

The Poetry Review Essay

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Translation

On 10th November 2004, the leading Iraqi poet Fadhil Al-Azzawi, and his translator, the Libyan-American poet Khaled Mattawa, visited The Poetry Translation Centre at The School of Oriental and African Studies to read their work and talk about the importance of translating poetry. The ensuing discussion was one of the most exhilarating poetry events I've ever attended, ranging from a fierce debate on Arabic poetry and nationalism to a detailed account of the beginnings of modernist poetry in Iraq in the 1940s. What was particularly notable was the number of poets referred to – including, among many others, Al-Sayyab, Cavafy, Eliot, Tsvetaeva, Hikmet, Vallejo, Montale, Rimbaud, Faiz, Walcott, Paz, Pound, Darwish – the field of debate being taken, without question, to be what Ezra Pound called “world poetry”.

I've been privileged over the past few years to spend time with some of the most important contemporary Arabic poets, one of whom, Saadi Yousef, in exile from Saddam's Iraq since 1979, has now settled in London.¹ What is so stimulating, and so moving, about all these exiles who, for decades, have been hounded from one home to another by despotic regimes, is their absolute commitment to poetry – and not simply to poetry in Arabic, but to “world poetry”. Saadi Yousef himself is widely acknowledged as having had a profound impact on poets writing in Arabic today. He is also known as the most significant translator of poetry into Arabic; and his translations have, in turn, transformed the way in which Arabic poetry is written. For him, as for Ezra Pound, the two tasks are interdependent.

Like Saadi Yousef's, “Pound's poetics,” Ming Xie has said, “is essentially a poetics of translation... [his] translations stimulated and strengthened his poetic innovations which, in turn, guided and promoted his translations.”² Given Pound's notorious political activities of the 1930s – which culminated in his radio broadcasts, laden with racist bigotry, on behalf of the Mussolini

¹ Saadi Yousef is unusual among Arabic poets in having been well translated into English: see *Without an Alphabet, Without a Face* translated by Khaled Mattawa (Graywolf, 2002); see also Fadhil Al-Azzawi's *Miracle Maker: Selected Poems* (Boa Editions, 2003), again beautifully translated by Khaled Mattawa.

² Ming Xie, *Ezra Pound and the Appropriation of Chinese Poetry* (Garland, 1999) p. 230.

regime during the Second World War – he may seem an improbable exponent of an inclusive world literature. Yet, from the very beginning of his career, Pound studied as many languages as he could and he read poetry in translation from as many cultures as he could. He was determined to find out what poetry really was by discovering through a process of evaluation what “could *not be lost* by translation”³: “The proper METHOD for studying poetry and good letters is the method of contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual COMPARISON of one ‘slide’ or specimen with another.”⁴ The larger and more widespread the sample of “slides” available, the more reliable the results. And with these results, Pound aimed to transform contemporary poetry in English.

Of Pound’s many translations, perhaps the most significant, and most enduring, was the slim volume he published in 1915 entitled *Cathay*: fourteen poems, as the headnote tells us, “For the most part from the Chinese of Rihaku [the Japanese name for the T’ang Dynasty poet, Li Po], from the notes of the late Ernest Fenollosa, and the decipherings of the Professors Mori and Ariga.” Pound knew not one word of Chinese. The Chinese poems included in *Cathay*, Hugh Kenner tells us, reached “Kensington by way of Tokyo, through the intercession of a Harvard-educated enthusiast of Spanish descent” in notebooks containing the sound of the Chinese words in Japanese, together with their literal translations, passed on to the poet by Fenollosa’s widow. As Kenner comments on the acknowledgement, “Pound never shirked his great debt to Fenollosa, nor concealed the devious chain of transmission. Though he knew the name of Li Po he let the Japanese form ‘Rihaku’ stand when the little book went to press, content to leave it on record that the Chinese had come to him by way of Japan.”⁵

Why is *Cathay* so compelling? Firstly, it exists, in its own right, as a collection of great poems in English. Published in 1915, the poems are, as Kenner points out, “among the most durable responses to World War I. They say, as so much of Pound’s work says, that all this has happened before and continually happens.”⁶ But what of the poems as translations? How “faithful” to their sources are they? How “Chinese”? It’s generally admitted that *Cathay* is full of “mistakes”. It’s hardly to be expected otherwise, given the misreadings made by the Japanese professors instructing Fenollosa, whose notes Pound often found difficult to decipher. However, what may be taken as Pound’s “mistranslations” are, as Kenner argues, “deflections undertaken with open eyes The main deviations from orthodoxy represent deliberate decisions

3 Ezra Pound, *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, edited with an introduction by T. S. Eliot (Faber & Faber, 1954) p. 77.

4 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (Faber & Faber, 1951) p. 17.

5 Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era: The Age of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis* (Faber & Faber, 1972) p. 222.

6 *Ibid.* p. 202.

of a man who was inventing a new kind of English poem and picking up hints where he could find them”.⁷ Pound’s loyalties, it seems, were to English poetry, not to accurately representing Chinese poetry.

Debates about translation have been raging since the Romans, and, crudely, they all come down to the same decision: whether to “domesticate” the translation or to “foreignise” it. In other words, as a translator you have to take a decision – a decision which is as much ethical as it is aesthetic – as to whether your translation should be as close as possible to a poem in English, or whether it should clearly announce its different, foreign qualities. As Friedrich Schleiermacher summarised it in 1813 (in the most influential essay written on translation in the nineteenth century), “Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader”.⁸ Pound, one might then conclude, given his stated priorities, was concerned with domestication, with “moving the writer toward the reader”. Yet a close examination of the poems in *Cathay* indicates that, yes, these are quite wonderful poems in English, *but also* that they announce their foreign status very clearly indeed.

One of the most beautiful poems in English written last century is Pound’s translation, “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter”. These are its opening lines:

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse.
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chokan;
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

Even the title indicates that this must be a translation, that it cannot be an English poem, “river-merchant” being a neologism of Pound’s own invention. He also retains the name of the village, Chokan, and refers to the very un-English plant, bamboo. This may seem standard practice now, but, in 1915, in the death-throes of imperialism, the domestication tendency was very strong indeed. Nor is it only the authentically Chinese details that Pound retains, his choice of vocabulary is peculiarly “foreign”: we don’t “pull” flowers in English, we pick or gather them. Neither would we easily describe someone who “walked about my seat”; it’s strange – “seat” as in chair, or “country seat”, or something else entirely? – and awkward, and irreducibly “foreign”. Are English plums ever described as “blue”? Even the way in which these children are

7 Kenner, *op. cit.* pp. 213, 218–19.

8 Friedrich Schleiermacher, “On the Different Methods of Translating” [1813], in Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (eds.) *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (University of Chicago Press, 1992) p.42.

playing seems unfamiliar. The syntax, too, is pared down and, in the next line of the poem, Pound famously inverts it: “At fourteen I married My Lord you”, thus both expressing the awe in which the young bride holds her new husband, and also sounding foreign to English ears.

Barry Ahearn has suggested that Pound’s “verbal perplexities” in *Cathay* give “the impression that this translation has been produced not by Ezra Pound, but by a native speaker of Chinese whose command of English is less than fluent”.⁹ I disagree. Having waded my way through oceans of translations of Arabic poetry clearly written by native speakers whose command of English is far less than fluent, I’d suggest that what these poems resemble is our idea of what the poet Rihaku / Li Po himself might sound like if he spoke less than fluent English. I say this because the fashionable notion of “foreignised” translations is often used as an excuse for bad translations. The fact that “The River-Merchant’s Wife” is a superb translation is evinced by Pound’s masterful control of the beautifully understated rhythm and music of the lines; every single word sounds perfectly placed; nothing jars; the strangeness of the poem is compelling, not irritatingly repulsive as it is in a poor translation. Reading the poem I think we feel that “pulling” is an exact transcription of the term used in Chinese, that it’s customary for a Chinese girl to indicate her youth by having her “hair cut straight across [her] forehead”, and that this is the precise equivalent of how it would be described.

In 1928, T. S. Eliot claimed that “Chinese poetry, as we know it to-day, is something invented by Ezra Pound”.¹⁰ How is it possible that an American poet who knew no Chinese can be said to have invented “Chinese” poetry? George Steiner has argued that “Pound can imitate and persuade with utmost economy not because he or his reader know so much but because both concur in knowing so little”.¹¹ In other words, Pound’s “China” is an Orientalist fake, an exotic invention lapped up by readers seduced by a lazy *Chinoiserie*. However, a number of Chinese scholars have agreed that “Pound’s versions seem to come nearer to the real qualities of Chinese poetry”; and that this is because “he recognized the importance of the culturally distant and unfamiliar”.¹² In fact, it turns out that Pound didn’t “know so little” after all. Although it’s true that, in 1915, he had just begun actively to engage with Chinese literature, this marked the start of a profound, life-long, commitment that had fascinating antecedents in his childhood in Philadelphia. Both Pound’s parents had contacts with Christian missionaries in China; they owned Chinese objects and works of art; and, of all American cities, it was

9 Barry Ahearn, “*Cathay*: What Sort of Translation?”, in *Ezra Pound and China* edited by Zhaoming Qian (The University of Michigan Press, 2003) p. 41.

10 T.S. Eliot “Introduction” [1928] to *Selected Poems by Ezra Pound*, new edition, (Faber & Faber, 1959) p.15.

11 George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* third edition (OUP, 1998) p. 379.

12 Xie, op. cit. p. 235.

Philadelphia which at that time was “at the center of America’s response to the Orient.”¹³ By the time Fenollosa’s notebooks fell into his hands, Pound was steeped in Chinese art and profoundly curious about the radically different world it represented. What Ming Xie and other Chinese commentators point out is that, even by the time of *Cathay*, Pound grasped “the paradigmatic frame of an entire culture.”¹⁴

In short, what makes *Cathay* the most important translation into English in the past one hundred years is that Pound successfully “domesticates” and simultaneously “foreignises” these poems. In Schleiermacher’s terms, he both takes the writer to the reader and he takes the reader to the writer. Added to this, the qualities of directness, simplicity and vividness in *Cathay*, and the unobtrusive, delicate music of the lines, have had an extraordinarily profound impact on the ways in which it is possible to write poems in English. It was Pound’s recognition of “the importance of the culturally distant and unfamiliar” that made this revolution in English poetry possible.

This should come as no surprise: all revolutions in English poetry have occurred via translations, when poets have unequivocally embraced what is distant and unfamiliar. As Octavio Paz reminds us, “The greatest periods of Western poetry, from its origins in Provence to our own day, have been preceded or accompanied by intercrossings between different poetic traditions.”¹⁵ English poetry wouldn’t be English poetry without poets absorbing influences from abroad. As we’ve seen, Pound enlisted ancient Chinese poetry for his modernist experiments, just as Eliot relied on Laforgue and other French Symbolists for his. From Chaucer’s version of *The Romance of the Rose*, via Wyatt’s introduction of the sonnet by translating Petrarch, Dryden and Pope’s reclaiming of the Classics for their Augustan ends, to the influence of Chapman’s Homer on John Keats, English poets have flourished in response to translations. And, think of the impact more recently of the Penguin New European Poets series; how it made the great Eastern European poets into our contemporaries, as well as introducing us to the major poets of Latin America.

What is considered to be worth translating is often as much about politics as it is about aesthetics. Throughout the Cold War, the CIA covertly funded magazines such as *Encounter* and *Partisan Review*, enabling them “to offer large sums in payment for single poems by East European and Russian poets.”¹⁶ The CIA actively encouraged the translation of fugitive East

13 Ira B. Nadel, “Constructing the Orient: Pound’s American Vision” in *Ezra Pound & China* edited by Zhaoming Qian, (The University of Michigan Press, 2003) p. 13.

14 Xie, op. cit. p. 236.

15 Octavio Paz, “Translation: Literature and Letters” [1971] in Schulte and Biguenet op. cit. p. 160.

16 Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (Granta Books, 1999) p. 355. Interesting to note that Pound’s rehabilitation and, specifically, his being awarded the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1949 for his *Pisan Cantos*, was part of the CIA’s Cold War support for high culture. See pp. 249–51.

European poetry into English as a (very effective) means of countering Stalinist propaganda. I'm not suggesting that the poets themselves were not worth translating – nor that their translators knew how their work was being supported. The point is that the CIA recognised that the translation of poetry could be a political act with significant consequences.

What doesn't get translated and published is, of course, as fascinating as what does. André Lefevere has noted that "of all the great literatures of the world, the literature produced in the Islamic system is arguably the least available to readers in Europe and the Americas".¹⁷ One famous exception, of course, is Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1859) which, as Lefevere reminds us "introduced the *roba'i*, or quatrain, into European poetics"; a form popular with many poets until it fell out of favour in the 1920s.¹⁸ But Fitzgerald's attitude to Persian culture is marked by disdain: "It is an amusement for me to take what Liberties I like with these Persians," he wrote, "who (as I think) are not Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really do want a little Art to shape them."¹⁹ Fitzgerald, of course, was writing at the height of the British Empire, when such "Orientalist" attitudes on the part of the colonizers were a matter of course.²⁰ But what we may regard as Fitzgerald's shockingly cavalier, and indeed racist, attitude to Persian poetry is little different from the smug indifference to the poetry and cultures of non-European, and, specifically, Islamic countries that is widely shown today.

What concerns me in this essay is the response of the British "literary establishment" to translating poetry. Outside the pale, a growing number of translations of non-European poetry are being published, notably of Arabic verse. The results in this instance, though highly commendable, are as yet uneven, and the work often appears to be aimed at an audience interested in Arabic culture rather than in poetry *per se*, though this does appear to be changing as standards are raised and more mainstream literary organisations, publishers and venues begin to take Arabic poetry seriously.²¹ However, this is very different from the response given to many contemporary East European and Russian poets (Brodsky, Milosz, Herbert, Holub, Sorescu, Szymborska: all translated to a very high standard) whose new books tend to be read and reviewed on the same terms as English-language poets, and whose translations are included in anthologies alongside poems in English without a

17 André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (Routledge, 1992) p. 73.

18 *Ibid.* p. 74.

19 Edward Fitzgerald, cited *ibid.*, p. 75.

20 I'm using the term here in Edward Said's sense; see *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1978).

21 See Salma Khadra Jayyusi (ed.) *Modern Arabic Poetry* (Columbia University Press, 1987); *The Literature of Modern Arabia* (Kegan Paul, 1998); *Modern Palestinian Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1992). Also Margaret Obank & Samuel Shimon (eds.) *A Crack in the Wall: Modern Arab Poetry* (Saqi Books, 2001) and *Banipal: Magazine of Modern Arab Literature*.

second thought. Indeed, contemporary poets from the old Eastern Bloc countries are far better known in the UK than those from Western Europe. For which it appears we have the CIA to thank, though I can assure you that the Bush administration CIA has yet to release vast sums to be spent on translating poetry from Islamic countries. But the Soviet Union was a feared enemy that required undermining rather than conquering; whereas fostering engagement with the cultures of people you only wish to vanquish is not a wise strategy, since reading their poetry might encourage your own people to regard them not as “the enemy” but as cultured human beings.

When, in 1996, I was the first writer sent to Palestine by the British Council, I decided that I was going to use my position to encourage and promote the translation of Palestinian and Arabic poetry. I want people to recognise that the Palestinians, and Arabs in general, have an extraordinarily rich and complex culture; culture that is most importantly expressed in their poetry since, in Islamic societies, poetry is regarded as the highest art form and is accorded great importance.²² Take Somalia, for example (Somalis are probably the most poetry-obsessed people in the world), where, in 1967, the president was brought down by the recital of a poem over the radio during a vote.²³ Or take Yemen, where in the “lawless” tribelands, the tribes settle their disputes not by hacking pieces off each other but through breathtakingly elaborate poetry competitions.²⁴

But there’s more to this than naked ideology: I also feel very strongly that poetry in English – particularly poetry in this bland, grey land – is vitally in need of what Palestinian, Arabic, or indeed, non-European poetry in general can bring us. Contemporary British poetry is badly in need of an aesthetic injection. And where best to find this than from our neighbours? I live in a city where more than 300 languages are spoken every day, and where more mixed-race babies are conceived every night than in any other city on the planet. And what is the response of the “unacknowledged legislators of the world” to this breathtakingly exciting opportunity to engage with and learn from the languages and cultures around us? With a few notable exceptions, a complete lack of interest would be an understatement.

My frustration with this state of affairs led me to establish The Poetry Translation Centre. The PTC emerged (thanks to Arts Council funding) from the poetry translation workshops that I began holding at The School of Oriental and African Studies when I was their Royal Literary Fund Writing

22 I’m using the term “Islamic” in the way I’d refer to European societies as “Christian”: as a matter of history and culture, not of faith.

23 See John William Johnson “Power, Marginality and Somali Oral Poetry: Case Studies in the Dynamics of Tradition” in Graham Furniss & E. Gunner (eds.) *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature* (CUP, 1995) pp. 115-17. Thanks to Martin Orwin at SOAS for this reference.

24 See Steven C. Caton, *Peaks of Yemen I Summon”: Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe* (University of California Press, 1990).

Fellow. Our aim is to bring poets, translators and academics together in order to translate contemporary poetry from non-European cultures to the highest literary standards through innovative collaborations linking language specialists with established poets. In our weekly workshops, language specialists provide first, literal translations which we then discuss together in minute detail, thus producing a new poem in English. We aim to stay as close to the original as possible, whilst writing well in English. So far we have translated poems from the following languages and places: Amharic (Ethiopia), Arabic (Sudan, Palestine), Assamese (India), Chinese (China), Dari (Afghanistan), Gujarati (India), Hindi (India), Indonesian (Indonesia), Korean (South Korea), Japanese (Japan), Portuguese (Mozambique, Cape Verde), Somali (Somaliland), Spanish (Mexico, Peru), Sylheti (Bangladesh), Turkish (Turkey) and Urdu (Pakistan). The PTC is less than a year old (we've only just got the stationery designed), so our plans are in the formative stage (and we've reached a funding crisis too), but we are hoping to bring over poets from Afghanistan, India, Mexico, Somaliland and Sudan to the UK sometime in 2005, if all goes to plan.

Robert Frost famously said that “poetry is what is lost in translation”. My PTC colleague, Tom Boll, has suggested that we take “lost in translation” in the sense that Sister Sledge meant “lost in music”, an interpretation of Frost’s spoilsport aphorism I’d strongly endorse: it seems to me to be far nearer the truth. Frost’s version stems from the Romantic notion of “Poetry” as being something ineffable, something beyond translation: “It were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as to seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet”, wrote Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* on “the vanity of translation”.²⁵ Not all English poets have been so sceptical about translation. John Dryden wrote one of the best essays on translation ever, full of wise insights and practical advice, all delivered in sublimely poised English.

Dryden, like many commentators from the Romans onwards, argues that “All translation, I suppose, may be reduced to one of three heads”. First he tackles “metaphrase, or turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another”. Next he turns to “paraphrase, or 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, finally, we have “imitation, where the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion”. It will come as no surprise that the eminently

25 P. B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), in Duncan Wu (ed.) *Romanticism: An Anthology*, second edition (Blackwell, 1998), pp. 946–47. This attitude explains why so few translations were undertaken by Romantic poets, at least in England; and also the horrible tendency to use “quaint archaic English” for translations during the nineteenth century, by William Morris, Robert Browning and others, which are now unreadable.

sensible Mr Dryden comes down in favour of the middle path, that of paraphrase. He damns metaphrase since “too faithfully is, indeed, pedantically: ’tis a faith like that which proceeds from superstition, blind and zealous”. Metaphrase, of course, is the impulse behind those deliberately awkward (bad) foreignised translations. As Dryden says, “a good poet is no more like himself in a dull translation, than his carcass would be to his living body.” But Dryden is even harder on imitation: “Imitation of an author is the most advantageous way for a translator to show himself, but the greatest wrong which can be done to the memory and reputation of the dead.”²⁶ And, here, again, I have to agree.

Translation, as Umberto Eco argues in his detailed and practical examination of the subject, depends on negotiation, and “Negotiation is a process by virtue of which, in order to get something, each party renounces something else, and at the end everyone feels satisfied since one cannot have everything”.²⁷ Which brings us to ethics. Translation always involves the translator taking a position, an aesthetic position and an ethical position. Does the translator wish to negotiate with, or to dominate, the poet she’s translating? Is her main aim to enhance her own reputation, or does she want to introduce a new voice into English poetry by attempting to render the poet’s own “living body” as vitally as possible? The real difficulty is to engage as fully as possible with the poet you’re translating, and her culture, and, in so doing, to bring as much of the original as possible into English. There’s a whole world of poets out there, aching to be translated into English. Not just for their sake, but for the sake of poetry in English. “To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life”, wrote Wittgenstein.²⁸ And it is this failure of imagination that is stifling contemporary British poetry.

The great virtue – and example – of Pound is that his translations never sound the same. They are dazzling in their rhetorical control, animating the individuality of all the poets he engages with. As Walter Benjamin wrote, in arguably the twentieth century’s most important essay on translation, “It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language, he breaks through the decayed barriers of his own language.”²⁹

Pound draws attention to his “masters”, the poets he translates, not to himself; unlike some of my contemporaries, who pass off other poets’ work as their own and fail to acknowledge the assistance they’ve had translating from languages they do not know. Worst of all is when the poets being translated are

26 John Dryden, “On Translation” (1680), in Schulte & Biguenet op. cit. pp. 17, 18, 23, 20.

27 Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat: Translation as Negotiation* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003) p. 6.

28 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Basil Blackwell, 1968), p. 19 (8e).

29 Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” (1923), in Schulte & Biguenet op. cit. pp. 80-81.

not even given the dignity of being properly credited, so that readers face difficulties finding out more about them. Friedrich Nietzsche, speaking of the Romans, had the last (sharp) word on such unethical practice: "In those days, indeed, to translate meant to conquer . . . in the sense that one would delete the name of the poet and insert the translator's name in its place. And all this was done with the very best conscience as a member of the Roman Empire, without realising that such actions constitute theft."³⁰

30 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Problem of Translation" (1882), Schulte & Biguenet op. cit. p. 69.

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