THE AUTHOR
Mixed parentage and frequent moves in childhood probably contributed to David Pendlebury's lifelong interest in language and cultural issues. After obtaining an MA in modern languages at Cambridge University, early jobs included a year as translator/interpreter in Germany and working on the team of Harrap's Standard German Dictionary. A considerable part of his adult life has been spent teaching abroad, predominantly in the Islamic world. He has translated books from French, German, Persian and Arabic. In 1988 he obtained an MSc in Information Systems. He is currently interested in producing materials designed to make classical Persian more accessible.
Creative Translation

Introduction

In a recent ICR lecture Doug Arnold provided a fascinating insight into the field of ‘Machine Translation’. In this essay I’d like to go to the opposite end of the spectrum and discuss translation as potentially one of the highest of human creative activities. As I shall be making free with the word ‘creative’, some kind of a definition would seem to be called for. As a starting point my dictionary offers: ‘inventive and imaginative’ – which, while being unexceptionable, lacks the very quality that for me characterises the creative: an amalgam of surprise, simplicity and utter rightness (leading one to exclaim, “Now, why didn’t I think of that before?”). Paradoxically perhaps, I shall be inclining towards the view expressed by Walter Benjamin when he spoke of ‘the impossible task of the translator’.

Dr Arnold freely admitted that he did not envisage a time when translation software would replace human translators: merely that it could free their energies for those areas in which they were pre-eminent. One such area he identified was a grasp of the original context, and to this I would add another: a sense of relevance to the new context. These are beautifully illustrated by the well-known tale of the mainframe computer program that was made to translate the proverbial phrase ‘out of sight, out of mind’ into Russian and then translate the translation back into English. The resulting sibylline printout read: INVISIBLE IDIOT. The moral is that a machine doesn’t know what it’s supposed to be looking for, whereas – hopefully – a human being does. The computing and programming power necessary to achieve even the faintest emulation of these contextual features make it practically certain that they will remain a human preserve for a long time to come.

Arnold’s concern was the vast ocean of information that has to be translated on a daily basis in order that the increasingly globalised institutions of science, economics and politics can function smoothly. I shall be more interested here in the translation of original ideas, whose meaning is not automatically apparent. I refer to what German literature calls Dichtung, an enviable word that is able to encompass both poetry and fiction. Indeed I refer to all language embodying deep thought, where the expressions used form part of a coherent and conscious whole.

Since publishers pay notoriously badly, it is small wonder that the quality of commissioned literary translations is generally so low. The exceptions to this are almost always those translations which are genuine labours of love, and it is to this area that my work as a translator has largely been confined.
I shall begin by exploring some of the problems that are commonly encountered in this sort of work, using examples that are often quite trivial, but typical nonetheless. In particular I shall focus on an area that has long been of interest to me, namely the special challenge that classical Sufi texts present for the translator: how to convey dimensions of experience and meaning that may well have no precise counterpart in the target language. I shall then take a different tack and look at a possible methodology for creative translation. Both of these approaches tend ultimately towards insights that are at best speculative, for which I apologise in advance. It is perhaps as well to remember that we are dealing here with an art, not a science.

**Problems and pitfalls**

Translation is not simply confined to the movement of ideas and information between two distinct languages. Seen in its widest sense as ‘interpretation’, it occurs between different historical periods, dialects and registers of one and the same language, between different states of mind (such as dreaming and waking), between fictional narrative and critical analysis, between literal and figurative, between thought and word even. Translation from one language to another is merely a subset, a special case of communication.

**Semantic shifts over time**

To take the historical parameter, for instance: in the twenty-first century we have to be told that when Shakespeare wrote the words ‘silly sooth’ he actually meant ‘simple truth’. And when, even earlier, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath referred to her husband’s *membrum virile* as ‘his *selly* instrument’ her tone may well have been humorous, but in my view it should be understood as anything but dismissive and derogatory, since in early English the word had the sense of ‘blessed’ or ‘happy’. If even within our own language words are susceptible to such vast variations in meaning over time, we have to ask what prospect we have of making sense of another language.

Fortunately perhaps, few other languages have changed at such a breakneck speed as our own. If we turn to German we find that the word *selig*, the counterpart of our fickle word ‘silly’, has remained more faithful to its ancient sense. Thus Goethe, in a poem addressed to the great Persian poet Hafez (whom he came to know via Von Hammer’s translation) writes this:

*Der du, ohne fromm zu sein, selig bist!*
*Das wollen sie dir nicht zugestehen.*

You who, without being pious, are blessed!
That’s something they cannot fathom in you.
Poetic licence – or liberties

But hold on: anyone with a couple of terms of German under their belt will see that this, my first sally here into translation, is neither literal nor accurate. I have taken the liberty of substituting ‘cannot’ for ‘will not’, and any dictionary will tell you that zugestehen means ‘concede’ or ‘admit’, not ‘fathom’. I could plead guilty as charged, or else energetically justify the liberty I have taken; but instead I would prefer to introduce some other related instances of the kinds of difficulty that repeatedly arise in translation, before attempting a more general explanation.

Already, just a few pages into my theme, it seems that what I have called ‘a labour of love’ and ‘one of the highest of human activities’ may, like love itself, prove to be fraught with difficulties, if not utterly impossible. So, in terms of both form and content, it seems quite appropriate that my next example should be a couple of lines in A.J. Arberry’s translation of the first ode of Hafez:

    Love seemed at first an easy thing –
    but ah! the hard awakening! 8

Let us now take a look at the source for that couplet in the original Persian, where in fact it is expressed in a single line (the second half of the very first couplet):

    ke ‘shq awsawn namood avval, valee oftawd mushkilhaw
    كه عشق أسآن نمود اول ولي افتاد مشکلها

A literal, if prosaic translation of this line (which, incidentally, is just as comprehensible to Persian speakers today as it was when Hafez wrote it more than 650 years ago) might be this:

    For love seemed easy at first, but difficulties befell.

As a telegram it could hardly be faulted, though it is scarcely an auspicious opening to what is commonly regarded as the jewel in the crown of Persian verse. But it accords pretty much with the rendering offered by the redoubtable Colonel Wilberforce Clarke, whose aim was not to replace the original with some kind of poetic simulacrum in English, but to furnish English-speaking students of Hafez with sufficient background to read the Persian text with as full an understanding as possible of its initial intention. In his actual translation he allows himself no poetic flights of fancy, reserving all treatment of the rich mystical infrastructure of these odes to the meticulous parentheses and copious notes that accompany his text:

    For (the burden of) love (for God) at first (on the day of covenant) appeared easy, but (now) difficulties have occurred. 9

Take away the parenthetic glosses, and you have something that matches my ‘telegram’ to a T. So in reality there’s no internal rhyme, no sigh of ‘ah’, no ‘awakening’.
However, in case anyone should think I am singling Arberry out for censure (when the truth is that I owe him an immense debt), let us turn to another interpreter of Hafez whom I hold in no less esteem, Gertrude Bell:

For it seemed that love was an easy thing,
but my feet have fallen on difficult ways.\textsuperscript{10}

This time the line seems to have acquired a pair of feet. But again, let’s suspend judgement for a little longer, and turn our attention to a third example – a piece of Rilke, taken from his second Duino Elegy:

\textit{Liebende könntten, verstünden sie’s, in der Nachtluft wunderlich reden.}\textsuperscript{11}

This time let’s look first at a plain prose translation:

Lovers could, if they understood it, speak strangely in the night air.

This is perhaps the sort of thing that might be achieved by one of the more expensive translation software packages – always assuming it could be configured to recognise that the second clause, \textit{verstünden sie’s}, is in fact a slightly archaic form of conditional clause (somewhat analogous to ‘...did they but understand’). If that arrived on a publisher’s desk, I think it would receive short shrift. Now here is Stephen Mitchell, whose work I would recommend to non-German-speakers (in preference to the more ‘poetic’ Leishman and Spender) as a useful, unpretentious first conspectus of Rilke’s achievement:

Lovers, if they knew how, might utter strange, marvellous words in the night air.\textsuperscript{12}

As it happens, I, too, have long been intrigued by this piece of Rilke, and already as an undergraduate it had prompted me to come up with something on these lines:

Lovers could,
if only they understood,
utter wonders each to each
in the air of night.

So, just like Arberry, I conjured up a jingling rhyme where there was none. And quite capriciously I introduced an unconventional locution, ‘air of night’, which was perfectly straightforward in the original German. As for ‘utter wonders each to each’, where on earth did ‘each to each’ come from? Certainly not Rilke; and yet at the time it felt as if the poet elicited it from me. As an attempt to convey the sense of \textit{wunderlich reden}, the phrase ‘utter wonders’ is just plain wrong; and indeed when I eventually sobered up, I somewhat reluctantly reduced it to ‘utter amazing things’, leaving out the totally gratuitous ‘each to each’ altogether.

Of course we can rationalise such liberties until we are blue in the face: but the fact of the matter is that things like these have a habit of imposing themselves on
the creative translator from time to time. One is tugged in two contrary directions – towards the whole, and towards the particular. On the one hand there is the desire to represent accurately what is said in the original. On the other hand we long somehow to compensate for the inevitable shortcomings in this representation, so that when what seems like a felicitous turn of phrase offers itself, we will gladly seize on it. Even if it was not present at that point in the original, we are conscious of so many other points where we failed to do our author justice. It is a strange business: an extraordinary mixture of hair-splitting pedantry and wild inspiration. Needless to say, there are serious dangers here: if I am not careful my ‘creative translation’ will begin to sound ominously like ‘creative book-keeping’. There have been many cases in literature of ‘the tail wagging the dog’ like this, some more successful than others: Fitzgerald’s ‘transmogrification’ of Omar Khayyam, Ezra Pound’s *Homage to Sextus Propertius* and Robert Lowell’s *Imitations* come to mind – to say nothing of Coleman Barks’s *The Essential Rumi*.

Multiple meaning

We looked briefly at the way meaning can change over time. Now let us consider the problem of multiple meaning, which frequently arises in Classical Persian verse. This should not be confused with mere wordplay and punning (though there is plenty of that, too). Rather it is an awareness shared by writer and reader that a variety of meanings may co-exist in a single word. A short while ago an Iranian friend asked me what he knew very well was an impossible question, in connection with a phrase in a quatrain by the 11th century Persian poet Baba Tahir:

Steingass (the Persian Dictionary) gives
سیاه چشم
[siyāh-chashm: literally ‘black eye’] as:
- unkind
- a mistress
- a hunting bird

“The poet,” my friend continued with just a hint of Schadenfreude, “probably had all three in mind. But what is the translator to do?”

Yes, what indeed does the translator do, when the original delivers a ‘black eye’ like this? Actually it gets worse: elsewhere Steingass translates this phrase (siyāh-chashm) as ‘the apple of the eye’, and in verbal combinations renders it as, ‘to deprive of sight, to afflict, torment, to make (someone) long for one’. So, failing a miracle, just about anything the translator tries is bound at best to fall lamentably short of the allusive richness of the original, and may at worst result in complete misunderstanding. In most cases of this sort one would probably have to forego the ambiguity, or at best mention it in a note, and settle for what in the context appeared to be the main sense.
Even in languages much nearer home this sort of problem is never far away. When I was translating Gustav Fechner, the German physicist and philosopher, I came across the German word *vogelfrei*, a compound which literally means ‘bird-free’. Actually in standard usage it means ‘outlawed’. So Fechner was able to play with the expression for ‘outlaw’ along the lines of ‘free as a bird’ in a way that is not available to the English translator.

Compound multiple meaning

The scope for complexity is virtually boundless, as one word with multiple meaning is made to rub alongside another. We could take as an example the Arabic title of a book by the 15th century Sufi poet, Nuruddin Jami: *nafahat al-uns* (نفحات الأنس). Using Steingass, I have listed some of the alternative meanings that could be given to the elements in this short phrase:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>nafahât</th>
<th>uns</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gusts</td>
<td>being intimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>puffs</td>
<td>sociableness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breaths (of wind)</td>
<td>familiarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diffusing odours</td>
<td>friendliness</td>
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<tr>
<td>scents,</td>
<td>friendly atmosphere</td>
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<tr>
<td>fragrances</td>
<td>love</td>
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<tr>
<td>fragrant breezes</td>
<td>affection</td>
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<tr>
<td>fragrant gales (!)</td>
<td>society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>repetations</td>
<td>companionship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gifts, presents</td>
<td>cheerfulness</td>
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Looking at the two elements (which we may link together with the word ‘of’), each with its batch of ten definitions, someone running on autopilot might conclude that the phrase is capable of up to a hundred possible interpretations. Had we chosen an example containing more than two ambiguous elements – by no means an unthinkable situation – the number of possibilities would proliferate correspondingly. A moment’s reflection will of course show that some of the resultant combinations (such as ‘fragrant gales of cheerfulness’) sound a good deal less plausible than others. However, although I am pushing it to the point of absurdity, this example does demonstrate two important points. Firstly the extreme slipperiness of titles – usually one of the first casualties of translation. In the case of Persian classics the situation is not helped by the fact that Arabic titles tend to be *de rigueur* – the pitier the better. Secondly it shows the severe limitations of even the best dictionaries. In fact the more comprehensive the dictionary, the more apparent becomes its inadequacy to the task of translation. And yet for most mortals there is no substitute. Ten alternative meanings may be exceptional, and admittedly some in the example above are practically synonymous; but it is not unusual to find oneself handling three or four problematic words at a time, each with several distinct interpretations.
Of course, experience helps, and years of familiarity with the language. In practice one has to settle for a particular version, which may in the end bear only slight resemblance to the fragments thrown up by the dictionary. As soon as it is written down, and native rhetoric kicks in, the chosen expression begins to sound so plausible and persuasive that one can all too easily forget the queasy sensation only moments before of running across quicksand or skating over thin ice. So I may have failed to answer my friend’s question about ‘black eyes’, but at least I think I have faced up to the dilemma he raised (there really ought to be a word ‘polylemma’), and have found plenty of fuel for my assertion that translation is inevitably more of an art than a science. However, I propose to leave this example untranslated for the moment and reuse it later, in the section on methodology.

Rhyme and verse
Equally problematic is the throttle-hold of versification. Completely disregarding the sense for the moment, I would ask readers to immerse themselves in the sounds of the following couplet by Jami. Notice the insistent recurrence of certain groups of sound:20

choo boo-ye-gul yawbad, khawhad ke beenad
choo roo-ye-gul beenad, khawhad ke cheenad
چو بوی گل یاد خواهد که بینند
چو رؤی گل بیند خواهد که چیند

Then try to hazard a guess as to a translator’s chances of replicating this wonderful musical effect in English. As for the literal meaning of the couplet (bearing in mind that the actual gender of the subject, given here as ‘he’, is arbitrary in Persian):

When he smells the scent of the rose, he wants to see it,
when he sees the face of the rose, he wants to pluck it.

In fact this is a fairly easy example: it boils down to juggling with just two verbs, ‘see’ and ‘pluck’, and two nouns, ‘scent’ and ‘face’. But even so, it should be clear that, without a great deal of contortion, finessing and good old-fashioned padding, we are unlikely to replicate the rhyming scheme at all, and to achieve the depth of rhyme found in the original (five syllables of it in this particular instance) is well beyond our powers. We might occasionally get lucky, but any attempt to sustain this over a whole poem would inevitably turn our Persian ‘gazelles’ into monsters. Far better, it seems to me, to lower our sights a little and aim for clarity of meaning supported by rhythmic and stylistic elegance.

Cultural allusions
Another bottomless hole the translator can fall into is to fail to pick up an allusion that is common knowledge in the cultural milieu of the source language.
While translating a German book, I was completely stumped by a chapter heading that read: *Ist doch ein Kraut gewachsen!* This seemed to be saying, as if querulously contradicting a previous assertion, “Yes, there is a herb [that has] grown!” That made no sense at all to me at the time. It was only when the book was in the proof stage that I heard a German say, “Dagegen ist kein Kraut gewachsen”. Literally: “No herb has grown against that.” – by which he meant “There’s no herb that can deal with that”, in other words: “There's nothing to be done about it.” Suddenly the quirky title made perfect sense, for the chapter in question happened to be about the curative properties of herbs. So the meaning is “Yes, there is a herb for that complaint!” But putting that into English is another matter, for as far as I know there is no equivalent catch phrase – no herb for that – in our language.

Another example may be found in the tale of Ali Baba in the Thousand and One Nights. Who has not thrilled to the unforgettable phrase “Open, Sesame!” In our culture this has become a byword for conjuring up supernatural powers, whereby mountains are rent asunder to reveal untold wealth. What a pity that this is not exactly what the original author had in mind. Apparently ‘Sesame’ and ‘Camphor’ are traditional nicknames in Arabic for light-skinned and dark-skinned slaves. Thus the command “Open, Sesame!” is addressed, not to occult elemental forces, but to a human being, in all probability dozing behind the huge door. Re-read in this light, the story gains, rather than loses, in my opinion.

Technical terms

Professor R. A. Nicholson, in his invaluable translation of Hujwiri’s *Revelation of the Veiled* has occasion to translate two words of Arabic origin that loosely map on to the English word ‘love’ – *mahabbat* (محبة) and ‘ishq (عشق). He chooses to distinguish the two by referring to the latter (‘ishq) as ‘excessive love’. 22 I think one can see what led him to make this distinction: love as something exceeding the bounds of reason, ardent, passionate, “This is bigger than both of us,” – or, as Racine put it: “C’est Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée”. But ‘excessive’ introduces a note of disapproval that is quite gratuitous. Sometimes a language can let you down precisely though its excessive precision. If we turn the tables for a moment, the Arabic and Persian languages do not make such a clear distinction as we do between ‘very hot’ and ‘too hot’. Nicholson, as it were, has simply opted for ‘too hot’.

However, it’s all very well to carp on the sidelines: I cannot see any easy way out of the dilemma. Those old Greek favourities, *agape* and *eros*, which traditionally have been used to betoken, respectively, brotherly love and the ‘in-love’ type of love, certainly don’t fit the bill any more: for the modern mind the one is far too bloodless, the other far too frivolous. Nor would it help simply to contrast ‘divine love’ with ‘profane love’, since both of the Arabic words could be applied in either of these contexts. What we have here is a mismatch of scales, as if, brought up on
Fahrenheit, we were suddenly confronted with Celsius or Kelvin: we no longer know at which point things freeze or boil. So, we have mahabbat and we have ishq; but fortunately we also have the brief context provided by Hujwiri himself in which to savour the distinction he makes between the two.

Concepts that lack a counterpart in the target language

The Argentinean poet Jorge Luis Borges has written what must be the definitive description of the dilemma of cross-cultural interpretation. Entitled ‘Averroës’ Search’, it depicts a day in the life of the celebrated Arab scholar Ibn Rushd (1126–1198), also known in the medieval West as Averroës. We see him wrestling with, and utterly failing to grasp, two concepts that figure prominently in Aristotle’s Poetics: ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’. This despite the fact that instances of both phenomena are manifestly present in his daily life. For instance, there is a power struggle of tragic proportions currently being enacted in his own harem.

And at supper a much-travelled companion gives a graphic, if mystified, account of an actual dramatic production he has witnessed in a distant land. At length, no doubt exhausted by the effort of keeping his mind prised open so long, Averroës finally has to allow it to slam shut again. In Borges’ words (translated, of course):

> Something had revealed to him the meaning of the two obscure words. With firm, painstaking calligraphy, he added these lines to the manuscript: Aristu [Aristotle] gives the name ‘tragedy’ to panegyrics, and the name ‘comedy’ to satires and anathemas. There are many admirable tragedies and comedies in the Qu’ran and the mu’allaqat of the mosque.25

Borges hardly allows us time to smile at the great scholar’s blind and biased gropings before completely turning the tables on us. The purpose of his story, so he tells us, has been to hold up a mirror to his own scholarly ineptitude in attempting to portray Ibn Rushd and his world:

> I felt that Averroës, trying to imagine what a play is without ever having suspected what a theater is, was no more absurd than I, trying to imagine Averroës yet with no more material than a few snatches from Renan, Lane and Asín Palacios.24

Borges’ parable would often spring to mind when as a translator I tried to grapple with some aspect of Middle-Eastern thought. For every tragedy or comedy that evaded Ibn Rushd, there is many a concept of equivalent opacity that I failed to comprehend. A purist, or at least a certain sort of purist, might throw up his hands in despair and abort the search. It is salutary to reflect that had Ibn Rushd been a man of that kidney, we might never even have heard of our beloved Aristotle. For it was Arabic scholarship such as his which kept the Hellenistic flame alive (albeit wondrously transmuted) during the Middle Ages. So God bless Averroës, with his tragic panegyrics and comic anathemas! There is, after all, another kind of ‘purism’ which can take all manner of accidental impurities in its stride, sustained in the confidence that “it’ll all come out in the wash”.

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Let us reverse Borges’ image, as he implicitly invites us to do, and take at random some concept, in its context perhaps almost a household word, but to an outsider every bit as baffling as Averroës’ tussle with ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’. We could take, for example, the Arabic word *dhikr* (ذکر), often persianised as *zikr*. The literal meaning, which relates to ‘remembering’, is easy enough. The fun starts when we encounter it as a technical term.

The English-speaking interpreter has a number of options. He can search around for the closest western equivalent – insofar as there is one, and insofar as he can grasp it. Perhaps he will come up with something like the word ‘litany’. But, oh dear, no, that will never do: far too ‘churchy’. Alternatively he can go for a descriptive paraphrase of what the Arabic concept seems to encompass: a (potentially ecstatic) remembering, repeating, praising exercise. This could become a trifle tedious if the little word occurs several times in the space of a paragraph. Or else he can simply attempt to naturalise it as *dhikr* or *zikr* (with italics, bold type, underlining, upper case, brackets, quotation marks, strange dots of all kinds added to taste). He can try any combination of these, but the fact of the matter is that, whatever he tries, both the translator and his readers will be well and truly stumped by a concept for which as yet there is no basis in their experience.

In this most unsatisfactory of situations, which may crop up dozens of times in a single treatise by a classical Sufi author, there are a number of factors calculated to rescue us and help us on our way. There is, firstly, the holistic capacity of the human mind, which is able, given sufficient encouragement and confidence, to perceive a total picture from material that is impressionistic, fragmentary, and at times even downright defective.23

The requisite mentality would seem to involve bringing to bear a judicious balance of scepticism and self-reliance on the innate human desire for meaning. On the one hand, one has to keep in mind that, taken singly, any piece of information one receives may turn out to have been corrupted in transmission. On the other hand one can learn to rely on an inborn capacity to arrive at an overall view of the material under consideration. Thus in the case of our *dhikr*, we can hope, by dint of contact with a variety of information about it, to come to as realistic an understanding of what it entails as is possible – short of actually experiencing it for ourselves.

Experience is of course the second factor that can come to our rescue. Sooner or later Ibn Rushd, or a descendant of his, will actually see a play enacted on the stage. He will then be able to judge for himself the relevance or otherwise of Aristotle’s discourse on the subject of drama, and whether or not there is an equivalence, or even a place, for such a thing in his own culture. Similarly there
will be people who themselves have direct experience of the essential meaning and purpose of dhikr.

We might take as another less well-known example a term which occurs more than once in Qushani’s Glossary of Sufi Terms, ‘ayn ath-thabitah – أعين الثابتة, and which we translated as ‘established Essences’.26 As a literal, word-by-word translation that’s fair enough, but we’re still left asking: what on earth does it mean? As so often happens, a short time after we had put our book to bed, some new and crucial information came to light. In answer to an enquiry I received a note from someone regarded as an authentic expert in this area. In an uncannily recursive way, his definition of ‘established Essence’ not only nailed down a concept which we had been worrying at for at least three years, but it also hinted at precisely the dilemma I have just been attempting to describe here with reference to Borges and Averroës:

The unchanging Essence and fundamental possibility of a being or a thing. The basic possibilities, often or always virtual or incipient, needing experience in some cases to manifest or even to be accessible (to a person).

I have no idea whether my friend formulated this definition for himself, or whether he got it from somewhere else; but it certainly seemed to fit the bill.

**A few words on methodology**

Creative translation usually involves two recognisable main stages, plus an optional third stage – whose supervision, as we shall see, is greatly to be desired:

Firstly we produce a draft translation of the original that is as literal and accurate as possible. In any but the most pedestrian exercise this will inevitably throw up a number of ‘gapping holes’ and pitfalls. For the moment these simply have to be noted and left where they are. It is also likely to throw up a number of ‘gaffes’ and misconceptions of the sort hinted at above. These, too, have to be left – obviously – until they are pointed out by an expert in the source language, or until such time as they work their way, like an itch, into the translator’s conscious mind.

We then ‘translate’ this draft, with only minimal reference to the original, into a form that as far as possible reflects and does justice to the author’s overall intention, whilst doing minimum violence to the target language. This stage of ‘weaning away’ from the original is nearly always necessary, otherwise the end result is likely to remain unduly influenced by what are arbitrary features of the source language. Anyone who has read the best-known translation of Saint Exupery’s *Le Petit Prince* will know what I mean. E.g.: “It is a very small sheep that I have given you.” *C’est magnifique, mais ce n’est pas de l’anglais.*27
Nested and interlocking systems

Any piece of creative writing involves a series of systems, which are shown below in increasing levels of complexity:

- Word
- Phrase
- Clause
- Sentence
- Paragraph
- Chapter
- The whole work
- The whole person

In order to produce an analogous structure in the target language, the translator has to engage with at least the simpler levels of these nested and interlocking systems. Only the most naïve would expect word-for-word translation ever to be viable on its own, and most people would recognise that equivalence at the sentence level is the ideal working objective, with a considerable degree of fluidity permitted below that level. To give an illustration, here is a fairly typical couplet taken from Jami’s *Yunaif and Zulaikha*:

*nabwshaad sar-e-por az nawz-e-habebee naseeb-e-awdamee joz bee-naseebee.*

نباشد سر پر از ناز حبیبی
نصیب ادمی جز بینصیبی

A preliminary, ‘phrase-level’ translation of this might yield:

*nabwshaad* – It may not be
*sar-e-por* – the head full
*az nawz-e-habebee* – of the charms of the beloved
*naseeb-e-awdamee* – the condition of a man
*joz bee-naseebee* – except haplessness

In its context, this could reasonably be rendered as:

With his head full of the charms of the beloved,
How could the condition of man be other than hapless?

At first sight I might appear to be taking a serious liberty with the text, in that I have inserted a question where there was none. However, the question is rhetorical rather than real: in effect it is saying the same thing as the original, and supplies a degree of emphasis that is comparable to that of placing *nabwshaad* (‘It may not be’) a: the head of the sentence.

Clearly it is of great importance to be able to drill down to the nuts and bolts of the language, to be able to *parse* each utterance and see exactly what is going on –
who is doing what to whom and in what circumstances. We could call this approach analysing the language at the ‘atomic’ level. As long as our culture set store by a knowledge of the Classics (i.e. ancient Latin and Greek), with their wealth of declensions, conjugations and inflexions, this was a prized skill, which was even applied – sometimes with a certain excess of zeal – to our own relatively denuded language. But now the practice has fallen into almost total disuse, with the result that foreign languages have become needlessly daunting.

However, once we have grasped the underlying ‘nuts and bolts’ – the atoms, as it were – it is immediately apparent that meaningful translation cannot take place at this level. Words coalesce naturally into phrases, images and figures of speech, and they do so quite differently in different languages. We have to discover equivalent, idiomatic word-clusters in the target language. It would be misleading to translate German Wir wollen gehen literally as “We want to go…” – in situations where the meaning, quite clearly, is “Let’s go.” Likewise, Ich habe keine Lust, nach Hause zu gehen unequivocally means: “I don’t feel like going home.” It would be laughable to render it as “I have no desire to go to house.” On the same ‘atomic’ analogy, we could refer to this as comprehending the language at the ‘molecular’ level. It is here that the actual meaning begins to emerge.

Of course, when it comes to creative writing, it cannot simply be a matter of mechanically transposing an established idiom in the source language into the equivalent in the target language. Frequently one encounters turns of phrase that are utterly unique: indeed that is the whole point. As another example of the verbal gymnastics that poetry – especially Persian poetry – can demand, here is a couplet that a friend of mine recently found embroidered on an antique sash:

نواژش دل ما گن - که دلتاوی توئی
بساز کار غربان - که کارساز توئی

_Nawawzesh-e-dil-e-maw kon – ke dilnawawz too’e_  
Soothe thou our hearts – for thou art the Soother of Hearts;

_Besawz kaver-esharehaben – ke kawrsawz too’e_  
Provide for the needs of the needy – for thou art the Ingenious Provider.

The first line probably requires no further explanation here, as the English rendering is fairly literal. However, it establishes a style and structure that are echoed in the following line; and in order to do justice to this feature at all, it is necessary first to distil off the meaning from the individual words, then to condense this back into plausible English. Inevitably the result differs from the literal Persian, and yet it contains the same mental elements and, though slightly more verbose, it remains reasonably faithful to the original style and structure.
The line plays on two words and a compound of the two:

- sawz – make, prepare, perform (present stem of the verb sawkhtan).
- kawr – action, work, thing, affair, need.
- kawrsawz – dexterous, skilful; the Deity.

In order to mimic the way these words recur throughout the line I have chosen to use the word 'provide' for sawz, and I have repeated the word 'need' in 'needs of the needy' instead of using the more customary word for ghareebawn, which is 'the poor'. Since I feel fairly confident that this text is intended as a prayer, I have also expanded kawrsawz into 'Ingenious Provider' in an attempt to incorporate the two main senses given by Steingass.

Connected discourse

Beyond the level of the sentence we move into what has been called 'meaning in connected discourse'. This is a topic about which translators have been strangely reticent, preferring to leave their readers in blissful ignorance as to the sometimes drastic expedients adopted on their behalf. The English language is unusually well equipped with devices to control meaning over extended passages of text; so much so – and there's a good example – that Anglo-Saxon readers soon begin to complain either of boredom or obscurity when these connecting elements (such as: moreover..., granted..., besides...) are not present. Some languages, on the other hand, for all their immense richness and subtlety in other areas, are relatively impoverished in this one. Tune in to any news broadcast in the Arabic language, and the first thing that you will notice is the relentless repetition of the word 'and': 'wa... wa... wa... wa...'. The dire inference to be drawn from this is that in a translation from Arabic, connecting devices between clauses, sentences and paragraphs could well have been inserted by the translator. We are thus dependent on his sensitivity (or otherwise) to the flow of the argument.

In straightforward, 'on-the-nose' writing this is often largely a matter of taste and style. However, in creative works (Dichtung) we tend to be dealing with a unified whole, in which each individual element is co-present with all the others, impinging on them and interacting with them in a kind of 'virtual eternity'. This is not to say that we, or even the original writer, are necessarily conscious at all times of this immensely complex super-system. It is merely that the potential for such consciousness is present, and whether we are aware of it or not it can influence the way we read the work. It can also influence the way we translate it. For example I could possibly justify my somewhat cavalier translation, earlier on, of zugestehen as 'fathom', rather than the (more correct) 'concede' or 'admit', by pointing out that the whole tenor of Goethe's poem is that the self-appointed 'men of religion' simply could not understand where Hafez was coming from. Continuing the atomic/molecular analogy developed earlier, one might think of this level of organisation as 'organic'.

18
The ‘optional third stage’
So far this is all fairly mechanical (even if it is becoming so complex as to go beyond the scope of the conscious mind). However, in certain fortunate cases a contrary movement can be discerned, whereby it ceases to be a matter of merely ‘reflecting and doing justice to the author’s overall intention’, and becomes much more a case of that intention actually taking the reins. The translator is ‘invaded’, as it were, by the spirit that moved the original author: for a season he or she inhabits the same mental space – is ‘coming from the same direction’. It is then that the dictum proposed by that great translator E.V. Rieu can begin to be realised – that the purpose of translation is to achieve the equivalent effect in the target language. At this point I am reminded of a terse passage in Hakim Sanai’s Sai‘r ul ‘Ibad:

\[\text{dar zamawn man namavnda. oo man shod}\]

در زمان من نمانده أو من شد

Literally: “In time I was no longer. He became I.”

A sort of conspiratorial relationship can sometimes develop between the translator and the author. The process may be fragmentary and uneven, and it can never for a moment be taken for granted, or ‘it will flee’. Of course one has to live with the possibility that it may also be a pure figment of the imagination. But it leaves behind an abiding sense of deep personal friendship, across time and space, with those giants of the past. To characterise this sense, I cannot do better than return to the Arabic title, mentioned earlier, that Jami gave to his book about the lives and sayings of former teachers in his tradition, the Khajagan and Naqshabandi Masters of Central Asia: nafahat al-uns – which might provisionally be translated as ‘breaths of the breeze of friendship’ (until an unrelated but pithier title comes to mind).

As an instance of the working of this ‘breeze’ I should like now to look at another short passage from Jami’s Yusuf and Zulaikha, which I translated as follows:

\[\text{All of us are slaves of opinion and victims of appearances. If reality did not peep out from behind appearances how should the sincere of heart ever reach the fashioner of appearances? When a thirsty man reaches for a jug, it is because he knows for certain that it contains liquid; but when he drowns in the limpid waves of the ocean, he no longer thinks of that weeping unglazed jar.}\]

I had a lot of difficulty with the last clause of this passage:

\[\text{nayawyad yawd nam-deeda-ye-safawel-ash.}\]

نيايد ياد نمديده سفالش

The words ‘unglazed jar’ have been added to drive home the meaning. Originally I had simply put ‘earthenware’ – the dictionary meaning of the word safawel. It
took me a long time to see where the word ‘weeping’ (nam-deedu) fitted. Then I remembered a large earthenware jar I had used in the mid-sixties in Saudi Arabia for drinking water, before I eventually got hold of a refrigerator. Some of the water would slowly seep through the porous clay and evaporate in the air. The latent heat for this process was largely borrowed from the liquid within, which thus became deliciously cool. Suddenly I saw that Jami was fashioning a truly glorious metaphor for ‘reality peeping out from behind appearances’, something tenuous and seemingly unimportant pointing to something infinitely vast and precious. And I would swear that the poet gave me a wink of complicity, as the penny finally dropped and we shared a common physical experience that served as a stepping stone to this deeper perception. You could say that such moments are ‘highly motivating’.

Conclusion

Originally, when preparing the talk on which this essay is based, I had wanted to use the title ‘the experience of translation’. The ambiguity was intentional, for I did not wish to view this process solely from the viewpoint of the translator. Consciously or not, the reader is going through an equally complex experience. The conventional paradigm is that of the translator locked in his study, slaving over a text which he eventually perfects and hands over to a passive public. They in turn have the magnificent option of either liking it or lumping it. But what I have tried to show here is that this simply doesn’t fit the facts, especially where creative work from a vastly different culture is involved. The translation in such cases is necessarily incomplete, tentative, and at times shot through with holes, and readers should never be allowed to imagine otherwise. On the contrary, they should be encouraged – by means of forewords, afterwords, annotations, etc. – to actively anticipate this state of affairs, so that they can learn to make allowance for it and see beyond the actual product to the underlying source, however sketchily this may be represented. Of course, such an approach can have the disadvantage of providing lazy critics with a handy checklist of faults with which to damn one’s efforts, but it is nonetheless a price well worth paying, if readers can be guided to a more realistic understanding of what they are looking at.

Translating creative writing can be rather like juggling: with all those mental balls in the air, sometimes there are more than one can reasonably handle without spoiling the overall effect. Something that reads smoothly enough in one language can come across as redundant and repetitive in another, and one is certainly not doing the original author any favours by slavishly transmitting every last word when one senses that the reader will already have got the message. There is a place for paraphrase in translation; but if we sometimes have to sell the author short, we owe it to him to be always on the lookout for ways to redress the balance. This, as I have attempted to show, often involves a process of distillation and condensation, whereby the individual perceptions of the writer are isolated from
the actual expressions used in the original and then recast in an equivalent form, without omission or addition. What ought to be avoided, though, is the ‘artefact’ – using the term at once as a technical expression, taken from optics, and as a metaphor. Translation may be an instrument through which we see something, but we have to take care that what we see is not a product of the instrument itself – a ‘brilliance’ produced by a flaw in the lens rather than the object itself. Transparency is the key: a translation may be said to be successful when readers are able to forget, at least for a while, that they are not reading the author in the original. This might seem to contradict the plea for openness in the previous paragraph, but there is really no reason why the two objectives should not coexist.

As we have seen, there is a whole spectrum of approaches to translation – ranging from the literal ‘crib’ of the sort that students use when cramming for an exam, to versions that have only the most tenuous connection with the original (e.g. ‘Homer’s Odyssey, retold by X’). Each can only be judged in terms of what it sets out to do. For example, beyond a certain point it is useless to castigate Fitzgerald for his Rubaiyat – which by the author’s own admission is ‘very unliteral’, a ‘transmogrification’, with ‘verses mashed together’. The ever-genial Borges comments somewhere that he knew at once that Fitzgerald’s Rubaiyat must be a poor translation because the poetry was far too good.

There is not one of the faults and shortcomings criticised here that I have not myself been guilty of at some time or other. I still blush at the line I translated in Hakim Sanai’s The Walled Garden as: “your girlfriend’s airs and graces”\(^1\). Sanai gives me a quizzical look: “Girlfriend?” Increasingly, however, I have chosen to draw my own line much closer to the literal end of the spectrum, guided by the hunch that this strategy actually makes it easier for readers to supply the elusive poetic dimension from their own imagination and experience. When translating poetry I see my brief as follows:

- to render the ideas and imagery into as appropriate, expressive, living English as one can manage;
- not to craft ‘poetic’ diction intentionally, but if at times one’s version wants to fly, then let it fly;
- never to seek for rhymes, but if they occur spontaneously whilst one is translating rhyming verse, then at least consider, and possibly retain them;
- to leave out material that one finds incomprehensible or nonsensical – with a suitable apology if necessary;
- to acknowledge gaps in one’s knowledge and shortcomings in one’s version, where these are apparent;
- above all, to honour the intention of the original, insofar as one has the power to discern it.

I think my principal aim in this essay has simply been to encourage others to try this sort of thing for themselves: to find an author who has impressed them in
translation (preferably in more than one version); to get hold of the original text and a reasonably comprehensive dictionary, and get a taste of how it was done in the first place; to keep notes of the process, which may eventually evolve into translations in their own right. Very little is required to get started, and the rewards in terms of understanding and personal satisfaction can be enormous. The chances are that one will occasionally find something completely new — something that previous translators, in their rush to meet deadlines and pay bills, may have missed. At the very least one could end up with a little more understanding, and compassion even, for their heroic but inevitably partial efforts.

NOTES
3 Translation software, when faced with the word Dichtung, would be just as likely to seize on the homonymous word meaning ‘washer, seal, gasket’.
5 Twelfth Night II iv 45.
19 Titles are always a nightmare for translators anyway, but Arabic ones often involved rhyming, rhythmic patterns, alliteration and other forms of wordplay. Classical Persian authors tended to give their works titles in Arabic, the language of the Qur’an, in order to lend them religious and intellectual credibility – in the same way that until fairly recent times scholars often resorted to Latin.
20 With apologies for the crude transliteration scheme. The ‘lh’ sound resembles ‘ch’ in the
Scottish word ‘loch’.
21 Persian orthography.
absorbed in love (mahabbat) for Joseph, from whom he was separated, his eyes became bright
and clear as soon as he smelled Joseph’s shirt; but since Zulaykhâ was ready to die on account of
her excessive love (‘ishq) for Joseph, her eyes were not opened until she was united with him. It
has also been said that excessive love is applicable to God, on the ground that neither God nor
excessive love has any opposite.”
*mi‘āllqa‘at* are seven ancient Arabic odes, thought to be pre-Islamic.
24 ibid.
25 A striking analogy for this may be found in the hologram, which may be damaged or distorted,
chopped up into two, four, eight or more pieces, and still be capable of projecting the entire
picture without much loss of quality.
translation by Irene Testot-Ferry (Wordsworth Editions 1995), which seems to have successfully
gone through the ‘second stage’ described in this essay.
29 An abridged version of this work appears, as ‘The Way of the Seeker,’ in *Four Sufi Classics*,
31 Hakim Sanai, *op. cit.*, p.34.

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