjoma*). In Persian, '*ta'lif*' and '*tarjoma*' are used as opposites, the first meaning 'authorial work' and second meaning 'translation.' *Ta'lif-e tarjomayi*—a noun phrase that recurs at key points in Farhadpour's text—which literally translates as 'translational authorial work'—is a hybrid genre combining authorial work and translation. These works are presented as original creations in Persian when in actuality they contain a considerable amount of unacknowledged and acknowledged translations. The phrase *tailif-e tarjomayi* establishes Farhadpour's insight that all modern Iranian creations are also translations.

The hermeneutic approach to translation distinguishes between felicitous and infelicitous translations in terms that parallel the distinction between deliberative (*āgāhāna*) and non-deliberative (*nā-āgāhāna*) translations. Deliberation is a function of the extent to which a text makes itself available to translation. Non-deliberative translations conceal the text's translatability. In the hermeneutic translational method, the self is mediated through the understanding of the other, which is best achieved through deliberative translation.

Farhadpour shifts to a Lacanian model of translation that challenges this homogeneity. In the Lacanian model, any understanding is structured by misunderstanding. The choice to privilege deliberative over non-deliberative translations appears meaningless when considered in light of the fact that even a deliberative translation is based on misunderstanding. In the Lacanian conception, translation does not conceal the internal gaps of its situation; rather,

translation reveals the gaps and voids internal to language itself. In other words, in this second approach to translation, deliberative translations can be as deceptive as non-deliberative ones. For Farhadpour, the shift in his approach to translation from a hermeneutic to a Lacanian method is a response to the political changes in Iran, including the shift from radical reformist to depoliticised post-reformist conditions.

Alongside the contextualising approach that has guided our approach to translating Farhadpour, we have drawn on Matthew Reynolds' concept of 'prismatic translation' to make sense of the many variant versions that productively interact with each other.³ Reynolds recognises that 'different translations can also be made by the same person; indeed, the potential for multiplication is latent in any act of translation in the moment of its happening.'⁴ Prismatic translation suits our multifaceted approach to Farhadpour, as well as Farhadpour's approach to translation, for it captures the multiplicity of renderings that inevitably arise in the process of adapting a text as rich as this one for different audiences. Reynolds registers an acute absence within contemporary translation studies when he observes that 'the idea that translation is fundamentally multiplicatory—that its essence is not reproduction but proliferation—has been difficult to hold consistently in focus and to theorise.'⁵ Farhadpour's reflections on the consubstantiality of thought and translation—indeed on their shared identity—shed light on the relation between translation and activism, and indeed translation and action of any kind: they help us to see how multiplicity in language generates possibility in political life.

This selection below is abridged, with the permission of the author, from Morad Farhadpour, Fragments of Thought: Philosophy & Politics (Tehran: Tarh-e Now, 2009), 231–264. Except where noted, all notes are in the original Persian, including the two passages below in bold type.

Morad Farhadpour: a biographical sketch

Morad Farhadpour was born in 1958 in Tehran, during the reign of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979). He is a widely read essayist and translator, and member of the new Iranian left. His father was a journalist and member of Iranian Parliament under the Pahlavis. During a short stay in London, where he was studying English in the years leading up to the Iranian revolution of 1979, Farhadpour became affiliated with Marxist student opposition groups that campaigned across Europe for the overthrow of Mohammed Reza Shah. Farhadpour returned to Iran in 1979, and has lived in Tehran ever since.

From 1979 to 1981, Farhadpour was the youngest member of a theoretically minded division of Trotskyists who developed their own theory of what the revolution meant. Farhadpour wrote and translated for a few short-lived Marxist periodicals (such as the theoretical quarterly called *Jadal*), as did many other members of the intelligentsia. For the next two years he worked as a member of an intellectual Marxist circle that published *Kavosh* (a theoretical quarterly) and *Basijeh: The Voice of Critical Communism*, first in Germany and then in Iran. After the collapse of the political and revolutionary spirit of those years, Farhadpour turned to literature, poetry, and theology until the path was paved socially and politically for more direct political and theoretical interventions during the mid-1990s.

Farhadpour was a prominent figure of the Iranian reformist movement of the late 1990s. The reformist era opened up a space for intellectuals like him to write and translate. It was on the pages of journals like *Arghanun*, *Rāh-e-now*, and *Kiān* that Farhadpour contributed to reformist intellectual debates by translating modern European

philosophy, literary and cultural theory. Farhadpour translated Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin among others for *Arghanun* and played a central role in popularising the Frankfurt School among Iranian reformist intellectuals. He achieved much of this influence as a translator. In 1999, Farhadpour translated the philosopher David Couzens Hoy. This was followed in 2000 by Farhadpour's translation of Marshall Berman's seminal study of modernist aesthetics, *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1982).

While first and foremost a critical theorist and a translator of critical theory into Persian, Farhadpour has also made a distinctive contribution to Iranian intellectual thought by introducing modern Christian theology to Iran. He translated two books by Adorno's dissertation supervisor, the Christian socialist Paul Tillich. He also translated an introduction to the thought of the German protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg. In addition to his work as a translator, Farhadpour's introductions to these translations are important and memorable.

From 1998 to 2004, Farhadpour was associated with *Arghanun*, a state-sponsored journal named after the *organon*, the standard collection of Aristotle's six works on logic, and published by the Ministry of Culture. When this journal closed in 2004, Farhadpour led a group of young leftist journalists and translators belonging to a circle that called itself *rokhād*, meaning 'event.' 'In search for a philosophical system to support a kind of radical emancipative thought and praxis,'⁶ Farhadpour was drawn to translating contemporary critical thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, and Alain Badiou. The outputs of the circle were published in a website which ceased to operate after the 2009 Green Movement. All in all, Farhadpour has translated and co-translated over twenty-five works of European critical theory. With Omid Mehrgan (another contributor to this volume, currently based in the US), Farhadpour translated Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Walter Benjamin's selected essays.

Farhadpour's leftism has been contrasted with other dominant intellectual currents within post-revolutionary Iran, including Ahmad Fardid's Islamic Heideggerianism, Abdolkarim Soroush's Islamic reformism, Tudeh leftism, and other Marxist trends in Iran, and Sayyed Javad Tabatabai's theory of decline in Islamic social sciences and Iranian political thought.⁷ In an essay on Heidegger, Farhadpour describes the German philosopher as a 'reactionary revolutionary'⁸ who nonetheless cannot be denounced and discarded as 'just another German Fascist.'

Farhadpour's essays have been collected in three collections: first, *Depressed Reason: Reflections on Modern Thought* (1999), *Western Winds* (2003), and *Fragments of Thought* (2008–2009). These essays cover a wide range of subjects: German intellectual movements, Serbian violence during the Balkan Wars, postmodernist relativism (a literary trend within Iranian reformism), Iranian idealism, and translation theory. While his thinking is not systematic, it is everywhere pervaded by a conception of translation that reaches beyond conventional understandings of this practice as the mere conveyance of a message from one language into another.

Alongside his theoretical writings, Farhadpour is a prolific literary critic. He has introduced and translated J. R. R. Tolkien and edited and translated a collection of Latin American short stories. Farhadpour's translations (with the Iranian sociologist Yousef Abazari) of European modernist poetry, called *Ketāb-e shā'erān*, make a significant contribution to Iranian literary criticism.

Distinguished as an essay writer, translator, and teacher of the younger generation of Iranian writers, poets, translators, and activists, for more than two decades, Farhadpour has played a central role in shaping leftist intellectual debates in Iran. A younger generation of Iranian leftist journalists and translators, including Omid Mehrgan and

Saleh Najafi, has been directly influenced by Farhadpour's ideas and positions with respect to Iranian and international politics, philosophy, and art.

Farhadpour currently lectures in private institutes, such as Porsesh Institute in Tehran, in order to develop his ideas and to inspire the young generation. In a recent interview with the Iranian daily newspaper *E'temad*, Farhadpour warns that international leftist thought is suffering a legitimacy crisis in relation to the masses. He expresses his hope of bringing about an emancipative event, in a world wherein all protest movements tend to be suppressed by state power and corrupted by capitalist interventions.

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Thought/translation

*Morad Farhadpour Rendered by Kayvan Tahmasebian and
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I

In 1999, in the preface to *Depressed Reason* (*'aql-e afsorda*), I related translation to thought in this way:

In the past years, I have frequently emphasised that in the contemporary era, beginning roughly with the Constitutional Revolution and ending perhaps in a future not so near, translation, in its broadest sense, is our only true form of thought. My personal experience as a translator and an author as well as the achievements of others in these two realms are evidence of this.

So, the main idea is that for us the only true form of thought is translation. This idea matters because it is related to the concept of situation (*vaz'iyat*).

We all must begin our arguments from within a particular situation. Therefore, we are not concerned with 'should' and 'should not'; our question addresses neither the abstract nor the ideal. It does not aim at what thought 'should be' but is instead concerned with actual reality or the actuality of thought.

The emphasis on the situatedness of thought is one of the main achievements of philosophical hermeneutics, which is rooted in a Hegelian tradition. Prioritising translation and introducing it as the true form of thought resulted directly from my choice of hermeneutics as my philosophical stance at that time. In the first part of this discussion, I demonstrate this hermeneutic aspect of the problem through the concept of translation. In the second part, I will try to show how a necessary passage from this hermeneutical space to a so-called Lacanian space takes place, and how in this process the concept of translation is transformed from within.

As far as the modern situation is concerned, it is necessary to introduce thought as something other than the action of an abstract un-situated subject. The concept of situation is meaningful only when we recognise that the very question concerning it is, as such, the outcome and a feature of belonging to a particular situation. Our dilemma does not consist in facing a choice between two abstract universals (*koll-e entezā'i*), tradition and modernity. The scrutiny that is already attached to tradition and modernity

attests to our location within modernity. If we were not already modern, the contrast would pose no dilemma for us. However, when thought admits that it is situated, it loses its abstract and ideological quality. Extracting the categories of tradition and modernity from within a situation, here modernity, leaves them neither pure nor ideal. Rather, such categories are meaningful only within the context of particular historical conditions.

One of my purposes in translating Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air* was to introduce modernity as a concrete experience (*tajroba-ye enzemāmi*). Also, in several articles on the subject of tradition, especially 'Ideological Traditionalism,'⁹ I tried to demonstrate that the abstract category of tradition used by ideological traditionalism is an outcome of the modern situation. In this context, it has a nihilistic meaning that eradicates all living tradition. Thought that takes its own situatedness seriously cannot see itself facing a choice between the two abstract universals, tradition and modernity. It experiences both as evolving processes and traditions, concrete and specific traditions. The most important part of our critical argument is that thought becomes ambiguous and abstract when we regard a problem without a situation.

Regarding our historical situation, this hermeneutical choice of being situated is manifested in other intellectual paradigms as well. For example, in the debates around a certain kind of Islamic Heideggerianism, mainly proposed by Ahmad Fardid, I am interested in the point at which this theoretical problematic (*mo'zal*) becomes dialectical, i.e. where the problem of *Weststruckness* (*gharb-zadegi*) comes to be formulated as 'even West is West-struck,' thereby transferring the gap between East and West to within West itself. In this way a gap or tension is introduced into the European self-conception. At the same time, it becomes impossible to define the East as an independent, solid and original (*asil*) totality or identity against this West-struck West. Like it or not, the gap is drawn inside us. To know the West critically, or to negate the West, is impossible without negating the East. Any attempt to do so transforms an ahistorical and abstract negation into a definite negation and amounts to the Hegelian 'negation of negation [*nafy dar nafy*].'

The negating subject is not faced with a spiritual or religious choice between two universals, West and East, or tradition and modernity. Rather, it experiences the tension between the two concretely, within itself. To experience this tension means to restore it to a situation. We recognise that the choice as such emerges from within a modern situation, that is, from the fissure of the self in relation to the other. The historical fact that we are undertaking this very choice shows that we live and think in a particular situation, that is, in the modern world. Within modernity, nothing and no one owns a pre-defined fixed identity. Everyone must construct their own identity, or essence, through historical discourses, narratives and images. As a result, only reflection on the situation can reveal the historical and concrete essence of thought.

This dialectical movement can also be discerned in certain aspects of Iranian leftist thought. Failing to reflect on itself or to define itself as situated, leftist thought conceptualised the passage into capitalism in a dogmatic, abstract, and as a result, arbitrary way. Different theories, including dependency theory, were proposed to explain Iran's transition from pre-capitalist or feudal conditions into capitalism without recognising how these theoretical paradigms may deprive leftist thought of its political purpose.

Leftist thought would have traction only once society passed structurally into the capitalist mode. In the absence of such a development, leftism would become merely a benevolent sermon or a call for an imaginary socialism. As in the paradigm of

tradition and modernity that reveals itself as an abstract choice between two totalities, both of which lack self-reflection, any form of thought that is unaware of its status within a specific historical situation, leftist or otherwise, reproduces itself in the form of an arbitrary general choice.

Most recently, this process (*farāyand*) has become evident in debates around religious intellectualism (*rowshanfekri-ye dini*;). Such debates characterise the attempts of a tradition or a theoretical discourse to confront its inner tensions, to overcome its abstraction and to discover its historical role. Given that the most important quality of thought is reflexivity, any attempt to overcome abstraction and to attain self-consciousness can take an abstract form and become indistinguishable from self-delusion.

A striking example of this reflexive turn can be seen in stagnate epistemological frameworks that repeat the primal event of this tradition: Abdolkarim Soroush's epistemological arguments, which are informed by the philosophy of Karl Popper. Similarly, Sayyed Javad Tabatabai's theory of the 'impossibility of thought [*emtenā'-e tafakkor*]' casts doubt on the possibility of thinking within all of our intellectual traditions. Despite its historical trappings, Tabatabai's theory lacks any concrete historical content. In Tabatabai's thought, the attempt to overcome abstraction and to understand the causes of the weakness and impotence of [Iranian] thought ironically resulted in pure abstract generalisations, therefore reproducing the same impotence on a wider scope.

Meanwhile, this 'impossibility' or poverty of thought dialectically reappears in Tabatabai's work itself in the guise of a philosophy that answers to all academic norms: voluminous books, each an ocean of historical facts and philosophical insights demonstrating the singular truth that explains and deciphers our intellectual history *tout court*. Condensing the entire history of our thought into a few books, Tabatabai argues that all Iranian intellectuals, except the author himself, are ignorant and incapable of thinking. His effort to overcome abstraction and dogmatism turns dialectically into its antithesis and produces an idealistic yet hollow discourse, which is rooted in the historical situation of our modernity. This modernity is characterised by, among other things, the proliferation of [a hybrid genre combining] authorial work and translation (*ta'lifāt-e tarjomayi*) and the production of voluminous books covering the history of ideas from Aristotle to modern times. These works, ranging from encyclopaedias to handbooks, devalue European philosophy through their misrepresentation of European thought.

This conceptual structure, which is at the same time an historical process, is one that I call 'concretised-historicised thought.' It drew me to hermeneutics: the most interesting philosophical tradition at that time, because hermeneutic philosophy is concerned with the situatedness of thought. For this reason, when my friends and I decided to start a translation project, we chose books that spanned the hermeneutic tradition, from Schleiermacher and Dilthey to Heidegger and Gadamer. My translation of David Couzens Hoy's *The Critical Circle* was the result of such a choice.

The unification of thought and translation is accomplished through the return to situation. As we saw, this particular situation, called modernity, creates a necessary encounter whereby the self is shaped through its confrontation with the other. As a result, the question can never be posed in terms of a pre-existing, pre-historical subject faced with a choice between tradition and modernity. Rather, the subject and the choice are outcomes of modernity and, *eo ipso*, of the confrontation between self and other. What matters is the dialectics of self and other.

In a Hegelian-Lacanian sense, the main point is the internal gap and negation that the other creates. Encompassing this gap, I become a subject with self-consciousness. Extending this further, we actually confront the concept of translation in its different layers and aspects, from the broad meaning of cultural transfer to translation in its specific sense, translation as the dialectical motif which Gadamerian hermeneutics derives from the relation of thought to situation.

If understanding and thought are situated, then all understanding of the other requires a transfer from one situation to another. In other words, understanding is primarily related to interpretation and translation. Transfer (*enteqāl*) is a spatial, temporal and at the same time verbal metaphor: transfer from one place to another, from one time to another and ultimately from one language to another. The concept of translation can reflect this historical and cultural dialectics. In this dialectics, recognition of oneself *through* an other often means recognition of oneself *as* an other. Recognising oneself *through* an other involves an understanding of translation as negativity: it interiorises the alterity (*ghayriyat*) that is concretely located in the source culture, especially in its traditional texts.

Tradition is a space in the continuity of which one can regard, from a new position, oneself and one's own history as an other, as something alien that is still connected to oneself. This opens the way to a critique of tradition and invigorates it. The opposite is also true: when I, as an Easterner, confront a European or Western civilisation as such, when I want to know it and internalize it, *I have to confront the other as not-I or as the negative side of my interiority*. Perhaps an example can elucidate the dialectical interweaving of self and other that is tied to different layers of the concept of translation, and to our knowledge (*shenākht*) of modernity and the West (as other) as well as our knowledge of our own past. When I foreground the concept of translation, putting it forward as the main form of thought, I mean that not only our relation to European modernity but also and more importantly our relation to ourselves is established through translation.

If any kind of thought can be considered a kind of translation, then we need to translate, not only in order to know Kant and Hegel, but also to know our own past. We need to translate Mulla Sadra and Ibn Sina, and, more importantly, Sa'adi, Hafez and Ferdowsi for ourselves. When we develop this conception of translation along with the dialectics of the particular and the universal entailed in this concept, the central role of the metaphor of translation becomes apparent. In simplest terms, we all know that, as modern subjects, we are inside modernity, thereby confronting the history of modernity and its philosophical attempts at self-understanding. In fact, modernity's self-reflection, in any form, is inevitably part of our self-reflection. This truth obliges us to translate and publish Hegel and Kant into Persian.

It is only in this way that we recognise our 'identity [*hoviyyat*]' or 'lack of identity [*bi-hoviyyati*],' as well as our premodern, so-called 'authentic self [*hoviyyat-e asil*],' or 'the self of the self [*khishtan-e khish*].' This recognition is the product of modern historical situation. As a result, in order to properly and consciously import our own past into modernity and history—a past that has always had a foothold in history through Ibn Sina and other Islamic philosophers—we should 'translate' the works of Islamic philosophy in both the restricted and broad senses of the term. Distinguished figures such as Ibn Sina, Abu Rayhan Biruni, Mulla Sadra should cease being cultural heritage—mere inheritances from the dead past—and become a living tradition.

This type of translation necessarily has various aspects and layers. We should be able to provide comprehensible Persian texts of the works of Farabi, Ibn Sina, Mulla Sadra, and so on. More importantly, we should be able to interpret these works in the context of our current situation. This is translation in the broadest sense. We should draw Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra, among others, into our tensions, decisions, and concrete experiences of our situated subjectivity.

Now we begin to see how different branches and layers of the hermeneutic act of translation are intertwined: in order to be able to draw Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra into our situation, we need to incorporate Kant and Hegel. When understood (even if through translation), Kant and Hegel enable us to incorporate Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra into modern Persian thought. This is true also for texts that do not require translation in the narrow sense, such as the poetry of Hafez, Sa‘di, and Ferdowsi.

To make Hafez, Sa‘di and Ferdowsi meaningful for ourselves, we must translate them into the current situation. They should be criticised and rethought from the point of view of modernity. To be meaningful in the modern situation requires our coming to terms with the utter meaninglessness of this ‘sacred literary treasure.’ This can be accomplished in different forms and through different literary and critical theories. We need to be familiar with Barthes, Derrida, new criticism, structuralism and other theoretical traditions and literary-critical tools to give us different understanding of our own tradition.

Despite what is usually thought, neither the philosophical category of translation nor the metaphor of translation posits a passive state or a shameful native subject because its apparent role is limited to praising the West. To the extent that translating Hegel and Kant is necessary for making Ibn Sina and Hafez accessible to us Iranians, European philosophical texts stand in need of interpretation that reaches well beyond merely verbal translation. However, this interpretation is derived from our own convoluted situation. Part of it consists of traditions that belong only to us, such as the works of Ibn Sina, Hafez, and others that distinguish our historical situation from the Argentinian or Icelandic ones.

Close reading, criticising and engagement with these works, among many other factors, enable me (the Iranian reader) to understand Hegel differently. But if my dialectical relation to Hegel goes beyond reading Hegel’s books in Persian then this dialectics surely extends to all my intellectual history, including all my past. Apart from this dialectical excess such books will gather dust on the shelves, or worse, turn into tools for the fabrication of university degrees. In all these cases, we are concerned with the actuality of thought; therefore, the question is not whether I can decide to use Hegel to comprehend my own past or not. This comprehension either takes place, in which case I will be forced to use parts of European philosophy, whether I like or acknowledge it or not, or it does not.

The same logic is followed when considering the opposite side of the relation. I either comprehend Hegel according to my own situation or I don’t comprehend him at all. Nothing remains to be said if I do not comprehend Hegel and keep the translation of his *The Phenomenology of Spirit* into Persian ‘on the shelf’ in both the literal and figurative sense of the term, either not reading it at all or only consulting it for ‘valuable philosophical knowledge’ that is separated from and irrelevant to my situation.

When I understand Hegel, my situation with all its diversities, paradoxes, traditions, complexities and gaps partakes in this comprehension. This involvement is not arbitrary or a matter of choice. A subject who lacks any situation can only choose between

abstract ideas and ideals. This is not thought but the dead remains of a mystical and 'spiritual' culture that is incapable of self-reflection. It is built on misunderstanding and falsity, like the ideological traditionalism prevalent in Iran, which is in fact the worst form of nihilism.

Situatedness is indeed what determines the fate of thought and its relation to truth (*haqiqat*) or falsehood (*kezb*). Rimbaud's famous phrase, 'one must be absolutely modern,' affirms this.¹⁰ However, the word 'must' here, as we will see, is not a universal and moral 'must.' Rimbaud's phrase is not only different from but also contradicts Taqizadeh, who said 'one must be modern from head to toe.'

As I argued, the claim that translation is the only true form of thought implies that there is no thought that is not translation in some way. To translate or not to translate is not an option. In the contemporary era, whatever we do is essentially translation. This is just another way of emphasising our participating in today's situation: the modern world we all live in. To clarify this aspect of the question, we need to refer to another key concept of Gadamerian hermeneutics. In explaining the problem of understanding, Gadamer distinguishes between *subtilitas explicandi* and *subtilitas intelligendi*, a distinction that has been common to all versions of hermeneutics since antiquity.¹¹

Throughout the history of theological and literary hermeneutics, that is, in all attempts to interpret and understand sacred texts and ancient literary works, one encounters these two notions. *Subtilitas explicandi* refers to what Schleiermacher describes as a technical interpretation. This hermeneutic method or subtlety is mainly limited to philology; it makes a text meaningful through the application of philological techniques, editing texts and removing the technical problems that burden all philological endeavours. *Subtilitas intelligendi*, on the other hand, serves to clarify the author's intention and discover the true meaning veiled by the text, especially in cases that involve textual ambiguity and where misunderstanding is likely.

Schleiermacher's hermeneutics consists of becoming familiar with all that seems strange or foreign. This is why Schleiermacher believes that the text must be understood as the author intended, and sometimes even better than the author understands. One has to grasp the hidden meaning in the text, intended by the author, through empathy (*ham-deli*), that is by putting oneself in the author's situation and reconstructing their intellectual horizon. Therefore, we first use a set of philological techniques to make the text technically comprehensible (*subtilitas explicandi*), then, through empathy with the reconstructed world of the author, we attain an understanding of the original text (*subtilitas intelligendi*). Obviously the second aspect has a psychological rather than a philological nature since it involves a form of *pathos*, that is, empathy.

Gadamer adds to this classical typology a third aspect, called *subtilitas applicandi*.¹² In his view, this aspect expresses the hermeneutical truth: every understanding is situated in a certain historical horizon. This performative dimension shows exactly that understanding and interpreting a foreign text or a foreign culture, even understanding the past, require that the horizon of the text or of the past fuse with the horizon that surrounds the interpreter in their historical situation. For Gadamer, the foreign text must be understood according to the requirements and exigencies of the existing situation, which are intrinsic to understanding.

Highlighting *applicatio*, Gadamer emphasises that hermeneutic understanding is not a pure theoretical knowledge (*episteme*). Rather, it consists of that kind of knowledge that Aristotle called practical (*hekmat-e 'amali*): *phronesis*. Understanding is necessarily practical; its significance is only realised when it is put into practice or performed (like

a play or a game). In contrast to the applied sciences, such as engineering, understanding never applies a pre-existing theory. From the very beginning, it is a performative act. Performativity or being applicable to a certain situation is inherent to understanding. At the same time, performance and application are not optional and arbitrary.

Textual understanding, like historical understanding, does not happen through universal theoretical principles that can be used to discover the meaning of a text or an event. Examples can be drawn from literary and legal hermeneutics. In literary hermeneutics, a director's understanding of a play is simply the director's production (*ijrā'*) of that play. No director can claim that there is a distance between her understanding of the play and its performance. In fact, from the moment a director interprets a play, it is being interpreted according to the requirements and exigencies of its performance. The performative or practical dimension is present in their understanding from the start. In addition, the director's understanding will ultimately be judged in light of the performance. No director can claim after the production that the play they had in mind is not identical with the play that has been performed, unless the performance has failed due to contingent and external causes such as poor acting or the failure of stage design.

Legal hermeneutics functions in a similar way. Judges reveal their understanding of how general laws apply in any particular case by the decision (*hokm*) they make. Here too, judges' understanding and interpretation of law is expressed in their decisions. In fact, it is through applying the law in a particular case that judges reinterpret and clarify their understanding of it. A judge comprehends the general law in terms of a particular situation, a particular case. This is accomplished through applying it in that particular situation. This example illustrates the relation among the three dimensions of hermeneutics: understanding, interpretation, and application. It shows that understanding always involves a non-arbitrary practical dimension.

Combining the above results with our discussion about translation leads us to this conclusion: *For us Iranians, more than for any other culture, translation is the performative dimension of understanding.* This axiom (*hokm*) logically follows from and supplements the previous one, that today translation is the true form of thought for us. Our understanding, whether of Europe or of modernity or of our own past and present, always entails a performative dimension which usually manifests itself as translation. In other words, all of us, in so far as we think and understand, are active translators. This return to translation is an essential part of our self-reflection. It is a part of the historical self-understanding of the thinking subject in its concrete situation. Here the distinction between an authorial work (*ta'lif*) and a translation fades and the priority of one over the other ceases to matter.

One can say that in this sense everything is translation and the only meaningful distinction is between felicitous and infelicitous translations. This distinction is manifested in the different types of translated authorial works (*ta'lifāt-e tarjomayi*). Works that do not reflect on their relation to translation and pretend not to be translations can be described as infelicitous translations, in contrast to the second type or felicitous translations. This first type of works claims to be pure and absolutely original 'authored works,' while in fact they are nothing but secondary literature: fragments badly translated and haphazardly stitched together. Recently, alongside these translated authorial works, we witness a second type: authorial translations (*tarjoma-hā-ye ta'lifi*) in which an inaccurate verbatim translation of a philosophical text is later published as

an original work. In these instances, ignoring the performative dimension of translation turns these works into bad and barren translations. By contrast, wherever thought becomes sensitive to its performative dimension, and therefore to translation, it becomes felicitous. More precisely, it becomes a form of understanding, understanding oneself, understanding modernity and understanding the other. From this vantage point, true thought is simply the distinction between deliberative and non-deliberative translation (discussed below).

The issue of translation cannot be reduced merely to translating the books deemed worthy of translation. What matters is how thought becomes concretised with reference to an historical situation, which provides the criteria for choosing the texts that should be translated. Whenever the act of translation turns into a medium for situating thought, the situation itself—with its tensions, paradoxes and inner processes—provides the criteria for deciding what to choose for translation and to what extent translation should be in an intralingual form and in what contexts it should acquire its broader meaning. In this way, translation manifests itself as a tension between European philosophy and modernity as it is experienced by us Iranians. So far, we have dealt with the hermeneutic aspect of translation. In the next section, the relation of history to modernity will be presented through another interpretation of the meaning of translation.

II

As argued above, the self is recognised through recognition of the other. Our past serves as an other to ourselves. Can we define the self as a self-contained, solid, and authentic (*asil*) identity? Or should we ascribe authenticity to translation that plays a decisive role in shaping thought and self-consciousness? If the answer is yes, our selves can be completely restored, via an other, and through a process called ‘deliberative translation.’ Deliberative translation facilitates transparent and complete self-awareness with recourse to ‘the only possible form of thought in our situation.’

So, it seems that after many ups and downs, paradoxes and tensions, and after overcoming the intellectual poverty of abstraction, our dialectical odyssey can reach a happy ending, thanks to the magic of ‘deliberative translation.’ This happy ending would generate a harmonious self capable of critical reflection yet still connected to its authentic past. This identity would be constituted by a combination of tradition and modernity, as it picks up the best parts of the past and the present in the ‘supermarket of history.’

Deliberative translation’s conception of the historical identity of the thinking subject and its insistence on the relation of history to thought is the concern of philosophical hermeneutics. This conception confers an ontological significance on situatedness. This is the main function of concepts of temporality in Heidegger and historicity in Gadamer. These categories facilitate the transformation of the dialectics of situatedness into an abstract ontological discourse. But as Walter Benjamin says, Heidegger’s historicity is an attempt to save historical thought, and the very concept of history for phenomenology—an attempt that ends in failure.¹³ Engaging with historicity as a part of hermeneutics but without referring to the history of hermeneutics itself, Gadamer too ends up with the same solid ‘I’ that attains a complete understanding of itself through the other.

However, the difference between history and historicity is present in hermeneutic philosophy itself. Historicity—the axiom that all understanding is essentially bound to an historical situation—is a contingent and therefore changeable axiom. Gadamer himself

refers to a possible future in which people no longer think historically. Moreover, empirical history also confirms the existence of many ahistorical cultures, civilisations and societies in the past. One can go further and claim that even right now all people in all cultures *do not* think historically. The credibility of historicity as an existential or ontological situation is therefore open to challenge. Despite this proclivity for ‘ontologisation,’ Gadamer’s genuine, deep and detailed description of the understanding of history is a major achievement in European intellectual history. However, his philosophical hermeneutics is radically fissured as a general theory of understanding: it argues for situatedness but extends it, ontologically, to all times and places, while leaving these questions unanswered: Why was such a hermeneutic view developed only in Europe? Is Gadamer’s hermeneutics itself an historical phenomenon? Are there any historical limits in the self-understanding of hermeneutics? What, if any, are its blind spots?

The emergence of hermeneutics from within a particular historical experience drives us towards an essential, and yet concrete and non-idealistic, concept of history. In the course of the evolution of European hermeneutics, external challenges compounded by internal crises in these humanist and historicist traditions paved the way for the passage from hermeneutics to structuralism and, later, poststructuralism. New theories emerged about subject, meaning, and truth, mainly inspired by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Void and gap become the main elements in the definition of the subject (*nafs*). The hermeneutic interpretation of the relation between self and other was questioned, especially its assumption that one can reach a homogeneous and perfect recognition of oneself or a recognition of a perfect and homogeneous self through confrontation with the other.

We have previously encountered this perfect authentic subject or self in Iran under the rubric of return to ‘the self of the self [*khishtan-e khish*],’ pseudo-religious, mystic and spiritual readings of Heidegger and theories of *Weststruckness* (*gharb-zadegi*).¹⁴ As indicated earlier, the fundamental point about these theories is the thesis of the *Weststruckness* of the West itself. From this point of view, both West and East are homogeneous, self-sufficient, and mutually exclusive totalities.

In this way a kind of negativity or a gap is internalised by the West and consequently by us, who are, according to that theory, part of the historicity (*havālat-e tārikhi*) of Europe. As a result, the universal homogeneous sphere of modernity emerges no longer as a closed totality against our previous Eastern life but as a gap within this life, as a line that divides any worldview or value system and, in this way, connects to the universal: universal morals, universal values, scientific facts, and so on. The universal, or universality, is always and everywhere realised as a void or crack at the heart of the full and empirical content of any particular substance (*jowhar*), any particular form of life or social system, but never as an abstract and encompassing sphere beyond all particular spheres.

This gap is produced by the negative, abyss-like, nihilistic dimension of modernity. It is also this very dimension that forms the basic ground of modern globalisation. If modernity is globalised, it is because, although generated by a particular lifestyle dominant in Europe, it relates to that life through creating gaps and holes in it, whether in politics, economy, ideology, culture or in Europeans’ individual psyches. This hole, this gap, is transferrable to the furthest ends of the world exactly as the negative, as a wind-like nothingness with no positive grounding.

The globalisation of modernity is an effect of this negative aspect or void, of the fact that modernity is not related to a particular content. Notions such as ‘religion and

democracy,' 'tradition and modernity' and 'the impossibility of thought' (as set forth in the pseudo-historical writings of Javad Tabatabai) gain currency as a result of efforts to fill this void. Such notions characterise a thought that has no particular referent. In particular, they demonstrate that thought flees any determined situation, such as modernity, or when forced to face it simply presents it as a full and complete whole for instance, in the figure of 'autonomous reason,' or ultimately in the form of a tool (technology) that Europeans have and which we lack. Such a thought denies its situatedness in modernity because it never dares to admit that the 'essential' characteristics of modernity are crisis, change, disruption and negativity. In other words, the very thing that Europe possesses and we do not is the lack itself.

In order to realise the idea or spirit of modernity, we need subtraction (internalising the lack and paradox), not addition (filling the void). Modernity is produced by rupture. Even in Europe, autonomous reason was questioned during the evolution of philosophy, as a metaphysical surrogate for categories such as 'being,' 'substance' or 'God.' Modernity cannot be characterised by a pure rationality reliant on super-historical, scientific and epistemological bases (*mabāni*).

Modernity knows no basis but *the critical* (in both senses of the word, as criticism and as crisis). What makes up the modern is the internal gap and void of modernity itself. It is this critical aspect of modernity that joins us to the universal by separating us from any particular life, opinion, religion, and historical content. The reference of thought to the contemporary situation entails a continual return to critique, crisis, and rupture, and not to an autonomous subject or a fundamental rational project, even one presented within the framework of a consistent formal, normative system as in Kant and later Habermas.

As in Fichte's subjectivist idealism, the conditions of rationality and the bases of reason are simply the inquiry into the conditions of this rationality itself. Although this Kantian conception of reason has no particular content or metaphysical substance, it follows a formal, *a priori*, and transcendental consistency, which subjects it to the existing situation and system. For this reason, subjectivist idealism always leads to reformism. The existing system and capitalism itself act more radically than does formal Kantian-Habermasian thought in its movement toward universality. In its movement toward universality, such a formalist philosophy is always left behind by the existing system.

Well ahead of this kind of critique, capitalism itself generates more crisis, tension, rupture, conflict and negativity in the body of society and in the individual's mind and body. That is why capitalism easily incorporates any radical challenge or desire into itself. Thinking that is unable to understand universality in terms of a gap—a short circuit between the singular event and the true universal—but which tries to explain it in terms of a formal, *a priori* consistency, is more attached to all sorts of particular contents than capitalism, a system that easily transcends any given content.

This is why capitalism flourishes even in places like Saudi Arabia where there is not a single trace of Habermas's rational liberal democracy. It is able to dissolve and transform the particular content of any form of life or life-world. By contrast, Habermas's formal thought confronts, in its first encounter, the ambiguities of this particular Arabian way of life, challenging its formal principles and turning it into a merely reformist discourse: an impotent form of educated nagging that gradually moves toward an unrealisable ideal.

III

If, in line with Hegelian thought and Adorno's negative dialectics, we replace the hermeneutic paradigm with a paradigm derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, structuralism, and poststructuralism, then any return to the historical situation of thought comes to signify a return to a gap or a void, rather than to a solid and complete identity. If we extend this insight to thought itself, which has translation as its primary metaphor, we will recognise that any thought that has its own situation as its point of departure is a thought that is chosen more than it chooses. It chooses what it already is as its identity, like a person or a subject whose freedom is defined as a forced choice based on a retroactive structure. This structure describes the shaping of the subject according to the mechanism of interpellation in its Althusserian sense.

However, in the context of this structure, our metaphor of translation is also raptured. As a result of all these points it becomes obvious that any concept or metaphor for translation must incorporate that gap and crisis into itself. We cannot simply put authentic thought, or what we have defined as deliberative translation, on top of a so-called non-deliberative translation that merely disseminates self-deception. If this internal gap exists, then any form of translation and any form of thought generates a fissured subject. This means that, according to Lacan, thought is always intermixed with misunderstanding in one way or another. *There is a lack of understanding at the heart of any understanding.* We fill this void or lack with fantasies or imagined stories. According to Lacan, truth is always structured like a fiction. Gadamer's hermeneutics ignores this gap at the heart of understanding, or in Freudian terms disavows it. He identifies truth with perfection and richness of meaning or with the accumulation of supplementary interpretations.

In this way, the metaphor of translation, as a centre that gathers everything into a consistent whole, falls apart. The vision of deliberative translation as the only mode of 'genuine thought' ceases to persuade. What was formerly excluded, namely non-deliberative translation, is made manifest again and then internalised. One reason for this is the process of repoliticisation that is the inevitable result of a risky dive into a situated thought.

In Badiou's philosophy, the concrete situation of thought is understood not as an epistemological system but in terms of a truth-procedure. This procedure begins with naming an event and remaining faithful to it. The subject is an effect and an aspect of this truth-procedure, not a thought that chooses 'freely.' The subject is chosen according to a structure similar to the experience of blessing; it is called by a voice or a vocation such as love, revolution, artistic creation, or scientific discovery. The subject is an effect of this choice and of this acceptance. The subject and its freedom are produced by an act through which we choose an identity we always had. We choose to be Iranians, Blacks, workers, activists, and leftist. We become, retroactively, subjects who enjoy these particular identities. Choosing reveals the potential of the subject. But in order to choose we must already be subjects.

There is no thinking subject without identity and situation. The act of choosing, of becoming a subject, is only possible in the context of a retrospective structure. However, this 'forced choice' in face of the vocation of history, this choosing to be what we have already been, testifies to the truth of freedom: the subject's identity is not natural, existential, substantial or innate. Rather, existence as such and its maintenance depend on a thought beyond language and the recognition of its 'objective conditions.'

As Mallarmé notes, any thought is a throw of dice. Therefore, the radical subject can maintain its thought as a 'logical revolt' by submitting to the risk. At this juncture, a person's being, or her 'passion and reason [*shur va sho'ur*],' becomes politicised. In the course of subjectification, we do not confront the transfer of knowledge through an education system. Rather, we confront a risk that already involves the danger of misunderstanding. Only by submitting to this constructive misunderstanding internal to itself can the subject move toward a comprehensive and correct understanding of the situation, in other words, toward truth. This conception of the structure of the subject, thought and truth places in a new perspective what we already criticised under the rubric of non-deliberative translation. Bearing this in mind, we should critically examine books such as Babak Ahmadi's *Structure and Interpretation of the Text* (*Sākhtār va ta'vil-e matn*), but this time without foregrounding the category of 'non-deliberative translation' in our critique.¹⁵ The aim of this return is to remove the ambiguity and one-sidedness latent in this category. It does not aim to moderate or dilute the radical nature of our previous criticism. The positive role of such books in education and knowledge expansion among a particular class of readers necessitates a new interpretation of their historical function.

Now with regard to the new sense of translation as a thought containing a void and inner gap, and according to the dialectical relation between understanding and misunderstanding in a particular situation, it can be argued that thinking based on non-deliberative translation has been more effective than what we imagined. Unlike the hermeneutic judgement that prioritised felicitous and deliberative translations, non-deliberative translation has opened up new spaces and introduced new forms for thought. However, we aim to go beyond recognising the productivity of misunderstanding or than insisting on irrelevant notions of fidelity to the original. In the hermeneutic framework, the dialectic of understanding and misunderstanding becomes an ontological structure, which plays the role of a Hegelian synthesis in this transformation. This synthesis automatically imposes unity, homogeneity, and peace on the historical situation.

Despite affirming misunderstanding in the context of the historical evolution of understanding, Gadamer ultimately subjects this evolution to an ahistorical universality. What is lost here is the concrete and historical quality of thought, the situatedness that goes beyond the subject in complexity and breadth. Risk-taking and fidelity to an unrealised and unfinished truth disappear. In other words, everything that highlights the political nature of thought as a risky act, everything that is perceived as an uncanny, new and incomprehensible rupture, is hereby erased.

From this point of view, the main problem of non-deliberative translation is not their misunderstanding and hastiness compared to deliberative, perfect and clear translation. Rather, it is the veiling of this political aspect of thought. Concrete thought resembles a performative sentence or a promise more closely than an affirmative sentence, the truth or falsity of which can be determined at any moment through empirical verification. The attempt to prove *truth as an enunciation (qowl)* exposes thought to all the gaps, misunderstandings, complexities, paradoxes and voids implied in the historical situation as well as to the possible emergence of an event on the margins of this void. The principal meaning of being concretely situated is precisely this.

This new conception of the relation between thought and translation, and the dialectic of understanding and misunderstanding, is a product of altered social circumstances and the new emphasis on the political dimension of speculative thought. Throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, as the reformist movement and its fervid political stances

transformed our historical situation, even a radical theoretical discourse could be efficacious as a manifestation of open-mindedness on the margins of the reformist movement. Back then, it was not necessary for a theoretical discourse to directly address the political situation, for the density and attraction of political change, struggles for power, and different types of political passions were adequate to facilitate the rapid transformation of any theoretical discourse into journalism.

In this period, theory could play a more critical role by distancing itself from the political scene, rather than directly addressing political problems. Marginal translation projects, or so-called ‘cultural work [*kar-e farhangi*],’ could nurture radical critique, or at least prepare the ground for it. Translation projects introduced new texts and concepts into Iranian culture. This kind of thought could as well be a preliminary but effective form of radical politics thanks to the dynamism of the reformist movement.

However, after the collapse of the reformist movement, Iranian society became more and more de-politicised. We witnessed a convergence between theory and politics: politics, especially radical politics, increasingly took refuge in theory. Meanwhile, following the principle already discussed, theory—that is, theory as a form of situated thought related to translation, that does not consider translation as a return to a perfect, homogeneous, riskless thought—became more and more political, in form as well as in content.

To what extent is this new situation different from earlier periods? For previous periods, we distinguished between deliberative and non-deliberative translations. How to distinguish one theoretical project from another when we believe even a deliberative translation contains a gap of misunderstanding or unconsciousness? So long as theory links itself to truth, it presents itself epistemologically as a kind of tension or rupture rather than as a positive force or a visible measure of progress. Truth lies beyond representation within the present situation. We must change the existing epistemological paradigm in order to make the representation of this truth possible.

This reveals the indeterminacy and inconsistency at the heart of the project of radical thought, and of this new conception of thought/translation. A rupture in the existing epistemological system can be minute, like a small change in point of view that displaces everything. What was irrelevant suddenly becomes an important problem. Thus, what is chosen is based on a judgement or decision that cannot be proven within the framework of an existing epistemological paradigm. Any justification for this decision must remain faithful to the thought it evokes and maintain the rational consistency of this thought and the universality of truths that are raised by it. This justification has a retrospective structure.

As far as the distinctions between all theories are concerned, everything depends on how these discourses—whether as translated originals (*tarjoma-ye ta’lifi*) or simply as translations (*tarjoma*)—function: whether they try to cover up and fill in this inner void with mythological and ideological narratives, or not. The ideological nature of these discourses derives from their conformity to prevailing conditions. Radical thought is indeterminate; it separates itself, fundamentally, from the big Other, or the symbolic realm, which is always contaminated with risk and ambiguity.

Ideological thought or thought/translation does not reveal its inner misunderstanding or gap. It does not preserve this gap as a productive tension at the heart of theory or theoretical act. Rather, it covers up this gap with an ideological narrative that is both delusional and demagogic. The main difference between all theoretical discourses lies in what they conceal. This is not a celebration of the infinite set of postmodern differences that can justify the existence of anything and everything. In fact, the affirmation of

ambiguity and difference in the form of postmodernist infinite multiplicity can be an ideological strategy for getting along with the chaotic and fluid space of modern capitalism.

As Badiou suggests, philosophy should distance itself from the fluid circulation of perceptions, imaginations, information, opinions, and beliefs that constitute modern capitalist discourse. Can this discourse highlight its unresolved tension or gap? In psychoanalysis, what is defined as law, what Lacan calls the name of the father, always has an ideological role. There is no hidden repressed desire somewhere ‘inside’ us. To the contrary, the desire we experience in the guise of a denied fantasy is a veil that resolves tension and covers up the gap; it hides the hole produced by the trauma of encountering the other and the mystery of the other’s desire. In Lacanian psychoanalysis this scar or gap that tears apart our ‘natural and innate’ order is called ‘symbolic castration.’ This castration makes desire possible and makes us capable of desire. The perverse and digressive nature of desire (*meyl*) is affirmed in language through its links to passion and perversion (*māyel*). The inscription or the trace of the unconscious is a gap and rupture on the surface, not a hidden treasure inside. The unconscious is the discourse of the other. In order to discover it, one must look at the other.

The Lacanian structure of the subject resembles Kant’s description of the transcendental subject. In Kantian philosophy what makes objective experience possible and consistent is what can never be experienced. What makes us ethical subjects in search of infinite good and evil is breaking with our natural desires. Kant’s transcendental subject, like Lacan’s notion of fantasy, is a veil that turns our sense data into a consistent image of reality at the same time as it covers our inner void or lack of essence, namely, our lack of access to our own noumenal reality.

The above points can be summarized as follows. By proposing translation as the only true form of thought in our age, we aim to make thought return to its historical and concrete situation. We also move away from abstract negation to determinate negation, a movement that conditions the attainment of truth and radical critical theory. This movement involves two stages. In the first stage, which I described with the help of Gadamerian hermeneutics, the abstract narcissism of thought is disrupted by the idea of translation. This stage can be described by the formula thought/translation. But this formula leaves dichotomies and polarities intact and reproduces them in a new framework. We must bear in mind that ‘situation,’ ‘concretisation,’ and even ‘thought’ and ‘translation’ are themselves mere abstractions.

Overcoming the abstraction of thought depends on a constant action at the heart of thought itself, the act of driving every concept towards its ultimate and dialectical limits, where it will overcome its abstract stagnation through the mediation of its opposite. However, the risk of falling into abstraction is always there. This risk can never be overcome in an absolute and *a priori* way. Situatedness also means partaking of the ambiguity of the situation. Removing this ambiguity depends on the evolution of the situation itself and also preserving thought’s openness and sensitivity to a changing situation.

The formula thought/translation entails both overcoming the abstraction and recognising the danger of falling into it again. In the first stage, the dialectical concept of translation—understood as the negative, the tension, or the inner gap within modern thought—was mistakenly defined as something substantial. This only reproduced the abstract nature of thought in the form of the opposition between deliberative and non-deliberative translation. This opposition, itself an effect of the hermeneutic interpretation

of the metaphor of translation that prevailed during the reformist movement, once again distorted our historical understanding of the situation and the situatedness of thought. Transforming the metaphor of translation, indicated by the turn to Lacanian theory, was a reaction to this problem. This transformation can be most clearly and succinctly formulated as follows:

Thought/translation → deliberative translation/non-deliberative translation → ~~thought-translation~~

In our new post-reformist period, the convergence of politics and theory amid the general depoliticisation and intensification of theory leaves no doubt that reflection on how to internalise the so-called objective and external paradoxes of translation as thought—or how to move from thought/translation to ~~thought/translation~~—is essential to any form of critical theory that pursues radical politics under present conditions.

Related topics

Translators as Organic Intellectuals; The Political Modes of Translation in Iran; Theory, Practice, Activism.

Notes

- 1 For a literal rendering of Farhadpour's text, see <https://transactivism.hcommons.org/supplementary-material/>.
- 2 Gould, Rebecca Ruth and Kayvan Tahmasebian (forthcoming) 'Translation as Alienation: Sufi Hermeneutics and Literary Modernism in Bijan Elahi's Translations,' *Modernism/Modernity* (currently available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/y35x-ah23>).
- 3 The idea of prismatic translation is first introduced in Reynolds, Matthew (2016) *Translation: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 87.
- 4 Reynolds, Matthew (2019) 'Introduction,' in *Prismatic Translation*, ed. Matthew Reynolds (London: Legenda), 1.
- 5 Reynolds, 'Introduction,' 2.
- 6 'Ruzgar bar vefq-e morād,' *E'temad*, no.3771 [online] 16 March 2017. Available at: www.ete-madnewspaper.ir/1395/12/26/Main/PDF/13951226-3771-7-6.pdf (This is an anonymous report of a meeting with Farhadpour).
- 7 See, respectively, Mirsepassi, Ali (2017) *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (New York: Cambridge University Press); Soroush, Abdulkarim (2009) *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion* (Leiden: Brill); and Tabataba'i, Sayyid Muhammad Husayn (2012) *Kernel of the Kernel: Concerning the Wayfaring and Spiritual Journey of the People of Intellect (Risāla-yi lubb al-lubāb dar sayr wa sulūk-i ulu'l albāb): A Shi'i Approach to Sufism* (Albany: SUNY Press).
- 8 Farhadpour, Morad (2009) 'Häydeger: enqelābi-ye mortaje' (Heidegger: A Reactionary Revolutionary),' in *Para-hā-ye fekr (falsafa va siyāsāt)* (Fragments of Thought: Philosophy and Politics) (Tehran: Tarh-i now), 97–125.
- 9 See Farhadpour, Morad (2003) *Bādhā-ye gharbi* (Western Winds) (Tehran: Hermes Publishing House).
- 10 Farhadpour refers to Rimbaud's phrase '*il faut être absolument moderne*,' in *A Season in Hell and Illuminations*, trans. and ed. Bertrand Mathieu (Rochester: BOA Editions, 1991), 53 (bilingual edition) [translators' note].
- 11 For further on this distinction, see Babich, Babette (2017) *Hermeneutic Philosophies of Social Science* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter), 227 [translators' note].
- 12 Gadamer, Hans Georg (1975) *Truth and Method* (New York: New York Seabury Press), 278.

- 13 The author refers here to Benjamin, Walter (2002) *Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press). N3.1, 463 [translators' note].
- 14 The author refers her to the theories of Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shari'ati, discussed in the biographical sketch above. For a relevant discussion, see Davari, Arash (2014) 'A Return to Which Self?: 'Ali Shari'ati and Frantz Fanon on the Political Ethics of Insurrectionary Violence,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 34 (1): 86–105 [translators' note].
- 15 Ahmadi, Babak (1991) *Structure and Interpretation of the Text (Sākhthār va ta'vil-e matn)* (Tehran: Markaz). It is one of the first books to introduce Iranian readers to modern European theories of reading, including hermeneutics, structuralism, and poststructuralism.

Further reading

Soroush, Abdolkarim (2009) *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*. Tr. Nilou Mobasser and Forough Jahanbakhsh. Leiden: Brill.

A much-debated contribution to Iranian religious intellectualism containing Soroush's programme for reforming Islamic traditionalism. Soroush argues in this work for a number of compromises between Islam and modernity.

Berman, Marshall (1982) *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

A seminal study of modernist aesthetics. Translated into Persian by Farhadpour and foundational to his efforts to theorise modernity in an Iranian context.

Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno (1969 [1944]) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Tr. John Cumming. New York: Herder and Herder.

A key text of the Frankfurt School and the most complete statement of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of industrial modernity. Horkheimer and Adorno trace the rise of fascism in the middle of the twentieth century to shifts in relations of production.

Benjamin, Walter (1999 [1982]) *The Arcades Project*. Tr. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Benjamin's posthumously published manuscript, compiled between 1927 and 1940, documenting the texture of modern urban life in the form of collage. This palimpsestial work has served as an allegory for translation for many theorists.