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Heteropoesia: Basil Bunting's Translation of Obayd Zākānī's *Mush-o Gorbeh*

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the role of 'selving' and creative interpretation in literary translation. Specifically, it analyzes one of Basil Bunting's successful translations of Obayd Zākānī's *Mush-o Gorbeh*, a picturesque and catchy poem in rhyme and rhythm, laden with animal characters, which was considered to be both a masterpiece of children's literature and a very important political satire. Bunting, a translator of Persian classical poems into English, had both political and poetic missions as a spy and an up-and-coming poet. This study turns to the theories of translation by Steiner, Benjamin, and Bassnett, among others, to show the challenges of translating Persian poetry. Through an in-depth analysis of this translated work in dialogue with Bunting's other works, this manuscript shows how the two missions sometimes overlapped. Ultimately, however, it is argued that literary translation functions as an aesthetic 'other' place where the translator can act as a cultural double agent, working to the advantage of both cultures.

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1. Introduction

This study examines Bunting's translation of Obayd Zākānī's *Mush-o Gorbeh* ("The Pious Cat"), the second section of a larger project that started with Bunting's translation of a poem by Rūdhakī (On the Poet's Rotten Teeth), which was analyzed in a previous publication (Naghipour, 2024). Bunting's choice of these poems for translation reflects his boldness and cleverness in terms of content and difficulty. His translations, despite their flaws, tackle two main challenges in literary translation: the cultural-linguistic barrier between English and Persian, and the translator's motivations that shape the texts and the author's worldview. By comparing the original and the translated poems, this paper explores the possible reasons behind the translator's semantic choices in relation to the context and the translator's frame of mind.

The paper discusses Bunting's 'act' of translation in relation to his aesthetic agenda and his poetics, which motivated him to choose *Mush-o Gorbeh*, a poem that combines political satire and children's literature. Moreover, the paper situates Bunting's 'act' within his life and his changing artistic and political views during and after his stay in Iran during the Second World War (1939-1945). This paper highlights Bunting's attempts, influenced by colonialist and modernist discourses, to reconcile the two cultures in question. To contextualize this aesthetic 'escapade,' it employs Foucault's notion of heterotopia and considers Bunting's translations as "Heteropoesia" (the 'other place' of poesy). This study concludes by showing how Bunting's translations differ from his political and poetic agendas, which are essentially one-way roads (colonialist and modernist, respectively), and how he finds a way to deal with the effort of reconciliation.

2. Zākānī's The Pious Cat[1]

Obayd Zākānī (c. 1300-1371 AD) was a satirist and poet from central Iran (Qazvin, Zākān), who spent the best part of his literary life in Shiraz at around the same time as other renowned intellectuals, Sa'di, Jahān-Malek Ḵhātun, and Hafez. Obayd is best known for his masterpiece of political satire, "*The Mouse and The Cat*," which was written in a mock-heroic style. It retains the grand and dignified form of an epic but deals with a rather trivial theme: the quarrel between the pious cat and the reckless mouse. Whereas a mock-heroic poem normally offers a disjunction between high-flown rhetoric and trivial subject matter, *Mush-o Gorbeh* is a multi-layered symbolic text: it is picturesque and catchy in rhyme and rhythm, laden with animal characters, and suitably called a children's book—it is considered one of the first instances of children's literature in Persian; however, and more importantly to Persian literature, it is also a political satire depicting the contradictory history of fourteenth century Iran. The political and religious undertones of the text—including but not limited to excessive use of power, and

[1] Bunting's translation of the poem can be found here: Bunting, Basil, and Don Share, *The Poems of Basil Bunting* 159-164. Zākānī's *Mush-o Gorbeh* can be found at: https://ganjoor.net/obeyd/moosh-gorbe.

the habit of manipulating religion as a device to deceive, divide, and rule—has made the text the target of numerous censors, emendations, and outright bans over the past seven centuries. Understood either way (Bunting took it to be a children's book), the poem deals, with precision and clarity, the at-moments bloody conflict between cat and mouse, their armies, their artilleries, their respective political agendas, and their various joys and griefs.

Obayd compares and contrasts the lives of ordinary people with those of rulers, judges, and the aristocracy (Gorjizadeh, 2001, pp. 36-37). It stems from the social spirit of an age in which the weak, no matter how mobilized and united, will always be trampled by the ruling class, and their lives at perpetual risk. One particular historical reading of the text is given by Zabihollah Safa in the third volume of his *History of Literature in Iran* (1993). Safa recounts the conflicts between Sheikh Abu Eshagh Inju (1321-1357)—the last emperor of the Mughal Inju dynasty who ruled over the Fars and Isfahan provinces for fifteen years—and Amir Mubariz al-Din Muhammad (1301-1358)—founder of the Muzafarid Dynasty who ruled over Kerman and Yazd provinces. According to Safa, Cat's penitence in the story harkens back to the repentance of Amir Mubariz al-Din and his subsequent allegiance to a recently converted Egyptian caliph. In 1337, after having killed thousands of people in central Iran and having stolen their land and money, Mubariz, in a sudden fit of conscience, took to piety and prayers, building mosques and donating money in Kerman. In these ways, he was able to win the hearts of his subjects, prompting tribal leaders to send him tributes and offerings from around the country. A while later, in the name of religion and piety, the Amir tore down taverns and started killing his adversaries with even more ferocity (Safa: 972). In the story, the war between cats and mice in the deserts of Fars refers to the same spot where the battle took place between the Amir and Sheikh Abu Eshagh, which resulted in the latter's escape from Shiraz and his subsequent assassination in 1357, and the people of Fars mourning their sad defeat for several days. Moreover, Mubariz himself is known to have used the term 'cat' as a derogatory term to refer to his enemies. Zākānī also used cat as a derogatory term to point fingers at Mubariz, something that the Kermani and Yazdi readers, disgusted and exhausted by the Amir's atrocities, would have easily picked up on in the poem.

Both Sheikh Abu Eshagh Inju and Amir Mubariz al-Din were hypocrites,[1] and both had several traits in common: double standards, feigned piety, inebriety, and recklessness. Not surprisingly, Cat and Mouse in Zākānī's story also have these traits. In the text, there is reference to the Ilkhanate dynasty, under whose name Abu Eshagh was ruling Shiraz (Zākānī: line 44), and to the name Mubariz ('مبارز'; Zākānī, line 43). However, Safa's suggestion that the timeline and historical background of the age in *Mush-o Gorbeh* absolutely and intentionally parallels that of Iranian history of the time is pure speculation, since Zākānī never explained his motives for writing the poem. Amongst critics, the idea of the poem's rootedness in

[1] Although, the former is said to have had a taste for music and poetry—hence, the enormous popularity of Obayd, Hafiz, and Sa'di from Shiraz.

historical and political events has both its opponents and proponents. For example, Mojtaba Minavi traces the conflict between cat and mouse not only in ancient Persian literature, but also in and amongst Greek and Indian folk tales, including the *Kalila and Demna*—parts of which had been translated into verse by Rūdhakī ("The Tale of Mush-o Gorbeh in Verse" 401-406). Mohammad Hakim Azar, on the other hand, finds historical and political affinities between the *Mush-o Gorbeh* and Obayd's other satirical writings with more direct references to the rulers of the time ("On the Social Context of Obayd's Satire" 102-113). In any case, *Mush-o Gorbeh* reveals the hypocrisies of religion, politics, and the various levels of power-play at a very tumultuous time in the history of Iran.

According to Richard Caddel, Bunting "intended this fable to be published as an illustrated book for children" (*Uncollected Poems* 64). At a poetry reading in Leeds in 1978, Bunting confirmed his aspirations for the story, saying: "It was seized upon not so much by the politicians as by the children, and it has remained for now 600 years the principal children's book of Persia. When I left Persia less than thirty years ago, it was still the book which children first read, about the age of twelve or so" (qtd. in Share, *Poems* 432). Bunting worked on the text for forty years (1937-977) before he deemed it publishable, which it finally was, posthumously, in 1986.

3. Translation as 'Expansive Transformation'

As David Damrosch observes, translation, in the vein of George Steiner, is more an act of interpretation than a "faded replica of the original"; it is rather an "*expansive transformation* of it, with an ethical responsibility to do justice to the original, though a variety of strategies can certainly be employed to that end" ("Translation and World Literature" 426; emphasis added). In the case of the text in question, Bunting's choice of reading it as children's literature can on the surface be seen as not so much an expansive transformation as it is an 'under-translation.' If one takes for granted Bunting's 'mistake' in his choosing to interpret the text as purely written for children (without absolutely any regard for the prevailing political undertone of the satirical poem), then Steiner's hermeneutic motion (*After Babel*, 1975) is supposedly turned on its head. But here, I will regard the text's belonging to children's literature as a given.

The place names are of course changed and rendered anglophone. 'Cat' from the city of 'Kerman' is now 'Tibbald' from 'Haltwhistle' (lines 11-19). The mosque Cat goes for penitence is changed into a church (lines 46-49). The presents the renowned mice took to Cat in good faith are transformed as well: The bottle of wine is altered to "a bottle of Schiedam" (line 86); a tray of dates is translated as "spaghetti by the yard" (line 89); a container full of cheese is transformed into "hot dogs, with Cocacola" (line 91); and fresh Amani (Jordanian) lemon juice is changed into "lemonade" (line 93). Moreover, during the preparation for war between the two armies, Zākānī mentions names of famous cities from which both Cat and Mouse mobilized their soldiers and state-of-the-art weaponry to fight in the desert of Shiraz.

Bunting chose to translate one of the poem's place names, anglicized as such: "But when he had watched the messenger mount he / called all the cats he could find in the county / and drilled them daily on the fells / to scratch, bite and fire off rockets and shells, / till one cold dawn they saw the host / of mice advancing from *Solway coast*" (lines 171-176). Reminiscent of the Second World War that was in the air (just over a year before the War began) when Bunting had started the translation, he adds modern war terminology regarding tactics and weaponry—rifles, sabres (line 125), bayonets, pistols, shells, bombs, gas-masks (lines 148-9)—as opposed to the spears, daggers, swords, bows and arrows of the original.

If we look at the translation generally through the Steinerian lens of hermeneutic motion, we find the following: (a) initiative trust: Bunting takes a naïve and unprecedented stab at translating the "yet untried, unmapped" (Steiner 296) poem by Zākānī; (b) aggression: Bunting, here, is like a colonizer who discovers and explores a new land, finds something precious there, loots, and returns home; (c) incorporation: Bunting embodies what he plundered from Zākānī's text in his own language. He anglicizes place names, changes the cultural traits, and modernizes artillery terminology, etc. Thus, he creates disequilibrium by taking away from "the other" and by adding to his own cultural production (Steiner 300). And finally, we come to (d) restitution: but in Bunting's poem, cultural context is not altogether lost in translation. Rather, it is transformed, in the imposition of place names and the politics of global war. Bunting restores the balance by retaining the rhyme scheme and choosing a style that is suitable for young readers. The opposing forces stemmed from his limiting comprehension of the original (that is, a disregard for the politically charged undertones of the text) come to an equilibrium by retaining a consistency at all levels, making the translated text an organic work suitable for children, thus bringing the hermeneutic cycle to its completion. However, this is only a loose analysis of the interpretation process of how the translation fares. Indeed, there are very strong and positive aspects to the translation of *Mush-o Gorbeh* whose success cannot be totally grasped by the hermeneutics of translation proposed by Steiner.

4. The Theory of 'Shutting Off Theory'

In his translation of the *Harry Potter* series into Slovenian, Jakob J. Kenda incorporates Steiner's first and second hermeneutic motions and does away with the third and fourth. This is what Kenda calls a strategy of 'shutting off,' as he believes too much theory would inevitably control and superimpose a sense of closure on the translator's work that would impact the process of 'rewriting.' Stressing the concepts of meaning and meaning making (or its lack thereof) in translation, Kenda merges the first two levels of the hermeneutic motion, stating that—and I paraphrase: the fact that the author decides to translate whenever s/he sees "there is something there" is an interpretive process and should therefore be applied on the text itself—after all the research has been done, and the decisions on whether or not one should translate the text has been made ("Rewriting Children's Literature" 163). The notion of 'thereness,' Kenda suggests, is to be used for choosing from a list of myriad meanings the

ones most fitting for the target audience. The meaning of proper names, for instance, is important to consider. Even if read as a children's story, 'Cat' of *Mush-o Gorbeh* does have historical undertones referring to Amir Mubarez; that said, this dimension of its meaning is at best a remote piece of historical knowledge to the Persian speaking youngster who reads it. Though there are other proper names and place names in the original, the 'Cat' figure retains its element of strangeness for the Persian child as much as it would for and Anglophone one. Cat is, as I mentioned, a duplicitous and hypocritical ruler who finds religion and mosque-going as a new means to undermine his subjects.

As Eugene Eoyang suggests in *The Transparent Eye*, "a translation should render both exoteric (transparent) and esoteric (opaque) aspects of a text. In the former, "the message must be transmitted through words that replace the original"; and in the latter, "a just degree of elusiveness must be preserved." It is the second, opaque, aspects of the original that prove to be most challenging: "the meaning must be opaque, but not impenetrable" (129). In order for Bunting to provide a more than acceptable rendition—aside from transferring the exoteric aspects—he would need to trace and internalize the implications of the pious cat in Persian, before attempting to reproduce the same level of impact for the young English reader. What Bunting does to retain this element of strangeness is curious: He gives the pious cat a name in the translation: Tibbald. With allusions to Lewis Theobald (1688-1744) who was lampooned by Alexander Pope in the mock-heroic poem, *The Dunciad* (1728)—branded as one of his "Kings of Dunces"[1]—Bunting's Tibbald character echoes the original text's alien elements for the target readers. Added to it the fact that the 'Tibbald' of Bunting attends church and not mosque, also that his being a cat might allude derogatorily to the minority Christian denomination of Roman Catholicism to which Alexander Pope belonged, it seems that Bunting's translation was more than a mere domestication or foreignization of Zākānī's text. Seen through Kenda's notion of 'thereness,' juxtaposed with Damrosch's 'expansive transformation' of meaning as the sole cornerstone of the translation structure, "The Pious Cat" finds a way to free itself from vacillating in front of an impasse that lies ahead of any translator of literary texts: "foreignization or domestication?" [2] Rather, the translation's success lies in its power to deterritorialize, striving to reach an 'interlinearity' that plucks the text from its historical rootedness, and giving it a universal dynamic framework.

5. Towards Interlinearity

At this juncture, and in the vein of Kenda, I would like to 'shut off' the hermeneutic motion to see it from another angle. Steiner introduces three different modes of translation that has been practiced since Dryden: *metaphrasis*, *imitatio*, and *paraphrasis*. The first one, metaphrase, is a word-for-word translation, suitable only for translation into prose, since much of the original form of the poem must be lost in order to maintain the integrity of the text in the target

[1] See Barnard, John. *Alexander Pope*: The Critical Heritage 227.
[2] For a better view of such dichotomy in practice, see, e.g., Eco, *Experiences in Translation*, pp. 22-25.

language. The second mode, imitation, is the opposite extreme of metaphrase: it enables the translators to appropriate the original freely into their own tongue. Metaphrase gives the translator the freedom to partially incorporate the target text with the transfer of meaning and sense, while acknowledging the right to take liberties with the original text, abandoning some words and senses altogether. Here, in Steiner's words, "[t]he translator absorbs the sense of the foreign work but does so in order to substitute for it a construct drawn from his own tongue and cultural milieu. A native garb is imposed on the alien form" (*After Babel* 249). The third mode, paraphrase, is an attempt to create a *tertium datum*, a third, 'hybrid' language that gives in neither to the novelties of the original text, nor to the experimental playfulness of the target language. This is a hybrid region, an "interlinearity" that inspires the translator to strive toward. Hereby, "[t]he circle in which 'the foreign and the native, the known and the unknown move' is harmoniously closed." Paraphrase makes sure that the translation does not stand 'instead of' the original, but rather 'in place of' it (270). I will come back to this distinction shortly.

Bunting's translation of *Mush-o Gorbeh* is neither a metaphrase nor an imitation. Rather, it is a paraphrase of the original, in which Bunting's craftmanship of perfecting his overdraft in the span of forty years has given the work what Steiner calls a 'translation with latitude,' "where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense, and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered" (*After Babel* 269). In other words, "The Pious Cat" sticks to the *intentio* of the original as children's literature, without adhering to either a word-for-word or a free imitation, none of which would carry over to the target language the *sense* of the original. Bunting's success lies with his ability to translate the satirical poem's sense adapted in a way that suits the English tongue.

Walter Benjamin, in "The Task of the Translator," speaks of a pure language that both the original and the translation should aspire toward (*Illuminations* 78). The concept of a pure, 'greater language' is a Kabbalistic view that all languages complement each other to point to an 'original' tongue, striving to become one in that *mission* towards primordial purity. In this sense, purity becomes a pre-Babylonian concept, originating from the time when the tower of Babel held every single book of the world; the time when—before what Maurice Blanchot calls "the confusion of languages" (*Friendship* 58)—no translation was needed because all languages were the same. Steiner's hermeneutic motion, by which the process of translation can be scaled, starts *after* Babel, and works against a 'puristic' notion of language as a slate of unmixed forms. Moreover, whereas Benjamin sets his theory of translation so that he can differentiate the task of the translator from that of the poet ("Task" 76), Steiner sees the act of a good translator exactly on the same level as one done by an artist: both create and recreate. In fact, as Octavio Paz says, "in writing any original poem, we are translating the

world, we are transmuting it. Everything we do is translation, and all translations are in a way creations."[1]

If, however, for the eighteenth-century figure, Joseph Joubert (1754-1824), "[t]he imagination has made more discoveries than the eye" (*Notebooks* 30)[2]; for a translator, the two qualities merge: imagination and vision are inseparable. An artist is in dialogue with their imagination, dealing with what s/he perceives through a particular medium, be it nature, society, personal experience, or all the above. A literary translator, intensely hands-on and hard at work, is in dialogue with those media as well;[3] nonetheless, for the translator, the driving force and the loadstar, the landscape 'in place of' which s/he sketches on the easel, is the original text.

Although drastically different in approach, Steiner does seem to form his conception of a good translation closer to the Benjaminian frame of mind. Benjamin distinguishes between 'pure language' and all other, supplemented languages. In Paolo Bartoloni's words, to Benjamin, "[p]ure language exists before languages and languages are born out as a direct result of the Fall" ("Benjamin, Agamben, and the Paradox of Translation" 2). In describing the third mode of translation, paraphrasis, Steiner posits two kinds of approaches in the philosophy of translation: (a) translation as something "instead of the original" and (b) translation as something "in place of the original." Those who translate 'instead of' are parodists who put premium on enriching their own culture (albeit half-heartedly), in accordance with the spirit of the age. Ironically, however, their total disregard of the target text and haphazard cherry-picking also means that their work is not ready to enforce new concepts—elements of strangeness—into their culture and onto the consciousness of their readers. On the other hand, those who translate 'in place of' the original, keep the original in hindsight, retain the alien element, while letting the rendition evolve "a new and richer structure." Such is the case with Goethe's rendition of Hafiz:

> Goethe and […] Hafiz conjoin their respective forces in a transformational encounter. This meeting and melting takes place 'outside' German and Persian—or, at least, 'outside' German as it has existed until the moment of translation. But both tongues are enriched through the creation of a new hybrid or, more precisely, entity (*After Babel* 272).

By seeing Goethe deterritorializing[4] the text 'outside' German and Persian, Steiner seems to invoke a new mold in Benjamin's theory; that a 'hybrid,' 'third' space can exist where

[1] See Eugene Chen Eoyang, *The Transparent Eye* 126.

[2] I will come back to Joubert and explore his relationship with writing and translation shortly.

[3] Bunting "urged writers to use a chisel rather than a pen so as to load each individual mark with its maximum freight of meaning and intensity" (Richard Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us* 2).

[4] By deterritorialization, I mean 'separating the text's field of semantic references from its original locale': I am aware of the Deleuzo-Guattarian connotations of the term. However, I side with Steiner's reading of Goethe for the purpose of this study. This is because, firstly, the Goethean frame of mind is striving toward a 'world-literature' conceived through a preplanned set of rules. And secondly, Steiner's

both the source and the original can feed into, thereby enriching both languages without losing much in the process. With regards to Bunting—the translating poet—I rely on Benjamin's notion that the original and the translation *can* liaise in being regarded as operating under one general concept: 'poetry.' This general notion of poetry, fashioned by translators and poets alike, is a concept conducive to the realization that, in translating poems, there is something more than a mere communication of messages taking place from A to B. In line with the late Harold Bloom's notion, 'anxiety of influence,' which posits all works of art as a response to, or a disavowal of, works by previous artists, Steiner states that the "craft of translation" is "exercised in a radical tension between impulses to facsimile and impulses to appropriate recreation" (*After Babel* 246).

6. Bridging the Gap

The fact that translation and metaphor have the same etymological root, meaning 'to carry over or across,' is hardly surprising. It is even less so if we consider that both metaphorical (that is, poetic) language and language-in-translation have taken, in modernity, a new direction, one that would promote bridging gaps between different mediums of expression, on the one hand, and amongst languages and cultures, on the other.[1] Moreover, there is no doubt that translation is a practice that needs to be dealt with—as I have—in direct dialogue with theory. However, and especially in literary translation, the gap between literature and translation itself should be bridged. If language is a system of conveying linguistic nuances, cultural echoes, political aspirations, literary traditions, and historical events, then a translator's task widens the scope of that transport to include her/his own versions of these elements as well. Thus, the 'impulses to appropriate and recreate' hint at a wider platform that require not only an in-depth analysis of the works translated, but also the necessity of 'shutting off' theory and rethinking the means by which the translator's subjectivity can be put under scrutiny. In other words, if we take 'translation of poetry' as 'poetry' itself, the mediating subject who is the linkage between the two, that is, the 'identity' of the translating poet, needs to be interrogated.

Extensive study of a work in translation is limited to two trends in academia: it is seen either through its mistakes (stylistic, grammatical, or otherwise), or it is gauged through the levels of its fidelity and faithfulness to the original. The two trends often converge as they raise problems of translatability and un-translatability. However, as Barnstone rightly suggests, we should accept the "unholy principle" that neither fidelity nor translatability should be a concern in translation studies. The reason is that A never equals A because the source and target languages

linguistic consciousness, of the translated text, makes this study more tangible without the need to contextualize expansive terminology from other fields.

[1] For more on the relationship between metaphor and translation, see for example Mark Polizzotti, *Sympathy for the Traitor* 19; and Eoyang, *The Transparent Eye* 125-127.

> can never be equal, for numerous semantic and phonic reasons, the most obvious of which is that meanings between languages can overlap, but never fully coincide; similarly, the sound of each language differs from every other and often … has no single overlapping words. … hence, complete fidelity is out of the question. … we should all accept, once and for all, that perfect translatability is impossible. Everything is untranslatable. (*The Poetics of Translation* 42)

Either way, translation is often seen as a function, and as a result, the agency of the translator is disregarded. The translator's thankless toil is largely ignored or acknowledged only minimally. The task is certainly a work-on-the-go, even though it means that the person behind the work is to be hidden by the shadow of the original author. Michael Hofmann's simile nicely captures the snare the translator inevitably gets caught in: "You're an ambulance driver, not a surgeon. If not me, then someone else. If not someone else, then me" ("Speaking in Tongues" [1]). Moreover, the endless attempts by the translator to produce something that waxes original in the eyes of its readers do not recompense their being taken for granted. Anthea Bell calls this 'original façade,' metaphorically, "walking the tightrope of illusion" in her eponymous article (58-67). But, sandwiched between the double-duty a translator owes to the original author and to the target audience is this crucial question: *what of the agency of the translator*? (After all, the translator *is* a double agent. I will come back to the notion of the poet as a double agent shortly).

7. Interpreter of the Self

Maurice Blanchot says that the predicament of an author is like that of Orpheus (*The Space of Literature* 176). Once the author starts writing, s/he turns their back from their object of desire, and thus shatters identity in a place called the literary space. But what if an author does not write? Blanchot sees Joseph Joubert—an eighteenth-century figure I have mentioned earlier—who had never published a book during his lifetime, as a writer *par excellence*.

> Joubert had this gift. He never wrote a book. He only prepared himself to write one, resolutely seeking the right conditions that would allow him to write. Then he forgot even this aim. More precisely, what he sought, this source of writing, this space in which to write, this light to define in space, demanded of him and asserted in him characteristics that made him unfit for any ordinary literary work, or made him turn away from it. He was thus one of the first entirely modern writers, preferring the center over the sphere, sacrificing results for the discovery of their conditions, not writing in order to add one book to another, but to make himself master of the point whence all books seemed to come, which, once found, would exempt him from writing them. (*The Book to Come* 50)

[1] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/nov/22/classics.referenceandlanguages

Rather than finding results, Joubert preferred "the discovery of conditions" that yielded results; he forestalled writing in order to allow new ideas to form. The challenge, though, is to give to the influx of new ideas a 'resting place.' In a similar fashion, in translation, it is indeed less a matter of right- or wrongness than it is about translating *at all*. In the twenty short and long poems Bunting translated from Persian, the quality of his work certainly varies. Valorizing the 'literal' in his translation of Rūdhakī's "Dandaniyyeh" poem (Naghipour 2024), Bunting stops at unqualified ideas; for instance, adding new ideas to justify his faulty literal renditions without qualifying them in a way that would mark a consistency in the overall translated text. What adds insult to injury are various linguistic mistakes that tilt the 'sense' of the rendition off track, wreaking havoc on, and making a muddle of, this simple tenth century elegy. Consequently, in his giving these shortfalls a 'resting place,' Bunting botched his translation of Rūdhakī's poem by working precisely contrary to the 'discovery of conditions,' and against the dynamic, "evolutionary" aspects of language. On the other hand, a literary translation is never finished, as new ideas should be incorporated to make and remake the work-in-progress viable. Literary translation, we are told by Blanchot, corresponds with literary works in their "solemn drift" (*Friendship* 59); translation is in a constant state of flux, travelling and becoming. In this sense, a well-translated poem is never concluded, as I have shown in Bunting's arduous attempt at rendering "The Pious Cat." Through the power of *paraphrasis*, Zākānī's text gains 'latitude' in English, and the 'conditions' of the original are transformed through and through in the span of forty years.

"Should not any discourse on literary translation," Maria Filippakopoulou asks, be "a reflection of text production over time?" ("Translation Drafts and the Translating Self" 19). In line with this stream of thought, Blanchot, quoting Joubert, despises taking any writing as an end-product for granted: "Conclude! What a word. One does not conclude when one stops and declares oneself finished. … when the last word is always the one that offers itself first, the work becomes difficult" (*The Book to Come* 54).

As mentioned, the translator shares the same predicament that an author faces. They are, after all, what Blanchot calls "writers of the rarest sort" (*Friendship* 57). Likewise, translation is never complete, never concluded. The *difficulty* of the task is to decide, after reading and re-reading the text, to the very last word, *whether to translate*: whether, that is, the translator's "evolving perception of the source text" (Filippakopoulou 20) strikes a chord with the evolving nature of the original (Gunnars 78). The evolutionary aspect of the 'text' has a direct relationship with two problems: first, its translatability; and second, its previous translations. The more intricate, the greater its quality and quantity, and the greater its importance in the eyes of its readers, the more a text is, à la Benjamin, 'translatable.' In addition, the more translators see a drift between the original text and its subsequent translations (that is, their failure), the more they are likely to set off translating it themselves. In Bunting's case, as we shall see, he had to learn Persian to realize his desire to read Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* in full before he could decide if he could take on the 'act' of translating it.

Literary translation verges on Blanchotian literary space, as the challenges faced in writing/not-writing and translating/not-translating are to a large extent the same. Gerald Bruns understands Blanchot's notion of literary space as a desultory and plural entity placed in a power-play between *neutre*, "the space of the neither/nor" (*The Refusal of Philosophy* 22), and *il y a*, an "existence without being" (52). 'Literary space,' therefore, is a space that facilitates the self-effacing writer/translator either to write (in the Blanchotian sense), or, in its extreme case, to *not* write (as in the case with Joubert). Literary translators are thus doomed either way. If they refuse to translate, their failure puts them in a *neuter* space where, as a 'non-writer,' they are not ethically accountable for any misgivings about the ensuing translation. But if they do translate, they will at best remain forever under the shadow of the author, relegated to an 'existence without being.'

8. Live Sparrow or Stuffed Eagle?

But the latter, 'an existence without being,' does not apply to our poet-translator insofar as his translation is infused with autobiographical elements—that is, his *signature*. Translation gives life to the original with respect to its language, its culture, or simply its long-forgotten author; what Benjamin calls the work's 'afterlife' starts from its translation. However, the translator's life is also infused into the text itself. If poetic language is a site where authors start from an essence and infuse their subjectivity toward creating a fiction, for literary translators, the act of translation is also a site for 'selving.' I take the act of translation to be the travelling of language from one domain to another. In this sense, the mutability of language in translation runs concurrent with the mutability of the translators. Invoking Heidegger, Bartoloni points to a constant reciprocity between language and the subject. "What does happen to language as it travels?" Bartoloni asks; "Does it change? … The question cannot be answered in and by language"; however, it can "be answered at the moment when subjectivity becomes the prime reason of the change. Language changes as it is spoken by the subject. As such the actuality of language is nothing other than the subject itself" ("Paradox of Translation" 6).

That is why for Bunting, literary translation (where the travel of language takes place) often becomes a site where the personal and the poetic overlap; perhaps this overlapping is the reason Don Share, the editor of Bunting's *Poems*, places some of his translations under the category of "Uncollected Poems" (vii). By way of example, in the final lines of 'The Pious Cat,' Bunting's translation reads: "That's where this story comes to a stop. / Now, if you think I made it up / you're wrong. I never. It wasn't me, / it was Obaid-e Zakani" (lines 203-206). The suppression of the subjectivity and identity by translators, as a result of their 'second existence' compared to the text's master/author, is a given. However, this anxiety is often addressed by translators either through direct speech or by using word choices and styles that demonstrate their presence on the same level as a co-author's. In Bunting's 'Pious Cat,' the urge to mention the obvious fact that he did not 'make it up' suggests more than merely a humble acknowledgment. The incorporation of the poet-

translator's self in the text speaks to the fact that he does not wish to remain a supplicant and a mouthpiece to Zākānī. This characteristic reverberation of the self/identity is further realized in other aspects of the poem: where Bunting anglicizes place names, modernizes armaments, westernizes references to food and beverages, and gives 'his' anti-hero with 'cattish language' a name (Tibbald) that alludes to its roots in Augustan English literature.

But this is not all; literary translation also has a *metamorphosing* effect. As Paschalis Nikolaou observes, literary translation is a restricting site where the poet-translator explores the original and 'lives with it' for a considerable amount of time to make sense of the shared experiment s/he finds relevant. In the process, "our readings invariably transform us, and thus, in translation, metamorphosis refers not just to what happens to the text, but before that (and in order for the text to transform) to what happens to the poet-translator" ("Turning Inward" 59). It is at this instance—when the poetic and the personal collaborate—that metamorphosis of the text and the self provide a pulsating, living thing. On the one hand, the poet-translator's choosing of a text to translate, and, her/his choice of words, phrases, images, and the overall form of the new poem in motion echo her/his autobiographical tendencies and idiolectic predispositions (68). On the other hand, the translator should sometimes compromise and settle for a less-than-complete rendition (or 'under-translate'), since not all data extracted from a poem are adaptable—as shown in 'The Pious Cat.' I suspect this is why when referring to Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat*, Bassnett suggests "it were better to have a live sparrow than a stuffed eagle." According to Bassnett, Fitzgerald had claimed that he could not retain all the original elements of Khayyam's text while at the same time producing a work that secures the original's 'afterlife'; therefore, he had to 'transfuse' in his rendition elements of his "own worst Life" (*Translation Studies* 76). Viewed in this light, poet-translators, experientially, make a personal event out of the original by transfusing their own life story—incorporating their autobiographical self in the act—even though it might result in 'lessening' the initial effects of the original.

9. The Gripes of Patronage

Such 'transfusion' is especially evident in Bunting's problem with the classical notion (and its modern versions) of patronage. Bunting's rendition of Rūdhakī's poor state and nostalgia for a 'better' past in the poem "Dandaniyyeh" resonates with his own life as a poet in desperate need for a job with a sustainable income (Naghipour 2024). Whereas Rūdhakī's speaker describes a state in the past when he was well off because he had patrons galore, Bunting's translation shows the poet wanting for nothing, *not even* patrons. In his own life, Bunting had a wary suspicion of the idea of patronage. What I examined through textual analysis as a 'mistranslation' (74) could therefore be Bunting's conscious word choice, suggesting a kind

of 'selving' discussed and applied at length by Clive Scott ("The Self of the Translator" 37-51).[1]

Bunting was marginalized most of his career: under the shadow of poets with reputations like Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, his poetic oeuvre went largely unnoticed from the early 1920s to the 1960s. In his article "The Problem of Patronage," Richard Price concurs that Bunting was indeed uncomfortable with relying on the largesse of a patron. While he needed money to live, he hesitantly knew that creativity eventually loses its energy for a dependent, 'enslaved' poet (97). Yet, given the dire economic straits Bunting was often in while struggling to publish (and often to no avail: for example, T. S. Eliot, who worked as a director at Faber and Faber, rejected three of his manuscripts),[2] he was always in search of potential benefactors. He voices these concerns in several poems of his own, as in the one entitled "An arles for my hiring," where his narrator meets a modern patron:

> The Lady asked the Poet:
> Why do you wear your raincoat in the drawing room?
> He answered: Not to show
> My arse sticking out of my trousers (*The Poems* 88; lines 9-12).

Similarly, in the last line of Rūdhakī's "Dandaniyyeh" (on the poet's decrepitude and poverty), when the poet-narrator asks for what Bunting translated as 'my staff and wallet' (line 64), perhaps it was less a mistranslation than a case of projected, autobiographical self-pity, a touch of the poet-translator infusing and insisting upon an albeit problematic stretched resemblance between his situation and that of Rūdhakī (Naghipour, 2024). Indeed, the word choice and the sensationalism expressive in both Rūdhakī's translation and the English poet's own pennilessness bears a striking resemblance to the last line of the "arles" poem, an aside, an interpolation of Bunting's self, set in parentheses[3]: the starving poet, without any hope of getting hired or published, loiters for booze: "(he is cadging for drinks at the streetcorners)" (*Poems* 88; line 15).

10. Translator as Double Agent

I will now turn more fully to the role of the poet-translator as double agent. With Bunting, this 'double agency' gets a twist. Richard Price quotes Bunting's arrival at Persian poetry in his biography, *A Strong Song Tows Us*. During his stay in Genoa in the early 1930s, Bunting came across an old book of Persian poetry:

> I found a book—tattered, incomplete—with a newspaper cover on it marked *Oriental Tales*. I bought it, in French. It turned out to be part of the early 19th

[1] See also: Nikolaou, *Translating Selves: Experience and Identity between Languages and Literatures*.
[2] See for example Forde, *The Poetry of Basil Bunting* 52; and Seed, "Poetry and Politics" 101.
[3] According to Price, this aside, put in parentheses, "shows how much he has himself been sidelined" ("Problem of Patronage" 96).

> century prose translation of Firdausi, and it was absolutely fascinating. I got into the middle of the story of the education of Zal and the birth of Rustam—and the story came to an end! It was quite impossible to leave it there, I was desperate to know what happened next. I read it, as far as it went, to Pound and Dorothy Pound, and they were in the same condition. We were yearning to find out, but we could think of no way. The title page was even missing. There seemed nothing to do but learn Persian.… (183)

Because he could not get his hands on a reliable translation of the *Shahnameh*, he longed to read it in the original. Pound provided him with the Persian text of Ferdowsi along with a couple of English-Persian dictionaries and thus Bunting learned classical Persian in the process. Consequently, his admiration for Persian poetry made him a translator.[1] The combination of his Persophile imagination, his desperate need for employment, along with the onus he felt to serve his country in the Second World War, compelled Bunting to apply for a position as an MI6 intelligence officer in Iran: he got the job.

There is no denying that Bunting's various roles in Iran as a diplomat, a *Times* correspondent, and a British Intelligence member would have qualities that a translator with a mere literary knowledge of Persian poetry would not. On the 29th of October 1953, a year after he was expelled from Iran for espionage charges, Bunting's letter to Zukofsky emphasizes his advantage in understanding Persian poetry over most orientalists and Iranologists in the West:

> It is no boast to say that I am more widely read in Persian than most of the Orientalists in British and European universities, especially in early poets … whose work is fundamental to a real understanding of Persian literature in the same way that the work of Homer and Aeschylus is fundamental to an understanding of Greek. (Cited in Forde: 121)

Once again desperate and jobless after being expelled, Bunting's discontentment and disappointment stem from the fact that he thought his potentials as a poet-translator-spy were not appreciated both in Iran and abroad. Yet, does this mean that Bunting's translations were merely frames for the author to contain his own worldview? Would his political mission in Iran have a part of it? And, are there any clashes between the spy-poet and the spy-translator?

11. Tainted Poetics

In his poetry, as in his personal life, Bunting had an agenda: the absolute separation of poetry from politics. He despised the role poetry had taken as a mouthpiece for various 'isms' that would easily become a propaganda tool for political and war campaigns. Previously, as a conscientious objector, Bunting had been imprisoned during World War I. Later, as a result of his anti-war stance, and during the events that led to World War II, he had once again

[1] See LoLoi and Pursglove, "Basil Bunting's Translations of Hafiz" 186; and Keith Alldritt, *The Poet as Spy* 62; also: Share, *Interview*, "On Cross Cultural Poetics on Bunting's Persia."

found himself living a nomadic life in Europe, fleeing the fascism that was looming large, in the neighborhoods of Rapallo and the Canary Islands.[1] Yet, as poetry was one of his rare devices with which he could express himself, he could never really 'shut-off' and secure his art from the purely 'aesthetic' codes by which he stood. In his poems during the 1930s, Bunting reveals a pessimistic view of the world at the time when the Great Depression took its toll, especially in Britain. Moreover, he often reflects upon his pacifism, echoing his Modernist version of poetic justice in form—both in poetic technique and objectivist language, and in the 'self-reflexivity' prompted by his encounters with various 'others.' In an article entitled "Bunting and the Vile Patterns of Expediency," Alex Wylie discusses the poet's "artistic anti-utilitarianism" in both his poems and literary criticism. Singling out some of Bunting's best poems, Wylie suggests that these, ambivalent at their core, represent the contradictory nature of the West's utilitarian attitude towards the East. Bunting often criticized the "zeal of usefulness" within which the definition of West is imbedded (316). For example, through his depiction of the works of Iranian artisans and artists in the poem named "The Spoils," Bunting pits the materialism of England against the intransigence of Persia from the world's 'viles' (319). In "The Spoils," Bunting echoes a duplicitous admixture of Persian poetry and British petty politics: Iranians "remembered [poetry] too much, too well" (lines 27-9):

> I wonder what Khayyam thought
> of all the construction and organization afoot,
> foreigners, resolute Seljuks, not so bloodthirsty
> as some benefactors of mankind; recalling
> perhaps Abu Ali's horror of munificent patrons;
> books unheard of or lost elsewhere
> in the library of Bokhara,
> and four hours writing a day
> before the duties of prime minister (*The Poems* 30; lines 42-50).

Persians, Bunting suggests, perhaps recalled too many poems by heart and kept too much art in their minds, and therefore they did not feel the need to preserve their culture. This suggests perhaps why they were 'too lenient' towards the Seljuq dynasty's technocrats who, in the name of freedom, had burnt books in Bukhara, enslaved poets and authors through patronage (the way Rūdhakī describes it in "Dandaniyyeh"; Naghipour 2024), and looted Iran in the name of Islam (as seen in Zākānī's 'Pious Cat,' who was a descendant of the same Seljuqs). For Wylie, the depictions of leniency and naïveté on the part of Iranians, in Bunting's verse, are indices of the very imperialistic tendencies Bunting claimed to have evaded in his poetics:

> But the reason Bunting was there at all, of course, was economic – the British were keeping out the Germans because of the strategic importance of the

[1] See Alldritt, *Poet as Spy* 70-91.

> region. In post-war Persia Bunting finds a *Pax Britannicum* and thinks it paradise. And his poetry registers this convulsive irony: for every carol of praise, there is a rumble of critique.… ("Vile Patterns" 321).

Of course, as Mervyn Roberts studies comprehensively in "Operation Countenance," Iran was never to fall under the influence of Nazi Germany (589), and the Anglo-Soviet interference with the affairs of the avowedly neutral Iran, along with the activities of the British Intelligence (of which Bunting was playing a part), proved to be highly problematic. Indeed, the 'Persia' echoed in Bunting's poem was the 'other' that he, a representative of the so-called *Pax Britannica*, had confronted in his experiences there. Thus, 'the spoils' of post-war Iran were food for his imagination, to act and react to the politics of the age.

12. The 'Other' of Espionage

If Bunting's personal life and artistic oeuvre both show a tendency to 'keep in dialogue' with the imperialistic agenda of the United Kingdom in the twentieth century, how do those inclinations pan out in his literary translations? I contend that, if in his life and poetry, Bunting's political agenda and espionage are expressly shown, in his literary translations, he is a double agent that, if anything, brings closer the two cultures by benefiting both. And this, he does, ultimately to the benefit of his own aesthetics.

Spy-translators were fashionable in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In *Sympathy for the Traitor*, Mark Polizzotti names a few prominent translators such as Sir Richard Burton (*One Thousand and One Nights*) and C. K. Scott Moncrieff (*Remembrance of Things Past*), who, like Bunting, were also accomplished spies for the British Intelligence. Polizzotti asserts that translators and secret agents have many things in common. They both have "double allegiances"; they are both capable to witness and analyze comparatively and in "parallel modes"; and they both can vacillate "like a seasoned performer, from one role to another, one voice to another, one persona to another" (33). Moreover, "a translator is a double agent, constantly playing two texts, two languages, two cultures, two readerships off each other in order to arrive at a truth that ultimately serves no master but his own exacting ideal of excellence" (34). Whereas espionage in our poet, Bunting, proves to be a one-way deceitful act, gathering sensitive information for a certain system, with his double-agency in translation, the exchange of communication and "the arrows of meaning, of cultural, psychological benefaction," in Steiner's words, "move both ways" (*After Babel* 318).

The idea of the literary translator-poet—following their own "ideal of excellence" rather than merely being a second to the original author—has as much to do with the readership of the translation as it does with the aesthetic goals of its translator. In the vein of Susan Bassnett, a poem-translator is akin to a travel writer: they both address readers who, because of the renowned stance of their author, take the new text/site-of-travel for granted; they are satisfied merely with the version of the original that their celebrated—linguistically

and culturally agile—translator/traveller is (re)presenting them with. For my concluding remarks, I shall consider the role of the translator as a double-agent who works, cursorily, to the advantage of both cultures and languages, and on a deeper scale, facilitating their "own exacting ideal of excellence" (Polizzoti 34).

13. Hetero(to)poesia

The two works of translation that I have analyzed (Rūdhakī's 'Dandaniyyeh'—see Naghipour 2024—and Zākānī's *Mush-O-Gorbeh* in this article), besides many more that are yet to be studied in-depth, showcase a range of qualities: from superficially erroneous mistakes to professionally deft and highly original renditions; from bland monologues and stretched rhymes to natural-sounding dialogues and skilful inner rhymes; from literalism to paraphrase; and from one serving the master-author to one that can be regarded as a poem in its own right. In addition, Bunting's translations often project his personal conditions and character. His word choices and phrasings, his changes of place names and the like are part and parcel of the literary translator's 'selving' through translations. None of these, however, can be said to be ideologically or politically charged renderings. As Julian Stannard writes, Bunting saw his act of translation as a "discipline in its own right where exposure to other languages turned the poet into a cultural negotiator" (*Bunting* 83). His decision to translate works by authors who are lesser known among his target audience shows not only his role as a cultural messenger and ambassador but also reveals something about the poet in the making. While in his poetry Bunting made extensive use of Middle Eastern themes and motifs in a highly problematic way, he found in translation a site to express himself freely without the need to be in constant dialogue, to demonstrate, and to incorporate the agendas that marked his politics and poetics. This semi-locus, this site he entered, in contrast to the 'other,' 'neutral' space he travelled to physically (Iran), is one that neutralizes Bunting's relationship with his own role as a poet-spy in the world. In this regard, translation for Bunting becomes what Foucault calls that 'other space': *heterotopia*.

In the article "*Des Espaces Autres*," translated as "Different Spaces," Foucault emphasizes the role of 'places' in history, showing all societies to constitute 'real' places, 'unreal' ones (utopias), and 'heterotopias' based on their cultures, conventions, and norms. Foucault indicates six principles for analyzing these 'other' spaces ('heterotopology'): (1) they are an inevitable part of every society, though each society's conception of heterotopia varies; (2) each heterotopia's functionality can be changed through time (for example, the cemetery); (3) each heterotopia can have multiple functions at a singular space (for example, theatres, Persian gardens and, by extension, Persian rugs); (4) they are usually linked to fragments of time he calls 'heterochronies' (for example, museums); (5) heterotopias can be both open-access and close-ended simultaneously (in that certain architectural structures are both restricted and accessed at the same time, such as motels and brothels); and (6) the contrastive presence of heterotopias changes the quality of the other real spaces in the society (179-184).

As for the first principle, translation is necessary for any society, as it provides a window for it to see and to be seen. With regards to the second principle, literary translation is a heterotopia, similar to the cemetery—which, until the nineteenth century, was an organic part of the city but had relocated to become that 'other city' afterwards: from the Kabbalistic, Babylonian principle that translation should cooperate with the original to pave the way for a 'pure' language, we come to a mode of translation in which the importance is put on a rendered text—quite apart from both the original text and its identical twin in the target language—that translation can be a highly original work of art in its own right. As for the third principle, just as a Persian rug is a microcosm of the Persian garden, but also, because it is mobile and can reach other places, literary translation is a "universalising heterotopia" ("Different Spaces" 182) that reaches out to places beyond its original locale. That, in the fourth principle, museum collections conjoin their real space with the ravages of time, so does literary translation: Bunting, as shown, has chosen for his translation poetic works that range from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries; a medieval museum of poetic translation if I may. Regarding the fifth principle of heterotopology, and, as I have thus far studied in two of Bunting's translations, Bunting's work has different registers: a closed-in work that does not allow for a real contact into the work of the original ("Dandaniyyeh"; Naghipour 2024); and, by contrast, a skillful, playful, open-ended text that remained a work-in-progress until the end of Bunting's life ("Pious Cat").

Finally, and most interestingly, the sixth principle of heterotopia applies to Bunting's literary translation of Persian poems. Apart from the disparities and affinities with the original texts he translated, Bunting's works have shown to be reflective of his own status ('selving'), and of that 'resting place' where he acted and re-enacted the apolitical, aesthetic proclivities he had promoted in his poetics. In this sense, although it is seemingly restrictive for the imagination of its agent, literary translation becomes the 'other' of Bunting's espionage, and by extension, of his poetics. This impulse marked the emergence of what I have called the double-agent translator; he tinkered with the words, ideas, and idiolects of Persian authors for a predisposed readership while freeing himself from the power-politics in which he had played a role, before and during the Second World War. Thus, for Bunting, translation becomes that 'other' space, a hetero(to)poesia, in which he writes poetry more freely.

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