Translating Rumi

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Anthony Lee

published in elixir-journal.orgvol. 3

2016 Summer

It is now a cliché to observe that the forces of globalization have transformed the world into a neighborhood. New networks of trade and transportation, instant communication, mass media and social media, as well as an unprecedented flow of millions of refugees have brought not only wealthy elites, but also whole populations in touch with one another as never before. But it is a less commonly acknowledged truth that the neighborhood into which the world has contracted is often an angry and dangerous one. Populations feel themselves distant, alien, and estranged from one another, regardless of their proximity in time and space. Despite globalization, the “other” remains unknown and threatening. Random and horrific acts of violence are a common feature of everyday life. Psychologically, we remain as distant from one another as our grandparents were.

That is why translations of world literature must continue to be undertaken and published. Literature is where we look to explain our deepest experiences to ourselves. What other kinds of words in our culture can explain us to other peoples as well as do those potent, enduring ones that fuel powerful literary works? Where else can we look to understand one another and experience our common humanity? This is especially true of poetry, which endures throughout the ages as the most condensed, the most intense, and the most fundamentally emotional form of literature. We excavate poems from history, and they become alive in the present, across boundaries of time and space and culture. Encapsulating whole civilizations in iconic verses, poems demand that we respond to their humanity. That is why the translation of poetry is both urgent and necessary.

My most recent volume of translations from Arabic of the poems of Jalal al-Dim Rumi, completed in collaboration with Dr. Nesreen Akhtarkhavari, a professor of Arabic at DePaul University in Chicago, is entitled Love Is My Savior (Michigan State University Press, 2016). A first time reader may be surprised to find that Rumi’s poems insist on the central role of love in Islamic texts and traditions. Rumi finds in Islamic spirituality and mystic poetry a vehicle for the expression of the endless spiritual bounties of love. Love is the center of his faith and also stands at the center of his practice of Islam. It is love that confirms Rumi's connection with the Divine. In his work, he pronounces love to be the goal of his life and the only form of true worship, and he demands the same of his readers. In one especially powerful poem, he declares:

If you're not in love, you have lost your soul.

He calls! The breeze of his love is our goal.

Glory resurrected you, glory made you whole!

If you're not in love, life has passed you by.1

But how is it possible. . . .All this said, how is translation possible—especially the translation of poems? At first glance, any attempt to translate a poem from one language to another would seem futile. Every poem is a condensed form of language that captures the essence of human experience: it must appeal to the mind as much as to the heart, in images and words with deep cultural value, on multiple levels, suggesting multiple meanings. If we were to alter even slightly a poem in its original language by changing a few words here and there, we would destroy the value and beauty of the work. How, then, can all the words of a poem be changed to words in a different language, with their foreign connotations and associations, and anything of the original meaning and effect be preserved?

But poetry is not only words: rather, it is the language we turn to when words fail to express our thoughts and feelings adequately. Poetry is, in fact, an attempt to move beyond words, to communicate states of mind and spirit that cannot be described, but which the poet nonetheless attempts to evoke by using words. In that sense, poetry is the purest expression of our humanity. A poem only points to or suggests a truth: it does not delineate it. A poem must conjure emotion in the reader. If it doesn't, then the poem is a failure. So, perhaps it is possible to find those emotions—across languages, across cultures, across time—and to translate poems that will move new readers? I believe that by some miracle of language it is possible, but not by means of merely translating words from one language into another. Translators of poetry must do more than this: they must struggle to find concepts, music, and images in the new language and apply their craft to creating the same effect as these had in the original poem.

The challenge for the translator is to bring a poem from one language and culture into another language and culture, while remaining true to both the spirit and the meaning of the original. In this effort, a word-for-word translation is of no help at all. Moreover, a translation that provides only the meaning of a poem, while it may give a fairly thorough understanding of what the poet said, translates nothing of the beauty or excitement of the original. It loses the poem altogether, replacing it with a dull explanation.
The worst outcome of any translation of Rumi, for example, would be to take a

poem that sounds natural, urgent, and beautiful in Persian or Arabic, and render it in English prose or poetry that is flaccid, dull, ponderous, or awkward. Scholarly translations have often fallen into that trap and have frequently disappointed their readers.

The goal of my translation of the Arabic verses of Rumi was to craft translations in English that would be successful as poems on their own terms, while remaining as close and true to the form and meaning of the originals as possible. In most cases, the poems are translated line for line, so the Arabic reader can follow in the original language on the facing page. Rhyme and meter are such vital and integral aspects of Rumi's poetry — of all classical poetry — that the translators felt both had to be accommodated and incorporated in the translation. However, the traditional meters of Arabic poetry were exchanged, in most cases, for iambic pentameter, the conventional rhythm of English poetry. While it is foreign to Arabic poetry, this meter gives the poems a rhythm that is familiar to and comfortable for the English reader.

Poetry as Poetry

The collaboration between an Arabic scholar, Nesreen Akhtarkhavari, and a poet who knows no Arabic at all, myself, might raise eyebrows. Our method of translation began with Dr. Akhtarkhavari making a literal translation into English of each line, preserving the original line structure. The next step was for me to take those lines and rewrite them as acceptable poems in English. The first drafts were then returned to the Arabic scholar for comment and correction; and then, back and forth, until both of us were satisfied with the results. The act of "translating" was accomplished through this process. The meaning of the Arabic had to be understood by the poet, myself, who then sought to find words and images in English that would be as clear and powerful as those in the original. The literal meaning of the words had to be guarded by the Arabic speaker, while the clarity and power of the poem needed to be recreated by the English poet.

Of course, the quality of the result always depends upon the knowledge of the Arabic scholar and the skill of the English poet. This method of translation is relatively new to academia, which has traditionally relied on the unassisted scholar of languages to provide translations of poetic texts. More recently, the necessity of collaboration has come to be appreciated. The impossible task of the poet must be to create a poem in a new language, with respect for the original, but in words and images that resonate in a culture that is far removed from the concrete truths, if not the spirit, in which the poem has its origins. The translations should be startling and seductive, natural-sounding, and fascinating. They must call up a poetic world of their own, in our case the mystic world of Rumi.

Let's take, for example, a short poem of Rumi that we entitled "Glad Tidings!" Here Rumi complains about attacks on his mystic beliefs and practice, saying they are all based on love for his Master, Shams-e Tabrizi.

The Arabic and the literal translation is as follows:

The carrier of glad tidings arrived, brought glad tidings with an announcement

He resurrected the heart on the eve with his arrival

He was a land that blossomed with its spring

He was a sun that rose

through her cheeks

O one who is blaming me for

my infatuation and immorality

Look at the fire of love and its fuel

But this is how the lines read when the literal word-for-word translation was shaped into a poem:

Glad Tidings!
He came with Glad Tidings. He brought Good News!

He raised the dead! Revived my heart's refuse.

He is Spring! The desert blooms. Renewal!

He's the rising Sun! The face of God's rule.

You hate me for my love and sinfulness?
See the flames of my love! He's their fuel.

Poems must be approached and read as poems, not as works of philosophy, even in translation. Each poem invites us to enter a world that is unique and beyond time and space. We enter, as if it were, another dimension where time stands still; we forget where we are sitting; and we find ourselves transfixed by the beauty of Rumi's mystical experiences, understood on no other terms but their own. The reader must judge.

In the first poem in our volume, "Let's Be Pure."2, Rumi writes—no, sings!—of his love and longing for his long-disappeared Master, Shams-e Tabrizi:

Let's Be Pure

Come on! Come on! Come on, now! Let's be pure.

Let's end our flirtation with temptation,

let your glance cleanse us of degradation,

return to the pure wine we drank when we

sat in congregation, the cups passed 'round

and offered up with no hesitation,

pure, cool, shimmering nectar of salvation. . .

We drank in secret—some days in the street.

Our wine's perfume was carried off so far

even the desert beasts yearned for its sweet.

But you're the key that opens up the jars

of that red flow, when friends sit at your feet.

There, every priceless thing becomes a lie.

There, drunk on wine and drunk on you, I lie.

I love and drink, and when I hate I die.

My friends, forgive me! My Lord, hear my cry

I'm melting with desire and love's duty

for my Master—Just look at his beauty!—

my refuge from death and calamity.

May God bless any land where Shams may be!

God gave Tabriz the best of his bounty.

Footnotes:

1 - "Banner of Love," Love Is My Savior, p. 7.

2 - "Let's Be Pure," Love Is My Savior, p. 3.

Anthony Lee

Bio: Anthony A. Lee, Ph.D., teaches African American history at UCLA and at West Los Angeles College. He has collaborated on a number of books of poetry in translation. The most recent, with Nesreen Akhtarkhavari is Love Is My Savior: The Arabic Poems of Rumi (Michigan State University Press, 2016).

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