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Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants: On Translating an Anthology of Persian Poetry

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Abstract

Poetry translated into English from other languages has long been an important scene of Anglophone literary activity. In the last few decades, however, poetry translation has become an even more prominent field of literary production in English-speaking cultures. This *translational turn* in contemporary poetry has been beneficial in not only expanding the often small readerships that exist for contemporary poets but in also expanding the literary horizons of English-language readers. In this article I explore some of my own experiences and concerns as the co-editor and co-translator of *Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants*, an anthology of Persian poetry in English. Whilst I am quite satisfied with many aspects of my work on this publication, there are also others which I believe have made working on this project difficult. It is hoped that by addressing both the positive and negative aspects of (co-)creating this anthology, this article will contribute to our understanding of the opportunities as well as potential problematics of the current *translational turn*.

The translational turn in contemporary English poetry

Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants: An Anthology of Persian Poetry from Rudaki to Langroodi (Arc Publications, 2012) is a new bilingual anthology of poetry that I have co-edited and co-translated with poet and anthologist John Kinsella. This book is the first sustained presentation of poetry from early medieval Persia to contemporary Iran to appear in English, and it aims to provide a selection representing Iran's entire poetic history. It is, therefore, a project deeply engaged with views and *doxa* apropos of the nation's contested past, its putatively troubled present state and its potentially unstable future; and, as such, the book unavoidably speaks to a range of challenging cultural, social and political themes and issues. It is not, however, these topics that I wish to address in this article. My aim here is to briefly discuss the book as a translation project, and to assess my work on it in terms of my role, intentions and expectations as a translator of poetry from Farsi into English.

Poetry translated into English from other languages has long been an important scene of Anglophone literary activity, arguably since Thomas Malory's late-Middle English interpretations of French Arthurian romances in the fifteenth century. In the last few decades, however, perhaps due to socio-political phenomena such as globalization, rapid and escalating movements of populations across the world, and the proliferation of theories and readerships of world literatures and transnationalism in both academia and the publishing sphere, poetry translation has become a prominent field of literary production in English-speaking cultures. Translations of poems of medieval Middle Eastern poet Rumi have become bestsellers in the United States, and many major contemporary poets known for their own *original* (here meaning *non-translated*) writings – such as Robert Pinsky, Seamus Heaney and Simon Armitage – have authored volumes of poetry translated from Italian, Russian and Greek sources.

This *translational turn* in contemporary poetry has been greatly beneficial in not only expanding the often small readerships that exist for the work of contemporary poets – by, for

example, introducing the Anglophone readers of the nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud to the style and aesthetics of one of Rimbaud's latest translators, the postmodernist American poet John Ashbery – but by also expanding the literary and cultural horizons of English-language readers who do not possess many or, in some cases, any language other than English. As a reader who can neither read nor speak Chinese, for example, I am very grateful to the Chinese-Australian poet Ouyang Yu for editing and translating the 2002 anthology, *In Your Face: Contemporary Chinese Poetry in English Translation*, which has introduced me to the work of many innovative and subversive contemporary Chinese poets.

In this article I would like to present and explore some of my own artistic and professional experiences and concerns as the co-editor and co-translator of one such anthology. Whilst there are many aspects of my work on *Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants* with which I am quite satisfied, there are also others which I believe have made working on this project precarious and have complicated my personal response to the book since its publication. I hope that by addressing both the pleasures and perils of (co-)creating this anthology, this article will make a contribution to the understanding and evaluation of the opportunities as well as potential problematics of the current translational turn in the production and dissemination of poetry.

Collaboration, transformation and poetry translation

The most satisfying aspect of my work on first sourcing a very wide range of potential inclusions and contributions for the Persian anthology under discussion, and then selecting and translating forty of these for the final manuscript of the anthology, was my collaboration with the renowned Australian poet, publisher and activist John Kinsella, a process which started in 2007.

I had worked with John prior to this project – by having had my second book, the collection of poems *Eyes in Times of War* (2006), commissioned by him and published by Salt Publishing – but the conception and the process of producing *Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants* provided me with the valuable opportunity to creatively engage with one of Australia's most remarkable and accomplished poets over an extended period of time. As I've said of this process elsewhere:

This has been by far the most involved and stimulating collaboration I've worked on, not only due to its size and scope, but also because of the intricacy and complexity of the individual pieces included in our project. Selecting and translating poems from a literary tradition of such depth and breadth of aesthetic variety and divergence required quite a bit of research and discussion between John and me; and once we had chosen the pieces that we would include in the anthology, we set about turning my initial literal English translations (often in the form of prose/paragraphs) into English poems that very closely aesthetically resembled the original Farsi texts. This required quite a bit of fine-tuning at times, and very detailed work on individual lines and phrases. I feel I've learnt a lot from working so closely with John and observing his poetics in action

(Alizadeh n.p.)

I am further delighted to find that John has also found our collaboration stimulating and productive. While acknowledging “a few technical questions that confronted” him during our work – mostly to do with the abovementioned “fine-tuning” – John has written that as a result of our collaboration, he has become “passionate” about “one of the great world poetries”; and that he has “enjoy[ed] working [on the project] as someone with a bit of a ‘history’ background [who likes] to explore eras and contexts” (Kinsella 25).

Another positive aspect of my experience of working on this anthology has been what Simon Patton has described, in the context of his own work translating poetry from Chinese into

English, as an “exhilarating sense of linguistic freedom, the sense that we could remake ourselves and our world through a new way of speaking” (136). This “*new way of speaking*” is, interestingly enough, the direct consequence of bringing an *old* or existing object – in this case, a poem in a non-English language – into an equally old and pre-existing linguistic and literary context, i.e. modern English poetry. Yet this *bringing into* or, put more accurately, *lingua-aesthetic transportation*, results in the creation of something new – in the case of our anthology, for example, the very first English version of a seminal early twentieth-century free verse poem by the Iranian modernist Nima Yushij – which did not exist prior to the act of translation. The possibility of creating something new out of an existing object via translation has been discussed by Valerie Henitiuk, drawing on David Damrosch’s work, as the consequence of a work of writing “being read in a language, medium, or juxtaposition other than that of its origin”, which results in “previously unseen significances [that] allow new intertextualities to develop” (4). In the case of the aforementioned poem by the Iranian modernist Yushij, for example, by translating his poem “*Qoqnoos*” (“The Phoenix”) I became aware of the thematic as well as formal rapport between Yushij’s writing – and, potentially, between the modernist movement in Iranian poetry – and the work of European modernists such as Stéphane Mallarmé who also used avian and/or mythological motifs in his equally enigmatic work. This awareness was, put in Patton’s terms, something of a “new” and “exhilarating” discovery for me.

Related to the idea of translation giving birth to a new work of literature, or it fomenting a new perception of existing relations, is the possibility of what Henitiuk has viewed as the “transforming (or refracting)” of the original piece “in myriad creative ways” (7). Seen as a purely evidence-based and, in a traditional sense of the word, *academic* pursuit – with the objective of merely transmitting data or *meaning* of linguistic formations from one tongue into another – translation would have very little appeal to creative writers such as myself; however, seen as a *refraction* or a deliberate and decisive transformation in aesthetic or discursive direction – which some may see as an inevitable result of translating poetry from one language into another – the translator’s prerogative comes to entail the possibility for a space in which “translation functions as a prism that allows glimpses of many different and potential aspects of a complex work, according to what are necessarily differing understandings, aims and sensations” (Henitiuk 20).

Such an approach was particularly useful, even necessary, in translating the much older, classical poems included in our Persian anthology. It is undeniable that my and my collaborator’s “understandings, aims and sensations” are radically different to those of the highly religious, evangelical Sufi poets who lived in medieval Persia; and, by seeing our task as not one of offering a *definitive English version* but a “different and potential” version of a mystical *ghazal*, it was made possible for us to not only engage with works with (political, spiritual and ethical) values different to our own, but to also view our project as a creative – as opposed to scholastic – engagement. This meant that our versions of well-translated classical poems by the likes of Rumi, Hafez and Omar Khayyam did not have to resemble existing English versions of these poems, and we took pleasure in transforming these poems – however subtly and without an overt deviation from the linguistic and prosodic attributes of the originals – into texts that expanded on and reflected our own literary and theoretical desires.

As such, the process of poetry translation has the capacity to be as stimulating and artistically satisfying and rewarding as that of writing one’s own *original* poetry, and this may further explain why we are in the midst of what I referred to above as a translational turn in contemporary poetry.

Constraints, limited reception and anti-interpretive communities

While the abovementioned ideas – of collaboration, discovery and transformation – made the creation of our Persian anthology an engrossing and at times joyful experience, a number of other aspects of the work have rendered it challenging and continue to make me feel concerned not only

about this particular project but also about the entire milieu of poetry translation. Before mentioning some of these aspects, I would like to state that my discussion from here on is made in the spirit of provoking thought and solutions apropos of these proposed problematics, and I do not at all wish to undermine the work I've done on *Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants*, nor do I wish to critique the processes and aims of other authors involved in similar projects.

My major challenge during the first stage of the project, during the reading and shortlisting of a large number of original Farsi-language poems – prior to finalizing the selections and translating these into English with John Kinsella – had to do with what Walter Benjamin has discussed in his influential 1923 essay as the foremost task of a translator, that is, the demand to discern and “incorporate the original’s mode of signification” (79). While it would be feasible to determine the linguistic meaning and content of any given poem, Benjamin’s *mode* – or, “manner of meaning” (Stoklosinki 51) – is notoriously varied and almost impossible to localize when one deals with a body of poetry comprising texts written over the course of well over a millennium by poets from a very diverse range of historical, ethnic, confessional and aesthetic origins. To address this demand, we had not only to analyze the form and content of the original pieces, but also to decipher and accept, as Benjamin would have it, an original poem’s “intended effect” (77). This exigency required, in other words, deducing the discourse or philosophy of each individual poem, and then deciding whether or not such a discourse or ideology would be something that my co-translator and I would be happy to respond to in the process of writing our new English versions, irrespective of the eventual degree of creativity or refraction in our final approach.

The work of the before-mentioned religious, Sufi poets, for example, posed a major challenge to my personal, atheist/materialist sensibilities. Time and again I found that, despite my admiration for the lyrical and prosodic qualities of the poetry of Attar and Rumi, among others, these poets’ firm belief in a creator, an afterlife and suchlike opposed my attempts at appreciating their “mode” or “manner”. I am further concerned that by translating such poems – and by seeing to their publication by an established commercial publisher – I may have, inadvertently, contributed to the propagation of religious writing, something that, as a secularist and a Marxist, I find rather troubling. Whilst it is possible to read and appreciate a medieval Persian *ghazal* as a purely literary text – and to interpret the genre’s common tropes and allegorical motifs such as *eshq* (love) and *saaqee* (wine-bringer) as those of a romantic or picaresque poetics – my knowledge of these texts’ religious modes or intentions meant that I had to struggle against my own subjective judgements in reading, assessing and choosing to work on translating these poems, and that I remain somewhat unsure about the outcome of espousing, however unintentionally and indirectly, the words of moralist and ascetical Islamic preachers.

The fundamental difference between my subjectivity and that of many of the poets selected and translated for our anthology could be seen as what Adele D’Arcangelo has described, in the context of her own translation of contemporary prose across linguistic, cultural and generational divides, as “an element of constraint” or a “gap” (93). However, while this gap presents D’Arcangelo with an enticing challenge – one which she has chosen to address through an astute oscillation between the differing registers of colloquial and official language use – the chasm between my worldview and that of many of the poets eventually included in our anthology presented itself as a significant hindrance, resulting in my decision to only translate poets with whom I have a strong philosophical and political affinity in the future.

Another decision that I have made, this time in the light of our anthology’s reception since its publication a year ago, has been to rethink having my translations from Farsi published bilingually, that is, having my or my and my co-writer’s versions published alongside the original Farsi texts. *Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants* is, as mentioned earlier, a bilingual publication, in keeping with the current trend to have poetry books in translation feature the new English version next to the original script. While I can see the obvious advantages of this approach when it comes to translations from many European languages, I believe it is quite problematic,

even counterproductive, for books which include translations from languages that do not use the Latin alphabet.

In the case of English translations from languages using the Latin alphabet – as per my own experience of reading bilingual versions of Dante, Rimbaud and Neruda, among others – the Anglophone reader could compare and contrast the translator’s version against the original text, however successfully, since the reader is capable of recognizing – if not comprehending – the words and syntactic units of the original text due to the original text using the same alphabet as the one used by the English-language reader. Such a reader could note the *basic accuracy* of the translated version – even if the notion of accuracy is extremely provisional – which would result in the reader establishing rapport and trust, however rightly, in the translator’s version.

However, in the case of a poetry publication featuring a non-Latin alphabet which the overwhelming majority of Anglophone readers would find simply illegible – in our case, the Arabic alphabet – the very presence of such an impenetrable script could, far from encouraging rapport between the reader and the translator or even conveying an exotic allure, have an alienating effect. The readers of such a publication may feel ill-equipped to establish trust in the translations’ basic accuracy as they have no way of recognizing the material/visual inscription of the basic units of the original poems’ language and, as a result, they may come to feel inadequate and incapable of appreciating the value of the work undertaken by the translator/s.

This is, to my mind, one of the main explanations for our anthology being hardly reviewed or discussed since its publication by a renowned UK publisher. That despite so much current intellectual and popular interest in Iran and the Middle East this anthology has received fewer and much less substantial reviews than my other books – my first, self-published book of avant-garde poetry, available only at three bookshops in Melbourne in 2002, was much more widely reviewed than *Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants* – is nothing short of puzzling, and one explanation is that many readers and reviewers are uncertain about responding to a book half of which is written in an entirely unfamiliar script. Another related explanation is that many reviewers, even those with some interest in Persian poetry and/or possibly some knowledge of Farsi and its artistic formations, may not feel confident about publicly commenting on a book featuring non-Western works, lest these readers make comments that may appear *culturally insensitive, ignorant, Eurocentric* and so on. I feel, at any rate, that our anthology has been more or less ignored by the reading public, and that it has fallen on the deaf ears of – to paraphrase Stanley Fish’s famous phrase – an *anti-interpretive community* of readers.

The paucity of responses to our anthology can be demonstrated by a brief citation of the only two existing reviews of the publication, if these may indeed be called *reviews*. In the two paragraphs on the book written by David Hart in the October 2012 issue of *Stride Magazine*, the reviewer comments on the anthology’s introduction, and on one of the two included poems written by a contemporary diaspora Iranian writer, a poem originally written in English and hence appearing in our anthology untranslated without an accompanying Farsi text. The reviewer then quotes from one of the poems translated from Farsi. The other reviewer, Ian Pople, writing on a British poetry blog titled *Eyewear* in January 2013, also mentions the Anglophone diaspora poet in his own two-paragraph commentary, and he, rather problematically, reads our anthology in the context of a comparison with a recently published volume of the British poet Basil Bunting’s translations of Persian poetry. The reviewer, therefore, expresses confusion at our not including a medieval poet whom “Bunting rated as one of the very greatest”. What Hart’s and Pople’s reviews convey, in short, is an unwillingness to engage with our anthology as such; and that theirs have been the only public responses to our book – a book which has been five years in the making, and which, in its publisher’s words, is “a groundbreaking new collection of poems presenting the wealth of poetic voices from one of the world’s most important literary cultures” – is nothing short of disappointing.

Conclusion

It is my view that the above concerns hint at the limits of translation as a scene of contemporary literary culture. As also mentioned, poetry translation has the potential to constitute a truly creative and exciting literary development, and yet the current circumstances – to do with most Anglophone readers' attitudes regarding non-Western languages and/or languages written in non-Latin alphabets; the dearth of suitably knowledgeable, enthusiastic and confident reviewers and commentators capable of writing adequate responses to a diverse body of translated writings; and the *gap* between many a translator's values and the principles of the works chosen for translation – impose constraints on the ways in which a translation project may be conceived, conducted and ultimately received by the reading public. It is my hope that scholars of translation studies will attempt to address these obstacles alongside championing the art of literary translation.

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