Dancing in Chains

Bijan Elahi on the Art of Translation

Translators’ Introduction

In 2011, the poet and distinguished translator of Italian literature Mohsen Taher Nokandeh published the writings on translation by the great avant-garde Iranian poet Bijan Elahi (1945–2010) under the heading ‘On Translation’. These writings are translated here for the first time, in part for the light they shed on Elahi’s original poetic creations. The first two selections were published as prefaces to Elahi’s translations. The third selection comprises Elahi’s notes towards an unpublished monograph on translation, initiated and abandoned in 1985, which he planned to call Translation in Every Words (Tarjumeh beh zabān-i ālam va ādam). Taken together, these texts reveal a great poet and critic, as well as an original theorist of translation at work dissecting literary texts and probing their philosophical implications. Their style bears the heavy imprint of Elahi’s two lodestars: Hölderlin and Rimbaud, whom he translated into Persian in 1973 and 1983, respectively. They also reveal an affinity with Ezra Pound, whose translation method Elahi discusses in the third selection.

To an even greater degree than Hölderlin and Rimbaud, Elahi’s writing is marked by various forms of interrupted speech, including ellipses and quotations. Like poetry, this feature of Elahi’s prose creates a jarring effect in which we have endeavoured to reproduce in our translation. Elahi’s ideas about translation jar even more than his prose. He considers translation as ‘a re-creation [bāz-āfarinish] even more difficult than the original’ and adds that ‘if creation [āfarinish] is viewed as a dance, translation is a dance in chains’. Elahi’s conceptualisation of creation as a form of possession by an outside source reveals the close kinship he perceives between translation and creation.

All endnotes below have been added by us. Given the gender neutrality of the Persian third-person pronoun, we have generally rendered the singular third-person pronoun by they/them whenever possible, and have only indicated a gender when grammatically unavoidable. The ellipses below in the translated text reflect the punctuation of the original. A fuller introduction to Elahi as a poet and creator may be found in High Tide of the Eyes: Poems by Bijan Elahi, also co-translated by Rebecca Ruth Gould and Kayvan Tahmasebian.

On Translation

I. From Ishāra (Indication), the preface to Elahi’s translation of Arthur Rimbaud’s Illuminations (Ishrāqhā 1984)

[We] should distinguish between ... a translator who is called ‘performer [āmil]’ and the one who can be called ‘teller [nāqīl]’. ‘Freedom’ of translation is conceptually different with regard to these two terms. Everywhere, everything can be defined in innumerable ways depending on the innumerable possibilities available in each situation. In this brief definition, however, these two are separated not by choice but by what the text at hand requires. A translator as teller can often work as a performer, and vice versa, depending on the text they choose to translate. It is a general problem that we have not distinguished between the two types of translation because we do not distinguish between performative texts and stories. Our perception of translation has unfortunately been restricted to ‘telling [naqīl]’. As a result, there are few good translations of performative texts, including much poetry translation.

Without wishing to enter into details, I can briefly state that the teller [nāqīl] works within the limits of a reporter while the performer [āmil] works within the limits of an executor. The translator’s relation to the text is that of a director to the play, of a filmmaker to the script and of a singer to the song. The song is already composed by someone else to be sung by her. Or as with traditional painters who co-drafted a single canvas: one sketched and the other finished.

A good teller narrates precisely the outer [zāhir] level of an event. The translator as performer, however, must precisely act out the event simultaneously on both the outer and inner [batīn] levels. On occasions when the teller cannot keep both levels in balance as their language and culture requires, that is, when the teller is obliged to
transition from apparent to hidden and vice versa, they should critically decide which level of the text, ie the essence of the text, has more presence in its new life. Particularly at stake here is poetry and whatever has a poetic presence in the realm of poiesis ["alam-i tadvīn"]. Without presence, a poem would be undoubtedly deprived of its necessary meaning because 'meaning' is only one of the necessary conditions of such a presence...

Our poets have not paid enough attention to prose poems. My experiments in this field (after two models, two signatures [raqam], namely Rimbaud and Michaux) are a challenge or trial anyway. Let's not forget what we read, whether a success or a failure, is a poem in Persian.

II. From Tadhakkur, the 1975 note appended to Elahi's translation of Friedrich Hölderlin's selected poems (published as Niyat-i khayr (Good Faith) 2015)

From a certain point of view, my Hölderlin is the opposite of my Hallaj.\(^3\) In order to elucidate the point of view, one needs to elicit a common, therefore popular, lukewarm and reactionary [murtaji] perception of translation typical of an impotent perceiver: 'Translation is either accurate or beautiful; If beautiful then not accurate, if accurate then not beautiful.' With a few exceptions, our literary translators have a static idea of beauty. Like rhinos with stiff necks, they can see only what lies ahead and are deprived of a turning eye [nigah-i gardan]. Furthermore, they are not even accurate. Most translations into Persian end up one and a half times the length of the original text. Where the translated text is difficult and at unreasonable distance from the original, beauty does not truly come from the translator who could be a person of minimal ability, undoubtedly less capable than the original writer. The translator may often be someone unable to write poetry, unable to write fiction, unable to think and investigate, who has only taken refuge [panah] in this field. In this way and in this atmosphere, translation is often the repressed complex of creation. However, we agree with those who consider translation as a re-creation [bāz-d firānish] even more difficult than the original. If creation [farānish] is viewed as a dance, translation is a dance in chains [raqs dar zanjīr]. When translating Shakespeare, you should fly as high as him though with tied wings. Translation, like authorship, can be accomplished in different ways and fashions. This is only one of those ways which serves meanwhile as a foundation for all others. Opposed to the above notion, I attempted in several books to prove the dictum 'the more accurate, the more beautiful' as long as our perception of beauty is purified from the static. Accuracy, it can be argued, is guaranteed by dictionaries as well. Those books are Rimbaud's prose poems, Flaubert's tale and this Hölderlin.\(^4\) Although all three enter late into Persian, as expected they bring to our language unknown or lesser known beauty and fresh taste, just as they introduced into their own language less known beauty or unknown beauty. The latter better describes Hölderlin's language and mood...

III. From Elahi, Translation in Every Words (1985)

...The question is the 'polarity' of the world of translation. This time, take one side as the writer (generally speaking, the poet, story writer, philosopher, mystic and so on), the other side as the rewriter where the term signifies the translator. Then say that translation generally consists of two types, bound [muqayyad] and free [mukhtār]. The former is done according to imposed rules, the latter according to chosen rules. If appropriately done, both types of translation are faithful, except that the former is faithful to the rules the writer imposes, and the latter faithful to the rules the rewriter chooses to the extent that the rewriter's chosen rules entirely or partly correspond to the writer's imposed rules in one way or another.

The second type, namely 'free' translation, is itself divided into two completely different categories. One, as we call it, is confidant [ham-rāz] translation that goes beyond intimacy [damsāz] and may suggest a shared secret [sirr], form [lawn]? and structure [sākht] respectively corresponding to the hidden meaning [bātin], the apparent meaning [zhārīr], and what brings them together. The purpose of this type of translation is creativity [khalaq] on different levels and for different purposes.

The second subdivision of free translation, however, tends toward aimless wandering [azād-ravī]. Appropriation [tasarruf] is another name for this type of translation or rather 'appropriation and alteration [dakh va tasarruf]'. I have denominated these two completely separate categories by two opposite terms, two antithetical correlatives:
alteration [dakh] and creation [khalaq]...

...Let me give an example. Wu Ching, or The Five Classics of the Confucian canon, is familiar to scholars. It consists of Shu Ching (Classic of History), Li Chi (Collection of Rituals), Shih Ching (Classic of Poetry), Ch'un Chi'iu (Spring and Autumn Annals) and finally I Ching (Classic of Changes), the Chinese book of divination. Only three translations of Classic of Poetry are considered here. For weeks, I have learned a lot from frequent comparisons I made between three translations into English by Bernhard Karlgren, Arthur Waley and Ezra Pound.

More than scholarly research, Waley's work is a translation of Chinese and Japanese principles and often poetry. No one can deny that Waley is a perfect poet for the hundreds of Chinese poems he translated into English. The inclusion of these translations, or influences [ta'sirah], within the canon of English poetry seems unquestionable today. However, Pound is not only a poet but also the grand master of poetics and one of the greatest pioneers of modern culture. His translations do not originate from a translational [dīlma] principle; they not only give lessons in poetry but also add an entry to the universal glossary of "knowledge [ilm]" in its broadest sense. It has been claimed that after Pound, translating and rereading the ancient poets is like observing art after Picassol. When it comes to Karlgren, we are no longer talking about poetry and the poet — we are faced with a great Sinologist, someone analogous to Norberg and Henning vis-à-vis our culture.
Karlgren's work on *Classic of Poetry* first appears successively from 1942 to 1946 in *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* in Stockholm, Sweden. The *Classic of Poetry* appeared in a volume in Stockholm in 1950. In September 1975, I accidentally picked up the volume in London. It made me extremely happy because I had read Pound's *Classic of Poetry* in 1971 and I knew that it was based on Karlgren's work. I had seen some of his other works before. Each poem in Karlgren's *Classic of Poetry* is presented in four sections. First, the original Chinese, then its transliteration into Roman letters with a presentation of the rhyme schemes, then a word by word translation into English prose and finally notes (where needed) on lexicon, syntax and so on. Altogether this amounts to a 'dream' for a lover, a poet-translator, for Pound who understood as much Chinese as you and I do except that he is vastly different from you and I. Firstly, Pound is a genius and we are not. Secondly, he has read extensively in Sinology. Thirdly, given his polyglotism and profound poetic talent, it was possible to reach, through philological veils, the seed [nutqa] at the heart [batn] of the foreign poet. Nevertheless, Pound's purposes lie basically beyond these words and the category of confidant translation. It is from Chinese that he 'translates', not from English! Waley's *Classic of Poetry* appeared in poetic language before these two in 1937. However, in a second edition with minor revisions published after Karlgren's work, he deemed it necessary to acknowledge that, in that edition, he had compared the whole work to Karlgren's though he admitted that in some occasions he could not agree with Karlgren in part or in whole.

What if this happened in our part of the world? What would we say, to be fair? We would call Waley the great scholar, may God increase his prodigious knowledge! We would call Waley the faithful translator. If by chance we liked his work, we would call him a talented translator — this is worse than the worst curses. But when it came to Pound, if we considered him 'great', then we would either initiate a silent strike or call him a traitor. If we did not regard him as 'great', then we would comment indifferently that someone had tried to translate and this man had come to 'revise its prose'. We would call it 'rewriting [nigarish] or 'adaptation [iqitbas]'. Or, we would call it 'translation and rewriting [tarjuma va nigarish]' or 'translation and adaptation [tarjuma va iqitbas]'. While the two last terms are nonsense, the first two are imprecise.

In a sermon, you can use proverbs [mithal] and tell stories, you can give advice and warn. Not so in a scholarly work. The comparability of 'al-shi'r [poetry]' and 'al-shams [the sun]' does permit a comparison. In Karlgren's *Classic of Poetry*, the woman is not your intimate [mahram]. She talks to you through the veil [parde] since you are forbidden to observe her beauty. In Waley's *Classic of Poetry*, the woman is not forbidden [na-mahram]. You can see what she looks like although literary norms [sharaye'i adabi] do not permit you to approach her because she is one of your intimates [maharam]. However, in Pound's *Classic of Poetry*, the woman is neither forbidden nor your intimate as she has been married to you. You can be near her, she can give birth to your child — creation [khalq]. Obviously, Pound could not facilitate the marriage of the second one [Waley's version], having known it since 1937, with his culture, since Waley's version was already an intimate to his culture. So, as there was nothing against it, he made the first one he came to know later an intimate to his culture and as I call it, a pantoum to culture [avizeh-yi farhang], like a yet-unheard-of word that has been inscribed on memory. If he drew upon Waley, it would be called adaptation [iqitbas] which was not far from incest [zena-yi bā mahārim]. The first [book], however, is waiting to enter into marriage through lawful means. It is unfair if it does not happen, not if it happens. Those who do not permit it: if it is not due to cowardice, it is due to ignorance of literary norms. Such readers have not opened the book of 'poetics [butiqī'] of translation, let alone read it!...

... I remember — those were the days — when one of our friends — named A — made an accurate draft translation of such and such a novel by the esteemed American story writer Thornton Wilder. It should have been edited and published. Unfortunately, this did not happen. It remained unedited until one of our friends — named B — who loved the novel finally decided to translate it. Then one of our friends — named C — reported to B that A had translated it years before and now D — namely, myself — had it. B was a writer and editor and C was a critic among other things. B was fond of C and kind to me. I was merely a transmitter of the translation. Finally, C suggested that B edit A's drafts instead of retranslating the original. The drafts were linguistically accurate. When the first chapter was complete, C and I went to B's place in the absence of A, who was in exile.

It was not an edited version of the Persian translation [guzarish]. Rather, it was a retranslation from the original American English. Now I tend to call it a 'transforming work ['amal-i mutahavvil']. For those who have read it, the American writer's prose is ordinary. Someone has described it as 'ordinarily pedantic'. Without quibbling over the example, he can be compared to Bahram Sadeqi whose work cannot be evaluated adequately in terms of its formal technique [sanā- at-i sūrī]. In other words, Wilder's is an impersonal artificial language [guftar-i sānī-i nawi] as in Tolstoy, as in Kafka, both of whom write in an impersonal artificial language, each in his own way. Unlike Joyce, Beckett, Nabokov, Flaubert, Faulkner, Durrell, Woolf, Stein, James, Musil and Queneau, all of whom write in a personally artificial language [guftar-i sānī va shakhsī]. Let's not forget that writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Hemingway try hard to appear ordinary in one way or another. That is, they work according to effaced mannerism [naw-i mahv] while Joyce and Flaubert, for example, chose deliberate mannerism [sahv-i naw], that is, they try to lay bare the traces of their device [shigird] and artfulness [fann] in the work. Like Rembrandt, who deliberately revealed the turns and strokes of the brush on canvas, and in contrast to Ingres, who effaces in order to appear natural. In Wilder's work, there is nothing of effaced mannerism, let alone deliberate mannerism. He should be evaluated according to
totally different criteria. Nonetheless, B who rendered the author’s artificial language in his own distinctively artificial style, had worked out an effaced mannerism in my view and I liked it very much. However, the translation did not please C, who asked: ‘What about Wilder himself?’ B became disappointed and abandoned the work. Finished…

... I was around 14 when I came across a poem by a man named Nima Yushij in a newspaper. Although I did not understand the meaning of ‘breaking the dream in my wet eyes’ [khab dar chashm-i taram mishikanad], I loved it. The more I read, the more I was drawn to it. It was later that I understood Nima. I learned many things from his poems that I have not found in anyone else. Later, I saw sparks [shararahad] of those things in his letters; What dignified letters, well done! Then I told myself and now I tell you that in modern Iran no great [kabir] figure has emerged in the cultural field except Nima. In those days, I loved him so much that I saw him in my dream one night. He took me to a café and treated me to tea. But he was upset. May he rest in peace.

In those days, we were derided by many. They turned against us, complaining that a child has to learn first and then begin such and such. Fereidun Rahnema gave shelter to the child. May he rest in peace. He said that they were wrong, that Eluard had said that love is the path to knowledge. Later, I encountered Eliot’s Dante. I cried when I read in its preface that he had been in love with French poetry long before he was able to translate two lines accurately. I noticed that Nima often chose rough and foul [khoshin va saqat] words in order to tame them. When I encountered Schoenberg’s non-consecutive intervals [lov-i namatib], the two ideas sparked the thought in me that I could do something new with the language of official letters, with the language of newspapers, pulp magazines and whatever seemed clichéd. With Ponge, I realised later that I had accidentally become interested in something like the so-called ‘anti-poetry.’

Then I was drawn to street talk too… I encountered Bayhaqi and he fascinated me. Teachers had taught us that the subject comes first, then comes the object and finally the verb that always stands in the end of the sentence according to correct syntax. However, I observed that Bayhaqi does not always follow this rule. He is not a poet to be pardoned by ‘poetic exigency’, as some ignorant people [say to justify transgressions in a poem in the name of poetic licence]. Meanwhile I came to realise that, in sublime prose and verse, [such rule-breaking occurs] according to a ‘natural exigency’, that is, according to what the structure requires, and not because of rhyme limitations. I had already read in Eliot that cultures rely on each other to enrich themselves and they must do so. And now I read in Bahar, the poet laureate, that Bayhaqi had done this under Arabic influence. I saw Bahar is right in this regard but not when he deems it inadmissible. May he rest in peace! Similarly, Gide wrote that the fear of influence comes from the fear of a lack of personality. It is written in the Gospel that the person who attempts to save their self will be deprived of it if while the person who sacrifices their self will save it, that is, they will be given eternal life. Then, great men have not feared influence…

I felt that Bayhaqi, like Nima, had drawn from the street and the book and had mixed them in order to tame them. In other words, he had coupled a wild wolf with a domestic dog to reproduce a third species, namely ‘wolfdog’, the strong guard. Later when I read Darab-nama by Tarsusi and other folk tales from old days, I confirmed that most of Abu’l Fazl [Bayhaqi]’s words that appear archaic today were drawn from the street rather than from books although his use of everyday language hardly seeks to please the common people by facilitating their understanding. The most certain evidence for this is that [many manuscripts of] his magnum opus have been lost over time. [Bayhaqi] was unable to adapt to the language of his day. Writing was for him fundamentally a craft [sanat], both in the sense of art and of alchemy, which is also a branch of philosophy. In this sense, Bayhaqi’s history is philosophical prose.

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Notes

1 For the Persian text used here, see Bijan Elahi, ‘On Translation’.
2 The pair can also be translated as ‘outside/inside’ and ‘appearance/heart’.
3 Elahi is referring to his translation of the Sufi Arabic poet Mansur Abu Hallaj, which differs radically in style from his Hölderlin translations. See Bijan Elahi, trans. Hallaj al-asrār (akhbār va ash ār).
4 Elahi’s translation of Gustave Flaubert’s tale, La légende de Saint-Julien l’hospitalier (The Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitalier) published in Bahānahā-yi ma’hūs (Familiar Excuses).
5 ‘Lawn’ originally means ‘colour’.
6 Matthias Norberg (1747–1826) was a Swedish professor of Greek and Oriental languages at Lund University. Walter Bruno Henning (1908–1967) was a German scholar of Middle Iranian languages and literature.
7 See Bernhard Kargl, The Book of Odes.
9 See Ezra Pound, The Confucian Odes.
10 See Arthur Waley, The Book of Songs.
11 Elahi uses here the Arabic rather than Persian forms for ‘poetry’ and ‘sun’ (both are feminine nouns in Arabic).
12 Thornton Wilder (1897–1975) was a renowned American playwright and novelist, whose work won the two major American literary prizes: the Pulitzer (three times) and the National Book Award.
13 Bahram Sadeqi (1937–1985) was an Iranian short story writer. His only collection of short stories, Trench and Empty Canteens (Sangar va qumqomehā-yi khālī), is considered a forerunner of modernist experimental fiction depicting the disappointed Iranian society after the 1953 Coup.
Nima Yushij (1897–1960) was an Iranian poet who is considered the founder of modernist Persian poetry. Fereidun Rahnema (1930–1975) was an Iranian poet who mentored many key figures in the poetic movement called Other Poetry (ši’r-i digar), including Elahi.

Paul Éluard (1895–1952) was a French surrealist poet who was influential on modernist Persian poets such as Bijan Elahi and Ahmad Shamlu.

Francis Ponge (1899–1988) was a French poet famous for his prose poems on everyday objects, which are devoid of emotions and symbolism.

Abu’l Fazl Bayhaqi (995–1077), author of the Tārikh-i Bayhaqī (History of Bayhaqi), the most important source on Ghaznavids. The major part of this voluminous work is lost. It is notable for its prose narrative style.

Muhammad Taqi Bahar, also known as Malik al-Shuara Bahar (1886–1951), was an Iranian poet, literary critic, journalist and politician. His work Sabk-shināsī (Stylistics) is the most important history of the evolution of Persian prose to this day.


Dārāb-nāma (The Book of Darab), a twelfth-century Persian prose romance written by Abū Tāhir Muhammad ibn Mūsā Tartūsī, recounting the story of legendary King Dārāb. The prose is close to the spoken language of its time.

Works Cited