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**“Beyond the Means of the Author:”
Hafiz in Emerson’s “Fate”**

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to show the generative interpretative nature of translation. It examines a few lines of Persian poetry translated and quoted by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his controversial essay, “Fate,” and through a genetic reading of their Persian and German avant-texts shows how the concepts the translations convey were created in the process of translation and through certain “interpretants” that the German translator, Joseph Von Hammer Purgstall, and then Emerson applied to the originals. Benefiting from Jacques Derrida’s view of translation, Walter Benjamin’s notion of “after-life,” and Lawrence Venuti’s hermeneutic model of translation, this paper demonstrates how even a foreignizing translation, which is concerned about equivalence, is subject to the translator’s interpretation. Here, the translations come into being through the collaboration of the translators and the original author. The original texts also live a different life in the determining venue they are presented. This study also raises questions about the issue of influence through translation. If translation is interpretative and generative then to what extent the translator is influenced by the original author. This issue is of significance, as many scholars have discussed the ways in which Emerson’s poetry and prose writings were affected by his Persian readings.

Keywords: Ralph Waldo Emerson, the hermeneutic model of translation, Hafiz, Lawrence Venuti, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida

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Introduction

In traditional views of language, translation is considered decadent because it destroys the pure and sacred language of innocence, and “already the Talmud had said: ‘the omission or the addition of one letter might mean the destruction of the whole world’” (Steiner 71). This is an example of the religious deprecatory approach that George Steiner describes as the attempt to preserve the sacred texts from proliferation. The sacred text tries to protect itself from translation because it claims to be irreducibly unique. What induces such cynical view of translation is of course the old famous saying: “traduttore traditore,” meaning “translator is traitor” (Danto 61), which is itself based on the erroneous notion that in a translation proper, fidelity to the letter of the original text is all. Andrew Marvell confirms this claim by saying: “He is Translation thief that addest more / As much as he that taketh from the store of the first author” (ibid.). Obviously Marvell’s definition of translation is not right.

Nonetheless, one should notice that “fidelity in the translation of individual words can almost never fully reproduce the meaning they have in the original. For sense in its poetic significance is not limited to meaning, but derives from the connotations conveyed by the word chosen to express it” (Steiner 78). Therefore to some, translators should be faithful to the soul of the text, not to its letter; otherwise, the scene of translation becomes inevitably a scene of failure, where the translators, by stubbornness and vain attempt to revive past eras for the present and to translate the true meaning of a work which, of course, can never be translated, continue to walk astray (Bannet 580). After all, “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Corinthians 3:6).

According to Steiner in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1997), translation resides “at the heart of human communication” and the attempts to explore “the potentialities of transfer between languages” engage us into rumination over the “consciousness and the meaning of meaning” (7). According to Steiner, every semiotic exchange, and every kind of sending and receiving of meaning, provides a model of translation. In his view, decoding a

message more or less corresponds to the message itself. However, one should not naively expect to find this correspondence a hundred percent complete. Some of the factors that conduce to this incongruousness include memories, different human associations, implicit meanings of words, and so on. According to Steiner, only mathematical symbols and transnational logarithms of formal logic are fully translatable (13, 83). Therefore, there is a need to rethink existing views on literary translation in order to achieve the most brilliant results in this field, free of unrealistic expectations.

In the contemporary era, especially after the emergence of modernism in literature in the early decades of the twentieth century, new theories have emerged about literary translation, along with a completely different approach to the past. In general, it can be said that translation today is an interpretive action that has a *creative* character which leads to the creation of a *new* work in another language. So any translation is in fact an interpretation or a fresh reading of the original work. Such a view of translation stems from the perception that the act of translation is creative and dignified, without any sense of inferiority to the original text. Literary translation is an imaginative work which is not supposed to be a word-by-word rendition or transmission of the subject matter. Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) in “The Task of the Translator” (in *Illuminations*) objects to a translation that “cannot transmit anything but information” and calls such inefficacious attempts “inessential” and “the hallmark of bad translations” (69).

Even linguistically speaking, complete equality and balance between two words is not possible. The implication of such a statement for literary translation is that the relationship between what is called the original text and the translated text is a relation based on difference rather than similarity, and this is precisely what Benjamin emphasizes. Translation of a work in the target language should continue the life of that work in the source language, “for a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never

find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life” (ibid. 71). Translation is a maturing and evolving process, far removed from “being the sterile equation of two languages” (ibid. 72). Therefore, what Benjamin means by ‘after-life’ is an evolution or a renewal of the original.

Benjamin argues that the task of a translator can be even more important than the role of the author. He argues that “[in] translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were” (75). To him, the translator, by recreating the work in translation, liberates the language from the cage of the work in which it is imprisoned. Therefore, the ‘task’ of the translator is far more important and different than that of the poet: the task of the translator is to liberate the pure language that is captive to the source language, by imaginatively recreating it.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) also says “resemblance” should not be the ultimate goal of a translator. The translator must pursue a higher purpose. For Derrida, it is impossible to translate the “meaning” of the original text because he does not think there is a single meaning in the text. Therefore, if the translation makes the text stable and fixed, then the text disappears. Derrida regards the text as unstable and considers it an ever-becoming phenomenon. Derrida believes that re-translations are not only possible but even necessary. The concept of iterability, which is repeated in various ways in Derrida's writings, relates to this subject. Translation protects the original text against deterioration. Translation for Derrida is the ‘sur-vival’ of the text: “Such sur-vival gives more of life. The work does not simply live longer, it lives more and better, beyond the means of its author” (179).

Partly building on Derrida’s ideas, more recently in *Contra Instrumentalism*, Lawrence Venuti speaks of a “hermeneutic model” of translation. He describes it as a model that “conceives of translation as an interpretative act that inevitably varies source text form, meaning, and effect according to intelligibilities and interests in the receiving culture” (1). What distinguishes the hermeneutic model

is in fact consideration of translation not as a means of transference of framed material but an “interpretative act,” which makes it individual and generative. In this way, Venuti puts the hermeneutic model in contrast to the well-established instrumentalism of translation theories that regard it as secondary and inferior to production. To Venuti, as translating the translator applies various “interpretants,” “formal and thematic” elements, that guide his decisions and the way he takes the text forward or posits it. This, according to Venuti, is done even when the translator is trying to maintain equivalency between the original and the translation. As a result: “The application of interpretants guarantees that a translation is relatively autonomous from its source text even while establishing a variety of interpretive relations to that text” (2). So, the original is released from the bounds of the source language.

In the rest of this paper, following what Benjamin, Derrida, and Venuti have said, this study attempts to show how some of the lines that Emerson has translated, quoted, and attributed to Hafiz in the essay “Fate” are only “after life” of the originals and as much autonomous as they are dependent on what hafiz has written. That is to say, despite the endeavors of both translators for maintaining equivalency, the lines have found a new life through their decisions as translators.

Discussion

Ralph Waldo Emerson translated more than two thousand lines of Persian poetry from the German translations of the eminent translator, Joseph Von Hammar Purgstall. Emerson’s method of translation was not consistent and ranged from what seems like word for word presentation of what he found in the German sources to translations that are more a creation and a “bringing back” of concepts emerging from the originals (Akrami 192). Most of these translations remained unpublished by Emerson; the others he published in his poetry books, sent to a magazine, or used and quoted in his essays. Emerson’s engagement with

these sources have mostly been studied in terms of Emerson's cosmopolitanism, his appreciation of the foreign or the ways in which he has been influenced by what he has read and translated. What is often neglected, however, is that each particular translation has its own history, each is a product of certain decisions and no generalization can be made about the bulk of translations he has left.

One of the essays in which Emerson quotes some of his translations is the essay "Fate," published in his book *The Conduct of Life* (1865). Due to the discrepancy between what Emerson states at least initially in the essay and his transcendental belief in the power of man, the essay has caused many controversies. His major critics such as Stephen Whicher, Stanley Cavell, and Barbara Packer have come to attribute the essay to different historical intellectual conditions and have interpreted it in different ways. In an unprecedented way, in "Fate," Emerson speaks of the undeniable power of fate as a limiting determining force. However, once he pictures the power of fate he argues that none of the events one might regard as fate are happening randomly or by chance, but there is a kind of "fitness" between people and their fate and everything is being directed by a grand "necessity," which is guiding the whole universe and puts everyone in relation to each other and the whole. Therefore, to Emerson understanding the concept of fate and its relation to freedom depends firstly upon one's understanding of his or her relation to the higher reality, the grand design, and the unity of things and secondly upon what he calls a "double consciousness" of a "private and a public" nature. The more one is conscious of his or her public and private nature, the less egotistic and self-concerned he/she will be and the more conscious of the web of relations he is part of. This awareness of course gives assurance and relief and should make one respect the grand "necessity" rather than dismissing or reproving it.

The significant point to this paper however, is the few lines of his translations of Hafiz that Emerson uses. One appears as he speaks of thought and moral sentiment as the elements through which one achieves assurance and comes out of the servitude of fate. That is to say, once the unity of things is

perceived by the mind and the “omnipresence of the law” realized then fate loses its power:

Whoever has had experience of the moral sentiment cannot choose but believes in unlimited power. Each pulse from that heart is an oath from the Most High. . . . A text of heroism, a name and anecdote of courage, are not arguments, but sallies of freedom. One of these is the verse of the Persian of Hafiz, “‘Tis written on the gate of heaven, ‘Wo unto him who suffers himself to be betrayed by Fate!’” (1983, 780)

What Hafiz’s line conveys for Emerson in this context is that while the individual can be on the side of the whole and assured, falling for the apparent potency of fate is a mistake. The other translation shows up as he speaks of the “fitness” of the “soul” and what happens to it, “the event”:

The secret of the world is the tie between person and event. Person makes event, and event person. . . . The soul contains the event that shall befall it; for the event is only the actualization of its thoughts. the event is the print of your form. It fits you like your skin. What each does is proper to him. Events are the children of his body and mind. (1983, 789)

In order to illustrate his idea Emerson then quotes a line from Hafiz: “We learn that the soul of Fate is the soul of us, as Hafiz sings, Alas! Till now I had not known, / My guide and fortune’s guide are one” (ibid). That is to say, according to Hafiz in this context, man and his fortune are being directed by the same force. A few lines later he states: “Nature magically suits the man to his fortune, by making these the fruit of his character. . . . Thus events grow on the same stem with persons; are sub-persons” (790). This comment can somehow clarify what the quotation from Hafiz meant to Emerson: that man and his fortune are harmonized or directed by the same force.

It should be mentioned that the lines that Emerson quotes of Hafiz in this essay are among his favorites. In fact, in different venues in his journals and published writings, Emerson admires Hafiz's "audacity" and puts the way he approaches fate in contrast to the prevalent submissiveness to fate and the determinism observable in his age and religion.¹ Many critics have also affirmed the relation of this line to Emerson's idea of Hafiz. Farhang Jahanpour, for instance, counts this line among the lines in which Emerson is quoting to show Hafiz's "self-reliance" (119-120). Marvan M. Obeidat also refers to the quotation as a mark of Emerson's admiration for Hafiz's "intellectual freedom," despite his awareness of the Sufi poet's belief in determinism (80-81). These lines, however, do not exactly refer to fate or convey the same concept in the original language. Examining their avant-texts shows that certain interpretants, as Venuti would say, determine their translation and the way they have been interpreted.

The distich: "Alas till now I had not known / that my guide and fortune's guide are one," belongs to a ghazal Emerson translated sometime in 1850s. However, his notebook EF shows that he had at first translated only this distich of the ghazal with a different word choice: "Alas till now I had not known that my conductor & the conductor of fortune were one" (EF 72). However, Emerson's translation of this particular line is far from what the Persian original conveys. In this ghazal, Hafiz speaks of the unreliability of the world and refers to wine, friendship, and the inaccessible beloved as the things that make it valuable and meaningful, things that should be pursued. In the first distich of the poem he refers to three elements that bring happiness, of which Emerson renders an acceptable translation: "safe place, pure wine, true friend / Secure these three and count thee blest" (1990, vol2: 110). In the subsequent lines Hafiz expands on each of these elements and then praises the beloved. The distich that appears in "Fate" is in fact an expansion of the notion of friendship introducing it as the

¹ One of the lines from Hafiz that he recurrently quotes in this regard is: I batter the wheel of heaven, / When it rolls not rightly by; / I am not one of the snivellers / Who fall on it & die. (465)

“alchemy of happiness.” A word for word translation of it could be: “Alas and shame, till now I didn’t know / That the alchemy of happiness is a friend, friend,”² which is far from the concept conveyed by the English translation. The distance between the English translation and the Persian poem, however, is partly due to the German translation that Emerson was using.

The German translator was benefiting from a commentary³, which emphasized on the fact that in this line Hafiz “regrets not having a friend” (vol3: 1713), however, Purgstall didn’t keep the metaphor and created another image: “Leider und Ach! Daß ich bis jetzt nimmer gewußt, / Daß mein Geleitsmann auch des Glückes Geleit’ Gewesen” (II: 118) (“Unfortunately and alas! I until now didn’t know / That my escort-man was also luck’s (or happiness’ or fortune’s) escort.” An escort-man escorts the speaker and happiness. So, though not keeping the original reference to friendship, Purgstall’s line is still able to imply that friendship brings happiness or fortune. The shift from the Persian alchemy of happiness to the image Purgstall creates is probably due to the fact that, as he states in his preface to the *Divan* of Hafiz, his aim was not to paraphrase but to keep “fidelity” to both the “images” and “phrase” and “rhythm” and “Strophic” (???). This distinguishing feature allowed him to recreate the concept in another image instead of paraphrasing the metaphor.

Emerson, however, takes the line to another level, giving it a new life, and awakening meanings “beyond the means of the author.” What he comes up with is in fact still a word for word translation of what he finds in the German version, but his word choice, that is his decision as a translator and his reading and interpretation of the German line take the line to a new horizon.

The words “Geleit,” “geleitsmann,” and “Glückes” are the keywords of the German original about which Emerson needed to decide. The dictionary

² My translation: دروغ و درد که تا این زمان ندانستم که کیمیای سعادت رفیق بود رفیق

³ Ahmad Sudi

meanings for "Geleit" are "escort," "convoy," and "retinue." Consequently, "geleitsmann" can be translated as escort-man or companion. *Oxford Duden* and *Collins* dictionaries offer: A: "luck" and B: "happiness" for "Glücke" and *Oxford* dictionary offers "fortune" as a third meaning of the word. Emerson's choice of guide for "Geleit" sounds somewhat irrelevant to a German speaker. Emerson, however, uses the line in his essay choosing "guide" for "geleitsmann"⁴ and "fortune" for "glückes," two simple choices that give a new life to the line. (Although a few dictionaries regard "to guide so" as a third meaning for the verb "Geleiten," which might be the point that allowed Emerson to use guide for the noun "Geleit," "Geleit," does not mean guide and its choice sounds strange to native German speakers.) Here the move from Hafiz's "رفیق" or friend to Purgstall's "escort" and "escort man," to Emerson's "conductor" and "conductor of fortune" and then to "guide" is of significance. Both "conductor" and "guide" connote "leading," while Purgstall's "escort," "retinue," or "convoy" suggest accompanying and attending, which are closer to the notion of friendship.

As it can be seen, the translation is both related to and detached from its source text. What acts as an interpretant in this case that allows Emerson to read the line in relation to fate rather than friendship is probably his own idea of the lawfulness of the universe and the relationship he sees between man and his fate. That is to say, intentionally or unintentionally he suits the translation to his idea. The result is a text that has gone under "transformation." According to Venuti: "a text is a complex artifact that sustains meanings, values, and functions specific to its originary language and culture, and when translated this complexity is displaced by creation of another text that comes to sustain meanings values and functions specific to a different language and culture. Any correspondence or approximation thus coincides with a radical transformation (3). The venue at which Emerson cites the line also determines the life of the line. That is to say, he engages the line in his theory of fate and continues to build on the concept he

⁴ According to *Reverso* and *Beolingus* online German English dictionaries, the verb "Geleiten" can mean "to guide."

has created. For example, in an entry in his notebook “Orientalist,” Emerson restates the view: “The mind in its plenary actively wd [sic] go behind the intuitions also & ask the foundation of the foundation, the guide of my guide” (1990, vol 2: 119). Here again, it is the determining force, the grand design that can give answers to inquiries of the mind.

The other quotation from Hafiz (“Tis written on the gate of heaven, ‘Wo unto him who suffers himself to be betrayed by Fate!’”⁵) is also a translation from 1847 that Emerson moves from journal to journal, at least ten times, with little variations: “It stands written on the gate of heaven. . . .”; “Tis writ on Paradise’s gate, / Wo to the dupe that yields to Fate!” A word for word translation of the original Persian would be: “It is written on the arc of the Paradise / whoever the charm of the world believed. Woe to him.” What the line conveys to most Persian readers is that Hafiz is dismissing the material world and admonishes those who fall for its charms.

Purgstall however changes the “the charm of the world” or “عشوه دنیا” to fate or destiny (“Schicksal”): “Es Stehet geschrieben am himmlischen Thor / Weh dem der vom schicksal betrügen sich läßt” (Diwan II. 386). Consequently, the line finds a new meaning, effective in the way Emerson came to read and admire Hafiz’s dismissal of fate. In one of his journals Emerson follows this translation stating: “I have heard that they seem fools who allow themselves to be engaged & compromised in undertakings, but that at last it appears quite otherwise and to the Gods otherwise from the first. I affix a like sense to this text of Hafiz: for he who loves is not betrayed, but makes an ass of fate” (85-86). Here again, once one is on the side of the truth and realizes his/her position in relation to the whole, fate turns powerless; something to use.

⁵ نوشته‌اند بر ایوان جنه الموی که هر که عشوه دنیا خرید وای به وی

Conclusion

As the cases presented here show, through certain interpretants the initial original notions evolve through translation, as if realizing hidden potentials. The lines examined in this article make the notion of influence through translation a complicated matter. To what extent the concept of unity of man and his fate, developed in the essay by Emerson in different ways, was thought of or created under the influence of the translated line is a significant point that is open to debate. However, as shown here, the translated line did not exactly belong to Hafiz. It was created in the journey that the line went through: companionship changed to oneness of the force behind man and his fate; and a recurring simple notion of the *Divan*, dismissal of the material world, came to stand for audacity of Hafiz and powerlessness of fate. If Emerson was influenced by that line he was only expanding a notion Purgstall and he intentionally or unintentionally created in the process of translation. Purgstall's translation of Hafiz is in fact an imaginative recreation of the sacred text of the Persian "tongue of secret." And this is the case even as he is trying to maintain fidelity to both form and meaning of the original. His recreation of the notion of companionship through changing the original metaphor and then the switch in meaning that happens as Emerson translates the text take us to the instability of meaning that Derrida speaks of and the continued life that is "beyond the means of the author."

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